



THE PASSION OF CHRISTOS

Christos Tsiolkas
has shifted from
stories of gay
sex and violence
to heterosexual
family dynamics.

But is the
straight-talking
novelist still
out to shock?

Caroline Baum
reports. »

Portraits by **Wilk**

WHAT AN IRONY THAT A MAN whose name is “Christ” should blame religion for the ripe vocabulary that litters his novels. “When I was young I was quite religious,” says 43-year-old Christos Tsiolkas, the bad boy of Oz Lit. “After my Greek Orthodox upbringing, I fell in with some evangelical Baptists. The terror of the body in monotheism is something I want to fight all my life. The disgust, the vilification. So yeah, I explore sweating, shitting, pissing, the lot.”

He’s not kidding. The “c” word appears in the first paragraph of Tsiolkas’s latest novel, *The Slap* (published last month by Allen & Unwin and already into its second printing). It then reappears too many times to count. Defending its use, Tsiolkas says, “I asked my female friends what word they used. The choices were that, vagina or pussy. Most of them used that. Besides, I wanted to reclaim the word from misogynists. Every character in the book who uses it does so in a different way.”

As anyone familiar with Tsiolkas’s previous novels, *Loaded*, *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe*, would expect, masturbation features prominently: in one scene a young virgin does it with a shampoo bottle, in another a young man does it in his father’s bed. (Not surprisingly, Tsiolkas’s favourite swear word is *malaka*, Greek for wanker.) There’s also domestic violence, alcoholism, infidelity and drug use, all of it described with explicit, forensic realism.

Compared with his earlier work, *The Slap* may seem tame. After all, it’s about middle Australia, not the depraved, squalid, blood-soaked fantasies of a 21st-century urban vampire retracing his roots in the Balkans, as *Dead Europe* was. Resonating with haunted metaphors of death and the bloodlust of ethnic cleansing, the novel had relentless shock value, but received rave reviews from most critics, although Robert Manne in *The Monthly* called it “repellent and unpersuasive”.

In its scatological fixation, *Dead Europe* is consistent with *Jump Cuts*, the joint autobiography Tsiolkas wrote with his late friend, poet Sasha Soldatow. Enumerating his favourite things, he mentions, not once but twice, “a nice, easy shit”. Obviously, Tsiolkas is not bothered by the expression “too much information”.

He appears to have quite a thing for vomiting, too. “I find the metaphor of purging oneself really attractive,” he says. But does that mean we readers have to be subjected to graphic details of these episodes? According to Tsiolkas’s editor, Jane Gleeson-White, the answer is yes. “He uses the most charged, the strongest words to startle and shock readers out of their comfortable slumber.”

The Slap is about people like us, people we know, friends, neighbours, colleagues. It pivots on the interconnecting relationships of a close-knit group, mostly migrants, living in inner-city Melbourne. When one of them slaps someone else’s exasperating toddler at a barbecue, their loyalties and values are tested to the max, ripping their relationships apart. It makes for compelling reading, partly because it’s so easy to recognise positions and attitudes about the hot-button issues of contemporary life that one has heard or expressed at countless such social gatherings, with their undercurrents of hidden animosities, rehashed platitudes, barely disguised agendas and ideologies.

Tsiolkas is the first to admit that his characters are not likeable. “Our culture is selfish and toxic in its aspirations,” he says. “I wondered whether I would be better off living in Greece for a while, until I realised that my Greek was not good enough



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and that I didn’t belong. But when I came back here to Howard and the Tampa and Iraq, I felt I was living in a nightmare.” Tsiolkas joined the Labor Party but left within months, disillusioned and disgusted by its policy on refugees. His favourite graffiti on a neighbourhood wall reads: “Howard, Rudd, different cheeks, same arse.”

No one in *The Slap* embodies Tsiolkas’s level of engagement with the wider world. The concerns of his characters are much more self-interested, and focused on the everyday skirmishes that take place on domestic turf. You can just imagine reading groups arguing over its politics and messages about loyalty, honesty, discipline and marriage. A vivid X-ray of the conflicts of life, the book seems to have given Tsiolkas a mainstream readership he has previously never reached, just as Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* enabled him to cross over from award-winning literary niche to mass market. So is Tsiolkas a potty-mouthed provocateur? Or one of the finest writing talents of his generation?

WHEN WE MEET AT HIS HOME IN PRESTON, on the northern edge of Melbourne, he could be auditioning for the role of suburban housewife rather than that of standard-bearer for the school of so-called “dirty realist” writers. He is preparing fish for the evening meal he’ll share with his partner of 24 years, Wayne van der Stelt, a quietly spoken cartographer (who asked Tsiolkas not to use the “c” word in *The Slap*).

