The Year's Work in Fiction: 2009–2010

Elizabeth Webby

Despite the GFC, the twelve months covered by this review have produced another strong crop of fiction by Australian authors, both new and established. Given recent emphases on the cosmopolitan and international contexts of Australian literature, it is interesting to see others following David Malouf, whose *Ransom* was discussed in last year's survey, in seeking inspiration from earlier literary works as well as from contemporary trends and events. Thankfully, however, the self-conscious intertextuality of the 1970s seems to have been largely abandoned in favour of a focus on the enduring problems and joys of the human condition, on life rather than art.

Steven Carroll's *The Lost Life* follows hot on the heels of his Miles Franklin-winning *The Time We Have Taken* but takes us to a completely different time and place. Like several other recent Australian novels, Carroll's mixes imaginary figures with characters from history, in this case the poet T. S. Eliot and two of the women in his life, his estranged first wife Vivien and Emily Hale, an American loved in his youth. On an autumn day in 1934, Eliot and Hale visit the rose garden at Burnt Norton to carry out a private and belated

ceremony. But they have been preceded there by two much younger lovers, Catherine and Daniel, and a light-hearted prank by Daniel has consequences for all of them. The narrative is mainly presented from the point of view of eighteen-year-old Catherine, as she discovers the wonders of first love but also becomes increasing involved in the lives of Miss Hale and her 'special friend'. In a particularly strong episode, Catherine travels to London to deliver a message from Miss Hale to Vivien Eliot. The description of the latter's flat, its walls covered with pictures from her life with her husband, beautifully illustrates the dangers of living in the past, as in a different way does Miss Hale's attachment to her role as Eliot's first muse. Daniel leaves Catherine to study abroad, just as the young Tom Eliot had done earlier with Emily Hale. But through the events of that autumn, Catherine has learnt the necessity of living in the moment rather than the past, the dangers of being the muse rather than the creator. Far from being a footnote in someone else's story, she is to go on to an independent and fulfilled life of her own. In this elegant novel, Carroll demonstrates that he can evoke the England of the 1930s just as stunningly as he depicted Melbourne suburbia of the 50s in his much-praised trilogy.

While *The Lost Life* takes place primarily in the past, Kirsten Tranter sets her highly accomplished first novel *The Legacy* very much in the present. It does, however, also refer back to the work of a canonical author, Henry James, specifically his *The Portrait of a Lady* which, as Tranter's epigraph reminds us, earlier inspired a poem by T. S. Eliot. But it is also a 'post-September 11' novel, though unlike most others in this category its focus is on home-grown violence rather than the external threat of terrorism. Most of the main characters—Ingrid, Fleur, Gil Grey, Maeve, Ralph—parallel James's Isabel, Pansy, Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle and Ralph, as their names make clear, and as in James's novel the plot is set in motion by an unexpected inheritance which leads to an unwise marriage. But *The Legacy* is, unlike *Portrait of a Lady*, mainly told from the point of view of a young woman who is not the ostensible heroine and whose descriptions of student life in Sydney and the streets, buildings and institutions of New York

clearly draw heavily on Tranter's own experiences in both cities. Julia Alpers, a university friend of Ingrid and Ralph's, who has been strongly attracted to them both, travels to New York to try to unravel the mystery of Ingrid's life after her marriage to Grey, and her apparent loss of it on 11 September 2001. Through discussions with Ingrid's supervisor at Columbia University and other friends of hers, as well as Fleur and Grey, Julia gradually begins to piece together the reasons for Ingrid's unhappiness, and discovers the secret which links Grey, Maeve and Fleur. In keeping with twenty-first-century attitudes, this involves far more than concealment of a sexual scandal, the mystery at the heart of Henry James's novel. *The Legacy* also concludes on a note more attuned to twenty-first-century expectations of female agency and empowerment than was the norm when *Portrait of a Lady* appeared. There may be a bird cage on the balcony outside Julia's New York apartment but, significantly, it is empty.

Another very impressive first novel, Cate Kennedy's *The World Beneath*, takes a wry look at many aspects of contemporary culture: desire for a wilderness experience, nature photography, popular music, alternative life styles and spiritualities. As in Joan London's *The Good Parents*, Kennedy's starting point is the very different world views of baby boomer hippy parents and their teenage daughters. But for Kennedy's fifteen-year-old Sophie, only her mother has tried to be a good parent, her father having walked out when she was a baby in order to continue travelling the world as a photographer. Now he decides to try to reconnect with her via a visit to Tasmania to walk in Cradle Mountain National Park, where things go badly wrong when he ignores warning signs. Presenting her narrative from the alternating perspectives of these three characters, Kennedy subtly reveals their preoccupations and shortcomings. Initially we are encouraged to share Sophie's view of her parents: her mother Sandy, seemingly still mired in the past, making jewellery to sell at the local market; her much more glamorous absent father who works in television. But we soon discover that Rich's glamour is built on shaky foundations. His work involves editing infomercials and his attempt

