

## Brian Castro's *Chinese Postman*

Launch speech by Ken Bolton, presented at the J. M. Coetzee Centre in Adelaide, November 2024.

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Welcome to the launch of Brian Castro's *Chinese Postman*—recently published by Giramondo, possibly Australia's most respected publisher over the last decade or so.

I assume we are a local crowd. That many of you will know Brian & are likely involved with literature—as readers or writers.

Of course Brian Castro is a personable guy. But, though booklaunches are almost *universally regarded* as Exciting Events, not many will attend on the basis, merely, of the author's good looks & charm.

#

Brian Castro's novels were seen from the first as impressively intellectual. I remember—I was a young writer, a poet, & actually not much concerned with Australian novels—when *Double-Wolf* came out & was greeted as 'an Intellectual novel'.

Was this *a warning to readers*, I wondered,  
or a defence  
of the reviewer's uncertain performance?

Despite this characterization as formidably intelligent, Brian's  
books win awards.

If you check, this is true of nearly every one. Brian Castro is the  
real thing—which is why we are here.

*Chinese Postman* already garners that same kind of attention—  
tho reviewers are more open now days about enjoying ideas.

#

Amongst this audience tonight there will be former students of  
Brian's.

Many being now well on the way to a long career—  
of writing, and thinking about writing. (*Chinese Postman* might be  
a comic warning as to what you're letting yourselves in for.)

I EM-CEE'd a long-running reading series, ages ago. And it was always a good idea to program Brian Castro: the former students who made up a good part of the audience (an audience of, almost entirely, writers) were always keen to hear him & their attention was always close and intense. People knew the work would be interesting, that it would demonstrate the qualities Brian had brought to his teaching and supervision.

I wrote various introductions for people appearing at those readings. Usually giving them an entirely fictional background in entertainment. Here is one developed for Brian Castro: an attempt to suggest some of the gravity, & existential, 'continental', worldly flavour of the Castro legend or mystique

HERE IT IS

**BRIAN CASTRO**'s most successful foray into the world of film  
was in  
the remake of a 60s Alain Delon crime classic  
***ANY NUMBER CAN WIN***. A bank heist movie.

Towards the end the gang members have finished betraying & killing  
each other

& the police have arrived & are searching the premises.

It is the final scene that people remember best: Castro sits in a deck chair, dressed in white & wearing sunnies. He has thrown the suitcase full of money in the motel pool,

**where it has sunk out of sight.** The detectives are clearly annoyed that there is nothing they can pin on the cool dude—as they go from room to room, opening drawers & doors, banging furniture about, slashing cushions.

Eventually tho, the suitcase opens & money begins to float up & out, spreading till the green hundred dollar bills cover the entire surface of the pool.

The expression on his face at this point (it's where the film ends: the credits begin to roll over the scene) is one you see now

only when Castro reads bad student work or fills out a grant form. Steely, grim, calloused & ironic.

There was always laughter in the audience, slightly rueful I think, at the evocation of Brian's disappointment or frustration—as regards the student work brought to him. Had they **experienced it?** had they **somehow avoided it?**

*you can see the intro lines up certain qualities and symbols*

there is Alain Delon (& 'the French');

the content is tough-ish;

it's genre-related;  
& it's 'cool'

And the robbery, at the last minute, **fails**. So, *'Realist'*.

#

Reading *The Postman*, I was pleased to detect a sketch of Brian's intellectual world. . . . . I mean, I had some idea, but I'm not a great fiction reader. Brian though, is about my age, so I had some idea.

Now you'll know *THERE IS* some parallel  
between the title's Postman ('Quinn') & the author,  
'Brian Castro'. (Some of the book's reviewers have figured this out  
— & it seems to be their chief insight.)

**Some of Brian's past enthusiasms**, one-time enthusiasms,  
maybe enthusiasms still current,  
**are given to the novel's protagonist.**

I noted that Brian mentions, for example, Italo Svevo's *As A Man Grows Older*, and *The Confessions of Zeno*. Both right on theme.

I myself have Svevo's 'letters home'—written from England, where he was selling to shipping lines the sea-resistant paint his company produced.

Svevo's novels are name-checked in Brian's book, AND Svevo himself.

OF COURSE! because to Brian he is especially sympathetic:

an author devoted to self-consciousness;

a friend of Joyce's;

in cosmopolitan a part of the world that housed many ethnicities & whose own identity kept changing. Trieste was multilingual, multicultural (across a Serbian, Swabian, Italian, Croatian etc spectrum)—long part of the Austro-Hungarian empire—and annexed after WWI to Italy, *but not securely*:

It nearly became part of Yugoslavia after World War Two.

Guessing at the world of ideas and reading that Brian brings to the novel I wondered which areas I might know as well as he does. (Not a great many.)

BUT . . . the book has the effect

of mobilising one's own store of  
knowledge, of 'summoning' it.

This is a facet *of all reading experiences* maybe. But it is remarkable that it might be more legitimately 'a fact' about *Chinese Postman* than about other novels: *Chinese Postman will be very different for different people*. In a way that is not at all true of *Slow Horses*, for example, or of Hemingway, Elizabeth Bowen, or David Malouf. (All of whom I like.)

