

## **Lunatics and the Asylum: Representations of ‘The Loner’**

The autobiographical fiction of Australian author Peter Kocan can, to date, be divided into two categories: the institutional, and the pre-institutional.

The event that splits these two phases of Kocan’s fiction down the centre, an event not covered in the prose itself, occurred on the night of June 21, 1966, when the 19-year-old Kocan shot then Federal Opposition Leader, Arthur Calwell, with a sawn-off shot gun. After being presented to the court as a 'borderline schizophrenic', Kocan was sentenced to life imprisonment and subsequently released in 1976, following a full recovery.<sup>1</sup>

While becoming a recognised poet during the years of his incarceration, Kocan did not start documenting his life in prose until after his release.

The first two instalments of this trilogy came in the form of two novellas (later released together as one novel) titled *The Treatment* and *The Cure*. These works are both heavily informed by Kocan’s life in the Morisset Mental Hospital, after his diagnosis.

They narrate the story of a nineteen-year-old ‘Len Tarbutt’, from his arrival at the Maximum Security Criminal Ward of a psychiatric hospital – where he is to serve his life sentence – to a point just before his release.

The second category, the pre-institutional fiction, comprises the prequel to these works, titled *Fresh Fields*. It is in this work that the life of the loner is explained from the point of view of an uneducated and mentally unstable youth, prior to his diagnosis. Again, this work draws heavily on Kocan’s early life - dealing with poverty, homelessness, and the hired hand’s bleak existence.

What is noteworthy is the way that Kocan has dealt with mental illness in his fiction, and in particular the way in which he has turned sanity into a Manichaeian conflict between darkness and light, good and evil, us against them.

The main inspiration that he draws upon for his protagonist, in this context, is the figure of a loner – who is the survivor of a war.

The protagonist’s frame of mind and his intentions are revealed through the company that he keeps: his allies. In both narratives the ally-familiars are soldiers. The character of the protagonist is equally exposed through his enemies, their backgrounds, and his different ways of responding to them.

The two most important relationships in these narratives are pure fantasy. In *The Treatment* and *The Cure*, the protagonist's counsellor, and main source of inspiration, is a character from a WWI novel – an infantryman called David Allison.<sup>2</sup>

In *Fresh Fields*, the protagonist has a similarly intense relationship, this time with Diestl, a Nazi soldier from a WWII film.

Following the development of the protagonist in a linear fashion, I will first examine the partnership between the character of 'the youth', in *Fresh Fields*, and his exemplar and friend the German soldier.

It was a gun shop. There were racks of rifles in the window and on the wall behind were medals and flags and badges and some Nazi armbands and a German steel helmet. The youth looked at the helmet and began to feel calmer, for it had reminded him of Diestl...<sup>3</sup>

This is the first occasion that Diestl is mentioned, and it comes right after a time of intense anxiety and mental activity for the protagonist. The youth has just fled, along with his mother and brother, from the house of the violent Vladimir, the youth's stepfather.

The psychological pattern is repeated through the novel. Left to his own devices, the youth tries to think his way out of all the quandaries that he is in - only to find that he flounders and does not possess the temperament to cope in the real world. It is then that he retreats to a quiet place and summons up what he calls, the 'Diestl mood'.<sup>4</sup>

The film that Diestl has come from is set towards the end of the war. The young German is a lone gunman - the sole survivor of his unit - who knows that he is on the losing side, and everything he holds dear has been destroyed. In the mind of the youth, 'Diestl has had every feeling burnt out of him except for a sort of grim pride that will make him determined and dangerous until the moment he goes down'.<sup>5</sup>

So the youth tries to imitate the way that Diestl, the underdog, reacts to any threat - with impassivity, ruthlessness and the determination to strike a blow before he is defeated.

What the youth has not yet understood at this point, by creating Diestl as an ally, is that he is drawing upon himself the same enemies as the German. Thus we have the aforementioned Russian stepfather, 'Vladimir', an adversary recalled with much fear and loathing, as well as the Jewish landlord and hotel manager 'Mr Stavros'. While Diestl is no more objective help than any other imaginary friend, the enemies the youth makes are all too real.

As an undiagnosed schizophrenic, unaware of the significance of the choice that he has made in following the Nazi Diestl, the youth must rely on his 'enemies' to notice the evil that possesses him; he himself is incapable of drawing the conclusion.

