NOTICE OF INTENTION

_Westerly_ has been cooperating with AustLit: Australian Literature Gateway and the Scholarly Electronic Text and Image Service at the University of Sydney to convert the full backfile of _Westerly_ (1956–) to electronic text, which will be made available to readers and researchers.

All creative works, articles and reviews converted to electronic format will be correctly attributed and will appear as published. Copyright will remain with the authors, and the material cannot be further republished without authorial permission. AustLit will honour any requests to withdraw material from electronic publication. If any author does not wish their work to appear in this format, please contact AustLit immediately and your material will be withdrawn.

Contact:
westerly@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

Cover design by Robyn Mundy of Mundy Design from a painting, “Saske”, acrylic on sheet canvas 28cm x 42cm, by Shirley Winstanley, reproduced with kind permission of D Archibald http://www.artbywinstanley.com
All work published in *Westerly* is fully refereed. Copyright of each piece belongs to the author; copyright of the collection belongs to the Westerly Centre. Reproduction is permitted on request to the author and editor.

*Westerly* is published annually at the Westerly Centre, The University of Western Australia with assistance from the State Government of WA. by an investment in this project through ArtsWA. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

Notes for Subscribers and Contributors
Correspondence should be addressed to The Editors, *Westerly*, English, Communication and Cultural Studies, M202, The University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia 6009 (telephone (08) 6488 2101, fax (08) 6488 1030); email westerly@cyllene.uwa.edu.au; web address: http://westerly.uwa.edu.au

Unsolicited manuscripts not accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All manuscripts must show the name and address of the sender and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of the paper only. While every care is taken of manuscripts, the editors can take no final responsibility for their return; contributors are consequently urged to retain copies of all work submitted. Minimum rates for contributors — poems $40.00; stories/articles $90.00. Contributors are advised that material under consideration for publication may be held until August 31 in each year.

Subscriptions: $45.00 for 2 years (posted), $100.00 for 5 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: $19.95 per annum (posted). Single copies $25.95 (plus $2.50 postage). Subscriptions should be made payable to The University of Western Australia and sent to the Administrator, Westerly Centre at the above address. Overseas subscriptions: please see back page.

Work published in *Westerly* is cited in: *Abstracts of English Studies*, *Australian Literary Studies Annual Bibliography*, *Australian National Bibliography*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature Annual Bibliography*, *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, *Current Contents/Arts & Humanities*, *The Genuine Article*, *Modern Language Association of America Bibliography*, *The Year's Work in English Studies*, and is indexed in APAlS: *Australian Public Affairs Information Service* (produced by the National Library of Australia) and AustLit, the Australian Literary On-Line Database.
## CONTENTS

### Poems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet/Artist</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Lumsden</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Edwards</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Fahey</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Winwood</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert James Berry</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Lee Compton</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke Simon</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill Jones</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Crawford</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTC Cronin</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Lansdown</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane McCauley</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah French</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Takolander</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff Page</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitris Tsaloumas</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Guess</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher (Kit) Kelen</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Dougherty</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Farrell</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouyang Yu</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb Westbury</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry O'Donohue</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juned Subhan</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Kite Festival</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Anderson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameo</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Dalziell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting With Summer</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda Maxwell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightfish</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roland Leach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wished For</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Gildfind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
July the Firsts
Ryan O'Neill

ARTICLES

Robert Smith on Values, Distances, Cultures, the Foundations of *Westerly* 7
Michael Ackland on Robert Drewe's Dissection of "the Good Old Past" in *The Drowner* and *Grace* 88
Victoria Burrows on Ghostly Hauntings of White Shame in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* 124
Graham Nowland on Fremantle: The Port as Threshold of Consciousness in the Novel 145

REVIEW ESSAYS

Megan McKinlay on new Australian poetry, 2005–2006 60
Thomas Shapcott on recent fiction 108
David Carter on the year's work in non-fiction 168

INTERVIEW

Noel King, Interview with Ray Coffey, Fremantle Arts Centre Press 31

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 207
The editors have pleasure in announcing the joint winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2005:

Simone Lazaroo
for her extract from “The Censors’ White Flare”
that appeared in the No. 50, 2005 edition.

and

Marcella Polain
for her story “Skins”
also appearing in the No. 50, 2005 edition.

The editors wish to apologise for an error in Kate Lyons’ biographical details in *Westerly* v.50, 2005. Kate Lyons was shortlisted but did not win the Nita May Dobbie Award in 2002.
Robert Smith

RW Smith edited Westerly for the first two years of its publication, in 1956 and 1957. He subsequently left Western Australia and the present editors had no knowledge of his identity and whereabouts. However, after the launch of the fiftieth anniversary volume of Westerly in November 2005 we were delighted to receive a letter from a Bob Smith in Geelong, identifying himself as that first editor. As a result of that correspondence, we invited him to write about those early Westerly years for this edition.

VALUES, DISTANCES, CULTURES: FOUNDATION OF WESTERLY

Why, I asked myself in 1955, would an art-loving mature-age matriculant be waiting for the start of the first lecture in Economics One? Having by that time embarked on a double major in English and History, why contemplate Economics, of all things? It had begun just over a year earlier, after teenage years as clerk and shop assistant, and adult life firstly on the dole, then in such varied jobs as fettler, electrical fitter’s assistant, and designer in several glassworks. Next, the helpful Commonwealth Employment Service suggested seasonal work with Co-op Bulk Handling, adding the advice: “Tell them you’re starting University next year – they give preference to Uni students.”

What could be better for someone flush with money and ideas after a couple of months up the scrub than a rewarding few weeks on campus at the annual Adult Education Summer School! “Oh,” says a farmer’s wife, “it’s easy to see you’re a university student. No? You left school at fourteen? A pity you’re not older or you could apply for mature-age matriculation – you have to be at least twenty-five.” Once convinced that the boyish appearance was deceptive, she pointed in the right direction, and a month later the relevant exams had been passed and my pretence to Co-op Bulk Handling became a retrospective reality.

Having opted for Industrial History and Economics as the one requisite “Leaving” subject made Economics seem a natural sequel. It turned out quite otherwise, seeming to begin at the wrong end, with no investigations,
but a swag of narrow definitions. “Money is a medium of exchange, a store of value, a means of investment...” What, nothing about a source of social security, luxury, prestige, power: even corruption? Yet there were redeeming features: for instance, on the staff was Wilfred Dowsett, poet, actor, Quaker—and sceptic (“If all the statisticians in the world were laid end to end, they still wouldn’t reach a conclusion”). Yet the stores not of value, but of values, lay elsewhere. Being an avid reader, already enthusiastic actor, director, writer and designer involved with sundry amateur dramatic societies and a couple of touring companies, I knew that, at best, real values reside with creative arts. I was soon to discover that they also belong with culture in the broader sense.

This was a fruitful time. World War Two, far from being the depressing period of historical fable, was in my experience a time of extended horizons and exciting populist experience for many Australians. Drastic shortages inspired improvisational ingenuity. Women were active in occupational and organisational ways previously unknown. Army and Navy education was distinct from training in warfare, consisting instead of creative and intellectual activities: writing, painting, drawing, performing, lively debate on current affairs. This carried over into the postwar era, and those Summer Schools were a seedbed of enlightening revelations and discoveries. The impact of returning ex-servicemen on university student life was still having a positive effect; and the story of “famous Belgian modernist” Jean Leps (a hoax to surpass Ern Malley) was the stuff of legend. Army Education, in which history professor Fred Alexander was a colonel, had been the formative influence in the university establishment of Adult Education, of which he was now director. The novel notion that “current affairs” was not the preserve of society’s upper echelons, but open to debate by the community at large was popularised by Sydney University’s Current Affairs Bulletin, each edition airing some issue of public concern for debate by adult education groups nationwide.

Freddy Alexander had other achievements to his credit. The Summer Schools were enriched by attendance at specially presented plays, concerts and films, which rapidly grew into the community-oriented Festival of Perth—Australia’s first. Perth’s isolation from other state capitals initially preserved the festivities from commercial debasement aimed at attracting big-spending festival tourists: an advantage, not “the tyranny, of distance.” It is hard to realise today how daringly innovative in the context of Eurocentrism and Anglophilia was Freddy’s introduction of courses in Asian history offered by John D. Legge, and Australian history by Frank Crowley.

Horizons were extended in another new and unexpected way. It had
never occurred to us that Perth is the most remote capital city on earth, so we were generally unaware of how this had engendered a spirit of self-reliance in which problems were tackled in terms of local conditions and available resources (no “fact-finding” jaunts). It just seemed to us the normal way of doing things. Though there had been a commensurate ill-effect of suspicion and intolerance, especially towards those of different racial and communal origins, it was modified by wartime contact with refugees from the Japanese advance, and now with Perth closer to Jakarta than to Sydney, by the great influx of Asian students. The jet age was still years off, and since they came by ship, stopping off at Fremantle was cheaper than adding another few thousand miles to get to Melbourne or Sydney.

The benefits were mutual. Easygoing Australian attitudes helped the newcomers forget political and inter-communal strife in their homelands. Encounters with a range of different cultures broadened Australian attitudes. Both tendencies were reinforced by fraternisation on campus, in courses, and through shared accommodation, particularly in the egalitarian University Hostel – former quarters for the US wartime Catalina squadron at Pelican Point and forerunner of Currie Hall – and later by foundation of Thomas More College, since the Catholic boys’ sense of being outsiders was conducive to empathy with others similarly disadvantaged. A typical outcome was rental by overseas students of the colonial mansion “Cernay” on Stirling Highway nearly opposite Claremont Fire Station for establishment of a communal mixed-race household – where Asian students were wont to entertain Australian friends to exotic banquets.

Another outcome was organisation of a referendum on the contentious White Australia Policy. The Guild of Undergraduates’ Council, controlled by illiberal elements who had banned any discussion of politics and religion, vigorously opposed not merely changes of the policy, but holding of the referendum. What most irked them was that overseas students, although not citizens, were qualified to vote as members of the Guild. About this time Frank Crowley, forthright advocate of history as synoptic enquiry, set “Origins of the White Australia Policy” as an essay topic, probably as a deliberate provocation, since it necessitated access to statutory records held in the Law Library, then the closed preserve of those same student supporters of the status quo. He might even have intentionally assigned it to me knowing my outspoken views on such issues. If so he was successful, for the wrath of leading law students on my incursion into their sanctum was surpassed only by the chagrin which greeted disclosure of the Dean’s written authorisation.

Many involved with the University Dramatic Society (“DramSoc”) became associated with the *Westerly* project. The inspirational teaching of
David Bradley and Jeana Tweedie, enabling nearly half the English major to be undertaken in drama – not always English – was based on the tacit understanding that plays (especially those of Shakespeare) were composed as performance scripts, not for publication as light fiction, and even less as pedagogic exercises for the torment of high-school students. This empirical approach even involved construction of a rudimentary Elizabethan stage to demonstrate the extent to which intrinsically universal themes of plays from that era could be illuminated by original theatre conditions and performance practice. How Shakespeare filled his plays with variant values and contrasting standards of conduct thereby appeared purposely designed to send audiences forth puzzling over unresolved moral dilemmas. This was incipient pluralism, endowing performance of his plays with a fertile, even if subliminal, afterlife in playgoers’ psyches.

Enthusiastic participation in student activities was presumably responsible for the invitation to replace David Hutchison when he resigned as editor of the Arts Union journal, *Winthrop Review*. Its rather pedestrian appearance inspired the instant resolve to make it more visually interesting and topically varied. After all, it was published by the Arts Union, comprised of students enrolled in many subjects, not necessarily including English literature. The possibilities were broached with the private operator responsible for having it printed, who resisted all editorial initiative, typographical or otherwise, his arrangement with the printer being to provide enough material to fill a standard number of pages in standard format and standard layout. This was cut-rate production by a jobbing printer, with *Winthrop Review* a vehicle to serve the business of selling advertising space. Proposals to employ a more amenable printer were flatly rejected, as was editorial right to determine the content of each issue, because of potential offence to advertisers.

Our consequent decision to terminate the arrangement and take over all *Winthrop Review* policy matters including choice of printer was countered by the middleman’s announcement of exclusive entrepreneurial ownership of the magazine, registered in his name at the Companies Office. It was a pyrrhic victory, for confirmation of the claim inevitably resulted in separation. He still (!) owns *Winthrop Review* – and *Westerly* was born: not denoting regional identity, as widely assumed, but a fresh breeze blowing aside such commercial imperatives and moribund conventions. Though members of *Westerly*’s informal and amorphous production team were eager to get the first issue into print, the primary task was to raise advertising revenue, which proved easier than anticipated. Businesses patronised by students were very supportive, and so were acquaintances from other organisations such as the
pioneering and inspirational Patch Theatre, not only craft dealers and the like, but even the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s publicity manager, Grieg Frieze – known through having played Robert Browning in Patch’s production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* – who placed full back-cover promotions for the Goon Show. A regular supporter was the Captain Stirling Hotel, where the recent undergraduate “aquatic carnival” had scandalised vice-chancellor Prescott, whose moralistic strictures aroused vociferous demonstrations of student ire. A giant cartoon of him on a “Prosh” float declared “The Vice is nice, but bitter is better.”

*Westerly* enjoyed close relations with the student newspaper *Pelican*, with several of its successive editors, Tony Hoffman and Bruce Lawson, providing useful input into *Westerly*’s treatment of both form and content. A student household at 27a Clark Street became the editorial and drop-in centre, where issues were planned, contributions proposed and discussed, sub-editing argued, and proofs read. Then when an issue was being put to bed a dummy was spread across the livingroom floor, with corrected proofs being cut and pasted until the small hours. Here *Westerly* sponsored as visiting speaker Dr John Burton, formerly of the Department of External (not “Foreign”) Affairs, and advocate of alternative, equitable, international policies.

In that same period, idiosyncratic perpetual student Trevor Artingstoll had founded the Politics Club, inviting individual students and selected outsiders to expound on “My Ideal State”. Western Australians had long been proud of our “free university,” even those with no expectation of benefiting from a tertiary education. The prospects were now being taken seriously, since the war had changed things. For very many of the troops their first job after 1930s unemployment was in the armed services where they’d gained trade qualifications, recognised as equivalent to apprenticeship. Aspirations had now turned to education in general, and the “old guard” of privileged students was under challenge.

In this milieu *Westerly* flourished, with Number 1 of 1956 something of a transitional issue, though already exerting its individuality. Willingness thereafter “to open its columns to constructive comment” helped create its characteristic identity, attracting a wide range of contributors. The number of academic staff who rallied to *Westerly* was gratifying, as was the response throughout the cultural and intellectual community generally; so there was no shortage of contributions – literature, comment and criticism. How some of them were attracted is now forgotten, but may have had something to do with the dearth of outlets for free and open opinion, plus enthusiastic unsolicited reviews by Ken Inglis in the Melbourne *Age*. There was Marcus Oliphant on University and Community; J B Polya on Tasmania’s infamous
Orr case; Brian Fitzpatrick on Apartheid; Max Harris’s aptly incisive review of James McAuley’s editorship of Quadrant’s first issue, only incidentally revenge on one of the perpetrators of the Enr Malley prank; and comments on the Outlook for Democracy in Japan by Bill Hartley, a student sent there as part of an Air Force squadron; while Ric Throssell wrote about his play on nuclear devastation, The Day before Tomorrow, which DramSoc had in production.

Then there was Don McLeod, advocate extraordinary for the Pilbara Aboriginal cooperative, Pindan. In an interplay between social activism and cultural events, about 1950 he’d written to congratulate the New Theatre cast of Oriel Gray’s anti-discriminatory play Had We but World Enough, and again after their production of the stage version of F. B. (“Bert”) Vickers’s comparable novel The Mirage, with Bert playing a part as the squatter. At Artingstoll’s invitation Don McLeod spoke on campus (causing consternation to the Department of Native Welfare), after which he contributed an article to Westerly on Aboriginal Enterprise in the Pilbara. Bert Vickers, whom Alan Marshall had taught in Army Education to master writing skills, had also been with Patch Theatre, trying unsuccessfully about 1946 to have his play presented there, while acting in a stage adaptation of Mary Webb’s Precious Bane. Irene Greenwood reviewed Bert’s novel First Place for the Stranger in Westerly 1 of 1957 – a Festival of Perth number sponsored by Freddy Alexander. Another Westerly contributor was Mary Durack, whose 1952 book Child Artists of the Australian Bush had helped publicise worldwide the art of Aboriginal boys at Carrolup, of whom Brely Bennell was among the youngest. In 1960 (deputising for Henrietta Drake-Brockman?) she opened his first exhibition, which Rose Skinner generously showed in her Gallery, responding to the growing mood of liberalism to which those early Westerly years contributed.

That was the key to Westerly’s success, due not so much to promoting specific attitudes and policies, as creating a focus for attitudes people already nurtured, while feeling themselves and their views isolated until Westerly helped provide assurance, opportunity and a sense of independence. The span of Australian contributions already ranged widely over varied cultural traditions when, despite conditions of Cold War and McCarthyism, Westerly received a broadening international response – much of it from or concerning what came to be called “The Third World.” They include Chinese and Indian views on “Freedom and the Writer,” a distinguished Indian author’s identification of English language as a cultural bridge; Dymphna Cusack’s report on a literary delegation to China; and a statement on “The Atom for Peace or War” by Germany’s leading nuclear scientists, translated for Westerly
by language students of the German department. At the same time, overseas students were keen to show through articles in *Westerly* their affinity with the values of Australian friends and colleagues by writing on aspects of their own lands and cultures.

So much were these developments an unbiased response to time, place and events that it only much later became evident that the pluralism involved amounts to multiculturalism in the most positive and constructive sense. Consequent investigation makes clear that *Westerly* of those first few years is not just Australia's but the world's first multicultural publication.

*Westerly*’s editorials dealt with currently significant subjects like “Cultural Freedom,” “The Menace of Lay Councils” to intellectual integrity, “the Open Skies Policy” of military surveillance, “On Means without Ends” such as the common good, and the need for defence of university independence, so arrival of a letter from the University’s chairman of its Publications Committee directing “You will remove from *Westerly* the words *University of Western Australia*” was a nice irony, indicating as it did official capitulation to outside pressure. *Westerly*’s notice, “published by the Arts Union of the University of Western Australia,” was indisputably true, and may even have been a legal requirement, but who were we to argue. As Timmy Mares of the drama staff remarked in a quote from *Macbeth*’s witches, *Westerly* looked like being “a birth-strangled babe.” The best recourse seemed to present the professor with a dilemma by not acknowledging receipt of his letter. He is still waiting, like Napoleon in Moscow, for evidence of surrender. Unsurprisingly, a demand for compliance came from one of the aforementioned illiberal student elements, the president of the undergraduate body.

Wilf Dowsett’s constructive scepticism, John Legge’s demonstration of the inextricability of Chinese history and culture; the experience of applied dramaturgy; Frank Crowley’s comparative and contextual methodology, and the liberal outlook of Fred Alexander, were only some of the factors operative in enlightened academic staff circles, creating an intellectual atmosphere engendering and supportive of values espoused by *Westerly*. So it is hardly surprising to find those values taking on a lively afterlife, comparable to that of Shakespeare’s plays, in the subsequent careers of many of those involved with *Westerly*, through circumstances conducive to development of their natural inclinations. Through personal acquaintance I am aware of one ex-student bringing back from South-east Asia experience of life at village level very different from growth in those countries of exploitive military regimes; of another working with Michael Somare in development of Papua New Guinea’s independence; others variously attempting to civilise the world of
economics and business; moving from technological preoccupations to concern with urban and regional problems; or trying to educate mining and other interests on Aboriginal attitudes and aspirations (and vice versa), tackling divergent assumptions through environmental, medical, social justice and equity projects; and in the case of overseas students, still attempting to inculcate in their homelands, up to half a century later, some of the values which impressed them in Australia, with reports of a resulting residue of good will towards Australia.

These were formative years for many of us in tackling an increasingly parious future, though application of insights from the experiences of 1956–57 was not without its vicissitudes. Personal establishment of art-historical studies at Adelaide’s Flinders University in 1966 was based on the premise, applied in Perth to drama, that practical involvement with creative processes of the cultures of other times and places, rather than narrow verbal definitions, can yield real insight into the innate meanings of specific artworks of other peoples. Though the standard relationship between education in the creativity and explication of art is strictly utilitarian, mainly requiring art students to undergo didactic courses chronicling successive stylistic changes, this genuine innovation overcame that disability — until it was opportunistically subverted during the manipulative nihilism of the 1970s and ’80s. An altogether different experience was writing and presenting the play *Art on Trial*. Like Shakespeare’s histories this is based on an actual event, from which significant conclusions can be adduced: the 1944 legal challenge to the Archibald Prize’s award to William Dobell for his portrait of fellow artist Joshua Smith. Playing it on open platform stages enabled us to take it on tour in art galleries, teaching us a great deal about how Shakespeare’s scripts developed, how readily he was able to stimulate audiences’ “imaginary forces” through direct contact without need of naturalistic spectacle, and how the fourteen roles could be “doubled” by a cast of six, including the author, and director Eugene Schlusser – a 1960s DramSoc stalwart.

In those early *Westerly* years there was much debate about rival value systems, particularly the seductive concept of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, eventually jettisoned when perceived as merely an emotional reaction against economic pragmatism. Now, at a time when common understanding and co-existence are even more vital to survival than they were then, it is disturbing to encounter situations where cultural knowledge is applied for expedient sectional ends in preference to mutual benefit. Recent study of body language in European painting to elucidate meanings inherent in fifteenth-century portraiture has led me to the surprising
realisation that many deaths at military checkpoints in Iraq result from use as the signal for “slow down and pull over,” of the identical gesture which in the region from Iberian Peninsula to Persian Gulf has long signified approval to proceed. But rather than disinterested application of such research results to elimination of human adversity, the tendency is for specialised knowledge to be used for exclusively partisan purposes, such as behavioural advisers’ use of multicultural learning to facilitate interrogation through techniques of humiliation and alienation. The great irony is that such cynical short-term measures ultimately prove counter-productive.

“O this learning, what a thing it is!” – William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew
JAMES ANDERSON

THE KITE FESTIVAL

When I was twelve years old I lived in the city of Nanchang in southern mainland China. My parents taught at the university and our family lived in a foreigners' compound on campus. It had a high wall all around it, and an attentive gatekeeper. In the summer when there were fewer classes to teach, we were extended an invitation to travel north to see the International Kite Festival in Wei Fang.

My mother and I accepted and we left with a small group made up of some other English teachers, two missionaries and a Chinese man sent along by the university to make sure we behaved. We flew to Wei Fang because a steam train would have taken four days. Chinese aeroplanes are rickety and dangerous, full of cigarette smoke and the smells of rice wine and pickled eggs. They shudder, which is common during takeoff and landing, but Chinese planes do so the whole time the plane is in the air.

People came from all over the world to the kite festival. The hotel lobby was unlike any place I'd ever seen or imagined. The lobby was designed, perhaps, after the curve of a cowrie, or other half-moon seashell. It had a thin, long and curving reception desk of raw wood, staffed by smiling Chinese who were of course all very thin, very polite, and due to the isolated remove of Wei Fang, unable to speak English, or German, or Romanian, or Dutch, or French, or to comprehend basic Chinese spoken badly and in an assimilated southern accent. Groups of people, whom I later saw operating together in lithe unison as various national kite teams, bustled about the lobby with intriguing luggage. They guarded long multicoloured canvas sleeves that might have concealed boat masts or technologically advanced weaponry, or jousting lances. Really these bags contained the skins and skeletons of complex and magnificent kites.

Concrete stairs guided by bare iron railings led our small party up from the bizarre lobby to numerous floors and labyrinthine quarter-mile long hallways. For some time we wandered, quite lost, through what was the
northern Chinese industrial equivalent of a western convention centre. At last on one plain wood door, one of many thousands, we read the correct Chinese numerals. In our small room we were delighted to discover hot running water. None of our group felt brave enough to drink from the tap. To slake our thirsts we drained cups of previously boiled green tea from glass thermoses which were painted candy red, and over that with dainty, stylised yellow flowers.

In the morning we boarded a small minibus — a shuttle service provided by the event’s organizers; we drove for over three hours. I imagined we were in a desert and I recalled the movie “Lawrence of Arabia” which I had watched for the first time some months before. I was then surprised to learn that we were not crossing through a desolation of desert, but that we travelled over another type of sand dune: we were on a beach. A beach with platinum-white dunes wider than the state of Vermont. We never reached the ocean that day, but stopped six miles short of land’s end. I knew the ocean beyond was the deepest cobalt blue, and wet, deep wet. The wettest, bluest thing on the planet. The dunes where we stopped were salt caked, flat and hot and white. Brilliant, radiant white. We stepped from the minibus and at once we were assaulted by powerful wind. It tore at our clothes, howling and lashing superfine salt crystals into the pores of our exposed faces and arms. Already some kites had been coaxed into the air.

They were mystical creatures as big as clouds in the lucid jewel-blue spaces of the sky. They swooped above us, and I felt my stomach flip, and it was very easy for me to empathize with a small mouse when it is caught in an open field and looks up and sees a hawk plunging down, eclipsing the sun. The kites were silent. All we were able to hear was wind thundering in our ears and the whipping of the kite lines. Some kites were built to resemble animals like whales, or fantastic birds with wing spans stretching over forty feet. Others were the apparent products of architecturally deviant minds, seeming to defy gravity with their simultaneous awkwardness and ariel grace. Some kites were constructed from many layers of smaller “wings” stacked one above the other. I believe fourteen levels was the highest count. One was a massive perfect cube, pure white like weightless marble.

The Australian team was having difficulty hefting their kite into the sky. They didn’t have enough people to support its many segmented shapes in proper form in a position effective to catch the wind, and then to also run and pull on its guidelines at the same time. My mother and I volunteered our help. Soon a group of about twenty people had conspired to launch the kite. Most of us were unable to speak each other’s languages, so we did this by way of hand signals and lots of laughing and tripping over lines and holding parts
of the kite first backward, and then at the wrong distance from their many counterparts. At last we stood in a long column, each self-assigned and correctly placed. The Australian fliers took hold of a two-foot wide triangle to which all the lines were secured, and at a cry from our leaders we ran into the biting wind, supporting the kite like a giant canvas centipede, shouting out for all we were worth, happy and defiant. The kite caught the wind, it hung above us – we knew how heavy it was and it seemed impossible that the wind could support such weight ... and then it soared into the air, arcing up in a massive technicolour rush. We stood, faces windburnt, eyes screwed against the cloudless and dazzling azure sky, and together we watched the kite, graceful and silent above us.
The neat hand of a poem for his father’s name day, 
a tiny toy-like manuscript – was paper scarce? – 
portraits of parents and two of the sisters.

Upstairs we get to Georges Sand 
and a mad scrawled note from Berlioz: 
*Mio Chopinetto!*

That photo of him, sullen, 
pale, arms folded, 
sickness plain in the skin, 
and a small hand’s cast, 
its fine sculpted fingers.

Outside the snow is falling thicker. 
By the music academy clarinet scales 
swirl with bars of Rachmaninov.

Coffee in Nowy Świat. 
Not far from here his heart 
lies in the pillar of a church, 
a new world relic like Galileo’s finger 
vesselled in a Florentine museum.

In the old royal park his dominating statue 
turns wholly white with frost: 
the city’s silent massive ghost.
Poor Dido –
She is torn between devotion to her husband Sychaeus,
Murdered for his wealth by her brother Pygmalion,
And her feelings for the stranger in Carthage. True-souled Aeneas
Is a figure of such noble bearing he seems sprung from the gods.
She confides to her sister, “He sways my will.” She feels again
The flame that once devoured her. How easily she rejected
Her suitors in Libya and Tyre, and the chieftains of Africa,
But not this Trojan warrior with the strong chest and shoulders.
She is entranced by his stories. How keenly she listens
As he tells them about the wooden horse as huge as a hill,
Grim Achilles and wily Ulysses, Laocoon and the serpents,
Cassandra’s sad omens, the terrible deaths of Hector and Priam,
And Troy in flames. He tells them too about his vain search
For his wife, Creusa, and the wraith of Creusa herself who bid him
Escape the burning city. Apollo had foreordained for Aeneas
A place the Greeks called Westland, also known as Italy,
Where the mighty Tiber flows through rich landscape and
Rome beckons. So they toiled at building a fleet. Their voyage
Took them past the dreadful Harpies that befoul everything,
Past Ithaca’s rocks and Phaeacia’s towering heights. They met
Hector’s wife Andromache, took wise advice from a seer,
And sailed on past Scylla and Charybdis and the coast of the Cyclops.
How attentively Dido listens, her eyes often filling with tears
For Aeneas’ suffering and for memory of her own sad plight.
It was Venus herself, Aeneas’ mother, who inspired Dido with passion.
She arranged the storm, the cave and the couple’s retreat,
That momentous first day between Dido and death. Beautiful Dido,
Poor Dido, Queen of Carthage, who must hear such vicious stories
Spread of her by Rumour, the loathsome goddess, and then
Suffer the news that Aeneas will leave her to head for Rome,
The possibility that shrouded their union from the start
Repeated now by fleet-footed Mercury, the gods’ messenger
Who comes with tidings from Jupiter himself: “Why waste time
In Carthage! Consider your heir, Iulus! Turn to Rome! Etc. Etc.”
However he may rehearse the compulsion of his leave-taking,
Aeneas cannot expel her grief. She has welcomed him, he
And his Trojans, extending to them such lavish generosity,
And trust. Ah, pitiless love, when the ways are so uncertain and
Expectations are confounded with such rough alternatives
That some attribute to the gods and some to chance or error.
Rosy dawn dispels the night; the sea is favorable. They are sailing,
The Trojans in their tall ships, and Dido watches from the cliff-tops.
Her tears did not stop him. Heaven barred his compassion
And across the water, all sounds of lamentation are hidden
By the noise of waves.
DIANE FAHEY

SUMMER

A northwesterly holds sway on this
hottest day for years, sand ghosting the damp verge,
a gritty coating on oiled skin. I look out
past shirred crystal to leaf-green, cerulean;
wade in, wanting to be braced by chill pressures,
till the breakers I stand beyond arch back—
sudden tears from parched blue. Salt in my eyes,
I swim where waves turn towards the river.
Nothing for it but to lie in these
liquid inches, as if earthed in ocean,
the sun dangerous on eyelids, my weight
erasing sand ripples. Here I stay,
swathed by gold, letting thoughts evaporate,
thirsting for fresh beginnings.

TIDES

Silent as virtue, the tide enters the coast—
holding back at first, a grateful guest,
then assuredly at home, ready to bring
its whole life swiftly in. As with bird flight—
always a new concordance of darkness,
light, as they split and meld, fertilise
each other. At ebb tide, scuffed waves circle
the stream’s centre, push back to where breakers
hook down on mirrors slick with sun. Clouds mass,
tumble, in a fast sky; ibis sway on
thermals, hierophants of a primal peace—
the lilt of their languorous black wings
a footnote in the unwritten book of days,
part of the tremendous drift of things.
DAVID WINWOOD

IN PRAISE OF INNOCENCE

Language clear and see-through as poisoned
Water, deadly as a ballerina’s smile. The foal

isn’t innocent; look at the way it bites the bark
and leaves trees dying. The normal lamb will butt

you in the crotch – and rightly so. The lamb
too cute for its own good, the helpless one on

legs like unspun wool? It dies first as the Good
Shepherd talks straight with a butcher’s knife.

Language, the politician’s clay; language unclear,
the civil servant’s tool. Theirs is the Chemical

Wedding of might. The new alchemy
became the old religion. All popes called Innocent

were knowing politicians and – uncivil to mention it –
creators of endless strings of civil wars. The lamb
too cute for its own good. The helpless one on
on legs like unspun wool. It dies first.
CAMEO

Putxinel-lis.
The boy traces this word in his mouth. Yet, it is the image, unexpectedly vivid, unabashedly violent, that draws him. He leans tip-toed in concentration towards the poster affixed to the stone wall, its bold blocks of colour a discovery on this wet wintry day, and stares at the puppet-figure, decumbent and vacant-eyed, with its heavy head inclined to a bearded assailant.

Two men in fur-lined coats making their way to lawyers’ rooms observe the young boy straining upward. A child alone in the Saturday-streets is not unusual in this turn-of-the-century city. And unquestionably, the boy is less angular than the girl into whose dirty, needy palm one of the men had earlier dropped a centime. There is something particular about him, however, that momentarily diverts them. He is most certainly handsome – his mother reminds him of this each day, cupping his cherished face in her hands – though this is not it. The men puzzle silently as the boy, unaware and inscrutable, deliberates.

It is at this point that the boy’s mother steps from a café. The heavy wooden doors fitted with filmy glass panels swing shut behind her, affording only a glance into the tiled interior. She takes a sharp, involuntary breath as she moves into the extraordinary cold of the morning, pulling her fringed shawl tightly around her shoulders. But even with this sudden return to the body she seems distracted, not noticing the men in fur-lined coats lower their eyes as they pass her to ascend the staircase.

Then she sees him, half-turned and earnest in the pale light, and stretches out her arms to encircle his small waist, to encompass his solitude, promising that they will attend together the puppet show the following afternoon.

***
She gazes at the reflected child, this wondrous creature, as she faces a thinly framed mirror. Beyond the boundaries of her self, and like any proud mother, she makes expansive claims for her son.

However, as Senyora Ferrer relates to her neighbours, her tenant is wilfully irresponsible. She is quick to point out, as she stands on the upper-story balcony and beats clean strips of worn carpet with a wire brush, that she understands the woman's need to work. Unwisely married herself, she often cares for the child while his mother leaves for the night, her dark hair piled high and woven with flowers. What troubles her, what she simply cannot comprehend, she gossips breathlessly (the boundless dust and factory filth sees the preponderance of Barcelona's inhabitants pneumonic rather than aposiopetic), is the younger woman's alarming insistence on abstractions. She speaks spiritedly of Passion and Art (in this city! Senyora Ferrer adds parenthetically in amazed exclamation, tossing her head to signal the belching smoke-stacks and the busy port beyond her immediate vision). Once she revealed shyly to the senyora several sketches that were unlike anything the senyora had seen, with their insubstantial relations to reality. And her maternal prognostications are utterly impractical - a poet, Senyora Ferrer, why, my son should be a poet!

As it happens, the boy (then grown) will die among olive groves, blood-drenched and nameless, fighting General Francisco Franco's Rebel Foreign Legionnaires and Moors on the other side of the country in Badajoz, the scene of innumerable sieges. His anonymous entry into the literary world will be ushered in by men such as Auden and Hemmingway who will compose Great Works on war and its casualties, and who themselves, for a time, will evade historical annihilation.

For now he sits cross-legged on the edge of the bed, tracing along the iron frame a small animal shaped from wood as his mother dresses for the evening. Senyora Ferrer, purblind at night, brings her mending to the damp, candle-lit room and sits blanketed in a cushioned chair that she places near the rusty brazier where coke is burning slowly. The evening is bitterly cold and the whirring sound of the sewing machines coaxed and pedalled by women in the rooms below is carried skyward. The younger woman turns from the mirror, taking a coloured container from the clutter of pots and jars on the dresser and powders her face, her neck, her chest. The dress she wears, with its firm-fitting bodice and full red skirt, is not suited to the weather, she acknowledges, although meteorological practicality is not its primary recommendation.

(A biographical acceleration: as his mother takes her last watery breath, before he identifies himself in places elsewhere as lately of Barcelona, he will
inexplicably recollect this enamelled moment – her shoulders sculpted by the deep shadows thrown by the refracted light, her resplendence. He too will recall, in the excitement of a new year, a new century, and by his own illicit glimpses, his mother’s preposterous effort to eat a single green grape at every midnight stroke as she sits unbalanced on the lap of a man, playfully kissing his lips and drinking from a fragile frosted glass.

***

The boy’s mother walks briskly across La Rambla towards L’Eden Concert, thankful that the rain has ceased and comforted by the knowledge that her son is safely tucked into a warm bed, asleep. The red skirt whips around her ankles (her hat is awry and the seams of her long grey gloves are fraying at the finger-tips), and despite the iciness of the night, carousing merry-makers linked arm-in-arm conspire to fill the narrow streets, forcing her, an Unaccompanied Woman, to sidestep skilfully flailing limbs and bottles aimlessly discarded. It would seem unlikely, then, as she approaches the electric lit street of the Paral-lel, with its burlesque theatres, cabaret clubs, artists’ studios and rudely sentimental music halls all awash with Rickett’s blue, that she feels obscenely alive.

***

She forces herself to suppress a laugh as the door shuts behind her. These men, these bohemians, with their absinthe and ideas about women! In this small ordered room above the club, she does her best to be enthusiastic, even athletic. (She glances at the discoloured looking-glass, rearranges her hair, reties her dress and resumes the requisite supine position on absurdly white linen.) But for painters, she notes, their hands are surprisingly lubberly and their eager bodies are hopelessly artless.

A light knock introduces a deep-eyed man. She knows him as Ruiz but very soon he will take his mother’s name, travel to Paris – where else? – and become the most famous artist of the twentieth century. She, by contrast, will remain an inky, unknown female figure in his early works, inconsequential to the fate of modern art.

He enters wearing a broad-brimmed black hat, narrow velvet trousers and a loose dark jacket. So young, she thinks as he rests his cane by the door and approaches her, fiddling impotently at the ribbons of her dress, his inexpert, paint-stained fingers sliding beneath her skirts, parting her thighs with mechanical insensitivity. So unlike my Love, she inwardly sighs (now
disappeared, presumed dead, his absence palpable), who moved with her in the dark. Rapturously. Refulgent. This Ruiz, rumoured for immortality, rocks above her invariably, self-concerned and taciturn, and the woman, refusing diminution, redistributes her body and has them both tumbling to the ground to illustrate the instability of things.

***

Here, along this broad strip of paved streets that was once a riverbed, he undulates. He unclasps his small fist from his mother’s hand (in the other hand she holds a large pail), and charts a singular excursion, a child-found world patterned by tree-filtered light and not at all ordinary. The old men sitting on wooden benches discussing phylloxera and crop failures give him little pause. He spins instead among the skirts of women, the shiny shoes of men; he swoops across the Sunday-leisurely paths of the marble cutters, the cabinet makers, the tailors, the factory-owners and their well-dressed daughters, the dyers, the iron-workers, the fabric printers, the bleachers. On both sides of the street, birds, oily and brilliantly opalescent, squawk and flap in small wire cages as a young woman, herself avian – her headdress predictably plumate, her nose truly beak-like – calls out to passing pedestrians. Groups of women with their hands folded into the soft crooks of each other’s arms encircle the enclosures, pointing and exclaiming, admiring the bands of gold, the flash of green.

Unnoticed among them the boy envisions a re-learning of the sky: feathered bodies outstretched and scoring sharp arcs above the city, turning mapless loops beyond the man with the rotting skin who howls and hacks as he trails through the streets each day, and who the boy does not dare follow.

Then he plunges again, past the musicians with their midriffs wrapped in vivid sashes; past the stiff-backed police, ever alert to anarchist malfeasance. He dives among simple actions, men rubbing their gloveless fingers and children watching their breath made visible in the air, and imagines himself elemental, pellucid. He stops momentarily at a distance from the chestnut seller who scoops smoky kernels into paper cones, before being swept by the crowd towards the flower stalls where young women sell sprays of flowers. Bell-shaped petals. Effuse inflorescences. Blossoms that his mother braids through her hair.

Her irresistible pull, this inexorable undertow.

Resurfacing, he looks around. And then there, by the fountain, he sees her tilting in conversation towards another woman. He approaches and she recovers his grasp, a casual, precious solidarity.
A few weeks earlier the boy and his mother had stood like this, hand in hand, on the very same street as a procession of gargantuan figures, beautifully fashioned in gold-threaded cloth, strode past them, sun-lit, on tremendous wooden legs. Around these supports hoofed eagles and bulls and lions and dragons, and human bodies, disconcertingly dwarfed by colossal paper-mâché heads, lurched compass-less to the beats of the superintending drums. As the crowd bustled behind, the pageant coiled its way to the paved square outside the old cathedral where brightly-coloured ribbons were strung and blindfolded children took turns to strike at animal forms suspended from tree-branches that, when punctured, gave up their sugary entrails.

No-one notices their entrance as the heavy doors swing shut behind them; a woollen-capped boy bending down to scratch the belly of a black-eared dog, and a woman removing her carmine pelisse, draping it purposefully across a high-backed settle. Pallid men sit around massive wooden tables, some with their backs turned to the window-arches that form one side of the capacious tiled room. In the sub-aqueous light these men are turbulent, scandalous, uproarious – they are artists, after all – perforating with their pipes the purpled-smoke air.

The woman helps her child remove his coat, unfastening the big hooks and loosening his arms from the sleeves that pinch. Exclusively attentive, she is at first oblivious to the man who approaches with an intimate, polished word that has the woman’s head snap upward to meet his imperturbable face.

The café is pleasantly pungent with tobacco and coffee grounds, and it entertains the kinds of excesses Senyora Ferrér finds difficult to forgive. Potted plants with vibrant green leaves totter on impossibly high shelves. Dust-collecting chandeliers are appendant from copal-varnished beams. Large ceramic vases squat without immediate purpose on the long bar. A dado of painted tiles patterned with fish-tail swirls of blue and green and crocein stretches around the room. And the walls! A huge panel of two bearded men speeding through a dusty city in an automobile hangs on the wall opposite the window arches. Unremarkable posters announce that crazy-time of Carnival. On every other available plane, fastened at their corners with small shiny pins, pencil drawings adjust an otherwise luminous life to tonalities of black and white. Fiddlers stand disconsolate at street corners, their necks at oblique angles as dogs sniff their bony feet. Young men on

Thin fingers ruffle his hair and the boy turns to follow his mother into another room, a smaller rectangular vault also riotously decorated, with seats set before a modest stage. Watchful children form imprecise semi-circles around the theatre and gently, his mother pushes him towards them. Something small, apheliotropic, rearranges itself inside him.

