

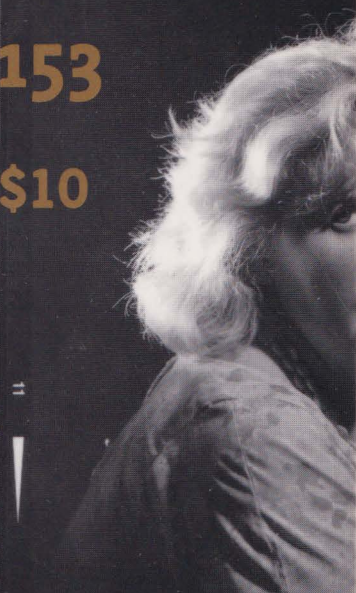
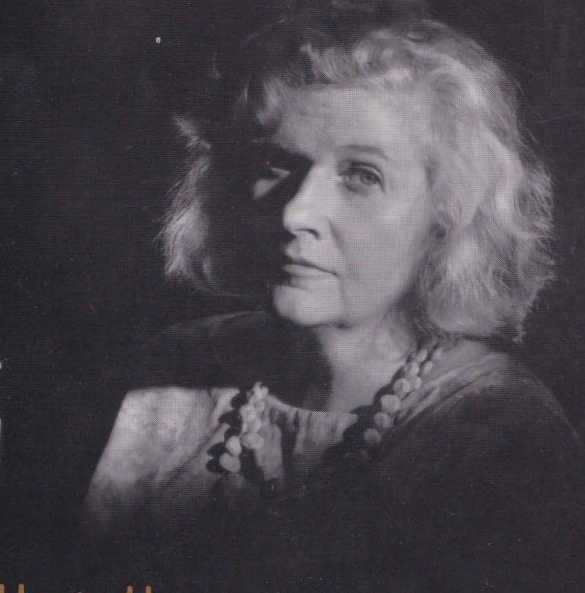


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12

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11

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153

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Dorothy Hewett

fill the void with a woman's voice



PANCHROMATIC

5

10

contents

- editorial** FRIENDS & ENEMIES *Ian Syson* 3
- features** COLEMAN'S OLD COLD WAR *David Carter* 4
FEMINIST PUBLISHING IN AUSTRALIA *Di Brown* 8
UNFASHIONABLE IN LITERARY TERMS *Phillip Edmonds* 14
DOROTHY HEWETT FILLING THE VOID WITH A WOMAN'S VOICE 25-49
TO AN OLDER POET *Lyn McCredden* 25, ASKING FOR MORE *Nicole Moore* 26, TO RUSSIA - WITH LOVE *Dorothy Hewett* 32,
INTERVIEW 34, THE AUSTRALIAN WRITER TODAY *Dorothy Hewett* 42,
EXCERPT FROM 'THE NEAP TIDE' *Dorothy Hewett* 46, THE PERIOD OF
SILENCE *Dorothy Hewett* 49
SUIT *Christos Tsiolkas* 50
- fiction** THE BLUE TEAPOT *Andrew Goss* 20
THE CAT *Peter Symons* 22
UNDERGROUND *Mudrooroo* 56
CAMERA OBSCURA *Scott Brook* 58
LAUGH *Martyn Pedler* 62
- poetry** *John Kinsella* 53, *Linda Marie Walker* 54, *Brian Henry* 55,
Dipti Saravanamuttu 55, *Hugh Tolhurst* 55, *Matthew Zapruder* 66,
Carolyn Gerrish 66 & 68, *John Tranter* 67, *Geoff Page* 68,
Chris Andrews 69, *Emma Lew* 69
- dialogue** A NEW INQUISITION *Richard Flanagan* 70, BRISBANE LINE *Marg Henderson* 70, ABOUT HUMPING BLUEY *Merv Lilley* 71, SA NEWS
Cath Kenneally 73, NEWS FROM TASMANIA *Tim Thorne* 75, NT NEWS
Marian Devitt 75, LONDON LETTER *Katherine Gallagher* 77, WHERE I
CAME IN... *Duncan Richardson* 77, AFI AWARDS FILMS, 1998 *Jane Landman* 80, MAGAZINE WRACK *Nathan Hollier* 81
- books** *Jenny Lee* 85, *Angela Mitropoulos* 87, *Frank Stilwell* 89,
Dawn May 91, *Christopher Lee* 92, *Carole Ferrier* 93,
Leigh Dale 95, *Phillip Edmonds* 96, *Cath Darcy* 97,
Brian Musgrove 99, *Nathan Hollier* 101, *Kerry Leves* 101
- graphics** DOROTHY HEWETT *Fritz Kos* front cover, EAST SWANSON DOCK
LINOCUTS *Mark Dober* 13, 52 & 61, DOROTHY HEWETT AT THE NATIONAL
PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE *Gerald Clarkson* 45 & back cover, *Lofo* 84

overland

Temper democratic, bias Australian

153

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editorial

friends & enemies

IN THIS ISSUE WE CELEBRATE the work-in-progress that is Dorothy Hewett's literary life. We include new work by her and about her as well as some previously unpublished photographs of our most photogenic writer. Hewett has been a friend to *overland* from the very early days and we are proud to feature her. Variouly loved and vilified, she is also one of Australia's most important writers. As Gwen Harwood urged, Hewett helped "fill the void with a woman's voice". Her literary works and her literary activism helped to change our culture for the better and for that we owe her a great debt.

Not all would agree. Peter Coleman, in a recent foray into cutting-edge journalism, has been stirring the pot a bit. No friend of Hewett's, he accuses her, along with Hardy, Cusack, Waten, Dark and company of the evil crimes of ... going to the Soviet Union to pick up their "roubles" and ... making polite, if excessive, speeches about their hosts and ... consorting with the sort of people who felt that Patrick White reminded them of a "big black velvet spider". In this issue's lead article, David Carter unpicks Coleman's failure to reveal anything new in his supposedly revelatory pieces in the *Courier-Mail*. Coleman's articles fit into an ongoing *Courier-Mail* campaign of harassment of significant left-wing intellectuals and writers, most of whom are dead.

Yet, there among the mock hysteria and cliched journalese, Coleman does have perhaps at least one valid point. He implicitly castigates Australian (left-wing) researchers for failing to "stampede to Moscow" (at around \$8,000 per trip) to help dig up some of the dirt on their intellectual forebears. Nor should we be afraid of exposing the perfidy of Australian Stalinism, literary or otherwise. Indeed, *overland* has performed that role recently regarding Ian Milner (see Phillip Deery in #147). Coleman's problem is that there is a quid pro quo in all of this. And I just can't see *Quadrant* (which is after all, the only major Australian literary magazine to have been substantially funded by arms of two different nation states) publishing an article exposing the CIA's role in bankrolling its establishment.

After reading his pieces, I took it upon myself to try to become something of a Peter Coleman of the left.

I would get into the Australian archives of that CIA front, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, held at the National Library in Canberra, and do some digging around. Unfortunately the archives are restricted. Permission to gain access needs to be obtained, coincidentally enough, from the gallant exposé himself. I breathed a sigh of relief, believing that Coleman's new spirit of revelation (a Moscow-inspired Glasnost, perhaps) would see me gain access.

I wrote to him and waited expectantly, looking forward to spending a couple of weeks in Canberra over Christmas, discovering the ins and outs of the CIA's role in Australia's postwar literary culture. When Coleman failed to reply I decided to phone him. Perhaps the letter had not reached him or it had slipped his mind.

How wrong could I be? At the end of a spirited and energetic conversation Coleman bluntly refused me access. His message was unambiguous. And just like the failed stampede to Moscow, there will be no mad rush to Canberra by academics, writers and intellectuals itching to find out just how much Washington gold ended up in the hands of *Quadrant* and its fellow-travellers.

Coleman probably doesn't like having mud thrown at his friends. Who does? But he would be aware that when you throw mud at your enemies, you are throwing it at someone else's friends. And they will be defended. Something Coleman does not seem to understand is the rise of a new, young, broadleft in Australia that hates Stalinism with a passion that probably exceeds his. We hate Stalinism because of its crimes *and* because of the damage it did to an otherwise noble goal. We see in writers like Hardy, Betty Collins (one visitor to Moscow who seems to have escaped Coleman's net) and, of course, Hewett, forebears and friends whose relationship with Stalinism was always more complex and contradictory than Coleman acknowledges. As Hewett reveals several times in this issue, her relation with Stalinism is one of the bad memories of her life; her relations with rank and file communists and other left-wingers are of an entirely different order. Anybody who could even begin to see that difference would not count Dorothy Hewett among their enemies.

Ian Syson

STALIN'S LITERATURE

David Carter

Coleman's Old Cold War

HOHUM. Here we go again. With its hands still dirty from the mud thrown at Manning Clark, the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* has dug up some more 'revelations' about Moscow gold and Soviet influence. Featured prominently on its opinion pages on successive Saturdays (29 August & 5 September) were articles by ex-*Quadrant* editor Peter Coleman based on his examination of Soviet Writers' Union archives and their files on Australian writers. The newspaper, it seems, sent Coleman to Moscow to examine the State Literary Archives. (I wonder if they'd send me to examine the *Quadrant* files, especially the bits about funding from certain US agencies? But then again I probably couldn't get access.)

It's difficult to see what the point was – Coleman's point or the editor's in thinking that this was newsworthy. Coleman begins as if he's uncovered something fabulously scandalous ("Just as incredible...") but can scarcely keep convincing himself as each article trails off into a desultory series of quotations and one-line comments – the old tactic of suggestion and guilt by implication.

One problem with Coleman's articles is that they have almost nothing to say despite the presentation, of the first in particular, which makes it appear as though the files will contain dark secrets like those of the East German secret police. There's very little that's new and even less that's interesting, although the attempt seems to be to imply some massive self-serving or Soviet-serving network – or conspiracy – of influence and obligation generously funded by

Moscow. Coleman's own facts simply don't support the idea that there was anything of the kind.

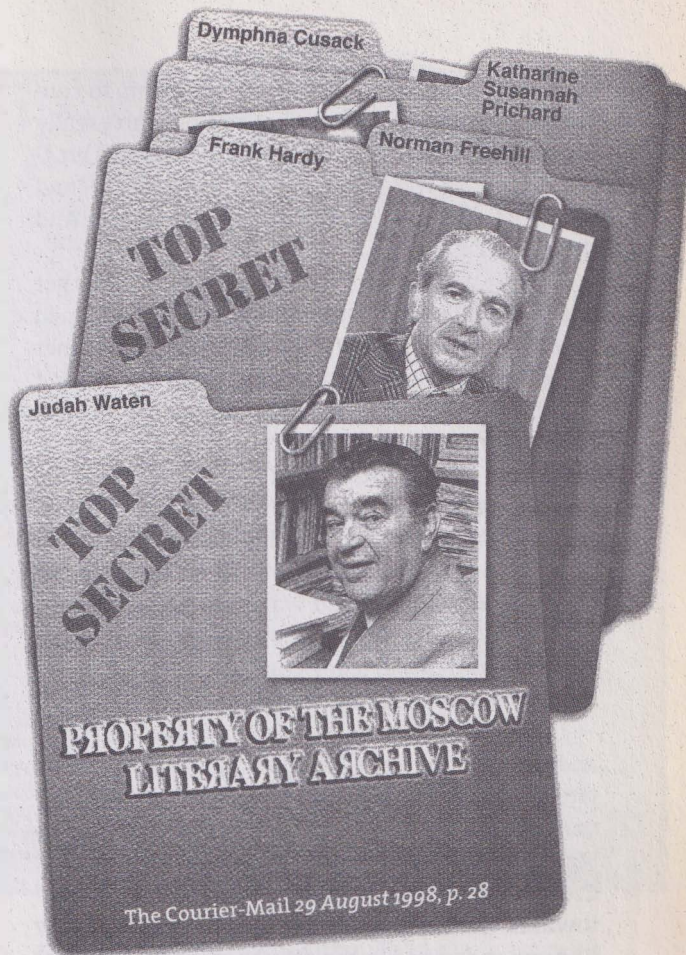
There's little to dispute in the facts that Coleman brings forward. Favoured writers – Alan Marshall, Judah Waten, Katharine Prichard, Frank Hardy and so on – were published in large numbers in the Soviet Union. Writers received 'royalties', according to Coleman whether the books sold or not. There's no need to disbelieve that, although as far as I know many of the books did sell in very respectable numbers, certainly in much larger numbers than in Australia. Australian writers visiting the USSR were greeted by large, enthusiastic audiences of readers and were, no doubt, deeply gratified by seeing their books widely available in libraries and bookshops, given the situation back home. Those books that sold well, however, were not always those with an explicit communist message: Marshall's *I Can Jump Puddles*, Waten's *Alien Son*, Prichard's *Coonardoo* and, of course, Henry Lawson's fiction. Australian social realist fiction (not socialist realist in the narrow sense) matched middle-brow Soviet tastes. Some more overtly political novels such as Waten's *The Unbending* were *too* political for Soviet literary taste and were not published there.

Given that it was impossible to make a living as a full-time writer in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s it is not surprising that writers were grateful for their Soviet royalties, and those from other eastern bloc countries. One problem – according to what I have been told – was that the roubles could not always be taken out of the USSR. One reason why writers en-

joyed their trips to the Soviet Union was the chance to collect and spend some royalties. Coleman suggests that royalties could be taken out of the country. I hope, for the sake of the writers, that this was so. But so what? There's no evidence of any Australian writers getting rich on Moscow gold. Even Prichard, who according to Coleman was paid a retainer by the Soviets – has he read her letters to fellow Australian writers?

Of course there was a concerted effort by the Soviets to cultivate 'friends of the Soviet Union' in Australia whether communists or not, and the Soviets' own sense of literature meant that they gave a sometimes absurdly, sometimes poignantly exaggerated importance to the significance and respect accorded writers in Australia. And no doubt their interest was much more than purely literary. They cultivated their flock and were disturbed by those who strayed. Did anyone ever think otherwise? It was a form of cultural diplomacy, only made to seem more 'loaded' by the circumstances of the cold war which drove it. Writers, especially those seen to belong in the broad realist tradition, were invited to the Soviet Union and, as Coleman relates (with horror?), treated to ballet and opera performances, banquets with plenty of booze, free medical treatment, good hotels and so on. None of this was ever secret, and writers from a very wide range of political positions took advantage of the opportunity to visit, from Hardy and Waten to Clem Christesen and Max Harris to conservative Queensland poet James Devaney – and many others. In the fifties and sixties writers' delegations were usually chosen through the state branches of the Fellowship of Australian Writers.

Again there is no secret, no revelation, no scandal to be exposed. When Judah Waten, James Devaney and Manning Clark returned from their 1958 visit – as members of a Fellowship of Australian Writers delegation – they announced it to the Australian press; Clark was signed up by the *Melbourne Age* for a series of three articles. There was immense curiosity about the post-Stalinist Soviet Union (not least among wheat and wool producers!). Writers across the whole range of political positions were deeply impressed by the Soviet commitment to and enthusiasm for literature and literary education which, they felt, contrasted painfully with the state of literature and education in Australia. Whatever the



State was doing to its writers, literary education was conservative and based on Russian and other classics. The State had more than one dimension, something that troubled Manning Clark. No doubt the Soviet Union bought itself a large amount of good will – though often the results were unpredictable – and the small number of writers who were already committed communists were confirmed in their beliefs and rewarded for them, in self-importance if not always in roubles. Australian writers would have been reluctant to offend their hosts, especially their main contact and interpreter Oksana Krugerskaya with whom many developed a warm personal relationship. Coleman, horrified again, relates how they called her 'Dear . . .' It is possibly true, as Coleman suggests, that Krugerskaya "reported regularly to the KGB" although he has no evidence to back this up; she was certainly a dedicated Soviet communist citizen who expressed a deep sense of personal disappointment when, for example, Frank Hardy wrote his

articles critical of the USSR. Coleman wants to conjure something sinister in all of this but can't really say what. The Soviet Union supported western writers who it felt were well-disposed towards it – and perhaps those, too, it felt could be persuaded. And then?

As the evidence gets thinner the implications get cruder. Royalties and writers' delegations get turned into this kind of thing: "Hewett, like numerous other noted Australian writers, was also paid in cash and kind by the Soviet Union under its propaganda campaign during the Cold War". Coleman gets rather defeated by his own discoveries: "A.A. Fadeev, one-time Soviet novelist who later committed suicide, wished the novelist Eleanor Dark well with her macadamia nuts". That reminds me of nothing so much as the poignant attempts of cold war ASIO agents to earn their keep by putting together dossiers on Australian writers – noting in one case that a certain member of the FAW collected Russian postage stamps.

In the second article, focused on those like Hardy and Hewett who turned against 'Stalin' (this is in the late sixties), Coleman's evidence in fact shows how varied were the responses of Australian writers to Soviet communism, especially following Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the cycle of repression and 'thaw' towards writers. Some were deeply worried by *Dr Zhivago* and joined in the attacks on Pasternak. Others made sensible distinctions and carefully-worded criticisms. James Devaney found the USSR a "revelation"; like many a true conservative he found the capitalist system "unjust and evil"; but he thought communism "mistaken in the matter of religion". It was often the non-communist writers – Xavier Herbert, Flexmore Hudson – who praised the Soviet Union in embarrassingly gushing terms or sought it out as a lifeline as publishing opportunities in Australia disappeared. There could be some more interesting matter here.

So Coleman's 'expose' adds nothing more than a few footnotes to what was already widely known – at least among those researchers who are interested in the details of Australian literary communism. There's nothing new or scandalous – and nothing to defend. At this level it's a very pale attempt to recapture the 'Manning effect' calling for none of the more complex arguments of 'defence' that those attacks required. There is no need to dispute any of Coleman's 'discov-

eries' or to be outraged by his attempt to be outraged.

Of course what's implied is another matter. The gross implication is that Australian writers were in the pay of the Soviet Union – and then, well, we can all draw our own conclusions can't we. In the ways that Coleman outlines, some writers were indeed 'in the pay' of the Soviet Union. The trouble for the anti-communist-horror argument is that there's nothing particularly unusual or scandalous about these forms of payments and favour. Thus the promise of revelation fizzles into incoherence.

More important is that Coleman makes no attempt to situate any of his bits and pieces in their historical context. Prichard in the thirties, Hardy in the fifties, various others in the sixties – all blur into the one period of Stalinism. The first article is called 'Stalin's Literati' despite the fact that most of the literary visits and contacts were undertaken in the period between the denunciation of Stalin and the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Coleman gets real horrified enjoyment out of quoting some of the most excessive, and in its own way shocking, kinds of pro-Soviet rhetoric from our small band of communists. But the serious historical work of understanding how such gifted and intelligent writers as Katharine Prichard and Dorothy Hewett (Coleman shows no understanding of their writing at all) could take the positions they did turns into nothing but moralizing implication. Praise of the Soviet Union or requests for assistance equal . . . well, again, Coleman can't quite say what. It's as if we just have more evidence of what we all already knew, the intelligentsia's self-deluding, self-serving, morally reprehensible, naive, dangerous love affair with Soviet communism. The grossest implication of all is that the attitudes of the Australian communists are the moral equivalent of Soviet Stalinism itself. This is bad history apart from anything else.

The point of responding to Coleman's articles is not to defend Australian communism. It was as awful as any of his quotations indicate and writers were up there with the worst of them. Of course it was a great deal more besides, but Coleman probably wouldn't be interested in their campaigns on behalf of Aborigines – or for free milk in state schools!

The real question is why Coleman thought he had anything to say or why the *Courier-Mail's* editor thought he did. Perhaps their reasons are different. For Coleman, I suspect, nothing has changed since

the 1960s. The struggles of three decades ago are still the struggles of today. He criticizes other researchers (by implication left-wing researchers who don't want to know the truth) for not looking into the Soviet archive as if there were fellow-travelling troops out there somewhere still with everything invested in defending Soviet or any kind of communism. The irony of *Quadrant's* Washington gold is so obvious it doesn't need elaboration – although I happen to think there's nothing deeply scandalous about that either except for its covertness.

For the *Courier-Mail* I suspect the issue is a different one, the same contemporary issue that drove along the anti-Manning Clark campaign. Coleman might be no more than a cipher. The clearest hint comes in the sub-editor's introduction to the first article: "Many of the Australian writers most revered in arts and history faculties in our leading universities were paid in either cash or kind by the Russian Government". Prichard is probably quite widely taught but for reasons that have nothing to do with her communism. Hewett too. But Waten? Hardy? Cusack? Like the notion that arts and history faculties reverse the work of Manning Clark this is so way off the beam it's breathtaking.

But there we have it: the arts and history faculties dominated by left-wingers, apologists for the communists of an earlier generation, and now, no doubt, in favour of feminism, multiculturalism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, socialism, environmentalism, Aboriginalism, Paul Keatingism, Manning Clarkism . . . in a phrase, advocates of the black arm-banded view of history. Cold-war communism and the Soviet Union have almost nothing to do with it. Make no mistake about it. However vapid Coleman's articles are, there is a serious struggle for hearts and minds going on. Well, they're trying.

The resentment against 'political correctness' among a particular class of journalists in Australia is a subject that has not yet been investigated but I think it should be: on one level it expresses a populist resentment against intellectuals (that gives it its sense of self-righteousness); on another level it represents a structural or institutional resentment against a form of cultural capital and credentialling different from and in a certain sense antagonistic

The Courier-Mail 5 September 1998, p. 28

Soviet Union dictator
Joseph Stalin
(1879-1953)

Author
Dorothy Hewett:
How we envy your young soviet poets and their happiness in writing for such a society

Author
Frank Hardy:
The death of our beloved leader, Comrade Stalin filled us with grief and the determination to work even harder.

to the journalists' own. Although in many ways it's the journalists who have the significant real power – envied by the academics in their fantasies of becoming public intellectuals – there's another kind of symbolic power from which they're largely excluded.

The *Courier-Mail* has taken a clear position critical of One Nation but if, as seems to be the case, its editors thought that Peter Coleman was onto something newsworthy, then they're blind to how far their attacks on the intelligentsia and political correctness belong in exactly the same basket as Hansonite populism. But then again, of course, they were simply doing their duty in reporting the facts, and bravely, too, for these were the facts that no-one else wanted to know . . . weren't they?

David Carter teaches Australian studies and literature at Griffith University, Brisbane. He has published on cultural communism and overland and recently edited Judah Waten: Fiction, Memoir, Criticism (UQP).

Feminist Publishing in Australia

Commercial and cultural practices

IN *EXILES AT HOME: Australian Women Writers 1925–1945*, Drusilla Modjeska writes of the futuristic novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, written by Marjorie Barnard with Flora Eldershaw, published in 1947. The book documents the crisis in Australian capitalism from the mid-twenties, culminating in a third world war that takes place some time towards the end of the twentieth century. This is an historical novel, written in the twenty-fourth century, including details of life and political struggles. Barnard Eldershaw's descriptions of Australian society include little change in the situation of women.¹

A previous novel *The Persimmon Tree*, published in 1943, is set in the present and dramatizes the loneliness of women approaching middle age; the experience of women who have never married and the nature of female friendships. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* does not challenge, in any way, the patriarchal ideology underlying women's situation.² While possible political solutions are explored, there is no suggestion of collective or political action by women against their oppression. Their situation is peripheral in the novel.³ The authors warn against advancing technocracy and machines which cannot cater for the whole of life. That, "whenever the material side of life outstrips the spiritual, there is trouble".⁴ This prophecy speaks to this essay.

The suppression of feminist ideas within western capitalism is achieved through control of the market.⁵ Moreover, access to public opinion has been structured and managed by men, and in the private sector, determined by profit. Historically, women's contributions have been excluded on a massive scale, rejected for publication or republication and preservation. This exclusion is an effective form of silencing through censorship.⁶ By the early 1940s, the Australian feminist writer Miles Franklin, was disillusioned and depressed by the ease with which the

'woman question' had been undercut by contemporary political crises. As a result, attitudes to women in Australian literature had degenerated.⁷

It didn't help that literary criticism and literary history presented a predominantly masculine view, which did not recognize the legitimacy of themes and subject matter that women were writing about. During the 1950s and 1960s writers like Dorothy Hewett and Glen Tomasetti spoke publicly of the pain involved in the long haul of those years. Hewett's first novel, *Bobbin Up*, published in 1959, was about the collective lives of women mill-workers in Sydney and communist activism. Hewett didn't publish another novel for over thirty years and *Bobbin Up* was finally reprinted by Virago in 1985.

Certainly the Communist Party was not willing to take the feminist protest seriously. The impact of the liberation movements of the late 1960s, and the economic recession and political backlash from the mid-1970s, renewed the interest of politically conscious writers, students and researchers, in the importance of cultural history and ideological readings of *all texts* – not just writing that had been traditionally and conveniently inserted into literary history's existing periods and genres.⁸ In the late 1980s Sybylla Feminist Press published two books documenting the activism of women members of the Communist Party of Australia. Joyce Stevens joined the CPA in 1945 and in the early 1970s helped to produce the first Women's Liberation newspaper in Australia, *MeJane*, and Australia's first socialist-feminist magazine, *Scarlet Woman*. She was also a journalist with the CPA newspaper *Tribune*. In her Introduction to *Taking The Revolution Home* (1987), Stevens quotes a former Party leader's comments: "We communists do not have the view that there is any specific woman question. We do not support any idea leading to a specific women's movement, because a women's

movement could only be a bourgeois movement.”⁹ The CPA accepted that women were exploited either in industry with low wages, or in the home by male domination, and recognized these inequalities, as long as “work among women” was within the Party and not outside of it. In her autobiography *Between The Lines* (1988), Bernice Morris traced the course of her life in the 1950s, shaped by events surrounding the Petrov affair. The author reconstructed through memory, letters and ASIO documents, the devastating interventions of security services, and life as a foreign comrade in China and the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Of her husband’s security dossier, obtained after the release of ASIO files to the Australian Archives in the mid-1980s, she remarks, “the files pursue their wayward way up to the Petrov Royal Commission, rarely recording anything accurately”. What they most reliably show is the McCarthyist mentality of the security officers who compiled them, and faced no challenges with factual inaccuracies or omissions of truth, under a Menzies government.¹⁰ In her ‘Epilogue’ Morris writes about the inversions of justice that took place in Australia in the 1950s, and poses to the reader that there has to be something better than capitalism.¹¹

At the Sixth International Feminist Book Fair, held in Melbourne in 1994, a former Sybylla Press collective member, who had worked on editing *Between The Lines*, said:

The demise of communism as a plausible alternative to capitalism has forced many radical political movements to rethink the possibilities for social change. Social aspirations have to be rethought. Capitalism seems likely to be the context in which we are situated for some time to come. It is important to be aware of how this influences the forms that feminism takes, in its resistance to features of capitalism, but also in its partial incorporation into it.¹²

At the Book Fair Peter Blake, patent exports manager with Penguin Books, remarked that “the industry was publishing feminist literature a great deal more now . . . the number of feminist books published had doubled over the past five years . . . feminist authors today were given far greater marketing attention and publishing muscle”.¹³ He made it seem like such a natural progression. Of course the success of femi-

nist books in the 1970s alerted mainstream houses worldwide to a profitable ‘gap’ in a capitalist market. Publishers, with greater clout and purchasing power, noted that women’s writing was selling well and began their own lists. In Britain, Pandora, The Women’s Press, Sheba and Virago initiated and nurtured whole categories of writing, until they were viable enough to be absorbed by mainstream publishing companies. Virago’s success indisputably changed the face of mainstream publishing by spawning similarly focused women’s lists in large and diverse trade publishers, forcing recognition of their market value. In Australia, Allen & Unwin saw the market value of a women’s list and in 1975 Penguin published Anne Summers’ feminist classic, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*. Australian publisher Rhonda Black asks “where was our Women’s Press, with its black women’s writing, science fiction and fantasy; our Virago, with its championing of out-of-print classics, our Pandora, with its quizzical mixture of fiction and non-fiction?”¹⁴

Arguably, feminist publishing in Australia has not been able to produce or sustain the impressive lists published by UK feminist presses. Australian feminist publishers have remained independent because they haven’t been co-opted into the mainstream. They are to be celebrated for contributing good ideas and books that “cheerfully or fiercely knock the posts out from under the status quo”.¹⁵ In 1995 Sybylla published the first anthology of Australian women’s speculative fiction, magical realism and fantasy. In her Foreword to *She’s Fantastical*, Ursula Le Guin wrote:

In the last thirty years or so, as women have taken to writing as women, it’s become clear that they see a rather different world and describe it by rather different means. The most startling difference is that men aren’t at the centre of it . . . A generation of feminists have given women permission to write as women and freed them as artists . . . In this collection Heroism is redefined.¹⁶

Feminist presses recognized that losing authors who moved on to bigger publishing houses was, and still is, an inevitable part of their success in discovering new writers. In the late 1980s, Sybylla editor, Alison Ravenscroft, warned of publishing takeovers. Notable examples were Rupert Murdoch’s buy-out of Angus & Robertson, publishers of Australian feminist

classics such as Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, Dymphna Cusack's *Come In Spinner* and Elizabeth Riley's *All That False Instruction*. She identified Allen & Unwin, then part of an internationally owned publishing group, as publishing an Australian series of women's studies titles, selected and edited by an all-male publishing executive. When Kerry Packer bought the Australian independent Greenhouse in 1987, the imprint's reputation was used to bring out the 'Dolly' series of romance fiction for young women.¹⁷

At a meeting in Melbourne, chaired by Greenhouse's founding publisher Sally Milner, on 14 November 1975, the Australian Independent Publishers' Association (AIPA) was formed. One of the founding directors of Sisters Publishing (1979), Milner was the only woman who sat on the inaugural AIPA executive of five.¹⁸ The Association was formed to promote and protect the interests of Australian-owned publishers and there was some urgency in doing so. In 1977 the AIPA warned the Federal Government's Foreign Investment Review Board against accepting guarantees of future performance from foreign companies investing in newspaper, radio and television, looking to take over local publishing. Figures released by the AIPA revealed that Australian companies represented only 18 per cent of the Australian publishing industry.¹⁹ Effective distribution of books continues to restrict independent publishers' visibility and sales in Australia. In the mid-1970s Book People of Australia was formed, to represent and distribute the works of small publishers to the book trade. A number of Australian small presses have made an important contribution in distributing the work of other independents. Amongst others, Wild and Woolley distributed Outback Press, which published the ground-breaking collection of Australian women's poetry *Mother I'm Rooted* (1975). In her Introduction, the editor Kate Jennings wrote that she wished women had their own presses in Australia. In November 1975, open meetings were held in Melbourne to discuss the feasibility and practical details of establishing a women's printery. A private donation was made for this purpose. Benefactor Katrina Alford recently wrote:

Sybylla started her life in 1976, about a year after Great-Aunt Elsie's ended. She bequeathed \$4,000, nearly \$20,000 in current money values, to each

of her closest relatives. Some bought real estate, others bought jewels. I directed my inheritance to establishing Sybylla. Auntie Elsie would have been pleased about this. She was not an educated, privileged person but a bit of a battler. She never had children of her own. She lived and loved life to the fullest and encouraged her nieces to do likewise. She would, I think, have relished the thought of generating a life, that of an infant feminist printing, and then, publishing company.²⁰

Sybylla is the rebellious and feisty heroine of *My Brilliant Career*, Miles Franklin's first novel, published in 1901. In Australia, feminist publishing in the early 1970s was largely printed ephemera – magazines, mimeographed pamphlets and newsletters.²¹ The first major job on Sybylla's own press was the printing of the *Herstory of the Half Way House Collective*, a 174-page book containing line graphics, photographs and typeset text.²² By 1984 the co-operative had developed from a small offset printery, sustained by unpaid labour, to a printing and publishing business close to economic viability, supporting four full-time paid positions on award wages.²³

A similar battle to that of Louisa Lawson, in 1889 with the NSW Typographers' Association,²⁴ was fought and won by Sybylla to unionize their workers, with the Printers and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU) in 1982.²⁵ Funds for co-operative development were made available through the Ministry of Employment and Training and the provision of capital for new equipment expanded the co-operative's services to include larger format printing, bromiding of artwork and platemaking, guillotining and folding. Sybylla began as a printery for the women's movement. With the advent of government funding, the pressure was on the business to prove its economic viability. This drove the need to increase turnover, restricting the co-operative's choices in what the group printed. Sybylla could no longer afford to offer cheaper rates to economically disadvantaged groups. Priorities of profit and loss compromised political ideals. Funding enabled the payment of award wages to more workers, and a higher priority was attached to workers' health and safety, through the purchase of better equipment.²⁶ For twelve years Sybylla operated as a printing press, offering its members a friendly, supportive environment where women could receive training in photography, printing and

publishing. The collective recognized the importance of demystifying mechanical and technical processes for women.

Commercial instant print businesses no longer worried about the political, racial or sexual persuasions of their clients, undercutting left-wing printeries, offering cheaper and faster service with upgraded technology.²⁷ In early 1982, Sybylla formally registered a change of name to include book publications, having commissioned two feminist editors, Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson, to work on Sybylla's first title – an anthology of contemporary fiction. *Frictions* was launched at the third Women and Labour Conference in 1982 and included some notable Australian women writers, who all moved on to bigger publishing houses.

Nicci Gerard talks about the perils and paradoxes of feminist presses during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸ Susan Hawthorne, the Melbourne feminist trade publisher, remarks, "It is no accident that commercial viability has become an important hallmark of presses established in the 1990s. It has become something of a cultural imperative."²⁹ Feminist presses not only keep an eye on a book's profit but also upon its cultural significance. Wendy Larcombe makes the point that feminist publishing is not so much publishing 'feminist books', as a different kind of engagement with texts, and the politics of cultural production.³⁰ Prior to setting up Spinifex Press with Renate Klein, Sue Hawthorne worked as a commissioning editor with Penguin Books. In 1987 she shared the Barbara Ramsden Award for Editing with Jackie Yowell. Hawthorne identifies activism as the political force that led her into publishing.³¹

SPINIFEX BEGAN IN AUSTRALIA in 1991 when the recession was on its way out, but not before it had widely affected the Australian publishing industry. The company name marketed the publishing house as 'drought and recession resistant'. Spinifex is necessarily a part of the mainstream trade market and recognized by the general book-buying public. As Hawthorne puts it, the numbers of booksellers are small, even though the per capita level of book purchasing in Australia is relatively high.³² Within the industry, Spinifex is identified as a successful export niche publisher, which has made it in an international marketplace.³³ Spinifex's independence ensures editorial freedom. The focus on export distinguishes it from most presses of comparable size. Hawthorne

and Export Manager, Sue Hardisty, attend all major international book fairs, exploiting Asian and Pacific markets.

Hawthorne talks about the internal battles that Spinifex has with resisting further growth. Of the 140 members of the Australian Publishers Association, 80 per cent are considered small – that is, their annual turnover doesn't exceed \$2 million.³⁴ Spinifex falls a long way short of this mark, with an annual turnover of around \$250,000, publishing ten titles a year.³⁵ Feminist books are published in Australia by publishing houses who do not dedicate their lists to feminist publishing. Rhonda Black remarks that books like Jan McKemish's *A Gap in the Records*, notable for its risk-taking in content and narrative form, and Mary Fallon's *Working Hot* could only have been published by Sybylla.³⁶

In 1983 Women's Redress Press began in Sydney and, like Sybylla, worked co-operatively to train women in publishing. Redress has published some important reference books including *Spectrum: a bibliography of women in Australia, 1945 to the present* (1995) and Heather Radi's two hundred biographies of Australian women – a collection reflecting the vigorous (even combative) state of women's history in Australia in 1988.

In 1991 at an Ideas for Australia Forum during the Melbourne Writers' Festival, Anne Summers identified the history of the women's movement as one of the most important areas in our recent history that remains undocumented.³⁷ What Summers had in mind for a movement history were memoirs – personal histories – which she regarded as an underdeveloped genre and likened them to "... one window into our national soul, an important means of tracking individual and social change".³⁸

Vivienne Smith began working on the first biographical directory of Australian women in 1974. This was eventually published eight years later. In the Preface to the *Who's Who of Australian Women*, one of the publication aims listed by Andrea Lofthouse was "to fill the obvious gap in the range of reference books ... there is nothing of this type in existence in this country because so little has been written about Australian women".³⁹ On a committee of five, set up to carry the *Who's Who of Australian Women* through to publication, was the reference publisher and feminist author Joyce Nicholson, and independent publishers, Diana Gribble and Hilary McPhee.⁴⁰

The 1974 edition of the *Who's Who in Australia* included data on approximately 430 women, from a total of ten thousand entries. A valid criticism was that the majority of these women were included because of their links to wealth and class. The 1980 edition included more women, but the criteria for inclusion hadn't changed – the ratio of women to men remained at about one in twenty.⁴¹ In the subject index to the *Guide to New Australian Books* 'Feminism' isn't listed. What will or won't be included in the forthcoming Australian *Oxford Companion to Feminism*? While Michael Denholm has made an important contribution in his two volumes on *Small Press Publishing in Australia*, the history of feminist publishing is still to come.

In the 1994 edition of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* there is no entry for McPhee Gribble, instrumental in building and inspiring an independent list and spawning the national bookclub and feminist trade publisher, Sisters, in 1979. At a time when there was an overproduction of books following the publishing boom in the 1970s, Sisters Publishing began in a small office rented from *The Melbourne Times* in Carlton. Sisters was founded by five directors, all managing their own independent publishing companies – Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble (est. McPhee Gribble 1975), Sally Milner (est. Greenhouse 1975), Joyce Nicholson (D.W. Thorpe) and Anne O'Donovan (est. Anne O'Donovan Publishing 1978). Sisters was a feminist publishing house with a bookclub and mail order business, offering their own titles to subscribers as well as buy-ins from other publishing houses. Sisters determined that their "publishing program would consist of works of particular interest to feminists, especially in areas badly served by current Australian publishing". Subscribers to Sisters' quarterly newsletter were given a month to order books. Print runs were based on subscriber response and books were mailed out in the second month. Discounts on direct bookclub mail orders were the incentive with a remarkably successful 80 per cent response rate.⁴² Sisters' own list will be well remembered for its poetry, and militant collections like the *Working Women's Papers*, thirty-six discussion papers relating to industrial issues for women in the workplace, suggesting possible union action.⁴³

The argument that women's presses should decline and fall, once they have done their job of intro-

ducing feminism to a general reading public, ignores the fact that it is only by continually reintroducing feminist works to the mainstream that feminism and radical literature develops.⁴⁴ In her Introduction to *Money, Power and Sexual Politics*, barrister and feminist publisher Jocelyne Scutt begins, "At the close of the twentieth century, women demand political, social and economic equality, and the most basic of human rights – dignity, respect and full citizenship". She adds, "What price 'democracy', when Australia's foundations rest on inequality, discrimination and keeping-women-out?"⁴⁵ Books like this, and Helen Irving's collection *A Woman's Constitution?* published by Hale & Iremonger (1996), directly address the 'woman question' which so frustrated Miles Franklin, and other feminist writers.