There is a telling incident early in the book, when a resident of the hotel in which the youth's mother works accidentally sets herself on fire while in bed. With the smell of burnt human flesh in his nostrils, the youth stands by and watches the spectacle of the stretcher being brought out by the paramedics, with a smile on his face.

He is unconsciously excited by the burning, until he sees Mr Stavros - a Jewish survivor of the concentration camps - looking at him with undisguised contempt. Realising that he has been caught out, and that the appropriate reaction was concern, the youth tries to cover his mouth, still stretched tight in a grin.

Soon after this episode the youth is again caught by Mr Stavros, this time using his little brother's crayons to draw a large picture of a Swastika. The landlord tells the youth's mother that the boy is no longer welcome, and he is sent out by himself to work in the country - only fifteen years old, and quite alone.

The irony of a Jewish landlord evicting him, and sending the youth to something like a labour camp, is lost on the boy. He knows little of history, and has no insight into the darkness within him.

The youth knows that he is different, but he does not understand why. Self-knowledge comes much later, during his recovery. All he has to get him through at the start is Diestl:

He knew he was not like other people. When the time came to board his train he put himself into the Diestl mood. He limped along the platform, imagining the Schmeisser against his shoulder, then got into the compartment by himself and sat staring blankly ahead until the train began to move. Then he let the mood slip off because he knew he would need it later and didn't want to use it all up.<sup>6</sup>

It could be said that the youth puts on the Diestl mood because he is uncomfortable with his own company, without realising it. He never retreats to the Diestl mood in company, even when afraid. Instead he waits until he is alone to re-imagine what might have happened and to recover a callous insouciance. But in the real world, without Diestl, he cares deeply. Diestl is the youth's reaction to not feeling in control, and not having a significant relationship with anyone else. His isolation is exacerbated by retreating into the Diestl mood, because Diestl demands that no one be let in, and warns that the only way to survive is to keep one's own counsel.

Other heroes the youth finds all feed back into his main obsession, of being the lone wolf ready to strike. He cries about the story of Harry Dale - a tragic figure in a Henry Lawson poem - and about King Harold in 1066: 'They were the knights and warriors and horseman who bear the brunt and face the odds. It was always the same story.'<sup>7</sup>

No matter the circumstances of these characters, the youth clings to the common denominators that link them to him, and to Diestl; they are alone and doomed to failure.

Kocan's use of the Nazi character to describe the condition of the youth, works on different levels. It allows him to focus in on the glamour of the violence, the sadomasochistic pleasure that the youth derives from it, while providing a justification and an outlet for the paranoia that the youth feels.

The youth sees and hears Diestl, first in his imagination, then in his actual life. The hallucinations progress to a sort of physical possession, in which the youth takes on the characteristics of Diestl, and hears his voice inside his head, unprompted. Only following orders, he can then disclaim responsibility for the evil.

Yet the evil of Diestl is all consuming, and ruins even the innocent fantasies of the youth – when, for instance, he imagines having Grace Kelly as his 'Sweetheart':<sup>8</sup>

He wondered what Diestl would advise, but knew the answer already. Do anything, as long as you fundamentally don't care. If you start caring, you start wanting to survive for the wrong reason – you start wanting to savour life, and then the world has you where it wants you. You have surrendered then. The only good reason to survive a bit longer is to get closer to the point of striking one good blow, of hitting the enemy hardest as you go down. But now the youth was toying with hopefulness.<sup>9</sup>

The battle being fought by the youth at this point is a strictly internal one. While this Manichaeian conflict might seem a simplification of objective political and ethical problems, when the battle is internal, like the psychomachia that the youth endures, it is much harder to distinguish between right and wrong.

The relationships that Diestl seeks to destroy are 'hopeful' imaginary ones that the youth retreats to in moments of exhaustion and weakness. His relationships in the physical world, with his mother, his work colleagues and various landlords, never have a chance of developing.

His relationship problems have to do with his age; the youth is a borderline schizophrenic male *teenager*. Socially awkward, he has personalised the conflict he

experiences, witnesses and reads about to an unreal extent. He also has no one in his life that can help to correct these deficiencies.<sup>10</sup> His only comrade and confidant is Diestl.

With the Nazi as his spiritual director, the youth prepares to set fire to the town and blow up the bridges on his way out. He moves towards the final act of destruction that he believes is his destiny.