Despite his long-term commitment to his partner and his strong commitment to gay rights, he does not feel the need for marriage. “Look, both Wayne and I come from migrant families who have been very loyal and accepting, but that would make my father feel uncomfortable. We celebrated our 21st anniversary together with our families, and that felt like a wedding.”

Tsiolkas gives me a tour of the garden, planted by van der Stelt. It includes an enviably vigorous vegetable patch, and Tsiolkas proudly points out the fig and olive trees. Then he makes me tea and admits to being nervous. “I don’t want people to think I’ve used family and friends for this book,” he says. “And I’m worried about the stuff about

breastfeeding, which will make some people think the book is about them.” (One character continues to suckle her child until he is nearly four, with Tsiolkas suggesting the habit is more for her own comfort than for the child’s benefit.)

But surely that should be the least of his worries, compared with the X-rated material of his earlier work? “Yeah, none of my friends wanted to recognise themselves in *Dead Europe*,” he laughs. What do his parents think of his writing? “They haven’t read *Dead Europe* yet, but they could soon because it has been translated into Greek,” he says. “Seeing *Head On*, the film version of *Loaded* [directed by Ana Kokkinos and starring Alex Dimitriades as the character based on Tsiolkas], with Mum was pretty tough. She didn’t flinch, except for the shooting-up scene. But then we both went round the corner to the pub, got drunk and really talked.”

His parents, migrants from remote mountain villages in central Greece, live nearby. Tsiolkas, his younger brother, John, a Victorian legal aid lawyer, and van der Stelt are regular visitors.

It was at one of the many big family gatherings that take place at his parents’ house that Tsiolkas got the idea for *The Slap*. “Friends were there with their three-year-old son. Mum loves preparing big feasts and she was busy doing the chickens, the barbie, the pitta bread, and this kid kept playing with her pots and pans. She told him not to, several times. When he disobeyed for the umpteenth time, she gave him a slight tap on the bottom and the kid turned to her and said: ‘No one is allowed to touch my body without my permission.’ It was such an amazing phrase to hear out of a kid’s mouth, he was obviously parroting something he’d heard at kindy,” says Tsiolkas, who has used the words verbatim in his novel.

At nearly 500 pages, *The Slap* is hefty and intense. It took two years to complete and, despite its sensitivities and potential for controversy, Tsiolkas found it a pleasure to write. “After *Dead Europe*, which took seven years, I was depleted. I don’t suffer from depression, but I was in turmoil and despair. I abandoned the book several times, but then I went dancing and came back to it. I was wrestling with demons but already beginning to think about the next project. Initially, it was going to be a novella but I was enjoying myself so much it just grew and grew.”

The dancing he’s referring to is not, as you might think, exclusively on the urban, subterranean clubbing scene. Tsiolkas also frequents Melbourne’s Greek clubs and loves to dance there. “He’ll throw his arms around other people and thrash around,” says Ana Kokkinos. “It reaffirms his roots, his identity, allows him to celebrate others, and lose himself in the moment.”

“I was lucky to be raised in a culture where dancing is not the prerogative of youth,” says Tsiolkas, admitting that drugs heighten the experience. “The first time I ever took ecstasy was at a lesbian nightclub and I remember the rush: I hit the floor in a delirium. My body felt like it had, for once, refuted the destructive split between the flesh and the spirit which is so fundamental to monotheism.”

LIKE MOST WRITERS, TSIOLKAS PREFERS TO write in the mornings. There’s a photo of George Clooney above the desk in his study. When asked if he thinks the rumours that Clooney is gay are true, he says yes, but his partner, overhearing the conversation, pops his head around the door and disagrees. “Doesn’t matter, he’s just gorgeous,” shrugs Tsiolkas, a keen film buff who used to work at Melbourne’s Australian Centre for the Moving Image curating film programs.

He cites Bertolucci, Pasolini, Truffaut and Godard as his favourite directors and, like most writers of his generation, wishes he could write for US cable network HBO, “although I wish series like *The Wire* and *Deadwood* were not the benchmarks of excellence. We need something of our own. The cultural cringe is so debilitating. I’m also sick of the fact that all our culture has been mainstreamed. We all talk about the Oscars and the Booker Prize even though we know that’s not really where it’s at. It’s just a kind of laziness.”

Tsiolkas has written a couple of screenplays. One, co-written with *Lantana*’s Andrew Bovell and five others who co-wrote the play *Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?*, is currently in production. Called *Blessed*, and directed by Kokkinos, it stars William McNnes, Frances O’Connor, Deborra-lee Furness and Miranda Otto and deals with mothers and children, beauty, love, politics, and racism. “The most provocative moments in the script come from Christos,” says Kokkinos. “He doesn’t censor himself. He writes what he really thinks and that takes you into fraught terrain, but it is always truthful, never gratuitous.”

