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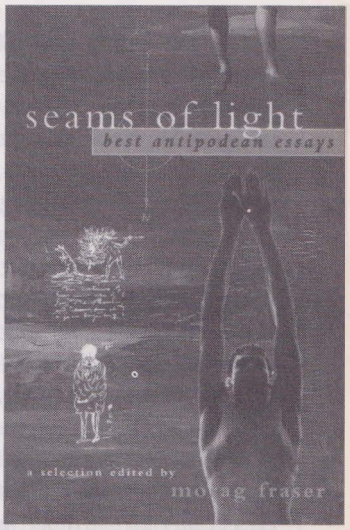
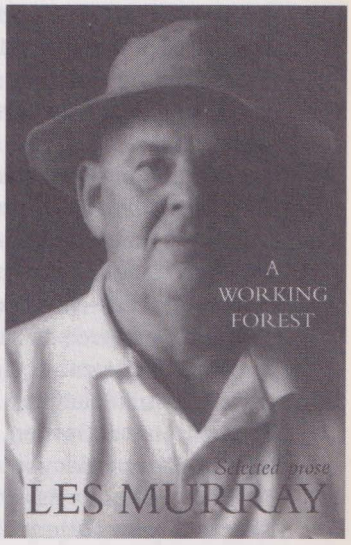
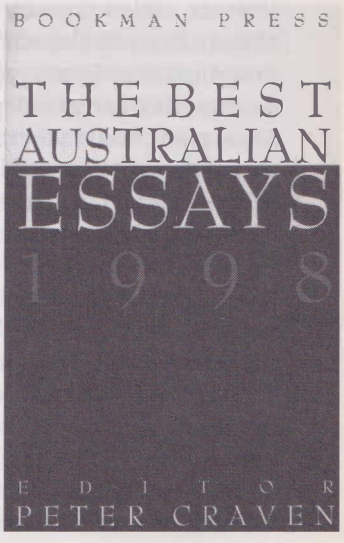
Mark Davis

Assaying the Essay

Fear and Loathing in the Literary Coteries







THE ESSAY WILL SAVE US. Well, that's the impression you might get from the claims, implicit and direct, made for some of the books of essays published lately. According to Morag Fraser, her recent anthology, *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays*, "is a set of essays on Wik, although I doubt that word is ever mentioned".[1] Peter Craven doesn't "know why, in any technical or volitional sense *The Best Australian Essays, 1998* is preoccupied with history ... perhaps it is what you would expect at a time in the last two years when Wik and Black Armbands and One Nations have raged all around us".[2] If Craven is concerned with what he describes as "the Aboriginal question",[3] then Robert Manne's collection, *The Way We Live Now: the Controversies of the Nineties*, too, starts off with a number of essays on Australia's Aboriginal history, including the standout 'The Stolen Generations', which is also included in Craven's *Best Australian Essays*. And *Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia* (which includes a Foreword by Manne) devotes itself entirely to race relations.

The race question is raised throughout the Imre Salusinszky edited *Oxford Book of Australian Essays* – as you might expect in a collection tracing the English language history of a postcolonial nation – by writers from D.H. Deniehy to the underrated Archie Weller. But the question is there, too, in its contemporary incarnation – anxiety – in essays such as Robert Dessaix's 'Nice Work if You Can Get It'. Dessaix's own collection, *And So Forth*, makes mention of Orientalism, Bruce Chatwin and Aboriginality in passing. Even two of the pieces in *Secrets*, an anthology put together by Drusilla Modjeska, Amanda Lohrey and Robert Dessaix, touch on race matters. Helen Garner's *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction* does the same in the sharply implicit politics of 'Mr Tiarapu' (which is republished in Fraser's *Seams of Light*). And Les Murray's *A Working Forest* broaches the topics of Aboriginality and ethnicity, including his own Scottish background.

Perhaps the journalist Luke Slattery was right when, reviewing Salusinszky's *Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, he said that the essay, in its Australian incarnation, "has been too much a vehicle for the working through of the postcolonial conundrum".[4]

All these books appear at a time when interest in the essay is unprecedented, amidst much talk of revitalizing non-fiction as a genre that the nation somehow needs to complete itself, and amidst laments about the lack of popular forums here – local versions of *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The New Yorker* – to facilitate the development of the form. But will the essay save us? I don't think so. Not in the form presented here. Though the reasons for this, paradoxically, don't have much to do with any lack of quality among the essays in these collections. And Slattery,

as usual, is wrong. Or perhaps not so much wrong as wrong-headed, having overlooked the real contractual terms being applied in these recent re-engagements with the 'post-colonial conundrum'. Re-engagements which, like many contracts, have silent conditions.

But let's get my baggage out of the way first. I have an interest in three of these books. My partner, Foong Ling Kong, copy-edited Fraser's book. Craven's *Best Australian Essays, 1998* includes Guy Rundle's essay about my own book, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*. Manne's *The Way We Live Now* also includes commentary on *Gangland*.

There's symmetry here. If the essay won't save us, it's got something to do with the situation I wanted to outline in *Gangland*. What we are witnessing in these collections isn't so much an attempt at saving a nation via an expression of concern about the fate of minorities (though it is that too), as an attempt to save a small and dwindling clique by seeking to demonstrate its ongoing relevance. It's the last-ditch stand of coterie liberalism.

A clique? Coterie? You can see what I mean in the way these collections were reviewed. Garner's *True Stories* was reviewed by Morag Fraser, Peter Steele and Peter Craven.[5] Les Murray's book was reviewed by Peter Craven.[6] Modjeska, Lohrey and Dessaix's *Secrets* was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Peter Craven.[7] Fraser's *Seams of Light* was reviewed by Peter Craven and Luke Slattery.[8] It contains essays by Robert Dessaix, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley and Peter Steele. The *Oxford Book of Australian Essays* was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Luke Slattery.[9] It contains essays by Robert Dessaix, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley and Pierre Ryckmans. Craven's *Best Australian Essays 1998* was reviewed by Kerryn Goldsworthy, Barry Oakley and Peter Steele.[10] It comprises many essays previously published in *Quadrant* during Robert Manne's editorship and *Eureka Street*, edited by Fraser, and includes essays by Helen Garner, Robert Manne, Drusilla Modjeska and Pierre Ryckmans. Dessaix's *And So Forth* was reviewed by Peter Craven and Morag Fraser.[11] Simon Leys' collection of essays, *The Angel and the Octopus*, was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Peter Steele.[12]

This is a culture that clearly fears being forgotten. One that somehow needs to validate itself. Gangs at work.

If what's going on here is a resurrection of the essay within the framework of a coterie liberalism that's attempting to re-invent itself as a relevant social force, then clearly that's not all that can be said about these collections. There are some very good essays here. Margaret Simons' 'The Press Gang' in *Best Australian Essays* is a stunner, especially the opening. Peter Walker's 'Maori War', Denis Byrne's 'Intramuros's Return' and Bill Cope's 'The Language of Forgetting' shine in *Seams of Light*. It's good to see essays like Arthur Phillips' 'The Cultural Cringe' and Manning Clark's 'Rewriting Australian History', to name two among many useful essays, in the same volume, as they are in the Oxford *Collection*. Reading *A Working Forest* I always seemed to be learning something, and I don't mean that rudely. Murray, for all his reputation as a self-fashioned 'redneck', turns out to be among the most democratic of non-fiction writers. His tone is often of collaborative information sharing: 'Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia'.

But none of these collections is simply about the essays in them. They're about the wider claims being made for the essay as a form. It's as a result of such claims being made right now, as an apparent necessity of this particular moment, that this spate of books has appeared. They're a phenomenon.

A clue to just what kind of phenomenon this anxious outpouring evidences is in the criteria laid down. The definition of the essay at work here is distinctly European, with a hint of *belles-lettres*, almost in spite of Simons, Walker, Clark et al. Fraser begins her introduction to *Seams of Light* with reference to Matisse in a Paris winter, adopts a notion of Antipodean hybridization for her sense of place, then books a ticket straight back to Europe and Montaigne for her sense of style, lauding his "zig-zag between self and subject, between interior rumination and the exterior world".[13] Craven tries for a wider, less conservative definition (trying to define the essay is an obsession for the multi-author anthologies among these collections), though he, too, nods in the direction of Montaigne. Yet despite this flirting with more adventurous definitions, *belles-lettres* still creeps in through the back door. There it is, in Robert Dessaix, in Chris Wallace-Crabbe, in Peter Steele, all in *Seams of Light*: the genteel turn from content to aesthetics, from politics to emotion, from worldliness to mostly banal interiority: epiphany, it was once called. There it is in David Malouf, in Pierre Ryckmans, fleetingly in Inga Clendinnen, tragically in Don Watson, all in *Best Australian Essays*. Mostly replete with olde-worlde liberal arts reference points: Agamemnon, Mahler, the Bloomsbury set, Victor Hugo, Don Quixote,

Byron, Poseidon's Trident. In *The Angel and the Octopus*, Simon Leys (who is really Pierre Ryckmans writing under a pen-name) can barely make it through a page without genuflecting to some canonical European artistic figure. What does it mean, this turn from the political to the aesthetic, at a time when "Wik and Black Armbands and One Nations have raged all around us"? The syndrome is there, even, in Richard Flanagan's indulgent 'Tapping a Cracked Kettle':

> But I am unable to read on. As the dull light of a grey Melbourne morning begins to seep into the hotel room my volume of Blake slips to the floor beside my bed and there drapes itself over Whitman's similarly fallen *Leaves of Grass* and my heavy eyes finally close.[14]

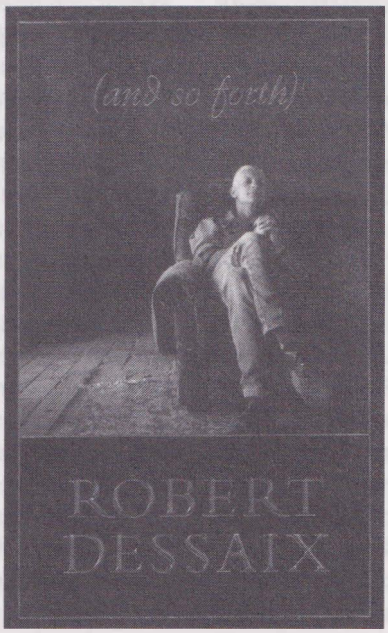
There's a clue here to what the broad aesthetic turn across these collections might mean. Flanagan, elsewhere in the above piece, tells people how to write (he warns against narcissism). Dessaix in *And So Forth*, is keen to pass on similar lessons (Garner, on the other hand, simply tells readers how *she* writes). Murray also provides the odd writing tip, which, like Dessaix's, are mostly aimed at academics working in the new humanities. For all the possible scope of the Oxford *Collection* it's surprising how many essays turn out to be about writing and literature: Deniehy, Sinnett, Kendall, Gilmore, Vance Palmer, Phillips, White, McAuley, Oakley, Wallace-Crabbe, Murray, Murnane, Weller (where are the sciences?). Salusinszky, here, appears to subscribe to the trad-lit idea that literature is at the moral centre of the modern world. This collection also contains quite a few essays about writing, literature and their relationship with the university: Brennan, Knopfelmacher, Buckley, Garner, Dessaix, Jennings – in the contemporary essays among these the lesson is the same: beware the dead hand. The other multi-author collections also focus on literature: Malouf on Victor Hugo, Wallace-Crabbe on the Bloomsbury set, Ryckmans on *Don Quixote*, Flanagan on everyone from Pirandello to Borges. Peter Goldsworthy self-consciously trying to buy into the (I think tedious) culture versus nature debate with an essay on the biology of literature. Like the introductions to Fraser's and Craven's collections, or the how-to-write lessons of Dessaix and Murray, such essays evoke an academic world that is fast fading from view: the era, perhaps, of Frank Knopfelmacher and Vincent Buckley, praised by Manne in his collection. It's like peering through a frosted window to a conservative nostalgia-world, the world as it once was: fireside academia. This is the academy that would have been, perhaps, if the clocks of social science and identity politics had been stopped, magic boomerang-style, sometime in the mid-1970s.

Europe. The place where *real* culture comes from.

The impulse at work here, I take it, is political, even as politics is often the very thing being disavowed. For all the gesturing towards questions of race and ethnicity, something else is being made safe. Not only do these collections look to the authorizing culture of Europe in what are difficult times for Australian identity, the self, here, emerges as a place of possible refuge. It's the very place, after all, where all that difficult worldly stuff seemingly can't intrude: the last refuge of unambiguous knowledge. As Salusinszky has said of the selection criteria for his collection, "the familiar essay is intensely personal", which is "why political, or republican, or monarchist, or religious polemics belong to another genre".[15] Well, that's true, at least, if we're speaking of the classical liberal self, the 'essential' self that these collections tend to valorize. The moral-indexing self of Garner or Manne; the reflective self of Steele, Wallace-Crabbe or Ryckmans; the vainglorious self, even, of Dessaix. The problem being, of course, that far from being self-evident, the way selves are constructed and the uses to which they are put is intensely political. The auto-validated Eurocentric self that understands high culture is precisely a product of the coterie liberal tradition. In Australia the members of such coteries set themselves up as a clerisy that speaks the common good, arbitrating on moral and aesthetic matters, self-licensed by their superior powers of discrimination and erudition.

But this sort of genuflection to Europe, this late in the day in a postcolonial nation, has political effects that apply to more than just the ruminative, personal essays in these collections, and that are themselves a commentary on the limitations of coterie liberalism. Among the essays in these collections, Manne's 'The Stolen Generations' is perhaps the most compelling, with its suggestion that the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families may have constituted genocide, much like the Holocaust. In a spirit of collaboration with Manne let me add that the federal government's present response to *Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Generation's Report*, and its reasoning that the practice of child removal should be judged by the standards and 'laws of the time', quietly recalls Hermann Goering's response to the post-Second World

War Nuremberg trials, when he argued that the actions of him and his fellow accused should be judged by the German laws they lived under at the time. This isn't to suggest the Australian government are akin to Nazis – they aren't themselves responsible for genocide, only a defense against a charge of genocide (well, not unless you include their and previous governments' failure to act on Aboriginal deaths in custody). But it's worth being reminded that protestations against charges of genocide tend to follow a pattern.



And yet, there's still something about Manne's essay that bothers me. As in so much of his writing, Manne's argument in 'The Stolen Generations' proceeds through occasional yet necessary reference to the Holocaust. Yet, for all the lessons of the Holocaust, part of me still asks, why Europe? In 'The Stolen Generations' Manne says that in his "thinking on the question of genocide certain concepts of Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have been central . . . for her the crime of genocide is committed when one group decides that another group is unfit to inhabit the earth and takes action to eliminate them".[16] Manne supplements this with Raimond Gaita's idea that genocide need not involve 'murderous means', but seems limited by Arendt's definition when it comes to thinking of socio-cultural assimilation as genocide – an idea Manne rejects. But admitting this last thing, it seems to me, is essential to any true understanding of what has happened, and continues to happen, to many Aboriginal peoples. Such an admission – that cultural genocide is real genocide – can be reached only by compassing the distinctiveness of Aboriginal cultures, and by acknowledging that instances of genocide each have specific characteristics, and that locally such genocide doesn't only involve lives lost and peoples dispersed, it involves the dispossession of entire languages, cultures and lands. One danger of Eurocentric models of genocide is that by neglecting the possibility of a culture where life and land are inextricably linked, they potentially limit our ability to perceive present injustices.

Given the Wik-related claims made by some of the editors of these collections, it's also worth recalling Veronica Strang's line on the Europeanization of Australian culture in her recent *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*. Describing the colonization of Northern Queensland by pastoralists, she says "they rode into the Gulf country on the momentum of modern Europe". There's an obvious warning here about the dangers of European high intellectual culture as an imperial apparatus. It, too, thrived by learning to speak for others, which is in part where the machinery of high liberalism developed.

The exercising of what T.S. Eliot called the 'European mind' might also be seen in Dessaix's lionization of liberal-arts pin-up boy Bruce Chatwin in *And So Forth*. Chatwin the hand of tolerance. Chatwin the understander of Aboriginal spirituality. This, the Chatwin of *The Songlines*, is a 'package' that Dessaix confesses to finding 'irresistible'.[17] But as the writer Ruth Brown has shown, Chatwin's ideas about an ideal marriage between (spiritual) Aborigines and (cultured) Europeans, while (racist) Australians are pushed to the side is not only Eurocentric, it conveniently ignores that Europeans dispossessed Aborigines in the first place. Chatwin's view of Aborigines as primarily 'spiritual' is precisely the stereotype that was used to further these same colonial ends – they aren't practical, lack utility, are childlike and unable to conduct their own affairs.[18]

As Murray says in *A Working Forest*, "We aren't Europeans any longer: some of us never were".[19] But there's little evidence in *A Working Forest* to suggest that Murray understands that a truly democratic embrace of race issues involves changing the very structure of public institutions. The people and agencies involved in making those changes are the very things that he, like Dessaix, seems most determined to resist.

All these assumptions about who the bearers of real cultural knowledge are have other unfortunate effects. For all the excellent essays in anthologies such as *Two Nations*, *Seams of Light* and *Best Australian Essays*, where are the non-white voices? Where are the Asian voices? Apart from Brian Castro's 'Auto/biography' in *Seams of Light*, silence reigns. Where, even, after decades and decades of immigration, are all the

southern European voices? But *how is it* that in the three collections here that claim to deal with Wik in some way, there isn't a single Aboriginal voice? Not one, among sixty-five essays. And why is it that those present in these three collections are the same old voices (a couple of token 'yoof' aside) who have been sponsored by newspapers, journals and publishers to speak for so long? What kinds of editing instincts are at work here? What is it here, finally, that is being preserved? Is it a speaking position – the tolerant benefactor?

The very criteria set up by editors and some contributors to these collections appear to foment such lapses. If contributors to *Seams of Light* were chosen for their insight into "how may we live together" so that the essays might "give some account of these cauldron years we are living through", and given that there are no Aboriginal voices present, it seems that despite good intentions, representativeness, here, still means 'speaking for' people using only those voices already legitimized by the aesthetic framework Fraser sets up in her introduction.[20] This aesthetic is already ideological in so far as it privileges the values and 'tastes' of a particular class, defining the essay accordingly. This tends to mean (but doesn't always mean) that Aboriginal writing falls at the first hurdle, *viz*: ungrammatical/unbeautiful/incoherent/directly biographical (as opposed to abstractly personal). Aboriginal peoples are descendants of many languages. They aren't likely, however, to be 'Montaigne's descendants'.[21]

As Dessaix suggests in 'Nice Work if You Can Get It', republished in the Oxford *Collection*, to be taken seriously, writers of non-English-speaking background should make sure their English (or their translator's) is "as inventive, as playful, as historically conscious, as good as a native's" before joining in the "conversations already taking place in the country they've arrived in".[22] By 'native', I take it Dessaix doesn't mean Aboriginal.

The voice that no-one wants to hear here is the voice out of season. The voice that might come crashing in on all this. It's perhaps fitting that the *imjim* totem figures Dessaix discovers in *Secrets* have no mouth, given that in the entire piece only one Aborigine briefly speaks (to pass on culinary advice – the old multicultural token). In keeping with the first two sections of his piece, one of which deals with ancient Egypt, the other with ancient Greece, everything here is covered with the lustre of the past, as if Aboriginal civilization, too, is long gone.

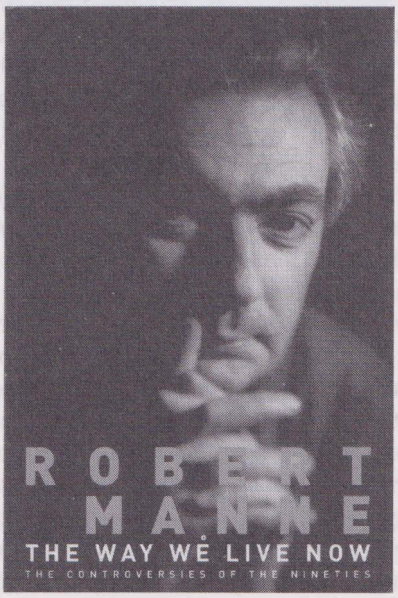
This is where Slattery's analysis comes unstuck. If there's any working through here of the 'post-colonial conundrum', then its terms are strictly limited. Nostalgia for a certain aesthetic style and the extended apparatus of coterie logic that goes with it are among the very criteria that tend to limit such debate. Sometimes, even, this coterie logic is enacted almost against the arguments offered in particular essays, without apparent irony. As Bill Cope says in 'The Language of Forgetting', in *Seams of Light*: "Liberal sensitivity to difference is a white lie . . . Difference and sensitivity are nicer than the way things used to be done – a kinder, gentler, white liberal racism".[23]

But to claim that the essay has fallen into abeyance as a form, and to campaign to resurrect it – to proselytize it not only through endless editorials, but through endless reviews from within the same relatively small clique – is only possible if one has already demonstrated another, quite different kind of blindness.

THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE in essays now is academic. It's only possible to pretend that the essay has fallen into decline as a form by equally pretending that academics haven't turned the essay into a multi-million dollar global industry. Or by ignoring the fact that academic publishers such as Routledge have, in the space of a decade, become multi-million dollar global conglomerates. Or by failing to acknowledge that academic theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Foucault, are now available in mass-market Penguin editions. The essay is in an unprecedented boom period, yet all the definitions of the essay offered in the above reviews and editorials seem designed almost specifically to exclude the contemporary academic essay as a way of justifying this blindness. Even if it's no longer necessary to mention Foucault's given name, so much has he become part of the contemporary furniture. Even if the sorts of (independent) bookshops that might stock coterie collections of essays usually have a large and growing literary theory section. Even if books by some of the very academics derided as cloistered by the editors of these collections have sold well over 50,000 copies to an international audience. Even if few of the supposedly mainstream local essay collections sold well, or found a wide public. It's no longer enough, either, to complain about academic prose (but then, the traditional liberal arts have always reserved the right to judge their writing by the best and the academy by its worst). The old guard of essayists might like to pretend this is still 1985, and that their clarity, therefore, has no peer. In some cases

it's still true – set aside an afternoon before tackling more than three pages of Judith Butler. But Sedgwick and others, such as Greil Marcus and Andrew Ross, write like a dream. Marcus, whose *Lipstick Traces* is a contemporary classic, recently had a piece nominated among the one hundred top pieces of this century's non-fiction writing.

It's like watching the inhabitants of a small but very industrious village go about their business of, say, building a wagon, oblivious to the fact that a very large and heavily trafficked freeway passes almost directly overhead.



Despite all the variations across the range of these recent collections, the single defining characteristic that almost all of them share is animus against the contemporary humanities. If it's not Salusinszky talking about academic intellectuals disappearing up their 'discursive formation'[24] (despite his own academic affiliations – in this respect he appears to be working in a long Australian tradition: academic self-loathing), it's Murray wagging his finger at "a cabal that rules the intellectual life of the nation, promoting a received sensibility . . . cracking the whip for an agenda of causes and social attitudes".[25] Or Garner describing academic feminists as "feminism's grimmer tribes".[26] Or Manne expressing the 'dismay' he would have felt had he discovered a history of the Holocaust in Latvia had been written by a Derrida scholar. Or Craven pretending he got to Foucault first, and is done with all that. Or Fraser praising Montaigne's amateurism as she valorizes those forms of essay written outside professional, indeed, pedagogical contexts. Dessaix's work is full of small asides against academic 'culture doctors'. "Even as you read these lines, they're out there", he warns.[27] It seems to be the stuff that keeps his self-definition going, and in this respect his work is emblematic of these collections. These attacks, clearly, are one of the ways this dwindling ecology sustains itself; makes itself real. This is the way the 1950s world seen through the frosted window is kept whole and available. But if what emerges here is simply a kind of chauvinism, where definitions are contrived to suit certain ends, then this chauvinism, too, can be measured by absences. Where, in the multi-author anthologies, are writers such as John Frow, Sylvia Lawson or Meaghan Morris? Have they not made a contribution to wider cultural life?

If this might seem to be simply a defence of the academy, then my point is deeper than that (clearly the academy doesn't have all the answers either). What these collections also share is a failure to notice changes in public space, and the way it operates. To put it bluntly, 'others', now, demand to speak for themselves. If the speaking positions taken up in these collections tend to evidence the old (monocultural) logic of centralized meaning at work, then they also hark back to the day, not too long past, when culture was vertically integrated and high culture was an end in itself, making available speaking positions with in-built, readily identifiable clout. Culture, though, is increasingly horizontally integrated, and appeals to meaning that rely on a high–low culture hierarchy are struggling for relevance in an era notable for the sheer number and variety of groups who claim to produce distinctive cultural meaning, as well as for the increasing variety of forums used. This isn't to say that the old forms can simply be declared 'dead' – but nor do they have automatic force.

Rear-guard actions, though, have a habit of getting nasty. The essays and writers who are most valorized in this little star system (for that is what it is: check out the style of photo, for instance, that graces Dessaix, Garner, Manne and Murray's books; proud yet wise in an era that cries out for seers) tend to suffer the 'nineties disease'. They hold to the idea that those who speak out against 'political correctness' are proud 'dissenters' (despite the fact that everyone's doing it), that such people run the risk of being censored by 'thought police' and becoming the victim of conspiracies of 'organized opinion' (despite their own high media profiles), but who nevertheless claim to be Clarion voices, whose business it is to announce some 'exposé' of excess and scandal in a given area – feminism and multiculturalism are favourites (having systematically overlooked the self-critique that goes on within the field, whilst exploiting the fact that its on-the-ground exponents are unlikely to get mainstream media space to put a counter-view).

An effect of such criticisms is to pretend that energy for social change comes primarily from within the academy (if only), and is containable.

Yet it's this very syndrome – the nineties disease – which, finally, mars *A Working Forest*, which is otherwise an eclectic and interesting read. Garner's 'The Fate of The First Stone' is already looking like a relic, a leftover from the culture wars: a period piece that stands out as by far the weakest in *True Stories*, because the story it offers up of the writer as victim of 'political correctness' is already a nineties cliché: it otherwise lacks the undercurrents of other pieces in the anthology and tells nothing new. Yet there it is, published in two of these collections. Dessaix's 'Nice Work if You Can Get It' with its polemicizing about what might happen if state sponsored multiculturalism were abandoned (equality), with its digs at grants some non-Anglo ethnics are eligible for, its underlying logic of assimilation, and its assumption that only one cultural conversation is valid, has turned out to be little more than a forerunner of what was to follow in the race debate. Dessaix is high in this star system: he graces four of these collections. Is this really what it takes?

Reading Dessaix on how academics "lock writers into categories they have willed into existence in the first place" (multiculturalism) and how "the losers, as always, are the patients [multicultural writers]",[28] I was reminded of another piece of writing:

> The indigenous people of this country are as much responsible for their actions as any other colour or race in this country. The problem is that politicians in all their profound wisdom have and are causing a racism problem ... until governments wake up to themselves and start looking at equality not colour then we might start to work together as one.[29]

I think it's safe to assume Dessaix is no supporter of the person who made this second remark – Pauline Hanson in a letter to the *Queensland Times*. And let me immediately stress that in no way am I suggesting Dessaix or his work are racist, or that either in any way manifest the kind of race-hatred and ignorance that I believe animates Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. But the similarities in logic are an uncomfortable reminder of how tied up sections of the cultural establishment have become in equality fundamentalism, with their own attacks on the 'elite establishment' of the social sciences, and through their own nostalgia for straightforward empiricism as *the* way of knowing. One function of what remains of the high–low culture hierarchy as a structuring device in public space, though, has been to shield the work of those who take the high culture road from this sort of comparison. It looks like blasphemy.

Would it be blasphemy too, to suggest that the version of the essay on offer here is primarily nostalgic for a culture where 'literature' still ruled as *the* form of moral knowledge, and that this form of cultural nostalgia, even as it fights against Hansonism and claims to offer something on Wik (offers which, I think, are sincere and often useful), is nevertheless making similar assumptions to Hansonism on the *real* origins of meaning and culture?

What the ideology of the essay form being brought into play here by the editors and publishers of these collections (but, as I've said, not necessarily by their individual contributors) does, finally, is ask contemporary criticism to give up its arms. It wants a muted, quietist criticism; not a complex, difficult criticism. One that can't do anything. One that, most of all, doesn't talk about difference. It's time to get back to essentials, such voices argue; to the things that derail ideologies (Eros, direct experience in the form of "less Foucault and ... more foreign travel"[30], Pinker's language theory – take your pick). This is where the writing lessons offered by so many of these collections come on stream. In *And So Forth*, for example, Dessaix conducts a discussion on open and closed writing as if he were the Truer Democrat – the archetypal open writer. His bogey, of course, is the standard academic straw man. Yet even as he teaches "letting the reader in", his own message about what happens to those who don't (you turn into an authoritarian academic) couldn't be sterner. In a wincing instance of false humility Dessaix offers what is in fact a clerical lesson; a pedagogy no less authoritarian than a high-church sermon, complete with moral – but the irony seems lost on him.

Manne achieves something similar with his proposal that academics should give up talking about 'moral panic' at the same time as conservatives give up talking about 'political correctness'. As a piece of reasoning, it's not very clever. What he's passing up here isn't simply an opportunity to think about the difference between the two – the latter is a populist media product, the former a product of decades of detailed and systematic research – but Manne not only quietly erases this distinction with his formalist, indeed, relativist approach, he also gives up an opportunity to speak about what happens when issues such as

feminism, race or youth crime enter the mainstream public sphere.

In fact the wonder of these books is that they tell so little about the present. Where is the stuff on biotechnology, cyber-being, digitization, or the melding of life with technology? Everything here takes place in the old modernist world, where the twin spheres of production are simply culture and nature, man and the world, functioning as discrete entities. It's the old existential-psychological 'man' of moral tendencies, not the 'man' of blurred subjectivities, that we find here. The Human Genome Project might be changing life before our very eyes – and the definition of life with it – but you wouldn't know it to read these collections.

But *will* the essay save us? Certainly not in this form. Not while the old wrongs are still being practised, in ever more secret, quietly nostalgic ways. Which isn't to say that watching these books being published and being party to their presence, isn't to have witnessed a distinctive historical moment.

ENDNOTES

1. Morag Fraser, interview with Murray Waldren, 'Front-line Puritan', *Weekend Australian*, 14–15 March 1998.
2. Peter Craven, 'Introduction', in Peter Craven (ed.), *Best Australian Essays 1998*, Bookman, Melbourne, 1998, p. xviii.
3. Craven, 'Introduction', p. xiv.
4. Luke Slattery, 'Not Personal Enough', *The Weekend Australian; Review*, 6–7 December 1997.
5. Peter Craven, 'This Helen's for Real', *Weekend Australian, Review*, 6–7 April 1996; Morag Fraser, 'Garner's Stories in Search of Truth', *Australian Book Review*, no. 179, April 1996, pp. 5–6; Peter Steele, 'Having a Go', *Eureka Street*, vol. 6 no. 3, April 1996, pp. 32–33.
6. Peter Craven, 'Grand Flow of Murrayspeak', *Weekend Australian, Review*, 31 January 1998–1 February 1998.
7. Morag Fraser, 'Troika of Secrets', *Australian Book Review*, no. 196, November 1997, pp. 8–9; Peter Craven, 'Triple Bill That Makes No Secret of Quality', *Sunday Age, Inside Story*, 11 January 1998.
8. Peter Craven, 'Words Conspire to Dazzle and Delight', *Sunday Age, Inside Story*, 8 March 1998; Luke Slattery, 'Maturing in Fine Style', *Weekend Australian, Review*, 9–10 May 1998.
9. Morag Fraser, 'Inspired Eavesdropping', *Australian Book Review*, no. 195, October 1997, pp. 9–10; Luke Slattery, 'Not Personal Enough', *The Weekend Australian, Review*, 6–7 December 1997.
10. Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'Essaying the Essay', *ABR*, no. 208, Feb–March 1999, pp. 9–10; Barry Oakley, 'The Heart of the Matter', *Weekend Australian, Review*, 12–13 December 1998; Peter Steele, 'Rambles in Reason', *Age, Extra*, 5 December 1998.
11. Peter Craven, 'Me and My Spirit', *Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum*, 14 November 1998; Morag Fraser, 'Grand Miscellany', *Australian Book Review*, November 1998, p. 19.
12. Morag Fraser, 'Untimely Truths', *Age, Saturday Extra*, 6 March 1999; Peter Steele, 'Angel, Sphinx', *ABR*, no. 211, June 1999, p. 5.
13. Morag Fraser (ed.), 'Matisse's Turban, An Introduction', *Seams of Light: Best Australian Essays*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 4.
14. Richard Flanagan, 'Tapping a Cracked Kettle', in Craven (ed.), *Best Australian Essays*, p. 75.
15. Imre Saluzinsky, 'Revival of the Essay', *Australian, HES*, 8 October 1997.
16. Robert Manne, *The Way We Live Now: The Controversies of the Nineties*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p. 39
17. Robert Dessaix, *And So Forth*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1998, p. 178.
18. *See* Ruth Brown, 'The Songlines and the Empire that Never Happened', *Kunapipi*, vol. xiii, no. 3, 1991, pp. 5–13.
19. Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Potts Point, 1997, p. 118.
20. Fraser, 'Introduction', pp. 5–6.
21. Fraser, 'Introduction', p. 5.
22. Robert Dessaix, 'Nice Work if You Can Get It', *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, Imre Salusinszky (ed.), OUP, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 239–40.
23. Bill Cope, 'The Language of Forgetting', in Fraser, *Seams of Light*, pp. 209–16.
24. Imre Salusinszky (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, OUP, Melbourne, 1997, p. 4.
25. Murray, p. 185.
26. Helen Garner, *True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1996, p. 172.
27. Robert Dessaix, 'Nice Work if You Can Get It', p. 232.
28. ibid.
29. Pauline Hanson, letter to editor, *Queensland Times*, 6 January 1996.
30. Robert Dessaix, *And So Forth*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1998, p. 210.

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Thea Calzoni

The Progressive Art of Community Writing

> *I feel so sorry for myself. There are times when I wonder if I wouldn't do best to spend in one year the three hundred thousand franks I have left – and afterwards . . . what would I have left? But what would that give me? New suits? Women? Travel? I've had all that and now it's over, I don't feel like it any more: not for what I'd get out of it! A year from now I'd find myself as empty as I am today without even a memory and afraid to face death.*[1]

In Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, the narrator, Antoine Roquentin (a writer), personifies the existential view that it is falsifying human life to present it in the form of a narrative. He speaks of "that existence which falls from one present to the next, without a past, without a future".[2] He develops a horror and a fascination for objects which exert the power of existing forever in the present.

At the end of the story he appears to gain strength to carry on through contemplating a new project of narrative construction.[3]

> A book. Naturally, at first it would only be a tedious, tiring job, it wouldn't prevent me from existing or from feeling that I exist. But a time would have to come when the book would be written, would be behind me, and I think that a little of its light would fall over my past. Then, through it, I might be able to recall my life without repugnance. Perhaps, one day, thinking about this very moment, about this dismal moment at which I am waiting, round-shouldered, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I might feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: 'It was on that day, at that moment that it all started'. And I might succeed – in the past, simply in the past – in accepting myself.[4]

As an alienated teenager in the 1970s, reading these words gave me hope. I sensed that self acceptance could be realized through creative practice. Today, I work as a community writer, engaging groups of people in a dialogue with the wider society through poems and stories of daily life. After more than twenty years of practicing community arts, with nine spent working on writing projects enabled by Community Arts' funding from the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA), I now feel ready to make a theoretical contribution to the field.

My understanding of community arts is drawn from practical experience supported by other workers in the field and backed up by resource material such as the working papers of the Victorian Ministry for the Arts' *Artist in Community Training Program*, particularly Working Paper No. 7, 'Four Approaches to Community Arts', by Brian Moroney (1985), the Writing in the Community Conference papers, the *Work Guide – How to Establish an Artist in Community Project*, written by Bev Roberts (1989), and journals such as *Arts Brief*, the newsletter of the now disbanded Victorian Community Arts Network, and *Network News* from the Queensland Community Arts Network, *Artists and Unions – a critical tradition*, a report on Art and Working Life programs by Sandy Kirby (1991), *Literature in Health: creating spaces for change*, Fiona Pace's paper delivered at the First National Conference/Workshop, 'The Arts in Health', Toowoomba, November 1994, the Artist Reports held at the Australia Council Resource Library, and the works supported by the ACA Community Arts Program, such as Wendy Lowenstein's oral record of the 1930s depression, *Weevils in the Flour*. Also helpful has been literature such as *The Republic of Letters*, edited by Dave Morley and

Ken Worpole (1982), *Community and the Arts*, edited by Vivienne Bins (1991) and *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras* by Gay Hawkins (1997).

The notion of community cultural development was introduced to me by Cliff Smyth, veteran of community writing from the anarchic early days of Collective Effort Press, which published *925*. He was an enthusiastic organizer of community writing groups and conferences and prepared to take on the question of how community arts might survive in the new political and social framework of the 1990s.[5] I learned from Cliff that writing groups as community cultural activity should be run on principles of mutual respect involving opportunity to comment on each other's work, listening to each other, and working collaboratively to develop a creative representation of the community.

Cliff formally inducted me into community arts in 1989 when he supervised my work with *Industrial Voices*, a community writing project of Carringbush Library funded by the Community Cultural Development Unit of the ACA to develop literature from injured workers in Melbourne and the La Trobe Valley. While the field was new to me as an area of paid employment, I had in fact been practicing community arts in the early 1970s when I belonged to the Guerilla Street Theatre Collective based at the University of WA. In the 1980s I engaged in a recreational pursuit of community through experimental video making and song writing about union issues and alternate lifestyles. In those days, my activities were expressive of but not informed by what Gay Hawkins describes as "a community arts complex".[6]

In her history of the Community Arts Program of the ACA, Hawkins claims that radical welfare discourses of the political importance of community were remade in community arts policy which, in defending community arts in opposition to both high and mass culture, resulted in the funding of programs "which spoke only to themselves".[7] She suggests that the focus on generating or reviving community has overtaken any concern to explore related issues in the production of progressive art.[8] In taking up this question, I will argue that progressive art is that which successfully contributes to the representation of cultural diversity. According to my definition, progressive art is that which goes beyond the prevalent social definitions of the dominant culture. It does not prioritize conformity to the aesthetic criteria of the elite but makes its power felt through the creative presentation and compelling nature of the raw material. It is not driven by attention to the demands of the market economy but can speak to a wider audience of people who empathize with its subject. It is active and carries a redemptive power for a modern society which prioritizes corporate culture over that of other communities.

Tom Shapcott, Director of the ACA Literature Board in 1985, referred to community writing as:

> an evolving craft area, one that would seem to waver between the educational and therapeutic practice of writing on the one hand and on the other hand the development of skills and social integration through community based writing activities.[9]

Practitioners contest the representation of community writing as therapeutic community development. Hannie Rayson, for instance, has taken exception to Shapcott's implicit devaluing of community writing as an enriching experience for unaspiring amateurs rather than as an enriching experience for writers in general.[10]

Bev Roberts shares her view. She comments that writing from persons other than those legitimated by publishers and other agencies of the dominant culture:

> provides a moving expression of the personal significance of writing, and suggests the significance of that writing for readers who might find, for the first time, familiar experiences given a written shape and in language which makes meaning immediately accessible. The devaluation of such writing in terms of personal therapy and social utility is evidence of the arrogance and elitism of the cultural oligarchy, tenaciously – and falsely – upholding an absolutist concept of 'solid literary merit'.[11]

The point is well made that the depiction of writing as therapeutic may detract from its validity in a particular aesthetic framework. This is not to deny that writing can be therapeutic, for writers and readers. Writing can have many effects, from pleasure to discomfort, from arousal to subversion. Choose your poison! My taste is for something with a bite but which also yields some therapeutic capacity.

Writing which meets my criteria for progressive art exists in *Voices from the Deep Close Distance*, a collection of stories and poems published by the Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture. The work was developed through the employment of writer

Mammad Aidani to facilitate Foundation clients' investigation of "their experience of language and its connection with their experiences of displacement, alienation and exile."[12] Sue Liddlelow, counsellor/advocate and holder of the Arts and Writing portfolio at the Foundation, declares of those whose work appears in the book:

> The writers speak out the 'unspeakable' and they have put themselves on the line in a public forum to contribute to awareness and change. The torturers wanted to steal the voices of these people, but by writing or speaking, they reclaim their voice and make others stronger.[13]

I bought the book after reading the following poem by Guatemalan refugee, Eliseo Balcazar:

I want to give you all the news
I want you all to hear my voice
I want you to know the reality.
You have seen the smoke screen for 42 years.
I have lived this reality for so long.
Mine is only one of many
My sisters and brothers, my motherland, have
even worse
histories to tell.
They cannot speak
They live in terror
They have disappeared.
They are dead.
I wish to be their voice.[14]

This simple poem conveys the weary agony and defiance of the refugee torture survivor speaking on behalf of those left behind. It is an easily accessible poem, but it has power. I would like to see such a poem in the foreign news section of the daily newspaper, for readers to make a sympathetic connection between the anonymous victims of foreign regimes of terror and the migrant in the street to whom they could show friendliness.

My creative expression has always been driven by an emotional response to forces of repression, alienation and exclusion.[15] When I speak of the redemptive validity of inward looking community projects, I am referring to a type of therapeutic benefit of creative practice experienced by those of us whose intrinsic sense of self-worth is under siege in the home, the school, the workplace and the market. One so disempowered feels a longing to redeem one's individuality and assert a claim to authorize one's own life. Community arts which tap into such a longing will generate creative works that assert individual identity and are celebrated by a supportive community that does not judge work on the basis of elitist aesthetics. Through the resurrection of popular knowledge in the creative representation of everyday life, community arts also carries the seeds of social redemption, of giving subjective meaning to human life in the face of systematizing social forces. The publication of such knowledge in the texts of community arts serves not just to make people feel better (in projects which 'speak to themselves') but also to enact the power of one who acts in her own right (in projects which speak to the wider society) in place of the passive voice of the subject, of she who is more often acted upon.

My models of progressive art are drawn from community projects which may appear to 'speak only to themselves' but which also hold a greater social significance in their representation of what Foucault calls subjugated knowledge. Foucault's analysis of the criminal justice system shows how power is yielded by those who accept the discipline enacted upon their persons by social institutions.[16] Foucault characterizes as subjugated knowledge those "buried knowledges of erudition" with which the study of particular local historical contexts has informed critical theory and "disqualified [knowledge] from the hierarchy of knowledge and sciences".[17] 'Functionalist' and 'systematizing' thought, which characterizes institutionalized knowledge, disqualifies certain popular knowledge (*le savoir des gens*), for instance, that of the ill person, the patient, the nurse or the doctor in experience which runs parallel yet is marginal to the knowledge of medicine.[18] In opposition to the discourses of the disciplines he advocates the publicizing of subjugated knowledges whose information might empower individuals.[19]

The following accounts of my personal experience of community arts projects are offered as case studies in the discussion of the nature of progressive art. The first is drawn from my impressions as a guest at the launch of the book, *That Woman in Black*. A Nicholson Street Community House oral-history project, it was designed to contest the stereotyped public representation of migrant women, as in traditional domestic roles or as subjects of workplace drudgery.[20] The launch was generously supported by the Moreland City Council, enabling the participation of a variety of local women and other performers from non-English-speaking back-

grounds. Some of the women featured in the book spoke about their lives, struggles, the eventual success of chosen careers and the financial support of their families.

I felt privileged to be in attendance at this celebration of the lives of strong multicultural women. I also felt some discomfort throughout one of the launch entertainments. This was a didactic piece of theatre by Brunswick Women's Theatre, performed with skill and precision but still managing to push tedium to the nth degree as it represented migrant women as oppressed factory workers and harassed housewives/mothers. That I found the work lacking in the qualities I seek in progressive art is not criticism of any other production of Brunswick Women's Theatre, but simply a strong negative emotional response to this particular cultural presentation which seemed utterly out of context. The piece did not sit well with the purported theme of the project to contest stereotyped images of migrant women.