This is how Kocan described it in an article he wrote after his release:

For over three years my fantasy and anguish had been building towards this terrible ‘solution’. I had never once considered what would happen to me afterwards. I was blinded by the potent vision of my life ending in a welter of violence, with the shocked eyes of the entire nation riveted for a brief moment on me.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately for Kocan, history shows that his failure became the catalyst for his future success. A consideration to keep in mind is that he did not do this by changing his modus operandi, or by trying to fundamentally alter his identity. As I’ll now show, he did it by changing exemplars, and adopting a new allegiance.

Continuing this quest to investigate the mental life of the youth, and its strong connection with war, I will now focus on the protagonist in his adult form, as Len Tarbutt, in *The Treatment* and *The Cure*.

In the opening of *The Treatment* Len Tarbutt is about to enter the psychiatric hospital, just months after his trial and incarceration. He has not yet started to understand the enormity of his decisions, as ‘the youth’, and the evil that gripped him in the form of Diestl.

Interestingly, there is still a residue of this character with him when he is checked into the hospital. When asked to give the colour of his hair, along with his name and height, he says that his hair is blond, and that he is five foot ten.<sup>12</sup>

In his mind, he has pictured himself as the Nazi Diestl, the blond death bringer and perfect Aryan specimen.<sup>13</sup> The young Tarbutt has to be corrected and told that his hair is actually brown. And here is the turning point and great irony for the character. The mentally ill Tarbutt, now officially labelled and transferred to the psychiatric hospital, would have been deemed to be genetically unacceptable to his former Nazi cohort. As a schizophrenic, Tarbutt would have been cleansed in the very first stages of the ‘final solution.’

The striking fact is that *Fresh Fields* is a prequel to *The Treatment* and *The Cure*, and was written over twenty-five years later. Yet, as I’ve shown, the image of Diestl found its way

into the opening of *The Treatment*, as if the Kocan had the full vision for his future work in mind, as a young novelist.

This is not an accident, and quite explainable. The young Kocan charted out the mature destiny of his protagonist and did not, as a novelist or poet, attempt to glorify or explain his youthful criminal past; for the most part he focused on the life of the adult psychiatric patient, the workings of mental hospital, and the subject of survival; in his view the criminal story had already been sensationalised and tainted by vulgar, stupid journalism.<sup>14</sup>

But, as in a war, it's the winner who gets to write the history. The youth of *Fresh Fields* was robbed of his autonomy and had his story written for him, whereas Len Tarbutt, as the recovering writer of *The Treatment* and *The Cure*, could take on the job of documenting his own existence.

It was only as a senior writer and teacher, with his literary position secure, and his dignity restored, that Kocan felt he could return to the story of the youth, and his fascination with a violent end – in retrospect providing for the 'lost adolescent' a compassionate defence for his actions.<sup>15</sup>

In *The Treatment* and *The Cure* it makes sense that Tarbutt's new comrade, the British infantryman David Allison, is from the opposing side to Diestl – the comrade of the youth. The point to remember, however, is that the protagonist is still in a war and the same psychomachia is taking place inside him.

But where Diestl is a friend who tries to help the youth become someone that he is not, a man of action, David Allison helps Tarbutt by showing him a way of coping as a thinking man, as himself.

Kocan stated this in plain terms:

You're always like this. That's partly how you know you aren't the same as most people. Most people just see one meaning and go ahead and it turns out okay. The only other person you know of who thinks and thinks and worries and worries like you is David Allison in *The Survivor*. That's why you often feel that David Allison is your only friend, almost the only real person that you know.<sup>16</sup>

The youth and Tarbutt's fellow internees in the maximum security ward have enlisted on the wrong side. But Len Tarbutt, in his new mission on the side of the good, sees it as his duty to honour those who have lost and had no voice to speak for them.

Where Diestl only offered a violent end as the solution, his polar opposite, David Allison, instead offers hope and a means of survival. Indeed, Diestl was opposed to the very idea of hope and survival, whereas the new allegiance with the Englishman demands it.

That is the shift in thinking that determines whether or not the character is sane or insane, right or wrong, in the work of Kocan. The recovering Tarbutt recognises that the situation is hopeless, and - with the help of David Allison - still tries to maintain his honour, in the process regaining his mind and his power. In the same way, the insane youth of *Fresh Fields* judged the situation to be hopeless but – at the instigation of his Nazi exemplar – fought violently to keep it that way, and in doing so gave up his liberty.

