Bernard Beckett

Lullaby

Australia (2015)

TAGS: Catharsis Mimesis Theatre



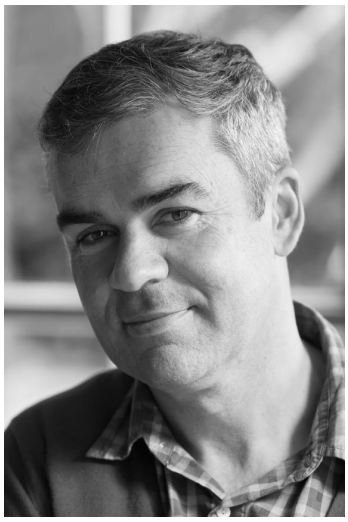


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General information	
Title of the work	Lullaby
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2015
First Edition Details	Bernard Beckett, *Lullaby*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015, 202 pp.
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Genre	Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Novels, Science fiction
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Portrait of Bernard Beckett. Courtesy of The Text Publishing Company.

Bernard Beckett , b. 1967
(Author)

Bernard Beckett a New Zealand writer. Born in Featherston and lives in the Wellington region with his wife and three young children. He combines two careers as high school teacher (he teaches English, Drama, Mathematics and Science) in the Wellington region and author. His writing includes several novels (young adult fiction) and dramas. His novels have received a number of prices, including winner and finalist of the NZ Post book award.

Sources:

Profile at the www.bookcouncil.org.nz (accessed: July 4, 2018).

Official website and blog (accessed: July 4, 2018).

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Additional information

Summary

This novel is the third and last volume of a trilogy with *Genesis* and *August.* It is set in a world like ours, but more advanced in regards to stem cell research. People have stem cell banks and it is possible to use these to re-grow organs in order to prolong healthy lives. Only the brain cannot be regrown in this way.

18-year-old Theo had an accident in which his body has remained intact, but all his brain function has been permanently destroyed. Scientist Dr. Huxley sees this as the unique chance to try to copy the information of Theo's twin-brother Rene's brain into Theo's brain. In order to go ahead with the procedure, he needs Rene's assent (Theo and Rene are orphans, so Rene is Theo's only living close relative) and an assessment of Rene's mental state in order to determine if he is fit to make such an ethically ambiguous and risky assessment. Since this procedure has no precedent, it is unclear what will be the outcome for either of the boys.

Rene is now in the same hospital as Theo to see his brother and to be assessed by Maggie, a hospital psychologist. He tells her the story of his life as a twin: the identical twins as children swapping roles at times and pretending to be each other, their parents' death and their growing apart over school and girls as teenagers. Rene was academically stronger and more thoughtful and sensitive than his brother. Theo was more popular with his peers and girls, but also more selfish and somewhat controlling over Rene. Rene often looked up to his brother, while Theo used Rene's feelings of guilt for being academically stronger, in order to manipulate Rene. When Theo had a one-night-stand with Emily, the girl Rene had recently started to see, Rene decided to stand up to his brother and, in revenge, applied to the same drama school that Emily and Theo wished to attend, even though Rene was not particularly interested in learning drama. Because he studied hard, he was admitted (and so was Emily), but Theo was not. Theo was devastated and his life began to unravel, while Rene moved in with Emily and experienced great happiness in their relationship. After a while, feeling guilty and in order to help Theo, Rene returned home and even offered to swap roles with Theo, so that he could spend a day with Emily pretending to be Rene. They went ahead with their plan, but on the day of the swap Theo was electrocuted.

Maggie, the hospital psychologist, has confused the twins' names and

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not told Emily that it is not in fact Rene, whom she thought she had been spending the day with and is now in a coma, but Theo. She notices this mistake only when Rene comes to the point in his story where he talks about swapping places with Theo that very day. Both Maggie and Rene tell Emily, who is sitting in a hospital waiting room. She is at first unbelieving, thinking, Theo was trying to trick her, then shocked and hurt. She leaves and comes back with a journalist, planning to expose the identity mistake and the ethically extremely ambiguous procedure Dr Huxley is planning to undertake. Both Emily and the journalist only get a brief chance to talk to Rene, but manage to advise him against the procedure. The journalist is removed by hospital security and Emily leaves angrily.

Rene, Dr Huxley and Maggie have a meeting, in which Maggie testifies that Rene is capable to make the decision whether he wishes to do the procedure or not. Rene now has half an hour left to make his decision, before Theo will be dead. The doctor and psychologist leave him alone, but Maggie indicates that she would like to talk to Rene in private. They secretly meet and Maggie advises him not to go ahead with the procedure and warns him of the dangers of two bodies waking up with the same identity and the possibility of an exchange of the two identical looking boys after the procedure.

