

Effects of Atmosphere in Andrew McGahan's "The Rich Man's House"

Marea Mitchell

boswithick@gmail.com

Copyright© 2023 Marea Mitchell. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged, in accordance with our Creative Commons Licence.

Abstract: Receiving an Aurealis Award for best horror novel in 2019, *The Rich Man's House* tells the story of events that unfold within and around the mansion commissioned by Walter Richman on a mythical mountain in the Southern Ocean near Tasmania, Australia. The external atmosphere around Richman's house consists of elemental forces or "presences" that become increasingly sinister. These external elements and the architectural atmosphere of the house create disturbing uncertainties about how to interpret the events of the novel. Collapsing traditional notions of background and foreground, McGahan's novel is susceptible to "an atmospheric reading" (Chandler, 199) that includes but exceeds the fogs, clouds, mists and winds that are its partial constituents.

Keywords: Andrew McGahan, *The Rich Man's House*, atmosphere, atmospheric readings

Beginnings and Endings

This is my last book. An author can't always say that with certainty, but as I'm in the final stages of dying as I type this, it seems a safe bet.

Andrew McGahan's brief but clear articulation of his own imminent death provides a dramatic entry point to the world of the novel, where the character Richman's hubristic obsession with defeating death creates chaos and destruction. McGahan's final novel conjures internal, external, and psychological landscapes to create an atmosphere of horror and ecstasy, foreshadowed in these first and last autobiographical words. The reader's introduction to the novel is also loaded with significance given that these are a dying man's last published words.

Plot, Author, Context

The central point of view of the novel comes from Rita Gause, who is herself author of a book on “invisible non-human presences, non-human forms of consciousness, all around us in the landscape” (229). These presences are:

inorganic. They are born only of stone, or of the atmosphere, or of water...these forms of awareness do not exist in just any piece of stone...They are born only when something unusual happens within a landscape or environment. (229-30)

Rita is the daughter of a famous and controversial architect whose speciality is cutting into physical landscapes, such as cliffs and mountains, in what becomes known “as an ‘enfolded’ or ‘buried’ style of architecture” (82), embedding domestic structures deeply within, rather than on, the land. In less sympathetic terms, it could also be described as a masculinist, penetrative style. Some critics call his works “an offense against nature” (36) and “abominations” (37). At her father’s funeral, Rita Gause is invited to visit her father’s last project (commissioned by Walter Richman), a massive house built on Observatory Mount, Theodolite Island, “two thousand eight hundred metres above the sea, sheer sided and narrow as a finger...only a tenth the size of its awesome neighbour” (59). Richman has a particular interest in this site as it stands next to and looks out on the massive 25 km mountain known as The Wheel. The summit, which he is the only man ever to reach, culminates in a cave-like area called “The Hand of God.” Rita accepts the offer, and her book becomes increasingly relevant to the catastrophic events that occur when only Richman, Rita Gause and four other guests are left in residence. She is the only one to leave the house alive.

The Rich Man’s House is McGahan’s seventh novel (in addition to one play and four Young Adult novels) written between 1992 and 2019 when he died at the age of 52. All his novels have strong political or environmental themes, ranging in genre from “grunge” or “dirty realism” to science fiction. Some have specifically Australian contexts such as *Praise* (1992) a semi-autobiographical story of youth in Brisbane; *1988* (1998) set in the Northern Territory; *Last Drinks* (2000) set in the world of corruption and politics in the years of Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s premiership of Queensland (1968-1987); *The White Earth* (2004) located in Darling Downs, Queensland, exploring the tensions and issues around the Australian High Court decision in 1992 that indigenous people had existing customary rights and therefore native title rights to land (known as the Mabo decision after leading activist Edward (Eddie) Koiki Mabo); and *Underground* (2007) set in a near-future world of politics and terrorism, partly in Canberra. Two novels use place rather differently: *Wonders of a Godless World’s* (2009) main location is a hospital for people with mental illnesses, adjacent to a volcano that is intermittently active, with two key characters who can time and space travel, but otherwise is non-specific in terms of place. *The Rich Man’s House* occurs on a precisely detailed but nevertheless non-existent island in southern Tasmania.

