

The book cover features a dark red, textured background. A hand from the left holds a single dark cherry on a stem, positioned just above a woman's open mouth. The woman's face is shown in profile, looking upwards with her eyes closed. The title 'Lust' is written in a large, elegant, yellow cursive font across the top. Below the title, the subtitle 'Stories from Australian and New Zealand writers' is printed in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. In the bottom right corner, the text 'Edited by Michael Gifkins' is written in a yellow, cursive font. A small, stylized yellow 'V' logo is visible in the bottom left corner.

Lust

**Stories from
Australian and
New Zealand
writers**

*Edited by
Michael Gifkins*

V

LYN HUGHES

BEYOND FLAUBERT

CAL THOUGHT THAT Flaubert must have travelled the whole of Egypt with an erection. She'd begun reading *Flaubert In Egypt* two days after Sue had left. Sue had gone to another woman, flying out to a secret capital city for a whole month. Secrecy, deceit, unfaithfulness, such long unyielding words, Cal thought. How often, she wondered, and where? Whole days. Whole nights? She didn't want to think of it, and thought of nothing else.

Cal had found the book in the library. She went to the library, K-Mart, the delicatessen, as she always did. There were a few early photos by Maxine du Camp. Flaubert's indiscreet diaries, and guarded letters home to his mother in England. And very different ones to his friend, the poet, Louis Bouilhet. Sue was also itinerant but there were no letters. After two weeks a brief postcard arrived. And then, after a few days, another briefer still. Cal remembered ironing Sue's clothes the day before she left, packing her suitcase the night before, kissing Sue goodbye in the morning. They'd made incoherent promises in the pre-dawn light. Sue had paused in the doorway.

'I'll phone you from the airport,' she'd said, turning.

'Don't,' Cal had said.

She couldn't see Sue's face properly. She'd wondered how she could pack her heart in ice until Sue came back.

Two weeks after Sue left, Cal wrote in her diary: 'The human heart is no small thing.' She hadn't cried for days, and she'd found a new lover.

In the autumn, out of the blue, Sue said she had fallen in love with someone else. That stone had travelled Cal's gut for six long

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months. Reading *Flaubert*, she remembered their holiday together in Egypt. How the food had travelled comfortably enough through her, until it squirted acid down her legs, between her teeth, surprising her one night in a hotel room. Sue had gone for toilet rolls, passing them tenderly through the bathroom door.

Cal didn't use a bookmark, rummaging afresh in *Flaubert* every night for her place. She held one page, one glass, one plate, one minute at a time. But she was beginning to almost enjoy the desert. Flaubert was stiff with lust. For women and boys and words. Swelling up with Madame Bovary — the *houri* he dreamed into an unhappy Flemish matron. Cal hoped, fervently, that Sue would leave her *houri* behind.

A week after Sue had left, Cal had phoned a virtual stranger.

'What about a movie?' she'd suggested brazenly. 'Or dinner?' Ablaze with loneliness, with her feet grazing empty sheets night after night.

She immediately wrote a postcard to a friend. 'I have a date with a blonde,' she said.

It wasn't exactly a blind date. She'd bumped, almost accidentally, the woman's leg one night at a friend's dinner table.

Back safely in her own bed, Cal spread herself diagonally, flipping pages.

Flaubert's cerebral sexuality had always proved antidote to her own venom. She closed her eyes. She imagined Sue with her new lover. Nothing. She imagined Sue kissing the breast of her new lover. Nothing. She watched Flaubert's erections like so many flies on the wall.

Sometimes Cal thought of Sue as a monument. She imagined busloads of tourists arriving, and the Sphinx suddenly gone, quite vanished. No sky caught in a net of scaffolding around that poor blighted head.

Just an empty sweep of sand and blue. When it was meant to last. To last forever. She swept Sue's pillows on to the floor each night.

'One month,' Cal said aloud. Practising its round ring. More than

mere days, more than mere years, more than a silver band on her right hand's finger.

Flaubert was captivated by the prostitute, Kuchuk Hanem. A lukewarm affection that he kept coming back for. The last time, certainly sick of some venomous ejaculation, she turned away from him. He immortalised her in his diary.

Scribbling in her own, Cal wrote: 'One week. What on earth am I to do?'

She smiled exultantly at the words.

A few days before Sue came back, Cal travelled home from the city on the midday train. It was airconditioned. Cold as a pyramid. When the temperature rose past 45°, Flaubert longed for beer. All along the desert route he saw dead camels. Just past Redfern, Cal passed a warehouse, unroofed, with portholes like a ship. The brick hung in place. The camel's skin, Cal remembered, was the last thing to rot. The flesh was eaten from the inside by rats. It was so hot outside that the concrete from the city had seeped into the sky. It was so hot her face came back to her, streaked with dirt, bronzed, at every station. Blacktown. She imagined the salt outside touching her skin. She remembered last night. Her new lover's hand brushing hers. People playing instruments, their voices, their salty bodies out into the ocean night. She passed Penrith and began to climb the mountains.

She renewed *Flaubert* at the library. At the airport, she read a thriller with a female detective. Slipping a bookmark in place ten minutes before the plane came down. She remembered watching her son closing *Anna Karenina*, sadly, on the 700-and-something page.

'It's been over a year,' he'd said. 'It's like a relationship. I'm going to miss it.'

The plane came in a shimmering oasis. Octane fuel, a gangway, a sudden surge from the seats.

Sue looked like someone else. Cal would have recognised Flaubert at once. They hugged fiercely, putting everything into their fingertips. Sue's eyes had the deep blue of time spent at high

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altitudes. Love, Cal thought. So it was love. She'd left *Flaubert* on Sue's bedside table.

'In case you want to read it,' she said, as she helped her unpack.