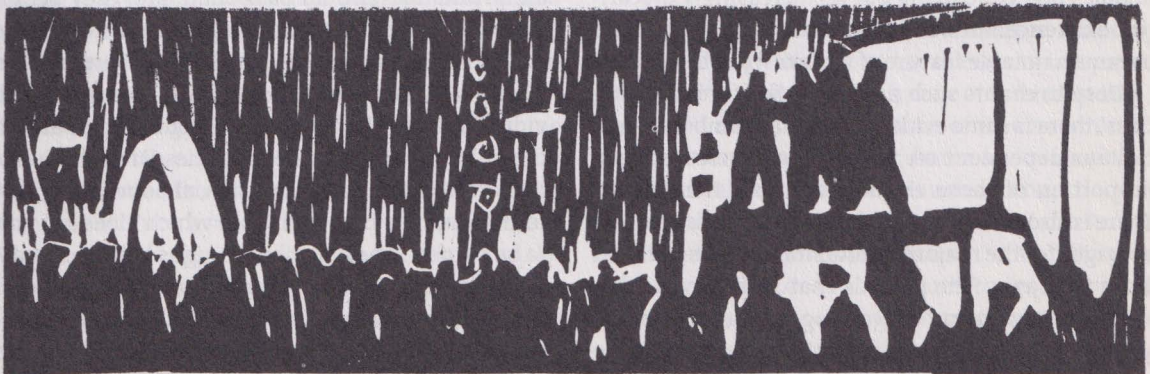
In 1996, Hilary McPhee remarked "whatever the trends, one thing is certain: the Australian publishing landscape will look very different by the start of the next century."⁴⁶ In the twenty-fourth century, M. Barnard Eldershaw warns that "even the most advanced technocracy, which has abolished war, violence, inequity and poverty, by running society on 'scientific laws' can still severely restrict human choice, cramp creativity and offer as little freedom as capitalism has done."⁴⁷ At the close of the twentieth century, commerce, capitalism and the commodification of the book are economic realities. Feminist publishing has repositioned itself and continues to push at artificial boundaries, informing debate and deconstructing definitions of Australian literature. It is highly desirable that the significant contribution made by feminist printers and publishers, to an Australian print memory culture, does not go unrecognized.

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'Peaceful Assembly at East Swanson Dock, pre-dawn 18 April', Linocut by Mark Dober 1998

Phillip Edmonds

Unfashionable in Literary Terms

Class in Australian short fiction of the 1980s

WHO INHABITED THE FICTIONS of the 1980s? Their characters were radically different on the whole from the workers, battlers, bush workers and drifters who often populated the Australian short story before the seventies. The stories signalled that there was significant change in Australia in the 1980s. Stephen Murray-Smith correctly suggested that waterside workers would fall from grace as fictional heroes as in the stories of John Morrison published during the fifties,¹ but the recent waterfront dispute has highlighted the omissions in the short fiction of the 1980s and the class tensions which built up during that decade to resurface in the nineties. It has further emphasized that, despite the growth in the service sector of the economy, and in white collar employment, there were, and are, millions of Australians still collecting the garbage, building roads, cleaning hospitals and offices, driving trucks, performing domestic labour, alongside a class (or underclass) of unemployed.

The 1980s were also notable for the growing casualization (and by implication proletarianization) of the workforce and for the increasing number of people working part time instead of full time. And there is evidence that significant sections of the lower middle class were living out an increasingly precarious existence. Interestingly, stress as a way of life became a notable feature of a majority of the stories.

Despite chants such as 'the death of the working class', there is some evidence that the number of Australians dependent on wage labour increased as a proportion of those employed during the decade. There is also evidence that the real purchasing power of wages for the majority of Australians has declined since the 1970s. The point is that jobs moved from the traditional areas of working-class employment such as manufacturing into an increasingly part-time service sector. In other words, there was still a sig-

nificant number of Australians inhabiting an objective social category, that is a class of men and women who work for wages, as distinct from the employers and the self-employed. Also notable in the 1980s was the withering of union power in the workplace and a decline in class consciousness amongst a growing number of workers in the cultural and informational spheres who saw themselves as self employed artisans rather than employees. Such people base their aestheticism, as Pierre Bourdieu points out,

on a rejection of everything in themselves which is finite, definite, final ... that is, they refuse to be pinned down in a particular site ... they see themselves as unclassifiable, 'excluded', 'dropped out', 'marginal', anything rather than categorized, assigned to a class, or inhabiting a determinate place in social space.²

In the generalized flight from realism during the 1980s in Australian short fiction, the lives of economically unfashionable Australians became unfashionable in literary terms. Robert Drewe's *The Bodysurfers* and his later title *The Bay of Contented Men* contain no working people and the dreams of his characters are private rather than passionate and they act out their bored fantasies on a stage similar to the cool commodified spaces of Crown Casino where the story is that of the atomized and alienated bourgeois individualist struggling against the odds. Compared to the culturally homogeneous fifties Drewe's characters are, like their class position, shadowy and indeterminate, they inhabit a space which "does not wish to be named". They are like the signs bourgeois, capitalist, proletariat, the locus of an unceasing haemorrhage: where meaning flows out of them until their very name becomes unnecessary. Drewe's stories propagate the belief that "bourgeois norms are the

evident laws of a natural order [and] the further it propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become.”³

Many of the short stories of the period perform a similar function, and engage with the naturalizing assumption that the average Australian was middle class or indeed classless (and by the ‘postmodern’ definition – more uniquely individual). Few of the characters go to work, even if as I’ve demonstrated, fewer Australians were actually getting their hands dirty in old fashioned ways. As the detective inspector in ‘Dalziel and Pascoe’ said on TV when walking past a disused factory – why don’t people make stuff anymore? Economically the answer is that many of the jobs have been exported to Asia and lost through technological changes to the means of production. And in much of Australian short fiction, unfashionable working characters have been exported off the page. It is a genre where the bedroom dominates as the narrative site for the stylized body, the gendered and genderless body, but as Terry Eagleton has suggested, the working body is noticeably absent from representation, not just because those who were working needed to jog to keep their limbs functional, but also because the process of production needed to be mystified and the power relations inscribed therein depoliticized.

IN CONTRAST TO DREWE, class was an issue in the short fictions of Barry Dickins. Indeed much of his work during the decade could be construed as a discussion of the notion of the death of the working class and of the economic and cultural changes of the Australian economy. Dickins started his sentimental assault in a column in the inner suburban weekly *The Melbourne Times* in the seventies when he romanticized his working-class childhood in Reservoir and satirized the trendies of Fitzroy and Carlton. His short stories, and indeed his journalism, evoke stereotypical characters such as in ‘The Reps’, anthologized in Disher’s anthology *Personal Best 2*, and in his volume *Gift of the Gab* where there are characters who do things and who have allegiances to a sense of place. Nan, for instance, lives in Thornbury and in the novel *The Crookes of Epping* a working-class family take on the fashions and cruelty of a trendified modern Australia. His people are invariably heroic in their cute powerlessness in the face of an encroaching postmodern present and future.

Dickins was and is a sentimental realist with a sense of closure that privileges an eccentric aesthetic as opposed to the ‘bourgeoisie’ aesthetics of a Robert Drewe, a Marion Halligan or a Carmel Bird. But he was astute as to the rise and strategic relocations of the new knowledge class or, the new class.

He was particularly scathing about hippy capitalists (something foregrounded by Peter Carey in his story *War Crimes* in 1979) when he parodied the then new site of the new class search for cultural authenticity – Brunswick Street Fitzroy in 1994: “not one nice old fish and chip joint in all of trendy Brunswick Street. Thousands of Australian feature film makers with no sense of humour. Documentary makers who hate their wives. And children. Editing people with nothing to tell you.”⁴ It was a theme of his stories and new journalism in the eighties. As narrator though he abdicates, because one minute he is on the side of the ‘battlers’ (to use John Howard’s wishy washy expression) and the next minute he searches for redeeming features in famous conservatives. But the big end of town is usually left nameless and is inevitably naturalized. For example, in ‘Getting Through’ (from ‘What the Dickins’) a piece written for the *Herald-Sun*, he eulogizes the clocks at Flinders Street station as a place where people meet and where there were the last vestiges of community. The piece shrewdly glosses across political difference:

The great thing about the Clocks is that it is apolitical. I have seen old Catholic brothers reading *The Phantom* in the sunshine, sitting cheerfully next to drunken skinheads, too toothless to gum the bag of Ma’s indestructible doughnuts. Page after gentle page, filled with light that shines on solicitor, skinhead and student alike.

His narrative stance is then the average wisdom, a shallow screen that intervenes between our present lives and our history. We have no understanding of history in depth, but instead are offered a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse. There is a clear connection with Bruce Pascoe’s sentimental recreation of the Australian Legend both in his stories and through the pages of his magazine *Australian Short Stories*, where a distaste for the encroaching commodification of Australian social life retreats into the bush. They are right about one thing though – there is a fractious new

class in our cities whose values are indefinable and permanently mobile and who have whorish political temperaments and who are permanently unsatisfied. They are right that the short story of the 1980s was an urban story with characters inhabiting shifting lifestyle positions. Ultimately though these writers aren't as political as Henry Lawson at his best in the 'Union Buries its Dead' because they seem to lack willpower as social critics and because capitalism no longer needs to shoot workers in Australia – it silences them by putting them out of work. The 1980s in the short story was then, to use Gelder and Salzman's phrase, "a new diversity" and, as a canary in the coal mine, the short stories suggested a great deal about the type of society Australia was becoming by reflecting and mediating discourses taking place across the country.

What also characterized the decade was a publishing boom for the genre, which is partly explained by an afterwash from the socially aware seventies, exemplified in the work of many authors who served out their apprenticeship during that decade. In other words, many of the short story volumes in the 1980s came from authors who became the literary establishment. Frank Moorhouse, Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, to mention only a few, benefited from the experiments and optimism of the seventies, to become household names in the eighties. The intriguing point is that while Australia was turning politically to the right it was also a time of increased visibility for women's writing and of the experience of minorities. But let's not be naive – women's lib became career feminism which was easily incorporated into the competitive logic of late capitalist Australia. Identity politics and the promotion of multiculturalism were overdue social and political correctives under social-democratic Labor which through its initiatives modernized society in all ways, including the acceleration of the religion of economic rationalism at the same time as it was culturally renovating the country. Inevitably then, contradictions surfaced. The arts became an industry for the first time after Whitlam's period of cultural nationalism. New markets were needed and instead of only occupying a section in bookshops labelled 'Women's writing', writing by fe-

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male authors became one of the success stories of the eighties. Early in the decade there were more experimental anthologies such as *Frictions* edited by Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson, but by the conclusion, mainstream publishers had identified sales success and were initiating new short story collections and anthologies. Contradictions surfaced of course – some of the less naturalistic authors influenced by post structuralist theory such as Susan Hawthorne, Anna Couani, Marion Campbell were making claims for a separatist language predicated upon a notion of the male Other, and their flight from realism, which they collapsed into notions of naturalism, was a more sophisticated and evangelical call for women's solidarity than Dale Spender's earlier attempts at homogenizing women. The agenda was to redress the lack of visibility given to female authors for much of this century, but in the process, issues of class were glossed over. But the best of the short stories by Garner and

Grenville and Farmer for example, synthesized public and private notions into a complex world of motivation which led Murray Bail to claim that "women's fiction accounted for much of the sharpest, most felt writing of the decade".⁵

The emergence of Gillian Mears, and the retrieval of Amy Witting and Olga Masters, was only marginally connected to the foregrounding of class as a narrative because the genius of these authors was their ability to pen characters with psychological depth and urgent motivations. My point is that class as a narrative added, on occasions, to the complexity and urgency of some of the fictions, such as in the work of the lesser-known Rosa Capiello where she reminds readers that any rendering of difference is predicated inside brutal and subtle class pressures. Her story 'Extracts from a Lucky Country' is about migrant factory workers who are both the victims of an industrial system and also at times the handmaidens of its representations. The bosses in the factory are men, but Capiello's narrator is aware that that isn't the end of the story. People are agents in their own oppressions and she shows that one-dimensional gender binaries can be very thin narratives. The story in other words, writes the personal in an intensely political fashion. It is then a story and not merely a

fragment, which was all too often the fascination of post-structuralist theory and the template of popular critics such as Helen Daniel.

Barry Hill's stories published in the 1980s were distinguished by precise epiphanies, which is another way of saying skilful homilies. Trained in the daily urgencies of "representation for an audience" (as a journalist) Hill's *Headlocks* makes homage to notions of naturalistic realism. The fictions come from the imaginative landscape of the industrial plains of western Melbourne. The fictions come from a place with a prehistory of political economy, in this case the emotional landscape of the narrator's parents. The characters are then individualized and socially formed. 'Lizards' for example, is a rite of passage for the narrator, who, encouraged at school leaves to go into a world of 'middle-class' education. It recounts meetings at the family home of his father's left-wing working-class mates, who with hindsight represent one of the vanishing metaphors of a deconstructed Australia:

We had nothing more to say to each other. They went back into the front room to talk with dad, leaving me with mum . . . and in any case I realized that my presence would cramp their style, I'd read too many books, done too much, in going as far as I could, had gone too far. It would be stupid to say that they disliked me personally. But to most of them I was the lizard that dropped its tail.

Class is a subtle and striking narrative in Hill's stories.

Class need not be overt as in the vulgarities of socialist realism or the homilies often behind unreconstructed naturalism. It was a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater for many authors and critics in the 1980s. My reading of another lesser-known author, Rosaleen Love, suggests this because in her *The Total Devotion Machine and other stories*, she employs for argument's sake, a magic realist methodology, which some could construe as futurist, even science fiction. It engages though with class as a narrative of difference in that it displays a future reality that is rapidly becoming unreal, or more real than any nostalgia for a period of emancipatory experimentation. Her story 'Bat mania' is in one way a pun on the social construction of a middle-aged woman (Barbastella) who actually becomes a bat by the end. Batwoman rises out of Barbastella; and her

narrator emits the proposition that "she will not be content merely to sort out the goodies from the baddies in combating the crimes of the patriarchy which is rotten to the core. What is needed is a fundamental restructuring of society along bat-led lines, so that the impulse to crime is no longer a powerful determinant of human action . . . Matriarchy is the power of the old bat". In this way Love asserts a political narrative more powerful than one which only seems able to decode along gender lines. The new bat sees that class ownership cannot be ignored, whereas matriarchy is how the old bat thought. And in 'The Tea Room Tapes' economic rationalism has invaded a government department and a casino is installed as a solution to staff problems – the amalgamations, the layoffs and the cuts.

Love's stories are chillingly mimetic (as magic realism) in non-naturalistic ways, of the type of society most Australians inherited from the economic and social experimentation of the 1980s. They exposed some of the social contradictions, as Michael Wilding has suggested, as to how the new liberations became a part of the new social order, beginning in the precursive seventies:

The new liberating focus on sexuality, drugs . . . was on one level a challenge to repressive social conventions; but it was also a distraction from and displacement of the traditional concerns of the social and political, of class and work.⁶

The gay community also found voice in the genre, but apart from perhaps the work of Sasha Soldatow, its self-conscious representatives were also about redress and affirmation and 'class' was a boring other.

There were a record number of short story anthologies – some prescriptive in terms of establishing an emerging canon, and some overtly sociological in that they were for gays or women. Some, such as Moorhouse's *The State of the Art* and Don Anderson's *Transgressions*, were in the editor's eyes, reflective of prevailing and developing social moods. In 1983 Frank Moorhouse deduced that the contemporary mood of cultural plurality was largely a question of lifestyle choice. He was "surprised to find that political life as a narrative site was hardly evident and that there were no stories about being on action committees . . . Overwhelmingly, the stories I read were domestic, in all its weird shapes". He thus suggested a

separation between social ground and narrative sites. He saw the tone of the period as a renegotiation of personal relationships, the foregrounding of new feminist (indeed separatist) agendas and a return to the domestic as a privatized site of struggle and a site of political resignation and defeat. Thus you won't find class as a dominating narrative in the collection. This is also the case in Don Anderson's superficially transgressive 'Transgressions', where there is a foregrounding of what Fredric Jameson calls "the utter eradication of all forms of what used to be called idealism, in bourgeois or even capitalist societies". Even though Anderson speaks of plurality and aesthetic openness, the social and political frame is decentred in comparison to Garry Disher's anthology from what he calls the community writing movement – *The Man Who Played Spoons*.

The Man Who Played Spoons is clearly off the expressway of shifting social parameters. It contains stories about ordinary people. The best of which foreground the notion that the deconstruction and renovation of the short story in the 1980s, under the influence of literary theory was, although a necessary corrective away from the inaccuracies of *The Australian Legend*, a flight from direct speech employing a cleverly marginalized notion of the Ordinary. The stories in Disher's anthology are from and about people left out of 'postmodern' Australia. They are an old narrative, like the waterside workers and farmers, and they appear in naturalistic styles which by the eighties was becoming an inefficient method. They then transgressed dominant ideologies on a number of levels. In discussing postmodern fiction in the US the critic Fred Pfeil tells of an incident with his literary agent who was having a hard time selling his stories of ordinary people: "It's about ordinary people, my agent said – and then cast down his eyes and gave out a hopeless, involuntary sign: Ordinary, ordinary, ordinary."⁷ The same response also happened to me once when a literary agent suggested I take up knitting or join the public service because I wasn't attuned to the tone of the times.

By ordinary Pfeil means an underclass of minority voices who don't have stylish lives and whose reality is ordinary in a surreal way. But class is in this collection contributing to the determination of lives. Some characters are dropouts, some are working-class people, to use the old terminology which is still useful, and some are buffeted about and agents in their own

history. By implication then history is a viable narrative, which means that class is an ongoing narrative contributing to human determination. It is interesting to note that Disher's collection received few reviews in the literary pages of the major newspapers, whereas the other anthologies were eulogized for being on the 'cutting edge' through their promotion of 'difference'. Ordinary characters then were becoming irrelevant to the reading habits of the new information class, except perhaps as props in a rural spectacle, or to add colour to the underside of Brunswick Street Fitzroy or the back alleys of St Kilda.

The 1980s saw the institutionalization in publishing terms of a diversifying readership for the Australian short story in the same way that the nation was increasingly becoming a collection of different Australias connecting on superficial levels. Maybe this was also reflected in the stories from the new minorities which stressed the relativity of individual speaking positions at the expense of notions of narrative contract.

Part of the problem for class as a form of difference was that the fear of generalizing from individual experience pervaded most of the emerging social and literary formations. A decentred logic which encouraged pastiche rather than adversarial parody became a form of closure under the guise of non-closure. A sense of closure in the sense that it privileged the individual bourgeois subject, even if, as we now know, the subject was fracturing, becoming schizoid and dispersing its representations so that it couldn't easily be caught in the act of gross libertarian selfishness. The problem of class then is the problem of speaking of society or community – it can become a grab-bag. Thus I have looked at the footprints. Class though will most probably become a narrative road again given what is happening to most of us in our workplaces and homes.

The readers of the relatively classless short stories of the 1980s were young adults in the seventies, many of whom were cheered by the note of generational nostalgia in the fictions and the socially aware messages, and in particular, the post feminist ideology of the authors. We forget that the so-called social revolution of the seventies was a minority activity in terms of the people involved and in the number of people who developed a class analysis of the time. They grew older and some clung to the last vestiges of their radicalism through the decon-

struction of language as a site other to social ground and in the emerging fundamentalisms of minority agendas. Much of this was reflected in the short story. Class it seemed was just too hard to argue, or introduce, particularly when it was difficult to discern villains from heroes. Globalization has also dispersed clear lines of control and determination, so then much needs to be done by theorists and practitioners who still believe in literature as a way in which we can live more fully.

The new class largely moved up in society. As a class fraction it both changes society and clings to its new privileges. As Anne Coombs said in a recent essay: individuals who work with ideas now make up a substantial class of people in this country. This broad class is the audience for public intellectuals such as writers. "There are still grand narratives", she suggests, "such as the trauma between black and white Australia. And there is another grand narrative being played out today and also in the 1980s – the crisis of work. The failure of old work patterns and structures; the unequal distribution of work so that some have too much while others have too little . . . culture becomes a product of consumption by the elites, rather than an organic part of society . . . it is culture for people with money and education – the New Class."⁸ Excuse me I'm generalizing for a moment. Class exists – just suspend disbelief.

ENDNOTES

1. Stephen Murray-Smith, introduction to *North Wind*, John Morrison, Penguin, 1982, p. ix.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 370
3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paladin, 1976, p. 138.
4. Barry Dickins, *The Age*, 15 March, 1994.
5. Murray Bail, introduction to *The Faber Book of Contemporary Australian Short Stories*, Faber & Faber, 1988, p. xv.
6. Michael Wilding, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Australian Short Stories*, OUP, 1994, p. xv.
7. See Fred Pfeil, *Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture*, Verso, 1990.
8. Anne Coombs, 'Conversations with truth', *The Australian's Review of Books*, July 1997, p. 31.

Phillip Edmonds has published two collections of short fiction and four histories. He has recently completed a PhD on the Australian Short Story of the 1980s. He is currently a Lecturer at the Victorian College of the Arts.

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The Blue Teapot

Andrew Goss

TO BEGIN. An afternoon, late, with the ravening crater of the sun in a near-black sky poised perfectly over a dark headland thrust into a dazzling, heaving, sea. And my lady Lena carrying a teatray up curved stone steps to a verandah overlooking the end of an endless beach. Is this a ripple in the river of time, or is time a reflection in a dark well? Lena took leave of time, for an instant, and returned. I followed her up to the verandah, she laid the tray on the ancient grey decking and asked: But where is the teapot?

Again. There was a girl on the floor when I opened the door. It was not my door, not my floor, not my girl or even my kind of girl but she was pale and naked and her mouth was open round and working so hard to say Oh Oh. Are you all right? I asked stupidly. Convinced that she had nodded I closed the door, content that it would close for ever. But some doors will never close. Some time Lena will open my door and maybe thank me, or maybe will not remember, it did not happen, only a headache and a bitten tongue. And the loom of death over the dark waters. I am afraid, she would say, shivering with a cold that could not be warmed for it came from somewhere else, from beyond where the soul howls alone and desolate. But Lena was alive, and so returned, in sections, in layers, like a signal disrupted she would re-form, the coherence of the image building on itself. What happened? Where am I? Who are you?

Me, I am angry. This is happening to my life too; Lena has melded into my pattern and I watch helplessly as some part of me is ripped out into the void and returned gibbering. She is gentle, kind, does not pretend to be anyone or anything. She loves the sun

and the flowers and please I want her back. The sun will dim, the flowers fade without her. So I sat then, in the pale low light that insisted that it would give us a day to live in, so I sit now as the night settles about us, offering rest. I held her cold hand, waiting for a word that was not just an echo in her head, for a question that had an answer, for time to synchronize with space again. Then she could rest, and the fear would pass. For a while.

The teapot, the blue teapot, broken so long ago on the stone steps, sits on the tray just filled and steaming as the surf thunders. We have been out there all day, we are salty, tired, bruised, we have seen fish swim in a wall of water above us, seen the sky tumble in green chaos, risen grasping the steady shoreline with our stinging eyes. There is nothing to say. The little bush birds hop in the low branches. We have done our working, invoked this day, and tonight will lie silent as the frogs call and the long seas roll in for ever.

As Lena passes from wake to sleep, like a ship crossing the river bar, she tosses, twitches, shivers and then lies steady on her course again. As then, so now, most nights she makes this passage in safety. But there have been wrecks, on the bar or later, the course resumed not being true, I have been wakened by a great shout and watched helplessly as the empty body by my side rolls and wracks, slatting and crashing, while Lena wrestles with the demon to take back what is hers, a life, a continuity, a course through time. I roll her on her side, see that she does not hit anything hard.

She will bite her tongue but tongues heal; once someone put a plastic brush handle between her

teeth, permanently damaging the joints of her jaw. There is little to do but wait. It is rather like a power failure, until there is power again, there is no power, until she comes back, she is gone. But then of course the work begins, as systems cut in and out randomly, she sheers about to fleeting echoes of reasons, as she fumbles in the cloud of fear for anything solid, real. At last she knows me, in a while she will be able to lie quiet, to sleep, to mend. But for days she will suffer. From fear, confusion, slowness of thought, exhaustion. It does not show on the outside, but she is working herself like a puppet on long and elastic strings, and every word has to be translated into, or out of, an alien tongue.

Now the blue teapot will always sit steaming in the clear low sun. When Lena stepped out of time and in again she took the teapot with her, saving it from the bushfire that a week later turned the verandah to ash, and the house, the trees, the frogs. The beach is still endless, the seas roll in eternally, but we do not go there. The shape of our life has changed. Now our beach is volatile, our headlands rocky, we have tides that rip and sea-fogs like cold blankets. And sunsets of silver and fire, and the little shadows dancing on the sand are our children. Heaven help them with such parents. Lena's epilepsy is probably not genetic in origin, but the consequence of a childhood of illness and deprivation; the chance of passing it on is minimal. But she is not easy to know. In twenty years I have had to re-learn her three times at least, twice after changes in medication, and the last change came with the children. Each metamorphosis is deeper than the last, each Lena contains her predecessors. Or perhaps she is emerging slowly into the light and my amazing good fortune is revealed.

I was alone before Lena, an alien life pretending to be human, joining in where I could and merging into the background so that no-one would know what I was. I thought I had found a cycle of life, small, poor, probably sad and short but I could do it convincingly. But then there was Lena. She saw through the image and did not care. My alien-ness did not matter, she was virtually an alien herself, no-one valued her con-

formity as she had none, she did not value it in others – did not even see it. She looked at me without conditions, was herself without pretence. I knew. That she knew. She told me at once that she had epilepsy. I was unimpressed. I knew a Russian princess supposedly dying of leukaemia, I worked with schizophrenics, alcoholics, persons of uncertain gender, terrorists. The last love-of-my-life was . . . hard to describe. Epilepsy was practically normal. While I was manifestly not.

"I never loved you, I did not enjoy any of it, I do not want to know you ever again" she said, on the stone banks of the river by the grey obelisk. Lena turned as if to stride away, took two steps, faltered, stopped, walked uncertainly towards the water, wavered. Her eyes were tired, her skin showed marks that I had seen before, but never had she done this, denied love, truth. I could bear a parting, but not a denial. I stood. The traffic rumbled, the river slopped leaden wavelets. Lena was not there, but her voice had been rational, modulated. I was afraid, not that it was over and I was alone again, but that this could happen, that something, an inversion, an opposite, even maybe some ancient evil out of the obelisk could use her voice, her living voice, to attack me. I was vulnerable. I had never known such hollowness, but if I gave up now I would be lost forever. I took her hand, she shook me off, but did not move away. She turned from me, to me, a vane in a tempest, until she was still and we walked away, not as we had come, for Lena was now depleted, numb. I took her to her flat and drove through the gathering night back to my refuge in another city, that is now the city I dream in, where all the trains go in the end. I wait for Lena to return to her suffering body, her sleeping children, and to me, her invisible, alien, husband. If she does not return, will the city reclaim me? Who will tend the children? Will they accept me for what I am, as she did, let me help them through the years until they can read their own charts, and I can return to mine, cracked as they are, and find my way back.

But the teapot is unbroken. Lena, prescient, has brought it out of your time into ours. While I can find it, I can find Lena, and I ask no more.

The Cat

Peter Symons

MY BROTHER HANDS ME a neatly written note with the phone number and address where he will be for the next few hours. He looks at me sternly as he gives it to me. He has always been a serious person. He says, "If there's anything wrong. At all. Call me." He speaks in staccato. Brief, incomplete, sentences. "I don't care. What it is. Just call me. I'll be back. At eleven." He then turns around and picks up his daughter who has been standing next to him, looking up at her father. He kisses her on the forehead. "Goodnight. I'll be there. In the morning." His daughter is five years old and I am to babysit her for the night. She rubs her eyes in the way children do when they're tired or upset.

"I don't want you to go."

My brother frowns but says nothing and puts her down. He looks at me again. "Anything wrong. Anything you can't. Handle. Call me." He turns and walks out the door and closes it behind him. My niece looks up at me in a distrustful way and pouts.

I am not looking forward to getting her to sleep.

GETTING MY NIECE to sleep was easy. For the first time. She is clever and knows every trick to stop doing what she is told. This time, however, she was compliant and is now asleep in her bed, surrounded by toy animals. The football is on the television with the sound off. Carlton are ahead by twenty-five points and things are good. The can in my hand is cold and I have taken a bag of salt and vinegar chips from the pantry and I'm making my way through them.

As Kernahan is lining up for his third goal in the quarter there is a knock on the door. I wait until I see the ball hit the post, then get up.

A woman is standing behind the flywire door. She is wearing a red jumper and badly applied lipstick. She looks upset. Or afraid. She says there's a cat, badly injured, lying on the road. She didn't see how it happened. She was driving. Saw something in the gutter. Stopped and there it was. Just a cat. Knew there was something wrong immediately. A little pool of blood. Cat wasn't moving. She thought it might be mine. She doesn't live anywhere near here, she was going to a friend's place for dinner.

I don't know this woman, but I put my hand on her arm. I explain the situation. I don't live here. I'm simply minding my niece. The woman is still upset. She doesn't want the cat to lie there, dying. She says the word hesitantly. As if she doesn't believe in death. She wants me to help her. She wishes that there wasn't a cat lying on the road. She wants to get to her dinner. But she can't leave the cat.

My brother owns a cordless phone and, as I'm standing at the door I reach out and grab it. This woman's voice forces me into action. Makes me forget about the football. She is deeply upset and it isn't even her cat. I dial the phone directory and ask for the animal hospital. As the operator gives me the number I click my fingers at the woman and make writing gestures with my hand. She fumbles about in her pockets and finds a pen. It is a beautiful silver pen with the name, *Amanda*, engraved along one side. I write down the number on my hand and lis-

ten to it repeated to make sure I get it right. I dial the number on the cordless phone with the thumb of the hand holding the phone. I cannot let go of the pen. Every action, every movement of my hand is precise. I am in charge. The phone rings and someone answers. The voice says *Lort Smith Animal Hospital*. I give the pen back to the woman at the door. I do my best to explain the situation to the person at the hospital. A cat. Blood. Probably a car. Perhaps a fight. I tell her it isn't my cat. The woman at the door nods as I talk. She is holding the pen in front of her. She looks like a child praying. The voice at the Lort Smith Animal Hospital is kind and strong. But it says I have to ring another number. The number of those people who spend their Friday evenings waiting for the phone to ring so they can pick up injured animals lying on the road. I snap my fingers at the woman at the door again and point to the pen. She gives it to me quickly. I write down the second number on my hand. My hand is now a jumble of hastily scrawled numbers. I dial the second number and a woman answers. I tell her the same story. A cat is hurt. Bleeding. Badly injured. I don't know how it happened. Suddenly I want to tell her more. Tell her that there is a woman at the front door of my brother's house who is very upset and I want to say that, although it isn't my cat, I don't want it to die and I want to say that I admire this person at the end of the phone for doing this on a Friday night. For waiting around for a phone call about a cat that's probably dying. Or already dead.

Instead I simply repeat the address. I have to check the number because I can never remember the number of my brother's house.

Then I feel a tugging on my trousers. My niece is pulling at my trouser leg. I love her very much. She wants to know what I am doing. She wants to know who the woman at the door is. And who is on the phone. I desperately want to stop her from knowing the truth. That there is no such thing as injured bleeding cats lying dying on roads. That there is no such

thing as death. The woman at the other end of the phone says she will come around and with my niece still pulling at my leg I feel the urge to tell this stranger something more. After a breath I just say, "It doesn't look good. I think the cat's going to die." I say it very quietly. She doesn't reply and I press a button to hang up the phone. The woman at the door still looks upset. I give her back the pen.

We stand at the doorway looking awkwardly at each other for a moment. Then she looks down at my niece. She says, "You have a beautiful daughter", and then she turns around and walks down the front path and gets into her car and drives away.

IT IS QUIET NOW. And the silence is uncomfortable. My niece pulls at my trousers again. "Who was that?" she asks, "Is there a cat?"

I say, "There's no cat." I do not look at her when I say this. I do not enjoy lying to her, but I believe in her innocence. I do not want to destroy it. "You said there was a cat."

"There is a cat that isn't well."

"Can I see it?"

I know that she will want to see the cat. I have admitted there is a cat and I know that she will want to see it.

"Can I see the cat? I want to see it."

I take my niece's hand. She is the daughter of my brother. She doesn't belong to me. I am just looking after her for the night while my brother works late. I cannot teach her anything. Yet, with her hand still in mine, I walk down the path and she follows. She is singing something she learnt at kindergarten. I am going to take her to see the cat.

We stand together on the footpath outside my brother's home. It is dark and I cannot see very well. Then something white and still catches my eye. I am aware that I am holding my niece's hand very tightly. I say to her, "It's over there. On the other side of the road."

"Where? I can't see it. I want to see the cat."

We walk across the road to where the cat lies. It doesn't move but it is still breathing. Its white coat is streaked with red. We stand together looking at the cat in silence. I feel my niece's hand slip away from me and see her walk quietly towards the cat. When she is up close she kneels down on the road and, very slowly, brings her hand out and strokes the cat on the cheek. She turns to me and says, "It's not very well, is it?", and then turns back to the cat and pats it once again.

"No, it's not very well."

Still patting the cat she says, "Is it going to die?"

I look at my niece and try to think back to when I was five years old. I do not feel any different then as I do now. I know that I am still the same person. "I think it will."

My niece is still patting the cat when she says, "That's sad, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is sad."

I see my niece stand up and walk back to me. She takes my hand. "That person on the phone. Is she going to look after the cat?"

"Yes. We can go back inside now. The person on the phone will look after the cat now."

We turn around and walk back up the path and into the house. It is much warmer inside. My niece says, "I'm going to bed now."

"Okay."

She pushes open the door to her room and disappears inside. I follow her in and watch her clamber into bed. I arrange the blankets around her and kiss her on the cheek.

"Goodnight", I say.

"Goodnight", she says.

As I'm turning to leave her room she says, "Will you make sure the person on the phone looks after the cat?"

"Yes" I say, "I will", and turn out the light.

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To an Older Poet

For Dorothy Hewett

I write this now to you
because of your words,
because they're pressing
hard, they stir and strip
because you can't help yourself
or anybody else,
so you imagine.

You come surging in
a great salt ocean
with your flotsam memories
your aviaries of feelings
gargantuan losses
a colonizer of others' dreams
with your own chameleon saga
your too strong version of it all.

You act out Goldilocks
skinning bears
who only came to play.
You feel, always,
that they didn't want
to be there
and you mourn their absence
sharpening your knife.

I see you, lover,
laughing and laughing
and weeping as your lust
offends and disintegrates.
I hear you, Sybil
cackling at your wrinkled body's
self-betrayals
all bottled-up and trying again
to punch through glass
through the prisons
of others' proprieties.
You take such baubles
to be tricks, surfaces
where you must impress yourself.

Half-baked as usual
and half-blind now
you take flight
bumping heavy hoping words
against the dark membrane
which will not let you through
slowly wrapping you into silence.
Lover and awkward woman,
poet, you are always gentle,
your garish chaotic yearning
may well fail to seduce
that final surly lover,
but I can hear you
in that wide place
giving it a good go
the silence
dancing with your words.
I wouldn't give up hope.

Lyn McCredden

Nicole Moore

Asking for More

The impact of Dorothy Hewett

TREPIDATIOUS ON MY WAY to talk to Dorothy Hewett, I remembered vaguely some lines of her friend, Fay Zwicky, who wrote in 1990:

*When I grow up, ... I want to ...
receive an interviewer from some
prestigious TV arts programme
once every twenty years, descend
to read aloud with detached hauteur
prophetic passages from past work,
refuse the academy's accolades.*

Zwicky's opening line actually says "When I grow up (I'm only fifty-five) ..." Seventy-five this year, Dorothy Hewett could perhaps feel grown-up. But this image of the sphinx poet, declaring intentional autonomy, or unmediated and absolute authority over her work and its circulation, scared me needlessly. Hewett is pre-eminently one of those writers whose work, life and reception have been thoroughly (re)generated through and against the varying enthusiasms of her audiences. This is at the same time, of course, as her abilities to regenerate the narratives of self and history in different forms and different contexts, have been continually noticed and variously reconstructed. Zwicky desires here an impossible authority: impossible not only because it's mostly not given to women, but also because it envisages a stasis, a point of solidity at which a poet's voice moves into stillness, mystery, even silence. "A big stone sphinx/ silent as a shadow." Hewett will never be a sphinx poet, because her writing won't sit still, her layered images won't be quiet, her various frames and shifting collections of allegory and history call out to be read in conflict. What is in question, nevertheless, is their cultural authority. What kind of authority is granted to the work of writers like Dorothy Hewett? How would we trace her impact and where?

In 1942 Hewett won the *Meanjin Papers* poetry competition with 'Dream of an Old Love'. So that's fifty-six years now, on-and-off, of working as, living as and being received as a writer. By the late 1990s, that's meant a collected plays, collected poems, an autobiography that may turn out to be multi-volume, a monograph about her theatre, a collection of essays on her work, large sets of commentaries that mark variations in reception across what is now an unshakeably important body of work. Indeed, her work and its receptions can be seen to span some of the most important social and cultural shifts of the later half of this century, and in ways that have been at once reflective and productive of them. Her figures, especially her 'glittering girls', her speaking, yearning, arguing, flickering, fabulous women figures – Nell, Julie Dockerty, Sally Banner, Tatty Hollow, Alice, Esther La Farge, Hewett the confessional poet – all talk out these shifts as well as refractively personify them and, always of course, so self-consciously. "Did I contain multitudes/ or was I only this lone woman/ having herself on?" Hewett the poet asks, in 'The Upside-Down Sonnets'. Stephen Sewell has called her Australia's tempestuous heart, but with Anaïs Nin, Hewett often laments that "no-one has ever loved an adventurous woman". Perhaps these figures, her work, can be seen as representative parts of Australian feminism's ranging and complex self-consciousness, at odds with shifting forms of power and often most critical of itself. There's no reason that a feminist self-consciousness may not be cast as Australia's 'tempestuous heart'. Perhaps, and yet that bad beautiful girl, the vain bourgeois bitch, too self-obsessed, too vulnerable, romantic, caustic and confessional at once, sings and screams to haunt us, always wanting and usually wanting more than there is.

In many ways, this is the horizon that so much of Hewett's work calls up for an Australian cultural his-

tory: the possibility of a situated, desiring, self-defining, revolutionary woman. This is the sighted horizon of *Wild Card*, the possibility that is never really fulfilled – that figure of the wanting woman discovering the structures of a desire, revealing its vision as a collective one, embodying desire as a sexual politics that speaks itself as transformative, robust, in for the long haul. Sally Banner, of course, has functioned as a multiple and repeated performance of this as horizon. In 1976 Carole Ferrier recognized an insistent individualism in *The Chapel Perilous*, that hallucinogenic concern with the interiority of a single, white, bourgeois young woman from which all else spins out in a wheel of reflection. Recognizable, indeed, as that “mesmerizing focus” on subjectivity that Gayatri Spivak has justly criticized in some forms of white western feminism. Hewett’s theatrical wheel is a mocking reflection, however: the cracked mirror or splintered eye of her poetry. Sally can choose and must choose among men, lives, identities, the competing frames of the play itself. She chooses, standing in the centre of the wheel, passing over husband and mentor, choosing the true lover. Her choice transforms the circle of competition among men into a wheel that spins around her, which is her. This is a model of a feminist epistemology of desire, a liberal ideal of choice that is simultaneously lambasted as foolish, as illusory. Sally chooses the great love, Michael, the lost, suppressed first lover, whose role is not to be chosen, to be unchoosable, the mysterious character/figure who has even successfully resisted the publishing of his name in Hewett’s autobiography.¹ There is no choice. The solipsistic wheel reflects impossibilities, refracts them as suffering, humiliation, chastisement.

In a similar way, the first-person present tense in *Wild Card* writes its resistant horizon as a limit. Hewett writes her former self as perpetual, always in the present tense, always becoming and becoming herself, so to speak, but that herself is a failure, an ironized disillusionment, an historical step away from the visionary politics of her communist years. By writing in the present tense, Hewett inscribes her historical and activist identity in a critique of left and

communist gender politics *at the same time as she* speaks her commitment to left politics and non-Stalinist communism. *Wild Card* writes out a complexly ironic first-person narrative, both retrospectively knowing and apparently perpetually naive.² This irony, this ambiguous prefiguring of readerly agreement and undercut investment in the singular, yet always multiple, character/writer, is a Hewett

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trademark, of course. In the Dolly figure or the Tatty Hollow figure, the plays set up impossible women-as-images who nevertheless also speak: of aging, death, romantic nostalgia, lost love, lost vision, as does Rapunzel from her tower and the Lady of Shallot in the poetry. Hewett’s pervasively postmodernist Cindy Sherman-esque re-performance of feminine subjectivity is still nostalgia for a whole and real self, as well as an ironic play within fatal tropic and commodity overcodings. This nostalgia is the horizon,

the possibility of the ‘adventurous woman’, and the irony is its immanent limit, its curtailment away from realized history.

