

Steep Stairs Review
Collected and Neglected Works



Trinity College Foundation Studies: Literature

1st Volume 2001

2nd Volume 2002

3rd Volume 2003

More from 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 & 2011

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Steep Stairs Volume 1: 2001

A Mountain of Stories

Dai Sijie (Ina Rilke trans.), Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, London: Chatto & Windus, 2001

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



An important sub-genre of Chinese writing is currently making an impact on the world. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* joins an impressive list of Cultural Revolution memoirs and novels published in the last two decades, most written by authors with first-hand experience as victims of Red Guards or as urban youth banished from their homes for re-education in the countryside. This literary genre is far from exhausted. Millions of urban youth – Dai Sijie among them – were sent to cool their heels, to pay their penance, to languish or to die on mountains, farms, and in China’s remote wastelands in the late 1960s and ‘70s. Dai Sijie’s novel is set in rural Sichuan, near the border with Tibet.

It is the story of two high school students from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, and their relationship with a local girl on wild Phoenix Mountain. Their story unfolds at a time of sweeping social movement in Mao’s China, but on their remote peaks and in the immediacy of Dai’s first-person narrative their story reads as personal and unique, an intimate expression of friendship, despair and love framed by the terrible beauty of precipitous mountains.

The two teenage boys, Luo and the unnamed narrator, arrive in the backward region in 1971, after ‘completing’ a high school education seriously disrupted by the political rampages of the Cultural Revolution and severely limited by the narrow prescriptions of Maoist orthodoxy. Luo, the son of a famous dentist who had worked both on Mao Zedong and his nemesis Chiang Kai-shek, is now labelled the offspring of a class enemy. The same fate has befallen the narrator, the son of two important - but less prominent - doctors. The boys face a life of re-education under the supervision of poor peasants, many of whom are illiterate, all of them struck with wonder at

the sight of Luo's alarm clock. Phoenix Mountain is economically and culturally underdeveloped. It had been an opium-growing region in the past, and the veneer of socialism is particularly thin. Local sorceresses appear like the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, and the poorly educated village youth think any picture of a westerner must be either Marx or Engels. Authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism feature prominently, and the boys live under political surveillance and threat. They labour in unsafe coalmines, in terraced fields, and on narrow mountain passages, slopping excrement in heavy buckets strapped to their backs.

Friends from school days, and linked by a common fate, Luo and the narrator become confidantes and allies. They struggle to keep each other safe and sane, helping with any physical labour or emotional need, and protecting each other from political danger. Luo, for example, cunningly defends his young friend's devotion to Western music - thereby saving him from further punishment - by explaining to the incredulous village headman that the violin sonata he was playing is called *Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao*. The narrator - in his turn - protects Luo's illicit relationship with the eponymous seamstress, the beautiful teenage daughter of the local tailor. What dangers they create for themselves they meet together, and they take risks to make their lives more bearable and enjoyable. Soon after arriving on Phoenix Mountain the two boys realise their creative talents, developing a repertoire as storytellers. To the awed delight of local peasants, these intellectual youth refashion "safe" plotlines from Chinese and North Korean films. But for their own secret consumption, and for a select few - especially the little seamstress whose beauty and compassion inspires devotion in both of them - they risk more challenging narratives. They steal, secretly read, furtively copy, and joyfully elaborate forbidden classics of western literature, works by banned authors including Balzac, Romain Rolland, Hugo and Dumas. Dai's narrative conveys the depths of feeling shared by Luo and his friend as they secretly devour these forbidden texts and share their new adventures and emotions with their local muse. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is an exploration of meaning in and through stories.

The foreign books loved by this secret trio were banned during the Cultural Revolution, for they did not meet the xenophobic and proletarian strictures of Chinese Socialist Realism. Fu Lei, the Chinese translator of Rolland, was condemned as a bourgeois expert and enemy of the people, just as Luo and the narrator's parents were labelled class enemies. Dai Sijie does not mention this fact in his novel, but Fu Lei and his wife committed suicide in 1966, during a particularly violent phase of Mao's revolutionary storm. Luo and the narrator - a couple thrown together during this social hurly-burly - do not leap off a precipice, but they do constantly worry if they will die down the mine, or if they will ever achieve political rehabilitation and leave Phoenix Mountain alive. They persist in living, despite the obstacles. They duck and scheme and contrive ways to be with the little seamstress. They risk discovery or death in order to live, and to be touched by genuine - not politically sanctioned - feeling. Luo and his friend are witty and audacious. Their adventures are both fast-paced and reflectively considered. It is not difficult to

sympathise with their thoughts and emotions, and one can imagine readers finishing this personal narrative in a single sitting.

Like the local yokels who ogle from outside her door, we are drawn to the radiance of the little seamstress – an unparalleled beauty that inspires protective pride in Luo and the narrator. We admire her vigour and her unusual degree of independence; her widower father is frequently away in nearby villages, making wedding clothes or outfits for New Year. She is a young woman of a certain personal confidence, despite her self-conscious lack of formal education. She dares to take the plunge, and to pursue her desires. We applaud her friendship with the two urban outcasts, and empathise with her suffering borne of a love that could bring ruin. But through the course of the novel we never learn her name, and rarely do we see the world from her perspective. Her innocence is obvious, and her loyalty assumed. Perhaps we fail, along with Luo and the infatuated narrator, to come to a full understanding of the little Chinese seamstress as the object of desire. It is a world, as Balzac knew, where a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price.

Dai Sijie, who was sent to the countryside from 1971 to 1974, now lives in France. The western books he lovingly describes in this engaging first novel are French, and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* achieved critical and popular success when first released in France in 2000. For his young narrator, a teenager in trouble and under suspicion who nonetheless is awakening to personal responsibility and to female companionship, the words of the French masters help him to understand the world, to respond to injustice, to seek individual meaning through love and courage, and to find his own way through conflict and disappointment. Novels are diverting, and can be inspiring. For desperate teenage romantics they may even be life-changing. But not all novels end happily, and the shock of Dai Sijie's denouement in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* contrasts starkly with the gilded class optimism of Socialist Realism, the formulaic and debased form of literature required by the Chinese state during the ironically named *Cultural Revolution*.

Out of the Abyss?

Kim Scott, Benang, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999

Reviewed by Mike Heald



Kim Scott is a Western Australian writer who is descended from the Nyoongar people. *Benang* is his second novel, and jointly won the Miles Franklin Award for 2001. It is a novel which continues Scott's interest in his own indigenous identity, and in indigenous issues generally. The book's subtitle is *From the Heart*, and it is appropriate to give a response, also, from the heart. I found *Benang* a searing, overwhelming experience,

which wrenched me to see Western Australia, the state in which I have lived most of my life, from a nightmarish 'other side'. The Nyoongar view presented is not always one of suffering, of course. Some evocations of the natural world, and the culture so closely attuned to it, are exuberant, and picture scenes I have observed many times in a way which seems both startlingly new and indelible:

In the afternoon a flock of cockatoos flew over the compound, screeching. They flew low to show how their glossy black feathers, so neatly side-by-side, felt the wind. Seeing the white tail-feathers, Jack remembered the clay on the dancers' bodies. The birds flew in, over, showing themselves off and Jack realised that this was a dance too, and how wonderful it was.

And one of the central images of landscape, or seascape, is deeply affirmative:

The sea, like the fire, formed and reformed and out by the island – even at night – there was that blossoming; white, gone, white, gone white gone. Like what? Like ectoplasm, like breathing.

Here.

Here.

Here.

For the most part, however, as I read the book on the train on my way to Melbourne, I could barely continue, knowing that the cruelties and humiliations related would saturate and oppress me for the rest of my working day.

Perhaps that is the wrong thing to say in trying to recommend a book. Yet I do most strenuously recommend it. I feel that the process of reading *Benang* is a part of that general, national process of facing up to our past in order to achieve reconciliation. It often seems bizarre to me that certain politicians can speak of race matters as if Australia occupied some kind of moral high ground. This book is a piercing reminder, if a reminder were needed, that in fact we are taking only the first steps, in this country, out of the racist abyss which is our recent past, and if the last federal election is anything to go by, they are faltering steps indeed.

Scott has incorporated many historical elements into the book. Sometimes, when a particular racist episode seemed almost beyond belief, I checked the 'Acknowledgments' section to discover that it was based on historical fact. A brief example is the behaviour of some white women on a pastoral station:

Through the doorway, Sandy saw what I only read about much later. He saw Mrs Mustle, with one of her sisters-in-law, beckon one of her old and crippled slaves to the door. She had the old man tilt his head back, and she tipped the tea dregs from her fine china pot down his throat. The women leaned together on the closed door, weak with laughter.

The story as a whole revolves around the main character and narrator, Harley. Harley is, according to his Grandfather Ernest Scat's plan, 'the first white man born' in a family of mixed white and aboriginal lineage. *Benang* traces the story of this project of Ernest's, and in so doing relates the effects of racism on those who were its victims. We witness both the large scale devastation, wrought chiefly through the offices of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, and also the way that the intimate aspects of life which most of us can take for granted – being a child, having children, making love, working, eating, washing, going to school, having a home, being ill, playing – are grotesquely, heart-rendingly interfered with, abused. It has been said that literature is capable of allowing us to take the 'royal road' into other people's experience, and thereby of engendering that most vital of human capacities, sympathy. In reading *Benang*, we feel as if we ourselves have suffered the myriad cruelties and indignities of

the characters, and I regard this as the book's most significant achievement. Some examples are called for.

We witness children being abducted, as was the government practice:

...a young girl barely out of the mission being lifted from the wagon by a group of strange men? The mother did all she could: she threw a blanket over the other children so they would not see.

We witness a Nyoongar man swindled out of his land, courtesy of the local shopkeeper and the Aboriginal Protection Act:

The police came, and gave them fourteen days to move.

Starr had sold the land to one of his sons.

The local magistrate, when a reluctant but Harry-harassed Aborigines Department made its enquiries, agreed that it was not justice. The Starrs had got the land at well below market price by using family as dummy buyers. But it was legal. And he didn't think Harry would cut much of a figure in court.

Scott uses juxtaposition to chilling effect, to reveal the gulf between black and white realities. Thus we see the process of removal to a mission:

It was a place to learn, to gather skills, to equip oneself for life.

Hariette had no choice. She wanted to believe them.

Sergeant Hall tried to reassure them. 'I have a friend,' he said, 'who will care for you.' He handed them over to another policeman, and gave them one last (unreturned) wave.

At the siding there was a man to guard them. He made a little sign, and wired it to the carriage. Niggers for Mogumber.

And we see the conditions inside the mission, a contrast in perspectives all-too-relevant for our current 'detention centre' regime:

The children were distributed variously.

Wire mesh on the windows. As soon as the sun falls you were locked into a dormitory. Insects in the mattresses stung your shivering body. You heard bare feet padding across the floor. Muffled cries. Whispers. Other bodies slipped into your bed, to investigate the newcomer.

Small children shat on the sandy floor of one room, and like cats they covered their heap.

If you were very lucky, a woman who worked in the kitchen said, 'You call me Aunty. Aunty Dinah.'...

A visit to a native settlement is always a joy to me. Any place where they are caring for the original inhabitants of Australia should receive the sympathetic support of all who have made this country their home...Delightful people with black skins were running about, and great was the excitement at the arrival of a visitor...What a blessing for the natives that they have got a sympathetic superintendent and self-sacrificing staff.

The way that the narrative unfolds is rather complicated, involving many time shifts and changes of scene. I have come to feel, however, that this is a strength. I think that a novel has to be a creature adapted to memory, as well as to the present experience of reading. The complex narrative, in recollection, returns me to a difficult, precarious, maze-like journey of discovery. I feel that a smoother, clearer narrative trajectory would not serve this kind of experience as well. Likewise the rather magic-realist element in the book, whereby Harley is prone to float above the ground. On reflection, this device does seem to evoke well, to intensely render, the sickly drift of disorientation which Harley's disputed identity causes in him.

I would also claim that *Benang* provides insight, as well as a harrowing empathy. Racism is far too deep-rooted and complex a problem, like all social atrocities, to simply be labelled 'evil' and dismissed. Scott does not avoid this complexity, or avoid the blurred boundaries and mixed motivations which are part of the situation. There are many aspects to Scott's insight, but one of the most significant, it seems to me, is his identification of the delirium, the mania, and the subtle dynamics of hierarchy, the drive for status. Thus, he imagines the thoughts of some not-so-well-off, white country-town dwellers:

They spoke of breeding and uplifting. These two hairy angels wished to seize people in their long arms and haul them to their own level. Their minds held flickering images of canvas Ascensions, with pale fat cherubs spiralling upwards into the light. They saw steps leading up stone pyramids, and realised that some creatures were simply unable to continue higher, even though the steps were there for them. Their noble selves sat at the top and no, they did not see themselves as leering, as guffawing, as throwing scraps to those below...

Citizens had made sacrifices, had worked themselves to exhaustion. Now, facing failure, they saw some of us [Nyoongars] looking in from the edge of the town, at corners, crossing streets within the very town. They measured themselves against these original inhabitants, and consequently wanted them pushed further down. Controlled.

Benang, then, is a book which, by tracing Harley's agonised disentangling of his identity, may be able to help us achieve a sense of our own identity in Australia. Writing this review has, again, made my heart ache, but my pain, and the suffering of Australia's people remembered in this novel, is not the end of the story.

Ordinary Inspiration

Robert Dessaix, Corfu, Sydney: Picador, 2001

Reviewed by Neralie Hoadley



Robert Dessaix's latest novel is a worthy successor to *Night Letters*. Like its predecessor, *Corfu* is structured around a trip. Out-bound and homeward travel provides Dessaix with the linking narrative for his ruminations on life and art. The central concern of *Corfu* is the way living may be seen as a worthy art form, with its own pattern and beauty, not always apparent to the observer or the participant. In his exploration of this idea, Dessaix is subtle and intricate but quite explicit.

Dessaix's closing pages provide a memorable symbol of his central theme. He uses a photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson in Serbia in 1965. "In the middle of a bare landscape (just a scruffy tree or two, some dusty bushes and a few unremarkable hills in the distance) a comically enormous double bass, slewed across the back of a man in a suit, is riding off down an empty, stony track away from the camera." Looked at from one perspective this image is pitiful or simply comic, quite risible in the juxtaposition of the ungainly instrument, the precarious bicycle, the rough surrounds and the carefully attired gentleman. However, Dessaix's argument is that there is a breathtaking, double-layered art in it – the art of the man in the picture who is living a life which includes a beautifully crafted instrument in the midst of the ordinary. And the art of the man who photographed him – who could look at a scene where nothing is happening and see something extraordinary. Clearly, *Corfu* is designed to function at both levels.

Corfu presents a dual plot line. The primary protagonist, the Dessaix character, is a young actor staying briefly on Corfu as respite from a relationship he is both attracted to and repelled by, and as a break in his journey home to Adelaide. The secondary story line concerns Kester Berwick, an Australian actor, writer and teacher whose house Dessaix rents during his stay and whose life he finds increasingly intriguing. The lives of the young actor and the older man reveal strange patterns and connections that both fascinate and unnerve the young man. This double story provides Dessaix with the opportunity for some unobjectionable didacticism about how a good life may be lived as the young man attempts to make sense of his circumstances by ruminating on the traces of the absent Kester he finds in Kester's house and writings. The fictional character

Kester Berwick has its basis in reality: He was born Frank Perkins in Adelaide in 1903 and lived in Australia, London and the Greek Islands. Dessaix is examining his life through the lens of fiction and thus, consciously emulating the position of Henri Cartier-Bresson as observer of the ordinary and as artist.

Dessaix uses Chekhov to provide this perspective also. He presents the Russian playwright as able to look at the ordinary boredom and tangle of human life and show us something remarkable. Chekhov's plays provide as much of the setting of the novel as the island of Corfu does. The Greek island offers the reader a sensory backdrop of colour, odour and texture, but it is Chekhov who provides the ambience of frustration, futility, and bewilderment. *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* are all performed, the last one staged on Corfu, with Kester's friends and acquaintances as cast. The stifled and adrift of Corfu in the late twentieth century, speak with the voices of nineteenth century Russia. This threatens to be a farce but on some level, it works. Both the audience and the amateur performers are moved by the sense that something truthful has been expressed.

The journey home is another major theme of *Corfu*. Homecoming is part of life, whether mundane or scintillating. Dessaix uses Homer, Sappho, Cavafy, Austrian Empresses and Greek miracle-working saints to inspire and guide his cogitations on the nature of home and how home may be approached. He manages to be both erudite and down-to-earth in his weaving together of these diverse strands into the fabric of his story.

However, there are parts of the book where the plot or the person is openly contrived to fit into the idea currently being explored. Undoubtedly, this will annoy some readers, particularly when new characters pop in because a certain perspective is required. One character perceives Kester as a skinflint and a bore so the next luncheon companion regards him as fascinating and saintly, his humble and niggardly ways evidence of the absence of materialism. Other characters come into the story to fill vacant positions in productions of plays. One of these, Maxwell Coop, personifies (as does Kester) some of the gender and sexuality tensions of great interest to Dessaix. It is a pity that he makes an entrance as an after-thought, his persona not developed deeply enough to escape caricature. Other readers may find Dessaix's verbal mannerisms irritating. The book is written using Dessaix's carefully modulated style. Every 'actually' 'really' 'as it were' and 'of course' is chosen and deployed with absolute precision and is recognisably his voice. However, it is also possible to be captivated by the ideas and to enjoy both the exploratory peregrinations and the manner of their expression.

Corfu leaves an overall impression of delicate profundity. Many of Dessaix's ideas appear quite fragile and paradoxical. He asserts that life's deepest truths may be accessible to us in the mundane surface of everyday life. This is ludicrous or inspiring, depending how you look at it.

Wishes Largely Granta'd



GRANTA: The First Twenty-One Years, London: Granta Books, 2001.

Reviewed by Claudio Bozzi

The twenty-first anniversary edition of *Granta* reminds us of the central role played by the small journal in the development and modernisation of forms of English writing in the twentieth century.

Granta was launched in 1979 with the declared intention of rescuing the reading public from the insipidness of British writing. Its manifesto raised the possibility of introducing its audience to a literature of engagement: writing which courted controversy, and finished in dialogue. Controversy is to be understood not as social scandal or as the exploitation of the indiscretions of the famous, but as an indication of political vitality: that things may still be put on the agenda for the attention of a public interested in seeking solutions to problems. The first thing *Granta* problematised was the mental lethargy anchoring writing and writers to the worn themes of middle class anxiety.

Bill Buford's post mortem 'The End of the English Novel', is delivered from the perspective of the state of writing and publishing in 1980. Importantly, the parlous state of English letters must be viewed along the lines of this two-track model. On the one hand, it is ascribable to bad writers, and on the other to a publishing industry which views fiction as a form of entertainment, in direct competition with others, to be sold to a mass audience. Writing becomes bad, says Buford, when it lacks urgency.

Insulated from philosophical debates and social issues, writers in England languished in the twin, connected valleys of insularity and nostalgia. Failing to understand the international contexts of thought, or to learn from literatures other than their own, the English novel was a timid creation compared with its experimental 'foreign' counterpart. Publishing is complicit with the decline of standards and the spread of provincialism, Buford says, when it loses interest in translating literatures from other languages, and when it leaves production to market forces. These represent nothing less than a silent censorship imposed on an unwitting public, whose vision, used to the grey uniformity of the bourgeois palette, turns away from anything brighter. Like the enlightened freeing the slaves from the cave in Plato's republic, *Granta* was to lead its readers into the day.

To do so it had to understand its readers. It had to recognise that, with the waves of migration and the upheavals of history in the last century, the constitution of the reading public had altered in fundamental ways. Firstly, the audience was diverse, no longer uniform. And this reconstitution of the public, and the reading public within it, necessitated a reconceptualisation of the meaning of narratives. It could no longer be assumed that the middle class novel had universal appeal, that Africa or India could be appropriated as the passive settings for adventure and heroic acculturation. Africans and Asians, Caribbeans and Europeans had established themselves in numbers in Britain, bringing with them their own sense of meaning, their own forms of expression, their own lexicon, imagery and grammar of thought. Being British came to mean something different from the stylisations of national mythmaking. *Granta* responded by seeking creative reactions to the conditions of the new social complexity from marginal sources within its own constituency, and from the experience of cultures who had already long undertaken the revision of tradition, and responses to modernity. The anniversary edition therefore presents the works of British, American, Commonwealth and European writers, some of whom may have remained marginal to the practice of the established field of literature had it not been for the assertiveness characterising the *Granta* project. What follows cannot hope to do justice to the richness of the selection, but reflects this reviewer's estimation of the most valuable pieces from a treasury of highest quality.

In 'Jackdaw Cake' (1984) Norman Lewis writes of life in a devout Welsh mining village peopled by unfortunates suffering (and admirably bearing) horrific injuries brought on by equally horrific luck. The philosophical endurance of Aunt and Uncle Williams is typical. He had suffered a stroke making it impossible for him to swallow. She chewed his food, passed it into a tube for him and massaged it down his throat to his stomach. Aunt Polly – an epileptic who had fallen into a

fire during a fit – is expressionless (or rather has a smile permanently fixed to her face) because her face is a mottled mask reconstructed from skin grafts from other parts of her body. Indeed, everyone's expression seems to be set against something in this town. The devout especially moralise about and against the miners, whose appearance with a gramophone on the beach promises music and motion, which is wiped away by the same discouraging hands that lob stones in their direction, and snatch sweets from a young boy (the author) to throw to the jackdaws.

Christianity brought to this town, as it did to many, only the imagination of sin. The possibility that suffering is only the product of a choice made immemorially and inaccessible to the individual consciousness reflects back on the condition of the narrator's relatives. More broadly, poverty was not a social condition, an economic problem or a class issue, but a visitation of divine but inscrutable justice. Toiling bent double in cramped tunnels seemed a luxury in the face of the gravity of the sin that must have been proportionate to this level of material misery. The poetic imagination vivid beyond the claims of evil, lay waiting to be rediscovered, it is implied, in the banned native magic (Merlin, recall, was Welsh) or raucous entertainment (dismissed as crude vulgarity).

In Richard Ford's 'Rock Springs' (1983), true to Buford's analysis of the state of the English novel, the reader is exposed to literatures produced in the ethnically diverse and fluid constituencies of the US. Earl Middleton can't get his life in order. He knows right from wrong and his crimes seem petty, or their gravity arbitrary – jail terms depend on the states in which they are committed rather than on any universal standard of morality.

When we encounter Earl he is again on the road with his daughter and new girlfriend trying to put distance between himself and the law. Ford's characters are fringe dwellers and his narratives describe the intensification of choice when it is a matter of life and oblivion, identity and shame. Earl's girlfriend observes that these key moments are questions of character, and Earl has a character that leaves something out. Earl's narrative is driven by a force he can't directly control, and ultimately he is manipulated by paradox such that we see the relevance of his being subject to a truth that is a force for the good for another class of person, in another situation, but not for him.

Earl is haunted by the feeling of being excluded but at the same time being given opportunities to observe propriety, steadfastness, and love. He is, in other words, allowed to feel close to, and almost possessive about, visions of a better life. The gold mine that looms at the centre of the story is a symbol of this better life. Similarly, the car he contemplates stealing at the end of the story has everything in it he would have if he had a car. Both are gigantic 'ifs': propositions of identity never fulfilled by difficult experience, and never realised through the necessary labours. 'Rock Springs' ends with a series of questions triggered by Earl's sense of being observed by an

unidentified and unidentifiable someone. Recognition and self-knowledge constitute each other, and the story has used this insight to construct itself all along. So the negro woman who allowed Earl to use the telephone is said to have a face like a mirror. Earl's girlfriend Edna sounds out his character's hollows, surfaces and solidities with questions and comments as deft as a cooper's mallet. And even the cat in the car he is contemplating stealing at the close stares at him as if he were merely the pale, risen moon.

Nadine Gordimer's 'A City of the Dead, A City of the Living' (1982) is one of the overtly political pieces of writing in the collection and evidence of the journal's taking the moral gauge of the era.

Set in the South Africa of Apartheid, an activist suspected of being involved in the bombing of a police station finds a place to hide in the female protagonist's home. She protests that the fugitive is not family and that the risks they are taking in harbouring him are not dictated by any recognisable responsibility towards him. Her husband counters that history has entered a time which transcends tribal and familial solidarity ("It's not a business of cousins").

The renegade is completely unplaceable. We are introduced to him as "Mtembu's friend" without knowing who Mtembu is. He is called "mfo" or 'brother' by all the men, and is addressed by the assumed name Shisonka. His earrings don't locate him either – they merely relate him to something he isn't – the unsophisticated country people he doesn't resemble. The atmosphere of the hideout with only the central female character and Mtembu's friend in it becomes increasingly pressured by eroticism. When the young woman inexplicably informs the police (who no longer represent justice) of his whereabouts we are forced to wonder whether there are in fact no reasons for her actions as she says and repeats consolingly to herself and anyone who will listen, including her newborn son. On the other hand her actions may be explained by the facts at our disposal, which are nevertheless not perfectly explicit or self-evident. Did the fugitive represent an untold danger? Was he a threat to the home's integrity? To the mother's or wife's role? To her authority? Is solidarity to be preserved at all costs?

Raymond Carver, the American Chekhov, writes in 'Vitamins' (1981) of life's unforeseeable disappointments, and the way in which everything individuals are subjected to is the product of their freedom, the cumulative result of their choices. For Carver, relations are tangential. People will as readily disappear into their own lives and selves and out of and away from others, as they will seek and protect the connections they have established and which have produced them. What distances and dichotomises is essential to this story, not what binds.

It is as if Carver were observing contemporary American society through the Hobbesian premise of life in a state of nature. Carver is interested in the potential for contrasts to turn into conflicts along apparently stark lines: homosexual and heterosexual, black and white. However, rather

than indulging in a spectacle of aggression Carver follows the tensions as they threaten to – but never to the point where they actually do – develop. So, the main character's wife is being pursued by a lesbian, but his response is to try hard to see it good humouredly, in keeping with his nature, and the degree to which he has undergone some form of re-education in marriage.

Carver does not judge his characters, no matter how pathological a sense of compressed violence they contain. His style might be called one of suspended observation in that it refuses to arrive at simple conclusions or make unduly dramatic points: a play of crescendos and decrescendos rather than a structure of opening and closing remarks. The free, almost improvisational musicality of the writing finds an appropriate setting in the jazz club of the story's final scenes, where the main character has brought the woman he intends to seduce. There they encounter Nelson, the soldier recently returned from the Vietnam War, who offers her two hundred dollars for sex. Lurking in the background, the hugely proportioned club owner who normally offers his patrons security from harassment, refuses to intervene. Meanwhile, Nelson's friend excuses his behaviour with the refrain that he has just stepped off the plane from Vietnam.

The sense of menace is both unceasing and hard to locate precisely, since none of the characters can be said to be innocent, and the degrees and types of violence being sketched proliferate. A sense of coldness pervades the events, and textures the lives of the characters. Intolerable cruelty is bearable only because daily assaults have made them insensitive to further corruption. Disgraceful behaviour does not disgrace them, not because they are saints, but because grace has fled this world. Yet Carver is a subtle moralist: in a disturbing complication to the conventional framing he refuses to identify the woman as the obvious victim. Carver ensures that we understand that her reasons are the product of a struggle to live beyond good and evil that ultimately fails: she refuses Nelson firmly, and leaves with the main character, but admits later to being in such financial need that she was tempted to accept the cash. Salvation lies not in the triumph of virtue, but on the road to failure.

'The State of Europe' (various authors 1990) addresses the issue of the extent to which the concept of Europe is a new reality. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was meant to have ushered in an era of freedom. Communist lies would be exposed for what they were: the myths of desperate dictatorships which for decades propped up militaristic ambitions of world dominance by keeping entire populations desperately poor and ignorant. The collapse of the wall tore down not only ideological and geographical barriers, it tore down the veneer of elaborate falsehood hiding the truth of Eastern Europe.

None of the writers asked to respond to the promise of a free Europe subscribes to a thesis as facile as this one. The Czech novelist Josef Svorecky, for instance, would hate us to think that writers (and therefore the writers assembled here) were the most reliable source of views on

Eastern and Central Europe. In fact, the whole of tenor of reliability, of authoritative opinion, he argues, is what characterised the regimes that have now crumbled in the wake of democratic liberation. Communism was marked by reliability and authority without legitimacy, a grey conformity of meaning and the reduction of expression to realism which for Svorecky affected European letters like a sickness.

Democracy, on the other hand, is different. It represents the free and open play of opinion, the poetic rediscovery of the voice in the fact that the People have spoken. But Svorecky is wary of celebrating too hard as the conditions of democracy have yet to raise the people along with it. His wariness is not called – in the flaccid journalistic distinction between optimism and pessimism that amounts to an epistemic ambush – ‘realism’. He reminds us that realism is tantamount to Totalitarianism (those who would lay exclusive claim to the real and disparage genuine artistic expression as decadence). Svorecky admits to being, in the best sense of the term, a cynic. Cynicism is a refusal to forget the past, or the presence of the past. It is the clear-headed jubilation that celebrates only real freedom. The tone of Svorecky’s assessment of recent history is a sad elation, because whilst the joke that socialism played on humanity seems not to have had the last laugh, comedians of some description are probably still in control of the state.

George Steiner is possibly less sanguine about the achievements of the European dawn. His remarks are tinged with an ambiguous regard for the man impatient for change in the frozen imperium that was the Soviet Union, but having to face the fact that the future cannot be invented simply out of that unrest. Steiner’s remarks have become interestingly and ambivalently dated. For him the US is hampered by a gigantism that fails to translate into global influence; or on the other hand, risks spreading itself too far and too thin when local problems are most in need of attention. If the current offensive in Afghanistan suggests otherwise on the first point, it is wise to recall that European opinion has stressed that the justice of the campaign is to be measured by its respect for wider issues including the rights of the local people, the specific identification of the enemy, and the definition of respectable limits. Europeans, with their relatively fresh experience of legitimate regimes showing their true and ghastly colours only once they had made themselves irremoveable, rightly suspect ‘crusades’ and all righteous, even angelic, intentions.

On the second point Steiner is precisely right: the wartime president tends to trip on domestic issues. It is happening to George W., as it happened to Bush senior over the Gulf. However, Steiner does fail to see the huge shifts in global power and cooperation that have centralised American influence. To his credit he builds a sense of redundancy into his own analysis, pointing out the instant obsolescence of ‘news’ in relation to the pace of events. The pace of change brings with it the strange quirks of Central and Eastern European history, as institutions, organisations and even countries come to be run by men who were their prisoners only weeks prior. Does this represent hope or paradox? For Steiner this sort of paradox drags hope in along

with it, but it remains paradoxical. For instance, he expresses reservations about the nature of the revolution in which he sees the emergence of cultural rather than political freedoms.

And by 'cultural' Steiner means 'uncritical': the freedom to desire differently is driven by advertising, by the fantasies of the market, by TV, with its soap opera lifestyles, and sitcom liberties. This is not to deny that the consumption of Western goods, the availability of new media products, and the public life of shopping are all in their own ways important indicators of positive change. It is simply that Steiner, whose style is marked by and marks a cautious approbation, fears that the new democrats will accept liberal capitalism thinking it is liberal democracy. That art will be recruited to celebrate the cultural revolution when the state fails to reinvent itself politically, and that intellectuals will satisfy themselves with doing cultural studies of a pop culture revolution without advancing the cause of emancipation from illusions.

The appraisal of what is truly new is the subject of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's article. In Enzensberger's view, the heroic acquires a new relevance in the post-communist world. The difference between this and the epic hero, however, is that the new man for the new day is a pioneer of retreat. Ulrich Beck recharacterised modernity in terms of increasing 'risk' (rather than a complacent belief in progress) and the responses necessitated by it some two decades ago. Since then, some German sociologists have turned their attention to the new virtues of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the fact that people will have to re-educate and bind themselves to morally appropriate desires, to less rather than more. The task cannot be accomplished without individual effort, but it will fail unless it is collectivised. The environmental, economic and political problems left behind by socialism testify to the need to restructure on the largest scale.

For Enzensberger, the new radical is the demolition man, not the engineer of social programs of fanatical vastness. The new exemplars work in a state of uncertainty and commit themselves to a leap of faith without so much as trust in others to guide them. They are men, and ultimately nations, engaged in so complicated a task that their proposals fail to find available categories, or their steps be measured by current standards, putting the labour of making and remaking history dangerously beyond good and evil. The three exemplars he identifies solve this problem of the directionless plunge in the dark in their own way. Firstly, Adolfo Suarez, who replaced Franco's fascist regime with a constitutional state, exemplifies the fusion of awareness and execution. Secondly, Wojciech Jaruzelski, the hero of Polish liberation from the Soviet empire, symbolises the patriot as martyr, the internal contradictions of history being such that one risks all for a rescue that will ultimately fail. Third, is the timeless figure of Gorbachev, who proves that superiority in intelligence, boldness and perspective may guide historical events despite the enslaved mentality of the national herd. Each of them suffers the loneliness of men ahead of history, blessed and cursed by a clear vision of necessity. The tragedy of the heroic defuser of

bombs is not that they could have done otherwise, but that there comes a time when patience evaporates: the clock ticks and tocks, one cannot wait and see.

The measure of success of any given project is the potential for self-renewal, not of fulfilment. Indeed, projects such as Granta's, can never be fulfilled. Aimed at the protean public, and dedicated to measuring the urgency of social issues in the broadest sense, Granta can only continue to offer its readers a diet of dispatches from the front line. This anniversary collection is the most appropriate way to celebrate a publishing venture whose future direction is set by the awareness of its past. Granta at twenty one frequently bristles with ideas, and is as alive with the imagination of the future as it ever was.

The Company of Strangers

V.S.Naipaul, Half A Life, London: Picador, 2001.

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



In a less than subtle reminder to the fiction reading public of the world, and in particular to a small reading group convened in Sweden, V.S.Naipaul's new novel was published earlier this year with an editorial note that proclaimed: "He has won every major literary award bar the Nobel."

Such audacious literary marketing reaped lavish reward in October 2001 when the great man received the Nobel Prize for Literature, an honour few people would begrudge Naipaul given the high quality of his work over more than four decades. Although Naipaul had chosen not to write fiction for a number of years, preferring instead to produce non-fiction works of travel writing, cultural history and personal memoirs, he returned to fiction with *Half A Life*, and he returned triumphant.

Naipaul's new novel begins in India in the 1930s, with the protagonist's father reflecting back on his life of self-sacrifice and his brief moment of fame achieved through asceticism and a vow of silence – very attractive to loud and wealthy western tourists seeking a religious experience in the Orient. The story moves with Willie Somerset Chandran to London in the '60s, where he takes a degree in a minor London college. He studies little but he learns much. He re-imagines his personal history to make himself more interesting to classmates and the faculty, presenting himself as the inheritor of an ancient minority tradition of Indian Christians rather than the son of a frustrated high-caste man who regrets his symbolic but loveless marriage to a low-caste woman. In London little Willie (as his father ominously calls him) discovers sex in squalid tenements and bars. He is shamefully confronted with his own deceptions and inadequacies: an inability to satisfy a woman is explained as the poor product of a culture of arranged marriage as opposed to practiced seduction. He mixes with bohemians, BBC journalists and minor scoundrels, and creatively transforms Hollywood film scripts into "authentic" stories of post-colonial Indian village life. The narration then bids farewell to London after Willie's only book is published and he graduates with a teaching degree but no intention of working in a run-down suburb where he might be knifed in a race riot. We travel with Willie and his new wife Ana to

her farm in an unnamed Portuguese colony in Africa that sounds, smells and bleeds like Mozambique in the years climaxing in the end of colonisation and the flight of Europeans, mulattos and oddities like himself.

