



***The Shingle Bar Sea Monster and Other Stories* by Laura Solomon. Hong Kong: Proverse (2012). RRP: \$22. Pb, 200pp. ISBN: 9789888167357. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Laura Solomon was Joint-Winner of the inaugural Proverse Prize (2009) with her

novella, *Instant Messages*.

Solomon's style in *The Shingle Bar Sea Monster and Other Stories* is fresh, conceptually dense, and richly suggestive in its complexity of images and ideas. Surrealism and black humour also play their part in these wonderful stories. Her writing repeatedly foregrounds thorny questions and their relation to the world of perception. In the terms of the first, title story "The Shingle Bar Sea Monster", it is the relationship between two sisters: the persona relating the story and her sister Stella, both twelve years old at the start of the tale about the sea monster. After the persona's own adventures in the sea, she returns to reality:

I slept on it overnight and when I awoke in the morning I had reached my conclusion. I couldn't bear to have the sea monster killed. I would have to return to my former life, with the parents that rowed and with Stella telling me tales about the sea monster whom I had once thought was fiction and whom I now knew was fact.

The story hovers, tentatively, between the interior mind or imagination of the persona and the exterior world of nature and lived experience.

Situated on the rim of interior and exterior spheres of experience, the stories draw upon a diversity of spheres of signification in order to sustain and

illuminate others. In "Count Homogenised", the story focusses on the girl's interest in vampires. Count Homogenised is the character in a television programme that drinks milk rather than blood. Later, as married women, the sisters meet the Count and eventually the persona dresses up as the Count to frighten her sister:

I swing the cape around my shoulders, spill the blood down my front, push the fangs into my mouth. Checking the mirror on the way out of the store. I leer at myself. I look pretty good. Marge is applying lipstick in the rear view mirror. I creep round the back of the car and tap on her window. She screams and jerks back in her seat, puts her hand to her heart.

Do these stories come primarily from within the imagination of the writer? Do they hark back nostalgically to childhood or are they corroborative of the world from an adult perspective? In "Going First", Solomon suggests a chain of references as she assumes that her grandfather, at age eighty-five, who has had two heart attacks, will survive her grandmother who has been diagnosed with leukaemia:

Leukaemia runs in the family; two of my grandmother's siblings contracted it, one dying at the age of fifty, the other still alive, receiving regular doses of chemotherapy. It was terrible news, but at first I assumed (despite the word "acute") that the leukaemia would be slow-acting and that my grandmother would be around for a few more years. Googling the illness, I found otherwise.

In a story such as "Lady Bluebeard" a modern day lady lures men to their deaths, but adores her seventh husband and can't bear to kill him. "Braille" is about a man who "went blind suddenly, overnight" but his magical cane makes flowers bloom. The stories cross mediums of perception and articulation, from the literary to the cinematographic. They are identified with the processes of the body as well as the functions of the intellect. Being about body and mind, sadness and happiness and the imaginary and the real, the stories enable the reader to see life from various perspectives.