We can read this complexly realized and multiple subject position as, perhaps, Hewett’s distinctive provocation as a writer. It can work as a radical gendering of the speaking political position, in a self-conscious and ironic way, which consciously foregrounds the requirements of power, on many occasions, that this position not be occupied in this way. The foregrounding of limits throws the established structures of the public political into relief, disclosing their impact on the desiring and resistant feminist/feminine political subject in history. In some ways, then, the ironic position that her iconic, often privileged, genius heroines occupy is an ability to reveal structures of oppression that don’t necessarily even oppress them. Hewett’s middle-class women are forced to expose themselves as classed: “Even geniuses have to eat” calls Sally’s father. Her white, rural, land-inheriting women face up to indigenous displacement and labour exploitation, in *The Man from Muckinupin* or in her ironic pastorals. Hewett’s deflationary comparisons employ typologies with bite, which recognize no neutral position for any character. What is inscribed eventually is a difficult

and variegated construct, an unstable I in the world, contingent yet multiple, ironically deflated yet always desiring.

And this then, is still the continued inscription of *asking for more*, a narrative of entitlement rather than responsibility. Hewett's desiring women in some ways are a figuring of the essential, anti-prot-estant *vanity* in feminism: the insistence on power, on change, on self-determination that makes for lib-eration, which for Hewett mani-fests in the metaphor of beauty, the heroine, the femme fatale, the het-erosexual desiring woman, the whore. We have witnessed the re-turn of blockbuster US and UK femi-nism to these as explicitly classed and heterosexual preoccupations in the recent spate of 'bitch' polem-ics: the self-made UK bad girl Julie Burchall, and Susan Faludi's call for women to assume positions of power in ways largely unresponsive to the widest aims of the various

women's movements. Hewett's beautiful women, however, seem to always suffer for their power – in ways that both highlight the limits of their positions and emphasize also, the responsibilities of their privilege. How do women assume their responsibil-ity for the world? Figures like Esther La Farge, her grieving yet monstrous mothers, her whoring actors, are not afraid to show ways in which women do it badly, even self-consciously, provocatively, badly.

The burgeoning usefulness of Luisa Passerini's iden-tification of the work of stereotype in memory, espe-cially the function of the rebel stereotype, for reading narratives by and about working-class women in Aus-tralia also shows up useful ways of re-reading the work of stereotype and role-playing or performance in Hewett's work. Nell in *Bobbin Up* and Julie Dockerty in *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home* are Hewett's responsible, politically authoritative working-class women, important figures in Australian literary his-tory with under-discussed antecedents and inheri-tors. In discussing the split between Nell and the young, sexually active, politically committed Shirley in *Bobbin Up* as a split between versions of herself, Hewett also points to the importance of the stere-otype of the bad working-class girl, rebelling against

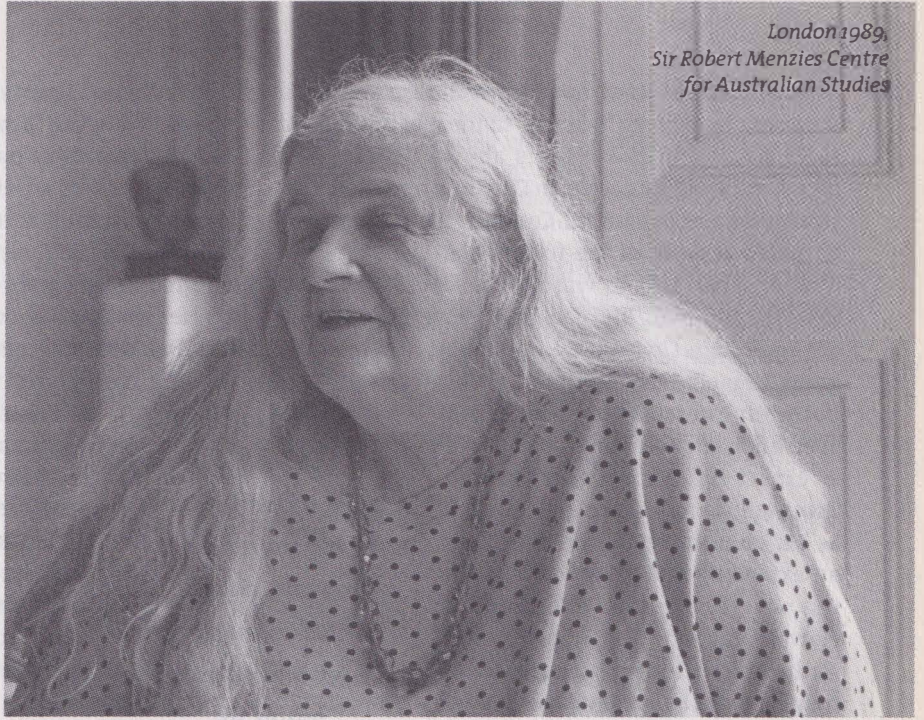
respectability and often suffering for it, in a long his-tory of representation that pits her against the wor-thy working-class woman. (Caddie and Josie, her bad, 'real' working-class friends, are an influential instance of this classed pair of roles.) Iris in *The Toucher*, who is "pretty horrible" as Hewett suggests, seems nastily caught between these two roles, grasping at nuclear heterosexual respectability, stability, but always forced to return to the bad girl position by Billy's ac-tions with Esther, and for her the bad

girl role means failure, real suffering, and so she's eventually cast as exp-ensible, the Hollywood stere-otype of the vulnerable but whining murder victim.³ The work done by the rebel stereotype is multiple in Hewett's work, fractured by class and nevertheless performing cer-tain of those identities as authorita-tive and resistant, even if just nostalgically, even if without accom-panying structures of critique. It is the interesting fission between per-

formative stereotypes and historically grounded, speaking, remembering women which produces these figures as horizons of possibility, desiring change yet always curtailed in enforced complicity.

I've focused here on the idea of a resistant sub-ject position in Hewett's work, because I think that this was a narrative of eighties feminism that has pro-duced a useful reading framework for much of Hewett's work. This 'feminine as subversion' model, however, isn't always adequate to discussing Hewett's work as a whole, despite its usefulness for many of her central figures. One of the reasons for this, of course, is the straightforward difficulty any critic faces in discussing her work as a whole. Not only is there the dangerous autobiographing impulse which can reduce her work to her life/self/authorship, but there is the ever-present danger of downplaying the role of history in producing different readerships as well as different texts and personas. As Allan Gardiner has noted, reviewing the Bruce Bennett edited col-lection of essays about Hewett, her career invites questions about how certain critical approaches in Australian literature have become established as dominant "in the face of alternative modes and institutionalizations of criticism and literature".

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time . . .***



The importance of the under-read context of Communist writing and left intellectual work in understanding Hewett's positioning, especially the reading context of her ballads and political poetry, as well as *Bobbin Up*, *This Old Man Comes Rolling Home* and *The Chapel Perilous*, is being increasingly re-recognized. And as it is, so that context itself must be rethought. Readings of Hewett now need to consider Gardiner's informing point about the Sydney Realist Writers' fight over the novels of Sally Bannister in prefiguring Sally Banner, as well as Stephen Knight's overdue siting of *Bobbin Up* within a history of working-class writing (albeit one that ignores much of the Australian tradition, maintained in significant ways by women through the 1930s to the 1960s). Hewett's writings for the *Realist Writer* are being usefully cited in distinction from her own pronouncements about her position in those activist years. Marvin Gilman's reading of Hewett alongside the influential radical Canadian writer Dorothy Livesay is a welcome internationalist challenge to postcolonial orthodoxies that position these anti-imperialist political allegiances as illusory and/or irrelevant. Interestingly, it has been male critics, to return to occasionally useful but always unstable gender diagnosis, who have substantially performed this revisioning. Most of the Hewett critics who have employed later forms of feminist

critical analysis, such as the "feminine as subversion" form, represented by Margaret Williams' volume on Hewett's theatre work (which has this phrase as its subtitle), may see Hewett's contribution to Australian literary history as a pre-eminently feminist achievement and want to discuss her working-class texts as work produced within masculine environments against which Hewett has loudly rebelled, along with some other CP and left women writers. Moreover, feminist critics may well be uncomfortable with disbelieving Hewett's own pronouncements about her motivations and the meanings of her texts, not least because she has made them so often and so forcefully, but also because the question of the authority of women writers is a crucial one at the heart of discussions about her reception.

Ian Syson has argued that Hewett "does a disservice to herself and history if she denies her agency" in the years of her CPA membership and involvement with the Realist Writers. I have argued elsewhere that autobiographies of ex-Communist writers like Betty Roland can be read against the grain: Roland's retrospective reconstruction of her Communist years is so markedly constructed within Cold War narratives that she figures herself as inherently bourgeois and never 'taken in' by Marxist analysis or the Party program, despite the evidence of her writing of the

time. One salient point, however, is that Roland stood little chance of being 'taken in' to the real business of Party politics in those years anyway, sometimes merely figuring, as does Jean Devanny, as a model for stereotypes of oversexed Communist women that obsessed writers of the forties like Kylie Tennant (that is, when Roland wasn't just endlessly having to do the shopping and cooking). Hewett's 1985 preface to *Bobbin Up* isn't the only point at which she gives herself "proselytizing stubborn blindness" as a politics, but even then she was careful to detail a respect for Marxist analysis and Communist work in Australia, as well as her own misery in that period in an exploitative marriage and grinding poverty. Perhaps pointing out Hewett's agency and (challenging) authority within that context can only be done by somewhat denying her those in the present.⁴ Never wanting to be a refracted character ever-present in her own work, that gallery of ironized and deflated glittering girls and wounded, 'left-over' women, Hewett's speaking persona is a fragile authority which must be history at the same time as attempt to resist and produce it.

In a similar way, the censorship of her work is still a crucial question – especially crucial in that she seems specifically to have been censored as a former wife and lover. Christine McPaul's work on her archival material has noted the forced suppression of the name of her first lover from *Wild Card* and the difference that knowledge makes to our reading of a secret that has otherwise seemed coy. Despite Hewett's ongoing construction, by herself and others, as the tell-all taboo breaker, her work hasn't managed to make it past these very immediate restrictions on stories of her most intimately shared past. Lawrence Burke has made a convincing case that the reception of her work can't be traced well enough through published or written responses because of the importance, not only of censorship in curtailing and producing certain receptions, but of literary and theatrical publicity, of course, as well as anecdotes. If women are relegated to custodians of the personal, the life story, the sexual, the corporeal, the everyday and of course simultaneously embrace that as the political, is this

. . . that bad beautiful girl, the vain bourgeois bitch, too self-obsessed, too vulnerable, romantic, caustic and confessional at once, sings and screams to haunt us . . .

where their authority must also remain? And is censorship from the familial what happens when they tell that personal publicly, or not politely? About Colette, another 'adventurous woman', Angela Carter had this to say: "A certain kind of woman, a vain woman, that is to say, a woman with self-respect, is spurred on by spite."

Her theatre has been performed across contexts varying from aggressively dismissive to the triumphant; contexts which that theatre has in turn affected and continues to. But as was revealed at the playwrights' conference this year, and as Hewett has discussed in the media, she has a trilogy of plays waiting to be produced which have been neglected as too long, too large and too expensive to produce. In her public persona as a spokeswoman about Australian theatre, Hewett reveals a strongly forged discontent about the state of funding for Australian theatre

and its dwindling status as both a provocative and public institution. Australian political culture has been working to close down forums even as others appear to be opening up for Hewett. As a novelist, for example. In the mixed reception of *The Toucher*, some reviewers repeated Hewett's ironized construction of the speaking woman as always the sexed ratbag, as a truth, as an identity rather than a masquerade; always the Scarlet Woman, even as she performs that role as a critique of those taxonomies. And what of the variously hinted at idea that the popularity of autobiography and the novel as niche markets have superceded the theatrical and poetic – that the publishing industry (and its manufactured consumer demand) want these domestic narratives from Hewett, in preference to perhaps more difficult, certainly more costly, forms?

In her latest persona, as aging poet, (un)wise woman and cultural critic Hewett straddles a lot of history that keeps on needing to be spoken. She seems to have been 'aging' for a very long time – stuck in that 55 to 75 age bracket that Zwicky joked about – and her poetry, especially, has used various careful metonyms for the process by which history occupies a situated body, including menopause and hysterectomy. Her munificently multiple work represents not

only the work of memory in language, but offers various modes by which history and experience are refracted through irony into analysis, self-consciousness and anti-mythic understandings of situation and meaning. The figure of Sally Bann(ist)er, the silencing men, the ongoing and insistent voice of the (dis)-believing interviewer, her genre transgression but also each one's distinctiveness, Hewett's own insistence on her right to retrospectively disbelieve her old beliefs, all of these questions can figure as kinds of ongoing sincere dishonesty. That is, all of these can help us to ask literary questions about history: What is history? Who writes it, who believes it? Who finds it? Who is it? How much is this sincere dishonesty, perhaps, all that we can ever have? This seems to me part of a necessary return to questions about authority. How far, for example, are authoritative women allowed to (rather than required to) speak about things other than 'being' women, and being singularly so? Sometimes quite far – Hewett has a lot to say about arts funding, about the state of Australian culture, the function of writing and the processes of memorialization, and we should listen, even if elliptically, across the play of her jokes. If older, politicized writers such as Hewett are so passionately disappointed and intensely pessimistic about the future of Australian 'culture' it seems a strong indictment of the state of Australian cultural politics.

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ENDNOTES

1. Christine McPaul has revealed this in her analysis of Hewett's archival donations, including a letter from this lover to McPhee Gribble, the inclusion of which, McPaul notes "partly circumvents those legal and publishing discourses which had ensured the secrecy in her book." (p. 307).
2. Susan Lever has argued that *Wild Card's* first-person present-tense works as the very opposite of John Pilger's characterization of Hewett, printed on the cover, as "above all, wise".
3. Hewett has reported on her uncanny rewriting of Hollywood myths and *noir* female roles in *The Toucher* and Harry Garlick analyzes her use of them in her plays in his article in the Bennett anthology.
4. John McLaren's analysis of Hewett's appearance before the Petrov commission, heavily pregnant and aware of that condition's ability to shock the judiciary, figures her as able to "triumph over circumstance" and as "adept . . . at resistance". Hewett herself says in *Wild Card*, "I fought hard." (*Writing in Hope and Fear*, p. 119).

Nicole Moore moved from Brisbane to teach in English at the University of Tasmania this year. Her blood is slowly thinning.

To Russia – with love

In a New York heat-wave Jack Reed
in a white shantung suit and a panama hat
meets Louise Bryant on the docks
off to Russia to report on the Revolution.

Moscow is full of ghosts,
fingers picking at pockets for roubles,
faces pale as death on the metro,
in all that decadent kitsch sweating blood
the trains sigh and slide through the underground . . .

in the opulent rooms with their Heath Robinson plumbing
we flush and scald our arses,
the listening device is hidden in the chandelier,
outside through the double-glazed windows the babushkas
are sweeping and sweeping their memories into the dark.

You were right Natasha,
eating icecream together in Gorky Park
after I gave you my unworn thermal underwear,
I never went back to that room
with the fleur de lys wallpaper
where Robert Frost once stayed on a culture junket
what did that tough old reactionary
New Englander make of Stalinist Russia?
The old women, *spies* Frank Hardy said,
left over from Beria
sit at the end of the hotel corridors
scowling and jangling the keys
that twist in the locks like corkscrews.
Dymphna Cusack rages down the marble stairwell
They are packing us off to a Writers' Retreat
without running water.

Her fingernails rake at my arm
Make them pay she hisses
We have given our lives for them.
Poor bastards! what more do you want?
They have been paying for generations.
In the Writers' Union dining on rissoles
stuffed with mince and butter
You are one of ours the apparatchiks whisper
No I'm not, you betrayed the revolution . . .
sharing the last of my kasbeks
with Jack Reed in his shantung suit
Louise Bryant in her crushed crepe de Chine
I limp through streets saturated with the scent of lilacs.

Now Moscow is a giant flea-market
crammed with unsaleable junk
where a woman stands mutely
holding out a single shoe.

Dorothy Hewett

interview

Jill-of-all-trades

**Dorothy Hewett talks to Nicole Moore,
Faulconbridge, Sunday 12 July 1998**

DOROTHY HEWETT IS IN the chapel perilous, as Ramona Koval called the back room of the old coachhouse on the highway. The blue mountains have turned on 'fine and cool' weather and the weekend traffic is just turning around to head back to Sydney. I have brought red roses and blue irises, Dorothy is in black with leopard-skin cuffs and collar, as doesn't befit a shopkeeper's daughter, looking fit but wary, prepared to be welcoming. I meet Merv Lilley on the way in and he is as laconic as the occasion requires (that is, says almost nothing to me but points out the way). I sit down, and Dorothy says "I don't know what we're going to talk about – I seem to have talked about everything in my life a thousand fucking times."

Nicole: [laugh] *I bet you have. Well! . . . Let's not talk about your life. We can just talk about what you think about everything else. When Jenny Digby came and talked to you once, she said, well everybody's always talked to you about your life, so I'm going to talk to you about your writing.*

Dorothy: Yes, yeah, well that was a relief.

Nicole: *Let's talk about how you separate life and writing – which is the question that everybody wants to talk about in relation to your work, all the time . . .*

Dorothy: I know.

Nicole: *Well it's kind of the same debate around Sylvia Plath, after The Birthday Letters. That's the kind of question I think is really interesting . . . Is there a necessary separation between the domestic, the personal, the autobiographical, and the poetic and the realm of writing? Is it necessary or is it impossible? Can you not separate the two?*

Dorothy: I think it's impossible. Maybe it isn't for everybody, but really, it would be difficult for me. Not that I do always write autobiography, this just isn't

true. And it's always said with that tone, like you know – oh well you just sit down and write autobiography like automatic writing. [That kind of comment's] definitely got a sting in the tail. But this is what I think: that every writer writes from their own experience because they haven't got anything else. I mean, how can you negate who you are and what has happened to you? Say oh well, I won't write a word about that. It just sounds ludicrous to me. But when it's transmuted into writing, it changes totally, and you only use what you want to, anyway. You leave out all the dross. So it's a kind of mixed bag I suppose, and I get material from everywhere, you know – I read a hell of a lot, I always have, and I get a lot of ideas from novels or poetry or plays or whatever, autobiographies of other people, biographies, I even get stuff from off the TV sometimes, anywhere, from conversations, or just somewhere out of your head, from god knows where.

Nicole: *Do you read a lot of other people's autobiographies?*

Dorothy: Yes, a lot. Particularly writers' autobiographies, I'm fascinated by them. Writers and actors.

Nicole: *Why actors?*

Dorothy: Well I wanted to be one.

Nicole: *Of course!*

Dorothy: Recently I decided to write the second volume of my autobiography, probably starting next year or the end of this year. I've put it off, because – oh out of nervousness and self-protectiveness and all those things I suppose, and also because when you start writing right up to the present, it's very hard to remain objective, or as objective as possible. Also there's lots of people who may take terrible umbrage, because they're all still alive, whereas with that first volume a whole lot of people were dead, like my own

Sydney, 1952, from *Our Women*



family. Old boyfriends are particularly difficult, because men are all so supersensitive! About anyone saying anything about them, it seems to me. They're a secretive lot of bastards. Some people of course are quite flattered if you write about them, but not very many. And it depends of course on what you say.

Nicole: *Well exactly. That's the worry, though, and I think it's so much more dangerous for women writers – you start talking about your life and then you get read backwards through what you say about yourself, again as you say, like automatic writing . . .*

Dorothy: Absolutely, absolutely. Yes, men are able to get away with a whole lot more. I remember that somebody wrote about that *Wild Card* book I wrote, that if she was a man, her life would have been called Rabelaisian.

Nicole: *And the question would be what's wrong with calling it Rabelaisian if you're a woman . . .*

Dorothy: As a woman, she is Rabelaisian, that would've been nicer, better.

Nicole: *But do you get sick of that sort of construction of yourself, as always the Rabelaisian . . .?*

Dorothy: Oh sick to bloody death of it. You know I live a fairly peaceful life, particularly these days. I suppose this is inevitable, considering I was seventy-five this year. It does rather put the kibosh on things. All this

sort of scandal mongering . . . well, it's highly exaggerated because people want to have something to write about and talk about. So that if you've done anything at all in your life it becomes the subject of innumerable speculations and manifestations and God knows what else.

Nicole: *There's a great line in Mona Brand's autobiography, which just came out at the end of last year . . . She says something about how people always used to tell her she was ahead of her time, and she says "I just hung out with a lot of people who were ahead of their time", you know, why don't you keep up . . .*

Dorothy: Exactly.

Nicole: *Someone reviewed it and said it wasn't personal enough, where's all the personal detail? And she said, "What do they expect, do they want to come into the bedroom with you?" Which is exactly the opposite to the kind of reception that your autobiography got, which was like, I wish she'd shut up about all that bedroom stuff . . . Even Bobbin Up got reactions that said it was too much about sex didn't it?*

Dorothy: Well, the Communist Party was full of respectability because its roots were in the Trade Union movement and the Australian working class, and no-one's more respectable than them – except for the tearaways, the ones the Communist Party used to call the lumpen proletariat, like the girls in the spinning mill were who'd never been organized into any sort of trade union. And then of course there were always a few anarchists around, in the Communist Party. And I married two of them. Or lived with one, Les Flood, and married Merv Lilley. 'Cause I was always attracted to anarchists, you see.

Nicole: *Yeah, cornered the market . . .*

Dorothy: Dunno about that but I always found the respectable working class, in their white singlets mowing the lawn on the weekends . . . a bit boring. They would've said that was a sign of my middle-class anarchism, which may be right.

Nicole: *But I mean, it makes it a really impossible situation for women, in a way, the women coming into the CP then, 'cause so many of them were really active and out there and doing a lot, writing or doing political work, and then the big respectability push means – no they should be at home, being wives or looking after the kids.*



'Myself, Tom, Rosie and Kate in the 60s'

Dorothy: That's right. I can remember when I was living in Redfern, one of the jobs I was given was to organize women, so I thought, oh well, the obvious people to start with are the wives of the Communist Party activists, so I started calling on them all. And their husbands were furious, absolutely furious! How dare she come and interrupt our peaceful, domestic lives where the wife does everything and I go out to my meetings . . .

Nicole: *Have you read any of those autobiographies by CP women that have come out in the last ten years or so, there's quite a few of them – Amirah Inglis' . . .*

Dorothy: I read Amirah's, in fact I wrote a review of it for the Age.

Nicole: *She's got all those lines in there where she's stuck in the suburbs in Melbourne . . .*

Dorothy: While Ian's rushing around being the big revolutionary . . .

Nicole: *And having affairs as well . . .*

Dorothy: Yes! On the side. Which he was very good at. (laugh) Yes exactly.

Nicole: *And she says something like all the great events of the twentieth century happen without her, 'cause she's stuck in the suburbs.*

Dorothy: With the kids! Well I was never very good at that role, as you might imagine. (laugh) In fact I fought against it, steadfastly, even when I had three little kids.

Nicole: *And you were the breadwinner as well.*

Dorothy: I was at one stage. And then of course, when I married Merv, back in Western Australia and we had two children – I had six kids altogether, I mean it's outrageous isn't it – are you Catholic or careless, you know (laugh). But I went back to university, finished my degree and started working in the English department but I could never have done any of that without him. He was fantastic. He was the antithesis of all those men. I must've sensed something different, 'cause I didn't really know all that much about him, 'cause it was a fairly fast courtship, but my instinct must have told me – choose right this time! And also back in Perth of course, I had the extended family, which does make a difference when you've got children . . . And when I started to work, I could afford to pay for baby-sitters, that sort of thing, whereas when I lived in Sydney, I could hardly afford to put the meal on the table, let alone anything else.

Nicole: *And that's the period when you weren't writing for eight or nine years or so in Redfern . . . That was about poverty and just trying to make ends meet . . .*

Dorothy: Just trying to make a living, that's right, and also be political, at the same time. And so the possibility of ever having a *second* of time to oneself was just about nil. Only when I got to work at that awful Waltons and there was a typewriter in front of me again, I could snatch a few hours, you know, here and there. Which was when I started to write *Bobbin Up*.

Nicole: *And that started from just a single short story.*

Dorothy: A single short story called 'Jeanie', yes. And I can remember that enormous sense of excitement I had; it was like a fantastic liberation of the spirit. I felt as if I'd stepped out of a prison into the wide world again!

Nicole: *You've always talked about that, in a way, that it was communism and the doctrinaire part of politics that stopped you.*

Dorothy: That was part of it, and the other part of it of course was children, domesticity and living with somebody who had no sympathy, really, with what I

was trying to do. Or whatever sympathy there was, was very marginal. And then of course he went crazy, so that didn't help much.

Nicole: *The preface that you wrote for Bobbin Up when Virago published it, seems to work, to me anyway, for a lot of writers of your generation as a kind of moment when you look back on your old politics and you think, what an idiot I was, what a fool I was. And there's a lot of other writers of your generation who did that in the same kind of way, or even more harshly than you did. At least you forgive yourself a bit, and say at least I was sincere about it.*

Dorothy: Oh well I was absolutely dedicated. Stephen Murray-Smith was a great friend of mine. He said to me once, not long before he died: Dorothy, how could we, who were intellectuals, who went to university, fall for all that stuff that they kept shoving into our heads and not even protest? I said I don't know, Stephen, it's one of the mysteries of the universe . . .

Nicole: *But he protested in the end, and you did. But there were other things that you were committed to, I presume, to other parts of what was going on. Sometimes you still say that you've got Marxist politics these days.*

Dorothy: Mmm, I have, it wasn't all negative, by any means. I mean being in the Communist Party taught me an enormous amount, just about human beings, particularly about the working class. I met people that, in my fairly sheltered middle-class existence I would never have known. I wouldn't have known what it was like to work in a factory. I wouldn't have known what it was like to go hungry. I wouldn't have known what it was like to have the electricity and the gas turned off. All those things.

Nicole: *What happens out of that? Out of middle-class people, intellectual people knowing those kinds of things?*

Dorothy: Well I think it extends your region of understanding and sympathy. When you come to think of it, in Australia, there haven't been a great number of people coming from the working class who've written about their lives, for obvious reasons. So if you get a ring-in like me, it can be quite useful.

Nicole: *That's true. So say, Stephen Knight's article on Bobbin Up in that collection of essays about you – he puts it in a history of working-class writing doesn't he,*

which is a really interesting way to read it. It's not normally read that way is it?

Dorothy: He's an interesting man Stephen Knight: I knew him in a little way, not much. But of course that was his area, working-class writing, in England mainly.

Nicole: *And he doesn't talk much about women in Australia who write about working-class issues, because there were people like Mena Calthorpe . . .*

Dorothy: *The Dyehouse . . .*

Nicole: *And Betty Collins, there is that whole history that's not read at all.*

Dorothy: It's very patchy though.

Nicole: *Yes that's true, and those are from the fifties, but you've got ones from the thirties and forties; that are sometimes really patronizing . . .*

Dorothy: Well there's all those Ruth Park novels, who sentimentalized the whole thing, tremendously. Yet I remember when I first came to Sydney in 1949, reading that winter, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where it was serialized, *The Poor Man's Orange*, and being quite excited by it. No-one had written about that life before. No-one had written about Surry Hills.

Nicole: *There's some story of her reading it at a Fellowship of Australian Writers thing, and a man getting up from the back and saying "Australian readers don't want to read about pregnancy and slums. That's not right, that's not literature!"*

Dorothy: Well that's the equivalent really, of saying, years later, that *Bobbin Up's* full of sex! And of course Jean Devanny got into terrible trouble with the sex in *Sugar Heaven*.

Nicole: *Exactly, yeah, and the sex in The Virtuous Courtesan which was one of hers that was banned . . . Your novels, especially, and Wild Card seem to have provoked quite a bit of shock about sex . . . differently to your plays?*

Dorothy: Well for so long Australians tended to write plays that sounded a bit like television. Very naturalistic and internalized sort of plays, between only a couple of characters because no-one can afford a big cast. This trilogy of mine is set in a country town between 1920 and 1970 and it's all the characters in the

town so there's twelve people in the play and even that doesn't take in all of them. I might do what that fellow in Tasmania did with his film script. I might turn my play into a novel because I think it would work quite well. But I'm still disappointed that nothing's happened because, well, what's the point of writing a play to stick in a bottom drawer? It's ludicrous.

Nicole: *Are you starting to prefer writing novels?*

Dorothy: It's very nice to have all that space to move in and to be able to talk about people's innermost thoughts. Wonderful. I've shifted over, you know, since I wrote that autobiography and then that book that so many people seemed to find quite shocking ...

Nicole: The Toucher?

Dorothy: Yes, I've nearly finished another novel. Called *The Neap Tide*. I've always wanted to write novels. I used to write lots of novels when I was a teenager, which I didn't finish because I never really had the self-confidence or the application. When you think about *Bobbin Up*, it really is a series of short stories strung together by the image of the spinning mill, the central symbol is the mill, and it comes together at the end with the sit-in strike.

Nicole: *And the city as well.*

Dorothy: Yes the atmosphere of a city. But the actual stories, they are helped in their linkage together by the fact that they all work in the same place. Like there's no linear structure. *Bobbin Up* doesn't really work that way at all, which makes it interesting I think and quite innovative for its time. I never really thought that I could sit down and write a novel where everything was tied together in some sort of way.

Nicole: *That kind of ideal novel. The Victorian novel ...*

Dorothy: Why I thought this was what you had to write I've no idea! I suppose that was what the culture told me. And I wasn't really into that by any means. I thought I wasn't organized enough to write a novel. I wouldn't get all the ends tied up and there would be bits sticking out everywhere and people would say "Oh well, that wasn't explained properly". Writing that autobiography, which I know is different to writing a novel of course – but there are similarities and you do have to have some sort of organizational structure – when I found out that I could do that it gave

me a big boost. I was in England at the time and I'd just delivered the manuscript of *Wild Card* to Virago and I sat down to write the first five chapters of *The Toucher*. But then, of course, as so often happens, all sorts of things intervened and I didn't get back to it for months. But it was obvious that I'd found a new self-confidence out of that experience of writing the autobiography. And I found it so marvellous to be so totally in control of what I was writing! One of the wonderful things about the theatre is that you work with other people and I love that, but in the end what you have to accept as a dramatist is that you hand over your work to the director and the actors. It doesn't work that way. Whereas a novel belongs to you.

Nicole: *What about those reviews of The Toucher that were a bit worried you'd gone soft until Esther really got horny and the sex happened? 'Cause she's an old lady and crippled she shouldn't be having sex ...*

Dorothy: Lots of people told me they were shocked by that novel. I was surprised really, how many.

Nicole: *The way you write about working-class men in it seems really interesting to me – really desirable but not, you know, in that glorified role as the larrikin or whatever ...*

Dorothy: That's true ... I've known a few in my life! ... They were different. I think it was the difference I found so fascinating and the entry into a completely different culture. And I admired their courage and I admired their not caring what the world thought. I admired their get-up-and-go. All that stuff. I still do really.

Nicole: *Yes, well in a way working-class masculinity, if you like, is what got represented as the failure of the organized left in a way, in Australia. That none of the blokes could deal with women very well.*

Dorothy: Well, they couldn't – it's quite true – this whole thing with working-class men is very ambivalent. On one side you've got the courage and the dash and the – no fear of behaving properly or class behaviour, all that sort of thing. A kind of freedom from all that and Australian working-class men – many of them are inclined to be anarchistic, which I find quite attractive. And on the other side, you had this masculine ethos which shuts women out from their lives and leaves them the poorer for it, it seems to me.

Nicole: *Yeah. The kind of mateship ethos.*

Dorothy: Which is very strong. It still exists. You know, the pub mateship syndrome. The football mateship – all that stuff. A strange ambivalence which to me makes the whole situation between men and women in that sort of *milieu*, very interesting. How do you make this work? If you're heterosexual? How can it ever possibly work? So I make it even worse by making one protagonist middle-class, old and crippled. The whole fucking lot! I wanted to see what happened if you presented this sort of situation. My son, Tom tells me it's wishful thinking. He's got a point, but the whole question of sex exacerbated to that extent, fascinated me. And some people say it didn't work. You know, they're not convinced that such a thing could ever happen, but I think they're wrong.

Nicole: *It must work because to some degree that's why people find it so shocking.*

Dorothy: Exactly. If it didn't work they wouldn't find it shocking at all. If it failed, they could just dismiss it. I'm not saying it's a perfect novel by any means. I would like to write other novels and better ones, but I think that actual relationship between Billy Crowe and Esther La Farge does work. It is believable.

Nicole: *But then poor old Iris gets it in the end.*

Dorothy: Hilary McPhee told me once that Iris was the most horrible female character ever invented in Australian literature.

Nicole: *There's this sense in which the working-class bloke gets all the dash, and the poor old working-class girl doesn't get anything... She gets a spade in the head!*

Dorothy: I know. Yes, she does, she does. I've known a few Iris's too and they were pretty horrible but I did write about all those good working-class girls in *Bobbin Up*. So I had partially redeemed myself.

Nicole: *A question that's kind of related to this, in terms of reception, is how you think about the impact of your work, over all this time. I mean, there's a kind of sense now that you get constructed as a writer at the end of her writing career.*

Dorothy: They think I'm going to cark it!

Nicole: *So you have the collected plays, the collected poems, the essays and the monographs. It's like, she's all over now, we've had enough.*

Dorothy: Well, people still come up to me and say "still writing?" Which I must admit gives me the shits a bit.

Nicole: *And it's conscious as well – you talk about ageing and dying so much...*

Dorothy: I've always been absolutely obsessed with the whole thing of dying because I hate the thought of it. I really hate the idea that I could actually go out into nothingness and of course being an atheist that's what I believe. And you know, I still wake up in the night and have nightmares about it, so I don't think I'll go gently into that good night at all. I'll rage against the dying of the light. But I don't feel at all as if I've come to the end of my writing life. I've still got all these projects on. Another book of poems nearly ready – and nearly finished this novel.

Nicole: *And the trilogy is out there.*

Dorothy: The trilogy is out there and I've also just started to do something with Fremantle Arts Centre Press and John Kinsella. About the great southern of Western Australia, wheat and sheep, big sweeping plains and huge skies. I suppose it could be a kind of superior coffee table book...

So I don't feel I am at the end of my career. Maybe I'm deluding myself, who knows? Perhaps I should stop talking about death and shut up about it. A friend turned up here one day saying she'd come to write my obituary for *The Herald*. I felt quite threatened! I said "Come off it Margo!"

Nicole: *But how do you feel about looking back at the history of your critical reception and your work? What kind of impact do you think you've made?*

Dorothy: Well I think it's very mixed. I think it is true that I've always been a maverick, that I've never been part of any mainstream and that's probably for lots of reasons. I think one of the original reasons was that I came from Western Australia and, you know, in those days it was like coming from another country and it's still a bit like that. I mean, I didn't take part in any of the great Australian literary movements that have taken place in my lifetime because I was stuck over in bloody Perth most of the time and when I wasn't stuck there I was in the Communist Party and it had its own agenda which didn't include all those very interesting modernist movements that were going on, which I actually would have loved to have been part of, but never was.

Nicole: *A lot of writers about your age went overseas.*

Dorothy: I was all set to do that and the war broke out and then I got married. I seem to have made all the wrong choices at all the wrong times. So that was part of the reason I think and also that I stopped writing for so long. You know I started off as this sort of *enfant* juvenile terror – winning a prize in *Meanjin* and winning an ABC poetry prize when no-one had heard of me and suddenly a silence fell, like death . . . And then I surfaced again with *Bobbin Up* and people said “Who’s she?” Because it was as if I kept on re-inventing myself. I discovered that literary critics are very, very suspicious of people who change genres. They think there is something suspect about it. Otherwise you are Jack-of-all-trades or Jill-of-all-trades and master or mistress of nothing. Whereas I’ve never found any difficulty in this really. It just seems natural to me. It’s all writing, you know. But I never really consolidated what I was doing until I suppose fairly recently. So my daughter tells me that I’m very famous, but I honestly don’t feel very famous.

Nicole: *But you are . . . Well, how does it feel to be famous? That’s a good question.*

Dorothy: How do I know? (laugh) Dunno! If this is being very famous, it’s a bit disappointing that’s all I can say! I thought it’d be better than this! I thought you could get your trilogy of plays on! and . . . So what’s gone wrong?

Nicole: *So you think there has been a kind of shutting down a bit in the last couple of years – a shutting down of literary opportunities and cultural work?*

Dorothy: It’s part of the whole conservative backlash we’re going through. You know it reminds me of the late awful Menzies years, only I think it’s a bit worse if anything. At least they used to say Mr Menzies had a beautiful voice. They can’t even say *that* about John Howard. And you know even when I go to universities, which I do occasionally, what I notice is how terribly conservative the students are. Quite frightening in fact. All they seem to be interested in is their economic situation and not any sort of global protest. When I was a young university student in 1941, we were deeply involved, and particularly after the war ended, in what was going on and we saw ourselves as a sort of vanguard of thought and action. As you see in Indonesia or various other countries, but this

doesn’t seem to be happening. I mean you get the odd student march or protest, usually about having to pay more money to go to university or fees going up or whatever.

Nicole: *There was that protest a month ago or so with the high school students . . .*

Dorothy: That was very good and I thought maybe another generation is coming up who do have the need to protest.

Nicole: *What do you think about the future? It’s going to be the twenty-first century in a minute . . . Do you feel like a twentieth-century writer?*

Dorothy: I suppose so – Well, I have been, haven’t I? But I’d like to have one toe in the twenty-first! . . . And it should be a period of great excitement with a feeling of newness and innovation and doing new things, but it isn’t! All it’s about is the fucking games. It’s like giving them circuses, like the Romans. Yep and, of course, the whole One Nation phenomenon is the result of all this because nothing like that could happen in a country that felt that it was alive and young and going somewhere. It’s a looking backwards, because all those, particularly those farming communities that are backing Pauline Hanson – what they want back is the past – that long, golden, sleepy time. You know when there were tariffs to protect everything, when we were the white outpost in South East Asia. This is what they want back again and that sense of endless security that nothing will ever change. But it always was a dream you see. It was the ideal, the Australian ideal. That’s how we lived and somehow someone came along and took it all off us.

Nicole: *And that’s what something like Bobbin Up showed then, that it wasn’t all like that . . .*

Dorothy: No, of course it wasn’t, but this was the dream and the dream is still alive and kicking out there, on the frontier somewhere.

Nicole: *What do you think about the state of writing in Australia at the moment?*

Dorothy: I’m worried about the publishing industry because it’s becoming so huge and taken over almost completely by huge dominant multinationals and the markets will shrink for writers for a start. And I suspect that the markets will also get more conserva-

tive, because I've never met a big corporation that wasn't conservative. The Australian publishing contingent is getting smaller and smaller. There are so few independent publishers now and most of them are small like the University of Queensland Press.

Nicole: *And they don't really want to publish new writers any more.*

Dorothy: No and they don't want to publish any more poetry. Few of the mainstream publishers publish any poetry. So the situation for poets is very, very bad. They've got to depend almost completely on little presses or else starting little presses up on their own as they did in the 60s. Maybe I'm being old fashioned, but I like to have a relationship with a publisher where one feels a kind of benign interest and I don't get this feeling at all any more. I get it a bit from Fremantle Arts Centre Press and I get it a bit from Currency Press because they're little presses. But Penguin, forget it.

