

PATRICK MCGRATH      PORT MUNGO    2004

What is Tropicalismo? We are told that it is a new wave of art... but in this novel it evolves into a new psychology of the self and even, perhaps, a new dark psychopathy.

This pathological behaviour and those associated with such behaviour - witnesses and perpetrators alike - will attempt to protect themselves from acknowledging how implicated they are in the ensuing situations.

Perhaps some find the messiness of human emotional life - its desires, and the rationalisations of those desires along with wilful ignorance of our real motivations - too uncomfortable to reflect upon for long.

In a seedy river town on the Gulf of Honduras, Jack Rathbone believed he had found a place that would give him and his lover, the accomplished artist Vera Savage, the solitude they would need to create a body of work that would shake the art world to its core.

But in a place where time is thicker than the mangrove swamps that surround it, Jack and Vera discover an emotional frontier more fearsome, untamed, and dangerous than any wilderness.

Told through the voice of Jack's adoring sister, Gin, **Port Mungo** is the riveting story of this ill-fated couple, one that begins as a bohemian flight-of-fancy before unraveling into a dark, debauched and sinister tale

With **Port Mungo**, Patrick McGrath, author of the acclaimed novels **Spider** and **Asylum**, delivers a spellbinding narrative to explore the obsessive pursuit of art and love.

## From **The New Yorker**

McGrath's latest foray into macabre psychology examines one obsessive relationship through the lens of another. The novel is narrated by Gin Rathbone, who has lived her life in thrall to her younger brother, Jack, a famous painter now ailing and in her care

. She tells the story of their eccentric, motherless childhood in England, a period that ends when Jack falls for a magnetic, promiscuous older artist named Vera Savage.

Jack settles with Vera first in New York, then in the ramshackle Central American river town of the title. Gin's account of their extravagantly tempestuous life is full of adulation of him and hatred of Vera, whom she blames for his misfortunes.

However, a series of shocking dénouements show us the extent of Gin's delusions about her brother and, in McGrath's virtuosic handling, make for a compelling piece of family Gothic.

Copyright © 2005 *The New Yorker*

McGrath deftly crafts [**Port Mungo**] into a sophisticated psychological exploration of the darker sides of memory, secrecy, desire and guilt. . . . claustrophobic, a Grand Guignol pageant of cosmic passion, obsessive reflectivity and reprisal.

The outstanding feature of McGrath's storytelling is his ability to write with tranquil, evocative beauty about the vilest of subjects. **Port Mungo** is haunted not because of any trickery of reversed expectation or suspended belief, but because we see so completely how damaging the most basic human emotions can be.

## From the Back Cover

In a seedy river town on the Gulf of Honduras, Jack Rathbone believed he had found a place that would give him and his lover, the accomplished artist Vera Savage, the solitude they would need to create a body of work that would shake the art world to its core. But in a place where time is thicker than the mangrove swamps that surround it, Jack and Vera discover an emotional frontier more fearsome, untamed, and dangerous than any wilderness.

Told through the voice of Jack's adoring sister, Gin, *Port Mungo* is the riveting story of this ill-fated couple, one that begins as a bohemian flight-of-fancy before unraveling into a dark, debauched and sinister tale. With *Port Mungo*, the incomparable Patrick McGrath, author of the acclaimed novels *Spider* and *Asylum*, delivers a spellbinding narrative to explore the obsessive pursuit of art and love.

Being a painter seems to confer a free bohemian pass, a license to drink too much, rut however you please and generally be selfish and heedless. So, at any rate, assumes Jack Rathbone, the spoiled artist at the center of Patrick McGrath's novel *Port Mungo*.

. McGrath's earlier novels typically featured characters with outré medical conditions, but Rathbone is physically sound.

It's his soul that's ailing, especially since Vera, the woman he marries, has a sharp enough critical eye to know when he is doing second-rate work (which is most of the time) and the brass to say so

. McGrath tells this story of wrecked lives with stylish panache, as in this aperçu about one of Jack and Vera's daughters: "Youth is profoundly obsessed with its own dilemma, which crudely put is the problem of going forward with the appearance of sure-footed confidence into what looks like a morass of uncertainty and risk."