Half A Life is a novel of partial visions, prejudices and misapprehensions, with characters moving within and sometimes beyond barriers of caste, race and culture. Playing roles, recasting identities, forging and leaving personal relationships of family, community and sex, Naipaul's characters remain frustrated or uncertain.

Naipaul seems uncomfortable with, if not hostile to, political and religious movements. His view is sceptical – a tone familiar to readers of Naipaul's non-fiction works on culture and religion – and some of his characters in this novel are embittered, even jaundiced. Naipaul and his protagonist are more concerned with the individual. But the individuals in *Half A Life*, when focused on themselves and their emotional needs and characteristics, often appear self-indulgent, unaware of their partners' feelings, or delusional. For reasons varying from age, culture, sex, political ideology, and hope, they all lead half-lives. Naipaul's characters are judgmental, but rarely judge themselves with insight, and seldom treat others with compassion. Willie Chandran - like his father - is unfulfilled. But so too is Willie's mother and, silently, Ana - who Willie deserts after eighteen years. Perhaps we all lead half-lives: partial and unfulfilled. Will winning the Nobel Prize make Naipaul's life complete?

Hate Couture

Rosalie Ham, The Dressmaker, Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove: 2000

Reviewed by Neralie Hoadley



The Dressmaker is subtitled: “an Australian gothic novel of love, hate, and haute-couture” which does in fact capture its mixture of genres. The novel is set in a small town in Victoria in the 1950s (judging by the fashions described). It is gothic in the sense of being extreme in its depictions of events in the overstated manner associated with tragedy. Love is central to the intensity of feeling that drives the main narrative line, though only covered with the utmost brevity and obliqueness. Hate is essential in any good tragedy, and as this novel deals with the base motivation of revenge, hate is present in abundance. Haute couture provides Rosalie Ham with a satirical voice to lampoon rural sensibilities.

The first half of the book is intriguing: the crafting appears to avoid the development of plot. Rather, Ham offers us a ‘peeping Tom’ perspective on small town life, moving from tableau to tableau. During this lengthy setting of scene Ham demonstrates her skills in observation of detail. She takes great care with period and place, recording brand names, merchandise, sewing patterns, styles of decor and contents of cupboards. There is nothing on the blurb to indicate whether Ham is old enough to remember these details of a now defunct life-style or whether she is reconstructing. Either way, it makes interesting reading from a social history perspective.

Ham is exploring the possible consequences for the small wheat-belt town of her imagining of the return of a glamorous outcast. As a child Tilly left Dungatar in lonely disgrace, after a death in which she was somehow implicated. She has returned with skills gained in the international fashion world. The dressmaker of the title, Tilly is a couturier who shocks the locals out of their seersuckers and gingham into exotic styles and sumptuous fabrics. Whether this transformation is plausible or not, Ham’s premise gives her scope for evoking comic imagery based on the incongruity of all this glamour in the bucolic Shire.

Tilly has returned from Europe to Dungatar to look after her mother, 'Mad Molly' who is near death through the self-neglect associated with mental illness. The gloom, squalor and despair of Molly's condition are described in Dickensian detail - the ramshackle hovel on the outskirts of town, tilting, slipping, down the hill towards the municipal tip. Molly's status in the small community has evidently been one of clinging to the fringes. Having decided recently to stop clinging, she is nothing: human refuse. The brooding question of what could have brought Molly to this state is ever-present. We wonder why she is there, what has happened to her and what the role is of the closed-minded, hypocritical town.

Tilly's strength of will draws her mother back from death's brink to an engagement with life strong enough for Molly to eat, drink, decorate her wheel-chair and curse. Ham convincingly portrays Molly as ungrateful for her daughter's ministrations. Molly responds with a foul tongue, her toxic thoughts fuelled by paranoia. Ham uses caricature as her main device for comedy and character, but with Molly, the cantankerous quirks of a real old battle-axe ring true. Ham plausibly depicts Molly's twisted malice and grief except for a strange brief scene of conciliatory lucidity just before Molly dies.

Ham is not really interested in subtle characterisation. It is part of the gothic feel of her novel that most of the characters are caricatures for whom we feel little sympathy. Events are mysteriously ghastly, atmosphere is ominous, and there is villainy behind the door. Only the few outsiders to Dungatar are shown to have redeeming human qualities. For example, Sergeant Farrat, who shares Tilly's passion for needlework and women's clothing, is able to see the townsfolk with a just eye. Also, Teddy McSwinney from the poor and overpopulated family of the night cart man, is heroic, a gallant sportsman and damsel rescuer.

Presumably love motivates Tilly's strength of purpose in caring for her mother, though there is little warmth evident in their interactions. It is certainly loss of love that triggers Tilly's drive for revenge. The man who has just become her lover is killed by his own act of bravado. Tilly's outrage and grief after the death propel her along the same path as her mother, the path of rancour and paucity of spirit. But in Tilly, whilst the bitterness festers, it is disciplined by an iron will into a maintenance of apparent sanity.

Terrible things happen in this sleepy country town. Relationships are cruel and exploitative. People are narrow and hypocritical. There are in-groups and outcasts. The colour and cut of haute couture substitute for the warmth and texture of human connection. Ham plays up these aspects of Dungatar life for comic effect. Some of the story's most tragic scenes are written in a slapstick style which leaves the reader somewhat torn. Ham also injects comic imagery into the moments of poignancy. Thus, the cross-dressing Police Sergeant ruins his frock in the rain at

Molly's funeral. And there are many comic moments in the ultimately tragic performance of 'Macbeth' by the townsfolk.

This is no accident. It appears that Ham is not content to write an Australian 'Under Milk Wood'. She chooses to liven things up by dropping in a glamorous and aggrieved Lady Macbeth.

Shakespeare and Speculation

Katherine Duncan-Jones, Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life, London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Ungentle Shakespeare is not intended as a conventional, chronological biography. Instead Duncan-Jones chooses to explore some neglected areas of Shakespeare's life and to "bring Shakespeare down from the lofty isolation to which he has been customarily elevated, and to show him as a man among men, a writer among writers – indeed, a writer whose manifest brilliance often made him the object of envy and malice, rather than adulation." Such an approach is laudable. Duncan-Jones's new book is thematic, and frequently enlightening. But her arguments, however colourful or provocative, are not always successful. Among her more controversial speculations is the argument that Shakespeare was homosexual, and she seems to leap on the dismal bandwagon that rolls over poor Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife and widow.

As Duncan-Jones herself makes plain, "It is manifestly risky to treat plays as sources of personal information or reflection. Nevertheless..." she does so, following a long line of Shakespeare biographers in bold pursuit of the elusive bard through the pages of his folio. In her case Duncan-Jones reads a good deal of autobiographical information in *As You Like It*. She believes this play includes a wiser, more urbane William marking his transformation from the rural idiocy of his Stratford youth. She also finds sexual puns in the names of Shakespeare and his characters, claiming that Shakespeare ("one who flashes a phallus") is mimicked in *As You Like It* by Touchstone ("one who handles a testicle").

Few definitive records exist to provide a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's movements as a youth and a young man, and this book does not attempt to fill in all the

intriguing gaps. Duncan-Jones does not seek to quantify the Latin Shakespeare learned at grammar school, nor does she promote or discuss in detail the theory of a recusant Shakespeare, the 'lost' Lincolnshire years, or the possibility that young Will worked as an attorney's clerk. She does, however, take it for granted that the eighteen-year-old Shakespeare was forced to marry the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway after making her pregnant. And she is sure that he did not truly love her. From the very beginning Duncan-Jones's account of Anne Hathaway is highly coloured and prejudicial. She claims it is likely that after the death of her father in 1581, the unmarried Anne was left "without much parental care or control, and as a mature and spirited country girl she exploited her freedom to consort with the local youth." As for young William, apparently a combination of "boredom" and "sexual curiosity natural to his years" led to his "dalliance" with Anne in what Duncan-Jones miraculously defines as "probably his first experience of sex." The unenthusiastic groom soon became lumbered with a growing family to feed, and no real career prospects in Stratford. Seeking to explain the young man's involvement in theatre that provided him both a career in London and respite from his wife in Stratford, Duncan-Jones speculates that Shakespeare joined the Queen's Men after being recruited from Leicester's players, as other performers from the region had been before him.

Shakespeare relocated to London and moved between theatre companies. He proved himself more as a writer than as a player, becoming key playwright for the Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men) and eventually securing a share in the lucrative Globe and Blackfriar's theatres. During sporadic plague outbreaks all public theatres were closed. At such moments of theatrical and commercial crisis Shakespeare turned to patronage and income from poetry. Duncan-Jones finds significant the fact that Shakespeare, unlike other writers of the time including Thomas Nashe and even Ben Jonson, did not dedicate works to noble women or seek their patronage. Shakespeare wrote the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, dedicating it to the young Earl of Southampton. Duncan-Jones claims that Shakespeare's relationship with the stylish young nobleman (and Cambridge graduate) was strengthened by the writing and dedication of *The Rape of Lucrece*. She suggests - rather unconvincingly and with no clear proof - that there may have been a sexual relationship between Shakespeare and his young patron.

Many scholars have commented on Southampton's financial support of Shakespeare. Duncan-Jones suggests that Southampton's cash gift was not, as others have argued, for Shakespeare's acquisition of a share in the Chamberlain's Men or for the purchase of property, especially New Place in Stratford in 1597. Instead, she believes Southampton supported Shakespeare in the specific purchase of a coat of arms and the necessary accoutrements of a gentleman. A coat of arms had long been coveted by John Shakespeare, William's father, a man who developed his trade as a glover and rose to the high position of Stratford bailiff before facing financial difficulty and the contraction of his assets. William Shakespeare not only advanced the family fortune by purchasing the prominent New Place, but he also stood to attain "gentle" status for himself on inheritance of his father's coat of arms. Duncan-Jones argues that Southampton's money and

political connections were relevant in meeting Shakespeare's desire, and the falcon motif in Shakespeare's coat of arms is most likely homage to the four falcons on the Southampton coat. Unfortunately for the successful playwright and poet, he was not the only aspirant purchasing fraudulent heraldry at this time. The official who sold coats of arms was later disgraced, and it became known that the Shakespeare coat of arms – among numerous others sold to mechanicals and rude men - was not deserved or honourable. The Shakespeare motto struck an ironic note: NON SANZ DROIT – Not Without Right. Shakespeare's friend and literary rival, the poet Ben Jonson, later ridiculed this motto as Not Without Mustard.

Duncan-Jones discusses the ungentle times of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, including plague, political intrigue, lawsuits, poor harvests and poverty. Having prospered as a writer in London and as a property-owner in London and Stratford, Shakespeare apparently hoarded grain during times of shortage – hoping thereby to maximise profits. Again Ben Jonson reputedly mocked him for this. Later, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare symbolically atoned for his selfish action and criticised this widespread practice - with the porter ushering a grain speculator into Hell. But Duncan-Jones suggests that Shakespeare also avoided paying tax, and did not give much charity to the community of Stratford even after becoming a wealthy man. Duncan-Jones pays close attention to the numerous court cases involving Shakespeare and his family (some including debts or fines, and one involving libel), and she analyses contemporary events that may have fired his literary imagination. She provides a plausible explanation of an English court case in the early seventeenth century – involving Cordell Annesley, the youngest daughter of a senile courtier – that may have influenced Shakespeare's rewriting of the old story *King Lear*.

Throughout this engaging book Duncan-Jones writes with vigour and wit. But sometimes her speculation is wild or cruel. Her turn of phrase is striking, though occasionally poorly timed or ill conceived. After the death in 1596 of his son Hamnet, aged eleven and a half, Shakespeare had no male heir. Duncan-Jones suspects (on what basis we are not sure) that Shakespeare and his wife ceased sexual relations in the 1580s. Duncan-Jones proceeds to connect the death of young Hamnet and the life of Anne Shakespeare in an unfortunate manner: "Yet while there's death there's hope. Fairly naturally, given the discrepancy in their ages, Shakespeare may have dreamed that he would eventually outlive Anne and that he might one day be able, as a gentleman of substance, to make a better marriage, and beget another son." William and Anne Shakespeare remained married for a further twenty years after the death of their only son, and the poet predeceased his older wife by seven years.

Nonetheless, Duncan-Jones insists on Shakespeare's dislike of his wife Anne, a woman who apparently played "no part in the fashioning of [Shakespeare's] art or ensuing fame." To present throughout her book such a totally negative perspective on the Shakespeare marriage, Duncan-Jones argues from silence, speculates wildly, and treats tendentiously extant documentary evidence. Although laudatory of Shakespeare's writing, Duncan-Jones tends to depict her subject

as a misogynist (particularly in a few sonnets) with hatred for his wife especially pronounced. In his will Shakespeare infamously bequeathed his wife “my second best bed.” A number of scholars have noted that this would have been the bed Shakespeare shared with Anne in their thirty-three years of marriage, the best bed being reserved for guests. Duncan-Jones, however, asserts that at the time of writing his will the ailing Shakespeare “was surely...being nursed in the best, or ‘master’ bed” and that he was “determined that Anne should never occupy it, even after his death.” Moreover, she reads a pointedly sinister motive into Shakespeare’s gravestone curse:

**GOOD FRIEND FOR JESUS SAKE FORBEARE
TO DIGG THE DUST ENCLOSED HEARE.
BLESTE BE THE MAN THAT SPARES THES STONES
AND CURST BE HE THAT MOVES MY BONES.**

Duncan-Jones believes these lines were designed to exclude Anne Shakespeare, to ensure that her remains never rested alongside his.

Shakespeare’s widow is not the only family member for whom Duncan-Jones makes bold value judgments. She is willing to assert that Anne was “unloved” and that Judith – the surviving twin of the unfortunate Hamnet – was “despised.” It is true that in his will Shakespeare treated Judith far less generously than his oldest child, Susanna. And it is plain that in conventional terms Susanna made a more prestigious marriage than her sister – joining with the prosperous and honourable Dr John Hall. But is there any evidence to support Duncan-Jones’s claim that Shakespeare was “coerced into accepting” Judith’s intended husband, the wine-seller Thomas Quiney? Duncan-Jones is determined to portray Shakespeare at the end as an unhappy man, living in Stratford only under sufferance because of his illness, and bitter with an unloved wife and a despised daughter who he is determined to do down in his will.

Duncan-Jones seems to read Shakespeare’s death-bed experience through the emotional prism provided by Ben Jonson’s play *The Devil is an Ass*. Jonson’s furious final scene depicts a bed-ridden (and apparently dying) man railing against his wife and feigning madness in the hope of invalidating a contract that would have left his property to an undeserving young man. But such vitriol and passion in Jonson’s late 1616 fiction is no guarantee that Shakespeare’s actual death many months earlier was accompanied by anything of the sort. Duncan-Jones in fact goes to great lengths to explain that the evidence she fails to provide must have disappeared along the way: “By the 1660s...Stratford gossip retained a memory that drink had played a part in Shakespeare’s end, and that some of his London friends [including Jonson] had come up to see him. But his angry alienation from his wife and younger daughter, and fury with his new son-in-law, had dropped out of oral tradition.” Duncan-Jones goes to similar contortions of logic to explain why Judith Quiney always remembered her dead father as a gentle man.

Duncan-Jones finishes her provocative study with an invocation that is difficult to take seriously: “It’s far better not to read yet another biography, but to ‘read him’.”



Is such a statement false modesty? Is it designed to throw critics off balance, or to provide them with a ready-made tag? If taken literally, should this command have been her first (and only?) line instead of her last? Or are her words a timely reminder of the need to return to the source? Whatever her intent, Duncan-Jones’s final words shall not bring an end to Shakespeare Studies, and people will want to read works by and about the bard – including such exciting but controversial books as *Ungentle Shakespeare*.

Poems by Mike Heald

Mackenzie Falls

In the pool at the foot
of the waterfall,
out where it's calm,
blocks of granite resting,
as you say,
like the ruins of nothing.

Lifting the Chickens

The chickens aren't used to their coop yet.
They're quiet, pale clouds in the gloom
I have to gather up one by one, and carry
to the perch. But there's a surprising tenacity,
a principle of balance, as I carefully
release them, and they fluster, then settle:
their poised quiescence passes from my hands
as breathtakingly as flight.

Poem for Jim, on his first Birthday

Jim! Your movements are still jerky
like those anachronistic dinosaurs.

You smile so much, and laugh
at the ordinary, like my friend's
description of his Zen teacher,
though up in the wattle tree
with the gang-gangs munching
seed-pods is where I've seen
your joyful equanimity before.

Jim! Your head on my chest
is a heavy warmth, unfathomable,
like that sphere of pure compassion
the meditator is supposed to let
enter his heart and radiate...

And in these times when armies
are proclaiming from the shadows
cast by luminous books, can I say,
with Mohammed, that I too
would let the worshippers stay
flattened like spear-grass
in a knock-em-down storm
while you finished your game.

Note: There is a story that once when he was leading prayers, Mohammed prolonged the prostration so as not to interrupt his infant nephew who was playing on his back in the mosque.

Sick with desire

Philip Roth, The Dying Animal, London: Jonathan Cape, 2001.

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



The latest book from the multi-award-winning American novelist Philip Roth is another work of intense relationships. Driven by sexual desire, and marked – at times brutally – by male power and weakness, this short novel is the latest instalment in a series of works centred on David Kepesh, a New York lecturer and cultural critic who is

seventy years of age when he narrates *The Dying Animal*. As the book begins, Kepesh chooses his “meat” from among the young women who take his class on Practical Criticism; independent and articulate young women who are drawn to his minor celebrity as a critic on local TV and reviewer of books for National Public Radio. Kepesh is looking back eight years to his affair with the twenty-four year old Consuela Castillo, a wealthy Cuban-American with breasts like the Modigliani nude reclining on the book’s jacket.

As his story develops we become aware that Kepesh is both predator and vulnerable old man, haunted by eroticism, jealousy and a fear of death. He selects his women from those on offer in the classroom, discards his wife in an act of ‘60s liberation that he routinely rationalises for the next three decades, and taunts the middle-aged son who blames his own personal failures - and adultery - on the absent father. He uses his sophistication and cultural capital as lures to attract sex partners and as weapons to attack those who dare judge him, but he also relies on culture as a diversion from isolation and despair. Kepesh fills his New York apartment with books, paintings, a piano and piles of music script; he tries to fill his life with female beauty, in the form of numerous young women who pass through his apartment – sometimes in secret – in a series of short-lived affairs.

The woman who dominates this novel - as she dominates Kepesh's dreams - is Consuela Castillo, a memorable beauty who is both confident and threatened. Although Roth writes boldly and explicitly of Consuela's physical presence and her sexuality, it is Consuela's absence that is most tormenting to Kepesh. Consuela's reflections on the marvels of Cuba before Castro's blighted reign may be trite and second-hand – the product of a powerful visual imagination and so many nostalgic stories told by her parents and grandparents - but her decision not to return to Kepesh's apartment after her graduation dislocates his life in a way reminiscent of the loss Consuela's family feels when separated from their source of identity and passion. After their year and a half together, Kepesh's longing for Consuela is more than mere lust and selfishness, not simply the old goat craving a tasty feed or the bloated Cuban emigre greedily eyeing poor Cuba from across the sea in Miami.

Kepesh's narrative voice in *The Dying Animal* keeps the reader alert and uncertain – at one moment shocked – or even disgusted – the next seduced. Kepesh speaks directly in self-justification and refutes conventional morality, throwing out numerous intellectual and emotional challenges. He creates vivid images of beauty and sex juxtaposed with degradation and callousness, testing the limits of intimacy. He reflects thoughtfully on jealousy, illness and death, only to leave doubts about his motivation and constancy. Fierce and defiant, but also at times wheedling and manipulative, Kepesh opens himself up to scrutiny as if the reader, personified on the edge of the cultural commentator's sofa, is alternatively a mirror, a secular confessor, or a silent replacement for the old professor's dead friend and confidante.

As one would expect from a novel with such a resonant title and evocative cover design (narrated by a cultural critic), *The Dying Animal* includes interesting discursions on writers, musicians and artists including Yeats, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Schubert and Modigliani. The world of Roth's novel is an intellectual world. But it is a sensual world, a world within and between generations, and a world of America from the 1960s to the present day. *The Dying Animal* is a personal story, the story of David and Consuela's passions and fears and the fact of death, and it is a tale of our civilisation, our savage civilisation. David and Consuela sit together on his sofa, watching the ludicrous millennial New Year's Eve celebrations – Cubans in fruity hats and fireworks tearing the sky from Sydney to the Eiffel Tower, “brilliance flaring across the time zones, and none ignited by bin Laden” – and the old man senses “the monied world eagerly entering the prosperous dark ages. A night of human happiness to usher in barbarism.com.”

Roth's writing is raw and confrontational. Moments of reconciliation that build almost to sentiment are stripped back in a single, brutal sentence. And although Kepesh's stories and his calculating charm draw you in, perhaps even to an embrace of understanding or sympathy, you can never quite tell if he will kiss, lick, or bite to the bone.

Beyond the White Boned Demon

Anchee Min, Becoming Madame Mao, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2001

Reviewed by Neralie Hoadley



Ambitious both in its undertaking and its realisation, *Becoming Madame Mao* is a historical novel about the life of Mao Tse-tung's last wife. By following Jiang Ching from her birth in 1919 to death in 1991, Min gives the reader a grand sweep through twentieth century Chinese history. She also attempts to explain the apparently inexplicable: Jiang Ching's role in the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution. This is a fearsome task but Min is not afraid.

In this book, Min is embarking on new territory as a writer. Min's remarkable autobiography *Red Azalea* and her earlier novel *Katherine* both touch on the Cultural Revolution. They give powerful and disturbing insights into the experience of such social upheaval, but neither tries to make any sense of the events. In fact, in these two books Min is content to let the senselessness of her subject matter speak for itself. She resorts very little to editorialising. In *Becoming Madame Mao*, however, Min is forced to hypothesise about the motivation of one of the key players in the cataclysm, and thus explain, to some extent, why it erupted. In doing this she never resorts to glib labels of the 'psychopath' or 'megalomaniac'. Rather, she creates a convincing portrait of a strong woman - who considers herself a worthy partner in her husband's great endeavour - warped by years of frustration and exclusion.

Min does not accept the strangely bifocal vision that has allowed people, both in China and the West, to regard Mao as a creative giant with minor faults while his wife and partner is perceived

as an irredeemably destructive upstart. Min depicts the remorseless cruelty of Jiang Ching's role in the Cultural Revolution as an outgrowth of devotion to her husband and his policies. This understanding is grounded in Min's belief that the marriage between Mao and Jiang Ching was a love match on both sides. Certainly, Min allows that there were elements of opportunism present both for Mao and for the young actress, Jiang Ching, at the time of their first meeting in 1938. Mao was taking advantage of the absence of his wife - the revolutionary heroine, Zi-zhen, who he had despatched to the Soviet Union - to capitalise on the attentions of a pretty devotee. Jiang Ching, for her part, engineered an introduction to Mao clearly with an eye to where it might lead for her own benefit. Nevertheless, Min paints the development of their relationship as one of love, with a passionate physical connection. This is the lynchpin on which she hangs her understanding of the obsessive behaviour and disregard for common sense that characterised Jiang Ching's later life. Min convincingly depicts Jiang Ching's violent extremism as the twisted progeny of a grand passion. In grand passions, obsessions are manifest. They rarely allow room for common sense. It is trite to observe that people find their lives taking strange, sometimes quite crazy, turnings because of the passionate attachments they form, particularly sexual attachments. However, the power ordinary people have to spread their craziness around extends only to those in their own family or immediate vicinity. The power of Mao and Jiang Ching, by contrast, was unspeakably huge.

In all three of her books, Min writes well about female sexual desire, acknowledging its subtleties and ambivalences but never shirking to face its power. This is rare and significant. In *Red Azalea* Min writes of the desperate and dangerous affair she had with her platoon leader, Yan, and conveys the power this lesbian relationship had both to sustain and imperil her in the harsh years she spent as a conscripted agricultural labourer. In *Katherine* she explores attraction based on a narcissistic recognition of aspects of the self in the other person. In *Becoming Madame Mao*, the central relationship is between Jiang Ching and Mao Tse-tung, although Jiang Ching had already been married three times by the time she met Mao in the caves of his Yen-an headquarters. The first of these marriages was a forgettable transaction entered into as a way out of financial difficulties, but the next two were complex and rather tortured affairs which certainly crystallised the quality of strength that Jiang Ching was seeking when she set her sights on Mao. Central to Min's interpretation of this relationship is the driving force in female desire for a sense of on-going connection. From the very early days, she depicts Jiang Ching as aching to have a connection with Mao that is not confined to sex. She pines for acknowledgment of her self and her status in the other areas of Mao's life. Thus, she is shown as bitterly resentful of the contract she was forced to sign before the Communist Party sanctioned her marriage to Mao, undertaking that she would take no part in his public affairs, nor attempt to influence him in any way. In effect she is instructed to refrain from any type of conversation that ventured out of the purely domestic. Min's hypothesis is that Jiang Ching's talents turned sour because of festering frustration. Jiang Ching was strong and able but was excluded from the role in public life that she considered she had earned not only by her marriage, but also through her commitment to the revolutionary cause and the hardships she had endured. Certainly, Jiang Ching left no doubt

about whom she blamed for thwarting her. They were top of the list for various forms of persecution when power came into her hands.

There was another important element in Jiang Ching's rage and bitterness. This was the way that Mao ran hot and cold in his treatment of her. His attentions fluctuated wildly and in ways she could neither predict nor control. Despite her powerlessness, she couldn't stop trying to attract and sustain his interest. But, by the time they moved to Beijing in 1949, they were living in separate quarters. Thus, the beautiful and luxurious section of the Forbidden City that became her home became also her isolation ward, her prison, tantalisingly close to power but not part of it. From the moment that Mao took up the official reins of power, Jiang Ching was cut off from his public life. She sensed that she was dependant upon Mao's favour for the few strings she could pull, and was constantly relearning that she had only bare threads still to pull with Mao himself. Jiang Ching was left to brood on her grievances for a couple of decades. However, during this time she gradually asserted her influence in the cultural realm, which was seen by the party as removed enough from real power to be unproblematic. The party was mistaken. Jiang Ching's cultural activities, such as those associated with the Army's Socialist Education Campaign and her cultivation of a coterie of musicians and performers, gave her a launching pad. In the aftermath of his appallingly ill-conceived Great Leap Forward, which had led to the death of millions, Mao needed support and turned to his wife. Jiang Ching found that the threads she still held were strong enough to have an effect when she tugged them. In Min's account, her long-standing association with Kang Sheng, director of Mao's intelligence service, came into its own at this point. Under Kang's guidance, she was able to capitalise on Mao's need of her and dramatically consolidate her own position.

It is notable that the account of the Cultural Revolution in this book is very much through Jiang Ching's own eyes. Although the Cultural Revolution is Jiang Ching's period of ascendancy - and thus is pivotal to the story of her life - *Becoming Madame Mao* gives less of a taste of its impact than do Min's previous books. Both *Red Azalea* and *Katherine* give strange and diverse insights into the intrusion of a great and repressive madness into the public and private realms of ordinary life. There is little of this in *Becoming Madame Mao*: just one anecdote about tractors stuck in the mud to illustrate the large scale agricultural failure caused by city kids and intellectuals grasping, and being forced to grasp, the means of production. The reader becomes witness to just one full account of public humiliation; and incarcerations, while mentioned numerously, are generally not depicted in a way that more than hints at their horror. There is little about school closures, forced relocations, or re-education camps, and no real sense of the conditions of localised civil war between various Red Guard factions, which at times amounted to gang warfare involving various sectors of the state, the military and the bureaucracy.

However, what Min does achieve is a sense of the power play, the flux and flow of influence and allegiance, the strategic concerns of Jiang Ching and her cohort. Thus the scene of public humiliation and persecution that is depicted is that of Mao's second in command, Liu Shao-qi, and his wife Wang Guang-mei. This case was close to Jiang Ching's heart. For years she had nurtured resentment and suspicion of Liu's influence with Mao, and envy of Wang's glamorous public role, which she felt to be rightly her own. Hundreds of thousands of Red Guards gloried in the awful scene of degradation of their erstwhile leaders. Liu's wife was sentenced to die, his son beaten to death at a rally, his three daughters either imprisoned or exiled. Liu himself was bashed, and shut up alone without food, water or medical help until pneumonia claimed him. Jiang Ching's enemies were vanquished and the affair is presented as a supremely well orchestrated performance without great emotional impact, both in the account of the narrator and the voice of Jiang Ching herself. Some of the brutality is softened, not, I think, intentionally.

Min's problem is that her natural style is well suited to the voice of the first person, in which both her other books were written. In *Becoming Madame Mao* she has ventured to alternate between Jiang Ching's voice and that of an unspecified narrator. It is easy to see why. This gave her the chance to give the reader insights that Jiang Ching could not reasonably be expected to have into her own character and actions. It also gave Min a mechanism to avoid the situation she encountered in *Katherine* when she improbably required the heroine to hide in a bed in order to overhear an important conversation. However, the alternating voice, sometimes paragraph by paragraph, has serious drawbacks for Min. My impression is that writing in the first person is what comes naturally to her. Perhaps the narrator's interruptions and interpolations are an editor's innovation. Mostly, the change of voice is fluent, even barely noticeable, because there is no change in prose style with change of voice. The style remains Min's short, choppy sentences, often fragmentary, which race the reader through the story, pausing only briefly for breath or the poetic moment. Occasionally though, the narrator comes through as providing an ominous voice-over of the 'little-did-she-know' kind. I am not convinced that the narrator's voice works. Who is she and why is she speaking? The fact that the style does not change with the voice suggests that perhaps the third person voice is supposed to depict a more reflective persona of Jiang Ching herself, pulling together the fragments of her life in retrospect. If this is intended it doesn't work. The narrator's voice tells us things that clearly Jiang Ching could not have ever known or acknowledged. Perhaps it is intended to be Nah, Jiang Ching's daughter. The prologue shows us a jailed but still defiant Jiang Ching begging Nah to write the story. However, she refuses. Thus, it seems that the third person is providing an omnipotent perspective, which only incidentally speaks in the same prose style as Jiang Ching's own voice.

In this Min has made a regrettable but understandable decision. It is regrettable because Min has a rare talent for seeing through the eyes of her protagonist. Both in *Red Azalea* and *Katherine* she is able to show, in ways that are sometimes shocking and always affecting, the way grit and poetry collide in life. The first person perspective gives her writing a remarkable immediacy and

authenticity that is diluted by the mixed approach she has adopted here. The decision is understandable because if she had succeeded in providing a credible explanation of Jiang Ching's actions from Jiang Ching's own perspective, Min would doubtless have been risking the accusation that she was acting as an apologist for Jiang Ching. However, I think that Min underrated her own capabilities by making this choice. In *Red Azalea*, Min is able to show her own part in acts of brutality. She doesn't apologise. She doesn't editorialise. She just states. It works, not to justify herself in any sense but to show how it was. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions. This could have worked for Madame Mao too. The actions speak so loudly they could have been allowed to speak for themselves.



To say that *Becoming Madame Mao* does not have the impact or cohesiveness of crafting achieved in *Red Azalea* is not harsh criticism. In *Becoming Madame Mao* Min is attempting a much more complex task. She is trying to offer a truthful historical account of a broad sweep of twentieth century history. Regarding the Cultural Revolution, she aims to tell not just what happened but also make a case as to why it occurred. And she wants to tell an operatic tale of tragedy and heroism in which ideals and love battle with human frailty. In all this she succeeds.

Note: I have used the transcription conventions of names and places used by Anchee Min.

Interview With John Mateer



John Mateer is a Melbourne-based poet, whose most recent book *Barefoot Speech*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001) won the Victorian Premier's Prize this year. John's previous books are *Burning Swans* (1994) and *Anachronism* (1997), both also published by FACP. This interview with Mike Heald was conducted in December 2001, in Melbourne.

Congratulations on winning the Victorian Premier's prize! What is your response to winning it, and what is your attitude to literary prizes in general?

Thanks. Well, winning the prize is a wonderful confirmation that my work has been noticed and is appreciated. It makes me feel that my work is now being recognized within the Australian context. I'm not sure what this will mean for the Australian context; whether it will be any different for the fact that my work is now a bit more prominent. As for my opinion of prizes in general: I think they are a great encouragement – they can make writers feel that their efforts are worthwhile – but ultimately they are a reflection as much of the judges' sympathies as of the quality of the writing.

Could you say a little about your background?

I was born in Roodepoort, a satellite city of Johannesburg, South Africa, and mainly grew up there. When I was a child we moved to Toronto in Canada where I mixed with children – mostly immigrants – from various backgrounds: German, West African, Newfoundland... We returned to South Africa when I was about eight. I moved to Australia with my family shortly before I was conscripted into the South African army during the state of emergency in 1989. I've lived mainly in Perth, and since 1998 have been in Melbourne.

What was the process of settling in Australia like for you?

I found it very difficult. For the first year – I was in Year 12 here – I hardly spoke. I found it very difficult to make myself understood and to understand the language and attitudes of Australian

people. Also during that time tremendous changes were taking place in South Africa. When we left the country was in a state of undeclared civil war: the African townships were frequently on fire, troops were being sent in to 'restore order', there were mass rallies and boycotts, and there was very strict censorship of the media. Shortly after we arrived in Australia Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the so-called thaw began. But even during that period there were bombings and the threat of radical Afrikaner nationalists. So, even while trying to live a 'new life' in Australia I felt beset by traumatic events taking place in South Africa. It took me a long time to become used to the experience of being here. And quite often I feel that I'm yet to become used to it.

How would you describe your relationship with Australian literature and readers in particular? Do you feel part of the Australian 'scene', if there is such a thing, or do you think nationality is fairly irrelevant.

These are fairly difficult questions. Australian literature is really two things: a context and a body of writing. In answer to your first question I must say that I do have an automatic relationship to Australian literature and readers simply for the reason that I am published here so I am inevitably in the Australian context. But what do I mean in the Australian context? Now that's something you probably need to ask readers. I suspect that my work is 'difficult' in the Australian context in that there are few writers like myself – from a South African background, for example – working here. But then that is not the sole fact determining my difficulty. That I haven't aligned myself with any of the prevailing schools of OZ lit has meant that many Australian readers don't know how to approach my poetry. Although this is presently something of a problem, I don't think it will mean much in the future. I think serious readers will eventually figure out how to read my work. They will eventually come to understand that my work is strange because – I am speculating here! – I am probably creating a new set of possibilities for writing in Australia. Maybe! And this does connect up with what you're suggesting in the second part of your question; namely, that my writing isn't easily placed within a national literary context with its attendant body of work. Poetry of my sort will probably cause readers to question the correspondence between person, nationality and literature. This is for the good, I think.

How do you combine poetry writing with your other activities?

Poetry fits in fairly easily. I write whenever I feel I should. The only problem is, of course, earning a living when all you want to do is think about words! I write art criticism and reviews and sometimes teach.

Could you describe the process by which your poems come to be written?

To a great extent every poem is written following a different process. In general I think my poems evolve in my mind – by that I mean that I compose them mentally, through visualization as well as sounding out phrases in my mind – and then are written down, either in fragments which I piece together or more or less whole. Then, over the course of days or even months, I will redraft the poem. I usually develop groups of poems simultaneously, drafting and re-drafting several at once. Then when I put them together in a book manuscript I'll return to the individual poems and rework them again. But it's important to remember that every poem and every book evolves differently. If we looked at any one of my poems I would have a different story to tell about its composition.

What would you see as the defining characteristics of your poetry, both in terms of language use and subject matter, and how would you relate your work to current movements in poetry writing?