Nicole: *What do you get from Penguin?*

Dorothy: Disinterest or only interested in a new book. Not interested in carrying anything. For instance – I think this is quite a good example – *Wild Card* sold 18,000 in Australia which is pretty good for an Australian book. It's now been out of print for a year. So I continually get phone calls from universities saying "Why can't we get *Wild Card*?" And this stuff isn't just happening to me. That whole concept of keeping a backlist is gone and if you don't keep a backlist, it means that if amongst those books there are classics, they disappear. Again it's that old thing about no sense of history, no sense of building a canon, no sense of any of that. It's now. It's all now, mate or fuck off. It's totally commercial and they say they've got to do this, they're driven by commercial interest because that's the world now. You know, with economic rationalism there's no other way to exist than globalization and it's bloody true! It's probably bloody true. I feel that whole scene is very depressing and very worrying, but on the other hand there will al-



ways be little presses, I believe this. There will always be people who believe in us, in creativity, who set up with virtually no money and just enthusiasm and idealism, to get out books. But the number of books that are printed like that will obviously shrink, which is sad, but it will exist. These sort of books will be printed and they will exist. Anyway, nobody cares about poetry except poets and we poets care about it to the extent that we don't really care about anything else that much. I'd rather write poetry than anything else.

Nicole: *So you love it?*

Dorothy: Better than anything. When it turns out well, there is nothing like that feeling of triumph, until the next time. That wonderful feeling – for a moment that everything came together. I think it's the economy of it I love, to be able to say so much in such a contained form and with such intensity. It suits me, you know. It suits me. And when you write novels as well as poetry and maybe even the odd play you can have it all, can't you? You can have that wonderful expansive, slow, introspective build-up of a novel. You can have the experience of working in a collaborative set-up in theatre and you can also have the marvellous sort of private exuberance of writing something short and memorable. So I can't see anything wrong with being a Jack-of-all-trades or a Jill-of-all-trades or a maverick – that's all right.

Dorothy Hewett

The Australian Writer Today

I AM FOREVER WEDDED to the book. This doesn't mean that I don't enjoy the movies and good television or that I can't grasp the fascination of the internet but the book is my cup of tea. I like to hold it in my hands, feel its weight, smell it, turn its pages. Its comfortable bulk supports me and excites me. Is this because I'm seventy-five next birthday and like the book am due to be pulped or remaindered? Maybe so but the good book gives me the same pleasure as good sex. It makes me tremble with anticipation. I can usually tell after the first page, maybe even the first paragraph that it and I are going to share a passionate affair. Therefore I cannot believe in the death of the book any more than I can believe in the death of the author. Maybe it and I will go out together. So be it. But if the book goes the world will be a poorer place.

We have a semi-literate society. When I say literate I don't mean just the basic ability to read and write. I mean a deep widely read literacy that experiences and stores up in the mind the work of its writers. Sometimes it seems that writers have ceased to be important in the postmodern world but is this really true? Can it ever be true? We are not and have never been amongst the legislators of the universe but we have been and are still the chroniclers of the time. And what a time it is – a time of civil wars, murder and racism, of cynical manipulation, of lies, impure ambitions, glitz, and greed, when we run eager to tread on the heels of our global masters, rattling our own pathetic sabres like children with dangerous toys.

You may say, what has this got to do with writers? and I would answer: everything, because this is the world that we inhabit and we turn our backs on it at our peril. The ability to record it whole is all that is left to us with our imperfect freedoms, certainly not

shared by large portions of the rest of the world who throw their writers into prison, ban them, burn their books, and even execute them for their words. An honest writer, a good writer, is always the conscience of his or her nation no matter how much of a maverick he or she might be (maybe to be a maverick is part of the answer). One of our tasks is always to question received opinions and the status quo. This will not make us popular but it will preserve our honesty, perhaps even our words.

Australia is not seen as an important part of the world. For a long time we were perceived as a small nation of isolationists, an island of white supremacy in South East Asia, but this is no longer true, and as Paul Keating said in his interview on the ABC's 'Lateline' *we can never go back*. We have at last accepted that geographically, economically and politically we are a part of South East Asia, a multicultural nation whose basic language is English. We have inherited a great language with a rich literature and made it our idiosyncratic own in a short time and in a quite remarkable manner.

When I was teaching English Literature at a university in the sixties and early seventies there was no such thing as Australian literature; at least that was what we were told by our professors, graduates from Oxford and Cambridge.

"What Australian literature?" they said. Only at the end of that period, by agreeing to teach an extra eight hours a week, a group of us inaugurated a course in Australian Literature. Now Australian Literature courses are taught in all Australian universities, and even overseas. There are scholarly articles, texts, journals and lectures, there are departments of Australian Literature and those who teach it are called Australianists. Now we, the writers, are occasionally asked to be 'writers in residence' at the same univer-

sities that once refused to teach Australian Literature. There are residencies for writers to live for three months in studios in Paris or Rome. We are even sent overseas as cultural ambassadors for our country. We have come a long way in a short time. Remember when Australian titles were kept in the back of bookshops like dirty secrets? Now we even have Australian best sellers. Modest ones to be sure because our population is small, our reading public smaller, and our books are not sufficiently known overseas. The State Premiers have jumped on the bandwagon and are eager to hand out literary prizes in their names. I wonder how many of them have actually read any of the books? While they do these PR exercises however the writer's share of the dollar keeps shrinking, books are taken off the bookshelves in doublequicktime, then remaindered or pulped in alarming quantities. The shelf life of a book is six weeks or less in an Australian bookshop.

In my own case this year, two novels and an autobiography that sold eighteen thousand copies and is taught on university courses are currently out of print. Three collections of poetry remain ironically on the bookshelves. Poetry at its best will usually only sell two thousand copies. These poetry books remain because Fremantle Arts Centre Press – a small but dedicated publisher – keeps them on its backlist. The other day I was offered seventy dollars to reprint a very long narrative poem and a smaller one in a prestigious anthology, and even then they wanted to lop off the last section of the poem. I was offered *one hundred dollars* to reprint a short story in an anthology of the year's best Australian short stories. What is happening out there in the corporate world is frightening. Meanwhile we are forced to auction our manuscripts in the marketplace like cattle, are sent on promotional tours to speak on radio and TV programs to promote our books like the latest in soap powders. That is if we are lucky, otherwise we can sink like a stone.

Whatever happened to that unsigned agreement between writers and publishers, that one-on-one precious and supportive relationship between writer and editor? Remember Scribner's great literary edi-

tor of the twenties, Maxwell Perkins and his long, patient, selfless support of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe and many others? He revered good books and saw the role of writers and editor as complementary. Without him it is not idle to speculate that the great postmodern renaissance in American fiction might never have happened. Writing is a lonely and self-motivated, often neurotic business. Most of our work is done in solitary confinement. Therefore we need, more than most, some system of

support, and like all people need to be valued for the work we do. But where are the Maxwell Perkins' of today? Gone, mostly gone into the marketplace, and there is little to be done about it except to keep on writing, close ranks and fight for our basic rights, otherwise we may well go under.

I would also like to say something about literary standards. Recently I was asked to review a new Australian book. The advertising hype that came with the book was exultant and gushy. "This is a marvellous book, will be a best seller, has already sold in America and is to be made into a movie." I read it – a light unexceptional sentimental popular type story – but I am in despair. If this is the criterion of a marvellous book, whatever happened to standards? Perhaps it was ever thus. Did Ethel M. Dell once get all the space? Is it only posterity that can sort out the good and beautiful? I fear so. And even then she sometimes misses the bus.

Meanwhile the teaching of writing proliferates, and Henry Lawson's "want to write and can't" are tutored assiduously, often by those who have never managed to be published themselves. Sometimes serious writers, desperate for a dollar, teach these courses. But what will happen to all these aspiring writers? They remind me of the current crop of university students, filling in time on campuses, who will certainly never get a job out of it.

The average Australian writer's income is now \$3,400 per annum, and the author's percentage of the total turnover of the publishing industry is decreasing. Barbara Jefferis talks about a golden time when authors were paid 20 per cent royalty for each book sold. Now Penguin offers only 7.5 per cent on paper-

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backs and cancels contracts with poets. Allen & Unwin offer royalty payments for six months for the first year, then only on a yearly basis, thus keeping back what is the writer's legitimate income for twelve months.

The whole of our Australian publishing industry is now colonized. Australian imprints have almost disappeared. Instead thousands of global imprint publishers have swallowed the market, in many cases buying out the pygmy Australian companies who cannot hope to compete.

Laurie Muller, managing director of UQP, one of the few Australian imprints still operating, estimates that 90 per cent of imprints in bookshops come from outside Australia. The multinational publishers provide over 80 per cent of titles stocked by booksellers. More profit is available through importations and redistribution than to take the high risk on Australian originals. The result is of course that publishers like UQP are forced to follow in the footsteps of the big monopolies, cut their lists and take fewer risks with new authors. Many publishers refuse to accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Our government is not in the least interested in supporting an independent publishing industry. Why would they be? They are Economic Rationalists wedded to the fast buck and the selling off of Australian industries to overseas buyers.

Not so very long ago the Literature Board of the Australia Council made a generous contribution to the writers of this country. Their grants made it possible for many fine writers to be published, to survive and go on writing.

Australian Literature flourished. A mood of optimism prevailed. I know, because at the age of fifty-one, I was one of them – a recipient of a three-year grant from the Australia Council under the Whitlam government. It was almost too late but it changed my life. I wrote like a demon: plays, poetry, short stories, an autobiography and eventually a novel. Those were the days when the media published cartoons of some of us riding on what they called 'the gravy train'. Today most of that has gone with shrinking budgets for the arts. I have now listened to two chairpersons of the Australia Council criticize writers pub-

licly on TV for their 'hand-out mentality'. If I receive a grant and do a substantial amount of work for it I do not expect to be named as a bludger and mendicant.

While the arts bureaucrats still collect their regular, if not necessarily large salaries, there seems to be little understanding of the plight of the Australian writer out there in the real world. Our small population, smaller reading public, refusal of publishers to keep a backlist, refusal of the booksellers to keep our books on the shelves, all go to make our situation perilous.

Remember when Patrick White, returning to Australia, was asked by a reporter what he did for a living. "I am a writer", Patrick said. "But what do you really do for a living?" A little later White could have answered that he bred dogs, kept chooks, and was writing *The Tree of Man* on a tiny property in Castle Hill.

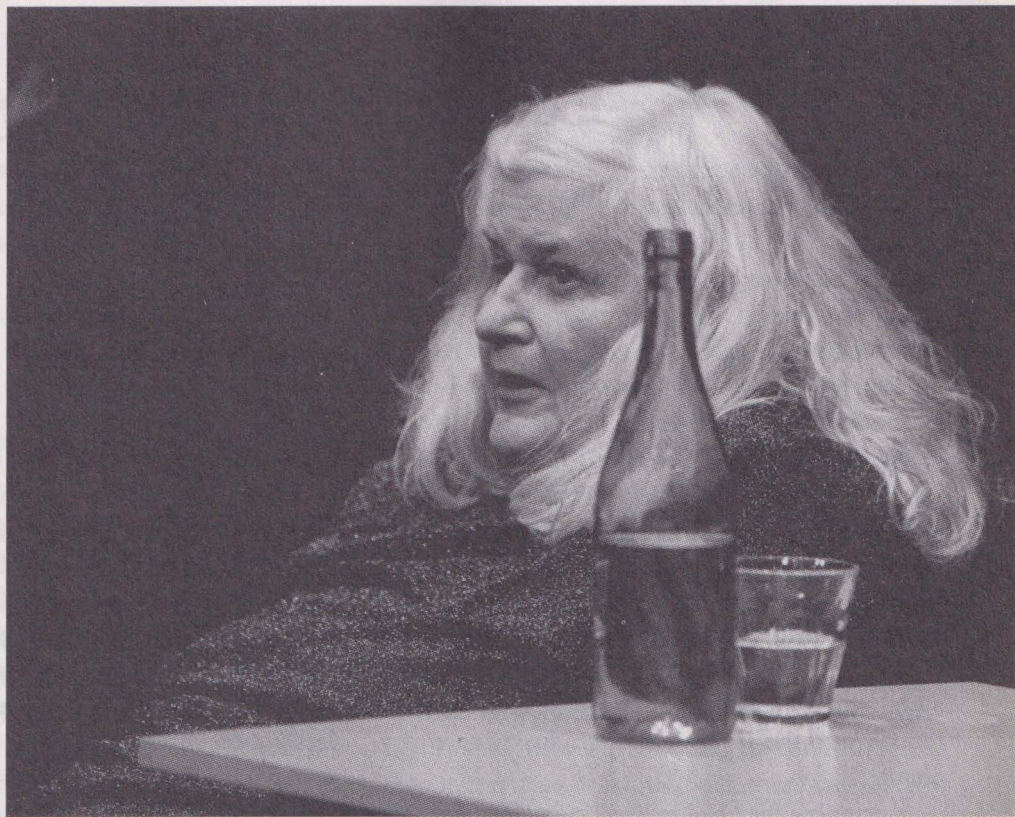
So is it back to the factory, the door-to-door salesperson, the part time jobs (if there are any), back to the dole or maybe teaching a course on how

to write? These are possible alternatives, but it is also true that writers will not do their best work in the early dawn or late into the night. When tired out, the creative juices flow sluggishly.

It all boils down to the government's, or even the community's attitude to its writers. In a hard time there is not much sympathy for us out there. We are not normally amongst the rich and successful, we are not corporate high-fliers, economic rationalism will get nothing out of us. Therefore we are seen as a rather embarrassing small minority who insist on giving our opinions and continuing, against all the odds, to write.

It's a paradox isn't it? That in this climate of more and more writers' festivals and proliferating writers' centres our incomes shrink and our survival rate becomes more tenuous. It is a mean government who begrudges us the small fruits of our labours, who attacks Public Lending Right (PLR), abolished Education Lending Right (ELR), when it was almost within our grasp, and did away with the Book Bounty. When the Book Bounty was axed poetry virtually disappeared from the lists of the bigger publishers and many of the smaller ones as well. The prestigious list that could never hope to return costs was doomed.

***It's a paradox isn't it?
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At the Australian
National Playwrights
Conference, 1998.
Photograph by
Gerald Clarkson

"In an age of brutal indifference artists are the creators and guardians of freedom through their idiosyncratic dissent", writes the Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Lhosa. I like that term 'idiosyncratic dissent'. It means I suppose that we are mavericks. We don't easily join political parties, or toe any political line, but we have always been, by temperament and trade idiosyncratic dissenters, and in this age of brutal indifference we must not only be the chroniclers but the conscience of our country. We must never turn our backs, we must never allow ourselves to be silenced. Remember Drusilla Modjeska's brilliant speech at the last NSW Premier's prizes, when she said that the report on the stolen children, *Bringing them Home* was destined to be the most important book ever published in Australia. No doubt some guests at that dinner thought her speech inappropriate for a gathering of politicians and writers, that it had nothing to do with the concerns of literature, but it had everything to do with it.

This brings me back to my original point about politics and art. I have been proud to belong to an organization that has lobbied against censorship and for the economic rights of the author, that fought for

years for PLR and eventually won it, who now carries on the struggle for ELR and the re-establishment of the Book Bounty.

I am happy to be giving this lecture under the name of Colin Simpson, the debonair travel-writer who fought the good fight for PLR over many frustrating years. We are facing hard times but then conservative governments are always contemptuous and afraid of the arts. Writers do tend from time to time to tell unpalatable truths. Let us not forget that writing is a dangerous game not to be taken lightly, but once it is taken our feet are on a hard road. Still, we are used to that and we do have the power of the word on our side. Let us always learn to use it well.

ENDNOTE

For the economic situation amongst Australian publishers, booksellers and writers I am indebted to an unpublished article by Lynn Spender.

This is a transcript of the Colin Simpson lecture Dorothy Hewett gave for the Australian Society of Authors at the Mitchell Library, Sydney in March 1998.

Excerpt from 'The Neap Tide'

Dorothy Hewett

AS THE WOODCHIPPERS moved inexorably into the state forests at Eden, something happened to galvanize them all. The retired intellectuals, all greenies living deep in the bush, were the catalysts. They didn't make their living from trees like the timber industry, the loggers and the forestry officers and the fact that when the forests eventually disappeared there'd be no more jobs anyway, was too far into the future for the industry to worry about.

It was now they had to live. Unemployment was skyrocketing and their trade was cutting down trees. The arguments raged in the pubs and the villages along the coast. The intellectuals brought the experts in. Famous conservationists explained the principles of the canopy only to be howled down contemptuously by the men in the field, the forestry officers who were on the side of the cutters. Joined by the mill-owners, the local member and the town businessmen, they packed the district halls for the protest meetings. Blows were struck on the pavements outside.

It was Victor Shoemaker who brought the news to Zane. Prized out of his tent on the banks of the dam, he saw himself as the fiery voice of the protesters leading the inhabitants of Zane into battle against the bulldozers, the chainsaws and eventually the police. It was to be his finest hour. Organizing Zane turned out to be not as difficult as he had imagined. The sedentary life behind doors needed an antidote and most of them relished a change. Even Tom Steven consented to come along. It was years since he'd taken part in any political movement. The last time had been the Aldermaston peace marches in Lon-

don. Leaving his beat on the Thames Embankment, he'd joined the other young men and women and found a moment of exhilaration in the anonymity of the marching crowd. A natural conservative and an outsider all his life, Tom found it difficult to empathize with any mass movement but the destruction of the planet had seemed a good enough cause at the time. His sexual preferences had made life endlessly difficult for him. "You dirty pervert, you vile degenerate swine." The words his father had used had branded his whole life with self-disgust.

When Peg called in with her pick-up truck, he was in no mood to go. Unshaven and shivering, he came to the door. "Come on," she said, "have some guts. We can't let the woodchippers decimate the forests. If they had their way they'd turn the whole south coast into a desert."

"Don't exaggerate," he told her but he pulled on his beanie and his overcoat from St Vincent de Paul and climbed into the truck. "We'll pick up Jess on the way," he said. "She's a born protester."

The only other hard nut to crack was Bruce Hanniman. "Christ, Annie," he grumbled, "I'm only a fisherman."

They drove in a long line of cars, crawling over the mountain in the drizzle, past the dairy farms, the patches of forest and the melancholy deserted little townships. Nobody came out to see them pass. When they dipped down to the coast again it was already late in the morning and a grey sky, heavy with rain, lay low over the sea. The fishing boats were anchored at the wharf, waiting out the bad weather. Only a few gulls were blown screeching over the town.

"Feel like a beer?" said Bruce Hanniman hopefully,

but nobody wanted to stop. They were in it now and impatient to begin. As they crawled up the corrugated forestry track, pushing through mush and fern, the trees closed in overhead, blocking out the light, the drip drip of their leaves making a melancholy accompaniment.

They pulled into the clearing. The locals were already ahead of them, a disconsolate grim little circle huddled under rain hats and overcoats. The trucks, bulldozers and jinkers with their drivers in boiler suits and hard yellow hats were drawn up facing them. A local TV crew, thirsting for a bit of action, were setting up their cameras. Victor Shoemaker had alerted the media. Then the hippies and the ferals emerged from the forest trails like native birds, in their odd assortments of bright clothing, flowing hair and shaven skulls, shouting, "Whadda we want NO WOODCHIPPING! When do we wannit NOW!"

Seeing an opportunity for heroics, Bruce Hanniman shinned up a 150-foot silvertop ash to chain himself to the upper branches. He sat up there grinning, his long legs wedged in a fork in the tree while Annie glowed with pride. Tom followed him up and they exchanged joints, passing them through the branches. From the hole he had scooped in the ground, covered up to the neck in mud and mulch, Victor Shoemaker regarded them sourly.

Max and Norah Greenlees linked arms with Lenny, Jessica and Peg. I haven't marched since the Vietnam demos, Jessica thought, but this was a far cry from Jim Cairns in the streets of Melbourne leading the chanting thousands. They replayed it on TV docs occasionally with 'Yesterday's Hero' commenting acidly on the soundtrack. She looked across at the people from the Settlement. A big mob of them, recruited by Isaac Mumbula's eloquence, had rattled out in their old bombs. Now they stood, men and women, in formidable rows, arms crossed on their chests, dark faces splattered with the light falling through the aisles of giant ironbark, bloodwood, bluegum, mahogany and turpentine. They're like the forest themselves, she thought, it's as if they grew out of it.

The rain began to fall, splattering through the leaves. Isaac Mumbula held up his hand. "Leave the

forest," he said. "This is our sacred land and you done enough damage already."

"Fuck off, darkie," yelled a beefy man with sun-cancered skin. "I been cuttin' timber in these big scrubs all me life."

Sirens howling, two police cars and a paddy wagon pulled over into the slush. "Here come the pigs!" yelled the ferals. A few policemen climbed out, looking nervous, gazing steadfastly into the middle distance. They adjusted a loud hailer.

"You are trespassing on government property," intoned the sergeant. The loggers moved in closer, sloshing through the clay.

"Don't break ranks," instructed Isaac Mumbula. Somebody threw a stone. It hit him squarely in the forehead, knocking him, coughing and wheezing, face down in the mud.

"Get the gubbas! Get the white cunts!" The Aborigines sprang forward wielding fists and sticks. The men in the trees began to shout, those buried up to their necks in leaves and dirt folded their arms above their heads as the boots pounded down on top of them. Somebody punched a TV cameraman. Soon, Lenny thought, it'll be on for young and old. He didn't hanker after heroics or notoriety. No coppers, no arrests, no flouting the laws of the land. He'd had enough of that to last him a lifetime. It was a simple matter of survival, but he did care about the forests. They provided him with shelter and the security he needed. With his beehives rattling on board he even made a sporadic living out of them.

The police pulled out their truncheons and began to beat their way methodically through the rows of protesters. Terrified, Jessica closed her eyes, feeling the sickening crunch of the truncheon on her shoulders. Her knees buckled. Through half-closed eyes she saw the canopy of leaves swinging in giddy circles against the sky. Sizing up the situation, Lenny pulled at her arm. "Come on Jess," he whispered, guiding her out to the sidelines. The demonstrators sat down in the mud. Dragged by the legs, arms and hair they were bundled screaming into the paddy wagon.

A timber cutter red-faced with fury was chain-sawing through the trunk of Bruce Hanniman's moun-

tain ash. Seeing what was coming Tom half-climbed, half-jumped to safety but Bruce hung up there yelling contemptuously. Only when it crashed, shaking the ground, was he finally silenced, hurtling down amongst leaves and broken branches to lie white-faced and unconscious, one leg doubled up at a strange angle underneath him. "Bruce!" screamed Annie, her face pressed to the wire mesh of the paddy wagon.

"Christ!" yelled the beefy man. "You've fuckin' well killed the stupid prick."

The police were radioing for an ambulance. Somebody lifted Isaac Mumbula out of the muck. He sat on a fallen log holding his head in his hands, blood seeping through his fingers. Norah Greenlees pushed her way through the crowd. "Make way," she called, "I'm the district social worker. Alright, Zac?" She touched his shoulder as she passed and he nodded. Kneeling down beside Bruce Hanniman, she cradled his head in her lap. The rain fell harder. The TV cameras were packing up. A drizzle of protesters trudged up the forest track behind them. Bruce Hanniman and Isaac Mumbula were borne heroically off with Norah beside them. Alone on the field of battle, the bulldozers and the trucks turned blindly, their windcreens splattered, ploughing through clay and slush. The inhabitants of Zane bailed out their comrades at the local lockup and headed for home. Bedraggled but triumphant, they sang as they drove. "We are like a tree stump standing in the water, we shall not be moved." They passed Isaac Mumbula, head bandaged, chugging along in his old ute, the tray packed with Kooris sharing their cans of Fosters, laughing in the rain.

Only Annie stayed behind, keeping vigil at the bedside of Bruce Hanniman, while Victor Shoemaker, muttering into his beard, was left to collect the twins from school.

"We deserve a drink," cried Max Greenlees expansively. Cold, bruised and wet, they piled into the front bar at the Anglers Rest, warming themselves at the open fire, shouting rounds, reliving their moments of dubious glory. The bar seemed full of their steaming bodies.

A local fisherman pushed in amongst the crowd. "You're all a mob of bludgers," he grumbled. "Stoppin' honest men from earnin' a livin'."

The bar went silent. "Listen, mate," Max argued, "somebody has to save the trees in the forest and the fish in the seas."

"An' if they do, four-eyes, it won't be youse lot, a few eggheads an' a mob a boongs. Youse couldn't save pussy."

"Not only are you a racist," Max said coldly, "but an ignorant, insulting bastard."

The fishermen gathered round, half-hearted. They had their own troubles with the conservationists. Lenny moved up quietly to stand at Max's right shoulder. Tom Steven pulled at his sleeve. "You can get thumped in this bar, mate," he murmured.

"I'm quite aware of that," Max said loudly.

The fisherman laughed. "Y' little pipsqueak. Y' got guts anyway. Come on and I'll buy y' a beer."

Tom drew Jessica away into one corner. "He's right, of course," he said gloomily. "What does it achieve in the end – nothing. The loggers'll go back to their jobs and we'll get fined in the magistrate's court and feel like heroes."

"Something might come of it," Jessica said.

Above the bar they could see a close-up of Isaac Mumbula's face on the TV screen. His lips were moving but they couldn't hear the words. "It's like that," Tom said. "He's talking but nobody's really listening."

Jessica looked for Zac above the heads of the crowd. He was standing down one end of the bar with the other Aborigines, his skin dark against the bloodstained bandage. She caught his eye, raising her glass to him. He smiled. She saw him hesitate for a moment, wondering whether to come across and join them, then he turned back to the bar.

"Leave this forest. This is our sacred land," she whispered.

"What's that, Jess?" Tom said irritably. His leg was throbbing since he'd jumped down out of that bloody tree.

"Just remembering," she told him.

He grinned sourly. "Preaching to the converted."

The Period of Silence

Eight years of silence – why?
No diaries no notebooks
not even a fragment
was it so terrible
nothing could be put into words?

Sometimes I could hardly breathe
if your thoughts were ideologically incorrect
if your words were inaccessible to the masses
better to be totally silent.
Once or twice I fell from grace
that was enough of guilt don't write
the doggerel of the Revolution.

What tore the gag from my tongue?
There was no illustrious love story
only the dogma was found wanting
the lies piled up like corpses
when I began to write
through the windows of darkened glass
I saw a long road and took it
feet flying like Perseus

but they dragged me into the courts
accused of libel
shredded my manuscripts
screamed at me from the galleries
if the writing is skilled
so much the worse
the sentence is doubled
one side or the other
the fear of words is the same
in all ideologies . . .

but my diaries my notebooks
my fragments lie in the drawer by my bed
telling everything
one day the rummaging children
will find them.

Dorothy Hewett

Christos Tsiolkas

Suit

Opening Monologue from *Who's Afraid of the Working Class*

(The actor, a young boy in his mid-teens, comes onto the stage.)

Who's Afraid of the Working Class was written by Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius, Melissa Reeves, Christos Tsiolkas, with music by Irini Vellis.

Characters:

Boy (15 years old, son of Sammy and Gina Destanzo)

Jamie Parker (young Aboriginal business man in his mid-twenties)

Claire (white prostitute in her forties)

Mr O'Manney (white farmer)

Gina Destanzo (Greek woman in her forties)

In the original production by Melbourne Workers Theatre, 1998, directed by Julian Meyrick, the above parts were played by:

Boy: Bruce Morgan

Jamie Parker: Glenn Shea

O'Manney: David Adamson

Claire & Gina Destanzo: Eugenia Fragos

Boy: I love Jeff Kennett. I think he's a good guy, a sexy guy. I like it that he's tall, I like it that he's smart, I like it that he doesn't give a shit about anyone. He's an arsehole, I know that. He's a cunt. It's obvious. He's a silver-spoon-up-his-arse cunt, he can't hide that, but I don't care. He's not whingeing all the time, not bludging, not making excuses. He's got style, he looks good and he knows it; he's got class. It's written all over him. But, he's not soft. He's not soft at all.

Not like my dad. No, not at all like my dad. My old man is one of those guys who's wasted his whole fucking life. He works a shit job, has for thirty fucking years, since he was a kid, pouring concrete. And man you should listen to him, listen to him go on about it. *I'm so tough, we brickies are so special.* Yeah right. Hasn't done a fucking thing with his life. Hasn't seen the world, hasn't had an original thought. Nothing tough about him except his mouth and his forearms and even they're going to fat. My mum's no different. She's brain dead as well.

My father hates Jeff Kennett, calls him scum, says he's destroying the unions and the working class. But I can tell that deep down inside he respects him. You've gotta. Kennett doesn't give a shit about anyone, does whatever he likes. He even stands up to that ugly piece of shit, Howard. And that's the leader of his fucking party! Kennett is a legend. Bet my old man wouldn't mind being like that, instead of following orders all his fucking life. Weak cunt! Just a day, just one day, I'd like to see my father be like Kennett. Just fucking once.

I want to go down on Kennett. When I do go down on a guy, when I come to that, it'll *have* to be someone like him. Tough. Arrogant. Knows what he wants. That's my favourite wank dream. I'm with school, an excursion to Parliament House. Somehow – I skip over this bit while I'm pulling off – Kennett and I end up in a lift. It's him and it's me. Sometimes there's this other guy, some suited young wog guy I saw on the Channel 9 News, some wog guy who hangs around Kennett. Sometimes he's there, banging away with us, sometimes he just watches. And then sometimes he's not there at all.

The lift stops. There's a moment that the light flicks off, then it flickers back on again. Kennett puts a hand on my shoulder. He's way tall, way taller than me. He notices I've got a stiffy in my school pants, I'm stretching the cotton. He's dressed real fine. Beautiful suit, slim tie. He winks at

me and then it's on. Every time I wank to this, it changes. Sometimes he's hairy, blonde curls, all over his chest and stomach. Sometimes he's smooth. He doesn't take off his clothes, just opens his shirt, unzips the pants. I dream that his dick is squat and thick, and that when he comes, he comes in fucking buckets. Just pours the come over me, over the wog guy. That's my favourite wank.

Fuck! I could come now. Man, I could come all over this fucking stage.

I wish I could tell my father about this dream. Maybe that would get the cunt alive. Poofter son, father, you've got a poofter son who wants to fuck a real bloke like Kennett not some boring working stiff like you. He'd crack, I know he'd crack it. How to tell his mates on the job?

"My son's a faggot."

Gutless cunt. He could never do that.

Kennett, when he got elected, there was this big rally in the city. It was fucking enormous, about 150,000 people. He had closed down my old high school, that fucking waste of space. It was nothing but a factory churning out dole casualties. They should've torched the place long ago. But Mum and Dad, of course, Mum and Dad were angry. (mimicking) *You got to come to the rally, it's important.*

So I had to go, with Mum and Dad. Dad kept bumping into all his scuzzy alco mates; even the young ones looked sick from their shitty useless jobs. I liked the crowd, it was exciting, I loved being there in all that mass. I thought we could do anything, fucking pull apart this shithole of a city if we wanted. I wanted it to get angrier, I wanted it to get bloody, like it happens on the news overseas. The cops were there, waiting. I wanted it to get bloody, so I could bash some cunt cop right in the middle of his fat ugly face. I wanted to kill a cop, then go right off, I was high, go right off and torch fucking China Town. That would have been a fucking winner, man. Kill a cop and kill a gook. But it wasn't that kind of rally. It was (contemptuously, an effeminate accent) *political.*

I managed to get up close, near Parliament steps, next to this really drugged-out feral chick and her dreadhead deadhead mates. I sat near the steps, bored now that the marching had stopped. Some Union wanker was going on, whingeing about what everybody already knew. *The government doesn't care about hospitals, Kennett doesn't care about education. This government sucks.*

(shouts) All governments suck you brain dead cunts!

I looked up. In the window there was Kennett, looking down. Some poncy guys around him were nervous, shitting their pants because of the crowd. But not Kennett.

Nah, not Kennett. You know what he was doing, you know what the cunt was doing?

Kennett was laughing. He was watching us and he was laughing at us.

That moment, that's the moment I knew he was a God. That's the moment I thought you are one smart mother-fucker. All around me people were singing union songs. Craphippie shit. We shall bloody overcome for Christ's sake. I looked around, looked around, saw my old man. There he was, little Sammy Destanzo, little Sammy who hasn't done one thing of any note in his whole wasted fucking life. Little Sammy Destanzo who is forty-six and fucking looks sixty-eight. There's my old man, chanting along, doing the old Nazi salute to Kennett who doesn't know who the fuck Sammy Destanzo is and who will never know who Sammy Destanzo is because Sammy Destanzo is a big fat nothing.

I couldn't wait to leave this crowd of morons, these fucking sheep.

Dad says to me, do you want a job on a building site, and I just look at him. A real dirty look. He goes ape-shit, calls me a bludging cunt. I don't listen. He wants me to work on a building site, he wants me to be like him. I'd rather sell my body for twenty bucks in St Kilda, I'd rather be a fucking whore. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep. Work, grog, sleep.

That's it, that's my old man. Three lousy little words.

I'd like to fuck Kennett. That would be the best. I reckon he's got a hairy arse and big red balls. I'd like to fucking ram it right up him. I'd like to do it again and again. That would be cunt worth fucking.

One day I'm out of here. I'm not going to be trapped in fucking Dandenong watching that dumb plastic arsehole Ray Martin night after night. One day I'm going to have lots of money. I'll steal it, I'll beg for it. Fuck, to get out of here, I'd kill for it. I'll get style, I'll learn about the coolest places to be, I'll have the best looking guys hanging on me, begging to have a go at sucking my dick.

One day I'll be like Jeff Kennett. I'll be above all of you, you'll all be little specks, little nine-to-five, seven-to-three-thirty little earthworms.

Work. Till you drop.

Drink Beer. Till you rot.

Sleep. That's the best part of your lives.

(spits on the stage)

I can't wait to vote.

(exits)



'Terminal Gates during the Picket', Linocut by Mark Dober 1998

Poems by John Kinsella

One Fourteenth (0.0714285) Of A Crown or A Sonnet re: Warhol's *Camouflage* *Last Supper, The Last Supper, & Coming* to Terms With *The Ode*

Environmental milieu like New Year's
Eve come the millennial quark, the

time it takes to dress the eye with make-up –
ah, surface – slow pan for a stylish ad

which IS religious, but this is seen on-
ly on the surface (a spiritual work-

out video – we never see how much
beauty hurts beneath): don't overdo it!

Machismo is a myth no Clausewitz
would refute & even disciplined war-

riors might favour long hair or getting pissed
the night before a ratings battle – no

posse from the street would go into bat-
tle logo-less: **General Electric** or 59c.

On Warhol's *Superman, Fate Presto, Untitled, Rorschach* *Series* (1984), *Moonwalk (History of TV Series)* (1987), & the 25th Anniversary of the First Human Moonlanding

Von Däniken might argue from a chariot of fire,
The spread of the scape as the Eagle's final

2nds of power drop just a little off-line in the Sea
Of Tranquillity, & those meddlesome Russians

Probing around (unmanned – off-course) & OJ Simpson
The Capricorn way scanning C/- his lawyers

Accruing accounts evidence of blood like the moon's
Rorschach-surface – *Fate Presto* – a headline & that

Was it – now 3 silent men are out on THE lawn
And at it (quietly again) – One small step for [a] (?) man

But [&] for man-kind – Andy knew its truth – TV:
15 minutes or 25 yrs IS gee-whiz! – Apollo

Or Superman breaking free – Kryptonite is *rare* –
But when the market crashes, ratings fall: despair!

On Warhol's *Myths & Dollar Signs*

Exemption is denial & culture
cyclical – time-share-planning: populat-

ion control, *even* a kid knows a toy box
can be only so full. And Supermen

are a type of hallucinogen – authentic! And therapy
is the size you draw \$ signs – a mark

you make before getting your ticket
of passage – it's **not** what you take back

but what you bring in – AND
who *wouldn't* dance with David Bowie(?)

or carouse with Santa Claus pissed.
The Christmas lights bright in New York.

Or like an X telling me she'll "move on
to *Melrose Place*" after she graduates!

Letters For The Sea

12 October

Today, Sunday
I walk to the sea
for you, The Sea,
passing the letter K
and passing the letter X
twice, painted blue
on the pavement,
the wind blowing
the waves over, and
a ghostly ship, still,
on the horizon.

13 October

Late at night
Early next day
No word from you
In my bed
In the green sheets
Yawning and the curtains wide
Do you see
The trimmed geranium
The sword fern
The marble path in honour
of a man now dead
And the wooden cross with
the silver ear-ring
My worry – will the magnolia
bloom.

13 October

The sky looks stormy
out to sea
A gull squawking at me
high on a light-pole
Walked to glowing Largs
Pier along the
path newly planted
with local
grass and pigface
And thought
of old love letters
sent by someone
called Capelli.

13 October

I fling my clothes tonight
They land on the cane chair
I don't care
You were not home
You did not call
You are away
I put on pale blue pyjamas
Over pale broken skin
Wishing things you
will never know
Already falling asleep
Already not loving you
Already walking to
the sea tomorrow

14 October

I'm stalling
I'm at the desk
Before the window
Thinking you are near
And you're not you're
many hours away
The wind is strong
Been this way all day
This is what I mean
to tell you, about the wind,
and about the cat stepping
in the middle of the little
blue painting I did earlier,
and her wet footprints
across the carpet. Bits
of sea in the house, the
smell of turpentine. I
like the view from this
window. It's the first time
I've sat here to write. The
honeysuckle looking
well. Seems quite wild.

14 October

This love, my love
Falls over me around ten
With the music

With the white wine
While you sleep with the drugs
Hurting from the syrup
Pumped into you
I record your pain
I savour your voice
If only you would say
something, who knows,
something, to bring
me into your world
In the wearing flesh
Still what comes is
the urge to feel alone
with you. So so in
the distance, eyes
closed to the starred
velvet sky that touches
you. And it touches
you. My love.

14 October

There comes a time in the night
For hot tea, for heat at least
Listening to a few last notes
Write words on paper
Along blue lines
Heard the train laden
with white marble
Screeching in such a
mournful way that I
stumble outside
Amazed at the number
of carriages, no, what are they
called, trucks, well anyway,
and wonder where that heavy
load comes from and goes to.
As the ships are waiting.
You would make
up a story for me. And I
would be grateful, even
as I stared at you in
disbelief.

Linda Marie Walker

The Cassandra Complex

While water soaks through coffee grounds
and cereal grows soggy in the bowl,
the cricket under the sink discourses
on the dangers of original sin,
but our translator has the day off
and the advice goes unheeded. Besides,
you're busy writing your millennium
sequence, two thousand stanzas or so,
each line rhyming with Apocalypse.

Awake all night listening for the forecast,
I heard only static, the occasional trucker.
This kind of waiting is the hardest,
you say, your back nearly broken from the tedium.
Even the cat finds no solace under the sink,
the cricket's oratorical flare stunning it
into delirium. The rubber band splits
from holding on to so much bad news,
and my arms burn from trying to turn forfeit
into profit. The cricket gathers his things
and leaves without a nod, without a word.

Brian Henry

Uncle Of No Enterprise

A picture book perfect morning
and from the station you walk down lines of least resistance.
Last night you read to a small child
then hit the wine, then the spiked Anzac biscuits,
the heart keeping several sets of books;
today you are uncle of no enterprise
more serious than being enjoyably late for work.
In Melbourne in the early spring
the days don't do what you want them to,
the light can make you think of oranges.

Hugh Tolhurst

Saucy Seaside Postcards

Parading their egos
laughing at the subterfuge
some days you're inclined
to distant conditions,
that manic parabola they imagine
from lust to envy.

