

Review

Forster, R. 2016. *Grant and I: Inside and Outside the Go-Betweens*. Melbourne: Hamish Hamilton. ISBN 978-0-67007-8-226. 341 pp.

Reviewed by: Matthew Bannister, WINTEC, New Zealand
matthew.bannister@wintec.ac.nz

Keywords: The Go-Betweens; Australian popular music; independent music; alternative music; 1980s; gender

The Go-Betweens now have two fascinating books about them, this and David Nichols's 2003 biography, which is two more than most bands get. But the Go-Betweens were always literate: Robert Forster met Grant McLennan in an English class at the University of Queensland. No wonder academics love them. They wrote songs to librarians; even their name is a literary, or more likely a film, reference. Originally, they were the Godots ('the band everyone's been waiting for').

Forster and McLennan reacted to the dictatorship-cum-cultural wasteland of 1970s Brisbane by cultivating arty, bohemian personae, losing themselves in pop culture and ultimately forming a band. 'At times we barely thought of ourselves as musicians, but as conductors of a whole set of ideas and influences that got their best expression through a pop band' (48). They exemplified 80s indie rock masculinity: geeky, arty, androgynous name-droppers, like David Byrne, Tom Verlaine or Jonathan Richman—the antithesis of the metallor's greasy machismo or the pub rocker's sporty blokishness. Unworldliness was their creed: McLennan 'seemed remarkably unattached from the start; his connection to the world ... was through the things he loved, even as they disconnected him further from the world around him' (29). It was also their downfall; McLennan's anyway.

Emotionally unattuned guys in pursuit of Great Art is a familiar theme, from John Keats to Nick Hornby and Wes Anderson. But they can't do it alone: 'Built into the frame of the band was the idea of having a woman as a third member ... every book or movie we liked had female characters' (53). Enter Lindy Morrison, definitely not the girl of their celluloid dreams. Forster: 'she was six years older than me, far more outgoing, politically engaged'. Nichols perceptively points out: 'She was not likely to fall in with their flights of fancy involving Warhol-style clubs with girls in fishnet stockings on trapezes, nor to have the respect they did for a more traditional sexist like Bob Dylan' (2003: 96). Art and life collided in other

ways when Morrison and Forster paired up. Forster: 'I would not have been overly sensitive to the threat Lindy might pose ... to Grant' (59) (never mind the threat Grant posed to Lindy). Grant kept his 'cards hugged to the chest, his emotional side always in check ... for Lindy, who lived on raw nerves and confession, it fanned a growing frustration she had with him' (102).

The subtext of *Grant and I* is about the post-punk consequences of men and women playing together in bands: Tina Weymouth and Talking Heads, Kim Deal and the Pixies, Kim Gordon and Sonic Youth, Jane Dodd and the Verlaines, Kat Tyrie and Sneaky Feelings, and the conflicts that arose. Not so much on an artistic level—Morrison's drumming helped make the Go-Betweens unique, as did Kim Deal or Tina Weymouth's bass playing and singing in their bands. Men, however, were usually the majority, wrote the songs and called the shots, and if the women, usually in the minority, didn't like it, they generally had to leave. However, the addition of multi-instrumentalist Amanda Brown to the Go-Betweens in 1986 changed the group balance of power, Brown initially joining at Morrison's request.

This is something Forster and McLennan seem to have overlooked when they blithely decided to break up the group in 1989 without consulting Morrison and Brown first. A monumental blunder, but one consistent with McLennan and Forster's peculiar *folie à deux*, in which art trumps life. But life generally has the last word. And so it was here—the group's end was also the end of McLennan's relationship with Brown, dealing him a blow from which he never recovered.

So who won? The Go-Betweens went on to claim a small place in music history, at the price of the perhaps avoidable death of McLennan, whose decline and fall Forster chronicles with tact, sensitivity and a slightly disturbing fatalism. It is almost as if Forster is living, or rather dying, vicariously through his partner, despite his claim that their band's story would never 'be mirrored in rock biographies' (89). Morrison and Brown have never received much kudos and it would be interesting to hear their story, but perhaps they would not wish to buy back into the rock and roll fantasy, which is ultimately a male fantasy. Forster's witty, arty book reveals, perhaps inadvertently, the cost of keeping that dream alive.

References

Nichols, D. 2003. *The Go-Betweens*. Portland, OR: Verse Chorus.