While McGahan’s novels are varied in style, they all rise to the call that prominent journalist and critic David Marr made in 2003: “that writers start focusing on what is hap-

pening in this country, looking Australia in the face, not flinching.” They also prove exceptions to the rule addressed by Kerryn Goldsworthy in her 2006 review of *Underground*, “Why are so few people writing novels about the lives we are living right now, here in Australia?” (Goldsworthy). McGahan’s novels are unashamedly political, unashamedly critical, unashamedly Australian. They are inherently concerned, as Stephanie Green puts it, with “racial, spatial and cultural politics” (Green, 84). His final novel most certainly addressed Marr’s and Goldsworthy’s concerns about cultural and political relevance, as do other novels published in recent years, including Heather Rose’s *Bruny*, also published in 2019. *The Rich Man’s House* and *Bruny* have commonalities: both are set in or near Tasmania, with accurate representational descriptions of place; both include fantastical elements (in *Bruny* the construction of a bridge between Tasmania’s mainland and the island of Bruny); and both are overtly polemical in their critiques of capitalism, environmental degradation, and corrupt political systems. For my purposes here, however, what is significant about *The Rich Man’s House* is the process of delivering direct criticism of current exploitative human practices in ways that lead readers to question their own reactions and interpretations. This can be seen as an atmospheric reading practice, where a reader actively engages with the narrative materials. *The Rich Man’s House* foregrounds texts and textual interpretation in its proliferation of books and written sources.

The novel not only evokes atmosphere, the novel creates it, replacing a detached subject/object reading experience, where a reader can fairly passively observe events described, with an immersion in the atmosphere of the novel that restricts the ability to remain unscathed, untouched, unimplicated. The novel can produce in the mind of a willing reader a connection between what is being criticised—anthropogenic climate change, human hubris, the betrayal of the land itself—and the rational and psychological means by which that damage occurs, so that the reader confronts their own imbrication in those processes.

Here an important caveat must be made. McGahan’s novels received many nominations and awards, including *The Australian/Vogel Literary Award for Praise* (1991), a Ned Kelly Award for *Last Drinks* (2001), and the Miles Franklin Award for *The White Earth* (2005). They have also been enjoyed by many readers who admired the imaginative, speculative elements of McGahan’s writing. However, it must also be said that his final novel disappointed many of his readers precisely because of the experimental aspects that I am here connecting to an atmospheric reading:

While it's ably written throughout, there are far too many plot elements that require such drastic suspension of disbelief that getting absorbed proved impossible. (Kate Cornfoot, September 7th, 2019.)

The supernatural trope was odd, and I wasn't convinced at all about it. (Camila, September 1st, 2019.)

The alternative history of prominent historical figures, that didn't really gel with me. If you like technical detail, want to learn about weather, climbing[,] go for it.

(Giovanni Walker, May 1st, 2020.) (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/51068309-the-rich-man-s-house>)

Suspending disbelief, accepting what does not “gel,” exploring what is beyond the “natural,” a reader might come to confront their own complicities in the damages outlined by the novel.

Structuring the atmosphere I: Externalities in *The Rich Man’s House*

At just under six hundred pages, *The Rich Man’s House* consists of four books, two prologues and two epilogues. There are two main narrative strands. One details the “history” of the Wheel in extracts from diverse fictional publications, the second relates events as they occur on Observatory mount in Richman’s house. Prologue 1 contains an extract from *The Cloven Sky* by Roger Fitzgerald in which we learn that Gerrit Jansz, “Dutch master-seaman and ocean-going explorer, born 1605” (1), sees what he first thinks is cloud: “‘I bethought it the top of a cloud,’ writes Jansz, ‘which, ascending to a great height, was catching the unrisen sun.’” (5). But if it is a cloud then it is anomalous with Jansz’ previous experience of cloud.

But the more he looked, the less Jansz thought the glowing red sliver to be a cloud. For one, there were no other clouds at all in the south. Nor was it the shape of cloud form: neither the cauliflower cumulus of a storm, nor the diaphanous sheet of high-level cirrus. (5)

Seeing no other clouds at all in the area, he applies his navigational skills and observations to calculate that it sits at a height of twenty-five thousand metres. Understanding this to be an impossible height for a mountain, and unprecedented even for a cloud, he reconsiders and decides that far from being a mountain what he is actually seeing must be “a cloud, and only a cloud” (7). Jansz sees the mountain through what might now be understood as an “elevated cloudy ecosystem” (Hayward, 2) but working with his own knowledge and experience misidentifies it. Much later, in 1772, frenchman Marion du Fresne happens upon it and identifies it as in fact a mountain, which he calls the “Red Wall”, the name taken up in James Cook’s journals. Through a printer’s error “Wall” is turned into “Wheel”, and this is the name by which the mountain becomes known.