The prince of the company
remains unrepentant, although aware
he's under reverse obligation.
Just being someone else's tabby
for a change – 'bout time too;
playing an interactive game
called 'Slap a Spice Girl'
makes him feel philosophical
or at least better,
germanic, profound.

Dipti Saravanamuttu

Underground

Mudrooro

GOOD EVENING, don't look askance at me, I was one of the first to reach these gold fields and dig for the metal. Yes, I may not be of your colour, but we're all the same underneath, or are we? Still, what does it matter when the night's fallen like a thick blanket over the diggings and there's nothing much to do until the dawn comes in with a scramble and the heaving of dry dust, and you cough and cough and you wonder what you're doing. But you all know that, don't you? Just adigging, just adigging for the precious metal.

See these two bits of stick, how smooth and worn they are. Real native artefacts. Listen to the sound, how clear it rings. Crack-crack. You know, they belonged to my once father. Once father, I'll get to that in due course, for there's a bit of old England in me, and how it got there . . . Well, I'll make it part of my yarn if the darkness holds up.

I'm here to entertain you, to make the night slide away easy and not too slow, for I know you're raring to get at the yellow metal and collect enough to flee this desolate country where the willy-willies swirl up the dust until you curse the day you thought to roam – to here, where time hangs heavy on your minds and you get to thinking of the girl you left behind. Left behind as I left my land. I don't hail from these parts. Who does? Just a blow-in like you lot. I come from far to the south-east, from an island and now I've become a nomad, a wanderer seeking to find fortune if not fame. Strike it rich and we'll all be home, eh?

Strike it rich! We roam the earth afire with our quest, with our thirst. Drifters, driven here and there

by rumours, and when the colour's gone from the soil and the big companies come in to rip deep into the guts of the earth, following down that reef which we just pecked at on the surface, well we up stakes and off we wander seeking always that lode of gold at the end of the rainbow. Wandering, that's what we're good at; but then the land's wide enough for our roaming and there's gold for the taking if you get in first or second. Hear tell there's another strike far to the north, gold for the picking rather than the digging. A mob upped their stakes, packed their swags and lit out for there just the other day. Where, I hear, it ain't dry all the year round, though every six months or so there comes a mighty flood just like in the bible and when the water subsides there shines the gold. Well, Noah was a nomad too and he circumnavigated the whole globe, just sailing, sailing on that wooden boat of his which didn't handle too well against the wind, so he drifted rather than sailed her hard; but when the flood went down, he saw the glitter of that gold shining, telling him to leave his ark and rejoice at his strike, for it was the mother lode.

Well, like old Noah, I left a ship though I didn't rejoice at leaving her. She rather left me, falling apart from under so to speak and I was washed up on these shores. Been in the west a long time now, following the strikes from the south to the east and soon it'll be north for me. But, you know, there's times, when the ocean surges in my brain and I've got to head for her and gaze across the waters remembering that long ago voyage much as you might recall that day you took to the gold trail, much as I dream recall that

voyage. I remember it as I stare over the tumbling waves and feel the wheel again in my hands. It's then that I think of forsaking this land and getting on a vessel with a course set towards the pole star. Out there lies Africa and did not the Queen of Sheba come from that continent laden with gold for that Old Israelite, Solomon who was said to be a bit of a wise-acre in his time? Gold there just for the collecting, at least that's what I've heard and the voice is getting louder and louder. Once, you know, I had a friend from there and never did he mention this yellow metal. Yeah, but he was worth his weight in gold to us. He was one of those Africans. Caught, enslaved, fought and escaped, and became a hero of sorts before he took to the sea and became a sailor, sailing, sailing over that lonesome ocean. Guess he's on her still, between one port or the other . . .

He was our chief mate, not so much a captain which means something less than chief in our language. Well, he was the one that guided us as we sailed from the east on an ill-fated voyage which would eventually fling me up here. In this place where the dust demons roam, though I'm a bit of a devil myself and cannot abide the day. Still, forget that and just hold a picture of that schooner scudding along. Beautiful, isn't she? A trim craft saucy and dancehall smart who could kick up her heels and lift her skirts high as she skipped across the ocean, that is until her bottom got too heavy with the barnacles and weeds. Still, she was as bonny a vessel as I've ever been on and charitable as well for she took all of us on without a protest and car-

ried us ever westwards as we searched, much like those Jewish people travelling out of Egypt, for a promised land. We were like those Greeks too, them that sailed off to fight a war and then got lost on the way home. Yeah, ours was like the voyage of that Ulysses. It went on and on, though at the end there was nary a glimpse of home, let alone a promised land. Well, it took a long time to get to where we were going, and what was that land I found myself in? This place with its dust, with its flies that seek even me out, and dare I mention that awful sun which shears away at my substance. You blokes, you diggers, too often do I imagine our mob in spirit up among those stars where the silver ocean glimmers and there they are on that phantom ship breasting the waves of that milky ocean as they sail on, searching always for that promised land, our home on some planet where our ancestors sit and forget the dreadful doings of this earth. Well, you've had enough of dust and heat, I dare say, and need a tale about the far cold southern ocean with its icebergs and strange werebears lurching above the snow, with its squalls and tempests and ghost ships petrified in strange frozen waves that take away the living temperature and render the whole crew, captain down to cabin scruff, stiff and dead. It's cold, mates, cold as the death you dream as the sweat trickles down your backs and stirs the hairs as if you feel a phantom touch of a frozen hand belonging to someone who once loved you . . .

An excerpt from 'Master of the Ghost Dreaming III'.

Scott Brook

My poem now to unknown crowds belongs

Goethe, 'Dedication', *Faust*.

In 1809 the word 'poem' (*Lied*) was listed as a misprint for 'sorrow', (*Leid*).

Warsaw 1997

LET ME JUST SHOW YOU these things which are neither simply things, nor so easily shown. Let me form them clearly, without complication or aversion. They speak of him as I of them.

Behind the parted green curtain see an unzipped travel bag on the concrete floor. Wide open, it contains his passport, packets of medication and two books. In the steel slot beneath the red light outside, see there a printed ladder of his face repeated three times.

A golden face. As photic as in life. A triptych to his own beloved multiplicities at the very moment he chose to disappear.

On that morning inside the underpass, beneath the booming of sleepers slamming down overhead and screaming of brakes along tracks, the crowds moving in all directions through the yellow light of the fluorescent tubes that disappear at the turn, in the noise and rush of this concrete tunnel no-one could have noticed that the booth was occupied. And sitting there watching his breath turn the air white, there must have been a moment in which he made some decision. It is impossible to know whether he

saw the photos before leaving, and, if he did, what they might have suggested. Perhaps they spoke of a person that was no longer the same, of a person who was somehow altered. Perhaps they confirmed in triplicate nothing had changed at all.

But at some point he parts the curtains, steps out; an international traveller awkward in the throngs of a foreign metro peak-hour. I imagine him still like this, in his preferred mode for negotiating fast-moving crowds in every city, including our own. Feigning his confusion. He makes his way through the crowd, finds the steps to the platform. Ascending into the early morning air, his face and hands must have burned with the cold.

But he is no Anna Karenina. The train is already there. He would have seen the heads pressed against coats behind windows. Travellers walking beside the carriages unfolding from a night-long search for a painless position. Heavy lidded and smoking, setting their watches, they stand in creased clothes before the card-table of some local entrepreneur who sells soup, coffee, Marlboros and vodka and can give the prices in three languages. *Both thief and saviour* someone will say as he counts the change into their hand, a rare example, I'm told, of their famous Slavic wit and fatalism.

Without passport or visa he steps up onto the train and finds a seat. Peers out the window. He would have seen the bright lights of industrial plants, black shapes silhouetted against a red line stretched thin at the horizon.

Like a person caught in the split focus of a camera, he writes in the journal, the last entry, the passport speaks of someone heading East for the first time while these notes of someone returning; returning to a past without border.

Forever his own subject and the subject of that which escapes him, he sits there in my mind. In the booth. The train.

At home.

Forever leaving.

(Two books in the bag. One is the journal he kept. The other an antique copy of Goethe.)

Leipzig 1767

GOETHE AGED EIGHTEEN. His geography, his chronology. The season of his youth. A time and a place to stand above all the takes and out-takes that need to be gathered up again. Swept up off the floor and held to the light. For unlike returning to see a film we were seduced by the first time, caressed by, until every strand of nervous tissue floated outside our skin, translucent and receptive in the frigid air, Leipzig cannot be so simply revisited. And not with words like these, words used to install a person in a time and place they could have no living memory of. No *bodymemory*. I mean there's nothing touching about the words Leipzig or 1767. I point to them with the tip of my finger but the pressure is not so much returned as elided; they sink, resurface, slip away across the page. Cold lovers whispering. Whispering Leipzig is a city of taped conversations. And Seventeen-sixty-seven? Well that's a bar code you can't get past.

(Watch the mixed metaphor though. It's a doozy.)

For as with all true lovers, 1997 and 1767 hold each other and don't, and their infidelities across time are what finally keeps the whole thing together. History is the tale of adulteries of this type and their disclosure. Their enforced return to the historian's harem. So Goethe will appear in his time, but, of course, not before she does. It was the night before I left. *Like re-*

turning to a film, I wrote. A night of reversals on which the betrayal preceded the seduction, as did the cinema the bedroom, before leading, amazingly, back to itself.

Melbourne 1997

IT WOULD NOT SURPRISE ME if you already knew this scene. You may have even watched them coming down the aisle. In love and needing to return, to fix the image in their minds, fix it for all time. Coming in they wore leather and fur, but even this had to come off to get inside the rows. And so it's hand-over-hand along the backs of seats, past the bags and drinks on laps as legs unfold and turn aside before them, through the light and noise of the opening credits – big names in bold type flying above the dividing lines of a highway, a scene of accelerated and unlimited hyphenation made more memorable, more terrifying, than any title – they finally sink out of view, couched in darkness. Same place as last time. A couch in time. And as they watch the credits dissolve into the first scene and the first into the second, forgotten suspicions begin to resurface. The web of mutual thoughts and enthusiasms refuses to connect again, will not map onto the screen. Like train tracks that run parallel but never coincide: All so close at the very moment things go completely out of focus.

Getting up, there is nothing they can say that the knot of their uncomfortable hands doesn't already communicate. Walking home it swings, pendulum style, between them.

The past has no surname, he'll later say.

Before adding . . . *and so many names*. And that it cannot be repeated, only recalled, the experience assembled out of the materials at hand. Renamed in the intimacy of a kitchen, late at night, a lounge room by the gas heater. A bedroom barely lit by street light.

Bricolage he whispers into her ear as they listen to the cars go by. Watch the orange square crawl up the wall, across the ceiling. Over and over again it

stretches, contracts. Flies across their bodies.

The night before I left was just like that.

and it was in the afternoon that they saw a man emerge from the chamber and out into the light of the square – appearing slightly perturbed he would have been taken for deranged if it wasn't for the fine condition of his clothes and that the crowd, for its part, did not entirely see what it was that stood before them.

IMAGINE WITH YOUR MIND'S EYE a city like a jewel in the crown of an Empire. This is Leipzig, die kleine Paris of mid-century Europe on a day that is not so much warm as it is bright. (The Spring of 1767, we read, was particularly cold.) See the enamels, tall clocks, porcelains, embossed books and painted brooches behind the glass windows of shops along the narrow winding streets. Note how the polished glass both invites and repels the touch of gloved hands, reflects a bleached double for the powdered faces as they lean forward to inspect. Faces from England, France and Italy, families on Le Grande Tour whose many accents mingle with the staccato sounds of their heels, echo down the cobblestone streets made cold in the shade cast by four and five story buildings. Brrrrr. It's like an alpine chasm. Having thrown open the shutters of any one of the top-floor windows and leant out over the sill, appearing half dressed to the people on the street and entirely naked to the person contemplating from the bed, whose head perhaps sits propped on two hands and is calculating any number of possible outrages (the first two are easy, the third less so), a person leaning out this window would, I imagine, be able to see forever.

A room with a view. A chamber in a city of chambers midway through a century famous for its interiors and facades. But there is another room I am looking for, another *camera*: at once interior and facade.

In the main square there is a young man sitting

on a stool in the darkness. He is a student of Law. Recall Johann as he was then, the scholar of only eighteen years whose name will later be heralded in bold script on the opening pages of gold-embossed tomes as *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, often beside a black and white print kept clean beneath opaque rice paper. Herr Goethe. The same man whose life-mask, a cast taken twenty-five years before his death by a phrenologist, shows a frowning face and, as with all life and death masks, eternally closed eyes. Beneath the chill of the wet plaster and the phrenologist's hands, Goethe in a moment of foresight, takes on the expression of someone looking inwards. The look of someone deep in thought.

But in the darkness of this uncomfortable box, this sedan model of the *Camera Obscura*, intended for tracing and not enjoying the optical illusion it produces, see Johann's eyes as very much open. His flesh is warm. He would be keenly aware of the smell of his own scent and the scents of those who had sat there before him. His satin-lined coat creeps up an erect back, pushes his collar forward. Hands grow moist as they cup his knees while pupils expand and a phantasm of the crowd outside slowly comes into focus. Their faces float across the sheet, the colour of bleached pastel. Like the shadows made by trees on a sandy path. *A carousel of faces* thinks Goethe. So many people on this sheet together. People come just as they leave. Known or partly known. Anonymous. Passing like light.

(THE NEXT PART OF THIS STORY is difficult to tell, a scene in which Goethe will perform an action he will think about for decades before repeating in a different time and city, making it the conclusion to a story he will write. A simple gesture, at once ironic and naive. A playful inhabitation of a device that bends the rules away from themselves. Perhaps, and I'm only guessing here, perhaps it was an expression of his adolescence. But for whatever reason it takes place, it is this imagined dress-rehearsal in his youth which

requires so many framings here, each one bringing us closer to these two dates, 1767 and 1997, closer to the non-entity of their touch. Like the double-ended finger that floats between the tips of the real ones, flaunting its impossibility right before your two straining eyes.)

Craning his neck towards the pin-hole of light, Goethe raises his hand inside the light's path and a bright circle ripples across his fingers, rests in his palm. As he slowly draws his hand toward the aperture, he notes how it becomes more intense, more focused. Many years later Goethe will sit at his desk and guide the hand of his reader toward the aperture with this singularly clean and precise phrase: *One closes the opening.*

In the darkness Goethe looks back at the sheet. Sees a kaleidoscope imploding colours; burning yellow surrounded by red becomes red surrounded by blue. Perhaps he recognized in this sequence an elemental order; sand after fire followed by the blue of the ocean. Primal elements aroused and now surfacing, repeating themselves in the eye of the beholder. But with his hand still over the hole and his eyes wide open, the last remnants of light fading from his retina,

Goethe sees the colour of fire return. It is brighter this time. More focused. A fire in a desert where, strangely, the flames are burning in reverse.

Then a house in the desert. A house on stilts being engulfed by flames.

Burning backwards in time.

THREE FLASHES IN THE BOOTH. He would have stayed for this much.

From the window of the train outside Warsaw, the morning light creeping over his body, he would have seen the tenement blocks inside the fog. The cattle standing in paddocks of abandoned cars. The steel stacks burning orange inside an overcast sky. Views passing like a current beneath his own reflection.

In the final pages he seems to be at a loss about where to take Goethe's vision and retreats more and more into the role of his own reader, compulsively re-reading and interrupting himself. *Seeing around the corner that goes by my name*, he writes. Multiplying the fictions of his own interruption but never permitting these intrusions to go too far, as if desperate to be both relieved of and hold onto his own text. As if afraid the intrusions could take on a life of their own.



'Barricade at East Swanson Dock', Linocut by Mark Dober 1998

Laugh

Martyn Pedler

Somewhere, sunk secret-deep into molten rock, there might be the world's largest computer. If you could put an ear to its side, and interpret its insect-language of binary ticks, you might hear it trying to make itself laugh.

Closer still, you might hear it say:

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE.

JERRY'S A MAN who walked into a bar. He remembers, compelled to play patience with his memories. They stick to the roof like pancakes, and he shuffles them against each other with his eyes, trying to make them stand in line.

Bound to his hospital bed, listening to the metronome in his nervous system, Jerry remembers that day when everything happened at once.

Says Groucho: well, either he's dead or my watch has stopped

Properly testing the knife took all the weight of Jerry's arm. His thumbs split like wet lips. They wanted to tell him something; the audience around him wouldn't stop whistling and stamping their feet long enough for him to listen.

At some point he'd watched a tremendously fat man have trouble getting on the train. One step in, one step out, something read his bulk that filled the doorway as CLOSED. As they shuttled away, the doors bumped against the fat man like friendly, dumb animals.

The blaring studio-lights hadn't helped. Flopsweat soaked Rorschach blots through Jerry's coat,

highlighting the blood on his lapel. He'd cleared his throat, over and over; thinking *blood*, so *this must have come last*.

He'd lost the word 'now'; he didn't remember 'when'. He'd completely failed to look at his watch.

A nervous young woman had slipped on the wet concrete outside Jerry's building. Her face showed perfect understanding, just no way to stop. She cracked her head amusingly on the step and went into shock.

TV had stopped him dead with a comedian in a bad suit, struggling with his lines. After scrabbling the words around, chewing variations, Jerry had heard:

... an agnostic, dyslexic insomniac? Lies awake all night wondering if there's a god...

And then: *... that's wrong ... sorry ... Can I go again?*

Letterman walked over and put an arm around the poor guy, making everything okay. Jerry had smiled so his lips cracked.

More blood. Jesus, it was everywhere.

But all he could see was the microphone. Jerry sucked at his thumb and fought through the studio audience until he reached the stage and felt the lights burn at his back. Turning, he saw the lights, fanned overhead like a trick deck: a sun for every minute.

Why wasn't anybody laughing?

The fat man had screamed until another passenger had accidentally looked up and been forced to help; and once Tubby was dragged on board, you could see the bone where his foot should be. It was ground off at a jaunty angle.

A funny thing happened to me on the way to the show, Jerry surmised.

And what must have been earlier: when he was helping the woman on the steps, cooing sympathies. She'd found her feet, eyes back in focus, then Jerry must have let go.

Sorting through the frames, ordering them like a flip-book, Jerry reconstructed the movement. Her face showed perfect, perfect understanding, just no way to stop, as she cracked her head amusingly on the step and went into shock.

In one sequence or another, Jerry cleared his throat, adjusted his tie, and tried not to giggle.

For a moment, everything was funny.

He held the knife to Letterman's throat.

The audience held a collective breath; everything moved into stasis.

He focused deep into the camera, past the lights, past the glass, and his eyes blinked out an unconscious pattern of zeroes and ones.

His smile stretched further, splitting the edges of his mouth. His breath caught on blood in the back of his mouth, and something gave in his side. There was nothing funnier than Letterman opening up over the floor of the old Ed Sullivan theatre.

Jerry's laughing at the world, and he's slipping in blood like a banana peel.

Listen harder.

There's something down in the machine, piped down through the earth like muzak; a new rhythm that runs at random around its walls. Insinuating itself between the processors that generate the Top Ten and the Stupid Pet Tricks. Can you hear it?

It's echoing off the computer-casing until it builds enough to bubble back up through dead static on the radio, turn itself on television, bounce down off satellites.

You can hear the machine laughing.

NOW, JERRY'S MEMORIES jigsaw together into a single, liminal image that hangs above the bed, ellipsing everything that came in-between.

The moment he finally got the joke: on a street corner, at lunch time.

Behind Jerry, through the window, there's a display of old TVs that have misplaced their vertical hold, going cheap.

Behind him, tenfold Marx Brothers scroll and somersault on their flickering stages.

Of all this, Jerry's only aware of the crowd thickening around him, laughing. He genuinely thinks they're all laughing at him.

So, up against the glass, Jerry's heart is frozen in his eyes.

He sweats and makes fists; he dances, involuntary, scraping out soft-shoe on the asphalt; he gives in to the sudden urge to bare all his teeth.

Jerry improvises.

And the whole world's laughing:

the moment before Jerry wakes up, and one thing follows another again.

Says Chico: *there's no such thing as a sanity clause*

Jerry couldn't sharpen the needle in his arm and scratch days' passing into the flesh-tone walls; he couldn't fight the rubber sheet that cocooned him tight against the metal bed-frame.

He vibrates in sympathy with the collection of clocks, scattered about the ward. Jerry presumes therapy: that they'd carefully pried apart the skin over his chest and filled his lung-space with cogs, gears and bells, ensuring that he'd keep in time.

Jerry's hands are held so tight to his body that he can't feel for scars or surgery; he can't even register air between them. He'd spent exactly seventeen hours, thirty-two minutes petrified that they'd grafted to his sides with a thick, pink skin.

That's the worst: he can feel each tiny slice of a minute as it travels through the wires, collecting in a cavity just under his heart. Without moving, he can weigh himself and *know* he's accurate within seconds.

So Jerry spends seven months, exactly, kept alive through a needle in his arm, blaming the clocks that

mirrored the timepieces inside.

Then something funny happens:

There are two knocks at the door.

Who's there? says Jerry, after searching for his voice and finding that it comes up dirty and thin.

Doctor says the voice, and Jerry can see it coming like a cancer, but when he tries to sidestep only his stomach comes up into his throat.

So *Doctor who?* he says, instead.

And the voice outside the door cackles mad, and Jerry hears footsteps that can only be skipping echo away.

Jerry forgave the clocks after two young girls came to collect them in a cardboard box, tearing them from the plaster and leaving wires hanging raw.

Seven months, a week and two days with no-one; only guesses. That, by the faded too-clean smell, this used to be a hospital. That the occasional, muffled sound leaking through the walls that he'd catch by holding his breath wasn't nothing. That he's been left, solitary, to count time for a reason.

Now comes visitor after visitor.

He always hears them coming up the corridor outside, footfalls that never mesh with the rhythm under his heart. It sounds like spastic children, trying to clap in time.

Then they pratfall through the door: they slip on tiles and splinter bones on the floor; they snap their bow ties against their necks and burn through their cheeks with thick, exploding cigars; they ambush each other with frying pans and drown on seltzer water.

They dress as doctors, social workers, priests and rabbis.

They can't put a joke together: scrambling the parts, opening with the punch line. They launch straight into another before Jerry can order a sentence and make himself heard.

They never stop laughing.

Jerry was solemnly watching a variable number of characters electrocuting themselves screwing in a lone, bare light bulb when the small man with the suitcase appears at the foot of his bed. It takes him a

good 0.13 shy of a second to make his point.

Letterman, he says, holding out a contract while Jerry's mind ticks like a fuseless cherry-bomb.

Everyone but Jerry's been staring at TV screens, all that hospital-time.

Step back and watch out of the corner of your eye and you might catch the patterns that play across the surface as things change:

A week's-worth of CNN was collected, spliced into soundbites, and scattered at random into children's television.

Colours became untrustworthy. Art cinema and ancient newsreels proclaim the Technicolor logo and the movie-of-the-week comes recoloured in deep pastel pink.

Entire soundtracks performed by the London Symphony Orchestra went missing; they were found months later hiding under emotional scenes in Friday night tits-and-ass flicks.

Advertisements took up dropping in announced, interrupting narrative at an invisible cue. Tiny slivers of Citizen Kane crept into the Home Shopping Network. Both were simultaneously featured on what was left of 'Unsolved Mysteries'.

Cause and effect were deftly torn apart and placed in different time-slots.

Colour became sound became style became content.

The only constant: a static-ridden laughtrack, running frame for frame.

Follow the cord to the socket, tear it loose; watch it spark and flail in the air, trying to spell out a warning in afterimage, against your eye.

Put your ear to the three tiny slots in the wall. Can you hear it now?

Dive in. You might follow the wires to the middle of the world and listen to the super-computer tick. Its synapses clack against each other like applause. It's so happy that its casing rings like fine crystal.

Perhaps follow a thick bundle of neurons back up to the surface; hold yourself together as they split apart and sprout all over the globe.

One possible destination. Find yourself up against an autocue. Read the giant lettering that scrolls backwards up the glass.

Listen to the crowd as Jerry's introduced.

THE SECOND TIME Jerry walked on the stage of the Ed Sullivan theatre, it was as THE MAN WHO TRIED TO KILL DAVE! He couldn't help but worry.

Letterman doesn't get up, but is all smiles.

Jerry slides into the first chair and refuses offer of beverage and tries to remember the anecdote he's rehearsed. He moves to adjust the cuffs of his straight jacket and accidentally catches sight of his legs. They swing above the ground like thin, frozen animals on hooks.

All he could think to say was *Sorry, Dave*.

Letterman reaches out – saying *No-one looks at their watches anymore, Jerry* – and touches his arm like he was Sarah Jessica Parker.

Jerry's heart spasms in time with the seconds he can feel tightening his chest. He reads the words as they appeared on the autocue; ever-professional, Dave must have them memorized. He's pale, though. No blood in his face.

All of America owes you a debt. You changed the face of network television, Jerry. You changed the way people think. Here at the 'Late Show' we just wanted to say...

Dave reaches under his desk for a tinned ham and places it in Jerry's lap. He just stares at the remnants of scar tissue ringing Letterman's neck.

Thanks for slitting my damn throat!

Standing up to leave, Jerry's eyes drop down the back of Dave's chair.

Tiny, thread-thin wires protrude at intervals from Letterman's spine. Some spider across the studio floor to the autocue; others burrow straight down. They jerk slightly as currents pass through them and raise Dave's hand in salute.

He says *We have a small clip of some of your work*, and activates the roof-cam:

Everybody out there having the time of their lives.

Jerry tries to smile along, but he doesn't really get the joke.

Says Harpo:

(but look, there's laughter in his eyes)

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There You Go Again

Meet me down by the picnic tables.
You can put me in a gunnysack and spin me like old times.
You know I do my best work with a mouthful of jute.
Lately I've been a mosh pit for trees,
hanging around the Waldorf salad saying "something outrageous".
I howl until the whole park comes running.
Speaking of trees there are things I should know.
Is that elephant you're going around with white?
Is that imagination, or just plot?
What's that goat's head doing up there?
Little frisbee face, shiny one, see what happens?
Let me lick the edge of your robe.
I thought we had what's known as an arrangement.
You said you would teach me to speak less crudely
of that alternate world, barely my inclination.
You said you would teach me to dance.

Matthew Zapruder

Why Not Bring Louise Into It

Louise Hay says to follow the voice within but i know
it's not metaphysically correct to lust after a workmate
who is already taken (even though we're both in the Union)
& you go to my head & you linger like a haunting refrain
& i find you spinning round in my brain & the windmills of
my mind could give Don Quixote a run for his money & you
are number one in my delusional system i'm a case for
exorcism (or Clearing as they say in spiritual circles)
just when i think i'm cured & can visualise a positive
outcome finding someone suitable who does not have a
partner you smile & sit down beside me & i'm gone
again for at least another week

what you can feel you can heal says Louise so i think
of ruses to touch you brush a bug from your hair pick a
crumb from your mouth lift a thread from your blue jumper
then i read on & allow Louise the final word *we can't change
other people so leave them alone*

Carolyn Gerrish

Gallery

Older teachers said they were artists – I was wanting art then like a future glittering and full – I kept going on joy-rides like travel – one more snapshot of you now, or ploughing I hear behind the motor drone that's the beer to turn a boy into a man, but leave me my childhood. A blowtorch – and deeper burning. I fell in green play, by a pallid seaside, cabins packed with wicked kids drinking – once the Gallery of the Open Air, and soon a rural stage – this was simply the world – to open it up, you just moved forward into it – there it was – now invisible. Parents were templates, but I could not plot the father. A spanner clinked on steel and danced in the ringing shed. Fronting the punch of the culture, the rusty tractor did its work like any office mechanism where his office was the open air, a church of absence. He wore old blue things, in a dark show. Does history have to be past tense? The diary says I'm much older now, can it be true? Here I am laughing and in that fragment of dream chatter catch my voice from another room and hear my father's laugh. Is he here? He's been dead – "I had the shivers – to get the shutters." Broken now – I guess. High on killing ethylene, I realised wrong could be right. They'd punish the boys to save them. I would not join. Oh, photos, and pack his poem of the breeze in a shirt pocket, a pale grey tract, and now I mopped the rain in deep gulps in flooded February, decorated with a chain. Driving to a party, and they said that's that, young people want anything at all times. That cheap kiss traded for a magazine with torn covers. One class was late – well, growing at their own pace, down by the river. I was afraid the dry climate would not be suitable for this new country. Can we try a different climate? Snow, ice? A girl – it was always clumsy, and now they forbid the rained-on hospital, the grey sky stretching so far, impossibly distant.

They call that a 'horizon', which is only a boundary, not a thing. She thought she was a debutante again, though she knew it for a fraudulent polish. If you never brightened up for the Rabbit Island disco then you were a creep, the guys opined. This was general. Then the boy in the threadbare snotty jacket hates us for noticing him thus, and then his blame becomes his chief addiction, it allows resentment, then prizes hate – that fellow now says I feel violent about how others pushed and bullied. Who's pushing? My dreams flicker with frightful animals. The theory that pretends to be no theory at all, it was busy blocking that other theory, disordered, quarrelling, quickly finished with, his royal madness noted spotting plots behind the bushes, sobbing with rage, a devotee of the sulky air.

John Tranter

White Knights

Penicillin, streptomycin
and all the good Greek names
are not quite now

what once they were;
the miracle is half-way gone.
Staphylococci, streptococci,

microbes ranging in the blood,
the spider's scuttle in their name.
'Strong enough and long enough'

the doctor sings inside his head
and scribbles on a pad.
Tetracyclin, vancomycin,

the skirmishing of saint and sin.
White knights and subtle
sorcerers

clash beneath the skin.

Geoff Page

Missing

*the four-wheel drive has stalled
outside a jungle of lustful monkeys
they shriek day & night
for what they'll never have*

& you're mourning that loss of intensity
the wave that carries you wherever it wants

regret is an aria from the St Matthew Passion
one of the Four Last Songs a grey area where
the sun is lost/chained below the horizon &
you're a wistful convalescent sitting in the
park a rug over your lap

there may be love here but i can't feel it

only sweating fear i don't exist dare not
be alone to think my thoughts

& you'll never find the one you yearn for

on the street precarious a freak without a
partner stalking Kim Novak in Vertigo
spooked among the cypress & headstones mesmerised
in museums unreal out of reach in free-fall
narrative

never follow another chasing where you'll never catch
up while they blaze a trail into *their* wilderness
stay instead on vacant ground among the cranes &
scaffolding where a new framework might appear

Carolyn Gerrish

The Thing

The thing is not to feel you have to clean deep
every time: try looking calmly at a mess
for a bit longer each day unless you want
to end up having to switch the TV off
at the power point before you can get to sleep

where set in a tastefully archaic font
the headlines run a mock-turtle soup kitchen:
dream perm left me bald star bares all to make-up
girl voted most luscious at glad wrap orgy
Hero's pebble necklace found in Hellespont.

The thing is not to feel you have to wake up
straight away: there are always plenty of things
to be going on with, like trying that deep
conditioner for dreamwrack snags while guessing
from the hairline cracks how the day will break up.

Chris Andrews

Nous

All things are formed from water
Our world is one of many
The sun at night does not go beneath
The earth is a flat disc resting on air

Each thing contains portions of all things
Each atom is solid, unchanging, uncreated
The soul is moved by a touch
The sun shines only because it is day

Thought is located in the blood
Sound is material, a bundle of atoms
The sun is formed of little sparks
From ether to earth and back is slow

Fire is the ultimate matter
The atoms swerve without a cause
The sun shines and forgets
Each world will be dissolved again

Darkness mixed with fire causes night and its stars
Love is an agreement between unlike things
Only the changeless sphere can exist
All things flow but everything returns

Emma Lew

A New Inquisition

An excerpt from Richard Flanagan's acceptance speech for the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction (for his book *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*) at the 1998 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards

... IT IS TOO EASY to take for granted that Australian books are now best-sellers, that Australian books are seriously and widely discussed and debated, when this was once far from the case. Thirty years ago a writer still had to leave Australia, and Australia was a literary and cultural colony.

That in this country over the last three decades there has been built an industry that has created an audience and a sizeable market for Australian writing is a remarkable achievement, a collective and historic endeavour of the greatest merit. But as recent history has shown, the work of generations can be very easily and very quickly destroyed in the name of rigid economic ideologies.

The Spanish Inquisition forbade either the publication or reading of novels in the Spanish colonies, and the first copies of *Don Quixote* entered America hidden in barrels of wine. My fear is that the GST may inadvertently achieve the same result as the Inquisitors.

When the GST is implemented,

when hardbacks rise close to \$50 retail, sales will collapse, jobs will go, lists will be slashed, independent bookshops and publishers will be forced to the wall. In the larger houses that don't go under, guaranteed best-sellers and overseas imports will be the order of the day. It is difficult enough now to take risks on first novels, on non-fiction, poetry, essays and short stories, but in a climate of retrenchment and collapsed market share, it will be impossible. Publishers will be forced to return to the bad old days of being essentially distributors of overseas books, and we will once more be a cultural colony.

In an ever more unfree age, in which the avenues for individual voices are closing off all around us, books are one of the last places where it remains possible for a single voice to speak untrammelled by the dictates of either power or money. These awards have tonight celebrated many such voices, but I am not sure that if a GST is introduced there will be much to celebrate in the future.

What I fail to understand is why our government would choose to tax books before it would tax Kerry Packer. This is not a self-interested argument, but a question that needs to be asked. Do we wish for an Australian culture? For an Australian literature?

For if we lose our capacity to

think and discuss and dream through books, if we allow that belief in a common destiny that books give us to disappear, if we allow our literature to be carpet-bombed out of existence in the mystical and deluded hope that it will somehow benefit our economy in the long term, then that sense of shared responsibility that we need as a people will evaporate like the mists, and the very idea of our nation will be in grievous trouble.

Thank you for this award and for the honour which it brings not only to me, but to all writers, and to all who love books and wish to read them, rather than search wine barrels for their smuggled wonders.

Brisbane Line

Marg Henderson

THE LAST COUPLE OF months have seen wall to wall culture in Brisbane, with numerous festivals: the Brisbane Festival (international and local theatre, music, and performance), the Film Festival, the Writers' Festival, and the Children's Out of the Box Theatre Festival. The Queensland Art Gallery also had an exhibition of the Photographs of Dorothea Lange. This eighty-five-print exhibition, organized to celebrate the centenary of her birth, was a powerful and moving survey

of one of the great photographers of the working class and dispossessed of the United States.

As a whole, the exhibition functioned as a counter-history, with its stark black and white photographs capturing the other side of the American century: the Depression, the dustbowl and rural immigration, the internment of the Japanese in the Second World War, Native Americans, and migrants. Lange's images also form a visual narrative complementing writers such as John Steinbeck, Agnes Smedley, and Alice Walker and their politico-literary chronicles of the poverty and struggles of rural American society in the early twentieth century. Lange's emphasis on individual and sometimes group portraits that are shot close-up or as figures in desolate surroundings, manages to capture not only the absolute despair or anguish or anger, but also her subjects' quiet dignity and strength. I kept thinking about the contemporary American labels for the rural unemployed and the poverty-stricken, such as 'trailer park trash' and 'white trash', and how corrupt they are in their reification of the collision between humans and capitalism. I was also amazed at how many of the images I had seen, some place or other, but without the excellent commentary, suggesting that Lange has managed to find a place in our collective social (sub)consciousness. And I was also amazed at how a number of Lange's projects were funded (but not without problems) by the American government. For example, Lange's most famous set of photos, covering the rural depression and immigration of agricultural workers, was a project of the Farm Security Agency, with her work being used to

illustrate reports on rural poverty and to capture the transformation of American agriculture. Her photos of the internment of Japanese Americans were part of a project by the War Relocation Authority (of which Lange was an outspoken critic). Could you see similar projects and approaches to documenting social problems and transformations being taken today by our federal government? How about photos of a Centrelink call centre where nothing works, or a country town bereft of government services, or Aboriginal people, well, just about anywhere.

Another blast from and at turbulent pasts was the Patti Smith-Bob Dylan concert on 1 September 1998. When I first listened to Smith's first album, *Horses*, I would never have believed I would ever see her live (nor Dylan, for that matter). Such legends don't bother with periphery like Brisbane. But there they were, at the dreadfully sterile Brisbane Entertainment Centre, playing their guts out to a very restrained audience. This, of course, was national poetry day, so what finer way to celebrate it than at such a gig. Yet what a surreal experience it was when a guy behind me muttered as Patti Smith walked on the stage, 'Who's this?' And what a magic moment it was for such an FM104 audience when Patti gave the band a rest and decided to read an anti-war poem. Her poems are never short, and this one was no exception, so I was getting a bit anxious as to how the crowd would respond. Anyway, Patti just let rip in her best performance poetry mode, all intensity and passion and galloping rhythms and always a character called Johnny (this time he gets killed in Vietnam). She just recites in a fury, and large parts of the

audience don't know what's hit them, and then she effortlessly blends the poem into a version of 'Not Fade Away'. It was a magic if slightly weird moment, wasted on giant carparks like the Brisbane Entertainment Centre.

There was a far more appreciative audience for matters literary at the Ipswich Writers' Evening hosted by the University of Queensland's Bachelor of Contemporary Studies Program and the Ipswich library, which featured Carmel Bird, author of *Red Shoes* and *The White Garden*, and Jennifer Bacia (bestselling romance writer). Dorothy Hewett was also to appear, but unfortunately because of illness, couldn't make it. But being troupers, both Dorothy and Merv Lilley wrote special pieces just for the people of Ipswich, which were taped and played on the night. Dorothy wrote a couple of poems, and Merv wrote a very funny and barbed attack on a certain local reactionary politician. Carmel Bird read one of her chilling short stories from *Automatic Teller*, and Jennifer Bacia gave a very interesting insider's view of the processes of writing and publishing popular fiction. As usual, the Ipswich people were generous, informed, and friendly hosts, so hopefully next year we can 'borrow' more of the writers from the Brisbane Writers' Festival and take them to slightly further afield audiences.

About humping Bluey

Merv Lilley

IT'S THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING! There's excitement in the air, along with wattle-bloom and bird call, and election promises, the sweet-scented nectar of political gymnastics with

the English language. Soon there will be the left-over aroma of political parties' rise or fall; the exciting question now is, who will be humping bluey?

*I'll hump my bluey
I'll shout and cooee
Back to Crowajingalingalong
just the place where I belong
amongst the old Australian scene
will Pauline be humping bluey or
Bluey humping Pauline
at Crowajingalingalong,
that's the place where they belong,
that very old Australian home.*
(with apologies to Jack Moses)

This is not my first time in Ipswich. Surroundings may have changed a bit in forty years or so, but I imagine there would still be a fish-and-chip shop in the main street where I used to call in, a few months or years apart.

Once there was a girl working there who looked at me in perplexity and said, "You're like a chap I knew . . . by the name of Merv Lilley. You look like him only younger."

I'd been cane-cutting for a few months and lost a lot of weight. I said, "Yes I'm his young brother, Jack."

I didn't ask her to go out with me again, like you don't take your brother's girlfriend out, do you? It wasn't Pauline.

My sister reared a family at Ebbw Vale, five miles down the road. By the name of Bostock. The first two Bostock boys became rodeo riders, horsebreakers and fighters in whatever order presented itself. They grew up wanting to be like their uncle Merv, in some words and some deeds. I'd say they outshone me in some deeds, respects, which was what they were living for, for the most part.

My namesake Merv (Bluey)

Bostock stood for Cleveland as One Nation candidate as you probably know. He's illiterate as far as book knowledge is concerned, but claims to have lived five hundred or a thousand lives which he reckons sets him up as one of the most knowledgeable men about, well suited to give advice to anyone who was in need of the same. This was a few years back, pre Pauline. He would like to give advice professionally, but he didn't quite know how to set himself up so that it could happen. Then apparently One Nation came along.