That Woman in Black contains a wealth of material but I feel that justice has not been done to the participants through the representation of the text. The lives of the women unfold through the printed transcript of interviews in a seemingly unedited text that struggles to keep the attention of the reader. This was a project with the potential to extend cultural awareness of the diversity and depth of character of migrant women in contrast to stereotyped perceptions. With better-crafted presentation of the material, it would claim the attention of the wider community. Its subject matter and the people involved in producing it are the bearers of subjugated knowledge that would assist our society to mature in its appreciation of people from other cultures. Had the writer/collector of the life-stories in *That Woman in Black* had more time, resources and professional development, it is likely that the work could have emerged as literature, rather than a collection of interviews. The failure of the project to reach its potential might be attributed to its development, on a shoe-string budget, outside the framework of the community arts complex, without any Community Arts funding support from the ACA. Progressive art can be enhanced by funding from appropriate agencies.

It is important that funding be adequate in terms of product as well as process. I have to live with the consequences of my past lack of attention to quality in this area. In 1995, I agreed that the desktop publishing for my trade union 'Writer in Community' project could be done in-house by overworked administration staff. The result was an amateurish looking book containing photographic portraits of workers and writers at work, printed so poorly that the subjects were barely recognizable. *Stories from the Workplace* contained some powerful writing capable of evoking compassion for the plight of the injured worker, but it wasn't distributed much beyond the immediate community of participants.[21] It was too badly packaged to stand the test of public scrutiny. Had I taken more time and developed an application to the Presentation and Promotion Category of the Community Cultural Development Fund of the ACA, the project might have been funded to meet the criteria I have outlined for the status of progressive art.

By 1998, I was experienced enough to adequately budget for *Disability Dialogues*, a self-initiated project which the CCDF fully funded to develop and publish work which did justice to participants in terms of product and presentation. Members of the public attending the chaotic book launch were pleasantly surprised by the quality of *Disability Dialogues*. A steady demand for copies continues into 1999.

A mark of the success of the project arises from its inclusion of people whose writing had developed beyond their first work with me on a previous disabled community writing project in 1993. In the earlier work, *The Special Children's Album*, Sandra Morabito wrote her first poem:

Getting the child assessed
to get special services
for special needs
the mother knows the problem
the specialist will not listen
asks "Does Mummy hit you?"

I always make sure I've got a back-up person
to wait with me
a support person
to help me get through
to the specialist

I remember spending a day waiting
at the hospital
for my child's appointment
the child getting more bored and frustrated
while people went before us
with suits and briefcases
miniskirts and sexy legs

They ask what did I eat when I was pregnant
do I hit my child?

There's something wrong
They say he is deaf
I know he is not deaf
I show them
He hears me say "Chocolate!"
from across the room
and comes running[22]

In *Disability Dialogues*, a new poem states the point of view of Sandra's son:

A house, a little house
with locked rooms.
Where are the keys?
Where did she hide them now?
Are they in the jacket by the door?
Or did she hide them on the shelf once more?
No, not there. Maybe in her pants, around her waist.
No, maybe in another place . . .
I found them! I open the door!
Here she comes once more so I kick and scream
That doesn't work. I tried it before.
I run to the window and bang on that
I bang so hard it begins to crack
I did that all round the little house
I'll do it again but what's the use?
She's smarted up and put plastic to use
Everywhere we go, she holds my hand
She might as well tie me to an elastic band
I say toys – She says – no money
I say food – She says – enough
My eyes close – She says – go to sleep now
My eyes open – She says – good morning

Oh what hell

Let me out Let me out
Here she comes once more
Hugs and kisses, hugs and kisses
We go outside to the street
She takes my hand.
I let go to run and run
as fast as I can
Just then she says – STOP!
The man in the car shakes his head.
She says – home again.[23]

This poem demonstrates progressive art in writing that lets us into the world of a mother and son struggling with autism. *Disability Dialogues* rates some success as progressive art in its content and appearance, but also in its potential impact upon the community directly involved in the care of children with disabilities and those outside this area. It is a work of passion, and for some, a source of empowerment.[24]

Chairs in a circle
yellow sparks of thought
words bouncing all around
lists on the white board
the blinds of the mind open and flowing free.[25]

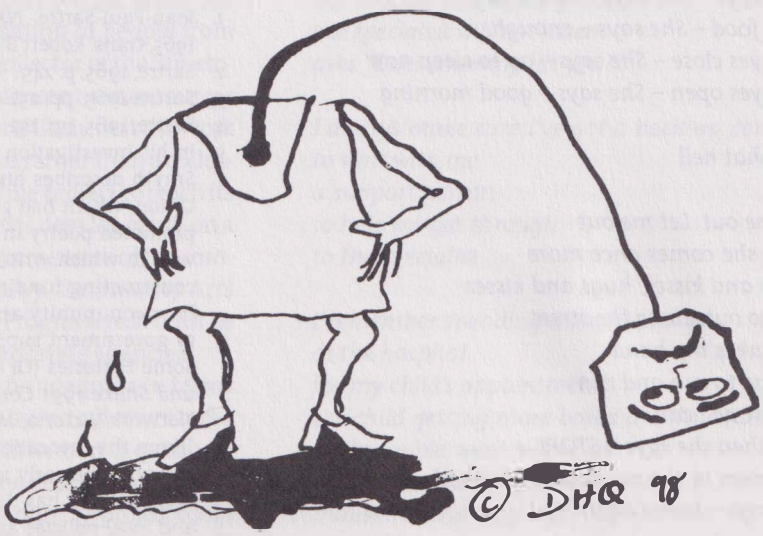
I find progressive art in community writing and I aim to keep on practicing it, warts and all. It is writing which is unlikely to attract the esteem of the cultural elite. It uses language more familiar to subcultures than to the dominant cultural group and it speaks the truth of varied forms of existence rather than the reality of the dominant paradigm. It is therapeutic for me and hopefully also to those with whom it communicates. It is good to have one's existence affirmed. It helps one along the road to self acceptance. One can also learn from having one's ideas challenged. We may not have the means to travel beyond our own circle, but through engagement in progressive art we can explore other worlds through literature about and from people of other cultures.

ENDNOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, trans. Robert Baldick, p. 245.
2. Sartre, 1965, p. 249.
3. Sartre, 1965, pp. 252–253.
4. Sartre, 1965, pp. 252–253.
5. In his investigation of writing in the community Smyth describes his early membership of the Poets Union, which had goals of payment for all poets and promoted poetry in the community. He describes the way in which writers use their creativity in constructing funding submissions and considers how community arts might survive the withdrawal of government support. See Cliff Smyth, 'Telling Some Histories (Or Some Telling Histories)', *Rattle and Shake 1991 Conference Report*, Community Arts Network Victoria, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 5–10.
6. "From the invocation of 'community' in federal arts policy in the early 1970s to the 1990s, a community arts complex has developed, characterized by state and local policies and funding programs, community-based arts organizations, associations of community art workers, journals and the discourses which circulate within and between these various

sites." Gay Hawkins, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, p. xx.
7. Hawkins, 1993, p. 162.
8. Hawkins, 1993, p. 164.
9. Tom Shapcott, quoted by Hannie Rayson, 'Writers at Work: In Community Contexts', *Artist in the Community Training Program, Working Paper 3*, Community Arts Project Centre, Victorian Ministry for the Arts, Melbourne, May 1985, p. 5.
10. Rayson, 1985, pp. 5–6.
11. Bev Roberts, 'Community Writing', *Meanjin*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1988, p. 292.
12. Sue Liddlelow, 'Foreword', *Voices from the Deep Close Distance*, Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc (VFST), 1997, p. 7.
13. Liddlelow, 1997, p. 10.
14. Eliseo Balcazar, 'Why I Must Write', VFST, 1997, p. 23.
15. See 'Trying Times', *Ash*, 1982; 'Revival', *Tropical Lust and other Stories*, Permanent Press, St Kilda, 1992; 'Dirty Work', *Southland*, Spring 1993; 'Lipstick', *Going Down Swinging* 14, 1994; 'The Client Perspective – the missing link in work injury and rehabilitation studies', *The Journal of Occupational Health and Safety* (Australia & New Zealand), February 1997.
16. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Penguin, London, 1991, pp. 143–148.
17. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p. 82.
18. Foucault, 1980, p. 82.
19. Foucault, 1980, pp. 82–92.
20. Georgia Flaskas, 'Introduction', *That Woman in Black*, Nicholson Street Community House, Melbourne, 1998, pp. i–ii.
21. Thea Calzoni (ed.), *Stories from the Workplace*, National Union of Workers, North Melbourne, 1995.
22. Sandra Morabito, 'Words . . . Excuses . . . Judgements . . . Labels', in Thea Calzoni (ed.), *The Special Children's Album*, Melbourne City Mission, Melbourne, 1994, p. 21.
23. Sandra Morabito, 'My Dominic's World with Autism', Thea Calzoni (ed.), *Disability Dialogues*, Calzoni & Fleckner, Brunswick, 1998, p. 44.
24. Thea Calzoni, 'Dreams Regrets Satisfaction Uncertainty', Calzoni, 1998, p. 33.
25. Karen Ditty, 'Empowerment', Calzoni, 1998, p. 71.

A writer of film scripts, plays, poetry and short stories, Thea Calzoni has produced five collections of writing from people facing problems of disability. She is currently working on a performance project with children from Croxton School. She is President of LeftWrites Alternative Festival for Readers and Writers Inc, an organization which is developing a festival with the aim of making space for the voices overlooked by the elite literary establishment.



Debbie Harman Qadri

Poem

You are cooking something spectacular.
Rain is flowing down the street,
filling the gutters, the rains are coming,
they are like a band and the town
brims over with you, or the news you have brought.
The telephone rings in your flat; others call wildly,
inoperatively. In bunkers people are cheering.
It is what the end of a war might be like.
You have almost forgotten how it was, before,
what it was like to feel lazy, or to listen in
with an intent that begins with the sound
of thunder after lightning then soon stops.
My front porch has a place in the relief
we once found in movies, where people say
what they want when they want how they want.

Cassie Lewis

A Dole Diary

Dangling Man
is a short book about unemployment,
original but
loveless.

Summer in Brunswick can be unrelenting.
I proceed to smoke myself out of hiding,
drinking black coffee in the heat.

Last week I had a vivid dream about enlightenment.
There was shit on the walls but a new reticence
made its way to the front of my thought.

Often I sleep now in streetlight
on a brown vinyl couch outside,
next to a fence covered with vines.

Friends travel, but sporadically.
I don't feel jealous:
I bless them
fervently.

An eternal convalescence
intercepted by a man.

She swam out to her lover through the drifting weeds.

Cassie Lewis

John

When i think of you i suspect
Bukowski was right
  "jail is a long time"

you did fourteen years
& one month for making
unspecified withdrawals from
banks
  not to mention those
specified withdrawals from
chemist shops

& you laughed through an
awful lot of that jail
  didn't you John –
& you made a lot of others
laugh too

did you ever cry into your
pillow at night John?
  i was always too
embarrassed to ask
  & anyway –
you always had me laughing
with your stories
through those visits

what are you John?
about 5 foot 5
maybe 5 foot 6 on a hot day
  but you told me you'd
never let a gun show
a tremble
  & you said how you just
loved asking for it
you said how you couldn't
drive or hot-wire a car
  that was always Benny's
gig
  & you told me how you'd
always have a series of four
cars on the ready
  so you could leap-frog
if the jacks closed in

& all those stories of
rubber masks
& sawn-off shotties
  & i loved that one –
that one about how the boys
knocked off a car with a
'vanilla ripple badge'
  & how you wouldn't
cop it

"take it back" you screamed –
"we don't pinch from cripples"

honour among thieves eh John?

think back to the police
informants in the yards

yards of them eh John
  & didn't they make a lot
of blokes laugh

& yes John
  i was laughing that sunny
day in San Francisco when i
sent you that postcard from
Alcatraz
  to me you were just an old
gangster
  just past your prime –
& i knew you'd love that card
  something to flash in the yards
eh John
  something to break the boredom
i've never told you this before

but one of the boys rang me
from Mobilong when i got back
said that you'd flipped out –
that you'd met god
or that you were god –
& that you were quoting the bible
& holding up the scriptures now
"schizophrenia" was what he said
the screws were saying

well you've been out for five
years now & you're on the 'done
but jesus John –
it doesn't look as though
it mixes too well with the
Pimozide

you rang me & i picked you up
from the train station
John you were hopping
from one leg to another
like a bird
five little hops
& then you were back onto
the other leg
you looked so timid
so gentle
so harmless
so old –
as dangerous as my daughter's
budgie

the years haven't been kind
to you John

Bukowski was right.

Geoff Goodfellow

Erudition

From the stone bathroom
where I washed alone,
unusually thin,
scared by dawn's romance
of light on blue surfaces
and my skull's marching I'd fall
crashing into her gaze
like a derelict lover. We drank tea,
discussed the open mind.
It was a year from our lives.

The hate I nursed like a vigil
like an angry war veteran
was familial, choked-up and banal.
My mother's sadness, my father's sadness.
Someone told me I was lost and I trusted them.
But she took the moon.
And she was the woman
like a flower
unfolding my life, so deeply sane,
interminably cheapened by a routine god.
There was, to us, in breathing, a certain resonance.

On the border between loss and choice
she encircles like a waist all I own
and all I'll ever know of beauty.
For my salvaged pride
with no bitterness, no remorse at all
I'd bring her wine as we're both delivered,
restored to warmth,
to symmetry.

Cassie Lewis

fiction

Father's Day

Betty Collins

BERT WILLIAMS WAS EIGHTY, this very day. He awoke in his twin bed, parallel with its replica – same sheet set, same blankets, same frilled cover hanging beside its mate on the hooks his wife Rose had had their long-time handyman fix to the bedroom wall.

Over the fifty years of their marriage he and Rose had grown more alike too. Maybe, he ruminated, you were what you ate, and they'd been eating the same food for that long also, except for breakfast. But Bert knew there was a difference. He might talk like Rose, have similar likes and prejudices, share the observance of their religion, have the same friends. But, he thought, swinging his legs out of bed and placing his feet firmly on the floor, he had something distinctly his own.

They'd had a shower annex put in the bathroom ten years ago, when at seventy he'd decided it was getting too difficult to climb into the bath and shower there. Now he hung his pyjamas on another of Rose's hooks (she couldn't abide clothes on the floor) and stepped into the gush of warm water, adjusted it until it was just right.

Bert was more sensual than his wife. His pleasure came not from hooks and tidiness but from the feel of things – warm water on his now-withering skin, the foam of soap from the ball of net he lathered with, the soft towel from the heated rail. That had been his idea, to run the hot water through the towel rails.

He put his pyjamas on again, wiped the mist from the cabinet mirror, used his electric shaver to remove his decreasing whiskers. They weren't white, and he wondered sometimes, if he grew a beard, would it still be brown and young looking?

Back in the bedroom he collected his clothes, careful not to disturb his still-sleeping wife, and padded out to the lounge to dress. It was a beautiful morning, and always he savoured this time on his own before Rose awoke. He didn't always sleep so well himself, but wouldn't exchange drugged sleep for this.

He went out to get the Sunday paper and so did his neighbour, old Geoff, two years older than he. "Well, you're catching up, boy," Geoff shouted, "Eighty today! That's pretty good."

They chatted a moment at the fence – fine weather, no rain for the farmers but great here on the coast where both had retired years before. Maybe a game of bowls later in the day – but the family would all be taking Bert out for lunch.

Bert walked round the garden, talking in his head to the plants. He knew not to do it out loud, one way to be defined as a nut in this enclave of retired members of the Returned Services League. But then, there was a lot Bert didn't say out loud.

He went down the back to see what the bandicoots were up to. There was quite a family of them outside the wire fence. A rather common but protected native species, Rose would have liked to get them eradicated, but had compromised with a chicken-wire fence and Bert's assurance that they preferred their bit of scrub to Rose's clipped lawn. Most mornings Bert chopped up an apple and tossed the pieces to the little furry creatures, telling them softly it wasn't healthy his side of the fence. They would stare at him, bright eyed, and

he was sure they got the message.

A pair of parakeets, vivid red and blue and green, came to say good morning, flying off again in a whir of rainbow wings. Rose couldn't abide pets, so there was no household cat to frighten the skink, sunning itself on its usual rock, or the tiny field mice who'd made a nest with bits of grass in a corner of the fence. Rose never came down there any more, once he'd given up his vegetable garden, so Bert and his little creatures had the place to themselves.

Rose was up when he went back inside. Clad in a pink quilted dressing gown and feathered slippers, she enveloped him in a perfumed hug. "Happy birthday, love," she said warmly. "It's a great day for it. Have you been up long?"

She always asked, and he always said No.

They went into the kitchen, Bert sat down to read the headlines and see what Ginger Meggs was up to. Ginger had been in the comics since Bert was a boy, carried on by others when his creator died. He wasn't quite as funny, but not to be missed.

Rose got Bert's breakfast – weetbix, tinned fruit salad and icecream. He loved it, and the doctor couldn't see anything wrong with it, so Rose had long ago decided to humour him. She made her own toast and marmalade, poured their tea, and was glad no-one but her and the doctor knew of Bert's outlandish taste.

Rose was rather careful about what people knew. She'd lived here now for nearly twenty years, since Bert had retired early on a full army pension. He wasn't really a TPI, totally and permanently incapacitated returned soldier from the Second World War, but a heart murmur had been noted on his discharge papers and had secured the pension with his early retirement.

They'd sold the house in the suburbs they'd bought with a veteran's loan, and owned this smaller one outright. The children had grown up by then and moved away. They and the grandchildren came up for holidays sometimes, one spare bedroom did for that and the motel could take the overflow.

"Mollie and Richard arrived last night with the children," Rose told him. "They phoned from the motel after you'd gone to bed. Fred and Beverley stayed overnight in Taree; it was a bit too long a drive for Julian. I'm glad, because at least he'll have had a good sleep."

"Just like his father," Bert said with a smile. "Remember how fractious he used to get when he was tired, or bored?"

"He wasn't that bad," Rose said defensively. "He just wanted to wait up for his father, and you were always late."

"Well, I was working pretty hard," Bert said. "And he's grown up all right. A chip off the old block."

"He really is like you, isn't he? Now, if you'll wash the dishes, I'll get ready."

"Sure." He put down the paper, amused that the sameness of their days was always punctuated by such requests. He wondered what would happen if he ever refused the small tasks. Long ago, as far back as when Rose was first pregnant, he'd decided to take the path of least resistance. Headstrong when young, Rose had settled into a kind of easy domination of him, her children and most of their friends. Bert had learned that the best way to handle it was to acquiesce, choose to enjoy it, and only to take a stand when he felt he must.

As compensation Rose had learned to give in if he really put his foot down. The rarity of such an event had if anything empowered him. If he had a real issue and wouldn't give up on it, stubbornness would be seen for strength.

Rose had booked their table for ten at the town's best fish restaurant, and they'd all meet there at two o'clock. Time for Mollie and Richard to sleep in and have a leisurely breakfast at the motel and follow their teenagers to the beach with Fred and Beverley's children when they arrived. It wasn't hot enough to swim, but running on the sand with their cousins would hopefully wear the young ones out.

Rose brought fresh-baked scones and morning tea out to the patio where Bert sat in the sun, a bolster against the too-rich food and wine that would come later. Rose was a good manager and rather despised women who couldn't do such forward thinking. She had put Mollie into the Girl Guides, whose motto was

'Be prepared', for that purpose, though it didn't seem to have stuck.

Punctually at two Rose parked by the restaurant and she and Bert made their entrance. He looked dapper in his navy blue blazer with the RSL badge on his lapel, and the well-pressed grey trousers that went with it. Long ago he'd changed collars and studs for open-necked shirts, but he still polished his shoes before every wearing. For eighty, Bert thought he looked pretty good.

Rose was wearing a new pale blue suit, setting off her permed blonde hair. She still had it tinted, no sense in letting herself go, and wore light makeup. It irritated her that their waiting family hadn't bothered, the parents dressed like their children in tracksuits, the women without even lipstick! "Ah well," she thought, "they look healthy. I suppose that's something."

They all got up and welcomed Bert, making a fuss, kissing and hugging him, shouting "Happy Birthday" so other diners would know. Rose sat at the foot of the table, receiving their kisses on her cheek as they filed to their places. The children hadn't brushed off the sand.

Fred ordered champagne and Rose was glad she'd made the scones. She knew they'd start drinking before the food arrived. And they ordered the fisherman's feast, with oysters and prawns, calamari, scallops and mussels, with fish and salads. Bert wouldn't hold back, not on his birthday, and Rose breathed a resigned sigh.

Bert began to open his presents – socks, a tie, a bottle of Scotch from Richard. Millicent and Roger, Mollie's teenagers, had brought him records for his old stereo (Bert refused to get a CD player), old pressings of the big bands of his youth. He guessed they'd gone to a lot of trouble to get them, and he beamed his thanks. The younger ones, Jilly and Julian, had clubbed together for a box of chocolates, forbidden, but no doubt Rose would take charge and dole them out to him.

Bert felt extremely happy. Here was the family he'd never expected to have. He believed they loved him, old codger and all. Rose could hardly monitor what he ate (or drank) from her end of the table, and he felt too well to be concerned himself. The youngsters were far noisier and uninhibited than his had been; even Julian was demanding champagne in his lemonade.

"What's wrong with Julian?" Rose asked Beverley. "He looks moon-faced."

"He had the mumps, didn't you, love? He's better now."

"Mumps?" Bert looked concerned. "You want to watch them, Bev, there can be some nasty aftereffects."

"That was years ago, Dad," Fred said with a grin, gently touching his young son's neck where the swelling had been. "Now they shoot them full of antibiotics, and it's over in a few days."

"Glad to hear it," Bert said, and offered the boy the last king prawn. "Do you lot always go for holidays together? When we were younger, couples used to go off for separate holidays. It was supposed to recharge their batteries; keep the marriage fresh."

"Really?" Mollie looked speculatively at Richard. "Now the children are older, I guess we could try it." Their two, Millicent and Roger, seventeen and fifteen, took a sudden interest in the conversation. "Why don't you try it, Mum? We're old enough to look after ourselves, and you two must be sick of always having Dad's leave coinciding with school holidays."

"It worked pretty well," Bert smiled. "I'd go off with a mate in his car, we'd play golf and go fishing. Your mother could go to health farms and eat vegetarian, and do lots of healthy exercise. She always came home in great shape. In fact, Mollie, you and Fred were both conceived after we'd had such a break. Which was good for Rose, because she wanted children so much and we weren't having much luck."

"Really?" Mollie smiled at her mother with new warmth. "Did you want us so much, Mum?"

"Of course. All women want children," Rose said. "When they're married, that is."

Millicent choked on her champagne, and managed not to point out that marriage was no longer such a consideration. She'd studied safe sex at high school; and was in the process of persuading her mother to get her the Pill to stabilize her periods.

"There's a right way and a wrong way to do things," Rose said primly. "We just have to hope that our children are bringing up theirs the right way."

Mollie sighed and ordered dessert, a more elaborate one than she really had wanted. Though she was always trying out diets she was still overweight, legacy from the days when food had been a refuge from her mother's self-righteousness. Poor Bert! She wondered how her father had stood that for so many years – more than half his life!

He seemed happy enough, placid almost. He glanced at his wife and ordered coffee but no dessert, a compromise he hoped she'd approve of. He wasn't supposed to drink strong coffee either; but could count on her not to shame him in public. Afterwards it might be a different story, but he remembered an adage from his youth – the game was worth the candle.

They all stood and drank a toast to his eighty years with the last of the second bottle of champagne. Eight faces smiled at him above their glasses – "Here's wishing you many more!" They came and hugged him, then it was time to go. Bert grabbed his Scotch and left his wife to gather the other presents. "Thank you all for coming," he said warmly, "I do appreciate it, and it's such a long drive home." Richard took care of the bill.

Mollie and Richard had checked out earlier from the motel; now they, Fred and Beverley rounded up their respective children and went to their cars. Bert and Rose waved them off, then she drove home and fussed him to bed to sleep off his once-a-year splurge at lunch. Rose removed his bedcover and hung it on its hook. "I'm glad you had such a good time," she said. "We'll take it easy for the next few days." She quickly took off her new suit, hung it, and put on something more comfortable. She'd sit in the recliner and read the *Women's Weekly*.

Bert hung his blazer in his gent's robe, brushed his teeth, folded his grey trousers in their creases over a chair, put his shoes on shoe trees and, with some relief, surrendered his tiredness to his bed. As he drifted off to sleep a smile was playing around his mouth. Bert too had had mumps when young, but in his day it had often resulted in losing the ability to father children. He owed his happy life, and the family with whom he had spent such a fine day, to the modernism that had sent his wife on separate holidays.

With a secret like that, a joke of such proportion, one that he had never discussed with her, Bert figured he could put up with Rose's concerns about keeping up appearances, hanging things on hooks, telling the children how to run their lives and managing his.

All things considered, she had done very well. Somehow she'd managed to give herself the benefit of the doubt, to finally go into denial, to become her version of the perfect wife. Her happy cuckold slept.

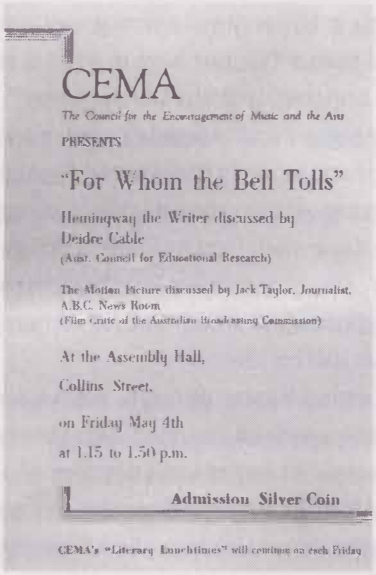
Deirdre Moore

The Realist Writers

THE REALIST WRITERS' GROUP in Melbourne emerged soon after the Second World War, and was the outcome of several earlier movements. One was the wartime organization, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, forerunner of the Australian Arts Council. CEMA was flourishing in England, and an Australian branch was established under national president, the singer Dorothy Helmrich.[1] The Victorian CEMA was formed late in 1944 or early 1945, with its president the Kew artist 'Rem' (Rembrandt) McClintock, and secretary Jack Coffey. It initiated and helped organize many aspects of the arts, including the movement towards libraries in factories, and lunchtime musical concerts in or near the workplace. 'Art and Working Life' might well have been its motto.

We were at war: CEMA was a catalyst in showing how human problems could become popularized through being shaped into literary and art forms which would reach wider audiences. In those days 'media' and 'markets' were not the 'boss words' in vogue today. Instead, we spoke about 'audiences'. CEMA's newsletter was called *New Audience*.

CEMA also held 'Literary Lunchtimes' every Friday at the Assembly Hall, Collins Street, in 1945–6, attended by many who worked in nearby offices. These 'Lunchtimes' (the audience brought their lunch with them) included a 'Meet the Author' series, with speakers like Leonard Mann, renowned for *Flesh in Armour*, a realistic novel about war; Alan Marshall, *These are my People* (1944); and R.H. Croll of *The Open Road* and many other books. Other programs included actor Moira Carlton who spoke on 'Australian Dialect' (Sydney J. Baker's *Dictionary of Australian Slang* (1941) and *The Australian Language* (1944) were new literary landmarks, much talked of at the time). On one occasion, in tandem with the ABC film reviewer Jack Taylor, I spoke on Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the writer and book, Taylor on the film of that name, just released.


CEMA

The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts

PRESENTS

"For Whom the Bell Tolls"

Hemingway the Writer discussed by
Deidre Cable
(Aust. Council for Educational Research)

The Motion Picture discussed by Jack Taylor, Journalist,
A.B.C. News Room
(Film Critic of the Australian Broadcasting Commission)

At the Assembly Hall,
Collins Street,
on Friday May 4th
at 1.15 to 1.50 p.m.

Admission Silver Coin

CEMA's "Literary Lunchtimes" will continue on each Friday

CEMA handbill, which changed weekly

So many scientists, artists and writers, as well as people from other walks of life, were caught up in the tidal wave of Marxism sweeping across the world after June 1941, when the USSR became our military ally. Some Realist Writers came from among the Communist Party radio script writers who met regularly in 1945 to plan scripts. The CP had a program on radio 3XY (Saturday 9.50 p.m.) 'Stories in Song', exuberant musical celebrations of working people, in poetic-prose style scripts partly inspired by the great American radio writer, Norman Corwin,[2] with appropriate music. Poet and journalist John Thompson wrote the year's first broadcast (24 February 1945) on 'The Birthday of the Red Army', with recordings of many stirring Red Army songs. Muir Holburn wrote and recited the second session (3 March 1945), 'The Ballads of Eureka', his fruity baritone voice delivering those long-forgotten ballads he had researched. Muir later scripted and broadcast the session on fellow poet, writer and friend, 'Voice of Humanity: E.J. Brady', author of *Australia Unlimited*. Historian Brian Fitzpatrick, known to me from the 'Mitre Tavern' days of 1943–4, scripted 'Saint Patrick's Day' for 17 March. John Bennett wrote 'Songs the Convicts Sang', and 'Vachel Lindsay', Maxine Bucklow (née Maxwell) wrote others on 'Sea Shanties', 'Negro Spirituals' and 'Fats Waller' (a member of the Communist Party of America), each a separate session. I contributed a script on George Gershwin (21 April 1945), and there were many others.

A third source was *Comment*, which nurtured some of our Realist Writers. This literary periodical, edited and published by Cecily Crozier, commenced in 1940. Its supporters met on fortnightly Sundays at Cecily's East Malvern home, for 'high tea'. Muir Holburn and I joined them in 1943, introduced by American poet Karl Shapiro, whose book of poems *The Place of Love* Cecily published in 1942. Shapiro writes in its Preface:

> [Ours is] an age of wars ... and in the midst of war ... I suspect a hidden panic; namely, Was this to be the last personal moment? Each modern soldier acts under a similar compulsion and panic ... Writing this book I found myself with Lenin in one hand and the Old Testament in the other.

Comment *Sunday gathering*

Left to right: *unidentified male, Cecily Crozier, Deirdre Cable, Josl Bergner, Sylvia Green, unidentified female, Muir Holburn, unidentified female. Courtesy M. Pizer. Can readers help?*

The book's cover states that his earlier work "was sharply satirical of modern life".[3] Despite war-time paper-rationing, *Comment* was impressive. Its cover and pages were pale brown, the consistency of today's brown wrapping paper, in the 'old quarto' size. Along with its one-word title as masthead, the text was printed in one different colour, red, green, blue, etc. for each issue.[4] Its contributors included poets Karl Shapiro and Max Harris, artist and poet James Gleeson, and reportage writer Ray Hughes. Muir Holburn's long (sixty-line) ode, 'Christmas, 1942', a celebration of the end of being an undergraduate as well as the victorious battle of Stalingrad, was one of his many poems that Cecily published. At her 'high teas' I well remember Cecily's husband and *Comment*'s layout editor, the artist and writer Irvine Green, whose many lino cuts enriched the colour and design of the magazine,[5] as well as his sister Sylvia who lived with them, and Cecily's hospitable mother. The poet Frank Kellaway, son of Australian actor Cecil Kellaway, was a regular attender, and Marjorie Pizer and I recall the plump Dutchman, Eric Schwimmer. Later contributors included Alistair Kershaw and Adrian Lawler.

Another much earlier movement, some of whose writers overlapped in membership with the Realist Writers, was the Australian Writers' League, formed in the 1930s from the Movement against War and Fascism (Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Arthur Howells, Len Fox, E.J. Brady and others). Its 'historian' Arthur Howells believed the Writers' League "was not ... party political. [It] catered for progressive young writers to whom truth and realism appealed more than the sugar-coated pills of escapism and literature nicety". Len Fox reported that the Writers' League was "a section of the anti-fascist Writers' International ... formed as a result of the Nazis' attacks on books and on writers."[6]

Frank Hardy spells out the list of Realist Writers in 1946, when he:

> joined the newly-formed Realist Writers' Group, the literary organization of the Labour Movement ... Among the original members were Jack Coffey, secretary ... Les Barnes, Stan Robe, Will Secombe, Deirdre Cable [myself] and a few others ... But Eric Lambert, Ralph de Boissiere, Walter Kaufmann, Max Brown, ... and others joined later and were nurtured in the Group and John Morrison, Elizabeth Vassilief and Judah Waten also joined as it developed.[7]

Bill Wannan was another who joined later. I am unsure about the dates on which these later writers joined, but can testify as to Frank's 'original members'. As a

Realist Writers' Group one Sunday morning, 1949 or 1950, at Stan Robe's home, Pine Avenue, Elwood

Left to right, Back Row: *Ralph de Boissiere, Jack Coffey, Frank Hardy, unidentified male, Roy Hartkopf, Ken Gott, Bill Wannan.* Front Row: *Walter Kaufmann, John Morrison, Nellie Stewart, Stan Robe. Photographed by Realist Writer Lance Loughrey. Courtesy M. Pizer.*

group, we had the same political leanings, supporting changes in society and advocated realism in literature. I have kept notes from some Realist Writers' meetings, one of which, dated 29 January 1946, reads:

> Our titles are too flat, many articles too dry. The writers know their material but can't write well (yet!). The Realist Writer's task is to learn life, to learn people and to learn technique.

But after the meetings some of us felt we had saved the world for another fortnight! The Realist Writers' Group ranged from university graduates to workers who had left school at thirteen or fourteen, but academic and working-class writers made a fine mix. Scholars and worker writers loom large in the democratic tradition of our literature.

New publication outlets also were opening up around this time. *Australian New Writing* was launched in 1943, inspired by the English journal *New Writing* edited by John Lehmann. *ANW*'s editors were Prichard, George Farwell and Bernard Smith, later joined by Ken Levis, and art editor Roderick Shaw. Issue No.1 was praised as a "brave new magazine" by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (as cited on the back cover of Issue No.2, dated March 1944 with cover in leaf green). On the back cover of Issue No. 3 under the title 'Our Critics' are five favourable critiques, seriatim the Sydney *Sun*, the ABC, *Education Sydney*, *The Workers' Star*, and the *Queensland Guardian*. Around 1943–44 *Progress* appeared, another magazine under the editorship of George Farwell, who was president of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (1944–46). *Progress* had less literary emphasis than *ANW*, but was another new outlet. The Australian Pocket Library (paperbacks published by Robertson and Mullens by arrangement with the Commonwealth Literary Fund) provided another avenue, publishing around twenty titles including Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1944) and Prichard's *Haxby's Circus* (1945).

A great incentive for realist writers was the 1952 launch of The Australasian Book Society, its colophon the kangaroo and kiwi, designed by Bill Wannan. Its successful first title was Ralph de Boissiere's *Crown Jewel*. The ABS and Realist Writers won over hearts and minds and helped shift public opinion.

Many 'Meet the Author' tours and book launches (state-wide and interstate) were organized. They promoted the movement's message and book sales. Their writers were popular speakers. Alan Marshall spoke at Beechworth in 1952, after the Shire Hall booking was cancelled through RSL pressure. Helen Palmer (*The First 100 Years*) and Judah Waten (*Shares in Murder*) stayed with my family (which included four small children) and addressed the Newcastle ABS in the fifties. The charming John Manifold with his guitar, and Eric Lambert, were speakers at our Melbourne home to good audiences under the same auspices.

Between 1952 and 1954 the Melbourne Realist Writers published *The Realist Writer*, a foolscap-sized roneoed journal. Len Fox writes of *Realist Writer*: "it was not a publication to set the world on fire".[8] In my memory it seemed thin and not eye-catching, in those fearful Cold War, Royal Commission on Communism

days. A brave effort, but flawed. Sydney's *Realist Writer* was published later, Vol.1 No. 1 roneoed with pink cover twenty-seven pages quarto appearing in July 1958. The Sydney *Realist* concluded with No. 35 in 1970.

In 1954 Melbourne's *Realist Writer* became *overland*. Edited by Stephen Murray-Smith, its first issue was sixteen-pages, appearing under the masthead *OVERLAND Incorporating the Realist Writer, Number One, Spring 1954 One Shilling*. The cover had Noel Counihan's drawing 'Off To The Diggings, 1854'. Because 1954 marks the hundredth anniversary of the Eureka Stockade, *overland Number Two, Summer 1954–55 One Shilling* bears the sub-title *Eureka Centenary Number*, cover drawing by Herbert McClintock: 'Burning the Licenses'. This issue includes contributions by H.V. Evatt, David Martin, and Vance Palmer.[9] The 150th issue of *overland* (1998) included a facsimile of the first issue.

The title *overland* was felicitous. Writers and musicians were now into oral history research for lost or fragmented early Australian ballads, hitherto unrecorded. New Theatre was staging the highly successful musical *Reedy River*, an 'on our selection' type story, with stirring lyrics and melodies about early overlanders 'Clancy', 'Andy' and their mates. It had a long run. An Australian film classic, *The Overlanders*, had been released, directed by England's Harry Watt, with Australian actors on Australian locations (Roper River NT, and South Queensland).[10]

Since I lived overseas between 1951 and 54, I cannot date the years when later Realist Writers joined the Group, so I can only comment on Hardy's 'originals' and on others whom I knew or felt close to, in those early days. Ralph de Boissiere (born 1907) followed his first novel *Crown Jewel* (1952) with *Rum and Coca-Cola* (1956) and *No Saddles for Kangaroos* (1964), all ABS books. I spoke on the same platform as Ralph's wife Ivy de Boissiere at Essendon Town Hall in 1954 for the Union of Australian Women. John Morrison's books around this time were *The Creeping City* (1949), *Port of Call* (1950), collected short stories *Sailors Belong Ships* (1947), *Black Cargo* (1955), and later *Twenty Three* (ABS 1962). To us Realist Writers, de Boissiere and Morrison were both role models.

Les Barnes (1905–1994) kept files on the history of the Victorian Labour Movement, and was later to publish on Brunswick's football history, the history of street names, and *It Happened in Brunswick 1837–1987*.[11] In 1944 Les had lectured me, a recent arrival from Sydney, on the democratic origins of Australian Rules football, which impressed me greatly.

Judah Waten, one of the greatest of our realist writers, had been a member of the Australian Writers' League in the Thirties. He was not present at the 1946 meetings, but later I came to know him well. His publications were outstanding: *Alien Son* (1952), *The Unbending* (1954), *Shares in Murder* (1957), *Time of Conflict* (1961), *Distant Land* (1964), *Season of Youth* (1966), *So Far, No Further* (1971) as well as reportage and translations. Judah was President of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (1961–62), as well as a life member.

Arthur Howells (1907–1986) was a rubber factory worker "bugged by a desire to write" in his early twenties. Howells is remembered for his books on Henri Barbusse (founder of the World Movement against War), *We Went to Spain* and the collection of short stories *Don't Throw Stones at your Mother*.

At meetings was the very gifted Eric Lambert (1918–1966), famous for *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (self-published, 1951) and an entertaining speaker at our home that same year. *The Veterans* (1954), *The Five Bright Stars* (1954) and *The Dark Backward* (1956) followed. Also present was Will Secombe, a gentle, sensitive person, English teacher at a GPS school. I remember Max Brown but as 'with us, not of us', preoccupied perhaps by a novel on Ned Kelly he was working on at the time. His publications were to include *The Jimberi Track* (1969) and *The Black Eureka* (1976).

Also present was the handsome, very earnest Walter Kaufmann, born in Berlin in 1914. Walter was a '*Dunera* Boy', his anxiety and passion directed towards his German Jewish family, then recent victims of the Holocaust. His books include *Voices in the Storm* (1953), *The Turn of the Spiral*, and *Death in Fremantle*. His account of his arrival, aged sixteen, on the *Dunera* was published in *Meanjin* in 1954.[12]

Stan Robe was a most friendly and enthusiastic participant. His books include *Memories of Gold Digging in Australia*, UQP 1979, *The Poles in Australia, A Bibliographical Record, 1775–1980* (Melbourne Institute of Multicultural Affairs, 1980) and *Charles Aisen: His Metal Sculptures*.[13]

The secretary was the energetic Jack Coffey, a Saturday reporter for many years on *The Sporting Globe*, which the *Herald*, now the *Herald-Sun*, produced weekly.[14] Coffey urged us to write for trade union journals, which were then burgeoning and desperate for copy. Those who took his advice were often lucky enough to have their articles syndicated in several union journals. I was a very minor contributor, fortu-

May Day March, Sydney 1948. FAW banner carrier Alan Bookluck, followed by Muir Holburn who was FAW President 1948, marching alone.

nate enough to have published a review of the satirical New Theatre production, *God Bless the Guv'nor*, a letter to the US *New Masses* and other incidentals.

Marjorie Pizer (born1920) and Muir Holburn (1920–1960) were beavering away, researching and collecting Australian poetry. Marjorie, interviewed in October 1998, remembers that she and Muir read "all the Australian poetry available at that time" in the Melbourne Public Library, and later "in the Sydney Public Library and the Mitchell Library". They published *Creeve Roe: Poetry by Victor Daley* (Pinchgut Press 1947). Creeve Roe, Anglicized Gaelic for 'Red Branch', was Victor Daley's pseudonym. It is dedicated "To those writers of Australia who are today maintaining the democratic tradition of Victor Daley and his fellow artists of the 'nineties." This most handsome book with grey and red cover was designed and printed by artists Edwards and Shaw. Muir and Marjorie co-authored *Freedom On The Wallaby* (1953), although Muir's name does not appear on the spine, at his request, since he was a Commonwealth public servant at the time when Australia was in the grip of 'Reds under the Bed' hysteria. *The Men Who Made Australia*, a Henry Lawson collection, appeared in 1957, and they were working on another book, *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, at the time of Muir's tragic early death. This was ultimately published as edited by Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer, but dedicated "To M.H. 1920–1960".

Finally, self-styled and registered as 'The Realist Printer and Publisher' Frank Hardy, of the Realist Writers' Group 1946. It is possible I first met him in August 1945 at a gathering of some writers (Coffey, Mathews, myself) and quite a number of artists. Hardy, a press artist for the Australian Army magazine *Salt*, under then editor Hume Dow, was in uniform. Vane Lindesay, Josl Bergner, and Ambrose Dyson were also in uniform, while Noel Counihan, Vic O'Connor and Jim Wigley were not; they were the nucleus of the (later) SORA – the Society of Realist Artists. The occasion was a meeting with Bernard Smith, down from Sydney to launch *Place, Taste and Tradition*. Later after one Realist Writers meeting, held in a library, Frank asked me if I knew anything about research. He drew me aside, and said he was writing this hush-hush book, and that his "life was in danger". In a most conspiratorial fashion, he told me Ralph Gibson had given him the idea of the Wren story, and some material. As Ralph Gibson was highly respected, his involvement in the project ensured my favourable response. I agreed to help, and spent my lunch hours at the Titles Office searching interlocking directorates of companies. In libraries I researched early newspaper articles on Wren's activities, and the Tom Tunnecliffe slush fund. Frank would transfer my information to his index cards, banded together on his makeshift work table in Richmond. Frank 'recruited' many voluntary helpers (such as Les Barnes) to assist him with *Power Without Glory* but not only realist writers. Frank was known to claim credit for work often initiated or performed by others. I also collaborated (unacknowledged) with Frank for an ABC radio feature entitled *To Arms! To Arms!* broadcast on 'Bastille Day' 1946, drawing on Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. Frank's title was taken from the cry *Aux Armes!* "Paris is in the streets; rushing, foaming like some Venice wine glass in which you had dropped poison."[15] Frank stressed that he needed to become known as a writer, never missed attending the races twice weekly, and only allowed himself eight beers a day "no more, no less".[16]

The Realist Writers can only to be described as a group of writers with a similar outlook, i.e. realism in

literature, and support for social change. Our quest for realism, social realism, and the distraction of the much narrower 'socialist realism' will be the subject of a future article.