I am a tall, thin, untidy Englishwoman, I drink too much and yes, I suppose I am rather—oh, detached—distant, aloof—snobbish, even, I have been called all these things, also cold, stiff and untouchable, though those who think me untouchable never saw me when I was perfectly touchable indeed! I should also say that I have an independent income, which has been quite adequate for my own needs and also, I should add, for Jack's. Which is why it always impressed me that until the very end he continued to work. Not with the fervour of his youth, of course, or with the sustained intensity of his middle years, but he worked, he worked every day, and I took a close interest, inasmuch as he would let me. I admit this was partly out of concern for his health. He was plagued by arthritis, and while through will-power alone he could usually ignore the steady grumbling ache of it, and the sporadic stabs of pain, the restriction of movement in his knuckles was a sore trial. At times it was debilitating. We were told the cause was uncertain, but that it might have been a sustained allergic reaction to his own tissue, which was ironic, to say the least. Curiously his old malaria medicine from Port Mungo would control the inflammation when it got too bad.

Jack Rathbone is a 17-year-old youth in the UK who aspires to be an artist and lives with his sister Gin (the narrator of the story) who is devoted to her younger brother in a near pathologic manner. Jack encounters Vera Savage, an exotic bohemian painter from Scotland who is well shown in the UK, and falls under the spell of his older chanteuse/alcoholic/free love personage. The two become entwined as sexual partners and Jack encourages Vera to move to New York where they will open an 'American Studio' in the wilderness of a new country and Jack will learn painting (and other lessons) from Vera.

Once in Manhattan their painting is delayed by Vera's insatiable need to be the center of attention among new artsy acquaintances and her alcoholism triggers periods of absence. Feeling confined by New York the two decide to seek other locations to pursue their art, and after a brief stay in Havana, Cuba they find the perfect isolation in Port Mungo - a seedy, smarmy, decadent Maughamesque spot in the Gulf of Honduras. There they paint, drink, carouse, and while Jack develops a painting style of 'tropicalism', Vera begins to follow her sexual needs in adventures away from Port Mungo. Always reuniting after these trysts and fights, they eventually have a daughter Peg and some years later another daughter Anna. Vera soon deserts her family, leaving Jack (and on occasion his sister Gin) to raise the girls. Peg is more in the mold of her mother and is worshipped by Jack, but Peg dies in a quasi-mysterious fashion plunging Jack into a deep depression.

Jack returns to New York to live with his sister Gin, and scathing rumors result in daughter Anna being adopted by her uncle who sees Jack as an inadequate parent. Time passes until Anna returns as a young woman to re-enter Jack's life - older, wiser, and needy. From this point on the story passes rapidly, enriched by characters who all deftly interplay with the strange history of what really happened in Port Mungo. Vera's absence is explained, Peg's death is clarified, and the true nature of each of these fascinating characters is painted before our eyes.

McGrath leaves no one free of fault, of the ability to have a dark side, or to demonstrate that their chameleon lives can shed a dermis to reveal the core animal beneath. He writes so well that once the story is started it is difficult to put aside, so wary are we of the tension always mounting. He understands art and the artistic mind and has depicted the artist/model relationship as well as anyone writing today. You may not like the characters in this book, but they will remain indelibly stamped on your mind. Here is another fine work by one of our better novelists writing today.

An intense and gothic novel of twisted passions, all acted out within the claustrophobic confines of that most artistically fecund of contexts - the family.

The narrator is herself well under the spell of the main character, her toxically egotistical artist-brother Jack, and it's not long before the reader smells a rat in the way she continually re-calibrates her interpretations of what she sees and hears about him.

Jack's long time mistress Vera is just too conveniently available as a scapegoat. Without regurgitating the plot and giving away the ending, I found the characters sufficiently well-described and believable to engage me, as was the sense of place in descriptions of the Caribbean and of New York city as backdrops to the events.

Interesting that some reviewers on this site have criticised both these aspects of the book, one even finding the denouement "laughable". Ah well, proof that reader response is as variable as individual temperament and life-experience, and sometimes our reactions are suspicious in themselves