

Westerly

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63.1

New Writing from
Western Australia

Fiction

Creative Non-Fiction

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Still
Marcelle Freiman

Marcelle Freiman has recently published poems in literary journals *Antipodes*, *Cordite*, *Mascara*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *Westerly*. Her books of poetry are *White Lines* (Vertical) and *Monkey's Wedding*. She is Associate Professor in Creative Writing and English at Macquarie University.

there is a stillness i require
no rain drumming the surfaces of things.
now, there is no quiescent water
rather a dry crackle of grasses, a sunset in Africa
yellow-brown and moving soft as hair.
only the child's eye can see
a memory like this. a making of time.
here, there is nothing in your eyes
that can take me back there—
though I want those traces of past
where every stone turns for me
as the line grows shorter. the stillness
i seek is not darkness: it is the shimmer
of red at the centre of the throat
of a leather-faced monkey calling across acacias;
a heart-muscle pink as flamingos against
a mirror of russet plains.
the thrum of rain on the roof returns.
times of dislocation—each sense
a feeler reaching for the light

**Green Shadows: Venturing
into Gerald Murnane's Plains**
Samantha Trayhurn

Samantha Trayhurn is a Doctor of Creative Arts candidate at Western Sydney University participating in the ARC funded 'Other Worlds: Forms of World Literature' project. Her work has appeared in *Overland*, *LiNQ Journal*, *eTropic*, *ArtAscent* and *Pure Slush*. She is also the founding editor of *Pink Cover Zine*.

'I have been delivered of my books.'

These words hang in the air as Gerald Murnane confirms his retirement during a rare address to around thirty academics, writers, publishers and fans at the Goroke Golf Club. The one-day symposium, 'Another World in This One: Gerald Murnane's Fiction', is part of Western Sydney University's 'Other Worlds: Forms of World Literature' project. On first glance it is a curious connection: how can the life work of an author who has rarely left the small pockets of Victoria, suburban Melbourne and a few regional villages and towns that he has called home for eighty years inform us about a literature of the 'world'?

Sitting in a vinyl chair, looking at the ageing pine awnings of the small clubhouse, I have the distinct sense that I have been here before, but it is more a literary *déjà vu*; these plains are the world of Gerald Murnane's work. Listening to him speak, it becomes clear that he has not been selected because he is in dialogue with a cosmopolitan literature of the outside world, but because he is a conduit for speaking about those internal planes where worlds foment. He is a world-builder.

Gerald Murnane is considered by a growing cohort to be one of the most important living novelists, both nationally and internationally. Among those present in the room are his long-time publisher at Giramondo, Ivor Indyk; his publisher at Text, Michael Heyward; acclaimed novelist Alexis Wright; and a sampling of emerging talent including novelist Luke Carman and poet Luke Beesley. In 2006, Murnane was in contention for the Nobel Prize, and while he did not receive the definitive nod (Genoni 1–13), there are whispers that he is again being considered. His work has recently seen a resurgence in popularity amongst a fresh crop of readers, as well as the international literati (Heyward np; Lerner np), who are drawn to his refined craft and intense introspection at a time often saturated with the digital and the disposable.

The attendees have collectively travelled many more miles than the author has traversed in his lifetime to be present. The majority of them are already aware of Murnane's withdrawal from writing after the release of his recent novel *Border Districts*. However, it is profoundly touching to hear the words so eloquently pass his lips, wedged between candid comments about his health and jokes about his technological incompetence. On this day in Goroke, he states that he feels 'sublimely untroubled' and speaks openly about his work, his creative process, and the personal experiences that have contributed to the construction of his oeuvre.

Murnane spends some time explaining the effect that a 'blanket-finish' has on his reading and his writing. It is a horseracing term used to describe an event when a group of horses approach the line so close together 'you could throw a blanket over them all'. As we observe the final moments of the author's own race as a writer, his body, his works, his landscapes and his life converge in the quaint space of the Goroke Golf Club and are so closely assembled as to produce the effect of such a finish. I tend to shy away from words like surreal when it comes to Murnane, though few other words do justice to the experience of the day. I have the sense that I am not only witnessing but also partaking in a moment deserving of a Murnanian fictive treatment.

An author stands behind a podium looking out over an audience of well-dressed visitors to the plains, and beyond the audience, a window looks out over bleached yellow fields. A woman in the front row listens.

Sun-Drenched Elsewheres

'I will always be haunted by dreams of a sun-drenched elsewhere' (66).

I first read these words from Isabelle Eberhardt when I was travelling on a slow boat from Luang Prabang to Huay Xai. Years later, I am on the road again and they return to me. A washed straw hue streams through my window and I consider the kinds of people who look inwards and see endless contours of possibility, and those who look out past the shimmer to what lies beyond.

