

Instead of mockery, a many-sided scrutiny

Glen Tomasetti's *Thoroughly Decent People* (1976) and *Man of Letters* (1981)

At first sight the titles seem innocuous but once the books have been started the reader suspects that s/he is being teased. The name *Thoroughly Decent People* suggests that a defence is going to be mounted against those who might think the book's people were something else; there's an emphasis in 'thoroughly' that sounds like the correction of a view that's in some way different, and probably less charitable. *Man of Letters*, by affirming the scholarship of its central character, implies also that at the other end of his figure there may be feet of clay.

I say these things, of course, after becoming familiar with the books, but I do believe that Glen Tomasetti's titles give us an indication, right at the start, of the ambivalence which we will find throughout her two novels. I say 'ambivalence' because I find that, while reading these books, I am constantly on the alert for signs that may show me what the author intends me to think, and other signals moving me to reconsider what I've decided, thus far, were her intentions.

Now another difficulty. Who *are* the thoroughly decent people of the first book? Are they Bert, Lizzie, their children and grandchildren, who inhabit the book's uneventful pages, go blackberrying in the Dandenongs, and so on? Squeaky Leonard, who tries to seduce Vera, the oldest, and married (!) daughter of

Bert and Lizzie, is certainly not decent, but he maintains a veneer of respectability, as befits a member of a family whose males go to Melbourne Grammar School (his father, we're told, also led a two-sided life). I think Glen Tomasetti has chosen Bert and Lizzie Pater (the Latin word for 'father'; is the author of *Man of Letters* showing her hand as early as this?) to be representative of thousands, and the 'people' of the title is a huge swathe of the population of Melbourne, a city which long regarded itself as respectable before almost anything else. *Thoroughly Decent People* is a book almost without characters, as conventionally understood; instead, at the centre of the book is a class, a type, the way of life of all those many, many citizens who fear the criticism of others like them, and value the integrity of their reputations. Bert and Lizzie feel they are safe only as long as they cannot be seen as anything but decent, controversy needing to be kept out of their lives.

Bert is domineering, or is he? He wants his grandchildren to be like him, but what is he like? The key to answering this question is a long passage about the word 'never'. Never? Yes, never. I've already said that Bert and his family typify certain things, which is consistent with the fact that they are defined via a stream of negatives.

He dropped the tools on the bench and turned to lean against it, folding his arms, his shoulders hunched. 'There it is again,' he thought. 'Why am I thinking NEVER? Never. The word hung like a huge sign in the sky of his mind. Yes, it was

true he'd heard it over and over as a boy.

"Stop mooning about. That'll never get you anywhere."

"That friend of yours, Joe Costigan: he never looks anyone straight in the face. He'll never do any good for himself."

"She's never been the same since she lost her third."

"I know who you've got your eye on. You'll never marry her. You'll never be able to afford it."

Bert hears more of these voices in his mind, and his thinking goes on:

NEVER. The word was like a hammer hitting you on the head, like a door slamming in your face. NEVER. It was a training in anticipating failure, punishment, refusal. Every chance was the last chance. It was a training in standing up in the face of the last blow, in the face of NEVER.

There's a page and a half devoted to explicating this word in the context of Bert's life – all the Berts, hundreds and thousands of them, with, of course, the resultant effects on all the Lizzies, their children and their grandchildren.

It trimmed the abundant life in them to struggle, to pick themselves up and start all over again. It crushed imagination out of them. It made them unyielding, reluctant to give, wary of their own expectations, ready to take whatever presented itself, adept at the grab. NEVER condemned them to pioneering without settling long enough to have anything grow slowly to maturity, to wait and watch.

Glen Tomasetti's net is cast wide enough to hold all the thousands who think, or thought, themselves to be decent people.

Yet for Bert she offers one sad exoneration. He lost his mother somewhere between the ages of four and five, and to this day he's intuitively kind to children up to that age – that crippling moment in his own life – and after they've passed the point at which he lost his connection with the feminine in himself, as well as the mother he depended on, without, perhaps, realising it, after the young, the tiny, have reached that point between four and five where he lost himself, he doesn't have intuitive knowledge of them any more. They are moved, in Bert's mind, into the same world as everyone else, the world where 'never' holds sway as the best advice they can follow.

