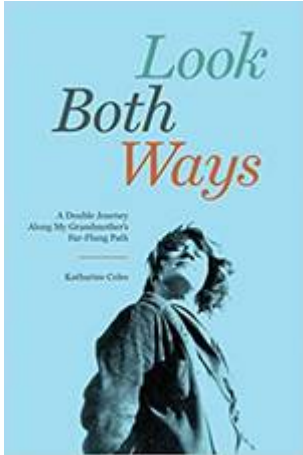


TEXT review

Voyages and voyaging

review by Jen Webb



Katharine Coles

Look Both Ways: A double journey along my grandmother's far-flung path

Turtle Point Press, New York 2018

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The writing of a book review is at once a privilege and a daunting task. The privilege is the opportunity to present one's own response to and evaluation of a new work. The problem is to treat book, author and reading public with respect; and to help build bridges between book/author and reader. There are few guides to the task beyond the exemplars already in the literature. Though literature reviews are at the heart of research, research has paid little attention to the writing of literary reviews. A four-page chapter that addresses how to review a medical book for a medical journal comfortingly points out that, 'Once you have accepted the invitation to do the review, it is a simple matter of reading the book and then writing your review' (Davies & Jardine 2013: np). Perhaps more usefully, many critics have castigated review writers for the strings of clichés on which we rely. Reading through their lists (e.g. Harris 2008; Flood 2010), and reflecting on the reviews I have written, I find to my shame that I reach "book review bingo" all too quickly.

With that *mea culpa*, I begin this review; albeit with some anxiety because *Look Both Ways* deserves all the encomiums listed in Book Review Bingo, and deserves a response that at least attempts to be writerly, and sensitive to Katharine Coles' supple, graceful prose. She writes: 'Voyager: from voir, to see, through my eyes and theirs' (68), and it is with this in mind that I approach this book.

Viewed as family history, the book initially propels me toward Tolstoy's dictum: 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way' (2006 [1877]: 1). Certainly, an unhappy family has stronger

narrative potential than a happy one, if only because it exploits the (almost) three Cs: Conflict, Change and unCertainty, which are both present and attenuated in *Look Both Ways*. Coles' grandmother, Miriam (16 years old when the book opens, in 1923) is a creature of conflict, always battering against the constraints placed on her – by virtue, primarily, of her gender – and hence always in a state of change and uncertainty. She is at the same time a comparatively privileged individual: a US citizen who lived as part of that empire's economic and scientific mission; who has sharp intelligence; and who interrogates and rejects social mores.

That is on the credit side of her ledger. On the debit side is having been born decades too early to have legal rights or access to an intellectually satisfying career; her wandering eye, in a period where dalliances and divorce, at least for women, were not easily incorporated into social life; and her mother Mandy and geologist husband Walter who seem to conspire to keep her *cabined, cribbed, confined* (Shakespeare c1623). Their representations of Miriam have a slightly sinister edge, casting her as 'little girl', 'little girl-wife', and though the years move on with the story, they seem unable to recognise her as adult.

Initially Miriam complies with this narrative; she marries Walter, and becomes a 'Standard Oil wife' (79), which allows her to travel widely, live in enchanted and enchanting spaces, and experience the world beyond Wisconsin. But it also ties her to a husband without glamour (23), in a relationship without sexual pleasure – '*he leaves me absolutely cold, physically. And I can't let him know*' (108). Walter has won his prize; she is left with empty hands – '*I have nothing and no one, not even sewing*' (126). It's a bleak vision for those who hold to *happily ever after*. For Miriam, it's: '*when you get married it's all over*' (69).

It is Miriam's story, she who is 'so vivid in person, so hard to turn away from' (41). In a different version, Walter would be the hero: cosmopolitan, brilliant, physically attractive, physically courageous, '*absolutely a man!*' (19). He lives an extraordinary life, ploughing through dangerous territories, discovering the heretofore undiscovered. He is often away from home, in the company of other men, finding sexual release with other women, keeping Miriam on a string, waiting. 'He gets to do anything. She gets to feel his eyes linger on her face, move down her neck' (123). Miriam tries to convince herself: '*If only we could live together permanently, I could submerge all my interests and abilities and live entirely his way and so I shall sometime*' (109). But, the narrative observes, 'Desire was her condition. No matter where she was or what she had, she saw what was missing' (126). So, inevitably, she finds alternatives: produces children, falls in and out of love, discovers she can make her own income, starts to build an independent life, to start over.

Set out like this, it sounds like the tale of a Tolstoy unhappy marriage, but it is much more than this. It is a feminist tract, a philosophic treatise, a personal memoir – the latter because, threaded through the story of Miriam (and Walter) is the story of Katharine (and Chris), whose marriage most encouragingly avoids most of the disasters of the earlier generation. In the contrast between the two, the real sadness emerges: Miriam and Walter stand as synecdoches for all the mismatched people in the world. Coles asks:

Why not imagine a different fate for them? Why can't I write a love story, two people bound even by difference, bound across time and space by words that might be

burning, here, on my page, if they hadn't burnt out already?
(109-10)

I can't help reading my own early marriage through the mirror of Miriam and Walter; can't help experiencing my own regrets at wasted years, my relief at the second chance. And I doubt I am alone in this.

Threaded through these human tales is the world itself, and the book is veined with exquisite writing about the natural environment. In these I see lines of connection with the writings of other women – Rachel Carson, Margaret Atwood, Amy Stewart, Barbara Kingsolver, Helen MacDonald – and it occurs to me that how a scientist sees the world is not so unlike the artist's view [1]. We are all, perhaps, 'voyagers' (from *voir*, to see). The seeing flickers from the vast stage of the globe to the narrow confines of personal life, in prose that is sometime wry, sometimes sharp, but always tender, illuminating the logic of 20th-century ways of living – in intimate relationships, in international relations, and in connection with the natural world.

Note

[1] Yes, this is a very 'white' list of names. It is not easy to identify CALD women authors in this category in Australia or in the UK. Indeed, in his interview with Forestry Commission writer-in-residence Zakiya McKenzie, Patrick Barkham describes 'the extremely white worlds of both conservation and British nature-writing' (2019). return to text

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