The curtain is removed to unveil a confected world of orange moons and blotchy white paint resembling the trembling of stars. The hero is conjured, his glass gaze unwinking. Another puppet appears, a lacy cap askew on her hollow head. Already embattled, she takes resolute, unladylike aim with pots and spoons to check the hero's amorous advances. The auditorium hoots and stamps with delight at his dexterous flexibility, at her domestic artillery. (The scene metamorphoses magically, now an exaggeration of shadows and powdery greens.) The pursuit persists through this penumbral forest until the devil emerges, fiendishly cloaked in crimson and with an eye for abduction. Children clamour and point in warning. The hero, momentarily doltish, head bob-bobbing, misunderstands their urgent directives. Determined, the children shout again, louder, and the hero turns to club the stealthy recreant. The backdrop transforms, the piano-accompanied charivari plays, and the puppets are reunited. The audience cheers and the players acknowledge the applause, bowing and stooping, until a wooden hand abruptly cuffs the lacy cap and the bare-headed puppet stumbles sideways, pitches and crumples. The din escalates wildly, and is musically validated.

The boy laughs and claps and turns to find his mother, to share this unrestrained moment, this extravagant hilarity. He searches for her among the women leaning forward in their seats, all the better to see as men swill amber beer from heavy glass mugs. He searches for her face. Then he sees her; she is sitting there, quiescent, and not quite smiling.
“I CAN’T GO ON ... I’LL GO ON”: INTERVIEW WITH RAY COFFEY, FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE PRESS, 22 DECEMBER 2004; 24 MAY 2006

NK: A. B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* came in at number 10 on the ABC’s knock-off of Channel 4’s Book Show. While that is good publicity for your press, it also confirms the impression of Fremantle Arts Centre Press as the press that had two great successes, *A Fortunate Life* and Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. Yet FACP publishes thirty-five books a year. So can you use the ABC – A. B. Facey moment as an occasion to outline the other publishing activities of the Press?

RC: Those two books have played a very important part in the survival of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. I read a statistic put out by the Australian Book Publisher’s Association early in 2000 saying that small presses lasted, on average, six years. We’re coming up for thirty, which suggests that some things are working for us! And two of the things that have worked very well have been *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*. When we first started up, someone said that if we published only Western Australian writers we’d soon run out of writers. Well, we still only publish Western Australian writers, although it’s a broad definition ...

NK: The definition includes books by writers who have spent a significant amount of time in Western Australia.

RC: That’s right, and we have no shortage of manuscripts, solicited and unsolicited. I began with the Press in 1978, eighteen months after it had started. It had done a couple of volumes of poetry and a couple of fiction titles. One of the things I wanted to do was broaden our list into the non-fiction area. I had noticed the way British publishers were then starting to look at what has now become
known as “life stories”. I was particularly interested in the sorts of things published by Centreprise in Hackney, and the Hackney Project, stories that were away from the centre of what was then considered important and valuable. So I started to look for and encourage those kinds of stories. At the time of publication of *A Fortunate Life* we had a little social history programme running – known as the Community Publishing Project – for which we received a little bit of funding from the State Government. And this was to encourage “ordinary” – whatever that word means – people to send in manuscripts based on their own lives and on the histories of their local communities. Many of the manuscripts were quite slight, but by working with the authors we built a number of them into something more substantial.

What I’ve always thought about publishing is that you have to sow seeds in many ways to see what will develop. We perhaps wouldn’t now publish some of those early things simply because the quality of work in that area has improved markedly. But at the start, you put up the shingle, you attract people in, and you encourage them. And because we were a small enterprise we looked at things that more established publishers wouldn’t look at. In the case of A. B. Facey it was his daughter, as I recall, who dropped in that partly typed, partly handwritten manuscript. We immediately saw possibilities there, and as they say, “the rest is history”. When I first read it I thought it put a full stop on a certain kind of narrative: it was a quintessential Australian *yarn*, if you like. This was around 1979 and WA’s sesquicentenary was coming up and in the lead-up to that there was, quite properly, an increased interest in our own narratives, our own stories. The bicentenary for Australia followed quite quickly. Timing was everything. So that kind of timing worked for *A Fortunate Life* – which was a well-told series of *yarns*, basically. And I think we edited and packaged it well enough, and it really did capture the imagination. We also did some promotional work that, I guess, was a little audacious. Knowing that we had a very limited marketing budget – or none! – we approached well-known figures ...

**NK:** Like Gough Whitlam.

**RC:** Yes. And historians like Humphrey McQueen and Geoffrey Dutton, and got their endorsements, and the book took off. And as a result ...
of that we were approached by Penguin, very quickly.

Another point to add here is that someone once said of small presses, “their first big hurdle is their first big success”. That was certainly true for us and *A Fortunate Life*. The book almost sent us broke! It took off so quickly, before it had even been released, really. The orders were such that the first print-run was gone and we didn’t have the money to pay for a new print-run. So we took out a little low-interest loan to do that. But within weeks of those copies arriving from the printer we had to reprint again. And Penguin came to us then and said, “we’ve seen you have this interesting book, are you interested in selling it?” And we said, no, but we’ll lease it. And so we leased the rights to *A Fortunate Life*, and they still are leased. We are on a percentage of earnings, with the author-estate, for every copy sold and the lease has been renewed three times now, I think. The book initially was released as a softcover but it was doing so well Penguin asked if we would lease hardback rights as well, which we did, and they issued a hardback “Australian Classic” edition. There was a talking book and a condensed version too. So we broadened the number of editions of that book and sold TV rights for a television series, and there was even a stage play based on the book.

**NK:** Were the TV rights with FACP alone, or shared with Penguin?

**RC:** The TV rights were with us and the author. The TV rights bought us a warehouse and that’s worked very well for us. Local TV scriptwriter, Ken Kelso was the first to come and talk to us about doing a script of the book. He had written an award-winning film script for a film set in Tasmania, *Manganinnie*, that had a bit of a buzz about it at the time. Ken didn’t have any money, but because we were supportive of local writers, we offered him an option on the rights to produce a TV version, which he ultimately sold on to Channel 9, or PBL, in the form of his script.

The other fortunate thing about this, for us, was that Ken had gone to school with a woman called Sally Morgan, and they had remained friends. And when Sally told Ken she was thinking of writing her family story he told her to come and talk to me. She came down with some writing, a chapter, or two, that eventually didn’t end up in the book – well, not in that form. Like a lot of first-time writers, the chapters she brought in were made up of bits and pieces pulled together thematically rather than running
chronologically. She was unsure how to proceed at that stage. From memory, at that stage she had interviewed and recorded her mother and hoped also to record her uncle and grandmother. But she was unsure how to use that material. We talked her through it and it was out of those discussions that she found the final form that the book took. That is the usual way I go with most inexperienced writers – simply follow the chronology and tell it first-person. I suggested the oral stuff be inserted in the narrative at the point it was told to her, so it fell in naturally. It’s the simplest way for new writers, because they don’t have to create or imagine a form for it. They just follow what they know. I also suggested something I often tell inexperienced writers – focus on one era, one chapter at a time, step by step. Think, what did I do and what happened then? If, in doing this, other things not immediately relevant occur to you, take notes and go back to them later after you’ve finished the particular chapter, the particular part of the story you are working on.

First-time writers often don’t know how to manage the full range of material they’re dealing with unless they start to break it down into the natural chronological order. And that worked very well with My Place. Around the time we were working on My Place, the lease on A Fortunate Life was up for one of its renewals and we negotiated with Penguin a distribution deal for all of our books, and that deal remains in place to this day. Penguin is our distributor, under contract; they distribute outside Western Australia, we distribute within WA. We were the first people Penguin had taken on outside their own stable of imprints. Since then they’ve taken on the distribution of a number of other publishers, local and international. I think we started the arrangement in May 1984 and that was the month that My Place came out. It was the first title under this new arrangement and it just took off. Interestingly, I thought this should be a good and important book, one that should be read widely. People forget that, at that time, in terms of fiction, women’s experience was starting to be noticed, a market for it was developing, and to a lesser extent, it was the same with non-fiction. And there had been some work by Aboriginal writers, but not a great deal. We felt that with the recent bicentenary and interest in Australian narratives, My Place would do well. And we did the same thing we did with A Fortunate Life, we got key people to endorse it, and it grew from there. Within the first few weeks of getting it out into shops it began to sell incredibly well and Penguin came to us to offer another lease agreement. But we were
able to say, “well, we have good distribution now, so we can handle it, thanks very much!” So we’ve retained the rights to *My Place* and the figures for it must gradually be closing in on those for *A Fortunate Life*. *My Place* would have sold over 600,000 copies and *A Fortunate Life* around a million. Now, often you only get one book that performs like this in the career of a small, independent press and we’ve had two. And of course people start to say, when are you going to pull out the next one?

**NK:** You’ve diversified by genre and sub-genre quite a lot as well, and have quite a mix of books. What would you say is your main emphasis?

**RC:** We’ve always seen ourselves primarily as a literary publisher. That’s the core of our list and we see our task as developing literary writers and literary writing.

**NK:** You also keep publishing poetry when many other presses have discontinued that genre.

**RC:** We publish three poetry titles a year when, yes, most presses don’t do any. But it’s a commitment we have, a sense of supporting that form.

**NK:** You published John Kinsella early on, and he has gone on to establish *Salt*, has an international reputation, and positions at Cambridge University and Kenyon College.

**RC:** Yes and the *Salt* poetry list seems to be growing, certainly in England. Our relationship with John has worked very well over the years. We published his first book and he says we did a lot of work to develop his career as a poet in those early years. Now that he has so many contacts, in Australia and around the world, that has worked very well for us, in many ways.

**NK:** You now publish children’s picture books and Young Adult fiction. How did that development come about?

**RC:** It was driven by demand. We were getting manuscripts from writers even though we weren’t publishing in that area. And a few of the
people we couldn’t look at went on to be successful, elsewhere.

NK: Can you name some writers who got away?

RG: Well, there was a young fella called Shaun Tan. We saw talent there but we couldn’t help him because we weren’t publishing in that area. Within twelve months we totally changed direction regarding picture books and went back to him but by then someone else had snaffled him. So, he’s a big name that got away. Glynn Parry is another one. He was sending in Young Adult manuscripts and we were saying, “Sorry, Glynn, we’re not publishing in that area.” There were two reasons for that. One is that, as a small publisher, you have limited resources and if you try to spread yourself too widely, too quickly, you run the risk of diminishing the core of what you already are doing, and doing well. The other reason is that it takes a while to build up in-house expertise so you know what you’re looking at and have a chance of making reasonably intelligent decisions. Even though you can use freelance people I still think that you have to have a good sense in-house of what the particular form is about and who the audience is. So I did a lot of homework, talking, over quite a period, to a lot of writers and academics, teachers, and librarians who specialised in kids’ books. I read a lot of kids’ books, and really immersed myself in that area for a long time. I received lots of advice – as with any area, some of it contradictory because people have strong, differing views. And after some time we felt we were in a position to begin feeling our way in this area of publishing with some confidence. And basically that’s how we work with every area. In a real sense it’s driven by authors who are looking for an outlet for their work. For example, moving into what is called “creative non-fiction” was an obvious direction to go in; it was so adjacent to what we were doing anyway as literary publishers. That was a logical, an easy step to take. Others have been more difficult, for various reasons.

NK: You also moved into crime fiction when you published Dave Warner’s *City of Light.*

RG: Yes, we tried that. In order to survive this long, it’s a juggling act of cross-subsidisation. We receive a small grant from the State Government of WA, through the Department of the Arts, but
that is about 10% of our operating budget. The rest has to come from sales. And poetry, you can’t publish other than at a loss. So we have to look at other ways of broadening our list to subsidise some of the more uneconomic things we do. Literary fiction is becoming harder and harder to sell now, even at break-even. For every one that does reasonably well, there are four or five that struggle to earn back their author advance.

NK: That’s a general point you’re making about literary publishing in Australia. What do you see is happening there?

RC: I hate these kinds of labels, but what is called “middlebrow fiction” is now dominating shops, along with that crossover of a personal narrative or “life story”, in fiction or non-fiction form. These have certainly taken over, or merged into, what was the literary fiction market. You’ll notice that there’s now a whole range of writing that is presented, packaged, as if it were serious fiction but is not necessarily that. So one of the things we’ve had to do is look at different ways of earning income to help us survive. To pay the wages, keep the operation going and continue to do all the things we want to do we have to try to get a proper mix, have some more commercial books to support the less commercial. So we’ve gone into cookbooks, gardening books.

NK: They are often very good sellers.

RC: They are. But the important thing we’ve realised – and this is another reason we’ve survived, and why small publishers who survive do survive – is that you’ve got to find the niche in the market that the big mainstream publishers aren’t covering. You can’t compete head-to-head.

NK: So what’s your point of entry in the cookbook area given that books by Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson are out there, tied in with TV shows?

RC: Well, you don’t try to do books like that. You wouldn’t call the books we do “cookbooks”, but rather, “food-based” books that include elements other than recipes. We’re about to do a book called Feasts and Friends. You might have seen a few months ago on SBS an item
on a programme that was run here, through St Vincent de Paul, I
think, to assist recent immigrant women and refugee women who
were on temporary visas and so forth. They started a thing called
“Women in the Kitchen” as a support. It was a social opportunity for
women from a whole range of cultural backgrounds who were
isolated here, to get together once a week around a big kitchen
table. They shared stories and recipes, and it became a life-line for
many of them. One of the women involved in that programme
approached us and said, “are you interested in doing a book on us?”
So out of that has grown this book that is a combination: it includes
a narrative from each of the eight women (one from the Sudan, one
from Vietnam, one from Afghanistan, one from Liberia, and so on),
regarding their background story and their story of coming to
Australia. Then there are eight or nine recipes from each of them,
and they talk about the culture of food in their countries of origin as
much as specific recipes. All the preliminary feedback we’ve had
from our marketing people says that this book should be really
successful. Again, it’s not competing directly with the Jamie
Olivers’, it’s aimed at a niche that nobody else seems to be working
in.

We’ve done the same sort of thing with our gardening books, and
have also done some local personality-based books. We did an
autobiographical book with a local radio person and that is doing well
all over Australia. Again, it’s recognising what your core market is and
working hard to expand from that core. It’s true for any publishing
but is especially the case with small press. You can’t run a hit and
miss kind of publishing, hope some strike and remainder the rest,
you really do have to work on finding a core audience to support each
title. And where you can build on that you start to earn enough to
begin to support less commercially viable, yet important texts – like
poetry. Now, with modern technology, the margins are better for
reprints than they used to be. We tend to do small initial print runs
and if the title takes off, we reprint. So you identify what your core
market might be for about the first twelve to eighteen months and
print that, so you’re not warehousing a lot of books if it doesn’t take
off, and you’re not paying the larger print bill, say for 10,000, when
you’re only selling 2,000. We are now much more careful about the
size of print runs and trying to identify exactly what the market
might be.
NK: What print-runs do you do across that range of books we’ve been discussing – literary fiction, poetry, food-based books, gardening books?

RG: First-up literary fiction would be about 1,500. For a writer who’s started to get an audience you’d do 3,000 and for someone you thought would do really well, 5,000. With a general non-fiction book, especially if it has pictorial stuff in it, you’re looking at a minimum of 3,000. Anything under 1,500, unless it’s poetry, is not really viable. Otherwise there would have to be a strong cultural, literary, social, or political value in the material, making us see it as important to publish. But then, the extent to which we can do that involves saying, “we’re taking a risk on this one, what cover do we have within the rest of the programme?”

NK: Other small and independent Australian presses have buy-in titles that occasionally help them through a difficult time. That is, their financial fortunes might be assisted by a book they didn’t initiate from original manuscript to publication. This was the case with Wakefield Press when they had Australian rights for a Guide to Harry Potter and a Guide to Lord of the Rings. And Pete Ayrton said Serpent’s Tail was assisted greatly by having the English language rights to The Sexual Life of Catherine M, which retired a lot of debt. By definition, FACP can’t do things like that.

RG: Well, as with any business, you have your lean times and difficulties, and so far we’ve got through those situations. Over the years I’ve noticed that the year after the rest of Australia has a slump, we seem to have a slump in WA. For example, 1988 was bad in the rest of Australia and it hit us in 1989.

NK: That was the period of the $200,000 debt, mentioned in an article in The West Australian.

RG: I didn’t know that had made it into the final printed article! Actually, it was a projected end of year debt on the basis of a poor first quarter performance. We had to lay staff off, and strip down to our ... underwear! And really negotiate the payment regime with our creditors. Because publishers can’t “go dark”, like theatres can, you have to keep stuff coming out. And we did, but we cut back our list
and delayed some titles. We had to strip the organisation back, make enormous cutbacks but that was the worst of it. Generally, with small press publishing, you never make any money. It's always a year by year, week by week, month by month affair, and cash flow is a constant problem. It's hideous. You can have a couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of books out there and you're on the phone chasing payment while someone is on another line chasing payment from you. That's constant, and ulcer-inducing, and is a reality of this life. The important thing is, never look for a single title to be your salvation. It *can* work for a while, and we've all had them ...

NK: As University of Queensland Press had Peter Carey for a long while.

RC: Yes, but you can never count on them. I'm not a betting man, I've never bet in my life, but I understand that when you bet, you put your money around a bit. I don't understand anything about stock markets but again, I gather the idea is to spread the investment around a bit. And that's what you've got to do when running a small press, you've got to minimise your risks and maximise possibilities. You *never* think, this is going to be so big we'll print 30,000 copies! No. You still print 10,000 and if it's as big as you hope, you'll do three print-runs. You won't make quite as much but you'll still be there. That's why you hear stories about publishers who invest everything in the next big thing, and then it *isn't*, and suddenly they are no more, or are bought out and become an imprint of another large publisher.

NK: In September 2005, *The Weekend Australian* ran a glowing tribute to you, Clive Newman and FACP, and yet more recently there have been reports in *The Australian* saying that FACP is in financial trouble.6

RC: From about December 2005 through to now the book trade has gone through a particularly tough time, resulting in most small or independent publishers experiencing increasing cash flow issues. The main causes of the current difficulties are the following. First, the market for literary fiction and non-fiction - a core of our program - has greatly diminished in recent years. This has been widely reported in the Australian media, for example in a major piece in the *Weekend Australian's Review* lift-out in April or so this year. Second, and
in part, I guess, as a result of the trade liberalisation measures introduced in the book trade by the federal government, figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that thirty percent of the sales of small publishers have been lost to large publishers within the past decade. Third, ABS figures also show that income from sales of new Australian books has plateaued in the past five years, while production costs have continued to increase. Finally, you have the addition of the 10% GST to the cost of books. However, as a result of a strategic review of our operations and an ongoing commitment of funding assistance from ArtsWA, FACP is currently implementing a plan to address its immediate difficulties and will continue to provide a vibrant publishing program in Western Australia into the future.

NK: For many years now, analogies have been drawn between mainstream book publishing and mainstream Hollywood filmmaking: each industry invests most of its resources in a few “blockbuster” or “tent-pole” titles hoping that will carry the day. I’m guessing that small/independent publishers would need to find some other ways of going about their business.

RC: That’s why I always argue – and it’s a view that is taken on by FACP – that we are not a leading title publisher, investing heavily in a “front list,” and crossing our fingers and hoping for the best with the rest. We don’t think that these are our three leading titles for the month, or the year. Ideally, every book should be seen as a lead title! Instead of saying, “how do we earn back on these major outlays?” we say, “how do we earn an extra ten percent, across the board, for every book?” Or as many books as possible. So you’re always looking for marketing angles to represent the books into the bookshops, you’re trying to work out how you can get that little bit more out of all of them. If one, two, or three take off, that's great but if that doesn’t happen, then at least enough of the rest have earned sufficiently to keep it all ticking over. One of the advantages we have is that we’re a non-profit organization. We don’t pay dividends, so we don’t have to look after investors in that sense. Our investors are our authors and our employees. So breaking even, although less than we’d ever strive for and settle for, is at least enough to survive on.

NK: You occasionally have a sponsorship deal with some of the books you
publish. How does that work?

**RC:** Occasionally, with a big art book or something like that, we’ll go to a corporation or institution because they have an established interest in the subject. Sometimes we can attract an outright sponsorship. Or sometimes they’ll pre-buy presentation copies for clients. That’s how that sort of thing usually works. But opportunities are limited.

**NK:** Have you ever thought of having a fund-raising drive, some kind of “Friends of Fremantle Arts Centre Press”, whereby you could generate some funds that would not be tied to any specific deal, that simply would constitute a way for these individuals and groups to show they approve of what you are doing and they want to help you continue?

**RC:** No, we haven’t done that. One of the problems for arts organisations is that there’s been a lot of pressure to work with the corporate sector. But there’s not a lot of money available and those corporations that want to do something tend not to be attracted to books. Generally, they tend to like big, black-tie events and books aren’t black tie events. So that’s difficult, and there is a real limit on the money that’s available in that direction.

**NK:** For a few years you had a joint venture imprint, Curtin Books, with Curtin university here in Perth. Although the books in the Curtin Books imprint were academic non-fiction works, the link with Curtin seemed to me appropriate given that they have the longest-running university course in creative writing in WA, and also bearing in mind that you published the early work of Elizabeth Jolley, who taught at Curtin for more than twenty years.

**RC:** There is so much research going on in universities. We get so many theses coming across our desks and 99% of them aren’t publishable as books but many could be, in time, given the effort. We always thought there was more to be done in that area and Curtin wanted to develop their own publishing outlet. And since it’s a small town, and we all know one another, we said “why set up your own infrastructure when it already exists here at FACP?” And that’s how that happened. It took us a while to come up with the right formula for the joint venture but it happened, and was copied by other
places. After producing a wide range of creative non-fiction books – 12 titles over three years – Curtin University was not able to continue its commitment to the program, and so that joint venture wound up in May 2006.

But the big problem with our organisation at the moment is ensuring it will survive its founding staff.

NK: Well, managing transition is a problem for all media tycoons!

RG: But unlike some tycoons, I’d be happy to pass the baton on! I’m not big-noting myself here but I doubt that we’d be able to find someone with my years of experience – and the same is true of Clive Newman as general manager – without paying a lot more than we are paid. And I guess people who have been with a press, or any arts organisation, for a long time, and have a passion for what it’s all about, put up with a range of things – long hours, low pay, limited resources – not to mention headaches, ulcers, early dementia. I don’t really mean “put up with” because I don’t think about it in those terms. It’s more than a job, it’s your passion, it’s your life, it’s what you are. I’m not saying I’m irreplaceable, it’s just that, for any organisation the transition from long-term or founding incumbents who have become synonymous with the organisation, to someone new can be very difficult.

NK: What’s your time frame for working out how to plan the transition?

RG: We’re in the process now. I’m 54 and Clive is 57, so over the next five to ten years we’re likely to be moving on, so we need to be thinking very seriously now about succession, and that’s what our Board is doing and what we are doing. Our biggest concern is to keep the place running and have it in a position such that it can continue long after we’re not part of it.

NK: At the start of the interview you mentioned that on first coming to Fremantle Arts Centre Press, you admired things like the Hackney publishing project. What presses around at the moment do you admire? Who is doing work that you think is worthwhile?

RG: Well, Allen & Unwin in recent years have been impressive. I certainly have admired Text Publishing. I don’t know what’s going to
happen there with the change of management and change of ownership, but it's important for Australian publishing that they maintain a strong presence. I admire anyone who struggles along like us. I admire Wakefield, the fact that they've survived as long as they have. And specialist publishers like Spinifex, Aboriginal Studies Press, Magabala, National Library of Australia. And I think everybody has to admire somebody like Canongate in Scotland, an extraordinary publisher.

My first love is quality literature and so the publishers I admire are always going to be people who are being bold about doing that. I think that's why Canongate excites me, not only for what they're publishing but how they're doing it, how they're prepared to take a risk with quality literature in a world awash with a kind of safe "McDonalds" literature.

NK: Are there particular cultural events or festivals that are important for FACP to attend?

RG: Yes, our local festival of Perth Writers Week, the Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney Writers festivals are events we always try to attend in one way or another. And various other festivals every now and then. We are represented each year at the Frankfurt International Book Fair, but the problem with us, frankly, is that we're so flat out keeping the place turning over that we don't have a lot of time to go to as many events as we should or would like to attend. Every time I get to a writer's festival or even go to New Norcia for a weekend to give an address, I straight away think, "well, I'm leaving my desk and look at how much I've got to do here, what will I do about it? I'll take that stuff home and try to finish it on Saturday." And that's what you're always thinking. You just don't have the time to maintain links at the level you would like to. We've got a full-time marketing person who does a lot of the link work for us to newspapers, festivals and specialist conferences through to international things like the Frankfurt Book Fair. We've been doing Frankfurt for quite some time and have sold a lot of rights to our books to other territories.

NK: Are some countries/territories better than others, Europe as opposed to the US?
RG: Well, yes! We’ve had success with indigenous titles in Germany and in the Netherlands. We’ve done well with fiction in Spain and Greece. When it comes to translations it’s pretty much into the European countries. English language countries can be hard. North America is tough because you’re competing against so much.

NK: Both Brenda Walker and Gail Jones published a couple of books with you and then went elsewhere. This must happen quite a bit – you bring along, mentor, new writers only to see them go elsewhere.

RG: That’s always going to be a difficulty for a small publisher. Ultimately, for one reason or another you’re not seen as offering what the bigger publishers can offer, and from day one we’ve lived with that. Elizabeth Jolley published her first four books with us and then ended up with Penguin via UQP. There are other writers who’ve stayed with us. When writers leave, the reasons tend to be the larger advances that other publishers can pay. There is also a perception that the distribution is better elsewhere. And sometimes it can be a feeling that there is more status to be had elsewhere, with a big multinational publisher. And I guess occasionally they might just not like us anymore!

NK: In retaining the rights to the first four Elizabeth Jolley books, it means that readers who might have encountered her writing first by way of Penguin, will still return to FACP to get the earlier books. The more a larger press promotes the later career work of a writer in their stable, the better it is for the smaller press who has some of the earlier works. Your backlist titles enter into a dialogue with the bigger press and the later work. Pete Ayrton said that after one of his crime writers, George Pelecanos, went off to Orion: the more money Orion spent advertising the latest Pelecanos novel the better it was for the Serpent’s Tail backlist.

RG: That’s true up to a point. We’ve had writers whose new book has been pushed by the new publisher, and we have dressed up the older work and put it back out there. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. But on balance I think it is rare that a small publisher really earns back on the investment they make. Perhaps the benefit is to Australian literature, perhaps to the large publisher. Of course when a large advance is paid they not only have to earn
that back but turn a profit as well. In those cases book sales figures which may have been a success for a small publisher are a failure for the large publisher. And as a result authors can soon find themselves without a home. We have writers who come back to us, for various reasons, sometimes because they are dissatisfied with the editorial work they receive at the other press. While we don't have big cheque books, we try to compensate in other ways. We are a very collaborative publisher, at every level of the operation. Our authors have more say about what their books will look like, what might be on the cover, than they would with probably ninety-nine per cent of other publishers. We put a lot of effort into working out the best way to communicate the author's intentions to the reader and when authors go elsewhere, while they might have received a bigger advance, they are often disappointed to find that they don't receive the level of attention they received with us.

I also know authors who have gone elsewhere because they thought their print runs would be bigger, and they're not! They're basically the same. The problem for us as a small publisher is that you must constantly be breeding new talent. Even if you're the breeding ground for other publishers down the track you're also the breeding ground for yourself in the first instance, you're constantly investing in your own future. So there's a lot of research and development, if you like, and it's the backbone of the organisation, not only in terms of developing writers but also for viewing possibilities in ideas and trends. It might not be a blockbuster but it might be a solid little performer, and that's all we need, as opposed to an investor-owned publisher. Some of those authors have a modest start but that kind of support and encouragement gives them a leg up either as a writer or in terms of their profile, and their second and third books do a lot better for us. That's why you are constantly turning it over with an eye for what is possible in non-obvious places. We pay as much attention to unsolicited manuscripts as any publisher in the world.

NK: You receive more than ten manuscripts a week. How much of that do you farm out?

RC: Everything that comes in is looked at. We have one person who is an assessment editor. She does a quick skim of everything, identifying manuscripts she will read more closely. After that a manuscript
might be read by one or two more people within the organisation, certainly before reaching acceptance stage. We have weekly editorial meetings and look at what's there to read and if we find that none of us can look at it immediately we might send it off to an outside reader. Sometimes we cover them ourselves, sometimes not. In other cases, as with any publisher, when we get a manuscript we think looks interesting but it's not in anyone's field here, we send it off to a specialist reader, sometimes two readers. Any research-based manuscripts we handle the same as academic publishers would, we get expert advice from the field.

NK: You've done some sports books. Rugby Union is coming to Perth as a substantial presence. Had you thought of doing a book on the building up of the Perth-based team, and the place of Rugby in a predominantly AFL and soccer market? It could sell into the Eastern States.

RG: I'm not sure how many people would be interested in a book like that. I don't know how Rugby works. We did a book by Matt Price from The Australian on the Fremantle Dockers which did very well in WA but barely scratched the surface in the eastern states. AFL is very tribal and if you are a Collingwood or a Hawthorn supporter you are unlikely to read a book about the Fremantle Dockers.

NK: You said earlier that literary fiction is your main interest. What current literary fiction appeals to you?

RG: One of my little tragedies is that I'm reading and editing so many manuscripts that I do not get as much opportunity to read other books as I would wish. But of recent reading I think Michel Faber is an extraordinary writer, John Banville, Margaret Atwood, Colm Toibin, Claire Messud. As a reader I'm also particularly interested in memoir, history, travel writing, cultural studies, science. Most recently I really enjoyed Jonathan Weiner's book on the Galapagos Islands, The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in our Time. It's a fascinating story.

NK: I loved hearing that the TV version of A Fortunate Life helped you buy a warehouse. Have you pitched other books to TV and film people?
RC: All the time. But, as you know, for every film that finally gets up there are hundreds that get stalled somewhere. We’ve had a lot get to that stage of stalled finance. We have a few irons in the fire there now but there are always irons in the fire in the film and TV industry. A documentary drama was made recently of one of our older books, *The Last of the Nomads* about Aboriginal people brought out of the desert. So, suddenly that old book got a new life. And a number of our books have been read on radio and been done as theatre dramatisations, or radio plays.

NK: To return to your comment on literary fiction being a struggle to publish over the last few years, you have had recent success with two books of that type, *Rhubarb*, and *Under a Tin-Grey Sari*.

RC: Yes, we had two first-time writers who really took off in the last twelve months. Craig Silvey is a 21-year-old and his book *Rhubarb* has had rave reviews around the country and is flying through its second printing and was taken up by the “one-book-one-city” program here in Perth.

NK: What is that?

RC: It’s a reading promotion campaign first done in California, I think, and recently done successfully in Brisbane, and now we’re doing it here as part of the Festival of Perth. It’s a partnership between the State Library, Chevron Corporation, *The West Australian* newspaper and local booksellers. It promotes the reading of a single book by the whole state, like a big book club involving schools, local libraries, private book clubs, a wonderful opportunity for any writer, particularly with their first book. And, of course, pretty good for the publisher.

As soon as I read the manuscript for *Rhubarb* I thought here is a guy who will have a career. The fluency was amazing. He’s a young writer and in many ways he’s a young writer on the page but in other ways he’s very mature. Like someone once said of Bruce Springsteen, “I’ve seen the future of rock and roll”. Sometimes you see a young writer and you say, “I see a future career here, I see a writer who’s going to go somewhere”, and hopefully that career is with us, but maybe not. Still, it’s exciting just to see that.

A bit earlier than Craig Silvey and *Rhubarb*, and once again that
rare combination of a work of literary fiction from a first-time writer, we had Wayne Ashton’s Under a Tin-Grey Sari. He calls himself an Anglo-Bango because he was born in Bangladesh, though it wasn’t called that then. The book’s in East Pakistan, as it was, and has sold extremely well. It had outstanding reviews, was featured on the ABC’s “Australia Talks Books”, and has been a darling of the book club circuit. Both those books have been optioned for film scripts, but whether anything happens there, who knows.

NK: Options are relatively cheap here aren’t they? You really want the big cheque that comes with the “first day of principal photography”.

RC: Absolutely! That was the thing about the TV version of A Fortunate Life – the first day of shooting you see some real money. It’s a different level, the money that’s involved in film and television as against the book trade.

NK: One occasionally hears stories of writers who feel they sold their rights, say to a film, too early for too little, or they hang out waiting for a better offer, and the deal dissolves.

RC: Yes, similarly with selling publication rights overseas, to another territory, and the author says, “I think we can do better than that”. We are basically acting as the agent in those situations for many of our authors and occasionally they mess around for so long that the offer drops, and nobody else takes it up. It’s always a delicate thing. As an author you want to get the best deal you can when you first take a manuscript to a publisher, but it’s tough getting published, so where do you draw the line in saying, “I’ll accept that”? It’s tough for first-time authors who often don’t realise that if the book is reasonably successful we, the publishers, would earn more or less what they earn. There’s this presumption that we’re earning much, much more. Obviously we’re looking to earn enough to cover our costs but beyond that is what you call real money and you don’t see a lot of that.

NK: Do you always sign authors up on one-by-one book deals, or do you try to lock them into a multiple-book deal, as many large publishers do?

RC: We do one-book deals. It’s never really been part of our thinking to try to anything other than that.
NK: Could you say a bit more about the economics of running an organisation like FACP? I have a good sense of how hard you all work, and how close to the financial edge you are working all the time. How many people are involved and how much money?

RG: I guess all up, we’re paying the equivalent of seven or eight full-time wages. That involves a lot more than seven or eight people! In broad we need a turnover in excess of a million and a quarter dollars a year. A million is a tough year, it’s survival level, just. We do about thirty-five books a year and that costs a lot of money and we’re not buying in titles, they’re all our responsibility from editing stage right through. So it’s an enormous workload. You’re not only reading and assessing a lot of manuscripts all the time, you’re doing the full range of things associated with all the various stages of assessment, editing, production, marketing and distribution, all the time. Everyone is multi-skilled in a way.

A strange thing happens when I meet authors to talk about their books. Even if I’m editing their manuscripts, I might be doing two or three others that would be at different stages of completion as well as checking proofs, and so unless I literally sit down with their manuscript ten minutes or so before they come in, to re-familiarise myself with the work, and recall what we’re talking about, I can forget the names of the characters or what the story was about. This sometimes happens when I meet authors at functions and they say, “what do you think of the manuscript?” And although it is something I’ve been working on and have read two or three times, I still have to stop and think which of the manuscripts I am currently working on, or have just completed, it is.

NK: So would $1.5 million a year be the sum that would give FACP the sort of breathing space it really needs?

RG: Yes, but by then increased costs will mean you’re still chasing your tail. Experience can easily make you pessimistic – or is that realistic? Publishing would not have survived were it not for modern technology. All the production on computers, editing and designing, has helped cut costs in significant ways. But compared with other industries our products have not kept parity price-wise with other products. Relatively, the retail price of books has moved very slowly, so while we cut costs, it’s actually in order to stand still. And in order
to stand still we have to take on more work. So, ultimately, all the technological advances really have done is enable us to get more ulcers, not make life easier. But, still it makes it all possible – “I can’t go on. I’ll go on”. I’ve always been particularly attracted to Beckett’s work.

NK: Has the Net helped, in that it makes you national and global very cheaply? People can visit your site and order books.

RC: Oh yes it’s been critical. We can see the patterns starting to emerge, and I think the Net will be increasingly important. Having a good website is crucial for a small publisher, especially if you are doing texts that will readily be used in education, especially tertiary education. At that level we are dealing with people who are very web literate and the website is where they expect to find information about new titles and other news. So you have to be mindful of that, and utilise it. We’re doing a major overhaul and redesign of our website at the moment.

The other thing about the Net is that, just as we have hardback and softback publishing, and audio publishing, I think web publication increasingly will be an important place of publication for some titles. I don’t think it will replace the other forms, but certainly for research-based works, dictionaries and reference works, online publication is the logical thing. These kinds of works already exist on CD ROM and so forth. Just to be accessible online is one way that kind of publishing will go. It’s already happening but I think increasingly what historically has been called academic publishing will go in that direction. Because again, it’s being delivered to a market that is increasingly literate in that form and will be continue to be so. And for small publishers, that form of publication is multinational, more so than the traditional book form. Although the book is portable in its own way, it isn’t necessarily international in the way the web can be. Whilst I think hand-held book devices will never take over from the hand-held ink-on-paper book, electronic reading devices will be an alternative form of publishing that will develop and grow. All of that has yet to settle down. The final form certainly hasn’t arrived as yet. Whatever happens there, the basic work that we currently do is not affected. Good editing, good design, good presentation is the same thing whether you put it out in hardback, paperback or online.
I remember some years back it was predicted audio books would wipe the rest of the industry off the face of the earth. Well, it didn’t and audio books didn’t grow anywhere near what people expected, though it remains a significant, small area. But certainly, electronic publication one way or another will be a much bigger thing than audio books.

NK: Has the increasingly visible, or growing literary prize culture been significant for your Press?

RC: Prizes have been very important, particularly in the early days. Operating from Western Australia, working away from the centres of Melbourne and Sydney, has always had its difficulties, but there has been some advantage to that. In the early days, particularly, for our size and the small number of books we did, we were really very successful in the number of reviews we got from around Australia. Maybe it was novelty value.

We found with literary prizes, from the outset, that unless it costs a fortune to enter, you enter! Because opinion-makers judge prizes and even if you don’t win, if you are attempting to draw attention to your list and key people are reading for this poetry prize, or that fiction or history prize, then they’re seeing your books regularly. And they talk to other people. And then when you win one every now and then, it helps the editors of the literary pages of journals and newspapers, dailies, weeklies to start looking more closely at your titles. With some prizes there are advantages in terms of direct sales, some more than others. In our experience the Miles Franklin is the one that leads to the biggest number of sales. After that it would be the NSW Premier’s and the Victorian Premier’s awards on a par. In terms of the response from readers, with most prizes sales drop away pretty quickly but you do see an initial little sales-spike here and there. In Western Australia we have the WA Literary Awards and we’ve had several winners of these. While that doesn’t affect Australia-wide sales, it certainly affects the local market. Because, let’s face it, when you walk into a bookshop, you can be overwhelmed by the choice. I’m in the trade and I’m overwhelmed! They’re all saying “buy me!” but it can be the Tower of Babel with so many voices of relatively equal pitch, so you can be drawn to whatever little badge or stripe is on a book, or a to a quotation from someone famous.
The other big prizes are the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards. Even being short-listed there is good because children's librarians, teachers, parents buy off those gold and silver badges. So even short-listing can lead to a significant jump in sales. And to win means a very big jump. Yes, prizes are important.

NK: And *Benang* won the Miles Franklin in 2000.12

RC: Yes, it's a very serious, and for some readers perhaps difficult, literary novel, but an extraordinary book. Getting the Miles Franklin sticker on the cover and the media coverage that followed the winning of the award, helped sales and the author's and publisher's profiles greatly. *Benang* has sold extremely well for a literary title.

In 2005 we published 35 titles covering all genres. Among the notable literary titles to appear in 2005 and early 2006 were new poetry collections by three leading contemporary Australian poets, Philip Salom's *The Well Mouth*, John Mateer's *Ancient Capital of Images*, John Kinsella's *The New Arcadia*. We published strong life-story-based texts by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown (*Kayang and Me*) and Peter Docker (*Someone Else's Country*), and novels by Chris McLeod (*Man of Water*), Ffion Murphy (*Devotion*) and Graham Kershaw (*Dovetail Road*).13

**Notes**


3 Dave Warner, *City of Light* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995).


9 W. J. Peasley, The Last of the Nomads (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983).

10 Craig Silvey, Rhubarb (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004).

11 Wayne Ashton, Under a Tin-Grey Sari (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002).

12 Kim Scott, Benang: From the Heart (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999).

13 Philip Salom, The Well Month (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005); John Mateer, Ancient Capital of Images (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005); John Kinsella, The New Arcadia (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005); Kim Scott and Hazel Brown, Kayang and Me (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005); Peter Docker, Someone Else’s Country (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005); Chris McLeod, Man of Water (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2006); Ffion Murphy, Devotion (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2006); Graham Kershaw, Dovetail Road (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2006).
ROBERT JAMES BERRY

GRASSLANDS

On moist midgy nights
eels are slippery as lightning
in the paddocks wheezy with mist.

I wait on day to wake,
for the fences to cement their
loyalty

for the insouciant cattle to rouse,
while my eyes graze the open palms
of fields

that are having a blood baptism,
their wonder leaching
away

with the gargle of rain,
with the far sea's choppy breathing.
ABANDONED HOUSE

I have been passing by this house for over twenty years. I don't know how it escaped the big fires in '39 and '64.

Always been meaning to stop and take a look at it. Before it was too late.

Now I start to walk around the house I see it is in worse condition than I thought. Time and the elements have done their work.

The big winds blow in this way. I have seen several houses and sheds collapse sideways.

The persimmon tree was always loaded with mythical golden fruit in the season. But I think the long drought has killed it.

Blackberries climbing in the windows. Not a pane of glass left.

The doors last longer than the window panes.

The old houses have the old fruiting trees. Quinces. Figs. Little bitter China pears. Often all that is left of a homestead is some gnarly old trees. And perhaps a chimney. Or some scattered bricks in the undergrowth.

I've never seen the house from this angle before.
The barn is in better condition than the house.
Bales of this season's hay stacked high.

I stepped inside the house.
It felt like trespassing.
But I trespassed.

What is left of the kitchen.
The old stove where they cooked their meals.

The front bedroom.
The ceiling is caving in.
Not a quick death by fire for this house but a slow, lingering disintegration.

As far as I can guess this is an old apple grader.
After people stopped living here, they used it to store equipment.

One last look out of the window towards the road.
So as I pass by the house I know what the reverse angle is.