Seen in this way, Bert may be said to have done fairly well; it's how he sees himself. And Lizzie? How does she see him? Lizzie is woman, Lizzie is her generation, just as much as Bert. She accepts Bert's view of himself as central. He has to be kept happy, if only so that he won't cause trouble. She knows, as does Bert, in his hidden way, that she's the other half of that organism that humans belong to once they've accepted marriage and home-making as being what life's about. What else? Truly: what else? Don't we all grow up in homes? Don't we need love and support to give us a start with our lives? There's something pathetic in Lizzie's acceptance of her situation, and yet there's also a pride as stubborn as Bert's. Who else is going to hold things together, if not a woman who can be relied on to watch, and worry, and calculate, and save, a woman with enough in reserve to deal with difficulties as they arise, as they surely will? Bert's limitations, transformed, become the limitations of Lizzie's life, and they're handed on, of course, to her

five children, their partners, and the children they produce. This transmission, inevitable as it is, somehow drains judgement out of the way we see our social issues. We received them, we found them too large, too ubiquitous and too difficult to do anything about, so we handed them on. How can we escape what no one else can escape? It's like saying the country shouldn't be in a war, so I won't fight. Well, the country is in a war, there's no escaping it, so you have to fight – that's the sort of social logic, the overpowering way of seeing humans, that Glen Tomasetti is offering us as the way that Bert, Lizzie and all who are theirs use to explicate themselves to themselves and to each other. Their decency is social so society's rules reach deeply into their lives, their ... what a different sort of society would call their motivations. Their freedom, their expression of what's known as free will, is not a freedom to find a path of their own, but to accept the pathways that are offered to them: those that lead from their front door to whatever the world has in store.

And what is that? A job, which means a place in society; a home, where society's standards must prevail, however private the family attempt to be behind their drawn curtains; an awareness of their limitations, the compensation for which is the approval-sign of their decency; a holiday once in a while, and modest enough; and those little sub-interests known as hobbies. In the age of the motor car, they can travel, these Berts and Lizzies, into suburbs some way from their own, noting carefully any evidence that the standards of these suburbs do or don't fall below, or rise above, the standards of their own. Thoroughly restricted people, but aware that most of the world doesn't live on the level they've attained: therefore proud,

despite the bind they're in. Glen Tomasetti subtitles her book 'a folktale', and this surprised me when I re-read it recently. Is she, as a writer then, doing what folksingers do, in the presentation of her tale, her people? This is a tricky question, although I think we must accept that that's what she's telling us; why else would she put 'a folktale' on the title page?

What does it mean, to call a novel a folktale? What does it tell us about the way we should read? These questions could be answered in any number of ways, no doubt, but I think that in this case we are expected to think of the events, the characters, as being presented to us, paraded, shown, for the entertainment, perhaps the amusement, of those who read. If I had to differentiate a novel from a folktale I would say that a novel presents us with a story in a way that prevents us escaping from the endless choices of its characters, whereas in a folktale or folksong, the decisions are irrevocable, having been made by now. All we can do is observe the results of those actions, those decisions, and respond, in our reactions, to whatever the storyteller, the folksinger, tells us. A folktale has its meaning built in.

I wonder if that's what Glen Tomasetti was thinking when she put the word 'folktale' at the front of her book? Probably not. I don't think she would want her writing to be tied to any firm definition, as I have just done. I say this because Glen Tomasetti is a subtler writer than my previous paragraph would suggest. Take the moment when Vera, Bert and Lizzie's eldest, goes to the home of the Leonards. She thinks she's going to meet the family, but Squeaky has chosen a time when there'll be nobody but himself at

home. Seduction can proceed uninterrupted. Vera runs away from what's supposed to happen as soon as she becomes aware, but the reader has been sent a signal a few lines earlier, when Tomasetti is acting as a novelist rather than the folksinger she often was.

She walked up the drive and a gardener, pulling out dead petunias, gave her a funny look, she thought. Could he tell that she wasn't used to such places?

Squeaky suggests a kiss. Vera swings her handbag and hits him on the head. She runs for her life, rushing out the front door.