ENDNOTES

1. Dorothy Helmrich was an Australian expatriate who returned to Australia after living in London for some years. As a soloist she had toured Europe and was engaged by the BBC. An accomplished linguist, she was "said to be the only Australian singer invited to give recitals in Holland, Sweden, Finland and Latvia as soloist". She joined the ABC and was a wartime member of the NSW State Conservatorium staff. *Who's Who in Australia 1944*. "Men and women writing to Dorothy Helmrich from the job asking for a teacher in music and verse-speaking to be sent to their factory", Lloyd Ross, 'Building Community and Nation', *Meanjin Papers*, vol. 4, no.1, 1945, p. 5.
2. Norman Corwin's scripts were published in book form: *13 by Corwin*, 1942, *More by Corwin*, 1944, *On a Note Of Triumph*, 1945.
3. Karl Shapiro had been one of the *Five Young American Poets* published by the New Directions Press. He had written "prize-winning poems [in] *Poetry Magazine*, Chicago, 1940, 1941, 1942, and his most recent American book *Person, Place and Thing* was published by Reynal and Hitchcock, NY, 1942", (quoted on *The Place of Love* front cover). In 1945 he was awarded the Pulitzer prize. "He married recently, and is to join Archibald's staff at Washington. His *Essay on Rime* will be published soon." *Meanjin Papers* vol. 4, no. 2, 1945, p. 148.
4. *Comment*, Issue 4, March 1941, for example, was printed in red. After Issue 11 the masthead appears uniformly across the top of the cover (prior to this, on the cover in different positions). *Comment* appeared from Issue 1, 1940 to Issue 26, Winter 1947. At first the editor published bi-monthly – there are six issues in 1941; later they appear irregularly. In the final Issue 26, 1947 notice is given of its demise for financial reasons. Issues 1–26 are held in the Latrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria, information courtesy Latrobe Collection.
5. Irvine Green, later awarded the OAM, was the author of local history books in the Templestowe-Doncaster area, which he illustrated with his drawings and photographs. Irvine was a regular contributor to the magazine *Tirra Lirra*, whose editor, Eva Windish, put me in touch with him again, after fifty years. He died in 1997.
6. The World Council of the Movement against War included Romain Rolland (President), George Bernard Shaw, Albert Einstein and Egon Kisch. More information is to be found in A. Howells, *Against the Stream*, 1983, p. 119 ff. and Len Fox, *Australians on the Left*, 1996, p. 159.
7. Frank Hardy (1917–1994) in *The Hard Way*, Australasian Book Society, 1961, p. 42.
8. Len Fox, *Australians on the Left*, Len Fox, 1996, p. 102.
9. Ibid, p. 105.
10. Harry Watt belonged to John Grierson's school of documentary film making. He had made *Night Mail* (for London's G.P.O.), *Target for Tonight*, *Christmas Under Fire* and others, and was Assistant Director to Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. The 'book of the film', *The Overlanders*, one of the first of this genre, was written by Dora Birtles, who was the writer's aunt. She claimed she suggested the title to Harry Watt. This story is described in Moore: *Survivors of BEAUTY*, reviewed *overland* 146. Watt went on to make, while in Australia, *The Eureka Stockade*, starring Chips Rafferty. Ealing Studios funded both films.
11. See Helen Penrose (ed.), *City of Brunswick*, Vic. Press 1994, p. xi.
12. Re: Walter Kaufmann, see Cyril Pearl, *The Dunera Boys*, Angus & Robertson, 1983, p. 93 ff. In 1994, Walter Kaufmann, who had been a resident in East Germany for many years, returned to Australia on a visit. He lectured at Queensland University on his experiences as a 1940 *Dunera* Boy, a dinner was held in his honour at the Graphic Arts Club, Sydney (14 September 1994), and he also spoke at the NSW Writers' Centre, Rozelle.
13. See Stan Robe, *Charles Aisen: His Metal Sculptures*, Introduction, Notes and Editorial Work by Stan Robe, Colour Photography by Benjamin Styel, Globe Press, 1982. Charles Aisen came from Chelm in Poland. Stan Robe became a member of the International Society of Janisz Korczak, a Polish pedagogue of world standing. Information supplied by Maria Robe, Stan Robe's widow, who also recognized "the window, plant and low brick fence" in Photograph 2. Phone interviews 13 November 1998 and 20 November 1998.
14. The *Sporting Globe* started in 1922, reaching a circulation of 400,000 at its peak, employing many then impecunious writers including Ken Gott and Jack Coffey. It ceased as a separate newspaper in 1996, rendered obsolete by television.
15. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* in three volumes, first published in 1837, p. 157.
16. Interviews of writer by Pauline Armstrong for *Frank Hardy – The Making of Power Without Glory*, tentative title for biography to be published by MUP.

Deirdre Moore joined the Realist Writers in 1946. She had a dozen or so articles published, during a full-time career in psychology. After retirement, she has had three books published: Survivors of BEAUTY – Memoirs of Dora and Bert Birtles*;* Newcastle Made Him: The Story of A.F. Toll*; and* Little Wales in Newcastle*; and has a work of memoirs in progress.*

Ralph de Boissiere

Leaving the Realist Writers to Themselves

I WAS NOT YET TWENTY when I came upon Turgenev in the Public Library in Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital. I had heard of him possibly through an article by Galsworthy, and with this recommendation I took one of his books home with me. No sooner had I finished it than I rushed back for *Smoke, A Nest of the Gentry* or whatever remained on the Library's shelves, one after the other. I was enraptured by the lyricism in which they were steeped, held fast by their warmth of feeling, a human sympathy which I had missed in other novels, which now seemed cold and foreign. I found myself identifying with this Russian life in town and countryside, this life of the mid-nineteenth century revealed in simple language with wonderful word pictures, because in it I heard echoes of our own living. Turgenev did not probe, but his characters conveyed the moods and hopes of his times, and each novel was a neat package about life in its changing, each left me with a sad yearning, a sense of the unattainable.

Reading Dickens, I saw the rich and the poor just as God had arranged it. Among the rich there was virtue. Among the poor, too, there was virtue. Who raised rebellion against the habitual respect of generations, that baring of the head before money and titles and endless acres all ordained by time? Should the lowly overstep the bounds set for them, justice was meted out as was deemed appropriate to the offence. The social structure, despite the horrifying disproportions between rich and poor, held together firmly. What I felt here was a reflection of the fixed spiritual values and social rewards I had absorbed with my schooling, and that thrived in Trinidad in the relationship between those on top and us below – the fixed inevitability of some vast injustice.

In the Russian pre-revolution novels, however, I found us all mixed up. We all were searching, tormenting others, ourselves tormented by the search for truth. Some were crushed, others rolled over and over in the dust by change. The intelligence stifled in the vast and backward countryside and the sleeping towns. One drank and danced to exhaustion, robbed and murdered, rejoiced, wept, the soul rising high and plunging low. Like the landscape it seemed to know no boundaries. These democratic writers of the nineteenth century lived in a peasant society moving towards explosion. They could not ignore the despotism supported by a small elite, those little tsars who ruled vast acres and were enriched by the labours of an enormous poverty-stricken peasantry. The heavy hand of tsarism could not be escaped. They could not ignore the endless deprivations, the loud stamping of military boots, the ignorance, the lack of education.

Britain, a monumental edifice secure in trade, profits and distant colonies, was not troubled by such vast contentions. Britain was good for the colonies and the colonies were good for Britain. Sin and virtue were laid bare in behaviour within the class or in one's attitudes to those in lower orders. But with those democratic Russian writers the weighing of sin and virtue had much less relation to class. It arose out of compassion for people and a quest for the meaning of life in a society close to eruption. They portrayed evil against mankind rather than sin against the accepted social morality of a stable, 'completed' society.

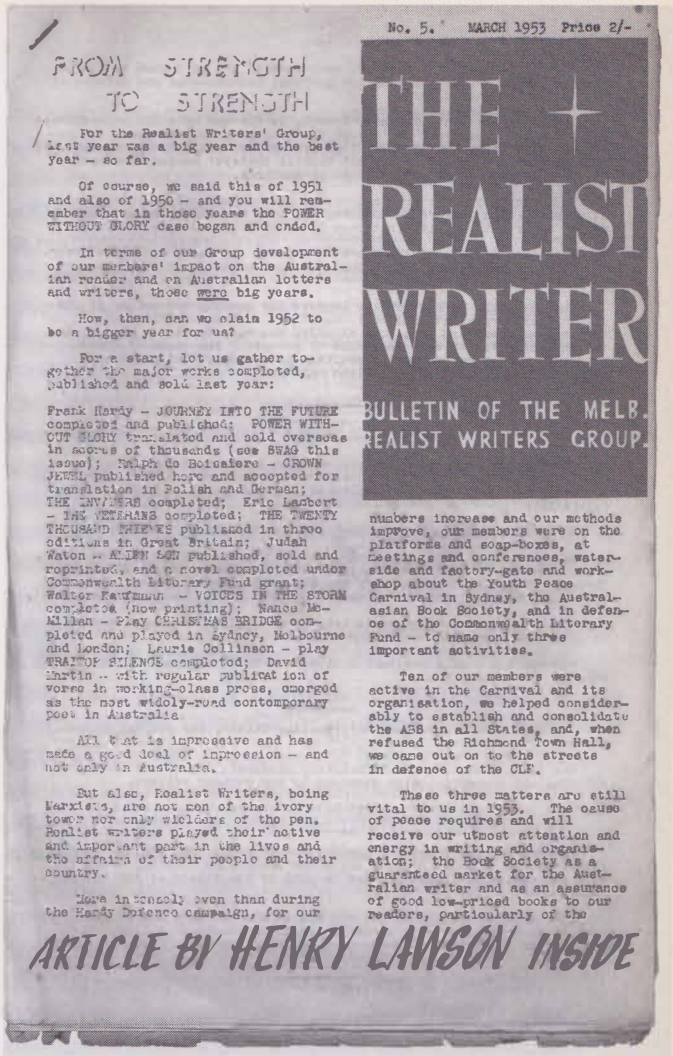
It was strange that I could find in the work of these writers echoes of my own tiny country where seldom were we out of sight of one another and a harsh climate was unknown. But we, too, robbed and murdered, rejoiced and wept, only our souls were sunk in mire and rarely ascended any heights. We, like they did, asked why, but we knew the answer.

To cap it all I read Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?*, not a novel but a protest in powerful artistic form against the ruthless conditions under which landless peasants, forced to be proletarians, worked in the factories that were proliferating in Russia in the 1870s.

Tolstoy did not speak to me of peasants only, he spoke of the law, of judges, the system, the gendarme state. And here it was – or certainly something not unlike it – in this little colonial outpost I had begun to understand. This turn in my reading stimulated enormously my own creative efforts. If I was not yet an active ally of the working class it was because they seemed to have no strength, but I was already far from being against them . . .

In 1940, early in the war, the whole of Trinidad was turned upside down with the coming of thousands of American workers, white men mostly, who set about building air, naval and military bases for Uncle Sam. Tremendous trucks and heavy earth-moving equipment never before seen roared through city and countryside day and night. Our unemployed vanished, swallowed up in the vast work of construction. Britain was staggering under the blows dealt by the Nazi war machine at sea and in the air. It would be wrong to say that this was a cause of concern to many people in Trinidad. Such anxieties as we suffered about the war were largely dissipated by the awareness of being sheltered by a powerful army of American ships and planes. British prestige, which had been high, dived calamitously not only from the blows being dealt her but as well from the different attitude of Americans to blacks. The new masters had no responsibility for the island in any way save militarily. American civilians were in our homeland to make a good wage before returning home to good jobs, and for men of the army and navy Trinidad was a temporary halt where they might enjoy whatever they could before an unknown future claimed them. No matter how black a girl, no matter her station in life, servant, working girl or lady of a house, she was readily taken out by soldier or sailor, gifts were showered on her, sometimes her rent was paid, and the young woman found herself in possession of luxuries she had only heard about yesterday and never imagined she would enjoy. From being a black female she was now a woman with something like power. She sat with her white man in the best seats in the cinema, ignoring the employers she had formerly feared to offend, her face alight with the happiness of this new freedom. Many could now afford to stay at home, mistresses of their own households, mothers to their children.

I, witnessing what went on around me and listening to the old-talk, the gossip, about what went on in areas closed to most of us, needed no-one to tell me I had another book on my hands. I remember making



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BULLETIN OF THE MELB. REALIST WRITERS GROUP.

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

For the Realist Writers' Group, last year was a big year and the best year – so far.

Of course, we said this of 1951 and also of 1950 – and you will remember that in those years the POWER WITHOUT GLORY case began and ended.

In terms of our Group development of our members' impact on the Australian reader and on Australian letters and writers, those were big years.

How, then, can we claim 1952 to be a bigger year for us?

For a start, let us gather together the major works completed, published and sold last year:

Frank Hardy – JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE completed and published; POWER WITHOUT GLORY translated and sold overseas in scores of thousands (see SWAG this issue); Ralph de Boissiere – CROWN JEWEL published here and accepted for translation in Polish and German; THE INVISIBLES completed; Eric Lambert – THE VETERANS completed; THE TWENTY THOUSAND THIEVES published in three editions in Great Britain; Judah Waten – ALIEN SON published, sold and reprinted, and a novel completed under Commonwealth Literary Fund grant; Walter Kaufmann – VOICES IN THE STORM completed (now printing); Nancy McAllan – PLAY CHRISTMAS BRIDGE completed and played in Sydney, Melbourne and London; Laurie Collinson – play TRAITOR SILENCE completed; David Martin – with regular publication of verse in working-class press, emerged as the most widely-read contemporary poet in Australia.

All that is impressive and has made a good deal of impression – and not only in Australia.

But also, Realist Writers, being Marxists, are not men of the ivory tower nor only wielders of the pen. Realist writers played their active and important part in the lives and the affairs of their people and their country.

More intensely even than during the Hardy Defence campaign, for our numbers increase and our methods improve, our members were on the platforms and soap-boxes, at meetings and conferences, waterside and factory-gate and workshop about the Youth Peace Carnival in Sydney, the Australasian Book Society, and in defence of the Commonwealth Literary Fund – to name only three important activities.

Ten of our members were active in the Carnival and its organisation, we helped considerably to establish and consolidate the ABS in all States, and, when refused the Richmond Town Hall, we came out on to the streets in defence of the CLF.

These three matters are still vital to us in 1953. The cause of peace requires and will receive our utmost attention and energy in writing and organisation; the Book Society as a guaranteed market for the Australian writer and as an assurance of good low-priced books to our readers, particularly of the

ARTICLE BY HENRY LAWSON INSIDE

notes of what the barber related as he cut my hair, an event he had himself witnessed. It gave me a whole chapter. When in late December of 1947 I set off from Chicago for Australia I was carrying with me not only notes but vivid memories of what I had seen and heard in my birthplace.

I CAN'T BE SURE of the time now, but in late 1947 I met Frank Hardy in the lift taking us up to the room in which the Fellowship of Australian Writers then held its meetings. Arthur Phillips was in the chair in those days. I had not spoken to Frank for five minutes when he said: "You should join the Realist Writers".

Soon I was reading discussions in Soviet Literature on socialist realism. Although there was considerable disputation among Soviet writers about its application and development, they held similar ideas on the need for this new literature in the socialist world. With the vanquishing of capitalism and its evils and the open-

ing of vast new opportunities for mankind it had become the writer's duty to present ideas suitable to the remaking of the country and the refashioning of Man. No specifics were offered. These came from the higher levels where Stalin dwelt. He referred to writers as "engineers of the human soul". His thoughts on this matter were distilled and purveyed by ministers, secretaries, organizers, guardians – you could not escape. I found all these bugle calls very stirring. So did my new friends. We even searched and began to discover "elements of socialist realism" in certain novels in our capitalist world. Momentarily the thought came to me that should such "elements" be found sparkling in my own work I might rise sharply in rank and importance as a writer. But sanity returned, I shut the door against the bugle calls – or thought I did – and reminded myself that to be any good at all I had to hold on to what I had seen, felt, experienced, hated or loved in that tiny island that I had quit with such high anticipations not long before. I also thought: "There are some very good Soviet novels. *The Iron Flood* by Serafimovich, for instance, or *Chapayev* by Furmanov, both written in early Soviet times before the bugle calls were heard. But there is nothing today, in novels of the fifties, to inspire us with the depth of perception into humanity, the poetry, the tenderness or the compassion found in their nineteenth-century forebears." I could have seen why it was so had I looked thoughtfully into the reasons for this strange failure of expectation in the new literature – the human soul was gradually disappearing along with the evils of capitalism. The engineering performed on the souls was in general simplistic and unreal. Once the hero, the exemplar of the New Man, beheld the light all his complicated inner problems vanished. He was cleansed of crime. He became, as one Soviet film was named, a *Cavalier of the Gold Star*.

I had begun my second novel, but often I laid it aside to read the work of some highly regarded American writer like Henry James, Faulkner, Dreiser, Baldwin, Mailer, and always with a secret expectation that I would learn something of much value to me, they having won so much applause. I was frequently disappointed that I could not find there what I was seeking.

That a writer might admire the methods, the devices another has used to paint his picture of life and people does not mean that he, too, can make use of them. Art is a personal possession. One chooses those devices that spring from one's own personality, one's life, one's perceptions. Who can extract and 'use' the magic with which Katherine Mansfield wrote her short story 'The Garden Party'? Writers find their own styles and methods and fit into them as into a suit, generally their one suit, full of rents but serviceable. They like to think of themselves as critics. Very few of them can lay claim to the title. Time often proves the professional critics wrong in their assessments, but they do have a broader vision than the writer who, wearing his one suit, thinks himself so beautifully clothed as to call forth general admiration. Peace to the man! Most times in that one suit are all his riches. He writes as he does because of his particular talents and the measure of his response to society, to the way he earns such bread as he can and his inability to alter this unsatisfactory world that at best ignores him . . .

Yes, we were harsh critics in the Realist Writers. Like all who have burdened themselves with a truth they must disseminate, we were cruel to be kind.

I was writing of the world I had come from. I had to get it out of my system before I could think of embarking on an Australian novel. I had consulted with my inner voice since early childhood. The more I developed as a writer engaged in refashioning in literature the world around me, the more did I cling to my inner voice and my intuition and my dreaming. The development of ideas, the fashioning of scenes by characters and of characters by scenes, was not only an artistic occupation, it was always a discovery and an awakening of myself. I was in all of the characters, their emotions and thoughts were my own, yet they were not myself, nor was I them. My recreations of what I had experienced in Trinidad dissuaded me from attempting to 'engineer' anyone.

EARLY IN 1956 I was presented with the galley proofs of *Rum & Coca-Cola*. It was more than two years since I had set eyes upon it. Now I was horrified to see that those stirring bugle calls against which I had shut my door had crept into my book here and there while I was dreaming. They were foreign to those times. And the theme was drowned in characters. I no longer liked even the way I had expressed my thoughts. I became acutely depressed, hating the book because I could not withdraw it – the printer had to be paid. I went through it and made merciless cuts, reducing its length by almost half. Never before had I regretted seeing my work in print. Shame and despair tormented me when I received what had been printed and bound, final, a kind of documented literary misdemeanour. For months and years my dissatisfaction festered

within me, until the time when I could sit down and rewrite it as I had to do. Meanwhile I had to do a tour with it for the ABS through four States and appear on television twice, drawing attention to a book I wished had never seen the light of day.

To my surprise, however, a great many readers liked this book. Dame Mary Gilmore wrote to me saying: "I thought *Crown Jewel* a remarkable book, but this outdistances that one. The writing and general set-up is more founded (?) or mature . . . But what drama and moving life! I lived with your characters, rubbed shoulders with and was jostled by them . . . " Such comments, and some encouraging reviews, were a salve to my self-inflicted wound. It stung me less, but the praise did not dissuade me from planning how I would rewrite it. And in after years I did so. Twice . . .

By 1956 I was making money in the socialist world with sales of my first novel, and so succumbed to the alluring prospect of getting rid of the boss and working on my Australian novel from nine to five. It was never so simple. I was incapable of writing more than three hours, when I had to stop and let a confusion of ideas sort themselves out. I had become trapped, too, into incorporating socialist realist ideas into the Melbourne world, ideas we were forever discussing without grasping that such ideas were not for us who did not live under socialism.

Every writer must seek out and follow his own star that is within him. I had in a measure deserted my own to follow a tempting one pointed out to me, and now what I was writing was turning out a contrivance rather than an inevitable development arising from the thoughts and feelings in my characters. Australia had been immersed in a secret, open, nasty, elevating (depending on which side you took) struggle for or against banning of the Communist Party and the country's involvement in the Korean war. We, as they, had felt we had truth by the tail and must not let go of it. My artist self, deep down, kept reminding me that all this was excellent for somebody else's novel; that the emergence of my character's true self, his particular inner world, was more important than the politics I accepted and could not escape.

One emerges, changes, develops from birth, and there is no perfection or imperfection in this, there is only a growing into what one may be. The genesis of character could never come out of ideology, it had always to arise from the unknown man within. Ideology came second. As a result of his experiences he had found an answer, a solution to problems; but this solution is no more fixed and permanent than the man himself ever is in his becoming.

There was another difficulty, that of writing imaginatively about the present in which one is fully engaged. I was seeing that this was not possible until the present had become the past, until I had had leisure to reflect on what happened, what had not happened but might have happened. I needed a stretch of years for everything to settle down and cool. Especially as I did not have that intuitive understanding of Australians as I had of my own island and people. And my Australian world was narrow, I knew it, I felt it. I had therefore to stay with what I had experienced. That would have been plenty had I not tried to attach it to a foreign star.

AT SOME TIME in this period of tormenting confusion Jack Coffey, our Realist Writers' secretary, disseminated among us a booklet which summed up the discussions on socialist realism raging in Hungary in 1949–1950. Its author was Josef Revai, the then Hungarian Minister for Culture, and its title *Lukacs and Socialist Realism*. Of this Lukacs we knew nothing, he was only an unpronounceable name. As I learned later, he was highly regarded in both the east and the west as a Marxist scholar who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the literatures of both worlds and their relationship to the times that had produced them. In the booklet it turned out, according to Revai, that this distinguished professor who held the Chair of Aesthetics had failed at times to free himself from some old habits of bourgeois thinking, so that while he had not actually deserted his post he had opened the door to views that made his lectures unsuitable for the guidance of the new literature in the new Hungary. We, knowing nothing of the unfortunate Lukacs, were invited to beat him with the sticks provided by Josef Revai, who was a Marxist of course, Minister for Culture and, as a consequence, the voice of truth.

Our secretary, a Stalinist but no writer, and artistically insensitive, was eager to inject some muscle into our writing. None of us, said he, half jokingly, had yet produced anything to frighten the authorities. Had such an idea occurred to us we would more than likely have frightened ourselves. Here we all were, living reasonably well, properly clothed and fed, gambling, drinking, our heads full of football, our days full of work and the future full of promise. Here were no aftermath of war, no traumas, no seizure of power by working people. Nevertheless we discussed the book-

let, which was written in an authoritative tone that demolished all opposition, and came to the only conclusion possible from this tone and the quotations given that Comrade Lukacs had shown tendencies to swing between Marxist and bourgeois ideas in his philosophic-literary dissertations.

I saw it as a futile exercise. My mind circled around not missing the next train home. Yet my old desire to bring forth an Australian communist hero, that step into the unknown, would not leave me. Only gradually did I appreciate that though I knew many communists there were no great social clashes in which heroes might arise. I could not invent upheavals for this purpose. The communist might be a hero because he survived and endured, but he was becoming an oddity in Australia. His praiseworthy dedication was not uncommon in other fields. Nor had that dedication necessarily taught him to be more humane, more praiseworthy in his relations with his kind. He had not necessarily grown in stature after he had taken up with truth. That he followed his truth, unrelenting, showed a facet of the man. What had truth done for him? What had he done with truth? Party members were declining in number, paper sales were falling off, life in Australia was proceeding at a comfortable jog along an even road straight to paradise. I was obliged to recognize that my concern should be the revelation of the man within the given circumstances of our times and that the un-political citizen was no less worthy a subject than the communist.

When, in 1956, Khrushchev revealed some of what he knew about Stalin's personal failings, errors, crimes and madness, some of us wept, some raged, many walked away from the Party and Marxism which had given them a false god. But I could not. I was too much aware of all that the world, especially the colonial world, owed to the Soviet people for their defeat of German fascism. I was seeing that nothing was so straightforward, so simple as it might seem; everything was complex and a part of everything else, and characters boldly promoting the Party line might be real in life but unreal as I tried to depict them. In fiction one cannot afford to be too strange. Shylock might demand a pound of flesh, but the knife to cut it off is not forthcoming. Ideas had to grow within the character as an expression of his psyche, which reflected the world he knew, and in portraying that inner world my own ideas would come through more convincingly. To do this, I knew now, I must leave the Realist Writers to themselves.

Some months later, in 1957, I was asked to undertake a study tour of China with eleven other members of the Party. I greeted with enthusiasm this opportunity to see something of the socialist life being built in China. I could not realize then, could not even suspect, how all that I would see and experience in that country would compound my literary problems.

Gerry Harant

We Laid 'em in the Aisles

Some reminiscences of the Realist Film Unit

THE 1930S WERE LEAN DAYS for Australian film. From its auspicious beginnings in the late years of the nineteenth century – for a while some people even claimed that the world's first feature film was made here – Australian production had been different. While Hollywood concentrated on what was significantly called the 'photoplay', our filmmakers, such as they were, developed a distinctly naturalistic style in feature films, even if the subjects still centred mainly on the bush; they also developed a tradition in newsreel and documentary.

It was, however, an uphill battle. Crude monopolistic practices by US corporations ensured that already in the twenties more than 90 per cent of Australian screen time was occupied by US films, mostly of mind-bending inanity. Unfortunately our exhibitors (mostly foreign owned), rather than fostering the local product, aspired to the styles and gimmicks common to the other side of the Pacific. This was true for the lavish style of cinemas, the insistence on mixing other forms of entertainment, the provision of orchestras and other 'up-market' trade nonsense in city venues; up-country the old tin shed still sufficed.

In 1927 there was an enquiry into the film industry which, amongst other things, looked into Australian content; many European countries had revolted against Hollywood. The supportive noises made by its findings led to a number of films being made the following year. It was a dying gasp. The year after that not a single local film was registered. After the advent of sound only one notable filmmaker, Ken Hall, working for Cinesound, remained in the business.

This relative cinematic desert was exacerbated by the way films from countries other than the US, even Britain, were difficult to access, and by wowserish censorship which was to dog Australian cinema right up to the 1970s.

FOR PEOPLE WHO USE FILMS as an extension of their interest in life, there is no sharp distinction between fiction films, documentaries, shorts or whatever. The invented distinctions have been disproved time and again with real audiences. This started with Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, a documentary refused by distributors for seven years only to become a top-grossing film when released by a fur company. Documentary film was the apprenticeship of British and some US pre-war and wartime filmmakers. Not a great deal of this was seen in Australia up to the beginning of the Second World War.

IT ALL STARTED WITH the Spanish Civil War. Ken Coldicutt, then a young man, a communist and a person highly interested in and knowledgeable about film, offered to take documentaries on the fascist slaughter in Spain around Australia for the Spanish Relief Committee. There were two serious obstacles to what sounds like a simple task. The first was technical: although advertisements for 16mm projectors always showed a slightly built young woman effortlessly carrying the machine, reality was less obliging and made you carry not only the projector, but films, spare reels, a loudspeaker, a screen and more often than not a transformer which made up in weight for its deceptively small size. Ken had no car but had to rely on public transport as well as the good offices of local supporters of the Relief Committee.

As well, there was the problem of political censorship. Although the Republican Government of Spain was legitimately elected, the forces unofficially arraigned against it included fascist Italy and Germany, as well as the Catholic Church. Australia had a government which, like that of Britain, admired and supported fascism, actively pursuing policies later euphemistically referred to as 'appeasement'; this meant that

every film shown by Ken had to be wrested from a censor who held it on the grounds of being "offensive to a friendly government". From this, Ken developed an early understanding that all censorship is political censorship.

Ken spent some of his war years in the Air Force, being denied a commission on the grounds of his political record which included the crime of having been noted by a police pimp when he addressed a rally against the alienation of Royal Park for military purposes. Towards the end of the war, he had no difficulties persuading his CO that he would be better off in civvies than ferrying comforts to high-ranking officers in parts of the Pacific from which the enemy had already been driven. Ken had contacts in the Commonwealth Film Unit and applied for a job there; however, his chances were reduced to zero after he was invited to an unlabelled room in a city building with an unidentified man who asked him, as a condition for getting the job, to spy on his comrades. Ken, of course, refused. He decided to start up an independent film unit.

Ken interested Bob Matthews, who was a producer at New Theatre; he, in turn, recruited me – I was also active there. Bob, who ran a large business, was mainly interested in film production. Between us, we formed a group called the Realist Film Unit. The name was not novel; there was a Realist Film Unit in Britain and other groups in the arts sporting the Realist tag.

We are here talking about social realism – a far cry from the later invented 'socialist realism'. Social realism had a long and honourable history in the literature of all countries. Social realism in film had been practiced by Grierson and others in Britain in documentary film, and by such films as *The Last Laugh* and *Mädchen in Uniform* in pre-Hitler Germany. These were the sort of films we wanted to make.

This we put into our constitution. As well, we wanted to foster critical evaluation of film and bring to Australian audiences the sort of films which had been denied to them by the trade policies and politics of the distribution monopolies.

Our initial activities revolved around screenings of 16mm films either from the then burgeoning film libraries of Victoria or from overseas consulates; we had a special arrangement with the UK Information Office which gave us first refusal on their films in return for supplying them with critical publicity material. We imported classics like *10 Days that Shook the World* and *Battleship Potemkin*; these we had to get from the British Film Institute rather than the Soviet Union directly. Sovexportfilm, the Soviet marketing agency responsible, had one duplicated sheet with an ancient listing of films, which they would post out by surface mail every time you asked about availability of specific films, no matter what they were; a bit like present-day government departments in Australia and their word-processed non-replies.

The venues we used ranged from living rooms to large halls. We advertised our screening services widely. We printed program notes, largely written by Ken, some of which are still used in the National Library to this day. We used carefully selected recordings as soundtracks for silents.

By no means all of our screenings were deadly serious. We had a selection of Chaplin two-reelers. One very successful program we repeated several times was an old Hollywood silent *The Bright Lights of Broadway* about a virtuous maiden rescued from a Fate worse than Death, which included a nail-biting sequence when a hub-cap was seen working its way off the villain's limousine. All this was overlaid with suitably over-the-top records; it says a lot for the relative sophistication of our audiences that this film, originally made as a 'real' story, worked wonderfully well as comedy. We laid 'em in the aisles.

MANY OF OUR MEMBERS and supporters were active in the Communist Party, although there was no pressure to join on those who were not. Communists were attracted by Lenin's slogan, "For us the most important art is the film" and by what we had seen of revolutionary Soviet cinema here and there. We had a number of Soviet shorts brought in through the Soviet Legation. Most of the documentary material was pretty straightforward; to us it represented the proper use of films, showing progress as the result of the exertions of ordinary people. The same spirit inspired wartime documentaries from other countries. However, our major program fare was documentary films, particularly those from Britain and from the US documentary school – films still well worth seeing today.

While Ken and I were in the CPA, we were not of it. Early clashes with CPA leaders revolved around Soviet feature films imported by the Soviet Legation in diplomatic bags and screened mainly by the Australia–Soviet Friendship Society. These appalled us, because they represented the worst of the personality cults dressed up in the worst of Hollywood cliches. When we expressed our horror publicly, we were nearly expelled. For us, the 'revelations' of the 1960 Twenti-

eth Congress, where Khrushchev denounced some of Stalin's crimes (carefully omitting names of accomplices, including himself), were not revelations at all. After all, we knew that these films would have to have gone through endless script conferences with innumerable party apparatchiks before being put into production. Clearly, the horrifying politics which pervaded epics like *The Fall of Berlin* and *The Vow*, which got Stalin Prizes, were the politics of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While we took scant notice of the ravings of the anti-communist media, here was evidence of a political disaster which socialist critics with even half a brain could not ignore. Indeed, after *Fall of Berlin* Ken always referred to Stalin as the "Great Father of the Peoples", the name previously given to Russia's czars. That, too, didn't go down too well with our local leaders. We escaped expulsion because we were too useful and, I suspect, because the apparatus realized that we didn't really need them and knew it.

At least these Stalinist films were on 35mm stock and we could only screen 16mm, so we couldn't get into trouble for not showing them; however, there was more trouble to come when we showed *The Bridge*, a little documentary made by the UK Crown Film Unit, which showed the post-war reconstruction of a railway bridge in Tito's Yugoslavia by the people of the local village. As Tito fell in and out of favour with Stalin, we were, according to our apparatchiks, alternatively either to show or to suppress this very fine short depending on which way the Stalinist wind blew. Of course we took no notice.

It went further. We had accumulated a fair amount of footage of the activities of people in the Peace Movement. We wanted to work this into a short fiction film and drew up a synopsis in which a girl student, a member of one such group, drew her factory-worker boyfriend into peace activities. This was rejected outright by the CPA propaganda committee to whom we submitted it. In accordance with the doctrine of the Leading Role Of The Working Class, it had to be the factory worker who led the intellectual, no matter what the reality. The film was never made.

On questions of art, as on many others, CPA theory was ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, workers were the carriers of all culture; on the other hand, capitalism deprived workers of all culture. Bourgeois culture was decadent and degrading. Only Stalinist chocolate-box descriptions of society (socialist realism) were acceptable.

While the CPA paid lip-service to Lenin's dictum about film, in fact it was totally wedded to the printed word. Thus, a moderately important political issue would rate ten thousand leaflets, a more important one 100,000. Many of these never got handed out or letter-boxed; however, attacks of conscience prevented comrades from admitting this and the undistributed leaflets were still lying around party venues years later. During the anti-Communist referendum campaign we were heavily criticized for running films on civil liberties issues to large audiences when we "should have been out distributing leaflets".

Payments were the worst aspect from our point of view. Ken lived by cleaning offices in the early morning; I had to take a job early on. We had reduced our hiring charges to 'progressive groups' to the vanishing point; yet while party branches and peace groups would pay for hall hire and printing, there was rarely any money to pay our expenses, let alone contribute to our filmmaking activities. Generally, organizers were quite brazen about these unpaid debts; after all, they were "doing important work". We, I suppose, were only playing with bits of film. Luckily, these hassles with the advance guard of the Working Class had only moderate impact on our political activities.

Unlike the Waterside Workers' Film Unit in Sydney, with whom we were in close contact, we could not find sponsors for our filmmaking. Ken assisted the Brotherhood of St Laurence in several films about housing and homelessness. We recorded events like a camp of the Eureka Youth League at our expense, only to find this priceless record given away by League functionaries to some East European youth group to whom it would have meant absolutely nothing. We made a commissioned film of Koornong School, an experimental school on the Summerhill model; I understand one print of it has been unearthed. We shot endless footage of demonstrations, mostly lost, but some of it coming in handy for archive shots in Rebecca McLean's recent film on the *Save our Sons* movement.

However, unlike the wharfies' unit, we came to the conclusion early on that making films was a bit pointless if you had no audiences. We set out to create film societies. By this time we had taken over New Theatre's premises at 92 Flinders Street to run regular seasons. From there, we organized classes for projectionists, duplicated and handed out leaflets on how to start a film society, hired out equipment and distributed films, some of which we had imported ourselves. We held classes and debates on film appreciation. We formed, for this wider purpose, an entity called the Realist Film

Association, which grew to a membership of hundreds. RFA screenings, run by volunteers in halls and private homes, reached annual audiences of tens of thousands.

The state paid us its compliments, too. We had, at our city screenings, attention from entertainment tax inspectors (there was entertainment tax in those days, as there will be when a GST is introduced). Admission was by donation; we couldn't charge as our films came from libraries. We patiently explained to the unbelieving tax inspectors that one of the advantages of running a leftie theatre was that it didn't attract the sort of audiences who would not support us financially. They also sent the performing rights people around to collect royalties on the disks we used for our silent films. We pointed out they were mainly of Soviet origin – "we represent them, too," the inspector said. Ken suggested they send in a receipt showing their last remittance to the Soviet Union – we never saw them again.

The right-wing government of the day, ably abetted by elements of the Labor Party, tried to shut down our screenings, drafting a Cinematograph Films Bill which was tailored to do just that. However, by this time our contact with other 16mm users was so close that when we pointed out to churches, schools and other institutional film users that they, too, could be caught up in the Bill's dragnet (which, of course, the government had no intention of doing) they joined our vigorous protests. The Bill was quietly dropped in 1948.

ONE OF THE ASPECTS of Murphy's law states that successful endeavours happen by accident. When the Realist Film Unit was established, we saw ourselves largely as filmmakers. In the event, it was our screening activities which had a profound influence on the medium. In all, within a few years we had created or assisted in the formation of some forty local film societies. These were the core group initially supporting the Documentary Films Council which led to the creation of the State Film Centre (now CineMedia) and the Victorian Federation of Film Societies. While we had forty societies in Victoria, NSW boasted only three. Later, they and other states would join in ACOFS, the Australian Council of Film Societies.

In 1952, the Victorian Federation got together at Olinda for a Film Weekend. Out of this grew the Melbourne Film Festival, at one stage the world's biggest in terms of audience numbers, which, like the Federation, maintained its progressive character for decades. The cinematic environment dominated by non-commercial film screenings and festivals in which the Hollywood product had to share the screen with the best of the world's films had a profound influence on our then incipient filmmakers, many of whom had come from the ranks of the RFA. Australia's emerging film production naturally assumed the flavour of opposition to Hollywood which had led to the establishment of the Realist Film Unit; it has largely stayed there since. Melbourne became Australia's film production capital.

We left our mark on the censorship issue, too. Realists were the first to campaign for total abolition of censorship, a stance which didn't sit well with our Stalinist comrades who felt that any censorship, even that run by the bourgeois state, was better than none – a far cry indeed from the heady days of the Russian revolution and its artistic freedom. Today, the argument still rages about what people should or should not be allowed to see, rather than about the films which never get made because the trade, dressing up their ideology in commercial imperatives, does not want them to be made.

Alas, the CPA had the last word. With a referendum on price control coming up, we decided to use the occasion to make a short film, *Prices and the People*, a light-hearted exposition of the concept of the labour theory of value. The party's propaganda committee decided, against our strong protest, that the film had to end on a referendum-oriented note, making it useless for long-term use. It was to be propaganda rather than education; the party would pay for it all – indeed they wanted six prints to distribute to all states. It was all done; laying out the cash drained our resources, temporarily we thought. In fact, we never saw a cent of the party's money. The Realist Film Unit was ruined. Ken gave up and took a teaching job; some of us carried on screenings till 1960 when New Theatre could no longer be maintained and, in any case, the political value of our screening efforts had diminished to the vanishing point.

IN THE LONG RUN, the Realist Film Association made a vastly greater impact than any of us had expected in our wildest dreams. In it all, the CPA played a negative role, and we knew it. Why did we stick with it, in my case until the early seventies?

This question has haunted other critical communists with similar experiences. There is no single answer. We can only answer for ourselves.

I didn't see the party apparatus as particularly evil. It was a management similar to the one I had experienced elsewhere as part of the capitalist system – as

managers had insufficient information and interest, they could only manage by interference. This was not surprising. Apart from the unions – of prime importance in an organization with a largely syndicalist outlook – there was an endless list of self-sustaining entities in parents' groups, sports, farmers, youth groups, national bodies and the arts. The concept of a small group of functionaries trying to understand all these would have been ludicrous, yet the concept of co-ordinating and assisting rather than controlling them was foreign to the notion of centralism. Besides, the inner-party struggles occupied a lot of time. Theory was a dead letter, to be rote-learned like a catechism.

But then, there was this other world, the world of collectives like the Realist Film Association, who had to live their theory if they wanted to succeed in the world at large. While, for instance, the leadership wielded self-criticism as a tool of aggression against individuals, we knew that all the term implied was learning from the success or otherwise of the implementation of our decisions. For us, the united front meant not mouthing empty slogans but co-operating with churches, local bodies and even the RSL and Young Liberals as well as progressive organizations to spread our message of both form and content in film as widely as possible. Participating in such collectives is immensely satisfying. They still exist, as I know from personal experience.

Protest movements are growing all round Australia. To those of us who grew up in the CPA they lack two essential ingredients. Firstly, mere protest offers little sense of building something permanent. However, the worst is the absence of a sense of overall purpose provided by our socialist objectives.

At heart, we are romantics, and we are still hankering after our dreams. But then, why not? After all, as we proved, these dreams are entirely within the bounds of the possible.

Gerry Harant is a retired engineer and 'an old leftie'.

Street yolk

Behold Mmmmmmmmmmmm-
ultinational food, hilarious MacDonalds
proudly the same, so automaticated
these massfries children love
and infantile adults, their mouth parts
punching into identical buns.
Each meal marches forth, drilled exact.
How can you eat for laughing?
The servers the same, liveried alike,
cheap kids, biddable fauns,
twigs trained to the nth smile,
pert as a papercup: use, dispose of.
Get the colouring-in book decor,
the yellow bumsign, titmass erect.
So there is no Mmmmmmmmmm-
istakeaway just more repetition.
There's money in jokes.

Peter Bibby

symposium

Realism: a symposium

overland asked six writers, critics and scholars to give their thoughts on realism in their work and as it applies to Australian writing generally. We aimed for diversity and got exactly that.

kylie valentine

IT'S ALWAYS FUN to start with polemics. Here then is Virginia Woolf, writing in 1928:

> Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to this moment: this appalling narrative business of the realist, getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.[1]

Forty-four years later the *Realist Writer* declared itself a new forum for responding to the charge that realism is unreal:

> Proust and James Joyce and Virginia Woolf may at first impress us as realists in the sense that they endeavour to analyze the flow of conscious thoughts of their characters. But their detailed probing has no more important purpose than to show indecision, futility, escape. It does not help us to a clearer view of the society in which these men and women are supposed to move. We are not made aware of the significant struggles which are shaping men's destiny. We do not see the ordinary people engaged in these struggles.[2]

Jack Lindsay went further, calling *Ulysses* the proof that James Joyce was:

> hardly adult at all; he ceaselessly breaks down and contracts the adult elements of his sensibility and mind, to compass a world in which character is disintegrated by a multiple flux of sense and thought. The attempt to impose a myth structure is the confession [of] his regression, an attempt to extort significance where it cannot [be] gained by the true organic and dynamic relationship of man and man; man and society.[3]

The grounds of the battle between modernism and realism are well known. The modernists found realism conventional, unconvincing and stagy, uninterested in the complexities of character and foregrounding the concrete interactions between people at the expense of representing consciousness. For their part realists found modernists obscurantist, arcane, and criminally elitist, uninterested in the material conditions in which character is formed and foregrounding the workings of consciousness at the expense of the concrete interactions between people. Modernists thought that realists had failed to pick up on the insights of Freud and Bergson; realists thought modernists had picked up on them way too extravagantly. Modernism defined itself through fragmentation, dislocation, symbolism and technical display; realism through the privileging of content over form and accessibility to readers.