The finial is gone.
Probably white cockatoos.
They love to chew on finials.
I don't know this yet but next year the persimmon tree will be laden with fruit.
my father
who may not be my father
after all (stem cell tests)
is forty years older than me

my mother
who is dead eight years now
was thirty years older than me
until she died gruesomely

my son
if he were to be born
this year
would be forty years younger than me

my illness
is only fourteen months old
and looks like a winner
wiping away my predicted life expectancy

by at least thirty years – the best years of your life!

my resilience
is yielding to steroid intake
which takes four hours to infuse
bloating me as if I had already died

my foul-smelling body
shall take just fourteen seconds to dissipate
into cinders into shards
weighing just four kilos on average

all this arithmetic
seems so fixed
against my incompleteness
my lifetime's search for comforting
It is tempting to begin with the enormity of the enterprise: some fifty volumes of poetry, 5000 words. More alarmingly put, approximately one poem per word. The equation, of course, is nonsensical, but the dilemma remains: how to give any kind of meaningful overview of a year of poetry in a handful of pages? If Sydney Morning Herald reviewer Andrew Riemer is to be believed, the very act of reviewing at this juncture has its limitations. In his recent review of Seamus Heaney’s latest collection, Riemer says that poetry “demands to be lived with, sometimes for decades, not praised or dismissed lightly”. On this basis, he offers the disclaimer that his own comments can only be “first impressions”. There is a rather circular argument to be made here: if serious assessment of poetry demands years, then why bother to review new work at all? The answer, of course, and the reason reviews continue to appear as they do, is that first impressions matter. For many readers, that initial sense of engagement or otherwise is the difference between closing the book or reading further.

In approaching this year’s work, then, I want to argue for the importance of “first impressions”. It seems to me that these so-called “light” responses are important, that they carry their own intrinsic weight, grounded in what might be considered egregiously uncritical notions such as readerly satisfaction or pleasure, and it is from this basis that I proceed. In coming to this task, I do so partly and unavoidably as a sometime poet and occasional academic, but most importantly, as a reader, and in this last category, as someone who approaches a volume of poetry with little more than a vague sense of optimism, the hope that it will engage, challenge, surprise, shake up settled notions. With such optimism in hand, why not, after all, praise or dismiss lightly? Why not place real value on these “impressions” – that pause language gives us when it suddenly exposes the texture of the real, that internal frisson at an unexpected image, a delight in the rhythm of a piece? And why not close the book and set it aside when the work appears willfully
opaque, or pedestrian, or pretentious, or simply fails to convince? In considering this year’s crop of work, I have done all these things.

In attempting an overview, annual anthologies seem the logical point of departure. Now in their third year, both Les Murray’s *The Best Australian Poems 2005* and *The Best Australian Poetry 2005*, guest-edited by Peter Porter, provide a sampling of the work of both established and new poets. Both volumes offer numerous moments of surprise, confrontation, and pleasure, as well as poems which, despite the moniker “best”, seem to me to be less successful – slight, overly prosaic, or insufficiently imagined. Porter reminds us in his introduction of the slipperiness of concepts such as “best”, particularly when dealing with the “embarrassment of riches” he considers himself to have faced in the selection process. Personally, I think there is something marvellous about having two different volumes each declaring themselves to be “best” sitting side-by-side on shelves; if nothing else it emphasises the subjectivity which is an inevitable feature of any review or selection. This is underscored by the fact that, despite the sheer volume of work represented, there is little overlap between the two volumes in terms of content, with Judith Beveridge’s “The Shark” and Craig Sherbourne’s “The Journo”, the only work to appear in both. Porter’s volume contains considerably less material than does Murray’s, a function in large part of the extended contributor notes which are a feature of the former. The other reason Porter’s volume offers far fewer poems than Murray’s is that Porter has chosen a number of extended poems, with work from four contributors alone accounting for over a third of the space allotted. Porter addresses this fact, noting that his decision is an “act of critical evolution”, that one of his concerns is with how poetry might claim back from prose “some of its empowering scope and dramatic force” (xiv). It is with this idea in mind that I want to turn to a brief discussion of the verse novel, a form which surfaces this year in the work of Geoff Page.

It seems churlish to be resistant to something whose resurgence has been credited in places with reconnecting poetry with a wider readership, but I have to confess that on the whole, my reservations about a poem often grow concomitant with its length; when the work moves increasingly towards narrative, too often it seems to sacrifice both focus and the richness of language poetry demands. When the particular demands of narrative incumbent on the novel form are added into the mix, the enterprise becomes a very difficult one indeed. A successful verse novel must achieve a nigh-impossible task – a balancing act or fusion of narrative and poetry in which both elements must pull together. In the service of narrative and character, the quality of the poetry must not be sacrificed, as it is here that the
distinction of the verse novel lies. *Freehold* ranges from the 1840s to the 1980s to cover a broad territory in its exploration of the issue of land rights and reconciliation in Australia. As discourse, it offers a thoughtful and complex engagement with these sensitive issues; as both poetry and narrative, however, it walks an uneasy middle ground, and ultimately fails to convince as either. The characters tend towards stereotype, without either the dimensioning and development one would expect from a novel, and the dialogue, which in its volume here sits rather uncomfortably within the verse form, shows little variance in tone across the entire cast. While it is not without lyrical moments, on the whole, the piece is disappointingly flat. There are poems lurking in here, along with a compelling narrative, and I found myself wondering whether this verse/novel’s concerns might not have been better translated to novella and/or a series of shorter, more tightly focused poems.

Another extended poem, but one which does not aspire in the same way to narrative form, is Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s *The Universe Looks Down*, which is described rather innocuously as a “long poem”. The poem’s basic structure takes the form of seven-line stanzas written primarily in decasyllabics; within this framework, Wallace-Crabbe also uses patterning, with the last word of the first line echoed or repeated at the end of the stanza, and rhyme. Within this structure, the poem gives itself free rein to play, ranging wildly across places, subjects, and times, giving equal weight in a very postmodern way to the classical and the contemporary, delighting in an at-times almost absurd conjoining of the two. There are characters and ideas in abundance here, so many that at times the reader struggles to keep up; then again, one has the sense that confusion is part of the point, and the poem self-consciously addresses itself to this on occasion: “My narrative’s run off the bloody track; / I must take measures now to get it back” (36). This is not narrative in any linear or traditional sense, and those narrative features Wallace-Crabbe makes room for – cast of characters, dialogue, a sense of forward movement and development of themes – never threaten to overpower or flatten the poetic quality of the work. Although there are concessions to ongoing narrative elements, the complexity and compression of the lyric remain primary; *The Universe Looks Down* is a highly charged, zany romp which manages to balance the concerns of both poetry and narrative in a memorable high-wire act.

Other prominent poets to feature in this year’s crop include John Tranter and Shane McCauley. Tranter’s *Urban Myths* brings together 210 poems, of which 40 are new, and 170 represent earlier work, ranging from *Parallax* (1970) to the present. Tranter has indicated that of the selected poems, he
chose those he was most pleased with, but that he also wanted to cover the range of different things he was doing over the years. Tranter loves playing with form, and there is much of the experimental here, along with a range of different structures, from flowing verse narrative to the constraints of haiku and haibun to the sonnet, sestina, and pantoum. The work ranges from the seemingly autobiographical to the brazenly imitative, with Tranter’s ventriloquism on show as he adapts and plays with the work of other poets; if there is a unifying quality here, it is that all of the work is seasoned with Tranter’s characteristic wit, his deep sense of irony and parody.

McCauley’s Glassmaker is a slimmer volume, an elegantly designed hardback whose content in many ways seems to reflect the principles of its production values. Many of the poems themselves are concerned with the act of crafting, of representation and translation, and art as a medium for these processes. In “The Art of Sumi Painting”, McCauley explores the relationship between objective reality and representation, the way in which the “alchemy” of the artistic process can act to re-position the real in a kind of transcendent space: all it takes is three simple steps, and "loqats/have ripened beyond all withering" (88), and in the subsequent “Sumi Painting in the Rain”, the steady hand of the artist “here controls the storm” (89). In its references to the scene it depicts, the latter poem is full of movement, but in the end, McCauley reminds us of the untraversable gap between signifier and signified, as “The painting itself is still / as a mountain dawn” (89). The image of the glassblower informs the work in complex ways; the glass bubble created contains a galaxy, but is rendered fragile and potentially transient by the act of representation, always on the point of an irrevocable shattering. There are echoes here of the Japanese concept of aware, a recognition of the pathos and beauty which inheres in the transience of things; when read with this image in mind, a poem such as “Shikata Ganai”, with its evocation of the “blueness of the sky”, the “everyday Monday morning”-ness of the moments before the atomic bomb was released on Hiroshima, becomes chilling in its aesthetic. Here is a world moving inexorably towards its own rupture, in which every moment closer to tragedy is rendered all the more beautiful by the inevitability of its passing.

On an entirely different scale, Jane Williams’ collection The Last Tourist, which draws on motifs of journey and transition to explore a wide range of experiences and states of being, deals in small slices, in fine strokes. With a deft, restrained hand, Williams holds the everyday moment up to the light, exploring and illuminating with careful precision. The opening poem, “Alms”, is forthright in its approach: here, as you “find your self unsure reaching out making a wish / the light cutting off your hand the bowl falling
breaking taking flight” (13), you enter the transformative space of poetry, a space in which everything shifts: shapes are not what they seem, subjects collapse into one another, boundaries of time and space are transgressed, and the “you” of the poem moves increasingly towards uncertainty, a destabilisation of perception and order. Poet and reader traverse the familiar as strangers; under the gaze of “the last tourist”, the known world becomes a site of exploration, a landscape to be travelled and reconfigured. In the poems that follow, Williams invokes this positioning to effect a seamless movement between the visible surfaces of the everyday and the startling depths beneath. Many of these poems dwell upon themes of ageing and loss, and they do so with images that are both unexpected and compassionate. In “Sea change”, “fingers ransack faces for clues to the past … tongues lose their places momentarily / everything leaks”. At the same time, Williams turns her exploration of the image out to larger ideas: in the line of elderly people, “there’s security in the middle / away from beginnings and ends”, and a woman’s voice “spirals up and up/in the universal language of the homesick” (15). Whatever the objective reality Williams is writing about, her eye is always on something larger, on the connections between these concrete moments and the abstract, connections she allows to speak for themselves, rather than hammering the point home. The reader does not feel the heavy hand of the poet here, but rather “the eye of the poem / blinking / surprising itself / like a paper cut” (57).

Themes of loss, separation, and desire recur also throughout Yve Louis’ The Yellow Dress and Annette Marner’s Women With Their Faces on Fire, both of which I found rather uneven. The early poems in Louis’ collection have a naturalistic quality, and it is in this mode that she is at her best. Sensual poems such as “Other Lives”, “Hub of the World (the old doctor)”, “Inheritance” and “Trust” are elegant in their restraint, engaging with themes of ageing, memory and notions of home. Louis’ work here is firmly grounded in a sense of place, and her landscapes, whether interior or exterior, are convincingly sketched. As the volume progresses, however, Louis moves into rather different territory, and it is here that her footing becomes less sure. The poems in the sections entitled “The Green Hood” and “The Yellow Dress”, are rather overwrought, veering at times towards sentimentality and cliché, and the connections Louis’ seeks to forge between the personal, the metaphysical, and the mythic seem rather strained. Marner’s work also tends towards the sentimental at points – “There is a perfect teddy bear / the child in me / cries for in a dream, / but when it comes / it’s wrapped in barbed wire” (29) – and much of the language is surprisingly shallow. Words such as “hunger”, “grief”, “loneliness”, “broken”, “agony”,

64
and “thirst” appear frequently; the work is full of wounds and broken hearts, of love and pain and longing, but too often this is stated, rather than felt, seeming to sit on the surface of the poems, rather than being embedded within. The image and concrete detail depicted are often insufficient in themselves to evoke the emotional resonance they reach for, and one has the sense that the poems attempt to make up for this by explaining or describing emotional states, with recourse to what is often rather empty language.

Mal McKimmie’s collection *Poetileptic* does not suffer the same weaknesses; McKimmie is a gifted wordsmith who seems to wrest language, hard-won, from a place of resistance and twist it emphatically to his ends. The work takes as its primary focus the poet’s own experiences of epilepsy, reaching at first towards what he terms the “blue splinter” (23) in ferocious, disruptive language, and then opening out into the quiet vulnerability of “The Brokenness Sonnet”. McKimmie plays wildly with image and metaphor, stretching language tightly in an almost manic staccato that seems at times to echo a kind of wild firing of the synapses. McKimmie uses this play to great effect elsewhere in the book where his scope is broader; his “A life in the day of a fly” (65) is one of the most effective and chilling “political” poems I read this year.

Susan Hampton’s extended narrative poem, “The Kindly Ones”, which gives her collection its name, also constitutes a kind of fusion of the modern and the classical, shuttling back and forth between contemporary Australian space and the Greek Underworld of the Furies. The individual poems in the first half of the book are a diverse bunch, ranging from wry sketches of Australian landscapes to richly detailed vignettes and narratives with an autobiographical quality. At the same time, they lay the groundwork for the second, with many of the poems evoking both the classical landscape and the moral concerns which are addressed to such compelling effect in the extended poem. In its unlikely yoking of contemporary New South Wales and Greek mythology, “The Kindly Ones” is a kind of fantastical travelogue which poses questions about the timelessness of myth: when the Furies interact with the present-day, they serve a function which parallels that of their classical existence, and the various stories that are enacted in the poem also have clear dramatic and moral connections with that world. On one level, the poem functions effectively as a satire on contemporary Australian culture, but its real achievement lies in its exploration of the nature of tragedy across the great distances it traverses through time and space.

A similar conjunction of the classical and the contemporary is a feature of *Phosphorescence*, the debut collection from Perth poet Graeme Miles. Miles is well-versed in the classics and his knowledge of Greek literature informs
some of his work, most notably the central, extended poem “Circle and Line”, which evokes Virgil’s *Georgics*, moving between the classical world of Orpheus and Aristaeus and the “bob-cut bush by Lake Joondalup” (34). Miles wears his debt to the classics lightly, writing with wit and humour, losing his Orpheus “up / and down on Escher stairways” (38), and many of his poems mine entirely other territory. Images of growth and fecundity abound, and many images recur and inform each other across the collection; the snakes of “Some Things the Body Knows”, “Some Hours”, and “Two Dugites” cross-pollinate, layering and texturing in dialogue with each other. There is a concern also with ways of seeing and their implications: the road in the rear-view mirror at night “appears in quick bites” (13); the sight of a tiger snake “brings you into its world” (14); on the drive home “something to decipher swings into sight / It appears in clues like an old English riddle: / flame first” (33). Much of this, of course, has to do also with the poetic process, and nowhere more so than “Perth Winter Liquid”, which opens: “To be really here / is to see the invisible liquid in a garden, / clearer than oceans ...” (76). Miles’ voice is quiet and assured; despite the breadth of his scope at times, there is no posturing here, just a sure, steady hand.

With a smaller but no less satisfying reach are Penelope Layland’s *Suburban Anatomy* and Aidan Coleman’s *Avenues and Runways*. The former consists predominately of concise free-verse poems in which each word is carefully measured. With striking precision and economy of language, Layland addresses subjects such as pregnancy, friendship, home- and small-town life, subjects which, if not entirely “suburban,” are certainly of the sort that might be considered “domestic,” inhabiting a tightly bordered world. However, although these may be “everyday” landscapes, they are in some ways fundamentally closed to the reader; the personae of these poems patrol her borders carefully, narrating her surroundings with a detached, deflecting observation. There is a controlling, proprietary tone here – “my horizon”, “my foreign hills”, “my dying sun” (7), “my kind”, “my folk”, “my people” (20) – even as the “I” is de-emphasised, used sparingly throughout the collection; what matters here is access, rather than involvement, and it is access which is granted to the reader, rather than entry. As Layland writes, somewhat self-reflexively, in “Within miles of you”:

... the gap between us never lessens
nor will –

I’ve always been a watcher
of yellow-lit windows across black fields.
I imagine you at your table, reading
and I at your door, hand raised
but still. (5)

In form, Coleman's work has something in common with that of Layland—these are, for the most part, short, tightly controlled poems which sit quietly on the page; a couple are only one or two lines in length, and consist simply of a single, keenly observed image. I find myself in two minds about this: its simplicity and directness is appealing, but there's something a little cheeky about it—after all, an image is not a poem, is it? Needn't there be a larger landscape here, a place within which the image might embed itself, find deeper context? Can it be enough to simply say:

"Sunset"
This hemisphere, like one hand
shielding a match from the night (28)

or

"Airship"
The moon's speech bubble (40)

I think it can. Indeed, I would argue that here is where the real strength of Coleman's debut collection lies. Coleman is first and foremost an imagist, and his ability to let an image sit, to allow an unspoken landscape to accrete in the spaces around it, without adding context himself, is admirable. To say that Coleman's work is sparse, unembellished, is an understatement, but it is all the more powerful for its simplicity; Coleman's images are chosen with such precision that they work overtime, a few brushstrokes evoking entire landscapes:

Shine of weather inside-out:
sun pays your bills and writes
your essay for you;

you don't need a big backyard
for sun: a deckchair
and a lemon tree, its pockets bulging. (13)
Unadorned and direct, these images evoke an uncomplicated innocence. As a whole, the collection is characterised by a kind of optimism, a faith in the clarifying potential of small moments and captured fragments. That is not to say that Coleman’s is a small vision; although he never ranges far from home for his subject matter, the connections he makes embed his work within a larger context, one which he distills and delivers in small, controlled bites. These are poems which don’t need a big backyard; still, their pockets bulge, and much of their pleasure is to be found in the movement between their simplicity of form and their rich implications, “the vague idea of galaxies” buried within (61).

Another debut collection comes from Melbourne-based poet Tina Giannoukos. *In a Bigger City* also positions itself within an urban landscape, but Giannoukos’ city is a very different one to that of Coleman. The opening poem, “Zone chaos”, sets the tone emphatically, from the title itself to its “abandoned cars,” “backpackers dumping their bombs before returning home”. The city is “[o]ne more place to decay”, and the process is inexorable: “next year more cars to impound but who’s counting?” (11). It’s Giannoukos who’s counting – her city is crumbling, empty, unfathomable, populated by “drug dealers street kids and the homeless” (13), by lovers who fail to connect. It is a space which at once possesses you, making of you a stranger elsewhere, and shuts you out; many of the poems are characterised by a sense of dislocation, of alienation. The “I” here is at once compelled and repelled by the city, which functions not simply as external landscape, but as something integral to identity; a carefully strung tension between belonging and alienation energises the work. Giannoukos ranges from Melbourne as far afield as Greece and Egypt, placing these different locales in conversation with each other as she builds the complex and contradictory landscapes of her personae. There is beauty here too, somewhat paradoxically rooted in the ugliness and contradiction Giannoukos foregrounds; there are moments of grace to be found in the negotiations one makes with this difficult environment, “bubbles of hope” which come upon one simply sitting at tramstops (24). In the context of the collection as a whole, though, such moments are hard-won. For Giannoukos, beauty and poetry emerge from ugliness, from complication and the struggle with these unruly elements; they are not, as she tells us emphatically, the easy, clean lines of “a god or two glimpsed running barefoot or something like that” (47).

Engagement with a distinctive physical environment is a feature also of John Millett’s collection, *The People Singers: The Surfers Paradise Poems*. Millett’s work is full of inventive imagery – a “pale bitch / invites [a street preacher] into the fog / behind her eyelids” (11), children on the beach “sing
to a meniscus" (24) and widows “walk through their own skin” (55). However, the subject matter never strays far from Gold Coast stereotype – widows whose smiles have been shaped by plastic surgeons (16), dreaming of “horny young men” (55), a wealthy CEO who “feels around for himself” in vain (40), and from this base, the poems struggle at times for authenticity. In the biographical note that opens the volume, the Gold Coast is described as “sometimes reviled but much loved”, and Millett is at his best when he allows the latter to infuse his work, when he sketches his subjects with real affection and empathy. Poems such as “Call Girl from Burleigh Heads” and “Funeral Parlour” are among the strongest here; these are understated, moving poems in which Millett does not follow what becomes something of a pattern in this collection – one in which a stereotype or caricature is sketched, and then “lifted” towards the end of the poem by a transformative moment. Too often, these shifts in tone are enabled by rather conveniently packaged images such as the night, the stars, or rivers/seas. Millett’s continual recourse to tropes such as these to dimension his subjects feels manipulative, and the “pattern-effect” is not helped by the fact that there is little formal or aesthetic variance across the collection. This cumulative sameness becomes somewhat tedious after a while; perhaps this is a collection most effectively sampled in small bites.

Another collection well suited to “dipping”, although for different reasons, is M T C Cronin’s *The Flower, The Thing*, which contains 121 poems, each taking as title and subject matter a specific flower, alphabetically ordered, and each dedicated to a specific individual or individuals of significance to the poet. Something of Cronin’s process is suggested in the poem “Dandelions”, dedicated to herself in which she writes:

... and dwelling
here I think, not how insignificant
we are, but how significant; pick one
flower as I put down another (20)

The contemplative poems are almost all identical in length at exactly twenty-five lines, but range across a variety of forms. A poem for Marcel Proust – “Fifteen Chrysanthemums” – appears as a numbered list (26), while “Bloom”, for James Joyce, is a stream-of-consciousness poem in Joyce’s characteristic associative “free-dream” style (8). Many of the dedicatees are familiar names, and there are clear and compelling relationships between their own work and the territory of the individual poems, both in form and theme. This is a considerable achievement, each poem at once negotiating an
intricate knot composed of its objective centre (the flower, the thing), and the debt the poet owes the dedicatee. These are intimate pieces, complex meditations on surface and interior, and while there is a sense that certain meanings or resonances may be closed to the reader, at the same time, the work is generous and expansive; while an acquaintance with the life and work of the dedicatees significantly dimensions many of the poems, they remain accessible and satisfying in their own right.

A new initiative from the Poets Union, emerging from the Young Poets Fellowships, brings a debut collection from Melbourne writer Lucy Holt, entitled *Stories of Bird*. Holt’s reach is eclectic, the poems in this small volume ranging from a close-to-home grounding in the natural, and the minutiae of relationships to Greek mythology, the 1864 autopsy of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, and the phenomenon of youth suicide in a Brazilian tribe. The strange and the everyday are brought close; Holt’s particular vision opens up cracks in the familiar, tilting the known world on a startling new angle. It is at once in the lived moment – “we dive in, suddenly light / and jointless ...” – and referentially mapping its own progress through time and space – a frangipani resurfaces “as a beautiful relic” (27), and lovers offer themselves up for geological and archaeological observation, positioning themselves in “Sedimentary Layers” (12), “petrified in bed as two delicate spoons” (11). Holt’s territory charts always for itself a “Third End”, a “trajectory older than bridges and far more stable / invisible one-way paths ...”; here, the winner is “the one to burst open the moon” (8), and Holt does so generously. The exuberance of her vision is complemented by the deftness of her touch, her confident formal control, particularly evident in the collection’s longest poem “The Head”. An at-times romantic sensibility is underscored by a pleasing musicality; Holt has found a rhythm all her own.

Another compelling first collection and the winner of the 2006 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry, Jaya Savige’s *latecomers* is divided into three sections. The first, “The Unofficial History Pavilion”, deals with a range of overt themes, but each is refracted through an overarching concern with time – the rate and effect of its passage, the weight it brings to bear upon arrival and departure, the ways in which the present moment is always referential to both past and future: here, new arrivals are immediately assaulted by the heavy presence of the past, finding at every turn “a heart in the cement” (11). The final poem in this section collapses notions of the old and new within its title; it is “New year’s day 1239”, a new morning in an already-dead landscape. Somewhat ironically, we reach the “unofficial history pavilion” only here, in the section’s final poem; latecomers ourselves,
we can only move on, without having savoured the fruits of arrival. This concern with time, and with the way in which the moments of which it is composed interact across a continuum, continues in the subsequent sections of the book, surfacing as an ongoing interest in history and its implications; Savige “know[s] / it is always another / that makes this moment possible” (61). The Bribie Island poems which are a feature of the second section, “Skirmish Point” depict a landscape which is never far from its history, whether an “official” history which carries with it pervasive echoes of violence, or the more personal “memories” written upon it physically. In these latter sections in particular, there are numerous poems in which a freer form gives the reader the sense that these are intervals, fragments scooped from a running stream of language, rather than something complete in and of themselves. Poems such as “Intercession”, “Neomenia”, and “Tarpaulin muster” begin and end mid-flight, eschewing the notion of a point of departure and arrival; here, language, as well as history, is an ever-present continuum.

It is tempting to end with the enormity of the task, as something of a caveat for the great volume of new work I have not been able to consider here. Peter Minter’s blue grass is exhilarating in its visionary sweep, and John Mateer’s The Ancient Capital of Images ranges widely across physical landscapes, combining finely tuned observation of the “real” with metaphysical rumination. Craig Sherborne’s Necessary Evil and Jennifer Harrison’s Folly and Grief chart more personal territory – Sherborne blending evocative sketches of family and the worlds of racing and journalism with satirical social observation and Harrison meticulously exploring a vivid canvas, an idiosyncratic landscape densely populated with an eclectic pastiche of found objects. What the passage of decades will do for any of this work remains to be seen, and I leave such assessments for readers more patient than myself; for now, thankfully, there is much to reward a reckless, impressionistic optimism.

Poetry received 2005–2006

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review


The river is clearer today -
slicked and peppered with refuse
but the bottom is visible
sludge and rocks, streaks of fish.
The sky spreads along its surface.

Somewhere a cock crows.
You notice it first and hold out
your question to me.
The mangrove toughness
and the rankness of the day’s flow
the old mausoleum built in the rock
those other ghosts, harried
or ages old, also have place for
archaic suburban memory
chicken-wired to a back fence.

How are we prepared for that under this sun?

The rooster will crow more than thrice
as if it’s run out of excuses, memories, betrayals.
The dogs are always there, searching
the wind’s complexities, nestings
of detritus and sifted leavings.

Helmets and wheels, roll and hello
along the bike track.
The lone man will watch us and circle on.
A game will swear on the oval
until the last goal practised
that it was played straight.
I will guard you at the amenity block door.

We are playing this as straight as we possibly can.

And though the energy seems immense
as it pours from the sky
dropping fuel and the passing minutes
we only inch forward, exploring
the surface and the refractions of an elsewhere.
The newly silvered pipeline
conducts the way of waste
although graffiti will grow there again
etched, temporary and hardly pondered.

There is no way to exactly catch hold.
The minutes pour on older passings.
The cycles skim by, concentrated or laughing.
There is no way to exactly be
happy or unhappy.
Each second adds its share
the pressures
the subtle foolings, the letting go.

On the tiny beach below are clusters of plastic
the opaque milkiness of trashy juice
quick sidelines of need.
But a couple is launching a kayak
from there with effort
with muscle and slippage.
“She looks terrified”, you say
but I don’t know if concentration
is a kind of fear.
If that is too exact then determination.
It may not make you glide, it may not set you free
but she will get out to the middle
and somehow handle the tide
stroking stroking stroking
as the waters turn again to the bay.
And, yes, we see her later closing
on the other shore.

And step back over the pebbled path
past gas lines, under empty kapok branches
past the pumps and the canal
where the death birds drink and scavenge.
The dog by the goal mouth
is watching us, tongue out
in its testing way and a weariness
edges me, not exact as fear, less alert
as though a memory drags
the bones I feel forced for home.

Perhaps towards, perhaps half-way
up the hill there’s an orange tree
in a front yard, each fat globe is heavy
but high. I cannot reach
the overhang. But again if it makes me
happy or unhappy
does not much matter now.

Cloud masses behind the hill
a car chokes into the kerb
the neighbours are flicking a frisbee
across the street, lime green plastic
skating seconds of energy
not allowing afternoon its balmy end.
And no one can exactly hold
or catch it straight.
MICHELLE CRAWFORD

THE MAD WOMAN

in a small company town lounge room the women whisper about the mad woman like fourteen year olds in the toilet block at recess

the popular one declares the mad woman too freaky to fit in here her tattooed body and shaved head doing her no favours at all

a nurse not naming names (of course) tells of numerous help calls made by someone late at night while her husband works

& the women feel sorry for her for a few moments it can’t be easy to be different in a place like this to not fit

but hearing about a certain incident from someone who knows someone who knows something they change their minds

& laugh about the crazy one always threatening never meaning it attention seeker making no effort with anything

until the day she cleaned her house, mowed the lawn, paid all her bills & splattered her brains over her lounge room walls
One thousand eye-shaped shells enclosing nuts have watched their brides, the flowers, die for wind, for the river, for rain, the earth and clouds. All escaped fire – that was for the other hill where the shepherds grazed themselves on love and the memory of their women – but all succumbed to time, rushing finally from the tree as if startled birds in an upside-down world. And, at completion of the word, death finishes blossom and the image takes itself to the still pool that settles at the end and satisfaction of all desire and floats there, inseparable from what slyly casts its reflection. What a quiet time for the tree! Now there is only the eternal moment in which to sculpt a space to insert oneself into and the tree fits finely into a sky that destines the soft earth to be its bed. It curls roundly over the small hill’s curve – which is to have a shoulder: that earth or that sky? They both lie pressing against the other like lovers with the almond tree a thorn in their side. Many many eyes of the thorn cut the day and watch how light seeps through the horizon’s bloodied gap. Soon, of course, it is dark and every flower given up to a hundred years of blindness. They smell, tantalizing, of the sun in another place, small voices coaxing the living to indeterminance.
AMANDA MAXWELL

STARTING WITH SUMMER

For the first three months it didn’t rain and I didn’t have any friends. The heat was everywhere in this new place, under my feet the ground was as brown and soft and loose as a lizard’s back. The gardens of Perth wilted around me, then became crisp to the touch.

On this side of the Nullarbor my skin felt parched and the cowlick that had always been there dropped out of my hair. My whole world had been turned upside down. Mum had sold our house in Melbourne and moved with him to Benalla. She said I had a choice, but where the hell is Benalla? I didn’t want to leave Melbourne, but no one asked me anyway. I was thankful when my brother Dion flew over from Perth to help us pack up the house.

“Finish your exams and come live with me if you like, Spud,” he’d said, “Perth’s not bad, you can get a job there, or study. The fishing’s alright.”

I’d been here for six weeks before I saw a cloud. It was the end of January, hot as hell when it came. I was resting on the crest of the Joel Street hill on Dion’s bike, my fishing line under my arm like a javelin. The cloud was almost transparent, nothing more than a sigh really. If I had been anywhere else I would have missed it. As it was, I pulled off the side of the path and sniffed madly at the air for that bloody, dirty smell that means it will soon rain. But the air was just salty and dusty and smelled faintly of the sulfuric algae that had clogged the Swan over summer, giving it a red skin, like the sun had given the rest of us.

Apart from that single day, the sky remained a flat, blue plain right through to the end of May. As the days went by I started to grow suspicious of the sky. It was impossible to tell if it was real, being so big and bright day after day. Lying on my back on the stiff grass out front I would pretend that I was looking up at the painted bottom of a back-yard swimming pool. Some days I thought about taking a hose and trying to fill up the sky, just so it could spill water back down on me and the lizards that dozed in the grass around me – but there was a water ban on and anyway, Dion’s rubber hose had split

79
open in the heat.

It wasn't just the sky I was suspicious of, so many other things in Perth seemed too bright in colour, too vivid, too strange - the sea was so blue that it almost looked purple, the bush flowers smelt just like lollies, the soil was sandy even miles from the beach. In the beginning, I distrusted almost everything in this whole strange city. Except the lizards. There were lizards everywhere, little geckos (*Diplodactylus* family) on the walls, fat bob-tails (*Tiliqua rugosa*) swaying across the roads, huge bungarras (*Varanus gouldii*) stuck to tree trunks where the bush got thick and my favourite species, the hostile but harmless blue-tongues (*T. occipitalis*) in our yard. I liked the lizards. They were quiet and un-assuming and they drifted around like the sun would never bother them, even if it burnt right through their tanned skin and cooked them alive.

Around the time of the cloud, I was invited to a party by my brother's girlfriend. Someone she knew was turning eighteen she told me, wasn't it time for me to try to meet some people round my own age? Maybe make a few friends to go to the movies with? I wanted to tell her that I would have made friends long ago if this torturous climate didn't keep everyone barricaded against the heat in their homes, their doors and windows and curtains all pulled resolutely shut. I wanted to paint her a picture of me running down the street calling at the top of my lungs:

"Come out and play! Come out of your caves! Get up off those cool floor tiles, you stole that trick from the dog!" But anyway, who could run with the whole sun pressing on their head?

My brother listened to the conversation from the kitchen, where he was drying dishes. It was obvious that the two of them had already rehearsed it.

"Dion," I said.

"Yeah, Spud?"

"I'm not a loser. As if I need you to go round getting your girlfriend to find friends for me. You really piss me off sometimes, you know that?"

He shrugged and mumbled something. His girlfriend looked over at him, wide-eyed and blushing. I didn't mean to be quite so harsh, but well, things happen how they happen, don't they.

I left the room and heard the front door slam a little while later.

"You made her cry," Dion called as he passed my bedroom door.

Good, I thought. You see, that is how I am when I am angry, I'm tough and I'm full of insight. I know a lot of things that other people don't know and most of all I know that I am right. But anger doesn't stay with me long, being angry gets boring. And usually after the anger drifts away I get the guilts. I get them pretty bad.
On the evening of the party Dion lent me a pair of suede shoes and a belt for my jeans. He drove us there in his Valiant, with towels laid over the vinyl seats to stop our arses burning. I liked that old car. The black dashboard, like everything else around here, had lost its true colour long ago and had cracked up in the sun. A line of dead flies, at various stages of decay, ran the length of the dashboard at the front where it met the dusty windshield. Under the setting sun those flies looked like a string of black beads, pearls even, and made the car seem girlish to me.

"Val's are good cars," Dion told me, "This engine runs and runs. Think she must have belonged to surfers though, the amount of rust on her body."

"And Val's a girls' name too," I said. It made me feel good that we agreed on her being a "her".

"Huh?"

"Nothing." I hate explaining myself.

At the party there were a lot of girls and women. The house was open-plan and the living area looked out onto a paved back-yard with a pool. A few little kids were bombing each other and scrambling on a lilo. There was water going everywhere, making rainbows under the floodlights. One of the women pressed a sweaty beer into my hand, smiled a red-lacquered smile and said,

"It's so lovely to meet you! You look just like your brother!"

The same woman offered me a little fancy cracker thing from a huge white plate.

"What are they?"

"Pate with green marinated olives on German pumpernickel." She had lipstick on her front teeth.

"Oh. No thanks, I'm vegetarian." I have been vegetarian forever. I don't care about animals so much that I don't want to eat them, and I don't mind the taste of meat, I just don't eat it. I don't believe that the world can keep on coming up with enough meat for us all to eat for much longer so I've opted out early. I could go on about this forever, and I could have told it all to the red-mouthed woman, but again, I hate explaining myself. And anyway, the next thing she said to me was, "Oh but it's okay, this is only chicken pate!"

Right about then I started to get that sick feeling I get when I am way, way out of my comfort zone. It's like being dropped from the sky into the middle of the ocean, I know that I'm supposed to swim but I don't know which way because I can't see any land.

Dion hung round at the party longer than I thought he would. I figured that it was because his girlfriend was still there, or maybe it was so he could protect his girlfriend from me and my "attitude". He needn't have been worried though, if there is one thing that scares me, it's when girls cry. I've
stepped lightly round his girlfriend since that day when I caused the upset, I've come to realise that she isn't just pathetic, she is also inherently fragile. I'm not going to make that mistake again.

Anyway I was kind of glad that Dion did stay. On the one hand, it didn't really help the nerves to have him around to witness my lack of social cool, but on the other, it was easier to be introduced to girls by him than to have to introduce myself.

The girl who was turning eighteen had a nice face and eye-lashes like palm fronds. Her parents were big and white and she was small and brown.

"Her name is Lila. She was adopted a few years ago, from some war zone, I can't remember which one," Dion's girlfriend whispered to me. "Isn't she stunning?"

She was. Stunning in the way that a musical instrument can be stunning. A guitar or violin or something. You know, all polished curves and with no sharp edges for the notes to snag upon. It was easy to think of something to say to her too:

"Happy Birthday Lila."

Her teeth were white and nicely lined-up when she smiled. I found myself wondering what it would be like to be bitten by them.

I don't like to admit it, but I followed her round like a dog all night. Alcohol makes me brave, just the way it is supposed to, and she was so god-dammed cute in that dress that showed her brown back and those tall shoes that looked like pain. I took her glass whenever it was close to empty and filled it with champagne. I even switched from beer to champagne myself and when Dion hissed "You might want to slow down," I rolled my eyes at him and drained my glass.

I didn't say much else to Lila, I'm not a big talker - more of a thinker. Someone once told me that if you are quiet you can steal the whole intangible universe, I kind of believe that. She didn't nag me for words too much either, she just introduced me to the other giris who floated by in short summer dresses, layers gaping open in almost the right places as they stopped to hug her and kiss her cheeks.

"This is Dion's brother Spud, he just moved here from Melbourne." That was how she introduced me. Was I cringing at being called "Spud" by this pretty girl who I'd only just met? Nah, everyone calls me that and nothing else. It's just who I am. Anyway, she squeezed my arm when she said it and it made my chest thump like there was rabbit paw in there.

Midway through the party Dion and his girlfriend went home without me. He signalled that it was time to go, but I shook my head and waved him away. I wasn't ready to leave, to go back to our splintery little place and my sandy,
smothering bed. But after he'd left I realised the shoes he had leant me were giving me hell-awful blisters and my socks were already squelching with sweat. The booze was starting to bubble in my guts and tickle my head. I swayed a bit, trying to stretch my toes, and spilt some champagne on Lila's dress. She just giggled, making her curls bounce all over her bare shoulders.

"I'm going to sit by the pool," she said. And so I went and sat by the pool. She took off her shoes and laid them next to each other, close together on the lawn where the edge had been clipped in a perfect line along the red paving stones. Then she dipped her long waxy legs in the water. I pulled off Dion's shoes and plunged my feet in, quickly before she got a whiff. A boy drifted by us on the lilo and called out "Lila, Lila-loo-ila! Look at my grandpa hands!" She giggled with her eyes almost closed and legs swinging through the water. I wanted to slide her gently into the pool to see how that dress would stick to her, but instead I just sat beside her and felt drunk.

"Do you get many lizards in this yard?" I asked her.
"Umm, I don't know. Not really, I've never seen any."
"Oh, that's weird isn't it?"
"Is it?" She was smiling at me with those white teeth again. I grinned back, forgetting about the lizards.
"Do you like it here?" she asked.
"What, at your party?"
"No, here, Perth."
"I don't know yet." I couldn't bring myself to lie to her.
"I love it here." She traced a circle on the surface of the water with a pointed toe.
"The sky never changes, every day it's always blue. It makes me feel weird."
"It's black now." she said. I looked up.
"Nah, it's still blue. We just can't see it right now."
She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but I could see a giggle hiding just behind those pretty lashes.
"Whatever." I shrugged.
"It does change, just not much over summer. Well, not this summer anyway. When winter comes though, there'll be storms and rain and then the whole world will turn green for a while - you'll see." I tried to imagine that. I wondered where the lizards would go in a storm.
"I guess Perth's just really different to where I'm from."

Lila pulled her wet legs out of the water and hugged them against her chest briefly.
"Me too," she said, "People I care about don't get killed here."
I hadn’t thought about that. How come a girl can make you feel like such a loser while she’s just being friendly?

The next thing I said was, “Lila, do you have a boyfriend?” It was a bit cut-to-the-chase I know, but it was more appropriate than the “I think I would die for you,” that I wanted to blurt out. I’d never been confronted with such a warm and graceful person, and nor had my life ever felt so arid. Sitting so close to her I realised that I had hardly touched another person, not even Dion, since I’d landed in this salt-burnt place. The only living creatures I could remember stroking, were the bob-tails (Z. rugosa) who crept past me on the lawn. One I remembered had a ripe black tick stuck in the scales behind its head and had held still long enough to let me pluck it out and squash it flat between my thumbs before meandering away.

In response to the boyfriend question Lila nodded, caught my eye briefly then looking down at the water with an embarrassed smile.

“Where is he?”

“Oh he’s away, he works on the mines.”

“He didn’t come home for your party?”

“It’s not that big a deal.” Maybe she meant the party, but I wanted to think that it was the relationship that wasn’t a big deal.

“If I was your boyfriend I’d want to be round you all the time.” I was drunk, my tongue was getting lazy and the words came out sounding ridiculous. And I suppose they were.

She giggled and pushed me away. “You’re a sweetheart Spud,” she said, or maybe she said “You’re sweet Spud,” I don’t know, it was something like that. Whatever it was that she said, I took it to mean something like “Let’s spend the rest of our lives together, you and me and the lizards, we’ll never be lonely again.”

“Where is your boyfriend again?”

Maybe she was feeling uneasy sitting beside me at that point but I didn’t notice, I was concentrating hard on my variation of a Heath Ledger “meaningful” look. I should have known it wouldn’t work, acting like an actor.

“He’s up north, Port Hedland, he works for BHP,” she said.

“I wish he was here.”

“How come?”

“Because you’re here on your own and you’re fucking beautiful. If he was here I wouldn’t be thinking about kissing you.”

Lila frowned and stood up, her legs making a sucking noise as she pulled them out of the water.

The sky really felt as if it was falling on me at that moment. It came down as an old, motheaten blanket, pouring over me in heavy folds. Meanwhile, the
lovely Lila re-joined a group of girifriends on the patio and slipped her wet feet back into those killer shoes. I watched as the girls nodded and swayed with laughter. At me, I thought, probably they were laughing at me, sitting there on my own, wearing my brother’s clothes, ugly with drunkenness and stinking of loneliness. I got up and walked inside without putting my shoes on or looking back. I guess the red-mouthed lady wasn’t too thrilled that I’d padded all over the carpet with wet feet, but she smiled at me anyway, stopped me on the way to the front door and insisted I waited “One minute!” while she cut a huge chunk of chocolate birthday cake and wrapped it in a black paper napkin. I didn’t want the cake, but I took it anyway and closed the door quietly behind me.

