Not Being on a Boat
by Esmé Claire Keith

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

It’s a gutsy move to write a 350-page novel from the perspective of an obsessive, unsympathetic character who is more concerned with the service of his meals than with the lives and feelings of the people he dines with.

In her audacious first novel, Winnipegger Esmé Claire Keith dares readers to tire of the way her character, a wealthy retired businessman named Rutledge, obsesses over the details of the luxury cruising lifestyle he's bought into on the ship Mariola. Those who stick with Not Being on a Boat will be rewarded by a unique and darkly comic metaphor for our age of global anxiety for the many and ever increasing luxury for the few.

Keith’s protagonist may be cold and unsympathetic, but he can be very entertaining, largely because he is so completely unselfconscious in his nastiness.

His character is established early when he describes his first meeting with his steward Raoul, “cringing in front of me in a way that I liked.” Later, when Raoul warns him to cover up with a hat or sunscreen, Rutledge says more than he realizes when he responds: “No part of me is sensitive, Raoul.”

We soon learn that social hierarchy is extremely important to Rutledge, especially when he discusses the moral distinction between buying a place on the luxury cruise ship using inherited money and simply winning a place through a lottery. “Anyone can win a lottery. You buy a ticket; you’ve got a chance. But if your family has money that’s not luck. It’s family values.”

It’s an accomplishment to write in such a deadpan voice while delivering so many comic lines, and Keith manages frequently to satirize the dog-eat-dog philosophy and hierarchical vision that Rutledge espouses – using Rutledge’s own words.

But the novel is not just a satire about a selfish man on luxury cruise. In many ways, the Mariola is our world: a place where a small number of people seek ever more refined pleasures while an unstable system threatens to crash to the ground all around us.

Early in the novel, passengers from the Mariola accidentally set off a revolution on a Caribbean island. In the aftermath life on the ship and, from what we infer, life on shore, get more and more chaotic. Passengers and crew are stranded on shore or jump ship, food becomes scarce, and the few snippets of news Rutledge bothers to note suggest a world awash in insurgencies and wars.

And yet, through it all, passengers cling to their rituals of dressing for dinner at the Captain’s Mess and Rutledge continues to lord over the serving staff while simultaneously trying to curry favour with the wealthy entrepreneur who is the ship’s reigning passenger.

It’s a novel of impoverished imaginations amid great wealth. Characters seem unable to see what’s happening in the world outside and even as they are discussing the growing disaster on the ship, they can’t escape the business jargon and promotional-brochure language that shape their every thought. Things are continually referred to as “top of the line,” Rutledge regularly uses expressions like “going forward,” and the most mundane products are discussed in the excruciating detail of luxury advertising.
N (while fighting with Rutledge over a set of keys, Raoul says that they are attached to his body with “steel wire, twenty mil gauge, precision ground and tempered to high tolerance”).

Rutledge and his shipmates are determined to live the good life. But they are in many ways lifeless, which is ultimately what the book’s about.

The book’s title comes from an exchange in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which Guildenstern says: “You can’t not be on a boat.” It’s a philosophical joke. To be dead is to “not be,” but if you “are” anywhere, by definition you are “being.”

It’s tempting to think that Rutledge and his shipmates are in fact souls in a nautical hell and they really are “not being” on a boat. Certainly if you’re familiar with Sartre’s play *No Exit*, in which hell is an elegant hotel, the exchanges between Rutledge and the sometimes obsequious, sometimes insolent Raoul will seem reminiscent of those between Sartre’s damned journalist Garcin and the demonic valet.

Maybe Sartre had it right, but with a twist. Hell is other people on a luxury cruise. 

Bob Armstrong is the author of the comic novel *Dadolescence* and long ago played the valet in a production of *No Exit*.

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