

A Town Like Alice

Jill Mushkat

When I opened this book, published in 1950 and set during and after World War II, I was initially incensed with the misogyny so prevalent during those times. I prepared myself to deal with negative stereotypes of women, not even being able to handle a managed financial inheritance, left to a woman only by default of no men being available. Then there was a shift, initially to my delight, and in your face focus on just how capable women were, then another shift to the unrealistic wonder woman level exceeding all realistic capabilities, and again shifting focus to how preposterous and incongruous this book is.

I realize this novel was written in the decade of Donna Reed vacuuming in a dress, high heels, and pearls. Initially degrading, the book focused on the tenacity of women faced with the harshest imaginable conditions weighted heavily against survival, yet survive they did, with perspicacity, attitude, ingenuity, force of will, and brute physical strength, characteristics rarely attributed the female gender at that period of time. Yet this was also the time of Rosie the Riveter, whose work was only valued until men returned from the war and were able to take over, eliminating jobs for women.

How much influence came from the author's transition from life in England to Australia whose history of struggle, despair and survival is well-documented in the book Fatal Shores. This tome documents the struggle of the Irish being sent to Australia in prison ships to labor to build a new country.

Our protagonist, Jean, is introduced to us in England, where she is the last survivor in line to inherit her uncle's fortune, small perhaps in our times, but sufficient for her to live comfortably the rest of her life as managed for her in a monthly stipend until she reaches the age of 35. She is the last surviving relative with the line of inheritance going initially to his sister's husband, as she would not be capable of managing a financial inheritance, then to Jean's brother, who was reported to have died in a Japanese POW camp in World War II, then her mother/his sister, but with all being deceased, proceeding to Jean. She ponders over her options, and instead of choosing a simple, stable lifestyle in England, wants to do something meaningful with her life and chooses to return Malaya, where she had lived in early childhood and returned to work as a secretary just before the war and was subsequently caught in the invasion by Japan.

We are then taken back to the World War II portion of the story to which we have not yet been made privy. It begins with her missing the evacuation by train of the staff at her company as she seeks to help Mrs. Holland prepare to evacuate with her 3 children and husband, Jean's employer. They try to flee in a car, but it breaks down, and they are unable to evacuate. Mr. Holland is sent to a men's POW camp in Singapore, and the women begin something akin to the Bataan death march.

This new episode of the story shows Jean assuming the leadership role which enabled half of the original women and children taken prisoner to survive their brutal ordeal. Exhausted, yet not defeated by being marched 100s of miles with little to eat, rare soap to wash, insufficient medication, and clothing not designed for the climate in which they were being exploited, she created a mini culture to facilitate survival culminating in their integration into a culture in which they learned to grow rice in the paddy

fields and did manual labor to provide basic food and shelter alongside the local community. Her ingenuity and press for survival became legend in the region, even reaching back to England.

Returning to England after the war, she settled into a mundane existence as a secretary/ typist for a shoe and handbag factory to support her Spartan lifestyle. The unanticipated inheritance provided her other options. She chose to return to Malaya to provide an opportunity for a better lifestyle for the community of people who had helped her and the other prisoners survive during the war.

She decided to use some of her inheritance to build a well and a laundry for the women who struggled to carry water miles each day. She once again tapped into her diplomatic and creative resources to convince the men of the village to allow her to build the well and the laundry to ease the travails of the women. This took some convincing as the women's trek each day allowed the men to maintain control of them and the lifestyle of the village, something they were not eager to relinquish.

Cultural factors run parallel between Malaya and England. There is a place for women in Malaya in which decisions are controlled by men. These men initially resist Jean's desire to build a well to make life easier for the women so as not to diminish their control. The women walk miles hauling water in gourds each day remaining subservient.

Let us now shift to Joe Harmon, the Australian soldier who came from a country built up on the backs and the blood of the Irish who were sent there in prison ships, frequently for crimes as minor as stealing a meager amount of food to feed one's family, or the sin of a 12-year-old boy taking an apple from the ground, or a fish pulled from the sea. Coming from such a background, he is now sentenced to a brutal death, hands nailed to a tree, skin flayed from his back by whips, and yet he survived. The officer who sentenced him to this horrific punishment for the crime of stealing two prized black chickens to feed starving women learned he had survived, barely, yet still sentenced him to death. He was offered a final meal and chose a beer, and the irony of the treasured black chicken. As a measure of honor, the brutal officer went to seek his final meal. The chicken was available, but nary a beer to be found anywhere.