And so on. The fact that modernism is as difficult to define as is realism; that both terms are used across a number of disciplines; that one disciplinary use does not necessarily support any other; and that there is not even agreement as to which camp belongs, say, Patrick White or Frank Hardy, does little to reduce the gap between them. Every now and again someone will argue that modernism is a kind of realism – and occasionally that someone will be T.W. Adorno or Bertolt Brecht. Then again, others will argue that realism should be subsumed under the rubric of modernism, which would certainly make discussing D.H. Lawrence a lot

easier. For the most part, however, the distance and name-calling between modernism and realism continues unmolested, and the reason for this is – and you're probably way ahead of me by now – that the two are defined in relationship to each other.

This is not to say that there are not real differences between modernism and realism, some of which I will discuss in a moment. Nor is it to say that these differences are not very important. On the contrary, it remains valuable to keep the agonistic relationship between modernism and realism intact when analyzing one or both of them. The differences between modernism and realism can and should be recognized in terms not only of style, but also of the class position of practitioners, and the relationships between practitioners, critics and readers. However, these differences can also be understood in terms of cyclical and generational change. The rebellions against a style by emergent writers will lead to the development of a new style, or the recuperation of an older one. If this style in turn becomes entrenched, then later generations will rebel against it.[4] The relationship between modernism and realism cannot be explained by this process of cyclical change, but is illuminated by it.

As I have already suggested, when purely formal criteria are used to differentiate modernism and realism, the distance between them becomes indistinct. This distance, though, is never more pronounced than when comparing, as I have also already suggested, the modernism of Virginia Woolf and the realism of the *Realist Writer*. Neither looks its most attractive during such a comparison, but the differences between them are usefully emphasized. Raymond Williams has written of Woolf and her Bloomsbury circle that as a fraction of the English upper class, they "were at once against its dominant ideas and values and still willingly, in all immediate ways, part of it". This kind of class fraction:

> relates to a lower class *as a matter of conscience*: not in solidarity, nor in affiliation, but as an extension of what are still felt as personal or small-group obligations, at once against the stupidity or cruelty of the system and towards its otherwise relatively helpless victims.[5]

In addition, we can recognize Woolf as part of a class fraction that was read mostly by other members of that fraction. She belonged to an avant-garde and most readers of her work were other members of that avant-garde. In contrast, the social realism produced in Australia in the 1950s was explicitly invested in a wide, working-class audience; and social-realist practitioners identified themselves with the working class. Rather than sympathize from a distance with an abstract working class, Australian realist writers involved themselves in activities like book clubs, which they hoped would:

> raise an insurmountable barrier against the false values of the pulp magazine, the comic strip and the pornographic best-seller.[6]

The *Realist Writer* reported in 1952:

> a tremendous upsurge in the Book Society from all sections of the community, and especially from the working class, who have quickly grasped the fact that books such as these published and planned by the Society can bring a significance to their lives by fostering an Australian and internationalist outlook in opposition to the degenerate and backward rubbish so prevalent in the bookshops, cinemas and newspapers.[7]

The differences in the class position identified with *readers* of modernism and realism was then reflected in the different class positions with which *practitioners* were identified. These differences inflected the political aspirations and content of modernism and realism. Whereas the politics of modernism were both ambitious and disconnected from class mobilization, those of the *Realist Writer* were at once arguably less grand and more concretely tied to the working class. The failures of both are well known, but I want to talk about something else here.

The politics of modernism are complicated and heterogeneous, as are the politics of realism. (I should say at this point that I am being imprecise all over the place in order to make the points I am making: for example, modernism was certainly read by the working class, as realism was read by some modernists. While the schematizing of modernism and realism here is defensible, its schematic nature should be emphasized.) Perhaps the best way to summarize these modernist politics is as synthetic. Modernism was confident that the world and the self could be theorized in the same moment; that the new mobilizations of feminism and the working class were connected to the revelations of the new psychologies; that it was possible to

find the mechanism that would free the mind, and this same mechanism would also free the body. Modernism, history has shown, was wrong in this. The contrast between realism and modernism is not as definite here as it is in the class identification of practitioners and desired readers, but is notable anyway. Australian realists were not wholly uninterested in psychology or psychological processes, but these processes were seen as distinct from those of material conditions:

> When we use our writing to fight for jobs for our people, for hospitals for the sick, for food and schools for our children, for national independence, for the outing of the Menzies government and their masters at BHP, then will the working people see writers as important people, and love and defend and use our writing.[8]

Modernism had a belief and interest in the politics of the self and society, and attempted to theorize both in a synthetic project. The result is that it possibly theorized neither all that well. It is largely true that realism had an interest in the politics of society, but regarded those of the self as a distraction. The result is that realism was eventually weakened by the chauvinism attendant to these beliefs. If the writings of Virginia Woolf on socialism do not stand up well after all this time ("I'm one of those who are hampered by the psychological hindrance of owning capital") then neither do Frank Hardy's on how to write character:

> The creation of the type is the basis of character building for the socialist realist writer. Take quotes from several grocers to create one, for example, taking well into account the behaviour of the small shop keeper.[9]

Today, the failures of both modernist and realist politics are evident. However, the lessons of these failures have been learnt only precariously, if at all. There is a tendency amongst some contemporary literary practitioners and critics to argue that 'postmodernism' has solved the problems raised by the modernist and realist traditions, that the agonistic relationship between the two has been transcended. This kind of wishing away of the distance between realism and modernism does little to overcome the limitations of them both. The political goals that both modernists and realists set themselves – to explain psychological and material processes and relationships, to speak to a working-class audience and foster working-class mobilization, to sacrifice neither the complications of the world nor the complications of the self – remain both unreached and valuable. Rather than carrying on about postmodernism's transcendence of both modernism and realism, we would do well, as both critics and writers, to examine the oppositions between these two great and flawed movements, and to work at the point of their historical conflict and connection.

ENDNOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, diary, 28 November 1928, cited in Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the fictions of psychoanalysis*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1989, p. xv.
2. Editorial, *Realist Writer* 1, 1 March 1952, cited in John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: literature as politics in postwar Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Melbourne, New York, 1996, p. 5.
3. Jack Lindsay, unpublished manuscript on socialist realism [early 1950s], Jack Lindsay Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 7168, Box 50. My thanks to Sean Scalmer, who provided insights and the material used here on individuals and the *Realist Writer*.
4. Anyone who has read my review in *overland* 154 will know this argument is so heavily indebted (almost to the point of plagiarism) to Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: a study in twentieth-century art and ideas*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998.
5. Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, Verso Editions and NLB, London, 1980, p. 155.
6. Joseph Waters, 'Realist Book Club to Start', Judah Waten papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4536, Box 24.
7. 'Australian People Hail Their Own Book Society', *Realist Writer* 3, September 1952, p. 12.
8. Vic Williams, 'Why I Write', *Realist Writer* 5, March 1953, p. 12.
9. Frank Hardy, 'My Problems of Writing', *Realist Writer* 6, June 1953, p. 13. The distinction between social realism and social*ist* realism should be noted at this point. Social realism did not take the same cues as did socialist realism on the character type; Hardy's pedagogical gesture here was probably not taken on board by social realist writers. On the importance of this distinction, see David Carter, 'Documenting and Criticising Society' in Laurie Hergenhan (ed.), *Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988. I'd like to thank Nathan Hollier for bringing this to my attention.

kylie valentine studies at the University of Sydney.

Michael Wilding

"My mind doesn't work in those regions," Wallace Robson, my tutor, is reported to have said when asked about aesthetics. My own response is much the same. 'Realism' has never been something I have understood as an aesthetic issue, but a moral issue. It represents a shorthand term for telling the truth in writing, which for me is what writing is about. Understanding, not mystification; discovery, not obfuscation. In part this has its aesthetic implications, a matter of seeing the object as it really is, describing characters as they really are. As they really are? Yes. For me the most interesting novels and stories are those that are based on real people rather than on fictional constructs. They are the ones I return to. When you read the work of Jack Kerouac or Christopher Isherwood or Katherine Mansfield or Anthony Powell or Christina Stead or Evelyn Waugh you are encountering characters drawn from the life, from observed experience. Of course some writers adapt the life models more than others. The strength of Christina Stead's writing was the closeness of her observation: her characters were closely based on originals, and the wisdom and value of her work comes from the wisdom of her observations about people. Other writers will combine aspects of more than one person into a fictional figure. I have done this myself. The advantage is that you can always say that this character is a composite, not a libellous portrait. The disadvantage is that you can end up with someone like a police identikit portrait, someone who is a combination of known features yet unlike any known living being.

The value of novels and stories is in large part in the wisdom they impart about how people behave, how things happen. They enable us to understand life. Something totally made up is unlikely to be capable of delivering such truths.

Realism is something distinct from the fiction of those writers who learned their trade in the entertainment or advertising industries, producing product designed to appeal to and lure and seduce the public, writing fiction 'that people really want'. Their skills in predicting reader response are considerable. This sort of thing seems to me to be the antithesis of realism, even if, as is often the case, its manner is ostensibly realist. It has its role as entertainment, as diversion, as distraction. But it should not be confused and conflated with literature, even when, indeed especially when, carrying that tendentious label of 'literary best-seller'. And this is not to deny the appeal and validity of non-realistic genres like the fable or fantasy or romance. These modes all have their place and their effectiveness, both political and metaphysical. I have found them enjoyable to work in.

One of the problems with traditional realism is the convention of plotting. Balzac's portrayals of greed and ambition and acquisitiveness, of capitalist chicanery and social climbing, are unequalled. But the plots inherit all the excess and unpersuasiveness of romance. Realism began with portrayals of bourgeois reality historically interwoven with a narrative apparatus of wills and inheritance, missing persons and reappearances, murders and mysteries, sensation and resolution. It was this heritage of narrative and plot, surviving now in the spurious realism of television and cinema, that modernist novelists attempted to throw over. Plunging into stream-of-consciousness and disjunction, inconsequentiality and whimsy, temporal dislocation and de-narrativization, modernist fiction tried to remake itself. I have often found myself in sympathy with these attempts. I can enjoy a strong narrative drive and plot in genre fiction such as crime fiction and conspiracy novels. But the world is only partially like that and one has little direct experience of strong plots and defined endings. The modernist, and post-modernist gains, in rejecting that baggage, were in attempting new ways of capturing reality. Kerouac, Richard Brautigan, Leonard Cohen offered persuasive interpretations of reality which I found true and satisfying. As the world changes, year by year, decade by decade, the novelist needs new strategies by which to capture, represent and interpret it. The experience of modernism and post-modernism has, like most experiences, its ambiguities. But any 'realism' being practised now can only benefit from having drawn on and learned from their achievements.

I have been emphasizing truth and representation. But writing fiction is an art, and suffers when lacking artistic qualities. There is no need for realism to be dull and lumpy and unattractive, with novels like "loose baggy monsters", as Henry James characterized the work of George Eliot. And the art needs to be contemporary, not a tired academic replication of past modes. Beginning writing in the sixties, it seemed to me

that the contemporary world was qualitatively different from the past. Probably it seems like that to every young writer who reflects on it. I believed that in order to write about a new world, new formal strategies were required. You could not just repeat the old models, you had to innovate. I remember talking about this to David Malouf, at that time teaching in the Sydney University English department, and he strongly disagreed. Yet to me it has always been self-evident that the cultural superstructure is the product of the social and economic base, and as the base changes, so does the superstructure. This is not to deny that visions and insights may be gained in the cultural superstructure that can then be fed into the base. That is something else again.

So the project for some of us writing in the sixties and seventies was to develop new formal techniques in order to represent new social patterns, to cut tissue samples in new sections to reveal the new, to develop new ways of taking soundings. Realism may have been our moral intention in recording the realities of the society we were experiencing. But it was not a matter of just copying it down. Just copying it down is a matter of using unthought, pre-existent forms ready to hand. New forms had to be developed. That search for new ways of expression was something I shared in those years with Vicki Viidikas and Frank Moorhouse and Colin Talbot. It was focused on observed reality, it was never emptily formalist like the work of some of our contemporaries. Nor was it in the traditional realist mode still favoured in those years by *overland* and *Meanjin*. We had no name for what we did. Why did it need a name? It was simply what you did, observing the world, developing your techniques, pushing the boundaries forward.

At the time we called it the new writing. The term post-modernism was yet to achieve currency. It was a valuable phase. It liberated us from a tired, unadventurous, no longer effective realism. It allowed for disruptions and discontinuities, broke a lot of formal taboos, encouraged the awareness of the nature of literary structures and conventions, helped to exploit allusion and intertextuality, and allowed a richer set of possibilities in all respects. But these formal breakthroughs were ultimately only valuable insofar as they enabled the writer to say something new, to bring a new vision to content. Minimalism and self-referentialism seemed fresh and lively, uncluttered by all the social baggage, until you paused to wonder what you were saying in the end, after removing all that social baggage. I had to stop and ask, where is this 'pure' writing taking me? It wasn't taking me where I wanted to be. So I re-engaged with narrative, re-engaged with society. I don't want at all to minimize the formal and aesthetic aspects of writing; but these emerge from an engagement with subject matter. I came out of post-modernism with a new interest in the story, in narrative, and with a renewed concern to engage with content, with the world around me. It is this engagement with the world that, for me, is the essence of realism.

Michael Wilding's most recent book is Wildest Dreams, *published by UQP.*

Christos Tsiolkas

NEAR THE END OF Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, there is a close-up of the young soldier Ryan which fades into a close-up of the old man he becomes. The old man is standing in a cemetery in France and contemplating his comrades who died on the battlefield. Except, instead of a traditional dissolve, Spielberg elects to use a 'morph'. The 'morph' allows for a seamless transition from the young face to the old, a trick of digital technology that further accelerates film's ability to shift across time and space. But the trick also implies a deception; and it was this one moment, for me, that captured most fittingly the fraudulence of Spielberg's film. This is a genre piece, a cobbling together of war movie cliches but which uses the most advanced and expensive of contemporary visual techniques to simulate something called 'realism'. But as the old man emerges from Matt Damon's face, the game is given away: there is nothing real of war in *Saving Private Ryan*, there is only the play with genre and the play with expensive toys.

I turned to my boyfriend and said, Why couldn't he have used a fucking dissolve?

There is less reliance on technology in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, and there's much more to experience and to contemplate about war. Unlike Spielberg's film the moments of gory verisimilitude are few. Instead, the camera focuses on landscape and faces: on the boredom of waiting, on the rushed instance of killing, on the crushing humiliation of defeat. It may be a symptom of our increasing

acquiescence to the promises of technology that it is Spielberg's film that is seen as the more realistic depiction of war and that Malick's work is termed romantic and poetic. The realistic looking wounds and bloodletting in *Saving Private Ryan*, the exactitude of the digitized sound as bullets rush the screen, convince us that what we see in the film is an authentic representation of what soldiers experience in war. We forget that there are scenes in the movie which are copied straight from old John Ford propaganda films. And like the old propaganda films the German soldiers in the movie are stereotypical cold-blooded Nazis. In *The Thin Red Line* we see the eventual conquest of Guadalcanal Island by the US forces and the camera moves across the faces of the defeated Japanese soldiers. Their pain and fear and loss are made visible, their suffering human, which is something that I cannot ever remember seeing before in any American film. So which is closer to the truth? Which is more 'real'? The virtual simulations of *Saving Private Ryan* or the metaphorical *mise-en-scene* of *The Thin Red Line*, which presents the cycles of nature as a commentary on the arrogance and futility of war?

Of course, on one level we all know that none of art is real, that it is artifice and make-believe, and that no document – on page or screen or virtual media – can reproduce the suffering of a bullet. Further, we are now audiences that are sceptical of the promises of the real. The claims of realist art, whatever the medium, have long been scrutinized and dismantled. Objectivity is a mythical position and the cultural space from within which the filmmaker or the writer emerges has an effect on the words and the images produced. If realism implies a record or a representation of material reality – the blood and guts of war, for example – then the possibilities for something called realist art are better served by the documentarian. That is possibly why all fictional attempts to represent the Holocaust on film pale before Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* and why ultimately Levi's *If This Is A Man* is more important, *fundamentally* more important, than Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. It is also why film has replaced the epic sweep of the novel in contemporary consciousness and why photography conquered the dominance of the painted image. George Stevens described for us, in the documentary *A Filmmaker's Journey*, what he remembered of being one of the first Allied soldiers to confront the evidence of the Nazi concentration camps in Poland. He looked on at the survivors of the camps with an appalled horror that had the intensity of a hatred, a refusal to acknowledge a shared humanity in the evidence of such destruction. Any notion of 'direction' or 'art' or 'technique' evaporated for him and all he as a filmmaker was able to do was turn on the camera and document. In George Stevens' confession can be found the germ of Adorno's idea that to create poetry after Auschwitz is indeed a barbarism.

There is, of course, another impetus to the creation of realist art, the urge to convey something of the texture and meaning of ordinary life. Initially, in the nineteenth century, this emerged as the detailing of bourgeois life but it was to eventually become a movement that also spoke for working-class people. (The social and economic conditions, however, dominating the production and exchange of the art product meant that rarely did art emerge *from* working-class people. This, I believe, is a bit of an ongoing story which also says something about the precarious premises of realism in the arts.) Recently I read Stendhal's *The Scarlet and the Black* and I was struck by how part of the pleasure in reading the book came from the detail within it of the specific political and cultural mores of post-Napoleonic Europe. But I was also aware that though the details in the novel may be described as realistic it was the idealistic and romantic character of the protagonist, Julien Sorel, that most drew me to the novel. More than a century removed from the book I find it impossible to classify it as either 'realist' or 'romantic' unless I resort to academic references to genre. The same pleasures – of realism, or romanticism – occur when I watch many of the Italian neo-realist films of the 1940s and 1950s. I am as fascinated by the use of actual locations in *Rome Open City* – the bombed-out apartments and streets of Rome – as I am seduced by the melodramatic heroics of the resistance heroes. When Anna Magnani is shot in the climax of the film, what meaning can be attached to the use of terms such as 'realism' to indicate anything of the terrifying beauty of the death on screen? Is it authentic? Yes, in as much as I have historic knowledge of partisan death in the fight against fascism, but again, for specific knowledge of this history I turn to non-fiction and to documentaries.

Rossellini's work can't duplicate this knowledge, nor do I think he wanted to. Instead he offers an image of betrayal which emerges from the real tragedy of the Second World War but which also has a resonance that speaks for all struggles that have been exploited and squashed. Magnani's fall, of course, reminds me of Goya. The romance of the real.

This dual commitment to documenting proletarian life coupled with the knowledge that the creative work can never be a simulation of real life is one of the reasons I admire and love Pasolini's art. We have become accustomed in our contemporary moment to be suspicious of polemic. We are in danger of forgetting the importance of films and books and drama which strive to communicate something of the fury and anger, and yes, the despair, that arises from trying to make sense of social divisions and exploitation. In *Accatone* and *Mamma Roma*, Pasolini utilized the tricks of neo-realism – location shooting, non-professional cast – to create epic, operatic tributes to the whores, thieves and lumpen proles of post-war Italy. Initially seducing the audience by the pretence to realism, he shatters our expectations by creating tragedy. Instead, however, of tragedy being the domain of kings and queens, warriors and princes, it belongs now to the whores and the peasants. This poetic transformation of the real was to culminate in Bertolucci's *1900* (he was an apprentice to Pasolini). In that film Bertolucci took the real material history of fascist Italy and transformed it into the grandest of proletarian fantasies, a romantic revolutionary gesture. *1900* is fantasy: the peasants, enveloped in the red flag at its denouement, take over the land from the aristocracy. It never happened, it is not real. But the dream was.

In Jennie Livingstone's documentary *Paris Is Burning*, set in the dance parties held by New York's homeless, young latino and black drag queens perform their routines at house parties, competitions of style, fantasy and escape. One category of performance is for the 'real', those fags and dykes who can best pass as 'straight'. The crowd of prostitutes, trannies and street kids holler and shout, encouraging the participants to act out their fantasies of masculinity and femininity. What these performances celebrate is the knowledge that the 'real' of objectivity, of something we call normalcy does not exist except as a system of beliefs that enforces the rule of bourgeois notions of the same: rules that do harm against the deviant, against the poor.

In *The Thin Red Line* a soldier, having watched his comrades die, states succinctly the reason for war: "It's about property." In *Saving Private Ryan* the only objections to war are voiced from the most cowardly of soldiers, the pacifist whose actions lead to the death of one of the heroes. It is true that *Saving Private Ryan* simulates accurately (I presume) the effects of bullets tearing flesh, of bombs ripping apart bodies. But I learnt nothing from this film and if I experienced any emotions, they were a revival of nostalgia – of watching Second World War movies on lazy Sunday afternoons. Spielberg mistakes his digital bullets for real bullets. I love realist fiction – from Stendhal to Baldwin – and I love realist film – from Rossellini to Cassavetes. I love it for the commitment to the detailing and celebration and respect for ordinary human life. But I never mistake the poetry for fact. I think *The Thin Red Line* is real poetry. I think *Saving Private Ryan* is a lie.

Christos Tsiolkas. He writes. He smokes. He dances. He has a strange thing for Bill Pullman.

Sue Holmes

THE PLACE IS ARARAT, population 16,000, the year is 1980. It is a hot, dry day with a strong northerly and the classroom carries the stench of twenty-five adolescent boys. I sit at the front of the room reading from *The Mango Tree* by Ronald McKie. The students are supposedly following in their copies as I attempt to imbue the prose with some excitement. Flies are droning around the windowsills. I ignore them and the student making snoring noises at the back of the room. I'm surprised to hear murmurings from the 'good' students sitting in the front row. The smallest of them, an angelic looking blond boy, screws up his face. I hope he's not working up to a fart.

"Miss, I HATE this book!"

This is the signal for an eruption of voices.

"It's boring!"

"Why do we have to read this crap?"

"It's the worst book I've ever read."

The last comment comes from a boy who has trouble with the *Sun News Pictorial*. I explain that we're obliged to read it because their parents have purchased their copies and we don't want to waste their money, but my arguments are

sounding hollow. I don't like the book either. We've given it the fifty-page test, the plot is still developing at a snail's pace and the soppy characters ponce around in their own little world. We negotiate. If they don't tell their parents, or anyone in the other year-nine classes, we'll ditch the book and read something else.

That night I sit outside on the verandah, stubby in hand, gazing up at the night sky and hoping for inspiration to arrive with a cool southerly. I need something to captivate my class, many of whom have never been further than Ballarat in their lives, either in body or spirit. Ararat is not a wealthy town. Apart from farming, the main employment is from the railways, J Ward for the criminally insane, or Aradale for the psychologically ill.

At year-nine level, raging hormones ensure most of my students have the concentration span of a gnat and they think writing is for sissies. Their worlds are physical not cerebral. I need something they can believe and maybe relate to but will bring up some timeless issues. The other problem is I can't possibly ask them to buy another novel or the game will be up. I start to think blokey and short stories and it hits me like a stab pass straight to the chest. Frank Hardy. Perfect!

We start with 'The Load of Wood' and Darky comes to life. Sure it's a bit dated and sentimental, but the characters are real, the story is well paced and the rural setting has the ring of authenticity. Darky speaks like your average bloke in Ararat. We work our way through a few more stories, my students are happy and so am I. This is my first big learning about realism and starting out from what you know. I encourage them to write from their world and gradually we move away from sheep and football, well, at least to new ways of writing about sheep and football.

'The Load of Wood' travelled with me to downtown Footscray the next year and found favour again, this time with street-wise adolescents. They could relate to the poverty and loved 'sticking it up' authority figures.

Why did I, as an educated female, relate to such a story? In today's terms it is sexist and chauvinist, but as a working-class woman I had yet to find many depictions from a female working-class perspective. I might add that I still haven't. Aside from a few innovators, like Barbara Baynton, short stories of traditional Australian realism are largely masculine in tone and content.

As an educated, working-class woman, realism for me is grounded in a sense of place and identity, zones of comfort which allow me to better know myself and others. When I don't want realism, but escapism, I travel (largely in my reading, but occasionally in my writing) to places not remotely connected to the world I inhabit, mentally and physically. But in this other world I am being entertained, not challenged. When I want realism, want to reflect on the human condition, I stay in the places and spaces of my life, a working-class life. I search for descriptions and dialogue where the domestic is not trivialized, where work is acknowledged as a necessary drudge and the battles of life are not hidden. I search for unromantic places and people who make me laugh by laughing at themselves – and not a titter but a big belly laugh. I search for unremarkable people who take huge emotional and ideological journeys, sometimes without realizing it, and may never resolve a dilemma or reach a resolution. People don't in real life. Real life is confusing and chaotic.

I like realism because my background means I have a fierce 'crap monitor' in place. Life is not a romantic comedy. I am grounded by the battles of the here and now. I can't afford too many flights of fancy. As my Dad used to say when confronted by 'if this, if that' people, "If your auntie had balls she'd be your uncle". Dad fought through a rich man's war. He knew exactly what being fed crap meant. In my reading and writing I like to see characters, female and male, who aren't polite and respectful. I want them irreverent with a 'spit in your eye' attitude. I want to recognize my values in a narrative, through either the characters or the authorial voice. I want to recognize workplaces and social settings rather than having to imagine them. Didn't any other young girl get bored to death working in a bank when she left school? I mistrust characters who theorize and pontificate in dialogue. None of my friends wax lyrical in conversation, except when they're pissed.

Sue Holmes is a working-class writer and teacher from Melbourne.

Brad Evans

IN 1993 I SIGNED up to put myself into debt, along with other students, by enrolling in a course at the University of Newcastle. In the first stage of the four-year course, we studied poetry at a basic level. In one assessment we had to choose a

poet and give a seminar on the life and work of that poet. Not knowing a poet I liked, I began a library search on some poets recommended by the lecturer. The first on the list was Ezra Pound.

I didn't like how Pound used big words in his poems, like he was trying to hide something from the reader. I looked at poems featured in 'Lustra', 'Ripostes' and 'Cathay'. I didn't bother with the long-winded Cantos, because he drifted in and out of Latin. I didn't see any boldness in his approach. His work appeared indirect and distant from emotion so I gave up on him. The next poet on the list was T.S. Eliot. I read poems like 'Preludes' and attempted 'The Wasteland'. Again, I gave up. Same problem. Big words and complex grammar and amongst all this I couldn't feel a damn thing.

These writers didn't appear stuck in a society like the rest of us, they seemed separate from it. The work was dead, starved of emotion and distant from what was going on around them. These poets appeared too far gone from the real thing. I wanted to read about the everyday struggle of reality and I wanted it put down simply so that I didn't need a Latin primer or a dictionary by my side. I realized that there was a fatal flaw with the poetry list – it was stuck on poets practising the complexity of form and technique rather than getting some content down so that anybody can pick it up and read it.

Back in 1993 I hadn't read much and was yet to discover the power of realism in poetry through the Russian writers like Mayakovsky, Mandelstamm, Solzhenitsyn; the Chinese poet Wen I-to, or the Vietnamese Nguyen Chi-Thien – rotting away in a political camp and committing hundreds of poems to memory. After discovering these guys some years later I thought, 'shit, why the hell weren't we given this at university! Where were their books?' Here was direction, purpose. Here was fire: poetry bound to real-life experiences. I wanted to know if there were writers still writing like that today!

In 1995 I was lucky enough to catch the Melbourne poet, Peter Bakowski, who gave a reading in Maitland. He read a piece, 'jaws of factory', which was about his experiences of working in a twenty-four-hour bakery. There was no bullshit. He'd written about the crappy conditions the workers faced in each shift. The suffering in the struggle for survival. It was about people stuck, sweating it out in a factory to repay mortgages and debts, and Peter had outlined the nightmarish conditions firsthand. I became aware that, even in Australia, there were a handful of writers writing with the facts and without the need for escape. Their poetry was authentic and committed to everyday experiences. Eagerly, I bought a copy of Peter's book, *In the human night*.

In 1997 I left Newcastle University having started a postgraduate course in a Bachelor of Arts Honours. I founded a journal which would commit itself to poetry with realist, socialist and humanitarian themes. This was to become *Red Lamp*. I'd read quite a lot of poetry and so realized that this would be no easy feat but I had some helpful neighbours who put me onto specific poetry collections and anthologies to get me started.

The first was a book, *Red Candle*, by the Chinese poet, Wen I-to. I-to taught me a lot about getting emotion down on the page (from a male writer's perspective). He also taught me that it was honest and natural to talk politically in poetry, to choose a side and a direction, rather than to squat on the fence. I admired I-to for doing that. This philosophy was further reinforced by two anthologies, *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* and *Bricklight*. These books exposed me to subject matter committed to the themes I was eagerly searching for as a solid benchmark for *Red Lamp*.

While getting poems together for the first issue of *Red Lamp*, I studied some of the mainstream journals at the local library to find out what was actually being accepted as poetry. I noticed that many of the well-established poetry journals in Australia are run by the English departments of universities who are, in turn, backed by government funds. I've also noticed that there is a stranglehold – writers being pushed into writing in a particular way to uphold unspecified agendas. Of course, these journals have the financial backing, so I can see why many writers are trying to get in – as getting in may mean getting paid for a contribution. The poetry being accepted into these journals is predominantly pastoral from a romantic perspective and escapist.

Government arts grants are almost always given to these university-backed journals, which maintain their own agendas for publishing poetry – one of which is excluding much of the poetry which bears any trace of realism. I find most of the poetry in these journals impersonal, distant, indirect – many of these symptoms which I had seen in the modernist poetry that I'd been assessed on while at university.

The kind of poetry that gets the

most publicity in Australia is dragging behind in its traditions, caught somewhere between a pastoral inheritance and a need to foster the romantic values preached by the likes of Keats and Wordsworth. This poetry fears confrontation, debate, direction; and anything which is vaguely offensive gets the reject slip. The reason being that most editors are scared shitless about providing any kind of material which may offend and/or feed a lawsuit; they prefer to tread carefully on eggs that have long turned rotten.

Australian poetry requires a significant improvement in the way it relates to real life. Much poetry in Australia is outdated, lacking thought, indirect and out of touch with society. If this could be resolved, poetry would be accepted and respected. At present, mainstream poetry is encoded, elitist and confined to university libraries for study and teaching. When poetry is only presented in this way it is not enjoyable and is downright boring. There's little wonder why people aren't supporting poetry, when poetry has turned its back on them.

There are some isolated pockets where this attitude is finally being reversed, and poetry is actually becoming accepted. I have been lucky to have been introduced to such poetry in Australia, poetry that has kept up with the times, but it has sometimes been difficult to find. In 1997, I made an effort to visit Melbourne and collect as much suitable poetry from writers as I could to help get them published. I went to readings, spoke to people and bought from bookshops. I felt that this poetry would be quite valuable to the Australian scene; however the main literary journals were neglecting these writers and giving them little public exposure. The small press is so important as an outlet for such writing.

As Poetry Editor for the *Green Left Weekly* in late 1997 I found that the newspaper was receiving a lot of poems from writers around the world: teachers, prisoners, and the unemployed, as well as factory workers. The paper was inundated with backlogged work and only had limited space for poetry. My job was to sift through and present a small sample for forthcoming issues of the paper; any suitable leftovers were set aside for *Red Lamp*.

Through this paper I was introduced to the work of Denis Kevans, Bill Anderson and a number of others. Denis Kevans also put me in touch with the poetry of Ralph Kelly and Victor Daley – who was a journalist and talented satirist from earlier this century.

At around the same time, I began to correspond with π0 of Collective Effort Press, who in turn, led me onto other writers from Collective Effort: thalia, jeltje and Jas H. Duke, all of whom have now appeared in *Red Lamp*. The work of these writers and of others like them will continue to make a significant and valuable contribution to contemporary Australian poetry. It's their kind of poetry that deserves to be read in schools.

In comparing these guys to poets who have been influenced by the modernists, I can't help but think just how false the influence has been: poetry that is devoted entirely to form, rather than content and realist commitment. Through the writers in *Red Lamp*, I have gained the belief that poetry should be something which ordinary people can easily understand and relate to. Those preoccupied with form just don't have that.

Modernist poetry is still being taught in the classroom so that it can be disassembled objectively via literary autopsy. This is not poetry. This is so that academics can feed abstract bits to their students and say: 'Hey, you guys, this is what poetry is meant to be, so get used to it!' I've attacked this approach to poetry in my introduction to the first issue of *Red Lamp*. Poetry should be thought-provoking, revealing and an enjoyable experience. In conclusion to this point, I felt that the objective in reading the crap we were given in my university course was to bore the shit out of everybody.

And if that was the objective, it did! By the end of the semester-long course, I found myself and my peers totally discouraged by this dead-fart approach with the kind of poetry we'd been taught. Some of the students didn't bother submitting their assignments; one student still received a credit for doing just that.

Brad Evans is the editor of the socialist, realist and humanitarian poetry magazine, Red Lamp.

Barry Hill

"Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" – Gramsci's wonderful phrase that might be used to describe the activity of writing as a 'realist'. I mean: while no realist could be rationally optimistic about democratic futures, the effort of writing (even about that) must express some optimism of the will. It was this optimism, I realized, that

was generated as soon as I started the 'Port Lights' poems about the dock dispute last year. Like many *overland* readers, I was down at the picket lines at the time: the poems were drafted during that unforgettable long day that culminated in that police visit in the early hours of the morning. Heroic moment! Classic activist energy! A revival of the body politic! In the poems it was this – the warmth and hope in the revival of the body politic, the physical reality in which the hitherto pessimistic intellect was embedded – that became the subject matter of the poem. Then, in the course of shaping lines, it felt natural to refer to leftist literary tradition itself – realism roping in older literary realities, especially those that seemed to come out of action itself.

In particular I had in mind erstwhile Victor Serge, who, in one of his activist novels, writes out of the 'we', out of the collective voice, a narrative move that does away with the bourgeois problem (so called) of the isolated and isolating individual and individualizing voice. And the more I wrote out of our own historical moment, the more the writing revived the usefulness of certain kinds of political language: oppositional language arising from the gathering together of a felt community, one united by a common cause and historical understanding. To this extent, then, I was happily surprised to discover myself writing as a certain kind of realist, even though, I have to confess, I had dismissed the realist project when I was a teenager, after a soporific experience of those mediocre novels put out by the Australasian Book Society. In those books, I had come to feel, prose was too much determined by hope, rather than an intellect that gave ground for hope. Stylistically, that kind of realism soon wears the reader, as well as its own trajectory, thin.

And so with the 'Port Lights' poems. It did not take long – about six poems – before I felt myself wearing thin. The realist mode worked as long as I was working with the physical embrace of the body politic, and the language that could be roped in and out of that. But what to do with events we couldn't see at the dock, large, impersonal forces elsewhere, determinants that may be summed up in one word: money? Money is surely one of the most abstract things: a set of operations rather than any concrete reality. Edmund Wilson, a critic who knew a thing or two about realism (the difference between, say, Dos Passos and the three kinds of realism to be found in Flaubert's *Three Stories*), once described Marx as the poet of commodities. How useful is realist convention with the poem of the stock exchange? Best go with Valery's dictum: "a flower, a proposition, and a sound can be imagined almost simultaneously". If we get stuck on realism, rather than hope for the imagination, the real world will be indescribable and any alternatives unsayable. The sad fact seems to be that (speaking as a political realist), contingencies tend to defeat most creative endeavour if feet must be religiously kept on the ground. As it is, ladies and gentlemen, the world must remain beyond our grasp when we speak the language of yesteryear. *This Way For The Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, was the parodic title of the toughest (most realistic) book to come out of Auschwitz (I'm citing Milosz here). Borowski's writing was deadpan play with the social order of the camp, with things that can hardly in their gravity, be adequately described directly. Dark reality sometimes allows language no choice but to dance on the pinhead of truth.

Of course writing is never just writing. It is an activity, a social action bound, one way or the other, to some sense of audience. It is an outreach. My happiness in writing those poems was knowing that they could be read aloud, and that an audience able to follow them would by definition be a sympathetic one (just as *overland* would be the natural home of the poems). Maybe this is the key to what might be called the realist impulse: the need for the solitary consciousness to create the reality of its own language community. That is to say, realism is something created between people: it is an outcome of relationship. But even then, in the music of that project, there are private notes struck by the reader, in which, for the time taken to speak or privately read what has been written, an *inscape* is at work. The question always with language is, how in is in? Borowski took the language out, into black parody; Paul Celan, in his meditations on the ultimate realities of twentieth-century history, pushed it in, into the darkest recesses of personal and linguistic recovery. In that direction of course, lies silence, the decision not to speak at all, or perhaps instead to pray, or in some way simply attend to things as they are. Such writing can be as realist as anything else – more so if we think of Beckett, or, in another idiom, Basho. George Steiner (in *After Babel*) wants us to think that the

primary drive of language is inward and domestic, that its outward and communicative thrust is secondary: hence the emergence of the tower of Babel and the problem of translation. At the same time languages are made for translation, for the crossing over of understandings, some of which can only be expressed, perhaps, in song – in what we might think of as a bottom line aboriginal overcoming of soliloquy. So a good song (if we had the poet of commodities!) has more social realism in it than a realist's poke in the eye.

I hope one day the 'Port Lights' poems will find a place in a much larger work called *Getting the Revolution Straight* – a collection of cantos about poetry and politics and the politics of poetry that arises from what Christopher Hill calls (with regard to the English civil war) "the experience of defeat". Now, what method could possibly exist for such a project? I don't know, but I'm in the process of finding out, having published a Canto on the Russian Revolution (*Republica 4*) and another on Shelley and abstract idealism (*Salt 12*, forthcoming). Would anyone seriously suggest that the realist mode must be *the* one? To write out of full consciousness is not possible within the realist tradition. Consciousness is full of conjectures, imaginings, mysteries, inherent privacies and poetic leaps of faith: it has stars in it as well as dust, light in it as well as iron and blood, silences as well as the grinding noise of power.

Barry Hill lives in Queenscliff. Two recent books include his narrative poem, Ghosting William Buckley *(1994) and his labour history,* Sitting In *(1990).*

Jiri Tibor

fiction

Extract from *Bettany's Book*

Tom Keneally

Prim Bettany is an Australian aid worker who believes that slavery exists in the Sudan as a result of the war between the Islamic North and the variegated South of the country. She has left her Sudanese lover Sherif and has come home to report and speak to the UN Association and others in Canberra.

THE OFFICES OF AUSTFAM were not in any of the high-rent buildings around Sydney Cove but in that seedy stretch west of the point where George Street becomes Parramatta Road. In the spirit of their surroundings and their trade, the employees of Austfam dressed more for down-at-heel comfort – old batik dresses, open-neck shirts on the men – than for corporate success. There was very little chubbiness or slickness of Austfam. Many of the staff had served in posts in Asia and Africa where the grief of the world had borne away their conventional sense of style. Many had been taught the virtues of vegetarianism in the societies they had visited or worked in. They had certainly learned that the daily meat of Australian diets was not the world norm and their sense of what the rest of the world got by on tended to make them herbivores rather than carnivores.

Peter Whitloaf, the head of Austfam, who commuted between Sydney and Canberra, was an exemplary beanpole. In his cardigan, he looked like a Trappist monk in mufti. But she knew enough by now, by meeting such folk as Stoner, that here at the bosom of aid and development bodies could be found at least as intense a voracity to prove, to survive, to succeed, as anywhere else in the human scheme. There was as well as an undeniable altruism, a hunger for credit, credit being something she had unintentionally acquired in the case of the Darfur emergency.

Peter was both a decent fellow and an operator. Capable of being a senior public servant, he was a former Federal minister's press secretary, had been offered a seat in the Senate, but was here by choice. This morning, after she had been greeted, pecked on the cheek, and answered the inquiries of the outer office staff – "Yes, I am thinner. It's that malaria from two years back." – she was greeted by Peter Whitloaf like an uncle greeting a favourite if over-exuberant niece.

"Prim," he said. "Ah, still a girl, still a girl."

In his office they talked about what he called "Austfam's footprint" in the Sudan. They talked about a new camp – not only Hessiantown, which she intended to visit. But recently some tens of thousands of Southerners living in shanties or on the streets around Khartoum and Omdurman had been rounded up and put in a new camp beyond the one at el Sherif. She had been there on inspection and then to supervise Austfam-financed latrine-digging by a Sudanese earth-moving company for whom Austfam paid. There had been no latrines until then, just bare ground on which tents and UN blue plastic had provided the shelter. So, another instant refugee camp! The government had been internationally criticized for it, even by countries like Australia, whose immigration intake was barely more than 100,000 a year! But, said Prim, you can't imagine the pressure the Southerners put on the city, the way you couldn't move for child beggars in Central Khartoum. The Ministry of the Interior had simply panicked and dealt with the city's increasing mass of refugees at a stroke. Of course the government could simply make peace with the South and the Southerners could go home. But within their own heads this presents as an impossible choice, and it will take a revolution, probably a military coup, said Prim, to make them call off the war.

Yes, Austfam was still supporting the old Operation Safety depot at Aweil by paying for air and ground transport of aid. The place the UN men from Chad, Anwar and Jose, had set up years before had needed to

be abandoned twice, but recently it had operated without too much military interference. There was no question that some Arab militiamen had acquired ration tickets and were drawing food there, but so had many of the rebels. There was simply too regular a stream of Southerners turning up desperate at Aweil, pitched out of their villages by army or militia or in some cases by a contrary faction of rebels, for anyone to consider the idea of the closing of that feeding station as anything other than a disaster.

Peter said how delighted the board of Austfam was at the community health studies Austfam had financed. They had, he said, not only served as a useful guide for those deploying aid in the field. They had raised the profile of Austfam in "the literature".

"This Sherif is a godsend," said Peter without apparent irony.

"Oh yes," she said.

"Which brings me to the question of the new Khartoum administrator we've been promising to send you."

Of course, she saw at once. This was a meeting on how they now intended to end her solitary residence at Austfam, Khartoum. She felt a drunken joy when Whitloaf hurried to say, "I'm afraid I have to tell you I don't think we can find a second person yet. There's a Canberra woman, a consultant Austfam employs, who would like to visit before the end of the year and make an assessment of our operations. That would take her a month or two. But I wondered if you felt you could hold out another year on your own?"

"Oh yes," said Prim. "I can manage."

"Well, that's the bad news. The good news is we would like to make you officially our senior office administrator there. You'd get five or six thousand more in salary. There's a minor problem about it. This promotion would make you totally responsible for Austfam's good name, and totally and exclusively dedicate you to Austfam's work in the Sudan."

"Of course," she said.

Whitloaf looked at the ceiling. "These letters of yours to the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and so on, which you have been kind enough to copy for us. The ones about . . . about slavery of a kind. Southern people in unjust forms of bondage – that comes as no surprise, I suppose . . . But this interest of yours is a bit worrying to us." He looked at her direct now. "Some of the board think it's an internal administrative matter for the Sudanese government, and that buying into it is extraneous to our mandate in the area."

Prim felt her blood move to her face. "I don't agree with them. It's part of the refugee problem, and there's no doubt the refugee problem's within our mandate." She wondered herself was her anger inordinate, related to some profound attachment, some potent electricity which for some reason she drew from the word 'slave'.

"Look, Prim, when we go into a Third World country we all pick up the politics and our opinions are swayed one way and another. And sometimes it's true that despite being neutrals we get to be pro-active, you know, we might decide a certain rebel group is better and juster at distributing equity than the government is. And we might think, even, what a pity it is that the rebels aren't the government, and so we send a little more aid their way than the government might like, and we get threats form various ministries as a result. But over-involvement in this slave business has the risk of getting us into real trouble with Khartoum. Here's a government which says, again and again and angrily, that there's no systemic slavery in the South or North and that if there are residual cases and the government knows about them the culprits will be prosecuted. And yet in the same city there is a woman representing an aid group who says, here is instance after instance of slavery. You see the fury you could attract. *We* could attract."

Prim took thought. "Are we to be totally driven in our actions by governments? If so, we might as well all go into real estate at Surfer's Paradise."

