

Visitants

First published by Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1979

It is 1959 and an enquiry is being held on the island of Kailuana in the Territory of Papua. The Assistant District Officer has arrived to preside, accompanied by young Dalwood and the Government interpreter. Mr MacDonnell has been the only white man on the island for many years and is a familiar figure to the natives who work in his crumbling house or support possible candidates to succeed Dipapa, the tribal chief. The Australian administrators who pay infrequent visits are as strange to them as are the visitants from the stars who people a new space-age version of one of their myths.

The confrontation between two different civilisations and the subsequent culture shock is the theme of this remarkable novel. As five different people give their own version of the violent events which led to the official enquiry, the protagonists and a host of minor characters come vividly to life.



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Abridged Review from Tony Hassell.

While its gestation was difficult and protracted, *Visitants*, as many reviewers observed, was worth waiting for. As economical as the best short fiction of Conrad, which Stow admires, *Visitants* is tautly and vibrantly written and brilliantly evocative of its Trobriand Islands setting. Its complex multivocal and multicultural structure is managed with an assurance that both contains and intensifies a narrative that throbs with political violence and the terror of psychic disintegration. Its action takes place in a tropical colonial outpost prior to independence, where the white characters occupy a position of uneasy authority over the restive Islanders.

Failures of communications between the two cultures are heightened by the sightings of four human figures in a disc-shaped craft in the sky above Boianai in Papua in June 1959. The white Patrol Officer Alistair Cawdor increasingly sees himself as a visitant, losing his sense of contact with other human beings and dreaming instead of contact with the star-people in the Boianai flying saucer. In the background, the Islanders carry out a political coup against the ageing Paramount Chief under the cover of a Cargo Cult uprising. The two narratives, entwined by their pervading tropical imagery, echo one another: the ruthless political takeover is juxtaposed against Cawdor's personal torment as he falls prey to a psychic usurper.

Cawdor is Stow's most harrowing study of alienation, and the account of his decline eclipses even the tragic intensity of Heriot in *To the Islands*.

Source: "Vanishing Wunderkind – The great oeuvre of the enigmatic Stow by Tony Hassall. Book Review - The Australian 30 September 2009.

Abridged Review by Nicholas Jose, Novelist

Visitants is a visionary attempt to enfold history and myth as a way of transcending cultural difference. Its tragic awareness acknowledges the failure of the enterprise: a limit to a certain kind of literacy imagination. Stow's recognition of what does not return from crossing makes *Visitants* an end point. In its imaginative attempt to escape its own locatedness, it comes up against that very same locatedness as a grief-laden apprehension. It is impossible to devise a position part from, free of, the weight of colonizing colonized relationships.

Source: www.nswwc.org.au/2015/07/randolph-stow-research-materials

Comments from Drusilla Modjeska, Writer

Visitants is a rich, resonant novel told with lyrical precision, steeped in the simmering suspicion and menace that haunt the novels of Joseph Conrad, a writer Stow admired, along with T.S. Eliot. On his final decline, Cawdor scribbles a note for Dalwood in the local language, which Osama translates into English. It is a version of the closing lines of Eliot's "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets*, which in turn echo Julian of Norwich.

Source: www.bookishgirl.com.au/2014/09/03/drusilla-modjeska-does-randolph-stows-visitant

