

## THE LIFE AND LOVES OF LENA GAUNT

Tracy Farr

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

*Music from a theremin can sound like a human voice, or an electronic scream; like an alien spaceship, or the low moan of a cello. The best players can tease all of these sounds from the wood and wire and electricity that is a theremin. And I am the best player – after all these years, old woman that I am, not bettered. I, Lena Gaunt, am a legend.*

Lena Gaunt, theremin player of legend, is *Music's Most Modern Musician*. Her life begins in Singapore at the beginning of the twentieth century and ends eighty years later in Cottesloe, Western Australia.

It would be an ending in obscurity, except that festival organiser Terence Meelink invites her to perform one last time. Inspired by her performance, filmmaker Mo Patterson approaches Dame Lena to make a film about her life.

With the unfolding of her story comes the slow opening of Lena's heart, closed for so many years against old loves and old griefs.

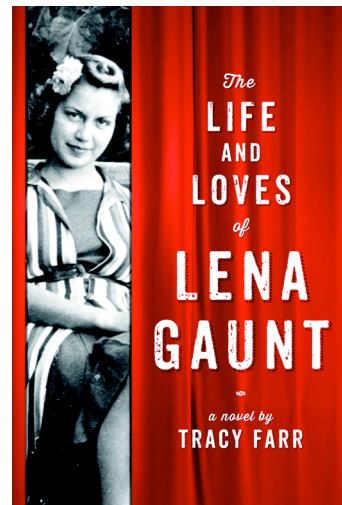
And through her long and intriguing life, music endures.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Farr's short fiction has been published in New Zealand and Australia in anthologies (*Best New Zealand Fiction* Volumes 1 and 3), literary journals (*Sport*, *Westerly* and *indigo*) and popular magazines (*New Zealand Listener*). Her stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand and been commended and shortlisted for awards in Australia and New Zealand, including the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Runner Up Award in 2001. She was Emerging Writer-in-Residence at Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Australia during 2008.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *I was a solitary child, lacking companions my own age, but I was not lonely. I was happy in my own company, dancing to my own drum. My earliest memories are of making music, patterning music. They linger, these memories, watery, hazy, in the back of my mind.* (p. 35)  
What kind of a character is Lena Gaunt? Do her childhood experiences shape the woman she is to become or is there something innate in her character that helps to shape her life story?
- What is the impact of different relationships on Lena's life, beginning with her relationship with Little Clive and ending with her relationship with Mo?
- How would you characterise Lena's relationship to the concept of 'home'?
- It might be said that Lena's oldest and longest relationships are with Uncle Valentine, and with music. What difference do these make to her life?
- What is Lena Gaunt's relationship to grief? And what is her relationship to music?



- *In those magazines of my uncle's, and in the slim literary volumes on his shelves, I found pages alive with the buzz of the next new thing. Like me, they were of this century, not the last; they looked forward, not to the past. If these are possible, I thought – this machine, or this poem – if these are possible, then anything, anything might be possible.* (p. 61)

In what ways are aspects of the unfolding twentieth century revealed through the character of Lena Gaunt? In what ways are they metaphors for her life?

- *The hairbrush creaked and crackled, released tiny purple-white sparks, like stars, in the dark dry air of the bedroom, tapped percussion as she placed it on the dressing table. Crystal rang like tiny chimes, and her rings sang gold and silver against the china tray she dropped them onto.* (pp. 41–42)

Writing in fiction often has an emphasis on the sense of sight in its delivery of its figurative and literal language. In what ways, by contrast, does the sense of sound function for Lena in this novel?

- How does the author make use of smoke and water – particularly the ocean – in this novel?
- Does it matter that we do not ever really find out what happened to Grace? Do you think the death of Grace is an inevitability in this story?
- What is Lena's reason for beginning – and then finishing – the writing of this story?
- Why does she choose to withhold and then deliver her long-kept secret to Mo?
- *This film of hers, it will be different, from what she tells me. I wonder how much of those old mythologies she has absorbed; how much do they stick to me, these different mythologies from the past?* (p. 76)

What does Lena mean by this observation?

