



The Mannequin Makers

Craig Cliff

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The Mannequin Makers is at turns a gothic tale of a father's obsession, a castaway story worthy of a Boy's Own adventure and a thorny remembrance of past tragedies.

"The skin was as near white as porcelain, but looked as if it would give to the touch. What manner of wood had he used? What tools to exact such detail? What paints, tints or stains to flush her with life?"

So wonders the window dresser Colton Kemp when he sees the first mannequin of his new rival, a man the inhabitants of Marumaru simply call The Carpenter. Rocked by the sudden death of his wife and inspired by a travelling Vaudeville company, Kemp decides to raise his children to be living mannequins. What follows is a tale of art and deception, strength and folly, love and transgression, that ranges from small town New Zealand to the graving docks of the River Clyde and an inhospitable rock in the Southern Ocean to Sydney's northern beaches. Along the way we meet a Prussian strongman, a family of ship's carvers with a mysterious affliction, a septuagenarian surf lifesaver and a talking figurehead named Vengeance.

The Mannequin Makers Details

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From Reader Review The Mannequin Makers for online ebook

Roxy Reno says

At first I was like cool, another book set in New Zealand. I don't know nearly enough about New Zealand. (what little I do came from Donna Tartt's novel The Goldfinch.) For instance, I never imagined that dueling department store windows would be a thing in New Zealand in the early 1900's. So, we get to meet the "mannequin makers" and the quaint town of Marumaru and the wife of one of the mannequin makers dies in childbirth and it's sad and a strong man comes to town, which is what I could imagine happening in New Zealand at the turn of the century.

Fast forward 16 years and we meet Avis and Eugen, siblings. They seem nice, they are nice. They're getting ready for their coming out to society ceremony. It sounds like a weird one but New Zealand right?

In the next 20 pages the following emotions happened.

That's weird but ok... Huh? Wait. What? Ohhhh no dude, you didn't do that did you? Oh no man. Oh my god are you fist fucking me right now!? I'm pretty sure you are, I can feel it. Ahhhhhhh!!

Then the book was half done.

Restrained yet Bat shit crazy. Loved it

Gary Schroeder says

This is a well-written novel with a unique plot. It involves a turn-of-the (20th)-century New Zealand town, England, and department store advertising. Sound like an odd combination? It is. It's hard to summarize this book succinctly. The basic premise is this: a man named Colton Kemp who is employed to stage elaborate window scenes for a local department store engages in a strange experiment with his own children in which he trains them from a young age to pose as clothing models for the display window. His children become entangled with an additional protagonist, Gabriel Doig, who is determined to understand how the apparent "mannequins" can be so life-like. A full half of the novel is dedicated to him and his backstory.

Part of this book's appeal is the writing style of the author. He's a real wordsmith and his evocative prose flowed smoothly, pulling me along. The other part of its appeal is the central mystery of the children trained to be mannequins. Are they ordinary human characters? Is there an element of magical realism going on? I was honestly unclear about this until the book's final quarter. That's quite a feat for an author. He strings it out carefully.

My main problem with the plot is that the book feels like two novels joined at the hip. Doig's backstory of how he moved from wood carver to island castaway is very engaging...but I wasn't sure in the end that it was ultimately all that critical to the plot involving the children. It explained how he moved from Scotland to New Zealand, but... It would have made a fine stand-alone novel of its own. (Cliff's descriptions of being aboard a gritty sailing vessel are wonderful.) Lastly, I wasn't quite satisfied with how the story is wound up in the end. As with so many novels, I felt the author had a brilliant premise and then wasn't quite sure how to end it. But, these aren't criticisms that should prevent anyone from reading "The Mannequin Makers." It's

well worth your time.

Merryn says

Wow! Craig Cliff very cleverly weaves two stories together in this novel of intrigue. A father's grief combined with his professional jealousy leads him to submit his children to a life of isolation and lies. Meanwhile his rival's story is told in a series of flashbacks and culminates in a meeting of the two families. A clever and well constructed story.

