

# Moral tales from the private world of a tormented race

**S**ERGE Liberman is a fine writer with an individual voice whose work deserves to be much better known. Part of the reason why his volumes of short stories have failed to reach a wider public is, no doubt, because this Russian-born and Melbourne-based medical practitioner publishes with small houses; but it is also a consequence of his highly personal, almost idiosyncratic, preoccupations. *The Battered and the Redeemed*, Liberman's fourth collection, displays the admirable strengths of his work.

At a time when most Australian writers of fiction are concerned with politico-sociological issues, when many flirt with fashionable literary and critical notions, Liberman's stories may seem doggedly old-fashioned, even perhaps outmoded, in their dedication to problems of morality, in their insistent scrutiny of the individual's responsibility to humanity, to the dictates of race, of culture and of religion. And, most significantly perhaps, these sketches, stories and longer narratives often face squarely something many modern writers tend to shun: the ubiquity of death; its presence, as the old saying goes, in the midst of life. This earnestness — this recognition of the essentially tragic nature of the human condition — could well alienate those readers who relish the socio-political conundrums and brittle artifice of much contemporary fiction. Liberman seems to be locked into a very private world of moral seriousness, the source, perhaps, of a limitation to his work which must be acknowledged.

That private world is the product of his background. The single mention of Liberman in the recent Penguin *Literary History of Australia* lumps him together with other "ethnic" or "first-generation migrant" writers. But he is sharply differentiated from his contemporaries — both immigrant and native-born — by the intensity of his preoccupation (or is it obsession?) with the agony and the privilege of being Jewish. All but one or

## THE BATTERED AND THE REDEEMED

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Reviewed by A. P. RIEMER

two of the stories in *The Battered and the Redeemed* are meditations on this theme. Within the narrow confines of Melbourne's Jewry — the setting of most of these stories — Liberman explores what it means to be Jewish, especially now, half a century after the death-factories, when the younger generation is beginning to forget what its parents and grandparents, uncles, cousins and more distant relatives suffered and how they died. Accordingly, the parents of a hospital intern are incapable of comprehending why he should have forgotten "who he is" in turning his back on decent Jewish girls and conducting a series of (in their eyes scandalous) affairs with gentiles. In another story, the mother of a young boy drags her unwilling son to learn the piano from a survivor of Theresienstadt who had survived simply because he made music for his captors while others died and burned.

In these stories Liberman reveals a sombre irony, registering the poignancy inherent in that determination to remember and to honour the victims of an atrocious world, while recognising, all along, that the price to be paid for such dedication is a descent into shrill, at times grotesque, obsessiveness, a ceaseless harping on what may seem ancient wrongs. Elsewhere his stories focus on the torment and self-doubt of the emancipated, secularised Jew who nevertheless finds himself haunted by his Jewishness. In two of the tales the central character fails to make the commitment (which is also a potential betrayal) urged on him by his love for a gentile. In "Requiem", for example, Mozart's music and the assertions of the Latin

mass provide the catalyst for severing the Jew and his *shikse*, driving them back to their respective ghettos: him to the Diaspora and her into a prim acceptance of Christianity.

Such, then, are the horizons of this distinguished collection. I cannot deny that there is a sense of relentlessness as Liberman pursues his preoccupations. But these stories are enriched by a resonance, by a sense of history, and by a recognition of the inevitability of suffering, pain and death which confer on his prose a sonority exceptional in recent Australian writing. The best pages and the best stories are those where a consciousness (usually, though not invariably, Jewish) plays on the mysteries which mould and shape life. In such places the writing pulses with the incantatory splendour of the *Old Testament*.

Because he is so fascinated by the processes of conscience, and because he seems so little interested in psychological, social or political phenomena, Liberman is relatively uneasy, it seems to me, when he tries to depict mundane affairs or the interaction of his characters. At times indeed, as in a longish story set among cultivated Manhattan Jews, there is something close to banality in his (to my mind) unconvincing attempts to convey civilised banter. But where the tormented or obsessed individual examines his conscience or discloses his innermost fears and anxieties — as St Paul does in a remarkable story in which he considers what human imperfection will do with the resplendent truth he has discovered on the road to Damascus — the results are moving and disturbing. *The Battered and the Redeemed* is a fine achievement. The errors in proof-reading and copy-editing, especially where Liberman uses French, Italian and Latin expressions, are unfortunate irritants, small blemishes in an otherwise memorable collection.

A. P. Riemer is Associate Professor of English at Sydney University.

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