The Players
by Margaret Sweatman

Reviewed by Irene D’Souza

It is a fact universally acknowledged that one’s given social class certainly defined status and was the stuff of life in seventeenth-century England, but in The Players, it slowly draws those who choose to defy and ignore the status quo and conventions into a labyrinth of both comic and tragic proportions.

The orphaned sixteen-year-old Lilly Cole comes from a family of prostitutes and her first paying customer is a titled gentleman. The second earl of Boxborough, whose common name is Bart, is smitten at first glance. In true fairy-tale style he offers the vivacious Lilly roles as a player in the King’s Playhouse. Lilly’s introduction to the gilded society is enhanced by her brilliant theatrical performances. The reader is poignantly reminded that “Lilly’s ear for suffering gave her a talent for playing comedy”; thus the fine line between humour and sorrow are firmly established at the beginning. The shining star is full of purpose and poise and, much to Bart’s chagrin and despair, catches the eye of King Charles and soon becomes his mistress. “She made him laugh; she pretended to the King that she didn’t need anything, and she pretended so well, he treated her as a lady, as a friend.”

However, Margaret Sweatman never allows her heroine to succumb to the happily-ever-after myth. She casts a provocative eye on the whims of the hypocritical society that doles out crumbs to keep the majority from any uprisings or resistance. This is no fairy tale. Lilly’s ascension on the social-mobility ladder of privilege is thwarted by the plague; the theatres are shut, and Lilly will surely soon be forgotten – the whims of celebrity being as fragile then as they are today.

Lilly, however, is a survivor, if a survivor is one who keeps on compulsively choosing life; she is desperate to survive against all odds, so she chooses to trust her own instincts and common sense, both of which tell her that even being the King’s mistress does not guarantee a luxurious lifestyle, and that enemies abound. In an effort to preserve her place at the King’s court she does not demand royal lodgings, but continues to live in
her aunt’s brothel. Therefore she is forced to deal with unwanted advances when returning from trysts with the King.

In order to thwart a rape by a brutal titled gentleman, she attempts to regain her dignity and self-respect by killing her attacker. Her act is, however, witnessed by spies of the vile Sir George Rose, and Lilly knows that she has destroyed her privileged position. Rose attempts to bring Lilly to the hangman’s justice and, left with few choices, she plans to escape the noose by setting off to sea.

Ever the survivor, Lilly boldly and somewhat brazenly opts for freedom by joining two French adventurers/explorers on their voyage to find a passage to China from Northern Canada. Despite the danger of their venture, the Frenchmen convince King Charles to underwrite their voyage; it is a win-win proposition, they argue, because their trading pacts with the Canadian Indians guarantee a windfall of beaver pelts.

The brilliant actress, using her inherent talents to take on the role of explorer, learns to survive as the lone female in the company of randy men. Her guardian angel on the voyage is the dark and brooding captain Magnus Brown, who falls for her.

Lilly’s liberation comes when she realizes that she is drawn to the breathtaking beautiful open spaces of Canada’s James Bay. Her body, it seems, yearns for the intense freeing landscape that is never claustrophobic, and that gives her a raison d’être. If her acting roles were a prelude to her real-life roles, she proves that she has learned well by ensuring that the child (the King’s offspring) with which she is pregnant will be born free and unencumbered in the new world.

Sweatman’s plot is haunting in its complexity. Immersed in historical fact, the shifts between fiction and reality are provocatively intertwined. Acting and role playing is a theme that runs throughout the novel. The players are ever on stage, keeping up an action as it moves from continent to continent, mirroring the heroine’s instinct for survival. The events of the novel are bookended by real-life dramas, and Sweatman is adept at focusing on her main interest, the interior dramas, played out within the stifling confines of seventeenth-century England.

Lilly Cole’s survival instincts are honed by her inevitable encounters with grief. Sweatman recreates in minute detail the limited options society at that time offered women bred to be mere appendages of high-society men. To her credit, she provides a glimpse of real-life human relationships while historical explorers of Northern Canada
boom off stage. Women and their interior lives are Sweatman’s territory and she treats these familiar subjects with depth, beauty and tenderness.

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