

16

Book Review:

Gabriël Moens, *A Twisted Choice – A Covid-19 Novel*

(Boolarong Press, 2020)

ISBN: 9781925877700 (Paperback)

Gabriël Moens goes to great lengths at the end of his debut novel to emphasise that the story and characters in *A Twisted Choice* are all fictitious. At any other time it would hardly be necessary to make this point. A tale of conspiracy and subterfuge involving a government deliberately creating a global pandemic in order to provide geo-political advantage makes for a great Hollywood blockbuster, but would be considered far removed from reality. It is a sad sign of how much the world has changed, and how much distrust in government and our core institutions has grown, that such a disclaimer is now thought necessary.

There is a risk in any work of fiction that draws inspiration from real-life events. The degree of responsibility that the author of a work of fiction based on fact bears to the truth is a contentious matter. The risk is a further blurring of facts and fiction, which is something of particular concern in a 'post-truth' age shaped by alternative facts, where even the wildest conspiracy theories seem able to find a comfortable home. But the reward for the reader when real-life events are the foundation of a story are that the journey of the characters can truly take centre stage. We can examine their decisions and consider their motivations more clearly.

A Twisted Choice is based around the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, with the chain of events commencing in the mid-1980s, taking us up to the present day and then concluding in the near future. The novel, set in Chicago, Wuhan, and Sydney, explores the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, and weaves a tapestry of intrigue with the

threads of many factual events happening around the globe. It follows the exploits of a Chinese virologist, studying at an American university where he meets an American lawyer, who follows him back to Wuhan in China. He deliberately cultivates a friendship with an Australian virologist, resulting in a fetish-driven relationship pursued lifelong.

The novel explores the intentions of the protagonists who undertake actions for different reasons which are incompatible with each other. This incompatibility requires them to make moral judgments and twisted choices. The fact that the characters are relatable and the underlying story is broadly familiar ultimately makes the moral choices they face even more interesting. The central question of whether the ends justify the means resonates because we can recognise ourselves and our world in the story.

A Twisted Choice is a thought-provoking book that raises critical questions about human nature, government power, and individual choice. It explores themes of uncertainty, morality, and honour in a way that leaves the reader thinking about the characters and weighing their actions long after the final page has been read.

But, importantly, the book is absolutely enjoyable to read. Gabriël Moens has a clear love of language, and combines vivid and imaginative prose with a lawyerly attention to detail. A slight hesitation when starting to read *A Twisted Choice* was the question of whether an author best known for his mastery of the technical intricacies of international commercial arbitration could successfully shift his focus from the commercial to the creative. That fear was entirely misplaced. This is an excellent debut novel from an individual who has already had a long and distinguished academic career, and can now add successful novelist to his lengthy list of career accomplishments.

Gabriël Moens is a deeply talented writer whose debut novel asks important questions in an interesting and imaginative way. I am already hoping that a sophomore novel might be in the works.