Outside I started walking, not sure of which direction I was heading in, or how I was going to make it home. The roughness of the pavement hurt my feet and I wanted it to. I wanted to feel that pain in every bit of my body. I pictured myself stripping off and rolling down the road, naked, stones biting into my hips and knees, the warm bitumen rubbing my chest raw and grazing my forehead. I unwrapped the cake and threw it into the middle of the road. It made me immensely happy when it landed icing-down with a loud splat.

“Haaaa!” I shouted, “Happy fucking birthday Perth!”

Then I tied the shoelaces of Dion’s shoes in a knot and hurled them into the sky. They tumbled over each other upwards and outwards, until they snagged on the branch of a tall gum and stayed there, the shadow rocking back and forward on the road under a street lamp. I ran the rest of the way home.

When Dion asked me, a couple of days later, about the end of the party and the whereabouts of his shoes, I hissed at him – something I’d learnt from the bob-tails. He didn’t bring it up again and I did my best to put the whole night out of my mind.

A few weeks later, on the six o’clock news, the weather man did an amazing thing. He showed a pie chart that said there was a small chance of rain in the Perth Metropolitan Area for the following day. My heart grew almost unbearably loud and fast when I heard that and so I switched to the ABC channel and waited for the seven o’clock news for confirmation. The ABC weatherman described the likelihood of rain as “very small”, but there it was – a chance of rain. A chance of clouds – white and grey and fat and fast moving. Clouds that might have rolled over themselves and torn open with the force of cold rain. I wanted to be the first to get to those clouds.

“Hey, Dion, I’m going out.” I yelled as I left, “Might not be home tonight.”

The night was cooler than normal and my bike moved through it quietly.
I pedalled slowly, there was no hurry now, just long hours until dawn. I rode out from our place, along the train tracks to where I could cut across to meet the cycle path that ran beside the river. My legs and heart felt light as I rode. I think I was even humming a song, but I don’t remember what it was. The algae in the estuary weren’t as pungent as the last time I’d been down there and under the city lights the Swan was awash with ribbons of colour. I noticed how snugly the city sat between the rise of Kings Park and the curve of the Swan, the few tall buildings clustered together in the middle and the smaller buildings stretching away to the east. There were still a few boats out and people were fishing from the pillars under the Narrows Bridge.

It didn’t take long to reach the Joel Street hill. When I got there I pushed my bike into the scrub beside the path and climbed up onto a pile of yellow builders’ sand in a vacant section. There was no one around and I dozed through the night, nestled in the sand. I dreamt of Lila.

Dawn was hot from the moment the sun came over the hills. I lay on my back and waited while the darkness retreated, giving in first to a dull grey haziness, then to the everyday cartoon-blue. There was a single cloud, thin and high in the sky. It was long and stretched out into a number of parallel strands, tapering away to nothing at the ends. The cloud was the colour of water rather than white, but it offered nothing in the way of a hope for rain. Disappointed I stood up, shook the sand out of my pants and t-shirt and retrieved my bike from the bushes. A little sliding skink (Lerista lineata), covered in a fine gold stripes was sunning itself on the seat and clung to the spot with its stumpy legs even as I pulled the bike upright. I stroked it lightly and it slid away like a snake, into the palladium of the scrub.

There was no point in staying up there if the rain wasn’t coming, so I rode down the hill and veered away from the river, north towards Lila’s suburb. I couldn’t remember where she lived but cycled around the quiet, palm-lined streets until I came across my piece of chocolate cake, still sitting in the middle of the road. I picked it up and found that it was as hard as rock, baked again over these weeks in the sun. The icing had melted away, but aside from that it hadn’t been touched, it was just a hard brown cube. It didn’t seem real. I put it back on the road and squinted up at Dion’s shoes, swinging in the breeze above me. I wanted to get those back for Dion. I ditched the bike and scaled the gum tree in a hurry, I needed to get out of that neighbourhood, before Lila or her parents or anyone else from the party saw me. The tree trunk was solid and oily which made it hard to climb, but I got there by hugging tight and pushing up with frog-legs. I couldn’t reach the shoes but managed to shake the branch enough that they snapped free and hit the road with a rubbery clatter.
Dion was happy to get them back and didn’t ask me where they had been or why there was a huntsman spider in one.

“Here, I thought you might be interested in this.” Dion’s girlfriend was on my case again, she had made it her mission to make Spud happy. It was embarrassing and made me feel even more pathetic, but she was tireless. She handed me a pamphlet for something called *Friends of the Fork-tongues*, a local herpetofauna rescue group.

“Thanks,” I said and made a point of not looking particularly interested.

Anyway I did join *Friends of the Fork-tongues*, but that’s confidential information. As far as she and Dion know, I spend a hell of a lot of time fishing these days, but not a lot of time catching anything. The group’s okay, the people aren’t really my cup of tea, they’re all kind of weird. But weird is better than boring. We look after native lizards and frogs and snakes that have been injured by cars and cats and dogs and people. When they die, we pickle them and put them in labeled jars that get sent off to the universities and schools. I spend a lot of time pickling, mainly because I don’t mind doing it, and also because the smell of the formaldehyde makes it feel like real science to me.

Summer is almost over now you know. More than three months in this place already – a quarter of a year without rain. There have been more clouds on the horizon lately, but it’s smoke from bushfires more often than real clouds.

I rescued a rare specimen from a burnt-out block near Swanbourne a couple of weeks back. I say “rescued” but the poor bugger died the next day. He was a skink, *Ctenotus delii*, with long brown stripes down his side and back feet that turned outwards. I pickled him, like the others and thought about taking him home for my bedroom. But it didn’t seem right. Instead I rode my bike back out to the bush where I found him, and hung him, in his labelled jar, from a charred Mallee branch. Just thought he’d be happier there.
Robert Drewe's investment in the past and history is much commented on but not always understood. Its very obviousness, together with the variety of subjects chosen, has deflected attention away from the evolving, subtly changing nature of his response to the historical record. This has, of course, ranged from the adversarial to the nostalgic and elegiac, and a similar diversity characterises the historical sources drawn on for his major fiction, beginning with genocide in Tasmania and Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region, through the making of national folk-heroes, to an autobiography and stories based on his early life in Perth. Nevertheless, there are discernible continuities in his writing, as well as attitudes towards history that cause him profound misgivings. The latter were touched on in a talk presented at a number of venues, entitled "Where the Yellow Sand Stops," in which he gently mocked Australians for their attachment to bygone days:

While we're uneasy about the present, and hardly dare think about the future, we're very nostalgic about the past. We don't seem to be able to get enough of it. Some of us will even vote for some quite dubious politicians if they suggest they'll take us back to it.

As a writer interested in our history, I have some very conflicting feelings about the past. I've often written about it, but when I talk about it, I'm struck by a strangely familiar feeling - well beyond déjà vu. It's the sort of feeling summed up by Barry Humphries as "the anticipatory excitement of dancing with your mother". In this country, it seems the Good Old Past is always being trotted out for one more waltz. Why is this? What is it with us and the past? Isn't enough, enough? These are the sort of questions that can worry me on sleepless nights (25).
The questions raised here go to the very heart of his fictional project. Most crucially, how are we to resolve the apparent contradiction between this confession of unease and his own repeated recourse to the past for material? The answer lies arguably in the notion of “the Good Old Past”. This is a past agreed on by consensus, that is thoroughly familiar and safe, even if prosaic, like the easy option of dancing with one’s mother rather than with an unknown, unfathomable stranger or acquaintance. Drewe’s abiding ambivalence towards history arises, then, not simply from the contestability of specific accounts, such as the received version of early black-white interaction in the colonies, but also from his struggle not to be co-opted by the conventional and homely, and from a related sense of writerly responsibility towards probing and problematising “the Good Old Past”. To an author avowedly preoccupied with what lies outside the frame of standard reporting, or of the camera’s optical field, the widespread pandering to “certain certainties” provides the stuff for insomnia, and for dissident creativity. Hence his novels are concerned with defamiliarising the established record, with highlighting lacunae and neglected episodes or aspects, as well as with investigating what propels a Ned Kelly to national prominence, or a Spargo to ignominy and suicide. His most recent novels, *The Drowner* and *Grace*, are, however, significantly broader in scope and make considerable demands on their readers. For they embrace the whole sweep of human history on the Australian continent, offer mutually supportive findings, and avoid both reassuring maternal figures and his earlier preference for male leads in favour of talented but confused young women, whose salvation ultimately depends on them realising when enough is enough, and acting decisively to shape their own destinies.

An analogy for this latest phase of Drewe’s fiction, and a potential key to its concerns, is afforded by a deceptively straightforward incident from childhood that formed the centre-piece of his talk “Where the Yellow Sand Stops”. There he narrates how, as a six-year-old recently arrived in Perth, he longed to leave a lasting mark by carving his initials into the “bland,” limestone facade of his family’s home, just as his new friends were doing at their parents’ houses. But this childish ambition went terribly wrong. Instead of forming neat, enduring letters, the attempt to carve “R D” into the soft limestone led to an accelerating flow of sand from the building. The initials collapsed to form an expanding hole; the trickle threatened to become a rivulet and worse. “The foundation stone seemed to be melting. Soon it was more crust than stone” (26). Quickly the pellucid, daylight world assumed the resonance of nightmare and young Drewe, like an Austral version of the
legendary Dutch boy endeavouring to plug a leak in a dyke, tried with mounting anxiety to stop up the hole, described in the next breath as a veritable “cave”, beneath “the old house my father had found for us” (26). Toys, tools and finally a metal sprinkler, “about eight inches square” (27), are rammed into the void, then cemented in place with a Rabelaisian mortar made up of Perth sand and urine:

Then I packed the mud into the cave, jammed it tight over the Ford, the London bus, the cricket ball and the screwdriver, packed it around the sprinkler, threw more mud over everything, patted it down and waited.

And it worked. The entombed offerings held fast. The plug stuck. Maybe that’s a metaphor for something. (27)

The concluding line should warn readers, if the scene itself has not already done so, that far more is at stake here than the inadvertent undermining of a valuable asset.

An important clue to its meaning comes in the preceding, reported exchange with Dame Mary Durack. “Place”, Durack explains to the brash young novelist, is a recurring preoccupation at literary conferences because “there is a lot of landscape out there” and “the yellow sand goes down pretty deep” (26). Nevertheless, as Drewe interjects, “it’s still sand, and not always the most ideal foundation to build on” (26). In this instance the recycled Pauline adage, together with the childhood anecdote, indicates a conviction that the frequently revisited historical record is not nearly as sound and solid as the public presumes. In fact, the apparent unshakeability of the old house is an illusion, the heavy foundation that seems ideally suited to support a stable, dignified edifice proves, on closer examination, soft and friable – an insight confirmed by today’s protracted “history wars”. Moreover, the ubiquitous sand or native landscape, far from being tamed, threatens to consume without trace the modern, Transatlantic heritage evoked by Dinky toy models of “a Ford Customline and a red London bus” (26), as well as to engulf metonyms of sporting mastery and civilising culture (“the cricket ball and the screwdriver”). Western man’s constructs begin to crumble and disappear, and the whole scene is likened to “a big hour-glass” (26), with the implied message: “White fella, your authority is built on sand; your venerable ‘house’ of history and civilisation more show than substance.” Described self-deprecatingly as “a metaphor for something”, Drewe’s anecdote is a dazzling reminder of his understated art and a warning that, in his hands, apparently banal or mundane matters can resonate with unexpected meaning.
As in this incident, so in *The Drowner* and *Grace*, the great explanatory codes of Western society are arguably marshalled against the void left by the current dearth of spiritual and ideological certainties, and efficacious alternatives urgently sought. "I like to have a lot of ideas in my novels", Drewe has stated, and nowhere is this more evident than in his latest books. Despite their very different subject matter, they offer complementary investigations of the claims made in favour of empire, parenthood, romantic love and empirical science, and highlight their shortcomings. Similarly, they interrogate the West's compulsion to create comprehensive historical narratives. In place of coherent, univocal versions of the past – that perennial dance with one's mother – they emphasise the role of discontinuities, diverse subjectivities, myth and chance in the formation of national self-understanding, while their tense, central parables underscore the contribution that ordinary individuals, as distinct from corporate heads and renowned politicians, can make to the shaping of events, and ultimately the national record. The "yellow sand" remains ubiquitous, but it is particularised by human activity and made the site of unexpected revelations. Rephrased in terms of the literary tropes of the past, the eerie landscapes and ghastly crones of colonial writing give way to the beach of today, to life-giving, life-buoying water, and to fecund, empowered young heroines symbolic of future promise.

Superficially *The Drowner* and *Grace* are unrelated books; however, recurring motifs, actions and concerns suggest that they constitute parts of a thematically linked project. The novels share both a broad range of preoccupations, including issues of migration, prehistory, aridity and the place of young women in the race’s struggle for survival, as well as major and minor details, from having female characters named Grace to a male lead who, in idle moments, picks at congealed lumps of paint on the deck of ships. And Drewe has, in the past, viewed works that formed no obvious sequence as cognate investigations. Writing in 1977 to the Literature Board of the Australia Council, for instance, he described his present and future novels as a loosely linked exploration of key influences on Australian identity:

Rather than being a trilogy in the normal sense, the first three novels spread outward from the Australian setting of the first (*The Savage Crows*, Collins 1976, Fontana 1977) to Asia (*Ice On Summer Seas*) and America (*All the Good Times*). Perhaps this pattern parallels Australia’s place in the scheme of things. Anyway, if the first could be said to represent its Australian characters as self-absorbedly materialistic (albeit guilty) conquerors, the second ... sees them as
aliens, exotics, in a different environment. Continuing that pattern, rather like the widening ripples in a pond, the third features the Australian as Would-Be American; as a frantic participant in the Master Culture, in the West Coast media-show business scene, who nevertheless needs to have that familiar and consoling Pacific Ocean in the corner of his eye."

Presumably Drewe conceived of similar, or even far closer ties between his most recent novels. Certainly they are linked by numerous patterns of "widening ripples", most evident in the prominence accorded Grace as both title and given name. In *The Drowner* Grace plays a minor, cameo part as the devout, Baptist mother of the novel's hero, Will Dance. She is divided by many generations and continents from her two namesakes in the ensuing novel: a twenty-nine-year-old woman, who has fled to the Kimberley to escape a stalker, and an indigenous woman, in her "late teens or early twenties" (G 101), who was ritually interred approximately 100,000 years ago. Yet the main action of both books takes place in Western Australia (although at different extremities of the State), and is separated by a mere century. The final scene of *The Drowner* coincides with the completion of the Coolgardie Pipeline in 1903; Grace is as contemporary as lattes and ecotourism. Also both works emphasise the importance of hereditary traces, whether from a shared Anglo-Celtic gene pool, or in atavistic memories that make individuals feel they have met in previous existences. In short, the two books share a common imaginative and chronological trajectory, with the century-long hiatus serving as a reminder of the incompleteness of national as well as family or individual histories.

The version of "the Good Old Past" most clearly targeted in these novels is the myth of benign, clear-sighted British imperialism, and its related theses of biological and social progress. In each novel the empire, or its representatives, is deeply flawed and contravenes conventional parental codes. Far from being responsible, caring and enlightened, it is typically motivated by self-interest, as the orphaned Molloy early learns. In spite of inquiries, his parents and genetic blueprint remain an impenetrable mystery. British institutions, he surmises, have systematically destroyed any reference to his origins ("Better for all concerned to clear the decks, burn the bridges, start life afresh" [G 185]) and responded to his plight with the time-honoured tradition of shipping human detritus off to the far reaches of empire: "the British Government had since apologised for such nineteenth-century colonial behaviour prevailing into the mid-twentieth century" (G 185–86). Nevertheless Molloy, and millions like him, are subtly inculcated
with the belief that British dominion is racially predestined, and that it represents the acme of civilisation. This view is still circulating even after the Second World War when Molloy, as a convalescing adolescent, chances upon *Humanity's Onward March*, a pseudo-scientific tract that “celebrates the romance of mankind’s relentless migrations ... [and] British wanderlust in particular” (*G* 196). There migration is depicted as producing optimal racial distribution and allowing “the bravery and navigational acumen of eighteenth-century English explorers’ to come to the fore”. Its bloody record is glibly re-envisioned as a grand sporting event: “with the *Homo erectus* runner passing the baton to the *Homo sapiens* athlete and then expiring politely on the side of the track” (*G* 197). Although these sanitised examples avoid any mention of Hobbesian nature red of tooth and claw, or of Darwin’s relentless and unpitying battle for survival, Will Dance will experience them within the charmed circle of the family and Molloy through his field-work, which brings him face to face with reality, not as it is enshrined in polished textbooks, but as a discontinuous, provisional and brutal narrative.

The standard Victorian transcript of imperial adventure and altruism, on which both Dance and Molloy are nourished, is trenchantly critiqued in terms of the natural imperatives it glosses over. On arriving in Australia, for example, Molloy is selected for special service: not to perform heroic deeds, but “to scratch dandruff from the sergeant’s scalp” (*G* 188) in a ritual close to preening among the great apes, that firmly elevates yet subordinates him in the camp, or tribal hierarchy. Also, years later, his confrontation with a young man who has stolen his bicycle triggers, not paradigms from the well-ordered “Good Old Past”, but impulsive hereditary responses. The youth, playing up to a female audience, is aggressively defiant, while his mother leaps instinctively to the defence of her offspring: “She knew the script by heart” (*G* 317). So, too, does the anthropologist and survivor of three orphanages, Molloy, who is swept by “an odd sense of déjà vu”, then by recognition that the scene played out between them “was ageless” (*G* 316). Even older perhaps is the script enacted at Victoria Falls which Will, inspired by the heroic story of the falls’ “discovery” by Livingstone, longs to visit. There the spell of the fervently anticipated scene is rudely shattered by a male baboon, with erect red penis, who leaps on Will’s lover, forcing a bluntly animalistic response from him which Angelica glosses with: “At least it wasn’t a leopard ... But he thought you were” (*D* 158). Both then and now power and its adjuncts, such as territory and the drive to procreate and control limited resources, are the dominant forces in play – as they are throughout *The Drowner*. With a plot set in the years around Federation, England and its imperium are very much actualities, and Hammond Lloyd
their ambivalent analogue at a family level. A feted king of nineteenth-century melodrama, he brooks no male contender. All the women in his entourage are his, as he demonstrates by French kissing his daughter and lying naked with her child. Like Britannia ever-prepared to intervene in events, this “ham” actor projects his stage personality into every part, and is equally ready to mangle Shakespearian texts or a would-be suitor of his daughter to ensure his unqualified adulation and dominion.

Fortunately other sources of knowledge exist that contest the grand narratives, like the buried testimony which, in both books, shakes the historical record. Will’s father recounts how he and his labourers have come upon uncharted graves and parts of skeletons. Their picks struck an apparent geological formation consisting of the calcified remains of a mass burial. These could have been remnants of a fierce battle from the Civil War, or date back to “Bronze and Iron Age hill-forts” (D 25). Precise, chronological dates are in short supply, and less important than the bones’ lasting lesson that there were “human sacrifices and plague and wars from Day One” (D 25). Grace conveys related insights into the fallibility and incompleteness of history’s archive. There Molloy achieves precocious fame when, as a fledgling palaeoanthropologist, he literally chances upon the continent’s oldest human remains, laid bare by a cyclone. They consist of a young woman’s skull, smashed into hundreds of pieces, together with fragments of other bones. Dubbed officially “Salt End Woman,” to her discoverers she will be known as Grace, because of her gracile bone structure. Carbon dating soon triples the original estimate of her age, later revised dating pushes it back still further into the shadowy past. Grace can be approximately placed on a prehistoric timeline, her anatomical particularity appreciated, but “the mystery of her death” and life remains (G 105). At best Molloy can surmise, on the basis of comparative anthropology, that great pains had been taken to prevent the return of her spirit; however, the limitations of scientific inquiry are plain. The issue of originary migration out of, or into, Africa is no closer to resolution than he is to fathoming why, at that particular moment after untold millennia, he should have been chosen to witness her dramatic reappearance: why, in short, “the woman had risen to the surface” (G 98).

Folk lore, too, is another repository of wisdom independent of science and history. The response of Will’s father and local villagers to nature is essentially pagan, commonsensical and based on working with, rather than trying to dominate, her moods. He takes pains to observe her lead closely, so that he sites ponds only in natural collection points and brushes aside the dictates of calendars with: “it’s not true spring till you can put your foot on three daisies” (D 28). Tipsy locals are similarly down-to-earth, using “the skulls
and jawbones of horses" (D 32) as impromptu toboggans to slide down a steep slope. They accept the human condition with age-old "bravado and mockery", whereas Dr Curthoys, the superintendent of an insane asylum and hence an official reclaimer of natural aberrations, responds to similar material as "an amateur archaeologist and phrenologist" (D 52). But his desk, personalised with "neolithic skulls and a mounted cricket ball" (D 52), recalls disconcertingly the alleged actions of young Drewe, trying feverishly to fill the gaping cavity with a screwdriver and "six-stitch" cricket ball – a kindred set of metonyms for vain endeavours to achieve control. Instead the opposite, acquiescence, is often called for, or as the narrator comments matter-of-factly: "Dead man's float: the first sign that water requires not only mastery from humans but surrender" (D 220). The one infallible cure for typhoid, too, is to let nature take her course. If by the end of the third day ulcers have not pierced a sufferer's vital organs, then recovery, assisted by patient nursing, is likely. Molloy is a more professional, enlightened and humble version of Curthoys. He keeps a brick room behind his house for prehistoric remains and anthropoid casts as a record of the provisional pieces in the puzzle of human descent, but he is also conversant with indigenous beliefs. Consequently, he is trusted by the custodians of both systems; however, their irreconcilability emerges when a second prehistoric skeleton, this time of a man, is revealed by further cyclone activity. For Molloy, the chance to examine it scientifically might bring confirmation, or at least a strengthening, of his speculative claims. Yet according to the indigenous people the lost couple have sought out each other, and must be returned to their point of arrival in the land – not handed over to a laboratory. The elders' decision is respected by recent legislation, and by Molloy, who cedes precedence to customs born of the heart and spirit, and to a people far removed from Western hubris and the dictates of empirical science:

History awaited and the people waited on history. The same old two-way relationship. In the meantime they didn't see any rush. They had been around for a long while. These were the world's most patient people. (G 397)

Nature, in short, proves stubbornly recalcitrant to man's drive for mastery. He is fortunate when he can interact reciprocally with her, like the tribal elders; more often he is the sport of unforeseen events and genetics. Nature decrees when Salt End Woman and her putative mate will re-emerge from the sand, reducing the archaeologist to an ancillary role. She dictates alike when rain will fall and the instinctive response of all species. Similarly, she
decides that Will shall bond with Angelica, over whom hangs the possibility of mental instability, inherited from her mother. The only example Will can offer of an individual controlling his destiny is “Henry Porteous, who has stood in the one position for four years” (D 62). But this so-called “complete control” (D 63) rests on the abdication of movement, and even then Porteous is subject to shifting subsoil. Similarly engineering, in spite of its vaunted ability to change the order of things, has to acknowledge that creation retains a will of its own. In exceptional terrain, “everything broke the laws and threw out the angles” (D 75). Rails need to be constantly reset, buildings underpinned, because nature is “irritatingly illogical and drawn-out and ... creates freaks” (D 23). As in The Drowner so in Grace, momentous life-changes come unexpectedly. Molloy, deeply in love with Kate, the young mother of Grace, is shattered when she abandons him for a former female lover, much as years later Grace’s life in Sydney is destroyed by the delusional fantasies of a stalker. Far from exerting control, individuals remain the victims of psychotic imaginings, instinctive reactions and tribal memories, repeating behavioural patterns that, down the ages, have frequently doomed them to mindless violence. Hence decades of diverse experience have carried Molly far beyond the sanguine vision of the race’s inevitable triumph, enshrined in Humanity’s Onward March, to a recognition of life’s unfathomability and the distinctly limited nature of human agency: “We underestimate our complexity. Evolution is not simple – it’s an intricate and tangled process and the forces behind it are greater and more irresistible than we realise” (G 291).

The other great Western shibboleth overturned by these novels is the gospel of fulfilment through passionate, romantic love. They show it to be, at best, a passing phase, at worst a masquerade, disguising dark motives. Its most extreme and pathological expression comes in the stalker, alias Carl the Icelander, who brings to Grace adoration, as a chapter heading underscores (G 58). In his letters she is described as his darling lover, his betrothed, or as a creature of rare gifts and beauty and, in his boundless passion, he even dotes on her fingerprints: “Such delicate spirals, and so complex, like the amazing vortex of your mind” (G 59). A true psychopath, he is entirely deluded, seeking to transform his pathetic existence through a rich fantasy relationship, as well as utterly unrelenting and unforgiving. Love easily shades into hate, the gorgeous damsel into a whore, the beloved into a vile woman fit only for vengeful immolation. Even the relationship of genuine lovers, like Will and Angelica, is rarely marked by moments of joyous elation. Instead, its evolution produces, not a romantic fusing of two souls in one, but bitter misunderstandings and irreconcilable views of existence. Will holds fast to
the rational, to the belief that the physical environment can be managed; Angelica is more open to the paranormal, more given to self-abandonment. And Molloy, who like him has measured love in terms of the number of acts of copulation per week, or per day, wonders too late: “what did he know about women?” (G 326). Finally, Hammond Lloyd is a stalker of a different sort. He acts out his fantasies, becoming the adoring suitor to every leading lady, and favouring the role of Hamlet, even if his self-centredness pushes his female victims into that of Ophelia. Alternately beguiling, lascivious and obscene, he hovers like a baneful yet allegedly loving spectre beside his daughter, and reveals his unlimited egotism by debauching her childhood friend, Kate.

The act is never consummated before the reader or Angelica, but it is memorably evoked as the two young women clamber up a hill outside Bath, laden with a picnic hamper and tumultuous feelings. The episode opens with a flash of delectable young flesh and a question, never shared with the reader, that Kate strongly denies — only to reverse her original answer fiercely at the end of the scene:

Waves of strange air roared between them. A barrier of meaty, intestinal air forming for ever. Black rain in the eyes. Taste of blood in the mouth. “Yes, Yes!” (D 49)

The striking mingling of ethereal and visceral testifies to an emotional shattering, as well as to an enduring severance between the girls. In between her contradictory rejoinders they have found a hot-air balloon with an empty basket, identified only by an attached “woman’s silk scarf” and a man’s visiting card. To the romantically involved Kate “the scarf — [is] like a knight’s favour” (D 48). More darkly, the cryptic stage prop of the Montgolfier evokes an absent deus ex machina and lofty Ham, full of hot air but distinguished by attractive panache, like the respectable associations on the gentleman’s card. The incident quickly passes, only to be obliquely recalled many years later when, in a final twist, a minor character on “his” deathbed yearns to “go ballooning ... to see the landscape from the air” (D 285). But instead of soaring to the heights, of kicking themselves free of terrestrial impediments, humans remain, as the delirious Axel Boehm remarks, “prisoners chained to trees” in anguish (D 285), like Kate. The dupe of romantic love, eventually she takes her life amidst whispers of pregnancy, while her namesake in Grace is her direct descendant in suffering, being forced to witness her lover, Judy, have a leg severed by a ferry rope rather than a chain.

The repeated failure of master narratives to contain primal threats complements, and has a counterpart in, young Drewe’s discovery that a
“cave”, or void, could emerge in the midst of the most solid-seeming surface. In these novels existence, though lullingly benign at times, is usually troubling, or grim and austere. Not only have disease and warfare existed “from Day One” (D 25), but they and “human sacrifices” persist. The precondition for Will and Angelica re-establishing their union is that they drown Ham, for Kate and Judy re-uniting: bloody disfigurement. Happiness is achieved only in snatches, success and semblances of order are hard won and often transitory, as when Will observes a neat, triangular flotilla of swimming ducks “disintegrate into chaos” (D 22). Admittedly, The Drowner begins with an epigraph from Thoreau that balances, and virtually reverses, the disposition of these antithetical impulses: “The man must not drink of the running streams, the living waters, who is not prepared to have all nature reborn in him—to suckle monsters”. But a comparably positive viewpoint within the novel, of “life … prevailing … [and] always the prospect of love” (D 300), is associated specifically with an American sensibility, coloured by Transcendentalism: “He [Felix Locke] is an optimistic man (an American, after all) and he has the help of Whitman and Thoreau” (D 300). What then, to pursue the paradigm outlined in Drewe’s public address, do these books offer to an Australian audience in terms of saving, if only temporary, mortar to maintain the crumbling facade? Where in the unpitying desert, among the dust of demolished idols, does Drewe locate the possibility of grace? The case for hope, as we shall see, is based on humanity’s capacity to inquire clearsightedly into its circumstances, to modify them and itself, and to take radical action, even to kill, be it a former self or a blocking presence, if this threatens the individual’s, or the race’s chance of survival.

Deprived of the conventional assurances of directive orthodoxies, Drewe’s characters stand “naked” before the great questions of origins, entropy and mortality. As science has shown, and as Grace’s pregnancy resulting from a single sexual encounter with a refugee confirms, opportunistic couplings are especially favourable to procreation. And death is similarly indiscriminating, as Axel Boehm’s bust of a young woman drowned in the Seine underscores. So, too, are death’s principal agents in the two novels: typhoid and the crocodile. Clearly neither operates according to the will of a putative deity. On the goldfields speculative theories about the origins of typhoid, that predate the discovery of bacteria, enjoy a belated second life. Climatic extremes, “the breaking of virgin soil” (D 128), the lack of moral discipline circulate freely as bogus explanations, as do equally impotent cures. Rich lore has also grown up about the great reptile. According to the Egyptians sacred to Osiris, a mythical creature in aboriginal creation songs, as well as featuring in “Jung and pop dream psychology” (G 345), the
crocodile has inspired diverse attempts to explain its place in life, yet there is no diffusing the fundamental threat it embodies as "an indiscriminate, opportunistic feeder, taking every prey from water beetle to water buffalo. And humans" (G 345). Like typhoid it is another grim reaper, whose mere existence can open up vertiginous, existential vistas, like those glimpsed at times by Drewe's protagonists. Young Will notices this out in the field, where the trappings of civilisation drop away, until his tarpaulin-clad father resembles a druid, beyond whom there is "nothing ... but the swirling of the void" (D 25). Angelica, too, experiences related moments. In the bowels of a mine, the intensity of "black nothingness" (D 308) may shock but is hardly unexpected; however, even daylight is not proof against kindred perceptions, such as Angelica experiences when, in passing beyond her sleeping father and daughter, she "looked out into the stark world and saw nothing at all" (D 304).

The search for ultimate answers may be doomed, the motives for the quest mixed, but Drewe repeatedly affirms the brave endeavour of questers who try to chart the mysterious scheme of things. Their prototype is the palaeoanthropologist Molloy, who "transfers his longing and curiosity about his background to the bigger picture, the study of mankind" (G 198). Yet after a life-time's work, the best he can offer are provisional answers, like his precursors in the Kalgoorlie subplot of The Drowner, Axel Boehm, Felix Locke and Jean-Pierre Malebranche. Each of them probes the well-springs of existence according to his own skills and training; however, their insights depend less on empirical than imaginative findings. Malebranche uses his microscope not, as his eighteenth century namesake and other natural philosophers would have done, to seek "to know God in his smallest works as well as the glory of his vast heavenly bodies" (D 133), but to discover the carriers of the typhoid epidemic that is ravaging the mining community. What he sees bears little resemblance to a benevolent order, with a single drop of water revealing "a world in which monsters seethe and pass" (D 133); moreover, his straightforwardly scientific approach fails. His two intellectual peers and drinking cronies endeavour to manipulate this seething flux. Locke practises "the art of distancing" (D 136), selectively simplifying an incident or scene until "abstracts as well as tangibles" (D 91) emerge that he can formulate in a sonorous line like: "Slithering mysteries of the night drawn by the glancing angles of the light" (D 93). Similarly, Boehm's photographs, that "capture such picturesque proof of human existence, its industriousness, optimism and diversity" (D 304) are, as Drewe repeatedly shows, produced by careful selection, props and adroit processing. Their promise of purpose and stability is as illusory as that of Drewe's limestone block. Ultimately all
his seekers are obliged to impose their version of “truth,” rather than being able to lay bare its bedrock, while the menace of confusion, variously designated the void, entropy or disorder, is always present. Individuals may ignore or forget it, but it will reclaim them, as when inattentive Grace “almost fell into the skeleton pit” (G 369).

Faced with intransigent circumstances or an overwhelming threat, others choose flight or migration as a remedy to their problems. Like Grace, Angelica says simply she wants to escape. In her case, the unspecified causes are primarily parental: the shame of a confined mother and the smothering presence of Hammond Lloyd – much as Inez, a nurse on the goldfields, changes the luxury of Toorak for the privations of waterless Kalgoorlie to flee the shame of her father’s financial ruin and suicide. Will, on the other hand, is disenchanted with the old order. He wants to put the weight of custom behind him, to cast off “this cobwebby century! ... to experience different surfaces, risks, landscapes” (D 60). Pursuing science rather than his father’s profession and accepting employment on the Coolgardie Pipeline are its logical consequences. In Grace, the young refugee of Middle Eastern appearance was originally part of a family’s attempted flight. But changing countries is not enough: he, like the aforementioned characters, must overcome his earlier acculturation. The naked flesh of Australian women shocks him, and he is obsessed with recreating DiCaprio’s hair-style from Titanic. Dangling locks hold for him a magical promise of attractiveness and success, much as Grace mistakenly believes herself healed from the stalker’s menace by her new-found persona as bronzed adventure-guide, unfazed by the wildlife of mangroves and tropical estuaries. Each protagonist affords a variation upon what Felix Locke terms “the mysterious disguises of the private self” (D 300), whose potential impenetrability is exemplified by Axel Boehm. S/he hides her womanhood under male Teutonic attributes, never offers insights into her past and dies an enigma, her choice of self-effacement and sterility sealed by typhoid.

More important than change of location or appearance is emotional and psychological growth, shown at its most radical in the two female leads. Both of them suffer traumatic disjunctions. Severe illness and relocation lead to a cracking of Angelica’s core identity: “She felt disassembled ... [as if] her soul had left her” (D 193) – she becomes a personal version of the friable limestone block. Consequently, she is “desperate to fill the vacuum” (D 193). Grace’s disorientation is almost as profound. At the outset of the novel she acknowledges having “escaped the loony bin by the skin of her teeth” (G 10): she, no less than the refugee, is seeking “alignment and coherence” (G 149). The stalker’s intervention has destroyed her equilibrium and undermined
her critical faculties. Insomnia, depression, paranoia are the predictable “step[s] in her disintegration” (G 91), till like Inez and Angelica before her, she asks: “what choice did she have but to leave?” (G 94). But what is fled must one day be exorcised, as Angelica’s recurrent nightmare of a childhood incident suggests. In it Ham, dressed as Neptune and acting like an unstoppable primal force, almost drowns her. Fittingly, her liberation takes place in Kalgoorlie’s new source of life: the reservoir of water pumped from the coast. There realism shades into fable as Angelica, growling atavistically, mounts on Ham’s shoulders like a demonic St. Christopher to prevent him from drowning Ada – homicide being implicitly justified by maternal instinct and Ham’s own acquiescence: “Festooned, ballooned, in the wet and smothering folds of dress and petticoat, Ham allowed himself to sink – encouraged it – and disappeared” (D 325). The sensed but invisible presence associated with the empty-basketed balloon, in the earlier scene, is finally fixed in place and dispelled, after he has served to reactivate Angelica’s vitality and reunite the lovers. “To love”, she remarked at the outset, “is to change” (D 60) and this young couple, by the end, has amply shown this ability on life’s ever-shifting waters.

Grace offers a reprise of these motifs in its climactic action where, once again, the death of an oppressive figure acts as an existential caesura, dividing a confused, directionless past from a purposeful future. The stalker Carl Brand, fixated on taking his victim’s life for imagined gross indecency, penetrates into the building that contains her father’s anthropoid collection as well as a musty wall vault, labelled Grace and decorated with her childhood scribblings. Brand strips naked among the assembled skeletons and, armed with a knife, invades this personalised “cabinet” as he has her life. Inside it he adopts a foetal posture and waits to surprise her. Some time after Grace arrives, suspects his presence, and decides to quell her terror: “Fuck you, you fucking madman” (G 411). Toxic inhalation, however, has dealt with Cari and, as in time-proven fairytales, she locks him behind “three sealed doors” (G 412). There he will sit inside the cabinet Grace, in a macabre parody of the foetus she carries and of the primitive burials that have shaped so much of her father’s research. Depicted here, as in The Drowner, is a return to a primal, originary scene, where a feared bogeyman is laid to rest, childlike dread and powerlessness are overcome, and full responsibility assumed for one’s own existence. Unlike Angelica, Grace is spared the taking of life, but not creation’s mark of blood. She is bathed in its colour (“suddenly she was standing in the pool of wine-coloured light in front of that drawing she’d done years ago” [G 411]) and takes a knife in hand, as she prepares to grapple with the stalker. Everywhere in nature she
has witnessed a thousand violent acts, while, unbeknown to her, both her parents were dealt the mark of Cain by the stinging rope that severed Judy's leg; and this preparedness to shed blood, as well as to give life, signals her hard won maturity.

The re-establishment of order and affirmative life forces in both books is, however, as studiously orchestrated as a photograph of Axel Boehm. The evocation of complexities, of the workings of chance and agents of disorder, has been so powerful and convincing that transcending them is marked by a shift from a predominantly realistic to a symbolic mode. This ushers in the narrative equivalent of Felix Locke's fictional world, where hope nevertheless prevails, and the prospect of love endures (D 300). Repeatedly stock plot situations are invoked in Grace, such as the woman alone in a carpark, or the unexpected lunge by a previously incapacitated assailant, only to be passed over. The final scene in the “skull cave” of Molloy, however, is a variation on standard “WOTO” themes (“Woman Overcoming The Odds” [49]) – minus violence – as well as a virtual comic-strip dénouement that condenses action into a few stark tableaux, as diverse allusions to “The Phantom” hint. In addition, dead Carl locked in the wall vault eerily recalls “the entombed offerings [that] held fast” – enabling young Drewe in the anecdote to repair the “cave” that had suddenly appeared in the midst of quotidian reality. The resemblance is illuminating. For in both novels the main source of threatening eclipse has been thrust symbolically into the nihilistic void opened up by his actions, and is deftly counterbalanced by his former victim's fecundity. An optimistic verdict on the predominance of life-sustaining over monstrous forces within creation, once identified as typically American, is revalidated in an Australian setting. Yet the neat narrative resolution remains an imaginative contrivance which, like young Drewe's desperately concocted “mortar,” neither precludes future threats nor answers ultimate existential riddles.

Such a challenging, diversely shaped universe is, according to both books, best met with a mature mixture of agency and wise patience. Even the tribal elders must, from time to time, assert their rights, while the passive mindset that needs to be overcome is articulated by Grace, midway through her journey: “At first you hope for a nice ride. Then you just hope to reach your destination” (G 247). Eventually she will grasp that she can help define her own destination, like Molloy. Despite being a failure as a lover, he is sufficiently clear-sighted to realise that his one significant relationship is with his daughter, and that he can best serve her with a combination of intervention and steadying support. Similarly, Will learns to confront adversity with measured resolve. By holding fast to his vision of winning
Angelica, and of social conditions improved through engineering, he finally succeeds on both fronts. In the last scene he and Angelica cradle Ada protectively while calmly treading water (“They had told each they could be patient” [D 326]), their setting, burden and reunion suggesting powerfully the likelihood of further progeny. The alternative to enabling choices is a state of helpless nonage, represented by Ada, a “marionette joyeuse” (D 297). As Angelica explains, “mental and physical handicaps” incapacitate these children. Although Ada has a happy, lovable disposition and, in appearance, is “a picture book angel”, she is, till the age of six, essentially powerless: “she needs us to pull her strings” (D 297). The etymological link of angel with Angelica draws attention to disturbing characteristics she shares with her daughter, and underscores how crucial it is that both she and Grace seize the decisive moment when action is called for, so as to take charge of their own lives and fertility.

Linked with the issue of individual destiny is that of Australia. In place of the metaphor of the dignified limestone edifice, Grace offers two images of alternate futures for the nation. To the refugee, it seems “the careless country of crocodiles and blond children down below” (G 154), relaxed, amoral and self-centred. Later Kelly, the young partner of a conservative publican, reminds Grace that “this was almost the Promised Land ... We came this close” (G 372), referring to a proposal to resettle Jews in Australia rather than Palestine. In the same exchange she warns Grace that her partner has reported the refugee to the authorities – adding her small act of grace to those of the eponymous heroine, the politicised nun and nameless others who aid the young asylum-seeker. The notion of Australia as a Promised Land for humankind had, of course, earlier inspired colonial Republicans, such as Charles Harpur, and has featured in recurring debates about migration and population density. Its antithesis, in the call for a return to “the Good Old Past” of quarantined, white Australia, is represented by the outback townspeople who, in an area subject to cyclones and “gusts [of wind] from Asia” (G 382), have turned their pub into a pro-white fortress. Waves of disapproval and mistrust greet strangers in the bar. Photographs in the lounge remind grimly of town catastrophes, while “old sepia pictures” document the degenerate threat that needs to be held at bay: “Ragged Aboriginal lepers were arranged in descending physical condition around a stern-faced nun. Gaunt black men in loincloths, fierce cicatrices striping their bony chests, squatting in linked leg irons between two boab trees” (G 381). The wages of intolerance are a community at war with itself, where at night stores are “fortified like bunkers against the tempests of nature and man” (G 383), and juveniles maraud unchecked in the streets. Yet unity can exist, as Molloy
insists, “despite extraordinary complexity” (G 291). The survival of Australian society, Drewe implies, depends on accepting those elements and sources of wisdom it has traditionally rejected – exclusion will no more lock out foreigners and threatening ideas than dangerous bacteria.