to seduce a glamorous presenter comes to naught. For him, as for Sandy, the high point has been participation in the fight to save the Franklin River; both of them also have unresolved issues with their mothers. Thanks to Kennedy's skilful characterisation, however, we are ultimately able to sympathise with all three characters as they are forced to reconsider their priorities: Sophie recognises the value of her mother's love, Rich proves that he really does care about the wilderness and his daughter, and Sandy gives up some of her old beliefs to move more confidently into the future.

Relationships between parents and daughters are also central to Alex Miller's *Lovesong*, his ninth novel. As its title might suggest, *Lovesong* is less complex and much less political than some of Miller's earlier works, though it still displays his interest in traditional cultures and his masterly ability to evoke other times and places. At its centre is a story told to the narrator over a series of meetings in a Melbourne café: that of an Australian man, Jim Patterner, Sabiha, the Tunisian woman he met and fell in love with in Paris many years earlier, and 'the beautiful and terrible story of their little daughter Houria.' The narrator, we learn, is an aging novelist who lives in Melbourne with his divorced daughter and who, before meeting Jim, believed he had written his last novel. This framing device allows Miller to have some fun at the expense of the literary establishment. The narrator's last novel had been called *The Farewell*:

> I thought this was a pretty direct hint for reviewers and interviewers, who are always on the lookout for metaphor and meaning in what we do. I waited for the first interviewer to ask me, 'So, is this your last book then?' I was ready to say, 'Yes, it is.' Simple as that, and have done with it. But no one asked. They asked instead, 'Is it autobiographical?' I quoted Lucian Freud: *Everything is autobiographical and everything is a portrait.* The trouble with this was that they took Freud's radiant little metaphor literally.

So of course *Lovesong* is not autobiographical, despite one of Miller's more recent works being called *Landscape of Farewell*, and despite his acknowledged use of stories of friends in many of his novels. Indeed, the driving force of the narrative is something no man could have direct experience of, the desperate desire of a woman for a child, specifically a daughter. Sabita has been very close to her own father who, recognising her special qualities, sends her to Paris to help her recently-widowed aunt run a little café. When she falls in love with Jim, Sabita is convinced she will soon have a daughter to take back to El Djem and place in her father's arms. But the years pass without any child and when Sabita's father falls seriously ill she becomes desperate. Inspired by some of the old songs of her grandmother, she takes a radical, though it is suggested also a traditional, action. This essentially simple story is made vivid through Miller's skills in characterisation, especially of the quiet, book-loving Jim and the more passionate and resolute Sabita. The beauty and terror of their story is also nicely set off by the humour of the framing narrative, as the novelist finds himself far from happy over his own daughter's choice of lover and discovers that Jim is also planning a novel. But he knows that Jim's story will inevitably be different to his: it is hard not to read the final sentence as Miller's direct address to the reader:

> Sabita's story had come out of her and been carried to me; now, after I had lived in it jealously myself for a while, I would carry it to others, and in the end would let it go and be done with it, like all the other stories I have carried.

Although many novels have turned upon unwanted pregnancies and the desperate measures women have taken to resolve these through abortion or suicide, and many others dealt with the effects of adoption and illegitimacy on both mother and child, few have attempted to convey the suffering experienced by a mother who is unable to give birth to a child. It is therefore surprising to come across two recent Australian novels where this thwarted desire

is the driving force. Interestingly, both also use a double narrative structure, allowing past events to be viewed from a new perspective. In Enza Gandolfo's first novel *Swimming*, seeing her former husband at an exhibition of photographs leads the central character, Kate Wilks, back to a novel she had written twenty years earlier. There she had tried to describe the impact on herself and her marriage of her repeated failure to give birth to Sarah, the daughter of her dreams. Skilfully shifting between the chapters of 'Writing Sarah', told in the third person, and the first person of the framing narrative, Gandolfo, like Miller with Sabita, tellingly conveys the intensity of Kate's desire for a daughter and the pain of her repeated failures to carry a child through to term. While the two novels differ in their outcomes, Kate also takes a radical action and must live with the consequences. By the end of the novel, however, she has come to terms with her past, accepting that creation takes many forms, as do daughters.