"I know, I know. But beside the true, visible problems this one is . . . you know, it's controversial. Unproven, if you like. And that word – *slavery* – has such a melodramatic weight. And Sunday, in Canberra . . . you must remember that your audience is generally middle-aged and older people who've been committed to the ideals of the UN, and essential to the support of bodies like ours, since their youth. We don't want to distract any of them from the main game. They're very dispassionate and worldly people, many of them former diplomats. They're not going to have much

respect for the buccaneering activities of someone like your friend – what's her name – von Trapke."

"Von Trotke. And she isn't my friend. I've merely heard of her."

"The point is, they're not going to be impressed. The slave-liberators like the von woman are attending to a minute part of the tapestry of African misery, and helping it grow. They demand centre-stage for it. It's part of their absolutist, Bible-bashing view of the world. And it's unprofessional."

"For Christ's sake," said Prim and stood up.

"I didn't want to make you angry," said Peter Whitloaf. "I actually thought I was offering you a promotion and a fraternal caution."

"And I don't get the one if I don't take the other?"

"I didn't say that."

"Look, Peter, the subjects, the people I interview, they surely have authority in their own right. They think they were part of a system of literal slavery."

"Only after the von woman had told them that by paying money for them."

"No, their knowledge is deeper than that. Bloody hell, Peter, read my case histories!"

"Well, they're certainly illustrative of a problem. But is it slavery in the Uncle Tom's Cabin sense? The position of people like von Trotke is ridiculed in the West."

She found herself laughing, richly, like Dimp. "I've had this argument so many times. With Sherif even. Maybe this is a *man* thing, after all. Women, von Trotke, my friend el Razhi, Connie Everdale, even the BBC woman Codderby – they all think slavery exists. The chaps, however, won't believe it till it hits them in the eye."

"Thanks a million," said Whitloaf, regarding the ceiling again.

Prim held up her index finger. "All right, what do you call it when people are captured and sold, and then redeemed again for money?"

"I know, I know. That's called slavery."

"We're told by her critics that if von Trotke goes round buying adolescents back, she is driving the price up and encouraging more captures. But that doesn't prove that there isn't a slave market. It proves there *is* a market, subject to supply and demand, like toothbrushes and bottles of gin. But if I want to be my own boss in Khartoum I can't say that. That there's a market."

"I'd prefer you didn't if you're speaking for us. And I'd really prefer not to hear it on Sunday. These people want to hear about our development and aid programs."

"I actually intended to tell them about development and aid."

"And the health surveys?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Ah, but I have a mind to change my speech now."

"Don't. Look, you ought to remember these people you'll be speaking to are very well-connected too, and the fact that we keep on getting Federal funding *despite* the fact that the Minister considers us a basket-weaving Marxist commune is an index of the good name we have with *them*. But what would happen to us in the next budget if they think we're a pack of Harriet Beecher Stowes?"

They sat in a silence which seemed to make Peter more uneasy, but he kept his long neck stiff, willing her to do the right thing.

"Well, I am going to have something to say about famine advertising."

"Ours?"

"Ours is exemplary, but I won't say that. Others . . . But it all diminishes the humanity of the people it seeks to help. Just my opinion."

"You've become an eccentric in your isolation, Prim."

"No. Well, maybe. But I have met noble Sudanese people too."

"By all means talk about noble people," he said.

"Peter, I wasn't seeking your permission."

When she left the office, she was overcome outside one of the pubs on Broadway with the absence of Sherif. She felt something like a digestive leadenness, a pain in the joints, but it all carried his name. Had this struck her in the office she could not have fought Whitloaf . . .

Delivery

Nelly Zola

He saw the girl at the top of Pretty Sally, where the road swings downwards in a mean curve. Drivers dozing in their cabs here like suckling babes against the soft roar of the engine scarcely feel the grip loosen before thirty-two hot Dunlops slew sideways and dash them wonderingly into the absolute. Impossible to stop, although he would have liked her wet T-shirt and hair like pale weeds dripping on the seat beside him. Even a car would find it hard to pick her up at that point. But girls think of nothing but dragging your eyes out of your head and pulling your rig off-course any time they like.

The image of her blurred with rain stayed with him, standing at the edge of thought, turning the cabin into a burrow or a caravan parked at the shore and the lights of oncoming trucks winking like boats on the far horizon and the girl still wet saying, do what you like.

He pulled in at the next truck stop. The girl had got there first. She stood at the counter waiting to pay for a bag of chips. The red Prelude that had picked her up nudged the cafeteria's window. Its driver sat blowing steam off his coffee, not even eyeing his prize: the narrow uplifted haunches tilted by the high-heeled boots, the bare arms, the breasts outlined in wet cotton.

He walked across. "Saw you on the road," he said to her in a voice that came out lowing, beastlike. Speaking to the side of her head.

"Did you now."

He stood right next to her. He could have touched her hipbone with his own. Her fingernails were moons, unbroken. Her arm above the elbow plump and smooth. Into the flesh a gold snake bracelet dug its mouth the way he wanted to. He smelled her damp hair.

"That bloke's alright is he? Not going to drag you off somewhere you wouldn't want to go?" She turned clear black-lashed eyes on him, the rims of her pupils drawn dark, the insides tawny yellow like a cat's. She seemed to spring right into his skull by looking. The shock reminded him he'd seen her once before.

When I arrived they showed me to my room. Nothing in it but a tall cupboard with a mirrored front, a brown bed, a chest of drawers. Number thirty-seven, down the back, the old part of the building. The cook was fat and eyed me off. They put an apron on me and pushed me out the swinging doors into the dining room. Twelve round tables with turned legs and lace tablecloths. Genteel, although it was only a motel with a bar on the main road. Trucks roaring past and dust on the hydrangeas. Well there's nothing like your first job to take the shine off things. Travelling salesmen and honeymoon couples, pensioners in worn cardigans. Silly jokes, hearty remarks. One man left me five cents for a tip. To show me what I was worth. I could have spat. I felt like spitting all the time.

Except there was the river. Down past the little park with picnic tables and playground horses on black springs, the river doubled back. In the slow meadow, wild grass and peppercorn trees. I lay there on my afternoons off. I swam where the water sped up and spilled into a wide pool. The peppercorns trailed their green stems over the edge. The stones at the bottom caught the brown light. A boy, thin, maybe sixteen, thatched yellow hair, blue eyes, hung back on the bank,

sat on his heels. He sucked a blade of grass.

At the motel they worked me hard. The witch that owned the place had it in for me. A dried-up type with black hair piled up in a French roll. She stood on her dignity but her hands were spotted and here I was just nineteen, a spoilt student from the city. I could see how it was.

"You'll bring my tray up to me," she said. "And see that you're dressed decently and knock before you open the door."

This was at half-past six. I wasn't supposed to start till seven-thirty. So I had to be up and dressed and grovelling to her long before I was getting paid for it. And then she complained about me working in the bar. I lowered the tone, she said. My décolletage.

I'd been hired for a waitress, but they had me washing dishes instead, hour after hour. At night the salesmen howled like dogs and battered on my door. The cook revealed his piece in the coolroom, same colour as the giant block of cheddar cheese. Nothing else to do in the country, the girls all married off as soon as they're ripe. His wife frying chips two feet away. I suppose he thought I was proud. And so I was. Too proud for that, although the boredom made you mad for any kind of theatrics.

Just the same, I wanted to stay. Apart from the job, it was all languor and simplicity. Back home the world waited and pressed in – watchful parents, a boyfriend, ideas and terrors that kept me up all night. But while I rested from all that, the glory of my complicated prospects, my petulant indecision, radiated to the lackeys in the kitchen, the timid honeymooners, the stiff dark woman who owned the place. Their interest was drawn. They had no control over it.

I had admirers. The blond boy who watched at the riverbank brought his brother, and he brought a mate. One had a job in a dairy. The other worked at the petrol station and owned a car. Some nights we drove to the next town along a straight black road, the boys' elbows hanging out the windows with beers in their hands.

One afternoon off, they took me to the waterfall. We climbed through rocks to a flat bleached slab of stone where the river burst out of scrub and fell down in a sheet of crystal. I sat against a boulder round as a bald man's head. Above, the white-blue held a sound it wasn't ready to let go. Everything was magnified or seemed a sign of something large. The sky bent down and touched us with fingers of heat. I took my clothes off first and climbed inside the misted cave behind the fall. The boys stayed up on top. When next I looked, they had stripped off too. Against the sky, they stood pure and bleached like the rocks. My toes were in the river mud, curled into the earth. I was holding on, feeling the water drag and suck like a live thing. The boys were silent. Then they flew down with the grace of birds, diving in perfect arcs one after another, off the rock ledge.

WHEN I GOT BACK to the motel, it was the dishes again. The sink stuck in a corner with a wet wooden rack screwed to the wall. My nose practically scraping it. Steam rising from the hot water and stoking up my neck. She came into the kitchen, the owner, to gloat. Pulled herself up over me. She reached up to inspect my work. "This one hasn't been done properly." I had a plate in my hand. The urge to kill her choked me, the grey china shattering the side of her head, to see her keel over like a ruined monument. I turned and let the plate slide through my soapy fingers to the floor. The crash quivered up my back like ecstasy. I bared my teeth. "I quit," I said.

SHE SAID, "You could give me a lift from here if you like. That fellow can't take me all the way home."

What difference could another girl make? Yet his hand shook, almost. He took a gulp of coffee. The liquid burned his throat, while the ease with which he'd captured her lit a match at the base of his spine. He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist, sauntered to deny the tremor in his legs. The girl went over and picked up her bag. They shook hands, she and the young man.

He waited patiently with no particular expression on his face. The worst would be a smile; a smile could

easily go wrong, could appear importunate or smug. It was a long time now since he'd understood the rules of silence and swift movement and biding his time, so long, it was like something he had never had to learn. He'd known about girls too, like a breathing in his bones, before he'd touched one, by the time he was a stringy boy of fourteen, suddenly filled up with their small shoulders and silly talk. Even before he had taken the first behind the fence into the long grass, had known the bird-feel of elbow and neck, the skin pale-blue inside the wrist, the small hot tongue, the swollen peach slit between the thighs.

Thin girls in cotton dresses. Too many to recall, past a momentary gesture that caught in the groin and could be spun into lazy heat behind the wheel. And since then, there were the pickings on the highway, the fruit that fell his way. Girls who needed a lift, girls with loose tongues and careless limbs. Their boyfriends had bashed them, or the car had broken down and they had to get to Sydney by five, otherwise they wouldn't do it, stand on the side of the road and beg for a ride with their street-kid clothes and their bruised eyes and tattered shoulder bags. And once inside there was no stopping the talk and in such thrashing detail that the roots of their lives were exposed. But they were cheerful in spite of it. Happy as windmills at the centre of a hurricane. Easy girls sometimes, when they wanted comfort or bent the mirror to look at themselves, when he bought them hot chocolate to warm them up, told them about his wife and kids and the crummy bosses working the truckies to death for a pittance, less than any half-wit could earn pushing a pen for the government. And some of them would turn it on for him, lying with arms stretched up behind them on the broad seat of the rig, or in summer once in the scrub near Benalla under the rattling gum leaves. Still, they never gave it freely or in exchange for the ride. Played it like their best card, even when their necks had almost been broken less than an hour before.

This girl too would have her reasons. He wanted to hear them, although he knew she would say something bloated and untrue. He sat straddled behind the wheel, the road juddering through the great metal frame into his arms and backbone.

He said, "I know something about you."

"What do you mean?"

His arms were wide across the wheel. The roar of the engine was his, throttle, gearshift, the whole ramming weight. She sloped away from him, still with that pride he'd noticed straight away.

"What do you know?"

"Nothing. I've got a feeling, that's all."

She looked at him from the distance of her tawny eyes. A jungle look, distrustful, with the foolish courage of a beast.

"I've seen you," he said at last. "Seen you do something you shouldn't."

"WHAT?" SHE ASKED, but he wouldn't say. It got her curious, got her talking. She wanted to know if he hated his job.

"No, not hate. It's rough though. The hours. I reckon I'd like more time off."

But time off to do what? The fibro house in Wangaratta stood before him, the dirty stove and meagre furniture of the kitchen, the window bleak in its prospect of the empty street. His wife's heated face, with the two red spots on her cheeks, some inner burning of misery. To tell the truth, he only wanted to be there when the road had exhausted him, when he could fall into bed too wrecked to take any of it in. The kids were good kids but he soon tired of them. It was a sin, if that was all the life he was to have. In any kind of breeze, the torn bottom of the Holland blind tapped like a schoolteacher's ruler, calling him to attend to all he'd made.

"What about you? You got a job back home?"

"No. I'm a student. At the Uni."

"Studying what?"

"English. Literature and stuff."

She pulled a book out. "Like this. This is what we have to read, *Metamorphosis*." The paperback had a cover in black and white with an insect drawn across

the whole of it, the legs extended so they gripped the spine, and in the top corner a frightful glaring head.

"This guy wakes up one morning and he's a huge cockroach. And his family, they keep him locked up. It's about turning into what you actually are. You know, how we're all different really, inside. Or maybe it's about your worst fears." Her breasts moved as if encompassing the thought.

Two days before he'd been so strung out from the heat and driving all night, he'd pulled over after lunch, fallen asleep in the cabin and woken up dry and itchy, as though he'd been marched over by fleas. He knew a place where he could cool off. He drove to the spot, jack-knifed the rig into the bush and walked with the piercing drill of cicadas in his ears along the speckled path toward the water's hush. Before he got to the clearing he looked up and saw the boys. Something strange about them, as if they were sleepwalking, held him. Unnaturally calm in that glaring heat. They had their clothes off, the kind of situation right for jokes and jostling and sporting about, yet they were solemn.

He stayed hidden. Then he saw why. A girl, naked in the river. White skin, pink nipples on her heavy breasts, pushing her belly against the tide, leaning into the water with something assured, self-possessed. As if she owned the place. She looked to the rock, threw back her head.

Such dumb pride. So sure she wouldn't be touched, and the boys acting more like skittering chooks than men, leaping like bloody children off the high ledge. She stroked her body as though she was alone. She held up her hair, her elbows out, and pushed against the water, walking toward him, the light glinting off her shoulders, her thighs spangled with wedges of mirrored sun. The slow movement of her hips, and the way she stared in his direction, although he knew she couldn't see him where he stood in shadow behind the bush, made him come too quick, almost as soon as he put his hand inside his shorts.

"That's filth, that book. Disgusting. Why'd you want to read a thing like that?"

He wanted to throw the ugly book out the window to be crushed under the next set of wheels. He could tell she was surprised. But then he fixed it by keeping quiet until his breathing eased, and he told her a funny story about the cat getting caught in the tree outside the pub, how he and two of his mates, half drunk, climbed up and had to rescue each other instead.

We'd only been going a half-hour when he wanted to stop. "What's up?" I asked, although I knew the score. Pulled into a cosy parking bay off the road. He leaned across and touched my arm. "Just let me rest," he said. "Lend me your lap."

He looked ridiculous. Like a hound that's been running all day, worn out, but wild and alert. He had a plan, I could see it. But why cover it up? Why not say what you want?

"Payment in flesh," I said, and laughed. The same old thing, as if it were a new move, entirely new. To me it was a joke gone stale. "I won't. You needn't think I'll come across. I'm not that kind of girl."

"What kind are you then?"

"I appreciate the lift, honestly. But just like this, I couldn't."

"You've got a boyfriend haven't you?"

"Yes," I told him and he tightened his grip on my arm as if to say, then what's the difference?

Outside the blood-red sun was drowning in the hills, the air as thick as milk. I had no will to struggle. What if I go along, I thought. The words I'd spoken denied everything real, his round head, the tight curls lying against his scalp. Sweat in black circles under his arms and his eye as dense as marble. The wish for something, some transforming thing, like when the boys dived naked from the ledge, turned in me like a lock.

He drew me close. "I know what kind you are," he muttered in my ear.

Now he had her half covered with his weight, holding her down with one arm. She would not protest, was playing out some drama of lifelessness.

He pushed her against the corner of the cab, awkward, with her head propped up in the angle of the window. Her face was turned away but her eye bent unnaturally on him, watching. Even if she screamed, where they were, no-one would hear. The thought of her belly and breasts stabbed him like a spur, the long waiting, seeing her on the road and the quiet he'd had to keep, like stalking a deer. But suddenly a kind of distaste, as though he'd eaten something foul, rose in his throat. She had put her hand up to his ear and was pushing against it, pushing him away with a little grunt like a pig, a feeble, half-meant gesture. He could have snapped her neck like a rabbit's. This useless struggle with clothes, the giving up of part of himself was sickening. It was the feel of her breaking that he wanted. He woke to the realization as a dreamer, disturbed by something muffled and confused, wakes to the sound of a phone in the next room. For the first time now he heard it ring clearly. *This is where stealth leads. It leads to death.*

WE WERE CONSPIRING together, me with my yearning for something to happen. Anything. And he all of a sudden filled with the rage of delivery. None too soon I recalled in a fright that brought the electricity back to my legs his grip on the wheel when he spoke of the book. I'd looked across and seen the veins standing out, the black hair bristling like an army of ants down to the very knuckles pushing under the skin. And back where he'd picked me up in the cafe, that vacant mouth, that shifting from foot to foot. All at once it signified. I sank my nails beneath the bell of his ear. I kneed his groin with a strength I never knew I had. The door fell open under my hand and I crashed out, dragging my bag with me. Some sorcery flew me to the road. I never looked back on the wheeled monster slumbering under the blue-black clouds.

A couple in a station wagon pulled up. The man the sweetest most pleasant I'd ever seen with a sweet little wife. I trembled still with the closeness of death but told them only my lift had dropped me off. They were glad to have company they said, they and their fluffy pet, a Pomeranian that licked my hand. They asked me what I did, which even though I'd had a shock I told them something of, and thought, while talking about books and study and a career ahead, it's high time I gave up this drifting into things, this willingness. I might get killed. The time had come to arm myself.

But then the luxury of life drew me back. The dog turned chocolate eyes of love on mine, gleaming in the half-light like two steady arrows to their mark. The woman wore her hair coiled low on her neck and where it sat the flesh was moist. Fine amber strands stuck to her skin in the heat and finer long ones fluttered up. The car bumped cheerfully along as though it would never need to stop. So I lolled back and let the scenery stream by.

They were fond of each other, the pair in the front. They called each other dear. Clarence, their little pet, they fed from a paper bag.

"And would you like a nice ripe pear?"

She turned and offered me the fruit. I could have swooned from gratitude and warmth. We laughed together at nothing at all.

fiction

Shop

Claire Thomas

I IGNORED THE OLD GUY and walked over to her register instead.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks," I answered.

"Okay, that's $3 exactly then," she said. Big smile.

I had my money ready. It was a bit hot from my pocket and from my hand. I gave it to her. A big clump of fluffy blue lint landed on her fingers with the two coins. I blushed bright red, thought about grabbing the lint. Then I walked out, banging into the giant inflatable Chuppa Chup lollipop that was hanging from the roof. She was looking at the money in the till and didn't even say good-bye.

The Chuppa Chup kept swinging gently across the shop. I think it was a strawberry one.

THERE IS A VENDING MACHINE at the entrance of her shop. I buy lots of drinks there. It's not a Coca Cola vending machine. It's one of those other kinds with all those drinks without their own names. Just Orange Drink and Passionfruit Drink and that sort of thing. I usually buy Cola Drink in a brown-coloured can.

Sometimes I stand there beside the machine and watch her talk to the customers. It's quite a good spot. Kind of behind a big pillar thing.

She smiles at everyone.

I love her teeth. There is one on the side that's all crooked. Her tongue plays with it sometimes and I don't think she even knows it.

She's so fucking skinny. You can see her hips under her skirt, under her T-shirt. Sometimes she wears white tights. White tights and dark red runners. She doesn't have any tits. But her nipples are fucking amazing. They're always sticking out. You can always, always see them under her T-shirt even when it's forty degrees and there are sweat balls on the top of her nose. She has eyes like some fluffy animal. Maybe a deer or something. Round and clear with long eyelashes that almost touch her cheeks when she's looking into the till.

She has pink stripes in her hair. She always does it in twisty things. One sticking out on either side of her head. Once I called her Heidi Hair when I was buying some ciggies. She giggled and tugged at the twisty things.

That was when I knew she liked me.

I KNOW THE EXACT times that she works. Monday afternoons, Tuesday all day and Friday mornings. I have this shaded pencil pattern over my lecture timetable in my diary. She has patterned shifts. Someone asked me why bits of my timetable were dotty and zig-zagged. I told them I'd just been doodling in class some time.

A couple of weeks ago, I got this new T-shirt. I decided to wear it one Tuesday. That way, when I went into the shop, she'd probably be impressed.

My T-shirt was black with blue sleeves with a big snake slithering across the back and some writing across the front. The writing said – Watch Out, I'm Right Behind You. I thought it was really witty. People'd read the front, you'd walk away from them, then they'd see your snake and they'd think you were kinda funny. Funny ha ha, not funny strange.

I think Heidi Hair read the front of my T-shirt while I was getting my money out. She didn't say anything though.

LAST WEEK I DECIDED to give her a letter.

I just wrote it on a page of my lecture pad. Just a corner of a page. I thought about the words for a long time. It was very important that she didn't just laugh at me and throw it away. It was very important that she realized how important it was. I even wrote my email address.

I gave the letter to her with my money.

"That's for you," I said.

"Oh," she said, shoving it into her pocket. "Thanks."

Later that afternoon, I bought some chewie. I walked into the shop. She walked into the storeroom.

I still had to buy the chewie though. Otherwise I might've looked dodgy.

LAST NIGHT I SAW her in the lane. Walking down a fucking dark alley in the dark. It was the first time I'd ever seen her out of her shop. I'd never even imagined her out of her shop. It was weird.

She'd been to the supermarket. The bags pulled down on her arms and her shoulders. Her neck stuck out and she looked like a bird. I walked real fast until I was right behind her. She turned around to check who it was. She didn't smile or nothing. Just kept walking down the lane. Her sneakers were making squeaky noises with every step she made. I started walking beside her, looking right at her with my head all turned. She would've seen me out of the corner of her eye. For sure. But she didn't look or nothing. She just kept on walking.

"It was a bit rude of you not to reply to my letter," I said.

She didn't say anything back. Just shook her head. Adjusted her bags.

"Don't you think?" I said.

"Sorry," she said, still walking. Not looking at me.

"Oh, you don't have to be sorry," I said.

"Right," she replied. That time she did look. She fully stared into my face. She practically sneered at me. It fucking pissed me off.

"You're a fucking snob, you know," I said to her. Then I laughed. Her face was getting red and she was walking real fast and trying to balance her supermarket bags. They were making red grooves in her hands. She looked fucking stupid.

"Been shopping?" I said.

"Yeah," she practically grunted.

Then I fucking lost it.

"What the fuck is your problem bitch? I just wanna be your friend, you know?" I was screaming at her I reckon. Then I grabbed her round the neck. Just a friendly hug thing.

Then she fucking screamed. I made her scream so loud.

Her supermarket bags fell onto the ground and her things went everywhere.

She was sprinting down the lane. I don't think I've ever seen a girl run so fast, except girls in races. She wasn't in a race though, she was just running. She didn't look back once. Not at me. Not at her supermarket stuff dribbling across the bitumen. I watched her until she was out of the alley. Her feet sticking out funny as she ran and ran. When she was gone around the corner, I sat on the ground, right in the middle of her things.

She'd bought some Rev that had kinda popped open on the ground. Her milk poured itself over her box of cereal – Weet Bix. I thought that was funny. Good milk going on the cereal. She had lots of pasta, little tubes and long strips and curly green spiral ones. She had tampons in boxes with flowers on them. They were Regular. I opened a box and opened a tampon and held it. She had Promite and Cheddar Cheese and some Donald Duck Shampoo. She had some crumpets and a copy of *Who* that I read right through. And there was some Band Aids. And a can of tomatoes. And a giant Caramello Koala.

And I sat there for so long, surrounded.

Until I picked it all up and carried it home.

fiction

Dad

Jane Sloan

THROUGH THE BARS of your cot you can see him turning the pages of the evening newspaper. Firelight on the bedroom walls. The rustling of the pages is keeping you awake. You lie there on your belly wondering at his nightly intrusions. Why does he come? He seems uncomfortable on the single wooden chair that he's taken from its usual corner to bring closer to the warmth, the light.

A taciturn man. Arnold Bennett himself described your people as "a solid and taciturn race". One of the reasons you will eventually leave. To venture footloose and fancy free to anywhere, nowhere because you realize you can't ever leave home behind.

You are not as unlike him as you first thought. You find yourself disinclined to conversation, a silent observer more comfortable on the periphery; a pedant, meticulous in your daily ways; irritated if the evening paper arrives late (you like to know what's going on in the world).

The chill of winter evenings in Melbourne. Why do they continue to remind you of him? It's as though there's no place that isn't eventually given over to his presence. The smell of coal smoke sweet as a lover's perfume. You sit there, in front of the fire, turning the pages. The warmth. You are him and not-him. Feeling the weight of his hand upon your head, holding you, for an instant. Your infancy cradled in the breadth of his palm. Why does he leave? You look down upon your own body, grown away from his touch. Then you are reassured.

NOW YOU'RE SICK but you cannot tell him. He would fly in and occupy the whole space of your life again. You may as well be dead. You will die alone. Rather this than the huge silence of him, waiting, waiting until you are gone.

Lying there. Around the bed you've painstakingly arranged sheets of plain brown paper so they're overlapping. There's not an inch of floor space to be seen. A rustling carpet has been spread out.

Any footsteps will now be easily detected.

Not even an insect could make its light-footed wanderings without you knowing of its presence. You lie there remembering the particular crackling sound as you opened the brown-paper-packages-tied-up-with-string he sent you. Birthday and Christmas. You hummed the song as you unknotted.

YOU BRUSH YOUR index finger against the ball of your thumb, recalling the feel of the paper. The sensation of it has been held there in the minute gap between skin and skin. The creases were smoothed flat, each piece of paper folded, refolded, corner to corner, then you tucked them away in the kitchen drawer for later.

You doze.

Firelight. A twig snapping somewhere in the darkness of a forest. Animals are awake out there. Their red eyes forgive nothing. The sound of flames crackling as they eat into the wood. The rustling of a body as it is dragged away across the forest floor.

It is dark when you finally awake.

He has not come.

The sheets of paper are undisturbed, the room is silent. It is getting cold. Too tired now to get up and light the fire. Everything aches. You take the matches from the bedside table. The first one you strike doesn't catch. You try again, fingers shaking with the effort. A flicker. You tilt it slightly until the sliver of wood is burning. You drop it to the floor. It makes the sound of an insect wing brushing the air. And then it seems there is only one breath left in your body. You whisper its word aloud.

Alice

Jennifer Sell

A WHISTLE SCREAMED and they jumped; it was the factory turnover. Anne leant over the sink; she looked out onto brick, and swaggering grubby kids. Her own children were in, for once. They watched her, folded into corners of the kitchen, as she continued squinting through the window's dirt. She knew her girls would work there, that she would see their bodies go round with the machinery. It was the workers she wanted to see, although there was never anything to see other than brick; the factories took the whole of the daylight.

A man strode down the road, jubilant. He paused at the window and looked down, smiling at her. She pulled back abruptly, turned to the kids, "Your Father's home". Her voice was rougher than she'd expected.

Their faces compressed. She smoothed her cotton print with picking, nervous twitches. Picked up the iron, chewed her lips. I've been married for too long. She could hear him swinging through the front door.

"Hey!" Their father entered, arms wide and eager. His familiar greeting rocked them to their feet and in terror from their mother's voice, they bolted into the bedroom. He stood mouth open, surprised. What's happening here? Dropping his bag he thumped on the door, "Hey! What is this!?" There was no answer. Only Sarah, the youngest, muffled her sobbing.

Bewildered, he headed back to the kitchen, dragged scarf and coat down. His neck was sore, he stood rubbing it, watching his wife iron.

"What's going on then?"

"Put the kettle on."

"Do it yourself woman. What the – "

"Shut up and put the kettle on. A lady came today."

Is her brain cracked?

"Didn't you hear me? You gonna make tea or not?"

"Alright," picking up the kettle, "where's the tea?"

"We don't have any."

He thumped the kettle down, glaring, then retired to his chair.

"A lady came today."

"Yeah."

"Health person something." Came squeaking in, and sat rat tat tatting on the table with her nails. "Not clean enough not good enough the children need new clothing."

His face went dark.

"You not doing well enough." That powdered face and caked mouth blinking at me.

"Hey . . ." he came to put his arms about her, "Hey, softly now . . ." he smiled and kissed her neck, playing with her coarse red hair. "Don't worry about what she said." She paused mid iron, watching the cloth stiffen beneath hot metal.

"So what was this woman's business?" He cupped a breast, the thumb two inches beneath the nipple's centre, lightly indenting the flesh.

"It was Alice, after you left that morning."

"Alice," his concentration broken, "Alice is ill?"

The iron began moving again. "Alice was blue."

"Blue?"

Thumping with the iron as she put it away, "Alice was blue in the face."

He stared at her back as she picked up the dishes, heading for the sink, humming too loudly in her

scratched throat. "Why?"

She looked at him, turned away. She broke off humming as she dumped the plates into the sink. "Maybe after you staggered off for the week's work, maybe before. I woke up and there was this hard lump beneath me. I sat up, looked down, Oh, the baby's all blue." She laughed a torn high pitch, and cut off abruptly. The clock measured the seconds as she spoke, "Alice is dead," and spun, clutching a plate. It slid from her wet fingers, shattered against the wall. "Don't blame – don't dare say I'm a'fault. That woman gave enough – so don't you dare – you understa – Ben! – Get Out – NOW!" The kid vanished.

He watched her, examining her. Her skin prickled beneath his gaze, at the way her dress sagged, its crooked hem, her swollen feet and raw hands. Irritable, cowed, "What you looking at?"

"If Alice is dead –"

"Then she's – "

"*How*?"

She drew the air in sharply, heaved in its weight. She wouldn't look at him, but began again, tasting the bitched delicacy of the word. "She's just dead. That's all; so what? It was only a baby. It would have grown up and we'd've starved ourselves further to half feed it, and kicked it out early as possible to work. It doesn't mean anything."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did."

"A week late."

"You were at work."

"You could've sent a message."

"I didn't have the time."

"Don't try that, you could've sent one of the kids. If you'd've let me know, I could've taken time off."

"And then be sacked like last time, when I miscarried and the doctor's hands gave me eczema. We owe too much. Just shut the drama; one less brat, so what?"

"Brat! – it was our child, our baby!"

"I *hate* baby!"

His mouth closed with a snap. She walked to the sink and plunged her wrists into the dirty water.

"The funeral is tomorrow. There's nothing else."

In the silence he stared at her back. He could not remember her face.

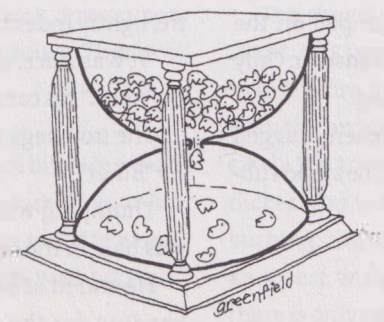
"What's for dinner?"

"There isn't anything. You'll have to get chips."

"Fine."

He put back on his coat and scarf, picked up his hat, and paused – her spine curved over the dishes. He walked out, slamming the door between them. Her eyes raised to see him walk past, but he would not look at her. She stared blankly across the road at the wall. There was an old advertisement peeling away from the bricks. The poster could have been for a movie, a soap, a politics. So old and faded now it was just white pasting. All she could make out was the mustache and beard of someone's scribbling.

The children are crying, she will have to deal with that; but she stands, just for this moment, biting on nothing.



... Mortality ...

Emending context flashfloods

stipulate death as endgame,
field-mice washed-out & riding
the cracker-barrel towards
a fossil fame
an oily slime emerging
from the paddock's eroding side
patronising rainbows arched
over Needlings' pendulum
hills [filmy deviations
in colour] – the holiday
should have begun
a few days earlier
and then the sun
would have played dynamic
with hearts
and brooding juices.
On the extremities
Thomas Hardy
lodges heartily
indoors – vulnerable & sleeping
later than usual, sleep the colour
of burnished jamtree flesh
left on the salt flats
for thirty-three years,
whittled needle-sharp
and looking other-worldly.
O so briefly the sun pierces
and lifts the covers.
That freaky crosswind
exploits the rattle
of an approaching truck:
soon-to-be plunging
articulated vehicle
crashing axle-down
foul-mouthed & abusive
with washout,
the flooded cabin,
drainage overflowing
and cutting up
the driveway, intransigent
and committing atrocities
among the polished roots
of York Gums.

Saltweed
and lowland cut-a-way,
moving lines in burnback
and deeply red clay,
arched backbone – high above the core –
curves, infiltrates, and sets,
cools rapidly as the surface retreats,
as the forest lifts and the sky, a sheet of dry
ice, slips
from season to season,
beating a hasty retreat
that is the defeat of mirages,
quenching light and knuckling down,
dismantling the crust
of the devil's Dante-esque flesh –
the flesh all fire and the breath vapour.
The backbone rests
despite its bed shifting
against the plains of Heaven, bracing
its imitation-perfect-joints, singing
whiplash against the painted rocks,
the fossils of its failures,
detractors from its triumph
on a continent of infinite variety
where civilisation is a dead bird that flies
against an inland ocean

John Kinsella

Rottnest Island, Photographic

Museum photos strung together: *Holiday Makers, Architecture, Reformatory, Prisoners* flip page sequence – past/present. *Prison*: across the road, now *The Lodge*: luxury accommodation, private pool, air conditioning, luggage moving in the dark, booted footsteps – 3 a.m.; *The Quadrangle*: cells masquerade: twice-as-big rooms, plastered, painted, brocade bedspreads, but knowledge precludes.

The small pleasures of *At the Hostel, "after breakfast", Easter 1922, "Horsey, keep your tail up", The Bakery*, everyone anticipating the day. Insubstantial hand descends against curling hair at my neck, fingers weighted. I am forced to *Prisoners in the Quadrangle*, standing, lying. *Prisoners, 1883; Bolted Cell Doors; Cell the Boat-house* – each face pulls.

Of course documents: *one set of clothes; one blanket; must assure cleanliness; let out to hunt on Sunday; a ration of tobacco for each snake killed; twelve to a cell; standing room only; up to their ankles in water; faeces; urine; lice; influenza; pneumonia; transported; flogged; hung; drowned; speared; dead/died for European transgression.*

Should I know these bodies, bones accountable, matted hair, unspeakable/disabled grasp – babel of language, forbidden animal flesh, rifle-snap holes in the skull, rope-neck broken, quaking stench slip/slide urine cell floors, slit back skin? In this *wadjemup* place, I am white, middle-liberal tautology, appropriate knowledges, epistemological: *Let it go; let it go.* Outside, the rain stops. A shelduck passes the sky.

Zan Ross

Pointillist Pseudofications

Your mouth open, but not to take it hard – I'd
know that look any where: *Why should I?*
Mein Freund. And if
we are on this street one
pointillist morning, your mouth open,
I'd offer you my dripping breast You'd
overlay, see me
at five, electric pink jumper, socks,
already
ankle-strapped, open-toed, spun hair piled
feathering my cheeks. You say, *Is it fair?*
my skin, my breasts, the veins blue milk.
You say, *It's just that*
We're seven on a swing, my Bluey dad
pushing or we're
ten in pastilles – dance lessons:
foxtrot, waltz, one box in four (*one, two, three*) we're
in a theatre in 3-D glasses –
Marilyn's jungle tits pop
right over the heads of the first four rows and
land
in your lap. I declare a foul, shove
one under my jacket,
run for the exit. *Mein freund*, you still
haven't forgiven me. *Why should I?*

I know
I know
that we stare at Cassiopeia on the same
  nights,
trace satellites.
You open a vein for me, your flesh layered
like French onion soup salt stinging
my lips *why, why*
should I lay gaping for you? at the scene of this
  crime
fiction: William Morris
light across one hip, the cane-seat chair
in peacock blue, blue,
dream of jaguar leather seats,
heated mattress wired to my skin, 3 a.m.
hard-frost, your open mouth
scheming *Why should I?* take
it hard – I'd know that look
anywhere.

Zan Ross

Angle

for Peter Raven

Pearl-shell light
Over the lake as
I wind through

Michigan
North of the big Thumb.
Early dawn.

My mind is
Heavy, all the farms
Are sleeping.

To my left,
Deep pinewoods, flickers
Of aspen,

Mile on mile;
Cuts for power-lines,
Loggers' roads.

Further on,
Clearings, with corn, beans,
Alfalfa.

The lake's edged
With water-weeds, snarled
By waves that

Can hurl dead
Trees across the road.
This half-light's

Tricky. Watch.
One man in a car.
You're not here,

Where poisoned
Eagles turn inland
Breeding less

Each year, where
Cormorant chicks,
Bills bent, can't

Crack their shells,
And neutered lake-trout
Never spawn –

You're not here
To remonstrate but,
Exactly,

As your gifts
Allow, to see things
As they are.

Cease railing.
Think what to do. Think
Very hard

Then act, or
Write. Learn steadiness.
Keep your guard.

A horned moon
Flares among nacreous
Cloud-swirls, then

Full dawn, with
Long salvos of light.
My car pumps

Ruin on
Everything that's green.
I am one

With this lake
Which rots with our greed.
I share this

Journey with
You, in an age of
Extinction.

Seen from the
Moon, the mighty lake's
Only a

Shoreless blur.

Keith Harrison

Murder Mystery

A white mansion sits at the end of her street
like an ice-coffin so well preserved
the curtains move and a black car
pulls up the driveway.
My sister loves me one day at a time,
that's what she believes in
her neighbours don't, their houses nailed to the sky's
landscape like a bookmark.
They think they've arrived at the best place near the end
where you know everything but the characters don't:
love's suicide returns as himself,
no hands. The hanged woman disappears.
My sister looks like she's getting married in March.
Her son hates mysteries and doesn't believe in anything much.

Andrea Sherwood

The Return

Orchid of Snow!
Mt Taranaki prints an
image against the
fish-fleshed sky, caught
stamp-sized at 30,000
feet as I head out
over the pink wash of the
Tasman from Auckland;
its streets falling into
phalanxes, like sad
pride and intense anger
squaring off at the
last intersection out of
the century's glare.

Stephen Oliver

East River Esplanade

Will you speak to me
Yellow god
Who else is watching

The buildings
Ships
Runners

This old-fashioned poem

The city is losing colour
Like a bird in the distance

Richard Allen

Robin Morrow

Class in the Australian Picture Book

Rose went to tell her mum.
"Well, honeybunch," Mum said, "you can get your ball back. Why don't you just go and *ask* him?"

"Because he eats kids," said Rose.
"We'll take him some hot cakes instead," said Mum.
"And maybe some flowers."

Rose's mother in her angelic white dress seems particularly unworried by practicalities.

In the world of children's literature the picture book is a star. At its best a showcase for succinct writing and skilful art, it can pack into a short format (the standard is thirty-two pages) a seamlessly melded narrative of text and illustrations, lively and subtle enough to repay many readings. Because of these rereadings, and because picture books are met so early in life, it is an art form with great influence. Picture books become extensions of the reader's world – children pore over the illustrations, noticing the minutest details, and often learn the text by heart and incorporate it in conversation and imaginative play. Some sophisticated picture books appeal even to secondary school students.

Educationalists have long taught that children need points of identification with the lives portrayed in their books, both for their self esteem and to attract them to reading. The younger the child, the greater the need for such identification. The adults who choose books for children (and it is mostly adults who wield the economic power, whether librarians, teachers or gift giving relatives) have absorbed this principle when it comes to national origin. For more than twenty years I have worked in selling children's books, and have observed customers' attitudes. A favourite memory is of a grandmother who rejected an English picture book "because it has a newt in it, and my grandchildren have never seen newts".

What sort of world is usually depicted in our picture books? If it is an extension of the readers' world, is it also a reflection of it? It is certainly not a foreign world, nationally speaking. Newts are rare these days, as are snowy Christmases, copses and spinneys. Australian picture books are produced in large numbers and are of a high standard, and in bookshops and libraries it is the imports that are becoming rare.

The principle that readers should be able to recognize themselves in their books has been recognized also in the areas of race and gender. Australian picture books may be set in Bali,[1] Japan[2] or Spain,[3] or back home with a diversity of multicultural characters.[4] A girl character can be found in a leadership role, or performing deeds of derring-do as a cat burglar.[5]

But what of the matter of class? Is the world of picture books an overwhelmingly bourgeois world? To examine this question I looked at all the winners or honour books in the Picture Book category of the Children's Book Council of Australia annual awards from 1988 to 1998.[6] Excluding puzzle books, nature studies and books set in other lands, there were twenty-six books that showed Australian characters in fairly naturalistic settings.

The first search was for the occupations of parents of young characters, as this surely is the main decider of class for this age group. I was surprised to find *no* clue in words or pictures as to *any* father's or mother's occupation, unless the mothers shown caring for children have no other jobs. Two books showed a couple, man and woman, as farmers, but neither of these couples had any children.[7] Many of these books are intended for a very young audience and so understandably focus on home life, but there was no hint

Mr Wintergarten's front gate had not been opened for years. Rose heaved and pushed. The gate groaned and squeaked. Then slowly it swung open.

(Bob Graham, Rose meets Mr Wintergarten, *Walker Books, 1992)*

even of parents rushing off to work or wearily returning, perhaps at odd hours after shift work.

The father in *Where's Mum?*[8] collects the children after school, and a fantasy story develops as Dad and the kids imagine what might have happened to Mum on her way home (we are not told what she is on her way home *from*, but may assume it is work of some kind: illustrator Craig Smith shows the mother neatly dressed with what could be a going-to-work bag over her shoulder). In no fewer than four of the books, fathers are closely involved with their children's lives on a seaside holiday or when fishing. In *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*,[9] *Greetings from Sandy Beach*[10] and *Not a Nibble!*[11] this relationship is affable and patient; in *First Light*,[12] with an older child character, the fishing expedition is the site of conflict between father and son.

A favoured role for parents is to greet the children on their return from adventures, together providing food (*Hist!*)[13] or hot chocolate (*The Journey Home*),[14] or the mother alone handing out ice cream cones after energetic play (*Drac and the Gremlin*).[15] The family in *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*[16] is an especially idealized one – both parents plant a garden on the day they move into their new house, and the mother proceeds to act as angel in her white dress, as she cooks cakes and encourages Rose to give them and a bunch of flowers to Mr Wintergarten, the forbidding next door neighbour. Rose's mother is able to concentrate on this project, untroubled, it appears, by mundane tasks.

What other aspects of life are markers of class for young children? Clothes are remarkably standard throughout most of the books: the T-shirts and tracksuits of young characters are fairly uniform and it is not easy to judge in most illustrations whether they are of the designer variety or from K-Mart. Only the children in Alison Lester's picture books seem to have access to an unlimited supply of costumes for activities such as ballet and horse riding as well as for playing 'dressing up'.[17]

Another significant indicator of class is food, both the food itself and the way it is prepared and served. In some of the books a meal is served formally at a set table, such as in *Grandad's Magic*.[18] And in *Let's Eat*, by Ana Zamorano and Julie Vivas, a Spanish family's daily meal is the focus for the whole story. The seaside holiday books all feature delicious freshly caught fish meals. Food serves as a sign of care and affection from adults to children, as already mentioned, and from an adult to an animal character in *The Very Best of Friends*. Food is a source of derision in *Counting on Frank*[19] (the schoolboy narrator is sarcastic about "the delicious grill Mum cooks EVERY night") and in *Greetings From Sandy Beach* a cause of resigned comment ("Dad cooked the dinner – Camp Stew out of a tin"). Apart from some pies and chips one lunchtime in *Not a Nibble!* there is no evidence of the realities of takeaway living, and the only Coke can appears as a threat to the environment in the ghostly possible future at the end of *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*. This absence of McDonald's or KFC meals is an example of the form of censorship that occurs at editorial level, the anticipation of possible objections by adult purchasers (such as complaints against depicting chocolate birthday cakes on nutritional grounds).