Apart from radically widening Drewe’s ongoing re-evaluation of national myths and the historical record, his latest novels unambiguously advocate an open and racially mixed Australia. His focus in *Grace* on the detention and treatment of boat people is, however, not simply an opportunistic exploitation of a highly topical issue – the theme of migration has long concerned him. In the 1977 letter to the Literature Board, for example, Drewe announced:

It may seem premature, but I have clear plans for a fourth novel based on the detention and deportation of an immigrant Italian cloakroom attendant at Romanos during World War Two, and a fifth based on a small but symbolic incident in western New South Wales during World War One. 

Neither has appeared. But *Grace* touches on concerns that originally drew him to this material and migration, too, is at the heart of *The Drowner*. There the main characters are born outside Australia, while Western Australia, with its mineral wealth, is drawing adventurers from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. Afghan camel drivers win silent accolades for gathering up corpses, ferrying water and supplies, and feeling no superstitious aversion to Felix Locke’s role as undertaker. For unlike the atheists or Christians of Kalgoorlie, Muslims had “no fear of death ... they saw his role as that of an honourable and patient helpmeet to God” (D 107). The racist countercase is only articulated in *Grace*, where it is damningly attributed to the repulsive, corrupt, former policeman-turned-publican, Strachan. He blames the aborigines for everything from his own financial misfortune to the alleged demise of science, citing government concessions to them as proof that “lately something had gone wrong with the brains of the nation” (G 262). Yet as the novel diversely reiterates, “Australia was always a recipient of many different people” (G 290). The arrival of diverse cultures and boats, from the time of Salt End Woman on, has been a constant in the continent’s history, as the setting in multiracial Port Mangrove (a thinly disguised Broome) emphasises. And the future in both books belongs to chance progeny and a multiracial cast. As Molloy, the spokesperson for “a world beyond nationalities” asserts, “evolution is happening everywhere and all the time, where any man and woman can produce children with each other” (G 291).
Ultimately both *The Drowner* and *Grace* are concerned with the past primarily as a guide and inspiration to future conduct, not as an object of nostalgic longing or veneration. Hence they affirm the deeds of those who slough off despondency, convention and victimhood to assume responsibility for their own and their country’s identity. What the boy achieved in Drewes’s parable of the dwindling foundation is granted, in heightened form, to his leading characters. Their capacity for positive action is ringingly confirmed by the central moral fable of *The Drowner*, where the reunion of the lovers and its natural equivalent, the arrival of water, guarantee that the red sand will bloom, that life will be sustained. In *Grace* the verdict is more nuanced but no less affirmative. By the novel’s end Grace, like Angelica, has conquered all that was most fear-inspiring and stultifying in her existence. Empowered and pregnant, she is about to fulfil her part as a bridge between scarcely imaginable times, past and to come. Her well-meaning father, however, insists on returning to Lion Island, the scene of his youthful love and separation from Kate, to fill in details from Grace’s childhood, believing firmly that “you couldn’t live with gaps in your own story” (*G* 413). But this is unequivocally disproved. First, any notion of an automatic hankering after the past is dismissed: “It was hard to be nostalgic for something you didn’t recall” (*G* 413-14) Grace reflects, though she decides to humour her parent and enjoy the fine weather. Then the impossibility of returning to “the Good Old Past” is driven home by numerous signs of massive change and commercial development. Finally, Grace chooses self-defining action over words. On a distant sandbank, decades earlier, the ferry bearing maimed Judy had run aground and Kate had given Molloy “custody of Grace’s life” (*G* 331). Amidst mayhem, tears and shipwreck they had begun their existence together — clinging to each other to form a solitary “island” on an equally desolate “island” (*G* 331). Now his daughter, with bulging belly, becomes part of the migratory, shifting natural world around them, as she strikes out strongly from the shore towards the same sandbank — a portentous image of independence and regeneration. Certainly Australia’s time as the Promised Land has not yet arrived, for the refugee must be flown clandestinely on to Auckland. But the ending leaves no doubt that fulfilment is possible, even “with gaps in your own story”. Self-understanding and resolve in the present afford a firm basis for taking responsibility for one’s own future on fresh, yellow sand that awaits the imprint of coming generations.
NOTES


3 Describing the genesis of his first book, *The Savage Crows*, and of his authorial ambition, Drewe recently quoted Saul Bellow’s protagonist Moses Herzog who, like himself, “had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends”, referring to his own and the nation’s past (“First Voice: Robert Drewe looks back on the writing of his first novel,” *The Age* Saturday March 11, 2006, A2): 29.


6 Commentary has been uncertain about what is at stake in his most recent books. Reviewers have contented themselves with general remarks about *Grace*, describing it as an “ambitious, multi-themed novel... like *Capricornia*, full of ideas and energy” (Kerryn Goldsworthy, “The Year’s Work in Fiction,” *Westerly* 50 [2005]: 63), then giving a plot summary, while the most extended essay on *The Drowner*, Alistair Rolls and Vanessa Alayrac, “Changing the Tide and Tidings of Change: Robert Drewe’s *The Drowner*”, *Southerly* 62 (2002): 154–67, focuses on intertextuality, both within the novel and between it and earlier short stories.


8 Drewe’s treatment of their many areas of thematic overlap is often tantalising and highly inventive. It tends to yield variations, expansions and inversions rather than simple repetitions of motifs and ideas. For instance, water for Molloy, unlike the two lovers from *The Drowner*, is a foreign, anxiety-creating element ("Water has never been his forte. First a London orphan boy, then an Australian farm boy, he's never been a swimmer" [G 329]), while Will’s passing aside about culinary habits ("I bet the natives don’t eat crocodile. I think there is a rule: Don’t eat anything that eats you" [D 161]) recurs in *Grace*, but there the immediate context is a highly successful crocodile farm and the human-reptile equation is a major plot element.

9 The second and third works mentioned here became respectively *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* and *Fortune*.

10 “A Cry in the Jungle Bar”, Ms. 49/A, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

106

But by this date the book, if not untouched, “has stayed intact, attracting no envy or vandalism from his companions. No other child ever coveted” it (G 194).

No cause is adduced to explain Mrs Hammond Lloyd's state, that has led to incarceration. Certainly her husband's serial adultery could have been a contributing factor, but she is devoid of rancour, and subsequently Will is also explicitly absolved of blame for Angelica's mental aberrations (D 193).

For further discussion of their roles and métiers see Ackland, “In the Service of Complex Truths: The Aims and Art of Robert Drewe’s Fiction”, 37–39.

They afford a modern version of “elective affinities,” drawn together by their respective experiences of adversity that began three years earlier, and led to their former lives being “submerged under fathoms of loss and stifled memory” (G 149).

For example, after prolonged exposure to pornographic sites on the internet and already mentally fragile, Grace concludes that millions of men “hated women and wished to degrade them”, that “all the average Joes logging on around the world” were potential stalkers or worse (G 88–89).

The motivation behind Ham’s actions in this final scene is unclear. Rolls and Alayrac argue that his leap into the reservoir represents “his final attempt fully to live out his Ophelia complex and take his role of drowner to its furthest limits” (“Changing the Tide and the Tidings of Change; Robert Drewe’s *The Drowner*”, 165). In addition, the concluding pages, which associate water with death (D 324) and Ham with “The Spectre Bridegroom” (D 320), invite us to see him as belonging to the world of death and bound to return there with his latest victim, Ada.

In this scene complicity in adulthood and tearful fallibility, rather than in murder, earns a burning ‘brand’, as Drewe recasts this stock, postlapsarian motif: “On the jetty, half stunned from the rope blow across his brow — it felt more like a metal rod! — all Molloy can do is shout their names ... Kate’s forehead is bleeding from a similar whip slash to his” (G 328, 330).

My point is not to criticise Drewe’s choice of an ending, but to tease out some of its consequences. Novels require closure and, as Grace herself notes, before this “her own situation defied the screenwriters’ manuals. Motive remained unclear; conflict was irregular but traumatic, and maybe never-ending” (G 47).


“A Cry in the Jungle Bar”, Ms. 49/A, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia. Their proposed titles were A Wolf Forgiven and A White Cleaning.

By anyone’s count the period from July 2005 to June 2006 has been a fruitful one for the publication of Australian fiction. Many of our best-known writers produced new books – Peter Carey, Brian Castro, Robert Drewe, Gail Jones, Nicholas Jose, Alex Miller, Brenda Walker as well as the recently naturalised John Coetzee. And there were books of outstanding quality by new, or relatively, new authors, ranging from James Bradley to M.J. Hyland, Sandy McCutcheon and (a real discovery) Josephine Wilson, not to mention Carrie Tiffany whose first novel was short-listed for the Miles Franklin award.

Where to begin? I dislike the idea of first, second, third, the sort of sports mentality that wishes to rank everything into “winners” and “losers”. There have been plenty of novels that have won some major prize but five years later are forgotten, whereas other books which did not even make a short-list seem to grow in interest and stature with time (and often enough the development of their author’s corpus and recognition). I do not think The Aunt’s Story would have made any short-list when it was published in 1948, even if there had been a prize for fiction here at that time.

Curiously, I was somehow reminded of The Aunt’s Story when I read Brian Castro’s The Garden Book. I think it was for two reasons. Firstly, The Garden Book is the only novel I have read, perhaps since Patrick White’s third novel, that I immediately wanted to re-read after I got to the last page. It is mysterious, haunting, and filled with a dark passion and compassion. It is this quality which reminded me of White’s Aunt. Swan Hay, a Chinese-Australian, is perhaps the least realistic but most unforgettable female character in Australian fiction. Castro has created a compelling portrait so that you believe in her utterly, despite her fyness, her strangeness and her exoticism. He has surrounded her with studies of more conventional unconventionality and the setting, in the Dandenongs of the 1930s, is breathtaking in its precision. This is an example of research that has been transformed into illumination and a driving conviction. The Garden Book is, perhaps, my personal book of the year.
It stands in challenging company. Peter Carey's last couple of novels have the air of being manufactured, willed into being. But *Theft* is his most energetic work for years. I enjoyed the gusto of the writing, the completely fascinating love relationship (and especially its cynical but triumphant ending) and the brilliantly managed counterpoint of the first-person narratives of the two brothers, including the mentally disadvantaged one. Indeed, Hugh Bones is more convincingly realised than Patrick White’s Waldo Brown (in *The Solid Mandala*). And this is before I mention the vividly pernicious world of New York Art Dealers.

By a curious coincidence, that same art world is part of the New York milieu searingly revealed in Josephine Wilson’s debut novel, *Cusp*. This is one of the first novels written by Creative Writing students in Australia that has been published by the University of Western Australia Press under the editorship of Terri-Ann White. It is a real illustration of the positive creative energies being nurtured and honed through this recently burgeoning “industry”. The ultimate interest in the novel, however, involves a mother/daughter relationship and is triggered by the return to Perth of Lena Perkins, who had escaped her mother’s stultifying dominance to attempt a new life overseas. The working through of their separate feelings is finely judged and the dialogue is completely convincing. This year has seen a number of books from writers with a Western Australian base or background, and *Cusp* certainly demonstrates great talent, and, indeed, achievement.

*A New Map of the Universe* is also published under the University of Western Australia’s new writers scheme. It is by Annabel Smith, who completed a PhD in Creative Writing at Edith Cowan University. I note this book has already been reprinted. It is perhaps easy to understand why. The first, and major Part offers an intensely romantic and idealised account of the brief love affair between Grace and Michael, before Michael abruptly (to Grace) departs on a study trip to Egypt. Grace is very much the central figure here. Michael is presented without shadows or much identity, apart from his seductive knowledge of the stars and myths from diverse cultures about their meaning or import. Grace has completed a degree in Architecture, but her disparaging mother (presented here as one of the more unattractive mother figures in fiction) has undermined her ambitions by telling Grace she will never come up to the natural talents of her (dead) father. Grace fantasises and dreams (the book is full of dreams) about Michael and tries to realise his suggestion that she design a house for him on his coastal allotment. Despite her romantic fantasies, their letters to each other remain stiff and remote. One wishes they had explored the internet. Parts II and III give us, in great detail, the histories of her parents. Perhaps if these parents had made a
greater impact on our understanding of Grace in Part I their stories might have seemed more relevant. A brief Part IV brings us, at long last, back to Grace and she learns to understand something of her own background. Her fantasies about Michael had tailed off, but in the end all is resolved, happily. If I were cynical, I would describe this book as almost wilfully romantic at its core. As it is, I will pass it on to a suitable adolescent.

I found Ffion Murphy's debut novel *Devotion* (the author also lives in West Australia - and teaches creative writing) a stylish and compulsive read. The theme is essentially a narrow one but it is handled with such essential concern and sympathy that the reader is drawn into its intensity. Veronica is in hospital following a caesarean and does not respond to treatment. She seems indifferent to her newborn son and refuses to speak. Her doctor persuades her to write - anything - at an Apple laptop and, unknown to her, he accesses her writings. A number of lives are tugged into the slow process of Veronica's rehabilitation, and Ffion Murphy, with great tact and clear writing skill, keeps the reader alert and involved, and even warmly sympathetic towards Veronica.

Marion May Campbell's *Shadow Thief*, also set in Western Australia but taking her main protagonists abroad (and bringing them back), is another mother/daughter novel. In some ways it is more ambitious in that Campbell depicts two separate mother/daughter relationships, both from childhood to adulthood and, in the final pages, brings the two girls together in a more-than-likely lesbian relationship. It is told through vividly written, brief chapters, often jumping from one story-line to the other so as to lead up to that final encounter, which is presented with just enough ambivalence to leave the reader expectant but not fully satisfied. In this novel I felt some of the “research” was a little too obviously imposed. It seems a fashion to give the names of popular songs and films of the past to provide an easy guide to whole eras.

Robert Drewe's *Grace*, a story about a stalker (among other things), is full of the author's characteristic zest in writing and the portrayal of the psychological implications of the unnerving situation is carried through more than convincingly. Grace Molloy holds this novel together, though I did find myself fascinated by the sub-story of an old Aboriginal skeleton and the contemporary difficulties of how such remains are to be treated - or respected. And there were some stunning moments of pure satirical skill as Drewe observes groups of people as types.

Roger McDonald's *The Ballad of Desmond Kale* won this year's Miles Franklin award and it is easy to see why. It is, in many ways, a tour-de-force. The setting is early days of settlement in New South Wales (by a curious
coincidence, both Thomas Keneally and Kate Grenville published books with parallel historical settings in 2005). As the title of McDonald’s novel implies, Desmond Kale is to be seen as an almost mythical figure, more talked about (or sung about) than actually present in the lives of the characters in the book. I think this is achieved, but at some cost. The “flogging magistrate” and parson, Matthew Stanton, really takes over the foreground of the story. Irascible, obsessed and vengeful, Stanton is clearly modelled on the real figure of the reverend Samuel Marsden, though interestingly enough, John Macarthur is nowhere invoked, even though the very heart of the novel, and its real achievement, is the subject of breeding fine Merino wool. This is a paean to the development of wool in Australia, a subject which has been taken for granted in many ways, certainly in our fiction. The sort of realistic portrayals of Macarthur to date have been cumbersome. To displace Macarthur with Desmond Kale was perhaps a masterstroke: Macarthur will never be the stuff of myth, but Kale assuredly becomes just that. The detailed approach to this subject is breathtaking and, for this decidedly non-wool-reverencing reader, riveting and, dare I say, educational. McDonald’s style is almost baroque, perhaps in keeping with the historical period. His turn of phrase has that measured tone of late eighteenth-century writing, but with his own poetic nuance.

Alex Miller’s Prochownik’s Dream is a novel about an artist. It joins a long list, and indeed must be seen beside Peter Carey’s Theft as an exercise in evoking the driven qualities of this species. I wondered, quietly, if artists in other genres, ever attracted anything like the same interest, and the short novel by Alex Skovron, The Poet, perhaps answered this question. The Poet concerns a writer who, with characteristic self-absorption, is not interested in having his work actually published – until he loses his manuscript and then finds another writer is publishing his work under their name; a theme parallel to Cary’s subject. Skovron’s novella is really a short-story, extended (sometimes by obvious means, such as the recurring bits about weather in Melbourne), so that (appropriately, for poetry) the issues of artistic validity and creativity are left for the reader to knot through. Alex Miller’s novel engages in the compulsive world of the visual artist. The complexity of personal relationships when others become entangled in either the artist or his obsession is at the heart of the book. I thought Miller was more succinct than Patrick White (in The Vivesector) but more intensive than Malouf (in Harland’s Half Acre) and the overwhelming shadow of Joyce Cary’s Gully Jimpson was avoided. The book may not have the ultimately devastating sense of revelation and horror that Journey to the Stone Country so eminently had, but, in its smaller scale, it gets inside the world of the artist. Would that
we could all live up to that romantic carelessness, in the real world, but there are perhaps enough wrecked lives all around, as it is.

Gail Jones' *Dreams of Speaking* haunted me and moved me deeply. It began as a typical Australian-not-making-it-overseas (Paris, this time) but really became a poignant, funny, and ultimately heart-breaking story of a human relationship, chaste but with an increasing sense of intimacy, between a young woman who has been trying to write and research abroad, and a middle-aged Japanese man, who is a survivor of Nagasaki, has a family in Japan, and who shares an interest in the lives of inventors and scientists. This shared curiosity leads to the growth of their relationship, and enables Alice, the narrator, to clarify her own personal relationships and to move forward. This is done only at the cost of realising she can only be on the outside of any real understanding of her Japanese friend, Mr Sagomoto. The novel is written with skill and a deftness of touch that makes the potentially mawkish material fully realised and therefore resonant.

In some ways the surprise and discovery of the year was Sandy McCutcheon's *Black Widow*. It is audacious to attempt a novel based on the recent dreadful events at Beslan and their aftermath. I knew McCutcheon largely as an ABC talkback radio figure and the sheer skill and obvious research that must have gone into this writing amazed me. The narrative has all the speed and compulsion of a thriller, and the theme of revenge, which perhaps rockets out of control, is all too familiar to us. A group of Beslan teachers who were hostages in the school drama decide to track down and exert revenge on the Chechnyan rebels. The pace is inexorable, and the fact that the teachers are all women gives an added glint to the chilling meticulousness of their actions. McCutcheon has incorporated seamlessly all the strange and very foreign elements of this passionate world so that the reader is utterly convinced. I have long been interested in the Alans, a mysterious people whose shadowy history goes back centuries, and McCutcheon, in this book, gives me a new insight into their influence and presence right up to our times. This man has real writing skills and, even more impressively, insight.

If *Black Widow* takes us far from Australia, in bringing us a very contemporary background of events, M J Hyland, in *Carry Me Down*, sets her novel about the awkwardness of early male adolescence in contemporary Ireland, and she does so with a similar conviction, though I would guess that the background research needed was far less serious than *Black Widow* necessitated. Indeed, in a recent issue of *Overland*, Ian Syson, while extolling the book's virtues, suggested it might as easily have been set in smalltown Victoria. I don't know. The Irish setting has its own authenticity, especially
when situating the world of boyhood development and the curious adult silences and evasiveness; this struck me as particularly apt in a contemporary Ireland but I am not sure I would have been convinced if it had been Castlemaine or Benalla. It is a wonderfully realised story, and the writing marks Hyland as an impressive technician. She is a major new talent.

Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* is a first novel which clearly announces a talent worth watching. It is set in the Mallee, largely, in the 1930s. This makes it one of a number of recent novels that explore that period anew (Brian Castro immediately comes to mind). I thoroughly enjoyed the pseudo-scientific approach in the writing and even the layout of the book, and the ultimate revelation of the unreliability of "scientific" attitudes without consideration of other factors, is deftly underpinned and with considerable wit. This was a particularly difficult, indeed arduous, period in our history and it is refreshing to see it played so amusingly for its pretensions as well as its pathos.

James Bradley is one of the younger novelists who has attracted considerable interest and *The Resurrectionist* is his third novel. It is set in London in the nineteenth century and the theme of body snatching and vivisection is one that has been tackled before, but is always, in its gruesome way, engrossing enough. Bradley has written with a firm sense of style and his pace, if a little deliberate and predictable, carries the story and its themes of love, death and vocation, with the sort of firmness this subject demands. I only wish I could have been carried on in a surge of rather more urgency.

J. M. Coetzee, now a naturalised Australian living in Adelaide, has set his new novel, *Slow Man*, in that city. It really is a working of aspects of his previous book, *Elizabeth Costello*, and indeed Elizabeth is a major, manipulating, figure in the new book. The essential theme, how a middle-aged man, Paul Rayment, manages his life after a leg amputation following an accident on his pushbike, is one that is compelling enough, at least for other ageing men, like me, when disabilities to do with the failing body begin to intrude on one's life. Coetzee is a remarkable writer, and by reintroducing Elizabeth Costello, as a sort of nurse and irritant, or conscience, the book takes on a whole new shape and direction, far removed from commonplace themes of ageing and disability. If this book were not by an author who has already received the Nobel Prize for Literature, I think I would have labelled it "astonishing". I am still filled with, let us say, admiration.

Nicholas Jose, like Brian Castro, in his new book *Original Face*, deals with aspects of the Chinese community in Sydney, in the period leading up to the Olympic Games. Like Sandy McCutcheon, his novel has many elements of
the thriller. I believe film rights have already been sold, and I can understand that. For me, the delineation of various layers of Chinese culture and society is what gives the novel its particular frisson. Nicholas Jose, who was the Australian Cultural Attaché in Beijing at one stage, and has written frequently about Chinese matters, has clearly delved into the specific background of this rather gruesome story of murder, revenge and the many webs of power and influence within not only Chinese society in Sydney but also with a fair insight into what we might term Occidental strata in the same city. I read it in one sitting. It was a book not to put down.

Brenda Walker’s *The Wing of Night* was short-listed for the 2006 Miles Franklin award. This is another novel with a Western Australian setting and it takes place initially in 1915 (Gallipoli and the First World War) but is essentially a rural lyric, recounting how some survivors (women, and returned men) learn to re-make their lives, or are eventually defeated by their traumatic experiences. The pastoral setting and the time period are evoked with minimum elaboration but with a convincing warmth and a keen eye for just the right detail. Her characters engage the reader and though it is a short book (it seems so, both in narrative length and in close attention to a small range of characters) there is a sweet compulsiveness that engages the reader. The writing itself is poised and gently persuasive. Details such as the Gallipoli sequence and the final descent into madness of Joe, the main male figure, are handled well, though they do have the slight sense of being “set pieces”.

In *Man of Water*, Chris McLeod tells about a writer with writer’s block and a PhD Creative Writing thesis hanging over his head. The setting is, again, West Australia. Novels about writers, as I should have guessed, are not as interesting as novels about Visual Artists. Chris McLeod has a good, rather clipped writing style and, underneath his character Watt’s false bravado and necessary self-abasement, there is still plenty of ego and the humour is waspish.

Manfred Jurgensen’s novel, *The Eyes of the Tiger* was a book that I felt should have attracted me more. It is the only book this year with a Brisbane setting, and the evocation of that sub-tropical environment is, indeed, graphic and sweltering. The weather of the novel is the now famous 1974 flood. The rank and riotous riverside suburbs capture exactly the summer oppressiveness of Brisbane, and the main theme, dealing with the influence of a “charismatic” newcomer Sannes, upon the immunologist Mark and his new girlfriend, Jessica, has the potential to create strong material and drama. Unfortunately, the author has a decidedly off-putting habit of telling the reader, sometimes repeatedly, and even dogmatically, the high import of all
these nuances of relationship and of event. I wish someone had whispered to
the author the old adage of “show don’t tell”. One feels that the shadow of
earlier twentieth-century German writers falls too heavily, particularly when
Jurgensen seeks to tease out the fine nuances of love and power, of influence
and duress.

If Manfred Jurgensen does not allow his characters to tell themselves, as
it were, Diane Bell, in Evil, A Novel, is thoroughly didactic. She uses the
device of a third-person narrator, Dee Scutari, but the reader cannot escape
the thought that the author, herself, is only very thinly disguised. This is
because we are told from the outset that there is evil afoot and predatory
priests aplenty. We are not led to make any speculations or conclusions for
ourselves. Professor Scutari does that all for us, and with a sort of
anthropological certitude that, frankly, chills. A text for the converted, was
my conclusion.

I found Billy’s Tree, by Nicholas Kyriacos an altogether more fascinating
and genuinely disturbing a story. It is about the problems faced by young
Aboriginals in modern-day Redfern and uses the historical event of the
wiping out of the Rabbitoh football club to bring together the diverse and
multicultural community. My real problem, though was that I found the
decisively idiomatic prose style, or impersonation, pretty off-putting,
rather than inviting. It is a big, sprawling book, but the material remains
urgent and immediate. I hope I don’t sound too schoolmasterly (the
author is a retired headmaster) if I say: a brave effort.

Colin Duckworth, in Summer Symphony attempts a basically erudite novel
about music and I felt I should have enjoyed his allusions and references
more, but the concept of a mystical chord that affects people strangely,
though explored with some conviction and scientific resonance (if I can use
that term), still reminds me too much of Scriabin or Hovhannes and the
composer, Alan Scott, whose English lower middle class background is
diligently explored, failed to energise my attention. The author has read well,
and widely, in musical and cultural fields. It is an earnest, rather than an
appealing, exercise, though I still feel it is haunted by a romantic
identification with the essential theme. I come from a lower middle class
background myself, and once wanted to be a serious composer, so perhaps I
found myself distrustful, rather than sympathetic.

Gay Lynch’s first novel, Cleanskin, was a book I approached with some
interest and a little trepidation. When I was Professor of Creative Writing at
the University of Adelaide, Gay Lynch completed a successful MA in
Creative Writing with me on a project that showed plenty of talent and
originality of outlook. Cleanskin was a manuscript highly commended in the
Adelaide Writers’ Week Unpublished Fiction Prize in 2004. It is a novel about suburban women and the strain on relationships when events push the thin veneer of politeness and good behaviour out of sync. The writing is tart and, in its own way, unflinching. Domestic life is portrayed as being as intense a scene for shattering moments as any. Claustrophobic, perhaps.

The development of creative writing courses has been much discussed. Several of the novels here were either written by teachers of creative writing, or by authors who have been through the system. I think that the great virtue of such courses is in the way in which craft skills can be imparted. If there has been something of an emphasis on matters immediate and domestic, family relationships and suburban angst, this is only one of the byproducts of such workshops, and clearly an understandable one: beginning writers have to start by wrestling with material they know something about, and family must come pretty high. We have not had (as in America) the surge of “campus novels” and books about the politics of universities. No doubt they will come, but wit and irony are not the most easily acquired skills for most writers. Only Michael Wilding, here, seems to have caught the sting as well as the tang of campus life.

Drusilla Modjeska, among others, a few years back deplored the state of Australian fiction, urging us all to turn to contemporary issues and material. Writers, and I think wisely, have proved that if you tackle old, or historical subject matter, you are not necessarily abdicating from involvement with the current world and the contemporary state of the world. Writing, by its very nature, looks backward as well as forward. If Kate Grenville or Roger McDonald take as their subject late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century colonial material, they are doing so in the light (and resonance) of distinctly early-twenty-first-century knowledge and attitudes. Some issues have to be re-examined again and again. If the History Wars have told us anything, it is that.

But of course, as these books show, Australian writers are tackling recent subject matter, and with some élan. I can’t help being intrigued, though, by the way earlier periods in our own history, emerge as material for new creative investigation. We had a spate of First World War novels some time back, then the Second World War provided the backdrop for some very distinguished novels (Malouf’s The Great World immediately springs to mind). I found that a new approach to the 1930s here offered the sort of creative frisson that intrigued. Castro and Tiffany are writers in a more varied and refreshing mode than the “dun coloured realists” who penned earlier books in the period prior to 1940. The Year of Living Dangerously, by Christopher Koch, was undoubtedly the success it was because it was published at a time when it
was almost impossible to write anything important about Vietnam – that war and the surrounding turmoil was still too close – but to select a South-East Asian subject – Sukarno and Indonesia – grabbed a range of material close enough yet just that little bit distanced. We should learn from that.

A look at three recent anthologies from Creative Writing Classes gives perhaps a good illustration of the range of work beginning to appear. Anyone – editors, publishers, agents – involved with the discovery and nurturing of new talent, should be aware of these publications. Sometimes quite surprising discoveries can be made. The books I have surveyed in this field are On Edge (edited by Christy Di Frances, Susan Errington, Rachel Hennessy and Emmett Stinson) which comes from the University of Adelaide; The House That Words Built (edited by Ioana Petrescu and Kasey Kilgariff) from the University of South Australia, and Making Tracks, UTS Writers’ Anthology 2006 (no editor named). The last named was published by ABC Books, which in itself gives a good indication of some benign publishing interest, though Wakefield Publishing in Adelaide produced On Edge, which is the fifth they have published in a series from the University of Adelaide writing course. Lythrum press, also of Adelaide, is the sort of very small publisher perhaps more usually associated with student work. The point, though, is that these books are reaching out beyond “student” writing, to become key anthologies of the emerging talent here. These are assuredly among the voices we will be hearing, and reading, in the future.

Fiction 2005–2006

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review


DISTRACTION

Waking unwell, 
worried about how I will cope 
with a new day, 
I glance out the window to 
see a thornbill 
 hopping lightly in the twigs 
of a wandoo — 
and it flits into my mind 
to set that bird 
in a poem, catch it in words 
as a distraction from pain.

MOPOKES

Perhaps they’re simply 
reassuring each other, 
those mopokes calling ... 
Who is there who doesn’t need 
sounds of comfort in the night?
But not presumed killed. You are somewhere, sharing this city, the cold touch of wet stone or bark. You, too, wait for the flowers to open.

It was a long-running skirmish. There were infiltrators on both sides. My retreat was almost suicidal. How must I put it in my memoirs?

There is love lost between us, wandering more forlorn than any child in the dark woods. Could it recognise us again? We have learnt well the art of camouflage.

We have found strange allies, no doubt. We have come to expect betrayal. It is winter and the campaign has slowed. Let us think about the spring.

You shrug at my truce messages. What further damage, reinforced by ill-trained love, can I do you? The common enemy is elsewhere: it is the past. Come, accept this surrender.
DREAMS

have no listing of ingredients on the label
no label, nothing we can read before consumption
every night we are in jeopardy, even a trace

of peanut will do it, a throat will seize up
a heart will end dreams are like the voices of violins played at high altitudes
an ice pick swung at the cranium if you have perfect pitch

dreams come for us at night; lull us into a false sense
do time, they are the shadows fallen from our yesterdays, and if we remember them, they will fall across our tomorrows

on waking dreams are like clouds, their looming
softly departs but leaves in the mouth an aftertaste that cannot be scraped from tongue dreams are like tea leaves, fortunes

brewed at 4 am, but at the hairline fracture of dawn beached on the inner china lip of a cup, so that the sense of ridiculous is never far from gazing at a future trajectory in a shape that could be

ducks, a trio ascending heavenwards, or three fingerprints climbing a wall or wet shaggy moons orbiting the rim or the profile of a man composed of smudges who finds himself quaint and discreetly baffled dreams, if you remember the left-overs
they are best consumed quietly, quickly, privately on waking. don’t offer
to share the
rest of us are full.
The publication of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* met with an ambivalent reception. The novel is a complex and often deeply moving narrative that vividly evokes the displacement, dispossession, uncertainties and anxieties of living in the border or contact zones in mid-nineteenth century Australia. Yet it radically divided literary critics, their divergent responses exacerbated by the socio-cultural context of its publication. This was in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, and one year after the momentous *Mabo v. Queensland* High Court ruling on native title. My own position in the ongoing debate is along the lines of Peter Otto's assertion that Malouf's text inscribes an "erasure of the political" through his literary translation of the "political into the psychological, and matters of history and politics into questions of creativity and aesthetics" and in compliance with Suvendrini Perera's postcolonial critique of Malouf's protagonist as being centred within a "discourse of happy hyridisation". However, rather than simply re-engaging with this debate, I want to offer a reading of the underlying theme of shame in *Remembering Babylon*, a subject that has so far been neglected in critical discussions of this novel.

This omission is particularly astonishing not only because of the omnipresence of shame in the text but also because ever since the Australian Reconciliation Convention in 1997, shame has had a particular contextual importance in contemporary Australia. As is well-known, the timing of the Convention coincided both with the completion of the *Bringing Them Home* report and John Howard's astounding denial of the shame of Australia's violent colonial history and the long-term impact this had and continues to have on the first inhabitants of this continent. Howard's crude dismissal of what he terms the "black arm band version of history", together with his studied refusal to apologise to the remaining Aboriginal population – which was tantamount to refusing to believe the authenticity of the stories of
profound trauma and grief that were recorded in the *Bringing Them Home* report resulted in many of the delegates at the Reconciliation Convention turning their backs on Howard as a physical marker of shame. Indeed, Raymond Gaita argues that “Australia is a nation ‘seriously stricken by shame’, which is why so-called ‘black armband brigades’ are set up to be mocked” by political conservatives as diverse as John Howard and Keith Windshuttle.

To be stricken by shame in either a personal or socio-political context while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge this shame results in paralysis and stasis. What is more, because shame — whether it is consciously acknowledged or not — is powerful, contagious, self-propagating and profoundly hierarchically structured, contemporary white Australia protects itself from shame by projecting the contagion of this affect onto the objectified other. Perhaps the most recent example of this here in Western Australia is the way in which the white-centric media constantly and forcibly exposes the shame of Aboriginal dereliction in photograph after photograph of the dinner camp in Halls Creek, with pictures of drunken mothers lying in the dirt beside begrimed toddlers and others of scores of adults leaving the pub with cartons of beer which will be consumed amid the squalor and hunger of the camp. What this exposure of projected shame covers over, of course, is the long history of white acts of dispossession and the subsequent shameful and continuing treatment of the indigenous population of Australia.

In other words, a refusal to engage with historical shame is a highly unethical form of political evasion. However, as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, shame is both a verb and a noun and the act of shaming is central to the operations of repressive societies or groups who rule. From Steve Connor’s perspective, “[t]he wielders of shame want to silence, objectify and discipline — to make subjectivity impossible.” As a counter-tactic, then, the first move beyond the toxicity of social shaming as a method of control is to expose these acts of shaming and the power politics that dominate this affect. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, who has written some fine work on shame, maintains that this affect can be used to initiate “a fight … against the killing pretence that a culture does not know what it does”.

When I began to think about this topic many months ago, I had intended to focus solely on David Malouf’s rather ghostly representations of whiteness in *Remembering Babylon*. However, as I re-read the text in order to write the article it became clear to me that what Malouf is questioning in a very profound way is the whole notion of the historicity of white shame in Australia. What the novel exposes, I believe, is how and why shame and whiteness interacted in a small settler community in nineteenth-century Queensland and the long-term consequences of such a toxic union. In the
first place, Malouf astutely and evocatively reveals some of the ways in which the settlers’ shame of being white-but-not-quite in terms of a relationship with the imperial centre transmogrified into a kind of anxiety about their status within the safe zone of whiteness.11 This racialised anxiety only too easily turned into acts of violent racism against Aboriginal others and the central outsider character Gemmy Fairley who is considered to be contaminated by his association with an Aboriginal “tribe”. Secondly, Malouf recreates intense instances of white-on-white social shaming which are used as a means of demarcating and policing the boundaries between whiteness and Aboriginality – and in particular as this relates to mateship and the unacknowledged whiteness attached to this iconic Australian grouping. And, finally, he demonstrates how shame can only too easily become a tool of silencing that can obscure or even erase the history of those shamefully othered by the dominant power.

In terms of whiteness theory alone, Remembering Babylon is an interesting text. As Penelope Ingram argues in her excellent essay on the representation of settler whiteness in this novel, “whiteness is produced in contemporary settler texts in ways different from those identified in representations of whiteness by other critics”.12 Indeed, in the main body of whiteness studies it is argued that whiteness is an ideology that retains its dominance and power in Western societies because it is the unacknowledged, invisible norm.13 This position of normativity carries a range of unrecognised privileges that arise solely from having a white skin. Whiteness’s ubiquitous power structure and white skin privilege are imperceptibly upheld by and through all the institutions of power, both ideological and material. Such a theory becomes complicated in relation to Malouf’s representation of whiteness in mid-nineteenth century settler Australia, because his white characters are both strongly marked as white and as racialised subjects. However, one by one, each central character reveals that his or her form of settler whiteness is overlaid by a sense of deep personal shame, a shame that is more often than not connected to class insecurity that adds a defect to dominant perceptions of whiteness. This in turn encourages feelings of aggression, envy or forms of white victimhood or abjection that can only be displaced through projection onto others.

The affect of shame thus turns into or magnifies “personal powerlessness, degradation, deficiency and misery”.14 Shame is generally thought of as toxic, as destructively disorientating, as a moment of heightened and tormenting self-consciousness in which the self is confronted by the self at its most despicable. It is often linked to the sense of being seen in an inappropriate or wrong context – to losing face. It is an acute, painful, inarticulate
experience, which leaves its subjects feeling exposed, silenced, impotent. Silvan Tomkins, one of the leading shame theorists, sees it as an affect of "indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation ... an inner torment [that can only too easily become, in his words,] a sickness of the soul".

From Gershen Kaufman's perspective, "[s]hame is multidimensional and multilayered: it is an individual, a familial and a cultural phenomenon. It is reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources and targets of shame." However, shame's most intimate connection is with the self. Indeed, Jennifer Biddle believes that "[t]here is no emotion that individuates, that isolates, that differentiates the self, more".

Levinas speaks of effects of shame this way:

We see in shame its social aspect; we forget that its deepest manifestations are an eminently personal matter ... The necessity of fleeing, in order to hide oneself, is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself.

At the same time, the exposure of shame sets up a division within the self, a sense of splitting, of duality, in which "[t]he self is experienced as part subject and part object, or as two different selves at different times". There is, Giorgio Agamben contends, a "double movement" within the affect of shame with subjective (but often unconscious) shifts between "subjectification and desubjectification". It is this movement from being in active control of the subjective white "I" to the passivity and loss of the objectified shamed self which, I think, is central to a reading of Malouf's *Remembering Babylon.*

The clearest manifestation of the shifting subjectivity of shame is presented by the "in-between" (28) character of Gemmy Fairley. Gemmy is the symbolic figure of shame in the novel, the out of place character who is always in the wrong place at the wrong time and is, therefore, both a subject and source of shame. Chronic shame reduces the person shamed to a state of inarticulateness or speechlessness, and Gemmy's famous first words enact his partial speechlessness: "Do not shoot ... I am a B-b-british object" (3) he stammers; and we later learn that his stuttering is not only because he has not spoken English for sixteen years. His stammer "belonged to someone he had thought was gone, lost" years before (14). Shame is a learned response and Gemmy has learned the hardest lesson of all. At the deepest level of shame is the "conviction of one's unlovability" writes psychiatrist Léon Wurmser: "the most radical shame is to offer oneself and be rejected as unlovable". Gemmy has lived a childhood of shame in a Dickensian London
with the humiliation of being unloved at its centre. Only when he becomes "Willet’s boy" (149) does the shame of unlovability pass, at least for a while, until he finally enacts a form of revenge against Willet’s abuse that ironically brings about his own enforced exile to Australia. His ability to make “himself small” (25) and his “street child’s gift for mimicry” (26) ensure him a place in the Aboriginal tribe of women and children with whom he lives for sixteen years, tormented by traumatic memories of the white world that has rejected him.

When the invasion of Aboriginal Australia begins, and the white-faced spirits drift up from the south (29), Gemmy seeks them out. He needs his shame witnessed. “He did not want to be taken back”, the text tells us. “What he wanted was to be recognised” (32). However, the one surety of this novel is that Gemmy’s shame can never be recognised, both because he represents in excessive form the white shame that each of the settlers feels in their separate ways, and because his unbidden presence forces them to confront their own hidden shames. What they all feared more than anything was losing the power of whiteness, the one thing that separated them from the feared and despised racial other. But here in front of them is a shameful “parody of a white man ... He had started out white. No question ... But had he remained white? ... [this posed] the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It” (40).

The unspoken “it” that drives this text is the ideology of the superiority of whiteness, and it is, Malouf suggests, an ideology that is never benign. It is always about white domination – it’s just a matter of degree. Malouf’s symbols that amply portray the strength of this ideology are the make-believe gun and the imaginary stone that is said by Andy McKillop to have been passed to Gemmy by two visiting Aboriginals. These tropes also represent the two weapons that match the two sets of behaviour that manifest within the white settler grouping. Lachlan’s stick-gun represents a child’s version of the masculine weapon of genocidal power that decimated the Aboriginal population in the nineteenth century and would have been the weapon of choice of the vehement racists in the settler community who believed in exterminating the blacks as a perquisite to building a new nation (62). However, Malouf implies that the power of ideology can be almost as dangerous as physical weapons when the spectre of fear is raised. Even “the milder members of the settlement, who argued that it was surely worth trying a softer policy” (62), were swayed into violence when paranoia about the loss of whiteness becomes seemingly visible with the passing of an imaginary stone. It is this literalised embodiment of fear of the other, a stone reputed to be wrapped in bark thus conferring the notion of secrecy, which triggers
the outbreak of brutal physical racism in the community. Even Jock McIvor, in voicing what he thinks is a defence of Gemmy, feels the need to back his statement with a qualifier: “We’re no’ scared o’ stones. Ah thought that was the difference between us and them” (105). Thus, even the “good” white settler is blind to his own inbuilt prejudices.

Malouf implies that each of the settler’s individual fears has an origin in class shame or some form of shame that is related to the outsider status of exile. Jock’s “shame ... [is the shame of failed exile, because he had promised his wife Ellen] so much and provided so little” (75); Ellen’s shame arises from their poverty that has resulted in the deaths of two of her children and her sense of loss and failure as a mother; her daughter, Janet, also “felt humiliated, as if the poverty was in them” (55); George Abbot’s shame is of not having lived up to his rich benefactor’s expectations and this shame is then displaced as rage at his pupils and himself (44–6); Lachlan is shamed by his Scottish accent and orphaned status; Hec Gosper by the shame of his harelip that separates his strong body out from the others (15); even Sir George in the Palladian splendour of Government House is plagued by feelings of inadequacy and shame at his lowly beginnings: “What he fears is that if he is too successful here he will be taken for granted and overlooked; but there are occasions when he fears even more that he may be exposed, since the secret that gnaws his soul, child as he is of a Donegal rectory, is that he is an imposter” (170, emphasis in original). It is a “slow poison in him” (171), a version of Tompkins’s “sickness of the soul”.