Her high heels sank into the gravel of the drive and she felt she was in one of her own childish nightmares. The gardener was down by the gates she'd come through, like the dog Cerberus at the gate of the Underworld. She was frightened to death and cut across the lawn to the other gates so she wouldn't have to pass him.

Why does Vera go to the trouble of avoiding the gardener? The novelist doesn't tell us, but I think we can say that Vera has realised the meaning of the funny look he gave her as she entered, and feels that to meet his eye again would be to admit how stupid she'd been to get herself into a situation so far from what she'd expected, but a situation which was, in some remote part of her being, perhaps, what she had been seeking? Whatever answer we may give to these questions, there would be a judgement forced on her by a second contact with the gardener which she had every wish to avoid. Escape was what she needed, not a judgement.

A good deal turns on interpreting this correctly. Her parents invite Vera to join them on a drive to Canberra, believing that a

break will do her good, or some such cliché. They know there's something wrong, or something's almost wrong, so, rather than probe, they feel that separation from the problem, whatever it is, might be helpful. Vera accepts, then she pulls out. She tells Reg, her husband, that she wants to stay with him. In her own words, 'I want to be where I belong!' In seven simple words she accepts both the rewards and the restrictions of being a thoroughly decent woman. Reg has to go and tell Bert and Lizzie about his wife's decision, Bert is furious, he jumps in the car to go and blast Vera ...

... but he cools down, and comes back quickly. The trip to Canberra is off. Lizzie was looking forward to going to the nation's new capital, but Bert was only going as a way of getting Vera away from whatever had been troubling her, and now that she doesn't want to leave home, the trip's off. Decency's been restored so what's the point in going? There's none, none at all. Lizzie's hurt, but Bert realises this and thinks of a couple of things he can arrange which he believes will please her. He spends the last brief chapter making these arrangements. He and Lizzie are no closer at the end of the book than they were at the start, but they're together, and their marriage, however stultifying it may have become, is still operative. They're decent people; their marriage is more than they are as individuals; to be a couple is to be something more than either of them can manage separately. The way of life is more than those who lead it.

There is a paradox here. Late in the book's first chapter we're told how Lizzie, helped by her sisters, climbed out her bedroom window to meet the young Bert, how she'd used a party game

(Blindman's Buff) to cause Bert to take hold of her, how she'd got through the window for several nights in order to meet this boy who was to become her man, until her father found out, and intercepted her: 'he'd pulled her to the house by her hank of hair and beaten her on the back and shoulders with his razor strop.' By the time we hear about this, Bert and Lizzie have been a couple for many years, yet they can still surprise each other, and us too, observing them. They are out driving when Lizzie asks Bert to stop outside a house in Clendon Road, Malvern, one of Melbourne's wealthier streets. He lets her look at the place for a minute before he toots the horn. Later, over afternoon tea in the Botanical Gardens, one of those things Melburnians will be doing on the day the world ends, she tells him that she stayed a night in that house before she went on to Geelong to find him. He had never known this. He had always taken himself so much for granted that it had never occurred to him that Lizzie, his wife, had made dramatic steps to be beside him, available and, eventually, married.

So the decent people are married people, and having reached that status, they are not about to undo the knots they've tied. Everything follows from that. They take their wedding vows as lasting. Binding. Life, which was full of 'nevers', gave everybody that one opportunity and anyone who was wise would do their best with it. Glen Tomasetti's account of this way of life, and one version of how a group of people had lived it, is full of delicate observations, balancing what things cost in people's emotional lives, and the silences required to sustain the marital agreements, against the satisfactions and securities of living a life inside the

restrictions of their class and time. For me, *Thoroughly Decent People* is a song rather than a folktale, turning a much-mocked way of life into a humble refrain which its people are proud to sing about themselves, not because it represents anything but a very modest level of achievement but because they can say – they can be aware, they can feel – that they made the best of the opportunities that were offered to them ... once, in a certain time and place, with no alternatives on offer to lure them in any other direction.

Choice was the temptation of a later generation.

