

# Some kind of ghost

Kate Holden

LOVE MACHINE  
by Clinton Caward

Hamish Hamilton

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I suspect that Clinton Caward is nostalgic for the good old days of 1990s grunge fiction. Though his likeable debut novel, *Love Machine*, is entirely modern (indeed, dated specifically to Kevin Rudd's Shooters confession of 2007), it shares the grot, the beer and drugs, the sordid sex, the terse jokes and listless lives that worked so compellingly in Andrew McGahan's *Praise*, Geoff Dyer's *The Colour of Memory* and Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* more than a decade ago.

When we meet Caward's hobbledehoy anti-hero, Spencer, he is a laconic loser with a blow-up doll called Bridget for a girlfriend. Spencer earns ten dollars an hour working in a sex shop in Kings Cross. He drinks beer in strip clubs after work, chats with working girls, has casual sex with women he doesn't understand, and yearns dumbly for a sense of direction. A seeming loner, he has problems with his father, who abandoned him as a child, and vague protectiveness issues with women.

*Love Machine*, partly a jaded lament

for the Cross, is entirely convincing – the writing is lively and assured, and there is a large cast of characters – but the most arresting portrait is of the sex shop itself. If you have never been inside a sex shop, you may not enjoy this novel. Through the prism of this reviled trade, Caward shows us not only the apparatus of commodified sex but a netherworld of dreamers and drifters. It is a good device to base a novel on, and Caward makes the most of it with his sharp detail and beautiful descriptions, even of the most tawdry items. Spencer, the narrator, a classic impassive observer, dryly passes the time with his work colleagues (a buffed Bangladeshi gay man, a student of sexual anthropology, a homeless man and a Chinese gambling addict who cleans the unspeakable booths for fifteen bucks), the dealer who pays him to use the back room for business, the prostitutes who try to steal the shop lingerie, and his boss, the hilariously parsimonious Rocco. He fends off stoned customers and watches addicts overdose on the footpath. His world is full of strangeness, and Spencer details it all, bluntly and brutally.

This Bosch-like assemblage of grotesques is exasperating, amusing, tedious, disheartening and finally moving. Spencer develops a crush on Livia, a messed-up teenage prostitute, and dallies with Antonella, a messed-up older professional woman. Or at least he believes they're damaged. Spencer has a strong protective impulse, not least for himself. 'Her honesty made me feel special,' he says of the lovely little Livia, 'but sad at the same time, because she must be like this with everyone'.

In fact, Caward has written a traditional love story set, like any Shakespearean romance, in the midst of travails. Spencer's pure love for Livia risks being tarnished by his own cynicism, the distractions of his crappy job and the splayed lunge of the world they both move in: unstable ex-boyfriends, psychotic neighbours, colleagues trying to lure Spencer into drug-running. He has a conscience: he keeps it to himself, and keeps his head down. In him the reader might recognise the classic Australian urban boy-man, alarmed by responsibility, mild-hearted and

wise-cracking, tententially passive, perturbed by his own impulses.

Where's the room for love, the book asks, when sex is so glibly sold? I am no prude, but I found myself fascinated by Spencer's descriptions of his merchandise and clientèle. Bored, he watches DVDs while at the counter:

I floated through the rivers of the mainstream – anal, oral, big-breasted, gang bang – and passing the transsexual border guards at the fringe of the known world, discovered places beyond, where frightened women had eels pushed into them and dreadlocked gypsies worked hard to befriend uninterested livestock.

He is sanguine ('When I first started I'd go home feeling as if I needed to vomit to get it all out of me. But you get used to anything') and relentlessly droll. Caward deftly avoids explicit judgements, even as he satirises the absurdity of manufactured sex. Mostly, what we sense is the profound loneliness of the furtive fumlbers and dishevelled denizens of this world.

There is heartbreak in this book, as observation softens into empathy. 'I didn't want any of this to be my life,' Spencer says. 'I was supposed to just be here like some kind of ghost, but things were starting to touch me.' The writing is lovely as it illuminates dark corners: 'Samoan men singing as loud as their shirts'; the skinny prostitutes of the Cross 'gathered around the ATM as if there was a hearth-like comfort in the machine's glowing promise'.

*Love Machine* is a brightly written, savagely funny, melancholy and adroitly sympathetic novel, more substantial than you might expect from the back-cover blurb. In it the reader walks down dirty steps to an underground den of sad people, dry jokes and the weird arrayed pink of pornographic falsity; but the comprehension its author brings to every line, the truth of its characters and their yearning for sweetness and meaning, ultimately raises their humanity back into the light. ■

**Kate Holden** is the author of *In My Skin: A Memoir* (2005). Her new book, *The Romantic*, will be published this year.