In some sense then it could be argued that it is the compensatory factor of mateship that is offered in this novel as a defence mechanism against the separating out and alienation effect of class shame. However, the class solidarity offered by the iconic status of Australian mateship (which of course excludes Ellen as a woman and Sir George because of his class mobility, despite the pall of his shame) is unspokenly but emphatically white. As Ingram succinctly states in her commentary on the novel: the “idiom of mateship that is thought to embody a truly Australian ethos ... [is] one based on race”. Malouf makes it clear that Jock’s attempted protection of Gemmy – an act of rapprochement that was in many ways forced upon him rather than chosen – results in his exclusion from the brotherhood of white mateship:

Something had been destroyed in him that could not be put right. He ... drifted back after a time to his friends, to Barney Mason, Jim Sweetman, but the days of unselfconscious trust in his standing among them, and the belief that to be thought well of by such fellows was the first thing in the world, were gone. (161)
However, this sense of settler mateship is a closed network to which Gemmy himself could never belong because he is forever contaminated by the smell of shame.

*Remembering Babylon* is an olfactory novel, suffused with rancid smells that are always associated with some form of violation and it is through this much-repeated trope that the visceral physicality of shame makes its presence. It is a smell that is connected only to Gemmy, and it was reputed to have seeped onto him from his time of living with Aboriginals, “learning [as the text stresses] their lingo and all their secrets, all the abominations they went in for (39, last emphasis in original). Gemmy has thus truly now become a colonial object, a “thing you could smell” (41, emphasis in original). Despite all the scrubbing and the new clothes given to him by Ellen Mclvor, “he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of the mayall, half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed” (41). What could not be reclaimed, of course, was his whiteness, a whiteness read off the body that in the settlers’ eyes had taken on “the native look” (40).

The Western grand narrative of shame and indeed the basis of all shame readings in Western cultures is the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Eden after eating the forbidden apple. It is, of course, also a story of shameful exposure and the punishment of exile, a shadowy allusion to which is implied by the title and more formally enacted in the famous opening scene of this novel. Gemmy, the innocent child-man surrounded by the seemingly hostile group of settlers, tears off the salt-stained blue rag that hides his genitals (an ironic symbol both of his rotted Britishness and a parodic substitution for the biblical fig-leaf) and holds it out to the crowd. When the rag is given back to him, Gemmy merely grins and hugs it to his chest until it became “too much” for one of the settlers, the burly ex-blacksmith and ironically named Jim Sweetman who bursts out: “For God’s sake man ... cover yourself” (13). “Flushed with shame, he [Sweetman] snatched the rag from the man’s hands, pushed it at him, and pointed, then looked away” (14). The irony here is that in terms of shame, the uncivilised and contaminated Gemmy appears to exist in a state of prelapsarian innocence, while Sweetman is personally shamed by confronting the nakedness of this white man who has “gone native”. Gemmy himself merely grins at the rag’s return to his body, and “[v]ery complaisantly ... knotted the thing ... in a very ineffectual manner, at his waist” (14). He is not ashamed of his nakedness, and this intensifies Sweetman’s own reaction of shame.

Yet Malouf’s choice of a man seemingly devoid of artifice and an attachment to the ideological codes of the white society to which he belongs,
however peripherally, also provides a particular kind of character who can be excused for being unable to voice or even see the political and social erasures of the dominant white society. *Remembering Babylon* in one sense begins the important task of making visible and exposing the long history of white shame in Australian society as Malouf acknowledges white culpability and the constitutive power of white shame. Nevertheless, as Germaine Greer, Suvendrini Perera, Garry Kinnane, Peter Otto and many others have argued, Malouf also steps away from the depictions of white violence and barbarity against Australia’s first inhabitants that were very much present in the historical narrative which Malouf tells us in the afterword gave rise to the memorable opening segment of the novel.

Once Gemmy decides to reject white settler society in order to return to his outsider status with the Aboriginal tribe, within the ideological parameters of the novel, he has to be wiped from the text. His rejection of the settler white way of being and the history of his ill-fitting life can be safely erased by the rain, though of course we as contemporary (and thus, distanced) readers are aware that it is the *wrong* history (181), the irony here acting as a mechanism of ideological displacement. Indeed, as soon as Gemmy’s racial allegiance is confirmed, he, along with the Aborigines to whom he returns, are euphemistically “dispersed” or killed off (196). Following this, the final chapter moves into a purified white point of view and a return to the biblical shame narrative. The disorderly scene of Gemmy’s performance of shame for the benefit of horrified white settlers is now safely separated out from the white enclosure of the new Eden. A white nun and a white politician – both synecdochic symbols of institutions that in different ways have promulgated the ideologies of white Australia – can relax in a “walled retreat (the walls were ten feet high, spiked at the top with shards of glass ...), an impressive but dangerous reminder of a world they had set themselves apart from, though not entirely” (182). Inside this safe white space, a ritualised and repeated eating of the fruit of temptation is now conducted in a “civilised” way with a knife, but one that divides “knowledge and curiosity” into regimented segments.

Significantly, the last conscious thought in the novel belongs to Janet who acts as the moral centre of the text. It is a childhood memory of her first sight of Gemmy atop the fence that divides black from white, the “impenetrable dark” (8) from the newly “civilised” white settler colony: “a stilled moment that has lasted for years [of] Gemmy as she saw him, once and for all, up there on the stripped and shiny rail, [seemingly] never to fall” (199). But fall he did, and Gemmy’s fall into conscious shame was to prove deathly for the “black white man” (10) who crossed the racial divide of the “Colonial
fairytale” (19). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon states that “in the colonial situation, dynamism is replaced fairly quickly by a substantification of the attitudes of the colonising power. The area of culture is then marked off by fences and signposts. These are in fact so many defence mechanisms of the most elementary type, comparable for more than one good reason to the simple instinct for preservation.”1 As I see it, while *Remembering Babylon* is suffused with ghostly hauntings of white shame that drift through mapped demarcations and pervade social imaginings, these eerie manifestations of whiteness are first questioned then evaded in this novel. Whiteness both acts as a defence mechanism and as an acknowledged form of power.

It could be said then that in *Remembering Babylon* while David Malouf evokes the ghostly hauntings of white shame he avoids the ideological repercussions. Moreover, the inexorable return of the ideology of Australian whiteness is almost impossible to discern because it is “ghostly at first in its feathery lightness” (181). In considering this ideological retreat from acknowledging shame that occurs in the last chapter of the novel, it is noteworthy that Malouf himself places a great deal of importance on forms of narrative closure. As he says in an interview with Helen Daniel, “I’ve always been very interested in endings ... I think I’m always working towards the ending, and I often, in shaping the novel, have no idea what’s going to happen in the middle. But I do know what the ending will be”.2 Yet in the final paragraphs of this novel the shameful cultural prescriptions and damage of white colonialism dissipate into an ethereal representation of an unlocated and unnamed stretch of ocean and an unbounded declaration of “love” (199) that can, it is suggested, conquer all.

However, if both the metaphorical and very real fences that divide white from black in Australia are ever going to fall there has to be a breaking open of the illusory shelter of a (white) nostalgic Eden and a politicised, self-conscious engagement with the literality of white shame. This needs to be addressed in terms of both historical re-readings and as a positive, political re-engagement with what has unfortunately become the spectral politics of Reconciliation.

Notes

Many thanks to Susan Midalia for her astute editorial advice.

1 For one of the more recent articles that begins and ends by outlining the parameters of the critical controversy, see Don Randall “Cross-Cultural Imagination in David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, Westerly 49 (2004): 143-4 & 152-3.


5 As Probyn states, the *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was tabled in April 1997 and the Australian Reconciliation Convention was held the following month – May 1997. The *Report* had rightly claimed much media attention and Howard’s very public refusal to say sorry at the Reconciliation Convention has been the cause of much continuing shame for very many Australians.


11 The phrase *white-but-not-quite* is a play on Homi Bhabha’s theorising of the “ambivalence of mimicry”, which he represents as “almost the same, but not quite”. See “Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse”, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 86 (emphases in original), also pages 89 & 91 for variants of this phrase.


Tomkins, 135.


Carl Schneider maintains that “we experience shame when we feel we are placed out of the context within which we wish to be interpreted”. Carl D. Schneider, _Shame, Exposure and Privacy_ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977): 35. When the concept of being interpreted out of context is attached to race and the defining machinations of whiteness, the proliferation of shame becomes only too obvious.

See Pattison, 41–3, for a description of the way in which shame reduces the shamed person to speechlessness. As he states, “[l]inguistic difficulties have also played a major part in ensuring that shame remains hidden” (41).


Jennifer Biddle describes the ambivalent duality of the psychic structure of shame this way: “As much as shame seeks to avert itself – there is no feeling more painful – shame seeks to confess. To be heard, to be borne by another, to find a witness – shame seeks to be allowed the very condition denied it in its rupture – recognition by another” (227).


Ingram, 163. Peter Pierce offers some insightful comments on representations of mateship in Malouf’s text in “Problematic History, Problems of Form: David Malouf’s _Remembering Babylon_”, _Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf_ , ed. Amanda Nettelbeck (Nedlands, Western Australia: Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1994): 185, 186 & 194.
For references to the connection between shame and smell, see Wurmser, 27 & 169.

David Randall also writes about Malouf’s focus on “the rag” which he sees as adding a “comic element to the text”. Randall also reads the trope as a “sign [which] intends to show much more than it hides”, which adds an interesting dimension in terms of a shame reading. See Randall (2004): 146.


I could have imagined the crabs;
the mud came alive and subsided so quickly.
You missed it, child-slow,

and the strange forms life takes to live are yet for you
the stuff of animation and comedy.
You laugh sideways at my story about these grave crawlers

as if you could see Daffy's beak spinning on his pin-head or
Coyote reduced, split-second, to an ashen silhouette.
Perhaps one day I'll tell you

about the seals on a desert coast in Namibia,
dragging themselves across sand-stretches and wave-crashed rocks
like swarms of amputees,

while in the hazy distance
sloped the panting shapes of hyenas.
Then there were the baboons in South Africa,

hunched quietly in the windblown sand hills above
the ancient clash of the Atlantic and Pacific,
their fur moving like grass,

while on the violent shoreline penguins teemed like babies.
With your soft hand in mine we move
over the pocked mudflats of the Tooradin foreshore.
Jellyfish drift in the murky water like ghosts,
    and further down the tideless beach, pelicans,
    with their newborn or ancient skulls,

stand before an audience of cormorants and gulls,
    ankle deep in mud.

One night in Zambia I saw

a tree full of vultures, spot-lit.
    They were hulking like souls,
    and it was as if the world itself had died there.

Will I ever tell you that?
    The stranded mangroves stink like a rare sea,
    and suddenly you let go, running

towards the boat ramp and the floating jetty.
    The sky, low-grey, accepts the motley outrage
    of the birds without ado.
Sometimes she hears their
central stillness:
these paragraphs, the silent house,
the way a spouse has gone to bed.
She sees the writer at his screen
among his myriad corrections,
musing on the lives he's typed,
transparent but with colour.
She sees the diagram on his wall;
the line is like a small yacht tacking.
Somewhere, too, there is a childhood's
damaged photographs.

She smiles at Faulkner's definition:
a novel is a narrative
with something wrong with it.

This well-worked opening page or two
will need to be re-written;
some other pieces don't quite fit;
the characters too well recall
the models they derive from.
The floor-plan of a crucial scene
doesn't quite make sense –
where was that couch again?
But, even so, the world exists –

for all its imperfections.
The cast converge, conspire, make love,
enact their small betrayals.

Borne by its momentum now,
she needs to reach the end.
These people are, she knows, still vivid

inside their maker’s brain –
and in a spouse’s too, perhaps,
and one or two good friends,

just as they are in hers.
She finds she’s come to care.
Sitting in her late-night chair,

she has another five beside her,
weighted with their limitations.
Those suits who mind the bottom line,

though rarely eloquent,
must have the final word.
The minds where all these true creations

might once have bloomed and waved a while
are flipping through their eighty channels,
a scotch perhaps to sink the day,

some salted nuts beside them.
She sees the coloured shadows shimmer.
But in this room with lamp and chair

she’s reached the final page.
The characters encounter fates
both plausible and not unkind –

although a few – like life, she knows –
must run on unresolved.  
She gives a sigh to see them leave –

then wanders stiffly to the kitchen,  
the outline of a soft rejection  
forming in her mind.

THE BOOK OF HIS ADDRESSES

The book of his addresses  
is like the mind of God,  
older than he'd like,  
with some names down the bottom  
seriously frayed.  
Too many of its entries  
have had a line drawn through –  
and so he keeps on losing  
the argument with death.  
The entropy of God,  
it's clear, is heaven-sent.  
Drawing near the silence,  
the book of his addresses  
becomes more eloquent.
THREE SKETCHES FOR AN AFRICAN IDYLL

1.
The woman’s eyes big
with wonder, beyond sorrow.
Tumid child sucking
leather purse, arms thin as reeds.
Strange birds beat croaking above.

2.
Child scratching in dust,
eyes hugely luminous, rimmed
with stubborn flies. Bleached
skeleton trees and father
feeding newsprint to the cow.

3.
Tall women erect
proceed in grave dignity
supporting pitchers on their
heads – black Caryatides
up from drying pools of mud.
“Can we go fishing tonight, Dad?”

The eleven year old boy had only been night fishing once. Walking along the high road above the beach seeing the fishermen’s lamps; the darkness of the ocean that melted into sky, and then the white splash of the sinkered line hitting the water before disappearing. He had loved that night on the beach; just his Dad and him on the beach together, silent most times but it didn’t matter. They got excited and let out hooting sounds when they thought they got a bite and he remembered the smile on his father’s face when the first fish was landed. He had caught a tailor that night. A smaller one, not as big as his father’s two. Silver. A night fish.

“Not tonight. Too windy.”

“But Dad, look outside, there’s no wind.”

“There would be wind on the beach. Onshore wind. Another night.”

His father had promised all week that they would go fishing on Friday night. He stared out the window, there was no breeze. They were only three houses up from the beach. There was no wind, but he couldn’t disagree with his father who had already grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and had sat down in front of the television to watch the News. There would be no moving him now.

His mother came in: “Another night, Michael. It is only the first week of summer. There will be months and months of hot weather and still nights.” But he didn’t trust his father to ever take him again. The beach was a hundred yards away but his father would never take him back there.

His mother seeing his disappointment added, “Lots of nights with fish jumping out of the water.” He couldn’t tell her that it was herring that jumped and boiled on the surface of the water. Tailor were a night fish that lived close to the bottom. They never jumped.

He went into his room and took out an atlas of the world. A large, green hardback with a circular vision of the earth embossed on the cover. He turned
to the page with the map of Australia and the Indian Ocean stretching all the way to Africa. Thousands of miles of water in different shades of blue that signified depth. How many fish were there in that ocean? Fish being devoured at this very minute, others being born, small and seeing for the first time water that went forever. How many in those dark blue patches on the map which lived in eternal darkness? Night lasted twenty four hours a day. There wouldn’t be day, he thought, at such depths. No light could ever penetrate that far down.

“Have a shower before dinner, Michael.”

He turned to the pages at the back of the atlas that had all the facts: the lengths of the longest rivers, the great mountains, seas and oceans. The deepest parts of the earth and sea. The Marianas Trench. Almost seven miles deep. It was further than the distance between Cottesloe and Scarborough. It would almost be as far as the City Beach groyne. All that way down in one of those underwater ... what was the name of that thing ... a Bathyscape. All the way down in the Bathyscape with it growing darker and darker. They would have great lights on the front to see. Great lights that would briefly light up a world that had only ever been coloured by darkness; it would be like the sun rising for the very first time. And beneath the sea there could be anything.

“Michael.”

At dinner he refused to look at his father. He looked down at his plate and slowly ate. He knew his father would not even mention fishing; wouldn’t sympathise or promise next week. It was only his mother who tried to make conversation. “How was school, Michael?” “Was he working on a school project?” “What mark did he get for his Oceans assignment?” “Where was his team playing football at the weekend?”

He didn’t look at his father but he imagined him sitting eating: his tanned face accentuated by his grey-white hair. Without any expression on his face, just bringing up food to his mouth. He was angry with his mother for still appearing happy, as if nothing had happened.

Back in his room he went back to his books. He had a small bookcase full on books on animals, the sea, dinosaurs. He had a theory that the Loch Ness Monster was an ichthyosaurus. They had long necks and lived in the water and could have survived the meteorites that supposedly killed the dinosaurs. He was going to prove this when he got older or else be a marine biologist. But for the moment he was obsessed with how sea creatures deep beneath the sea lived in eternal darkness. His mother had told him many times that he had all the brains in the family. She would one day sit in the pews of the halls of a university and watch him walk up and collect his degrees, dressed
in a black cape and wearing a mortarboard.

He grabbed the T volume of the Encyclopaedia of Animals and looked up tailor. It wasn’t there. There were tailor-birds, a type of warbler, but no tailor. Another certainty fell away from his world. Things changed too much. It was like the countries of Africa. His atlas had names of countries that were no longer there. Rhodesia and Congo had disappeared. It was like the beach in winter. Unrecognisable with the sand washed away. At Trigg the sandbank that was crowded with surfers all summer was rocky and deep. At least the sand came back every year but some things would never come back. He wanted permanence and the more he learnt the more he felt as if he was travelling into a strange country, no, it was more like descending beneath the water where light diminished slowly till there was only darkness.

He closed his book. He heard his father close the bedroom door.

Outside was still, with not a breath of wind.
From 1829 Fremantle was the economic hub of the new Swan River Colony, and by the 1850s it became the centre of the last penal settlement in Australia. Although the town was essentially a port, shipping lines, including those carrying mail, shunned Fremantle’s unsafe facilities for decades. Then, in 1897, the state’s chief engineer, C Y O’Connor, finally created a safe inner harbour. It made Fremantle the “Gateway to Australia,” the Australian first port-of-call for almost every ship from Europe and the first contact point for huge waves of migrants. After World War II a global shipping industry and demographic changes altered the port again, especially after the 1960s, and these changes continue.

Between 1879 and 2006 approximately seventy-five novels containing Fremantle passages appeared, but not in a steady flow. In the first fifty years only three or four were published, while since 1986 around thirty-five novels appeared, and in one year, 2004, five were published. The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia devotes four pages to Fremantle, but recognises only eight novels of the forty or so published up to that point, and was too early to catch the most recent wave. Inevitably selective, the guide included most of the really important novels, but not a neglected gem by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Intimate Strangers (1937).

My interest is not in identifying “true” Fremantle novels, for such a criteria creates a difficulty, as John Arnold indicated in the introduction to the book he edited on writing about Melbourne. He scanned or read over seventy-five novels and autobiographies set to some degree in the Melbourne metropolitan area and commented: “However very little of the fiction could be classed as ‘Melbourne novels’ in the sense that they could not have been written without the distinctive geographies and characteristics peculiar to Melbourne.” He added that, with many, setting and atmosphere could be provided by any typical urban environment. Arguably, many novels with
Fremantle settings could be similarly reset in any port or small industrial town, though perhaps not to the same extent as those of Melbourne. Faced with so many novels with scenes in one place it might be tempting to write as if “place” were the sole issue. If so, Lennard J Davis’ work might be useful. He argues that all descriptions of novelistic space are “ideological in the sense that they contain embedded social meaning,” and develops ideas of how this coincides with questions of authorial power.

Some of the Fremantle novels I’ve identified tend to fall into groups that could be analysed in terms of Davis’ argument. Novels on incarceration in Fremantle for example start with Western Australia’s first novel, John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne* (1879) and penal ideology may be definitive in the early identity of Fremantle. The port’s heritage of radicalism is important too, but not as well represented in novels as one might think. However, rather than focus on embedded social meanings in a notion of “place”, I want to explore David Lodge’s idea of the narrative nature of consciousness. He cites the scientific work of Antonio Damasio, and argues that the novel is “humanity’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual humans beings through space and time.” This may be contentious but his broadly psychological approach allows me to consider issues that I am loosely calling “archetypal,” “unconscious” or “psychological” in relation to reading the ways ports – specifically Fremantle – are used in a range of narrative types. In 1994 Gail Jones wrote of Fremantle in a way that encourages this kind of reading: “the city is already an especially mythologised site; Fremantle is a romanced port”, and some of the contemporary “Fremantle” novels do make direct use of universal archetypes. A striking example is Tracy Ryan’s neo-gothic *Vamp* (1997) in which a vampire runs loose; a sight of the port waters from an outlying suburb causes a mermaid like sea-witch to be invoked, and the Whaler’s Tunnel seems to become a passage between two worlds.

There is evidence that the deeper layers of the mind are always stirred at ports, though usually less spectacularly than in *Vamp*. Throughout the age of ocean travel novelists created waterfront scenes in which characters passed through often traumatic changes of consciousness as they transferred between land and sea. And the power of a port zone to move a story from one state to another, or signify a change in a character’s consciousness is evident in a range of writers’ work. Think of the threshold role ports have in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for example. It is also hard to imagine how Garcia Gabriel Marquez might have written *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) without the purpose, symbolism and setting Florentino Ariza’s home river port scenes provide. And Bram Stoker uses ports repeatedly in *Dracula* (1897), creating one of literature’s classic scenes when
his “living-dead” Count arrives in Britain at the port of Whitby, and for several tense days the forces of good and evil battle at the threshold of the port.

Slightly more prosaically, writers have often used the passenger arrival in or departure from Fremantle as a dynamic story mechanism. The prime examples of such writing tend to be in books actually written at the height of the age of ocean travel, although some recent examples – Joan London in Gilgamesh (2001), Liz Byrski in Gang of Four (2004) and Brenda Walker in Wing of Night (2005) – have briefly revisited the port threshold in telling scenes of memory and history. In these, and in many earlier novels, the port, with its stark threshold between deep water and land, can be read as symbolically similar to the boundary between sleep and waking, the conscious and the unconscious, and is representative of this structure of sometimes traumatic, always shifting states of consciousness.

It is perhaps important to note the difference between jetties, which probe out into the ocean, and harbours that enclose a pool of deep water. In The Coast Dwellers, Philip Drew used Coff’s Jetty, in northern New South Wales, to make some general comments which could apply to any jetty. He thought it symbolised “an intense externalism ... the main orientation of Australia; the extent of Australia’s dependence on outside contacts in the economic sphere, our role in supplying raw materials and a history of involvement in other people’s wars ... It also indicates a psychological orientation”. What Drew doesn’t state is that a jetty also gives an uninterrupted view of the ocean, a fact which allows ships to be watched coming and going from afar, and authors usually handle jetty scenes differently to those in enclosed harbours.

In Black Swans (1925), Molly Skinner creates a scene on an imaginary Fremantle jetty. People gather there to watch two unscheduled sailing ships draw closer, like a slightly unnerving mirage. The author creates a sense of vulnerability, underpinned by feelings of dependence on a very distant economic base. The prospect of new goods arriving is stimulating and the excited audience starts betting on which of the two ships might arrive first:

“Curious,” one of the gentleman remarked suddenly, “that the forward ship should come so much faster, while the other lags in the same wind”.

It was curious. They could see the gorged sails over-abundantly spread, and yet she faltered, simply brandishing her white beauty to the sea, the sky and the golden sun.

“She seems over-laden with good things for the new world”, said Mr Granville. How truthfully he spoke! An orderly galloped up with
a dispatch and the grown-ups gathered round him. A soldier in his old shako, tail-coat, and white breeches ever drew Letty's attention—and she also turned away from the sea.

When they turned back there was only one ship. They all stood bewildered—and presently aghast.  

In fact one ship was an over-laden pirate vessel and had sunk while their attention was distracted. The strange incident profoundly affects Letty, opening up the young girl's developing consciousness, and establishing a disturbing dreaminess in the story which soon billows into a somewhat incredible romantic fantasy.

The previous year Skinner had published with D H Lawrence *The Boy in the Bush* (1925), which presents a passage with a similar structure, the drawn-out arrival of a ship under sail, seen from a Fremantle jetty. The British migrant in the story, Jack Grant, has already been through the port once, where he expressed his shock and disgust at the port and the new country, before heading out into the bush. Now partially hardened, and indistinguishable from his fellow passengers who have a general air of "disreputable outcasts", Grant arrives back at Fremantle from the north-west in a small coastal schooner. The migrant is about to repeat his journey into the interior, where he will face his final transmutation into manhood as a new Australian, and perhaps find some resolution to his complex and troubled love interests. The jetty scene is again observed from the landside:

They could see the bulk of near islands. Farther off, a tiny white sail coming down fast on the fresh great sea-wind, emanating out of the north-west. She seemed to be coming from the beyond, slipping into the slightly-open, living oyster of our world.

The men on the wharf at Fremantle, watching her black hull emerge from the flecked sea, as she sailed magically nearer, knew she would be a cattle-boat coming in from the great Nor'West. They watched her none the less.

As she hesitated, turning to the harbour, she was recognised as the old fore-and-aft schooner *Venus*; although if *Venus* ever smelled like that, we pity her lovers ... (257)

The ambiguously named *Venus* reminds the reader of Jack's love tangle which needs to be resolved, while the white buildings of Fremantle, mentioned further on, remind Jack that his soul is far away. The depiction of this jetty arrival, with its magical and compulsive quality, helps establish
the new mood of this part of the story.

Compared to jetties, a flat wharf in an enclosed harbour, like Fremantle’s Inner Harbour, creates a different mood and perspective: the psychological energy flows differently there, and it leads authors into different treatments. A harbour’s enclosed domesticity is tangible and so is its lack of an uninterrupted view of the ocean. At the same time, any security this may offer is ambiguous. The opening of Ainslie Spence’s *The Mystery of Red Gum* (1946) is a good example of the way this ambiguous quality may be used, as well as novelist’s tendency, in harbour berthing scenes, to begin the observation from the ship:

A young woman leaning on the rail of the mail boat *Kama* gazed down with mixed feelings at the busy wharf beneath, upon which she was shortly to land. So this was sunny Australia; the country of vast spaces and wild bush, about which she had heard so much from her husband in the grey winter of far away England. Her heart tightened a little. She was about to embark on a new life among strange people of different habits and customs, so she thought, and it alarmed her. Alarmed her more because her husband was still more or less a stranger.

The decks were thronged with the usual crowd of excited people, collecting luggage, waving to friends ashore, and bidding farewell to shipboard acquaintances. The ship had drawn steadily in until a sudden bump announced the fact that they had come to a standstill.

“Here we are, Mary”.

Spence depicts a shift in Mary’s consciousness, where her deep misgivings rise to the surface. As the couple pick up their luggage and head for the train the mysterious husband, her supposed protector, becomes markedly more threatening.

Writers need not be literal about arrival or departure, or even about a character’s feelings, for the port’s threshold energy is available as a source of artistic metaphor. In *Intimate Strangers* Katharine Susannah Prichard’s principal character, Elodie, is about to enter an adulterous relationship with tramp-ship skipper, Jerome. Weary and shaken by emotional upheavals into an almost reckless state of trust, she allows him to steer her to his car, then later to move her to a place under trees near the river, and take her protectively in his arms, when “floodgates of her sorrow burst”. Finally he guides her towards his ship in the harbour. The man and ship become a
united embodiment of ambiguous enclosure; Elodie a kind of passive vessel, then living-dead cargo needing discharge after a traumatic months-long voyage:

They had come to the harbour. He led the way across the deserted end of the wharf where the Ikan was moored. Dazed yet acquiescing, she followed him up the gangway on to the ship and his quarters. An indefinable compulsion underlay what she was doing. Drugged by her weariness, she could not think, except that Jerome had dragged her from some unfathomable depths of mystery, and was assuming his right to dispose of the corpse...

Jerry helped her to undress, kissed her bare shoulder. Elodie was conscious of him beside her, of caressing hands, and infinite protective tenderness.

Yet it transforms her:

In the morning, she wakened to find herself in the trim white cabin behind Jerry's sitting room: the hooting of sirens, the clatter of derricks, the busy life of the harbour going on all about her...

Slipping out of bed, she confronted herself in a long mirror surprised at the vitality, the strange happy confidence which had taken possession of her.

In a later scene though, in the same harbour and cabin, they are about to discuss the end of their brief liaison. This has become threatening for Elodie, an unstable source of danger because of Jerry's exotic expectations of her as a travelling partner; his are the wild romantic dreams of a lonely seafarer. Prichard's appropriation of the energy of the port is now different. In a single paragraph she uses words like "rattle", "distant", "thudding", "heavy", "clatter", "harsh", "noise", "shouting" and opens a long clause on the port's odours with the phrase "faint, fetid smell" so that the language expresses the sense of threat and depression that Elodie feels at this moment (302). As she leaves, to return to the relative security of life with her husband, the whole harbour reflects her deeper feelings: "It had become dark and quiet along the wharves and river. One of the Malay seamen was singing eerily, homesick and yearning for the sights and sounds of his native village" (310).

Judah Waten uses a similar expressionist technique in The Unbending (1954). The idealist dreamer, Kochansky, is at first excitedly anxious and optimistic as his ship arrives. But his oldest friend from their radical Russian student days, on whom he was counting on for help, is now a wealthy
capitalist and belittles Kochansky on the wharf. The new migrant is suddenly overwhelmed by fear and feelings of alienation and Waten reinforces these emotions with images from the port’s inner harbour infrastructure. Kochansky’s feelings extend even to the ship itself, which has been his home for weeks.

Kochansky walked behind his wife and son, glancing back again and again at the wharf. The human uproar was subsiding as the migrants departed, to be replaced by the hard mechanical sounds of winches and engines. The low slung cargo trucks clattered as they were pushed by the lumpers to-and-fro between ships and sheds. And a loose steam engine was trundling back and forth with single empty rail trucks and on another line a loaded train was sitting comfortably alongside a row of sheds. And rising above everything was the Frederick the Great — now strangely remote and inhuman.15

A long ocean journey created complex layers of anticipation, excitement and anxiety. Sea voyagers made a sort of home of the ship, while the expanse of sea, its almost unfathomable depths, was unpredictable and dangerous, full of mysterious and perhaps threatening underwater creatures. This has clear parallels with the depths of the unconscious mind, with its often startling thoughts and dreams materialising like mysterious sea life from the deep darkness.

The point of transition unleashes this energy and it need not be a simple ship scene; it is open to an even less direct approach than the one in Intimate Strangers. Peter Cowan, in The Hills of Apollo Bay (1989) needs only to invoke the wharves: “He’s got a sideline. He’s a kind of runner. And he’s at the wharves a lot. A mover. I don’t say what he moves from the wharves. I don’t know where it comes from. Anywhere probably”16 to initiate a sub-plot opening at Fremantle, which climaxes in a brutal “noir” crime-film style murder, complete with a bloody body in a V8 sedan parked in a dark alley. Here, the very idea of the waterfront also seems to create a kind of entrance to an area of outlaw consciousness and behaviour. A number of novelists have used this ambience to develop crime themes, with the most completely realised example Dave Warner’s hard-boiled thriller, City of Light (1995). Warner exploits the port’s streets, the sleazier parts of its industrial landscape and glimpses of the waterfront to help reinforce the dark mood of his story, which is about serial murder and corporate corruption. Warner does not need a ship arrival or departure.

A scene involving a ship is more common in the novels though, and most
often it is an arrival. Although in maritime terms there is no precise moment of arrival, but a long and complex sequence of connected events, the moment when the ship is tied safely to the berth is probably the most significant for seafarers. But for both J. M. Harcourt in *It Never Fails* (1937) and Nicholas Hasluck in *Our Man K* (1999), the threshold moment at Fremantle begins while the ship is still out at sea, with the arrival of the pilot’s launch. In Harcourt’s story journalists accompany the pilot aboard and one of them persuades the main character, Julius Windowen, to pose as an English aristocrat for a gossip story, a subterfuge which has important semi-comic consequences later in the novel. In Hasluck’s book a fictionalised Egon Kisch, based on the true life radical 1930s Czech writer, realises from mail that comes aboard with the pilot that he may face difficulties. This is confirmed when the ship docks at Fremantle and he is refused entry. At such threshold moments, characters begin to grapple with information which is often disturbing. Senses intensify, emotions churn and, as in these two novels, writers key in a psychological dilemma or an inciting incident as more or less essential to the subsequent story.

The less featured departure has a different dynamic, a more structured ritual mood, with bands playing and passengers throwing paper streamers from the ship. In Alfred McKenna’s *Tryst* (1945), a drab little flat-bottomed ship departs for southern Asia. When it reaches Hong Kong, Peter intends to meet a travelling part Russian “specialty dancer” with whom he has fallen in love. His parents oppose the match, preferring the less exotic local girl, Helen. Water-side vendors press streamers onto the passengers and some of the brightly coloured strips are already held taut between people on ship and shore. Others have broken and float in the breeze. It is simple but effective symbolism for the fragile relationships in the story.

Suddenly Helen materialises on the deck beside Peter, as though she has arisen from Peter’s mind. The pair conduct a strained conversation and his resolve to finish with her momentarily weakens. The ship’s whistle sounds, then a purser with a booming voice, like a seaborne archetype of fate, hustles Helen off the ship: “Sharp at noon the *Yindaroo* drew away from the wharf. Farewells were called; streamers snapped; last messages were shouted; general excitement altogether. Peter was on his way.” This launches the second half of the novel, where the loose ends of the story come together in a violent climax.

In *Wing of Night*, Brenda Walker creates a World War I troop departure scene which invokes a memory of cattle going to slaughter, as bands play and people sing “God Save the King” but the war metaphor is not the main point. Elizabeth Zettler is searching the ranks and decks of the ship for a last
glimpse of her husband, a farmer in peacetime, when she sees less well-off Bonnie Fairclough, a farming neighbour, impulsively embraced by her sweetheart, Joe Tully. The embrace causes the crowd to roar. The ritual mood of the departure, at this novel's opening, emphasises the moment as one of psychological transition, and helps to create the beginning of a bond between the two women, while the memory of the departure and of the impulsive embrace becomes significant later in the story.

Joan London almost completely eliminates the ritual of departure and creates a lonely, bleak dynamic in *Gilgamesh*, when Edith takes her small child, Jim, in search of his father. They are the only passengers boarding a small cargo vessel, heading for a Europe under the looming shadow of World War II. In spite of the solitary nature of their departure, the reader still gets a hint of a rite of passage. “The *Touchpole* sailed that evening, but Edith was too intimidated to go on deck for a last glimpse of her native shore.” Such muted isolation is not the usual mood in fictional departure scenes, but it is apt for *Gilgamesh*.

Judah Waten’s family first migrated to Perth in 1914, then moved to Melbourne in 1926. In his innovative autobiographical novel *Alien Son* (1952), he links an arrival and a departure at Fremantle harbour. Waten does not narrate his novel chronologically and the highly atmospheric departure scene, complete with band on the wharf, is really a kind of ending, but comes early in the book. His father is sending the family ahead to a port in the eastern states and his mother is stirred by the energy at the threshold:

The ship was vigorously belching smoke that quickly covered the sheds in a dirty cotton-wool blanket. It vibrated from stem to stern with impatience and infected Mother with its restlessness. She wanted to move about and seemed afraid to stand still.

“We must go aboard”, she said suddenly and holding my little sister in one arm and clutching my hand firmly, she almost ran up the gangway while Father, sweating and grumbling, followed behind with two suitcases.

However, before the ship leaves the mother's deepest obsession, a far more profound feeling than the prospect of a temporary separation from her spouse, surfaces:

She was absorbed with her own thoughts and she glanced resignedly at him, smiling like a deaf person. Then she suddenly came out of her reverie and caressing Father’s fleshy white hand said, “Even if
you make money we must leave this country. We mustn't lose ourselves here. We should only be living dead in a graveyard". (37)

This is her mainspring emotion. At the close of the novel it is explained by what happened years earlier at the moment of the family's arrival:

The impressions she gained on that first day remained with her all her life. It seemed to her there was an irritatingly superior air about the people she met, the customs officials, the cab men, the agent of the new house. Their faces expressed something ironical and sympathetic, something friendly and at the same time condescending. She imagined everyone on the wharf, in the street, looked at her in the same way, and she never forgave them for treating her as if she were in need of their good natured tolerance. (178–9)

These examples show the how the port as a threshold is given a symbolic power to unlock difficult areas of consciousness that are not connected with the sea journey being described. E H Brewer's short story, "With the Daybreak came Light", which appeared in The Westralia Gift Book (1917), is a very interesting early example, though it may contain an element of denial. Here a returning sheep farmer goes on deck at dawn to get his first glimpse of Fremantle. A beautiful dark-haired woman is doing the same and they are thrown together, literally, when he saves her from a sudden wave, "which licked after her".

He does not at first realise the woman is Aboriginal, but later marries her, against his family's advice. When their child is born black he rushes into the bush with it, presumably intending to kill it, before having a kind of benign vision and returning to his senses. I would agree with Bruce Bennett who argues that the story "purports to vindicate nature and the natural over the dictates of civilisation, but reveals in the process deep chasms of anxiety and fear about relations between white and Aboriginal Australians, which have persisted across three-quarters of a century in Western Australia". And it is these "chasms of anxiety and fear" that are embedded in the dawn arrival at Fremantle.

Patrick White's Fremantle arrival scene broaches searching questions about gender and narrative. The Twybom Affair (1979), almost his last novel, adopts a transsexed narrator. In the first part there is a female alter ego; the second opens on the Fremantle waterfront, where she becomes he, Eddie Twyborn, a returning World War I soldier. Rather than begin at the ship or
wharf, White emphasises the symbolic crossing of railway lines, analogous to the criss-crossing of the gender of the novel’s narrator, which run parallel to the waterfront at Victoria Quay:

No heat or is it the glare? more quenching than that of Fremantle ...

After letting the party make its getaway, I went down into the town. Rusted railway-lines are strips of red, solidified heat. Wharfies sweating round their hairy navels. I am the stranger of all time, for all such hairy bellies an object of contempt – a Pom, or worse, a suspected wonk. If only one had the courage to stick a finger in the outraged navel and await reactions. Nothing minces so daintily as an awakened male ...

Perhaps I should have gone with the Hoorah Party, fun finding in Perth. Fremantle is something to be passed over because so painfully personal. No doubt that’s why I chose it – the expatriate masochist and crypto-queen. (142-3)

White wrote this in the twilight of the age of ocean travel. Some ship scenes continue to be written, but by necessity are a re-examination of the past or explore the nature of memory. In Gang of Four, for example, Liz Byrski creates a brief but powerful waterfront memory. Isabel, outgoing Mayor of Fremantle, undertakes a journey of self-discovery abroad, during which she remembers a profound moment at the wharf:

Isabel had been bitterly disappointed when Eunice and Eric returned from Europe. Her excitement had evaporated the moment she saw them. Her mother was neither the glamorous dancer of the photographs nor the vivacious mother who had lived in the pages of her letters, but a thin, pale woman whose face was lined with pain and whose wheelchair was carried down the gangplank onto the Fremantle wharf by two sailors. Isabel’s jealousy was born in that moment, for as the chair was set down it was pushed to the terminal by a tall blond man in a Harris tweed jacket, the bowl of a pipe sticking out the breast pocket. A stranger who talked like the men who read the news on the radio, and who seemed to have first claim on her mother. Poor Eric, he had shown such patience.24

For at least two years after this threshold moment, Isabel is consumed with deep feelings of anger, disappointment and jealousy.

Now that the ocean passenger era has been almost completely
superseded by air travel, will novelists continue to capitalise on the energy at the waterfront? Perhaps there will be more retrospective explorations, like Liz Byrski’s, and others such as those of Nicholas Hasluck, Joan London and Brenda Walker. However, one contemporary writer has turned to the small modern boats. In Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001), Georgie Jutland has reached a life crisis at a mid-West-coast fishing village. She returns to Perth, and at Fremantle her father gives her a boat, but with emotional strings attached. The waterfront moment opens up an uncomfortable insight into a certain kind of parental love:

Her father and Cynthia were on the dock in their poncey sailing outfits, all deck shoes and polarised shades on lanyards. Cynthia wore so much make-up Georgie figured she used it as sunscreen. The old boy’s legs were white and scaley. The three of them kissed awkwardly.

Before Georgie could get to the point, which was surely Jude’s immediate future, the old man placed a sheaf of papers in her hands. These were the registration papers of a vessel called *Closing Address*. It was already in her name.

Then the old man steps down into his own big boat, *Summary Affair*, its engines already running, and departs to Rottnest. As Georgie watches it glide from the marina she has to face the nature of her father’s love. She feels he has served his gift upon her like a “writ”: “canny entrapment, even in fatherly love, the great game. To serve upon. That was his idea of service. This was love” (276). And in *Cloudstreet* (1988), there is a long, emotionally charged passage involving a small boat purchased in Fremantle, which Winton develops from an old family myth.

The small boat scene by definition is usually about a short trip, and from the 1970s on passengers arriving across deep water to Fremantle were increasingly limited to big cruise ships. These vessels have size, power and glamour but most of the voyagers are undertaking a leisurely cruise to nowhere in particular. Perhaps because these journeys lack the driving sense of purpose of the earlier sea passages, the threshold experience of cruise ship passengers at Fremantle have so far not attracted novelists. Yet, as Gail Jones noted in the quotation cited earlier, the port of Fremantle has itself become “romanced”. New writers such as Samantha Ellen Tidy with *Cappuccino Diva* (2003) and Craig Silvey with *Rhubarb* (2004) have moved on to find narrative possibilities in the evolved social fabric of modern Fremantle, virtually ignoring the waterfront.
Notes

1 Result of research undertaken in recent years. The starting points were Bruce Bennett et al. *Western Australian Writing; a Bibliography* (South Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press in association with CSAL, UWA, 1990), and *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987). Talks given by Bob Woollett, former president of the Fremantle Historical Society, were important as was his typescript, *Fremantle: A Place in Literature* (2004), in the local history section in the public library in Fremantle.