After Rene remembers a running race at the beach with Theo (it is important here, that it is not Rene, but Theo who won this race – Rene has clearly learned that they need each other and it is more important that they can be together than who is “winning” in their competitive relationship), he makes the decision to go ahead with the procedure as it is the only way to at least save some part of his brother, i.e. his body. Before it is done, Emily returns and gives Rene a secret cut in his armpit which Rene can hide from the doctors. Since both boys after the procedure will wake up not just looking identical, but also with exactly the same memories, in fact Theo thinking he was Rene, this will be a way for them and Emily to know who of the twins is who after the procedure, as both boys will remember the pain of the cut, but only Rene will have the scar.

The plan is that after the procedure, Rene can return to his normal life, but Theo will be sent away for a year so that both can make new, different memories and so regain different identities. The procedure is successful, but in diary entries (printed on opposing pages, one in bold print, the other in normal print) each boy now describes what is happening after they have woken from the anesthesia. Their reports

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are almost identical, but then it is Rene (with the scar) who is taken away by the doctors, not Theo.

Analysis

The title of the novel is an allusion to the play *Rockaby* by another author of the same last name, Samuel Beckett. Rockaby is an allusion to the traditional lullaby about the baby whose cradle is in the tree top and falls down. Both Samuel Becket's play and Bernard Beckett's novel deal with the themes of birth and death from the children's song. Since Beckett has twin boys of his own (born in 2010), the topic of twins will be close to his heart.

Beckett's work is informed by reading in the Western Canon, and an interest in Classical philosophy. Though this novel does not structurally refer to classical matters, there is a lightly balanced reception that flows through the novel, in names, in parallels, and some plot matters.

Protagonist's name Theo is Greek, short for Theodore, meaning "present of god", which alludes to Dr Huxley (his name is also an obvious reference to Aldous Huxley and his 1932 novel *Brave New World*) and his colleagues trying to "play god" with the possibilities of stem cell research and even going so far in their experiments that they actually exchange the two boys without their consent. There is a direct reference to immortality and gods in regards to doctors in this book. Dr Huxley sees Theo's and Rene's case as a singular opportunity to try out his procedure of copying the information of one brain onto another, so Theo is in a way a god-sent gift to this scientist. The name Rene is French and derives from Latin *renatus* = re-born, a reference to Theo getting another chance of life after his electrocution though Rene, even though with a crucial twist: in his second life, he will have his brother's identity, not his own.

There is a reference each (both on the same page!) to vase painting (regarding feminine beauty) and Socrates (a re-phrase about knowing that one knows nothing). The discussion of the soul at the end of the work seems to be more influenced by Christian doctrine than Socratic teachings.

The topic of theatre plays a central role in the novel, both in a direct way – with Theo's and Rene's involvement in a school production and drama school auditions, which are both tightly connected with the

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love-story with Emily – and indirectly, in Rene trying to play his role in a way to convince Maggie that he is capable to make a decision regarding his brother and the procedure and, especially, in the question of how much playing another person makes you partly become this person, the concepts of a collective imagination and audience feedback (with possible, indirect references to *mimesis*, tragic illusion and perhaps *catharsis*).

The plot of the novel has some similarities to a Greek tragedy: Rene, who has finally achieved great happiness (in his relationship with Emily and being on top in the competitive relationship with his brother), suffers a sort of tragic fall and has to face himself and his guilt. The theme of mistaken identities reminds one more of a comedy or errors, though here with tragic consequences which are not resolved by the end of the book.

Rene is in some ways like a typical tragic hero. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero should evoke pity and fear in the audience when undeserved misfortune befalls him. Rene appears to somewhat fit this profile, as he, by trying to help his brother with the swap, puts him unwittingly in the situation where he has the accident. When he tries to help him a second time by undergoing the brain information procedure, he himself is taken away from his old life, against his will. Rene is isolated as the last living member of his family and, while he is generally morally good, when he got carried away and used his superior intelligence to win over Theo in the drama school admission and in love, a chain of tragic developments is set in motion.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Catharsis Mimesis Theatre
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Childhood Death Dementia Emotions Family Future Identity Life Loss Love Peers Psychology Relationships School Science Siblings Success and failure Theatre Twins Values

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Further Reading

Jackson, A. et al., *A Made Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011.

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