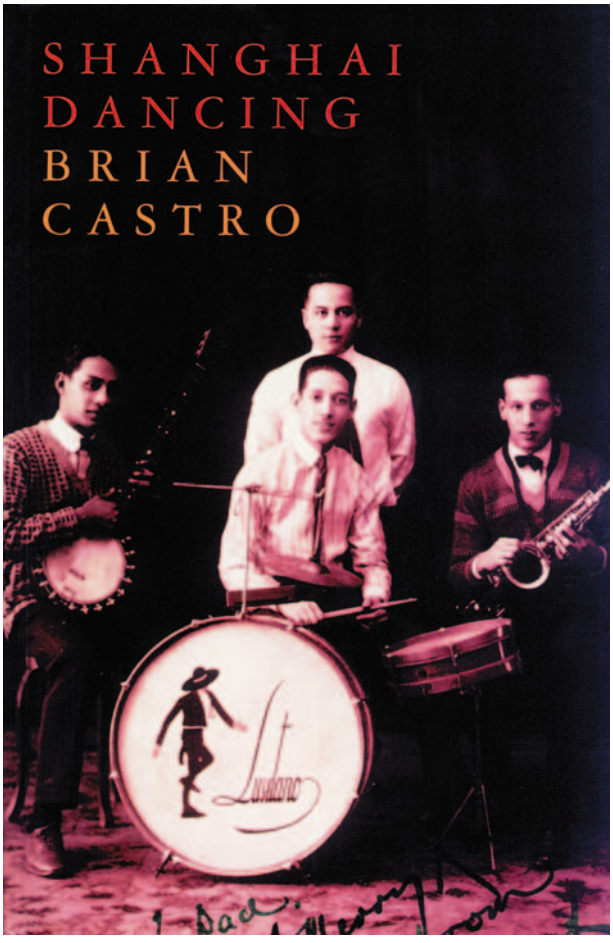

Shanghai Dancing

Brian Castro
Artarmon NSW, Giramondo Publishing Co., 2003
pp.xii+449
ISBN 0 9578311 8 8

DAVID BROOKSHAW*

Brian Castro is one of Australia's foremost contemporary writers, author of seven novels to date and a book of essays. *Shanghai Dancing* is probably his most ambitious novel yet, and one that contains themes present or hinted at in some of his previous novels: the quest motif and thriller element that characterized *Pomeroy*, and the interest in and discussion of deracination, duplicity and hybrid multiplicities that runs through his other works of fiction such as *Birds of Passage* and *After China*, both of which focus on Chinese migration to Australia, and *Stepper*, a novel of espionage set in Japan during the 1930s. In the author's own words, *Shanghai Dancing* is a "fictional autobiography (…) loosely based on my family's life in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macau from the 1930s to the 1960s". The historical range, however, is far wider, and extends back to the Dutch wars of the seventeenth century and the reconstruction of the circumstances that brought Israel Castro to the Far East from Brazil, while at the other end of the timescale, it comes up to the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997.

The narrative is based on family stories and memories, which are both enlivened by and breathe life into the grainy black and white photos of relatives and scenes from pre-war Shanghai. In many ways, the novel is a homage to the author's parents, Arnaldo José, a Shanghai Portuguese businessman, jazz musician, part-time policeman and volunteer soldier, *bon viveur*,

* Professor of Luso-Brazilian Studies at the University of Bristol, England. His specialist interest is in the field of colonial and post-colonial literary discourse. He has published widely on Brazilian and Lusophone African literatures, and is also a literary translator. His most recent book, *Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature – Border Gates*, is currently at press.