These first twenty pages of the novel introduce some of the main themes and strategies that contribute to how atmosphere is used structurally in the novel. At its most straightforward this is a novel fundamentally concerned with atmosphere: atmosphere understood through climate and geography. The mountain at the heart of this story, initially misunderstood as cloud, is described in great physical detail as experienced by its first explorers:

Naked rock was all that greeted the four men, the stony surfaces without lustre or sheen. Nor was there any glint of ice, for even the trace moisture that had been contained in the rocks themselves, millennia ago, as they lifted inch by inch into the sky, had long since been sublimated away into the parched air. (11-12)

...the Wheel dwarfs all normal mountains. At twenty-five thousand metres, it rears clean through the troposphere and penetrates fully thirteen kilometres into the stratosphere, a part of the atmosphere that is entirely alien to the realm in which humanity exists. (257)

These details occur in the supposedly factual accounts of attempts to scale the Mountain and the difficulties inherent in this process. These passages emphasise the size and magnitude of the Mountain, with emphasis on the hard work humans undertook to climb it—

many dying in the attempt. The physical atmosphere of the Mountain is awesome, and its ominous presence dominates these sections of the novel.

Yet its physical appearance is only part of its power. As the ship carrying Rita Gausse approaches the Mountain for the first time, the Mountain remains tantalisingly invisible.

The clouds remained all day, only to blow away frustratingly at nightfall, and then by the next day, infuriatingly, fog had come instead, followed by rain....The mountain loomed immediately above them now, and should have been a spectacular sight, climbing away to the stratosphere—but, other than its dreary lower ramparts, the Wheel remained as invisible as ever in the clouds. And so it stayed for the next day as well, the rain and the fog and the cold equally miserable and unending... (57)

As this description demonstrates, for all its implausibility, the Wheel is knowable because of its shared characteristics with known other mountains, and part of the atmospheric effect of the novel relies on knowledge commonly available to a reader. The detailed descriptions of the weather of and around the mountain create a vivid picture. Furthermore, these intense accounts of clouds, fog and rain that recur throughout the novel, recognisable as accurate manifestations of high-altitude atmospheres, also create a mood or feeling about the mountain that can be thought of as atmospheric in a different but also familiar, even uncanny, sense. The implausible has its roots in the plausible.

McGahan here complicates the familiar and longstanding conception of the relationship between people and land understood in terms of an subject/object dynamic. In the nineteenth century, John Ruskin, in *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), excoriated what he saw as the tendency by his contemporaries to attribute feelings or emotions to non-sentient objects. It was in his eyes an abhorrent tendency in “that it does not much matter what things are in themselves, but only what they are to us” (Chapter XII, Of the Pathetic Fallacy). So, a character’s happiness is reflected in the sunny, cloudless blue sky; the opposite in cloudy, rainy weather. For Ruskin this was a form of anthropomorphism that was lazy and androcentric. Nevertheless, the habit of using the weather or geographical landscape primarily in terms of their impact on human beings has a long and ongoing history, and elements of it can be seen in the description above. Rita Gausse’s eagerness to see the Mountain is met with a denial that seems deliberately obstructive. Her experiences of the clouds and rain coming and going “frustratingly” and “infuriatingly” do indeed conceive of the mountain specifically in terms of its meaning to Gausse.

However, what emerges from this account also suggests an alternative interpretation that breaks down the subject/object polarity that is at the heart of Ruskin’s scathing attack on his contemporaries. On the face of it, Gausse’s experience seems entirely subjective; the clouds and fog that linger around the mountain in daylight when it might be seen, and disappear at night when it cannot be seen, are experienced through her frustration and desire to see it. However, this also suggests a deliberation and intent on the part of the Mountain and its attendant atmosphere that troubles the androcentric binary of the superiority of human over non-human. And, in fact, this is a perspective that Gausse explored in her book, in which she outlined the way that certain spaces and places have “presences”:

Presences have nothing—*nothing*—to do with the notion of Gaia, or with any sense of Life Force or Mother Nature, or with environmentalism. Remember, they are non-organic. They do not rely on the system of photosynthesis; they

do not care about global warming, or about preserving forests, or about saving the whales. The scurrying life of plants and animals is of no consequence to a consciousness that is born of motionless stone, or of shifting air masses, or of the upthrust of an ocean wave. (233)

Gausse's desire to see the mountain is thwarted by factors over which she has no control. Little by little, detail by detail, the wilfulness of the Mountain emerges, challenging the attributions to it by humans. In this context, architect Richard Gausse's project is a difficult one: "How do you humanise a space so cold, and so windy?" (115) Rita Gausse asks. The second phase of human effort to "conquer" the Mountain and its environment, and to render the non-human habitable, lies in the architecture of the rich man's/Richman's house itself.

Structuring the Atmosphere II: The Internal Architecture of the Rich Man's House

Snežana Milosavljević Milić describes a traditional understanding of "atmosphere as the qualitative characteristics of a situation or the mood caused by a situation," (Milic, 32), and sees the "experience of reading as the perception of atmospheres" (37). The reader's perceptions of Richman's house are channelled, at least initially, through Rita Gausse, and her first impressions consider the extensive work that has gone into creating this building in the most inhospitable location.

The snugness of the setting—the soft couches, the whisky, the fire—was heightened by the fact that *outside* the wind had been rising all evening and was now moaning audibly about the Observatory. Whenever Rita looked up to the windows of the Atrium dome, she could see wraiths of icy fog racing across the Terrace above. Occasionally a deeper thrum would signify an even stronger gust, and the very stone foundations of the Mount seemed almost to tremble underfoot. (136)

Airlocks separate the inside from the outside, and each has a control panel that indicates temperature, average and maximum windspeeds, and whether the external conditions are safe. If conditions become too severe, Clara Lang, mountaineer turned major-domo to Richman, explains: "The doors automatically lock at that point anyway and will only open with a manual override" (93). Part of the extravagance of the building lies in the effacement of its production. Of the "nearly seven kilometres of passageways and service tunnels" tracking through the building "only a third...were ever meant to be seen by guests" (119), and this effacement includes the workers who make the building tick. When Rita encounters a cleaning woman lost in the service corridors, the woman is immediately sacked for being seen. The building may be "pushing the technology to its limits" (79), as Clara has said earlier, but the philosophy of its running in terms of human labour is punitive.

While the description of the house is extensive, and much is made of the effort and cost used in its construction, three elements can be said to symbolise the ambiguity of the project that is this rich man's house. The first is a staircase ominous in its first apprehension by Rita Gausse:

It appeared at first—as Rita moved to the balustrade to see better—as if the structure was some mad kind of M. C. Escher illustration brought to life. Circular flights of stairs curled impossibly around other circles of stairs in a puzzle without end, the twined serpents forming a great column of stone that plummeted away into dimness (90).

While Rita thinks of Escher’s image (see above), Clara points out that the inspiration for the staircase is of a much older origin: the staircase in Le Chateau de Chambord, designed by Leonardo de Vinci in 1516.



Figure 1 - Château de Chambord double helix staircase (design attributed to Leonardo da Vinci) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Escalier_Chambord.jpg

Clara, who is conducting the tour of Richman’s house, explains: “This is the Double Helix Staircase. It’s two spiral staircases entwined in each other: whichever flight you take, it never meets the other one, though they both get you to the same place” (90). Rita’s response sets the tone for one of the key atmospheric effects of both the inside and outside of the novel’s setting—vertigo. Placed high on a mountain overshadowed by another much bigger mountain, everything about the geographical location of the house and its internal architecture is on edge. The scale, complexity, cost, and implausibilities of the house threaten to overwhelm both Gause and the reader, as they lurch from one impossible extravagance to another.

A second key image that haunts the novel is “The Triumph of Death,” by Pieter Breughel the Elder (1525-1569), which is the centrepiece of Richman’s collection of paintings and sculptures in the foyer.