In Kristina Olsson's *The China Garden* we are in more familiar territory of babies who arrive when they are not wanted or even expected. The novel opens with a brief prologue describing news of an abandoned new-born baby and the impact of this on three of those who are to become its central characters, before taking us back two weeks in time to an orchard in Italy. There Laura, one of characters briefly introduced in the prologue, hears of the death of her mother Angela in a northern New South Wales coastal town. As Laura flies home, we learn more about the other two characters through whom events are to be focalised, the elderly Cress and her grandson Kieran. Olsson's portrait of Kieran is one of most original features of this novel; while physically an adult, in many ways he remains a child, capable of simple tasks in a sheltered workshop but not of holding down a regular job. We are never told exactly why he is the way he is and Olsson's avoidance of labels helps to engage the reader's empathy for Kieran, with his intense interest in words, his careful observations of both people and the natural world and his special friendship with Angela. Olsson delicately unfolds the ways in which Angela has made a life as a painter, and has helped, and been healed

by, those around her, especially Kieran, after giving up her own son for adoption. The title refers to Angela's garden and its broken pieces of china, an evocative image suggesting that beauty can be created from what is broken and apparently irretrievable, but also the danger and sharpness of buried secrets. Without feeling the need to resolve every absence or mystery, Olsson gently suggests that it is always possible to make new things out of the past, however apparently fractured or painful.

In contrast, Andrea Goldsmith in *Reunion* looks at the problems that arise when four friends are reunited in Melbourne twenty years after their brilliant days at university there and later in Oxford. All but one of them have since become part of the Australian diaspora: Ava a well-known novelist, Helen a cutting-edge molecular biologist, Conrad a philosopher and TV personality; only Jack, held back by his unrequited love for Ava, has failed to build on his earlier promise as a historian of Islam. Ava's husband Harry, though regarded with disdain by her friends, especially Jack, has also done well and, as the head of a new organisation, the Network of Global Australians, has provided the funds to bring Conrad, Helen and Jack back to Melbourne. Of course, it is never possible to relive the past, and the reunion goes far from smoothly as each of them has to face up to new challenges: changes in their bodies as the result of aging, changes in society and culture which make different demands on their expertise. After September 11, there is a new interest in Jack's specialisation in Islam; conversely, Connie's style as a TV guru no longer appeals to a generation immersed in new media, and even his serial seduction of young women is becoming harder to keep up. Helen is forced to compromise her beliefs in the independence of science in order to continue doing the work that is her lifeblood. When Ada's challenge becomes too much for her to bear, help comes not from her husband or friends, not even the enamoured Jack, but from someone even further back in her past. Although the novel's main focus is on Jack and Ada, Goldsmith makes us share the dilemmas of all her characters, and care about the outcomes. Along the way, there is much witty

commentary on contemporary life and culture and some great set pieces, including the NOGA cocktail party and the disastrous pilots for Connie's proposed TV series.

One of the many current issues raised in *Reunion*, that of the right of an individual to choose when and how to die, and the impact this can have on their relatives and friends, is central to Susan Varga's *Headlong*. Although written as fiction, it is clear, especially to those who have read Varga's earlier *Heddy and Me*, which centred on her often difficult relationship with her mother, that this is a novel with strong autobiographical underpinnings. After the death of her husband, Julia, who like him had managed to survive the Holocaust, decides she no longer wishes to go on living and searches for ways to commit suicide. Her doctors and members of her family, believing Julia is just depressed and grieving for her husband, make unsuccessful attempts to talk her out of this. Varga provides a thought-provoking portrait of a mother-daughter relationship always fraught with guilt and pain that is intensified when Julia survives an overdose of pills supposedly guaranteed to end her life. After her daughter refuses to provide any further help, Julia, with the resoluteness that has earlier helped keep her alive, takes things into her own hands in a final brave if shocking act. And the novel's title and the image of the diver on its cover take on a new and much blacker meaning.

Loss and suicide are also strong undercurrents in Emily Maguire's third novel, *Smoke in the Room*, in which three ill-assorted characters share a flat situated on Sydney's Broadway. The flat belongs to Katie's grandmother, whose attempts to be choosey about who shares it are regularly thwarted by Katie's self-destructive behaviour. Adam, a visiting American still recovering from the death of his wife, is no match for Katie's alcohol-fuelled powers of seduction. The second tenant, the much older Graeme, works at the nearby office of the Refugee Assistance Foundation, where he remains a loner, concealing his life and plans from his colleagues. It is Graeme, however, who is able to show true empathy for Katie and to take the, for him, radical step of asking one of his colleagues to help her. By the end of the

novel, it seems that there may be a future for her, even if it is too late for Graeme. *Smoke in the Room* demonstrates a new maturity in Maguire's work, with convincing portraits of three very different and complex characters grappling with the impact of depression, personal loss and a sense of hopelessness in the face of the widespread misery and violence of the contemporary world.