I want now to move to *Man of Letters*, so this is a good moment to say a few things about the common features of Glen Tomasetti's writing of these two books. She belongs to that generation of Australian writers and artists who found it hard to look at the Australian version of the mass, post-war society with anything but contempt. When World War 2 ended there was a flock of artists who headed for a Europe that was no longer cut off. Fittingly, this happened at a time when travel, to England or anywhere, was no longer the preserve of the wealthy who had connected British society with Australia's. They fled, these writers, artists, singers and dancers, because Australia was dreary, lacking in imagination ... everything that Glen Tomasetti presents us with in *Thoroughly Decent People*, and yet her voice hasn't the same scornful, ridiculing tone that can be found in the work of some of our most famous, most celebrated, names. In Tomasetti's case, her penetration, though sharp, is un-brutal. She is at home with her decent people, amused by them, but preferring to leave them standing rather than to knock them down. Sandy Stone and Edna Everage they are not. Things that happen to them are real things; real things to

real people. Tomasetti does not belong to that category of artist who needs to show her public that she is superior. I doubt if such an idea ever presented itself to her mind. Even when, in *Man of Letters*, she joined the major movement of her time – feminism, the women’s movement – she shapes her presentation in order to make it both precise and clear to her readers what, exactly, Dorton Serry is charged with, and, if you note, she allows him to recover, at the end of the book, having begun the learning that he needs.

The first half of the book shows the unreformed, unredeemed, Dorton Serry: *Sir* Dorton, having been knighted for saving his university from arousing the fury of a radicalised generation of students. Dorton’s was the wiser head that prevailed. This is only mentioned in passing, but the Dorton that is shown to us, even when he’s at his worst, is a highly intelligent Dorton, able to notice signals and adjust to them, even if he doesn’t know what they mean or why they’re being sent. He’s an old-fashioned man, except that his out-of-dateness is mostly restricted to his ideas of women. They are peripheral to men, whom they should serve. Man’s imagination is central to Dorton’s way of seeing the world, and women are massively important to the imaginative life of man. He knows he’s in trouble when he returns from an interstate visit which has ended badly and discovers something changed about himself when he sits in his garden – his wife, Beth’s, garden – when he gets home.

For nearly the whole of his life, since the age of ten anyway, a long span of years, he’d been in love. He’d been in love with someone or other, always female. He’d had a person to dream about, to yearn towards, to warm his days and nights with what might be.

He’s in his wife’s garden, as I say, but this is no comfort:

The silence that frightened him was in his own head for there, in a space always filled with distant music, *the sirens had stopped singing.*

Dorton is more than a man, an individual, he’s one of a cast of thousands, an act running for millennia, reaching back to the sirens who tempted Ulysses on his way to a home he didn’t particularly want to reach. As everyone knows, the journey was more than the destination. Ulysses – Odysseus – was a man born to travel, and to arrive was to know that his adventuring was over. Dorton is fascinated by women, but what he really wants, apart from being taken to their beds, if possible, is to have them writing to him. His office contains a filing cabinet full of letters, which he dips into at times. Dorton is wise in the ways of universities and their committees. He’s an excellent chairman, and critical of those who can’t manage an agenda full of business to be got through. He’s helped women with their careers, because he knows how to do it and he relishes the fawning, the gratitude, that his skills can cause younger women to offer. They need him and he likes to be needed. He sees himself as the master with the delicate touch. The letters in his cabinet confirm this opinion. They’re satisfying, and reassuring. He is, in the eyes of the outside world, well married, so he’s practically invulnerable, until ...

Until the women’s movement shifts the sand until it almost covers him. Then he’s lost. This is the burden of Part 1 of *Man of Letters* – Sir Dorton Serry discovers, while he’s on an interstate trip, that he’s out of sorts with his times. He’s lost his touch. The

old tricks don't work any more. The trigger for this change – but only the trigger, for it's been coming from a long way back – is a film maker called Con (Costanza). She's beautiful, and smart, and Dorton would love to have her in his cabinet of letters, but this is not to be. He gives her an apple – as to a teacher – and she walks away, leaving us with the impression that she's left the book.

She hasn't. In the middle of the night, after Dorton has had an unsuccessful attempt to create another liaison with Ms Jean Wuthers, a composer – a *woman* composer – whose room is on the same floor as Dorton's, and who travels with him, in an upward direction, in the lift. They have a cup of tea, then Dorton, finding himself bored, says goodnight. But it is not to be. The phone rings. Con (Costanza) is below, with another 'lady'; can they come up? Dorton agrees, and they arrive, leaving the door open as they enter. Why?