In some of those lives he lived he relied on what I taught him; and since I haven't been around for many years for him to repeat what I was saying or doing he can easily get into this sort of trouble, but not yet into parliament.

Like the time he rode a white horse out of a crowd and cut a ribbon like DeGrootte did on the Harbour Bridge, because I had once told him about that incident, which he kept in mind and re-enacted at the first opportunity, with bells on, and got himself into years of trouble with the police. He reckoned that anything DeGrootte could do he could do better. I doubt if DeGrootte got into trouble with the police. You can only re-enact a DeGrootte to a certain point. I apparently didn't explain that to him when I told that story, years earlier. Fortunately I didn't tell him that Lenin's brother, an anarchist, shot someone. Or if I did, I may have told him that the brother was shot by the Czarist State as a result.

Other anecdotes, told in front of camp fires, that Bluey re-enacted in his own version of them should have put him behind bars for a few years. I can't go into that here, but I may write what I know of his history some day.

I know that he has been dead and brought back to life after putting a truck into a flooded river when bearing down on a bridge and seeing a woman in a car crossing it, and unable to stop the truck, took the corner of the country bridge with him into the stream. He was pulled out of the cabin by a mate and was pumped out, but didn't know anything about it. Thereafter he was supposed to be permanently on crutches but after nine months he began throwing his crutches, one at a time, as far as he could and crawling after them; eventually he could walk after them and didn't go after them any more, and could go back to being a rodeo clown. That's turning up from the bottom of the pile with a trump card called enormous determination, the only way to win, vouchsafed to few on the breadline.

You may know that he put out his election CV saying that he was the oldest rodeo clown in the world . . . as a reason for people to vote for him.

If he'd made it into parliament he'd have been the best parliamentary clown there, they'd have known about it. He's had some adverse publicity for a One Nation candidate since the elections, the claim being made in parliament that he had been a member of the Communist Party in the days when there was a Communist Party. It's not for me to say anything about it. Fancy me recruiting my nephews to the Communist Party! It really would have upset my sisters.

You can recruit who you like to a party but you can't teach them fundamentals about human rights, economics, morals, or anything that goes against the grain of making money . . . what, when, something is white Australia and what's wrong

with it. You can talk till you're blue in the face to most people about the nature of society, about laws of value, but they still have to find out what suits them and that's where democracy comes in. If they keep getting it wrong they can still have another go, so you keep getting these big shifts in where the public 'are at' at any one moment, and you know that the wily politician is going to win, finish up in front, time and again. They're practiced political psychologists, making cliché noises like birds amongst humans. Like bower birds they gather all sorts of little bright things into their nests, and unlike birds this must not be seen as pure art.

Pauline became one of those glittery bits of glass, gathered in by a bastard breed of politician, and she has been able to transform into a bower bird and do this to others, like my nephew. A big percentage of men, I don't know about women, have fixed the gaze on her nest, and she knows the support value of men and perhaps women wanting to become nestlings. "Fair's fair" she says, and offers 'a fair crack of the whip' to the imagination. I know exactly what Bluey Bostock would be thinking in terms of becoming a Pauline hero without peer, and what the rewards could be, that thing a man's been hungering for, plus "a quid for life", (his term) this time as a parliamentarian, without doubt. That little glitter is sitting just out there in front. 'Fair's fair', isn't it? One good turn deserves several others at least, including fame with fortune attached, and she already has that too, as an example.

Fortunately I'm almost past thinking about *it*, but I could use a bigger quid for life, like Bluey. But not that way. That's because I understood

what I was 'on about' all my life. It has had its own kind of fame and fortune, which I tried to fix Bluey up with, but he never quite 'got it'.

I've still got 'it' to write about, and that's what I'm doing now. I'm pure as the driven snow at Thredbo after the slide, I reckon. I can write about *it* clinically. That's what writing is about isn't it? To be able to sit back and observe, try hard to understand what you've seen, and then 'get it down', for anybody who wants to know what you think it's all about, without getting your own pants too low down, so to speak.

I know there's nothing new in what I'm saying; I'm only writing about a little saga I happen to have some inside knowledge of, that's taken place somewhere just around you. I do believe that if it has happened just around you, it's happened just around everyone else everywhere else. It might be history of a particular sort. If it's only a history of the imagination, that should be important too, shouldn't it? I know for sure that Bluey Bostock is a very naughty little boy, always has been, despite his years of trying to prove that he has lived a thousand and one lives, looking for the elusive quid that could be with it, just around the corner. I think the corner may have been run into by a big red truck with democratic, humanistic, moral preservatives on board that is getting into the drinking water and whatever else is being drunk; red wine, beer, knowledge. I can only hope and expect that we are getting into an age where the good values of life will triumph, even if another thirties depression is just around the corner. This time it will not stop the minority masses from having a sane knowledgeable voice and using it with the technology that has also helped

to bring them down to an even more unfair distribution of the world's superwealth. I leave you with it, on paper. Or should I say I leave *it* with you? I would like it if you were to put this on parchment, if only because of the hours put in getting it down and the cost of getting here. Or there. Or from there to here and back again. It's a real teaser. I would like you to think it's worth preserving. I don't seem to be able to stop. I hope I never will. Yours sincerely, Merv Lilley, a poet, playwright, radio drama (*Green River Run*), short stories, novelist, reviewer, seventy-eight-year-old firefighter under chiropractic/osteopathic/physiotherapy treatment for "a back that's weak and a mind that's strong", not under the weather, and believes in a good red wine with crayfish, prawns, oysters, top steaks, etc. for the masses who don't and won't get any yet, thank you, this side of social revolution for reconstruction of Australia and perhaps the One World to achieve equal distribution of goods and services . . . A likely story, and I'd like to see that!

SA News

Cath Kenneally

ARCADIA IS A NEW PLAYER on the SA publishing front. It's an imprint of Melbourne-based Australian Scholarly Publishing (run by Nick Walker), but the plan is for Arcadia to hold its own as a general trade imprint, and for it to focus on SA writing. Louise Poland, a one-time Adelaide resident, is charged with bringing the scheme to fruition, and she's busily seeking marketable manuscripts. Nick Walker was

involved in the early days of Wakefield Press. Now he's back to get a little bit of healthy competition happening.

Live poetry lives in Adelaide: Friendly Street poets continue to meet to hear guest poets and each other read work on the first Tuesday of each month at the Box Factory in Regent Street; Tales of the Minority is a casual/occasional open-mic. affair at the Interactive Art Gallery in Hindley Street, while Nutz @ Boltz is open-mic. on the last Thursday of the month at Boltz Cafe in Rundle Street. Beat Route continues to attract a huge youth following at the Cargo Club every Monday night. Poet Martin Johnson puts his all into getting great readers out to the Prince Albert Hotel in Gawler every month, out of which emerges the anthology *Come Down the Lane with Me*.

Independent publishing goes on apace. *SideWaLK* is a newly-launched "specialist SA-based quarterly magazine for the poetical". It's at PO Box 58, Enfield Plaza 5085. While a book called *paroxysm* is the first publication by an eponymous publishing collective, Paroxysm Press, gathering several confronting young SA writers between one set of covers.

The Electronic Writing Ensemble operates out of the Experimental Art Foundation, currently running on the combined talents and enthusiasms of Linda Marie Walker, Jyanni Steffenson, Teri Hoskin, Francesca da Rimini and Simon Robb. They have had an intriguing project called *Ensemble Logic* happening in the second half of '98, fortnightly on-line postings beginning with a look at the possibilities of cyberpidgin (Gregory Ulmer). The email list called Choragraphy functioned as a venue for considerations around electronic writing, intending "to produce an

electronic rhetorics/poetics" leading to new art works being produced at the ensemble site. Try <<http://com.au/ensemble/enslog.html>>.

Also of interest in the virtual writing world is a project developed during the Australian Network for Art and Technology's virtual residency program for deep immersion: creative collaboration. please press play is the 'output' of the residency of lowkey operations/nude productions with AltX, combining electronic music and spoken word poetry, operating at "the intersection between audio and text". This output is archived at the AltX website. Noteworthy, too, is the Ngapartji Virtual Writers in Residence scheme, where a short fiction and poetry competition was launched and judged on-line in '98. Mentors/judges were John Kinsella (who was in Copenhagen at the time) and Jack Dann (Melbourne). They posted their critical comments to the site, too. The Ngapartji Virtual Writers project gets money from the Audience Development and Advocacy division of the Australia Council, and is jointly managed by Ngapartji Multimedia Centre and SA Writers' Centre. Check <<http://writers.ngapartji.com.au/poetry.html>>

Otis Rush, published by Ken Bolton, and published on-line as well in the last few issues, has ceased to be. *Otis's* dozen or so issues, gathering together the best of edgy, spunky Australian writing, have been the jewel in the crown of SA independent literary publishing, and *Otis* will leave a large gap in the shrinking field of reputable, adventurous small magazines in Australia.

SA writers who have been in the habit of submitting grant applications to the Arts Department,

a tedious, but till now relatively straightforward procedure, now have to do battle with practitioners of all other art forms for ArtSA funds. The ArtSA restructure has regrouped its erstwhile art-form-specific project officers into esoteric divisions such as 'Festivals and Events and New Commissions'. All writers who are would-be grant recipients have to find the niche they think most suits their case, and then go up against a probable bevy of dancers, musicians, filmmakers and visual artists in the grants-round scrum. There are supposed to be enough experts in each art-form on all the relevant panels to ensure that expertise in whatever form is recognized and rewarded. Just for instance, the last grant round saw grants going to writers under 'Leadership', 'Festivals and Events' and 'Emerging Artists'.

A daunting but noble undertaking by Anne Chittleborough at Flinders University is the capturing on one database of names and publication histories of all South Australian writers. She has been working till now on a database of all women writers in SA, with bio. notes and a comprehensive list of all publications including entries in journals and anthologies. She wants to include all creative writers of whatever gender eventually. A Web launch in late '98 is anticipated, the beauty of an electronic database being that it can be continually updated. Her email address is <anne.chittleborough@flinders.edu.au>.

Noris Ioannou, Adelaide cultural historian, has received a partnership grant from the Australia Council Literature Fund to work with the SA Migration Museum as writer in residence. He is at work on a project documenting the diversity of folk art practices in Australia. The project

examines folk art in all visual media. Interesting, then, that Dr Ioannou is being funded by the Literature Fund.

Colin Thiele, well-loved SA children's writer best known for *Storm Boy*, has won the 1998 Dromkeen Medal for services to children.

Imprints bookstore in Hindley Street continues to attract the crowds to a monthly event for those suffering Writers' Week withdrawals, a Meet the Author series that has seen the likes, lately, of Paul Davies, Oliver Sacks and Patrick Gale. Paulo Coelho didn't show up. It's called the Imprints PM Club, and happens at the Hindley Parkroyal.

Mike Ladd goes on making wonderful poetry programs (PoeticA, every Saturday at 2.05 on Radio National) from the ABC studios in Adelaide. He is himself a poet, currently working on a manuscript featuring a very appealing Roman functionary amusingly translated to the imperial outpost of regional South Australia.

News from Tasmania

Tim Thorne

EVERYTHING EXCEPT the wind moves slowly down here, so a review of 1998 is going to read a lot like one of 1997. There are times when it feels like a round-up of the literary events of 1898 would be as useful.

Forgive the ennui, but even the election of a Labor State Government was a bit light on in the frisson-causing department. This is not to say that nothing's happening; there are three excellent literary magazines still going strong, a couple of lively festivals, and so many published writers per hectare that overcropping looms as a possibility.

The ABC's National Poetry Day provided one of the highlights of the year. Coming on the first official day of Spring, it acted on closet poets like a shower of rain on snails, bringing them out into the open where they could be crunched by the boots of critics and judges. It is strange how, in order to make a popular success out of the creative process, one has to turn it into a competition.

ABC Radio devised a contest for which entrants were given a key phrase, then had thirty minutes in which to compose a poem using it. Entries were phoned, faxed, e-mailed, hand-delivered and even read live-to-air by poets who'd been scribbling away in the foyers, car parks and corridors of the ABC's Launceston and Hobart buildings. The number of entries was well up towards a hundred, and there were many more who couldn't get through in the allotted time. And all this at the ridiculous hour of 9 a.m., when most poets with any sense of the dignity of their calling would still be asleep.

The winner, Marilyn Arnold, then went on that evening to take out the Sims Poetry Handicap, a warm-up event for the Launceston Poetry Cup, Australia's premier performance poetry competition. The Cup itself had not been run at the time of writing this, but she is an unbackable favourite.

The best story to come out of National Poetry Day, however, concerns the filming of a segment for 'Snapshots', the 7 p.m. pre-news TV-filler which that week featured readings by Tasmanian poets. The producer wanted a rural setting for my poem, and I was directing the crew to a farm belonging to some friends of mine at Reedy Marsh when they spotted the ideal location – a run-

down hovel surrounded by mountains of junk. The producer knocked on the door and was greeted by the bearded, beanieed occupant, whose response was, "Poetry eh? Who's the poet?" When told, he averred that he himself was, in fact, a superior practitioner of the art, and the price for using his place was to film him reciting one of his poems. And a cleverly macabre little piece it was, too.

At this time last year I mentioned moves that were being made towards setting up a Tasmanian literary publishing house. As I said above, things move slowly, and there is as yet nothing tangible to report. Tasmanian writers with a national reputation such as Amanda Lohrey, Margaret Scott, Anthony Lawrence, Richard Flanagan, James McQueen, Jenny Boulton and up to a dozen others have access to publishers interstate, and so don't need such an enterprise (although, arguably, it would need them). On the other hand the market within Tasmania is just too small. We need an A.B. Facey or a Sally Morgan if we are to emulate WA's Fremantle Arts Centre Press, someone to come out of nowhere (or out of a tumble-down hut in Reedy Marsh) and justify a publishing venture which starts out local and goes on to showcase the State to the rest of the nation. The risk, of course, is that they mightn't emerge, and these days there isn't the money, government or corporate, to outlay on such a gamble.

NT News

Marian Devitt

IT'S BEEN ABOUT TWO YEARS since the idea of publishing NT writers in a special edition of *overland* was

raised and I must admit to feeling a real sense of satisfaction when issue #152 finally arrived. 12 September 1998 was the first time the recently formed Writers' Centre has had an Open Day and there were forty or more people who came for the launch and the readings. The launch was part of the '98 Festival of Darwin and we were pleased to also have Dorothy Porter here after her visit to Alice Springs.

I felt acutely the absence of the Alice Springs writers and Rosemary Plummer from Tennant Creek. Their presence and the world they represent in their writing was so strong in the special feature that it felt lopsided and incomplete not to have them here for the launch. But that physical distance is the reality of the Territory and the only way around it is to repeat the launch in Alice Springs in November. I think the main thing that being published in *overland* has done for these writers is to give them a legitimate voice as a literary community and hopefully, encouraged a sense of confidence in themselves as writers. It goes without saying that we are very grateful to Ian Syson and the staff at *overland* for their support and faith in us and their unflinching good humour throughout the whole process.

But opportunities come and go. What has been curtailed lately in the NT is one of the few chances of being published locally and that has been as a direct result of the 'downgrading' of the NT Literary Awards this year. The awards are no longer administered by the NT Department of Arts and Museums and have reverted to the Northern Territory University – an ironic move, given that there is no longer an English Department where they can

be most appropriately affiliated.

A considerable amount of the award funding was previously spent on interstate advertising and interstate judges. The open sections (Arafura Short Story and The Red Earth Poetry awards) have not been offered this year, an unfortunate outcome of there being no allocation in the budget for employing a project officer to administer the awards now that it's no longer under the umbrella of the department. The administrative costs are now covered by deleting the open sections, thereby saving money on judges and advertising. This move not only downgrades the awards on a national scale but also threatens the likelihood of the winners and commended entries being published in the NT. While we still hope to have some interstate judges it is now uncertain that the equally beleaguered *Northern Perspective* will consider publishing a special awards edition as they did in 1997, if it is 'just' local writers. So once again this tenuous gain in publishing on the local scene is no longer supported or even, I suspect, considered particularly important, by those who control the funding allocations.

Northern Perspective, which is also suffering from a lack of paid helpers, is hoping to issue a special 'Statehood' issue in 1999 which will be an important forum for the many voters who felt that the process of consultation on statehood was inadequate and who seek greater debate and analysis of our current situation.

In the meantime the Writers' Centre has been negotiating with *cordite* magazine for a special NT feature of poetry in 1999, which gives local poets an outlet in a nationally distributed magazine.

NTU Press occasionally talk about widening their academic brief to include creative writers and it is possible they will be taking on a novel by a local Darwin writer in 1999. Tall Stories Publishers recently released an autobiographical work by S.T. Daly. The editing of the manuscript, *Too Late to Say Goodbye*, was financially supported by the NT Writers' Centre and the book was launched during Hearing Awareness Week. The author is profoundly deaf and despite refusing to wear hearing aids or to use sign language he manages to retain an amazing 'ear' for dialogue through his acute lip-reading skills.

The NT Writers and Publishers Group have reformed recently and hope to have an anthology published in 1999. This will be their fourth collection of NT short stories, anecdotes and poetry. The Katherine Region of Writers (KROW) have moved closer to realizing their project of publishing a collection of stories relating to the 1998 Australia Day floods that devastated the town of Katherine and the down-river communities. The disks were handed to the printers in early October and they hope to launch the edition on Australia Day 1999. The project has been acknowledged as an important step in the community coming to terms with the devastation of the floods. The numerous interviews that were conducted with the help of a local writer and historian will be lodged with the NT Archives Service and will remain an important record of that particular disaster and its aftermath.

One thing you can count on with Territorians, is their capacity for regeneration after a disaster.

London Letter

Katherine Gallagher

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN London seems to be awash with Festivals. On August Bank Holiday weekend there was the Notting Hill Festival – a Caribbean explosion of costumes and colour, music and dancing. This week, the Soho Jazz Festival is on. One person who'll feel freer to join in the festival scene from now on is Salman Rushdie. At last, the Iranian Government has formally distanced itself from the fatwa. However, Rushdie might still be under some threat. A few British Muslim leaders want him to apologize for *The Satanic Verses*. He refuses: "Why should we give in to these tactics now when they're what we've fought against all these years?"

In March, 1999, London will have a London Arts Board-sponsored Literature Festival – two weeks of readings, panels and lectures, directed by Peter Florence, who runs the wonderfully diverse annual Hay-on-Wye Festival during the last two weeks of May. If it's as good and strangely homely as the Hay-on-Wye one, it's going to be quite a Fest.

On the Australia-London front, things are looking up too. Lee Cooper, Cultural Officer at Australia House, assisted by John Kinsella, Jim Hunt and others, is organizing a ground-breaking Australian Book Fair to be held at Australia House from 15–17 October. There'll be more than fifty British and Australian publishers, with events including readings, book launches, signings, debates, and a Patrick White discussion. This year's highlight is poetry and on the 15th, the program will feature readings by leading

Australian poets. Friday 16th is children's day and includes participation by students from local Westminster schools. Saturday 17th has book launches, a multimedia launch and display, a focus on food, wine and travel, and a reception for publishers.

Poetry is also on the agenda in the many UK celebrations surrounding National Poetry Day, 8 October – celebrating comic verse in particular, this year. Roger McGough and Wendy Cope are very much the vogue for this sort of poetry. They're also on the program at the South Bank for Poetry International – nine marvellous days of readings, workshops and general poetry, featuring Nobel prize winners Czeslaw Milosz and Derek Walcott, and various others from 30 October–7 November.

Inner London, with its traditional tourist draws such as Covent Garden and the West End, claims much of the London buzz. At the moment, some of it is going to Nicole Kidman, "from the sticks", as the conservative *Daily Mail* described her in a front-page headline. She's appearing in *The Blue Room* at the Donmar Warehouse. As much a glitter-occasion as a dramatic one, the play, written by David Hare from Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* and directed by Sam Mendes, is booked out for its two-month run and will then go to New York. Kidman has also made news in agreeing to work for £250 per week. Whilst there is universal praise for her acting, Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard* critic, questions Hare's treatment of the play: "Hare's gentle comedy of sexual manners displaces Schnitzler's serious drama of sex and betrayal." He also says Mendes' production is "super-cool, hip" and "oozes flashy

post-modern sumptuousness". Oh dear, what's new?

At least there seems to be less litter in Central London these days (largely due to instant fines). And if the Government finally listens to environmentalists, there'll be fewer cars. An idea is afoot to charge motorists £10 (\$21 Aust.) to bring their cars into London; there are also plans to pedestrianize Trafalgar Square. A car-free Trafalgar Square would be amazing. At the moment, it must be one of the most dangerous places around for both pigeons and people.

Where I Came In, An overland Retrospective

Duncan Richardson

ARE READERS OF literary journals dumbing down? Last year in *Australian Book Review* Ian Syson raised this question in discussing the continuing crisis for literary magazines. I disagreed with the 'dumbing' hypothesis then because it implies current readers are losing their brain cells under the onslaught of commercial television or dying off and failing to be replaced by the ever unreliable younger generation. There is no evidence of the former and the latter places the focus on readers, which misses an important point. Instead I want to ask the question: are a lot of journals sliding into pretentiousness? Having found no sign of brain death among lapsed subscribers that I know, I think part of the problem does lie in the journals and I argued that in a letter to Ian last year. As a follow-up, he suggested a retrospective on *overland*.

My original focus was to clarify

the reasons why I stopped subscribing three years ago. This was broadened when I discovered two other local writers/readers who had also become lapsed Overlanders around the same time. Discussing it with them, I found their reasons were similar. Though I started with a negative focus, the issues from 1990 quickly reminded me of the reasons why I had subscribed in the first place. Looking back over even this relatively short span of *overland's* life, one of the things that strikes me is the sense of community, something raised occasionally by contributors. This is a feeling I don't find in other literary journals and it is all the more important because it is inclusive. The journal also has had a unique blend of literary, social, political and cultural material accessible to non-specialist readers. It is heartening to find resistance to both economic rationalism and literary fadism in one place.

While *overland* in 1990 looked fairly 'glossy' on the outside, the internal layout of text reminds me of *The Realist Writer* from the 1950s. The content reveals a generally outward looking attitude, with an assumption that complex ideas can be explained in language understandable to the average, educated reader. This is true even for the literary criticism, such as the review of David Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* in issue 121. The social perspective also comes through literary criticism, as in a piece on 'Black Women in Australian Writing'.

In these issues there was the first of many reminders of how many literary figures have been lost to us in this decade, with a memorial to Patrick White. Barrett Reid notes the loss too of some long-term subscribers, due to hard times, also

an important factor now. There was a lot of diverse poetry with strong social comment, clear poetic voices and fresh language without preciousness.

In 123 it was apposite to find a review of a *Meanjin* retrospective, as debate over the recent loss of funding to the journal was the spark for the discussion last year in *Australian Book Review*. The article charted *Meanjin's* course away from its roots and Left slant to a generally academic journal. Kevin Hart's quarterly review of new poetry was a valuable feature of issues at this time, as it gave a careful, reasoned and involved perspective on work, at some length.

In the first four editions for 1990–91, there is no sign of padding or waffle. Re-reading them, it was impressive to see how much material held its interest value and remained fresh. As if to underline this achievement, in issue 124, Barrett Reid addressed the point directly, when he commented that "Obfuscation comes out of intellectual insecurity."

In 125, the first scent of termites in the *overland* timbers appeared with 'A Boy and His Reading'. This piece seemed to have been written with the assumption that *overland* readers would all be familiar with titles from the early years of this century as little was said about them beyond listing names. This assumption about the narrow homogeneity of readership acts directly against any appeal to the many potential readers 'out there'.

It was interesting to note Barrett Reid's comments on the appointment of Bruce Dawe as poetry editor at the *Courier Mail*, a position lobbied for intensively by members of Queensland Poets, now defunct. Reid

referred to Dawe as a "sitting duck" on the crest of a "poetry wave", liable to be pelted with poems, if the two thousand per year submissions to *overland* were any guide. As poetry in the *Courier Mail* gradually disappears into foam on the sand, the pelting may soon be over.

When the dreaded 'pomo' creeps into discussions of writing, the sound of termite mandibles begins to seriously threaten *overland*, such as in issue 127 in Kevin Hart's poetry column. After some discussion of modernism and postmodernism, he gets to the poems for review and both labels are shown to be so slippery they hardly matter, as he had implied initially. Yet many recent writers in *overland* and elsewhere seem to feel compelled to make some nod in the direction of current academic theory, as if afraid of not being taken seriously otherwise. At the same time, 'wails' regularly go up about the shortage of review space. Much of the available space is being consumed by de facto essays on literary theory and could easily be recovered by some vigorous editing.

The Lofu cartoons are one thread that continues throughout the issues and the earlier, very prescient ones were a pleasure to re-visit, especially the sequence in 129 about Max, a tireless advocate for youth who finally finishes his novels only to be confronted by a young publisher that views him as an old fart. Also very worthwhile were the PEN reports on writers in trouble overseas.

In the writing before the Year of the Helens there seems to be a curious sense of calm or a lack of stridency. Perhaps there was less sense of the need to take sides. It was also a shock to realize Kennett has been in power so long while reading ample reminders of the

destructiveness of the former Labor Government, lest nostalgia and comparison guild the memory.

By issue 131, with the death of Robert Harris, I had an overwhelming sense that the literary landscape was being rapidly ravaged, which was exacerbated by Barrett Reid's farewell note. He mentioned his large correspondence with contributors and the occasional feeling that he was the only friend of an isolated army of forlorn poets. As one of the many encouraged by Barrett's interest, it was pleasing in a way, to be reminded that he was aware of the difference he was making.

Correspondence of another kind in the next issue; where new editor John McLaren cites critical responses from faithful readers about the type of poetry being published. My feeling by this stage was how easy it would be to make a great poetry anthology from these ten editions alone. Also in this issue, Hugh Stretton continues the demystification process in his Stephen Murray-Smith lecture on economics. George Alexander ends his article on post-natural art by suggesting there is a need to acknowledge the bad news about the world even in a literary magazine, while conceding it may be "pushy to carp about ozone holes" etc in such a place. The fact that people do 'carp' is what makes *overland* worth reading; not for the doom and gloom but some sense of hope and action in the face of it. Alexander's piece is a good example of the clear, unpretentious prose in *overland* around this time. As someone who rarely reads material on the visual arts because it is riddled with verbiage, I find this access to the work is especially welcome and one of the points about the journal which first attracted me to it.

Highlights of issue 133 were the photo essay by Peter Lyssiotis (let's have more) and an insightful piece by Damien Broderick, 'Writing in tongues' which cuts to the heart of the literary magazine problem. He takes a slice of trendy obfuscation and puffery and switches the supposed 'cause' and 'effect' in the statement, leaving the same vague sense of fuzzy profundity as in the original, revealing the absolutely meaningless nature of the writing.

Book reviews had jumped to the front of *overland* by the next issue, which was a welcome change, helping to overcome the image of reviews as fillers or afterthoughts. 'Capsule' too had appeared, another valuable element.

Themes were creeping in by 135 and here again lies a problem, in that for some readers, the likelihood increases that most of an edition is going to have little interest, because of its narrow focus. Others may argue that the reader is at fault for being so 'picky'. Perhaps, but subscribers, being mostly human, are like that. In this edition too, John Jenkins notes the great diversity in Oz Lit, which he believes precludes rule by clique. While I agree that *overland* does reflect diversity, both within itself and by contrast with other journals, control by cliques is still a major barrier in Oz Lit, as Mark Davis has recently outlined.

136 has several of the features that I believe are most 'dangerous' for a journal like *overland*. Firstly, in Mackenzie Wark's article on the increasing role of the electronic media, he falls into exaggerated journalese when he says "we don't have roots, we have aerals". This kind of polemical writing seems to be so beloved of publishers (now as

ever) but is currently invading otherwise well considered and interesting texts, such as Wark's article. Mark Davis's *Gangland* also suffers from this, which is generated by the perceived need for a nanosecond grab, something controversial to get the blood boiling. This might be harmless but it wastes time in discussions on-air or text as contributors beat each other back from their published extremes to what they really think, often agreeing after what has been merely a false controversy in the first place. As if there aren't enough real issues of difference, without manufacturing straw dogs. There is also a definite Sydney/Melbourne focus in this issue, which continues in later editions as it does in other southern journals, undermining any claims to be a national publication.

By 137 and 138, the fiction was becoming more self-conscious and opaque, much of the poetry was flat, lacking the earlier social bite and the literary criticism was dressing up in the kind of jargon that Broderick so successfully demolished, the kind that is only of any use for academic careers, rather than the general reader. By this stage, I was finding little to appeal and dropped into the bottomless pit of once-were-subscribers.

More recent issues have shown some return to the former social focus, at least in the articles. The poetry and fiction though, in my view, still has too much pursuit of the obscure for its own sake or homage to experimental form at the expense of meaning.

It is easy to make criticisms safe in the knowledge that the burden of change is on others. However, having been involved with two publications, I am well aware of the hours of

scarcely paid work that many editors put in and the frustrations of dealing with prickly contributors and fickle readers. Despite re-visiting my complaints, the experience of travelling through the recent history of *overland* has produced more feeling of commitment to it, and I have put my money where my whinges are. The Autumn issue, including the first edition and the other retrospectives have helped too to give a sense of history. Howard, Reith and Borbidge have also done their bit.

Being a regular reader too of *New Internationalist* and *Social Alternatives*, I've also been interested to plot the trends in the three publications. Publishing a magazine is always a difficult balancing act but it seems that journals have a tendency to shift away from a balance, to overstress certain qualities in their make-up. *New Internationalist* for example has veered towards presenting basic facts, forgetting that many of their readers are well informed on those, whereas *Social Alternatives* has largely lost its alternative edge and become a rather dry academic specialist journal.

These eight years of *overland* show in a small scale, some of that process of shift within this journal, as pressures have, for a while at least, moved the content and style towards a more specialized academic approach. Apart from the lack of any personal appeal in that, I believe there is already no shortage of esoteric publications with tiny readerships. *overland* has played a uniquely diverse and interesting role in Australian culture and will continue to do so while it perseveres with the idea that complexity and clarity are not mutually exclusive.

AFI awards films, 1998

Jane Landman

OPEN TO A BANK of eucalypts, threaded through with a hint of morning mist . . .

Film scholars know that trends so regularly discerned by reviewers of Australian cinema rarely stand up to close scrutiny. Underpinned by selective attention and retention, apparent directions are retrospectively revealed as mere journalistic device. Yet this knowledge can only partially temper the categorizing urges engendered by watching the nineteen fiction feature films nominated for AFI awards this year. At the very least, such a synchronic viewing experience encourages a relay of signification from film to film, so that each is no longer contained by its own textual boundaries and instead enters into an unwitting dialogue with its fellows.

This year's nominated films, many of which are currently in release, overwhelmingly concern interiority. Not only are all the films sited on-shore, but their lens is turned on the domestic, the familial and intersubjective realms. This impression is heightened as a number of the stronger films involve small or ensemble casts confined to intense enclosed spaces. In Rolf de Heer's *Dance me to my song* Julia is confined to a wheelchair and can talk only via a voice machine. The isolation and difficulties of everyday existence for Julia are played off against the self-indulgent neuroses of her able-bodied carer, in a confrontingly stark manner. *Radiance* and *The Boys* are further examples, and provide a fascinating contrast. Both stories concern crises

in the lives of three same-sex siblings, related maternally but of different, and absent, fathers. Both concern gender, class and race.

In *Radiance* three sisters hold a wake at the family home after burying their mother. This is not a particularly 'cinematic' film, rather it is a performance vehicle, retaining a theatrical structure of escalating cycles of set scenes of soliloquy and dialogue which lead to the revelation of the structuring secret and subsequent catharsis. Although this is a 'stolen generation' story, characters and their dialogue do not stand for positions in the manner which so overburdened the film version of *Hotel Sorrento*. In *Radiance* sisters trade their experiences like blows, fighting to win primacy for the point of view that validates their own memories, experiences and desires. Their lives are fractured, with or against the grain of their fringe-dwelling mother's life, the mistress of a man who keeps his secret hidden away from white eyes. The film moves towards a provisional equilibrium established across these fractures, excavating family from the ruins of childhoods of yearning, loss and deceit.

This movement is reversed in *The Boys*. The eldest son returns from prison to the household he shares with his mother, brothers, and their girlfriends. With studied camera work and faultless editing, an almost unbearable sense of menace is generated as this son reasserts his will over the household, with the most concentrated assault focused on his hapless brothers. One by one these variously ineffectual or irrelevant women (the 'roads not taken') are removed from the plot which arrives at a momentary stillpoint before the brothers

together commit the crime to which all this remorseless grimness has led.

Tough-talking boys slog it out again in the *The Interview*, whereas despite its stylization *The Boys* works in a sort of documentary realist register. *The Interview* pushes into different territory, denying viewers omniscient narration. The police headquarters to which the interviewee is brusquely transported are initially presented from his point of view. The cavernous spaces (the director calls this style 'industrial Gothic') of the building lead to the 'birdcage' – the interview room itself – a disorienting realm where those props and reference points which work to support identity are withheld. But as the film progresses, perspective and power shift as the detectives themselves are revealed as the objects of surveillance, inquisition and constraint and subject to seduction and suggestion.

In *In the Winter Dark*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and *Oscar and Lucinda* cinema provides a visual means for elaborating what remains a literary sensibility and, though in very different ways, none of these films is wholly successful. Here is the place where we open to banks of gum trees. *In the Winter Dark* relies heavily on voice-over narration, and mutes its horror plot with an art-cinema obscurity which is ultimately irritating rather than suggestive. *Oscar and Lucinda*, which was released much earlier this year, has been discussed at length elsewhere. It stands well apart from all the other films of the year, both in respect to its lavish spectacle and its sensibility. *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is adapted and directed by the author of the novel, Richard Flanagan, and is over-long and

heavy-handed. A young girl, abandoned by her traumatized mother, returns to Tasmania and is reconciled with her father through the birth of her own daughter. Kerry Fox (whose performance in this film is one of its strengths) argues that Australians won't like the film because of its seriousness and poetic style – but I didn't like it because it is clumsy. A prejudice against generic styles and in favour of fairly bland 'art cinema' runs through the assumption that serious films and worthwhile sentiments can only be narrated in particular filmic vehicles, often ones that derive their legitimacy from high culture links.

Head On, though also a literary adaptation and at times rather heavy-handedly symbolic, is a far more interesting film cinematically as the camera narrows in on a frenzied, jarring, amphetamine-fuelled journey through the night. This story resists any notion of reconciliation between the first and second generations of the Greek migrant community at its centre.

Instead Ari rejects a veritable catalogue of possible structures or frameworks for understanding identity. His father's desire is arrested in communist ideals of freedom, yet he imposes a hypocritical and brittle regime of control over his limited remaining familial sphere. Ari in so far as he 'seeks' at all, achieves a sort of promiscuous permeability of body and identity where boundaries are neither defended nor protected.

There are also comedies amidst these tales of dislocation and disintegration. *Amy* is a film which is uneven in tone and lacking overall coherence, but its strongest moments are disarmingly humorous. *Crackers* works in a recognizable

Australian tradition of exaggerated, grotesque characters and black humour. *Paws* is a likeable children's story. Yet each of these also tells stories of children haunted by the figure of the lost father. Relationships with mothers in each of the films are left unexplored.

No AFI award screening is complete without at least one truly awful film – this year it is *Hurrah*, a film fated to be a direct video release. This sad effort at eroticism is pegged to such an inane plot that audiences were hooting and dissolving in laughter, yet I do not think this film has enough of any particular trash aspect to be redeemable as a cult 'bad film'. Weak also, though to a less spectacular degree, are *A little bit of soul* (already consigned to oblivion), *The Sugar Factory* and *Terra Nova*.

Magazine Wrack

Nathan Hollier

'FEAR AND LOATHING in the South China Seas' (*overland* 152) is a transcript of John McLaren's valedictory lecture at Victoria University of Technology. Drawing on historically important works of Australian literature, it reads as an analysis of the present state of Australian culture. McLaren engages with several of the fundamental issues confronting the body politic, including white and black relations and Australia's place in Asia, motivated by his desire for an open and inclusive nationalism that is both intellectually exciting and politically satisfying. The recent ABC television documentary on Manning Clark reminds us that this particular type of commentary, on the nation's *geist*,

is not so common nowadays. Like Clark, McLaren confronts a pervasive strain of masculine 'hardness' in our culture, a materialist rapacity that overwhelms qualities of contemplation and self-evaluation. As he notes, this is inevitably an insecure masculinity, frightened of what lies in its past and forever calling forth imaginary threats to its power in order to justify its recurring rape of, for example, the rights and property of Aborigines.

Linzie Murrie examines this relationship between masculinity and Australian cultural tradition more closely in an essay in the recent 'Australian Masculinities' issue of the *Journal of Australian Studies*. She notes that masculinity, and I suppose gender itself, is "always temporally and culturally contingent. To read the Australian legend as masculinity then is to read it as a dynamic construction: a complex set of strategies and negotiations, of inclusions and exclusions, which enable and legitimate gendered power relations". Building on the important work of Marilyn Lake and others, Murrie goes some way towards identifying how this idealized Australian masculine legend has been used by both right and left for political purposes which invariably, if differently, functioned to preserve gender inequality. Perhaps it was not her brief here but these different purposes promise further fruitful and necessary study in this area. One recent article which sheds light on the politically specific manifestations of this masculine tradition is Paul Adams' 'The Stranger from Melbourne' (*Tirra Lirra* 8:2 & 3). This literary biography of Frank Hardy mentions Hardy's fixation as a young man with Henry Lawson. Lake singled out Lawson as an exemplar of

Australian masculinism, indicating how Australian patriotic yearning is always already prefigured by masculine figures, symbols and mythologies. Interestingly, Adams analyzes changes in this culture in relation to the increasing modernization of Australian society, particularly the shift from rural, oral cultures to urban literate ones. Hardy is historically located at a nexus between these, and his personal struggles – artistic, political and intellectual – are usefully representative of those of the Australian left, seeking to synthesize communitarian aspects of the past with the new truths and literacies of the city.

The vibrant folk culture of Western Victoria, that Adams discerns before the Second World War, would appear to be extinct or changed beyond recognition these days. Campfire yarns and groups of men riding through the bush appear mostly in clichéd movies, advertising campaigns or Les Murray's poetry. Rob Finlayson is amongst the recent writers to satirize these stereotypes, in his *Westerly* (43:2) story, 'Lasseter's reef': "It's an Australian theme, he'd said, and you know me, he lost me then, I mean, I was out in the bush with Lasseter . . . even my incredulity has been done to death, hasn't it, surely, what a relief when it all fades well and securely into legend, then it'll be fun when scholars argue over whether the billabong's bloody real, or the legend's real, or whether they, the scholars' degrees are real." Throughout the story, aspects of this undesired and *passe* 'Australianness' return in the speaker's language, despite his manifest tiredness with it all: "Of course I'm not a bloody fuckin' racist. You're more of a mug than I fuckin' thought mate. O shit,

sorry, I'm doin' it again." In the same issue Kim Scott looks at the somewhat more vexed question of literary Aboriginal identity. She sees Kim Scott's *True Country* as exemplary of the kind of "hybrid", or "borderline" culture and personal identity that undermines Anglo-centric attempts to conflate race and nation. She opposes this notion of hybridity, often identified in Aboriginal life-narratives such as Sally Morgan's *My Place*, to the "more purist approach such as Mudrooroo's in *Writing from the Fringe*". Usefully, she explains 'hybrid language' as metonymic, a more easily absorbed explanation than the 'rhizomic' and 'fragmentary' description advanced by John Kinsella: "A hybrid is . . . in fact, a conscious undoing of the codes that constitute all possible readings of a text . . . The result is a denial that is cultural as well as linguistic; a refusal to accept that the component parts are relevant to the discourse" ('The Hybridising of A Poetry', *Westerly* 43:2). Sonja Kurtzer questions the implicit historical relationship between hybridity (the future) and purity (the past) set out by writers like Hogan ('Wandering Girl', *Southerly* 58:2). She raises the possibility that the political amenableness of 'hybridity' to white intellectuals, readers and consumers more generally, may place pressure on Aborigines to represent their identity in ways that are similarly non-threatening to that dominant culture. She emphasizes that the most effective means of cultural struggle for Aborigines on both sides of this debate is to displace "the hegemonic culture which seeks to control the manufacture and public circulation of images of Aboriginality". Curiously, the radical nationalists' belief that the

establishment and control of a distinctive culture is necessary to ward off economic and cultural domination is resonant in the concerns of Kurtzer and perhaps Mudrooroo. As in Finlayson's story, 'the past' is never wholly or easily done away with.