The suicide of the Harvard professor who is supervising her doctoral thesis forces Simone Harlowe, the heroine of Larissa Behrendt's *Legacy*, to reassess her own life and especially her relationship with her father, a prominent Aboriginal rights activist. As in Behrendt's first novel, *Home*, there are strong emphases on Indigenous history and politics and clear autobiographical elements. But these are set within wider questions of individual responsibility: how does one balance personal needs and desires and the needs of others; how does one balance the needs of family members against the needs of the wider community? Publicly, Tony Harlowe has been a hero since the days of the Tent Embassy but, as Simone discovers, he has been far from heroic as a husband. Paralleling this is her discovery that Professor Young, whom she has also greatly admired, has been a failure as a husband and father. *Legacy* is a much stronger novel than *Home*, with Behrendt confronting complex, contemporary issues which impact on both the Indigenous and wider communities.

While the history of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy plays an important role in *Legacy*, two first novels are less successful in attempting to combine historical material with a contemporary story based on the author's personal experiences. In the engagingly-titled *A True History of the Hula Hoop*, Judith Lanigan writes equally engagingly about the life of burlesque performer Catherine Barnier, drawing on her own experiences as, to quote her bio note, 'an international street theatre and circus artist'. The intriguing little interspersed notes about the history of the hula hoop culminate in Catherine's discovery that hoops were indeed being manufactured in Australia two years before they were supposedly 'invented' in America. Less successful is the parallel story of a troupe of *Commedia dell'Arte* actors who

are trying to travel from Italy to Paris in 1572. Despite a few half-hearted attempts to link these episodes with Catherine's own travels through Europe, this historical material does not add much to the novel, especially as there are too many jarring anachronisms in language and incident. I would have much preferred to learn more about Catherine and her adventures, though others less familiar with the history of street theatre may feel differently.

In Robyn Mundy's *The Nature of Ice* the parallels between the contemporary story, based on the author's own regular travels to Antarctica, and the historical one, based on Douglas Mawson's expedition of 1911–14, are more obvious. Again, however, the very different styles of the historical and the contemporary sections seemed to detract from rather than add to the novel, coupled with the fact that Mawson's story is now a fairly well-known one. In contrast, the contemporary story is very engaging, thanks to strong characterisation and a fast-paced narrative. Mundy provides vivid and original descriptions of the Antarctic environment and the difficulties of working there, with many insights into how this affects human relationships. It is pleasing to see she has recently been awarded the Watermark Fellowship for environmental writing.

In another first novel, Goldie Goldbloom's *The Paperbark Shoe*, the problem is not one of a mix of historical and contemporary material, since the novel as a whole is set in the 1940s, but of a mix of styles. It is told in the first person by Gin, an albino and champion pianist, who has grown up in comfort in Perth but has been forced to marry Toad, a short, misshapen person with strange sexual preferences, to escape from the asylum where she has been sent by her wicked stepfather. Together, they slave to develop Toad's farm, situated on third-class land near Wyalkatchem; then their subsistence existence is considerably enlivened by the arrival of two Italian prisoners-of-war to work as farm labourers. Gin falls in love with Antonio and, believing that he also loves her, is devastated when he leaves her without a word. After the war, she manages to raise enough money to travel to Italy in search of him. In the final chapter, with its abrupt

switch from the grotesque comedy of the earlier episodes to the historical realism of the massacre of Antonio's wife and children by German soldiers, we are in very different fictional terrain. Gin is forced to reassess Antonio's feelings for her but the reader is forced to question the overall success of Goldbloom's novel.

Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World* is perhaps the most unusual novel to be published in Australia recently, one that demonstrates yet again McGahan's ability to combine literary fiction with more popular genres. After making his name as a writer of grunge fiction, McGahan went on to win the Miles Franklin with his pastoral epic *The White Earth*, followed by *Underground*, a satirical thriller. All his work, however, has had a political edge and *Wonders*, which can perhaps best be described as an ecological fantasy, is no exception. At the most basic level it is about the age-old conflict between man and his environment in a world where, as the title indicates, there is no such thing as a benevolent creator. In a mental hospital on an unnamed island, a man and a woman come together. She is an orphan, who cannot speak, read or, indeed, understand any form of symbolic communication, though she has peculiar powers that allow her to manipulate matter; he, known only as the foreigner, is in a coma after a horrific accident. Thanks to the foreigner's special mental powers they make amazing journeys through time and space, and the orphan learns about many of the world's wonders as she experiences the earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions that have destroyed so many lives. Ultimately, however, McGahan suggests that men, in their determination to survive whatever the cost, represent the real threat to the future of life on earth.

