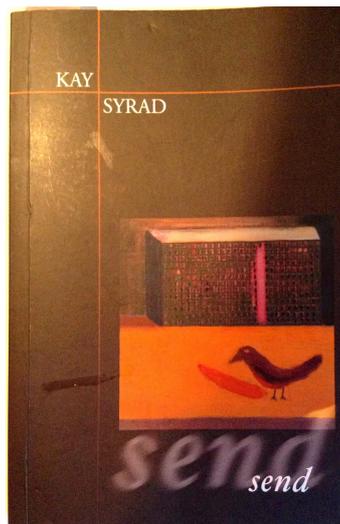


Can Art's courageous experiments also be accessible?

A review of a brief work of brilliant obscurity

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Sometimes art and philosophy tantalise us with ideas or experiences we can never quite 'get'. Sometimes, we may suspect, this is the author's intent. Can this, nevertheless, enrich us?

Book Review

Send: Kay Syrad. Cinnamon Press. 146pp. ISBN 9781 9090 777 99

This small book is bursting with rich fragments, yet I doubt that it will be read with the attention that richness deserves – so swirling and polymorphous is the material that it is frequently impossible for the (or this) reader to retain concentration or comprehension.

This is a great loss, for Syrad has very evident literary, intellectual and philosophical gifts. She applies these to a fascinating 1950s fictional plot: Lilian is expecting her first child when she is diagnosed with tuberculosis. Her physician, Morley, decides that she must be separated from her baby until and unless she recovers. But Morley becomes haunted by doubt over his diagnosis and the fate of the mother and infant he had coercively separated.

Syrad's novella explores the lifetime's reverberations of Morley's momentous decision for all three lives. We are offered a maze of flashbacks, philosophical questions, poetic reveries, academic abstractions and narrator commentary. Seminal life-themes are evanescently identified: the nature of perception and memory, internal and external realities, attachment and, ultimately, our conception of other people's consciousness and needs. A heady mix, surely – but is *too* heady to be assimilable?

There are passages where Syrad's literary gifts have arresting power:

[Morley] must listen for a roughness, for a diminished respiration. He must listen for a succession of murmurs that follow each other so rapidly there can be no differentiation between them – this is what he will hear as a roughness ... He looks at her now: Lilian. Her shoulders are hunched forward over her pregnant belly. Her hair is dark, curled. He places his hand on her forearm. She is twenty-three: she is expecting her first child. They both know what it will mean if he can hear the roughness.

Or

Morley had imagined the babies' tongues, pink and raw and made muscular by their crying, full of nerve endings, awaiting sensation, awaiting instruction.

But such luminously poetic passages are all too often sullied by leaden academic notions that opacify rather than enlighten:

Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the act of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought ... If myths and dreams and illusions are to be possible, the apparent and the real must remain ambiguous in the subject as in the object.

Such dense metaphysical fogs contend with Syrad's shards of lyrical brilliance: many readers, I fear, will experience *Send* akin to sitting through a long foreign-tongued art-house film with indistinct subtitles (though, paradoxically, this book is short). I felt Syrad was saying a lot, but much of it I could not hear.

About 150 years ago a reader wrote to Lewis Carroll after reading *Jabberwocky*: 'It seems to fill my head with ideas, but I don't know what they are.'

Maybe Syrad is part of that great tradition of elusive depth. Certainly I admire her creative courage. Do I recommend *Send* as a good read? I am much less sure.

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