Ian Callinan *The Lawyer and the Libertine*, Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 1997.

This is an old-fashioned book, as the title (and the sub-title) reveal all too pointedly. The author alerts the reader to the nature of the work most particularly in the sub-title; it is "a novel of passion and revenge". I didn't come away from the experience of reading the novel with much "passion" about the book or its characters, but I cannot say that I was not entertained. Its style reminded me just a little of Frank Hardy's 1950 novel, *Power without Glory*, although I sympathised with Callinan's characters far less than with Hardy's. I suspect this is the nub of my unease about the work; I liked the "yarn", but never felt at ease with the cast of either composite or one-dimensional characters, the latter mostly female. There seems to be a tendency in some modern fiction to draw the characters in such a way that they emerge on the page, not only human, flawed and vulnerable, but down right unlikeable. So it is here. Mentmore and Dice, the protagonists of the title (although they are both nominally "lawyers") are unfathomable. Their "inner lives", potentially the most absorbing aspect of the characters, are only revealed through the "hearsay evidence" of others, most notably the intriguing and shadowy sometime narrator, Lester. Callinan has chosen an astonishing array of uneuphonious names for the characters; names more appropriate for a political satire. There is General Blowser, Miss Stalem, the Reverend Skene, Dr Neroty, Sir Lionel Portson, Mr Cleeves, Mr Gulganin, and of course, Stephen Mentmore and George Dice themselves. None of these names endeared the reader to the characters.

The pace of the narrative is interrupted on occasion by some oddities which deserve mention. These include some very obvious proof reading errors: "seperate" and "base (sic) drum" amongst the number. However, the one which puzzled me most was the "chronological" relationship of Hannah East (the unforgettable "girl in a million" character) to her siblings. There seems to be some confusion about this on pages 21-22. First the reader is told: "Hannah had four brothers, all younger than she." Further on, the author continues: "Hannah was born...Four other children followed. Hannah was the last." Hannah is then either the eldest, or perhaps the youngest of the East children; I am still not sure. Perhaps that is why Hannah keeps running away, fading out after each new undeserved disaster befalls her. This is a story that needed a consistent narrator, but there isn't one. Poor Lester is made to serve as the narrator intermittently, but elsewhere a different voice relates the actions and passions of the characters. This "anonymous" authorial voice is intriguing: forensic, analytical, and unknowable.

There is a clear risk associated with reworking recent history for a fictional account of public life. Whereas the private lives of fictional characters situated in Depression era Sydney or wartime London can be

absorbed relatively readily by the collective memories which we call history, it is highly likely that a readership will reject the kind of tinkering with public life for fiction, which permits a Churchill government for England, but insists on a Portson government, a Dawson government, and a Gulganin affair for Australia, as well as a Dr Neroty for the United Nations. Clearly there are "historical" figures which underlie the cast of *The Lawyer and the Libertine*. The author's statement at the outset about the fictional nature of *all* the characters raises unanswerable questions in the reader's mind about Callinan's view of the nature and role of "historical fiction", especially historical fiction which centres on the public life of the nation. I am not entirely convinced that the risk has paid off in this novel.

Without a doubt the strongest, tightest, and most exciting portions of the novel are those set in the courts. I was drawn at the outset by the keenly-observed commentary on the retirement of Chief Justice Mentmore in Chapter One, right down to the description of the dress of the participants and the glasses of water on the Bench. In view of recent events, I was engaged by the comments in the mouth of Lester on the High Court building (an example of the "New Brutalism style" of architecture), the role of the High Court ("What was wrong with bending, no, reshaping the law? These would be the infallible seven. Give Mentmore his due, he had never tried to usurp the legislature. He knew his place, interpreter, not innovator.") A second piece of delightful prose describes Mentmore's cross examination of witnesses in a defamation case before Justice Rupert ("a bookish sort of chap") in Chapter 11. Here the author's professional experience is used to great effect. It is clever, witty, and just what the doctor ordered after the time devoted to Mr Dice's "libertine" exploits. It must be noted that only the old newspaper proprietor, Dinny O'Ryan ever calls Dice a "libertine" in the course of the novel (twice). The other characters choose less alliterative, and more "new-fangled" descriptions and assessments.

Finally, a comment upon the production. The book has been produced as a large size paperback which is rather a shame as it is just the thing to slip in the corner of a bag to read during a summer break. The cover illustration, a copy of a painting by Rod Emmerson, is most unforunate in its use of colour and design. Two grotesquely-coloured male figures lean towards one another framing a female figure (presumably this is the lovely object of "passion and revenge", Hannah East). Beneath this is a foreshortened view of Old Parliament House in Canberra. There is little sense of unity in the cover design and nothing in the colour scheme to attract a potential reader.

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