If McGahan is a writer of literary fiction with a popular twist, then the publication of *The Broken Shore* in 2005 drew widespread praise for crime novelist Peter Temple from literary circles. *Truth* is billed as the sequel to *The Broken Shore*, and does feature some brief appearances from its central character, Joe Cashin, as well as an even briefer one from Jack Irish, hero of several earlier Temple novels. But Inspector Stephen Villani, first met in *The Broken Shore*, is a less

original and compelling figure than Cashin, despite struggling with the breakdown of his marriage and other family problems while trying to solve two violent crimes. *Truth* also lacks the wonderful evocation of the Victorian countryside that was one of the highlights of *The Broken Shore*, though Temple again shows his skill in appealing to all the senses in his vivid depictions of contemporary Melbourne. One of Villani's own special skills, his sense of smell, proves crucial in solving his cases but in other respects this is a fairly conventional crime story, though a well-plotted and fast-paced one which will certainly not disappoint lovers of the genre.

2009 also saw new novels by Gerald Murnane, David Forster and Brian Castro, for Forster and Murnane, the first for many years. Indeed, Murnane devotes most of *Barley Patch* to the question 'Must I write' and to describing the fictional work he gave up writing several years ago. In the process, he claims he has no imagination and does not create characters; as those familiar with his work would know, Murnane also does not believe in anything resembling a plot. Nevertheless, *Barley Patch*, a title explained in the last few pages, is always fascinating, especially in its accounts of Murnane's early reading and how he began to explore the images suggested to him through comic strips like 'Mandrake the Magician' and serialised fiction in the *Australian Journal*. It is of course the images, many of them recurring throughout Murnane's work—racecourses and horses, the colours of jockeys' silks, houses of more than one story, grassy plains—that link the various parts of this fiction. In the face of Murnane's frequent reminders that what we are reading is fiction, only a brave or foolish reviewer would note that *Barley Patch* seems to be strongly autobiographical. This of course is part of the problem of representation. As Murnane reminds us, he 'can never be any more than a personage in the mind of any reader of this writing.'

Problems of representation are, as one might expect, central to Brian Castro's ninth novel, *The Bath Fugues*, which consists of three interlinked novellas, 'Beckett's Bicycle', 'Walter's Brief' and 'Sarraute's Surgery'. These titles point to some of the novel's literary

references; their epigraphs indicate others: Baudelaire, Benjamin and Montaigne. The two epigraphs to the novel as a whole provide some further clues about to how to read it: a Wikipedia entry describes Bach's Goldberg Variations and pianist Glenn Gould, best-known for his recordings of this work, notes that it is 'music with neither real climax nor real resolution, music which like Baudelaire's lovers rests lightly on the wings of the unchecked wind.' In novella three, we find what seems to be a fairly clear statement of the novel's structure:

> Bach wrote fugues. The important thing about a fugue or 'flight' is that all the voices are equal and independent in counterpoint. They are all relative to each other, and in this organised complexity, they speak together, drop out, become fellow travellers, form pairs of dialogues, and in general, mutilate the subject by inverting, augmenting, truncating or copying it.

Of course, the speaker here is not Castro but Dr Judith Sarraute, one of these 'equal and independent voices' through whom the novel is narrated. Others include Jason Redvers, artist and forger, Walter Gottlieb, academic and would-be biographer, Camilo Conceição, a Portuguese poet and art collector, living in Macau in the 1920s, Julia Grace, an Australian cubist artist with whom he has a liaison, and an unnamed man who lives off what he can garner from others and is perhaps closest of all to the author figure. All of them are related in various ways, come and go throughout the novel, and interact as described above. But what is the subject? There is much here about art and poetry, the anxiety of influence, copying as against authenticity, madness, opium and baths, not to mention bicycles and jellyfish. And plenty of the puns and game playing which, as Bernadette Brennan notes in her book discussed below, have always been part of Castro's work. Perhaps it's best just to immense oneself in the writing, enjoy the wonderful descriptions of life in Sydney, Macau and North Queensland, and admire the intricacies of Castro's counterpoint.