Gause sees this painting and other works by Rembrandt, Picasso and Raphael as “an *orgy of death*” (201), and Kennedy, the security officer, points out the four wheel shapes

mounted on tall poles at the top right of the painting, explaining that they are medieval instruments of torture known as “*breaking wheels*” (203). Seeing them as “some kind of metaphor for the Wheel the mountain,” (203) Gause expresses surprise that Richman’s association with the Mountain is so morbid, to which Kennedy replies:

‘You don’t understand. The breaking wheel means pain and defeat for its victims, just as the Wheel the mountain has meant pain and defeat for all those who’ve attempted to climb it. Except for one man, that is. Except for Richman. He’s the only one who has ever stood atop the Wheel, the only one who has beaten the world’s greatest mountain. And to beat the Wheel is to beat the breaking wheel.’ (204)



Figure 2 - The Triumph of Death by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. 1562. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Triumph_of_Death_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder.jpg

This dense and populated picture replete with images of torture and death symbolises Richman’s fantasy of overcoming death, in the same way that he thinks he has overcome the Wheel. His devious and malicious actions to make sure he is the only one to stand at the top of the Mountain, are compounded by his actions when he gets there. The horror of Richman’s callous disregard for the environment reaches its apotheosis in his final revelation to Gause. Trapped in his own house, in a manic delusional state, he believes he will be rescued by helicopter, and speaks to her as she makes her descent on the emergency stairs, intending to tell his rescuers that she is already dead. With this in mind he tells her what no one else knows: “ ‘I took a piss in the Hand of God. Did you know that, Rita? I pissed on it....As long as the Wheel itself stands, my piss will be on its summit. Is there a better way to say how much I fucking *own* that mountain?’ ” (567-8)

For Kennedy, however, Richman’s interpretation of the painting reveals that “Richman might have missed the point completely” (207). While Kennedy does not go on to explain what it is that Richman has missed, one clear implication is that no one can in the end

defeat death. Richman's faulty appreciation of the picture, encumbered by his outrageous self-importance, flag to the reader the likely nature of his own end.

A third key image that contributes to the vertiginous effect of the highly detailed descriptions of the house occurs before the two images just described, but its significance and terror only emerge later in the novel. This is the emergency staircase by which Rita eventually escapes the rich man's house. Clara's guided tour of the house works its way up from the entry level at three hundred metres where she and Rita enter the building on a buggy that takes them into the mountain before they ascend. The lift shaft runs upwards for two thousand five hundred metres. At this point in the novel the description of the "emergency staircase" is brief, except for Clara's ominous remark "Best hope you never have to use it though; the flights are steep, and there are thousands upon thousands of them. I'm told it's the longest internal staircase in the world" (77).

Much later, when an avalanche has destroyed part of a face of the Wheel and a tsunami has wiped out all services at the base of Observatory Mount, when all technical help is gone and only six people are left in Richman's House, the emergency staircase becomes their only hope of escape. Gousse's glance into the shaft sums up the intensifying horror of the situation.

The stairs were not really stairs, she had been told. And it was true. What she beheld was a series of ladders, narrow, bare and steeply angled, that switched back and forth as they descended within the scaffold tower, joined each to each by only the tiniest of landings made of naked squares of metal grating.

There was nothing *solid* to any of it, no proper railings, no floors that weren't merely screens. And around this matchstick structure opened the immense emptiness of the shaft, falling and falling in vanishing perspective to its invisible base, two and a half thousand metres below in the darkness....None of that was the worst....Rita was battling with nausea, so revolting was the sight. About fifty metres below, just where the gloom of the shaft began to dim details into a blur, one entire flight of stairs had come loose from its lower landing, and was now hanging about forty degrees askew, its last step dangling over the gulf. And even further down, at the limit of visibility, a second flight of stairs had come similarly free. (367-8)

When there seems no other option but to seek help from the base, the much lauded security of the building becomes the main problem. The difficulty of Clara's attempt to descend the damaged stairs is evident, despite her mountaineering experience, and this is compounded by what happens on her descent. Each section of the staircase is numbered, and Clara's passage directly downwards ceases. Now she appears to be climbing up and down in a frenzied replication and macabre revisiting of the illusion of the Double Helix Staircase.

'The numbers again? I told you—'

'Please Clara. It's important.'

'Well, it's ES27. But...'

Rita bowed her head: that confirmed it, the panel before had been ES26. The major-domo was climbing upwards now, not down. Worse, she was nowhere near the bottom, she was merely circling about at the halfway mark. (435)

Clara's mental disorientation continues. The experienced climber repeatedly climbs up and down the same set of stairs while believing that she is progressing to the bottom. Tortured by the illusion that she is being tricked and pursued, she takes off her clothes and jumps off the staircase into the shaft. At the end, Gause is left alone, all her companions having died in horrifying circumstances. Each death involves the active compliance of the victim. The architecture of the house directly contributes to the disorienting effect of events and narrative, replicating in the reader a vertiginous sense of displacement.

