

Wait For Me, Jack

by Addison Jones

Sandstone Press

Reviewed by Alison Napier

It is a while since I have encountered 'reverse chronology' in a new novel despite it having been utilised by luminaries such as Martin Amis, Iain Banks and Virgil. Hence my surprise when having read the first chapter of Addison Jones' fine new novel to find that after the initial chapter the narrative leapt immediately to the end of the tale with the two main protagonists within a whisker of death.

Each subsequent chapter then leads the reader back in time until the opening chapter is finally reached and repeated once more at the end of the book. I do hope this makes sense.

In less assured hands this could seem an annoying and unnecessary writerly gimmick. The anticipation of 'what will happen now?' is removed as we always know what has happened. What we don't know however is why and how it happened and the effect of reading is transformed into one of an anxious awareness of the future such as the loss of a child, an injury, an abrupt change of job, and waiting to learn the circumstances that led to such momentous events. So the reading becomes an exercise in patience. More than once did I resist the temptation to start the book at the end and work forwards in time.

But staying with the process and the idiosyncrasy is rewarded for we are immediately drawn into the American West Coast of the 1950s where Jacko and Billie are respectively a copy writer and a typist in Perkins Petroleum Products, San Francisco. In different ways they are each reinventing themselves and pursuing their own individualised American Dreams but as the years pass we watch the glossy sheen gradually wear thin on these dreams and the self-deceptions that are required to create the glue that might hold them in place grow ever more urgent.

Jack and Millie (even the name changes are poignant attempts at new identities) live out their long lives in a groove parallel to the lives they were sure they were destined for. Millie longs for an education and Jack is always almost writing a novel. Their children are over the years a delight, a disappointment, a mystery and, finally, their primary support system.

The novel spans the years between 1950 and 2014 and references all the major events of these 64 years. The assassinations and the brands, the television programmes and the

popular music, the meal plans, the social movements (beatniks, hippies) and the slang, all are meticulously placed in their decades with a precision that avoids the self-conscious shoe-horn.

But regardless of the dodgy fashion choices and uncomfortable soft furnishings what we have here is the story of a marriage that survived, rightly or wrongly, all the turbulences of these years. It begins with cigarettes and flirting and rapidly arrives at hints of disappointment that the dream is not all it promised. Yet the loyalty that each has to the other, and to the shared history of their heroic battles and tiny triumphs, creates a bond that survives temptations, infidelities and these uniquely American decades, a period that offered so many illusions and aspirations yet held them fractionally out of reach of the 'just about managing' majority. Plus ça change.

So be assured that this, right from the finish to the very start, is a darned fine novel indeed.