Of course, social position is also shown by the kinds of houses people live in. In this regard, illustrators seem to wear glasses rose-tinted with nostalgia. At least seven of the books in the sample have houses with corrugated iron verandahs, mostly bull-nosed. This tradition in the Australian picture book has been alive and well especially since the publication of *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*[20] in 1977. In this book the illustrator Ron Brooks provided a drawing opposite the title page, lovingly cross hatched, of what seems to be one of the most important characters in the story: Rose's house. It is the kind of house described by estate

Reality for some, fantasy for most? Seemingly boundless playing space in this leafy backyard.

Allan Baillie, pictures by Jane Tanner, Drac and the Gremlin, *Puffin Books, 1998*

agents as having 'both charm and character', a worker's cottage originally but affordable now only by the opulent. Its descendant is the house to which the children return in *The Journey Home*. With its iron roof, verandah and grassy surrounds, this historic but perfectly maintained cottage could in fact be described as 'picture-book'. No child character in the books inhabits a high rise building or a stark suburban prefab, let alone a caravan park ...

Which brings us to the gardens. Picket fences are popular, as are spacious areas to play. *Drac and the Gremlin* is cleverly self-conscious about the counterpoint between words and pictures: while the text describes adventurous actions in the language of science fiction, the pictures show children playing in a back garden with improvised playthings (for example, the Anti-Gravity Solar-Powered Planet Hopper is really a swing made from an old tyre). The point of the double narrative – and it is very popular with teachers – is that children catch on to the contrast between the real and the imaginary. But I would claim that for many readers, the size and freedom in this garden are as fanciful as any SciFi tale. Tree ferns, jacarandas, expanses of lawn receding into seemingly endless vistas – all these make the 'real' world of Jane Tanner's luscious illustrations anything but the reality of many children's play spaces.

So my report on the picture-book world is a report of absences: the absence of unemployed parents or frantically busy ones with real jobs, the absence of cheek-by-jowl living conditions, the lack of such realities as family day care or child care centres, of fast food, of litter on the streets.[21] This is not surprising because illustrators depict what they know and most, although not wealthy, know a world of tastefully restored furniture in chic neighbourhoods or on rural hobby farms.

There is no point in being prescriptive about such things. In publishing for children there is a proud distinction between educational publishing, of commissioned books with their tight guidelines, and trade publishing, of manuscripts written by independent authors and illustrated by artists free, theoretically at least, to follow their own vision. But here, as elsewhere in cultural life, there are subtle ideological pressures. Producing a full-colour, hardback picture book is an expensive undertaking. To cover costs and allow for even a modest profit such a book needs to sell at about $22.95. Publishers must be aware of the two-edged appeal needed for a picture book: it is intended for a child, but it's an adult who makes the purchase. As mentioned in the matter of nutrition, everybody involved in producing children's books is aware of the financial power of the adult gatekeepers who make buying decisions, so the push is towards a bland 'niceness'. The small average print run of a picture book for the local market also means that it is vital for Australian publishers to try to sell co-editions to overseas publishers, and this is an added incentive to go for a look that is glamorous and internationally saleable.

To end more positively I would like to draw attention to three exceptional works.[22] *Tucking Mummy In*,[23] by Morag Loh, illustrated by Donna Rawlins, was published in 1987 but is still unsurpassed for its down-to-earth depiction of family life. The situation at the heart of this story is recognizable to anyone who has ever had small children. Mummy is so tired that as she is sharing a bedtime story with her two daughters, *she* falls asleep first. Just as the (adult) reader is wondering whether Mummy is a single parent, we see the

return from work of Daddy, with his workbag, thermos and folded newspaper.

The second book, *Highway*[24] is a recent publication by Nadia Wheatley, illustrated by Andrew McLean. This illustrator is adept at showing (as in *Hector and Maggie*[25]) the world of unglamorized dusty farmyards. *Highway* is an account of a brief 'highway holiday' taken by the narrator, her young brother and parents in Dad's big truck. For once we are in no doubt at all how Dad earns his living! If there is idealization here it is in the almost always patient dialogue between parents and children, as they explore the world of signposts, landmarks and the Travellers' Rest Rooms.

Dad, a truck driver, takes his children and wife (who is driving the truck) for a 'highway holiday'.

Nadia Wheatley & Andrew McLean, Highway, *Omnibus Books, 1998*

Lastly there are grounds for optimism in the autobiographical work of some Aboriginal writers and illustrators. In *As I Grew Older*[26] and later in *Tucker*,[27] Ian Abdulla, born at Swan Reach on the Murray River in 1947, has told a riveting story in paintings and words of the scrounging for food which enabled his family to survive on the fringes of white society.

Tucker is, as the title implies, devoted fully to the matter of living off the land. The foods mentioned include yabbies, several kinds of fish, swans, quondongs, blue-tongue lizard, and sheep's heads bought cheaply from the abattoirs.

> One night when we were camping along the creeks and everyone had gone to bed, I went down to the creek to check the hand line. It must have been a good fish – a pondi, or Murray cod – because when I pulled it in I broke the line. It took the hook and everything. That fish was supposed to be for our breakfast the next morning. We'd cook 'em on the coals on a grid iron.

There is no suggestion here that the young narrator's family can pop out to buy a McDonald's breakfast to replace the one that got away. This is a book about food that *really* means survival. In the words of Paul Greenaway, writer of the foreword to *Tucker*: "If 'tucker' is food, then this ... book ... is tucker for the mind, the heart and the soul ... it will give pleasure to many; and it will also serve to empower the poor, the oppressed and the dispossessed."[28]

If there is one thing the twentieth century has taught us, it is that there is no such thing as an inno-

cent text or innocent illustrations. Nor can it be claimed that the absence of representation of working-class life in the picture book is an innocent absence. It would be good to think that in the twenty-first century Australian children of every kind will find representation, and therefore empowerment, in their picture books.

ENDNOTES

1. Stephanie Owen Reeder & Dadang Christanto, *The Flaming Witch*, Random House, Sydney, 1997.
2. Junko Morimoto, *The Two Bullies*, Sydney, Random House, 1997 and many other fine picture books.
3. Ana Zamorano & Julie Vivas, *Let's Eat!*, Omnibus, Norwood, 1996.
4. Gillian Rubinstein & Terry Denton, *Mr Plunkett's Pool*, Random House, Sydney, 1992.
5. Natalie Jane Prior & Terry Denton, *The Paw*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993.
6. The CBCA awards have great influence. Schools and libraries use the list as a buying guide, so successful books are reprinted and attain sales much greater than most children's books. Paperback reprints of the winners and honour books are widely distributed in department stores and through book clubs, so are likely to be found even in households with very few books.
7. Pamela Allen, *Belinda*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1992; and Margaret Wild & Julie Vivas, *The Very Best of Friends*, Margaret Hamilton, Sydney, 1989.
8. Libby Gleeson & Craig Smith, *Where's Mum?*, Omnibus, Norwood, 1992.
9. Jeannie Baker, *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*, Julia MacRae, Lane Cove, 1987.
10. Bob Graham, *Greetings from Sandy Beach*, Lothian, Port Melbourne, 1990.
11. Elizabeth Honey, *Not a Nibble!*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996.
12. Gary Crew, & Peter Gouldthorpe, *First Light*, Lothian, Port Melbourne, 1993.
13. C.J. Dennis & P.J. Gouldthorpe, *Hist!*, Walter McVitty, Sydney, 1991.
14. Alison Lester, *The Journey Home*, OUP, Melbourne, 1989.
15. Baillie, Allan & Jane Tanner, *Drac and the Gremlin*, Ringwood, Viking Kestrel, 1988.
16. Bob Graham, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, Viking, Ringwood, 1992.
17. Alison Lester, op cit; to be fair, in this book which was included in my sample the children are dressed plainly while they visit fantasy lands – it is in her books included in *Clive, Tessa, Rosie and Frank*, Rydalmere, Hodder Headline, 1997, that the cast of young children has an enviable range of tutus, space suits, etc.
18. Bob Graham, *Grandad's Magic*, Viking Kestrel, Ringwood, 1989.
19. Rod Clement, *Counting on Frank*, A&R, Sydney, 1990.
20. Jenny Wagner & Ron Brooks, *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977.
21. There have been a few books devised specifically to deal with such issues (and which were not included in my sample of CBCA honoured books) notably *Mum Goes to Work* – a self-explanatory title – by Libby Gleeson & Penny Azar (Ashton Scholastic, Gosford, 1992) and *Way Home*, a story of urban homelessness by Libby Hathorn & Gregory Rogers (Random House, Milsons Point, 1994).
22. Of these three books, two were not honoured by the CBC (perhaps because of their lack of 'niceness'); and *Highway*, published last year, was eligible for the shortlist in 1999.
23. Morag Loh & Donna Rawlins, *Tucking Mummy In*, Ashton Scholastic, Gosford, 1987.
24. Nadia Wheatley & Andrew McLean, *Highway*, Omnibus, Norwood, 1998.
25. Janet & Andrew McLean, *Hector and Maggie*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1990.
26. Ian Abdulla, *As I Grew Older*, Omnibus, Norwood, 1993.
27. Ian Abdulla, *Tucker*, Omnibus, Norwood, 1994.
28. Ian Abdulla's books, and many publications from Magabala Books, Broome, are helping to fill the gap in representations of Aboriginal life in picture books.

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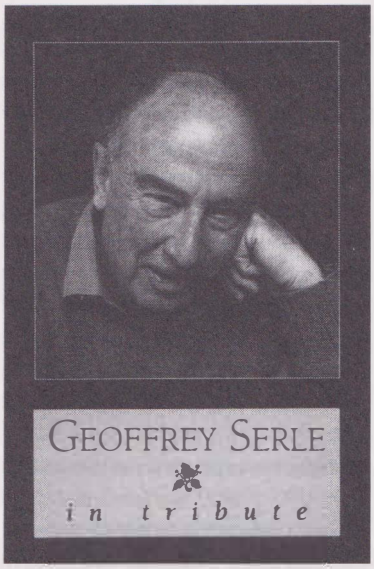
Funeral Oration for Geoffrey Serle, 30 April 1998

Ken Inglis



THIS IS THE TIME and the place for mourning and for remembering. We mourn and remember Geoff as husband, father, colleague and friend. We grieve with Jessie, Nonie, Donald, Jamie and Richard. I speak as colleague and friend.

My memories go back more than fifty years, to a day early in 1947 when Geoff spoke at a Labour Club freshers' welcome. I see him in a khaki shirt left over from the war as he leans on a lectern in the Old Arts building, giving a smile that signals shyness, good humour and good nature. He drawls quietly and fraternally. Even freshers know that he is off to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Ex-serviceman, social democratic student politician and intellectual, editor with his friend and ally Ken Gott of that year's *MUM*: to a boy just out of school, Geoff Serle at twenty-five was an impressive and attractive person.

The fresher wasn't privy to what happened next. I quote from Amirah:

"When our Labour Club chairman Geoff Serle won a Rhodes the Labour Club travelled in force to Station Pier . . . to send him off, holding high its own red banner and a hastily painted new one reading 'Serle for Margaret Rose', waving him off to Oxford and the still unmarried second princess." Serle did much better than that, in 1955.

The fresher was still a schoolboy at the time of an earlier scene described by Manning Clark:

"One night at a students' hostel in Fitzroy I had the good fortune to see Geoffrey dancing with Amirah Gust . . . a history student through whom the gale of life blew very high. I was astonished. He looked so happy, so teeming with life that I had difficulty reconciling him with the man who was so sensible in class and elsewhere. This combination of head-piece cool and warm heart would have a flowering time later."

Neither Amirah nor Geoff actually remembered that moment at the hostel, either because it was one of many such moments or because like some other recollections of Manning's it's an event that *ought* to have happened. It certainly embodies a truth. The last time these two old friends met, in January 1998 at Bethesda, they sat together smiling and hugging.

As candidate for the coveted Rhodes, Geoff had an unbeatable combination of athletic prowess, civic activity, and scholarship. Hear him modestly on his academic performance, writing rough notes in 1994: "Managed to get a first, largely educated by my fellows Ian Turner, Stephen Murray-Smith, Don Mackay and the harbingers of the new Australia, Franz Philipp and Hugo Wolfsohn . . . and . . . Arthur Burns and Alan (Foo) Davies."

What a study of Australian intellectual history could be written around those names! Or maybe two studies, the first one devoted only to the men of 1922, now all dead, Ian Turner, Stephen Murray-Smith, Arthur Burns and Geoff Serle.

Geoff had sailed away from Chifley's Australia and sailed home to Menzies, after serving as chairman of the Oxford University branch of the Labour Party. A unique double, I think.

He was still, and would remain all his life, a social democrat. But the world had changed while he was away, and with it the Labour club. The united front of communists and social democrats forged in the war had broken apart by the time he returned. For Geoff the decisive event occurred on 25 February 1948, when communists seized power in

Prague. He went there himself and saw the consequences. In Parkville the united front lasted until late in 1949, when the Communist Party instructed its members in the Labour Club not to support the re-election of the Labor government. Geoff was more at home in the lately formed ALP Club. He declined Arthur Calwell's urging to go into parliament; his mission, he judged, was rather to help the party think, and in that cause he was a principal founder of the Victorian Fabian Society, which yielded in 1954 the book *Policies of Progress*, edited by himself and Alan Davies.

He was just as likely now as in the time of the united front to mix with communist friends who were no longer political comrades. So were two other close friends and social democrats, Arthur and Netta Burns. Geoff may well have danced in the fifties with Amirah Turner. His friendships, old and new, were quite undented by differences of commitment across the whole spectrum of politics and religion.

Though he was now Dr Serle, Geoff was expecting in 1950 to settle for a career in the Commonwealth Public Service. To his surprise Max Crawford appointed him to teach the course in Australian history Manning Clark had been teaching until he took off for Canberra. Then Geoff became one of the people from Crawford's school, among them John Legge, A.G.L. Shaw, Alan McBriar and Ian Turner, who transported its qualities to Monash. John Thompson has recalled the stimulation of being taught history at Clayton by those emigres from Parkville. John had discovered *The Golden Age* at school, and felt a privileged participant in seminars which were workshops for Geoff's second Victorian masterpiece *The Rush to be Rich*. John Thompson pays tribute to Geoff as a maker of connections: between the young and the mature, between the academy and the library; and as teacher and writer he now began to connect cultural history with what he called in the preface to *From Deserts the Prophets Come* "the general discourse of Australian historians". Later, at the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, working first in laconic harmony with Bede Nairn and then alone, he co-ordinated the largest enterprise ever undertaken in Australia connecting academic and other writers. As his *Dictionary* colleague Chris Cunneen put it, Geoff saw himself there as general manager of a huge co-operative.

He is the only person ever to have edited both *Historical Studies* and *Meanjin*. He captained the *Meanjin* team each year in the famous literary cricket match, but he had also the credentials to play for *overland*. In his last major work, on Robin Boyd, Geoff goes on making connections, between professions and worlds. The president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Ric Butt, urges all young architects to read that book.

As Stuart Macintyre says in his obituary, the public person who came closest to Geoff's standards was John Curtin. I saw Geoff, for the last time as it turns out, last Thursday, and had the poignant experience of reading, as he dozed, the short biographical study just published in Perth by the John Curtin Memorial Library. Now that he won't write a full biography, this survey and the entry on Curtin in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* have become all the more precious. Not that this is his last work, as Stuart reminds us. A study of his old headmaster Colin Gilray will join other biographical studies written in retirement, which Stuart describes as filial. I don't know how far he got with one on John La Nauze. We have already a master of Ormond; the vice-chancellor John Medley; Eric Partridge; and most eloquently, his own father. All of them finely crafted appreciations of Australians; all of them, as A.G.L. Shaw says of *The Golden Age*, beautifully written, in that lean and lucid prose he contrived for his own writing and encouraged in other people's.

Like many other Australian men, Geoff discovered his Australian nationality in the army. There should be a plaque on the spot outside Port Moresby where early in 1943 Corporal Serle lent Private Murray-Smith his copy of Hartley Grattan's book *Introducing Australia*. Though Geoff rarely talked about his war, and like other ex-servicemen on the left never identified himself as a returned soldier, he knew that his army experience had done much to form him as teacher and writer. Geoff's jottings: "Best years of my education – witnessing the daily parade of vice and virtue – learning to get on with anyone (including the crooks and the louts – sport helped) – great training for a historian." And this, on being severely wounded by a bomb at Finschhafen: "Evacuated by barge and plane to Moresby where 2/1 AGH finest human institution I have known. Eight months hospital Atherton and Tamworth." One way and another the war helped equip him to be the best possible biographer of John Monash.

From Deserts the Prophets Come. Yes, but from suburbs too; and though prophets are said on the highest authority to be without honour in their own country, that isn't true of Geoff. His books have won award after award both from academics and from custodians of

culture at large: Ernest Scott Prize, twice; National Book Council prize, twice; Moomba award; *Age* book of the year, twice; Townsville Literary award. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia. And in productive retirement from the *ADB* he was accorded high honours. The National Library published in 1994 *Geoffrey Serle in Tribute*, papers from a celebration in the Library foyer. The Curtin Library book is an expanded version of a lecture he gave when he was the Curtin Scholar at Curtin University in 1997. "They gave me a standing ovation", he told me with that shy smile. Jessie, who laboured lovingly on the transition from lecture into print, represented Geoff earlier this month at the launching.

'Melburnian' is a label Geoff pretended to wince at. "I am an Australian and a Hawthorn man. Stuff Victoria and Melbourne." Discuss, as they say on exam papers. He didn't really mean it. The son of Percival and Dora Serle grew up in a distinctively Melburnian culture. The University, the Public Library and the National Gallery were its temples. When Geoff expresses "distaste for the corruption of the market place", he sounds like other Melburnians, among them Manning Clark and several Boyds, including Arthur, painter of yellow blobs which are both nuggets of gold and animal droppings. The book on Robin Boyd is among other qualities a Melburnian's evocation of Melburnian culture.

"A prophet of cultural history", says the headline over A.G.L. Shaw's obituary in the *Australian*. Geoff described himself not long ago as a fairly angry old man determined to be as optimistic as possible. Other old optimists can find it heartening that our best three daily papers published substantial obituary tributes by scholars. As Geoff was a keen critic of the *Age*, I think it would have pleased him to know that the following words in Stuart Macintyre's piece, though cut by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, were retained for readers in Melbourne:

"Some years ago he sent me a detailed analysis that showed there were more Scotch Collegians in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* than from any other school, but the lineage he celebrated was that of Esmonde Higgins and Steve Yarnold, not Jeff Kennett." The Stirrers and Shakers, as Geoff entitled the inaugural lecture in the series commemorating Stephen Murray-Smith.

We all cherish our own mementoes of friendship with Geoff. I treasure two books. One is *The Inked In Image* by Vane Lindesay, inscribed by Geoff and Jessie to Amirah and me after they had stayed with us in Port Moresby for the ANZAAS Congress of 1970, Geoff delighted to be meeting students who were sons and daughters of the Papua New Guineans among whom he and his mates had moved in 1943. The other is his own *Robin Boyd, A Life*, inscribed 'Ken, old colleague, old mate'.

Liberal and Secular Culture Resurging in 'Islamic Iran'

Dennis Walker with Golam Reza Baghai

AUSTRALIA – especially Sydney – has for some years now been home to a large community of emigre Iranian liberal and left intellectuals. Mostly hostile to the hardened 'Islamic Revolution' establishment that rules their land of origin, Australian Iranians remain in shock at the extra-judicial assassinations of poets and journalists by an ultraist faction in Iran's internal intelligence services.

High literature and intellectualism have always had a fatal relationship with political power in Iran since the aborted Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. During their ensuing fifty-year dictatorship, the two Pahlavi 'Shahs' repeatedly intervened to purge Farsi literature of Arabic words and Islamic themes. Such quasi-totalitarian drives from a secularizing state explain the fury with which Islamist clerics and laypeople took part in the movement to bring down the Shah in 1979. The violent insecurity that a section of Iran's current Islamist ruling class now vents against new secular-minded writers stems from Shi'ite Islam's consistent status as a threatened opposition group throughout most of this century.

The two 'Shahs' wanted to transplant many things from the west, but not its parliamentarism, its liberalism or its socialist analyses: Iranian poets and litterateurs who toyed with those ideas often saw the inside of the monarchy's jails. There were two intervening years of pluralism under the parliamentarist PM Mosaddeq (1949–51), but the CIA brusquely cut off that experiment when it threatened the west's control of Iranian oil.

In his middle age as a second-rank cleric, Khomeini condemned the electrifying essayist Ahmad Kasravi, the most vehement denouncer of the Arab conquest, Islam and Arabic words in Persian. That underground 1950s strike group, the 'Self-Sacrificers of Islam' (Fedaiyan-e-Islam) duly killed the linguist and historian Kasravi. The

Shah and his police institutions kept an ambiguous distance from the matter. (The revived Fedaiyan-e-Islam was to take part in the 1997–1999 stranglings and stabbings of secular poets and dissidents.)

The Iranian Writers' Association, in its open, semi-legal, and then underground incarnations, was a focus for input by liberal, pluralist authors into the 1979 movement against the Shah, and, in the 1990s, into the deep-seated dissatisfaction the educated young feel with the drifting – but highly stultifying – 'theocratic' regime of the ayatollahs. Dissident liberal or pinkish poets and journalists as yet have no drive or plan to wrest political power in Iran. They only seek a so-called 'open space' in which to create artistic works that would publicly express their personal thoughts and their direct impressions of the realities around them. The ultraist section of the clerics and ruling bureaucrats has responded since early 1997 with the intimidation and murder of the poets and writers whose works might provide the focus that could detonate all the inchoate dissatisfaction festering among the educated and the young.

The waves of extra-judicial killings of dissident poets and writers in Iran also are a spin-off or symptom of a conflict over power and policy between two evenly-balanced factions in the Islamic state apparatus and establishment. A more flexible group around President-elect Khatami recognizes that the government owes US $30 billion to foreign governments and financial institutions, and that foreign capital will be needed to get the economy moving again so that the debts can be paid off. Better relations with westerners require a less xenophobic and more liberal society. Khatami and his colleagues also understand that the 'Islamic' regime will have to conciliate a wider range of groups in society if it is to last. In contrast, the faction led by the Islamic Republic's 'Religious Guide' Ayatollah Khamenei maintains the Khomeini revolution's initial drive to regulate all society in a quasi-totalitarian way, and to maintain a ritual war-posture vis-a-vis the western states in international relations.

The reality of the liberalism of the pro-Khatami faction of Islamists is questioned by some radical secular dissidents in Iran. Groups of Shi'ite clerics have often taken liberal and left Iranians and a range of western states for rides in the past. Radical Islamist clerics in Iran are multi-cultured, and have been adept at enticing their victims to underestimate them. Under the Shah, youth who opted for clerical higher education had mostly received their basic education in the primary and secondary schools of the laicist state. Thus, they were from childhood acculturated to secular ideologies and the leftism of former classmates. Iran has Islamists who are well-read in the works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and of American academics. In contrast, most Iranian liberals and leftists have been illiterate in Arabic and the subtle, vast religious culture of the clerics who systematically manipulated and led them on for years, got the leftists and the Shah's adherents to kill each other off then, after 1979, machine-gunned their left allies away into mass graves. The current doubts of some secularists, leftists and feminists about Premier Khatami's overtures for an alliance against the 'more hardline' clerical faction stem from the sudden execution squads in which past united fronts with Shi'ite clerics too often ended.

Hardline officials and clerics in Iran have moved vigorously to suppress newspapers and magazines that go beyond backing for Khatami to offer an outlet for the radical edge of discontent that wants to open the Islamic revolution as such to discussion. The newspaper *Jameah* (circulation 300,000) was closed and its proprietor Hamid Reza Jalalipour given a suspended five-year sentence in mid-1998 for 'distorting the utterances' of the deceased spiritual leader Khomeini. Mohammed Reza Zaeri, the proprietor of *Khaneh* was given a suspended sentence for publishing an anonymous letter that said Khomeini had sacrificed hundreds of thousands of youth during the Iran–Iraq war, and isolated Iran through his *fatwa* calling for the execution of (tawdry) British novelist Salman Rushdi. Anti-hardline clerics and officials in the judiciary have repeatedly blocked the campaigns to close moderate publications and jail their personnel, but such writers can still be assaulted by goons or hardliner-organized mobs outside the processes of law.

But ultras in the secret police have jailed and murdered with impunity those farther-out Iranian writers who have opted for a westernist, liberal – basically secular – outlook in high culture. Ahmad Mir-Alai, a writer and translator, who was arrested several times by the security forces, was kidnapped and later found dead in a back alley; his relatives charged that he had been murdered by lethal injection of oxygen bubbles. Youth who have internally emigrated from the politicized mutation of Twelver Shi'ite Islam that the regime imposes in Iran are hungry for translations of

even very apolitical western poems and other high literature. Ultraist elements in the security forces, especially since late 1998, have set out to kill precisely those multilingual poets and intellectuals who are transmitting western humanist culture and thought into Farsi. Ghaffar Husseini, a noted translator and writer, was found dead in his apartment, while the corpse of Mohammed Jafar Punyandeh – a translator from French – turned up under a railway bridge in late 1998. Ibrahim Zalzadeh, head of the Ebtekar publishing house – which mainly brought out poetry and children's books – vanished from a Tehran street: his corpse was found a few days later in open country south of the capital.

Adineh was a cultural magazine that carried short stories and many translations and analyses conveying issues in American, German and other European literatures. Its editor Faraj Sarkuhi had been arrested many times – once, sardonically, when he was about to board a plane to visit his wife in Germany. When he came out of one stint in prison, he wrote a smuggled letter to his wife "hoping that someone will publish this letter after my arrest . . . I don't know how much time I have. I expect to be arrested or killed anytime in a contrived accident or arranged suicide . . . This is George Orwell's 1984". On his rearrest "for spying for Germany", though – espionage charges are a prelude to execution – his intellectual friends and the media there, and then PEN, mustered a world-wide campaign that won his release; the Iranian government then in effect exiled him to Europe. Thus, international publicity and solidarity by their peers abroad can save at least the lives of Iranian writers – can make a difference in that sense. Still, by driving Sarkuhi out of the country, Iran's hardliners had, after all, ended the role of a crucial figure in the continuing transmission of some western literature into their restless country. They had won that battle, overall.

From late 1998, fearing that Iran would slip out of their hands for good under Khatami, the ultras had stepped up the dispatch of the death squads. Still struggling to establish his authority, Khatami set up a special committee that found 'rogue intelligence agents' in the Ministry of Information and Intelligence had been carrying out the murders of writers.

Some liberals and leftists have questioned the will as well as the capacity of the 'liberal' clerical President to try the murderers and end the terror. The public disclosures of the institutions from which the killers emanate and of a death-list of writers and dissidents have discredited, perhaps fatally, the radical Islamist faction around Religious Guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khamenei's recent outbursts betray a rattled sense that a disgusted public now sees him and his closest colleagues as the apex clique that ordered the violence, and feels the 'Islamic Revolution' has failed over the past twenty years to establish a peaceful order. In a March 1999 Friday prayers sermon, Khamenei described the murders of writers as an 'instrument' the enemies of the Islamic revolution around the world were now exploiting to "strike at the regime, not at just any specific person or wing/faction" (an implied plea to Khatami and his pragmatists not to move to finish off the weakened ultraist faction). Iranians were listening to the lies of the US, British and Zionist broadcasts: might not MI6 or the CIA or Mossad have organized the murders? Khamenei denied that his faction had any interest in killing the poets and activists. Too few Iranians read the writings of the westernist authors. As for murdered liberal politician Daryoush Farouhar, he had been an ally of the Islamists before and after the 1979 Revolution, and when he became an oppositionist was a harmless, tolerated one with too small an audience for any government figure to ever think of killing either him or his wife. (Farsi text of Khamenei's speech in the *Persian Herald* (Sydney) 24 January 1999 pp. 8, 15)

Thus, the Iranian public blames the Khamenei component of the establishment for the murders of Iranian writers and dissidents. This faction (but perhaps also the Islamic Republic system as a whole) now has a bloodstained image that has wounded it politically.

At least some of the violence of the hard-line clerical faction around Religious Leader Khamenei has hit figures associated with Khatami, some of whom the new dissatisfied forces have then moved to support. In early 1999, the women's daily *Zan* (edited by ex-President Rafsanjani's daughter Fa'izah) accused the head of police security Mohammed Naki of involvement in an assault on Vice President Abdollah Nuri and Minister of Culture Ata'ollah Mohajerani in front of Tehran University in September. The Press Council then suspended *Zan* for two weeks.

Dissatisfied women are a rising force that the ultraists are far from eager to take on. The 1975 'Islamic Revolution in Iran' awarded neo-Islamist women roles in public political space when it had enemies to overpower. Guns in the hand and demonstrations gave scarfed modest

women feelings of empowerment. After the Khomeiniites' 1979 seizure of power, the roles and opportunities for women contracted. West-tinted Iranian feminists believe they can establish bridges to women who went along with the mullahs' purge of the west's 'corruption'. In mid-1998 the hardliners imprisoned Mohsin Said Zadeh, a clerical writer who called for more equality for women. Yet the current revival of interest in the west's cultures and concepts could take educated urban women at least to a feminism completely outside any affiliation to Islam as public identity.

AUSTRALIA IS IMPORTANT to Iran as a source of wheat and sheep and as a buyer for oil in face of savage boycotts and embargoes waged by the US. Australian readers can thus expect yet more reassurance from the Iranian embassy in Canberra that a robust reform process is under way under Khatami and that the country is becoming pluralistic and stable. Still, the Iranian state remains paralyzed by the drawn-out struggle between its two clerical factions. Yet the other conflict between the 'Islamists' and the tenacious if repressed secular forces is potentially more explosive. The Islamists and westernists do still each retain an impulse to eliminate the culture of the other, and indeed the other party, as a force in society or in the polity. The more farsighted group in the Islamic establishment is ready to relax some restrictions in order to co-opt or neutralize sections of the youth in particular. The scepticism of Australia's vigorous Farsi press about how far Khatami's reforms could ever go in such an establishment has real force in view of the meagre changes that the much-touted 'liberal cleric' Ali Akbar Rafsanjani brought in after he finally became President in 1989.

Iranian writers who moved to Australia under the clerical regime as yet see no clear process through which it can be replaced, or by what. Communism penetrated the psyche of a fair number of intellectuals and literate urban workers after the Second World War. However, the traditional Stalinist Tudeh Party aided the US and British destruction of the secular-liberal PM Mosaddeq in the 1950s, and finally discredited itself among secular Iranians by standing with Khomeini before and even for some time after his seizure of state power. The Mujahidin-i-Khalq or Sacred Warriors of the People claim to have synthesized Islam and Marxism, and showed impressive organization in fighting the Shah's police state. However, literary-minded Iranians in the 1990s are fearful of falling under a thought-control regime even more suffocating than that of the mullahs if the Mujahidin, with their Stalinist skills, pick up the pieces. Moreover, Mujahidin leader Mas'ud Rajavi has used as his strike base the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, who wreaked such devastation on Iranians during the Iran–Iraq war.

If there are today no accepted vanguard parties able to focus and lead resistance, ordinary urban Iranians are no longer atomized. Former supporters now openly call the 'Islamic' regime a bogus fraud over their telephones and in public, defying the spooks. Some writers hope that the ongoing pressure from the people could pressure the more flexible clerics around Khatami to grant genuine pluralism. Yet, other clerics around the 'religious guide of Islam' Khamenei may make a stand, and a popular explosion bring down the regime. Furious resurgent secularist forces might then exclude 'Islam' from politics and high culture for a period, carrying forward Iran's tragic dichotomy and pendulum.

Dr Dennis Walker, a Melbourne Arabist, is writing a trilogy on pan-Arab ideas in Egypt before 1952.

Golam Reza Baghai is a Sydney poet in Persian who, after several arrests, left Iran in 1991.

Brisbane Line

Duncan Richardson

BREAKING OUT OF its West End bridgehead at the South Brisbane Sailing Club, the third manifestation of the Queensland Poetry Festival shrugged off lack of support by the Literature Board and invaded the Valley this year, spreading into six venues plus a 'fringe' in other central/inner city locations.

The experiment was described by organizers as a "poetrification of the Valley" and the results were promising. Good crowds for most events drew on people from the world beyond poetry writing circles. Several shows were free, others only $5, eliminating the problem posed previously by day tickets and their intimidating prices and confusion over who paid what and when. If any venue hosts were eager for the poets to finish, they kept it to themselves and early closings weren't a problem. Of all the fresh locales, 'The Latin' on the corner of Brunswick Street Mall was a great 'discovery', combining just enough space, with a practical layout. Having poetry enacted inside an ex-bank is more than fitting and it's to be hoped it continues to be

used in that way. Perhaps other, current banks could follow suit. It might even increase their meagre profits.

As usual, several books were launched over the five days touched on by the festival, including the six new titles from Five Islands Press. With a healthy quota from Queensland this year, the Writers' Centre barely coped with the crowd. One of the authors, Ted Neilsen, acknowledged a debt to previous festivals in achieving publication, a measure of its growing stature.

Media coverage was down this year. While the *Courier Mail* included a focus on one poet and the winners of the inaugural Arts Queensland Award for Unpublished Poetry in the week before, on the weekend when most events were on, the James McAuley debate was raging in the paper's review pages. This issue had stirred the pot elsewhere for the week before yet rehashing the literary debates of the Cold War era was considered more important than a current event, promoting new voices. It could be yet more evidence that Mark Davis was essentially right in his *Gangland* argument about babyboomer domination of culture. The Poetry Festival this year took a stance explicitly centred on youth, which these days is hardly a shocking approach. Yet this, plus the relative absence of poets known to general readers may have been enough to make the event all but invisible to local media.

The *Courier Mail*'s focus on two individual poets and their stories highlights a problem for the media, I suspect. Journalists seem uncertain about covering diversity. The single face and profile fits more neatly into their professional world view. It is not hard to see why but we are all the losers for it, when larger cultural events are ignored. This broad scope is one of the strengths of the Festival and has been since its fringe origins.

As the Festival grows, other venues disappear or shrink. Poetry at Club Sangria in Mt Gravatt has declined to one night per month, of bush ballads. The Avid Reader at West End is now programming month by month so the rest of the year is looking fairly sparse. Unless Writers' Week returns to poetry, the only sail on the horizon is the new National Poetry Day in September.

Dispatch from the Northern Territory

Marian Devitt

As the blessed Dry Season weather envelops the Northern Territory, literary activity seems to have gone up a gear. I am currently editing our first anthology of Northern Territory poetry, a collaborative publishing project between NTU Press and the NT Writers' Centre. I am confident that this publication, called *Landmark: Poetry from the Northern Territory*, will bring to the national scene a number of new and exciting poetic voices. Another anthology, *Red on Red* published by the NT Writers and Publishers Group, is also underway, with a strong collection of short stories from some previously unpublished writers as well as those who have featured in earlier anthologies published by this group.

Stephen Gray's novel *Lungfish* and John Muk Muk Burke's collection of poetry *Nightsong and Other Poems* are both in production with NTU Press. Hopefully they will be ready to launch in NT Writers' Week, which is scheduled from 9–16 September, the second week of the Festival of Darwin. Writers' Week is, in this inaugural year, organized by the NT Writers' Centre. We have developed a series of literary panels as well as reinventing the popular poetry events 'Mother Tongues' and the sunset readings at East Point. Although literary panels are well established in southern writers' festivals they are somewhat of an innovation in Darwin where forums encouraging critical discussion about literature (or indeed any art form) have been scarce.

In an attempt to showcase the diversity of writing in the Northern Territory we have programmed panels addressing some of the major genres and featuring local writers: The Historians; The Novelists (in this instance NT writers discussing their first published novels); The Poets; Writers for Children and Young Adults; and Indigenous Writers. Regional events are also planned for Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine with Helen Chryssides delivering a series of workshops on biography, autobiography and writing community histories in both Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. Elaine Christie will visit Katherine for a weekend writers' retreat with local writers.

The focus of NT Writers' Week this year is very much about developing an awareness of Northern Territory writers within the local community. Without a local publishing industry as such many writers retain a very low profile despite some publishing successes further afield. It is not often that these writers are invited to interstate writers' festivals although some have travelled as far as Berlin promoting their work and attending

launches. We hope to be able to extend our scope in years to come into the Asia Pacific region but believe the necessary basis for developing Writers' Week is to support and promote our local writers.

We are fortunate to have our three interstate mentors visiting as special guests: Peter Goldsworthy (who is currently mentoring three prose writers from the Northern Territory) will discuss his work with local award-winning short-story writer Wolfgang Wirf; Chris Mansell (who is mentoring three Territory poets) and Nadia Wheatley (who is mentoring three writers for Children and Young Adults). Chris Mansell will also be visiting Alice Springs to catch up with Val O'Neill and Michael Watts, two poets who were successful in our mentoring project and to deliver a performance-poetry workshop. Both Michael and Val were featured in *overland* 152 in 1998 featuring NT writers. Our other successful applicants for the mentoring project were: Kaye Aldenhoven (poetry); Graeme Parsons, Jackie Swift and Diane Lucas with Nadia Wheatley; and Leonie Robin, Ray Hayes and Kim Caraher with Peter Goldsworthy. Once again *Northern Perspective* will publish this year's NT Literary Awards and this special edition of *Northern Perspective* will be launched during Writers' Week. At the moment the board of *Northern Perspective* is awaiting the outcome of a funding application which will determine the fate of any further issues of the journal. We have conducted a diagnostic study of the state of affairs of the journal and while many suggestions for improvement, marketing and streamlining of administration have been formulated the bottom line still rests with the ongoing support of the arts ministry and the Northern Territory University. With the demise of the English Department at the University the necessary lobbying power, interest and commitment to keep the journal going with any sense of vision and development has not been evident. The continuing appearance of the journal, however haphazard, has been a result of the unpaid and persistent efforts of editors such as John Muk Muk Burke and Barbara James. Another breakthrough in writing for theatre was the performance in July of four new one-act plays written by Darwin writers. *Block* (the collective title of the four pieces) is set in a block of flats in Darwin. The individual pieces in order were: *In Terms of Your Life* by Marian Devitt (my first attempt at writing for performance); *Scratch* by Rowena Ivers (the author of *The Spotted Skin*, also Rowena's first attempt); *Trade Secrets* by playwright and actor Stephen Carleton; and *Rut* by playwright and actor Gail Evans. The directors were Tessa Pauling (who also acted in *Rut*) and Ken Conway. Stephen and Gail established Knock Em Down Theatre as an alternative to the focus on producing interstate playwrights in the Northern Territory. While *Block* was very much a 'shoestring theatre' production (with props borrowed from the lounge rooms of the actors and writers and the actors working on the promise of a cut from the door take), it was encouraging that the project was partly supported by the NT Department of Arts and Museums. Its financial support indicates a promising initial commitment to local writers, actors, directors and production staff.

Response to Philip Jones

Robin Lucas

FOR THE RECORD, a few corrections of fact for Philip Jones' obituary of Geoffrey Dutton, published in your winter 1999 issue.

Geoff did not deny that there was ever love between himself and Ninette, neither in his autobiography *Out in the Open*, nor in private discussions with me. This often-repeated assertion that his autobiography stated that he had never loved his first wife upset Geoffrey Dutton greatly. He wrote many letters to reviewers and commentators correcting such a willful misreading of what he had actually written.

What he did say in the autobiography is "... I was in love with her ..." (*Out in the Open*, p. 117). Later, he writes that he fell out of love with Ninette "fairly early in the piece ... falling out of love happens in many marriages, and is nobody's fault". He quoted a translation of one of Yevtushenko's poems: "I no longer love you; for that I do not ask forgiveness. I did love you; that is what I ask forgiveness for". (*Out in the Open*, p. 336)

Jones' strange interpretation, or half-baked psychologizing, of Geoff's and my changes of address is that as "it was no longer possible for Dutton, the quintessential South Australian, to live in his home state ... he and Robin moved restlessly around the country, finally settling in Melbourne".

Of course it was possible for us to live in South Australia; Geoff happily chose not to. In our fifteen years together we lived mostly in Sydney where we were both working, had a couple of years in Mudgee in order to wind down

(Geoff was then in his late sixties), and then built a house on twenty-five acres of bush in Queensland. Our final move to Melbourne was necessary because Geoff's first stroke and faltering health meant that living in the bush was no longer an option. Is this "moving restlessly"?

Philip Jones writes that many of Geoff's books are "infinitely forgettable". This is to be expected with such a large output. However I do feel Jones might have more graciously added that some, such as *White on Black*, *Russell Drysdale*, *The Hero as Murder (Edward John Eyre)*, *Snow on the Saltbush* (much admired by Stephen Murray-Smith), *The Innovators* and his biography of Kenneth Slessor are not only infinitely memorable, but valuable and lasting contributions to Australian studies.

Finally, Sun Books was not "subsequently incorporated into Penguin Australia". Geoff, with Max Harris and Brian Stonier, resigned from Penguin to set up Sun Books in 1965. Sun was later incorporated into Macmillan Australia.

Yours faithfully,
Robin Lucas
Literary Executor

The Public University

On wednesday 16 June 1999 about 120 people congregated at Readings Bookshop in Lygon Street, Melbourne for a forum on academic freedom and the Launch of the Association for the Public University. Speakers from the convening group were Sophie Bibrowska (Psychology, RMIT), Raimond Gaita (Philosophy, Catholic University), Paul James (Politics, Monash), Robert Manne (Politics, La Trobe), Allan Patience (Politics, VUT) and Alan Roberts and Jennifer Strauss (currently Honorary Research members – after retirement – of the Physics and English Departments of Monash). Readings was especially chosen rather than a university campus, exactly because it is a public space and the convening panel of the Association wanted to emphasize their belief that concern about ways in which universities as public institutions are being changed by corporatization and managerialism is not the exclusive preserve of academics, even if it is largely academics who can and should bring these changes into the arena of public discussion.

What was to emerge from the speakers at the Forum was a clear understanding of the special threat to academic freedom that has emerged within the context of changes which are reducing the universities to instruments of a market-fundamentalist culture, at best a limited form of vocational training and at worst, a sales counter for titles. In the management process of turning universities into business enterprises and Vice-Chancellors into Chief Executive Officers, the relationships of collegiality among staff that once were honoured (even if not always acted out) have become increasingly hierarchical and too often marked by hostilities and mutual contempt. In the elevation of productivity the relationship of staff to research is corrupted by the necessity for the quick and profit-making result. In the name of productivity and efficiency, students become units of output and the relationship between staff and students (themselves driven by ever-increasing economic pressures) becomes increasingly tense and harried. And in the name of corporate loyalty (under the imperative to be a docile, 'productive', 'performing' employee), academics are required to realize that speaking out in public about perceived shortcomings of their own institution is no longer a right (let alone a duty). This is the new area where academic freedom no longer runs: and the sanctions against telling the public what it ought to know are imposed from within a system, which has many ways of enforcing them more subtle than recent egregious episodes of evicting people from their offices or cutting off their e-mail.

The Association welcomes anyone with an interest in preserving universities as places publicly funded, accessible to the public, and responsible to the public for fulfilling their true function of the free pursuit of the discovery and transmitting of knowledge (which may include skills, but is not co-terminous with them). It can be contacted at PO Box 1374, Carlton Vic 3053 or by e-mail at <FPU@arc.net.au>

Floating Fund

The response to the break-in has been astounding. Supporters came out of the woodwork with donations.