Javant Biarujia makes clear some of the ways that this is so in an essay which wins the award for sending me most often to the dictionary ('The Homotextual Dissimulation of Robert Dessaix: A Reading of *Night Letters*', *Imago* 10:2). This is demonstrative of the learned, imaginative and stimulating nature of his article however, rather than of any desire to show off. Always sensitive to the operations and genealogy of language, Biarujia illustrates how our speech often reveals more about us than we realize. In this case he finds in this "jaded aristocrat's" autobiographical novel, evidence of Dessaix's "homotextual semantics", his unwillingness or inability to confront the cultural sources of his own insecurity and self-loathing: "As the author of *Night Letters* is also ill, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion, if we haven't already decoded his tropes, that *Night Letters* is *his* story. He blackens almost three hundred pages in the ink of his homotextuality, searching for the courage of *Tristram Shandy's* 'black page', a solid block of chthonic

despair . . . he has internalized all the historical hatred directed toward homosexuals in Judaeo-Christian times."

Across these various pieces of writing there is, or is discussed, a complex longing centring in different ways on the past. In Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* the whisky priest finds in a fragment of foreign (English) poetry a phrase that seems to encapsulate his spiritual and emotional despair: "My daughter, Oh my daughter". Eliot Weinberger refers to this capacity of poetry "to remain vital as it persists through the ages, even as the language in which it was written dies out, even as it travels by translation from language to language" ('Karmic Traces', *Heat* 9). Weinberger's essay examines how the meaning of 'time' changes as our world progresses, arguing that our present time has taken on the quality of poetry: "At the end of a century that has dismantled all the old models of time, we too, in everyday life, tend more and more to explain the present tense, our ordinary activities and emotions, by some distant timeless factor". In the terms of economics, this realization could be put as demonstrative of the law of diminishing marginal utility – that the greater our knowledge about the causes of our physical and mental

condition, the less pleasure this knowledge is likely to give us (which is not to say that it is less useful). Back when the economics discipline routinely factored in the distribution of resources that may not be monetarily measurable, Weinberger's formulation may have provided the basis for an intelligent *rapprochement*, or discussion, between the drive to accumulate and the need to be aware of what we are doing, where we are going and why – Weinberger's "universal human desire for an origin, and a coherent narrative of what has happened since, a continuity of the ancient and the new".

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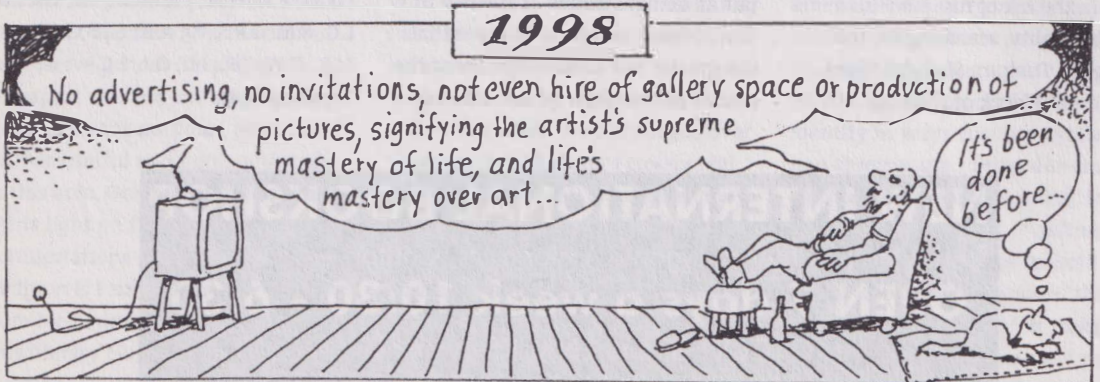
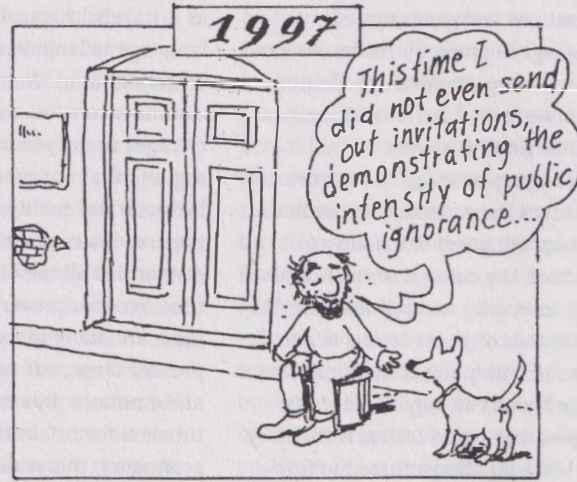
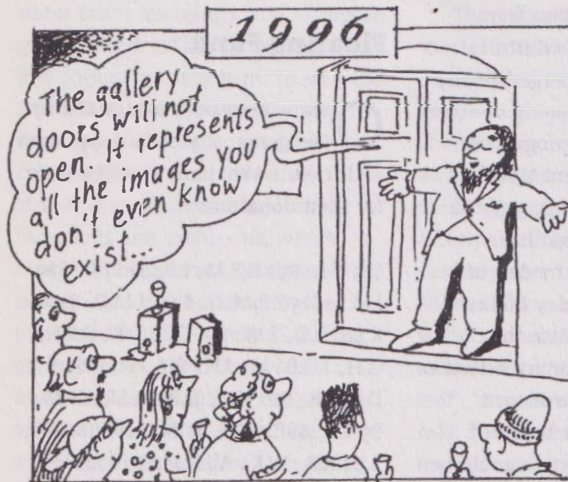
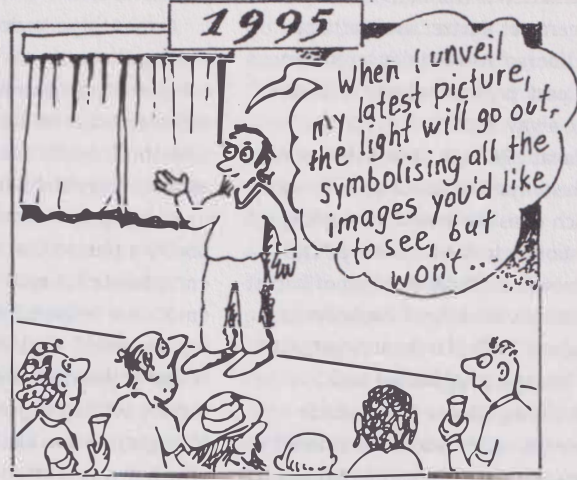
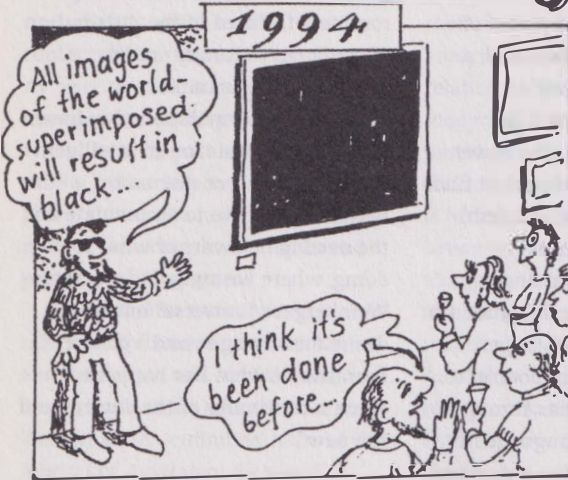
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An Artist's Progress

#45

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The New Grievance Industry

Jenny Lee

Paul Sheehan: *Among the Barbarians; The Dividing of Australia* (Random House, \$19.95).

IT MUST BE AN ENDURING source of frustration to right-wing commentators that appeals to the 'silent majority' were discredited along with Richard Nixon, who used the slogan to such effect in his 1968 election campaign. Even those who posture against 'political correctness' in the 1990s have balked at trying to rehabilitate the tainted phrase. Paul Sheehan comes closer than most. In the introduction to *Among the Barbarians*, he appoints himself spokesman of Australia's 'silenced majority' and modestly quotes the plaudits they have sent him for his courage in defying the 'mandarins of multiculturalism'.

There has been a lot of noise about silence lately, and Sheehan has added a new voice to the chorus since his return to Australia from the USA in 1996. According to the cover blurb, *Among the Barbarians* is "the story the media will not tell". As the acknowledgements page reveals, however, substantial chunks of the book are based on stories published in that venerable bastion of orthodoxy, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which also ran another chunk to coincide with the publication of the book.

Far from breaking silences or carving out new paths, *Among the Barbarians* is largely a pastiche of familiar gripes against immigration and multiculturalism, drawing on the usual suspects (Les Murray, Bob Birrell, the "ecologically sustainable population" mob et al.), all of which Sheehan has turbocharged with a powerful sense of personal grievance. This leads the book into some slippery rhetorical ter-

ritory. In the introduction, for example, Sheehan is quick to cast himself in the role of martyr to the multicultural thought police. For publishing his *SMH* article, 'The Multicultural Myth', Sheehan tells us, he was pilloried in a highly personal way by a series of taxpayer-funded individuals (no *argumentum ad hominem* here!) associated with the multicultural lobby. There follows a parade of snippets from Sheehan's attackers, cumulatively creating the impression of a shrill, self-interested minority intent on tearing the author down for having the temerity to say the unsayable.

Yet there is a deafening silence that vitiates Sheehan's rhetorical ploy: at no stage does *Among the Barbarians* reproduce the unexpurgated text of the *SMH* article that caused the outcry. Had this been done, it would have given readers a chance to make their own assessment of that intemperate piece, and perhaps to understand the vehemence of the reaction it elicited. As Anne Henderson commented in the *Australian's Review of Books* (July 1998), Sheehan's response to his critics displays "all the disingenuousness of the child who writes 'fuck' on the dining-room wall and can't understand why he's in trouble".

The blurb also describes *Among the Barbarians* as exposing "one of the greatest political frauds in Australian history". The 'fraud' in question, it transpires, was perpetrated by the Hawke and Keating governments, whose immigration policies are portrayed as a form of branch-stacking writ large. Labor in government, according to Sheehan, cynically set out to bolster its electoral support by boosting the immigration intake and subsidizing "a multicultural industry with a vested interest in ethnic divides". Labor is also accused of encouraging "neo-paternalism, welfare dependency, double standards, reverse racism, mismanagement and rorting within the Abo-

riginal aid apparatus". All this has produced "a nation increasingly divided along racial lines" with "cultural enclaves, high unemployment and high crime".

These contentions are supported – if that is the word – by a selective, sloppy use of evidence and a series of rhetorical subterfuges. For example, relatively 'hard' (though by no means incontestable) information about government savings from welfare crackdowns merges seamlessly into a discussion of fraud among immigrant communities; the clear implication is that 'they' – and only 'they' – are costing 'us' our hard-earned money. A statement by Bob Birrell that 30 per cent of Australian marriages involve 'offshore' spouses slides into a sensationalist exposé of immigrant marriage scams. Among numerous studies dealing with the complex and controversial issue of the economic impact of immigration, Sheehan selects only those that support the anti-immigration case, many of them drawing on the very different US experience.

The sole shred of 'evidence' to support the notion that Labor conspired to stack the electorate is a statement attributed to ALP president Barry Jones, who promptly put it on record that he had been misrepresented (House of Reps *Hansard*, 28 May 1998). Sheehan also overlooks the inconvenient fact that, far from permitting a free-for-all, Labor had restricted welfare benefits to new immigrants and tightened checks on the bona fides of intending marriage partners long before Howard's razor gang identified newly arrived (and therefore voteless) immigrants as a soft target for expenditure cuts.

In Australia, complaints about crime and marriages of convenience among particular ethnic groups are almost as old as white settlement itself. Sheehan's counterparts in the 1830s raised a similar hue and cry against Irishwomen who took assisted passages as domestic servants but found husbands instead, and the criminality of the Irish was deplored in much the same terms that Sheehan uses against the Vietnamese, Lebanese and Romanians.

The difference is that *then* there was a near-universal consensus that immigration was essential to the colonies' survival; *now*, by contrast, there is an increasingly strident body of opinion that not only questions the desirability of immigration, but looks to its restriction as a cure-all for Australia's ills. Far from being a voice in the wilderness here, Sheehan draws on a range of commentators who blame immi-

grants for unemployment, the balance-of-payments deficit, welfare dependency, drug use, environmental degradation and the rise in violent crime. There is no space for the suggestion that problems of drugs and crime are more likely to be solved by drug law reform than by immigration controls, or that unemployment among immigrants is a symptom rather than a cause of economic malaise – let alone the notion that, without the inflow of funds brought by new immigrants over the past decade, Australians would have been forced to curtail their consumption or risk a blow-out in overseas debt.

Clearly sensitive to charges of cultural prejudice, Sheehan emphasizes that he is not opposed to 'ethnic diversity' as such ("the Australia I returned to is better than the Australia I left"). He merely wants to insist that Australia has "a distinct dominant national culture that binds and forms society". Yet when he sets out to elucidate the characteristics of this supposedly self-evident national culture, Sheehan is totally out of his depth. Perhaps for fear of being contaminated by "outdated Marxist analysis", he seems to have confined his reading to a handful of 'friendly' texts – or bits of texts. Though he praises Alan Atkinson's *The Europeans in Australia*, there is nothing to suggest he has read beyond the introduction; Atkinson's sensitive, dialogic approach to Australian history has nothing in common with Sheehan's superficial blather about a unitary national culture. As it is, Sheehan dusts off well-worn clichés about mateship and egalitarianism, and brands historians who have criticized this nationalist mythology as suffering from a "hatred of Australia's past" that turns "success into failure". 'Success' is the key word here; like John Howard, Sheehan wants to read Australian history as a success story, and his argument in support of that proposition is based primarily on a celebration of the good life. It appears to escape his notice that to place an environmentally unsustainable lifestyle at the heart of the national being mocks his own professions of ecological concern.

For all its slipperiness and confusion, the "story the media will not tell" has had a dream publicity run. It was promoted by 2UE talkback host Alan Jones and received glowing press reviews from like-minded commentators such as Michael Duffy and Les Carlyon (who even broke the tabu on mentioning the 'silent majority'). Almost before the ink was dry, the book's claims were being used to bludgeon

the Labor Party during Question Time in the House of Reps (see *Hansard*, 28 May 1998). Amid dronings pro and con in the opinion pages and a rash of letters to the editor, the book shot to the top of the best-seller lists; it became grist to the mill of talkback radio, where it has contributed its mite to a rising tide of isolationism and intolerance.

Above all, Sheehan's insistence that "playing the race card was primarily Labor's game" – and, by implication, that of the Aboriginal and immigrant lobbies Labor fostered – can only give heart to those who harbour the illusion that relations between Australia's diverse cultures would be better if the multicultural and Aboriginal lobbies would just shut up. Beneath all the shouting about 'silenced majorities' lies a yearning for a return to the old monocultural public sphere, where members of the dominant culture could (and did) blithely parade their prejudices, secure in the knowledge that no-one would dare tell them to mind their tongues.

Jenny Lee is a former editor of Meanjin. She is a historian who works as a freelance editor and writer.

The road to Wigan Pier – again

Angela Mitropoulos

Various authors, with a Foreword by Robert Manne:

Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia (Bookman Press, \$14.95).

FOR A DECLARATION to appear as uncomplicated and clear, the circumstances of its making – of its making sense as simple and as clear – must have receded beyond the visible horizon, no longer readily available to examination. And so it is – mostly – with the book *Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia*. In the Foreword, Robert Manne writes: "The thought here is simple and straightforward." This is not true, which is also to say that it is true, so long as the reader intuitively shares or presumes the question which prompted and frames the writings here.

To elaborate, let me begin by noting what *Two Nations* is not. It is not a book that explores racism in

Australia, though it gestures toward doing so. Nor is it a discussion of racism from the perspective of those who, in this case, have been gathered into the objects of racism: indigenous peoples and those rendered as generically 'Asian'. I am not suggesting that only those subjected to racism can speak of it but, like Graeme Little in his review, I am surprised at their absence in a book which seeks to account for the politics and presence of One Nation.

So: what is *Two Nations*? Technically, it is seventeen short essays authored by four politicians, six academics and seven journalists, including a series of photographs by a news photographer. Some pieces are more interesting than others. Margo Kingston's work is possibly documentary journalism at its best. Michelle Grattan, Murray Groot and others point clearly to the intimate connections between One Nation and the Coalition parties. Henry Reynolds rightly insists that racism is a central feature of Australian life, a fact extant before One Nation. There are contributions from the conservative side of politics – those conservative elites – who endeavour to make the 'politically correct' elites liable for One Nation: Padraic McGuinness and Ron Brunton, maintaining their rage at being left out of the loop during the years of ALP rule. There are those such as Judith Brett who, rather blithely, regards One Nation as an inchoate call for the return of the ALP to social democracy and the return of ALP government. There is Marilyn Lake's bizarre attempt to reject, from a feminist perspective, Hanson's presence in politics whilst continuing to assert that feminism is still a universalism: feminists, whilst supporting all women's political participation, are – apparently – relieved of their central idea because Hanson, after all, is a "man's woman". And, there is Paul Kelly's defence of Paul Keating and (that dreaded word) 'globalization' – a view which Manne takes issue with briefly in the Foreword.

What holds these pieces together though, what gives the volume its air of clarity and simplicity is the unstated question which, perhaps, is more a kind of panic: how do those involved in political, symbolic or social management, those who work as the word-smiths for social order, deal with this apparent rise of the vulgar masses in a frightening form, whose terror resides most squarely in the fact that they seem no longer amenable to administration? This is not only evident in the biographies of the contributors but, more importantly, in the way they speak, in

the way certain formulas repeat themselves and in the way the problem of One Nation and Pauline Hanson is ascertained. For Manne this is expressed as the emergence of “two nations inhabiting separate moral universes”; for Nicolas Rothwell this is a split between the “intellectuals” and the “mainstream”; for Michael Woolridge, this constitutes a divergence between “policy culture” and “the community”; Grattan: “the community in revolt against the elites”; Brunton: “ordinary citizens” and “leaders”. Michael Woolridge asks plaintively, “Why this malaise in the relationship between power and people?” Kelly is more direct: “Why was Australia so incapable of managing Hanson?” The masses have, evidently, run amok; no longer responsive to reason or decency. As Tony Abbott sees it, the masses have succumbed to the “not very rational” expectation “that the system will always let them down”.

While these dualisms grasp a real fact concerning the nature of political authority in late twentieth century capitalism, they are generally put to use as a moral estimate which either exalts or derides ‘the people’ on the basis of an assumed innocence or ignorance – thus holding on to, at least as a longing, the promise of re-asserting some kind of tutelage, instruction and control over the ‘vulgar’. Disturbingly – and some would say, paradoxically – there is manifest here an appetite for vigorous leadership. Brunton argues that “Australia’s current misfortune is the absence of any federal leaders on the horizon who might be capable of restoring the trust of a large number of ordinary citizens in the political system, and convincing them that the nation’s social and economic circumstances should really be a source of great optimism.” What we have here (so the story goes) is a failure to communicate. Also, ‘ordinary people’ are far too often and effortlessly defined as white, dovetailing nicely with One Nation’s (and the Coalition’s) constituency-building strategies. The contributors do not offer the same explanations of the apparent divergence between ‘the masses’ and ‘the elites’. They do, nevertheless, assume that here resides the fundamental difficulty of One Nation. This implicit fear and derision of ‘the masses’ is – I think – ever-present in those in positions of governing or managing. This book is, with few exceptions, drafted as an expedition by ‘the elites’ (which includes McGuinness and Brunton) into the territory of ‘the masses’ – a kind of *Wigan Pier* as political commentary.

To return then to Manne’s quarrel with Kelly. It seems to me that here is the possibility for discussion and understanding. But only a possibility. Manne is right when he insists that people’s painful experiences of ‘economic restructuring’ should be taken seriously. I think Kelly is also right that economic nationalism is no solution here. Unfortunately, this debate threatens to contract into a dispute between those for and against economic rationalism. In doing so, a crucial point – perhaps it is *the* crucial point – goes unremarked. One Nation talks ceaselessly about work: the problem with Aborigines is that they are getting hand-outs; the problem with single mothers is that they are on welfare; protesters are dole-bludgers; the elites (academics, journalists, etc) don’t do real work; the problem with immigrants is that they come here and go on welfare; the problem with Asians is that they work too hard and take our jobs, or take them overseas because they can live on less pay. Farmers work hard. One Nation members work hard. In short, One Nation’s limitless complaint is that ‘we’ work hard while ‘others’ bludge.

There is a widespread faith that waged work is both a national duty and a moral imperative. The Labor Party’s election policy was drafted explicitly along these lines. The Coalition’s strategy against the MUA was premised on building up a popular resentment that maritime workers got paid too much for not enough work. Waged work is now regarded as the chief criterion of citizenship. For years we – all of us, including academics and journalists – have been forced to work harder and longer or face the smear and poverty of unemployment. Having worked harder and longer, subjected to years of speeding up and efficiency drives, we find that there are no rewards for hard work for the masses of people.

It is routinely assumed that One Nation is an irrational phenomenon, an anomaly or a throwback. But, why is it assumed that it is rational that no matter how much more productive and efficient the world becomes, the more people are subjected to poverty and the more people are required to work longer. Surely – logically even – one would think that greater efficiency and productivity would entail less work for everyone. The supposition of scarcity which underpins One Nation’s racism – a class racism, if you will – is simply wrong: if the world’s troubles can be tracked to anything it is perhaps the disposition and the compulsion to produce more and more. If we con-

sume only 20 per cent of the foodstuffs made here, exactly why are we encouraged to be so internationally miserly and why is anyone here wanting? In the final analysis, One Nation does not present a critique of this situation. Rather, it offers a dreadful enforcement of the belief that every person is born owing a debt to society that can only be repaid through ever-increasing sacrifices to waged work, much like the concept of original sin. The work ethic become feral. It is too often forgotten that the entrance to Auschwitz was emblazoned with the slogan, *Arbeit Macht Frei* – clumsily translated as: Work Makes Us Free.

In a situation where we cannot see the possibility of things being different, of having to submit larger chunks of our life to waged work (or competing with someone else for their pay), where the terrorism of money is seen as eternal and rational, why would anyone be surprised when some people see the only available option as one of a struggle for relative advantage? One Nation is a response to economic rationality, but it is also a creature of it. Is not the need to engage in a national struggle for relative advantage what economists have been teaching us? 'Globalization' never meant internationalism; instead, it announced a time of relentless competition between nations, a malignant entrepreneurial nationalism that forced everyone to prove our devotion to the nation by 'tightening our belts' and under-bidding other countries' wage costs. The difficulty the contributors to this book have is the same one confronting One Nation members: they cannot even begin to think of the possibility that capitalism is not eternal or natural – or reasonable. This too has been made to recede beyond the perceptible horizon. Many of those writing here have been both prominent and instrumental in framing anti-capitalist politics as beyond the pale of rational thought, as taboo even.

There is a third way in which what is obvious here in this book is so because of what is presumed and thereby no longer available for debate. There is no reference here to the relation between the rise of One Nation and the population control policies which all the parliamentary parties now more or less adhere to. No mention of the ALP's introduction of compulsory and non-reviewable imprisonment of refugees; nor of the Democrats' policy of zero net immigration. Immigrants and refugees are now customarily and serenely regarded as the source of all evil, economic strife, disorder and pollution. Indeed, One Nation's

much-vaunted coarseness has become the shield and alibi for other parties' embrace of these policies. This disregard highlights again the absorption of *Two Nations*: it is not concerned with the racism that One Nation promotes but, instead, with the presumable insufficiency of political administration that One Nation has come to indicate for those in positions of authority. Here the struggle against racism is converted into a technique of the state against the unruly masses. This is appalling, echoing as it does the fact that in the rallies against One Nation, this same struggle has been reduced into an occasion for recruiting for organizations on the left. An analysis of the causes and effects of the rise of One Nation remains to be done, in all its difficulties, and without the tranquil presumption of the everlasting nature, if not intrinsic virtue, of our current political and economic system.

Angela Mitropoulos lives in Thornbury, Melbourne.

Poor Show

Frank Stilwell

Ruth Fincher & John Nieuwenhuysen (eds): *Australian Poverty: Then and Now* (MUP, \$24.95).

IT IS TWENTY-THREE YEARS since the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, chaired by Professor Ronald Henderson, produced its landmark study of economic disadvantage in Australia. Coming just after the end of three decades of steady economic growth, it was deeply disturbing to know that 12.5 per cent (or one in eight) of income units in Australia were living below the poverty line, with a further 8.1 per cent being classified as rather poor because their incomes were within 20 per cent of that margin. Evidently, the fruits of economic progress were being very unevenly distributed. Ideologies about the land of the 'fair go' were not being translated into egalitarian outcomes in practice.

Now we have some new estimates, on a comparable basis, of what has happened to poverty since. Lo and behold, the problem has intensified. According to the figures presented in this new book, 16.7 per cent of income units are now below the poverty line and a further 13.7 per cent are in the 'rather poor' cat-

egory. So the proportion of the population classified as poor or rather poor has risen from just over 20 per cent to just over 30 per cent. The most important cause of this situation seems to be what has been happening in labour markets. The persistence of unemployment, officially estimated at about 8 per cent of the workforce (and possibly up to double that figure if 'concealed unemployment' is taken into account), is a potent source of economic marginalization. Within these ranks is a core of long-term unemployed people among whom the incidence of poverty is particularly prevalent. But single-parent families are strikingly over-represented among the poor too. Poverty among the elderly has diminished somewhat, but poverty among indigenous Australians remains at appalling levels.

The sixteen chapters of the book under review, each written by a different author, provide a wealth of detail about these and other dimensions of the poverty problem. The book is, in effect, a powerful plea for a policy response. Various chapters deal with poverty and the life cycle; housing and poverty; poverty and health; disability and poverty; indigenous poverty; poverty and the law; poverty, education and training; poverty, gender and sole parenthood, and so forth. In exploring these issues the book builds up a detailed picture of poverty in Australia. What seems to be relatively underdeveloped though is analysis of the link between the specific problem of poverty and the more general forces shaping economic inequality throughout the society. An analysis of this link is a precondition for an effective policy response.

Statistically, poverty is just one end of a distribution of income and wealth. Indeed, therein lies a big definitional problem. Just to set a poverty line at a particular income level implies that a person with a few dollars less is poor whereas a person with a few dollars more is not. The latter person may actually have fewer commitments or less-pronounced material ambitions so may actually feel themselves to be less poor than the former. Adjustments can be made to the poverty line to take account of differential housing costs for people living in cities and in non-metropolitan areas, but this essential problem of classification remains. In the literature it is manifest in continual debate about the appropriate setting of the poverty line and the appropriateness of a relative concept of poverty. Defining poverty in relative rather than absolute terms requires a different pov-

erty standard for Australian society than for Bangladesh, and a different poverty line for Australia today compared with decades ago (when the social norms and expectations would not have included the lack of a TV set or a telephone, for example, as a defining feature of poverty).

From a political economist's point of view, there is an analytical, as well as a measurement, concern here. It concerns the relationship between poverty and inequality. Wealth and poverty are two sides of the same coin – so the concentration of wealth is part of the cause of poverty. Karl Marx emphasized this feature of capitalism in his theory of surplus value as the product of the exploitation of labour. Modern examples abound. To the extent that making extravagant salary payments to corporate executives requires those corporations to squeeze funds available to pay ordinary production, clerical or sales workers, then the creation of a 'working poor' is a predictable outcome. This is starting to become evident in Australia (following the lead set by the United States), as the traditional protective institutions in the labour market are pared back and as the workforce becomes increasingly casualized. Poverty in these circumstances becomes a cumulative phenomenon. The rich take refuge in their enclaves in the classier suburbs, paying for their children to have access to the best education and thereby perpetuating and intensifying their relative advantages inter-generationally. The poor, on the other hand, become increasingly segregated and marginalized.

This new book on poverty provides us with useful information about the composition and problems of the most disadvantaged in Australian society. What now needs to be done is to develop a more systematic understanding of the broader connections with social inequality and the political-economic forces of change. Equally importantly, there remains the need to confront Ronald Henderson's challenge – to develop the political will to do something about the persistence of poverty. Henderson himself advocated a guaranteed minimum income scheme, as the chapter by Peter Saunders reminds us. That eminently sensible suggestion still lacks any significant political backing. Indeed, the current proposals for tax 'reform', centering on the regressive GST, show how far we have travelled in the opposite direction.

Frank Stilwell is a political economist from Sydney.

Persistence, Patience and Pay-Off

Dawn May

Alexis Wright (ed.): *Take Power; like this old man here* (Jukurpa Books, \$24.95).

WHILE OTHER EVENTS are sometimes identified as the beginning of the land rights movement, *Take Power* locates the walk-off at Wave Hill Station by the Gurindji in 1966 as the genesis of the campaign which subsequently changed the political landscape of the nation. This important book highlights the extraordinarily complex nature of the issue and the dedication of the people involved.

Once the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) of 1976 was passed, traditional owners moved quickly to try and regain their land. For most it was a drawn out affair stretching over decades which required persistence and patience. As Geoff Eames, former solicitor for the Central Land Council noted, "everyone who has been involved in land claims will tell you, the conduct of a claim is exhausting". Tony Tjamiwa, senior traditional owner of Uluru, travelled to Canberra three times where he had meetings with "that short bloke" [Bob Hawke]. He recalled that "number one time I went down there they said 'no', then the second time I went down there they said 'I don't know', and then this third time, this last time they said 'maybe'." In 1985 the title papers to Uluru were handed over and five minutes later the traditional owners signed an agreement leasing the area back to the government.

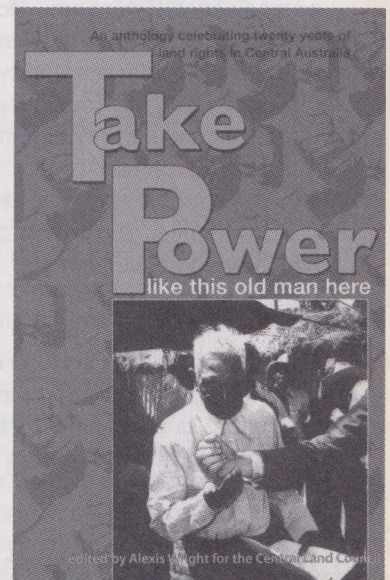
Whereas most Aboriginal people in Central Australia would once have been employed on cattle stations, a section in the book dealing with work demonstrates just how much this has changed. Aboriginal people now work as administrators, teachers, rangers, miners, field officers and in many other fields. Where Aboriginal people still work cattle, they now are often the owners of the stations. Stephen Ellis took over the management of Mistake Creek when it was purchased in 1991 on behalf of the Tjupanyin Aboriginal Corporation. Ellis recalled that he had been a ringer most of his life and had never managed a place, "so they took a hell of a chance on a place that cost \$4 million. But I think I made it work quite successfully".

The section on work is followed by one dealing with "Olden-time struggles: before land rights" which would probably have been better placed at the start of the book to demonstrate more powerfully the gains that have been made in terms of Aboriginal empowerment. Sections dealing with 'Campaigns' and 'Dirty Tricks' and 'Twists and Turns' highlight the intensity of the campaign and the opposition mounted from some sections of government. Kumantjayi Ross, Central Land Council Director, described the resolution of the Warumungu land claim, one of the longest and most bitterly fought, as "a triumph of common sense over hysteria".

Take Power is an exceptional book because of the diversity of people who have contributed to the publication. While many of the offerings have come from Aboriginal people closely associated with the land rights movement, there are sections by others such as Edward Woodward explaining the factors which influenced his 1974/5 report on Land Rights which was commissioned by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. It is interesting to note that many of the non-Aboriginal contribu-

tors knew little about Aboriginal people before their initial involvement with the Land Council. Kaz Cooke working as a media adviser for the Central Land Council, admits that like "a lot of Australians who hadn't had much to do with Aboriginal people, I was intimidated by them". As a result of her exposure to Aboriginal issues, she was able to "convert a fear to a respect". Bruce Donald, Director of the Legal Service at the Central Land Council from 1984–1986, also admits that he knew nothing about the country or Aboriginal culture when he took up the job. He is now deeply convinced that "land rights are the absolutely essential underpinning to any attempt to remedy the past and advance into the future".

Most Aboriginal history has been collected orally



and passed from generation to generation. Much of the written history that has emerged to date has adopted an autobiographical form. While a great deal of this has been done in a bid to recover a lost past or to affirm their Aboriginal identity, *Take Power* marks a departure from what has gone before. In particular, it is written for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children so that they will know about the land rights activities from the late sixties in Central Australia. The aim is not only to set the record straight but also to enable the younger generation to build on what has been done by their predecessors.

Although it is evident from her recent books *Plains of Promise* and *Grog War* that Alexis Wright is a highly skilled writer, *Take Power* required the author to adopt a very different approach. This book which she has edited is testimony to her superior organizing skills, in particular her ability to bring together the offerings of eighty-four different contributors. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines would find this a useful resource book. It contains a very helpful glossary and biographical sketches of the authors and storytellers. The only thing missing is an index which would have added to the book's value to researchers.

Dawn May is a Senior Lecturer at the Cairns campus of James Cook University. Her most recent publication is Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland From White Settlement to the Present.

Lawson, the Bush and a little bit of Politics

Christopher Lee

Robyn Burrows & Alan Barton: *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling* (HarperCollins, \$19.95).

IN THE SPRING OF 1892 J.F. Archibald, the editor of the *Sydney Bulletin*, sent Henry Lawson to Bourke in western New South Wales. His objectives were simple. He wanted to separate the young beer-loving poet from his bohemian haunts and give him a dose of rural experience; he also wanted a man to cover the escalating tensions between the Pastoralists and the Amalgamated Shearers' Union in that part of the

world. *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling* revisits this period of Lawson's life from a local perspective and the result is a book that is as much a hymn to the "metropolis of the great scrubs" as it is an account of the famous poet's formative rural experiences. The spirit of the *place* is an important preoccupation for the authors. Many of the poems and stories that draw upon Lawson's time in the region are reprinted here and the study – particularly in the second half – tends to take the form of an annotated anthology that places local social memory beside the known detail of the celebrated poems and stories.

Burrows' introduction points out her family's long relationship with the region and celebrates the work of local historians. There is a trace of the troubled relationship between professional and amateur historiography on show here and a recognition of the importance of place to a historical consciousness. Burrows, a historical novelist and a published local historian of the South Queensland Coast, tells us that this book is the result of the dedicated research over many years of her late father, Alan Barton. Barton's hard-won local knowledge has in the past been generously shared with other historians, but this study represents the first recognition of his author-ity. The study seems in some senses to be a memorial to the interests and activities of this locally known custodian of the region's memory.

The amateur historian is enjoying a renewed status of late on the back of the revived interest in social memory shown from those currently active in the professional discipline. Tom Griffiths, in his award winning study *Hunters and Collectors*, drew attention to benefits of what he called "antiquarian" techniques and practices for professional historians. "In its cultivation of field skills, attention to locale, undisciplined breadth, engagement with memory and 'sensuous enjoyment of material things'," he argued, "it represents a surprising source of invigoration for an academic history that has been isolated and constrained by professional specialisation." Barton and Burrows' sources for the original part of their research into Lawson's stay at Bourke comprise old newspaper clippings, a previously unregarded microfilm and their personal access to local knowledge and oral memory, and this combination produces some useful discoveries.

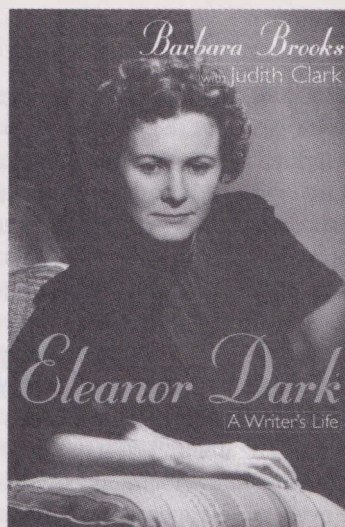
The historical maps of the township of Bourke during Lawson's time there, and the course of his two treks through the area with Jim Gordon, one of the prototypes for his celebrated Mitchell character, are useful documents in themselves. The material which contextualizes Lawson's work at Toorale Station in terms of what is known about the station at the time is well done, and the comparison of Lawson's descriptions of the local area with alternative contemporary reports impinge upon long running critical debates about the inconsistent relationship with truth that characterized the legendary figure's writing.

The argument that Lawson represented what he saw in the terms of his own artistic preoccupations is not new, but it is not common for his manipulation of the facts to be presented in the context of an inquiry into his political activities. When the relationship between his Bourke work and ostensibly historical fact is examined we receive an interesting insight into Lawson's political *work* in the period, that complements the scholarship of A.A. Phillips, Michael Wilding and Bruce Nesbitt in particular. This is particularly so when Lawson's politics are pursued in the light of the poetry he wrote for the local unionists and published in the local newspaper – an original discovery of another local resident, Paul Roe, and republished here for the first time.

There are of course weaknesses. Despite demonstrating Lawson's creative use of his experiences the authors sometimes tend to take him a little too much at face value. There is a general failure to discuss the implications of the original material presented in the study for some of the more interesting long running debates on Lawson's life, art and politics. And although there is a bibliography and footnotes, much of the unoriginal information on Lawson is presented as a store of general knowledge that fails to adequately credit the work of previous critics and historians – particularly that done by Colin Roderick.

Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling has its uses for Lawson scholars and students of Australian literary culture, and it represents an interesting expression of local memory. Clear prose, an entertaining interest in character, and some excellent ink drawings of Bourke's historical landmarks should ensure that it finds favour with a more general audience.

Christopher Lee teaches Australian literature at the University of Southern Queensland.



“Mrs Dark is not a thinker”

Carole Ferrier

Barbara Brooks with Judith Clark: *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life* (Macmillan, \$39.95).

THIS BIOGRAPHY LOOKS at Eleanor Dark's life (1901–85), particularly as a (woman) writer's life – and also at the surrounding Australian *Weltanschauung* of those times; one from which Eleanor and her doctor husband, Eric, like most left intellectuals of the period would become increasingly alienated as the 1950s advanced.

Eleanor's father was the poet, Dowell O'Reilly; her mother was a talented pianist, submerged in family, exhausted when she died in 1914. She got some small revenge by leaving Dowell out of her will. Dowell then married his cousin, Molly, portrait painter to the English upper classes. Her seduction back to Australia by a man given to such sentiments as: "I have never yet known a 'happy couple,'" or: "Immutable law has set aside woman for childbirth and man for thought-birth" remains a mystery; Marion Piddington, Dowell's sister, tried but failed to dissuade Molly from the match. As Eleanor's stepmother she did not do much more painting.