That depends on which of my books and which of my poems we look at. I suppose the qualities that I would describe as being characteristic of my work would be those after which I have strived – immediacy, a sense of physicality, an attention to linguistic and psychic particularities and an awareness of the philosophical – that is to say ethical – components of our everyday experiences. These qualities are a result of my fascination with language as action and embodiment. We are beings not only full of ideas, but also full of strange impulses and memories, all of which are constantly present in our day-to-day life. In a way I suppose I would see my work as being a kind of lyricism that, although it is in language, is constantly attempting to query language. I'm not sure that my work sits well in relation to current trends in Australian writing – especially that kind of poetry which is concerned with writing itself – but, that said, I have learnt a lot from modern African writing, especially Southern African writing, and from the lyrics of post-war Europe. I feel allied with those feminists who are interested in the connection between corporeality and language. And this means that I am interested in the poem as a performative act. In the past few years I have been realizing that I am interested in the 'old fashioned' artefact – the lyric poem – because it conveys both the utterance of an individual and – often most subtly – the context of its action. Despite what many literary theorists are currently saying about the lyric, it is a very powerful medium because it enables the presence of an 'I', a voice that speaks out into the physical world.

To what extent does your poetry retain a South African's voice?

There are many voices in my poetry. In some ways this question is impossible to answer without looking at my poems one by one. In some poems there is a single voice, in other poems there is a

voice that echoes other voices, and in some there are several distinct voices. If anything, I would say that my work is marked by my desire not to have a single voice, a single tone, a single position from which to speak. For many years I used to fret over this, feeling that I wasn't forming a coherent literary self – if I can call it that – but now I don't have that feeling. I now feel that voice, just like the phenomenon of self, is context-dependant: change the context, the self changes.

Poetry, these days, does not seem to have a very large readership. Can you describe your own views about this: how you came to devote so much effort to this art form, and how you see the role of poetry in today's society?

No, it doesn't. In answering your question I have to fall back on the values that I feel are at the core of the linguistic act. For me this means thinking of poetry as a process of testifying to experience, the range of our experience. It's a kind of truth-telling, a sharing of truths so that we won't feel alone amidst the radical strangeness of the world. Whether a poem talks about love or an animal or politics, it is always – if I must generalize – a way, a means of sharing experience. I have devoted over a decade to this genre of writing first of all because I like it as a medium, its modesty, its sonic and visual qualities, and secondly because I feel it allows me to orientate myself within the near chaos of life! But, of course, it should be remembered that every poem suggests a different relationship to the world.

You recently returned to South Africa, and witnessed the country since the collapse of apartheid, the so-called 'New South Africa'. What were your impressions?

I've returned twice, actually, first in 1995, and then again this year, 2001. Both times it has been very different. In 1995, the year after the first free and fair election, I felt that little had changed in the country. But on the trip this year it was very different: there are rich black people and Afrikaner beggars, there are many languages spoken on TV and there is now a sense that South Africa is a part of Africa itself. There are many, many things I could say about the country, but they are hard to elucidate in the context of an interview. I have many feelings about the so-called New South Africa. To some extent I feel that I am lost to the country, that I don't belong there, and yet I also feel incredibly moved by it and its people, and I feel that some of my best poetry is about South Africa. There is really no word to name what I am in relation to the country. I don't fit the connotations of any words that come to mind: I'm not really an immigrant, an émigré, a refugee, an exile, a fugitive... While this every so often gives me some kind of existential anxiety I think it is actually useful to me as a writer – I am constantly changing...

You have also recently been to Indonesia on a writing fellowship. Could you reflect on the significance of that trip for you?

Being in Indonesia, in Medan in North Sumatra, was a powerful experience for me. Not only was it the first time I've been to Asia, but it was the first time I've been somewhere where I can't speak the language. I learnt some basic Indonesian while I was there. Learning a new language meant that I was forced to confront the dynamics of sentence construction both in English and Indonesian, and the effect of this on my writing has been profound. Since then I have been turning to a simple, less conversational language in my poetry and I have also become more interested in the traditions of poetic forms. While I was there I read all the Indonesian poetry in translation that I could get my hands on. Of course, as I was there shortly after Suharto resigned and before the election, I couldn't help but be aware of the political situation. Through meeting many Indonesians – many of them Chinese Indonesians – I got a better sense of the history of the region. I also became interested in the early history of South-East Asia. I went there originally because I was interested in researching the relationship between South Africa and Indonesia that resulted from the trade of the Dutch East India Company. I returned to Australia with an awareness of the complexities of cultures and how nationalism simplifies them.

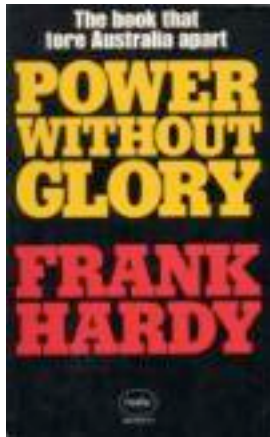
Could you describe your current projects?

I've got a few things on the go: I've got a new book of poems, *Loanwords*, coming out in March 2002 with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and I'm currently working on a number of poems about South Africa that I started when I was there in June, and I'm trying to finish a book of prose, *Semar's Cave*, about my stay in Indonesia. And at the moment I am planning a trip to Japan in 2002 where I will be investigating Shinto ritual practices with a view to writing a sequence of poems.

Thanks John, and once again, congratulations: poets must savour these moments of recognition!

Frank Hardy: 50 Years of Trial and Error

By Glen Jennings and Neralie Hoadley



Power Without Glory is an enormous novel detailing the rise to financial and political power of a Melbourne slum dweller, the fiercely determined John West. It is a fascinating account of gambling - an Australian obsession - and it lacerates political corruption. *Power Without Glory* is also Frank Hardy's first and best known book. Many commentators consider it the most influential novel published in Australia in the twentieth century. It has become an Australian icon: not just because of the novel's gripping tale of gambling, crime, and power, but for the stories that surround its unconventional publication in 1950 and the trial of its young author in 1951. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Frank Hardy's public notoriety, and it is an opportune time to look once again at

Power Without Glory and to assess Hardy's general legacy.

The public spectacle of Hardy's trial is in some ways ironic, because *Power Without Glory* was researched and written in elaborate secrecy. Hardy and his supporters worked in a clandestine fashion to avoid the attention of police and powerful individuals who could prevent the novel's publication. After years in preparation, *Power Without Glory* appeared on Australian streets in 1950. It was self-published and bound by volunteers in suburban homes across Melbourne. Exhibiting its close relation with radical politics and the union movement, *Power Without Glory* was not distributed through normal literary channels: it was sold in factories, at political and cultural meetings, on street corners, in pubs, and under the clocks at Flinders Street Station. Most contemporary reviewers in the established newspapers and journals ignored the novel. Nevertheless, Hardy's realist fiction soon became an underground hit, before exploding into public life when Parliamentarians and other leaders of society fulminated against his thinly veiled attack on powerful men and machine politics. The thirty-three year old author was arrested and charged with criminal libel of Ellen Wren, the wife of John Wren, a multi-millionaire businessman and power broker in the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

John Wren, in the guise of the fictional protagonist John West, dominated Hardy's great urban novel. *Power Without Glory* depicted John West as a man who gained wealth and power through illegal gambling, bribery, and murder. It traced West's gambling empire from its birth in the 1880s in the alleyways of Melbourne's slums. The novel also explored West's political racket within local councils and the ALP up to the 1940s, a web of influence defined by corruption, violence, and bribery. *Power Without Glory* exposed police crimes, ruthless capitalism, political opportunism, hypocrisy within the church, and the machinations of the anti-Communist Movement spearheaded by B.A. Santamaria's Industrial Groups within the Labor Party. The attempt to suppress *Power Without Glory* and imprison its author was a key episode in the Australian Cold War.

The story of the making of *Power Without Glory* is one of individual and collective courage. Great drama and daring marked the actions of Hardy and his supporters in collecting stories from the criminal underworld and political backrooms. The notes and manuscript also required protection from powerful enemies. A great many people were involved in researching and producing *Power Without Glory* and working on the Frank Hardy Defence Committee - people like the researcher and compositor Les Barnes, the printer Vic Little, the Communist intellectual Ralph Gibson, and Alvie Booth, an organiser for Hardy's defence. At various times during the production of his controversial opus, Hardy and his family went into hiding or lived with guns and bodyguards in their homes. The supporters of the project showed initiative and determination, keeping the printed texts hidden from police and the functionaries of the Wren Labor machine who were determined to destroy the book.

The events surrounding the publication of *Power Without Glory* have been of on-going interest. Hardy tells his own story of the novel's birth and its defence in *The Hard Way*, published in 1961. This lively but not always reliable book is seldom read today, but its basic argument is well known to readers of Hardy's fiction because it served as the basis for Jack Lindsay's 1968 introduction to the re-issue of *Power Without Glory*. There were many people Hardy did not name in *The Hard Way* or felt it best not to name at the time of writing. In late 2000 Pauline Armstrong's book, *Frank Hardy and the making of Power Without Glory* filled in some of the gaps. Her work reveals in fascinating detail the invaluable assistance Hardy received from many people within the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and from outside the party in the long process of researching, writing, editing, printing, binding and distributing a novel that was clearly intended to damage those who Hardy and his comrades believed held power without glory in Australia. Armstrong's research has given these people their due by recovering their names and responsibilities for posterity. She has corrected errors or confusion in Hardy's account, and also



shorn it of some exaggeration and drama (although her book is itself marred by a jaundiced view of Hardy's character, poor editing, and the tendency to neglect interesting lines of inquiry).

At times Armstrong suggests that Hardy's egoism led him to forget or downplay the role of other people in the *Power Without Glory* drama. In *The Hard Way* Frank Hardy certainly dominates centre stage, through his alter ego Ross Franklyn. Nonetheless, *The Hard Way* records Hardy's gratitude to the prominent figures who supported his project or came to his defence, including the Communist leader Ted Hill, the Melbourne Guardian editor Ralph Gibson (who Hardy holds responsible for "the ultimate decision to write *Power Without Glory*"), the famous author and Defence Committee chairman Alan Marshall, the Butcher's Union boss George Seelaf (who helped Hardy to steal away his own book from under the noses of Wren's operatives), and the dedicated - and expensive - legal team of Don Campbell and John Starke. In a mix of personal emotion and Marxist rhetoric, *The Hard Way* also pays special tribute to the "nameless ones" who promoted Hardy's book and his cause, many of whom he never met:

The nameless ones who contributed a coin to the defence fund, voted for a resolution, [or] signed a petition...; the nameless ones who sewed ... with unpractised hand the sheets of the second edition; the nameless ones who organized meetings; the very definitely nameless ones who 'robbed' the Industrial Press to recapture the second edition; the nameless ones who passed the books from hand to hand until the ill-bound copies fell apart; ... the nameless ones who placed our message in the letter-boxes of history.

What shall I say about them?

Only this: to them the victory belongs, to them the future belongs, for they, the people, are the real makers of history.

It is now half a century since Frank Hardy's trial, which was an important moment in Australian literary and political history. The criminal libel case brought against Hardy focused on the question of whether or not Ellen Wren had been defamed by the novel's claim that Nellie West, the wife of John West, had engaged in an adulterous affair. Looking back over fifty years, such a case may not appear a matter of great consequence. However, the Hardy trial was conducted in the midst of repeated governmental attempts to outlaw the Communist Party of Australia, a party to which Hardy belonged since 1940. Hardy served the CPA in organisational work and self-consciously promoted its cause through his writing. The effort to suppress *Power Without Glory* and imprison Hardy was integral to the Australian Cold War. As Hardy continued writing his novel in 1949, the Victorian Government held a Royal Commission into Communism. While the first edition of *Power Without Glory* began circulating on the streets, the Federal Government's Communist Party Dissolution Act passed into law on 20 October 1950, although this Act was overturned on High Court appeal in March 1951.

Frank Hardy was arrested five days after the “Red Bill” became law. He went to trial in June 1951, at a time when the newly re-elected Menzies Government had set a date in September for a referendum to amend the Constitution enabling the proscription of the Communist Party. Unlike most libel defendants in Australia - then and now - Hardy did not face a charge of civil libel, with the prospect of retracting any defamation, paying a fine, or making money reparations. Instead, Hardy was prosecuted in the Criminal Court under an old, rarely evoked provision. Hardy’s prosecutors sought a jail term for the author.

Throughout his legal ordeal, Hardy linked his personal defence to the struggle for freedom of speech in Australia and the political survival of the CPA. His case attracted passionate support from Australian writers, Communists, and civil libertarians. Many of the volunteers – such as the author Alan Marshall - worked through the Hardy Defence Committee to publicise the cause and exert community pressure to have proceedings dropped. Hardy and the struggle to save his book received words of encouragement from intellectuals, writers, and leftists around the world. Hardy’s opponents outside court and in the witness box dismissed *Power Without Glory* as Communist propaganda. They accused Hardy of stooping to defame an old religious woman when he wrote of Nellie West’s adulterous affair with a man labouring on the mansion of her powerful but emotionally distant husband. Significantly, the prosecution did not charge Hardy with libelling John Wren.

Hardy’s trial involved great courtroom drama, shown by the contemporary Argus reports. Proceedings revealed the skill and cunning of Hardy’s legal team – the King’s Counsel Don Campbell and his junior John Starke (later Sir John Starke). The records show a series of prosecution witnesses repeating the argument that *Power Without Glory* was “Communist propaganda” and “a Communist plot.” These witnesses maintained that Ellen Wren, and not her powerful husband and his legal advisers, was the true instigator of legal proceedings against the Melbourne author. They also claimed that Nellie West’s adultery was the grossest libel contained in *Power Without Glory*, not the series of criminal actions and political abuses ascribed to her husband and other establishment figures. Hardy depicted Nellie West quite sympathetically in his novel, and most readers could appreciate why she became emotionally estranged from her ruthless, domineering, and criminal husband. When the various claims and characterisations contained in *Power Without Glory* were revealed in court, the jury was unconvinced of Frank Hardy’s guilt – perhaps they were not convinced of John Wren’s innocence? – although it has been suggested that a relative of the novel’s compositor sat on the jury under instruction from his unionised workmates to acquit Hardy or never return to work!

The secrecy and suspicion that characterised the clandestine production and distribution of *Power Without Glory* erupted into public elation when Frank Hardy was cleared of all criminal

charges on 18 June 1951. The book then continued along its path to becoming a best seller in Australia and internationally, although anti-Communist authorities in the USA impounded 500 copies of *Power Without Glory* and tossed them into the sea. Many of those who worked to defend Hardy went on to promote the “No” case in the Australian referendum called to outlaw the CPA, and they succeeded in the vote of 22 September 1951.

The intensity of the battle to get the book written, released, and to avoid imprisonment, took a toll on Hardy. The struggle hardened his attitudes and his suspicions of the capitalist forces he saw arranged against him. Soon after his acquittal Hardy took a trip to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and for a time he became the Communist apologist he had been accused of being at his trial. This can be seen in Hardy’s execrable catalogue of the achievements of “new socialist man,” based on a five-week visit to the Soviet Union he took with his wife, Rosslyn. *Journey Into The Future*, published in 1952, was a work Hardy later disowned, for good reason. In this turgid and didactic book, Hardy proclaimed Stalin a military genius and the intellectual equal of Karl Marx. Hardy revered Stalin as an inspiring figure who made no major errors, exerting masterful leadership in all fields of work. Hardy applauded Lysenko’s (farcical) biological theories that reportedly led to bumper harvests, rejoiced with Soviet women who supposedly enjoyed absolute equality with Soviet men, and repudiated the Nazi and Capitalist lies that anyone languished in Soviet labour camps. It is easy to make fun of such nonsense.

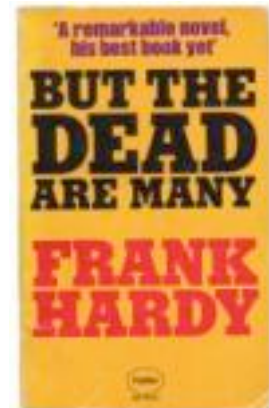
But it is less acceptable to dismiss the body of work that came before and after the ill-named *Journey Into The Future*, books that came from Hardy’s profound personal experience, intensive research, and deep wells of humour and courage. Hardy’s best work is characterised by realistic drama, political commitment, and laconic comedy. His writing is fired with passion and narrative energy, as with the most compelling sections of *Power Without Glory*.

Power Without Glory itself cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda, a work of no social or literary merit. It is a compelling story, an important social document, and an insightful characterisation of gambling (a passion which remained close to Hardy’s heart – and the bane of his family’s finances – throughout his adult life). At the time of writing his first novel Hardy was influenced by the irony and realism of Dickens and Balzac. As an inexperienced author, he relied on Elizabeth Bowen’s *Notes on Writing a Novel* to give his first prolonged work structure and narrative drive. He also supported Soviet prescriptions for socialist realism. Hardy believed his writing promoted working class interests, class interests he identified with in a visceral sense, having grown up in a poor family during the Depression. *Power Without Glory* documented social conditions from the 1880s to the late 1940s - with vivid representations of poverty and inner city Melbourne. Through a diaphanous screen of fiction, the novel exposed police and political corruption and the unedifying workings of church, business, and state. Soon after the novel’s release, a list of names circulated among avid readers providing the true identities of

characters mentioned in the book. This list identified policemen, gangsters, politicians, capitalists and priests - many of them subsequently named in Hardy's trial and the surrounding publicity. These men included the Labor politician Frank Anstey, Prime Minister James Scullin, the murdered criminal Squizzy Taylor, Archbishop Mannix, and the powerful media proprietor Sir Keith Murdoch.

From a literary perspective, *Power Without Glory* is not unflawed, particularly the final sections that Hardy knew himself to be rushed. Yet it is a novel of undoubted consequence. Even Hardy's old political enemy B. A. Santamaria felt the novel was like "a Grand Final football match." A poll of 150 Australian opinion leaders conducted by the Age and Sydney Morning Herald in 1999 voted *Power Without Glory* "the most influential work of fiction published in Australia during the twentieth century." And Hardy's book rates among the few Australian works listed in Callil and Toibin's recent study of *The Two Hundred Best Novels in English Since 1950*. *Power Without Glory* is a crowded but compelling book, with traces of Balzac and Dickens fused with a socialist realist aesthetic that produces an early and explicitly Australian urban fiction. It also remains, as Santamaria believed, a social document of interest to historians.

Hardy's important contribution to Australian life and literature is not confined to *Power Without Glory*. On a light note he is remembered as a great humorist and raconteur, or more likely as a larrikin yarn-spinner and a life-long gambler who died at his desk with a racing guide in his hand. More significantly, in the wider context of Australian politics Hardy is noted for being an early and effective supporter of aborigines, particularly in his advocacy for the Gurundji people. Hardy's efforts to promote land rights and to change the appalling condition of aborigines in Australia helped the local communities themselves, but also attracted other non-aborigines to work with indigenous people - including the famous eye surgeon Fred Hollows. Hardy's commitment to indigenous issues was long-term and significant, and his 1968 book *The Unlucky Australians* presents a powerful indictment still worth the reading in this time of national debate over reconciliation. In addition, Hardy's major literary achievements include *But The Dead Are Many*, a novel of political tragedy that partially atones for Hardy's early, naïve Stalinism. Although marred by psychological jargon and tainted by the accusation that Hardy used the suicide of a friend to construct his fiction, *But The Dead Are Many* succeeds in depicting the passions and disappointments of life under oppressive regimes. Hardy's novel presents the deadening atmosphere of Stalinism and the personal crises of an individual. In the book's personal focus and ideological sympathies, *But The Dead Are Many* evokes a more humanistic vision. Stylistically more adventurous than Hardy's first novel, *But The Dead Are Many* is a work that the usually unsympathetic critic Max Harris described as "a remarkable book."



According to Cyril Connolly "the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and...no other task is of any consequence." Perhaps Connolly's words may be read sceptically as the self-serving aphorism of a writer who, like Frank Hardy, was reportedly a troublesome guest and a difficult man. But this statement nonetheless has something to recommend it. Frank Hardy was not always kind, temperate, sober, or honest. He was frequently rude, obnoxious, stingy, and profligate. He was also arrogant, egotistical, blinkered, courageous, hilarious, and a passionate supporter of aboriginal rights. And if he never produced a universally acknowledged masterpiece, he at least produced a work of great moment in Australian cultural history.

Steep Stairs Volume 2: 2002

Interview with Michael Heald

Michael Heald was born in Grimsby, England in 1959. At the age of twelve, he moved with his family to Perth in Western Australia. After completing his schooling at Swanbourne Senior High School, and a basic Arts Degree at the University of Western Australia, he worked for a number of years as a squash instructor in Europe, and afterwards completed a Ph.D on contemporary Western Australian poetry, also at UWA. Michael published his first collection of poetry, Occasions, in Shorelines.Three Poets in 1995, and his second collection, Bodyflame. in 1999, both with Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP). A third book is presently under consideration.

Michael lives currently in Ballarat, Victoria with his partner Sharon and their young son, Jim.

This interview for Steep Stairs Review was conducted by Anya Daly in Melbourne, in August 2002.



When did you begin writing poetry?

I began writing poems when I was very young. I hardly remember a time when I didn't write them. My earliest memories are of being in my parents' house in England, aged about six, and trying to get the words right for a description of spring. In the first year of primary school my teacher gave me an exercise book to write poems in, to prevent my getting distracted and misbehaving. I'm not sure why she did that, but I just accepted it. I cut out a picture of an eagle to stick on the cover, and got started. That predatory image I chose has since intrigued me. Later in primary school, we had a very encouraging headmaster, who gave us poetry 'lessons' – he provided a subject, and away we went. Then some were chosen to read theirs aloud, and the class voted on which was the best. I describe this in the poem 'Subject', in Occasions. I think it was important because it gave me the sense, at a formative stage, that poetry mattered, and was a legitimate way to engage with myself and those around me.

Are your family happy about your choice in career or did they have other plans for you?

My family have always been very supportive of my writing. I suppose it's a bit hard to refer to poetry writing as a 'career' in the normal sense, since it doesn't fit in with the formal economy very well. In general, my family has a genuine interest in poetry, and in the expressive capabilities of language, and they have been very understanding in allowing me to follow my literary inclinations. My mother is currently exploring her childhood experiences of the Second World War through writing. My father has a strong interest in Zen, which is, of course, a tradition in which poetry has an important place. And my sister teaches young children, and is very aware, therefore, of the developmental dimensions of language, both functional and imaginative. So I don't feel like a linguistic oddity in my family by any means.

How did you come to publish your first collection of poetry?

I sent a manuscript to FACP. I'd been able to work on it quite intensively thanks to a residency at the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre, in the Darling Ranges just outside Perth. I'd published a few poems in magazines in Australia and England. The press said they could include the collection with two other poets in a series called Shorelines, designed to showcase new poets. I leapt at this chance, but gathered afterwards that I could probably have held out for my own separate collection. However, those kinds of things don't really bother me. There's a fair bit of power-mongering and politics in the poetry world, which strikes me as rather ironic, since poetry doesn't fit very well into a capitalist economy, and is never really going to lead to fame and riches anyway. That situation is at times frustrating and unfair in that many people have well-paid jobs in various parts of the literature 'industry', while the actual producers are often job-less and insecure financially. Despite this it can also be a good opportunity to keep considerations of ego and status out of the process of writing. If I can be high-minded for a moment, I think that the vocation of poetry should be, and can be, rather above the careerism which so bedevils other areas of working life. And I suppose for me, the basic fact is that matters of status and reputation simply bore me – I just can't get interested in them, even though there are often some fascinating tales around of wheeling and dealing.

Having said that, it is genuinely difficult these days to publish poetry. There are many reasons for this, most of them rather crudely economic, and I won't go into them now. But to be denied publication is a serious problem: not just a blow to the ego, but an interruption of the process of moving the work into a public place. This can have serious consequences not only for writers, but also for the well-being of the culture in general. Poetry is an important repository of many perceptual and intellectual sensitivities and explorations: the loss or decline of these is significant.

What are your sources of inspiration?

That's a difficult question. I could say something like 'the natural world', or 'the migrant experience', or 'the insights of Buddhism', but nothing like that would sound right. I think my 'inspiration', what provides the impetus to write, is the pressing sense of a certain quality of being

which is at once uncommon, and yet also present in all experiences. There is a kind of strangeness about all things, and I suppose that reveals itself in various ways, or it strikes you in connection with various situations at different times. For a formulation of the kind of quality of being which I'm talking about, I would tend to look towards the Buddhist notion of experience which is somehow beyond the ego, though it's not something you can be doctrinaire about. I think it has certain consistent qualities, and yet it is infinitely various. Now we've entered the realm of paradox! Perhaps I could say that anything can be 'inspirational', but that doesn't make the process entirely arbitrary or random.

You once remarked that many of the ideas for your poems come from that time between sleeping and waking. How important do you think it is for poets to have this access to the unconscious for the effectiveness of their art?

For me it's very important, but poetry is a very broad field, and some poets either wouldn't see the need for such psychic exploration, or wouldn't think of the process in those terms. Cognitive science seems to be indicating that 95% of brain activity is unconscious, and this accords with my sense of a very powerful substrata to our experience. Certain states, such as that between sleeping and waking, may provide opportunities to glimpse that depth, and I certainly value that, though I also acknowledge that conceptualising this, and its representation via language, is a very complex matter. There are many cultural and cognitive factors which mitigate against our access to ready-made, or raw poetry – but then again, nothing can really be ruled out. The mind is mysterious.

Poetry, I think, is often dealing with the relationship between the experiential and the conceptual. So an ability to focus the experiential and see through conceptual habits is necessary, though this might not necessarily be seen as accessing the unconscious.

So, how might you otherwise ignite the process?

I don't think, in general, that I pursue poems, or seek to 'ignite' them. I find that enough pressing material presents itself, and the actual challenge is to do justice, artistically, to that material. I often find that I begin with a kind of hypothetical attitude. I seem to think "If I were to write a poem, this is how it would go, or these would be the images I could use..." This is a kind of first stage, which seems to repeat itself, always to my surprise.

Perhaps it's like creating a free space – or permission to write... Like opening up another level, plugging in the data and allowing this other level to go to work on it....?

It may be just a quirk of my mind: a loop that I'm aware of, but that still recurs. Once I get started, I discover – ah! There is a poem here, and then the poem seems like a centripetal force

and draws lots of things into it. Sometimes it seems as though you could almost use anything, everything: every scrap of experience could be turned into poetry.

Would that mean it might become mundane? What's the magic ingredient that enlivens those experiences, makes them meaningful for not just yourself?

During those periods, you can overwrite. Ask anyone who's tried to read Pound's Cantos in their entirety! You may get a lot of material that is very mixed in terms of quality. My writing cycle seems fairly consistent. Most of the time, I can't write. I just can't find a voice, and then I find I start to be able to. It often seems to be a rhythmic impetus, which is closely bound up with a kind of attitude, or tone, which enables me to begin, or continue poems (I'm always working on around fifty or more poems at any given time). In times when this process has been more or less uninterrupted, this tends to happen about every six weeks or so. Then I can get a lot started and make progress with older drafts and complete a number of poems. Then later a trailing off occurs, when I feel I can write about anything and that's when they can become facile.

Are there dry spells?

Yes – when I'm travelling. It's almost as though your voice is connected to a certain place. You move, you leave it behind. When I returned to England the first two times, I lost my voice. I thought, how can I articulate this place?

So where is your place? Australia? City? Country?

I think it's got to the point where it doesn't matter that much. Over the years your voice, or voices, become easier to find, I think.

I recently watched a program on the ABC about synaesthesia (the ability to see smells, hear colour, taste an emotion) and it struck me that this is often how poets communicate – mixing these sense impressions through image and metaphor. Would you comment on this?

I didn't see the program. I think that synaesthesia is important, and is one variety of many syntheses which poetry may accomplish. The poetic creative process can involve registering experience at moments 'prior' to our usual experience, and therefore synaesthesia may be a realisation of experience before, or as, it is divided amongst our various sense organs and processed by the brain. In this way, poetry can render a less differentiated, more primary kind of consciousness, which can be very powerful, though the conceptualisation of such a consciousness is, again, a complex matter.

Apparently the cave paintings of our Neolithic ancestors display synaesthetic qualities. The paintings occur at places in the cave system where the acoustic properties are unusually focused, and the distribution of paint has a correspondence with the distribution of sound.

Certainly, composition, for me, is often driven or accompanied by what feels like a concrete perception of something normally considered abstract: the spatial apprehension of a mental or cultural process, for example.

Wallace Stevens proposed that having a “day job” was essential to his art. What effect, if any, does teaching literature to overseas students have on your writing?

I'm not really sure about the necessity of a 'day job' as such, since I'm not a great admirer of our economy and the way it structures our lives. But I do think that writing poetry is a sporadic activity which benefits from being mixed with other forms of activity. That is not to say that the process of composition is not continuous, or potentially a 'full-time' thing. It's just that the stage of physically composing is not continuously present. I do feel that writing poetry is a sufficient way to justify, or occupy, one's existence, if there's a way to get the other things you need, such as food and shelter, etc. But the crucial question is what works best, or what the right balance is for the individual. It is usually going to be a difficult balance to achieve, because the good time to be writing cannot be anticipated or planned for very well, and because the personalities of poets vary a lot. Dylan Thomas, though needing a great deal of time to compose each line, speaks also of saving a Mars bar just so he would have something definite to do the next day (ie eat it!) thereby staving off a crippling ennui. Personally, I have also found that you can have too much time to write.

Teaching Literature to overseas students, as a particular way to accompany poetry writing, I find pretty amenable. When I was teaching specialist students of Literature in a university English department, I found that less favourable, probably because of the need to handle a great deal of theory. I'm not against theory per se, but it's probably a different mode to composition. A non-specialist audience, like my present is different: I feel more at the interface between the text and the world at large, which is stimulating. It just feels more 'out there' and challenging, and down to earth, though I don't intend a general slur on academics: they often do excellent and necessary work. Again, it comes down to what suits an individual best, along with the more general factors I've indicated.

What would happen if you didn't have this avenue to explore this intense curiosity about experience?

I imagine I'd get very irritable and unhappy, based on the occasional times when, for one reason or another, I can't get to my notebook. But perhaps I would just find a different sort of equilibrium.

So, does your partner recognise this and perhaps need to send you to your room, "Go and pick up your pen! I don't want to see you until dusk!" - that kind of thing?

Well, at least with poems, practically, you can work on them fairly easily, and fit that in around other activities (like looking after children: my son might snatch the manuscript from my desk ten times, but between the ninth and tenth time I'll get to look at it for a sustained period of time!...)

Writing is sometimes seen as an invasive, even predatory activity – through which writers “cannibalise” their own and other’s lives. Is this true also of your poetry? Have any of your sources of inspiration objected to their inclusion in your verse?

Yes, writing can certainly be invasive, though it depends on how people define and protect their borders. Some people said they thought my second book *Body-flame* was very personal, but I don't really see it like that. It also reminds me of some comments about the sequence 'Twins', in *Occasions*: one reviewer, Alan Wearne, thought it was a confessional poem, and judged it accordingly (ie not as good as Snodgrass's 'Heart's Needle', and so on) But the expression, or confession, of feelings is not my aim: my aim is different: to render experience translucent to other insights: an aim not so dissimilar to Rilke's, I think. Rilke is one of the most satisfying poets to read: the emotion is there, but also a profound intelligence, and his work is so well-achieved in terms of poetry's medium, language. His phrasing is superb: exhilarating without being showy, eloquent without being over-formal or pretentious. It lives in the language, but is never just a matter of linguistic effect: magnificent stuff! Though I'd probably qualify that slightly by saying that his later work, the later 'Duino Elegies' and the 'Sonnets to Orpheus' are most impressive to me.

Some people read my poems and say they're really grim – focussed on suffering. My poems may certainly sometimes be visceral, confronting, but I don't think my tone is morbid. It's not! In 'Twins', for example, or 'Reminder', there's an exploration of the bodily experiences, which are also emotional. But it's not that I'm morbidly wallowing in suffering, or, in some premeditated way, 'transforming' it via the writing process. I think that language, and poetic form, help to crystallise a dimension of my actual experience, which partakes of a kind of freedom within the experience.

That probably sounds rather general and abstract. In fact, I'm just drawn into particular experiences and I try to articulate them. As Phillip Larkin describes it (a poet I disagree with on

many things, particularly politics!) – you get an ‘emotional concept’ which you try, through the poem, to recreate in someone else. This phrase ‘emotional concept’ is quite good – it’s a hybrid, both feeling and thought, and that’s what it feels like – a conceptual depth and a powerful feeling, and that’s what I try to manifest in the poem.

But I digress! If people are uncomfortable about appearing in my poems, I do have sympathy with that, and will sometimes simply not publish the poem. However, my own position is really that the discomfort comes from an overly narrow view of self: we don’t really own our experience, it has a life of its own, if you like. If that experience can be rendered significant in a poem, (it has its own intrinsic significance, of course) then I think that’s worthwhile. So words like ‘predatory’ and ‘cannibalise’ have very limited validity, I think. Nevertheless, you can’t just force your idea of self onto someone, so I would respect a person’s right to define their own limits.

Would you comment on the thematic thread running through your collection “Body Flame”?

I think that the book focuses mostly on the imperatives of the body – though ‘body’ includes all of that unconscious mental realm too. My main mood, I think, was that of vehemently acknowledging the power, indeed near irresistibility, of bodily experience: how we are rooted in it. But also in the book are intimations of a mysterious capacity to intervene in these processes and for them to be transformed: this relates to my interest, again, in Buddhism. So there’s a kind of dialogue between those things in the book, a tension which is still present in my current work. Reviewers of *Body-flame* haven’t made the mistake of labelling it confessional, which is a relief, because I think I also see the book as, in part, a challenge to conventional western poetic notions of self-expression. Emotions, for me, and in *Body-flame*, are not the final word, the final value. Emotion is generally a necessary, probably inevitable, part of a poem, but I would want to qualify Ezra Pound’s famous assertion that ‘only emotion endures’. I think it’s the form that makes a poem endure. Without form, emotion in a piece of writing dissipates and is not distinctive.

How would you describe the thematic shifts in the development of your poetry - from references to your personal experience, the Aborigines and their oppression, the landscape and the day-to-day world?

Well, a constant has been an interest in the natural world, and that has also flowed into what you’d call politically engaged poems dealing with the views and treatment of nature by societies.

With political poems it’s hard to get the voice right, so it doesn’t sound angry, belaboured or didactic. They are hard to do, but I think I can do them better now. So there are a few more of these in the latest work. For example, a sequence called “Catchment” which is about protecting the Wombat Forest near Daylesford.

There's no shortage of such material in Australia, being a continent on which the mass destruction wrought by industrial society has been delayed, but then unleashed with peculiar severity. The subject of indigenous people is of course closely connected to this, and the confrontation between indigenous cultures which are not habituated to very powerful technologies which allow a coercion of the natural world, and our own, is fascinating and one of the most crucial situations for humans to consider. There is a very great deal of misguided thought and argument in this area, I think, and that is a major stimulus to the writing: to try to lay bare the dynamics of it, without vested interest, and without the preconceptions which often doom the debate to endless circling around vague notions of race and civilisation. Of course, there is always the danger that poems can be commandeered by one group or another, and perhaps only a vigorous and thorough critical environment can prevent that, or ameliorate it at least – but such criticism is not really that much in evidence in Australia. Reviews tend to be brief and superficial, longer studies few and far between. General education about poetry tends also to be inadequate, which compounds the problem.