A little earlier in this essay I raised the question of whether *Thoroughly Decent People* was or wasn't a folk tale. It's time now to ask the category for *Man of Letters*. Novel? Novella? Novellette? I ask this because the arrival of Con with her lover, a woman called Jude, is the climax of the bad time Dorton is having in his days away from home, and the climax, although very amusing, necessary within the structure of the book, and well-prepared, is rather arbitrary. It's the sort of thing that mightn't be noticed in a song or a story read aloud, but put down on paper it isn't really enough for the hullabaloo it causes. The second half of the book, Dorton's collapse and eventual recovery, are the direct flow-on of the events of Costanza's visit with Jude, whom she suckles, giving her breast

to her lover as they sit on the side of Dorton's bed. Dorton flies into a rage, hits them with a towel, rushes into the passage, crying out aloud ... and so on. Hotel staff come up in the lift, police appear as if by magic, Con and Jude disappear into the stairwell to walk down five floors, and Ms Jean Wuthers assures everyone – other residents have come into the passage by now, snickering about Dorton's women – that he was sound and sane a few minutes earlier ...

It's good fun, it's farcical, it's the stuff of revue, but it doesn't actually connect with the previous scene between Dorton and Costanza, where the young film maker appears to have at least a fleeting affection for the elderly gent whose head she pats. I think the writer has trapped herself here. One of her strengths is that she is not too ideological. Among the many points made to establish her feminist point of view there are also the observations and the complexifications that show us the novelist casting her eye widely for the details that add fullness to the picture. Glen Tomasetti combines the folksinger's wish to make a point well with the writer's wish to let surrounding detail speak for itself in whatever way it will. This, as I say, is a strength, but these two wishes don't quite match when we get to the climax of Part 1, the scene on the fifth floor. Con, for all her beauty and the attraction she carries with her into Dorton Serry's life, is a minor character used to make a major ruckus, and she's whisked off centre stage in order to let the reader's attention focus on Dorton's ridiculously compromised situation. Con disappears when she's no longer needed. This is acceptable, I suppose, if Dorton's given central status in the book – as he is. It is about the man of letters, after all,

and even his wife, the ever-so-capable Beth, is a lesser figure too, despite her rise, toward the end of the book, to national presidency of her native plant organization. Glen Tomasetti is very skilled at making Dorton's ignorance of his wife's activities indicative of his strangely switched-off way of dealing with those everyday things that are close to him. His attention is for the most part attuned to the singing of the sirens, that feature of his life which keeps him in love and makes life worthwhile.

In love? Endlessly attracted? Endlessly distracted, Beth might say, in her practically observant way. It's hard to know whether she's been defeated by Dorton, or whether they've fought each other to a standstill. Win, loss, or draw, with honours even? Perhaps the latter; it's one of the questions Tomasetti leaves open. She doesn't hammer her points hard. She leaves readers room to decide for ourselves. The benefits of this approach are felt when the book's been put down and we start to notice its effects. Both *Man of Letters* and *Thoroughly Decent People* invite us to embrace their contents and ponder them over time rather than make a speedy decision about their meanings. Both books contain humour that's sly, and delicately observed. The writer's invitation is to join her in a certain way of seeing rather than in taking up an ideological viewpoint. The books are no more predetermined at the end than they are at the beginning.

The first chapter is called 'Our Man', and it begins, 'Dorton Serry wrote marvellous letters.' When the book ends, he's writing – beginning – a book of his own. It's called MANY MEN HATE WOMEN. WHY? Sub-title: 'A Critique of Western Myth'. So that

net referred to before is cast wide indeed, and it reaches back, as we've seen, into the time of the Greeks, an almost mythological age for modern minds.

At last he could walk about with a little spring in each step. Marvellous. Pandora, Psyche, Daphne, Persephone, were names to match his tread.

Psyche was perfectly entitled to light her lamp and look at the face of her nightly lover. What woman worth a cracker would permanently take Cupid himself in the impersonal and mindless guise of Anonymous? He could hardly wait to begin.