Cruising smoothly along the empty roads in a hired Hyundai, I question whether the north-western pocket of Victoria I am moving through is really the north-western pocket of Victoria just outside Goroke, or whether it is in fact Gerald Murnane's construction of the north-western pocket of Victoria just outside Goroke. I recently came to the author's work, and my first encounters with the strange landscape are overlaid with his 'faded-gold' reflections, much in the way one might experience a stony shiver while crossing Bronte's moors, or the way that, for some, the streets of Paris are forever slicked with Hemingway's brush.

Before setting out on my five-hour drive from Melbourne, I receive an email from the conference organisers stating that mobile phone reception in the region is currently down, and that attendees should document the route before approaching the golf club. I quickly scribble some poorly drawn markings on the back of an old receipt. As I eventually push on past Ballarat and Natimuk, the images of my crude map are shaded in. I realise that I have entered into what J. M. Coetzee dubs a 'Murnanian topography' (np), and, much like the narrator of *The Plains*, I resolve to keep my eyes open, looking for anything that seems 'to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances' (*Plains* 3).

The colours of the landscape bring to mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's comments from *Intertwining: The Chiasm*, in which he states that:

naked color [...] is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances. (131)

Driving on, I wonder if Murnane ever read these words, and conclude that, given his seeming distaste for theory (though he does mention Wayne C. Booth and Frances Yates somewhere), it is unlikely. Later in the day, I will hear him express a dislike for Darwin and Freud, boldly declaring their works 'baseless speculation', and stating he feels incapable of abstract thought. I pass by Mt Arapiles, a mere mound on the spectrum of peaks, but the only elevated crest along my journey. I know the plains I am travelling through aren't the same plains that Murnane wrote about, and that the landscape may not yield any meaning behind its appearances, but one is prone to romanticise when venturing to an author's current place of residence.

Rounding the last turn, I pull into the small car park that appears unexpectedly among the unploughed fields, and can't imagine a more fitting location for the event. In his address, Murnane will express an unhappy memory from the last literary conference he attended sixteen years ago, during which his 'hotel room overlooked the ocean', something which he has 'hated and avoided' for all of his life. It is not surprising then, that Murnane initially said no when asked by organiser Anthony Uhlmann to attend a conference dedicated to his work. On further consideration he decided that if an event should come to him, then that would be okay. Following an 'if you build it, they will come' mentality, Uhlmann set to work, and gathered a list of speakers and attendees strictly limited by the small club's capacity to produce a certain number of scones, assorted cakes and homemade sandwiches. Parking my car adjacent to the putting

‘greens’, which are actually made of raked dirt rather than grass, the man, his work and the land intertwine, his ideas leaching back into the soil.

For Murnane, the sundrenched elsewhere isn’t part of the visible world; it lies within, but is not a terrain that he has conquered, or pretends to be able to explain:

I think of my mind [...] as a vast place that I have barely begun to explore and the boundaries of which I expect never to approach during my lifetime. (‘Author’ np)

Approaching the clubhouse, I wonder if we can learn something here about the chiasm—about the intersection between external and internal horizons. Passing under the handwritten sign with house rules scrawled on a chalkboard, I borrow my mission from the third-landowner of *The Plains*, who declared:

the man I want to study is the one who came inland to verify that the plains were just as he’d hoped for. That vision we’re all looking for. (*Plains* 63)

Another World in This One

Home is the staccato of the race call, the pitches and troughs through a transistor radio, my mother’s blue biro markings on the sleet-grey *Best Bets* form-sheets, notes transcribed by lamplight into cheap legal pads. Home is white cards with red-inked squares pushed into a machine, the laboured sound of the TAB printer that will never modernise, that always song of chewing and spitting out. My mother has collated years of evidence for a system that I will never understand. When I tell her I am attending a conference based on Murnane, and that he shares her passion for horseracing, she asks that I pass on her tips.

‘That is the strangest thing I have ever been given at a conference,’ Murnane tells me with a wry grin as I hand him the numbers.

I wonder about what other strange things he has received, but when I later learn that this is only his second conference in two decades, I conclude that the competition for such a title is probably slim.

With proceedings about to get underway, the attendees take their seats around a handful of tables dressed in white embossed cloths, and Murnane excuses himself. He hands a neatly typewritten letter to Anthony Uhlmann, who reads the note to the audience:

Gerald Murnane wants you to know he’ll be present during the lunchbreak and both tea-breaks. He will also be present for

some time after the final sessions. He does not feel obliged to be present at any other time [...]

The Goroke Golf Club is licensed to serve alcoholic drinks on weekdays from midday until midnight. Gerald, who is the bar manager for the club, is available to serve alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks during the lunchbreak and the afternoon tea-break and for some time after the final session. Anyone wanting an alcoholic drink must sign the visitors’ book.

Gerald has provided several items for your diversion. On the side counter of the bar are copies of a palindrome of about 1,600 words that Gerald composed in 2006. Nearby are copies of the exam papers for English One at the University of Melbourne in 1965, when Gerald was a mature-aged student there. Anyone is welcome to read or photograph these items but to not take them away.

