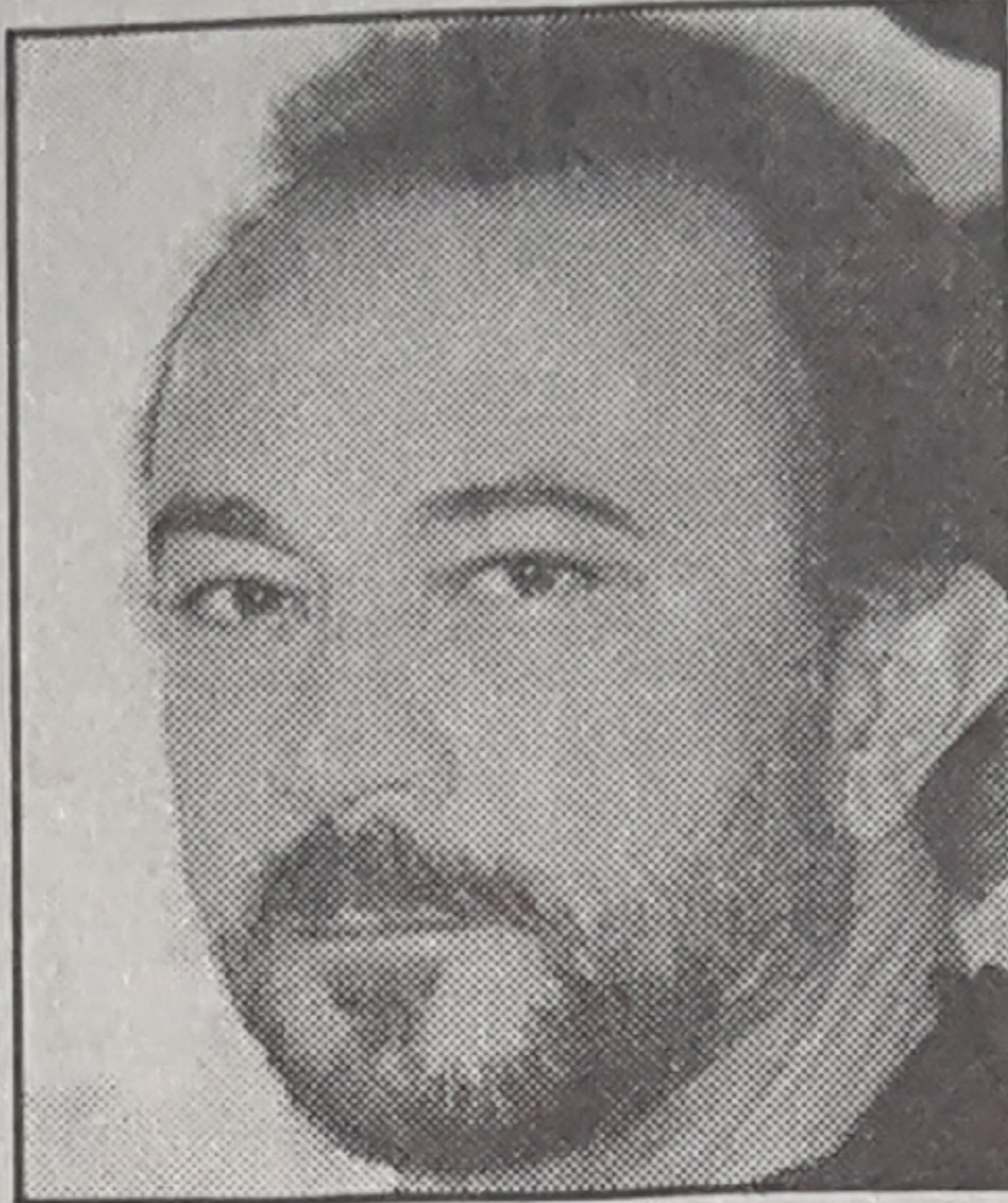


THE LAST MIGRATION - An appreciation by Anne Fairbairn

Panache Publications
A novel by **Jad El Hage**



I was delighted when Jad El Hage rang me from Beirut to invite me to launch his new novel, *The Last Migration* during *Carnivale* at the NSW Writers' Center in October.

The eminent French writer Stendhal, (1783-1842) wrote on *Le Rouge et le Noir*: 'A novel is a mirror which passes over a highway. Sometimes it reflects to your eyes the blue of the skies, at other times it reflects the churned up mud of the road.'

Stendhal's 'Blue of the Skies' echoes and re-echoes throughout Jad's novel from the time the main character, Ashraf Saad, receives Claire's 'little book', her personal diary which celebrates in intimate detail her day-to-day feelings for her lover, Ashraf. Claire and Ashraf had been deeply in love. Their affair had been a true meeting of souls expressed by a passionate meeting of bodies. Ashraf describes Claire as 'a wonderful paradox - a shy lover and an experienced courtesan.' Their love could be described in words used by Dante, 'The love that moved the sun and others stars.'