An interest in Buddhism has also been a constant in my work, and this has many implications. It relates to the view of emotions as one part only of the flux of our experience, not the final value, as I said before, and this can result in quite a radical reassessment of the Western tradition. And although, as I also said, I'm not doctrinaire about this (that would be antithetical to the spirit of Buddhism anyway) I am very interested in how devotional poetry works, and how it differs from contemporary forms. Of course, you don't have to look to the East for the devotional: English poets such as George Herbert and Thomas Traherne, for example, are fascinating, and their poems certainly transcend any one religion, I think. Herbert's lines from 'The Flower', 'We say amiss this or that is/ Thy word is all, if we could spell.', although they are evoking the Christian sense of God, can also be read as recognising a Buddhist experience of the lack of inherent selfhood in things. I know that issues of comparative religion are complex, but nevertheless, I think it is valid and important to realise these connections.

There is also, of course, a large body of so-called 'ecstatic' poetry, but there are all kinds of issues associated with evoking the ineffable, which leads to a certain unevenness in such work.

Apart from shifts in focus, have there been any changes in terms of style or structure in your poetry? What has inspired these? Are you currently experimenting with any new forms?

I think when I began writing, I was very careful to let things speak for themselves, as it were: to make sure that I wasn't merely imposing descriptions on objects or events, but that significance was embodied, not abstract: what Eliot called the 'objective correlative', though that term tends to assume a certain relationship between form and content which is not necessarily the one in my work. As time goes on, though, I think you find different kinds of formal integrity, or you become

able to achieve these. For example, in my more recent work I'm more comfortable with articulating ideas which can seem rather abstract, but I feel that I can manage a linguistic representation of them which has, say, metaphoric and performative substance. I also feel more able to make use of the adjectival aspects of language, which, if you're not careful, can seem like cheating, because you're merely appending qualities to things: but that doesn't have to be the case. Making more use of the various possibilities of sentences is another development, I think, and a bolder use of rhetorical devices, such as repetition. Although Rimbaud called for the death of rhetoric, (and I can see why he wanted that, given his literary context), rhetoric is really ineluctably part of language, and can be used without compromising emotional sincerity, as long as you're aware of its dynamics, both historically and technically.

Interview with Rosalie Ham

Rosalie Ham, author of *The Dressmaker*, interviewed by Neralie Hoadley.



Can you tell us how you became a writer?

Writing was part of my childhood because I lived in a small, isolated rural community, so writing letters was what you did. That was in the days when the postie came twice a day. I used to write to relatives. It seemed that the only thing I was ever good at at school was composition. Then I went to boarding school, as you do if you are a farmer's daughter, and I nurtured also the writing thing. Then I travelled overseas so I kept writing journals and writing letters, and always enjoyed it but nobody ever said that you can be a writer, because I was a farmer's daughter.

They just said you could be a teacher or a nurse. Anyway, I came back from travelling overseas, and then I decided that I wanted to do something other than nursing so I went off to Deakin University and I did Drama and Literature and learned how to write essays. As part of the Drama course we had to learn how to write plays and scenes, and when I left drama school I had a friend at 3CR and asked me to write a play for her radio show, which I did. So I wrote four plays which were very enthusiastically received by our family and friends. However, it taught me that I didn't want to write plays because I didn't like the theatre thing. It is just too hard, you have to do everything and there is no money so I went off to RMIT. I just decided to do the short story and novel course. Part of the course was to write a novel and so I did. I was only in the course about three weeks and then I suddenly thought, this is what I am meant to be doing, this is what I prefer to do. And so I just wrote a novel. That's it.

You started writing *The Dressmaker* when you were in the Creative Writing course. Apart from starting you off, did you find the Creative Writing course helpful?

Absolutely, in as much as it showed us what was good and wasn't good, how to progress a manuscript and make it publishable, how to write a publishable document. It made us study all sorts of styles that we would never normally pick up and read. But for me it just honed and gave me a direction for my skills, so it was invaluable to me.

***The Dressmaker* is currently being made into a film. Can you explain the process, and your involvement?**

Well, I am very fortunate, because normally when a book is optioned, it is a bit unusual to employ the novelist to write the screenplay, a) because we tend to be a bit precious about it and tend not to want to let our characters go or change the story too much. And b) because we are novelists not screenwriters. But in my case, I had sent the manuscript for the novel off to be published, thinking that it would never be published, and it got picked up first time. It just progressed so that when it was published I had something like fourteen expressions of interest for a screenplay, and I just audaciously said that I would like to write the screenplay. I thought that since I had done one year of screenwriting at RMIT that I would be qualified.(laughing)

But it is OK, because having done that year and knowing the process of the novel I am quite happy about adapting something for a screen and letting some characters go. I know what I have to do. Even before I started on the screenplay I knew that I was going to get rid of at least twenty characters, because *The Dressmaker* has a lot of characters. Also, it is a particular story with a sad bit in the middle that most film producers wouldn't like. So I knew, before I went off and talked to any of the producers, that I had to find somebody who didn't want to alter the arc of the story and go for a happy ending, which most of them did. Overall, the process for me has been enlightening, very joyful, because the people that I ultimately picked who didn't want to alter the story too much, have allowed me to collaborate all the way up til now. I am about to write my fourth draft, and I am about to write it with a script-editor. I have collaborated all the way along with the director and the producer of the film to find how the story will go.

What I am finding now is that we have honed it back to such a point that for certain things to change is actually becoming physically painful for me. The producer had to do a bit of fast talking and ply me with lots of very nice wine to get me to say yes to a recent change. It is now getting to the stage where it is starting to hurt too much and I know that I would be better off stepping back and letting the experts do the polishing. But as far as imbuing it with the spirit of my characters, which is what they want me to do, they are keeping me there for that.

Are your characters coming to life as you want them to?

Yes, as it stands now, they are all going to be how they are in the book, but as I say, this beautiful working relationship might become too painful for me if they really do want to cut out a lot of things. A lot of the readers find particular favourites, and they all very enthusiastic about them and I don't want to disappoint them. I am emotionally involved in the whole thing too which is bit tragic. I am trying to be objective and I'm taking lots of advice but I find the process is fascinating because you write something for a screen rather than something that is read off the page.

What kind of differences have you noticed between writing for the visual images that are going to form in someone's head through reading as opposed to writing the visual images that someone is going to see on film?

It's really difficult because the nuances change so dramatically. You might spend a page on explaining how someone expresses something, and actor can do it by lifting one eyebrow on the screen. One of my characters indeed does that: Tilly, the main protagonist, does say a lot by raising one eyebrow. I use that, but in order for that to work in a book I have to write a whole lot of stuff around that whereas it all can be demonstrated by a fleeting visual on the screen. For me, because I write in a visual way anyway, I write what I see on a screen in my head, it hasn't been that difficult. But I have always had to be conscious of the technical aspects of it - a bit like play writing, how to get people on and how to get them off. It is necessary to keep bearing in mind that everything has to be cut back because you have to maintain audience interest from the start to the end and it has to look good. I'm finding it a bit hard to explain but I write as if I am a camera.

In fact, the transition isn't as hard for someone with your style of writing.

Not for my style of writing. I like words and I like making paragraphs work but I'm more interested in the story and it comes to me via the screen in my head so in that way I am quite fortunate.

Is this your main project at the moment?

No, I am currently writing my second novel. It is also set in rural Australia. It is contemporary, and it is set here in Brunswick as well. It has the same theme - it is just the thing I am on about at the moment - the idea that communities function as a microcosm of the whole world and they represent most things within them, and how boundaries are skewed, how there are insiders and outsiders. Its about people's flaws, there's black humour, there is that whole thing about how country people are so used to death and life cycle, and putting that up against the city thing. It is about a country girl who does well in the city. I am also contracted to write a sequel to *The Dressmaker*. So, with the screenplay, that's me tied up for the next five years.

The House of Illness

Kate Jennings, Moral Hazard, Sydney: Picador, 2002.

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Kate Jennings' powerful new novel is written from Cath's perspective. A freelance writer in love and in New York, Cath finds herself working for amoral finance capitalists to pay the exorbitant medical bills of her husband that Medicaid can't meet. Despite her "bedrock feminism" that had been examined but not "tested" over the years, Cath had married Bailey, a designer and collage artist twenty-five years her senior. Bailey was warm, optimistic, and enthusiastic. Cath was pessimistic and introspective. But they connected. He could understand her, and she could keep him grounded. Jennings defines their early years together as happy, with the usual fights and tensions. But then Bailey began to forget. He had Alzheimer's.

Jennings is well known for reworking autobiographical material in fiction, and Cath, the protagonist of *Moral Hazard*, shares many experiences with Jennings herself. Both women were left-wing feminists raised in Australia in the radical sixties. They relocated to the United States and married men much older than themselves. Their husbands were adored partners, stricken with Alzheimer's. Both men were nursed over many years of disorientation and decline before their deaths. Cath, like Jennings, worked as a speechwriter for Wall Street banking executives, crafting speeches on derivatives and hedge funds to earn enough to pay for her husband's medical and nursing care. Cath, a freelance writer with a cynical bent, entered investment banking wary of corporate clichés and macho business ethics. She knew, in her blunt Australian way, that in her firm "women were as welcome as fleas in a sleeping bag." Cath faced a number of terrible dilemmas that challenged her instincts and stretched the boundaries of her tolerance: working for a craven corporation to earn the money to care for her dying partner; and contemplating ending the life of a man she loved. Jennings' novel explores compromise, moral torment, and defeat, but - like the most fully realised scenes in the life of Cath and Bailey - *Moral Hazard* is at its best when confronting compassion.

Throughout *Moral Hazard* Jennings uses short, sharp sentences. Acerbic and direct. Her writing is usually straightforward and uncomplicated. But some writers, even in brief, vivid sentences, cannot always resist the urge to remind us that they are writers with impressive vocabularies or large dictionaries. This is particularly unfortunate in *Moral Hazard* when the dictates of style jar with the overt content of a love story exploring the painful onset of memory loss and physical debilitation: “He raged, pounded walls, accused me of all kinds of perfidy. This, the most trusting and uxorious of men.” (Perhaps a good test for Alzheimer’s disease is for concerned wives to require their ailing husbands, every morning after breakfast, to define uxorious.)

More impressive aspects of Jennings’ style in *Moral Hazard* include the forceful, but intimate, first-person narration of the expatriate Australian. Cath’s clear Australian voice is heard throughout *Moral Hazard*, particularly in her irony and bluntness of speech. Cath also displays a not uncommon tendency to swear when feeling stressed. But Jennings, like her fictional alter ego, has lived in New York for more than two decades. Rich Americanisms of image and phrase flow through her prose: “At the Fulton Street subway stop, a press of people oozed like molasses through the turnstiles and up the narrow stairways.” When Cath takes her wheelchair-bound husband on an outing from the nursing home to a New York café Bailey eats a bagel (what else?) with cream cheese and lox, Jennings preferring the Yiddish word for smoked salmon.

Cath felt obliged by economic necessity to work at Niedecker Benecke in the World Financial Center. When sketching her corporate characters Jennings at times knowingly presents stereotypes, such as the bullies and bigots who worshipped Reaganomics, railed against affirmative action, and decried the “billions” wasted on the Americans with Disabilities Act. Jennings does not try to discern hidden layers of depth and emotion in such unsympathetic characters, but notes instead that Cath’s boss Hanny (short for Hannibal) was “true to type in every respect” and that the firm’s touchstones of “respect” and “integrity” were “aspirational” and defended by a bevy of lawyers. Her approach to such characterisation is not shallow, unsatisfying, or a failure of the novelist’s nerve. Perhaps every large workplace accommodates a caricature or two. But there is, however, a certain inevitability to her plot line and characterisation: the firm’s left-wing critic of corporate excess takes the bullet when the hedge fund collapses, and the CEO walks away with a cool \$250 million. Shares go up, shares go down. Inevitable.

Moral Hazard is an expression of love for a dying and dead husband, sometimes communicated directly to the apostrophised reader: “Have I told you how much I loved him? Bailey: my family.” It is also a novel of love for the author’s adopted home, New York: an expansive,

encompassing intimacy recorded in a poem of Walt Whitman's that Cath found inscribed on a wrought-iron fence fronting the New York marina:

City of the world. (For all races are here, all the lands of the earth make contributions here.) City of the sea! City of the wharves and stores – city of the tall facades of marble and iron! Proud and passionate city – mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!

New York is home to Kate Jennings and to Cath. And both women have contributed their loss to New York's torment and the pain of its citizens. In *Moral Hazard* Jennings portrays the individuality of Cath's anguish and bereavement. Cath's loss is unique because of her passionate relationship with Bailey, but also common: shared with other caregivers, including Jennings, who love partners that no longer recognise them. The stunned sense of loss at the heart of *Moral Hazard* resounds with the horrors faced – like the unexpected onslaught of Alzheimer's – by a shocked city after the sudden attack, and then the dramatic, irreversible, crumbling of the World Trade Center on September 11, when all that was solid melted into air.

Moral Hazard is a short novel about love and finance capital, weighty subjects treated with surprising economy. In her earlier novel, *Snake* (1996), Jennings wrote a brilliant book – sadly now out of print – in which she used deft sentences and brief, poetic chapters to reveal the domestic tragedies of an Australian rural family without condescending to the reader or burying her audience in unnecessary detail. But with *Moral Hazard* the punchy sentences lose their impact when the writing occasionally degenerates to listing names of bankrupted companies or financial scandals that are meant to speak for themselves - such as the Asian meltdown, the Russian loan default, the crisis in hedge funds, or the dot-com bust. (We could add Enron, WorldCom, and OneTel and HIH to bring globalisation more up to date and closer to home.) The relationship between Cath and Bailey is individual and deserves the close, detailed attention provided by Jennings' novel: the type of personal attention a loving wife gives her debilitated partner when he can no longer dress himself, control his bladder, walk unaided, or remember his friends. The moral hazards of working in finance capital deserve more intimate detail as well. Not so many catalogues or buzz words; more complexity and literary "thick description" of an individual financial case that would draw the exemplary from the richly specific. Jennings often equates the dementia of finance capital with the dementia of Bailey's last years, but the destructive madness of derivatives, currency speculation, and hedge funds is named rather than examined in this novel.



At the Graveside and At Home

**Tracy Chevalier, Falling Angels, London:
HarperCollins, 2001**

Reviewed by Janie Gibson



Many writers choose to write historical fiction. Some however, are far better than others at conveying not only events, but also the atmosphere of the time. In her second novel, *Falling Angels*, Tracy Chevalier again captures the feeling and atmosphere of the period she is using as her background setting. We come to know her characters, both adult and child, not by what she tells the reader, but by their behaviour, their thoughts, the words and the tones of voice they use.

The opening paragraph does not specifically define the time or place. However certain phrases in the text gradually draw the reader into the historical period Chevalier is evoking. Initially the novel appears to be just another story about a difficult marriage, but as the plot unfolds, it becomes multidimensional. Not only do we view the relationships and events through the parents' eyes, but also from the point of view of the children, the servants and outsiders, such as the gravedigger's son Simon.

Two families, the Colemans and the Waterhouses, meet through a visit to their family gravestones positioned side by side. The relationship is immediately coloured by the disdain which each has expressed for the other's choice of headstone: the Waterhouse's sentimental angel and the Coleman's austere urn. Unconcerned by their parents' difference, the five year old Lavinia Waterhouse and Maude Coleman strike up a firm friendship while exploring the graveyard. Here they encounter Simon, the apprentice gravedigger.

The gravestones are but one symbol of the social gulf between the families and their inability to overcome it. The two women hold their 'at homes' on the same day to avoid having to invite one another. The Queen has died but the Coleman's do not go along wholeheartedly with the rituals associated with mourning her, contrasting sharply with the Waterhouse's devotion to 'ritual' and the past. These attitudes are further emphasised by Chevalier through the continued relationship of the two girls.

Chevalier uses events and symbols to convey the differences between the marriages and lifestyles of the adult Colemans and Waterhouses. As the novel progresses, Chevalier explores the Coleman's marriage problems. While they go to events together, they do so under sufferance. Attending a Guy Fawkes bonfire, Kitty draws comparisons with their actions and their relationship. As she moved closer to the bonfire, Richard stayed back looking up: "That is just like him - his love is not in the heat but in the clear sky".

Chevalier succeeds in conveying the period and the physical space the characters move through by developing their commentary to include descriptions of their houses and the places they visit. Thus a description of a particular building might come through a character discussing her reason for holding an 'at home' in the front room rather than the parlour. We also come to know the cemetery, which plays an important role in the story, through the actions of the characters, and what happens in the cemetery, as well as from brief descriptions of the gates or the hill leading to the graveyard. Social context is also conveyed in this way. Attitudes to pregnancy and abortion 'below stairs' are contrasted with those in 'society', and we see the shame that Kitty's involvement with the Suffragette movement brings on Richard's family name. Chevalier allows the reader to 'imagine' the meeting of the Suffragettes at Kitty's 'at home', while at the same time using Waterhouse's tone of voice as she describes the meeting to convey the disapproval many would feel at such noisy women being at 'afternoon tea'. Perhaps for some readers her sparseness may be a problem if they are unable to visualize the scene.

Chevalier successfully attunes her language to the age and gender of the speaker. The book is divided chronologically into sections, but within a section each chapter provides the reflections of a character on his or her part in the action. It is through this ability to capture, for example, Simon's Cockney accent and feelings as vividly as the more educated Maude's or the dramatic Lavinia's reflections, comments, and feelings, that not only is the reader caught up in the events unfolding, but also comes to empathise with the different characters as their lives are changed. Minor characters become individual people, integral to the plot.

Over the ten-year period covered in the novel, the relationships between the two families ebb and flow. As Kitty becomes more disillusioned with her marriage she starts to take risks to gain

personal freedom. In doing so she sets in train a series of events that not only affect her, but also change the lives of all the characters.

Chevalier has the ability to tempt the reader to explore further the period she is writing about, along with creating hope that she will repeat the performance a third time.

Open-mindedness in the age of closed borders

**Per Knutsen, Vil du ha meg?, Oslo: JW Cappelen
Forslag, 2000**

Reviewed by Meagan McCue



As the issue of asylum seekers is debated and governments globally see refugee immigration as contrary to the social and economic interests of their population, Per Knutsen's *Vil du ha meg?* (Do you want me?) provides a welcome contrast to these negative attitudes. Set in contemporary Norway, the novel begins benignly enough with Emma. She has the expected teenage troubles with her mother, twin sister and brother Tora and Finn, and their father, Kristoffer. Emma's biological father is away, mostly in the south, but Emma has the key to his apartment building and begins to go to his flat regularly, unlocking the door to adulthood when she becomes uneasy about the noises being made in an African neighbour's flat. As she inhabits her father's empty home and moves away from the comforts of being a child, she unexpectedly explores her new identity, emerging as a more informed person.

Emma befriends Leo, the African neighbour. He remains nameless for most of the novel, as a symbol of his foreign background with its unimaginable horrors. Once a child-soldier during Sierra Leone's civil war, Leo now lives with his aunt in Norway. He resorts to making money by killing unwanted kittens in his new home, acknowledging to Emma that he is good at killing yet it weighs heavily on his mind. Losing his family to the ravages of war has taken its toll on Leo, but he takes a chance with Emma. Both characters find in each other uncomfortable aspects of themselves and an unlikely friendship develops.

Norway has a very liberal attitude towards encouraging young people to be informed on all sorts of topics, and this novel, designed for young readers, is no different. It examines relevant themes

from parental tensions, self-esteem, hitchhiking and shoplifting to, controversially, killing. But the book is more than just politically correct ideology, it speaks to the readers as much as the reader is ready to handle. More than this, Knutsen's novel gives us a perspective on refreshing possibilities for the world. So *Do you want me?* has moving elements that also take us to an unknown place. For a while the story belongs to Emma, and teenagers will identify with her awkwardness and boredom with a seemingly comfortable but uneventful existence.

It is only through Emma's discontentment, mooching about complaining to herself that "everyone else her age did exciting things together like she had heard they do in books or on TV, but that experience always alluded her" that ironically she is ready for what Leo has in store for her to understand. She becomes spellbound by the mystery in the neighbouring flat and resorts to stealthily watching Leo's grim movements. Leo opens up an unknown world that entices further investigation and challenges Emma's assumption that she knows all there is to know about our world.

It is while she is engaged in pushing the limits of trying to learn about Leo's life that she feels fully alive.

She said, "Killing. Is that what you're good at?"

He looked her straight in the face for the first time as though he wanted to say, "There is more. Much more."

A rotten sneer formed around his mouth. She felt it like a blow to the stomach and gasped for breath.

"I knew it," he said. "you don't want to hear it. You don't dare."

Her heart was pounding. The throbbing in her head was loud enough for her to think that she would lose her hearing. She couldn't think but when he smiled, she knew it: somewhere or other, in one way or another, he had killed someone, one or more. People.

At times the reader may be sceptical about Knutsen's ability, as a white person, to portray Leo's experience. However, there is an important place for the experiences of refugees to be told by the affected countries themselves. Knutsen's story does not shy away from telling something that needs to be told, even if it is only in a limited form. His writing successfully strengthens the spirit in the way that is possible with literature.

"Do you want me?" – a significant line towards the end of the novel, plunges us into the world of accepting others with terrible pasts, assessing what it takes to accept Leo, so young to have used real guns in the game of war and to grieve the death of his family. Knutsen reminds us that there

is more to the person who has committed a horrific crime than the criminal act itself. Due to this, there is the possibility of redemption and embracing other unique elements as Emma discovers, meeting Leo again on holiday in Oslo after he has moved away from Emma's hometown.

He smiled. It wasn't a teasing or malicious smile. It was the kind of smile that she had dreamt about, the one in her imagination that she had managed to see from a boy, once, no, many times, imminently, momentarily, when she was older, when life began to be more ordered, the kind of smile that everyone dreams about. She had never seen it before, only in films. Now she saw it.

Knutsen provides a positive insight into what develops between people of various backgrounds. This is not the only attitude in Norway, with the recent racial murder of a fifteen-year-old Norwegian boy of African paternity. Norway also has a history vastly different to English-speaking countries on how to deal with child-murderers. While perhaps it may not be appropriate to make the comparison between child-soldiers forced into war and child-murderers, nevertheless children who have killed is a reality that many communities worldwide are coming to terms with. Norway has a similar case to the Jamie Bolger murder, but the community affected has a more forgiving nature than England's, seeing it as their responsibility to rehabilitate the two Norwegian children rather than incarcerate them for long periods. In *Do you want me?* Emma, with the encouragement of her family and friends, ultimately embraces Leo and encourages a friendship with him, though it takes time and patience. Knutsen suggests it is not an easy path to redemption.

The Nordic setting with its woods, clusters of spruce trees and fjords, can feel very removed from the Australian landscape. Any cultural disparity is overcome with most of the novel acquiring its own pace and momentum, centring on the universal elements of a teenager's life. The hazards of hitchhiking and stealing, the petty jealousies as Emma's friends fight over Leo's attention, exhilarated dancing, Emma's romantic journey to Leo's secret place: these are all intriguing and, combined with the discomfort of losing one's innocence, make us understand the inevitability of Emma's imminent transformation. Leo appears to be left thinking his fate is unsettled, though this is certainly not true. But it is only Emma and the readers who are privileged to know otherwise.

Knutsen, an accomplished writer of adult and children's fiction, captures the transition between childhood, its family squabbles, and an encounter that shatters our sheltered existence in the West. He has given a fresh perspective on teenage fiction that has serious overtones. Within a very readable description of the daily life of teenagers, with all of its compassion and contradictions, Leo's past and his needs emerge as a catalyst, strikingly vital for the whole world to understand.

What secrets do you have from long ago?

**Ian McEwan, Atonement, London: Jonathan Cape,
2001**

Reviewed by Nina Waters



Ian McEwan won the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* in 1998. *Atonement* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001. I have been a McEwan fan for a long time and this is the best of his prolific output yet. Starting very slowly, it becomes more gripping as the plot and characters develop and intertwine – quite irresistible! *Atonement* is an engaging novel with a message about how we all attempt to edit our own versions of history.

The title *Atonement* hints at a dark secret, a need for retribution, something we can all be curious about with our own hidden secrets. McEwan's story of the intricate relationships within an English family staying at an estate begins in the 1930's, progresses through wartime, and then concludes, with a twist at the end, in the present day. The complexity of youth, along with the vagaries of maturity, the awakening of sexual awareness, and the agony of desire and guilt, all contribute to an intriguing and hypnotic plot.

McEwan's use of female characters as the main protagonists is well executed. We meet Briony Tallis, the fiction writer, the storyteller, and the dramatic director, in the process of writing a fantasy play with all of its associated drama. Despite its melodrama, Briony's fairy tale, *The Trials of Arabella*, becomes a symbol of her obsessive search for perfection. When Briony inadvertently witnesses something disturbing and interprets it in her own impressionistic manner, life will never be the same for the characters drawn together at the estate.

The second part of the novel is quite a contrast to the first. The descriptions of battle and its aftermath are well written and graphic. The emotional trauma of the war and the wounded is developed in a manner that allows us to feel the anguish and despair of those fighting for their country. The futility of war and the assault on all physical and emotional fronts is portrayed in an overpowering fashion.

As an adult in Part Three, the life experiences of Briony during the time of war enable her to address her earlier actions and their terrible outcomes. The last part of the novel is dramatic. It details the agony of Briony's past and her desperation for retribution. Can atonement ever really take place? Once the damage and hurt has been done, is there anything that can ever really take it all away?

.....how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her.

Words For Secrets

Harry Aveling (ed), Secrets Need Words: Indonesian Poetry, 1966-1998, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 2001

Reviewed by Mike Heald



I recently attended the launch of two books about the ex-Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, at which the subject himself, often known affectionately as Gus Dur, was the guest speaker.¹ Hearing Wahid reminded me of what an extraordinary event his election was, and what a turbulent, complicated country we have as a northern neighbour. In the same week, an article appeared in *The Age* newspaper written by Wahid, entitled “How to counter Islamic extremism”, a topic, of course, very much on people’s minds after the events of September 11th. Wahid’s argument was that many students from Muslim nations who study overseas do not receive a broadly-based liberal education, focussing only on vocational areas such as engineering and the sciences. He argued that, as a result of this narrow education, many of the students lack the intellectual subtlety and capacity to interpret their religion in any but a simplistic, literalistic way, unmindful of cultural change and nuance:

Because they [the students] have not been trained in the rich disciplines of Islamic scholarship, they tend to bring to their reflection on their faith the same sort of simple modelling and formulistic thinking that they have learned as students of engineering or other applied sciences. Students studying liberal arts are rather better served when it comes times [sic] to reflect on the place of Islam in the modern world.²

¹ Greg Barton *Abdurrahman Wahid: Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President: A View From the Inside*, UNSW Press: Sydney, 2002; Wimar Witoelar *No regrets: reflections of a presidential spokesman*, Equinox Press: Jakarta, 2002.

² *The Age* 10th April, 2002, p15

I read Wahid's article with an interest fuelled, in part, by my own professional role within the teaching program responsible for this journal, the Foundation Studies Program of Trinity College, Melbourne University. The wisdom of including humanities subjects, such as Literature, Drama and History of Ideas, as compulsory elements of our Core Curriculum, is periodically questioned, from the position that a functional competence for one's vocation is all the formal education that a young person needs. The error of this way of thinking, and the very real connection between suicide bombers and intellectual training, is made very clear by Wahid. Intellectual subtlety, a capacity to deal with ambiguity, metaphor and cultural relativity, are by no means disposable, abstract or decorative educational objectives: they are indeed 'foundational', and they lead to certain kinds of behaviour which are highly preferable to anyone who values an open and tolerant society. The Core Curriculum of Foundation Studies at Trinity guarantees, for example, that students encounter, and reflect upon, poetry. And poetry, as this anthology *Secrets Need Words* again confirms, entails a grappling with the subtleties of human experience: so that, through Harry Aveling's translations, we encounter the ambiguities, the passions, the uncertainties and, in general, the inner life of Indonesians in the Suharto years. After reading such a collection, we can no longer believe in simplistic, or strategically distorted conceptions of contemporary Indonesia: they are dispelled.

This power which poetry has to witness particularity and ambivalence is no doubt at the root of one of the main phenomenon both the poets and Aveling deal with: the issue of repression. This issue has personal resonance for Aveling:

I set out for Indonesia on 6 April 1996, but to my surprise was denied entry at the airport in Bali and required to return to Australia the following day. This was in accordance with a prohibition placed on me in July 1994, which I had not known about. The reasons for this unexpected ban were not clear at the time, although they were apparently related in part to my earlier translations of the dissident Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer.³

Aveling's response to this situation reminds me of my own reflections when reading, in *Secrets Need Words*, about poets who are banned from reading their poems in public, as has happened, for example, to WS Rendra. A first response can almost be one of jealousy: if only poets in Australia were taken so seriously! Thus, Aveling relates that he was 'upset but not totally cast down. Exclusion was also something that was considered a "professional hazard" among Indonesianists. (Jokingly, it was sometimes suggested that not to have been denied entry into Indonesia, in fact, implied that one was naïve about the Suharto regime)⁴ This is the outsider's response to repression. To be a victim of repression is, of course, neither glamorous nor

³ "Finding Words For Secrets: Reflections on the Translation of Indonesian Poetry" (place of publication unknown) p4

⁴ Ibid p4

gratifying, it is highly traumatic, as Aveling goes on to experience during a subsequent visit to Indonesia: 'But the banning and subsequent visit also taught me the reality of something I had not known before. For the first time I realised the fear under which writers now worked in the later New Order period.'⁵

One of Aveling's main arguments throughout *Secrets Need Words*, then, is that much of the poetry he has translated, can be read as various forms of response to repression, and to the political climate in general. So I will first look briefly at the recent socio-political background of Indonesian poetry.

Avelings' collection gathers poetry published in the years 1966-1998, the time of Suharto's presidency sometimes known as the New Order. In terms of modern history, the assemblage of ethnic groups and islands that we call Indonesia was largely subject to Dutch colonial rule from the late eighteenth century until the second world war, when the Japanese took over. After the war, an independent republic was established, under the presidency of Sukarno. This republic was centred around socialist principles, and literature at this time was often coopted to the cause of a socialist vision. Burton Raffel, one of the foremost translators and scholars of Indonesian poetry comments, for example, that the poetry of Sitor Sutumerong suffered a 'drastic thinning out' in the collection of his work published by LEKRA (the People's Cultural League) in 1962, *The New Era*.⁶ Aveling's anthology takes up the story after the fall of Sukarno amidst widespread perceptions of corruption, and the transfer of power to Suharto.

Via the periods and thematic groupings he identifies, Aveling arranges the book by first describing the socio-political situation, and then speaking about some poets writing during that period, whose poems are then given. This makes for an orderly book, which allows the reader to consider poems with their background still fresh in mind. The danger is that this kind of arrangement will engender a simplistic sense of causality between environment and text. I don't consider this too serious a problem, however, because poems have the ability to speak for themselves, and because Aveling's contextualisation is both flexible and sophisticated.

It is worth remarking, however, that seeing stylistic attributes of poems as symptoms of socio-political pressures is not a universally accepted procedure. Aveling is aware of this, and refers to the objections of the critic David Hill, who argues that the 'fantastical and bizarre styles' which developed during the seventies, were

⁵ Ibid p4-5

⁶ Burton Raffel, *The Development of Modern Indonesian Poetry*, State University of New York Press, US, 1967,p131

unrelated to contemporary social problems and issues. Rather they were concessions made in response to the official suppression of political organisation and analysis, which writers could make without difficulty because of their “universalist, ahistorical literary perspectives” and their “lack of social commitment.”⁷

Hill does seem to make very tenuous generalisations here, though a certain imprecision also haunts Aveling’s argument. The poems of Sutardji akin to “Q”, for example, are similar in their linguistic play to recent works by the Australian poet Pi O, (and many other examples from other writers could be found) yet we must acknowledge that the political situations of these two writers, though perhaps having some features in common, are of rather different dimensions.

Aveling’s general view of the New Order period is that the new regime was at first greeted with some enthusiasm by writers, partly out of relief that Sukarno’s reign was over, but that it soon became evident that conditions under Suharto would not be as amenable as might have been hoped. Aveling summarises his perspective, using some Marxist terminology, (which I think is accessible) as follows:

As a nation increasingly dominated by the power of the president, Suharto, the General Mode of Production of the Republic of Indonesia moved from a poor, largely agriculturally based economy in the mid sixties, firstly to “a regime constituted by the interests of a rent seeking group of military officers” in the seventies, and then to an integralist state dominated by vast industrial and trading conglomerates in the late eighties. The literary Mode of Production followed this shift to dispersed conglomerates, as writing became less based on privately published magazines and small presses and, instead, increasingly dependent on newspapers and booksellers because they were simply less profitable than other items of mass media consumption.

The General Ideology was one which emphasised obedience to a strong but non-political state, through a range of public formulations (most particularly the doctrines of Pancasila⁸) and the active surveillance of the community by a number of repressive state apparatuses, including the army, the police forces, and the legal system. In particular, the means for the shaping of the individual sought to produce gendered persons who were disciplined and full participants in the economic and social General Mode of Production under the control of the president and the ruling elite subject to him.

⁷ *Secrets Need Words* (hereafter abbreviated to *Secrets*) p93

⁸ *Pancasila* refers to the five principles enunciated in the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution: Belief in God, humanitarianism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice. See *Secrets* p88ff.

At the beginning of the New Order, the Authorial Ideology participated fully in the General Ideology through its emphasis on legitimate political change, away from the rule of Sukarno towards that of Suharto, and the appropriate place of the armed forces in [sic] socio-economic and political structure. Once the state turned against the liberal expression of personal opinion after 1974, writers sought a variety of legitimate, but separate, ways of writing in ways which I have argued can be considered to be in opposition to integralist statism.⁹

In a paper given at the Annual Conference of the American Literary Translators Association,¹⁰ in October 2000, Aveling describes the various responses to repression that we see in New Order Poetry, and gives a poem which he believes exemplifies each response: ‘to speak out, holding back the fear’ (W S Rendra’s ‘I hear voices’); a ‘retreat into pure language’ (Sutardji Calzoum Bachri’s ‘Q’); a withdrawal into the ‘realm of the personal’ (Sapardi Djoko Damano’s ‘I Want’); a withdrawal into ‘the use of personal symbolism arising from the world of literature’ (Kriapur’s ‘Search’); and finally, a withdrawal into ‘the safety of religion’ (no specific example given)¹¹.

Aveling does not see this as a wholly negative situation, however. He states in the preface, indeed, that his hope in the anthology is to counter Henk Maier’s opinion that “Suharto and his administrative apparatus have castrated a generation of writers, robbing them of their generative power, the power of being historical witnesses who could tell others about what is happening before their very eyes.”¹² Aveling, on the contrary, wants to show ‘not the failure of Indonesian poetry during the New Order but its great diversity and richness.’¹³

Indonesian literature has, of course, been profoundly affected by its historical circumstances prior to this period, and it is naturally advantageous to have knowledge of what came before. Although much modern Indonesian poetry is characterised by a rejection of traditional forms, to know what has been rejected is often useful. Thus, we may note the absence of prolix and formulaic narrative characteristic of the *sjair*, and we may consider the influence of the epigrammatic vitality of the *pantun*, a form based on the Malay proverb, or the influence of the Romanticism of the Dutch sonneteers, introduced by the colonial power. A familiarity with some of the

⁹ “Finding Words For Secrets” p35-6

¹⁰ “*Secrets Need Words: Indonesian Poetry 1965-1998*”, Annual Conference of the American Literary Translator’s Association, San Francisco, 2000.

¹¹ *Ibid* p8-12

¹² *Secrets* xiii

¹³ *Ibid*

important precursors to Aveling's poets is also valuable, such as Hamzah and Chairil Anwar, poets who can be seen as both 'modernising' Indonesian poetry, and enabling it to live and breathe in the recently adopted national language of Bahasa Indonesian.