Jeremy says

Feats of extreme physical strengths and durability wends itself through all the narrative roads, and there are many roads, in Craig Cliff's *The Mannequin Makers*. Split up into four distinct sections, told in four distinct voices, and happening in four distinct times, Cliff keeps it clean, letting you know who you're with, when, and why, only disorienting the reader at the start of each section as you play catch up. It opens on New Year's Eve 1902 in the small New Zealand coastal town of Marumaru. Colton Kemp is one of two mannequin makers in this town of two competing department stores. While Kemp is the superior in his *mise-en-scène*, his rival, simply known as the Carpenter, is adept at making life-like figures from wood. In the first scene, Kemp's wife dies giving childbirth to twins, sending a grief-stricken Kemp into the New Year revelry, culminating in a show with living-mannequins and the strongman Eugen Sandow, providing Kemp with the germ of a terrible idea, that once revealed in the following section, is devastating in its totality. But to tell more, would rid the book of its dark underbelly. Cliff provides a strong sense of place and time, which involves more than New Zealand, but by dividing the narrative up, even with its well-told third section that fills in gaps you didn't know needed that much filling in, changes the story that is being told, before returning to it. And it's the longest, leaving the main story feeling that it has only been told in miniature. Or that there are two books in this one. Still, it's the ties that bind, which is applicable to the structure and to the characters, making it almost physical to disentangle from it.

Hayden says

New Zealand is dark, disturbing and Gothic in its windswept isolation in this book. Written in four parts, it's a story of obsession turned horribly wrong, as two makers of department store mannequins on a small town duel for who can create the most convincing tableau. One loses his wife in childbirth, which takes him down a dark and unlikely path, a plan borne from a desire to achieve perfection, plotted over many years, without regard to the consequences.

The second piece of the novel goes deep into back story of the opponent, featuring the malevolent, superstitious crew of a ship dangerously navigating the southern ocean. A shipwreck on a remote island, and what the mind of a man descends into in isolation. With quite a description of eating raw penguins and albatross.

I enjoyed the picture painted of small town turn-of-the-century New Zealand, one modeled after the very town I grew up in. The barren cape, the muddy streets planted with hotels, theaters and department stores.

John says

Quirky. Very quirky. But delicious. The book interweaves four stories and produces a very readable, literary (in a good way) study of unusual people doing unusual things. Highly recommended.

Hyperliteratura says

"Creatorii de manechine" alcătuiesc o poveste gotică în lătat înșurubate pe două plăci tectonice care firește că se vor ciocni la un moment dat: prima, cea a cioplitorului în lemn din Marumaru și a naufragiului său interior, cealaltă, a Tâmplarului din aceeași micuță așezare, mai exact teribila aventură a vieții lui Gabriel Doig, un biet cioplitor și el, dar unul de galioane, plecat din trunchiurile Scoției pe unul dintre ultimele vase cu pânze ale istoriei și pierdut în insulele Pacificului.

O experiență meta-robinsoniană ascunde această carte, o poveste de-a lungul căreia omul pătrunde cu adevărat taina singurătății și a dialogului, a sacrificiului și a sacrificării, dar mai ales pe cea a apropierii de celălalt.

Citește continuarea aici <https://hyperliteratura.ro/creatorii-...>

Ghilimeii says

Înțeleg foarte bine de ce unii cititori i-au dat 5 stele și alții abia dacă i-au dat 2. Unul dintre acești cititori spune în review "My main problem with the plot is that the book feels like two novels joined at the hip". Sunt complet de acord. În plus, unul dintre aceste două romane joined at the hip este scris cu mare atenție la detalii și e foarte bine documentat, iar celălalt omite exact tușele psihologice și aprofundarea personajelor care ar putea da senzația că povestea e rotundă și completă. Țiu că e ușor să critici și mă simt vinovat când o fac, dar mă simt și tras pe sfoară când prezentarea cărții îmi promite ceva și mi se livrează altceva. În plus, finalul mi se pare artificial și forțat, posibil din cauză că lipsește profunzimea personajelor. Petrecem foarte mult timp înțelegând ce simte și cum gândește Tâmplarul, care până la urmă este un personaj secundar, dar extrem de puțin timp cu Avis și Eugen, astfel că mie una mi-e greu să înțeleg ce le motivează acțiunile pe final. Rezultatul este un final care mie îmi pare de un dramatism artificial, mult prea evident motivat extern (de cheful scriitorului) și care nu are neapărat o logică narativă. Nu vreau să mi se bage pe gât un final, vreau să înțeleg de ce s-a ajuns acolo, vreau să curgă natural sau dacă e cu twist, să fie unul lucrat frumos și inteligent.

Sophie says

I am so disappointed! I initially thought this novel was a fabulous historical fiction set in the Antipodes, à la *Oscar and Lucinda* or *The Luminaries*. But then the story began to lose momentum two-thirds of the way through before falling apart completely in the final act.