5 I explore these in my not-yet published book *Fremantle and the Novel 1879–2006*.


7 There is for example no Fremantle waterfront novel like John Morrison's *Port of Call* (London: Cassell, 1950) or Criena Rohan’s *Down by the Dockside* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963), both set in Melbourne.


9 Extracted from her jacket comment on *Fremantle Stories* (Fremantle: Cliff Street Publishing, 1994).


At Melbourne Kisch literally jumped ship, breaking his leg on the wharf but, amid a ludicrous language test and court battles, managed to complete his tour.


Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1981, first ed. 1979). White's leading epigraph to this novel, taken from David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (Sydney: Pan Books, 1978), encompasses both the maritime and the psychological: "What else should our lives be, but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have yet to become?"

Suzanne Falkiner in *The Writer's Landscape: Settlement* (East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1992), argues on p15 that Fremantle in *The Twyborn Affair* is just a reincarnation of Sarsparilla, White's imaginary suburb of conformity and self-satisfaction, which appears in his earlier fiction and dramatic works. Yet the real port town is quite recognisable and one scene, in a Fremantle pub, is directly comparable to that of local writer, Peter Cowan, in *The Tenants* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994).


Private letter from the writer, February 2006. He lives in Fremantle but also has connections to the ports of Albany and Geraldton.
It's a matter of public record now
that Percy Grainger
when in America
and playing at a concert
a very long Faure piece
left out
six pages of the score
because he had to catch a train
and no one
noticed.

During the interval
while men smoked cigars
and women sipped champagne
there were overheard
whispered conversations
and snatches of gathered speech
about the integrity of the music
the unity of the thing
the stunning wholeness
of all the notes and parts.

I admire that immensely
and I like the sense too
of a perfect kind of abridgement
even Faure
might have approved of
while Percy sat back
in his plush first class seat
giving of course a kind of damn – but having completely got away with it.
CHRISTOPHER (KIT) KELEN

BLOKES

Blokes are always coming over in their droves or in their ones. Wear thongs in summer, boots for weather. Won’t be tied, won’t be predicted. No one says mind my good floor love.

Triumphant in their utes and vans, they’re around here day and night. They’re courting our Penelope. They know what’s next, what’s what, when, why. Blokes know what to do and what you need and even if you can’t decide. Blokes’ll sort your trouble out. If it ain’t broke it’s easy fixed. Take care but not responsible. They’re always late and rude and wet. Blokes like to be outside the best. They dare the ozone at their backs. Sleep with someone else. They say things you wouldn’t. Feel less, do more. You’ve got to love them though. Hide in their frothy beards to weep. You feel for them. The camera shies. Cuddle them and know they’re bad. Take them all for granted.

Don’t like to be told. Won’t take hints. They slink away to shed when dark.
Grow blacker under moody trees, shed their lacks among the fauna. They won't be caught, they get away. Get down to pub and dob and dob. Until they're almost in the clink. They tell their temporary comrades. Blokes all tell the truth and when they don't they've got the story all worked out.

Blokes all know the pecking order, how to fit, not rock the boat. They make a play for the affections. Trust the passing moment, loathe the permanence of plans. Won't stand still in all that distance unless it's advertising beer. They have terrific urgency. Already, yes they've climbed your tree, know what you've lost before it's gone, what's down that pipe, what ails your pet. Blokes give each other pointers. They stand off when the strain requires. Keep their level on the job, the issue well in hand. And prime themselves with jests, digress.

Blokes are slaves of circumstance. It's not their fault the way they are. Was done to them as blokelings. They can't help being rough with stuff, have to give it all a test. See if it's well made or not.

Blokes are mates or so they say. Won't Let a bastard down. The blokiest are Your best mates. Your mates are blokes If you're a bloke. Women can be mates or ladies, can't be blokes. Mate with them to make new playmates. Blokes or no. If you're a bloke you mustn't mate with other blokes. It doesn't work. A dreadful thing. Unblokemanlike. Besides - how could you ever tell your mates?

Some things are better left unsaid.
And out of earshot of the nagging
Blokes won't need your looking after.
Dinners tabled, washing done.
Blokes go lean in filth and glue
their rotting jeans together.
Blokes know it's bad luck to speak
when gesturing would do the trick.

As insects lead the faster life
they've lost a leg before you've
finished telling them precautions.
Enemies of labour saving, scoff
at ingenuity. They do a thing
the hardest way. Heaviest, most
arduous, most danger to their backs,
their hearts. They use their tools
with no protection. Clog noses
and their ears fall off. Eyes are
full of filings. It shows what
blokey blokes they are. Drown
in beer to build a gut. They suffer
beef to have the dripping. Sneak
from the ward at last for fags
and curse their curtailed freedom.
That's with their last breath.

Bloody this and bloody that is what
your bloke ghost says at last. And
when the dirt's dug and well sifted
where are those blokey souls all fled?
They've gone to blokeland. Hellish
spot. Celestial shed. And dim
or bright to their deservings.

There's always more after.
There never was a drought of blokes
not since the war. Blokelings grow
to blokehood's full bloom. Blokes
abound, they pull their weight.
Just ring for blokes, they will appear.
Show some leg, offer beer. When
all else fails you needn’t fear.
Just stir him up.
Your bloke is here.
CONJUNCTION
for John Bradley

—1— To John, This Offering
Returning to friendship, a force that sustained
across hemispheres and the demonic rage of history,
to tears and the wrestle of dreams,
neither of which I understand,

Returning to the most intimate conjunction
Because I was listening to other things, other ways of knowing,

Returning to a place where names
are unreadable, where slate-blue rivers
run calmly through the reflective, shimmering mind,

Returning to the conjunction and green flame
of the self, to grammar
we can never escape, to a dawn
crimson with confusion,

Returning to the rhythm of a phrase
that is both disturbing and beautiful,

Returning to a raging habit that breaks my heart
but I fall back into like sleep,

Returning to offer you this:

Because there are invisible words under these,

Because Kobodaichi sat on the mountain
without food or water for one hundred days,

Because his fire still burns on Miyajima, tended by monks and devout laypersons hundreds of years later, and because

There is no other word for because...

—2— Returning to August 6
I was listening to other things, eyes closed for other sight.
The cicadas had stopped.

The superfortress has been up there for hours heading this way. The war has been over for years.

At the news, each member of the family, starting with grandfather, rose and reached for the other. Holding hands, they observed

Silence. Listening for other things. My eyes were closed but I could see.

Clinging to bark, the cicadas had stopped. The great thrumming of engines filled the heavy chamber of a still summer evening.

Why return to this approaching? Why let years circle like a stunned family? I have no answer but

Silence like a kind of listening. The world and all its paces tuned to a pitch just out of reach, a band of color just out of range.

—3— The Hungry Ghosts
The old monk said the streets are thick with them, wandering homeless. They grope, desperate to be at peace, ghosts in a world that does not believe in ghosts. You must be careful, walking, driving, even bundling along the arcade, shopping, you must take great care.
Every step
is shadowed by their ghostly fingers grasping the air turned by your passing
pant leg.
Every step you take in this city where you are an alien. Your decisions,
take care:
how you choose and what. As you move from task to task, filling your hours
with meetings and happenings, you are pages ahead of the seasons, miles
ahead of
your souls.
This is the space they inhabit, the kingdom you don't even know about let
alone rule.
The old monk says the more we dismiss as superstition, the more
hungry and desperate their longing, the more we owe them. In this city,
the blind
monk said,
the streets are thick with these ghosts, yearning to be at peace, longing to
come home.

—4— The Place of the Seed
I am told that seeds buried in earthen walls
seeds dormant for years burst open
in the sun-centered heat

Listening that dry yet accessible place
I am leaning close listening
to walls and ghosts

Returning a long slow circle
in the wrestle of history I am returning
to my life the larger one

I am returning to the place of that seed
the shriveled homeland the spirit-clogged place
I come back here to live
There are books scattered across my desk, across the floor, too, to be honest, in an arc around my chair – books hardback and paperback, fat and thin, tall and squat, down-market and up-market, sober and extravagant. Twenty-five new books have arrived from *Westerly*’s editors as “the year’s work in Australian non-fiction”.

Strictly speaking, of course, they are nothing of the sort. For 2003–4, the last year that figures were collected as part of the federal government’s post-GST sweetener package for the book trade, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 1695 new Australian non-fiction titles across the general, trade and mass-market sectors, alongside a further 4610 in the education market.¹ I have no cookbooks or textbooks, no celebrity biographies, no *feng shui* or financial management titles, no Lonely Planets or CSIRO diets. What I do have are the books that happened to land on the editor’s desk, a fraction of Australian non-fiction publishing. But while there is doubtless something haphazard about the group of books which have arrived, it is not altogether a random selection of titles. These are the books that publishers and marketing divisions think might appeal to a certain kind of reader or consumer – the *Westerly* reader – whose profile probably fits that most elusive of all categories, the “general educated reader” (a form of the “discerning consumer”). This has traditionally been a difficult area for Australian publishers, with a domestic market too small to sustain a high volume of “serious” non-fiction publishing outside the education sector, certainly too small to sustain high-level, regular scholarly publishing, but large enough for a steady output of books that cross from the scholarly to the general, from the literary to what we might call “public opinion” publishing, the book form of the broadsheets’ opinion pages. This is where we (academics) in Australia often find ourselves, writing on the back of our scholarly experience and expertise, but for better or worse not being able to write only for other scholars in the field even where we suspect that our only readers might be
other academics or their students. Come to think of it, that’s exactly where I find myself writing now, half in and half out of my academic self, writing for a university-based journal, but for readers rather than scholars.

To put it another way, our scholarly publishers are often nervous about scholarship and scholarly books, and for the most part have to function as general or trade publishers as well as academic presses, certainly in the humanities. Thus their presentation of academic books in trade formats and their search for cross-over titles, books by academics that might just strike a chord among general educated readers, find a place outside the university sector in the “good bookstores” and even the chains, or win a Premier’s Prize and make it into the newspaper review pages. Robert Manne has the knack; Ganglands and The History Wars were recent and unexpected successes. Inga Clendinnen, Robert Dessaix, Geoffrey Blainey and David Day, with his biography of John Curtin, have all, in their different ways, had cross-over bestsellers.

A task like the present one, to survey the year’s work in Australian non-fiction, is likely to encourage diagnosis of the state of the nation or at least the state of its intellectual life. Robert Dixon, writing last year’s review of the year’s non-fiction, focussed on a selection of key books in the broadly-defined area of Australian studies which manifested an intellectual shift from national to transnational and cosmopolitan frameworks. This year’s selection seems much too scattered to allow any such prognosis. I can announce that writerly memoirs and essays and up-market accounts of maritime explorers are still in vogue. More seriously, questions of race and culture (local, national and transnational cultures) are still driving Australian studies. This emerges in Regina Ganter’s major new work on Asian-Aboriginal contact in northern Australia (my pick among the present titles), Gwenda Tavan’s history of the Long, Slow Death of White Australia, Zohl de Ishtar’s memoir-ethnography of her two years with Wirrimanu (Balgo) women, Michael Clyne’s passionate study of Australia’s multilingual potential and current monolingual complacency, even Richard Waterhouse’s cultural history of rural Australia. In effect, in a number of these studies, we see the repositioning of Australian studies that Dixon noted turned back onto sites and histories within the nation’s borders but no longer “national” in any self-evident or self-contained manner.

In rather different ways, the nation is located within a global framework in Anthony Moran’s Australia: Nation, Belonging and Globalization, a work of political and social theory, and in Ann Curthoys and John Docker’s Is History Fiction?, which takes on the full range of “western” historiography from Herodotus to Holocaust history, sliding-in its Australian
examples as part of the ongoing, contested and “multi-national” history of histories. Australian history wars, for example, appear within a broader sweep of history wars in the USA, Japan and elsewhere.

For the moment at least I want to put aside any larger speculations, and instead concentrate on what these books do tell us about more directly: the conditions of publishing and getting published in Australia, in this particular sector of the global publishing market. On this level, the collection of books can be taken as symptomatic after all, but of the structures of Australia’s publishing industry and book market rather than of the nation’s cultural health.

***

First, the publishers. All but five of the books are published by independent Australian houses: ABC Books, Black Inc (Schwartz Publishing), Central Queensland University Press, Curtin University Books/Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Giramondo, The National Library of Australia, Pandanus, Scribe, Spinifex, University of New South Wales Press, University of Queensland Press, University of Western Australia Press, and Wakefield Press. Another is from Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand.

Of the remaining titles published by overseas or multinational corporations three are from the Random House imprints of Jonathan Cape, Harvill Press and Vintage: respectively, Carmen Callil’s blockbuster account of French Nazi collaborator Louis Darquier and his Tasmanian wife, Myrtle Jones, first published in Great Britain; Murray Bail’s Notebooks, published simultaneously in Great Britain and Australia; and Michael Fullilove’s collection of “great Australian speeches,” an Australia-only title. Random House represents one model of multinational publishing in Australia. It has itself been owned since 1998 by German publishing and media conglomerate Bertelsmann AG – one of the big four or five – but it has its own local publishing operation, Random House Australia, and together with stablemate Transworld issues Australian titles under a number of its many imprints (including Arrow, Bantam, Century, Doubleday, Knopf, Vintage and William Heinemann).

Moran’s Australia, from Routledge (London and New York), represents a rather different, newer model. The book is pitched directly into a transnational academic market – an Australian-authored book about Australia, written for an international series, and marketed back into Australia. Routledge is now an imprint of international scholarly publisher Taylor and Francis, who have an Australian office but not an “independent” Australian
publishing arm. Taylor and Francis, alongside Sage perhaps, is the leading international (i.e., not just “overseas”) publisher of new work in the humanities and social sciences, at least in fields such as cultural studies or social theory that travel internationally. I can’t think of any Routledge titles in Australian literary studies or Australian history.

The book that really does seem the odd one out in my list – though strangely a form of publication that we might once have imagined to be standard and mainstream – is Clare Archer-Lean’s book of literary criticism, an extended “cross-cultural,” postcolonial and intensely textual study of the works of Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo and Canadian Thomas King. It is sobering to reflect how absolutely rare it is to see book-length literary criticism published in the Australian market, even (or especially) those based on PhDs, as this one seems to be. The only other book close to this end of the scale is Ann McCulloch’s Dance of the Nomad (from Pandanus/ANU), a substantial selection from A. D. Hope’s notebooks with interspersed analysis from McCulloch. But the book probably appeals as much to our biographical interest in Hope as to a literary interest, although McCulloch insists that her book “presents an argument,” and her own interests are theoretical and high aesthetic. While it is difficult to imagine who the book’s readers might be outside a small group of scholars and poets, again one is surprised and grateful to see such a book published in Australia, especially so generously, this one a large 366 pages, with wide margins and quality paper. It almost seems old-fashioned, despite its very contemporary Deleuzean rendering of Hope’s attitudes and practices.

The publisher of Archer-Lean’s book is The Edwin Mellen Press, based in Lewiston, NY, Queenstown, Ontario, and Lampeter, Wales, and it is a heavy and handsome hardback. So rare is this kind of book in the Australian market that I had to go googling, and I was not surprised when my search revealed a series of controversies about the publisher. According to some, it is a business committed or at least willing to publish in areas of scholarship that other publishers won’t touch, such as African studies; according to others, it is a kind of academic “vanity press”. While it does not accept author subventions or other subsidies, it will publish almost any decent scholarly work, without paying royalties, and relying on the research library market for its sales (although apparently some libraries in North America refuse to buy from its list). It would appear from the present example that they don’t do much proof-reading for their authors.

By drawing attention to the contested reputation of The Edwin Mellen Press I do not mean to imply anything negative about Archer-Lean’s book, which is a wholly respectable work, worthy of its PhD; but the fact that such
a book, to appear at all, probably depends upon this kind of publisher is
telling. Extended analysis of Australian writers and their works is scarcely part
of our public conversations, except sensationally when the occasion allows an
attack on the literary establishment or the chattering classes. As I write, ten
Australian publishers and literary agents have been “exposed” by the
Australian, having been sent a chapter of Patrick White’s The Eye of the Storm
as a new work, and having rejected it. Odd how a newspaper aggressively
committed to market principles can criticise the “literary establishment,” if
that’s what it is, for adhering to them; but then again, the newspaper is also
agressively committed to the self-evident values of the western cultural
tradition, to which White “self-evidently” belongs. White, one can only think,
would have been appalled by the newspaper’s stunt, whatever he might have
thought of the publishers and agents. That none of them recognised White’s
scarcely miss-able style perhaps indicates, more significantly, just how far
advanced the disjunction is between “Australian literature” as an enterprise
and Australian publishing as an enterprise.

****

So: thirteen Australian publishers and three international (the New Zealand
example is closer to the former than the latter category). What does this
particular spread of publishers tell us? Perhaps most obviously that the
domain of “ideas and opinion” publishing in Australia – books based on
research and expertise written for academic and/or general educated readers
– is almost entirely reliant upon independent Australian publishing houses.
With the exception of those few runaway titles that ride the wave of a debate
or appeal as intelligent Christmas presents, this is small volume publishing
for a restricted section of what is already a relatively small domestic market,
not necessarily high risk, as relatively small investments are involved and
subsidies are often sought, but at best modestly profitable. It’s unlikely to
appeal to the big operators unless a very broad or very delimited market
segment can be identified.

To take Random House as our case study for the big companies, the
multinationals will enter the market at either side, as it were, of the quality
non-fiction domain occupied by the locals, taking on books that are either
more international or more popular in appeal. Bad Faith, Callil’s book, is big,
bold and biographical, full of research, archives and appendices (ironically the
kinds of things Australian publishers often want us to remove because they
look too academic) but also framed in reader-friendly fashion as a personal
search, from Paris to Launceston, written in straightforward prose and with a
theme that touches both great historical movements and the intimate details of family life – the Holocaust with an Australian connection. Bail’s book, by contrast, is expressly “small,” its pitch to an international niche market of literary readers reflected in the book’s expensive, small format, hardback design and minimalist content: the shapely, fragmentary jottings of Bail’s notebooks, framed by a good proportion of blank page. Everything about it says “rare” and “precious”. (Interestingly, Notebooks is an extension of his Longhand: A Writer’s Notebook, first published by independent local McPhee Gribble in 1989. The independents often play the role of talent scouts and training schools, rather like SBS for the commercial TV stations or Australian cinema for Hollywood.) Michael Fullilove’s collection, different again, is a soft cover trade paperback, designed for what we might call the popular educated market. It probably made it into the chain bookstores, while very few of the other titles under consideration would have – perhaps only Callil’s, Robert Dessaix’s The Best Australian Essays and, given its topic, Roger Bourke’s Prisoners of the Japanese.

Routledge, as suggested, has aimed Moran’s study of Australia and globalisation at a very different market: an international scholarly network within which Australia is one node, at best a middle-sized market, but reasonably profitable nonetheless. Here the appropriate model is network rather than one-directional export; that is, it is less about exporting British or American books into a dependent market than servicing a dispersed, transnational readership (although we know where the power lies). Thus we might also say that Australian academics represent a medium-sized but reasonably profitable group of “content producers” for this same market. The book is the first in a series, “Globalizing Regions”, which will include other titles on Ireland, China and South America, concise studies designed primarily for university students and scholars.

Few independent Australian houses can enter these international markets, despite the increasing success in the sale of international rights for Australian fiction, self-help and children’s titles. Inversely, the multinationals see little profit in the local “public culture” market. The optimistic view of this stand-off is to note just how varied the publications and publishers are, to see in the list of locally-produced titles evidence of a bold, active and expanding local publishing scene, indeed an active and engaged intellectual and cultural life. The pessimistic view is to note how little interest overseas-owned publishers, even those with local publishing offices, appear to have in this particular market sector. The field, with its mostly small-scale print runs and profits, is left to the locals. (Cambridge University Press is something of an exception, but where, these days, are the Penguins?) Still, to return to
optimism, we can point out how local publishers have grabbed the opportunities this imbalance presents, indeed created their own occasions by bringing new publishing fields into existence, making a virtue of necessity. Thus the expansion of university presses into general publishing, Giramondo’s move into literary essays, or the creation of new public spaces in print through initiatives like Black Inc’s Best Australian Essays or the Agenda series, the imprint for Robert Manne’s Do Not Disturb.

There are, nonetheless, two kinds of imbalance operating to structure publishing in Australia. The large publishing houses, mostly foreign-owned multinationals, are responsible for the vast majority of new Australian titles across all sectors of non-educational publishing. In fiction the top three houses publish more than a third of new titles annually, while the top six publish around one half (Independents Allen & Unwin and UQP come in at number 5 and 6 respectively). At the same time, small firms – those with less than twenty persons employed – produce around one third of new Australian non-fiction titles per year, but only nine per cent of the more profitable sector of mass-market fiction. By contrast, as we’ve just seen, in the particular sector of “public culture publishing” represented by the books that cross the Westerly editor’s desk – mostly local authors on local topics of cultural, historical or political interest – the vast majority of new titles are produced by the smaller local publishers.

It would be misleading, though, to read the imbalance between large multinationals and small, local independents as a sign of either sudden crisis or terminal decline in Australian publishing. It is rather one of the structural features within which the industry has always operated. The conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability produced by this unequal situation and by the relatively small domestic market are defining features in most sectors of Australian cultural production – publishing, television, cinema and popular music, for a start. It is difficult to point to a golden age before this situation pertained, despite the flourish of Australian publishing in the late-1970s and 1980s. Indeed, I’d be prepared to argue that more and better books about Australian history, culture and politics are appearing today than ever before, although some areas, such as literary criticism, are doing less well. The distribution of the field is such that the boom in celebrity bios and self-help pop does not mean the death of serious publishing. Further, there is nothing to say that large or foreign-owned publishers will not be committed to local markets, and they are normally better placed to offer professional editing, publicity and distribution services. Nonetheless, uncertainty and vulnerability remain key features of Australian publishing outside the educational or mass-market sectors. As a striking illustration of this fact, at
least three of the publishers active on my list of books from the last year have closed down or restricted their activities. Pandanus is accepting no new manuscripts, Spinifex will cease publishing new books at the end of this year, and Curtin University Books ceased operation in May.

****

Perhaps even more telling than the presence of independent Australian publishers in the quality non-fiction sector is the role being played by our university presses and other public institutions. Eight of the titles have been published by four university presses - Central Queensland University Press, UNSW Press, the University of Queensland Press and UWA Press. In another year, no doubt, there would be additional titles from Melbourne University Press. To add to these we have the one title, East by South, from Victoria University Press in New Zealand (Charles Ferrall et al.); The Vision Splendid, from Curtin University Books, an imprint of Fremantle Arts Centre Press “in partnership with Curtin University of Technology”; McCulloch’s work on Hope, from Pandanus Books, published by the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University; and McCulloch’s work on Hope, from Pandanus Books, published by the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University; and Gerald Murnane’s essays, Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs, from Ivor Indyk’s Giramondo, “published from the University of Western Sydney”. Two further titles are from public cultural institutions: a short book about Ray Mathew, attractively produced by the National Library of Australia, and from ABC Books, film-maker Bob Connolly’s Making Black Harvest, a trade paperback, based on his wife’s diaries, the story of the making in PNG of the film referred to in the book’s title.

I do not know the details of the various commercial arrangements that exist between the individual universities and their presses, although the overwhelming tendency in the last decade has been towards having such presses operate on a wholly commercial rather than subsidised basis, aggressively so in a number of instances. So too the publication arms of the public institutions (indeed I understand that ABC Books is one of the broadcaster’s most profitable operations). Of course, as institutional subsidies have been withdrawn, costs have been shifted so that requests for publishing subsidies from authors or responsible organisations have become a commonplace part of commercial calculations for scholarly publishers. Nonetheless it is striking that by this count fourteen of the twenty five titles are from institutional presses; presses which retain a commitment to public or “subsidised” culture, to books that won’t make anyone rich, even when operating on a fully commercial basis.
University of Western Australia Press offers the outstanding example among this present selection of books (no doubt there’s a local bias). It is responsible for four titles: Ganter’s *Mixed Relations*, a large-scale, multi-authored project co-ordinated by Nonja Peters; *Ernest Hodgkin’s Swanland: Estuaries and Coastal Lagoons of South-western Australia*, by Anne Brearley (UWA); and Nigel Rigby et al., *Pioneers of the Pacific: Voyages of Exploration, 1787–1810*, from the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich). All are large format, generously illustrated hardbacks. *Mixed Relations* is especially important in reshaping the agenda of Australian studies (the term seems inadequate). As Ganter writes in her opening sentence, “This book approaches Australian history from the north, where it begins”; and later:

The idea of an isolated continent does not stand up to historical interrogation, either in the north of Western Australia, or in the north of the Northern Territory, or in the north of Queensland ... On the contrary, for the Yolngu ... a period of isolation commenced with the establishment of British sovereignty. (28)

It’s not clear how or why, or through what publishing agreement, UWA Press released *Pioneers of the Pacific* (although it will probably be the best seller of the four). It is for the general rather than the scholarly market, but more to the point it seems to belong to another time and place, to an earlier, untroubled, Eurocentric view of Pacific exploration – it might be contrasted to *Encountering Terra Australis* for a more complex, locally inflected and less imperial view. The *Dutch Down Under* is an impressive, comprehensive work, if primarily in the “making it” and “contribution” modes of migrant history. It is published by arrangement with leading business, tax and legal publisher, CCH Australia (who hold copyright), and their owners, the multi-national group Wolters Kluwer, also a sponsor of the book. *Ernest Hodgkin’s Swanland* (Hodgkin, from UWA, put the estuarine “Swanland” on the environmental map) is again a wonderfully illustrated and comprehensive study. It has six government or corporate sponsors, plus the university, the National Trust, and the Ernest Hodgkin Trust. Even *Mixed Relations*, presented in an unusual horizontal format (attractive but not altogether reader or librarian friendly), notes the financial assistance of the Australia Council, the Australian Research Council, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, ANU and Griffith University. In short, perhaps none of these books would have appeared if the decision to publish had been governed wholly by the marketplace – yet they have all appeared.

Again we can interpret the prominent role of institutional publishers (and
their sponsors) either optimistically or pessimistically: evidence of how well our institutional presses are doing or how badly our large commercial presses are doing on behalf of public culture. On the one hand, the institutional presses are making a major investment in publishing in the quality non-fiction domain. On the other, the rest of the industry isn’t much interested. This makes even more remarkable the commitment of the independent non-institutional publishers such as Morry Schwartz’s Black Inc, Henry Rosenbloom’s Scribe, Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein’s Spinifex, and we should add Ivor Indyk’s Giramondo, despite its new institutional setting. These are all presses driven by individual commitments to cultural and political ideals.

Scribe concentrates on non-fiction, particularly politics, biography and history, often from a left-liberal perspective, although its greatest success has been the autobiographical travel-thriller novel, *Shantaram*, the controversial life story of Australia’s erstwhile “most wanted man”, Gregory David Roberts. Scribe was founded in 1976, releasing only a couple of titles annually until 1997, when Rosenbloom committed himself to publishing full-time. It now publishes around thirty “quality fiction and serious non-fiction” titles a year (and some pop-psychology). While I’m not quite sure what the significance is, I’m convinced it’s more than coincidental that both Rosenbloom and Morry Schwartz are the sons of Holocaust survivors, born overseas, resident in Melbourne. Schwartz, a successful property developer as well as publisher, helped establish Outback Press in the early 1970s, before Black Inc was founded in 2000. It has been remarkably successful in doing what the large multinationals were never going to do, launching a number of new series alongside an impressive list of individual titles, some literary, the majority in the critical “ideas and opinion” market, and not all from the left (the Quarterly Essays series, *The Monthly* magazine, the Best Australian essays, poems and stories series, the many Robert Manne collections). Indeed, Black Inc has played a major role in that very Melbourne task of inventing something like a new “public sphere” in neo-liberal, neo-conservative Australia, although the Quarterly Essays, for example, have only recently broken even with a circulation of 8-10,000.

Giramondo has taken on a more literary task, successfully finding – or making – space in a small niche of the fiction and non-fiction market by publishing literary fiction, poetry and individual essay collections unlikely to be commercially viable for the larger publishers (but potentially prize-winning, as in the case of Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing*, Emma Lew’s poetry, and John Hughes’s essays, *The Idea of Home*). Giramondo was established in 1996 to publish the literary/ideas magazine *Heat*, and began
publishing books by individual authors in 2002; it now publishes around six books a year and two to three book-length issues of the magazine. Its list is an impressive one, its literary standards sophisticated without being stuffy, its design qualities high. Alongside Hughes’s book and Murnane’s wonderful, intriguing essays – that somehow manage to be literal-minded and literally marvellous, understated and baroque all at once – Giramondo has recently published two other volumes, Louis Nowra’s *Chihuahuas, Women and Me* and Beverly Farmer’s *The Bone House*, as a deliberate strategy to establish the (non-academic, literary, autobiographical) essay collection as a commercial genre in Australia. This is a “courageous” decision. Essays are certainly an expanding field, as represented in the Best Australian Essays volumes and new magazines like the *Griffith Review* or *Heat* itself, and the successes have included self-reflective, artful essays – the Dessaix-Clendinnen-Modjeska genre – as well as public issues pieces. But still, away from the public issues and the autobiographical, this is a small, even delicate market, and not one the bookshops know what to do with.

The other non-institutional independent is Wakefield Press, from South Australia. Established initially by the South Australian government in 1983 to produce books for the state’s sesquicentennial celebrations, Wakefield subsequently became a private firm, first achieving national prominence, perhaps, for its classic Australian crime fiction. It is now a very active publisher, with more than thirty titles on its “What’s New” list, but still strongly committed to regional publishing. Current titles include *Grasses of South Australia, State of Mind* (on SA entrepreneurs) and collections from the Friendly Street poets and University of Adelaide’s creative writing students. The dominance of Sydney and Melbourne in Australian publishing remains as strong as it was a century ago, but the role of regional publishers in the public culture non-fiction sector, and in fiction and poetry publishing, is a significant feature of local publishing. UWA Press, UQP, CQU Press, Wakefield and Curtin/FACP collectively are responsible for nine of the titles on my list.

Wakefield’s books in the present bunch are of two very different kinds. *Drawing the Crow* is literary scholar Adrian Mitchell’s memoir of growing up in Adelaide, presented through a series of essays or meditations which find an intriguing perspective and voice – modest, disarming and insinuating – from which to evoke the profound kinds of “modesty” he finds in South Australia itself: a place that “in anyone else’s terms ... isn’t anywhere. It is not one of the eastern states ... nor is it of the west; and it is not south. It certainly doesn’t feel south. It feels closer to the centre, for it has a common border with all the other mainland states, but it isn’t the centre” (7). The book is a
modest paperback, though with a striking cover (a Clifton Pugh painting, appropriately featuring crows, less appropriately perhaps from Victoria). By contrast, *Encountering Terra Australis*, is a weighty, illustrated hardback, a comparative study of the journeys of Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin which interieaves their contemporaneous diaries, plus commentary from the co-authors (Jean Fornasiero, Peter Monteath and John West-Sooby, from Flinders and Adelaide universities). Part of the book's purpose is to redeem the reputation of the French explorer, indeed to claim him as something of an Australian hero. It has an important chapter on the clash of cultures between Indigenous Australians and the explorers' parties – Baudin who could leave for home with his equable Enlightenment views intact, Flinders much more entangled in the histories of colonialism. This was clearly a major production for the Press (with Australia Council assistance), and the result is outstanding, a significant piece of scholarship as well as a handsome book for enthusiasts. It is also prize-winning: the 2005 Frank Broeze Memorial Maritime History Book Prize. This potential for a wider readership – given the hunger still for explorer stories – probably made the investment worth the risk.

Spinifex is perhaps the most remarkable story of all. Emerging from the feminist movement, the rise of feminist publishing and uptake by mainstream houses of women's lists in the 1970s–80s, and the consolidation of academic feminism over the same period, Spinifex was founded in 1991 with a clear eye to the significance of commercial imperatives, necessary if feminist publishing was to survive beyond its “collectivist” founding moment. Spinifex successfully positioned itself across feminist, women's and academic markets, internationally as well as locally, selling feminist titles from Australia into international markets and international titles into Australia. As Diane Brown has shown:

Spinifex has successfully exported and secured international rights trade agreements in five main ways: exporting finished books to overseas distributors; selling English-language rights to overseas publishers; co-producing English-language books with one or more overseas publishers; selling translation rights and buying territorial, co-production and translation rights. [It] contracts for world rights on almost all of its originated titles.\(^6\)

Spinifex titles have included biography and memoirs, books on the body and health, Asian and Pacific literature, and titles on the environment, development and globalisation. The current title, dé Ishtar’s *Holding Yawulyu*: 
White Culture and Black Women’s Law, is a mix of history, anthropology and personal memoir, based on the author’s time with the Wirrimanu community on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, and its Women’s Law and Culture Centre or Tjimdi. Although sometimes finding its way awkwardly through citations and uplifting clichés (“academic in the bad sense” perhaps) the book is a moving, important study, not least of the bureaucratic and political obstacles to developing genuinely new relationships between White and Indigenous cultures.

Although Spinifex announced in March that they would cease publishing new books from the end of this year, distribution of its list will continue in Australia and overseas. Klein and Hawthorne explained their decision as being due to the disappearance of independent and feminist bookstores worldwide, competition from global superstores and global marketing, “postmodern prevarication” in intellectual fashions, which saw the sharp edge of feminism replaced by the blur of “gender,” and universities moving away from women’s studies programs.

****

For all the criticism we might want to make of our current universities, another vital point underscored by this present bunch of books is how well served we are by our much-maligned academics. On the whole these are not “academic” books, at least not in any narrow sense, but of the sole or co-authored titles, all but four are by academics or based on doctorates. The exceptions are the two literary titles, Murnane’s essays and Bail’s notebooks, the National Library publication, and Carmen Callil’s Bad Faith. Of the edited collections, East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination is, as it sounds, edited by academics and largely written by and for academics; two other titles are also edited by academics although their contributors are a mix of academics, journalists, travel writers and others – journalists in the case of Robert Manne’s Do Not Disturb, a collection of essays under the heading Is the Media Failing Australia?, and fiction and travel writers in the case of Travellers’ Tales, an odd collection of past and present travel writing, assembled by David Myers and former academic Michael Wilding. The other edited collections are Robert Dessaix’s Best Australian Essays, where a third or more of the contributors have past or present academic connections, and Fullilove’s book of speeches (Fullilove is a “lawyer and historian by training” and director of “the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Politics in Sydney”).

It ought not be necessary even to make the point, but given the relentless
media and political campaigns against the humanities academy in Australia (loony research projects funded at taxpayer expense, out of control political correctness and cultural relativism, betrayal of the western tradition, impenetrable prose, and so on) it is necessary to state and restate it: authors working in and trained by Australian universities are doing the work of remembering, recovering, arguing, interpreting — in short, researching and writing the books of our cultural and social memory. They’re not alone of course, for working alongside them are film-makers, museum or library staff, journalists and broadcasters, and other kinds of professional writers (chattering away between the lattes and the chardonnay). But the sheer cultural productivity of our universities deserves to be acknowledged and celebrated. The point is not about any romantic notion of the agonistic intellectual, always at odds with society’s home truths — some of these books are eminently respectable, and only one or two are consciously “radical” — but rather about how work in culture and history gets done across a broad spectrum, from radical feminism to mainstream political critique to literary meditation to celebratory maritime history. Let’s tell the columnists.

At the same time, however, the other side of this contribution by Australia’s universitaires to the public culture is the absence, by and large, of any distinct “scholarly” publishing domain, at least in the humanities. As suggested briefly above, Australia’s university presses, although the main publishers of Australian academic authors and dependent upon academic authors for the bulk of their output, are not quite fully-fledged “scholarly” publishers on, say, the North American model (i.e., Canada as well as the USA). They cannot survive by producing scholarly books for scholarly purposes. For the most part, this negative condition has been turned into positive policy, manoeuvring scholarly work towards a broader audience. Academic authors are encouraged to rewrite for a general readership, scholarly books are published to look like trade books, and instead of being subsidised to publish PhDs, university presses support public programs to train young authors how to turn their doctorates into books. There are good reasons for these policies and preferences, and real advantages too. The proximity of scholarly cultures to public-political cultures in Australia has meant scholarship readily engaged in that public culture in a robust way, scholarship willing to risk moving outside familiar disciplinary boundaries and audiences, scholarship not protected by its own disciplinary traditions.

But there are losses as well as gains. There’s little place for mandarin theory or intense philosophy, little place for work on literature unless it’s biography or chat, little room for the kind of excess, the weird theory, that can suddenly change paradigms; but also little space for the massive scholarly
tome or bibliography, or the intensive exercise in textual analysis that might also change paradigms or at least help to build scholarly traditions. I suppose if we followed the *Australian*’s example and sent around a chapter of Derrida or Deleuze to our university presses they’d ask the authors to rewrite for the general reader; but then we’d only have proven (to the *Australian* at least) how whacky euro-theorists really are.

Perhaps the only books here pitched wholly at academic readers are Moran’s short book on globalisation, McCulloch’s book on Hope (which seems aimed straight at the library shelf) and Archer-Lean’s lit crit (which seems scarcely to belong to an Australian context). Even Curthoys and Docker’s *Is History Fiction?*, which takes on the complexities of historical discourse and its truth-telling claims across an ambitious theoretical and historical reach, has its eye on a wider market, the *History Wars* market perhaps. Of course, most of these books are likely to find the bulk of their readers within the university (or schools) sector, with some spill-over into the ‘para-academic,” other knowledge professionals in the market for history and ideas. The imagined general reader will often turn out to be a student after all. But while the dream for some of these books is to be “set”, they all dream, too, of a wider readership, indeed a wider impact on the public culture. Richard Waterhouse’s *The Vision Splendid*, with its soberly academic subtitle, *A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia*, is a substantial piece of historical research, and probably unlikely to be read much outside the research and educational sectors. But it looks like a general trade book, in a form that asks to be read, not merely studied. The same can be said of Gwenda Tavan’s *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (not quite a scholarly title for a book, perhaps, although the book itself is serious historical work). Michael Clyne’s equally research-based book, *Australia’s Language Potential*, argues a stirring case against Australia’s “monolingual mindset” and present government policies that encourage it, versus the progressive policies of a decade or so back; it asks how much longer can Australia afford monolingualism. In short, it addresses the public domain. As Clyne explains, the “book is written for the general reader interested in exploring some issues of multilingualism in Australian society”.

****

This list of twenty-five books teaches us to be wary of any doom-laden or nostalgic vision of the end of serious or independent Australian publishing. Small, independent Australian publishers have been extraordinarily successful and committed not only to picking up important individual titles
but in opening up whole new sectors of the marketplace for public culture publishing. They do so, of course, because by and large the field is left to them by the larger multinational corporations, either because they’re too big to see it or because they reckon it’s not worth the investment. But in any case, as a general rule, the local publishers read the local audience best. Both independent and institutional publishers read the public culture and publish to it.

But the fact that the field is left to the smaller publishers means that there’ll be ongoing problems getting the books into the bookstores and review pages. A selective search indicates that of all the books covered here, those that scored best in terms of reviews or features were the two internationals, Callil’s Bad Faith, with two feature spreads, over two weeks, in the Saturday Australian, and Bail’s Notebooks (all the Australian broadsheets plus the TLS). Size matters. Among the local productions, only The Best Australian Essays and Murnane’s collection, the more literary titles interestingly enough, received good coverage in the newspaper books pages. Most of the others will rely on Australian Book Review or academic journals, and they might miss out altogether. Market realities mean that to a fair extent this kind of non-fiction, literary/academic publishing remains a subsidised form, and not one that can support a dense or developed scholarly sector. But small to medium-sized houses can still generate important lists (in the range of three to thirty new titles a year) and so publish creatively into the public culture. Perhaps the unresolved question is the degree to which the idea of Australian literature is still a part of that public culture.

**NON-FICTION RECEIVED 2005–2006**

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review


*Wilding, Michael and David Myers, eds. *Travellers’ Tales* (Rockhampton: CQU Press, 2006)

NOTES


4 The information on Scribe and Black Inc in this paragraph is derived largely from Susan Horsburgh, “Independents’ Day”, *Age*, 28 July 2005.


ON LEAVE

that's where I am where that scrap of orange towel is not many to see me at this hour but I had to break out try & reverse the gender immersion of camp that's what we were all like no dancing or lovers writing us letters but bobtails approaching us quietly & finding dugites in our bags gives us a thrill.

they try to leave me, on weekends weeks all: go go go hardly time to point or, siphon though hours come from nowhere like a third stomach gas, & I'm stranded here with a bag full of leaves & not a few needs a guy that lives under the tower could relieve with drumming but he won't.

the firing range gives off boring music the signs say you're-not. & do not even a pole with nothing but a can signifies. piss doesn't dry in the relatively mild heat

what's the point of smoking if that's all it is sending unwanted messages to now unsmiling faces would anyone think me a soldier with my cartoon shorts my unshaking hand?
THE KINGSBURY TALES: WRITING A POEM, IN THE SUN

The blinding sun of Wuhan, at my East Window
I have been reading like I have never done before
One nostril stuffed, I sip tea from a shadow
The sun is shining on a smoggy lake sandwiched
Between two high rises and behind what looks like a stadium
She puts her hand out towards a tip of my hair:

“It’s definitely greyer than before
You left Australia”

In an ancient country one gets ancient quick
One’s thoughts slowed down by the futility of even thinking
If there is anything colourful it is the bed linens
That they hang out to sun on the open tops of those high rises
There is an Australian quietness here
Broken only by someone announcing his collecting 2nd hand televisions

“Is the moon walking in the water or is the boat moving between the lake and the hills
Not knowing where I am, I feel like turning into a deity beyond the dust”

These words come to my mind facing a world of dust and dusty faces
The sun warming my shoe on the windowsill
An autumn mosquito, dying, is crawling between the patches of the sun
And the patches of the sun-shadow
My life becoming extremely small at this moment
Turning into this poem and, that’s it

(Morning of 20/11/05, Room 402, Gate 3, Building 28, Zone 9, Wuda)
THE KINGSBURY TALES: A WUHAN TALE

City of Macho Men in direct translation
And of women wearing their desires on their heels
And of a woman beating up her man outside New World last night
And of days and days of winter under hoary clouds
And of Han Mouth, Han Sun and Macho Prosperity
And of German English Japanese Russian settlements in the 19th century
And of a boss having seven wives in the 21st century
And of a man keeping spitting outside a window on a bus
And of salted fish and pork hanging out on the railings
And of a prostitute wearing expensive fur escaping from a taxi without pay
And of taxi-drivers telling you off because they are changing shifts
And of footbath salt bath milk bath double fliers oil pushers
And of the unwanted trees near the Yangtze looking dark brown
And of the Yangtze swallowing up the sky in its tons of pollution
And of a desire to write about no Beijing or Shanghai but just Wuhan
And of a man tortured to death for his belief and a young girl killed by unintended hands
And of a French consulate stationed out of all proportions to other Chinese cities
And of me having nothing to do with poets, Chinese or otherwise
And of me getting smaller and smaller till I disappear into a word, a character

(28/1/06, afternoon, Room 402, Wuda, Chinese New Year the next day) (revised on the night of 13/06/06 in Kingsbury)

There was a time,

nights:
hugging your knees
to your chest in the dark,
you wanted to hear
a voice not your own
counting
inbreaths outbreaths
the stars.