That includes being honest about his own sexual fantasies, which are often triggered by porn films that feature “white Anglo men who reminded me of the tougher ‘skip’ boys I went to school with at Blackburn High. They were the ones who called me wog and teased me as a bookish nerd but – sexuality is nothing if not contradictory – they were also the kind of boys I was most attracted to.”

Tsiolkas wishes that society were more candid about the role of pornography “instead of just talking about the bogeyman, the pedophile”. Ambivalent about his own connoisseur’s collection, he says: “I worry that our sexual imagination is being colonised by pornography, but I do use it and enjoy it. My previous dishonesty about it is what prompted me to write *The Jesus Man*.”

THese days, Tsiolkas fits his writing around his day job as the office manager at a local vet clinic where he also works as a nurse. He’s used the world of the vet clinic in *The Slap*. “You see pain, suffering, death, the grief of humans. I feel privileged to be there. I also love cleaning the cages, handling animals, learning new skills, the elements of science and the fact that it provides a rest for my mind.”

With his commitment to exploring the visceral aspects of life, he has not sidestepped getting scratched (“I was scared of cats at first, they can really hurt you”) and dirty (“I’ve assisted in giving an enema”). It’s not a new sensation for Tsiolkas, who worked as a cleaner alongside his parents for several years while he was at university.

“I feel guilty that, compared with the lives of the working class, and being so aware of the nature of labour, my life as a writer is so soft and easy. This work really centres me.” Perhaps it also confirmed what Tsiolkas already knew: that underneath the surface, human beings are animals when it comes to basic impulses and appetites.

It was not the kind of job Tsiolkas originally envisaged when, as a young idealist, he signed up to do a dip ed. “I’d taught literacy as a volunteer and was very committed to becoming a teacher in the state school system. I am really passionate about education. It’s probably the single thing that gets me most angry – what successive governments in this country have done to our public education system. I would like to take every minister responsible for that portfolio since the Whitlam era and put them up against a wall and shoot them,” says Tsiolkas, who confesses to a hot temper – usually fuelled by drink.

“We have really failed as a nation on this issue. It needs a bipartisan response. The private school system enforces inequality from birth. What really shits me is that parents with children in private schools are always happy to give me their two cents’ worth about the failings of the state school system, but they know nothing about it because they’ve opted out of it.”



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Eventually, Tsiolkas had to make a choice: his writing or his commitment to teaching and reform. “In the end, I was too selfish,” he says, “and I was scared that parents would read my books and create a scandal about someone who wrote about sex and drugs being responsible for their children. Moreover, as a gay man, I’m told that I have no right to be part of the debate about children’s education or parenting issues, such as discipline.”

In his 30s, Tsiolkas agonised over whether to become a father. “We want everything, we want too much,” he says, with a deep sigh. “I didn’t want to ask for things that could tip the balance when I’m so lucky to have what I have,” he explains carefully, pacing the kitchen in a state of agitation that suggests the emotion surrounding his decision not to have children has not dissipated.

He fulfils his need unofficially, from the sidelines, acting as a mentor to the children of his family and friends. He gave one godchild the Bible, the Koran, books on Buddhism, and *The Communist Manifesto* as a starter kit for life. His love of music makes it easy for him to relate to teenagers. “He’ll sit for hours with our children playing them cool music on his iPod, everything from De La Soul to Johnny Cash,” says his editor, Jane Gleeson-White. “They feel like he’s a magic figure in their lives who talks to them about politics and the wider world without patronising them.”

A favourite ritual is to accompany teenagers through what his friend Andrew Bovell describes as “crucial adolescent rites of passage”, like the Big Day Out. Tsiolkas is close to Bovell’s two children, and Bovell considers him “the kind of adult you want to be an influence on your children. He’s big-hearted, embracing and so smart. Spending time with him is like doing Humanity 101.”

So Christos, then, is a keeper of confidences, a source of advice and even, with parental consent, a chaperone to those who, like himself, wish to experiment with recreational chemical substances. “For me, drugs have been a source of pleasure and an introduction to art. I’ve had friends who have been junkies but, to me, death is part of the way I understand desire, and I try to be as honest about that as I can so that those who want to try things out can make an informed decision.”

There is a Greek word, *kefi*, that means lust for life. It represents the capacity to engage with people and to lose oneself in the euphoria of the moment – epitomised for many in the famous dancing scene in *Zorba the Greek*. Whether his dance is fuelled by anger, love, compassion, indignation or a heady, contradictory mixture of these ingredients, Tsiolkas is too intoxicated by the rhythm of the steps, and the words, to show any signs of being ready to stop. **GW**

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