

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 9

Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Book Title: Adult Themes: Rewriting the Rules of Adulthood

Author: Kate Crawford

Reviewer: Mandy Nolan

I don't think I've ever really felt like an adult. By society's standards I meet only half of the requirements. I am married with children. That equals two ticks in the adult box. But I am still renting and my primary occupation is listed as 'stand up comedian.' Two strikes against. A proper socialised consuming adult is married, has children, owns property and has a regular job. Most of us thirty somethings and below struggle to meet all the necessary requirements. Is it because we are part of the iPod, Tsubi jean wearing, self-obsessed ME generation, or are there greater cultural and social powers at work? Has feminism, technology, and a vastly changed workplace modified the traditional prescription of adulthood? Kate Crawford is the author of 'Adult Themes: Rewriting the Rules of Adulthood', a book that identifies the cultural values implicit in the assignation of 'adult' and 'non-adult' behaviour.

Kate Crawford is a writer, a composer and an academic. She's worked as a journalist, she's presented an ABC TV series, she's a regular ABC radio as a cultural commentator, she's a lecturer in Media and Communications at Sydney University, and in her spare time when she's not crocheting the edges of tea towels or hand embroidering her curriculum vitae, Crawford is a well known music producer having released 3 albums and 6 EP's with B(if)tek and Clone. She rents, sports no ring and is currently listed on the relationship stock exchange as: 'available'. Whilst her career achievements are massive, Crawford falls well short meeting the adulthood indicators and is a prime example of the much maligned and stereotyped generation now being referred to as 'adulescents' or 'kidults'. Media commentators proclaim these well educated, single, childless, travel-obsessed young people as the scourge of adulthood, and they alone bear the full responsibility for what is predicted as a social apocalypse: a childless future of property deficient gadget obsessed geeks.

In her impressive text Crawford deconstructs the mythology surrounding adulthood. Each chapter is another onion skin which shrouds our social assumptions about what it means to be an adult. The well researched chapters deal with work, marriage, children and family, property, culture, politics and citizenship and conclude with an optimistic re-write of a new narrative for adulthood, and points the reader in the direction of the Ethics of Adulthood. This is not the kind of book you pick up for a night time read. It's dense with information. This text has been thoroughly researched, and Crawford interweaves resources from pop culture, with philosophers, media commentators, literary theorists and more. In fact, this book is so well resourced, that one assumes that this is a PhD project, as no ordinary writer would go to such extraordinary lengths to develop such a careful argument. This is not supposition and prejudice. This is a precise negotiation that investigates the social markers of adulthood. This is a powerful and academic response to rhetorical clichés that don't acknowledge the increasing diversity and heterogeneity of culture.

The much maligned generation X and Y are operating in a different sphere to their 'adult' parents. Members of that generation often cite economic difficulties for remaining childless and without property. In fact, as Crawford points out, these generations are heavily taxed, to cope with the burden of an ageing population. Although 'Adult Themes' locates the generational oppositions established by the media, it doesn't seek to further the argument between Baby Boomers and the X and Y crew. She points out very succinctly, that the mere act of creating generational divides is simply a marketing exercise to identify consumer values, and is never indicative of people's real experience. One person may be living in a housing commission flat in Penrith, the other in a waterfront beachhouse in Wategoes in Byron Bay. They cannot possibly be ascribed the same values, although social commentators continue to do this through their generational labels.

Crawford's book is peppered with examples of prejudice and negative inference, suggesting that these unwritten rules of adulthood are powerful means of social identification. She cites the example of Julia Gillard. 'Gillard had just returned to Australia when Mark Latham vacated the leadership of the Labor Party in January 2005. Gillard hadn't even unpacked her suitcase before a Sun Herald photographer appeared at her house, and she agreed to have her photo taken in the kitchen. Suddenly, Gillard's status as a woman and as a capable politician was in question. The Sydney Morning Herald ran a snide description of the kitchen as "lifeless", 'unnaturally spotless" and "eerily stark". On ABC radio Sally Loane objected that "there was something terribly lonely about that room" because there were no flowers or paintings or loaves of bread in evidence.'

How can she represent the Australian people without a husband or family? But then, if she had a husband and family, how could she fulfill her duty to them? Even Gillard's empty fruit bowl was criticised, and it became a symbol for a childless life, devoid of fertility. These are powerful prejudices, based on one simple kitchen and what its appearance signified about the marriage and child status of an individual, and what that indicated about her values as a person. After the massive stir, Gillard later remarked that in future she would always keep a few half rotten bananas in the fruit bowl to allay suspicion.

In *Adult Themes*, Crawford clearly identifies that the playing field has changed distinctly, and the way we find work, form families and engage in politics and culture has radically transformed. Crawford argues that its time the debates on social values recognise the variety of ways we choose to live. The gatekeepers of adulthood are asked to cough up the key, as the future is about embracing diversity in a landscape of shared values rather than arbitrary attributes like age or property ownership. Crawford echoes the sentiments of Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney, and re-iterates, that we are in fact Hunters and Collectors of values on an ongoing quest for meaning. It is not so much what delineates 'adult', it is more about the failures and successes on the quest to being human.

Kate Crawford is a featured writer at this year's Byron Bay Writer's Festival.