Their affair ardent tragically comes to an abrupt end when Claire is killed in a mud slide in Mexico. Ashraf is shaken to the core of his being.

Then Françoise, Claire's grown-up daughter, gives Ashraf Claire's 'little book'. This diary makes very clear to Ashraf, Claire's profound feelings for him and therefore gives him immense comfort.

Each chapter in Jad's novel is prefaced by a passage from Claire's little notebook. These passages glow like Stendhal's 'Blue Skies'. For example, at the beginning of chapter six there is this passage from Claire's little book: 'I don't know how to tell you how important and dear you are to me. Shall I say 'My days are empty without your voice, your hands your laughter, your lips?' No. Shall I say 'You are with me wherever I go?' No. Shall I say 'Wait for me as I wait for you? No. No. I want to say something like, 'Look at my eyes, how brilliant they are because of you, how thirsty my mouth is for your mouth, how hard my nipples are because of you.' I want to say something else but there is no time left. So I say what you already know, 'I love you.'

But within each chapter, after Claire's death, Ashraf seeks to escape from the unbearable grief he is experiencing by becoming involved in meaningless, self-destructive affairs. This is an experience in escaping from self - a migration into hell in London's seedy Shepherd's Bush, invoking Stendhal's 'churned up mud'. Sometimes I cannot help feeling that perhaps Jad is in agreement with Gustave Flaubert remark: 'The more indignant I make the bourgeois, the happier I am.' Perhaps Jad is also tweaking the noses of those he may perceive to be the intolerable censors in the Arab world. As Jacques Derrida could have written of this novel, Jad 'attempts to make the not-seen accessible to light.'

Yet Ashraf is also searching, searching for Claire. For a while it seems Ashraf may have found the woman he is searching for when he begins a relationship with Jenny; Ashraf is generous and thoughtful to a fault with Jenny, showering her with flowers for her birthday and flying her young son Miles to London from Germany where he is studying, as a surprise present. However, at the birthday party he arranges for her with her friends, he realizes as the trivial small-talk babbles on, how far they are apart in so many ways. During this period, Ashraf's easy-going, generous friend, Anna, is always there for him, injecting a degree of cheerful sanity into his life by bestowing another glimpse of Stendhal's 'Blue Skies'.

At the same time, on another level, and in a different place in far-away Australia, Ashraf's two daughters are experiencing their own teenage problems and he flies out to spend time with them. He loves them dearly and enjoys a good relationship with them, filled with fun and laughter. Ashraf finds in Australia the 'Promised Land'. He is deeply grateful to Australia, as I believe Jad is.

Yet Ashraf never ceases to metaphorically migrate - from woman to woman, and from concept to concept. Lebanese-Canadian artist, Dunia A. Beydoun's brilliant image on the cover is dream-like, echoing the passage of time and Ashraf's constant migration.

Jad believes all novels are, in a sense, autobiographical. Jud's mother had migrated to Australia in 1977 with her two sons. Ashraf's mother flies with Ashraf from Beirut to Australia after the tragedy of Cana. After dozing on the plane she says to Ashraf, 'Don't let me drop off again, son. This is my first and last migration. I don't want to miss a moment of it.'

Reading the novel one is very aware of the horrors Jad had witnessed during the civil war in Lebanon. In the novel Jad describes the carnage at Cana: 'An olive tree against a familiar blue sky. The tree knotted with human shreds ... The wailing mothers, the devastated fathers holding up parts of their children for the cameras.' As Henry David Thoreau insisted, 'Write what is in you ... the writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with.' As a young man, Jad, a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, worked hard to try prevent the division of Lebanon into factional areas, because he could see the

seeds for the tragedy of civil war being sown.

Jud's father had been a civil servant in Lebanon's Civil Administration. Jud had attended Saint Antonin Brothers' College in Beirut. He admits to being a roguish anarchist who hated school and was always selective about what he wanted to learn. He says that the good teachers understood this. He attended four or five classes at the university, exploring subjects he chose himself. His character is in many ways similar to the ever-searching Ashraf. As Flaubert said of his novel *Madame Bovary* 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi,' I believe Jud could say of *The Last Migration*, 'Ashraf, c'est moi.'

After all his searching there is a conclusion to Jud's novel which is very interesting - but you must read it to find this out what this is.

I began by quoting Stendhal and I shall close by quoting Stendhal: 'I know only one rule, style cannot be too clear, too simple.' Jad's style in *The Last Migration* is both clear and simple.

Marcel Proust borrowed the title of his great work *Remembrance of Things Past* from Shakespeare's Sonnet (number 30):

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought

I summon up remembrance of things past ...

Jad borrows the title for *The Last Migration* from *The Death of a Bird*, a brilliant and sensitive poem by A.D.Hope, Australia's foremost poet, who died in 2000:

For every bird there is this last migration:
once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
with a warm passage to the summer station
love pricks the course in lights across the chart.