

# ELIZABETH MCMAHON

Moreno Giovanonni, *The Fireflies of Autumn: and other Tales of San Ginese*

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Receiving, reading and reviewing this book is a particular pleasure for *Southerly*, which published three sections of it as the manuscript was being developed. David Brooks and I independently selected Moreno Giovanonni's work for respective issues we were editing and were in complete agreement that Giovanonni's essays and fiction presented a truly original and compelling new voice in Australian literature. So I was unsurprised but thrilled to see that Black Inc had published *The Fireflies of Autumn*. Nor was I surprised that the book was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction 2019 and the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction 2018 and listed by Helen Garner as one of her favourite books in 2018. I was more prepared than others for the full volume. And yet, I was not. It is one of the most affecting books I have ever read.

*The Fireflies of Autumn* maps the collection of hamlets that comprise San Ginese, the author's ancestral home and birthplace in Tuscany. If, by that description, you are imagining the genre in which various outsiders decamp to beautiful villas and experience renewal, think again! This is a very different Tuscany and Giovanonni renders San Ginese in its intricate specificity and its shifting place in globalised modernity, including global labour markets, migration and the sweep of global war. Life is hard in San Ginese, often brutally so, and the interwoven stories map temporary and permanent immigration to the United States, Britain and Australia from the early twentieth century to the present, as villagers search for ways out of subsistence living. The proximity and distance of national and international politics to this small place are also measured in those stories that detail the life and death of the San Ginese during World War II and its aftermath.

*The Fireflies of Autumn* moves between fiction and personal history replete with a list of characters and a family genealogy as an appendix. So, too, the line between author and narrator is variously crossed and reasserted in the various tales as the "visitor" returns periodically from Australia. These are hardly new approaches and effects but in this text they are integral to the longing of the "migrant," the "translator" narrator, which fuels the narrative and binds the disparate stories and characters. It is the shades and modes of this longing that are so powerful when the tales are read in their inter-relationship, in the ways they inflect each other and accrete.

In the opening and framing address to the Reader, Ugo (the narrator's father) recounts and lists the losses of migration: the places, people, language and memories. *The Fireflies of Autumn* is thus framed as a document of recollection. There is a sense of urgency in recording the lives of people and places who are not only missing from mainstream historical accounts but, with migration, from shared family memories.

The stories relate the many inferences of the migrant's non-arrival, of their permanent deferral of homecoming. The narrator's visits from Australia to San Ginese are not the long-awaited return of *The Odyssey* nor the celebratory reclamation of the prodigal son. Instead they expose mutual loss, compromise and unbridgeable distance. In one such experience, in "The Dead Boy," the "Visitor" sits at a table with the elderly parents of a childhood friend who has been dead for 20 years:

The Visitor tries to explain that their son was another of those people whom he'd known once, for a short while, and who has died before he had a chance to say goodbye, and that the cemetery is not full of people like that. The old couple say nothing and wait for him to finish and go away. (212)

Understood as gestures of longing, the tales of San Ginese are bridges and calibrations of distance and closeness. The close-ups of the villagers portray the complexity of the individual and collective understandings of identity and experience. The monikers attributed to individuals by the community are often brutally specific—"The Imbeciles," "The Adulteress," "Tommaso the Killer"—and echo fabular storytelling. They work simultaneously to characterise and de-personalise individuals and are emblematic of a kind of collective first-person perspective that binds community, narrator and reader. One acute example is the desperate story "The Imbeciles and the Fig Tree." By the conclusion, the two imbecile sisters have lost everything: their family, their cow, chickens and goose and, finally, their fig tree does not fruit. They sit waiting for spring to see if the curse that has afflicted them will lift:

... and they sat, they sat, holding each other by the hand, just inside the door of their freezing, crumbling, clay brick house, looking out, guarding their tree, waiting for spring, waiting for the fig to produce fruit, sat, their eyes large and round and sunken in their sockets, sat, their lips thin and the skin stretched with hunger across their cheeks, sat together, waiting. (35)

This time of waiting is a travesty of longing for it has no momentum. The tableaux, which is all about the future, also refuses the future by its stasis.

*The Fireflies of Autumn* is also a comedic work in the tradition of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (another Tuscan). It is fiction that sympathises with the human comedy and is deeply pleasurable in its depictions of "absurd" logic and perception that upturn conventional narrative lines and the behaviour of literary characters. The constant disruption to bourgeois understandings of cause and effect in the stories works to construct alternative textual co-ordinates that, amongst much else, refuse the expectations of realism and individualism. We readers are taken outside ourselves to take up the text's invitation to enter into the lives of others. The great irony of the *The Fireflies of Autumn* is that the reader is fully transported to another world in a way the narrator/visitor can never be. For the world of the text is not another world for this narrator or the migrant subject more generally. It is not only fiction but a dilemma written into the souls of "migrants [who] never arrive at their destination."

## About the author

**Elizabeth McMahon** teaches in the School of the Arts and Media at UNSW. She has published widely in the fields of Australian literature and Island Studies. She has edited *Southerly* since 1998, alongside David Brooks until his retirement in 2018.