

PLAYING THE SYSTEM

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Alexandra Long. *I Took My Harp to a Party*. Sydney: Picador, 1993.
\$14.95.

Alexandra Long worked as a solicitor before concentrating on her career as a writer. *I Took My Harp to a Party* is a collection of 10 short stories. Only the first story, "The Doctor Daddy", has a legal theme, but it is not of the usual lawyer, client and trial variety. This story is about a clerk obstructing a young solicitor, Timothy Masterton, who is endeavouring to file a series of defamation documents in the Supreme Court Registry in Sydney. The Registry is a typical bureaucracy with inflexible rules and a hierarchy of decision-making.

Long's writing is attractive because of her quick narrative and colourful descriptions. Timothy has "long, ectomorph's legs" and "[l]ife has not yet had a chance to stamp its definition around his chin and neck; they had a bland, out-of-focus appearance". The clerk officiates by discovering unacceptable margins, documents which have telltale smudges suggestive of photocopies, and a possible forgery when Timothy's "plump, careful, female" signature becomes a "huddled nest of hieroglyphics on the last page"! So Timothy's attempts to file documents are thwarted. Yet, Timothy's liaison with Genevieve in turn thwarts the clerk, who ends up at the cinema with Pig-Pen, "so called because she is truly disgusting" and prone to clean out her ear with borrowed manicure tools.

The other nine stories range widely. "Lucinda and the Girl in the Sarong" is about a merchant banker whose success in banking and uncompromising selection procedures do not secure her a "real peach" of a spouse when she decides it is time to get married. In "Courting the Night", Miriam, accused of being old inside, goes raging with her friends who work at the hospital where she is a clerk in the admin section. When she and friend Leanne end up back at Pizza Madness, this is surely having a good time. "I Guess I Always Knew I Would Be Famous" is a semi-historical tale of the parentage and birth of Marilyn Monroe, born Norma Jean Mortensen. Unlike the other stories, the last story, "The Littlest Chicken", has a sad twist when conception from a substitute gene pool is displaced by gin and a hot bath.

These are original and entertaining stories. Alexandra Long has an eye for quirky detail, and her descriptions are perceptive and funny.