

*Divisadero* by Michael Ondaatje (Bloomsbury) R259  
30 December 2007

A character in this latest novel of Ondaatje's teaches his illiterate young neighbour to read by reading aloud to her from the novels of Alexandre Dumas. When he loses his sight temporarily, his investment pays off: she can now continue the reading sessions for their shared pleasure.

That detail encapsulates much of this novel. The swashbuckling adventure of Dumas, admittedly, is toned down to suit the time frame (which extends over the twentieth century into the twenty-first), but the spirit of romance, of chivalry even, survives against the odds; and the interdependence of the two young people is characteristic of a novel in which people more often than not (which is not to say invariably) achieve more by cooperation than by competition. The one constant, surprising in a novel that has quite a violent surface, is the recurrence of mutual trust and assistance.

The novel is in fact a complicated interweaving of relationships, extending back in time from contemporary California to early twentieth-century France. The first part of the novel, "Anna, Claire and Coop", deals with three young people growing up on a farm in Northern California. Anna is the daughter of the owner; her mother died in childbirth, and the father brought home another baby, "the daughter of another mother, who had also died." Coop, the orphaned son of neighbours who had been massacred by a hired hand, was an earlier adoption.

From this nucleus the story radiates and ramifies. Coop and Anna start an affair; the father, coming upon them, almost kills Coop, and Anna almost kills her father, before fleeing, never to return.

Coop, when we meet him again, has become a professional gambler in Tahoe. He is taken under the wing of an established group of gamblers, who recognise and hone his talents, in a strangely harmonious symbiotic relationship; things go wrong only when Coop overplays his hand and cheats The Brethren, a band of born-again gamblers. Though his cheating is too subtle to be caught out, he is now a branded man and has to leave Tahoe. When we meet Anna, now "The Person Formerly Known as Anna", again, she is an archivist, researching the life of a twentieth-century French poet of the Gers region called Lucien Segura. She is in fact living in Segura's last home. Here she meets a guitar-playing half-gypsy called Rafael, who as a boy had known the old poet. Rafael's father was an amiable thief who had no permanent name, but whom readers of Ondaatje will want to recognise as David Caravaggio, the thief who features in both *An English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion*.

The story now doubles back to Claire, who has become another kind of researcher in San Francisco, working for the Public Defender's Office. On a mission to Tahoe, she bumps into Coop, who is back in town in pursuit of a strangely addictive drug addict called Brenda ...

That inadequate synopsis of part of the novel should convey something of the intricacy of the interrelated stories. The novel's controlling metaphor is a strange thirteenth-century belfry in the Gers, "constructed like a coil or a screw ... so that as it curved up it reflected every compass point of the landscape." Anna finds yet another metaphor for this doubling-back motion: "It's like a villanelle, this inclination of going back to events in our past, the way the villanelle's form refuses to move forward in linear development,

circling instead at those familiar moments of emotion. Only the rereading counts, Nabokov said. So the strange form of that belfry, turning into itself again and again, felt familiar to me.”

In a villanelle the same two rhymes recur in a varying pattern: an image, then, of constant return upon itself, which conveys something of the dizzying way in which the elements of this novel recur and refract. Thus the reader would be well advised to heed Nabokov’s caution: rereading may be required.

A *divisadero*, the novel tells us, is both a dividing line and a vantage point. There are many divisions in the novel – the novel itself is divided into an America and a European section, characters become separated from another by divisions of one kind or another – and a succession of towers serve as literal vantage points at crucial points of the story. But the narrative itself is of course our vantage point on these interrelated and yet divergent lives. We see more than a single character can see, but we see at any given moment only what a given character sees – as Anna says, in another ramifying metaphor, ‘the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are songlike in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue.’”

The “single monologue” of *Divisadero* is in fact a richly patterned and varied narrative. The sole drawback of Ondaatje’s technique is that we tend to become so engrossed in a single strand of the story that we experience it as a disruption when the novel abruptly switches to another strand. The total effect is of a wonderful meal of which each element is so good that one that would, if left to one’s own devices, gorge oneself on that one alone. Ondaatje wisely rations us, keeping our appetite alive for the next dish.