Affective Resonance in *The Rich Man's House*

The Rich Man's House provides a good example of Milić's point that the perception of atmosphere "cannot be defined as a purely cognitive construct" (37), but lies in the "space, description, the sensory experience of the character, and the affective resonance of the reader" (37). The novel uses both external dynamics of atmosphere (the wind, rain, fog) and the internal architecture of space within the house (the dizzying staircases, the size and labyrinthine structure of the house) to "conjure atmospheres" (Chandler 194: my emphasis). "[A]n atmospheric reading" (Chandler, 199) also involves "considering "the physical spaces and cultural contexts in which they are encountered" (Hodges, v). The ultimate horror of reading *The Rich Man's House* arises not from the setting, although the extreme weather conditions of the Mountain are worrying enough, nor from the human actions depicted in the story, some of which are certainly malicious, but is "a production precisely of the narrative" (Chandler, 199). The connections between setting (traditionally background) and events (traditionally foreground), create the affective resonance in the mind of the reader, and herein lies the impact and wider significance of this novel. At this point, it is worth noting again, that this involves a willingness to engage on the part of the reader, and this is an engagement that not all readers are inclined to make.

How might this affective resonance be described? Part of the impact lies in the interweaving of the plot, the events as witnessed and understood by Rita Gause, with the "elaborate imaginative history" (Bradley) of the novel's main location. One key effect of this interweaving is that the reader constantly feels like Gause standing at the top of the 2.5 km staircase looking down into the abyss. The abyss the reader confronts is the inability to differentiate consistently between what is real and what is fictional, and to inhabit a comfortable and certain zone of interpretation.

McGahan's brief preface establishes his role as a reliable authority that is almost immediately undercut by the play between fact and fiction through which the novel is structured. The two prologues and two epilogues play key roles here. Prologue 1 purports to be an extract from the introduction to *The Cloven Sky*, a history of exploration of the Australian continent, detailing the failure by early explorers to "discover" the mountain that is at the core of the book's story. Yet from the outset there is a strong sense of ambiguity surrounding the Mountain, as we have seen. What is it? Is it a cloud, is it a mountain? Furthermore, while readers may recognise the names Jansz, Du Fresne and, most likely, James Cook, as they are all real men drawn from history, and in particular the history of colonial "discovery" and subsequent exploitation of Australia and New Zealand, the published "authorities" quoted in the prologues are fictional. The events

described in the prologue did not occur. There is no mountain as described. Yet, as James Bradley puts it: “Despite the Wheel’s improbability (or perhaps impossibility), McGahan goes to considerable lengths to make it feel plausible.”

George Mallory and Edmund Hillary are two examples of real figures named in the book whose histories are distorted. In the middle of the novel they are recuperated as a part of the history of the Wheel. Here they both died on the Wheel, demonstrating partly the superiority of Richman as a mountaineer, and partly technological advances since the twentieth century. In fact, Mallory died on Everest, the Wheel’s constant shadow, in 1924, and Hillary died in 2008 in New Zealand, having been, amongst other things, Ambassador to Nepal from 1985-88.

Prologue 2 describes the first and only time that the summit of The Wheel is reached, and the description is dense with details of how that is achieved. The extract from “*Reaching for the Hand of God* by John Soliola, 2007” (8) describes how on November 14 1974, the team led by Walter Richman approached the climb. Studded with details and technical accounts of climbing suits, huts and equipment built specifically for “HAEV, a High Altitude Environment” (9), this section of the novel constructs a carefully precise account of the climb. The “painstaking checking of equipment” (9), the “HFT11 (High Terrain Function) suits” (10), the technical details “Thin air, for instance, even at only five per cent of the atmosphere at sea level, is better than no air at all” (10) are all scientifically laid out. The reader is drawn into the sense that this could all have happened. Time after time, known experiences are detailed with the express effect of making the unknown sound plausible:

To those who have not been there, the higher altitudes of the stratosphere, free of winds and weather and ice, may sound like an *easier* place to climb, compared to the lower, windier, snow-bound regions of normal mountains, especially with an HTF suit to keep one warm, and to provide air. But those who have done it know differently. (15)

Furthermore, there is always, lurking in the shadows of The Wheel, a literal benchmark against which it is measured: “Far away in the Himalayas, the world’s second highest mountain, Everest, long ago defeated, was less than half that height” (12). The known existence of Everest is used to assert the possibility of the Wheel, while simultaneously proving its impossibility. The ongoing and insistent assertion that the Wheel is higher than Everest effectively reminds us of the Wheel’s non-existence.