Thank you to the following: $5000 Anon; $250 J.K.; $129 P.H.; $100 A.P. R.H.; $70 R.C.; $66 B.B., B.W., W.E.; $35 R.G.K.; $30 F.A.; $26 D.J., D.N., D.R.; $25 F.S.; $20 K.J.S., $16 D.McG., N.McG., E.R., J.B., J.A.McD., R.P., W.K., J.G.B.; $10 A.J.D.McG.; $9 T.B.; $6 P.G., B.B., J.A., R.O., T.G., A.B.M., D.J.O'S., J.J.R., P.D.; $4 P.P., M.McH., A. & J.B.; $2 W. & R.W., B.R.; Totalling: $6252.

Screamer in the Night

Bob Ellis

Cassandra Pybus: *The Devil and James McAuley* (UQP, $34.95).

THE SHADOW OF THE Cold War ever lengthens down the century, and Gerard Henderson of the soft remorseful right and Donald Horne of the soft self-mocking left are quarrelling still in 1999 over who in the McCarthyist fifties was politically wise and who was mentally unstable – this time over the costive, cantankerous cadaver of James McAuley – poet, professor, pianist, atheist, Catholic convert, western suburbs boy made good, wartime insider, friend of New Guinea, foe of world communism, CIA-paid *Quadrant* editor, secret sodomite (perhaps, perhaps not) and screamer in the night. There was a shadowy thin man in a stovepipe hat in the corner of his every bedroom, waiting for him to die. The screaming made him a poor house guest in most suburbs, and a famously dreadful room-mate.

His biographer, Cassandra Pybus, did not know him, and neither did I. Her book, however, wonderfully evokes the pre-war Sydney University revues (with Jim on piano composing and singing blasphemous ditties) and rival waspish newspapers (Whitlam at *Hermes* versus Horne at *honi soit*) and the all-night coffee-fuelled raves about the shape of the universe and the secret, risky acts of student sex (oft ending in wounding abortions) whose last fine, careless fag-end I inhaled in the latter fifties and early sixties. She gets well too how it was in the dodgy wartime quangos, in particular the one confected by the drunk erratic perpetual student Alf Conlon (he studied Medicine for decades, but never passed it) out of a distant acquaintance with Curtin and a need to save his mates, McAuley and John Kerr among them, from active service, but not alas from the long fine mischievous lazy afternoon that resulted in Ern Malley and the shame lifelong of poor Max Harris. Out of this, and much boredom teaching and writing reports, McAuley had a good safe war – seeing, at his own insistence, battlefront bloodshed only once, in New Guinea, and killing, perhaps, to his horror, a man or two, an act that changed his life.

He pursued religion, significantly, after that, joining Mother Church in 1952, and came back again and again, as a wiser and wiser and ever more paternal colonial advisor, to New Guinea (did he have a male black lover there? Pybus hints, but cannot know), his twin post-war passions eventually commingling in his obsession with one Mother Marie Therese of Papua, a saintly woman already dead who in her lifetime was much harassed and afflicted by the Devil. "He took the form of a gorilla," her disciple Archbishop de Boismenu alleged, "and tried to strangle her"; he also pushed her out of portholes and held her underwater, electrified her bed, and sent squads of loud chittering monkeys to suffocate her and tear at her with claws and under the pretext of letting her rest a while attempted to seduce her, but was usually gone by midnight – having no doubt a number of other, similar calls to make in the neighbourhood. That McAuley believed this nonsense (and why shouldn't he? A Catholic believes in the Devil, and a Devil who is an active agent in the world of men) does not, as Henderson in his defence of him asserts, prove Stalin was not a bad man, and that Jim was not right to think so, but it puts in some psychological context his belief that communism was an ultimate evil, and his old quadrangle acquaintance Whitlam, the Fabian socialist, a knowing and active handmaiden of Satan.

Catholicism looks sillier and sillier these days (do we eat Christ's living flesh each Sunday? Should we?) and those who convert to it – Newman, Wilde, Waugh, Graham Greene – more and more psychologically suspect. And other things about McAuley – his rejection of an academic post in London, his long tepid stay in Tasmania, lording it over the provincials, his tightening circles of male mateship, his unusual fondness for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which Pybus rightly alleges was the world's first male bonding road movie, his involvement as a Redfern church organist with the drab mascaraed relics of the fugitive paedophile Bishop Leadbetter, his playful friendship with the closeted gay Harold Stewart, depressive co-author with Jim of Ern Malley, his reverence for God's spy Santamaria, his laziness as *Quadrant* editor, his frequent, late bursts of womanizing, his nightmares, devil fantasias and obsessive recitations, even in his last weeks, of Shakespeare's

envenomed sonnet on lust – bespeak a man ill at ease with his place in the world (a back-block suburban boy forever a-bluster on campus?) and seeking a better world to strut in. It is as a campus figure he fares best in this book, ever kindly and available to students, conducting tutorials down to his dying weeks. A good man fallen among Groupers, perhaps, and dark angels. Perhaps not.

The book suffers a good deal, I think, from its late date of composition. Horne is clearly a big information source, and Santamaria, and Peter Coleman and the ill-used girlfriend of his student days Joan Fraser, and their contributions are pretty illuminating, but too many of his intimates are dead, and one yearns for a line or two from Harold Stewart, or Alf Conlon, or Bert Evatt, or John Kerr. I would give a lot to see film of him at the piano in a student revue, or lecturing in Hobart in his middle age. Such living memorials are cheaply possible now but the subjects, of course, are less interesting. One returns with frustration to an unfinished quest for the source of so many of his mysterious lines:

When nightmare breathes upon the mind
As on a glass and peers behind
With mad and watchful eyes, malevolently;

When in the sexual night descended
The spirit quivers undefended
At the quick of human mystery;

When a woman's hair is a bush of pain
And the heart is a blind man in the rain
That nightlong sings of what it cannot see.

But of course these things are inaccessible to us now, and they always will be.

From my late teens onward I have been able to recite much McAuley from memory, but on revisiting him in my fifties I find him a little overburnished, a little drained of blood, a little self-censored, in the end, of the sometimes beastly impulses that fed the torrent that gave his verse, or should have given it, emotional, erectile, passionate force. With similar cultural constraints Ken Slessor did better, I think, with the mere English language and its rhymer's cul-de-sacs, and Doug Stewart and Alec Hope and R.D. Fitzgerald, and at the heart of Jim's aroused and fanatical ideological hatreds and wars with the Devil and loathing of his fleshly self, perhaps, is this fear that he is not quite good enough as a poet or, like Hemingway, has lost his talent to some pursuing demon or some sad Faustian pact with God for his soul's salvation. He could have done better, and more, or lived longer, or left the church in disgust (he might have, he really might have), and been now like the once fierce Hornes and Whitlams grown gracefully old, a more benign figure in the nineties, lording it sweetly over the fleeting century, a wise and kind and fairly talented, and uncontroversially respected man.

Bob Ellis is a writer and veteran of many court cases. He is not always innocent as charged.

New Ethics

Jeff Sparrow

Catharine Lumby: *Gotcha: Life in a Tabloid World* (Allen & Unwin, $16.95).

With the left so much on the defensive, the media is a convenient scapegoat. Strike figures at an all-time low? Well, the masses must be patsies, lulled into apathy by an unholy alliance of John Laws, the Backstreet Boys, and the gang from Friends! That is, of course, the problem with media-bashing. It's only a short step from blaming the media to railing against the population that consumes it.

Catharine Lumby's book *Gotcha* analyzes the media in the light of one of the darkest developments in recent Australian history, the sudden – almost elemental – emergence of Hansonism in 1996. Lumby sees herself as defending ordinary people, arguing – correctly, in my view – that it's mistaken to simply label Hanson a media creation. When One Nation did so well in the Queensland election, it was never simply the tabloids wot won it.

Gotcha's focus is the world of 'trash' media – the downmarket press, the talk shows, the shock-jock radio programs. Those who condescendingly contrast the quality media to its downmarket cousin, Lumby argues, are missing the point. The consumers of tabloid media are not zombified couch potatoes. Young women aren't tricked into buying magazines like *Dolly* and *Cosmo*; they read them because the mags are a space (often the *only* space) in which sexuality and personal identity can be discussed. The tabloid emphasis on sensationalism and scandal is popular precisely because ordinary people *aren't* passive consumers, and are capable of shaping these stories into narratives which make sense of their own lives.

Unfortunately, from this promising beginning, Lumby's argument rapidly degenerates.

Gotcha covers Bill Clinton's sex scandals, the death of Diana, the O.J. Simpson trial, and so on – but nowhere offers any discussion of the basic economics of the media. Lumby says (rather grudgingly) that she "doesn't deny" that "economic and political elites" have traditionally owned the media – but nothing whatsoever seems to follow from this.

Now, a recognition of the fact that the media is a huge industry, controlled by people who have nothing whatsoever in common with you and me, doesn't mean accepting that the proprietors determine absolutely everything that we see and read. But it does make it harder to blithely declare (as Lumby does) that "opportunities to resist and subvert [media monopolies] are available to anyone who wants to record a video and display it on the Internet".

One could reply by pointing out that the vast majority of the world's population has no access to flush toilets, much less the World Wide Web. But probably what's more important is the inherent silliness of thinking that home-made websites on Geocities constitute any kind of meaningful 'subversion' of Rupert Murdoch's global power.

Lumby claims that the media offers "a vast collage of diverse viewpoints, audiences and forms of speech". But, actually, the media's diversity has quite sharply defined limits, and its inclusiveness tends to end rather abruptly at the point at which the status-quo comes under genuine threat. Sure, *Who Weekly* is happy to use feminist rhetoric to describe Madonna. But does anyone really expect the tabloid media to provide sympathetic coverage of a militant abortion rights demonstration or an industrial campaign to defend child care services?

For Lumby, the tabloid media is the "place you can most often hear ordinary people speak out on their own behalf". But how does this happen? Well, think of talk-back radio. The masses 'speak out' during talk-back, sure, but not in any way that unifies them collectively. It's not like, say, a stop-work meeting, in which the intervention of each unionist serves to bind strikers more tightly together. No, the radio callers form a jumble of atomized, isolated individuals, in which the traditional middle-class (the opinionated taxi drivers, the angry shopkeepers) and the socially isolated predominate. In other words, the form of participation that the tabloid media encourage is populism – a form resolutely opposed to the genuine collectivity of class politics.

Many of Lumby's claims about the radical space opened up by the mass media rest upon her oft-repeated assertion that the personal is political. But the political is not *simply* personal. Strikes are political. Demonstrations are political. Elections have even been known to be political. Yet Lumby gives only the most cursory consideration to these phenomena.

And that's why the 'new ethics of public life' promised by her book's cover blurb are so inane. Everyone, it seems, knows that the old categories of Left and Right no longer apply. The task of right-thinking people, then, consists of "[a]ctively listening to what people are saying, regardless of how they're saying it, where they're saying it and why" and recognizing that "there are always other ways of speaking and looking around".

The effective meaning of these injunctions becomes clear when Lumby outlines her strategy for opposing Hansonism. Actually, 'oppose' is the wrong word – because, as it happens, even Pauline Hanson has a few interesting things to say. After all:

> the rise of One Nation forced the left elite to question their own identity and their claim to the political moral high ground. Conflict, like collaboration, with groups who see themselves differently can be enormously productive, then, because it reminds us that who we think we are is never stable or universal.

You only have to replace the nasty Hansonite phrase 'left elite' with 'Asians' or 'Aborigines' to see what a tremendously reactionary position this is. One doubts whether the Aboriginal people of Redfern found it so enormously productive to learn that they weren't who they thought they were.

Lumby is right to assert that the tabloid media is more complex than is usually imagined. But there's a difference between trying to understand the need that the down-market media fills for ordinary people, and promoting the tabloid media as the locus of great deeds of resistance. To misquote Gil Scott-Heron, in the modern age the revolution will be televised. That, however, does not make Ray Martin a revolutionary.

Jeff Sparrow is a Melbourne socialist.

All Writers Should Read It

Kathleen Mary Fallon

Mark Davis: *Gangland* (Allen & Unwin, $ 19.95).

THIS SECOND EDITION of *Gangland* includes three new chapters in which Davis updates the continuing business-as-usual goings-on of the 'cultural elite' and summarizes some of what's at stake for us as a nation,

politically, socially, culturally, whilst the same old gang perpetuates the same old insider-tradings, schmoozings, gatekeepings and border patrolling in its battles to cling on to cultural authority, accumulate cultural capital and commercial power rigged to simulate open debate. The three chapters include one in which Davis, not playing by the good-taste rules of the game, summarizes the reception of the first edition. It's fascinating, hilarious and proves his point perfectly – not just about the ways the gangs work but about what *not* operating in a chronically defensive way might look like. He takes some of the criticisms on the chin and presents an example of how this more open, non-defensive debate might operate. He then moves beyond this, using it to fuel arguments about what is really his basic concern, the possibilities for cultural renewal through facing contemporary realities rather than looking for scapegoats.

The new material also looks more specifically at the ways in which literary festivals and events operate. His detailing of the bad faith obfuscations and downright lying around the 1998 Melbourne Festival's panel discussion at which Bryce Courtenay spoke is illuminating. He uses it to ask the gormless questions that many of us have become too benumbed to bother asking. "Doesn't everyone have a right to be represented fairly and honestly in the media, no matter whose finer sensibilities might be offended?" he asks. He points out that the language used to disparage Courtenay "was almost entirely the language of class: the language the old rich use to describe the new rich". The critics making mugs of themselves by confirming and parodying Courtenay's claim "about the snobby divide between the way critics review popular and literary fiction", obviously believing they'd be taken at their word and never called to account by someone who was actually at the panel discussion, could suss what was going on and had recourse to a media outlet. Davis himself doesn't have the right lineage, is not cut from the right cloth. Let this sort of irreverent personage in and these are the bad mannered, infra dig questions and observations one can expect. Davis has the downright temerity to turn their own arguments back on themselves, point out the weakness and inconsistencies in their positions, not simply as a point scoring exercise but to reveal just how threadbare those arguments and positions actually are.

One of the aspects I've enjoyed most about *Gangland* is the humour. Davis' good-humoured approach is in steep contrast with what often seems the gruesomely serious slog of some kind of moral and aesthetic war for the hearts, minds and 'taste(buds)' of a nation. "So much error, so little time." (I actually heard Robert Dessaix [which I am told is pronounced 'Desex' in French] say with a worry-wearied expression, he felt a Hercules-didn't-have-it-so-bad "responsibility for shaping the tastes of a nation". Now, I often, when I'm thus thrust back into the dreary world of my school days, find myself childishly dissociating, mishearing such pomposities. I swear I heard him say 'tastebuds of a nation' and proceeded to hallucinate Desex in one of Mummy's frilly aprons, working away all through the live-long night as she used to do, twisting marzipan roses onto wires for the wedding cakes she iced.)

Most importantly much of the new material highlights the contemporary context in which writers and culture workers are operating, with particular reference to youth issues and race relations. If we're going to take our work seriously and believe it can have political and social impact and relevance, these are the sorts of questions that should be replacing the tired old considerations that the standards-of-excellence judges, with their 'transcendent eternal values', 'finer sensibilities', 'felt art' and 'felt morality', have rammed down our throats our whole dreary education long. Tired old has-been questions out of a past where a good education meant a 'Latin education, shared ideals and common prejudices', a colonial past in the Great Western Tradition of 'universality' which served Europe well when it ruled the world. By documenting the spheres of influence through which they evolve, Davis shows that these 'timeless' values are not 'timeless' at all but painstakingly constructed, coteried, cosy, timid climacteric and menopausal reactive panics.

As Davis clears away more of the dust from the dreary old 'debates' and 'usual suspects' up on their pedestals in the culture industry line-up in these additional chapters, his argument and writing style have become more focused, sharper, more strategic. He continues in the style of the first twelve chapters combining the immediacy and accessibility of journalism with the permanence and 'more serious' status of the book. His clear, persistent analysis of liberalism and its current manifestations in Australia – high liberalism, coterie liberalism, liberal liberalism – puts it well and truly on notice. He goes on to point out the crisis it is faced with in terms of technological and scientific innovations, global communications and information explosion, and its connections with, and response to (often imported) think-tank-driven ideological and strategic interventions of the far right (who it's woken up and found itself in bed with in its harping pendulums-swung-too-far way on terms such as 'political correctness', 'victim-feminism', censorship and the perils of multiculturalism).

The first edition, "a book about the decline of certain kinds of 1970s liberalism, and their mutation into some-

thing more dangerous and defensive" was written as an "old-fashioned, empirical account of events" yet informed by Davis's involvement with cultural theory and its concerns for social and cultural contexts. He has done what Meaghan Morris says theorists need to be able to do: "learn to translate – and that means learning to use other languages with grace, complexity and skill". This first edition was well and truly reviewed, so I'll focus here on what it meant for me as one of the writers favourably mentioned; as a writer trying to survive in the 'gangland' Davis maps and as a writer sidelined as one who doesn't agree with its "dominant, dated methodological and aesthetic paradigm".

I must say here I was loath to read the first edition as I was trying *not* to know too much more about the mechanics of how the culture industry operated; the set agendas, the intellectual clubbiness. This was as the result of my history; years of writing away as a bit of an avant-garde anarchist on the fringes, self-publishing books (on which I refused even to use ISBN numbers). Then, moving into mainstream printing and publishing for a number of years before the unexpected success of *Working Hot*, which thrust me, much to everyone's surprise (including my own) into some prominence for a moment. It was from this vantage point I retreated from the world Davis talks about so as to not let it decide or influence my writing agenda.

It didn't like me (I *did* notice the shock/horror on certain flabbergasted faces as they wondered how on earth such a grave affront to the 'tastes of a nation' as *Working Hot* had made it past the gatekeepers) and I didn't like it. So I 'hunkered down', as the Yanks say, in order to stay out of the maelstrom of the ready-to-wear gangs, cliques and coteries of all persuasions. I felt I had to maintain this independence despite its tendency to be isolating, sometimes lonely and worst of all, counterproductive to my own writing. When I finally did read *Gangland* it proved to be all that I'd feared; filled me with the despair and depression that I'd had to overcome daily in order to keep writing, keep functioning in this system where I had no place, no voice and one in which my best strategy seemed to be to keep my head down.

My depression finally overcome, my *faux* naivety blasted, I got mad. It wasn't that I had halitosis, B.O. or a bad personality. It wasn't just some personal lack or inadequacy; Davis put it more succinctly than I'd ever dared, I wasn't "the *right* sort of writer". "Her work has been dismissed as 'subcultural' as a way of ricocheting her concerns back into the margins", he says. I felt as elated and shyly gratified as if someone had unexpectedly stood up for me against a gang of schoolyard bullies. It was a decisive moment. I was now informed, armed with a depersonalized overview and dangerous. I'm indebted to Davis for this.

And there are many other writers who are not the *right* sort of writer and for 'inexplicable' reasons aren't 'taken up'. One Davis doesn't mention and one of the most significant is Tom Flood. His *Oceana Fine* won the Vogel back in 1988 and went on to win the NSW and Victorian Premiers' Prizes and the Miles Franklin. He has never been approached, let alone feted, poached or headhunted by any publisher interested in his next novel. Surely this is very strange behaviour which the analysis in *Gangland* goes some way towards explaining.

All writers should read it; you'd have to go to a hundred dinner parties to get this much good oil. It's more useful than any cultural theory seminar or 'how to' manual. Then they can decide whether to schmooze and suck, to develop strategies and methods of intervention (of which *Gangland* itself is a case in point) or to just ignore in a more discriminating way. (Perhaps Davis could add a 'Table of Hierarchies' appendix to following editions, with regular biennial updates on who is who and who is where in the hierarchy, who's fucking whom, lineage and friendship lines etc. so that sucks can do a quick flick at literary events.)

I hope this updated edition is to become a biennial event. It could develop the scourge-like status of the worlds' worst-dressed list or a 'Guerilla Girls' action. The fact that Davis might put their goings-on on record might give the gangs pause for thought as they review, interview, consult, debate, defend, advocate and invite each other. But it's to be hoped it doesn't degenerate into a glorified gossip column or updated strings of statistics and facts about social problems. I'd hope that it would become even more strategic, analytical, develop models of intervention from theoretical analysis, a focal point for disaffected working writers, gathering and collating information on the way they are treated. He might even consider doing a special edition focusing on the theatre establishment which, proving there's always someone worse off, is *worse* than the literary establishment in terms of gatekeeping and reactionary, paralysed nostalgic thinking. Have you noticed how everything is either 'heartwarming' or 'heartwrenching' and no-one, mainstream, alternative, elite, academic, black activist, has made a peep about the offensive racism of the way the black presence is represented in *Cloudstreet*. I felt like a kid in one of those nightmares where you wake up and you're alone in an empty world. "Where has everyone gone?" I've been asking since I saw the thing.

Something that Davis might delve into more deeply is the cultural climate this elitist system creates. It seems to me it operates as a bit of a model and there are innumerable splinter wannabes who absolutely conform to the ethics and aesthetics of these empowered elites and thus feel

sidelined, embittered failures because they, for reasons that they can only construe as personal inadequacies, haven't found a place in the sun. Another effect on the cultural atmosphere I've observed is that the countergangs, those who would see themselves as 'alternative' cultural formations, have set themselves up smugly and self-righteously, in opposition. This allows them to operate in an unselfcritical way, in a reactive mode; perennial adolescents forever in arrogant rebellion against the mummydaddies of the elites. These positions are sad, depressing, complacent, smug; rendering their adherents incapable of effective engagement with urgent contemporary issues.

I was interested to see that it's now, with its red cover, a little red book. I have images of countergangs waving their little red books and chanting "down with the usual suspects" from the audience, striking fear into the breasts of literary event organizers. I see the blue helmets of the Reformed Australia Council Task Force bussed in to keep the peace ...

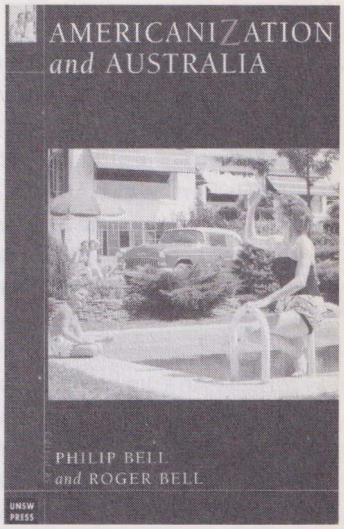
Gangland is a book written in good faith and it's to be hoped publishers and their marketing machine (or should that be the other way around?) respond to its success in good faith, not simply take the money and run, but take the arguments and get serious; extrapolate from the issues raised in *Gangland*. They could, for a start, find the neglected voices, encourage younger or emerging writers and commentators, destabilize the status quo of the 'usual suspects', explore the potentials of the demographics Davis's book has itself tapped into.

Kathleen Mary Fallon lives in Melbourne. She is currently working on a new novel and a play about interracial relations.

Trans-Pacific Culture

Dianne Currier

Roger Bell & Philip Bell (eds): *Americanization and Australia* (UNSW Press, $29.95).



AMERICANIZATION EMERGES through the essays in this collection as a wholly inadequate rhetorical framework for investigating and evaluating the many and varied meetings between American and Australian cultures. Indeed Bell and Bell in their introduction, 'The Dilemmas of "Americanization"' and Jill Julius Matthews in 'Which America?' examine the way 'America' is constituted within such a discourse with its connotations of political, economic and cultural imperialism and find that such a concept of Americanization offers far too simplistic an account of the processes of cultural transfer in the late twentieth century. Problematic as the term Americanization may be, there is, however, no doubt on the part of any of the contributors that American cultural products and process impact on Australian culture – though there is considerable divergence amongst them as to the scope, modalities, potency and outcomes of such cultural miscegenations. Indeed one of the driving questions across the entire volume becomes that of with which mechanisms and by what criteria can we evaluate the influences of 'alien' cultural products and practices?

For most contributors the task at hand is to firstly discern the presence and then speculate on the consequences of American culture across a range of sites and practices in Australia. Some take a straightforward approach of quantitative analysis of physical American presence such as how many American actors appear in Australian films or how many Australians attend baseball as opposed to cricket and tend to conflate size/volume of presence with degree of influence. Neil Rattigan evaluates the impact of the USA on Australian film by quantifying the use of American actors and giving brief consideration of the social and economic rationale for their presence. Finding few, he concludes that Australian film is not Americanized. Kathe Boehringer examines the operations of jurisprudence and the doctrine of constitutional free speech in the United States and while making some attempts to compare them to local practices is content to remark that they are different. Elaine Thompson writing on political culture likewise presents a comparative descriptive piece which in ascertaining that there are structural differences concludes that political culture in Australia is not influenced to any tangible degree by Americanism. Such studies, useful to the extent that they illuminate the differences and similarities between two cultures, offer little by way of insight into the complexities of cultural production and transmission, the impact of global economic and political activity and the discourses

of democracy across which notions of national identities and cultures are constantly being reassessed and reconfigured.

More useful are the introduction, and Jill Julius Matthews' 'Which America', which address the questions of how culture is to be understood and how might it be said to be transplanted or dominant or influencing or influenced. Roger Bell in discussing race and ethnicity combines comparison and contrast with these kinds of questions in investigating the points of connection between American concepts and representations of race and Australian ones and tracing how these feed into divergent processes of national identity formation. Mark Rolfe in 'Suburbia' tracks the adoption and dispersal of architectural styles and urban development doctrines but also links them into wider US cultural contexts such as modernity and consumerism and demonstrates how these cultural contexts are in part imported with the adoption of architectures and urban planning and in part modified in distinctly local ways driven by historical and local conditions. Pam Peters' 'Australian English', in the best of the compare and contrast articles, demonstrates the difficulty in attempting to fix the origins of linguistic forms and usage and that the mobility of language is such that no usage can be determined as permanently and irretrievably American – linguistically or culturally. The point which Peters is signposting and which Mackenzie Wark takes up is that cultural objects and practices take meaning from not only the contexts of their creation but of their deployment and use – that is they are not simply material manifestations of a foreign culture which, once they reach critical mass, extinguish local culture. Mackenzie Wark suggests that Americans themselves are not even as Americanized as we tend to think. He suggests that the dominant culture may well dominate but not to the extent that all cultural practices and objects are completely saturated with it.

Bell and Bell's response to this complex field of cultural interaction and the issue of the status of the cultural object, institution or practice itself, is to propose that cultural exchange is a process of negotiation. Within such a negotiation any American cultural import will be taken up in a uniquely local manner which precludes any sense of out and out 'influence'. Indeed the general consensus is that 'Australian' culture is at least in part articulated through its relations to external cultures. The difficulty with this is that while it does offer a more complex understanding of the processes of cultural formation and interactions it offers no means of gauging the impact or outcome of such negotiations which in many instances are implicated in cultural change which is not always beneficial. While it may seem obvious that it is through the process of negotiation with external cultural artefacts and practices that indigenous national identity is articulated, caution must be taken not to assume that such things are rendered innocuous or domesticated simply by becoming localized. Clearly they still require critical scrutiny and evaluation.

Dianne Currier is a PhD candidate at Monash's Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies.

Heroic and Diabolical

Simon Ryan

Tim Flannery: *The Explorers* (Text Publishing, $24.95).

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN a steady appetite in Australia for tales of exploration. Even when the explorers themselves have been unfashionable, their exploits have found their way into various anthologies and collections, reprints and facsimile editions. The introductions to these can form a map of the way attitudes to exploration have changed. As Tim Flannery notes in the introduction to his anthology, *The Explorers*, exploration writing is always subject to those with political and social agendas. The triumphalist and rather boring presentation of exploration as the incursion of heroic coloured lines upon a tabula rasa, though still alive in primary school teaching, has been challenged by more critical responses. Some, like Edgar Beale's *The Chipped Idol: A Study of Charles Sturt, Explorer* (1979) work to reduce the myth of the heroic explorer to human proportions. More recent work such as Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* and my own *The Cartographic Eye* have analyzed the structure of language and the way that the land and inhabitants are depicted in the writings of explorers.

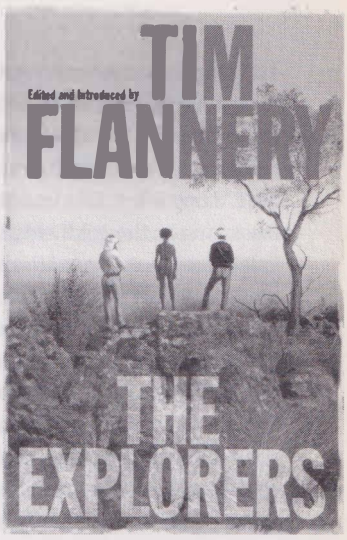
Flannery and Text are doing us a service in making available writing that is rare, or expensive or both. But it does join with a number of anthologies which do much the same. Jan Bassett's OUP anthology, *Great Explorations*, was published in 1997. Why the sudden popularity of exploration narratives? I don't think we need to rush to a conclusion that the present conservative mood has made people reach once again for cultural founding figures. Rather, in the exhausted wash-up of the cultural wars of the eighties and nineties there is an opportunity to see explorers as both heroic and diabolical figures, and to conceive of their interactions with indigenes as patterned through a unique

combination of misunderstanding, dependence and mutual derision. Flannery has not brought out some of the complexities of this interaction, and it is one of the weaknesses of the book that the general introduction does not connect with the more recent work done in this area. I do not want to make an argument in favour of overly long introductions to anthologies, but Flannery's somewhat meagre fifteen pages of introduction, in the context of a nearly four-hundred-page anthology, threatens to construct 'Flannery' (given his frequent media appearances and popular editions of other colonial works) as a kind of brand name, attachable to a number of products.

Yet, for all this ungenerous carping, *The Explorers* is marked by a fine choice of material. There is much reportage by those who are usually excluded from the exploration canon, and even those familiar names have selections that are far from dull. The choices do not illustrate the occasional monotony and overly detailed nature of the exploration journal; they have been chosen for their narrative excitement rather than representativeness and are a pleasure to read. The Georg Neumayer excerpt concerning his climb to the summit of Kosciusko is a lesson in how even the relatively low altitude areas in Australia can prove suddenly deadly. The famous account by Jackey Jackey of Edmund Kennedy's death is also a reminder of the fatal incidents which were a part of an explorer's life; the lesser known death of an Aborigine in the encounter is also a reminder of the deadly effects exploration had on indigenes.

There are lighter moments to be found. One of the explorers was Gerard Kreft who, as the introduction to his piece recalls, was appointed director of the Australian Museum only to be overtaken by accusations that he was profiting from the sale of risqué postcards. Refusing to leave quietly he was carried out still seated in his chair and dumped in the street. 'Discoverer' of the now extinct pig-footed bandicoot, he unfortunately grew so hungry he ate his specimens of the creature: "I am sorry to confess", he wrote, "that my appetite more than once over-ruled my love for science". It is to the advantage of this collection that, as a palaeontologist, Flannery is aware of the too often ignored writings of naturalist travellers. Along with Kreft we find Carl Lumholtz and Hedley Finlayson, both of whom made important recordings of rare animals.

The selections from better known explorers are well made. Exploration journals often have one moment when the fate of the expedition and the lives of explorers are in the balance; the most famous of these moments is recorded in Charles Sturt's *Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia*, where Sturt is about to fire upon a large group of Aborigines who object to his travelling through their country. At the very last moment, the Aboriginal guides who have been helping Sturt's party intervene and soon the groups are interacting with mutual curiosity and occasional laughter. The extract demonstrates that the line between violent and productive contact may be very thin.



The collection is not without its flaws; the choice of modernized punctuation can interfere with the rhythms of the original prose, and it is a pity that some of the wonderful art work of exploration could not have been included. The anthology is successful, however, in widening the canon of explorers. Naturalists, female travellers, Europeans and Tongan travellers in Australia have been included. The celebration of British explorers and the denigration of others such as Leichhardt or Lhotsky was a strategy in the construction of Australia as primarily a British nation; anthologies like *The Explorers* help us towards a more complete understanding of the range of people who came to this continent to explore.

Simon Ryan teaches at the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane.

Spicy Goldfields

Patsy Poppenbeek

Robyn Annear: *Nothing but Gold: the Diggers of 1852* (Text Publishing, $24.95).

My first sight of Robyn Annear was riveting. Prior to addressing an audience of keen embryonic writers at a writing festival, she walked in pushing a pram. I panicked. Was this the enticingly wicked writer of *Bearbrass*, described as an ex-typist presently living with somebody else's husband? Would I have to mind the baby? A closer look showed the pram was adorned with tinsel, and the 'baby' was the gestation stages of her latest work, *Nothing but Gold*. Like her pram, this book is practical, quirky and fun.

Two pieces of Annear's family history serve as bookends. In 1852 Selina, married to feckless Ben, sits down on a log in the ugliness of a goldfield, gazes at the bright young grass mocking her desolation, and mutters, "I don't see any gold here." Long after, Ben deserted her for a girl who grew up fossicking on the goldfields: she once traded a nugget for a kaleidoscope. As Annear says, they were "alike ... they always saw gold ... Selina was different. She lit on the diggings determined that she'd see no gold. And she never did." Emblematic of the effects the gold rush had for those generations, these stories are also emblematic of their descendant's ability to select and arrange the significant anecdote so that her book crackles with life.

Like a filmmaker, she uses long, medium and close-up views, plus commentary by a colloquial kind of Jane Austen. Thus she comments, "There was no gold in Victoria until somebody discovered it. True, people had been finding gold in the Port Phillip District ... for years." And of one of poor La Trobe's agitated dispatches about imminent anarchy, she says, "You've got to admire the man's grammatical pluck – in the teeth of chaos, he still remembered not to split his infinitives." She takes us from the politically-inspired 'discoveries' themselves to the newspaper reports designed to impress those at Home, to a close-up of a letter from a Victorian digger which was read by everyone at a Sheffield factory the day it arrived so that it was worn through at the creases.

We travel by ships on which, Annear says, "The more abstemious passengers must have felt like captives on an end-of-season footy trip." There is a survey of crowded gold-rush Melbourne and amazing Canvas Town; and we watch several travellers to the goldfields coping with mud, bushrangers, being overturned, and Learning to Be Diggers. We learn everything anyone might want to know about the goldfields: their looks, sounds and smells; how people dressed, cooked, worked, and amused themselves. And what they (probably) used for toilets.

Annear also considers what the gold rush meant to the diggers: a chance for independence, a taste of freedom and adventure, a rite of passage. As for why Eureka happened when it did and why it was not the equivalent of, say, the Boston Tea Party, she suggests that most diggers "while jealous of their own rights and liberty, were not over-keen on joining movements – not just then".

The lack of endnotes contributes to the narrative pace, but some quotations are so evocative it's somewhat annoying not be able to identify the source. It would also have been nice if the budget had stretched to a hard cover and a few more illustrations; but these are minor blemishes in a readable and poignant history.

Patsy Poppenbeek has an MA in Australian Literature, organizes the Castlemaine Writers' Festival, teaches and is a student in the Creative Media Department, RMIT.

Judicious Editions

Frances de Groen

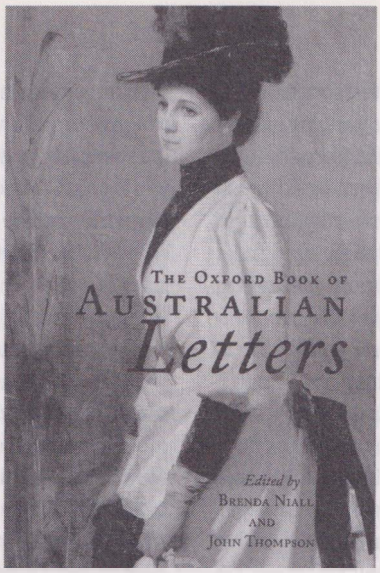
Brenda Niall & John Thompson (eds): *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters* (OUP, $39.95).

Sally Graham (ed.): *Man About Town: The Letters of James Graham, Victorian Entrepreneur 1854–1864* (MUP, $29.95).

JUDICIOUSLY EDITED BY Brenda Niall and John Thompson, *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters* capitalizes on the current enthusiasm for non-fictional genres which embraces the essay and the memoir as well as the letter. Two hundred items chronologically sequenced and often pointedly juxtaposed have been intelligently quarried from more than two hundred years of 'Australian' experience. The resulting anthology orchestrates a multitude of discourses about the meanings of some of the central themes of our history: European invasion of Aboriginal land; white settlement and Aboriginal dispossession; empire and nation; exile and home. Local historical concerns, however, are unified (and possibly obscured) by 'universal' literary themes of desire, death, artistic expression and the act of letter writing itself. George Meredith's passionate avowal of devotion to his wife in 1826, for example, is contextualized by a host of other letters expressing love: the poignant farewell in 1846 of convict Denis Prendergast, under sentence of death, to his homosexual partner; delegate Patrick McMahon Glynn's self-consciously witty proposal dashed off from the Federation Convention to his fiancee; Herbert Brookes' agonized address to his recently deceased and much missed "Angel Wife"; Aboriginal Minnie Koran's powerful 1902 declaration of loyalty to her Pacific Islander husband, from whom she had been forcibly separated; the divergent but complementary expressions of affection of Alexandra and Paul Hasluck (later Governor-General of Australia) during their first separation as a married couple.

The literary values ("themes", "charm", "art", "element of theatre", "tone") which inform the editors' selection make for pleasurable, often piquant reading. A variety of epistolary styles (casual, formal, passionate, official, self-

consciously rhetorical, unbuttoned) are also included, as well as a diversity of occasions: the 'convict' letter home (Mary Reiby); the letter despatched in a bottle to an unknown recipient (Wilson Tong); the letter-to-the-editor ("It's Time" by the "Undersigned", 23 November 1972); the historically significant letter (Governor-General Sir John Kerr to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on 11 November 1975); the letter from the front (John Nisbet); the letter to Santa (Paddy [Patrick] White); the letter of homage (Brett Whitely to Lloyd Rees); the suicide letter (V. Gordon Childe); the protest letter (Martin Boyd).



Opening with a vivid report of his voyage to New Holland from Captain James Cook, the anthology closes with an endearing "irrational[ly] tribal" fax from David Williamson to Peter Carey and an e-mail exchange between Nick Jose and Mandy Martin which, despite her delayed response, conveys something of the immediacy of on-line communication.

In the intervening pages we encounter an array of correspondents from colonial officials and convicts, explorers and settlers, squatters and Aborigines, serving soldiers and the women they left behind, performing artists, writers, painters and politicians. On closer scrutiny, however, it is apparent that most of the two hundred letters are written by members of the educated middle classes – professionals in a range of fields, but generally important public figures, often from the literary world. This is particularly so for the twentieth century, the latter years of which are represented predominantly by well-known authors.

Scribes with "thumbnail dipped in tar" are scarce. Only fifteen correspondents are drawn from the 'lower orders'. Likewise, although many key episodes in Australia's history earn a mention, there are no letters highlighting the impact of the Great Depression on ordinary folk (or on the wealthy for that matter). Where letters penned by the uneducated (e.g. M.M. Walsh to Margaret Forrest) are sandwiched between accomplished literary contributions, 'condescension' and 'tokenism' may be unintended effects. The "personal oblique history of Australia" which emerges in this anthology is thus civilized, humane and genteel but also conservative and 'bourgeois'. There are few casually humorous letters and none which express 'uncivilized' or 'larrikin' sentiments, apart from a few that imply failings in the surrounding culture – from a destitute woman, for example and from Aborigines pleading to keep their children or to remain on their land.

The cover of the *Oxford Book of Australian Letters*, which features Tom Roberts' elegant 'An Australian Native: Portrait of a Lady' prepares us for the genteel world within, a world (and world view) eloquently shared by *A Man About Town: The Letters of James Graham, Victorian Entrepreneur 1854–1864*. This latter compilation focuses on profits and losses, rents, mortgages, trusts and ledgers. Although of interest to the economic historian, it captivated me only in the glimpses it offered of compelling tales beneath the polite surface: the efforts of a school ma'am to keep afloat in the face of Graham's demands for rent and the demise of a Scottish doctor's alcoholic son, consigned to the colonies – and to Graham's supervision of his remittance – to save embarrassment at home.

Frances de Groen teaches at UWS Macarthur and is the author of Xavier Herbert: A Biography *(UQP, 1998). She is editing a selection of the letters of Xavier Herbert for UQP with Laurie Hergenhan.*

The Righting of the ALP

John Tully & Tony Dewberry

Gary Jungwirth (ed.): *Labor Essays 1998: New Visions for Government* (Pluto Press, $20). [Includes essays by Kim Beazley, Mary Delahunty, Gareth Evans, Mark Latham etc.]

Lindsay Tanner: *Open Australia* (Pluto Press, $24.95).

AUSTRALIA'S MANAGERIAL ELITES show an easy capacity to bear the costs of globalization because it is not they who suffer the insecurity, fear and declining living standards that it brings to those at the bottom of the heap. As the old saying goes, nothing is easier to bear than someone else's pain. This truism is borne out in both of these books where the leading lights of the ALP show the same indifference to the consequences of globalization as any other group in our ruling elites.

What gives these books any point of interest is that they are the product of politicians leading one of Australia's major

parties during its first taste of opposition after thirteen years in government. They both provide a good overview of how the ALP assesses its role in government and chances in opposition. They also, perhaps depressingly, show what we may expect from any future Labor government.

The reviewers feel they should reveal their hand from the start, and make clear our perspective in reviewing these books. We are the co-editors of *Progressive Labour*, a newspaper published by the Victorian branch of the Progressive Labour Party. The PLP is a small left-wing party that believes that the union movement is no longer well-served by its historic links with the ALP; we support the formation of a new labour party that would allow the most progressive elements in the labour movement to act as the centre of gravity in a broader political alliance of 'minor' parties committed to social justice.

Readers seeking "new visions for government" will be disappointed by Gary Jungwirth's book of Fabian essays. Although Jungwirth genuflects towards "democratic socialism" there is none of it in this uninspiring collection of essays in which a collection of Labor 'heavies' offer the same dreary old pragmatism of the Hawke and Keating years, interspersed with some self-congratulatory rhetoric about their "capacity to renew" themselves.

There is no serious analysis of where Labor failed its working-class base in its thirteen years of federal rule. In fact Gareth Evans seems to believe that it was *us* who got it wrong when he smugly opines that the ALP "almost certainly got ahead of the wider community". One wonders what planet Evans lives on. In the nearest thing to self-criticism in the book, he admits grudgingly that under the ALP the "upper income groups by and large did well in Australia" whilst "wage incomes grew slowly". In fact real wages actually fell while the government failed, by and large, to deliver on its Accord promises of an increased social wage to offset this decline.

At the same time there was a massive transfer of income from wages to capital. The wealth of the rich and very rich 'mates' grew astronomically. At the start of Hawke's reign in 1983 the top ten richest families were worth $1,255 million. In 1998 they were worth $15,000 million. Paul Keating might have believed his own rhetoric about Australia being "an egalitarian society" but it's unlikely that Kerry Packer was fooled. His wealth grew over the same period from $100 million to $5,200 million and is now around $6,500 million. Wages made up 63.5 per cent of GDP in 1974–75 and only 51.1 per cent in 1988–89. Yet, says Evans complacently, the problem was that wage earners found it "difficult to *think* of themselves as better off". (Emphasis in the original.)

Nor is there any discussion of the disastrous haemorrhage of union membership over the years of the Accord. (Union membership is now less than 30 per cent of the workforce.) While the reasons for this are complex, 'wage restraint' and the creation of faceless super-unions did not help – all of this overseen by Labor governments and a layer of opportunist union officials for whom a party card was *de rigueur*.