The issue of the national language is a complex one, but is obviously of crucial significance to the question of translation. The complexities of translation are discussed by Aveling in "Finding Words For Secrets". The paper examines the theoretical considerations affecting translation, as described by such critics as, for example Burton Raffel and Edwin Gentzler. Aveling thus shows himself to be aware of the issues, both philosophical and practical, involved in the translation process. These issues include: cultural context, ie the way that the insider's feel for the source culture is missing; post-structuralism's problematisation of the link between language and an 'outside reality', and consequently of the aspiration towards any simple form of 'equivalence' in translation; the plethora of particular issues surrounding poetic language in particular, such as its contraventions of everyday language use, its structuration and musicality; and also the questions of what the translator is actually aiming at: a 'new' poem, or the closest possible approximation of the original, for example.

Nevertheless, I have to say that my experience of reading the translations of the poems was generally not satisfying. Often, the poems of protest sound like simplistic agit-prop, religious poems sound formulaic and dogmatic, poems about love and relationships sound cliched or stereotypically romantic, metaphors seem too predictable, syntax is lifeless, and dramatic immediacy and distinctiveness of voice are generally lacking. The deafness I usually feel when reading poems in translation seemed acute with this anthology: I found myself straining to catch the cultural nuance and attack of these words, straining to hear the performative quality which would be part of their oral delivery, which I know is an important and distinctive feature of Indonesian poetry. I felt rather as though I was listening to rich and sophisticated music via primitive and inadequate audio equipment. In saying this, I am not attributing the inadequacy wholly to Aveling's abilities as a translator. Although I don't speak Indonesian, it seems plausible that this source language has differences from English, some of them involving simpler grammatical structures, which tend to manifest themselves in English as the deficiencies I'm complaining of. Also, rather primitive political rhetoric to mobilise people was often the aim of the poets, and not considered a deficiency at all.

Another dimension to the blandness I perceive could be what Geonewan Mohamad talks about in his essay focusing the literary device *pasemon*.¹⁴ Mohamad develops the idea that Indonesian poetry may exhibit an elusive allusiveness (allusion being, according to Mohamad, an

¹⁴ Goenawan Mohamad, "Pasemon: On Allusion and Illusions" in *Menagerie 2. Indonesian Fiction, Poetry, Photographs, Essays*, John H McGlynn and Leda S Chudori, editors, The Lontar Foundation: Jakarta, 1993, p119-135.

approximate though inadequate translation of *pasemon*) due to the fact that most of the poets are writing in a language, Bahasa, which is not their first, and which may severely restrict their expression:

I would like to tell a story, one of an Indonesian poet being forced to write in an environment of linguistic collapse. I am talking about myself, of course, but this same story can be told for other writers, particularly those whose mellifluousness in their mother tongue has been transformed by history into a “stammer”.¹⁵

Thus many poets, argues Mohamad, make use of ‘silences’ instead of the nuances they could achieve in the native tongue, and the poetry comes to rely ‘not on the power of the word and its variations’, but rather to exemplify the way that ‘the matrix of a poem is made up not only of rows of words or lines of sentences but also encompasses the silent interstices that hover between sentences and, very often, form the backdrop for the sentences.’ And so, Mohamad affirms, the feeling we will often get from reading an Indonesian poem is not what Roland Barthes called ‘a mirage of citations’, that is, a plenitude of connotation, but rather ‘a clarity of silence, a measure of emptiness’.¹⁶ My point would be, then, that such articulate silences and resonant emptinesses are particularly vulnerable to the translation process, so that they may, given their culturally and linguistically dependent fragility, simply vanish, leaving the kind of lack I’m complaining of.

Rather than try to mount a general, comprehensive argument about this, however, it might be best to focus on one poem, and to point out what I regard as its deficiencies. In his article, Aveling makes reference to Goenawan Mohamad’s poem “Asmaranda/Love Song” (45):

He heard the beat of the wings of the bats and the fall of
the rest of the rain, the wind against the teak trees. He
heard the restlessness of the horses and the tug of the
chariot as the sky cleared of cloud, revealing the pole star
in the distance. Between them words were unnecessary.

Then he spoke of the separation, the death. He saw the
map, fate, the journey and a war indistinctly.

¹⁵ Ibid p121.

¹⁶ Ibid p126.

He realized she would not cry. In the morning there
would be footprints on the grass in the yard, to the
north. She would refuse to consider what had passed or
what was to come, no longer daring to do so.

Anjasmara, my love, stay, again.

The moon is covered by the wind, time ignores it.

Passing cloud and ember, you forget my face, I forget
yours.

Firstly, I will mention what I think the problems are, and then examine the comments Aveling makes about his translating decisions. In the first two lines, there are too many 'of's, and the syntax is too exactly repetitive and therefore monotonous. Also, what is 'the rest of the rain': that's a very strange way to quantify rain, as if some, or most, has already fallen. To hear the wind 'against' trees is odd, too. In lines 3-4, is it possible to hear a 'tug'? In lines 4-5, it seems redundant to say that the pole star is 'in the distance', since it's in the sky: you could say 'the distant pole star', but there's still a redundancy. There is a jarring contradiction between stanza 1 and 2: 'words were unnecessary./ Then he spoke...', and 'the separation' and 'the death' seems strangely general because of the definite article. The list of things which Damarwulan sees in lines 6-7 is messy: it's unclear whether the last item, war, is the only thing seen 'indistinctly', or whether this adverb refers to the whole list. Similarly, the clause 'to the north' in lines 9-10 could refer either to the yard or the footsteps: the latter seems more likely, but why not say 'leading north', ie 'to the north' of what? Stanza 4 begins with a very odd sentence in terms of temporality: does this mean she has stayed before? In the next line, wind is not opaque and can't 'cover' anything without acting as an agent on something else: 'shrouded', for example, would seem better.

Aveling comments that this poem 'has an elegant, melancholy tone, as the hero Damarwulan takes leave of the [sic] Anjasmara, in order to meet his inevitable death in battle against the invincible Menakjingga. The translation needed to reflect this elegiac tone.'¹⁷ There is nothing to object to here, but when Aveling goes on to describe another of his procedures aimed at faithfully conveying the tone of the original poem, I have trouble following his logic, and I also question the result:

¹⁷ "Finding Words for Secrets" p22

There is, by the way, a further twist in the last line of the poem – “Lewat remang dan kunang-kunang, kaulupakan wajahku, kulupakan wajahmu.” – which intensifies this grief. The second half of this line means “you forget my face, I forget yours”. Literally, the first half means: “Passing cloudy (overcast) weather conditions and fireflies”. The weather suggests darkness, obscurity, possibly rain or mist, and is thus also possibly tears. The word for “fireflies” (kunang-kunang) recalls a similar word “kenang-kenang,” [sic] to remember; the antonym of the word used later in the line “lupa”, “to forget”. Despite their devotion to each other, the greater devotion to their stern duties forces them both to repress their memory of the other. In my translation, I have taken the liberty of changing “fireflies” into “embers”, which is hopefully not too far from “remember” and also suggestive of the forced extinction of love. This too was a way of attending to tone.¹⁸

Aveling’s method of linking phonic resemblance to a connotation consistent with elegy seems ingenious but rather abstract. And the replacing of ‘fireflies’ with ‘ember’ which results, not only seems ineffective (do we think of the word ‘remember’ when we hear ‘ember’?) but also sounds odd because we normally speak of ‘embers’ plural; it also entails the loss of a wonderfully evocative and interesting juxtapositional image, ie cloudy weather and fireflies. Fireflies are alive, hovering in the air: they are therefore like a glowing cloud, or mist, themselves, and form a kind of vital counterpart to the inorganic atmospheric conditions. They can also suggest memory, because of their floating, luminous quality. To my mind, then, Aveling has here spoiled a rather original and striking image, on the grounds of translation principles which seem somewhat abstract and detached from a registering of the specific qualities of the original words. A version with these aspects to which I object avoided, though not offered here as a fully considered or achieved translation, would read as follows:

He heard the bats’ wings beating
and the drumming of the rain,
wind leaning on the teak trees.
He heard the fidgeting horses
tugging at the chariot, as the sky
was swept of cloud, revealing
the pole star. They had no need

of speech, but he spoke
of their separation, of his death.

¹⁸ Ibid

He saw the future: fate, map,
journey, war, all indistinctly.

He realized she would not cry.
In the morning, there would be footprints
on the grass in the yard, leading north.
She would refuse to consider
what had passed, what was to come,
no longer daring to.

Anjasmara, my love, stay with me.
The wind has shrouded the moon:
time ignores it. Amongst
the mist and the fireflies, you forget
my face, I forget yours.

I reiterate my awareness, however, that translation is a very difficult balancing act, and I do not mean to accuse Aveling generally of the specific faults I find with 'Asmaradana'. One of Rilke's translators, Stephen Mitchell, has commented that the two most important factors for successful translation are luck and grace¹⁹, both of which would seem fairly unsusceptible of methodological constraint. Whatever the merits of these translations may be, however, there is no doubt that Aveling provides Australian readers with a wealth of insights into contemporary Indonesia, at a time when the dominant political culture in this country is both simplistic and manipulative in the area of foreign affairs. Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world, for example, but the place of Islam in Indonesian poetry, and in Indonesian social and political life, is not a simple matter. Aveling comments, in a section with the title 'Islam Religion, Yes! Islamic Ideology, No!', that '[d]espite its numerical significance, Islam has had little influence in Indonesian politics.'²⁰ (It is interesting, of course, to read this with the hindsight of Wahid's election as president – and his subsequent defeat.) Aveling acknowledges both the diversity and evolution of Islam, considerations often lost to Westerners taking notice only of Islam's most visible aspects. In Indonesia, he identifies three main forms: traditional, modernist (which strove to 'purify' the teachings through rationality) and revivalist (in which practice is more public and

¹⁹ Stephen Mitchell *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Vintage International: New York, 1989, p297.

²⁰ *Secrets* p227

less severely pruned by reason)²¹. Poets are to be found in all forms, but Aveling refers in particular to a group in the revivalist form, the so called 'New Sufis', poets born after 1950, such as Emha Ainun Nadjib, Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda, and Acep Zamzam Noor, and summarises their distinct feature as a 'lyrical emphasis on interior religious experience' as against their predecessors' 'stricter externality.'²² This kind of poetry has the potential to be of great interest to the West, since it is in keeping with the 'New Age' attraction to Eastern, but not doctrinaire, spirituality, and because it is, in theory, tapping a common source as the work of poets such as Rumi and Hafiz, which is generally to be found on the shelves of even non-specialist Australian book shops. Again, however, I found only an occasional happy coincidence of simple language and spiritual depth in the poems translated here. Taufiq Ismail's 'Reading the Signs' is an example which I think works well: it manages to combine a spiritual with an ecological foreboding, a balance which prevents the more general formulaic abstraction from predominating. Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda's 'The veins of your neck' (257) also achieves a kind of visceral numinousness which is combined with an ominous political dimension:

in his love God has set
an angel on each of your shoulders
...
you need not be afraid
the angels are not policemen

It is not true to say that poets resorted in any simple way to Islam or to religion in general, despite their being, as Aveling says, some degree of protection afforded by religious affiliation, for poets. Although there is some very conventional rendering of doctrine, a poem such as Abdul Hadi's 'Near God', despite its standard sentiment, has nevertheless a kind of yearning for union that can well be read as related to the persistent sense of alienation and danger characterising life for intellectuals in Suharto's Indonesia. On the other hand, Darmanto Jatman speaks with a kind of derisive resignation about God: 'Bah!/ Why bother fighting with God/ He always wins' ('What can I say?' p114), while for Sapardi Djoko Damono, as Aveling relates, 'the very existence of God passes into the realm of clever tales, told by the old to reassure the young and help them endure the suffering of the world. Sapardi seemed to suggest simultaneously that only the myths of religion could give life meaning, yet they were also untrue, and even unworthy of human adulthood'²³. Such a stance reminds one of Wallace Stevens's 'necessary fiction,' but Sapardi's poems don't take on the wry and sometimes searching gorgeousness of Stevens's work, but tend more towards direct, rather blunt, assertion: 'Our parents were wise, they tricked us/ with their

²¹ Ibid p225ff

²² Ibid p233

²³ Ibid p34-5

lullaby legends.’ (‘Pilgrimage’ p53) Sutardji Calzoum Bachri brings the same zeal to his poems of Islamic devotion as he did to his preceding anarchic discontent, in ‘In front of the Ka’abah’ (p238-9):

In front of the Ka’abah, I come to the end of my poems.

After my questions and my restlessness, after my heart
has been driven wild by worry, after the cat has roared
through my blood, this is the way forward.

I look at my veins and search for my blood. My blood
flows in prayer, circumambulation, in kissing the Black
Rock, Bismallah, Allahu, Akbar...

And Sutardji goes on, in this poem, to imply that both sectarianism and nationalism are annihilated by the force of revelation which, borne along as it is by the momentum of Islamic devotion, might surprise and challenge the doctrinaire amongst any religious group, not to mention the politicians who thrive on the conflict of superficial division:

...Everything fades.

Fades. Fades. There is no Tardji. There is no crowd of
Pilgrims circling the mosque. There are no Afghanis,
No Iraqis, no Pakistanis, no Iranis...

Nationalism is another common theme in the book. The hopes entertained for the New Order early in Suharto’s reign have a disconcerting echo in Taufiq Ismail’s “Give Indonesia back to me” (p17-19). W S Rendra is scathing on the subject of exploitation by tourism in “Song of Bali”(p147-9):

This is a different sort of colonialism.

It came so quickly we were taken by surprise.

It came so cunningly we were powerless.

...

‘Oh honey, look!

Look at the natives!

He's climbing that palm tree like a monkey!
Isn't he fantastic! Take a photograph!

The World Bank
helps backward nations
with huge projects,
In which ninety percent of the goods are imported.
We progress like slaves,
Middlemen and consumers.

...

In Bali, they spit on us,
our beds mountains and temples.

And Rendra's tour de force of social criticism 'Prostitutes of Jakarta – Unite!' (21-7) is the most powerful indictment of the social justice situation in this collection:

The prostitutes of Jakarta
the greatest and the least
have been crushed
hunted
They are frightened
Lost
offended and embarrassed.

...

Sarinah!
Tell them
how you were called to the ministerial suite
and how he spoke long and deeply to you
about the national struggle
then suddenly – without even finishing what he was

saying,
calling you the inspiration of the revolution,
undid your bra.

And the threat of violent uprising is evoked by Kriapur's incendiary lyricism in 'Men on Fire' (279):

Leaving their villages, men on fire
head for cities spattered with blood,
to destroy property, houses,
the wind and time

Sexual politics is, in a way, an issue of nationalism too, in that the ideology which the Suharto regime aimed to impose on the whole country, Pancasila, involved a particular view of women. As Aveling puts it, 'most attention was given to forming attractive but docile and submissive female identities.'²⁴ The responses to such an ideology vary in this collection. Arifin C. Noer gives the lie to the objectification of women by evoking a tender mutual sensuality, while Linus Suryadi Ag praises the wisdom of peasant women. The defence of wives, in Darmanto Jatman's 'Wife' (189-191), is not one which is likely to meet with the approval of western feminists:

We need a wife to look after us
To sweep the yard
Cook in the kitchen
Wash at the well
Send food to us when we are in the fields
And massage us when we have a chill.
Yes, a wife is very important

...

Ah, see. She is as important as our water-buffalo,
the plow, our fields and coconut trees.
We can plow her night and day and she will never
complain...

²⁴ Ibid p162

Aveling nevertheless argues that, against the prevailing ideology, this must be judged as subversive and courageous: ‘The message of the poem was unusual in that it forcefully reminded men to respect their wives and never take them for granted. To some extent, this was still a conventional message, although not part of common national discourse patterns. The poem should not, therefore, be dismissed as merely patronizing.’²⁵ Sutardji ruthlessly satirises male arrogance in ‘A gift of love from an Indonesian gentleman in Iowa City, USA, to a young Indonesian maiden in Jakarta’ (101):

some lovers send gifts of flowers

some lovers send gifts of blood

some lovers send gifts of tears

I send you my penis

may it grow longer and longer

may it stretch thirteen thousand miles

from me to you, ignoring US postal regulations

against parcels longer than 3’ 6”

my lady, my love, don’t cry, relax

open your soul, your mind, be naked

...

Women writers, too, tackle these subjects. Toeti Heraty, for example, quotes DH Lawrence in her poem ‘Man’ (67) to suggest the actual proportions of male sexual capability:

Who says:

“like a little bud in my hand”

the woman holding him

a woman

should be grateful

²⁵ Ibid p165-6

for her good fortune
fortune?...

And Heraty, in 'The Department', lays bare the cruel reality of male 'compliments':

in your last letter
you said
 may you always be
 as young and beautiful
 as you are today.

But probably the harshest commentator on gender relations in this book is Dorothea Rosa Herliany, whose poem 'Married to a knife' evokes a disorienting and violent experience of marriage:

I have arrived somewhere, spinning
in a labyrinth...

there was a scream. It sounded like a song.

...

but I have landed in a place
of perfect alienation: your body is covered with maggots
which I ignore. Until I find complete
sexual satisfaction. Then I finish you too,
I stab you in the heart and
tear off your prick
in my pain.

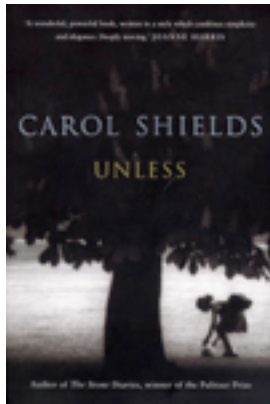
Many of the issues raised in this book, then, are in extremis. We are confronted, therefore, with the day to day realities, dilemmas, and indeed agonies of our close neighbour. And though it is possible that for some of these 'secrets' one might propose alternative words, Aveling's anthology

undoubtedly allows us a keen awareness of situations which will concern and disturb us, however much our political leaders try to render our borders impermeable.

The Idea of “Goodness”

Carol Shields, Unless, London: Fourth Estate, 2002.

Reviewed by Susan Bendall



Unless is Carol Shields’ latest novel and although it deals with power, sexual politics and the interconnectedness of people and events, it does so in a deliberately contained domestic context. Reta, the novel’s centre, acts as a conduit through which notions of family, love and relationships of various kinds are played out against an exploration of more challenging and, at first, more distant realities.

Reta is a 44 year-old writer: a novelist and translator. Her life is presented as a privileged and fortunate one; she lives very comfortably with her husband and daughters and can afford the luxury of writing full-time, meeting friends for coffee and allowing life to take its own shape. The carefully managed order of Reta’s life begins to disintegrate when her 19 year-old daughter, Norah, suddenly appears on a street corner, silently proclaiming “Goodness”, from a sign hung around her neck. What follows is a search for meanings and an explanation for the silent Norah’s retreat from the world.

The idea of “goodness” becomes problematic and inscrutable as it takes on an echoing significance in Reta’s world. It is pitted against “greatness”, seen in the novel as a privilege accorded men and denied to women. Reta speculates bitterly, largely through the device of a series of unsent letters to prominent men, that it is Norah’s exclusion from the possibility of greatness that has caused her to abdicate from life. These letters are vicious, slightly hysterical and somewhat comical in their extravagant invective.

The dynamics of power are examined through gender but also through Reta’s relationship with Danielle Westerman, a feminist thinker who dominates her intellectually, culturally and also professionally: Reta’s most significant work, for most of the novel, is her translation of the volumes of Danielle’s biography.

The novel self-consciously miniaturises its themes, even heading each chapter with “little chips of grammar”, that read as disembodied utterances: Here’s, Otherwise, So, Since, Ever... Shields explains late in the novel that “Life is full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together”. Chapters are short and episodic and although complete in some ways also carry a sense of being fragments of something larger.

Many of the novel’s preoccupations are seen through the act of writing. *Unless* is a very self-conscious reflection on the art. The book considers what it means to write, what constitutes a serious voice and how undervalued certain kinds of writing are. Reta is a respected translator of another’s life, but strives to have her own voice recognised and approved. Her fiction writing, while successful enough, is largely dismissed and understood to be light and without enduring qualities. Reta understands and appreciates writing and struggles to maintain authenticity in her own fictional work. Her writing is deliberately crafted, but her new editor’s attempt at catapulting her work into the realms of “greatness” is misguided.

Being Shields’ last novel – the author is in the final stages of breast cancer – it will perhaps be tempting for readers to take imaginative liberties with the text. No doubt this writing is informed by the knowledge of human closure. It is not, however, pervasively dark; rather it is a gently written, witty and rather lyrical novel which will not disappoint Shields’ many admirers.

Africa Dreaming

By Danny Fahey



Darkness has settled like a contented cat. You can hear it purring through the mouths of sleeping husbands. The urban world dozes as people dream their way forward into tomorrow. Street lamps flicker as if powered by dreams less ardent than they once were. Occasionally a car blunders down the road like a weary predator searching for a feast. Sometimes human voices carry, sounding like echoes of a long ago childhood.

In the bedroom, Suzanne sits in the rocking chair bought to feed the newborn. In the double bed, her husband slumbers, a gentle snore escaping as it does some nights and not others. In the cot beside the bed little Thomas sleeps also, his arms flung free from the blankets, his little mouth pursed in a tiny 'o'. He has his father's mouth.

She sits in the rocking chair at the foot of the cot and stares out the window. Because it is night, she sees her reflection in the glass mingled with snatches of the outside. A lamppost replaces her nose and her eyes peer back from a neighbour's wall. The juxtaposition unsettles her mind, casts it free so that it wanders with a nomadic spirit.

The glass reminds her how frail everything is. How easily things can shatter and never be redeemed. *No matter how many King's horses or King's men.* She reaches out and touches the cold glass; imagines wet dew upon a vast open land where beasts mingle in a display of magnificence. Above the beasts a wide stretch of blue sky and a hot, yellow sun. Birds waft across the blue as if seeking rain to ease their thirst. She has been slipping back of late. Time travelling is how she describes it to friends and relatives who looked at her for a moment too long before shaking their heads and 'tut tutting'.

'I'm wandering back in time,' she explains one afternoon over tea shared with Marianne, her neighbour.

'What do you mean?' asks Marianne, while thinking about a few square metres of dirt in her backyard not yet converted to garden.

She sees the glazed look in her neighbour's eyes and understands. New Mothers are expected to ramble on. Everyone lets them but few actually listen. *It's like adults with children, nodding their heads, muttering their 'uh huh's' but revealing too much in the way their eyes leave the child and watch things happening behind their little, eager heads.*

She continues on anyway, it is nice to hear her voice after the silence of the night. Nice to know sound still exists: That her language is English and not an African dialect lost some thousand or so years before a ragged Christ wandered out of the desert to convert the world to a new sensibility.

‘Sometimes I step out of the shower and shock myself when I see that my skin is white, my hair blonde and straight.’

Her neighbour half-listens but understands little. She hasn’t had her two children yet. *Putting it off until the finances are in order and the mortgage is reduced to a sustainable level. She thinks she will probably rant a bit after the birth of her first. Certainly all my friends have, about all sorts of things.*

‘Africa is haunting me,’ Suzanne explains at the breakfast table one morning to her husband.

‘What do you mean?’ he asks casually, more concerned with the sports page than her words.

She knows he is not really interested. It’s not his fault. Their lack of physical contact since Tom’s birth has opened a small chasm between them. Besides, he has a finite length of time before he must dash off to work. *He likes to read the sports pages before leaving in the morning.* It doesn’t matter that she hasn’t his attention. That really isn’t the point. She needs to say things out loud for her own sake. His input is incidental.

‘I feel Africa in my bones. I hear it in the sounds Tom makes. Maybe I’m going mad.’

‘You?’ he says with a snort. ‘You’re the sanest person I know.’ He stares across the table at her, measuring her, noticing the glow to her cheeks, the way her green eyes shine with life and feels his heart give a little kick. Then his eyes return to the paper and he reads about his beloved Tigers.

If only you knew, she thinks but doesn’t say anything. *How can I explain this irrational fear? This sense of impending doom and yet this joy also, this delight every time I have to pick Tom up?* And with the thought her nipples tingle and she feels a leakage of milk. In the background Tom stirs and comes awake, calling for immediate attention.

It is night. Again. Her thoughts, like twisted kelp, drift upon the currents. She is on a voyage of returning. A voyage spanning centuries of footprints leading out of the birthplace to spread across the globe. Tears always seem close to the surface. *They hover like thirsty insects around the naked light bulbs, their buzzing irritating my eyes, dangerously.* Old heartrending songs tumble in and out of her consciousness like favourite clothes appearing then disappearing in the clothes dryer window. Her hand holds an unlit cigarette. Looking down at the cigarette she thinks of Tom. *His eyes staring, his tiny hands touching my chin, his ridiculous feet kicking away the soft blankets.*

Smoking is confined to the outdoors since her son's birth. Tonight there is a gentle drizzle falling, besides, she cannot bother donning clothes again and she is supposed to be determinedly giving up the habit anyway. *Motherhood imposes certain sacrifices.* Thinking of the cigarette she has a vision of a small African village, the smoke from its fires gently rolling out across the savannah. Outside the window the streetlights gaze solemnly; judges of late night worriers.

A zebra slowly ambles across the horizon. Its huge buttock muscles quiver as it steps. Its muscles are made for speed, make fine food for the preying beasts, but do not appear fulfilled when engaged in a slow walk. The zebra walks with purpose, unconcerned with the few passing cars. Its feet apparently fail to touch the ground. The zebra pauses mid-stride. It settles itself, spreading its front legs out. Its strong neck bows down and its thick, shockingly pink tongue reaches down to lap the night air.

Jonathon lies asleep in the bed behind her. Warm. Oblivious. His long, greying hair lies floating on the pillows. She thinks of seaweed. The ocean stirs within. A traveller's ocean. The Siren's call to go beyond. *Once I followed her call without pause. Now I pause and marvel where that recklessness has brought me. She takes her eyes away from the window and stares down at her feet. Were they once black? Did they ever travel the sands and grasslands of the ancient land?* Sleep seems a long way off.

Early morning. Something startles her and she wakes. Laying in bed she listens but everything sounds normal. She slips out of the bed. For a time she sits in the rocking chair and watches her husband's chest rise and fall. Then her eyes fall down to her own engorged breasts, feels them waiting for Tom's lips to bring relief. Tom starts to stir and she hears the sound of water being drawn from Africa's ancient rivers.

Tom is asleep in his cot. She can hear his faint murmurings. Some nights she wakes in terror. Sits bolt upright and listens, her heart racing, until she hears a noise from the cot. No one mentioned this about motherhood. This fear. This constant living with the hazard of mortality. *This awareness that we cannot control everything, that we have little power in the scheme of things. Only hope, always hope.* She rubs her eyes tiredly, wishing she could sleep and dream her way back to herself.

Behind her eyelids lurk the shadows of ancient dreams. Then she opens her eyes and looks at her newborn son. *What dreams call out to little Thomas? Does he hear the beating of tribal drums? The roar of the killing lion? Has the haunting begun within his tiny frame? Or is he still in the liquid moment of innocent unknowing? The pause before the fall?*

Between the window and the poorly lit street a zebra ceases its grazing on nothing and strolls into the distance. *Is it the same zebra or one of many?* The appearances of the animals no longer startle her. Their stripes, like sharp blades of grass, cut into her present location and send her drifting. She stands under a deep blue sky, her right foot resting on her left thigh, and watches a herd of wildebeest pass her by. Her hand clenches tightly. *Grips what? A spear? A collection of seeds? A woven blanket perhaps?* While her eyes remain fixed upon the zebra's stripes her ears echo with the calls of other animals. The shadow of a vulture passes as it swoops down towards some unknown carcass. *Some poor rotting flesh that failed the test of this land.*

She stirs, pulls her thoughts away from the echoes. As her eyes leave the window she notices the zebra has moved close. It stares back at her with its large, wet eyes. *Is it angry? Does it remember my bloodline? My history? The feasting upon its flesh?* Her eyes fall into the zebra's large liquid pools of dark chocolate. *Perhaps it too is dreaming. Dreaming of a time before man? Before lion perhaps?*

Her hand stretches out and smooths down her nightgown. She envisions a mother's hand wiping dirt from the face of a nomadic child. Hears the sound of thousands of hooves trampling across the open savanna. At this time of night everything seems haunted by spectres of the past. Threads dangle backwards so all can catch tiny, shimmering glimpses of what might once have been.

'Can't sleep Suzanne?' Asks Jonathon as he wipes sleep from his eyes.

'Just thinking,' she replies with an awkward smile.

'You okay then?'

'I'm fine. Go back to sleep.' Even these words resonate. Everything resonates like bones knocked together to form a primordial rhythm.

'Has Tom stirred at all?' he asks.

'He's fine Jonathon, now please, go back to sleep. I'll join you in a moment.'

'Okay,' he mumbles as he easily slips away. He, too, is growing accustomed to her nightly window gazing.

She watches him for a moment then returns to looking out the window. Sleep seems distant, like the tiny glow at the edge of the horizon where the sun has begun its ascent. The glow sets her thinking about another sun. She wonders how it must have been in that ancient country, the sun rising upon small villages scattered like shells washed up across the land.

Since Tom's birth six weeks ago she has spent hours adrift. *The ocean full of the tears I and others like me have shed since our expulsion from paradise. Oh Africa, my mother, were we so bad? Or did we ignore you so completely that we left without a farewell?* It is not uncomfortable to drift for hours, not totally so. It is more that the sands have been disturbed by Tom's birth and

now she must endure the visions while they resettle in new patterns. At first she was frustrated by this alertness in the still of the night. Now she actively seeks out the strange half world her drifting creates. Like some explorer, she wanders the strange between- hours, not searching for anything concrete, just stretching out and seeing where she might venture.

If Tom should waken she delights in holding him up high a moment and staring into his bright blue eyes before passing him down to her waiting breast. After he has sated himself she holds him against her shoulder, her hand gently patting his soft back while her nostrils swim in the scent of 'babyness'. She hums unknown tunes, tunes that feel like lullabies from that continent fled centuries before.

While sitting in the twilight created by the streetlights, gazing down at Tom suckling, she feels the winds blowing through gnarled trees of Africa's archaic forests. The trees seem sentient – almost aware that one day they will be replaced by drifting dunes of bitter sand. *Like hard grittles of dried up tears. Did you shed them mother? Have we hurt you so much?*

She senses Tom's suckling slowing down and allows herself a gentle exhale. His tiny figure, cradled in her arms, stirs her like no planet possible could. This is a force to be reckoned with, this thing between a child and his mother.

After the burp and the sweet minutes spent drinking in his scent, she puts him back in the cot then returns to the rocking chair. Rocks, to and fro, to and fro, each movement stirring up visions, like picture postcards flicked by unseen hands. Postcards of a continent she has never seen nor given any thought to except since the birth of her child. As if his creation is a thread that has led her back to the cradle of humanity. Back to her own impossibly distant roots.

Early morning, the light just beginning to damage the night, she sits by the window staring up at the stars. *Are these the stars that shone from the hot savannas where once I sat on my haunches and drank, sharing water with elephants and wildebeests? We shared the common foes then, we weaker animals. How swiftly things change, how quickly the toothless gain their first incisors.*

She is aware that if she were to lower her eyes the zebra would be there again. She smiles to herself as she shakes her head. *Tom shall wake soon, demanding.* She can feel his weight in her arms, his lips at her breast. She pushes herself out of the chair and crosses back to the bed, slides in and cuddles close to Jonathon. He mumbles and she moves closer feeling him snuggle his buttocks back into her as acknowledgement of her return.

While she sits drifting in the rocking chair or in traffic jams her flickering eyes capture the zebra's gaze and her ears thrum with the lion's hungry song. If she is in the chair it is usually Tom's developing lungs that break the spell and bring her back to the present. Back to the delicate

discovering of this new role. *Will I ever grow accustomed to the smell of his skin? May it always remain this marvel?*

Sometimes she holds him close and inhales his scalp, catches a glimpse of Africa as it once inhaled our scent, marvelling at her new creation. She runs her hands over the skin of his stomach and feels Africa's worn-out sand sliding beneath her bare feet, some of it managing to cling as if hoping to hitch a ride to a new beginning. *How far we have run. How very far. And for what? What was the goal?*

If she is in a traffic jam someone's blaring horn shatters the spell and she returns to her surrounds. Guilt overwhelms her. *I must be more careful. I cannot just drift. Tom is in the baby carriage in the back of the car, he relies upon me.*

All tasks carry an undertow that threaten to pull her down towards oblivion. Sometimes she feels that it would be an easy matter to let go and fall back into Africa's cradling arms. While her hands grip cooking utensils or nappy pins, Africa's hot skies whisper stories of times too distant to comprehend. Stories that vibrate deep within; set motions into strange disarray while she succumbs to a hot forgetfulness. The kettle whistles for attention, the refrigerator hums about its miserable loneliness, everything beckons and thrusts her deeper into the waking dream. Only Tom lures her back. Only Tom connects.

Her son rests his head upon her chest. He teeters on the edge of sleep, the fingers of his right hand buried in the tresses of her long hair. She rocks to and fro aware that Jonathon lies staring at her from the bed. She turns to her husband and he smiles.

'You're both beautiful,' he says quietly.

She nods foolishly, feels the tears threaten at the corners of her eyes. Averts them from his gaze by staring out at the zebra grazing in the shadows between the two lampposts. *Have we travelled long across the grasslands? For water perhaps? Did we drink you dry dear Mother? Is that why we left? Do we sit around the campfires situated at your perilous boundaries and watch the sparks drift into the night sky to become new stars under the world's expanding consciousness?*

Tom's eyes, heavy with the day's expense, lose their will, close like silent blinds. She knows the instant he is asleep. So softly, so easily does he slip into a realm she cannot enter. Stranded, she waits at the shore while he drifts far, far away. *Africa my mother, did you feel like this when we fled (or were abducted)? Did you watch us leave with sadness buried in your breast? Or did you urge us on that journey, pride filling your heart as we spread out like an unravelling blanket?*

She lifts her hand and cradles his soft head as she rises up and places him in the cot. She looks down at her sleeping son and wonders at his dreams; how virgin must be their landscape, how unwearied it must be with colours bright and eager and a heart daring and unimpeded. She remembers that heart. Remembers it like an old friend gone walkabout these many years.

Looking down at his small, comfortable head, she thinks of Africa. Young Africa freshly risen from the bones of terrible lizards. Soil exploding with life – not Africa as she is now, tired and too full of experience but as she must have been in that crystallized time when anything seemed possible. Clear faced, vital, her valleys spreading wide to allow for the birth of humanity.

Tom shifts, resettles in the cot. She can still feel the weight of him in her arms. Knows she always will. His weight lifts my weight.

‘Coming to bed?’ asks Jonathon.

‘Soon,’ she replies, ‘I promise.’

‘Can I switch off the lamp?’ he asks.

‘Please,’ she says quietly as she returns to the chair.

‘Suzanne?’ he asks.

‘Yes?’

‘Nothing, goodnight, I love you.’

‘I love you too Jonathon, goodnight, I won’t be long, not tonight, I’m tired.’