This disorienting sense of uncertainty as to what is true and what is made up is profound, as one reader commented: “The genius of this story was the compelling and realistic world-building. So many times throughout I started to google the Wheel, wanting to examine the particular part of the mountain that he is describing” (Kylie Westaway, September 13 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/51068309>).

The affective resonance of *The Rich Man’s House* is complex. In part, the novel can be read as a simple morality tale, as one understanding of its title implies. In biblical terms, the phrase “the rich man” probably best recalls the story in the book of Luke about the rich man and Lazarus, where the rich man, shocked to see Lazarus’s preferential treatment in the bosom of Abraham, is reminded: “Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivdst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented” (Luke, 16:25). There are consequences of the rich man’s actions that exceed his understanding. As Kennedy indicated earlier in the novel, Walter Richman

fails to understand his own hubristic actions, and his end is presaged by his behaviour in scaling the mountain. In 2021 in the second epilogue, the reader learns that Richman's corpse is finally found in the Hand of God, naked and battered.

It was as if the man had blundered from place to place under the overhang, grazing up against the brutal cold of the stone, his skin freezing on contact, so that he had to tear it away to be free (593).

Richman quite literally has his nose rubbed in the result of his previous actions of pissing all over the cave. There is poetic justice in Richman's death. Here the reader might experience a type of *schadenfreude*. The enlightened reader, in anticipating the punishment of Richman, and symbolically therefore all rich men, can bask in the knowledge that they would not make the same mistakes and need not expect the same punishment.

Yet in so far as "the sensory experience of the character" constitutes part of the "affective resonance of the reader" (Milić, 37) Rita Gausse's role in the novel adds a level of ambiguity that is not easily ignored. The content of her book is gradually revealed to the reader, outlining her understanding of "presences" in the environment, and her attempts to placate a presence through "lustrations" or blood sacrifices, as "payment for its suffering" (399). In the past she has been successful in calming a presence by self-cutting, but her attempt to appease the Wheel in this way is summarily dismissed. In a kind of mind-melding moment, the consciousness of the Wheel takes over Gausse in an experience "beautiful beyond bearing" (532).

The Wheel had held her, effortless in its supreme strength, examining her in the fullness of its loathing, and then, instead of destroying her, it had tossed her aside. (533)

Gausse is irrelevant to the Wheel, intent on the pursuit of its only objective, Walter Richman. Gausse's lustrations are examples of a different kind of human hubris, however sympathetically intended, in seeking to treat the non-human world as an object to be controlled. The sonorousness and self-importance of the word "lustrations" gives this away. Furthermore, there is a sense that Gausse's role as focaliser of the novel is flawed or at least highly naïve or neglectful. Her knowledge of "presences" does not lead to a sophisticated understanding of the events going on around her. Furthermore, while she, unlike Clara, does miraculously escape down the emergency staircase, she does not go on to tell the tale of what actually happened. She does not "tell truth to power" as she so easily might have done. Why is she silent? "Is it merely because, as Ms Gausse claims, she has no desire to relive what was undeniably a stressful experience?... Or is it because, as has been increasingly rumoured, the Richman family has *pressured* her to remain silent?" (589) After her death in 2049, it is reported in the final epilogue, "a printed manuscript was found with her belongings, which, among other autobiographical matters, detailed Richman's demise" (595). Yet the manuscript goes missing: Richman's relatives, "owners still of vast commercial enterprises, went to some lengths and expense to purchase Ms Gausse's estate, including all writings and documents" (595). Gausse's role in covering up the events, particularly Richman's confession, and his complicity in the deaths of others, remains questionable.

