

## Back to the future: a look at the hedonists and virilists

*The Wedding Shroud* by Elisabeth Storrs, 2010, Pier 9 Books, Sydney, 496pp, \$32.95. ISBN 9781741967906.

By DAVID ASH, *Barrister*

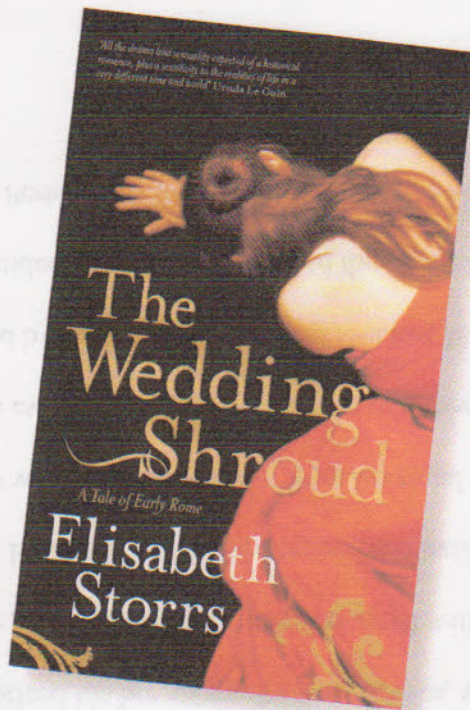
IN 2,500 YEARS, WHAT WILL WIKIPEDIA say about Australia: "In ancient times, Australia was an important Indian/Chinese/US [delete as appropriate] colony famous for its natural resources. Its independence was lost after a misunderstanding between the hedonists and the virilists."?

Storrs' first novel marches back 2,500 years, covering 18 months in the decade before Veii, the richest of the Etruscan League's cities, finally fell to Rome.

The author clearly subscribes to the tenet that contrast is the first law of art: slave and master, male and female, adult and child, learned and lay, sibling and sibling, parent and child, soldier and citizen – each at some point is pitted against the other.

But the contrasts are not over-simplistic. A story can always be had about good and evil. A good story is far more human, something about the choice between good and evil in a real world, where no thing and no person is ever wholly one or the other.

Storrs achieves this human story in three ways. In her heroine Caecilia



we have a young Roman virgin who is required by the needs of state to marry a Veiiian aristocrat. She must mature in a maelstrom, and the urgency of her plight – and, perhaps, her triumph – is

deftly delivered.

Equally compelling is Storrs' choice of venue. Veii was a mere 12 miles from Rome. But there is a skill in putting into relief two neighbouring cities.

It would have been easy for the author, and boring for the reader, to leave the relief once it was erected: Rome – and remember, it is an early Rome – as the self-righteous and prudish up-and-comer, Veii, as the decadent cesspool north of the Tiber.

Through Caecilia, we find that each city has its own complexities and, being comprised of humans, its own failings and hypocrisies. The strength of Caecilia is that by being carried by the failings and hypocrisies of others, she is able to find, and perhaps to conquer, her own.

Finally, there is perspective. The decision to make a woman the centre of this story was a necessary one. Without it, Storrs would have been unable to explore themes of gender, sexuality and, ultimately, equality. But it is a decision which carries a narrative risk. In a world where men were left to create the mistakes we still know as politics and statecraft, Storrs was going to have to work hard to avoid contrivance. "Exit, pursued by a bear."

Shakespeare had the ability to make action happen offstage as well as on it. Fortunately for the reader, Storrs does too. □

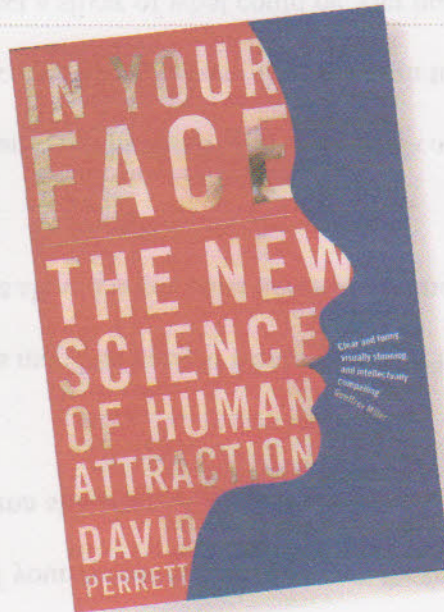
## How we view beauty

*In Your Face: The New Science of Human Attraction* by David Perrett, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2010, 305pp, \$39.95. ISBN 9780230201293.

By SHARRYN RYAN, *Solicitor*

DAVID PERRETT IS PROFESSOR OF psychology at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, where his unit, the Perception Lab, is dedicated to the study of human faces, in particular facial beauty. This, his latest book, explores what is attractive and beautiful in faces, and why.

Perrett reveals that humans process, identify and make assumptions about faces by utilising specific areas of the brain. He reports experiments that compare masking the eyebrows, then the eyes in images of famous people (it's the eyebrows we rely on more for facial recognition). If the areas of the brain that do this work become damaged by drug use, accident or illness, an ensuing inability to respond to or even identify faces can occur, as graphically described by Dr Oliver Sacks, whose patient Dr P famously mistook his wife for a hat after he suffered a brain injury.



Perrett explains that human faces show evolutionary development from the jaws and faces of fish, which is still particularly visible in human embryos at just a few weeks' gestation. However, human faces have become more mobile and expressive than our amphibian ancestors, reflecting how humans as social animals rely on vision and exchanging facial expressions to

navigate our way around the world.

Perrett looks at the effects of hormones on bone growth and, consequently, head and face shape. He describes female faces as "neotenus ... with less prominent brows and jaws, thicker lips, a smaller nose and head size and large eyes relative to the rest of the face". Research participants were able to manipulate photos of faces by using a computer to increase or decrease sexual differences. Across cultures, Perrett found that 95 per cent of participants decided that "feminisation of women's faces made them more attractive", although interestingly "increasing masculinity makes male faces less attractive to both men and women". Ultimately, and perhaps comfortingly, however, Perrett found that a beautiful face is not a guarantee of success in love; being a valuable social partner is much more important.

The book follows in the footsteps of others reporting on research into the human brain in an accessible way, such as Norman Doidge's *The Brain That Changes Itself* and any number of works by Dr Oliver Sacks. For those interested in the developing understanding of the human brain it is worthy of attention. □