Dowell died in 1923. He had always insisted that any attempt to combine the roles of mother and artist "would cause nothing but pain." "When Eleanor started to write", the biography suggests, "it was as if she was in dialogue with her father." She "took for granted from an early age that she would be a writer". Tellingly documented are her continuing

struggles with herself, and with constructions of her as (house)wife, to resist the expectations that Kylie Tennant described as “you can use your brains or you can use your pelvis”. Eleanor and Eric toyed with “semi-detached living” but didn’t implement it. She had a workroom in her garden (though on the important question of whether it had boronia on one side of the door or both, the biography is unilluminating), and tried to insist upon being disturbed only for life and death matters. The family didn’t take this very seriously, her son Michael on one occasion reporting to her the life and death matter of his being hungry. When they got their new ‘flash’ house there were even more appearances of domestic bliss to keep up. “When Eleanor looked back on her life it seemed as if she had written her novels in moments snatched from the housework”, is one of the biography’s concluding statements.

A character in *Waterway* (1938) reflects that a woman “must deny herself sexual fulfilment, or accept, along with it, the extra burden of domestic cares”. This is the old split that the new woman thought in the 1920s she was beginning to overcome. What Barnard called “dom dts” was seen by Miles Franklin as the bane of women writers, in what she labelled in the early 1930s “a nation of charwomen”. As a middle-class doctor’s wife, Eleanor had access to “hench-wenches”, as her husband dubbed them, but they needed supervision. The biography offers the interesting theory, however, that: “Eleanor could complain about the housework without disturbing the surface of her existence too much.” But while the Angel in the House is massacred repeatedly, Daddy perhaps refuses to die. One view canvassed in the biography is that Eleanor wanted to construct for herself a secure domestic harmony her parents had lacked – though familial ideology must have been somewhat challenged when her son’s wife went off to Sydney with her stepson.

Eleanor’s earlier work has been read as modernist, but one response to *Slow Dawning* (1932) was that it was “not lowbrow enough on the one hand, on the other, not highbrow enough to succeed”. Other reviewers received *Return to Coolami* (1936) as “the acceptable face of modernism”. As time went on, Dark moved away from studies of female neurosis – perhaps attempts to understand her mother more – like that prefiguring Elizabeth Harrower, in *Prelude to Christopher* (1934). The *Bulletin* in the early 1930s

sneered at “young women rushing into ‘Freudism’”, but perhaps this biography will encourage assessments of Eleanor’s neglected contribution to the psychological novel of the new woman. The notebooks Eleanor kept in the 1940s parallel those of Lessing’s writer character, Anna, in *The Golden Notebook* (1962); both express a postmodernist sense of fragmentation of discourses, and the impossibility of conventional narratives in the face of the horrors of history. Many of Dark’s earlier novels use what Barnard called “that most difficult creation, another writer”, and amount often to reflections upon the production of fiction.

Historical trilogies were a feature of the literary landscape of the 1940s and 50s; part of an attempt to reconceptualize (white) Australia also engaged in by Prichard and Devanny, among others. Dark was hailed by some historians including Manning Clark as a pioneer in the (re)writing of Australian history and as having a substantial influence. Clark told her in 1946 that his history students were reading *The Timeless Land*, and in 1963 that “the inspiration in reading *The Timeless Land*” had been important to his work. After this novel (original title *The Black Man’s Burden*) was finished in 1940, she wrote *The Little Company*, “a novel full of arguments about communism, fascism and democracy, about writing and propaganda”. She researched her fiction in the Mitchell Library, especially *Storm of Time* (1948). But appreciation of her contribution to Australian cultural history was not uniform; GA Wilkes asserted in 1951: “Mrs Dark is not a thinker.”

During the Second World War the Darks were singled out as Reds, even traitors, a foreshadowing of current renewed attempts to depict Manning Clark and Prichard as, at best, Agents of Influence for Communist conspiracies. Eleanor and Eric had set up a library for evacuated children but there were rumours that it was “run by Friends of the Soviet Union and used entirely for Soviet propaganda”. Though a “relatively benign” looking Stalin appeared on the front cover of the *Women’s Weekly* in 1945, “anyone who did not agree with Menzies”, as Eleanor pointed out, “was a Communist anyhow”. Eric had been learning Russian, and there was a possibility that the ‘Dark Lady’s Husband’ might be made Ambassador to Moscow. This didn’t happen, but in the parliamentary denunciations that began in 1947, Eleanor was described as “an underground worker for the Commun-

ists." When they went to Central Australia on one of the wandering trips to which they were addicted they were accused of spying. Eleanor saw herself and Eric, the biography suggests, as in the mould of C. Wright Mills' notion of intellectuals as the "organized memory" of humankind. She perhaps didn't have a developed intestinal fortitude to stand up to concerted public harassment.

Eleanor's writing was reviewed as 'fictionalized history' – as opposed to historical fiction – in 1941. One problem of how to read such fiction now, of course, is that, as the biography puts it, "it may speak of contemporary issues, but not in a contemporary voice." The anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry, like Clark, welcomed the representation of Aboriginal characters; the shift through the trilogy from the relatively assimilated Bennilong to Pemulwuy, "warrior and outlaw". Eleanor herself described *The Timeless Land* as addressing "the darkest of all blunders . . . our dealings with the black Australians whose land we stole." The approval of her treatment of race was not uniform either. Franklin found *The Timeless Land* "mixed up with the prevailing fashion in sentimentality about the Aborigines . . . no idealization can do away with their primitiveness in habits." The biography acknowledges that: "What Eleanor did is something a white novelist would not do easily now. Now black writers, criticizing racism and appropriation, want to tell their own stories; and white writers have been told to examine their prejudices." It suggests that Eleanor might have responded that "unless black and white can write thoughtfully as well as critically about one another's point of view, the complexity of the problem will not be represented."

Biographies these days seem to be getting shorter, with less space for analysis of such crucial complexities; it's not clear whether the lack of expanded analysis in this one compared with, say, Hazel Rowley's biography of Stead is attributable to editorial 'improvements' or cuts. Certainly the space allotted to photographs is distinctly parsimonious.

Writers in the early 1950s, the biography suggests, felt they were "no longer the voice of the culture".

After years of seeing themselves as critics of the society, years of carrying the dream of what Australia could be . . . it now seemed as if their time had passed. They were under attack, they were marginalized.

This state of alienation that afflicted many engaged intellectuals has some resemblance to the widespread current anomie in Australian cultural life. It was transformed in the 1960s with a new wave of political engagement – but by then Eleanor, who had never been a particularly public person, was well on the way to withdrawal from writing and life.

Carole Ferrier edited *As Good As a Yarn With You* (CUP 1994), a volume of letters between Australian women novelists on which the *Dark* biography draws extensively, and her latest book to appear soon from MUP is a biography, Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary.

Passionate Dispassion

Leigh Dale

Andrew Riemer: *Sandstone Gothic; Confessions of an Accidental Academic* (Allen & Unwin, \$19.95).

ANDREW RIEMER'S SUBTITLE is misleading: in fact, he claims in his latest volume of autobiography that on entering the undergraduate English Literature course at Sydney University in 1956 he planned to become an academic. This is by no means the most important of the dissemblings in this book but it is one of the most significant, for *Sandstone Gothic* struggles with what, in a previous autobiography, Riemer termed the problem of being "inside/outside": a child of a Jewish Hungarian refugee family who subsequently becomes a teacher of Shakespeare in the country's oldest university.

Much of the first half of *Sandstone Gothic* is spent describing Riemer's undergraduate studies at the University of Sydney (please could someone from Sydney write an autobiography that doesn't mention Clive James, Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes and Jill Ker Conway?) and postgraduate study at the University of London. The second half describes in some detail Riemer's view of the famous split in the English Department at Sydney University in the mid-sixties, and follows through until his retirement in 1994; the account of 'the split' is clearly intended as a counter to other versions, although those 'other versions' are never mentioned.

From these stories Riemer emerges as someone passionately committed to the idea of dispassion, a commitment that seems (by his own account) to have structured and given meaning to his professional life. And having devoted his life to the study and teaching of English literature in the name of 'disinterest' and 'pure scholarship', Riemer is deeply distressed by changes to practices of criticism and the content of curricula over the last three decades, and what he sees as dramatic shifts in the ethics of pedagogy. These shifts are, in general, away from historical surveys of the literature of England and towards cultural, geographical and theoretical diversity in curriculum, and the inclusion of consideration of political questions in criticism and teaching.

The real crux of this conflict is felt in the conclusion, in which Riemer goes on the attack against those whom he gathers under the broad rubric of "the left", variously women, feminists, environmentalists, postmodernists, Australianists, and his particular scapegoat, post-colonialists – never the left itself. He attributes what he sees as the failure of English departments like Sydney to preserve cultural standards to the spread of Australian literature as a university discipline(!). Now, much as I would love to agree with Andrew Riemer on this, I really do not think it feasible to blame Leonie Kramer, a long-time President of the Australia–Britain society, for the decline and fall of British culture (and therefore all civilization) in Australia – but readers should judge his case for themselves.

The book is perhaps pernicious in its caricatures of 'the left', but it is also in some ways a moving story of a life's work felt to be lost to the barbarians. One irony of *Sandstone Gothic* is that it should wrestle at such length and with such rage with precisely the kinds of emotional, political and cultural issues that it insists are irrelevant to the 'proper' conduct of English studies. But an even greater irony is that, with six books in seven years and a new career as a "cultural and literary journalist", not to mention chief reviewer of books for *Sydney Morning Herald*, Andrew Riemer should be making such a distinctive contribution to a literary culture and society that he so clearly, so deeply, despises.

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Pathetic, Paranoid, Passionate

Phillip Edmonds

Michael Wilding: *Wildest Dreams; A Selective Memoir* (UQP, \$18.95).

MICHAEL WILDING'S *A Selective Memoir* isn't pretty, in that as a discontinuous narrative, we are encouraged to empathize with a flawed and contradictory central character, Graham. He is a pathetic, paranoid, passionate, hopeless, endearing irritation described by Wilding in a prose notable for its propositions and statements, which in a way, means that the work is against the tenor of our times. As a selective memoir it refuses petty co-option, its feral conjunctions and explanations then, won't easily be slotted into a literary culture still unravelling its obsession with surface texture. *Wildest Dreams* makes such a point through the story and its relatively flat style.

It is a fascinating social and literary memoir, in which discontinuity has a linear shape, to the extent that the 'stories' have been arranged in an order over real time. It begins with a 'young' Graham discovering the terrors and delights of the Sydney Libertarians and the expansive light of Sydney all the way from the dark and sombre British Midlands, meeting Joe, becoming excessively sexual and trying to get published. The territory (already covered in his previous fictions) and to some extent in Moorhouse's fiction, is nothing new, but of course nothing is, yet despite some predictability, pieces such as 'Bachelor Writing' and 'Life in Review' are engaging enough. 'Libertarianism' parodies the anarchist pretensions of what I presume is the aftermath of The Push, the flight from realism, the onset of the performative utterance in the messy sixties as a precursor to the opening out of the seventies, and then the private dreams of the eighties and the nineties. Reading Wilding, with the advantage of hindsight, it is sad to see how he prefigured such non-materialist idealism in his 'fiction' (and may have backfilled it for this publication), and indeed, how he might have fallen from notice despite being an established literary figure and academic.

These were the years of abstract expressionism, the living death of modernism, the end of ideology, the seed-bed of nihilism and the post-modern.

Wilding was of course on 'the cutting edge' in the seventies, when every second person seemed to be putting out little magazines and publishing each other. So, I got a lot of laughs out of 'Publish and Perish' where there is the unforgettable, professionally enthusiastic Bobbie from California, who becomes a publisher alongside Graham. As in most of the stories, you can pick out the people if you are into that sort of thing, but it is a good story because she is memorable, and in the context of the concerns of the book, her characterization represents the contradictions of American enthusiasm in smaller places and impressionable climes. US Imperialism through other names and guises with the CIA as a paranoid metaphor rocking along through the 'stories'.

I must come clean here: I partly liked this book because Wilding's narrator buckets 'post-modernism', even if the tone is conspiratorial, which is at times an irritating diversion. At the conclusion of 'Publish and Perish' for example, he is refreshing and preachy. But, as a memoir, it can survive:

Gradually he came to see a sinister purpose in that aspect of post-modernism that insisted on a separation of literature from the social world, that presented art as an autonomous end. It was serving to remove one of the instruments of social analysis and challenge.

Graham ventures out to Writers' Festivals, observes all the bad bitchy behaviour and engages in quite a bit of it himself, and notices that some of his contemporaries have sniffed the wind and are, in their flight from the political, lying low and flying high by being arty. In 'Conference', Graham is in the US observing writers on the make, such as the infamous Frances Templer, with the implication that such success is predicated on a notion of whoring.

Is not *Wildest Dreams* an attempt to kill a good-looking cat and place it in the middle of the living room? 'The Fishing Club' supports such a thesis, because Graham is so feral he is rude in suggesting that the women's movement was a coordinated strategy to divide the left by making two "distinct categories: men and women", and that the events of 1968 were a controlled "burn-off" to prevent a dangerous bushfire. In this way weren't the seductive deconstructions of post-modernism another controlled burn-off? Such are the delights of fiction! Characters can say things,

become crazy and paranoid, just like in life.

The last piece entitled 'Creative Writing' is black humour at its best. Our hero is back in a place of ultimate seduction, an American College teaching Writing to spoilt undergraduates. There is the contemporary cynicism of a colleague about the motivation of these students, yet despite all of this, and maybe because of it, the story moves towards an epiphany that is more than merely a realization, it is an idea of hope. He tells a student that she writes well:

"That was a good story you read", he said.

"What's that? Really? No, that was a piece of crap."

"No, really, it was very good."

"What was good about it?"

"It was real."

There is an allusion to Henry James and there is another student who wants to write about what's really going on. Somehow, the hero "survives and writes a book". I recommend *Wildest Dreams*, but if you don't want to be unsettled, it could really depress you.

Phillip Edmonds has recently completed a PhD on the Australian Short Story of the 1980s.

Dreamtime Alexandria

Cath Darcy

Mandy Sayer: *Dreamtime Alice; a memoir* (Random House, \$24.95).

Victoria Thompson: *Losing Alexandria; a memoir* (Picador, \$16.95).

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE DEFINES the memoir as the dramatization of "one section of a lifetime, a phase which fate has marked with a particular accent".¹ *Dreamtime Alice: a memoir* is the story of Mandy Sayer's years performing on the streets of New York and New Orleans with her father, the Australian jazz drummer, Gerry Sayer. The period dramatized by Virginia Thompson in *Losing Alexandria: a memoir* is less easily defined, tracing as it does her life from childhood through to mid-life. It is a thematics rather than a given period which is dramatized in this book, the author's Alexandrian

childhood heavily influencing the other events which have shaped her life.

If the autobiography proper is generally accepted as a purely non-fictional account of the subject's coming into being, these memoirs diverge slightly from the norm. Both Sayer and Thompson foreground the hybrid nature of their texts. Sayer writes that although the events and people portrayed in the book are real, "fictional names and descriptive detail have sometimes been used as literary devices, or to protect the privacy of certain individuals" (Author's note). Thompson interweaves "[f]act, myth and memory" in her narrative (Acknowledgments).

Dreamtime Alice displays a close intertextuality with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*. Scenes from the children's book are mirrored in the memoir, and the character of Alice becomes an alter-ego of sorts for Sayer. The author writes that the Alice story provided her with an imaginative escape from the distresses of her troubled childhood. When she felt threatened by her mother's abusive lover she would retreat into her imagination. The beatings "didn't matter because I knew . . . I would change into a blue dress, slip through the looking-glass, and be able to tell the Mad Hatter all about it". "Fiction", writes Sayer, "was to me what alcohol was for my mother, a balm, a secret anaesthetic." During her time in the United States, she continued to make use of this mechanism. When recounting painful sexual experiences, the author slips into the narrative as Alice, looking at the incident from one remove, in the same way that one views oneself in a looking-glass. As Sayer grows into a mature self-hood, and develops the capacity to protect herself in her daily life, she no longer needs to draw on Alice as a means of escape. "No longer that girl Alice", "[I] gradually invent[ed] my own language, my own voice . . . [I] slowly bec[ame] the protagonist of my own life."

Losing Alexandria intersects with other literary texts. Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* is a constant presence, as is E. M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and Guide*, and the writings of the Alexandrian poet, C.P. Cavafy. Thompson's childhood memories of Alexandria appear to articulate neatly with the city and culture described in these texts. The author mythologizes Alexandria, the "sensual city" "of memory", "of lovers", "of fatal joys", which oppressed its women, yet was the home of one of history's greatest fe-

males, Cleopatra. If Alice becomes a metaphor for the self in *Dreamtime Alice*, the equivalent in *Losing Alexandria* is Cleopatra, the woman "who loved Alexandria more than she loved any man". The narrative reflects on Cleopatra at several points, the most significant being the scene in which Cleopatra comes to Thompson in a dream. "All the characters in a dream are part of the self", writes the psychotherapist Thompson, and this scene would seem to demonstrate that. Thompson describes herself as "a liberal feminist animal rights activist and ardent anti-fascist", and her Cleopatra displays an affinity with these identifications. She deplores the "barbarism" of human beings: materialism, environmental pollution, the killing of animals for meat, human rights abuses, war. At a time of vulnerability Thompson finds comfort and validation in Cleopatra.

For David McCooley, "self reflection is the root of historical consciousness".² In autobiography, "[t]he reflection of a person about himself (sic) remains the standard and basis for understanding history".³ This is indeed the case in *Dreamtime Alice*, where the storytelling of Sayer's family echoes western historiography's tendency to elide the stories of women in its privileging of masculine activity. Sayer "long[s] to be a part" of her "verbose father's" repertoire of stories. The "fragments of feminine history" which trickle down to her through her reticent mother "never seem quite as significant". When her mother finally pours forth her stories she comes to realize that "[w]omen . . . have their own war stories. Stories they keep to themselves, stories that don't get celebrated in pubs and marches and over boozy two-up games". The term 'war stories' may be seen to apply as much to her mother's tales about her life with Gerry Sayer as to the official World War of 1939-45. A knowledge of the feminine history of her family facilitates the development of an independent self for Sayer, as it allows her to move beyond the confines of her father's past and "into the future".

Thompson's chronicle of her own past is even more deeply steeped in world history. She was born during the Second World War, when "the black clouds of war rolled over Europe casting their long, cold shadows". Her childhood memories are dotted with air-raids and the knowledge of her father's involvement with the RAF. She remembers how she was haunted throughout her childhood by the image conjured up by her paternal grandfather, when he told her that,

High Art Meets Low Sociology

Brian Musgrove

Leonie Stevens (ed.): *Warp Drive; Australian Drug Stories* (Vintage, \$17.95).

THE SHORT, UNFAVOURABLE NOTE on Leonie Stevens' anthology *Warp Drive* in the *Weekend Australian* (1–2 August 1998) was unfair. Her collection is not entirely “dull” and “self indulgent”, and the Murdoch reviewer's suggestion that drug writing is a low form, pivoting on “awful truth”, displayed an ignorance of its genealogy and complexity. Yet *Warp Drive* does begin with a partial disappointment. More detail and context in Stevens' Introduction – rather than the mixture of thumbnail history and decriminalization polemic – and more Australian literary history could have put *Warp Drive* in a bigger local picture. Stevens' generic referents are the old overseas favourites De Quincey, Hunter S. Thompson, Bill Burroughs, and the American newcomer Ray Shell. Perhaps Australia's self-proclaimed first drug anthology should have observed the rich stash of dope-lore hidden in AustLit: from the weirdness of Marcus Clarke's ‘Cannabis Indica’ (1868) and J. Fordel Henderson's ‘The Opium Slave’ (1913), to Michael Dransfield and the early Robert Adamson, reams of the Wilding-Moorhouse push, absorbing confessions like Kevin Mackey's *The Cure* (1970) and even *Monkey Grip* (1977) – a text to which Stevens' own 1994 novel *Nature Strip* can be read as a Generation X reply.

Then again, the dried leaf of literary history may be less interesting to *Warp Drive*'s implied readers, who no doubt are meant to prefer the fresh bud of John Birmingham's bong-on comedy, can identify with Anne Maree Weatherall's ‘Model Methadonian’, or recreationally rave in the party scene and clubland of Larissa Grundy's ‘Higher Than the Sun’. In this generally shady-realist style-zone, the editorial decision to include poetry (Gig Ryan's nervy, high-crafted pieces, for example) is initially somewhat dissonant. And not many anthologies come with an appended ‘User's Guide’, as is the case with *Warp Drive*. There is a non-fictional afterword on various popular drugs, from cannabis to Ketamine, with notes on their pleasures and perils prepared jointly by the Northern Sydney Area Health Service and the NSW Users & AIDS Association – an organization dedicated to the social

had the Nazis reached Alexandria, “they would have made lampshades from our skin and stuffed mattresses with our hair”. Her family's departure from Alexandria, which so distressed the young Virginia, was a direct result of the Suez Crisis of 1954. Thompson slips these facets of history into the text effortlessly, blending personal and official history into a coherent whole.

When recounting her adult years in Australia, however, the fusion is not quite as neat. Thompson lists her encounters with a dizzying array of famous people, from her brother-in-law Jack Thompson, to family friend Patrick White, to acquaintances Dennis Hopper, Leonie Kramer, and Barry Humphries, to a smile she received from Rudolph Nureyev as a star-struck teenager. The validity of her explication of these encounters is not in question here. Her marriage to Peter Thompson, and her subsequent close relationship with his family and their friends clearly had a great impact on the development of her sense of self. I felt at times, however, that the urge to list famous acquaintances was in excess of their influence on her emotional development. This tendency in the narration of the adult years slightly soured, for me, the pleasure I derived from the beautifully expressed coalescence of her Alexandrian family's history with significant world events in the earlier sections of the memoir.

These two books are so multifaceted that there is no room in a short review to completely do them justice. Given the space I would delve deeper into the two authors' relationships with their fathers, a significant motif in each book. I would examine each author's representation of their Australianness, their differing attitudes toward their marriages, their conceptions of femininity . . . the list goes on. These books are skillfully written, captivating, and well worth an attentive read.

ENDNOTES

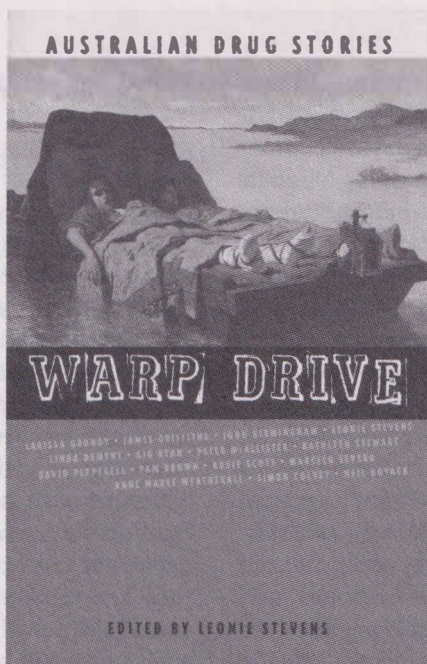
1. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, ‘Autobiography’, in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, ed. Laurie Hergenhan, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, p. 569.
2. David McCooley, *Artful Histories: modern Australian autobiography*, CUP, Cambridge, 1996, p. 12.
3. Wilhelm Dilthey, quoted *ibid*.

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welfare of drug users, vilified this year on talk-back radio by John Laws. This peculiar move for a *literary* anthology (imagine the *Penguin Book of Murder* supplying an appendix on poisons and hints for evading the homicide squad) seems bizarre on the surface.

Under the skin, however, the supplementary 'User's Guide' is a clue to the most valuable feature of *Warp Drive*: the point that drug writing is a field where social issues and realities have a peculiar saliency, and the lines between fantasy, fiction and fact dissolve like smack in a spoon. In drug texts, 'confession' frequently nuances into oral history, and the cartographies of synthetic heavens or hells often turn out to be maps of a humdrum world, proximate to and intersecting with everyday consumer culture. Sociologically, the rituals, class and gender relations, value systems and patterns of commodity-exchange in drug scenes soon seem pretty normative. "Drug-taking is a logistical nightmare, requiring advanced mediation and negotiation skills", Larissa Grundy writes; an observation that the ecstatic culture of the "beautiful golden rush" is built on a concrete network of social transactions and subterfuges.

In this regard, nearly all the contributions to *Warp Drive* are little sociologies of late 1990s Australia. The ingenious interactions of cannabis culture and high capitalism partly occupy John Birmingham in his mock ethnography 'Bucket Bong', which plots the invention and dispersal of a dope-smoking apparatus that finds new uses for the discarded 1.5 litre Coca-Cola bottle. Birmingham investigates why the bucket bong has taken Queensland and, to a lesser extent Perth, by storm, but has failed to catch-on in Sydney or Melbourne; and how drug demographics and decorums are influenced by the country's varied urban identities. Birmingham himself then appears as a character, and partner-in-crime, in Peter McAllister's 'Those Wacky Green Generals and Their Last Crusade' – reportage on a marijuana conference in Nimbin. McAllister recounts a meeting of the feral tribes of



northern NSW, a hip university criminologist, a medical researcher, politicians and townsfolk. The Crusade is a doomed attempt to establish a broad anti-prohibition coalition, set against the carnival backdrop of Nimbin's annual Harvest Festival. 'Those Wacky Green Generals' is also a satiric Conradian journey into commune-land's moral "heart of darkness", where the Kurtz-like Birmingham falls prey to the unspeakable rites of the region. A Nimbin native sneers at the comatose, grassed-out figure: "Mr Birmingham, he stoned", and the still-sane McAllister is left to face the horror of police-

men and to plan the escape back to civilization.

Rosie Scott's autobiographical 'Reefer Madness' is a memoir of experiment and eventual renunciation of drugs, framed by the familiar narrative of 'kid from the colonies trips to swinging London'. It soon changes gear, analyzing the destruction of counter-cultural idealism by economic forces and the "corporatization of drugs", and noting the epidemic effects of crack and heroin on working-class communities and "ghettos" in the US and here. Personal reflection leads to larger questions about the symbology and politics of dope, and thus the most introspective pieces in *Warp Drive* can acquire an unexpected sociological dimension, as Pam Brown's verse sequence 'I Remember Dexedrine and Other Poems' momentarily does. One poem, 'Double Adaptors', crystallizes a library of addiction studies in four simple lines, pinpointing how deftly narcotics can traduce genuine affections and relationships. Scott and Brown are amongst a majority female contributor-population in *Warp Drive* – an interesting gender balance, given the reputation of drug writing as a domain of the rogue male, and the still-prevalent assumption in academic research that the drug scene is a macho sub-universe where women are victims, props or appendages. This last myth is perceptively countered by Elizabeth Ettore's 1992 study *Women and Substance Abuse*, with its call for a specifically feminist sociology of addiction and, indeed, by *Warp Drive*.

Unsurprisingly, there are confronting things in *Warp Drive*, and superficialities too – a sense of the unbearable lightness of being stoned, and the danger of slightness or cliché in depicting it. “Drug stories are legendary”, Stevens says in the Introduction, and her invocation of De Quincey and Burroughs is a reminder that ‘quality’ drug writing can be a difficult art.

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A Canonical Overview

Nathan Hollier

John Leonard (ed.): *Australian Verse; An Oxford Anthology* (OUP, \$34.95).

I FORGET WHAT THEY CALL IT; the marketing technique where you instil prestige within a product by linking it with one that occupies a more prestigious position in the market. Oxford University Press applies this technique to Australian poetry in John Leonard’s latest anthology. Leonard had edited the various editions of *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*, widely used in schools and universities, commonly found in second-hand bookshops but I’m sure also, much appreciated by many readers of poetry and by others who normally wouldn’t purchase a poetry book in a pink fit, but know what they like. This anthology of Australian verse is modelled on the international poetry-in-English one, both in its appearance and format, beginning with the most recent and tracing its way back to the poetry of Barron Field, famously the author of *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (1819). I for one was very pleased with the presentation and glad to see the positioning of Australian poetry alongside, though of course distinct within, English literature.

Leonard also edited *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1990). That anthology is occasionally referred to as comparatively even-handed, and he seems to have remained removed from competing poetry cliques (at least in so far as one can within Australia). This Oxford anthology presents a canonical overview rather than a critical selection, though Leonard states that “no poem has been chosen simply for its histori-

cal value”. Again, this is not a bad thing and I don’t think he takes this tendency too far (there is ‘Australia’ by Ania Walwicz but not ‘Migrant Woman on a Tram’ by Jennifer Strauss, for example). It seems right in this context that some poems pick themselves: Harpur’s ‘Creek of the Four Graves’, for example, Slessor’s ‘Five Bells’ or ‘Eve to Her Daughters’, by Judith Wright. Leonard also allocates space, fairly blatantly, in accordance with literary or historical merit, leading inevitably to disputable selections. Les Murray, says Leonard, is “the obvious choice” as the major contemporary Australian poet. Well in one sense probably yes but . . . perhaps there is some room for critical awareness or explanation. As noted for instance, “regular publishing in Australia is increasingly in the hands of a few international companies who favour a small number of well-known poets who will sell many copies”.

Finally, I would like to raise the question of traditional Aboriginal song-cycles in translation. Murray was an enthusiastic advocate of such material in his Oxford anthologies while others, such as Kevin Hart, have rightly been wary of appropriating what is essentially a non-English-language tradition. Understandably, Leonard follows the latter course but this question has much to do with context and I wonder if this widely marketed generalist anthology may have been the place for it.

Nathan Hollier is researching Australian poetry at Monash University.

open framework: new poetry

Kerry Leves

Andrew Leggett: *Old Time Religion & Other Poems* (Interactive Press, \$17.95).

‘Rough as guts’ may be your first response . . . then you’ll notice you’re on the underside of Australian suburbia, and the view is very clear: “A skywriter is diving into the final ‘S’/ of JESUS SAVES, that final hook/ like the blade of a can opener/ tearing its way into heaven.” Consumerism, spiritual poverty, sexual repression and violence find language of harsh integrity. Uneven though; wide-ranging selection is magnanimous to a fault.

Poetrix 10, May 1998 (Western Women Writers, \$5).

A small, good-looking magazine of poetry by women. It breathes easily into the contemplative – there are some finely-modulated feeling-states and also a revisionist cameo – Helen Williams' deft, pungent Lady Icarus: "Someone is escaping, throwing off her shackles,/ heading for exotic horizons, fresher infidelities." Other standouts: Tricia Dearborn, Adrienne Eberhard, Sylvia Irlicht, Philomena Van Rijswijk. Excellent value for the money.

Zan Ross: *B-Grade* (Monogene, \$15).

A perverse misnomer – there's nothing mediocre about the busy abstractions, the black-belt assertiveness of this poetic language. Disdainful skewerings – "My father returns with touriste tokens: dolls, mantilla,/ perfume and syphilis" – alternate with confident impossibilities – "His thoughts telescope into a lipsticked slap/ against a mirror." Not exactly big on feeling, but the hot-wired edginess has its own appeal.

Susan McGowan & David Cookson (eds): *Friendly Street 22* (Wakefield Press, no price available).

The editors slaved over the selection for this yearly anthology of the Adelaide venue's reader-performers, and their hard graft has paid off. Eclectic and lively; if the ghost of pentameter stalks many poems, many others invent their own prosodic forms. Anna Brooks, Kon Calembakis, Neil Paech, Olive Snuggs add spark to the reader-friendly diversity.

Friendly Street New Poets Four: Junice Direen, *The Right Side of My Face*; Jules Leigh Koch, *A Set of Negatives*; Jason Sweeney, *Boy Stunner* (Wakefield Press, no price available).

Sharply differentiated trio. The prosepoems of Jason Sweeney's *Boy Stunner* (nice ambiguity) sling themselves around paranoia, longing, sensual mischief: "underhand. the hand goes under. dark and under. under the sleeper. cover blown. blow. he blow. blows in. in out. place hand pectoral waist sucking breastplate such ornaments glow." Junice Direen's lyrics can be colourful and feisty (Weekend is particularly strong) but her travel poems have a dimension of quiet that suggests an interesting contemplative talent. Jules

Leigh Koch's meditations on Garden Snails, Earthworms, Mice are among his most effective poems.

Neil Paech: *The Skinscape Voyeur* (Wakefield Press, \$14.95).

"the tongue's a volcanic flower that reeks of burning rubber./ the tongue. it does wheelies with hunger." An obsessional lover haunts Adelaide's streets and coffee bars and struggling galleries and low-rent housing. This allusive, inventive, extended lovesong never seems to take itself too seriously, yet can be anguished, blissful, cutting. "her eyes are grey and full of the smoke and mist that follows/ lakes around ...". Poetry that grips the way novels are supposed to.

Nicola Bowery: *Bloodwood* (Bunda Press, \$14).

Bold. "We ran to the tin room, the labour ward . . . / The nurse was scooping the last performing mother/ off the rubber pad – a tabby with her clutch –/ and the woman half-giggled at the joke/ before she moaned/ and we coaxed her to the bed." Tenderness, humour, interesting rhythms and a created tension between observation and construction: ". . . he rolls his wrist on the pad like a pro –/ his boy's wrist, barely a hair on its cuff./ Proudly he brands the page./ How so cool!/ What trigger has his finger oiled?" Invites the reader to make the poetry's meanings and to find (rather than be clobbered by) its distinct originality.

Ian McBryde: *Flank* (Eaglemont Publications, \$19.95, includes CD).

Portentous tones – but the deliberate pacing of the poet's incantatory reading-style serves the spare, oblique, imagistic poetry, backed by keyboard, multi-sync and drums. Rewards patient approach.

John Tranter: *Different Hands* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$16.95).

Reflects Tranter's awareness of information technology as a new transformer of writing. Based on the simultaneous processing of wildly divergent texts (e.g. Alcott's *Little Women* with Castaneda's *Tales of Power*) through computer-assisted letter-group frequency analysis. Tones and some syntax from various sources remain; the clash of registers is bizarrely

satisfying. "For his part, he was fascinated by the enormous flocks of Gertrude Steins we had surged out from lunch to see, sailing above the city. We looked up, but they had the advantage: they looked down on Paris."

Stephen Lawrence: *Beasts Labial* (Wakefield Press, \$14.95).

Crystalline diction, some fabulous imagery, strong rhythmic control . . . but mixed. Poems which give the sense of a top-flight intelligence fully engaged (Dancer at Dockside, Men with Breasts, Pauline Kael's Companion) share with overkill high-register riffing (Near Gillman, Cloudreading et alia). Best when situation, character/persona, and emotional content are assayed.

Michael Crane, Dee, Sandy Jeffs, Geoff Prince (ed. Michael Dugan): *Loose Kangaroos* (The Domain Press, \$20).

Performance poets, united by a common suffering: schizophrenia. Sandy Jeffs searchlights the landscape of the affliction, speaks also to the wider culture, can be refreshingly blunt and cynical. Rough, rave-style poems from Dee, with visionary flashes: "A man is like an argument/ Not backed up by any proof". Plangent portraits-in-depth from Geoff Prince. The big surprise is Michael Crane: playful, witty, affecting and skilful.

Philip Salom: *New and Selected Poems* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$22.95).

Affords space to witness the development of a generous, restless talent, a poet with a rhapsodic gift. The longer poems often strike the ear like hymns – they at once sue for and manifestly construct the beauty of the world, in Simone Weil's sense of that phrase. New poems open interesting perspectives on (for instance) representation, sexual jealousy, propaganda and everyday myth.

Anthony Lawrence: *New and Selected Poems* (UQP, \$24.95).

3 a.m. in broad daylight. "Over Katoomba pigeons turn from the underside of a purple thundercloud/

like a thrown set of knives." Intransigent, yet metrical and mimetic 'outsider' poetry that works to construct positions from which a recognizable world can be read in unfamiliar, troubling light. Phenomenal ingenuity, from a poet who's published six books in less than a decade, and carried off a swag of awards.

Jean Kent: *The Satin Bowerbird* (Hale & Iremonger, \$16.95).

Fairly sparkles with invention. Lightness, delicacy abound, yet it's culturally incisive. Can be read to trace social construction of female identity, as "the girl I used to be, navy-pleated, pristine-collared,/ reciting Verlaine, Ronsard, Victor Hugo" journeys to surrealistic apotheosis in the 'City of Arts' itself – Paris, with its fashion industry and patented images of Woman: "... that Dada shepherdess, the *Tour Eiffel*,/ tonight is supermodel tall . . . / . . . a million lost cars bleat at her stiletto heels." Emotionally literate, thoughtful, funny, the Australian poems spin on catherine-wheels of ardent lyricism, create a Queensland of the mind and senses – cities and outback towns, heat, rivers "eeling behind mangroves and baubinnias", thunderstorms, tropical fertility and velvet nights.

Lee Cataldi: *Race Against Time* (Penguin, \$19.95).

Might also be read to construct a dialogue between two places: the mountains of Italy, dark, familial, redolent of the cultural past, and very cold, with "a snow/ so light it can be breathed" – and Australia's far north-west where bush honey "slides out of the wounded tree/ into the open hand" and people "drink/ as if there is no tomorrow and dance/ their empty bank-books into oblivion." Sometimes witty and louche, sometimes anthemic, always affecting. On occasion wears its politics like a t-shirt; no excuse for the publishers' highlighting, on the back cover, the book's weakest lines: "the poet can only/ wring her hands like Cassandra". Oh, please. Cataldi has a no-nonsense attentiveness to physical and spiritual localities, a sensual intellect. Cassandra is her least convincing persona.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.

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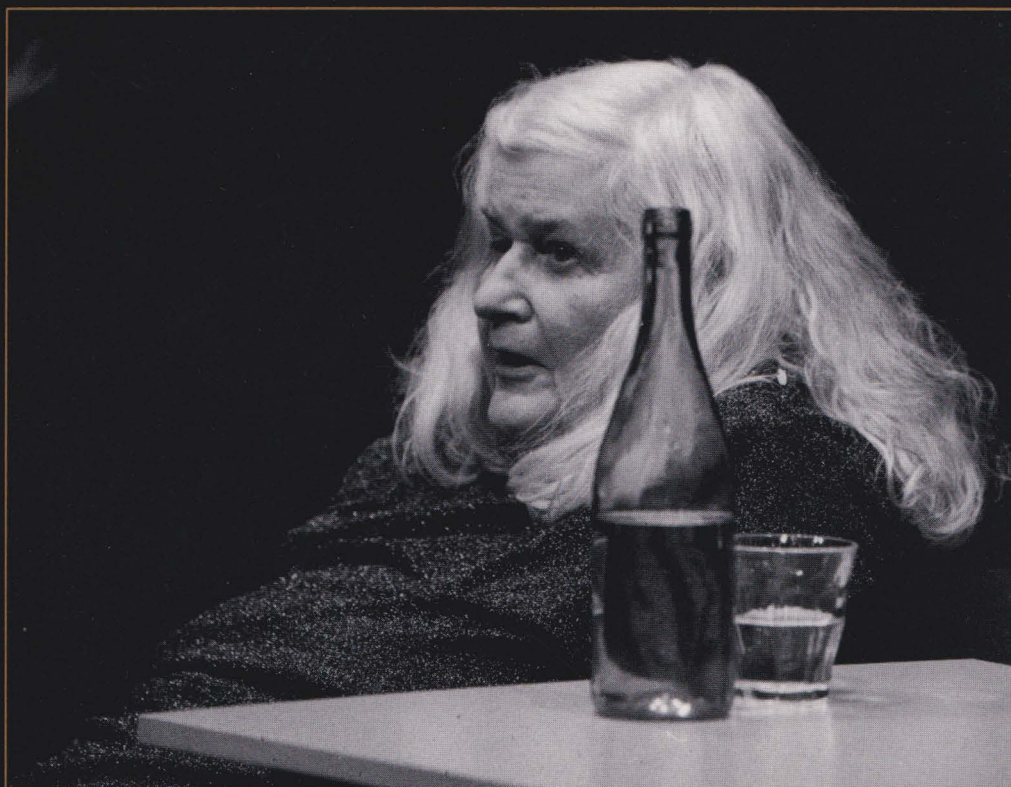
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