To illustrate how similar the relationships with these two different spiritual directors are, consider two quotations. When the youth of *Fresh Fields* starts to picture a life without pain, “I thought you were one of my kind,” Diestl would say. “But it seems not. You want Strudel instead of steel.”<sup>17</sup> When Len Tarbutt dreams about parole, and being moved to an open ward, he fantasises:

If you had parole you could hang about at the canteen and drink milkshakes and stuff. You suppose you must be getting soft. What would David Allison think of you? Milkshakes?<sup>18</sup>

The two figures are not just admired for their way of dealing with crises, or for seeing out a bloody war. They are idolised by the youth, and Len Tarbutt, to the point where they influence every major decision of the protagonist.

The political morality of the figures that each protagonist hero-worships is all important to the life of the youth and Tarbutt. That the protagonist is in crisis does not change; what changes is the role model – the voice from whom he takes direction.

The decisions are no easy matter; Diestl and then David Allison, in turn, come to inhabit their protégé:

This novel had become part of your life, or maybe part of your life had entered the novel - it was hard to say which. Finding it was like an act of fate...He (another poet) told you that you simply must read *The Survivor*...It was about a person called David Allison who has an unhappy childhood, then goes to the trenches in Flanders, and afterwards tries to become a writer so as to tell the truth of the war for the sake of the dead men.<sup>19</sup>

War as a metaphor for a patient stuck in a mental institution is apt, in that in the mental hospital there are no real winners; and it is a highly traumatic environment both psychologically and physically. The patients and the staff are all seen to be in the same boat, with little to differentiate them other than the choice they have made in terms of their 'side'. A World War is a particularly appropriate analogy, as the losses are so catastrophic for all participants, that even the character of David Allison, a soldier from the victor's side, can be looked on as a victim.

In *The Treatment* and *The Cure* the new enemy for Len Tarbutt is a female German doctor, assisted ably by a male nurse who has Nazi sympathies. The asylum doubles as a POW concentration camp, and the nurses are demonised as guards determined to degrade the patients: 'If I was in control I'd have all you faaarkin blokes put down...Hitler had the right idea. Crims, pervs, poofers all into the faaarkin oven.'<sup>20</sup>

Kocan's protagonist is, to all intents and purposes, the same before and after the criminally insane act. The thought processes and the way of coping, the fantasy relationship with a soldier, and the unchanging depiction of the self as a lone warrior, whose only community is with those lost in action, is the same whether the protagonist is declared sane or insane, right or wrong.

In the two acts of Kocan's autobiographical fiction, we are given both views of this Manichaeian conflict; the youth who cannot cope with human relationships, keen to go down in a hail of bullets as a protest against an unfair and inhumane world; and the adult who works to understand the system: fighting to survive and giving a voice to those who were less fortunate than himself.

Survival, and sanity, depended on the protagonist's selection of a guide: in the end, the only difference was in this alliance.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Graham Freudenberg, 'Calwell, Arthur Augustus (1896 - 1973)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 13, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp 341-345.

<sup>2</sup> Clearly 'George Sherston' from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*.

<sup>3</sup> Kocan, Peter Raymond, *Fresh Fields*, Europa Editions, 2007, p 15.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p 16.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p 33.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p 108.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p 210.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p 232.

<sup>10</sup> Colebatch, Hal G.P, 'Fresh Fields by Peter Kocan', *Quadrant Magazine*, April 2005, Volume XLIX Number 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kocan, Peter Raymond, 'After I shot Arthur Calwell', *Quadrant Magazine*, August 1977, Volume XXI Number 8, p13-18.

<sup>12</sup> Kocan, Peter Raymond, *The Treatment and The Cure*, A&R Classics' edition 2002, p 5.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p 27.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p 201

<sup>15</sup> Kocan, Peter Raymond. *Fresh Fields: An Exercise in Autobiography*. Master of Creative Arts Thesis, University of Newcastle, 2003: Thesis no 2620. From 1st Synopsis page.

<sup>16</sup> Kocan, *The Treatment and The Cure*, p 102-03.

<sup>17</sup> Kocan, *Fresh Fields*, p 232.

<sup>18</sup> Kocan, *The Treatment and The Cure*, p 132.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p 99.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p 24.

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