You *might* wonder if the book is a machine that *plays you, the reader*, calling up whatever it is you know. And of having you take a certain *distance* from that knowledge—some perspective.

#

Paris is the international city heroized in Brian's mind.

Home to French artists and thinkers.

And home to a floating population of the displaced—*from everywhere*. Castro—whom I am here happily confusing with the novel's Abraham Quinn—

does not mention many/

does he mention **any (?)** *of the*

*French:*

he cites instead the *French-based* **outsiders**: CIORAN, CANETTI.

(No mention of Sartre or the other Parisians.)

No Germans are

mentioned—except Benjamin & Adorno—Jewish German thinkers.

In fact

—& it is time to say something of what this book is like—

in the early pages, as I marvelled at the writing, every sentence, almost, seeming to produce a fabulous insight, or wonderfully expressed conception. I remember thinking,

*Wow, this is as good as*

*Adorno.*



Moralia ))

#

What is the novel about? what does it **deal with?** or deal in?

*Chinese Postman* is philosophical:

- a look at memory, at ageing & age;
- a joke about the constraining patterns that old age can bring:  
patterns of thought or patterns of preoccupation & revision;

**thought about** desires—former, or lingering, or unachieved  
about goals, ideals, *fixations*

about a search for validation

- It is about the question of whether a life has a story or a shape  
(*and does it have a good one?*)
- & about the recognition that most of this will be in vain

*The novel* is partly an object lesson in the impossibility of  
PREPARING for death.

#

Structurally *Chinese Postman* presents

not so much a **Plot** as **A Situation**.

One that involves asymmetries, and uncertain elements. Can these be overcome, can the situation resolve into something acceptable?

The seeming near success in bringing this about,

& the actual failure at the last hurdle,

give a final irony:

the failure arrives *as an endorsement*, and *as foreseeable*

Quinn is caught-out

by *what, all along, might have been predicted*

**but**

if you're a pessimist, in losing you *win*.

as Quinn dies  
this failure will confirm his thinking  
& give him a chuckle:  
'Right Again!'

#

I was reminded fairly early in my reading, of Tarkovsky's movie *SOLARIS*. In it a space station orbits the planet of that name and the astronaut (sent to see what the trouble is with all the crew) has his own guilts & concerns revisit him in the person of imploring, wronged, but helplessly adoring former lovers (or 'a' former lover): the planet Solaris taps & amplifies elements of the human visitor's conscience.

In *Chinese Postman*, 'concerns'—self-reproaches, desperate self-defences, and various 'areas of interest'—return again & again. Sometimes tragically, at other times light-humoured, or they return as farcical.

These are sometimes to do with old 'affairs of the heart' & Quinn's personal history

At other times they will be, say, curious minor theses or bug-bears of Quinn's.

for example, *Quinn often returns to 'The Uncomfortable Toilet'*

— ((the **unnecessarily** uncomfortable toilet)) —

*as an index of Western puritanism* or hatred-of-'the body'.

This notion's regular return means we take it first as genuine insight & unarguable, then as a *pet fixation*

of the author/protagonist's,  
*then* as simply 'funny' or 'neurotic',

then again, as 'incisive'.

**Like everything else, it returns, always in different registers.**

Quinn has quite a bagfull of these—(these interesting problems, ideas, & memories-memories-memories, regrets, unrealised goals)—**They haunt him.**

. . . they are met, each time around,  
differently

with steely objectivity;  
with remorse; with warm nostalgia;  
they are sometimes corrected; explained,  
amplified

Or they are discarded,  
let play out, like water running into the sand.

Two quotes:

"Quinn thought in . . . . *vintages* of memory and desire . . . . old wounds."

"Perpetual longing; nostalgia; these are hypochondrias," says the book, "aggressive illnesses; wounds which are enjoyed"

#

Some of the reported memories will remain **with** you—the  
reader—almost as if  
they had happened *to you*.

Smells of coffee & sandalwood, for example, connect in the  
novel to death & sexual adventure—& there is a great incident,

fondly recalled, in which coffee is deliberately spilled on the protagonist in a friend's gesture of disapproval. Coffee is knocked from the table into the author's lap. But Quinn remembers he had then cheerfully gone about his amorous business.

Undaunted, Undeterred.

The friend's disapproval (the friend being an old girlfriend)—identifying his attitude and intent—Quinn takes/or had taken as a kind of endorsement.

The book makes it real, but the detail of the discomfitting spill also has the feel of Greek myth. The coffee stain symbolic like Achilles' heel.

Description and Ideas are the chief source of the pleasure *Chinese Postman* delivers.

Check the humour in this line, typical of the book—it comes, I think, near the end: it is subtle in its phrasing—gentle—but warrants a knowing laugh:

"Quinn felt bitter-sweet, an emotion that he understood was chronic in his life."

*Chinese Postman* is entertainingly thoughtful, vivid throughout,  
delicately thoughtful . . .  
and then cut-throat

AND FUNNY as well as Tragic.

I read every word in the book, and I liked them.

You will too.

END