I have attended other literary conferences based on the works of particular authors, but they have never served me drinks in rooms where their names appear on plaques for various voluntary committee services and golfing accomplishments. Nor have they given tours of the surrounding facilities with pride during the intermissions.

Perhaps curiosity gets the better of Murnane, and the same urge he has to google his own name followed by the word ‘author’ drives him to linger



Photo: Andre Sawenko, 2018.

behind the bar out of view of the audience, or within earshot outside the door. During the breaks he takes up his promised post selling soft drinks for \$2 and beer for \$4.50. When I ask if the venue has EFTPOS he shakes his head disapprovingly.

'I knew there'd be one or two like you,' he mutters.

Another attendee pays for my drink and I move away, nibbling a coconut slice at the front of the room. I listen to a strange recording playing from a small speaker. The bleeping electronic sounds distort over an onslaught of seemingly nonsensical words. A man I don't recognise notices me listening and introduces himself as a local from the area.

'Do you like it?' he asks.

'It's interesting,' I reply. 'What is it?'

'It's Gerald reading his palindrome over a soundtrack I compiled. We are working on a few other tracks too... One has a country riff and some poetry dubbed over the top.'

I listen more closely and recognise Murnane's voice. 'Do good, dog-god! Do, o god! Do!' Behind the bar, as he cleans glasses and clears away bottles, he looks from the speaker to the chattering crowd, perhaps perturbed that the composition has gone largely unappreciated.

The afternoon presses on and the speakers of the day each cast their vectors over the existing topography of Murnane's work. For the most part, he sits quietly behind the bar reading his race form, appearing not to



Photo: Andre Sawenko, 2018.

listen, but ears pricking up at key moments. During Indyk's discussion of *A History of Books*, he is quick to correct the mispronunciation of a certain reference. When it is his turn to speak, Murnane expresses an unexpected pleasure in the day.

'I urge you good folk to go on with your interpretations and your surmising.'

However, for him, it seems that meaning is secondary to the act of production—a mere luminous by-product cast through the many-coloured fragments of his mind.

Symbols, yes, there are many in Murnane's writing; but his horses, his catholic iconography, his entire pouch of marbles and the ever-present plains are just as much signs to the reader as they are concrete objects in the memory of a writer who trusts himself to bring forth just the right recollection at just the right moment.

Sometimes [...] during an early reading of the finished typescript, I discover a measure of meaning that I was unaware of while I wrote. Such a discovery produces in me a surge of elation. I feel confident that my theories have been vindicated: that my mind truly is a landscape still not adequately mapped while the firmament above it contains suns or stars yet to be discovered.

[...]

Meaning, for me, is connection. A thing has meaning for me when it has a connection with another thing. ('Author' np)

In that sense, Murnane's work traces lines of meaning both spatially and temporally; a migratory path beginning on his internal plains, crossing his beloved landscapes, connecting via the reader to countless other ideas and thoughts that exist well beyond the limits of his own mind.

It begins to rain as Murnane speaks. The darkening sky drops lower over the golf course, a grey-green haze drifting in through the windows. Ruminating on the presentations of the day, I am drawn to the description of a person Murnane refers to multiple times as his 'ideal reader':

This personage has been never more than a blurred image in my mind and I have no wish for her to be otherwise. As I write these words, she may be a mere child or still unborn, but the desire to have her one day ponder my words in the hope of learning what gave rise to them—that sort of desire has sometimes kept me writing when no other motive would have done so. ('Author' np)

I find this idea more compelling than any quest for meaning: that rather than writing towards an ideal message, an author should write towards an ideal reader. The process of composition shifts from one of translation between the mind and the page, to a nomadic journey where words ultimately settle at an unknowable locale. Murnane's words can thus travel where in his physical form he cannot, or does not wish to.

The day drawing to a close, the author stands behind a podium looking out over an audience of well-dressed visitors to the plains, and beyond the audience, a window looks out over bleached yellow fields. A woman in the front row listens. The author recounts some advice from his childhood English teacher, given when he was preparing the boy to sit an examination that required compiling reflections on a previously unseen poem.

Forty years later [...] my teacher's words came back to me when I happened to be asking myself whether my books might be said to consist of some sort of basic matter, some literary equivalent of sub-atomic particles. Julian had told us to be sure to write in our exam answers that the poem under



Photo: Samantha Trayhurn, 2018.

consideration produced in our minds vivid images and strong feelings.

Images and feelings. ('Author' np)

The author finishes by reading a previously unseen poem titled *Green Shadows*; set to appear in a complete forthcoming collection, likely to be the last creative work he will release.

The woman closes her eyes. In her mind she sees an empty library, the shelves are bare, the desk recently cleared of its decorations but their imprints still visible in the settled dust. The author sits in a simple wooden chair, washed of his colour. Through the stained-glass window, light catches a particular panel, casting an emerald shadow across the entire canvas.

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