So, if there is no admission that the Hawke and Keating governments massively failed working-class people, what can we expect from a future ALP government? Whilst almost anything would be better than the Howard crew, we should be under no illusions about what to expect from Beazley's.

Up-and-coming guru Mark Latham is so sharp he might cut himself. Despite all the evidence that Australia is one of the most unequal, class-ridden societies in the developed world, he seems to have given up on any vision of the redistribution of wealth. Latham thinks that public sector deregulation and winding back state intervention was a good thing, despite all the evidence that it has helped create misery for workers and the poor – and a profit bonanza for the rich.

According to Latham the problem is no longer one of class in the old sense. We should understand that society is divided between the "information-rich" and the "information-poor" and strive for the "socialization of knowledge rather than the public ownership of the means of production". For sheer bloody meaninglessness, this phrase must rank with Jack Lang's demagogic and nebulous slogan of "socialization of the means of credit"!

There is much talk about the blight of unemployment, some of it no doubt heartfelt, but there is deafening silence on positive policies such as the thirty-five-hour week. Jennie George doesn't raise it in her essay, despite the fact that it has been ACTU policy since 1957, and that a number of European social democratic governments are committed to legislating for it. For Beazley and Co, it's back to the Band-Aids.

The model for 'renewal', quite consciously, is British 'New Labour'. John Pandazopoulos and Steve Booth provide us with a completely uncritical appraisal of the Blair phenomenon. They tell us nothing about its right-wing economic policies, its pro-capitalist industrial relations policy (exemplified by Blair's abandonment of the Liverpool dockers), its hawkish foreign policy, nor anything of the crushing of what was once a fairly vigorous internal party democracy.

These writers come across as the well-heeled functionaries that they are, remote from the concerns of working-

class people. We should not forget that a number of them pulled out from speaking at a recent Fabian conference in Warburton because they could not book their flights up to the public purse! The pioneers of the labour movement fought and suffered for a better future, and would have *walked* to Warburton if need be. But these writers have no fire in their bellies to drive them on.

Tanner's book, *Open Australia*, will appeal to those involved in policy formation for professional or academic reasons, but even a generous reviewer would have to concede the style is very dry. As with the *Labor Essays*, it is no critical revision of the Hawke–Keating governments.

Open Australia contains some defence of traditional social democratic ideas on a strong role for the state in health, education, and infrastructure provision. However this defence is undermined by Tanner's failure to intellectually confront economic rationalism. At several points he claims that economic rationalism is the understandable and necessary response to the globalizing economy. And criticism of globalization is presented as right-wing populism or nostalgia for the days of "high tariffs and pork barrel politics".

For Tanner, many privatizations are "a result of the combined pressure of new capital requirements, government budgetary needs, intensified international competition ... and new technologies breaking down natural boundaries between public and private provision". Tanner provides no intellectual foothold here for political opposition to privatization. This is precisely how the business press justifies privatization – as a rational response to new economic demands. If you accept this logic, why should the health and education sectors survive as public enterprises?

There is no suggestion in *Open Australia* that the mad rush to privatization is part of the trend to highly speculative mergers and acquisitions – essentially asset-stripping and job-destroying operations carried out with borrowed money. Instead of productive investment, large corporations choose speculation in existing assets, and acquire utilities built up over many decades under the protection of public ownership. Many of these public utilities were previously able to re-invest for growth precisely because they were not paying out dividends to passive shareholders.

As with Latham's essay, Tanner exhibits a disturbing retreat on both the role of government and the importance of class in Australian politics. For Tanner government's role is "more about facilitating between different interests and less about imposing the will of the majority on an unwilling minority". Carried to its logical conclusion this idea is the death of the democratic ideal of government of the people, by the people and for the people.

As for class, according to Tanner, "The relative simplicity of the divide between capital and labour has been blurred by the leisure and information society". He uses figures on the growing rate of participation in the share market to argue that "Robber baron capitalists are a dwindling breed". This ignores the fact, which Tanner no doubt knows full well, that the spread of share ownership and the growth of investment by superannuation funds still leaves huge corporations in the hands of the super-rich who need own only relatively small concentrations of shares to exert their control.

Although Tanner is a leader of the ALP left he seems to have given up on any form of socialism as the basis for his politics. There is a complete retreat from the basic socialist ideal of common ownership. In a masterful understatement he tells us that "Extending public ownership is unlikely to be at the forefront of any future Labor government's agenda".

It is somewhat surprising then, that he favours keeping Labor's Socialist Objective, which commits Labor to socialize the means of production and exchange to the extent necessary to eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features. But Tanner does not want the Socialist Objective as a pledge of future action against corporate power. Rather he wants it as "an expression of Labor's soul, its commitment to timeless values of social equity and community". One suspects the Socialist Objective is fated to be nothing better than one more dingy battle standard in the eternal clash between the ALP's 'left' and 'right'.

The last three chapters are the more thoughtful and interesting and deal with concrete policy issues on education and training, greening government and reforming political representation.

The chapter 'Greening Government' is good as far as it goes, but is mainly confined to the issue of water conservation, an important issue for our dry continent, but a relatively safe one. The chapter would have been better if it had addressed issues like greenhouse gas emissions, uranium mining, and logging; these are issues where we see a clash between powerful vested interests and the green movement. Given Tanner's prominent role in the ALP left, it would be interesting to know where he is positioned in this conflict.

Tanner's ideas on reforming the Labor Party itself seem very positive, and the kind of party he describes would be an attractive proposition. He believes that the collegiate decision-making prevalent in the ALP is inherently undemocratic and authoritarian and he calls for giving the

membership the power to vote directly on policy issues and some leadership positions. He also supports party branches formed on the basis of common interest, as well as the conventional electoral residential branches.

One doubts that Tanner has thought through the political consequences of the internal reforms he outlines. Breaking the factional stalemate, broadening the range of opinion within the party and increasing the effective powers of the membership would no doubt create a more attractive party. But it's unlikely that such a party would meekly suffer compromises and sell-outs like those of the Hawke–Keating years.

The Australian labour movement is at its lowest ebb in one hundred years and these books will do little to help turn the tide. Populist right-wing demagogues such as Jeff Kennett are on a roll; treating the people with contempt, secure in the knowledge that no matter how authoritarian, corrupt and arrogant they are, the ALP remains pathetically ineffectual. Australian workers, the poor and the increasingly pinched middle classes deserve better than this. They need, in fact, a new party of labour that will stand firm in defence of their interests, no matter how "cowards flinch and traitors sneer".

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Who Punched Dinny O'Hearn on the Nose?

Jack Hibberd

Veronica Kelly: *The Theatre of Louis Nowra* (Currency Press, $24.95).

LOUIS NOWRA EMERGED as a card-carrying playwright in 1977 with a production of *Inner Voices*, directed by John Bell, and showcasing a new star, the actor Tony Sheldon, whose sustained mainly mute hysteria said a lot for his stamina, if not much else.

After seeing *Inner Voices* at Nimrod I got into a tough argument with my good friend Ken Horler, then a director of Nimrod and now a judge. I attacked by asserting that the play leaked with the very essence of melodrama. Horler counterattacked with forensic zeal. I insisted the play be compared to *Kaspar Hauser*. In the end it boiled down to definitions of melodrama.

Because of this pedantry I was unable to add that *Inner Voices* as well owed a lot to pantomime. That night I defined melodrama as a pseudoaesthetic in which the high degree of emotional heat required, elaborated, by the language, or the production, is egregiously out of proportion to the engineering of the action. I still would.

Inner Voices displays most of the shortcomings and few of the virtues of Nowra's dramaturgy. The virtues are more evident in recent work, such as *The Incorruptible*.

On re-reading the text I found the same traits: melodrama, pantomime, campery, rhetoric, kitsch, the gothic, dress-ups, and an unstable ear for dialogue.

Now I have nothing against rhetoric (being a victim of it), but in the context of all those other traits, the writing screams out for understatement. When Nowra does abridge, that instability of ear tends to abate.

The fifty-year-old Nowra has written some thirty-three stage plays, on top of radio plays, telescripts, screenplays, novels and short stories. His devotees must be desperate for a volume of poetry, to finally flesh out a prolific and astonishingly versatile career.

In *The Theatre of Louis Nowra* Veronica Kelly latches on to, among other things, the camp, kitsch and gothic. While I don't have many problems with the last (being a victim of it), I feel that kitsch is simply kitsch, and, while it can be deployed dramatically, comically, that's the limit. As well Kelly argues for camp as an aesthetic. For me it remains affected, ornate, adventitious, oblique, craven: a style incapable of sustaining serious content.

Nowra specializes in deformity and the grotesque. His plays are stuccoed with characters who are mute, blind, fat, genitally challenged, spastic, one-legged, club-footed, dwarfed, and chock-a-block with metal.

Some of these deficients are presented as visionaries, and Kelly thinks they exert a compelling effect on audiences. I've never found that. They stand as end-points, static states – we don't see any dramatic process at work: indeed, they get in the way of theatrical locomotion.

In a corollary of this, many of Nowra's plays insist that an audience plumb a mystery (a character, a tribe, a whole play). This makes theatre-lovers into sleuths or riddle-diviners, and diverts them away from their true theatrical purpose: to re-act, to complete and at the same time re-charge that arc of electricity between actor and audience, so that it becomes an arc of ritual and imaginative meanings.

Many years ago in a published lecture, Louis Nowra praised *A Stretch of the Imagination* as by far my best play, then went on to denounce the monodrama as constitutionally non-dramatic! I raise this here, not out of acrimony, but to make the point that there is something awry in

Nowra's understanding of theatre, and there is something awry about actor-audience dynamics among his theatre.

The actor-audience relationship and mutually active contiguity is the defining essential in theatre, not, as Nowra contends, conflict between characters on stage. A concentration on this deflects energies sideways on stage (encouraging the fourth wall), away from out frontally to the audience. Because of this conviction, he over-works the action verbally: hence the prevalence of melodrama.

Radiance, especially in its rendition of black themes, stands up as one of Nowra's finer works, but again it trips up on melodrama. Kelly argues that "the retrospective exposition and culminatory revelations [are] appropriate to the gradual unfolding of family secrets." But this is a somewhat sudden unfolding right on the end, and as such is a classic device of modern melodrama – seen at its most dreadful in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in much of Williamson, and Michael Gow's lugubrious *Away*. These are specious shock tactics to wring tears out of parched audiences.

Veronica Kelly, in the context of *Cosi*, sees the characters' self-construction and renovation as a signature of Nowra. Even if this were true, does it convince and compel? Certainly not in *Cosi*, a drama severely damaged by inapt choice of vehicle. Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* would have been more suitable than the grander *Mozart and Da Ponte*. In the Brecht, the chap who sacrifices himself for the overall good could have been seen as a typical psychiatric patient.

Kelly's book is clotted up with the weathered jargon of undesconstructed postmodernism: signifiers, discourses, narratives, hybridization, decodings, abjection, bricolage, and so on. As such I suspect that she has nailed Nowra's rather more concrete and set oeuvre to the revolving mirror-stage of contemporary literary theory.

Veronica Kelly is not the most polished prose stylist, and this, along with the cultural studies brogue, did not make the book easy to read. As well, she lapses at times into the trap of Pavlovian Melbourne-bashing: for example, the absolutely false platitude that Melbourne arts is dominated by a 'blokey' aggro un-PC mafia. After all, who punched the late Dinny O'Hearn on the nose? Louis Nowra, a supposed victim of this culturally mendacious tripe.

I'm afraid we shall have to wait for a more balanced, legible, critical and harmoniously responsive book on Louis Nowra.

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Incandescent Rage

Melissa Lucashenko

Christos Tsiolkas: *The Jesus Man* (Vintage, $17.95).

TWO QUESTIONS. First, is Christos Tsiolkas's novel any good? And, second, what about race? Or more specifically, what about Us? How far into Aboriginal territory has the ... invader? Migloo? whitefella? ... How far has the stranger ventured, and why, and with what result? (You can see how quickly my uncertainties multiply.)

I picked up *The Jesus Man* ready for my daily recolonizing, only to discover that this is a very fine book indeed. It is also an extremely ambitious one. Tsiolkas gives us three brothers in his panorama of modern heathen Australia: Dominic, Tommy and Lou Stefano. Not exactly Greek, not really Italian, not even, in the final analysis, quite European, their turbulent lives unwind beneath the burden of an older, more sinister family legacy. Black crows mark the family's days. There may be laughter here but there are no innocents, not in these generations anyway.

The book opens on the day of Whitlam's sacking; Maria Stefano, the boys' mother, is incandescent with rage. At school there is uproar, and Dominic throws his history book at the map on the back wall:

> It crashed into the solemn face of the Queen. The snakeskin withered to dust and the glass fell as confetti to the floor.

That night the Stefano family gathers, not for a wedding, but for blood:

> Whitlam was on the television, camera in his face, a crowd before him.
> – Look what a giant he is, his mother praised.
> – What's he saying? Yiota asked.
> His mother translated. That only God can save that slut's crawling slave, that bastard John Kerr, because the people are going to hang the animal.

But there is, of course, no hanging, and no God either, to save Whitlam. The three brothers are on their own. Desperate for money, Dominic soon sells himself to a bigoted old widower at twenty bucks a pop ("You've got to be careful of poofters, son, they'll corrupt you."). His girlfriend has the abortion she needs, and a crow dances in the air above him. Exit Dominic.

Tommy Stefano is the middle brother, terrifying in his

viciousness and self-loathing. It is 1990, and capitalism has thrown him away:

> The world was celebrating. The Wall had fallen, apartheid was ending, and the future was free of nuclear menace. But Tommy was still unemployed.

Addicted to pornography and violent fantasy, fat Tommy slides away from the white-collar world into a smaller and smaller reality, until at last he cannot exist beyond the sound of his television.

Isolated from the family, and in his madness ditching his girlfriend Soo-Ling, Tommy has a revelation in the porn shop which is his second home. The grossly overweight street evangelist he sees leafing through the magazines is himself, his double, his brother, his future. Only he's not. He's Aboriginal Neil, and when Tommy catches the Jesus Man committing incest with his brother, he attacks in disgust. Neil is left bloodied, damaged goods. It's not enough. Tommy is still consumed with post-industrial hate:

> He wanted to kill them all, every last one of them, every person on the planet.

When Tommy, hazed with savage porn and self-righteousness, finally does kill, it is in a sensational lacerating scene which leaves him dead too. The family is shattered, Maria unable to believe that her son, a suicide, is denied a proper funeral. More crows, and it is up to Lou to carry the can.

Poor Lou is obsessed with Soo-Ling, but it is only her Eurasian daughter, his niece Betty, whom he's really allowed to love. Anti-racist, radical and sexually ambiguous, Lou lusts after a fellow student as he writes his thesis, dances and drugs his brother's shame away. He can't escape. Travels to Greece – few answers there. There are more clues in Perth, where the family curse is half-revealed. Did his great-grandfather kill his Aboriginal wife before spawning a Greek dynasty? There is no clear answer for that one, either, Lou's aunt tells him:

> There is no reason for these memories to keep singing in our blood... I'm not Italian. I'm an Australian woman. I have no time for these stories of curses and revenge, I don't listen when the wogs tell me, I don't listen when the blacks go on about it. She finishes her wine. There are things that belong to the past, Louie. You don't need to understand them.

Lou cries, does need to understand, does need to know why his brother died. Goes to the ancestor's grave, but his proffered candles won't light:

> The crows are watching me.
> – Fuck you, I whisper. I am not on any side.

The curse is unresolved. Lou returns to the East Coast, to the anti-racist rallies, to compromise solutions with bigots in pubs, and to his hopeless adoration of Soo-Ling. He is an excellent uncle, but a pathetic suitor. Asia doesn't want him:

> – I love you Soo-Ling.
> Her voice was exhausted.
> – You're a child, you don't know what love is.
> I hate her. Her age, her experience, her refusal to believe my sincerity.
> – I love you Soo-Ling.
> She looks at me.
> – I don't love you.
> The sky is black with crows.

So: Soo-Ling, burnt before, can't love the white man. He might, perhaps, get to love the mixed-race Australian child who is part of his own blood. An Aboriginal man is murdered at the hands of the white. The Aboriginal woman is marginal (in Perth), but cries with the white woman for a lost sisterhood. And the creature whom Tsiolkas can only (delightfully) call The Racist is to be fought in a confusion of morals and meanings, but fought all the same. (Discuss: what did the Black American poet mean when she said "War is not to be talked about and rerun, war is to be fought and won?")

According to David Marr's biography, when Patrick White wrote *Riders In The Chariot*, he spent a long arduous time researching the Jewish character. The book was published, took its place in a long line of distinguished novels, and White went on to win the Nobel. Let us pause, though, for one small discordant footnote – who but an Anglo-Australian novelist could have an Aborigine as a central character and never have spoken to an Aboriginal person?

On the evidence of *The Jesus Man*, Christos Tsiolkas has manifestly not only spoken with but listened to, argued with, fed and probably fucked with Aboriginal people. (Come to think of it, maybe White... but no.) Does this qualify Tsiolkas to write Aboriginal voices? No, it doesn't, but the arguments are not that simple, either.

I was captivated by this tremendous book, by the strength of its people who became utterly real to me as I read. Then I reached page 186, Neil and Darren entered,

and my heart sank. It was only fifty or sixty pages later, when I realized that Tsiolkas had backed off, had not made the Koories major characters after all, that I could resume reading in safety. Ironically, it is because they are merely symbolic that these characters don't ruin what is an otherwise fine and seamlessly told story.

There are some technical problems. The middle pages of my copy are bracketed and annoted with lots of 'NO's. No Aboriginal person I've met would ever smile upon meeting the white man who'd recently bashed their brother, nor fail to recognize him just days later. Nor would any of my brothers laugh at being called an "Abo cunt" in public, even in jest (and neither would I). And the Aboriginal horror of incest is not well served by Tsiolkas's casual portrayal. But these flaws are not the problem in outsiders portraying Aboriginal characters. The problem is the larger one – how are others in Australia to know us, when we don't speak for ourselves? Who will they in fact see, thinking that they then know Aboriginal people? And from what wells of racism and mocking stereotypes are the non-Aboriginal images reproduced? There has been genocide attempted here, and now who is writing that story?

Yes, I can hear you screeching 'free speech' as I write. There is no answer that will satisfy you. Simply, for most Aboriginal people free speech is a nonsense. Not because this society silences us, though it often does. But because all Indigenous rights – rights to speak, to learn, even to exist as a human in society – are earned, not given. Responsibility is an intricate and interwoven web of relationships, which whites, and their free speech, stand outside of. You write in one world, and we live in another, or in both.

Tsiolkas's story is wise, tragic and compelling. His insights into modern Australia are powerful and rich. For their flaws, his Aboriginal characters give weight to a laudable vision of what we might all become. I don't need to read myself through white eyes, even if you do. I worry what permissions each instance gives to the Hansons and their literary handmaidens. I already feel myself drowning in a sea of whiteness without going looking for more analysis, more staring. But if there must (and I remain to be convinced) be white stories which are, amongst other things, about Us, then at least let them be like this one. Highly recommended.

Melissa Lucashenko is a Murri writer from Brisbane. Her first book, Steam Pigs, *won the Nita Dobbie Award for women's fiction, and was short-listed for the NSW Premier's Literary Award.* Hard Yards *will be published in September by UQP.*

Spin Demons

Bill Harley

Hugh Mackay: *The Spin* (Pan Macmillan, $16.95).

HUGH MACKAY MAY BE an accomplished social researcher, broadcaster and columnist, but *The Spin* fails to demonstrate a capacity for sophisticated analysis of politics. Mackay's message is neither complex nor novel: politics is dirty, crucial to those involved, but largely irrelevant to ordinary people. Delivered in a homiletical tone, the message is woven into the story of an electoral battle in an Australian country town. Each chapter, laden with shocking tales of the unscrupulous tactics of party spin doctors, ambitious candidates and local business people, concludes with a vignette reminding us of the suffering or triumphs of ordinary people (a homeless man, a victim of domestic violence, a depressed mother, and so on) are largely independent of who wins the seat.

In making this rather laboured point Mackay ultimately falls into the same trap as the spin doctors whom he demonizes. He restricts his definition of politics to the "machine politics" of electioneering and ignores the fact that the outcomes of elections really do make a difference to ordinary people's lives. Are we to believe that Wilbur, a homeless man living in a cardboard box and oblivious to the political machinations in his town, will not notice the difference when he's made to work for his welfare payments under a Coalition government?

If the book fails as a critique of Australian politics, is it nonetheless a good read? *The Spin* has at least some of the hallmarks of a best-seller: sex, deceit, a simple predictable plot and moralizing aplenty. The dialogue is trying. A good, although far from egregious, example is advice from Polly, a Labor apparatchik, to Martina, the candidate:

> You know what Machiavelli said, Marty? . . . he sure knew his politics. He said that once good and decent people enter politics, determined to change the world for the better, the first thing they have to learn is how not to be good.

The verdict? If you want to understand the machinations of electoral politics, read a political science textbook or a retired politician's autobiography. If you prefer novels reread *Power Without Glory*.

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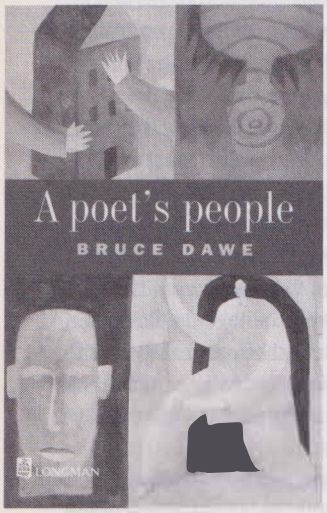
Bruce Dawe's Parallel Universe

Ken Goodwin

Bruce Dawe: *A Poet's People* (Longman, $16.95).

A POET'S PEOPLE IS VIRTUALLY an alternative *Sometimes Gladness*. It is a retrospective collection of about a hundred poems not in the current (fifth) edition of Dawe's *Sometimes Gladness*, together with about twenty new uncollected poems.

Some critics have professed to find the successive editions of *Sometimes Gladness* a rather odd way of providing a retrospective view of Bruce Dawe's poetic output. It is true that in Australia there is not much of a tradition of poets producing a series of volumes of selected (or partially culled collected) poems during their lifetime – at least not up to the 1970s – but it is the standard procedure of many British and American poets during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Walt Whitman, Matthew Arnold, Robert Graves and Robert Frost are just a random selection of poets who added to and subtracted from previous selected or collected volumes. In Whitman's case there are well over a hundred poems and passages either not collected into *Leaves of Grass* or excluded from one edition or another.



In the case of Dawe's *A Poet's People* two obvious questions arise: Is this collection a set of also-rans, without either consistent quality or the presence of poems equal to the many that have lodged in the reader's consciousness from *Sometimes Gladness* or the shorter (and older) selected volume, *Condolences of the Season*? Secondly, and irrespective of the answer to the first question, does this provide a different view of what sort of poet Dawe is?

There's no doubt that some readers will miss their old favourites – 'The Flashing of Badges', 'Condolences of the Season', 'A Victorian Hangman Tells his Love', 'Homecoming', 'Drifters', 'Weapons Training', 'The Cornflake', 'The Vision Splendid', 'The Little Blokes', 'Mrs Swipe Speaks Out', 'My Experience of God', or 'Interviewing a Poet'. But it has to be recognized that in the successive editions of *Sometimes Gladness* excellent poems had to be dropped to make way for new ones: there were marketing imperatives and problems of sheer size that forced out admirable poems. There must also have been questions of maintaining balance (for instance, between Dawe's various recurring themes) and of providing an attractive sequence.

If this is in some sense, then, a *salon des réfusés* it is one of great merit and interest. It is a very carefully composed book, where almost Tennysonian forethought has obviously gone into setting the order and balance. Dawe has inverted the phrase often used about him – "the people's poet" – to emphasize his continuing focus on human beings, ordinary to most people, but always extraordinary in some way to him.

Does the new volume, nevertheless, produce a different impression of Dawe's preoccupations and modes of poetry-making than that produced by *Sometimes Gladness*? The answer is, I think, yes. This volume, like a number of the individual ones, is dedicated to his wife, Gloria. The difference is that this time she is no longer alive, and Dawe is to some extent relieved from the need to limit the number of poems in which he speaks about Gloria and his love for her.

A second emphasis is on the nature and purpose of life, a kind of ontology and epistemology of the soul. This has, of course, always been one of Dawe's themes, but it is now more insistent and a little bleaker, with mortality and death often in the foreground. On the whole then, the alternative universe of *A Poet's People* is parallel to that of *Sometimes Gladness*. There are no great surprises, though most readers will make some valuable discoveries.

A final question. Are there any poems that deserve to become Dawe classics? If I were putting together a 'Best of Bruce Dawe' I would certainly include from this volume 'Bonsai', 'At a Literature Board Gathering', 'For the Other Fallen', 'Medi(a)ocrity', 'Love Game', and at least two of the new poems about Gloria Dawe. 'Bonsai' is from *Just a Dugong at Twilight*, the collection of occasional poems written for the Toowoomba *Chronicle*, most of them generated from a news item. While Dawe writes mostly in praise of the 'little fellow', whether human or ant, 'Bonsai' is actually a thanksgiving for being 'maxi' rather than modishly 'mini'. 'At a Literature Board Gathering' is a sustained hyperbolic satire of the culture of literary dependency. 'For the Other Fallen' is a delicately balanced dialogue between two sides of the white Australian self concerning Aboriginal land rights. 'Medi(a)ocrity' concerns the process of choosing and grooming electoral candidates by the major parties. 'Love Game' is a fantasy of being "hopelessly in love with a girl called Life":

Here she is, talking her beautiful head off,
with half-an-eye for the bloke at the neighbouring table,
shedding opinions like so many hairpins,
and stubbing her cigarette in the chocolate mousse!

It would be easy to dismiss lines like this as 'blokey' – a recurrent criticism of Dawe – but that would be to ignore the dramatic (as distinguishable from lyric) genre of much of his work. In any case, there is not a touch of 'blokiness' in the very tender and affecting poems to and about Gloria. They, and much else in this volume, offer a rich new perspective on 'a poet's people'.

Ken Goodwin is an honorary professor of English at the University of Sydney.

Poetry as History

Dîpti Saravanamuttu

Jordie Albiston: *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (Black Pepper, $19.95).

OPENING THIS BOOK is like opening a book of photographs – the poems are instantly both detailed and absorbing. Jordie Albiston's third collection of poetry is about the life and trial of Jean Lee, the last woman hanged in Victoria.

Convicted, along with her lover Robert David Clayton, 'Bobbie', and a third male accomplice, of the torture and murder of William 'Pop' Kent in November 1950, she was hanged in 1951. As a work of imaginative sympathy the poems sustain an emotional force and directness that one wonders if Albiston would allow herself if writing from her own persona. Certainly the poems about God are like this, but the poems about childhood, about marriage and about birth, are equally striking:

When I meet God I will
kill Him With Bible
and knife I will cry for

His life in words even
He won't be willing to
fight

'Dear Diary'

This book could be a who-dunnit, if one did not already know the ending – with the clues being literary ones, to be found in the early poems about childhood and adolescence, hinting as they do, of the existence of violence, and the role of law, and the law of the father. She dresses her dolls "for a stroll/down streets lined with knives" in material cut from the lamp in the lounge:

O my Lord just you wait
till your father gets home
You can't do as you please
whenever you like there's
no room for children with
pincers for fingers in this
house tonight or any night

'Sewing Hints'

It's possible to suggest that the murder of Pop Kent is synonymous with the murder of the principle of authority or the rule of law. And that the symbolic murder of the father ('Pop' Kent) betrays the wish to substitute logic and sanity with their opposite, to replace these things with chaos, tyranny and cruelty.

These elements are there, and give the poems their strongly metaphysical undertones, despite their readability and apparent lightness. But it's as if the poet enters into the spirit and the mind of Jean Lee to such an extent that these elements are written in as opposites: if religious imagery and the hope of traditional religion are presented as a form of salvation at the end, so are they fearsome and threatening:

These walls are angels in their
hordes families of vampires

Vultures and harpies are the performers of religious rites in this poem:

A
couple of them sing to me we
will watch over thee give me
communion in a medicine cup

'Cell Talk'

The angels are prison guards, "and angels/have taken Jean under/their capable wings" ('Final Night').

The book is constructed in rhymes and half rhymes, and employs constant alliteration with a dexterity unusual in a modern poet. This is quite a formalistic book, although a preoccupation with form is not to any degree a

requirement for understanding and enjoying the poetry. The poems 'unpack' rather than wear their construction in an ornate or intrusive way.

The humour in these poems is not exactly caricature, rather, something between bleakness and whimsy, an odd unusual angle on life that is probably the poet's best grace in dealing with her rather grim subject matter. This is a very carefully crafted book, and a highly intriguing one, not least because it calls into question ideas about the role of poetry as history: for instance, given that our interpretation of historical events is always to a degree subjective anyway, how valid a medium is poetry, to explain or analyze the underlying factors within significant events? If this book is anything to go by, poetry is an extremely capable medium, it would seem.

Dîpti Saravanamuttu is a Melbourne poet.

Really Missing Modernism

Lee Cataldi

Jennifer Strauss (ed.): *Family Ties: Australian Poems of the Family* (OUP, $29.95).
Ken Bolton: *Happy Accidents* (Little Esther Books, $10).
Ken Bolton: *August 6th* (Little Esther Books, $10).
Scott Welsh: *The Bob Dylan Theme Team* (Scott Welsh, np).
Scott Welsh: *All Lies and Jests* (Scott Welsh, np).
Dorothy Porter: *What a Piece of Work* (Picador, $17.95).
Deb Westbury: *Surface Tension* (Five Island Press, $12.95).
Syd Harrex: *Dedications* (Wakefield Press, $14.95).
Jack Hibberd: *The Genius of Human Imperfection* (Black Pepper, $19.95).
Tracey Ryan: *The Willing Eye* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $16.95).
Michael Heald: *Body Flame* (FACP, $16.95).
Caroline Caddy: *Editing the Moon* (FACP, $16.95).
Barney Roberts: *Gone Bush with Horrie and Me* (Shoestring Press, $12.25).

I REALLY MISS MODERNISM. Back then, in the fifties, faced with arcane diction, references to dead texts and in-your-face poetic machines, you knew – even if you could not understand a word of it – what you were reading. If modernism was characterized by extremism, "the uncompromising attitude of 'going right to the end' " (Zizec, *The Plague of Fantasies*), postmodernism has been characterized by a regime of play, "respecting the secret of the other", a play of forces, a play with forces.

These two initial descriptions of different aesthetic strategies at least give some grounds for distinguishing (in both) what might succeed. The slippage from modernism these days has been in two directions, one away from a fixed structure towards a process of floating, so to speak, on the surface of events, the other towards a kind of simplicity, with no complicating structure, but with little compensating fluidity in the writing either.

In a review of a book by Seamus Heaney I found this:

> To represent the 'simply impossible' might not be a bad aim for a poet to have, though it would require more tolerance for the unprocessed and fragmentary than Heaney allows himself . . . his poetry often leaves too little in suspense: he prefers to resolve and assuage, or to bind up the contradictory in . . . paradoxical closures.
>
> (Kerrigan, *LRB*, 27 May 1999)

Binding up the contradictory might be the modernist strategy. If so, representing the simply impossible belongs to the postmodernist (not that there is a clear separation) but it helps to divide up this set of books. Representing the simply impossible could be what Ken Bolton does, as in the poem 'Happy Accidents' (which is also the little book), which is about poetry:

> *I wrote some poems just by going through my*
> *note books circling all the good bits still*
> *unused – from poems, letters, notes & quotations –*
> *& typing them up in the order they came*
> *adding new stuff whenever I felt like it. I still*
> *do these occasionally. People don't understand them*
> *but I feel exhilarated.*

However, there is more to accidents than this. Where the succession of events becomes in itself significant, "exhilarating", where the seemingly random reveals the shape of reality (desperate or happy), then the postmodern deviously returns to the modern, as in the opening section of 'Happy Accidents':

> *I sat, saluting – & stonkered –*
> *facing*
>
> *an horizon – blue sky,*
> *blue sea –*
>
> *empty*

of all but

admiration,
cheered, in-touch at last, silent,

on a kitchen chair, in Glebe,
upon a beach, in my imagination.

What poetry ought to do has rarely been described so simply or so well, and I shall use this as another way of dividing up these books, or rather the poems in these books. Not all the poems in a book hit the reader in this way, indeed not all of the poem 'Happy Accidents' does. However, we should expect in a collection that a poet sees fit to publish that some of them do. In Dorothy Porter's *What a Piece of Work*, a set of short poems put together as a narrative of madness and lust, with all the trappings of a mad scientist comic, the love poems at the centre do create imaginary beaches:

these dormant terrible verandahs
could still erupt

trapping me forever
in this cleft
of raw sandstone cliffs
and wisps of rainforest
clinging
to the valley's soft and secret parts
like pubic hair.

'Driftwood'

Since readers are not all poets, it may be that the less intense, the less truly poetic, parts of a book or a poem serve to inveigle the reader into a. buying the book, b. reading it, c. getting into a receptive state, and if a mad scientist is what it takes, well, so be it. This is a very moral book. The scientist commits some unforgivable sins which he is sane enough to recognize. His subsequent disintegration is a satisfyingly Greek punishment:

I'm going to invite him in
for a nocturnal coffee
I'm going to open my legs
as wide as they'll go

I've given the green light
to that tall dark stranger

that most persistent
of seducers

Mister Private Practice.

'Private practice'

From among these books, Ken Bolton's and Dorothy Porter's are, in their different ways, the innovative and experimental. Another innovator is Scott Welsh. The most successful of his efforts is the first, *The Bob Dylan Theme Team*, which crosses a local basketball team with a loaded investigation of the position of man (yes, man) in contemporary philosophy, occasionally very funny:

> The Crawleys, too, would have their manhood questioned. After all the fast cars and intimidation, after all the threats of violence and the violence, the possibility and reality of being beaten by a bunch of Nancy-boys, a bunch of long-haired university hippies and a builder, guys that thanked them for the compliment when they were called faggots, this was too much for their grease-stained hands and egos to bear. The game would bring darkness to each sides (sic) light, snuff the very spark of each man's existence. It was an ugly choice between the emptiness of realized hatred and the nothingness of defeat.

In these two little books, published by Scott Welsh himself, despite occasional lapses (grammar, spelling, comprehensibility) the prose sections are witty and interesting, yet another torch beam into the darkness of suburban student life. However, the sections which appear to be poetry are dreadful. Since poems use the line endings as an extra punctuation, it is essential that these be used, and that the writer's ear makes something of this extra cadencing. This does not:

Crucify the eyes
Annihilate the eyes
For
Innocence and me
and you and
Insanity

Too much writing which appears to be poetry but which is insensitive to this essential feature is published, writing which would be better, more interesting, more readable, as honest prose.

In 1999, "resolving and assuaging" is what poets normally do. In the absence of the extremism and the push

for the new that characterized high modernism we can still demand the writer possess and use considerable skill, and that she or he reject what is uninteresting and mindlessly simple, in other words, by whatever means, achieve what Ken Bolton described as exhilaration. A number of the poems in Deb Westbury's *Surface Tension* do this, particularly the complex and beautiful 'Reading the Signs':

red and white toadstools
are pushing up magic circles
through vermilion leaf litter,
flakes of light
snow are spiralling through the late autumn sky
and the black cockatoos are headed home to the tall
trees on the ridgeline,
their voices hoarse with crying.

The positioning of "light" at the end of a line in a sentence which runs on deflates what would otherwise be soppy, but the meaning of light against darkness (grief, represented by the cockatoos, by the cold, by the season). The untimeliness of this grief is represented by what we associate with toadstools, emphasized by the repeated colour, red and vermilion, associated with visible blood.

Another tour-de-force in relation to colour is found in 'Blue Angel':

and, drowning, knew
bliss was one ocean; layers
of green, touched on every
side by madder blue,
of terre-verte
embracing the azure;

Very nice.

Scott Welsh has used jokey narrative to provide a framework for philosophical considerations (e.g. life, the universe etc.). Another young writer, Michael Heald, places these considerations inside apparently casual lyric poems, a procedure much closer to the apparently random but exhilarating one described by Ken Bolton, although these poems still appear to be formally derived from the modernist lyric:

... a scrimmage held aloft
by sheer vehemence;
but its milling
is softer than aggression,
and the way one suddenly darts
to hover elsewhere
looks more like precise cooperation,
decisions sparking
in an agile mind.

I walk away, then turn
to see it
still effervescing in place,
a fragile and tenacious turmoil,
the ghost of coherence.

In this poem, 'Spring', the insects become a metaphor for both the way the mind might work, and the way the poem might work. Very impressive, exhilarating in fact.

We associate a considerable degree of this type of complexity with modernism itself, that is, the old modernism, the one we grew up with. Modernism however, as it was, demanded a very high degree of innovation, something which has either been impossible or impracticable for subsequent writers to do, or to do all the time. Complexity (twisted as well) however remains, for example in the work of Syd Harrex, as in this poem about the West Indies, 'Brother Woman':

here's no place
for heroes in the rain; debt's dripping blood
and against this age of scourge – star brackets
in a peat sky with a moon pot of gold –
the souls of the slaves possessed cry upsky
their arms of stave stone take aim with assault
poems by mikey smith arse slaps then they
snuff you stranger into new god-shock day

Another much younger poet, Tracey Ryan, demonstrates that Catholicism can still be complex, metaphoric, questioning, "twisted" and not necessarily predicative or hectoring, as in the first part of 'Rain':

One voice in the mass
seeks you out and pierces
like those cruel frequencies
dogs keen at
unfelt by the rest of us

Another dimension, your pain,
the banks and brakes, the chervil
and the birds – the rain, even
invested and utterly private

Just for this moment I cross
into it, hurtling down

the relentless lane

In the work of Caroline Caddy, the formal flexibility of the modernist style is apparently maximized, but this is both deceptive and revealing. Modernist writing is not actually all that flexible, since it must also answer to the demands of heroism and innovation. As the sequence in the pub in *The Waste Land* showed all too clearly the modernist style can not easily breathe with the speaking voice. Despite the technical facility, there is something stiff and cramped in these poems, brought about by the need for resolution, where nature perhaps would have none:

In the thick of it
catch sight of other vessels
read their flags
– you are standing in danger –
– manoeuvring with difficulty –
listening tapping
the ends of lines
what
can that be? a movie once about a submarine
it sank
they died

'Above us the Waves'

Just as with poems that formally reflect older types of writing, particularly, following modernist taste, the lyrics of the seventeenth century, we wonder whether or not these are becoming tired, and, of course, being modernist, whether their unrenewed formal qualities can express our present condition, so poetry that is stylistically indebted to the modernists themselves, in particular Pound and Eliot, now faces the same modernist criticism; they are not sufficiently heroic, they have not broken with the past to describe the present. What in that case the hell are we doing?

There is of course always room for something that, no matter how old fashioned, is perfectly successful, like Jack Hibberd's translation of a poem by Baudelaire, *'Tristesses de la Lune'*:

Relaxed upon satin groins of soft cumuli,
more rapturous and moribund by the hour,
her gaze loiters on spumes of white incubi
mounting the air in multiplying towers.

And there is of course always room for the sort of verse that, mainly written for health and enjoyment, contains enough of wry, ironic, local history in a form sufficiently unpretentious, articulate and compact to engage the mind and feelings of at least the local reader, and being Australians, the local in what we think of as art has historically been relatively under-represented (it can be over-represented as well), for example from Barney Roberts' 'Horrie solves nothing at the Tarkine':

He'd never bothered to return to these
old haunts, old memories; the end came
when his Dad ("no better bushman ever was"
the priest said at his funeral) got killed
by a falling limb from an old stag Brown-top.
"Keep one eye on the oldies, Son," he'd say
"remember it's the quiet bull that gets you."

When we look at *Family Ties*, an anthology of Australian poems about families, edited by Jennifer Strauss, I should say first that a good anthology should always give the reader a chance to look back, to see how we got to where we are (not how the editor redefined Australian poetry to make his own writing the logical outcome) and Jennifer Strauss' *Family Ties* is such a one. Of course there are poems and authors I would have liked to see included, such as πO's early poem about his mother, 'Colour TV', or poems by the major writers Sue Hampton, Ken Bolton and Pam Brown or something of the very brilliant Ania Walwicz, serious omissions, but these are the gripes any anthology attracts. To me the anthology illustrates a thread of what we might identify as a voice we can call multifariously (multiculturally?) Australian, beginning with Henry Lawson's savage truthfulness, about life in general and the bush in particular:

Now up and down the sidling brown
The great black crows are flyin',
And down below the spur I know,
Another milker's dyin';
The crops have withered from the ground,
The tank's clay bed is glarin'
But from my heart no tear nor sound,
For I have got past carin'

'Past Carin' '

It also illustrates however, another thread, of poetry which does not deserve the name, which is pompous, boring, and mainly distinguished by the writer's having no sense of what poetry's extra punctuation, the lines, might be useful for, as in:

Ah, the saddest thought in leaving baby in this bush

alone
Is that we have not been able on her grave to place a stone!
We have been too poor to do it; but my darling, never mind!
God is in his gracious heavens, and his sun and rain are kind.

(Henry Kendall, 'Araluen')

The pompous and boring, the Midas touch of resented displacement which turns everything to lead, continues unabated, even celebrated, into the present, as in:

My sister still desperately beautiful
rides the boundaries of their big establishment.
One of her children sleeps with his eyes open.

(Geoffrey Lehmann, from 'Pieces for My Father')

Still, *Family Ties* contains many poems that are sensitive to their shape, and do tell their own truths, such as this sinister little lyric from Bob Adamson (whose work is often overly romantic, and therefore pompous), 'The Australian Crawl':

Back at home
on the shelf conch-shells

sitting next to books become
little inkwells of nasty beliefs.
The silver we never used dancing
on the table like soft silver tadpoles

sequential meanings drift into meltdown.

Jennifer Strauss is to be congratulated for sifting so much gold from the necessary dross, and providing for the reader who wants to know, a sensible and sensitive guide to the scenery, the peaks and valleys of the independent, the talented, the truthful and the necessary sloughs and swamps in between. After all, if not by contrast, how else shall we know them?

Lee Cataldi's Race Against Time *won the 1999 NSW Premier's Award for Poetry. She lives near Adelaide and works on documenting Australian indigenous languages.*

For Vicki Viidikas

Infront of you the sea
and behind you the washing machine

Peter Ruehmkorf

Infront of you the street
and behind you the newspaper
infront of you beauty
and behind you resignation
infront of you the future
and behind you politics
infront of you chaos
and behind you order
infront of you poverty
and behind you culture
infront of you the sun
and behind you shadows
infront of you the world
and behind you love
infront of you war
and behind you nothingness

Rudi Krausmann

Some scenes from the Bible

Set in **reality** by Lofo

VERITAS, A QUOCUNQUE DICITUR, A DEO EST.

(TRUTH, BY WHOMSOEVER SPOKEN, IS FROM GOD.)

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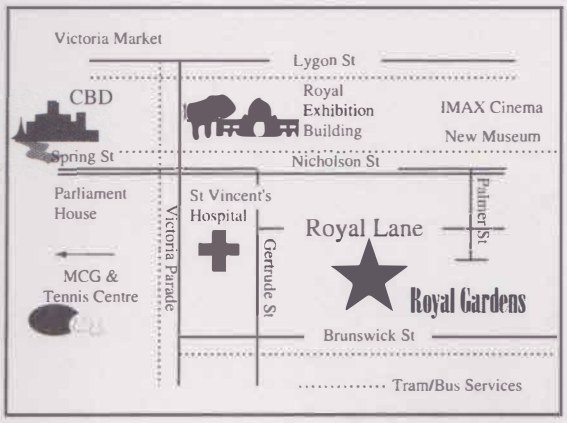

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