As a matter of honor, after beating him to near death for the theft of 2 chickens, he was released because his final meal could not be provided. He was taken to the hospital. For failure to procure a beer, a promise unkept, the officer allowed him to survive. Had he been able to produce the beer and the chicken, the intent was to complete the execution. A matter of honor.

I digress to address the racial portrayals and epithets referring to the Malaya people, to the Japanese, and to the Aboriginal people, the latter of whom's trauma is well portrayed in the film "Rabbit Proof Fence," and whose history parallels the suffering of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The issues degrading women change somewhat throughout the book, the racial and ethnic slurs do not.

Then, through all of this, emerges the love story between 2 of the most unlikely people, Jean Paget, and Joe Harmon, but brought together in this perfect storm of isolation, abuse, suffering, and the push towards survival. Yet this is not just a story of survivors finding love, but also giving up the life they knew to be with each other.

Then suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, we begin racing in another direction. Jean and Joe rediscover each other, and Jean commits to staying and building a life in Australia. At this point she decides to build a town in Willstown, starting with a shoe factory, also making hand bags out of alligator skins, with the interior of wallaby, ironic in that she and Joe have a pet wallaby, kind of

equivalent to lining shoes with dog skins. She has no experience other than working as a secretary in a shoe factory, but contacts her former employers to obtain some assistance and also a person to help her run it. She decides in conjunction with the shoe factory, she also has put in a milk bar/ice cream parlor, again something in which she has no experience. She does, however, decide to set up 2 separate areas, one for whites and 1 for Aborigines, bowing to the environment of segregation. There would be one central freezer, but two parlors. On the positive side, Joe is entirely supportive of her efforts, engaged in discussing them, and the possible obstacles, but encouraging her to do this on her own.

This book is really two stories. The first part is an effort to break from gender stereotypes by recounting and fictional forms the actual struggles of the Dutch community of women captured in Sumatra, not Malaya and forced on a March much like the one portrayed in this book. They survived in great part by the impact of their leader, Mrs Geysel, upon whom the character of Jean was based. Developed from real events, it presented well.

The second part of this book is a total travesty. Jean and Joe romantically searched the world for each other, finally reconnecting in Australia, Joe's home, and decide to marry and turn the remote town of Willstown into "A Town like Alice." Joe maintained his Outback station, while Jean single-handedly build an entire town in 3 years. She establishes the bustling community with the shoe and handbag factory, swimming pool, ice cream parlor, beauty salon, green grocer, Cinema, dress shop, etc., all by herself. The fact that she had no experience in any of these diverse endeavors really stretches credulity beyond the breaking point. Although, did I mention she had 2 babies along the way in this same 3 years?

The author did a much better job focusing on fictionalizing a version of real events than creating a story of his own. The racist and sexually demeaning epithets were particularly distressing. He took what could have been a good story and converted it to something totally unbelievable. The adage about truth being stranger than fiction clearly does not apply here. The truth was a powerful story; the fiction absurd.

I forced myself to watch the horrible movie made from this novel. It featured rather than indigenous men scoffing at building a well and laundry to ease the women's work, a set of happy natives playing an accordion, not exactly culture specific, and doing bizarre "native" dances. The idiocy of the movie did, however, present more favorably than the book. The producer and director of the movie at least had the good sense to end the movie when Jean and Joe reunited in Australia, before the building of a city. There is also an Australian miniseries, but I was unable to access it.

Jill Mushkat offers the following questions for us to consider

1. **How would this book come across were it written today? Would it even be published?**
2. **How do the various cultures and stereotypes, England, Australia, Malaya, Japan affect how this story is developed?**
3. **How could this tale have differed had Joe caught up to Jean in England?**

4. How do you relate the 2 different portions of the story, WWII and the aftermath in Australia?

And, dear member, I am taking the liberty of adding another question:

5. Compare A Town Like Alice to last month's book, Main Street, on the criterion of your choice (focus, message, literary merit, other).