Professor de Estudos Luso-Brasileiros na Universidade de Bristol, Inglaterra. Investigador da área de teoria literária colonial e pós-colonial. Tem vasta obra publicada sobre literatura brasileira e da África lusófona, sendo também tradutor literário. A sua mais recente obra ensaística (Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature – Border Gates) *está actualmente no prelo.*

womaniser, whose fortune is lost when the city falls to the Japanese, and Jasmine Xixiu Wing, daughter of a Chinese doctor and English missionary. The family seeks refuge in Hong Kong, Arnaldo José survives internment during the Japanese occupation, and the family has to begin its struggle for survival after the war. By this time, António (Castro's narrator and *doppelgänger*) is born, and by 1961, like the author himself, is packed off to boarding school in Australia by an impetuous, authoritarian father, determined that he should learn English, an act for which he is repaid when, to his chagrin, the son embarks on a literary rather than a business career. In writing a work of fiction that is so close to the life experiences of himself and his family, Castro indulges one of his favourite postmodern themes, which is to demonstrate the inter-relationship between so-called historical fact and fiction, and, as part of this process, to write himself into his narrative, melding with his own fictional creation, and by so doing re-inventing himself. Thus, António, like his creator, Brian Castro, was born on a ferry between Macao and Hong Kong in the middle of a typhoon. When António returns to Macao at the end of *Shanghai Dancing* in pursuit of questions relating to his family's past, he again escapes the grip of that past along with its ghosts on the last ferry before a typhoon: he therefore undergoes a re-birth.

The central metaphor of the novel is, of course, dance. It is enhanced by the picture on the book's very cover, the dated photo of the jazz combo of the Clube Lusitano, the time-honoured association of the Hong Kong Portuguese, which reached its zenith during the period covered by the novel. Notwithstanding the definitions of 'Shanghai dancing' that Castro playfully gives us (syphilis, a rite of passage) to underscore the significance of the title of his novel, it is tempting to see the very act of dancing as an entirely self-contained ritual, unconscious of either past or future: before the music begins, there is no dancing, when it ends, the dancing stops. Like the dancer, Castro's father and his generation were focussed only on the present, a borrowed time, like life itself, of making money and enjoying the luxury and promiscuity that Shanghai seemed to offer its foreign settlers in the 1920s and 30s. But like the medieval Dance of Death, Castro's metaphor is both a warning to powerful men and an invitation to recall the shortness of life. Dancing is, therefore, both ritual (and rite of passage, as Castro tells us), and a celebration of life, improvisation and cadence. It is also a repeated ritual that runs through the 'incautious' Latin side of Castro's family down the ages. Equally, as a metaphor for life, it contains within it the danger of death, which is why it can also be a ritual of entrapment: Isaac Castro dances with the fair Isabella, even as he is being accused of sympathizing with the Dutch in their battle with the Portuguese for control of Recife in 1643; Arnaldo dances the night away in Shanghai even as the city is under threat from the invading Japanese; António escapes the seduction of his cousin, Cindy Ling, on the dance floor of the Bela Vista Hotel in the Macao of 1997, thus avoiding the possibility of being drawn into the twilight business dealings of Lobo Ling, triad boss and gambling tycoon.

With the exception of a handful of works by writers rooted in Macao, Brian Castro's latest *tour de force* is the first novel in any language to evoke the experience of the Portuguese Eurasians in China, the oldest of any western diaspora in East Asia. *Shanghai Dancing* reminds us of the origins of this community deep in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It reminds us of the crucial role played by New Christian traders and adventurers who fled the Inquisition in their Iberian homeland to travel the trade routes between Brazil, Africa, the Indian Ocean and the China seas, mingling with the populations they met on the way. It reminds us of how the city of Macao developed, and its importance as a hub in a network that included Malacca, Manila and Japan, and later the treaty ports of China. Like many writers whose cultural roots lie in communities whose halcyon era, socially and economically, lay in an age of European colonial hegemony, communities which have been dispersed into other diasporas, Castro's fictional world is one haunted by the weight of the past and a sense of loss. In this, he is like Ondaatje and Naipaul. This is why the stitching together of a past from fragments of memory, family tales and myths, the deciphering of documents and even photos, is an act of historical narration, a way of coming to terms with that past. Yet countering that sense of loss, the act of writing itself celebrates Castro's multiple, cosmopolitan affiliations, questioning notions of essentialism and, in the manner of his distant Luso-African cousins, Mia Couto and José Eduardo Agualusa, suggesting that identity is a continuous creative process rather than a fixed state. RC