David Foster's thirteenth novel, *Sons of the Rumour*, also pays

tribute to literary forebears, especially Richard Burton's translations of the *Arabian Nights* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but unlike Murnane's and Castro's moves well beyond questions of representation. As other reviewers have noted, the most brilliant section describes a pilgrimage to Ireland by Al Morrissey, failed scientist, failed jazz-drummer, failed husband, in which Foster the satirist gets stuck into such contemporary horrors as long-distance air travel and the decline of once great cities. It is hard not to see this 100-page tour-de-force as a male equivalent of Molly Bloom's soliloquy, though one that ends in death rather than sexual delight. Likewise, the novel as a whole reverses the main premise of the *Arabian Nights*: the Shah finds Shahrazad's tales boring rather than enthralling. Instead, he spends his 'Iranian Days' in visits to the Sons of the Rumour. From them he hears tales and sermons that range through many religions and regions, in which sexual desire jostles with the desire for enlightenment. 'The Man Who Fell in Love with His Own Feet', for example, gives a marvellous account of the origins of the Chinese custom of female foot-binding while 'Blue Melons' combines the wonderful, the horrific and the abject in true Foster fashion. Foster claims in his 'Author's Note' that *Sons of the Rumour* was inspired by his presence at the Cronulla riot of 2005 and aims to explore the current conflict between '(fundamentalist) Islamic man and (anti-Christian) secular Western woman.' This is clearly a topic of vital importance and one can only admire the immense amount of erudition, imagination and passion that has gone into this novel, though at the same time wondering how many readers will make it through to the end.

Despite the success of Nam Le's *The Boat*, collections of stories are still thin on the ground in Australia and published mainly by smaller presses. The winning book in the University of Queensland Press's 2008 David Unaipon Award for a manuscript by an Indigenous author was however a collection of stories, Marie Munkara's *Every Secret Thing*. Set on an Aboriginal mission in northern Australia run by the Catholic Church, much of Munkara's humour and satire is reminiscent of *Bran Nue Day*, though her vision is ultimately a much

bleaker one. The somewhat over-insistent ironies in the opening story 'The Bishop' made me fearful that this would be a one-note work in which the whites could do not right and their ostensible charges no wrong. But Munkara spreads her sympathy and her criticisms more widely. 'Pwomiga' reveals some of the problems that can arise in traditional cultures when a man with little interest in women and children inherits the wives and offspring of his dead brothers. In marked contrast, 'Mira' tells the story of one of the nuns, who has taken to the veil after being betrayed by her lover, only to find him turning up many years later to die at the mission, so ensuring that even after death she will not be revenged on him. 'Marigold' describes the even sadder life of a mixed-blood woman, sent to the mainland as a child, who later returns to the mission to find her mother. Marigold's education in white ways, however, has left her stranded between cultures: 'As a product of the bush mob and the mission mob Marigold's place was with neither of them and it was with a heavy heart that she watched her dreams of a life with her family disappear.' Behind all the comic bumbling of the missionaries and the often subversive activities of the 'bush mob', is the inescapable pain caused by disruption of traditional cultures and failures of love and understanding.

Marie Munkara's stories, for all the variety of their themes, share a common time and place. In contrast, Archie Weller's collection, *The Window Seat*, brings together stories written over many years, including ones commissioned by various publications. Early stories, 'Stolen Car' and 'Dead Dingo', are similar in style and subject matter to Weller's first novel, *The Day of the Dog*, describing the misadventures of Aboriginal youths as they hit the big city. Later ones, though still mostly dealing with Indigenous issues, naturally take on the genre and themes of the anthologies in which they appeared. So 'Dead Roses', named by Weller as one of his favourites, is a murder mystery and 'It's Only a Game' a comic piece for an anthology on Australian Rules football. '67 Yagan Way' is a futuristic story along the lines of Weller's more recent novel, *The Land of the Golden Clouds*, while

the zany 'Confessions of a Head Hunter' was also inspired by the story of Yagan, though here it is Aboriginal youths who collect the heads from statues of white men. Other stories in a more realist mode describe personal relationships that rarely have happy endings, as in 'The Island', where an idyllic love is only possible in a brief escape from normal life. Since Weller is not a prolific writer, this collection of his short fiction is especially welcome.

Unusually for a collection of stories, Richard Rossiter's *Arrhythmia* features not one but two family trees as an appendix. Despite some initial confusion caused by the characters 'Emily' and 'Ellen' having different husbands in family tree 1 from those they have in the stories, the appendix is useful in keeping track of who is who, since the stories feature people from four generations and do not follow a strict chronology. Many of them, however, focus on two characters, Roland, the grandson of Samuel and Emily, whom we meet in the opening story, and their great-granddaughter, Laura. As Roland is the product of a later, second marriage, he is probably much the same age as Laura, daughter of his half-sister Leah, although the two never intersect. In 'Roland' he reflects bitterly on his parents' disastrous marriage, blaming them for all the problems in his life, and things do not improve for him in the following stories. 'Present Tense', for example, describes his increasingly more bizarre attempts to live wholly in the moment, something he perhaps achieves, though in an ironical way, in the final story, 'Roland Redux'. Laura's life appears to have a more hopeful trajectory; introduced to us while involved in an unsatisfactory relationship in 'Her Next Lover', by the end of the collection she is settled on her father's farm. Despite the mystery of his disappearance it is possible her rootless life is at an end. While the 26 stories in *Arrhythmia* are all quite short, recurring themes and characters allow Rossiter to explore many of the complexities of family and contemporary life.

