

The Age

2 August 2003

'Review', Pg. 5

The yearning heart of a young woman

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BOOK REVIEW: KISS FROM MADDALENA, By Christopher Castellani (Text)

Tiny Italian villages perched on hill-tops now more often inspire self-indulgent, self-satisfied travel books than novels. *A Kiss from Maddalena* provides a happy, rare exception to that rule; Christopher Castellani's villagers do not ever exchange recipes, play bowls, or proffer home-spun homilies.

A Kiss from Maddalena recounts a story about the village of Santa Cecilia in 1943, when the German retreat through Italy began, and in 1945, when the war ended. Throughout, Castellani's focus is tightly, sometimes claustrophobically so, on at most two streets in that village. We are offered a few intuitions about the dreary rigidity of daily village life beyond, especially its harshly judgmental views on sex, authority and punishment.

The real emphasis, though, is on the teenager, Maddalena Piccinelli, 'not yet a woman but close enough', on her conventionally drawn but surprisingly touching evolution into an adult, and on those whose plans or desires reflect and bounce off Maddalena's own. Maddalena is deftly and gently created. Although Castellani does not allow his teenagers to narrate the story, he captures the edginess and giddiness of teenage feelings with both passion and precision. All those things and thoughts that seem so vitally important to teenagers are made to matter again to us here. Castellani's approach is neither patronising nor evasive; he makes us care about them without either dressing them up or setting them up.

Castellani almost never strains for an effect. The war intrudes only in rudimentary, unconvincing sketches: 'Then the planes would come, screeching overhead in their thousands.' The villagers of Santa Cecilia are merely scared and confused by war (as any isolated peasant, or worldly intellectual for that matter, might well have been).

This book tells us far more about worries closer to home (as close as could be), whether it is how to worry about your sisters' chastity, or clean up after an ailing mother, or flirt in advance of a first kiss, refining 'that girlish pout as she bit the corner of her lip, that shy bending of her chin into her neck'.

Castellani is also a singularly reticent, discreet writer. He cuts away even before Maddalena's first kiss, then again as her boyfriend first slips off the straps of her dress. We are given instead Maddalena's memories, evoked always in apt, kind words. Take that kiss, which, we are later told, occurred 'nervously at first, then slowly, with tenderness and something close to joy'. When much worse things happen (a woman loses two fingers, a man one leg), those events are mentioned only in summary form, retrospectively.

A Kiss from Maddalena informs us that: 'From the air, the village of Santa Cecilia appears like a woman lying down.' From close up, in a couple of houses in those two streets, the place seems smaller, meaner and nastier than that. These village folk are easily persuaded that they are cursed, crippled or condemned. They fret and they gossip in a way that is at once knowing and malicious, and does not leave even young lovers unscathed.

A Kiss from Maddalena is a novel about yearning but also - more subtly and more intensely - a story about the burdens of conformity, about the cost of not yielding to temptation, about bad choices impossible to reverse. Disclosing Maddalena's choices would spoil it but underlining Castellani's skill in making her predicament credible and moving should encourage readers to try a novel that is quieter and sweeter than the norm.

Christopher Castellani will be a guest at the Age Melbourne Writers' Festival.