You wound yourself back,
to the room, the phone.
Your fingers stabbed four digits
and waited
for the machine to speak;
"At the third stroke it will be ..."
You put the hand-piece down
and dialled again
and again.

It never changed the subject
or asked you questions.
The stars came closer,
your breath quietened;
"At the first stroke it will be precisely ..."
You placed the receiver in its cradle
carefully,
and at a time undetermined,
fell asleep.
Enter from the gate. A weatherboard house. Hard red borders slashed everywhere: the window frames, the eaves, the doors and the door frames. The smell of fresh paint, even from the gate. This smell of fresh paint from the crusting, darkening red and from the brightening cream glaring between blood borders. The late day summer sun: a blinding reflection, flashing about the eye with each footstep and stumble over the loose rubble of the drive. Pass through the drying garden whose edges blur into the forest. Notice the pot plants: geraniums, succulents, paper-petalled daisies. Tough plants, the type that find it easier to live than to die. Approach the wooden wheel propped against the wall facing the gate. Anyone would notice it straight away: huge and old, as tall as a person. It is just propped there, between the wall and the weather, neither beginning nor ending, just existing as it does and has always done. Next to the wheel, the door. Not quite a front door, not quite a back door: like the house itself, it is oriented to nowhere and everywhere at once. From the outside, look in: the kitchen. The wooden benches, the wooden floor, the wooden everything. A kitchen patterned with the rough checks of bits and pieces thrust together, dovetailed, mitred, routered into shape: a patchwork of ancient wood, wood that took hundreds of years to grow, days to chop down and months to twist into this house where whole lifetimes have been lived out.

She stands at the sink, peeling potatoes. Arms and legs and feet bare, hair pulled back roughly, unflattering, unflattering like the loose cotton dress she is wearing. Her forearms gather starch freckles with each vicious flick of her wrist. With each burst from her peeler’s stroke her toes and the hairs on her legs also begin to gather the stray blood-dots of the potato. But all she can see is the action of her hand. How well peeler and wrist burst skin off potato, cell off cell, insides from outsides. Oblivious to the starch patterning all over her, she is fixated on the peels piling up before her. Notes how useful a thing it is, this peeler of skin. Wonders who and when and how it was invented. Wonders why she wonders such things at all and, wondering this, stops. She looks out the window to quieten herself. The bits and pieces of her just-
begun garden dwindle into the forest. The forest spreads thickly into the distance, subsuming the mountains under its canopy. In places, the canopy thins and disappears. Through these keyholes she can see the lawns of ferns: the forest under the forest. This scene lulls her, calms the random assaults of her mind. This scene, plus the quiet transition from the wet sounds of her peeling, to her pause, to the birds out there: the kookaburras, the magpies and the parrots fighting it out. Then, the rough music of the wind as it picks bits and pieces of things up, shakes them about and casts them back down to the ground.

She peels four potatoes. She walks across the kitchen and from a hook hanging above her she gets a pot. Dashes salt into its base. Fills it with water, puts it on the stove. Gets the potatoes from the sink. Carries them over to the pot and puts them in. She stands next to the stove for a while, till the water steams, till a white froth builds up on its surface. She takes a fork, rushes it across the foaming liquid. The froth drifts to the edges of the pot and she can see the potatoes, naked and stupid, on the steel base. She puts on the lid.

Back at the sink she cleans out the peels: one sopping handful. She slides open the screen door next to her, steps outside, closes the door behind her. She holds her dripping hand away from her dress, as if her dress is something special. She walks to the compost bin, puts the scraps in. The stench hits her like a spray of muck in the face. As it disperses, the smell of eucalyptus, sharp and constant, moves in from the forest that grows and rots all around. Then, competing, and winning, is the dull headache of fumes from the hot paint, crying itself dry on the walls.

This smell, she thinks, this smell of paint. She looks at the shine of it on the weatherboards. Is that all it takes to string a life together across time? This reek from the compost. Are these the only constant things, the only things that do not change? She stares at the bin, fat and powerful with its common stench, stinking the past right here into the present. A whack of nausea hurls up from her gut, distracts her. She clutches her stomach. She steps up to the door, memories skirting the edges of her mind like words lost on the tip of a tongue. She slides the door open.

She stops. Suddenly stops.

Does not move.

Her ears, momentarily deaf, try to pick out the problem: a crackling somewhere in the scrub near by. Something there. She listens, looks. But the sound is gone. She walks into the scrub to see. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

She returns to the kitchen. Slides the screen behind her, halts a moment,
her back half-turned to the outside.

She wanders towards the track that leads to the main road. She passes the stuck and rusting gate: permanently half open, permanently half shut. She walks with the lowering sun shining onto her bare neck. By the time she sits to eat her dinner, the light will be yellow, and everything else will follow suit, morphing into those warmer shades and softer textures that she'd always imagined. Strange, how she has always known this place. Strange, that all her life she has looked, literally looked forward to this point: the abstract daydreams of her childhood; the painful wishing-aways of pubescence and the more recent, distinctly purposeful imaginings of her supposed womanhood. Yet her presence here must look to the world like chance, an accident, a mere reaction to circumstance.

Of course, her daydreams could tell her only so much. She had never counted on the daytime, this pregnant glare off everything, the heat immovable and dangerous, pressing into the drying earth and the crisping plants. Never understood the stretching quality of time. Never predicted the exposure and growth of the small sore wounds that have itched and irritated themselves into acknowledgement, these sore little absences that she unwittingly created in her final act of leaving, absences other than those for which she planned. These past months have seen the inscription of details onto an image of the heart. But she won't dwell on that. She can't dwell on such things now.

Ferns take ten years to grow each foot of their height. The ferns that line each side of the track, like a guard of honour, are twice her size. In their presence, she feels the roughness of her look, the fadedness of her dress like a defiant but ill-judged statement against the rich opacity of green around her. The sticky mess of her hair plastered to the sweat on her forehead and neck. The sweat trickling behind her knees, as she wanders along, trickling warmly like an accident. She can't feel much under her bare feet, their brittle and cracking heels too thick now to notice such things as the rough-cut rubble. As she walks further from the house, the ferns on either side of her move a little closer together till they stand right over her, creating a cool, shadowed corridor for her walking. As she goes, she puts one hand out, so that her fingers trail over the black thatched fur of the ancient plants' bodies. She stops before one, pauses, then pushes her fingers deeply into the bristles. She feels like a pervert, a desecrator. Through her skin, the thrill of fear, of not knowing what she might find. Is this what men feel when they cross such boundaries, with permission, without permission? How different it is to be the one who enters, who intrudes. Her mind flutters back but is stopped
short as her fingers reach the fern’s body. There, just roughness and hardness. Just roughness, and hardness. No explanation of how it is that these plants so persistently, so elegantly, so competently succeed in their project of living.

She continues down the track. Her home is in this rainforest, but around her house, that place where people have lived, is a circle of yellowing dryness. A fire hazard. A spotlight on her home alerting the elements to its presence. But the forest doesn’t need to be alerted, the same way a person doesn’t need to be shown that they are missing a finger, a leg, a chunk of their heart. Like skin smothering a scab, the forest is trying to reclaim this turf, her turf, its turf. She can see its reaction, even here, on the track, how the edges are fatly overgrown with creepers and runners and weeds that have picked out soil in the sand and the rubble. As she walks, she scuff’s dead any plant that encroaches upon the path. With her toes, she uproots these broken bodies and flicks them back into the scrub: a warning. She doesn’t do this for spite alone. This is a tactic. She knows the forest, how it waits. Waits for the gone-wild, homesick orchards around her home to die. Waits for the crumbling of these tracks and roads obscenely cut into its belly. Waits for the buildings and the old, left-about machinery to break down or burn up. Waits for all that people and time have left here to dissolve. Then it can win back its loss. But the forest’s loss is her gain and she has painted and planted her battle cry. As she tends to her home, as she treads and retreads, treads and retreads time and this path, she is picking the land’s scab. It will stay open and fresh and hers. Theirs is a battle of the wounded: a fight between two forces hell-bent on healing.

She walks on. She can smell the road before she can see it: the strong, comforting weight of oil and tar released like steam from cooking asphalt. Her fern canopy recedes as she approaches, standing back as if conceding defeat to the immutability of the road ahead. As she rounds the bend, a snap.

A sudden snap to her left.

Another snap and a shuffle.

Something rustles.

She stops, her breath a pain, caught like a hiccup in her throat.

The fear clenches her muscles and throws her heart beat up into her head. She can’t look. But she must look. She slowly turns her head, body still, to the direction from which the sound came. And from that direction, like a magnet, she feels a tension resisting and reacting to hers. It can see me, she thinks. It can see me. Her dress feels like a big, blank billboard advertising her fear like a white flag. She can only see dark, dense scrub. She stares at this, at the scrub.

All at once, a branch hurls itself into her vision.
It doesn't fall from above her. It flies right at her like an arrow shot from
the tense poise of a bow hidden in the ferns and bushes infront of her. An
entire tree branch, heavy enough to crack her skull, lies at her feet, its
splintered butt-end aligned with the edge of the track. Its foliage streams
away from her, into the fernery.

She stares at it. The impossibility of it.

Slowly, her breath returns with the normal sounds of the forest. She stares
into the scrub, trying to work it out. But there is nothing there. She stands
still, stretching her minutes, waiting for clues in the ear or the eye. But there
is nothing to hear. There is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kitchen: steam filled and clattering. She rushes to the pot. It is boiling
over. Volcanic white blotches spew around its lid and down its steel sides. A
puddle grows on the stovetop. She pushes the pot off the gas flames and
within seconds it calms down. The kitchen fills with quiet. The sounds of the
outside slowly creep in. She stands before the stove, looking at the white-
stained pot. She must have taken longer than she thought. She tries to recall
what it was that she did, what it was that took so long. But she can think of
nothing. She sees the letter, fat and inevitable, placed by the side of the sink.
Must have dumped it there, rushing to save the pot. Yes. It is the letter that
she got from the letterbox, the letterbox that she walked to after the scare in
the scrub, the scare that happened after touching the fern. It all happened
today. She looks down at her arms, crossed against her chest. She remembers
remembering her dress in the confrontation. Yes, all of these things happened
today.

She looks again vaguely, at the stovetop. She realises that the gas is set to
its highest setting. She sits by the kitchen table. Hadn't she left it set on low,
like she always does? She can't remember. Every day she peels four potatoes
and sets them to boil slowly while she checks the letterbox. Everyday she
does this and so she cannot distinguish one day from another. Did she turn
the heat down, today, as she should have? She laughs. Of course she didn't:
Who would have turned it up? She shakes her head. Shakes it harder than a
gesture. Shakes it as if she is trying to rattle something out of it, as if she
needs to exaggerate to herself her foolishness. She laughs, at herself, to
herself, till she realizes she is laughing out loud, right out loud. She registers
with a shock the strangeness of the sound. For as long as she has been here,
she has not laughed aloud. Has not a single word been spoken? No sound
other than her breathing? Can this be right? It must be right, she can barely
recognize her laugh. And now, when she tries to say something to see if she
recognises her voice, she can think of nothing to say and so says nothing, just
sits there, stupidly shy.

She stands, not remembering how or why or when she sat down. She gets a dishcloth and picks up the pot of potatoes. She skewers the lid to one side and tips the water into the sink. The steam rushes up, threatening to burn her hands. She puts the pot back on the gas, gets some milk, butter and cheese out of the fridge. With her own careful measures, she places these ingredients into the pot. She inhales the sudden flush of steam as the milk recoils from the pot’s hot base. Salt. Pepper. She roughly mashes everything together. Puts on the lid. Turns off the gas, and leaves the food to melt into itself. She stands there, her hand and her weight against the stovetop. She stares at the starch-streaked pot. Remembers, again, the letter by the sink.

The writing on it is blurred in places, splashed from the water she poured out of the pot. She picks it up, looks at her address written carefully on the front. Notes the postage stuck in the corner: twice as many stamps as needed. She turns the envelope over. On the back, the sender’s address carefully printed, even the country underlined and written in capitals beneath the state, as if the letter had been sent from a different country, from a different state. A phone number and an email address under the sender’s details. So many details. The familiar writing spews an excess of details that she can feel the weight of, in her hand, on the enclosed pages.

Not her details.

The man the house the car the job. Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. These are the details she has left. Domestic details. Details of the familiar, born from the comfortable repetitions of a life insistently, competently, lovingly knitted by someone else. By someone with a reliable pattern, ‘tried and true,’ the pattern everyone seems to admire: the man the house the car the job etcetera etcetera etcetera. So comfortable was this life that she hardly realised she was wrapping herself right up in it, like a blanket. Hardly noticed that it was comforting her to sleep. Hardly noticed that she was going to sleep herself to death as if repetition and comfort, the repetition of comfort, were drugs: the stupor of having all needs met, a future full of certain certainties, a big fat life directed by the crushingly concrete details of another person’s plans.

A paper-perfect life. All the right details: she weighs them, again, in her hand.

Not her details.

She puts the letter back down onto the edge of the sink. Returns to her pot. Opens it, inhales the buttery hot steam. She gets a plate and a fork. She piles the mash onto her plate and goes to the sliding door. She opens the door and sits down on the few splintered steps that connect the house to the yard.
Warm on her knees, the plate. The sun, absurdly sweet, stupidly golden. The kind of light she came here for. Everything around her is flushed and distinct. The patchy grass that grows and dies in clumps leading to the forest’s edge is lit up. She can see each blade with surreal clarity. Through each blade she can see the shadowed outlines of the blades behind as they compete for the last and the best of the sun’s rays. This is her favourite part of the day. The purposefulness of cooking: the guarantee of being able to make something from beginning to end, to control its making, to see and enjoy its result. The sheer privilege she feels, still, of eating her dinner here with the entire forest around and before her, the trees and the birds shifting themselves into their evening poses. Everyday works up to this point. Then, with reluctance, with a small and immediately suppressed panic, she finishes her meal.

The pinnacle passed, she notices the mosquitoes and the cold shadows of the dusk. All that was warm and solid a moment ago is now pallid and translucent. She takes her plate and her cutlery inside. As she slides the screen door behind her, her thumb pauses over the door lock. After all of this time, she still hesitates. She looks out into the shadowing garden. How flat it looks, as if all perspective goes with the light. She scans the garden’s familiar form. She is looking for shapes and movements that she does not recognize. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kettle squeals. She moves around the letter. She ignores it. Makes her tea. Then she settles, as she does every night, to read at the big kitchen table. Against the windows the moths, the dragonflies, the spiders and the spray of tiny bugs that throw themselves against the glass. She has learned the patterns of their sounds and now their presence reassures her. Keeps her company. Every night, when she sits to read, the rest of the day pushes and shoves into her mind, begging her attention. Begging for the same sort of analysis that she is about to apply to the pages infront of her. Tonight, unwelcomed, the memory of her dinner carelessly and dangerously boiling over in an empty house. Tonight, unwelcomed, the image of the letter on the sink. Tonight, and every night, unwelcomed, the image of herself reading, taking pages and pages of notes that she has, and will, carefully file away in one of her big old cupboards. What else is she to do with them? Her daydreams dreamt of the reading of books, of the recording of reading, but she never wondered what this reading would, or could, be applied to. Just as she couldn’t predict the harshness of the daytime, she could never have contemplated the seeming futility of her nights. She looks and listens to the bugs, pattering like confetti on the pane. Their presence brings her back to the space in the room, to the tables and chairs, to the wooden floors, to the
open and waiting before her.

For two hours she reads. She notes onto lined paper what she notices in the words, what she understands, what she needs to understand better. Once or twice she gets up, wanders the wooden house. Goes to the toilet, washes her face, looks closely at her skin in the mirror. She drifts into her bedroom, turns on the lamp by her bed and makes up the sheets so that the room is waiting for her. She returns to the book. Sits, continues to read. Then, as so surprisingly often happens, something leaps up from the pages. Something hits her in the face. She traces the words with the tip of her finger, mouths the phrase to herself. In big, pressed-in capitals she copies down the quote that has knocked her awake. She carefully copies the words that are kicking and slapping and shocking her mind into working again. She sits back, looks at the truth on the page. Circles it again. Highlights it as if it matters, as if one day she might need reminding that these things mattered to her, once.

Eventually she realises that she is reading and rereading the same words. Her mind is wandering. Her eyes are tired. She puts down her pen. She looks over at the swarms blurring the corners of her windows. She walks over for a closer look. She is never sure whether or not to leave the lights on for the insects. Never sure if turning them off will spoil their fun. Never sure if darkness will instead relieve them of the object of their mindless pursuit, destroying the cruel and invisible wall they keep bashing themselves into. Tonight, she turns the lights off. She stands, listening, as the dusty sounds of their feet and wings slowly diminish. She moves back into the darkened room. She picks up her tea and her teapot and returns them to the sink. She won’t clean them now, she will leave them for tomorrow morning: her way of connecting one day to another.

She turns to leave. She notices the letter. She is pleased at how well, for a while, she had forgotten it. She picks it up. She looks again at the familiar writing all over it. Thinks of the promise of pages inside that are written to her. Just to her.

Of course she will not open it.

The moment that she does their eyes will roll out into her palm. They will stare at her from the pages with their wet, confused goodwill. They will look at her. They will ask her to explain, to share, to justify. To be a part of their life. To be their wife. To be their daughter-in-law, their sister-in-law. To be the mother of their children, their grandchildren. To be the source of their futures. To be the mechanism through which meaning can be born, literally born from her, and stolen back into their lives. She looks out into the night-cast garden. She sees nothing in the pitch-black density of the scrub, just silhouettes against the sky. The spaces that she has cut back and emptied.
make catchments for the light. She can see the starlit details of objects that she has carefully placed in these lit up hollows. She is her parent’s daughter. She is her sibling’s sister. She can only be these things, for she has always been these things, and these things are herself. She cannot bear to have their children, yet she cannot have children on her own, and of her own. She looks out into the garden, at the only solution she could find.

Of course she will not open the letter. This place is for the anonymous: the unnamed and the unnaming; the unspeaking and the unspeakable. Opening the letter, seeing her name written in his hand, would be like letting the weeds encroach onto her dirt track. The forest, watching, watching, will take the moment.

She opens the sliding door. A few disconcerted moths dust about her face and her hair as she passes through them. She goes to the compost bin and takes off its lid. She rips the letter up and throws into the bin’s warm, dark guts. She goes to the water tank and fills up a bucket, the sound of the water obnoxious and loud in the private quiet of the forest. She tips the water into the bin. She refills the bucket and, again, tips the water in. She read somewhere that water helps compost to rot, helps it to disappear into itself like invisible ink. She stares into the bin. She looks down, staring into its dark insides.

But there is nothing to see.
There is nothing there.

Watch from the gate. Look at the cream and blood house, colourless in the starlight, blank in the moonlight. Watch as the house turns out its last light. Watch as it rests in its own quiet, as it sits in the blue, spot-lit space it has forced around itself.

The forest is turgid with black. It isn’t asleep.

A branch snaps outside her window.

Wait. Feel the change. How the house tenses. How the forest braces.

Watch. One by one, as each room in the house is lit. See her jump, each time, as her reflection flashes up at her in the night-mirrored windows. She wears no clothes. She walks, room to room, checking behind doors, in cupboards and under beds.

When she cannot sleep, when her mind begins to assault her, when a strange sound teases her, this is what she does. When her day-dreams fail her or her nightmares shake her awake, this is what she does.

Rattle her bedroom window.

Splinter wood in the middle of the still, summer’s night.

Watch her as she rises. Watch as the house pulses, slow and defiant, a silk-worm spinning itself a home that will glow, and continue to glow, in the forest’s dark gut. Watch as she passes through the house, lighting it up, searching for nothing, making sure that nothing is there.
QUEEN'S PARK

1. Queen Victoria's Statue

Pigeons invade an island of green
between granite monoliths
heding closer, crowding in.

Couples taste the saliva of love
in their bodies,
smell the cut grass

on their hands. Under fixed eyes
a monarch from her exile of death
looks down, a stranger now

in a war absent of enemies,
silent in her bronze limbs.
There is no grief, merely a void

of emotion. Inwards
the gentle lovers
speak a language without words.

Sensing alarm
the pigeons wing softly
to a bony ledge,

look down on a Queen
ageing slowly into ruin,
the grave she will cherish

is shivering, and its earth torn with empires.
2. Grass

At dawn or dusk, if you have a certain sensitivity you may see the ghosts spring up from the grass, or the tall ships don sail down by the river, masts furling and upsetting the anchor across from government buildings designed to arrest them.
During the day you can see just the lunch time crowd, some lovers and Uni students sprawled as wounded or dead on the battlefield of their ambition. Hope is a sprinkler system stuttering twice a day and this is a farmers dream, water, food, green around the verges. And then they go, the tall ships slip down to the port, while frontier men and women crawl once more into the ground which houses them, their children's laughter echoing within the roots and the shale, echoing like rippling ploughs across farm soil certain to become city.
I scrunch the satin of my sheets
and see November – its
cobalt flakes, purple jelly & blurred moons.

My bed has turned to sea
– crystalline –
and I’m floating above it.

My father waggles, fluffy
& anaemic, tussling himself
out of the bottom of that water.

He grins. He says, I’ve missed
you baby, and something sluggish
like silkworms dazzles out of

his mouth, sexual & squirming.
How’d you get down there?
I slipped, and a flock of willowy

geese slivers its way up, as
angels might, whipped in yoghurt.
A vellum of them cover

my father in titanium-white,
and his retinas freeze with
their arctic-breath, so

when I breathe in, it’s like a


does not contain a full story or narrative, but rather a poetic exploration of sensory experiences and emotions.
chilled tunic over my face.  
*Just look at these geese ...*

do you want these geese?  
*You always loved geese ...*  
*if you come down here, you can*

*swim with them too,*  
and before I can say anything,  
he hauls me in & the splurge

of November encrusts my hair.  
Then I'm writhing in hazy scuffles,  
*fibulas* dissolving like sugar,  

and my father glares up, and screams,  

*We’re only swimming baby ...*  
*we’re only swimming.*
It is July the first.

And Ernest Hemingway is cleaning his favourite shotgun, the one with the silver edged barrel, which he will next day place in his mouth, and Charles Laughton is born and Thomas Moore is on trial for his life and I (1970-present) am lying awake in Newcastle. On this day Vespasian was given the purple by the Egyptian legions and Napoleon captured Alexandria. The first television advertisement, for watches, was broadcast in New York City, costing the company nine dollars. It is 12:50 am. In 1971, in a Brisbane hospital, my wife Sarah has just been born. Four years ago at this time I lay in bed awake, listening to her stir beside me. She had wanted to make love, but I had said I was too tired. In truth I was bored of her. By then I already knew the history of her body, the provenance of every scar and blemish. I pretended I was asleep.

This year (2004) I have taken to sleeping in old piles of the *Newcastle Herald* which I bought from a pensioner in Charlestown. The past week I have been napping in the 1988 earthquake, but tonight I cover myself in a more recent pub brawl and the football results. For some reason, I find I enjoy most rest in December 1979. Yet just now I cannot sleep and so continue the introduction to my *History of Newcastle* (Newcastle University Press 200?). One hundred and twenty notebooks filled with my handwriting are stacked on the floor around my desk, along with the dozens of history books and journals that are referenced in the 90 pages of footnotes. And still I have not arrived at the First World War. I once wrote a history of Africa that took less time and research than this history of a small Australian city. And yet still I believe I was born to be an historian, exiting from my mother backside first, in order that I might better understand where I came from. I take a new page in the introduction (p104) and write, *Abraham Lincoln once said, “We cannot escape history.*

Then the Beatles start singing *Paperback Writer* on the radio, number one
today in 1966. There are more songs and I stop writing for a time and listen to them, *My Foolish Heart, Why Don’t You Love Me*. Then I hear *Guess Things Happen That Way* and I run barefoot to turn the music off, trailing a Lambton murder from December 14, 1983 on my heel. My feet are dirty. The floor is filthy with my dead skin and hair. Historians should not sit in ivory towers after all.

Now it is four am on July the first and in 1993 I have just proposed to Sarah. We lay in bed together in an Edinburgh hotel. I had bought the engagement ring earlier that day at an antique shop – I wanted it to have history. She told me it was the best birthday present she had ever had. She told me of each of the men she had loved. She asked me about the women I had been with. “I don’t want our pasts to ever come between us,” she said. I had a cold that night, I remember.

My medical history; measles (1975) appendicitis (1984) a fractured left arm (1992) malaria (1990, 1991) and of course, clinical depression (2001 to present). Outside the house, a red and green and yellow bird is whooping in the dawn, but I don’t know its name. I have no knowledge of natural history. It is a cool morning. I decide to go for a walk and dress in my second-hand clothes. I leave the house, cross the street, walk past the undertakers where an Australian flag is displayed against black curtains, as if the country itself is to be buried today. My house is near the harbour. The roof was destroyed by a Japanese submarine that fired 34 rounds at the city on June 8, 1942. Three drunken young men shout at me and I hurry past them and think of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. I could never fight. I have no history of violence.

I walk down to the foreshore and look out at the ocean where in the pale light I can see five identical coal ships spaced equidistant along the horizon, like a time-lapse photograph. Long ago today the French frigate *Medusa* sank and the survivors escaped in a raft which became stuck in the sea of the famous painting. There is a strong smell of seaweed. It is Estee Lauder’s birthday. In 1998 at this time I was still asleep in bed, but not with my wife.

I walk back and forth along the sand for a while, and then return to the road. At this early hour I am surprised to see an old man reading on his front door step, with a faintly astonished look on his face, as if he had just seen his own name in the book. I pass him, then charge back up San Juan Hill with Roosevelt and take my street without casualties.

It is eight o’clock in the morning on July the first and I still cannot sleep. I return to bed and sit and watch old black and white films for some hours, looking for Olivia de Haviland to wish her happy birthday. Then it is midday and the postman rings the doorbell once and I wait until he rings again, in
honour of James M. Cain, also born this day.

The postman is a Barbarossa of a man. Ink has come off on his large hands as if he has been making words with them. He has a package for me from Melbourne which I must sign for, and as I do so I entertain him with the history of my surname. He does not seem very interested. I take the package inside. Some history books, including one that I once wrote about the Mau-Mau rebellion. Years ago I lent them to Sarah’s sister, but I need them now for my history of Newcastle. Sometimes I think I will need every history book, from the time of Thucydides to those yet unwritten, for my history of Newcastle.

When I open the book a photograph falls out. I stare at it for some time, for it has been so long since I have seen a photograph that was not stapled, captioned and dated. A man and a woman are standing outside a dark stone cathedral, smiling in a sunshower. The picture was taken on the July the first of 1989 in Glasgow, when I met Sarah for the first time. I could hear her in the next chamber in the cathedral before I saw her. She was leading a group of Polish students. Her Australian accent I noticed at once, but then certain other words that she pronounced differently, some rising unexpectedly, some falling. I imagined numbers over these words, leading to footnotes which explained that she had once lived in China, India, England. I watched her, fascinated. For when she spoke of the past, she threw her hand back over her shoulder, when she spoke of the present, she pointed in front of her, and the future was a sweeping gesture of both her hands. She had begun these motions to give her students visual clues for their tenses, but eventually they had become habit. She had sent her students away to look at a tapestry and she was finishing a book on a bench outside.

“What are you reading?” I asked her, and she looked up at me.
“Oh. How does it end?”
“Well, she dies,” she said, and we laughed.

I remember how her hands moved when we arranged to meet the next evening. Later, I watched her students sing Happy Birthday to her. The next year, we were alone when I sang it to her.

In 2004, now, I return to the one hundred and fourth page of my introduction. Outside, above the houses, there is a picture of the sun in the sky that is already some minutes old. I wonder how it compares to the sun the Americans made in the Bikini Atoll, the fourth time of splitting the atom. It was on this day of course, years and years ago. After some time writing, I fall asleep and when I awaken I look at the clock. It is 5pm.
In 2001 the conference I was attending at Sydney University to discuss trends in African historiography had just ended. It was Sarah’s birthday, and I was going to call her from the lobby, to tell her that I would be home soon. There was a black woman at the hotel bar. I recognised her accent as Burundian from the speech she gave about French colonialism. Her name was Clio Mbabazi. She was quite pretty and invited me to join her for a drink. “It is July the first,” she said, “and Burundi is celebrating its independence.” She looked at my wedding ring and my whisky. “And so it seems are you.” I called Sarah at nine o’clock to wish her happy birthday and tell her that I would not be home that night, as we had planned. There was too much work to do.

And then I am hungry and I eat using November 23rd 1997 as both tablecloth and napkin. The bread is four days old, the cheese is six days old, and I am 12,875 days old. It is evening and I go to shower off the history of the day. The ink, the sweat, the dirt. It is still July the first, still, and Marlon Brando has just died on television, though he is there in the screen screaming, “Stella! Stella!” I sit on the floor. Something cuts into my leg. One of Sarah’s diaries. She kept them from when she was fifteen years old. I have read them several times. In them I appear as an historical figure, like a Garibaldi or a Caesar. Herein, all my lies and my infidelities are recorded. “For an historian,” Sarah wrote on July first 1997, “my husband is no good at fabricating the past.”

Suddenly, it seems, it is 9:02 pm. In 2001 at this time I was in a Sydney hotel room. On the radio, Johnny Cash was singing. I kissed Clio Mbabazi and we took off our clothes. Afterward I could not sleep and I idly read the Gideon’s Bible. Much later I learnt that the society had been formed on a July the first by some Wisconsin travelling salesmen.

It is 11:41 pm and in 2001 Sarah is dying on her thirtieth birthday, alone in our bed in Newcastle. A sudden heart attack. The doctors could not explain it. There was no history of heart disease in her family. If only someone had been with her, they said, she might have been saved. In Germany, Chekhov was dying too. They would take his body back to Russia in a crate marked “fresh oysters”. Like Shakespeare, whom Chekhov greatly admired, Sarah was born and died on the same day.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “We cannot escape history”. It is July the first.
CONTRIBUTORS 2006

MICHAEL ACKLAND teaches English and Comparative Literature at Monash University, and is currently a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University. He has recently co-edited a volume of essays on Australia-Japan relations and is now preparing a monograph on Christiana Stead.

JAMES ALLEN ANDERSON was born in Papua New Guinea, and has lived in Rabaul, Port Moresby, London, China and Hong Kong. He has a Post-Graduate Certificate in Chinese from Thames University, London, and has had essays published in Walking Rain Review and poetry in Antipodes.

ROBERT JAMES BERRY lives and writes in Auckland, New Zealand. His work has been published widely, and he is currently preparing his fourth collection, Sky Writing, for publication.

VICTORIA BURROWS has recently completed a three-year postdoctoral research fellowship in English, Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia, where she is now an Honorary Research Fellow. Her first monograph, Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2004. Her current project, Whiteness and Shame in Contemporary Literature: Marguerite Duras, J.M. Coetzee and Arundhati Roy, is near completion.

DAVID CARTER has been Director of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland since moving from Griffith University at the beginning of 2001. He is currently Project Manager for the Australian Studies in China program for the Australia-China Council (DFAT).

MICHELLE CRAWFORD currently lives in Perth and recently commenced a Creative Writing PhD at Murdoch University. She has had fiction and poetry published and placed in various competitions, a play professionally produced, and in 2001 was awarded a mentorship with the Australian Society of Authors.

JENNIFER COMPTON lives in Wingello on the Southern Highlands of NSW with her husband. She was resident at the Whiting Library in Rome from February to July and during her tenure was a guest at the Sarajevo Poetry Festival.

TANYA DALZIELL is a Senior Lecturer in English and Communication Studies, the University of Western Australia.

EDWARD A. DOUGHERTY'S first full-length collection of poems, Pilgrimage to a Gingko Tree, will be published in 2008. He lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York state and is active in his Quaker Meeting. “Conjunction” was written after volunteering at a peace centre in Hiroshima for two and a half years.

BRIAN EDWARDS writes theory and criticism, poetry and fiction. His recent books include the critical study Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction (Garland, 1998), two collections of poetry All in Time (Papyrus, 2003) and The Escape Sonnets (Papyrus, 2006) and a collection of short fiction Corresponding with Thomas Pynchon (Mattoid/Grange, 2006).

DIANE FAHEY'S seventh poetry collection is The Sixth Swan, based on Grimms' fairy tales. Her forthcoming Sea Wall and River Light centres on the natural environment at Barwon Heads on the Victorian coast, where she lives.


In 2005 SARAH FRENCH was awarded an ArtsWA Grant to complete her first poetry collection. Dreams was the winner of the Trudy Grahman Poetry Award that same year. In 2006 she was Emerging Poet In Residence at Tom Collins Writers Centre.

HELEN GILDFIND lives in Newport, Melbourne and is currently studying Honours at Melbourne University. She has had short stories and poems published in Poetrix, Veranda, and Voiceworks and has had essays published in Idiom.

From a background of teaching English in high schools JEFF GUESS now tutors at the University of South Australia and teaches poetry at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. His eighth collection of poetry Winter Grace was launched during Writers' Week in March 2004.

JILL JONES' latest books are Broken/Open (Salt, 2005), which was shortlisted for both The Age Poetry Book of the Year in 2005 and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in 2006, and Fold Unfold (Vagabond, 2005). She won the Kenneth Slessor Prize in 2003 for her fourth full-length book, Screens Jets Heaven, and has collaborated with photographer Annette Willis on a number of projects.
CHRISTOPHER (KIT) KELEN teaches Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Macau in South China. His sixth and latest volume of poetry *Eight Days in Lhasa* has just been published by VAC in Chicago. A seventh volume *Dredging the Delta* is forthcoming from Cinnamon Press in the U.K.

NOEL KING teaches in the Department of Media at Macquarie University. His interview with Ray Coffey on Fremantle Arts Centre Press is part of a larger project ("Cultures of Independence") investigating the fortunes of various small/independent presses in Australia, England and the United States.

ANDREW LANSDOWN'S most recent books are a collection of poetry titled *Fontanelle* (Five Islands Press, 2004), a collection of short stories titled *The Dispossessed* (Interactive Press, 2005), and three fantasy novels titled *With My Knife*, *Dragonfox* and *The Red Dragon* (Omnibus Books/ Scholastic Australia, 2006).


DAVID LUMSDEN currently lives in Warsaw, Poland. He designs large software systems. His poems have appeared in various periodicals, including *P.N.Review* (Manchester, UK) and the *Mississippi Review*.

AMANDA MAXWELL currently lives in Melbourne, where she is at work on her first collection of short stories and her first novel. She is also a scientist sometimes.

MEGAN MCKINLAY teaches in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia.

SHANE MCCAULEY was born in England in 1954, but has lived and worked in Perth for most of his life as a TAFE lecturer. He has published five books of poetry, the most recent being *Glassmaker* (Sunline Press, 2005).

GRAHAM NOWLAND has been a bookseller, a book reviewer and journalist. He began publishing short fiction in 1993 and won the Lyndall Hadow/Donald Stuart short story award in 2003. He is now finalising his non-fiction book *Fremantle and the Novel 1879–2006*.

BARRY O'DONOHUE lives in Brisbane. He has published several volumes of poetry, but for the past 10 years has been unproductive. He was the editor of *Image Magazine*, *The Border Issue* and *Place and Perspective, Contemporary Queensland Poetry*. He is currently writing a new collection of poems.
RYAN O’NEILL has had two short story collections published by Ginninderra Press; *Six Tenses and A Famine in Newcastle*. He lives in Newcastle with his wife and daughter.

GEOFF PAGE is a Canberra poet. His most recent works are *Agnostic Skies* (Five Islands Press 2006) and *Eighty Great Poems from Chaucer to Now* (UNSW Press 2006). He also published his third verse novel, *Freehold*, in 2005 with Brandl & Schlesinger.

OUYANG YU has to date published thirty-five books in the field of fiction, non-fiction and literary translation, in both English and Chinese. He’s now professor of Australian literature in English Department, Wuhan University, China. His forthcoming book of non-fiction is *On Third Thoughts: speaking English, thinking Chinese and living Australian* with Wakefield Press.

This is LUKE SIMON’S 20th published poem. He has just finished post-production on *My Stamp Collection*, a short film he has written & directed. Luke was diagnosed with Stage 4 Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma in 2003. He manages LS Language Services (www.lslanguageservices.com)

ROBERT SMITH, a member of the International Council of major artist-reference *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon*, is its Australian commissioning editor; has honorary research appointments with Curtin University and the University of Melbourne; and is occasional curator at The Counihan Gallery in Brunswick. Currently he is working on decipherment of the Wilton Diptych; recovery of attitudes and insights in Shakespeare’s plays; and preparations for a screenplay *The Trials of Bill Dobell*.

DIMITRIS T SALOUMAS is a bilingual poet who has published eight books of poetry in Greek and seven in English, published in Australia and the UK. This poem is from *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*, to be published by the University of Queensland Press early next year.

TOM SHAPCOTT was Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide from 1997–2005. He is now retired and lives in Melbourne. His most recently published novel is *Spirit Wrestlers* (Wakefield Press 2004) and he has a collection of stories, *Collectors & Hunters* due out shortly. It has already been published in a Macedonian translation.

JUNED SUBHAN is a graduate from Glasgow University, who has completed his second volume of short fiction entitled *I Was Someone You Once Knew* and is currently working on a novel. He has short stories forthcoming in *Wasafiri* (London) and *The Ontario Review* (USA).
MARIA TAKOLANDER is a Lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. Her poetry has been published widely in Australian and international journals. She is the author of the chapbook Narcissism (Whitmore Press 2005) and was Emerging Writer at the Mildura Writers’ Weekend in 2005.


SHIRLEY WINSTANLEY is a Western Australian artist based in Perth who works mostly in acrylic and oil and uses a wide a range of subjects. She has exhibited several times as part of a group and held two successful solo exhibitions.

DAVID WINWOOD has contributed to newspapers and magazines in Australia and New Zealand, in the British Isles and in the United States and Canada. His first e-book, Erasmus in Stepanakert, was e-published by Blesok, and a small pamphlet, Dive For Cover (with three prints by Rigby Graham) has recently been published by In De Bonnefant, a small firm which specialises in books for the bibliophile market.
LILITH
a feminist history journal

NO. 15 – AVAILABLE NOVEMBER 2006

Lilith: A Feminist History Journal is a peer-reviewed academic journal based in the History Department at the University of Melbourne. Since the early 1980s, Lilith has provided a valuable forum for new and established scholars to present research in feminist history. The journal is published annually in November and includes a substantial book review section.

Our upcoming issue of Lilith (available end of November) begins with a feature article by Katie Holmes on “The Future of Feminist History” and reflections by Zora Simic and Mary Tomsic. It includes articles on the relationship of young Australian women to feminism, the links between contemporary Australian women writers and earlier female literary pioneers, the historicized construction of gender identity by young women in contemporary China, Antebellum American feminist thought, the racialisation of the maternal body in late colonial Australia, and the racialised pro-natalism of the Australian Nazi community of Auslandsdeutsche in the 1930s.

Current and back issues of Lilith are available via our website or by contacting the editors at the address below. Australian subscription rates for 2006 (incl. GST) are:

Students/Unwaged: $15
Individuals: $20
Institutions: $35

(International prices are available on application)

Lilith encourages submissions from both established scholars and postgraduate students. We are committed to publishing articles and reviews on women, gender, sexuality and related issues from a variety of perspectives. The editors seek articles that make an interesting, original and historical contribution to feminist scholarship. We accept papers which contribute to important historical debates, consider notions of feminism and gender, and explore the relationships between theory and practice in feminist history. All submissions should be based on substantial and original historical work. Submissions may be sent or emailed to:

Lilith: A Feminist History Journal
Department of History
University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010
history-lilith@unimelb.edu.au
Fax: 613-8344-7894

For subscription details, style guide and conference updates please visit our website at: www.history.unimelb.edu.au/lilith
STORIES
James Anderson
Tanya Dalziell
Helen Gildfind
Roland Leach
Amanda Maxwell
Ryan O’Neill

POETRY
Robert James Berry
Jennifer Compton
Michelle Crawford
MTC Cronin
Edward Dougherty
Brian Edwards
Diane Fahey
Michael Farrell
Sarah French
Jeff Guess
Jill Jones
Christopher Kelen
Andrew Lansdown
David Lumsden
Shane McCauley
Barry O’Donohue
Geoff Page
Luke Simon
Juned Subhan
Maria Takolander
Dimitris Tsaloumas
Ouyang Yu
Deb Westbury
David Winwood

ARTICLES
Michael Ackland
Victoria Burrows
Graham Nowland
Robert Smith

INTERVIEW
Noel King

REVIEW ESSAYS
David Carter
Megan McKinlay
Thomas Shapcott

Single copies of Westerly including postage:

Aust   $25.95
NZ     $30.40
USA    $19.80
UK     £10.40
Euro   £15.50

Print Post Approved PP639699/00008