Mainstream publishers seem more prepared now to publish new anthologies of short fiction, one of the most recent being Mandy Sayer's *The Australian Long Story*. In her introduction Sayer discusses

differences between a long story and a novella, provides a brief history of the short story in Australia and explains why she has not included any works written before the 1970s: it seems they were too short! (There are in fact some great long stories by nineteenth-century women such as Tasma and Ada Cambridge: see another 2009 publication, *The PEN Macquarie Anthology of Australian Literature*). Sayer has, however, selected some wonderful long stories, including Elizabeth Jolley's chilling 'Grasshoppers', first published in a shorter version in *Westerly*, as well as other established classics by Malouf, Garner, Carey, Winton, Mears and Goldsworthy, along with Nam Le's more recent 'Halflead Bay'. Indeed, the only real surprise is a story by Louis Nowra, known more for his plays and memoirs than his fiction. Sayer claims Nowra's 'Ten Anecdotes About Lord Howe Island' is 'a rare example of the comedic long story' but also acknowledges that he is her husband.

Meenakshi Bharat and Sharon Rundle, editors of *Fear Factor*, an anthology of fiction relating to such current issues as terrorism, refugees, and fear of the other, present an intriguing mix of work by Indian and Australian authors, new as well as established. Alongside extracts from novels by Tom Keneally, David Malouf, Salman Rushdie and Kiran Nagarkar one finds stories presenting very different aspects of the main theme. In 'Packing Heat', for example, Devika Brendon provides an insight into the mind of a female suicide bomber; in marked contrast, Meenakshi Bharat's 'Compensation' shows that an act of terrorism can sometimes have unexpectedly positive outcomes. Picador Australia are to be congratulated on releasing this book originally published by Picador India.

If short fiction is generally out of fashion with mainstream Australian publishers, works of literary criticism, especially comprehensive studies of our leading writers, now get published overseas if at all. In 2009, UQP bucked this trend with David Callahan's *Rainforest Narratives*, a study of Janette Turner Hospital's fiction, perhaps because they publish her novels. Despite his title, Callahan does not confine himself to Hospital's Australian novels but covers all of her

work—eight novels and three collections of stories—up to *Orpheus Lost* (2007). He also includes an excellent bibliography, listing her uncollected stories and numerous articles and reviews, as well as publications on her fiction. As a title, *Rainforest Narratives* is used metaphorically, to refer to 'the bewildering oversupply of information', the 'networks of connection, entanglements of involvement', and the sometimes disorienting questioning of time and identity found in Hospital's fiction. In contrast, Callahan's approach is clear and lucid, providing interpretative guides to Hospital's fictional labyrinths. As he indicates, problems of identity, related especially to cultural and gender issues, together with the use of unreliable narrators and an increasing emphasis on violence, are hallmarks of Hospital's work. He notes, in her two most recent novels, a move to a more accessible style and more linear structure, one that perhaps mirrors the move away from postmodern reflexivity in contemporary fiction generally. Nevertheless, Hospital's novels continue to make many demands on the reader, besides offering much in return, and Callahan's comprehensive study will be welcomed by her admirers.

In *Messengers of Eros*, French scholar Xavier Pons presents the first extended study of 'representations of sex in Australian writing'. Despite the subtitle, with the exception of a chapter on A D Hope's poetry, his focus is on fictional representations, primarily from recent decades. In his conclusion, Pons admits the impossibility of demonstrating 'an identifiably Australian way of writing about sex'. This may explain why the most interesting of his sixteen chapters are the later ones that look at one or two texts or authors in detail. Although Pons demonstrates wide reading of both Australian and international literature in his more general chapters, there is some repetition and no sense of a developing argument. Another difficulty is that some novels that were much discussed when first published because of their highly erotic nature—such as Linda Jaivin's *Eat Me* and Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*—have not lasted. The best chapters, however, offer new insights into works that have not received much critical attention, such as Peter Carey's *The Tax*

Inspector, discussed alongside Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* as representations of sexual abjection. Another valuable chapter selects three very different historical novels, Tom Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes*, Philip McLaren's *Sweet Water…Stolen Land* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, to discuss the use of sexual encounters as metonymic representations of the colonial process. These chapters demonstrate the value of an external perspective on Australian literature, one that also allows Pons to address what has seemed a taboo topic locally, 'Homoeroticism in David Malouf'. In a sensitive reading of Malouf's fiction, Pons sees him as concerned to 'free his characters from an imposed binary categorization of sexualities', pointing out that difference as it relates to sexuality can be regarded as just as much part of the postcolonial condition as racial difference.