- What does the novel have to say about the nature of memory?
- In what manner does Lena's transcription of her story mimic her other performative endeavours? In what ways is writing different, for her?
- Why does the novel end in the way that it does? Does this book have a 'happy ending'?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

*What sparked your interest in the theremin, and in the character of Lena Gaunt? What kind of research did you have to do?*

I'd started writing notes, circling around a character I wanted to write about. I knew she was a musician, but I couldn't pin down what her instrument was, and I needed to do that before I could write much more about her. When I watched the documentary *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey*, I knew I'd found Lena's instrument – an instrument you play without touching was perfect. The film – a history of this bizarre musical instrument and its inventor, Leon Theremin – was where I first encountered Clara Rockmore, the first virtuoso player of the theremin. But I knew I didn't want to base my character, Lena, strictly on Clara, so I more or less stopped my research then and there. Film and still images of Clara – from a young girl to an old woman – in the documentary gave me some really strong visual cues for my character, Lena. I started with a lot of notes based on my recollection of the film, then as I developed the character, I aimed to distance myself and Lena from the film and from real life events. Clara Rockmore was a starting point for Lena, rather than a model.

*I can't remember the last novel I read featuring an octogenarian junkie! What gave you the idea to make Lena a user? In what ways does her drug use help you explore the novel's themes?*

Aetherwave – an alternative name for the theremin – prompted a clear connection in my mind between (a)ether and anaesthesia. Once I'd established that Lena played the Aetherwave machine, her drug use (and the particulars of it – smoking opiates) fell into place. I saw Lena self-medicating for recreation, but also for relief from emotional pain. I liked the idea of opium-smoking as an old-fashioned, almost genteel, turn-of-the-century pastime. It was a neat fit with notes I had from my great-grandfather's observations of life in Malacca in the early twentieth century, and with the opium dens that would have existed in Sydney when Lena found herself there.

I also liked the idea that as a writer I had to work hard to make it believable for the reader that Lena could reach the grand age of eighty, despite years of drug use. I figured that a mostly controlled habit, and the comfortable financial reserves to ensure her supply, could make that possible. On the other hand, I hope there's at least a hint in the novel that she wasn't as in control of her habit as she – in her telling of her own story – indicates.

Aether/wave; smoke/water: I played with those motifs in the novel. Both can be healing, cleansing (think of herbs burnt to cleanse, to cure, to drive away spirits); both can be dangerous. Balance and caution are required – don't swim too deep; don't fall in the well; just a little, just enough.

*Lena is unreservedly enthusiastic about the increasing influence – some might say infringement – of the technological on the artistic. What are your own feelings on the subject?*

I don't share Lena's enthusiasm unreservedly; I sit on the fence. I can see beauty in (and from) technology, but at the same time I'm a great fan of the old-school, the hand-made, in all its forms. I hoped, as I was writing, that readers could believe in her decision to put the (warm, human) cello aside in favour of the (manufactured, cold, machine) theremin, but I knew it was a big ask. So, I was careful to nurture and build Lena's enthusiasm for the modern, to make it make sense in the context of her life and experiences, to have it be something she learns originally from Uncle Valentine. That time between the wars was a time for celebration of technology, favouring new over old, manufactured over hand-made. In our time, now, the effect of e-books (new publishing models) on treebooks (traditional publishing models) is clearly an example of the influence – some might say infringement, others liberation – of the technological on the artistic.

*The sea is almost a character in the novel, functioning as an essential wellspring for Lena. Do you too find the sea to be artistically magnetic or sustaining?*

I have a complicated relationship with the sea, myself. I was fearful of the ocean as a child – a terrible swimmer – and remain, as an adult, respectful and slightly nervous of it. So, unlike Lena, I find the sea magnetic and sustaining *from a distance*, or as a notion, rather than needing to be immersed in it. It features in a lot of my writing, almost to the point of obsession; perhaps I am writing the ocean to tame it, or simply to understand it.

I had firmly in mind as I wrote the novel the twin motifs of air and water that that etherwave ('aetherwave' in the novel), one of the names for the theremin, suggested. The 'wave' in aetherwave obviously refers to sound waves. Wave – in terms of aetherwave – obviously refers to sound waves, but I also wanted to play around with ocean waves. I wanted sound waves to be present in the ocean waves, as they are in the opening of the novel, when Lena is swimming, and observing sound, and practising her theremin piece underwater. Water flows through the novel, nearly (but not quite) causing harm to Lena as a young child in Singapore, being blamed for the 'weak heart' that sees her sent away from her parents; but ultimately, water becomes a healing medium for her; a 'wellspring' is a lovely way to describe it. On a larger scale, the sea both separates and links the different geographical chapters of Lena's life, as she travels by ship between them.