Ooh, but the beginning is so, so good! It is New Year's Eve, 1902, in the quiet town of Marumaru, New Zealand. Colton Kemp designs window displays for one of the two department stores in town. Although he

dedicates himself to work on his mannequins, he is not very good at woodcarving and the results never match his imagination. His rival, a silent man known simply as The Carpenter, is, of course, more talented and works for the other, more successful store. To compound Kemp's bad luck, his beloved wife suddenly collapses and dies after giving birth to twins.

Strangely, Kemp doesn't alert anyone to the death of his wife or the birth of his children. Perhaps to distract himself, he wanders alone into town, where everyone is aflutter at the impending visit of the famous strongman Eugen Sandow. The next night, Kemp manages to catch Sandow's performance – essentially a sales pitch for a workout system – and is struck with an idea that will finally see him triumph over the Carpenter. Let me just say that there are several references to Pygmalion and *The Winter's Tale*.

I was really enjoying this book until Craig Cliff decided to delve into the Carpenter's backstory. And I'm sorry, but I didn't find the Carpenter very interesting! Other characters that seemed like they would be important – a young Maori man, Kemp's best friend, a neighbor's daughter – are just left fallen by the wayside. So my interest began to wane at this point. And then a trope I can't stand cropped up in the last part and I was just *done*. (view spoiler)

I am actually kind of sad. I thought I would love this! I *was* loving this! Maybe I'll pretend I only read the first third and conveniently forget the rest.

Oana Gheorghiu says

An interesting historiographic metafiction, four narrators of the same events (it reminds of the great Alexandria Quartet in this respect) - four ways of telling a story from the colonial age, an exercise in dehumanization for art, a literary dialogue with Shakespeare, Dickens, Shaw and others. I am currently translating it into Romanian, looking forward to seeing it done and published.

Sara Head says

Cliff comments in his acknowledgements that this book is the product of two separate ideas combined into one book. This rings very true, and unfortunately, I only liked one of them.

The first of the ideas, of mannequin makers that go down a dark and twisted road of obsession, was fascinating and page-turning. Unfortunately, my interest in that half of the web was the only thing that got me through the immense chunk in the middle of the book that was the Carpenter's backstory (a story that was inherently quite boring and quite repetitive - the life of a castaway on an island with nothing on it...).

Overall, I enjoyed the book, as the parts I liked I REALLY liked. But I would say it could use a strong editing eye. We got more detail than we could ever want in the Carpenter's history, and approximately ZERO detail on the relationship between him and Avis currently happening. I feel Cliff just honed in on all the wrong things.

Jessica says

Kemp's shaky hands and rough temperament were ill suited to life as a carver, but it is curious the paths a life can take, the dead ends to which ambition and rivalry can lead a man.

A turn-of-the-century story about department stores and sailing set in New Zealand? Yes please. Cliff's debut novel is about strength and survival, performance and isolation, and art and creation.

His writing is absolutely beautiful, and I was transported in a way that I haven't been in a long time, forgetting about my chair, my house, and the 21st century. The tone is atmospheric and dark, and the slightly-fractured timeline in the third section was absolutely perfect for me. I highly recommend this for fans of *Cloud Atlas*, which it reminded me of a little--it combines very different stories and interweaves them beautifully. One of my new all-time favorites.

Blair says

A quirky take on the historical novel with some postmodern touches from a fellow Palmerston Northian. It strains credulity, but that's fine. The different narrative voices intersect well and the structure is clever. This is the second work I've read by Cliff, after his Commonwealth Prize-winning collection of short stories, *A Man Melting*, and I look forward to reading his next work as well.

Catherine says

I don't even know what to make of this book. The only way for me to fully process it is to separate it into three parts.

- 1) Historical backdrop of turn-of-the-century small town New Zealand life, 5 stars.
- 2) Shipwreck/castaway epic, 3.5 stars.
- 3) Dark, twisted psychological abuse, physical abuse, and incest, 0 stars.

This book reminded me of *The Miniaturist* with its rich historical backdrop to a WEIRD plot. It's clear this fledgling writer had a lot interesting ideas. Unfortunately he tried to combine them all.

I think 2 stars is actually generous.

Vicki says

Set in early 20th century New Zealand this is a story of a rivalry between 2 men who carve mannequins for local department stores. One raises two children to be human mannequins with terrible results. The beginning of the book makes no sense to a modern reader but if you stick with it the story and characters and

settings are so unusual it becomes a can't put down read.