Given the subtitle of Bernadette Brennan's *Brian Castro's Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language*, it may seem surprising that Castro's fiction is not discussed by Pons, especially as he was the French translator of Castro's first novel, *Birds of Passage.* But, as Brennan makes clear, Castro has always been more concerned with linguistic seductions, with the play of words and meanings rather than lips and limbs, with death rather than sex. She provides detailed analyses of his eight novels published between 1983 and 2008, reading them chronologically and in conjunction with his own essays and a wide range of fiction and essays by others. Her emphasis is on Castro's imaginative concerns and strategies, especially his celebration of language, as seen in his love of puns and literary games, his breaking of narrative and genre conventions, his linking of writing, desire and death. Castro, as she notes, runs the risk of alienating readers through his constant playing with and subversion of our desire to impose meaning or anything in a way of a unitary interpretation on his fiction. Autobiographical readings, in particular, are rejected, especially of his 'fictional autobiography' *Shanghai Dancing*. Brennan's chapter on this, arguably Castro's most important work to date, is one of the highlights of her monograph, though she is concerned to stress

that her readings of Castro's novels are not to be seen as in any way definitive. This first extended study of Castro's fiction is a welcome addition to Australian literary criticism and offers many insights into his work, as well as an excellent bibliography.

In conclusion, a brief mention of a novel written in 1864–65, though published only this year: *Tom Hurstbourne or A Squatter's Life* by John Clavering Wood. Gerard Benjamin, a descendant of the author, was given the manuscript by a family member, and has edited it in conjunction with his wife, Gloria Grant. Originally believed to be a diary, the manuscript was in fact that of the second novel to be written about Queensland and offers some fascinating insights into colonial life, despite an over-melodramatic plot. Even in these cosmopolitan times, history returns in unexpected ways.

FICTION RECEIVED 2009–2010

Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.

*Bharat, Meenakshi and Rundle, Sharon, eds. *Fear Factor: Terror Incognito*. Sydney: Picador, 2010.

*Behrendt, Larissa. *Legacy*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

*Brennan, Bernadette. *Brian Castro's Fiction. The Seductive Play of Language*. Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2008.

Brophy, Kevin. *Patterns of Creativity*. Amsterdam: Rodophi, 2009.

*Callahan, David. *Rainforest Narratives. The Work of Janette Turner Hospital*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

*Caroll, Steven. *The Lost Life*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2009.

*Castro, Brian. *The Bath Fuges*. Sydney: Giramondo, 2009.

Cho, Tom. *Look Who's Morphing*. Sydney: Giramondo, 2009.

Cole-Adams, Kate. *Walking to the Moon*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2008.

*Gandolfo, Enza. *Swimming*. Melbourne: Vanark Press, 2009.

*Goldbloom, Goldie. *The Paperbark Shoe*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2009.
Kenneally, Cath. *Jetty Road*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2009.
*Kennedy, Cate. *The World Beneath*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2009.
*Lanigan, Judith. *A True History of the Hula Hoop*. Sydney: Picador, 2009.
*Maguire, Emily. *Smoke in the Room*. Sydney: Picador, 2009.
*McGahan, Andrew. *Wonders of a Godless World*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009.
*Miller, Alex. *Lovesong*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009.
*Mundy, Robyn. *The Nature of Ice*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009.
*Munkara, Marie. *Every Secret Thing*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.
*Murnane, Gerald. *Barley Patch*. Sydney: Giramondo, 2009.
*Olsson, Kristina. *The China Garden*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.
O'Neil, Patrick. *Sideways*. Melbourne: Viking, 2009.
Orr, Stephen. *Time's Long Ruin*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2010.
*Pons, Xavier. *Messengers of Eros. Representations of Sex in Australian Writing*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
*Rossiter, Richard. *Arrhythmia, Stories of Desire*. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2009.
*Sayer, Mandy, ed. *The Australian Long Story*. Melbourne: Hamish Hamilton, 2009.
*Temple, Peter. *Truth*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009.
*Tranter, Kirsten. *The Legacy*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2010.
*Varga, Susan. *Headlong*. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2009.
*Weller, Archie. *The Window Seat and other Stories*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.
Westwood, Kim. *Daughters of Moab*. Sydney: HarperCollins, 2008.
*Wood, John Clavering. *Tom Hurstbourne, or A Squatter's Life*. Salisbury, Qld.: Boolarong Press, 2010.