*Both Lena's upbringing and the contours of her life are characterised in many ways by itinerancy. What interested you in exploring a character with a different, more muted sense of national identity, particularly in the period covered by the novel?*

In this, Lena is a reflection of me. I grew up near where Lena lives, in Cottesloe, but I left Australia in 1991 – the year that the here-and-now of the novel is set. I've lived away from Australia for more than twenty years now, in Canada and New Zealand, and have lived more of my adult life in New Zealand than in Australia. You could say I have a *disrupted* sense of national identity. Although I love New Zealand, I'm not quite, and perhaps never will be, a New Zealander; but my son is – he was born here, and that grounds me in the place. New Zealand's home for me, it's where I live; but Australia's home, at some much deeper level. There's a Māori concept, *tūrangawaewae*, which most simply means 'place to stand', or 'place you're connected to'. When I smell the air as I walk out of the Perth airport terminal, when I see the sky that goes on forever, when I see bore-water stains on the footpaths, and Rottnest Island floating above the ocean on a strip of heat haze, I know I'm back in the place I'm connected to. As I wrote this novel, I felt incredibly drawn to write about home, and the fact that I was staying in Perth (as writer-in-residence at Katharine Susannah Pritchard Writers' Centre) when I started the novel in earnest only reinforced that.

*In some ways, the novel seems situated in a liminal place, at the interstices of music, prose, and film. Do you see each of these genres as more discrete, or blurred? What about this sort of cross-genre approach did you find stimulating?*

I love that liminal, interstitial place. Forms – genres – have their strengths, but I love the idea that they meet and merge and blend. I've always been interested in all of the forms that are present in the novel – music, words, film, visual arts – and they've always been part of my life in one way or another. Years ago, I used to draw my stories as often as I'd write them in words; nowadays, I just write. When I write, I think in terms of scenes, like the scenes in a play or film, and sometimes I write them using that terminology. And I'm a visual thinker, so I see in my mind scenes and poses (and artefacts, like Trix's paintings and posters in the novel) as I'm writing. I suppose I'm saying that, for the most part, I don't see the genres or forms as discrete. And above all, I'm interested in how all these forms tell stories; how they're all about crafting a story and re-presenting it to an audience; and how, very often, things (stories, people, lives) connect and interconnect.

*Roland Barthes' Image-Music-Text is a book whose title (and material) has an at least felicitous, if not downright uncanny relationship to the novel. One of the essays therein is 'The Death of the Author', in which Barthes famously argues that the assignation of a single author and interpretation to a text is an inherently limiting critical performance. He goes on to make the argument that all texts are essentially part of the same connective, referential tissue, and promulgates a critical readjustment that deprivileges the author and promotes the audience. What do you make of this assertion? How do you think Lena would evaluate it?*

I haven't read Barthes for a long time, nor thought of him (consciously) in terms of this novel. I like the connection, though. I think Lena would be quite happy – as am I – with the deprivileging of the author/artist. She puts her art (music/story) out there to have its own life. Handing her story over to Mo, Lena says:

*She will make a better story of it than I could, than I have. She will make the connections, pull it all together, make it sing. Make sense of it. (p. 302)*

In a sense Mo isn't simply the audience – she's going to be recrafting, redrafting Lena's story as film, so she too will become author – and yet, in the end it's Mo for whom Lena has written (or at least finished) her story, so in a real sense she is the audience. And while I'm not sure that (mis)connecting, disconnected) Lena would share her view, Trix might be seen as championing the idea that 'all texts are essentially part of the same connective, referential tissue' when she tries to help Lena explain her music (and Trix's own paintings):

*'No, no, it makes sense. I think that's it exactly. Itself, and more than itself, and less. Everything connects.' She stubbed her cigarette out in a bowl on a table. 'Everything connects!'* (p. 149)

I love the idea that, once my novel is out in the world, what I intended as its meaning is irrelevant – it's all down to what the text says to a reader, and how the reader receives it. I love the idea that there are readings of the book that I haven't foreseen (or consciously invited, or intended), and that it has a life beyond and without me.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

There is a list of acknowledgements in the back of the novel. What follows is an extended bibliography for the resources that were used by the author in research for her novel, or provided inspiration.

### Film and documentary

*Home by Christmas*, produced and directed by Gaylene Preston, 2010.

*Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*, directed by Matt Wolf, 2008.

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'Thereminvox.com: Art, Technology & Gesture', <http://www.thereminvox.com>.  
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