He reaches across and switches off the lamp and the room shrinks into the dim light of the streetlights. She sits in the chair and thinks about the day. Smiles at Tom’s remembered triumphs. She can feel the ripples his becoming has wrought within. Feels them spreading out. *Like a great migration. Again her thoughts turn to Africa. How terrible the pain of that birth, the agony of their ascent into a reason that no longer needed her?*

She sits and watches the light dancing into night and rocks to and fro, to and fro, the rocking chair’s wooden legs wearing its space in the thick carpet. She watches her son’s chest rise and fall, rise and fall: *A tiny continental plate, moving in dynamic rhythm.*

Almost, she reaches out and touches his cheek, touches that childhood left far, far behind in the land before awareness: *Before the sad knowledge of the sands slipping through the gap. The apple had a steep price.*

She can smell the smoke from the campfires; can hear the voices murmuring at the encroaching dark while jackals call to each other in savage yips as if death worked in Morse code. *Instinctively everyone pulls their children closer; like gold the children were, like the living dreams of all possible futures. The jungle surrounds the thatched huts, threatening to overwhelm the villagers. It is so easy for a young child to perish in jungle, alone, lost, swiftly forgotten.*

She lifts her head up and gazes at the ceiling rose. She sees bright skies and tastes rich soil between her cracked lips. *Did Jonathon and I once walk together beneath Africa’s clear-eyed skies? My child, asleep in the cot, was he once there also? Are we reverberating? Self-repeating? Has his birth opened up a corridor to my distant beginnings?* Africa haunts her being so

intrusively that she cannot escape its possessive sweat. Her skin is always flushed, beads always gathering at her temples and top lip. Jonathon has noted her increased temperature while her heat sends Tom into easy sleep.

She looks at the empty double bed. Jonathon has gone out for the evening. She thought she would not miss him. Is glad she does, fiercely. For the first time in months she feels a need, a deep pulse. She realizes that she has not seen the zebra for several days now. *The ripples finally resettle; the new pattern grows so familiar it is old.*

She yawns, a wide, animal-like stretch accompanied by a loud groan. She pushes herself out of the chair and realises she needs to lie down and sleep. She cannot recall the last time she felt such a desire to lie down and sleep. *And for Jonathon to come home and seek contact.* She smiles, feeling the love she carries for both her men rise up like a sudden wave. Her eyes fill with tears, such an easy response for her since Tom's birth.

Later that night she wakes to Tom's cries. She turns over and discovers Jonathon's cold space. She reaches out and switches on the lamp. Sits up and sees that his side is unused. She glances at the clock. It is eleven-thirty. *Too early for him to be home. Too early to worry though I do anyway.* Tom continues to cry and she pushes herself out of bed and hurries to the cot. She lifts her son and sits down on the rocking chair. His head bangs itself against her breast.

'Hang on little one, hang on.' She slips her breast free and offers Tom her nipple. He lunges, misses once or twice and then latches on and drinks as if it were his last.

She sits in the chair, dozing as he drinks. Half asleep even as she switches breasts. Finally Tom stops and soon falls asleep. She remains in the rocking chair, waiting for Jonathon to return home, for her son to wake again and call her back into his life once more. *Is this how Africa feels? Does she sit under the hot sun, the barren earth sick with grief, waiting for us to return and succour her?*

In bed that night as her husband and child sleep she lies awake and dreams ardent dreams of Africa as a sad, solitary mother who hugs the corpse of her child to her aching bosom. She senses again the gulf between her and Jonathon. A gulf she wishes to break. She rolls over to Jonathon and seeks to rouse him, succeeds. Even in the joining, part of her seems distant, many miles and years distant but returning, like a vessel after a long voyage. She feels the land will soon be reached.

Steep Stairs Volume 3: 2003

Txopokods and Clay Pots

Betty Mindlin and indigenous storytellers, Barbecued Husbands, London: Verso, 2002.

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Betty Mindlin is an anthropologist living in Brazil, and a founding member of the Institute of Anthropology and the Environment. IAMA has been involved in extensive fieldwork with Brazil's indigenous communities since the early 1990s, promoting native languages through multicultural and multilingual programs. The compellingly titled *Barbecued Husbands* is Mindlin's new collection of stories recording the extraordinary myths of tribal peoples from Rondonia, a remote area of the Amazon near the Brazilian border with Bolivia. Mindlin arranges the short, frequently shocking stories according to six tribal groups, representing the oral storytelling of the Macurap, Tupari, Ajuru, Jabuti, Arikapu, and Arua peoples.

To a Western reader the stories contained in *Barbecued Husbands* appear fantastic. Human heads detach from their bodies at night and fly through the air in search of food. Tapirs strip off their fur and transform into seductive humans. Mothers turn upside down and become cooking pots for slow boiling *chicha* (an intoxicating drink best made by women – because vegetables chewed by women make a sweeter fermented drink than anything masticated by men). Piranhas spring fully formed from the severed head of a devoted, but discarded wife. And the disappointed dead ascend as newborn stars or constellations. Yet these seemingly extraordinary oral narratives are coherent tales of origin, identity and instruction within indigenous societies. This rich collection of myths provides a wide range of stories explaining natural phenomena, human skill, and social mores of interest or practical application to tribal people. Various storytellers relate why Brazil Nut trees are tall, why thunder roars, or why women menstruate. (In ancient times men used to menstruate and women would tease them

about it, but since the day men retaliated by flicking menstrual blood at their tormentors it has been women who suffer.) These stories explain the origin of cool rivers and the difference between venomous and non-venomous snakes. They narrate how the tribe survived disaster, and the origin of clay pots. These stories also warn against incest and the dangers of spirit lovers sneaking about at night. And young girls are counseled not to reject short suitors or they might end up with a snake for a husband!

The myths are often brutal, direct, and yet dreamlike, with sex, food and death constant preoccupations. Hunting and foraging skills, body painting, drinking parties, love in a hammock, and the medicinal snuff associated with shamanism mark positive dimensions of life for the peoples of the jungle. But the Amazon is no idyll. Jealousy, vengeance, cannibalism, wild beasts, and malevolent spirits mark the dangers and despairs of tribal life. A number of the stories deal with the near extinction of the tribe. Ghosts populate the jungle, and villagers need to be constantly alert and aware of danger. Significantly, in some tribal languages the word for evil spirit is also the word for white man, but many of these stories predate contact with Europeans. The villages also have their own endogenous problems unrelated to the historic disaster of colonisation, making life in the primal Amazon less an Enlightenment-era State of Nature – populated by nakedly happy noble savages – and a little more Hobbesian in prospect: nasty, brutish and short. Adultery or unrequited passion leads to murder or rape; scarcity brings theft, slaughter and cannibalism; and the Stubborn One, as is painfully apparent in many communities, ruins things for everyone. At times the narrator of a gruesome moral tale links the old story with current practice and past – often violent – behaviour, such as the Tupari legend of a girl who refused to get married. She was killed, roasted, and eaten. “Even today, when a girl doesn’t want to get married, they tell her the story of Piripidpit. In the old days, if a girl didn’t want to get married, they had her killed.”

A small number of the indigenous narrators of these marvelous legends were born in remote areas of the Amazon before contact with white people. They suffered the decimation of their communities from introduced diseases like measles, or were forced into near slavery on rubber plantations in the 1920s and 1930s. Many were dispossessed, moved on from their tribal lands, or required to work on the plantations before some groups attained land rights in the late twentieth century. The six tribal groups represented in *Barbecued Husbands* represent a total population of 750 people. In some of these tribes only five or six people retain knowledge of the traditional language. Mindlin has had contact with one tribe, the Kanoe, where only one native speaker remains.

While a few of the native storytellers spoke to Mindlin in Portuguese, most used their native language. Some of the stories in this collection have passed down a complex path of translation from one indigenous language to another, then into Portuguese and finally rendered in English.

They remain vibrant and challenging for the non-indigenous reader, with striking imagery and occasional echoes or themes repeated in the stories and across tribal groups. Mindlin has sought to be true to the mood of the narrations rather than literal, although she has been careful not to invent material. She is keen to have her collection live as a resource for indigenous peoples, and Mindlin has retained over three hundred hours of tape-recorded stories for others to use for education, further research and translation. The Jabuti, among other tribal peoples, believe in the transformative power of words: “In those ancient times, what was said happened.” With *Barbecued Husbands* and other collections like Mindlin’s living archive, things will continue to happen.

And finally, some practical advice: Whenever confronted by a ravenous Txopokod, do not be foolish enough to believe that handing over all the fruit from an apui tree will satiate this evil spirit. A Txopokod certainly loves *apui* fruit, but your flesh will remain irresistibly desirable. Unless you arm yourself with pepper; then you should be relatively safe.

Imagining a nation

**Peter Craven (ed.) The Best Australian Stories 2002
Melbourne: Black Inc., 2002**

Reviewed by Felicity Henderson



This is the third volume of Australian stories edited by Peter Craven in recent years, and, like the others, it claims to represent the ‘best’ new fiction by Australian writers. Twenty-three writers contribute twenty-four pieces of writing, many of which have not been published before in any form, and some of which are extracts from works-in-progress rather than short stories in the traditional definition. Peter Craven, in his substantial introduction to the anthology, fires off various salvos at Australian cultural institutions or commentators he sees as inimical to his project (and hence, it seems, to Australian literature itself). These need not concern the reader unless the reader is curious about the cut-throat world of Australian literary publishing. More interesting is Craven’s comment that ‘a nation can only feel it exists when it imagines itself’. If these stories contribute to Australia’s imagined identity, what do they tell us about ourselves?

Present in several of these stories is the suggestion of something hidden under the surface of the Australian landscape: an event that might be ignored or forgotten, but will inevitably come to light in a frightening and life-changing way. Perhaps this sense of underlying tension stems from our sometimes savage history of colonisation and repression, which successive governments have done their best to bury or deny. Generations of farmers and town-planners have stamped a certain European-style identity on the land, taming it with roads and fences and cultivating imported livestock and vegetation. However, the ferocity of bushfires and the desolation caused by drought or floods keep reminding us that we have a tenuous grasp on this country. We have an uneasy sense that we don’t belong here.

Our ambivalent relationship with the landscape lurks in the background of several writers’ stories. In Sonya Hartnett’s ‘The Dying Words of the Archangel’, a man lies dying in his bedroom and another hides in the bush outside town. The men are linked by the discovery of bones in the forest. It is not explained whose bones have been found, but the narrative suggests the archetypal Australian story of children lost in the bush. It is a beautiful piece of writing,

illustrating the inner lives and voices of its two contrasting characters with clarity and detail, and an attention to the physical and imagined world that seduces the reader. However, as an extract from a forthcoming book it is slightly too elusive to stand alone here as the first chapter of the anthology.

Liam Davison's sparse prose charts the progress of another 'lost child' story, though again the original loss hovers in the background as the memory of sorrow. Many of Davison's short stories use the Australian landscape and in particular the beach as a setting which sometimes dominates the action, both mirroring and influencing characters' inner lives. 'Men like Beattie' locates two men on a surf-beach and explores the way their memories continue to shape their lives.

Recently published as a novel, John Scott's eerie story 'Warra Warra' tells of a small Australian country town gradually taken over by the ghosts of people killed when a British Airways flight crashed there.²⁶ The ghosts are English, and their cardigans, mournful expressions and the dampness that accompanies their presence all contrast shockingly with the brightness and dry heat of the outback town. This is a story of ghastly re-colonisation and, though it is left unstated, we remember that the Aborigines thought the original English invaders were ghosts when they first encountered them, and were just as helpless against them as the inhabitants of the story are against these new English ghosts.

In 'Christ stopped at Echuca' Jack Hibberd takes elements of the bush stories that are Australia's foundation myths and re-narrates them in a burlesque parody. In his hands, Australia's colonial history becomes a fantastic patchwork of comic-grotesque images and literally larger-than-life characters, including wild Irishmen, itinerant preachers, giant kangaroos, and a bunyip. However, the underlying theme of white oppression of landscape and native inhabitants remains obvious in stark contrast to the overt comedy of the piece.

Relationships, like the Australian landscape, have their concealed histories and dangerous places. The anthology includes several stories which explore the complexities of human interaction. Most are told in the realist mode and are situated in the ordinariness of their characters' daily lives, against which the occasional extraordinary action or insight take on an unusual clarity. Catherine Ford's 'Anchorage' describes a day on a French beach, and the interaction between two families who know each other well, but whose inner lives are hidden from each other, or at best only partially revealed. Joan London, in 'The New Dark Age', follows a man whose relationships are quietly disintegrating after his recovery from cancer. London's story demonstrates the way a person's inner and outer worlds can spin away from each other without any warning, and without any outward appearance of change. Brian Matthews's story 'Literary Criticism and the Second Law of Thermodynamics' describes a literature lecturer's emotional response to a text in which the main character is suffering relationship problems that mirror his own. The tension in Matthews's story comes from the conflict between the lecturer's (and his students') understanding of his job as a literary critic, and his inability to discuss this piece of literature in an objective

²⁶ *Warra Warra* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003)

manner. Unexpectedly, he finds sympathy from one of his students rather than derision or incomprehension. Philomena van Rijswijk in 'Faith, Hope and Charity' tells a simple but engaging story of a man remembering his boyhood and the seemingly-necessary lie he told his mentally-disabled sister. Lisa Merrifield's 'One Lovely Thing' explores the dynamics of a family in which the father's character is completely, tragically, different from his wife and children.

A couple of stories, also written in the realist mode, stood out for this reviewer. In Amanda Lohrey's 'Reading Madame Bovary' a young Australian woman agrees to accompany her schoolteacher boyfriend and a group of underprivileged children on a canal-boat trip in England. The scene seems set for a miserable week. Instead, Kirsten has an epiphany, recognising herself in Flaubert's self-pitying heroine. She chooses to make the best of the situation rather than spend the time feeling cheated and bitter. This simple story nevertheless commands the reader's attention. The insight gained by the central character, prompted by her reading of the French classic and her damp holiday in the British Midlands, is perhaps not profound. However, it is born of being an alien in a foreign culture. In answer to the children's query about 'why she bought so many vegetables . . . she told them it was an Australian custom'. She relates heroic stories of the bush, realising as she does so that 'she was constructing a mythical landscape . . . Some other planet that was hot, white and ferocious'. This reconstruction, something surely done by every Australian abroad in Europe, reminds us of our traditional status as Antipodean other. Like Kirsten, we understand ourselves best when we come into contact with foreign cultures.

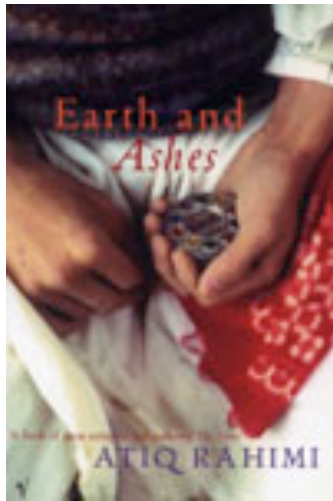
Delia Falconer's 'The Intimacy of the Table' is another story about a young Australian encountering an unfamiliar scene. This time it is an aspiring poet who spends an evening in the company of Kenneth Slessor in 1950s Sydney. Falconer deftly evokes the cultural climate of the time: the young narrator tells us that a poem of Slessor's had appeared in his school reader 'miraculously, among the work of well-known, foreign poets'. This picture of an Australia still lacking confidence in its own cultural productions is mirrored by Falconer's narrator himself, whose 'shabby cream suit', handkerchief and hipflask signal his literary pretensions but who never finds the right moment to show Slessor his folio of poems. Instead, he dines with the great poet at a restaurant where the European-style 'rituals of the service' are foreign to the young man. The intimacy of the table proves to be false or illusory: the young admirer comes to see that the poet's life is withdrawn and essentially incommunicable, and that his hoped-for initiation into the writer's mystery will not take place. Falconer's vision of this fictitious meeting is detailed, and her hero-worshipping but hesitant narrator is realistically and likeably drawn.

These stories span a wide range of genres and themes, and illustrate the depth of contemporary Australian writing. Apart from those already mentioned, the anthology contains work by Tegan Bennett, Gerard Windsor, J.M. Coetzee, Gerald Murnane, Peter Mathers, Jessica Anderson, Graham Henderson, Anson Cameron, Tim Richards, Joe McKenna, Bernard Cohen and Peter Temple. Not every reader will like every story, but most will find something to enjoy in this collection.

Resisting Revenge

Atiq Rahimi, Earth and Ashes, London: Vintage, 2003

Reviewed by Mike Heald



Earth and Ashes is a novella written by an Afghan writer, Atiq Rahimi, which is set during the Afghan-Soviet war: ‘a war ago’, as one review puts it.²⁷ Rahimi was born in Kabul, and, to cut a long and perilous story short, travelled to Pakistan in 1984, where he successfully applied to France for asylum. He has since completed a doctorate in audio-visual communications at the Sorbonne, and is a documentary film maker as well as a writer. Thus, great benefit has flowed from France’s compassion towards this refugee. One can’t help but ponder the squandering of talent, quite apart from the inflicting of misery, that is involved in Australia’s present approach to asylum seekers.

Earth and Ashes is Rahimi’s first book. It tells the story of Dastaguir, who is travelling, or rather, waiting to travel, to the mine where his son, Murad, works. Dastaguir has Murad’s son with him, Yassin, a young child who has been deafened by the exploding of Soviet bombs. Dastaguir is going to see Murad to tell him of some news about his village and his family, news which we understand is not good, but the exact nature of which takes time to emerge. At the opening of the novella, Dastaguir is waiting, in a bleak, dry landscape, for a vehicle to arrive at a checkpoint, so that he can get a lift to the mine five kilometres away. At the checkpoint are also a fairly incommunicative border guard, Fateh, and a very kind, very well-educated and intriguing shopkeeper, Mirza Qadir.

What we get in this book is, if I can put it like this, micro action set against macro action: the minutiae of human life, both interior and exterior, and the vast machinations of war. This juxtaposition is perhaps well encapsulated in the following passage:

²⁷ Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Baltimore City Paper Online*, November 13-19, 2002.

At your feet, your grandson is busy playing with an ant attracted by the naswar you have spat out onto the ground. Yassin mixes the naswar, the earth and the ant together with a jujube stone. The insect squirms in the green mud.

The soldier says goodbye to Mirza Qadir, and walks past you.

Yassin digs with his jujube stone at a footprint left by the soldier.

The ant is no longer there. Ant, mud and naswar are stuck to the boot of the departing soldier. (p17)

One might characterise the plot as slow-paced, therefore, but there is a constant sense of the enormous drag of great disruption. As Dastaguir rehearses his meeting with his son, with modulating degrees of foreboding, we become intensely curious about his news. When we find out the details of what has happened, we then anticipate the meeting with sharper awareness. If the plot thus far has availed itself of these fairly conventional incentives to read on, the ending avoids the conventional, and in doing so, I would argue, succeeds in projecting the central concern of the book beyond its final pages very powerfully indeed.

And the central concern of this work is revenge. Murad, we are told by Dastaguir,

Is not a man who listens to advice or thinks about the law or logic of war. To him, blood is the only answer for blood. He'll take vengeance, even at the cost of his own neck. That's all there is to it. And he won't care too much if he has blood on his hands either. (p24)

Rahimi has spoken of his concern with the act of revenge, a concern which has a personal dimension, in an interview with Gerry Feehily. He relates that his brother, a communist, was murdered:

“My family, fearing I would try to avenge him, kept his murder a secret for two years,” he says. “It struck me that this culture of vengeance was the reason why, time and again, Afghanistan descends into new forms of violence. This refusal to mourn, always to seek vengeance without concession, meant that even as the Soviets withdrew, with one million dead behind them, we were fighting yet again.”²⁸

Personally, I don't believe that humanity is capable of avoiding the vicious circle which revenge perpetuates, without recourse to the profoundest repositories of traditional wisdom. Rahimi

²⁸ Feehily Gerry, Interview with Atiq Rahimi in *Independent Digital*, 25.2.03.

seems to be in sympathy with this view, and with the view that there are, in fact, universal principles in human behaviour, when he says ‘the only cause I am committed to is that of the defence of universal and human values.’²⁹ And in the book, the shopkeeper Mirza Qadir tellingly draws on traditional wisdom to advise Dastaguir when he is faltering in his resolve to tell his son what has happened: “Don’t leave him alone. Make him understand that a man’s fate contains such things...” (p24)

Earth and Ashes is unusual in that it employs the second person point of view: ‘You take an apple from the scarf you’ve tied into a bundle...’ (p1) One reviewer, Rachel Aspden of *The Guardian*, has found this unsatisfactory: ‘Their long wait at a dusty border post is narrated by Dastaguir in a strained second person, both inviting the reader to share his experiences and insisting on his own detachment from them.’³⁰ The last comment about detachment does not seem to me accurate, however. Aspden goes on to judge that ‘filtered through Dastaguir’s apathetic gaze, its [the novella’s] gathered fragments remain oddly unaffecting.’³¹ Yet Dastaguir’s state does not strike me as at all apathetic: stunned, perhaps. Aspden also is dissatisfied with Rahimi’s allusions to the Persian Book of Kings, in particular the story of Sohrab and Rostum: ‘oblique references to Persian epic and Afghan codes of honour aim to transform his slight story into a parable of Afghan history; if these go unnoticed, most of its resonance is lost.’ I would say that if these references go unnoticed, that is negligent reading. Also, these allusions, I feel, do succeed in amplifying the significance of Rahimi’s story, particularly in its violent, patriarchal, revenge-taking dimensions.

Rahimi’s novel has been translated from Dari, one of the many languages spoken in Afghanistan and in neighbouring regions. Again, Aspden is unhappy, remarking that the resultant language is ‘frequently florid or unidiomatic.’³² In my view the spareness of the language is consonant with the deprivation which we witness. Also, the novella has other forms of richness. There is the proverbial, for instance, where Mirza the shopkeeper enumerates the forms which sorrow might take: water, sword or bomb (or all three.) There is also the world of dreams, in which Dastaguir’s predicament is powerfully refigured. And the intense psychological pressure yields vision-like formulations for this agonised grandfather:

You are on one side of the river, Murad is on the other...

²⁹ Tirthankar Chanda, “Afghani Writers in Exile”, *The Daily Star Internet Edition*, Vol 1, Number 70.

³⁰ Rachel Aspden, “Short and Bitter” in *Guardian Unlimited*, Saturday December 14th, 2002, p1.

³¹ *Ibid* p2

³² *Ibid*.

Then Murad starts to cross over to you.

‘Murad,’ you shout, ‘stay where you are child! It’s a river of fire. You’ll get burned! Don’t come!’...

You ask yourself who could believe such a thing: a river of flowing fire? Have you become a seer of visions? (p7-8)

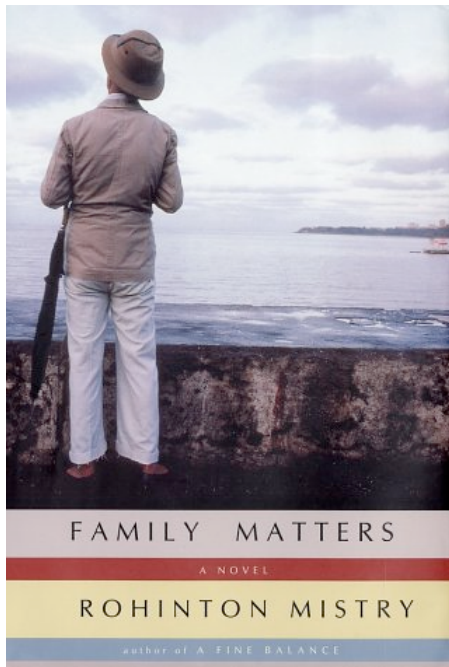
Despite the brevity of the book, Rahimi has created characters of solidity and force. The child, Yassin, is breath-takingly realistic, especially in his undiminished recalcitrance and his way of understanding his deafness. Mirza Qadir’s engrossment in the mythico-religious also is plausible and intriguing. The main character and narrator, Dastaguir, has many compelling aspects, not the least of which is his very poignant wish, in the face of his unpleasant task, that he was Murad’s son, not his father.

Atiq Rahimi, then, has composed, in exile, a work which succeeds in posing and suspending, as it were, a crucial question for the Afghan people. One hopes that, amidst their latest turmoil, there is the opportunity for them to read it. One also hopes that it will receive considered attention in those countries, apart from Afghanistan, where militarism and vengefulness may yet, despite an apparent milieu of tolerance and decency, dominate the national agenda.

Character and Fate

Rohinton Mistry, Family Matters, London: Faber & Faber, 2002.

Reviewed by Janie Gibson



In *Family Matters* Professor Nariman is the central character around which three generations of family revolve. The complex relationships of his immediate and extended family provide the tension of the unfolding story.

As the narrative begins the aging Nariman, a former professor, is living at Chateau Felicity with his stepson, Jal, and stepdaughter, Coomy, in a spacious apartment that he has made over to them. Roxana, Nariman's natural daughter and her husband Yezad live in a much smaller flat, Pleasant villa, in a block with their two sons, Murad, a laconic teenager and Jehangir, a sensitive young boy.

Coomy has never forgiven Nariman for her mother's death, despite the fact that he had continued to care for her and Jal. She is constantly berating him and trying to control his life, both in the apartment and beyond, lest some accident befall him. This is exactly what happens. Having failed to dominate the old man, she then decides he is too much of a burden for herself and Jal, and should be cared for by Roxana and her family, a situation she manipulatively brings about. Mistry uses the impact of Nariman's incapacity on daily life to explore the tensions that arise, as each member of the family is forced to confront their own attitudes to each other. Yezad, for example, refuses to help with the old man, complains constantly about him and the imposition on the family, and even forbids his sons to assist with Nariman's ablutions. This causes anguish for the young Jehangir, who is very compassionate and empathetic, both to the old man and to his mother. This forces the burden onto Roxana and increases the old man's plight and frustration, as he becomes more and more dependent on the family.

Coomy refuses to help the family financially, even though she has control of Nariman's finances. Jal, because he is afraid of her, is unable to stand up to her and so retreats into his own world. Through these behaviours and actions, Mistry is able to reveal the different personalities of the family, as each tries to 'help' the situation. As each one tries to think of a way to improve their financial situation, without communicating a plan to any one else, misunderstanding arises and this further increases the tension in the flat. For example, Jehangir, who has been made a homework monitor because of his good character, tries desperately to help his parents by taking bribes from fellow students. Not only does this upset his parents and teacher when he is found out, but also places him under great stress. Meanwhile Yezad is sneaking off to gamble at the neighbour's flat, further compounding Roxana's misery as she suspects he is being unfaithful.

The goodness and strength of Roxana, the peacemaker, is juxtaposed with Yezad's feckless behaviour. His coolness towards his father-in-law, a man he once respected, his foolish gambling and his high handed attitude once he loses his job, contrast with his wife's self-sacrificing and loving nature. Mistry's characters are realistic, and through their actions they reveal both strength and weakness. Yezad, while having visible flaws, is also shown to be a loving and caring father and husband. He once had ambitions to migrate to Canada, and had tried to improve his position at work by persuading Mr Kapur, his boss, to become a politician. But he seems to be overwhelmed by circumstances and his own 'imperfection'.

Despite the bleak picture that Mistry paints at times, and the seeming inability of the family to ever improve their situation, there are also many moments of humour, albeit sometimes a little black. Yezad's return to his Parsi faith provides one such moment, especially when he tries to impose his fanaticism on the teenage Murad, who previously has had little religious upbringing at all. The descriptions and behaviour of some of the minor characters, such as Mr Kapur, provide some light-hearted moments in the novel. Mr Kapur's behaviour is seen as eccentric because he will not change from the old ways. e.g. he refuses to call Bombay, Mumbai.

A Fine Balance, Mistry's earlier novel also set in India, was a huge canvas, and the fate of the characters appeared to be determined by an inevitability of red tape and tradition. In some ways it was easier to read, because there was so much happening and there was a tension in the story throughout. *Family Matters*, while still having this sense of the characters' lives being determined by fate and circumstance rather than choice, is a more focused look at one family. The canvas is more detailed as you become immersed in a smaller world, the neighbourhood. His setting allows the reader to experience the hustle and bustle of Mumbai, while at the same time feeling the intimacy of the crowded flat or train. The characters are convincing, their behaviour and emotions are plausible. Again, Mistry's story telling involves the big themes: the cycle of life and the fundamental events within it. In this more intimate look at a microcosm of Indian life,

however, we also learn more about how Mistry sees people's characters as their fate, while recognising how their actions, in fact, sow the seeds for their future.

The Heavenly City and the Damaged Throne

Per Olov Enquist, The Visit of the Royal Physician, London: The Harvill Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Claudio Bozzi



The Visit of the Royal Physician, Per Olov Enquist's sixth novel, confirms a shift from the existential concerns of his early writing to an exploration of society and politics, in which he thematises the materialist paradigm that 'humanity does not exist as Humanity, but must always be related to historical and political realities.'

Enquist has adapted the influences of post-Existentialism to the tradition of Swedish documentarism. The documentary novel saw literature as a research into reality committed to reaching behind perceptual and experiential conventions and was premised on a direct involvement with the social conditions it sought to unveil. Its critical and analytical activity was held out as the opposite of realism's problematic ambition to 'portray' reality, with its concomitant idealisation of the role of the observer.

Enquist's critics have accused him of mistaking radical undecideability for an incompletely worked out understanding of the relationship between historical documents. Enquist has responded saying that the real mistake is to 'believe that the document is in some sense truer than fiction' - thereby pointing once again to the realist's fantasy that they are dealing with empirical rather than social facts.

The Visit of the Royal Physician is like earlier works in that it is an historical novel based on seemingly real documents. It goes further, however, in drawing its characters and events directly

from one of the best known episodes of Danish history – the rise and fall of Johan Friedrich Struensee – to address concerns about agency and history.

Set during the reign of Christian VII, King of Denmark and Norway, *The Visit of the Royal Physician* concerns the appointment of Johan Friedrich Struensee as Royal Physician upon the king's ascension in 1766. Struensee was appointed to manage and, if possible, cure the king's madness. As Christian's condition worsened, his dependence on Struensee grew, effectively giving the physician control of the kingdom. The novel follows his appointment as minister, his rise to prominence and power, and his execution for high treason in 1772.

Royal Physician is an historico-political novel in the sense that the events with which it is concerned are directly relevant to the possibility of a rational politics, and directly concerned with the durability of forms of feudal government and repression. Struensee attempts to practice an enlightened politics, and takes up his post, encouraged by Count Rantzen, to 'realise his noble dreams.' But the new force of Enlightenment – its progressivism based on principle and visionary potential rather than historical precedent – encounters an entrenched culture of politics – the sober and traditional 'art of the possible.' From this encounter the battle over the power to redraw the boundaries of the just society, and to draw the line over which reform staggers into chaos, is waged.

But enlightenment is not a simple or unitary phenomenon. The author does not apparently accept Foucault's reduction of the historical Enlightenment to innovations in the techniques of power. However, Enquist illuminates his narration of this discrete episode in the history of liberal reforms with the paradoxical figure of the 'black torch.' The black torch may refer either to Horkheimer's and Adorno's 'dialectic of enlightenment' – reason's spontaneous self-transformation into terror – or to a less extreme 'suspicion' of Enlightenment. In the first case the torch is carried by the opponents of Enlightenment. In the second, adherents may equally entertain doubts about the orientation of the movement and the means it employs.

For Guldberg, the pietistic enemy of progress, the black torch is a figure of nihilistic vacuity, and not a paradoxical figure of illumination: 'I cant see God's love in the darkness, but only despair and emptiness,' he declares. Guldberg is the novel's converted 'free-thinker'. The conversion is an indication of the absolutism in the positions he adopts. Lacking the negative capability for life outside the Court, Guldberg must try to eliminate the paradox of representation: ambiguous social reality cannot impinge on a political framework governed by the dichotomy of good and evil.

The necessary outcome of Guldberg's understanding of the world is to divide it into friends and enemies, and to see politics as the putting into practice of means of strengthening the ties with one, and eliminating the other. Anything else is, as Carl Schmitt would say, political romanticism: wherein the spheres of society and culture are subjected to aesthetic contemplation rather than practical analysis. The romantic, according to Schmitt, does not attempt to resolve the conflict arising from the encounter between contemplation and reality. Conflict is positively valued as a stimulus to selfhood, and is only resolved in the imagination by means of the perfect symbol which suspends and incorporates the antithesis into a higher harmony: poetics replaces politics.

For adherents the power of enlightenment controls the individual. In the kingdom of the mad prince, power is deformed by personality: 'Everything was clarity and reason, but illuminated by the king's insanity.' Diderot convinces Struensee to see his appointment as the chance to move Enlightenment from the realm of discourse into the machinery of policy. Contrary to Guldberg's view of 'free-thinking' as political romanticism, Struensee will position himself in the networks of power in order to release reason as the motive power of history beyond the subjective will.

Struensee devotes himself to carrying the 'black torch' of enlightenment through the country, unmasking historical structures parading as metaphysical truths, imagining a state of future well-being, and giving up his more immediate problem-solving work in Altona. The dark torch simultaneously shines and casts a shadow because enlightenment cannot do its work without seizing power, but works against the very mechanism which it seizes control of. Struensee, who wants to make the abuses of intolerable systems of work and social relations transparent, must work by subterfuge.

Ultimately, however, historic opportunities are overtaken by personal interest. Struensee cannot manage the transition from the 'silent one' at the outset of the events that propel him from backwater to capital, from obscurity into history, to 'the royal physician'. The movement from indifference (silence) to awakening is experienced as a contradiction which proves his downfall, necessarily of his own making. Guldberg, too, appears on the stage of history as a character traversed by contradictory desires ending only with the substitution of an illusion for recognition and self-understanding.

Characters fail to adjust themselves to the requirements of the time. It is the mad prince Christian who demonstrates that the self achieves reality through representation in others during his remarkable transformation from inchoate idiot to self-controlled ruler in the role of Voltaire's Zaire. The theatre provides him with what the Court cannot: self-realization through self-distancing.

The Court must in fact obscure the king's dependence in order to construct him as absolute, as if to say that only by imaging a fixed pole of power can society and sovereignty relate in an ordered fashion. But Queen Caroline articulates the blind spot in the operations of power when she realises that the coherence of the palace garden can only be viewed from one spot: the royal position. The coherence is only formal, and absolutist politics is trapped within an abstract perspective which facts, rather than substantiating, would only shatter.

The queen is a threat to the Court because she knows 'there is a world outside the Court; and when I say this, the membrane splits, terror and fury flare up, and I am free.' Similarly, the king, hungry for reality and enclosed within the formalities of politics imaged as a garden maze, bursts through the labyrinth rather than attempting to solve it (thereby not conceding to its logic). He gladly bears the scars of the thorns that have lacerated him in the process.

The king's gesture vindicates Struensee's appreciation of his weird acuity, and seems to justify Struensee's efforts to create a rational world in which there was as much place for the mad king as for anyone. The novel, however, is sanguine about the ambitions of Enlightenment. 'What is the ultimate goal of those ... men of the Enlightenment?' wonders the Machiavellian dowager craftily. Struensee openly replies: 'To create a heaven on earth.' The idealist reformer is yet to encounter real limitations. Things become complicated when Struensee tries to reconcile a rational society with one having a place for the mad prince. Moreover, the heavenly city has to be constructed directly on the power emanating from the damaged throne.

Struensee must either agree with traditional wisdom in finding the Christian a complication to be hidden, or else discover a certain irony to imagine the mad king on the throne of the kingdom of reason. The Ascheberg Gardens, 'an illusion of a natural state,' reveal that courtly power only exists in its romanticised form. However, Struensee enlists the figure of complication to the service of classical order as he and the king will form 'a splendid pair', and harmony emerge from discord - with Struensee acting as Socratic midwife to the birth of reason from its dark other. Irony succumbs to romanticism however as Struensee commits an evil to eradicate evil. By allowing the peasant boy on the horse to die at the hands of the villagers in order to impress the king sufficiently to enlighten him, he loses sight of morality for the purpose of establishing it. The future cannot be the altar on which the present is offered: what is hoped for does not supply the form for its own content.

