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Intersex fettle leaves sinking feeling

FICTION

THE SINKINGS. By Amanda Curtin.
 University of Western Australia
 Press. 381pp. \$24.95.

Reviewer: **PETER PIERCE**

For investigations into genetic roots, ancestral heritages, family secrets, the elusive but alluring stories from the past, Australian fiction seems to have a thirst that cannot be slaked. But in her first novel, the dolorously titled *The Sinkings*, Amanda Curtin has made the quest for origins both stranger, and more intimate. Near the present time, lonely book editor and researcher Willa Sansom is grieving for her lost daughter, Imogen, whom she has perhaps unconsciously doomed with the name of one of the lost children in Shakespeare.

Now Imogen and her mother may never be reunited, but Willa might come to understand how her daughter's "intersex" condition (sex organs and chromosomes neither definitely male nor female) may have been inherited from the former convict who passed in Western Australia as John King, better known as Little Jock, the last of his many names. In October 1882, at a campsite called The Sinkings, outside Albany, he was murdered, and violently

dismembered. The essence of the mystery is not who did this, but how Jock lived with, and disguised his sexually ambiguous condition for many years – in Ireland, England and, finally, in Australia.

Willa's researches begin with contemporary accounts from the Supreme Court of Little Jock's murder and the trial of his killer. They will lead her far away and deep into the tantalisingly close, but ultimately irretrievable, structures and shifts of families. For John King was more likely Peter (or perhaps Patrick) Lennie (or Lunney, or Loney – orthographical exactitude not being strictly practised among the 19th century poor). Aided by a keen and kindly internet correspondent in Scotland, Willa eventually feels compelled to travel to Britain and Ireland, there to troll through what records have survived; to search for places that usually have not. The author's own historical research for this novel shadows that of her protagonist, lending it sympathy, and conviction.

Incidentally almost, *The Sinkings* is the story of the failure of a marriage. When Willa was diagnosed with a subfertility condition, she and her husband Matthew hardly hesitated, undeterred by mention of rare "negative outcomes", before she took a fertility drug. But the marriage did not long survive Imogen's birth and "when he

left, it was like the completion of a sigh". Much more terrible is Imogen's outburst when Willa complains about her going out, drinking, living the semblance of a late teenage life: "What were you frightened of, Mother? I'd already been raped, remember? Vaginal Dilation by Loving Parent" (as the gynaecologist had instructed).

Curtin never falls into the historical novelist's familiar trap of overloading the narrative with period detail. When she is specific, her choices are telling. There is the shipboard journal of the convict transport Clara, which brings John/Jock to Western Australia, *A Voice of Our Exiles*. Its "voice" is "lofty, witty, classically educated and quintessentially Victorian". This is not at a rhetorical distance, if not so far removed in fact from the prison environment that Jock endured on land, where "the warder returned after dark with an iron bar and a tub of mutton fat".

The Sinkings is a calm, closely worked performance, artfully sustained, perhaps further than its material can stand, but the work of a writer in command both of her prose and of the intricate, unconsoling story that she tells

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