The fate of the Wheel also troubles reading of the novel as a morality tale where evil doers get their just desserts. One of Rita's findings is that if a presence lashes out at human intrusion and seeks revenge, that act brings about the death of the presence itself. "The entity that had been so angry and vengeful over the intrusion of humanity into this

previously untouched place, had, after its last display of fury, bowed to the inevitable, and died” (389). And so it is with the Wheel. While the Wheel itself is physically little impaired by the storms and weather that contribute to the human deaths, the power that characterised it when we first see it has gone. One commentator says: “I have never seen the mountain look friendlier...It’s a hard thing to explain to non-climbers, but all peaks have moods, and to me, even after all that’s happened, the Wheel is looking like a happy mountain” (587). The Wheel might be calmed after its mighty act of revenge on its abuser. However, having wreaked revenge, the Wheel no longer seems to have the presence that made it a thing not governable by, not explicable to, human beings, and not measurable in human terms. There is a triteness in its reduction to the simplistic human perception of it as “happy.”

The final voice of the final epilogue is speculative. “A fantasy? A ghost story? Of course it is, most would say” (594). *The Rich Man’s House* is ultimately a conundrum. Its uncertainties are overdetermined in the sense that some of its contradictions could come from McGahan running out of time to complete it. The novel escapes authorial control in this very specific way. However, some of the uncertainties that make the novel so intriguing lie in the construction or conjuring of its external and internal atmospheres, the way they are apprehended through Gause, the reader’s increasing caution about her, and the richly elaborated fictional histories the novel supplies. Yet it is also susceptible of a more troublesome moral reading that re-aligns the reader with Gause through acts of affective resonance. Given that the damage that has been done by treating the planet predominantly in terms of human needs is already understood, why, like Gause, do humans continue to act as if we did not know? *The Rich Man’s House* makes for sober reading, an uneasy but salutary reminder that in understanding the world as an object for our subjective pleasures, in the end, humans reap what we sow. Atmospheric readings—by dissolving barriers between self and other, subject and object, background and foreground—promote further questioning about these pressing global concerns.

References

- Anderson, B. (2009). “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2:77-81. https://www.academia.edu/14267077/Affective_Atmospheres accessed 26 May 2022.
- Bradley, J. (2019). “*The Rich Man’s House* by Andrew McGahan,” September <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/current-issue/417-september-2019-no-414/5782-james-bradley-reviews-the-rich-man-s-house-by-andrew-mcgahan>.
- Chandler, T. (2012). “*Locus amoenus*: Pastoral Atmosphere of Virgil’s *Eclogues*,” *Colloquy* 23, 185-207.
- Dolin, K. (2014). “Place and Property in post-Mabo fiction by Dorothy Hewett, Alex Miller and Andrew McGahan,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol 14.3, 1-12.
- Goldsworthy, K. (2006). “Underground by Andrew McGahan,” ABR October, no 285 <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2006/273-october-2006-no-285/6716-kerryn-goldsworthy-reviews-underground-by-andrew-mcgahan>

Green, S. (2016). "The condition of recognition: Gothic intimations in Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*," *Queensland Review*, 84-94 <https://doi.org/10.1017/gre.2016.9>.

Hayward, P. (2022). "Apex Liminality: Comprehending Lord Howe Island's Cloud Forest and Related Island Ecosystems," *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 3(1): 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1217>

Hodges, B. K. (2021). "Atmospheric Visions: Mirages, methane sweeps and 'clam-monsters' in the Yellow Sea," *Shima*, 16 (1), 115-136. [10.21463/shima.132](https://doi.org/10.21463/shima.132) accessed May 15 2022.

McGahan, A. (2019). *The Rich Man's House*. Allen and Unwin.

McLary, R. (2019). "The Rich Man's House by Andrew McGahan," *Queensland reviewers Collective* <https://www.queenslandreviewerscollective.com/2019/09/14/the-rich-mans-house-by-andrew-mcgahan/> accessed May 26 2020.

Milić, S.M. (2020). "Notions of Atmosphere: Toward the Limits of Narrative Understanding," *Primerjalna književnost* (Ljubljana) 43.1 31-49.

Ruskin, J. (1843-1960). "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," in *Modern Painters* https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38923/38923-h/38923-h.htm#CHAPTER_XII accessed 13 May 2022.

Sloan, A. (2020). "Man and Nature collide in Andrew McGahan's final work, *The Rich Man's House*," May 14 <https://thesloanranger.org/2020/05/14/review-rich-mans-house/> accessed May 26 2020.

My thanks, as always, to Robert Mackie

In memory of Australian literary scholar, Brian Matthews (1936-2022)

Before taking early retirement, **Marea Mitchell** was a professor of English Literature at Macquarie University.