There's more of this as Dorton rights the recently sinking ship of the self he's captained in a masculine way for the years of his life. Men hate women. He accepts, by the end of the book, that he's guilty as charged, and it's an extraordinary act of generosity by his creator that she allows him to find – with considerable assistance from others, it's true – his own way out of the mess. Only a few pages earlier, we may recall, he was driven to Custom House (proprietor Marion Custom) to be put through various therapeutic processes which it was hoped would lead to a cure. Tomasetti the folksinger, Tomasetti the novelist, isn't in favour of this way out. If he's half the man he's believed himself to be, throughout the book, he should be able to do something for himself. He leaves Custom House and hitches a ride home. Beth may be surprised, and yet again, she may not; either way, she doesn't have much to say. And Dorton? 'He was looking forward to getting back into old clothes in the morning. They were nearly ready to stand up.

A no-hoper's outfit with a sleeping giant inside. He had a sense of achievement.'

It takes him a little while to find his new direction, but he's reasonably quick. In the intervening days he gets the last of the letters in this book, and it's from Doona, a name which I take to be another of the author's sly jokes. Doona tells him she's begun a relationship with the young engineer who had a room in her household, and she says a few words about the thesis which will lead to her interviewing him the following year, if he's agreeable. She writes to him as if the relationship between them is in yet another phase, and she hopes this will continue because, she says, 'I still have a strong affection for you and hope you have some for me.' Glen Tomasetti has been at pains to make us see, throughout her book, that Dorton is a capable and even an admirable man by most standards, that he's respected and sometimes loved by those who know him through working with him. This is by way of mounting her argument so that it's aimed precisely at her target. It's a cultural argument. For Dorton Serry and all those who are like him to get well, to recover, they have to find a way out of the long-lasting, even ancient belief structures that shape the definition and thence the behaviours of woman and man. No less than that will do. It's a major task and it's no accident, in my view, that the job begins with the writing of a book. Dorton will write the book that Glen Tomasetti thinks needs to be written. In that sense, *her* book is only the starting point, the first step, for a lengthy process of re-definition. Men and women will be different, in themselves and in relation to each other. Costanza will be able to make her

films and have her young lover in her arms because it/they won't seem unusual any more. Dorton will have to give up the powers he's practised in using and let his qualities speak – attract – for themselves. There seems a fair chance that he will be able to do it. He's burned all those letters he kept in his filing cabinet. It's interesting to observe how Tomasetti manages this process of recovery. Guilt is kept firmly out! Dorton, sensing that he's in trouble, analyses his way out of it. Beth is useful, and Marion Custom makes a couple of telling points, but Tomasetti, one feels, thinks that men – Dorton and all the rest – have to work it out for themselves and then adjust. Nobody can think that this will be easy, but if enough people make the shift and start moving in what they think is the right direction, something will be achieved.

This, I think, is where the folksinger and the novelist in Glen Tomasetti come together. The book's points are made simply, even lightly, but the change required has been well-defined, and it's right inside the hearts of ordinary people. All of us are capable, and any of us may reject. Who's to persuade us? Not the man of letters, or even his book, which will probably be readable only for the minority, the tiny percentage, who know the names and meanings of the various gods and goddesses Sir Dorton will refer to. The battle will be won – was won, perhaps – in the minds and hearts of ordinary people, sensing that the times are changing for the better, with God alone knowing who's in charge but the people of a certain period feeling that change is in the air, and its banner must be followed, lead wheresoever it may. *Man of Letters* is an extraordinarily effective book, all the more so because it's so

mild, so modest, so free of battlements, boiling oil or all the other accoutrements of radical change. Laughter is said to be the greatest weapon for advancing change, but Tomasetti only rarely makes us laugh. For the most part she's happy to amuse us; I think she would have been happy enough if she could have been reassured that we were still following, interested, amused, getting the points she was making and curious, still, to know where they would lead us.

She only gave us the two novels but each of them requires considerable agility on the part of the reader to notice, first of all, the terms on which they're written, as opposed to the clichés of current thinking, and then to realise the implications they entail. Lastly, and Tomasetti doesn't press this on her readers, we need to march with her for a time, linked in thought, if we're to change any of the things she's shown us to be less than satisfactory for our lives. It's a considerable ask, but she makes her case well.

1. *Thoroughly Decent People*, Glen Tomasetti, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1976
2. *Man of Letters*, Glen Tomasetti, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1981