The novel explores the many forms of power: sexual, charismatic, hieratic, political and ultimately democratic. The multiple points of power are concentrated by force into the singular form of the politics of the Court. At the end of the novel, however, power is redefined spontaneously by the formation of the will of the people from its disillusionment with the

arrogance of the courtiers who seem able to dispose of lives as if troublesome individuals were only so much ethical garbage.

As pious counter-revolutionaries promote the myth that the temple has been cleansed, the people fly into a rage, setting Copenhagen ablaze, sparking purifying fires burning offerings to the gods. Pietism, then (like reason) can be dialecticised into paganism, revealing itself as political myth. From the ruins of the conservative façade a revolutionary potential can be constructed: ‘... the contagion of sin ... that black glow from the torches of Enlightenment had not been extinguished.’

The spectacle of Struensee’s execution becomes an aperture for the politicisation of society. ‘The crowd’s’ spontaneous recharacterisation as ‘the people’ represents the true alternative to centralised power emanating from the Court – but it is an alternative that is unimaginable without the difficulties caused to authority by the multiple forms of power it has encountered and suppressed. These multiple forms essential to the development and emergence of the proto-democratic face of society include Struensee’s strange power of ‘quiet reluctance’, his ‘oddly passive’ resistance to temptation, both of which resonate with the tension of temporality, of change. They also include Queen Caroline’s sexual allure, and the power of reason or unforced assent.

Caroline becomes the most threatening force in the novel as a woman who desires power – not the traditional power over side-bars of the Court of immensely capable women such as the dowager, but the immediate power of being at the source of actions on a universal scale. The power of reason is both resisted and abused. Struensee fears corrupting it by involvement in politics. Guldberg, the novel’s ultimate political animal, undermines it by reference to the most famous of all formulations of Enlightenment – Kant’s *sapere aude*, or ‘dare to know’. For Guldberg, politics – or to him life – is all thrust without reflexivity: ‘I dare’ (all *aude*, and no *sapere*) is the most revealing thing he says about himself; and ‘it’s true, but imagine that he dares to say so’ the most damaging thing he can think to say about Struensee.

Emancipation from illusion, suggests Enquist, is a project for the people and by the people:

Is it the darkness that is light, or the luminous that is dark? A choice must be made. The same is true of history, people choose what to see, what is light and what is darkness.

The people now face the choice first offered to Struensee: the opportunity for an individualisation which had been denied them in the dynastic past. Struensee may ultimately have failed politically.

The novel, however, counters the pathos of the personal narrative with the formation of a new consciousness forged from the same pathos. The impediments to the enlightened reconstruction of the relationship between autonomy and the strategies of government, suggests (but only suggests) Enquist, can overcome the embattled condition of the people, and their political apathy conditioned by the unchanging machinery of state.

In Enquist's novel of 1978, *The March of the Musicians*, the political worker Emblad dreamed that he was enchained on a square mountain in the middle of the sea. A bird lights on the mountain and sharpens its beak against the rock. He tells Emblad: 'Before the Swedes become socialist, the mountain will be worn away by my beak.' Emblad, despite his fatiguing battles against popular apathy, learns to interpret the dream not as a sign of the futility of his mission, but as a warning against destructive indifference.

Emblad represents Enquist's belief in the need for the writer to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Whilst the people are the agent of socialist change, the slogan 'knowledge is power' indicates that the masses lack of understanding is the enemy of reform. Emancipation is linked to education, but education itself does not emancipate. As Liebknecht noted:

Only in the free people's state can the people achieve knowledge. Only when the people wins the struggle for political power, will the gates of knowledge be opened to it.

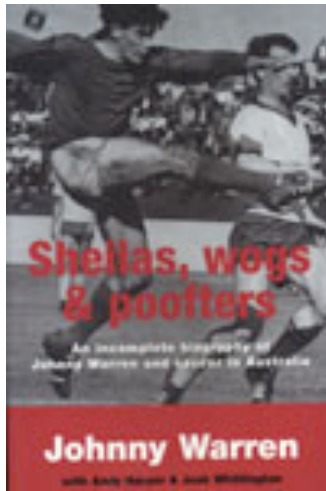
Freedom therefore precedes knowledge, since knowledge gained under the conditions of the state is the substance from which the chains of servitude are forged.

In *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, the people have not yet found a voice but they have acquired a certain gaze, a certain framing. The nocturnal Copenhagen is the setting for a dream, but the actors are awake – they are yet to speak, but the death of Struensee provides the pre-conditions for the emergence of a popular voice.

Barracking For Soccer

Johnny Warren, with Andy Harper and Josh Wittington, Sheilas, wogs and poofers. An incomplete biography of Johnny Warren and soccer in Australia. Sydney: Random House, 2002.

Reviewed by Mike Heald



Sheilas, wogs and poofers makes a fascinating cultural chronicle, because the sport of soccer has been so tied up with Australia's increasing cultural diversity, and the many tensions this has caused. The main episode of Australian history this book deals with is that which begins with the influx of European migrants after the Second World War, to the present day. Warren's own career as a player began in the fifties, and he has an intimate knowledge of soccer's affairs since that time.

Warren seems to have several aims in this book. One is simply the autobiographical urge to set down the details of his own involvement with the game: to remember, reconstruct, pay tribute, and generally to unfold the yarns he has accumulated. There are also, however, two other important, associated aims: the first of these is to promote the code, and to oppose any notion that soccer should be a minor sport in Australia. As such, the book is a declaration of support and commitment to advancing the cause of soccer on these shores. And the second objective is to explore the acutely felt question of why Australian soccer has, in recent years, so consistently failed to achieve either international success or domestic administrative competence.

Warren's answers can be surprising. He declares himself unable to dismiss, for example, the notion that a curse placed on the Australian team by a witch doctor has been effective: 'Every time I look back on 1970 I can't help thinking about the series against Rhodesia, the witch doctor and his curse. As the disasters and freak occurrences that have befallen Australian teams since 1970 pile up, my belief in the curse has only strengthened.' (p106) And yet, as a former captain, and player in the only Australian side to make the World Cup finals, Warren also offers

penetrating technical analyses of the many bitter defeats. And this is just one way in which this book is often a very strange mixture of perspectives.

The question of a lack of domestic administrative competence, which today sees not a single game of the National Soccer League on free to air television and the code's finances in tatters, is quite simply answered. It's the usual smorgasbord of empire-building, in-fighting, pettiness, and corruption which bedevils any large organisation. In Australian soccer, it's mainly the sheer scale and consistency of these problems which make them remarkable. Warren has anecdotes enough to destroy one's faith in commonsense once and for all. But when commenting on other aspects of this game's tribulations, the ex-captain's take on it all is anything but simple. What struck me most forcibly about the book is a kind of groundlessness, so that when opinions are given, they may be contradicted by statements earlier or later in the text, they may suffer from the implied challenge of incommensurate perspectives (as with the supernatural / technical dichotomy), or they may simply strike the reader as somewhat inexplicable assertions. Thus, it is not without irony that I observe that Warren, after frequenting and indeed dominating so many grounds in his time, in this curious narrative does not seem to have any to stand on.

I don't see this as merely a fault in Warren's ideas or his writing. I see it as deeply symptomatic of the world of sport in general. If you try to take sport's side, or a sport's side, then you find yourself in a kind of nowhere. We sometimes see this happen in the old debate between sport and politics: namely in the assertion that politics should be 'kept out of' sport, and vice-versa. So, while a regime is obviously deriving reflected glory from a sporting event, the participants from elsewhere delude themselves strenuously that their performances are not aiding that regime. There is a bizarre example of this in Warren's book. The Aus team was sent to play in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. In his reflections on this episode, however, Warren seems to have two irreconcilable views. On the one hand he appears to make the brave and significant observation that the team was duped into becoming performing seals for the Americans: 'It wasn't until years later that I realised how the team had been blindly steered into helping the war effort.' (p70) And yet, in concluding that chapter, he suddenly declares that, whatever went on behind the scenes, 'I wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again.' (p82) And so intelligent, politically aware analysis is superseded by camaraderie and nostalgia. This last, amoral, manifestation of sport's daemon, is one which I've always thought impoverishes the whole activity. The kind of disconnected enthusiasm Warren expresses is understandable in a way, but doesn't it also evidence an immaturity: a refusal, in the end, to acknowledge that sport does take place in a moral and political context?

Another form of groundlessness can be seen in the whole thesis that soccer should become the major football code in Australia. Warren makes many good arguments about the intrinsic merits of soccer: its international nature, its skill levels, the earning potential of its top players, and so

on. And the prejudices against soccer are easily made plain. But why should a game such as Australian Rules Football be vanquished? Why isn't it good to have a diversity of sports on the planet, and to celebrate a home-grown, if isolated code? Warren never satisfactorily addresses these questions, and so the whole argument for soccer taking over seems to be fuelled by an unenlightened sectarianism. And what could possibly be a sound argument for one code dominating another? Why should one set of arbitrary rules for a game be any better than another? There is simply no ground from which to launch an argument for one sport over another, unless perhaps you consider physical danger to the participants. But most football codes are much of a muchness in that regard. The capacity to earn a good living might be brought in to the argument. But Warren acknowledges the dangers of corporatisation, and indeed paints a quite sinister picture of the G-14 (the group of mega-clubs such as Manchester United and Barcelona) who wield their influence through such considerable figures as, for example, AC Milan and Italian president Silvio Berlusconi.

Overall, then, the driving energy of *Sheilas, wogs and poofters* to combat the prejudice against Australian soccer is effective in that particular conflict, but does not issue in any more universal insights into sport as a human activity, and perhaps it is a little unfair to expect it to. Warren illustrates very well the way that soccer provided a home-away-from-home and lingua franca for ethnic minorities in Australia, including, at times, aboriginals. He also chronicles his own exploits engagingly, particularly the period of his career-threatening knee injury. Descriptions of overseas tours are genuinely dramatic, especially the first Vietnam trip in 1967, and virtually make the whole book worthwhile by themselves. *Sheilas, wogs and poofters*, then, is welcome in that the story of Australian soccer is brought to life, and we are left keenly anticipating those chapters still to be written.

Compelling darkness

**A L McCann, The White Body of Evening, Sydney:
HarperCollins, 2002**

Reviewed by Vincent Ramos



The macabre holds a perverse attraction – and in fiction, that which is dark, unknowable, undoable, becomes not merely possible, but palpably achievable.

The White Body of Evening, the debut novel by Melbourne academic Andrew McCann, opens with Albert and Anna Walters stumbling through a perfunctory shotgun wedding in the spring of 1891. The contrast is immediate. Albert is deeply troubled, and inclined towards taboo thoughts and the more sordid diversions available in the arcades and laneways of Melbourne. Anna, the reserved Barossa German who dreams of seeing the European countryside that her parents called home.

Already the juxtaposition of respectability and what lies beneath it are drawn. This is not the Melbourne we know today – shiny, aspirational, humdrum. McCann breaks the recognisable skin of propriety with a passion and perversity that makes Melbourne into a grotesque, magnificent Gotham.

Based in South Melbourne, where the upscale St Vincent Place, in which the mysterious Dr Winton resides, is literally around the corner from the poky squalor of the Brooke Street where Anna and Albert have a cottage, *The White Body of Evening* is also well-acquainted with the seedy, now-vanished arcades of Bourke Street. This is a Melbourne still only edging towards Federation, steeped in Victorian morality, but where the menace of violence hangs in the air and a mob will gather at a moment's notice to lynch a man on the mere suspicion of guilt.

Albert, increasingly erratic and paranoid, longing to escape the 'emasculating' tedium of work and domesticity, is receiving the attention of Dr Winton – who himself carries the baggage of a

shadowy past, a man whose rich cologne conceals a ‘hot, musky odour’, something ugly and bestial. The novel’s atmosphere intensifies by the page, painting a dark, dysfunctional Melbourne through Albert Walters’ dark, dysfunctional family.

By the eve of Federation, the Walters’ son Paul is eight, and soon to be introduced to the freak shows, brothels and ‘anatomical curiosities’ that obsess his father. Albert’s intention, on their saunter through the Eastern Arcade, is to discourage Paul, but the bent towards the perverse, it seems, is hereditary. Here, the reader is reminded that these ‘moist, fungal depths of the city’ were only streets away from the ‘respectable citizens strolling down the posh end of Collins Street’.

Albert and Anna also have a daughter, the preternatural Ondine – with whom twelve-year-old neighbour Hamish McDermott, and Paul himself, are already besotted, the first of a string of captives to her Estella-like detachedness.

McCann nimbly handles the novel’s various impending crises, allowing them to be activated slowly and subtly, until their force finally disturbs the hard-fought equilibrium for which each character has striven.

Secrets – buried under floorboards, dumped into the Yarra, hidden in crevices in the most obscure parts of the city or the mind – refuse, of course, to stay that way. Each rises inexorably to the surface, as do the humiliations, the betrayals, the abandonments.

McCann’s facility is strengthened by intelligent historical insight and unobtrusive prose. The novel is stylised, not at the level of words and sentences, but paragraphs and chapters. It is an effective technique.

By now, a persistent melancholy has been established in the novel’s Melbourne – not quite Grand Guignol, but with a sharp handle on the psychology of horror – but where it is lifted, foreboding transforms into brash grisliness, an atmosphere of bulging, malevolent eyes and fiendish cackling.

White Body’s central characters (Paul, Ondine, Anna, Winton, Melbourne – even Albert) are each angling always at a brighter future – casting themselves towards the light of aspiration with only the most fleeting of glances-back – but every bright outcome harbours shadows and upsets.

The novel's ultimate focus is Paul's artistic development, the troughs and crests of his career, making the book in essence a *Künstlerroman*. With his inherited predilections, the young man eschews the conservative ideals of the Gallery School – 'the horror of the everyday' – for the perverse and the scandalous, eventually leaving Melbourne for Europe – the Old World for which his mother used to pine, where sophistication, culture and history might be found. Against the manners and taste of Europe, Australia becomes the uncouth, uncomplicated counterpoint – highlighted by the rivalry between would-be sophisticate Paul and grazier's son Ralph Matthews, Ondine's love-interest.

McCann has situated this aspect of *White Body* in the debate on Australia's identity. Various other contrasts play into this notion – city-bound Ondine and her ambivalent love for the grazier's son, the impoverished, besotted Hamish and the ultimately well-off Walters family, the hype of Federation against the reality of a nation still labouring under a morality and way of life inherited from England.

Overall, McCann's storytelling is kinetic and suspenseful, well-plotted while maintaining a sophisticated literary texture. In the Europe segue, however, there are narrative digressions that cause the story to lose pace and focus. During Paul's otherwise-effective Vienna sojourn, he spends what the reader realises is an entire chapter fretting over his artistic credentials and resulting inaction. It is a small blip on McCann's record – the reader will forgive indulgence.

The complexities of the novel are notable for a debut. *White Body* blends the logic of history with the sinuous and ethereal, while balancing a considerable ensemble of characters.

Here is a novel that spins on the great axes of love, lust and jealousy, of ambition, betrayal and loss, while also exhibiting an array of duty, frailty, gentility and perversity. It evokes a knowledge of history, art and medicine, as well as prostitution, freak-shows and cabinets of curiosity, that reveal a solid intellectual poise.

Into the atmosphere of Melbourne McCann has released an all-shrouding menace, one that manifests in angry mobs and shadowy figures from 'the queer end of Bourke Street', although ultimately the anarchy that had always threatened to overrun the lives of *White Body's* protagonists takes the form of war. In an ironic twist, it is a war that is fought half a world away – in the Old World – that sees Paul and Ondine's lives upended.

The White Body of Evening is a smartly-executed socio-psychological observation of fin-de-siècle Melbourne and its middle-class. And while the alternate lustre and pungency of the book's

historical detail may show McCann to be a fine historian, without doubt the power of the book lies in its sensitivity to the complexities of human relations and the potency of desire.

In the crossed destinies of his characters – their negotiations through life, the betrayals, the pay-offs – McCann has found the stuff of novels. Compelling.

Fitzroy, Varnish and Vice

Peter Temple, White Dog, Melbourne: Text, 2003

Reviewed by Kathleen Logan



White Dog is the latest crime novel featuring Jack Irish and it's really good fun. Irish is a Melbourne-based ex-lawyer/private investigator with a penchant for woodwork....and trouble.

Temple clearly knows and loves Melbourne and its environs – part of the enjoyment of reading his books is recognising the various streets and situations where Irish finds humour, sex, dirty dealings and an assortment of characters like those in the “Youth Club”. The exchanges between Irish and these oldies (still lamenting the demise of their beloved football team the Fitzroy Lions) are amusing and quite sharp – particularly in the previous novels when these die-hards are tossing up whether to barrack for the Brisbane Lions or keep their local loyalties by supporting St Kilda – not an easy choice. Irish also hooks up

on a regular basis with Harry Strang - ex-jockey with a nose for a good horse and (not quite kosher) betting arrangements. Punters will follow the esoteric musings on track records and run times, and the rest of us can still enjoy the plot.

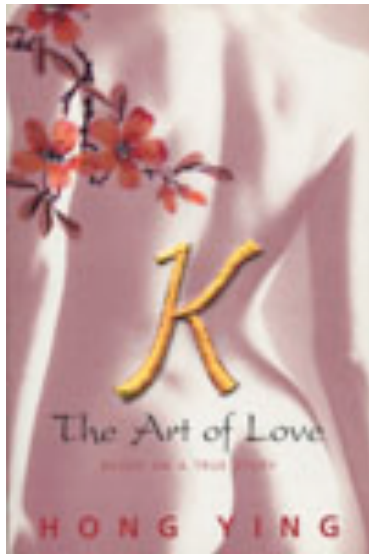
Jack Irish is not so lucky in love – his lovers tend to get damaged: well, that's a bit of an understatement – one wife and one lover both lost to explosions as Jack's enemies try to do him in – but nonetheless, he comes across as a likeable character. He is faithful to his friends and his ideals, and he has empathy for the underdog. His views on the changing face of Brunswick Street and its inhabitants are heartfelt and perhaps reflect those of his creator. Jack occasionally works as an unpaid “apprentice” to a master carpenter. The finer points of cabinet-making, and the precision insisted upon by his older mentor, act as a balm and counterpoint to his unstructured and risky private investigator role. Temple is good at establishing the close relationships Jack has with the older generation.

In this latest adventure Jack is drawn into the shady world of escort agencies, big business and politics. Murder, missing persons and a couple of truly horrible country types keep up the interest. While there's little sub-text or social message in Temple's novels, they are entertaining, observant and wryly nostalgic for Melbourne's recent past.

Sex and Sensibility

Hong Ying, K: The Art of Love, London: Marion Boyars, 2002.

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Under the sensually embossed *K* of this book's front cover – with the gently raised letter printed like ritual scarification on the lower back of a naked young woman – lies the novel's suggestive subtitle. *The Art of Love* just touches the upper curves of the woman's bare buttocks. Immediately below the subtitle trouble begins, for Hong Ying and her publishers boldly advertise an unequivocal claim across both cheeks: *Based on a True Story*.

K is an historical novel set in 1930s China. It purports to tell “the true story of the passionate and illicit affair” between the minor Bloomsbury poet Julian Bell and a beautiful Chinese writer known as Lin. Cultured and sensitive, Lin lives in the city of Wuhan, where her husband is a senior professor of English, and Julian Bell a visiting scholar in the same department. As a short story writer Lin belongs to a literary circle of Chinese liberal romantics known as the Crescent Moon Society, and her writing style attracts comparison with the New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield.

Unfortunately for Hong Ying and for the prospects of official sales of her novel in the People's Republic of China (the country of Hong Ying's birth), *K*'s specific claim to historical verisimilitude came back to bite her. After excerpts of *K* were published in a Chinese magazine, the daughter of a prominent writer from the 1930s took Hong Ying to court for defaming the dead. Ling Shuhua was a writer who lived in Wuhan with her husband, Chen Yuan, a professor of English at Wuhan University. Ling Shuhua wrote for Crescent Moon periodicals in a literary style consciously modelled on Katherine Mansfield. She also knew Julian Bell and is reported to have had a brief affair with him. Chen Xiaoying, the daughter of Ling Shuhua and Professor Chen Yuan, found Hong Ying's book pornographic and false, and she won damages through a Chinese court in December 2002. *K* was, as a result, banned in China – which of course guarantees the novel underground success. *K* had earlier been published in Taiwan, and is now

widely available in foreign translations, including this English translation by Nicky Harman and Henry Zhao, Hong Ying's husband.

The banning of *K* provides yet another example of heavy-handed censorship in China, which can be arbitrary and is often self-defeating. Recent banning of other so-called pornographic works, such as Wei Hui's narcissistic *Shanghai Baby*, has only assured the author international notoriety, broad exposure on the internet, wide distribution through underground networks in China, and massively increased publicity and foreign sales. Wei Hui was even interviewed by the iconic Kerry O'Brien on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's national *7:30 Report*, a level of exposure for a young woman's sexually explicit novel that is difficult to imagine for an Australian young writer of fiction, and impossible even to contemplate if the Chinese government had not tried to suppress *Shanghai Baby*.³³ In terms of more conventional political censorship it is well-known that political writers banned by Chinese Communist authorities often garner increased public respect or sympathy, as was the case with the dissident Fang Lizhi, whose works were distributed by the Party for the express purposes of criticism and denunciation in the mid 1980s. Instead his thoughts spread among a receptive and disgruntled community as the Chinese democracy movement gained momentum in the late 1980s.



In the specific censorship case of *K: The Art of Love* it is worth noting that the London-based Chen Xiaoying could not take court action in Taiwan, where the novel was first published in 2001, or her home country of England, because of different defamation laws and official

33 *Shanghai Baby* is the first-person narration of a self-proclaimed genius, a romantic young writer named Coco who speaks for the conventionally unconventional younger generation of artists, writers and exhibitionists in materialistic China. Like the author Wei Hui, Coco is a graduate of Fudan University and is in love with her own prose. (She thinks it is lyrical. In fact the novel's improbable narrative is propped up by clichés and endless forced similes, as Coco writes about writing her novel. Wei Hui's characters all speak in aphorisms: none of them insightful or memorable. And for supposedly independent thinkers, Coco and her friends rely on greater authorities, quoting *ad nauseam* from philosophers, psychologists or pop icons from Sartre to Sonic Youth.) The beautiful and brilliant Coco lives with Tian Tian – an impotent Chinese artist who is also a genius. He loves Coco's soul and her sensitivity. But Coco has an affair with the highly potent Mark, a married German businessman making the most of financial, cultural and sexual opportunities in Shanghai. *Shanghai Baby* is a melange of derivations, both Western and Chinese, but it pretends to be the voice of a new generation. It is an awful novel, with bluntly contrived scenes designed to create controversy and notoriety. The sex scenes are more silly than shocking, but they had their effect. When 40,000 copies of the novel were publicly burned in China *Shanghai Baby* become an international bestseller.

attitudes toward sexually explicit material. Like the woman who sued her in the Chinese court, Hong Ying is now a resident of London, having left China in the wake of the military suppression of political dissent in 1989. After unsuccessfully defending her novel in China she has been required to pay damages reported to be in excess of 124,000 yuan. Publication of the novel has been prohibited, and she has been ordered to make a public apology. But Hong Ying and *K* have gained notoriety – and in some minds political or artistic prestige – as the latest well-known victims of Chinese censorship. Interestingly enough *K* includes brief reference to Communist censorship of what they deemed “feudalistic pornography” in the 1920s, a case resulting in capital punishment. And it may be that in trying to publish her novel on the mainland Hong Ying sought to test the Communist’s current level of tolerance. Whatever her intentions, Hong Ying’s decision to criticise the Communists and to write a novel supposedly based on a true story has left her open to attack, and the attack has come from the daughter of Ling Shuhua. As a lightning rod of freedom, Hong Ying and her rather insipid legal defence to Chen Xiaoying’s charges lack inspiration. The central defence of creating composite characters for the novel does not tally with *K*’s claim to being based on the true story of a passionate and illicit affair between Julian Bell and the boldest woman writer of the Crescent Moon Society. But the logic of advertising a product to make money is perhaps different from the logic of defending a legal case where you stand to lose money. Not all censored books are of great literary quality or historic importance but – to rephrase George Orwell – if liberty means anything at all it means the right to publish what people do not want to read.

The action of *K: The Art of Love* takes place in China in the 1930s. As the Japanese Army makes bloody incursions into a post-imperial China weakened by civil war and colonialism, *K* focuses on the adultery and Daoist-inspired lovemaking of two young writers. Lin and Julian are made to represent binary opposites of East and West in a pseudo-philosophical attempt to present the novel as more than romantic cliché or sexual titillation. Hong Ying writes passionately about sex and desire, but seems to believe that her novel is more profound than prurient. Her novel’s foreword warns against stereotypes, but *K* succeeds only in perpetuating many as Hong Ying strains to deal with the big issues of Men and Women, War and Revolution, Sex and Death.

When the novel’s central protagonists first meet in China, Julian Bell is brash, arrogant and confident. The devotedly Oedipal son of Bloomsbury bohemian Vanessa Bell (and nephew of novelist Virginia Woolf), Julian swaggers through Wuhan in the knowledge of his intellectual and cultural pedigree, although he knows little of China and is not properly trained for his new job as a university lecturer. Lin by contrast is publicly quiet and polite, but stunningly beautiful, emotionally intense, and intellectually free despite the traditional constraints of Chinese society. She is a writer of well-crafted stories that are admired by China’s urban progressive intellectuals, but she is in great need of a man who can truly share her depth of feeling. Their relationship forms the heart of this novel, and Lin instructs the young Bell in *The Art of Love*: sexual skills

and self-cultivation from a Daoist classic text, secretly taught Lin by her mother, concubine to a former Qing dynasty official.

With such a cast of literary and historical characters in a time of sweeping social and political change, Hong Ying has the raw material for a fascinating novel of ideas and engagement. But her preoccupation with the sex life of Lin and Bell becomes laughable over time, and her treatment of character perfunctory. Famous names are dragged in at will, and dropped and discarded with little or no character development, including Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Julian's "spiritual father" Roger Fry and the painter Qi Baishi. We get instead long descriptions of Lin and Bell's sexual encounters – with "bodies bathed in sweat, glued together" – or melodramatic expressions of rapture, as when the two lovers re-unite on the dance floor of the British Consulate after a brief period of separation: "Thank you, music!" The seriousness of the novel's tone is not helped when Hong Ying unwittingly treats the female lead as a cross between a woman and a garage: "Julian embraced her tightly and entered her."

Hong Ying claims to have received permission from Julian Bell's surviving family to use his real name in the novel. Bell's relatives did not, and would not sue the author for her depiction of Julian Bell as a naïve radical and adulterer, but one can imagine their displeasure at Hong Ying's characterisation of the poet, and dissatisfaction with the literary quality of her novel. Indeed Bell's nephew was scathing of the novel.³⁴ Apparently Hong Ying had no intention of providing balance with Chinese names. She did not ask Chen Xiaoying for permission to use the real names of Ling Shuhua and Chen Yuan, instead using the ploy of diaphanous pseudonyms and changing a few biographical details. Hong Ying claims that her character Lin is not Ling, but is instead an amalgam of writers and women from Bell's letters and other writings. Apart from the obvious biographical and literary similarities between Lin and Ling as Crescent Moon writers married to academics in the city of Wuhan, the simple "g" transfer from Ling to Lin and from Professor Chen to Professor Cheng makes the references to real historical personalities easy to spot. In addition, Hong Ying's fictional Lin gives her lover an embroidered handkerchief, and this embroidery becomes a central motif in *K*. To readers familiar with Chinese literature of the period, one of Ling Shuhua's best-known short stories is *Xiuzhen* (Embroidered Pillow).

K is superficial in regard to the historical and political context of warfare that tore apart communities in the 1930s, including civil war between Chinese Communists and the Guomindang, Fascist Japan's invasion of China, and General Franco's coup against the Republican Government in the Spanish Civil War. Hong Ying depicts Julian Bell as a naïve

34 The painter Julian Bell described Hong Ying's work as 'a piece of manually assisted fiction. It's like those Black Lace or Black Knicker books you get in airports.' *The Observer*, June 16, 2002.

revolutionary romantic who travelled through outback Sichuan in search of Mao Zedong's forces on the legendary Long March. But when Bell came close to the brutal realities of class warfare he vomited, collapsed, turned tail and ran, wailing about brutality and personifying Hong Ying's simplistic view of the essential differences between East and West: "Oh...Why? Why do they need to be so cruel? Revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries...Why so cruel?...This kind of revolution is not for me." As he rode away from the front Bell consoled himself with the thought that he was not a deserter: "What they were fighting for was not European-style socialism or liberalism. Atrocities were normal in revolutions in this part of the world, but he was not Asian and he did not have to be dragged into it. Even when the cause was just there was still a difference between East and West. The gap between them was too wide for him to bridge." This profound recognition of Oriental savagery compared to European-style liberalism did not stop the young English poet from having a death wish, in Hong Ying's mind, and Bell fled directly from China to the presumably more civilised massacres of the Spanish Civil War, where he was soon killed while serving as a medical orderly on the battlefield.

In other books Hong Ying has also used dramatic and violent moments in Chinese history as backdrops for her fiction. But her focus tends to be on individual emotion and the torments of love, as with the doomed affair of Lin and Bell in *K*. Hong Ying studied at the Lu Xun Writers' Academy in Beijing in 1989, and she participated in the popular democracy protests on Tiananmen Square of that year. Her novel *Summer of Betrayal* (also banned in China) presents a self-indulgent and uninspiring story of romantic rejection and emotional torment that seemingly parallels the violent suppression of the democracy movement in the Beijing Massacre of 1989. Unfortunately even when describing the popular protests around the killings on June 4, Hong Ying's *Summer of Betrayal* fails to express the political depths of the protagonist's actions. Here she may in part have been let down by her translator, the normally reliable Martha Avery, or by the decision to not encumber a novel with footnotes or explanatory passages. The young people who smash soda bottles on the ground in *Summer of Betrayal* are not mindless hooligans or litter bugs. They are, instead, making a bitter, angry, and dangerous political stand in the face of armed attack by the Communist Party and its military establishment. The little bottles (*xiaoping*) that democracy activists smashed to pieces or hung from strings and paraded through the streets were in fact homophones for Deng Xiaoping, the aged Communist tyrant who ordered troops to kill the people.



Hong Ying has been better served by Howard Goldblatt, the noted American translator who worked on *Daughter of the River*, Hong Ying's best and most directly autobiographical book. While Goldblatt's literal translation of *guotie* as "pot-stickers" may not help the English or

Australian reader to know that *guotie* are actually a type of fried dumpling (Americans *do* call them pot-stickers), his fluid translation of this evocative memoir cannot be blamed for the extraordinary coincidences that enliven Hong Ying's account of life as a poor girl in the slums of Chongqing who grew up to be a writer and sexual adventurer. One gains from *Daughter of the River* a sense of Hong Ying's emotional and physical deprivations as a child, and the book reveals her literary interests and great desire to be daring and liberal – she tells us provocatively, if not defiantly, how she went to dances and carried condoms in her pocket in her early years as an aspiring writer drifting through China in the 1980s.³⁵ And it is difficult not to follow threads of the emotional and literary embroidery connecting Hong Ying's biography, her semi-autobiographical novel *Summer of Betrayal*, and her sense of connectedness to the philosophy, sexual freedom, and romantic sensibility of Lin, the heroine of *K* who seems to embody Hong Ying's physical and intellectual aspirations. Hong Ying certainly writes with the melodramatic style of many Chinese writers of the 1930s, and in one of the most self-referential (or self-indulgent) passages in the novel she proclaims that if the two great lovers, Lin and Bell, had a child, they would call her Hong (Rainbow), Hong Ying's own name. A rainbow is the result of “intercourse between the sun and the rain. As it is improper yin-yang intercourse, it embodies the pure carnality of Heaven and Earth.”

There is a lot of nonsense about Chinese eroticism in *K: The Art of Love*, a philosophical pretext for unusual positions, techniques, and multiple orgasms. On their honeymoon Lin's poor husband, Professor Cheng, is so taken aback by Lin's Daoist-inspired movements that he is physically ill for two weeks and does not want ever to be so exercised again. Fortunately for Lin Julian Bell arrives in Wuhan and he is more teachable and willing, although even virile Julian needs to “Rein Back the White Ox” to avoid premature ejaculation and to synchronize his orgasm with Lin's. Julian, with all his English experience as a dashing bachelor, is a novice compared to the self-cultivated Lin. She is more daring and experienced than Julian, and far more in control. She is a generous adept, willing to encourage, stimulate and extend. She even prepares special treats for her lover. In the opium den (her idea) Lin and Julian use a naked maid as a pillow for their lovemaking, but whether through unclear prose or the poverty of this reader's imagination I could not quite follow Hong Ying's description to work out which bits of who went where. At other times her writing about sex is breathless, obvious, or unintentionally hilarious: lovers swoon, or suddenly realise that they love someone – and had always loved them. (Hong Ying adores the device of sudden recognition). Flickering sparks shoot



35 What was daring for Hong Ying in the eighties is passé for the more explicit Wei Hui, writing on the eve of a new millennium from the metropolis of Shanghai, her city of Sin and Sophistication.

out from the glans of erect penises; and orgasms judder bodies into pieces. In one particularly unfortunate juxtaposition of action in the upstairs bedroom and down at the front door of the lovers' house, Hong Ying interrupts the reunited lovers with the arrival of the cuckolded professor: "For the first time [Julian] had the astonishing sensation of enjoying repeated orgasms...It required genuine love...A series of tremendous bangs shook the door downstairs." Professor Cheng had discovered the affair and caught Lin and Bell still in bed, in the Chinese equivalent of in flagrante delicto. Hong Ying tries to squeeze tension and potential violence out of this awkward and uncomfortable scene, but, like many things with this novel, it simply does not work: "Cheng stood there, pale with anger. He was an imposing figure in his gown, and not as gaunt as Julian remembered him." (Beefy Julian's memory of the pale and be-gowned Cheng needed to stretch back less than twelve hours, when he'd last seen the not-so-gaunt professor in his living room.)

When it is not risible Hong Ying's sexual cataloguing can also be clinical and detailed. Perhaps Ling and Chen's daughter Chen Xiaoying, already displeased with the character assassination of a timid, insipid professor and his adulterous, libertine wife, simply lost her tolerance with *K* and read as insultingly pornographic the repeated word pictures of her mother's vulva, clitoris, pudenda, and hairless armpits (these anatomical examples come from just four lines of the novel). In Hong Ying's defence, Lin is always depicted as beautiful, fragrant, highly cultured, and exciting. The physical descriptions of Lin's body are meant to be positive, and the sex scenes erotic and ultimately expressive of romantic love. Lin is a stunning Chinese woman, and Hong Ying clearly identifies with her. By contrast Western women who read *K* might contemplate suing Hong Ying for collective defamation, since in comparison to the elegant Lin Western women are hairy, sweaty, and coarse. Julian Bell has met the ultimate in Lin, and all European women fail to rate: "[Western women] were a little better when young, but past thirty their charm was gone for ever."

The real historical figure of Ling Shuhua, like the fictionalised Lin, was the daughter of a concubine who resided in a compound with many concubines. Ling Shuhua also wrote about the tensions within a family comprising numerous wives (see, for example, the ironic *You fuqi de ren*, *A Fortunate Woman*). In *K: The Art of Love* Hong Ying by contrast at times seems to take the difficult-to-justify position that the feudal system of concubinage was actually centred round a woman's pleasure. By choosing Julian Bell as her sexual partner Lin may express her freedom and pursue her own physical and emotional pleasure (like Hong Ying in her 1980s dance parties, or the narrator in Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*), but this does not reflect the networks of necessity, obligation, compulsion, or purchase that characterise the feudal system of concubinage: "To buy a good book is the same as to buy a pretty concubine, but its beauty is greater and lasts longer."

In Hong Ying's mind Lin and Julian Bell are life forces, inevitably attracted to one another despite their differences of race, culture, and marital status. They are destined to ignite together and burn out. But in a conscious bow to Chinese literary precedents of lovers reunited after death – and to religious notions of burnt offerings to the spirit world – Lin and Julian's love endures through sacrifice.

Hong Ying is interested in Julian Bell and Lin (or Ling Shuhua) because they provide her with the opportunity to explore obvious differences while emphasising similarities and shared experiences. Literature, sex and love are *K*'s worthy concerns, coloured by romantic myths of suicide or sacrifice familiar to readers of melancholic Chinese fiction from the 1930s. All this Hong Ying packages with war and revolution. But despite her attempts to pass this story off as a philosophical exploration of profound feelings and ideas based on the true story of writers engaged in the major historical developments of their times, we don't really get to know much about Lin and Julian as committed people. What, apart from sexual attraction and intercourse, brings them together and binds them for eternity after death? Why, apart from his availability and the fact that he was tall, had a full head of hair and a large penis (all features upon which Hong Ying dwells), would Lin be attracted to Julian Bell? Surely not for his execrable poetry or his attachment to his mother? According to Hong Ying Lin was a better writer than Bell. She was a more skilled, refined, imaginative and constant lover than Bell. She was more courageous, decisive, and clear thinking. And, despite Bell's Bloomsbury heritage and English sensibilities, Lin was clearly more liberal. Bell, for his part, finally realised that he truly loved Lin (according to Hong Ying), but he walked out on her without another word when he felt that she had orchestrated exposure of their affair to force his hand. He left Lin and China without hesitation, as Hong Ying said, and his abandoned lover knew immediately that he was as "racist" as any of the Westerners in China who were attracted to the "exotic" but contemptuous of Chinese people and their culture. He went off to Spain and got himself killed, fulfilling the death wish that Lin had identified in his character. She, meanwhile, had the "courage" to commit suicide, and he came to her in death. Why does he return, even in Lin's imagination? Is it not for more exotic sex? Isn't *K* and its preoccupation with the esoteric *Art of Love* simply pandering to notions of the exotic that Hong Ying seems to consider racist?

Poems by Fergus Ong

Fergus Ong is an ex-Foundation Studies student of Trinity College, who went on to complete a degree in Media Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. He now resides in Malaysia.

Muar

Back home,

 somewhere between the
 smog-famous Kuala Lumpur and
 garden City Singapore,

I dream of

somewhere back home

 in *Muar*

You are “mew-ar” to foreigners,

but you are “moo-ar” to me

(and all the locals).

I know you so well

 like the lines on my 20 year-old palm.

You are the river and the swamp

 you are the bridge

 and the park

 and the playground.

You are roundabouts in town,

dilapidated shophouses

And glutton-street, with

Chinese hawker food-stalls

lining both sides of a one-way road.

 You are an infinite

 Muarian McDonald’s drivethrough,

The old Indian man who sells
roasted nuts outside the cinema,
and the other one, who cycles around
selling sweet bread in the evening.

You own me,
my sleepy-hollow town,
retired person's village,
famous for the
furniture factories I never see.

And I own you
in some weird form of memory.

But old nostalgic town,
right now, you are so *real*.

right now, you are
big-screen TV,
24 channel satellite transmission,
internet phonedlines and Microsoft colony,
shopping mall and VCD heaven.

My boom-time town,
with your congested roads
wide enough for the '80s

you oscillate between
truth and falsity.

Navigate me with your browser's
back button.

I know there's something left behind
That I need to cut,
copy and paste.

Sunset, Pollocked

They used to call you

Poetry in Motion,

a walkin', talkin'

Livin' Doll.

But today, you look like

a painting, framed

inside a doorway

with one hand

pressed against the wall.

I watch you forty seconds,

looking out at me

with all those crazy lines

dripping on your face.

Reds and yellows and orange

splatter across your dress,

making a thumping, dripping sound –

like wall paint falling

on old newspaper.

You look so caged, almost wild

like a sunset from somewhere. *Pollocked.*

Poems by Danny Fahey

The Old Wolf

Evenings,
Purple, bloated,
Float
Half-submerged and never drowned
In alcohol;
Flesh beckons
And he bays to the moon –
How swiftly
The young boy's adventures
Litter the mind
Of an adult.

As Months Pass

In limbo
You swim
Bedazzled by our dreams...
Mine, technicolour catastrophes –
So much could go wrong!
Your mother's – her first kiss
(and the smell of your scalp).

And you?
What dreams do you dream
As you swim in that ocean of possibility?
Are your dreams prescient lessons

To help with the preparation?

We wait,

Your mother and I

Bloated with expectation

While you kick,

Silently swimming towards us.

Do you want me?

PER KNUTSEN

(b.1951)

Per Knutsen comes from Nordland in Norway. He made his debut in 1976 as a children's writer and has written over 20 books for children, teenagers and adults. He has also written scripts for the theatre. Two of his books have been made into films. Per Knutsen received the Norwegian Department of Culture's Literature Prize in 1995. Many of his books have been translated into Danish, German and Flemish. Do you want me? will be his first book to be published into English.

Do you want me? was first published in 1998. This short and intense teenage novel is structured around the contrasting relationship between the safe but boring on the one hand, and the unknown, alluring but threatening on the other. Between Emma, who wants away from all things nice and innocent, and Leo, who has experienced enough guilt and evil to last a life time. Emma lives in a perfectly 'normal' divorced family. Leo is a former soldier from Sierra Leone. Emma is restlessly moving away from her childhood – she does not know to where. And Leo – what options are open to him? There are lots of people in the world who do not want their hands dirtied, but Leo's are already stained. And there is one thing he knows and knows well: How to kill.

Original Title: Vil Du Ha Meg? Translated by Meagan McCue



Chapter 5

She was woken by the telephone. Ten past ten. It was her mother ringing from work, wanting to know whether everything was okay.

“Of course everything's fine,” said Emma.

“You weren't afraid?” asked her mother.

“Mum!” groaned Emma. “There's nothing to be afraid of.”

Especially now, as it's morning, with the sun high in the sky and the sound of laughter from the basement, she thought to herself. She was hungry, but her father had left the fridge empty when he went south, except for a

little Coca-Cola that he always kept for her arrival. Since there was no milk, she made herself a bowl of cornflakes with sugar and warm water. It tasted revolting. She couldn't remember ever having eaten something so terrible, so she emptied it into the rubbish bin. Through the back window she saw the African boy coming out with the big box under his arm. She dashed to the living room, pulled the tablecloth off the table and ran to open the outside door. She positioned herself on the doorstep and shook the tablecloth roughly, pretending that she couldn't see him. He mumbled to himself and tied the box that she thought had been empty, tightly to the handlebars of his bike.

"Hi," said Emma trying to sound surprised. He didn't answer but scrunched up his face. He had the kind of eyes you could not see right into.

"It's my father who lives here," she said. "What's your name?"

He looked right through her before getting on his bike and peddling along the wall and around the corner. She heard him continue down the back towards the road. Her cheeks felt on fire as she went inside.

She mimicked herself using a thin voice, "It's my father who lives here. What's your name?"

It was obvious that he didn't like her. He wouldn't even say his name. She couldn't have had a clearer signal. She had made a fool of herself yet again and to help forget, she put on the German hit single that she had lying about her father's place, *Huet' ist mein Tag* - Today is my Day, and danced around in the living room and hall and the kitchen until she was gasping for breath and sweating. She stopped the music and thought that there must be something terrible about her. Then she mooched about saying to herself everyone else her age did exciting things together like she had heard they do in books or on TV, but that experience always alluded her. She wanted to do something ordinary, to prove that she was normal and healthy. So she ran into the garden and began pulling out the weeds from the herb garden. She didn't care for that and stopped after four and half minutes. She noticed the window to the neighbouring flat was open. Inside hummed a radio on an English station. Pots being washed rattled. The African woman came and shook a dusty rag out the window.

"Hi," called Emma.

"Good morning," said the lady in English. She smiled briefly and went inside again. Emma inched closer towards the window.

"Excuse me," she said loudly, without peering in. The smell of aromatic food wafted by. The lady had wet hands and seemed annoyed when she came over to her.

"You can take some of these if you want to," said Emma pointing out the herb garden.

"What is it?" asked the lady.

Emma knew that she had learnt the English names for "herbs", she also knew the word for "parsley", but now the words wouldn't come to her.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “Sorry.”

“Thank you. It’s very kind of you,” said the lady looking a little sympathetically at Emma. She went back into the flat. Emma went into the kitchen to wash her hands, took some magazines from the living room, a can of Coke from the fridge and went to sit on a bench in the garden. She could see down along the road. The rear of the house ran right alongside her. She made up her mind that when the boy returned she would speak to him. It didn’t matter that he had become angry. She must find out what the noise meant and what he was carrying in the box.

She let the magazines (her father had just sporting ones) fall from her side into the grass without looking at them. Then she started her stopwatch, sat and stared for eleven minutes and thirty-five seconds before she gave up and went inside to ring Mia. She got the answering machine with Mia’s mother’s voice. Emma was about to hang up and dial Ingrid’s number when Mia’s little brother took the phone and said “they” had been in the bedroom. He called out and a door tore open. Her brother said, “What’s-her-name, Emma, wants to speak with you.”

Ingrid giggled easily and it sounded as though someone else was standing next to her and listening.

“We don’t have much time,” she said. “Mum is sitting in the car waiting. Was there anything special you wanted?”

“No, not really,” mumbled Emma. Communication over. She stroked her arm up and down. She was so bored that the hair on her arm was on the point of standing on end. This is what she gets all because she was moody with Mia and Ingrid on the beach and just left without any explanation. She wound up her watch but even that annoyed her so she took it off and put it on the table. Through the window she caught sight of the boy down the road. She leapt out the door and forced herself to go a little easier around the corner and out into the garden. She placed herself on the bench rubbing her wrist where the watch had been. She saw him coming nearer. He had the box on the back of the bike, and she heard the screeching noise. He didn’t see her or else he pretended he hadn’t and cycled right past. She squeezed her hand tightly around her wrist and went over to the corner. There she angled herself carefully and saw that he leant the bike up against the wall and struck the box with his other hand.

“Shut up,” he yelled.

The shrieking rose and became so pitiful that it would burst. Emma saw that he loosened the box and went inside with it. He left the door open. She went to the doorway and heard the boy and his mother arguing in a language of which Emma couldn’t understand a word. The mother yelled loudly. The boy answered with quietly animated sentences and then stopped with a loud bellow, before he came running out with the box under his arm. Inside it there was moaning and screaming. Emma had been standing in the doorway with her hand on the doorhandle. The boy turned around and stared at the wall behind her.

“What are you staring at?” he said. She began to feel herself blush and clutched her wrist that felt naked and strange without the watch.

“I can stare at whatever I want,” she said, but wasn’t sure whether he had heard or not. He went up towards the edge of the forest. She went back inside and took her watch. She decided to follow him but had to wait until he came to a track that lead in among the trees. There he couldn’t see her. She ran up the steep hill until she saw his back and kept close to the trees, safe enough to slip behind a trunk if he turned around. He reached the top and disappeared without noticing her.

She got up and caught sight of him just ten to twelve metres away. Luckily there was a bush that she could hide behind whilst she heard the wild howls from the box. The sound of something in terrible pain. The forest ran clean along the back of the hill’s ridge that slanted down towards a small lake. He went to the water. Around to the right lay a field with a dense cluster of spruce trees. She crouched down the back of the hollow and saw him go a short distance along the shore before he let go of the box. She couldn’t hear the screaming any longer. He squatted, opened the box and with both hands took something out that he sank down in the water. Emma started the stop-watch. After one minute and fifty-eight seconds he brought his hands up and landed what he had been holding under water down on the ground. He did the same again. This time it took two minutes and nineteen seconds before he was finished and flung the little clump onto land. Afterwards he washed his hands and sat down with his head bowed for a moment. Next time he used one minute and twenty-six seconds, the fourth time he managed to take it to one: fourteen. The fifth and last he held under one minute and forty-six seconds before he heaved it onto the shore. Emma heard a wasp buzzing around her left ear so close she realised that its wings were fluttering against her head. A moment later it flew away but the sound remained after that, as did her own breath. Her heart was beating so hard that her throat hurt.

The boy took something white out of his pocket, a plastic bag, and lifted the five small clumps into it. He took the box and bag and went along the shore into the dark forest grove. Emma froze and forgot to take the time. The boy came out of the forest. Laying low she saw that he had the box with him but not the bag.

She scrambled her way up and ran. She attempted to keep low along the top of the hill but he couldn’t avoid seeing her. The best she could hope for was that he didn’t know who she was.

She ran down the hill to the other side. She camouflaged herself behind the line of trees. She no longer froze. Sweat dripped from her and her breath rasped so the taste of blood was in her mouth. She kept on looking back and didn’t stop before she was in the house. In the entrance she stood still. Her thighs ached. Her knees trembled and her breathing resonated like an echo throughout the living room, reverberating inwards. She took a look in the mirror and went into the bathroom; there she slumped down on the toilet seat. She leaned over and pressed her arms against her stomach.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “Oh God, oh God.”

She got up and went to the back window. She stood by the window frame and peeped out. The boy was on his way back to the house. He drummed the box while he whistled with a

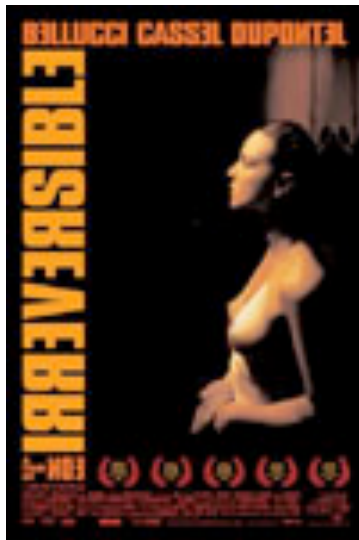
seemingly pleased look on his face. At the doorstep he stopped whistling but she saw that his mouth was still moving so he must have been singing or speaking to himself. His eyes darted back and forth, but didn't meet Emma's. She saw, though, that he knew she was standing there.

Film Note: The Tragedy of Irreversible

Reviewed by Caitlin Mahar

There are some movies that can make revenge seem appealing . . . my movie's not appealing.

Gaspar Noé



Variouly declared a masterpiece and slammed as a ‘shallow shocker’, French film-maker Gaspar Noé’s ultra-violent *Irreversible* has polarised audience members and critics since it first screened in 2003. The film features a notoriously brutal murder and horrifying rape scene and it is not difficult to see why some have dismissed Noé as simply a shock-jock (and no surprise to learn of a belated attempt by Fred Nile and cronies to ban the film in Australia). There is no doubt this film is (intentionally) shocking, but it is definitely worth steeling yourself for a look at Noé’s world.

After a brief prologue delivered by two dissipated old men in a shabby hotel room, *Irreversible* plunges the viewer into a world of violent mayhem. The camera whirls sickeningly, picking up flesh amid strobing black and red and it takes a while to work out what is happening: two men, one spewing racist, homophobic invective, race through a gay S&M club searching for another called ‘The Tapeworm’. This excruciating sequence ends when one of the men bashes another to death with a fire extinguisher.

Then we are confronted with preceding events. We witness two bourgeois types, Marcus and Pierre, set off to take revenge and the brutal, protracted, rape of Marcus’s girlfriend, Alex, by a stranger in a subway. From here Noé gradually winds us back to uneasy normality. We see the three main protagonists at a party and the minor quarrel between Alex and Marcus that leads to her leaving alone. Then we see the trio jaunty on the train prior to the party - Pierre, Alex’s old boyfriend, jokingly needling Marcus. This is followed by a tender love scene and the film ends with Alex lying in a park full of children playing.

Irreversible has been called a rape-revenge drama, but this is a misnomer. By reversing events, Noé turns his story into a tragedy. In the prologue we are told that, ‘Time destroys all things’ and, ‘There are no good or bad deeds . . . just deeds’. From the beginning of the film we are presented with a world where human beings are caught up in, and tossed about by, forces beyond their control and finally defined by their actions rather than their characters. These sentiments infuse the opening, apparently senseless, brutality. As the film unfolds, the tragic sensibility is compounded as we come to understand that the ‘wrong’ man has been punished and that the perpetrator of this horrific act is not some red-neck (or even the instinctive, hot-headed Marcus), but the film’s designated philosopher, the rational, reasonable Pierre.

By tragically reversing events, Noé also throws the film’s engaging latter scenes into ironic perspective - we are not able to get too involved. The boyish competition between Marcus and Pierre and Pierre’s teasing allusions to Marcus’ ‘primate’ nature are infused with a slightly sinister air. Similarly, a shadow is cast over the tender play-fighting of the couple and the film’s life-affirming final image appears seeded with doom.

The distance between audience and characters and narrative created by the extreme violence and the reversing of events is heightened by other techniques designed to create discomfort and unease (and it is these – rather than the violence – that seem the most likely cause of the infamous faintings that took place at early screenings of the film.). The hyperactive camera work and strobe are, at times, so dizzying they demand their own warning as you enter the cinema. Further, Noé has suggested that the thumping beat that underscores the first part of the film is a constant tone intended to induce nausea.³⁶

This isn’t a film for those who think cinema’s meant to be easy. It is clearly Noé’s intention to *trouble* his audience – to keep it at a thinking distance. We are meant to feel uncomfortable, even repelled. Indeed, initially you feel the appropriate response is to hate the director for putting you through the sickening opening scenes. Is the violence too much? Yes – many will find it unbearable (I closed my eyes in parts) and one does not imagine Aristotle would approve. Yet, in an age where tragic myths no longer haunt the collective psyche, arguably such a graphic depiction of the pivotal violent acts is here necessary to establish the image of unbearable horror on which the tragic view turns.

36 Matt Bailey, *Senses of Cinema*, No. 30, Jan-March 2004. Bailey mentions Noé’s use of a constant 27-hertz tone designed to cause nausea in an essay that looks at his work in the context of a ‘cinema of attraction’ where cinematic techniques designed to shock and unsettle the viewer are used.

Detractors have accused Noé of being a demented sicko. While teaching Oedipus I suspect numerous students have had similar thoughts about Sophocles. I can't offer character references for either. But, certainly, despite moments of compassion, virtue and terrible beauty, tragedy assumes this universe is a sick, demented place - one, ultimately, that we puny humans cannot understand. At the same time tragedy insists we strive to grasp unbearable, unknowable truths about this place and ourselves. I'm not prepared to anoint Noé a modern master of tragedy, but there seems little doubt to me that these are truths with which this *enfant terrible* is grappling.

And Some More Works From 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 & Now

Feasting with Asterix

By Rebecca Lucas

Not long ago I read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, for no reason other than that the title popped up in conversation. It took me a little while to warm to it, but from a certain event onward I was hooked: it is where Mess officer Milo serves the four squadrons at Pianosa fresh eggs fried in fresh butter.³⁷ I fried an egg in butter and ate while re-reading about eggs and soldiers. It might seem an unlikely book to set off reflections upon a habit so long established, but the synthesis of reading and eating has always been a part of my literary pleasure.

The first time I bit into a pickle was when I was five, soon after finishing a children's classic by Eric Carle. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* arrives at a penultimate narrative moment: its picture-book double spread of tidbits lined up with a perfect hole punched (eaten) through each. "On Saturday," the hungry caterpillar "ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie,

³⁷ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 134–136.

one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon.”³⁸ Only the pickle was then an unknown to me. I needed to know the taste of everything tasted by the very hungry caterpillar. With no personal sensuous experience of ‘pickle’ the word and illustration were a frustration. The story seemed incomplete. Later, the Gallic banquets in *Asterix* comics were complemented by something meaty. I wanted to hold a chicken drumstick or lamb cutlet in my greasy fist and gnaw on it. Reading became an invitation, in this case, to eat what the Gauls were eating, to be there with Obelisk as we gorged on roasted boar.



These enacted readings connected real and imagined worlds. The connection was not confined to passages featuring food. I ate my way into a narrative in order to explore its entire sensuous landscape. There is a chapter in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* called ‘Turkish Delight’ where C. S. Lewis writes that “Edmund... thought only of trying to shovel down as much Turkish Delight as he could, and the more he ate the more he wanted to eat.”³⁹ My lasting impression of the *Narnia Chronicles* concerns ordinary children (though rather proper and British) in an extraordinary forested world of talking animals, but this impression is, at the same time, linked to the sensation of stuffing my face full of Frye’s Turkish Delight. The few children’s books left on my shelf are those replete with descriptions of food and memories of eating. I first identified with characters through the meals we shared.

Countless times I scoffed a bar of chocolate at the exact moment that Charlie in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* “tore off the wrapper and took an enormous bite. Then he took another... and another... and oh, the joy of being able to cram large pieces of something sweet and solid in

³⁸ Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (London: Puffin, 1969).

³⁹ C.S.Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Middlesex: Puffin, 1977), p. 37.

one's mouth!"⁴⁰ But no matter how hard I worked to convince myself, the Yarra River, brown as it is, would not flow for me as melted chocolate. I could make-believe that my Milo had been scooped from Wonka's river, but I never expected to drink from it directly. And when Enid Blyton wrote of a purse that delivers a dish each time it is opened, although I tasted the delicacies which appeared, I knew nothing would appear from my imitation purse with pink beads and silver clasp.



It did not really matter that such daydreams stayed unfulfilled. Wishing for what was fantastical generated only a slight disappointment. Did I have a tacit understanding that the impossibility of magic purses somehow keeps fiction safe? The synthesis of reading and eating does not act to make another world disappear into this one. Bites, chews, flavours and swallows are real. The fictional world is imagined real through the bites. Of course, the tasting has not always agreed with the reading. I once read of how a 'pot' of jam packed in a school boarder's 'tuck-box' was enjoyed straight from the jar. But forcing down dark spoonfuls of straight jam was so horribly sweet. The writing seemed to be affected by this incongruity. As a twelve year-old, I could not feel the same excitement over an orange shown by a novel's nineteenth century children. Their fruits were held like fat edible jewels. Nevertheless, I am able to marvel at the preciousness of an orange.

Although literary descriptions of food and eating stimulated my mouth as well as my imagination, lusciousness was not a condition for the content of the writing. I left a rough chunk of bread to go stale, so it could be chewed and washed down with a big gulp of black tea like the swagman in *The Shiralee*.⁴¹ Eating bread and dripping (bacon fat left in the pan) sat me at a table in the Depression. The pleasures of combining reading and eating do not entail gluttony (although it is definitely an option). Nothing decrees that one must eat to read. Language is always the essential ingredient. Over time I have become less impelled to consume the various foods represented on the page. And I like to think that my early tendency for blending appetites of the mind and body has well cultivated a mature appreciation of literature.

⁴⁰ Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (London: Puffin, 2005), p. 62.

⁴¹ Niland, D'Arcy, *The Shiralee* (1955).

It was at least ten years ago that a well-read friend declared to me that Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was a masterpiece, but I have only now picked it up. Following on from my reading of *Catch-22*, *Gravity's Rainbow* is, as it happens, another lengthy wartime book. By contrast, a few pages in and I'm finding it reads too intellectually; it is constructed a little too self-consciously. However, just a bit further along and a paragraph surprises my senses: it is so exquisite an inventory of Pirate's Banana Breakfast that I am already heady with the delicious scent of this literature. There were, writes Pynchon:

tall cruets of pale banana syrup to pour oozing over banana waffles, a giant glazed crock where diced bananas have been fermenting since summer with wild honey and muscat raisins, up out of which, this winter morning, one now dips foam mugsfull of banana mead... banana croissants and banana kreplach, and banana oatmeal and banana jam and banana bread, and bananas flamed in ancient brandy Pirate brought back last year from a cellar in the Pyrenees.⁴²

⁴² Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 10–11.

The Father of Modern Art

Robert Hughes, Goya, London: Harvill Press, 2003

Reviewed by Sasha Cyganowski



There has been much on TV recently about the 18th-19th century Spanish artist Francisco Goya y Lucientes, or Goya. The British art commentator Matthew Collings, in the second part to his series *This is Modern Art*, walks amongst contemporary artists who, with their oversized plastic noses, sniff the bottom of a fellow artist. In another scene, we watch a gluttonous freak almost choke on melted chocolate, which is being poured into her mouth from a funnel inserted between a pair of thighs hovering above her. Goya, claims Collings, is the father of modern art. Few would doubt this, but I wonder what Goya would think of being catalogued alongside such art.

Prior to Collings's series, SBS screened a show in its *Masterpiece* series by Australia's Robert Hughes. Both Hughes and Collings released television shows to accompany their latest books; *Goya* by Hughes, and *This is Modern Art* by Collings. But that is where the similarity ends. Collings's commentary is verbose and all-embracing, Hughes's style is sharp and critical.

In his show, limping with a cane, Hughes takes us on a personalised journey through Goya's Spain. The limp is a result of his car accident on a West Australian desert road in 1999. Emotionally, the effects of the accident, court case, and media coverage are obvious; his book is infused with sentiments such as West Australian justice is to justice what West Australian culture is to culture. Indeed, the major motivating force pushing Hughes to write this biography he had thought so long about was his horrendous car accident, which left him in a coma for five weeks. His chances of survival were rated as extremely low, and it was in nightmares during the coma that Goya came to Hughes, taunting him like a toreador to a bull. Driving into Goya seems a suitable title for Chapter One.

It was through the accident, Hughes writes, that I came to know extreme pain, fear, and despair; and it may be that the writer who does not know fear, despair, and pain cannot fully know Goya. If one strips away all the media coverage of Hughes, one is left with his writing:

They were friends. But that, in broad outline, is all we know about Goya's



relationship to the duchess of Alba.

Despite the acreage of scented embroidery that has been superimposed on their friendship, despite the romantic novelists and the Hollywood scriptwriters – for, inevitably, there was a film about their liaison, *The Naked Maja*, with the duchess played by Ava Gardner; alas, it was made too early for Cher, who really did look like her when she was young, to take



the part – there is no good reason to suppose that the beauty was ever in bed with the deaf genius twice her age.

Goya was deaf (not mad) from the age of 46 to his death at the age of 82. To live so long was an amazing feat of longevity for a Spaniard at that time, partly because of the status of Spanish politics and religion. The Inquisition, although coming to a close, was still a terrifying presence and war with Napoleon's France brought out the worst in humanity, both illustrated by Goya in his *Caprichos* and *Desastres* series, respectively. When the war was over Spain fell into the hands of the bumbling Fernando VII, which was enough to drive Goya into exile, arriving in Bordeaux "deaf, old, awkward and weak, and without knowing a word of French." Some 12,000 families similarly went into exile, most of them to France, like Goya. An illustration of Fernando's incompetence, and in particular his attitude to education, is provided by Hughes:

... the chancellor of the university rose, or rather sank, to the occasion ... he assured the Desired One, [Fernando] "Far from us be the disastrous mania for thinking."

Hughes poses many interesting questions. Some, such as the following, are particularly relevant in today's culture of fear:

Nearly sixty years after the bomb bay doors of the *Enola Gay* opened to release Little Boy, and a new level of human conflict, over Hiroshima, there is still no major work of visual art marking the birth of the nuclear age. No esthetically significant painting or sculpture commemorates Auschwitz.

...

Vietnam was tearing the country apart, and where was the art that recorded America's anguish? ... in general there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that came near the achievement of Goya's *Desastres de la guerra*, those heartrending prints in which the artist bore witness to the almost unspeakable facts of death in the Spanish rising against Napoleon, and in doing so became the first modern visual reporter on warfare.



Hughes's technical remarks on Goya's work are as insightful as the historical context in which he places the art. Goya's use of aquatint in etching and his use of the sketchbook as a visual diary were both innovative, and his use of 'stable' structures such as diagonals, pyramids, and triangles to compose an often brutal subject matter was to become his hallmark. Prior to the chemical process of aquatint, the most common method of varying tones was by Rembrandt-esque hatching and cross-hatching. In the above plate, Goya shades with aquatint and places triangles, such as the void between the legs of the kneeling man in the background, deliberately.

Apart from late-night TV, where else had I seen Goya lately? The vivid, grotesque characters from the recent Peter Booth exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria were loitering in my mind, and it was no surprise to learn that Booth studied Goya. Booth seems to detest the crowd as much as Goya did, and he captures humanity, as Goya did, at its lowest.





If one is interested in Goya, then it almost goes without saying that Robert Hughes' book will appeal, but it would also appeal to those with an interest in the fashion, politics, or sport (i.e. bullfighting) of 18th-19th century Spain. Physically, it is a hefty hardcover with thick glossy pages, and excellent colour plates. A book by one of the best known art critics on one of the greatest ever artists, it is a gem.

Dehumanising Experiences

Ma Jian, (Flora Drew trans.), Stick Out Your Tongue, Chatto & Windus: London, 2006

Ma Jian, (Flora Drew trans.), The Noodle Maker, Chatto & Windus: London, 2004

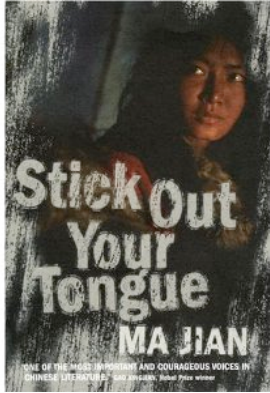
Ma Jian, (Flora Dew trans.), Red Dust: A Path Through China, Pantheon Books: New York, 2001

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Ma Jian is a Chinese writer living in exile who is sympathetic to Tibet and Tibetan culture. Without expecting fundamental change any day soon, Ma Jian personally hopes for a peaceful end to China's destructive rule in Tibet before it is too late for the local language, religion and culture. But Ma Jian's writing about Tibet is totally free of the romantic notions and utopian visions characteristic of many outsiders – often Western converts to Buddhism – who idealise Tibet and Tibetans. Indeed, Ma Jian writes about Tibet with a profound anger and disgust, passions familiar to readers of Ma Jian's *The Noodle Maker*, a sardonic novel about life under Communist rule in China during the “Open Door policy” associated with Deng Xiaoping. Ma Jian's novel, although bleakly comical, is filled with violence, crushed illusions and emptiness. *The Noodle Maker* is set in eastern China, home to the Han Chinese majority. Now, in this newly translated collection of his short stories, *Stick Out Your Tongue*, Ma Jian writes specifically about Tibet: a land in which he spent many troubled months as described in his stunning and confessional travel book, *Red Dust*.

Instead of ethereal, numinous, and spiritual Tibet, life in *Stick Out Your Tongue* is nasty, brutish and short. Ma Jian's Tibetans are not bloodless spirits, or smiling simpletons whose indomitable faith shines forth beneath dark clouds of Chinese contempt and oppression. His Tibetans are anguished or defeated, tormented by their own desires and limitations.



A poor girl is effectively sold to another family to become the polyandrous wife of two brothers more than twice her age. She dies in childbirth, and her husbands cut up her body for the vultures and crows. A student returning from a two-year stint in the town searches in vain for his nomadic family. His simple gifts for his aged parents and younger sisters are lost with his bolting black horse, his uncertain life lost on a barren mountainside. An old man seeks redemption from his incestuous past, circling a sacred mountain in an attempt to escape this life of guilt and the memory of his abused daughter. A Chinese traveller seeks meaning in a world where he cannot distinguish myth from reality. His camera, like Ma Jian's prose, always searching out darker and darker images.

Ma Jian is a photographer and painter as well as a writer, and the stories in *Stick Out Your Tongue* include images or whole passages identical to the travel narrative *Red Dust* – including a half-naked girl huddling beneath a Lhasa meat stall, and an angry Chinese soldier mourning the painful life and premature death of his pregnant Tibetan girlfriend.

Ma Jian's writing in *Stick Out Your Tongue* includes references one would expect from any stories about Tibet: yak butter, prayer wheels, ruined stupas, prostrate pilgrims, sky burials. But Ma Jian does not romanticise the people or idealise the mountains, lakes and grasslands: yaks and horses are driven mad by gadflies and mosquitoes. People die on lonely precipices. Starving men drink congealed blood.

Unlike other writers who may seek inner peace through Lamaism, Ma Jian explores the physical life of a Living Buddha, nervously aware of the body and sexuality while searching for the inner eye.

Before setting off on his travels through China and Tibet that spawned both *Red Dust* and *Stick Out Your Tongue* Ma Jian went through an acrimonious divorce. He had limited access to his young daughter, and he felt stifled at work. Chinese authorities frowned on his artistic attitudes and lifestyle, including his relationship with dissident poets and his habit of photographing models and dancers. He also felt betrayed by his girlfriend, an aspiring actress who slept with another man but was so acquiescent with Ma Jian that she allowed him to file down her tooth to straighten her smile for a film role. Her sexual betrayal taught Ma Jian “never to trust a woman again.” And he felt that “Love and hate can drive you on, but hate can drive you further.”

As recorded in *Red Dust*, Ma Jian's relationships with women were troubled and his experiences rarely free from violence. His wife was the girlfriend of a man tortured and executed by the Chinese State – an execution Ma Jian witnessed himself – and a brief sexual release was described in almost fighting terms: “I let go of myself and pound into her.” But his solo travels through remote provinces were never free from longing, regret, or attempts to connect – especially with women poets or artists.

Some readers may find Ma Jian's writing misogynistic. *Red Dust*, *The Noodle Maker* and *Stick Out Your Tongue* certainly contain an uncomfortable repetition of rape, domestic abuse, and contempt for women. But his works are intentionally confronting and condemnatory. In the case of *The Noodle Maker* for example, Ma Jian depicts a disturbed and distorting society that both gives rise to gang rapists and then stands by to watch the gang rape without coming to the rescue of the victim. As Ma Jin writes in *Red Dust*: “When a country is ruled by a band of thugs, men behave like savages.”

Chinese authorities have branded Ma Jian's writing “pornographic” and his works have been banned in China. The original editor of Ma Jian's Tibetan stories was sacked from his job with *People's Literature* and the original copies of *Stick Out Your Tongue* were recalled and destroyed – an act which of course raised their black market price and assured temporary underground success.

China has made significant progress in economic and social development, particularly since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the years of reform associated with Deng Xiaoping and his successors. Hundreds of millions of people have escaped poverty, and China's economy has grown to become one of the largest (and most influential) in the world. These developments have been especially obvious in the eastern seaboard provinces, while absolute poverty still scars many inland rural and remote regions, including Tibet. It is undeniable that “your average Chinese with a steady job” now has more freedom to save, to buy and sell, and to travel than was the case during most of Ma Jian's life in China. But these freedoms are relative. China still leads the world in executions, more than 1,700 last year alone,⁴³ and women and children are trafficked as sex slaves or forced brides, a phenomenon observed by Ma Jian in *Red Dust*. More Hong Kong music, fashion magazines, and pirated foreign films are available in Chinese streets than Mao's old colleagues could ever have imagined, but the streets are still policed against freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, and independent trade unions are ruthlessly suppressed.

⁴³ Execution figures are a state secret in China. Based on public reports, Amnesty International estimates a minimum of 1,770 executions in 2005. Some legal experts put the actual figure at close to 8,000.

“Political freedom gives one a sense of self. Economic freedom encourages greed. If one has the latter without the former then society becomes warped and this can be very dangerous.”

It remains a sad fact that many of China’s most challenging writers are living – or in the recent case of Liu Binyan dying – in exile, their works suppressed in the motherland. (Even Yu Hua, a popular novelist still living and working in China, first gained a serious boost both to his book sales and his notoriety when the Chinese authorities banned Zhang Yimou’s film version of his novel *To Live*.)

China’s only Nobel laureate in Literature, Gao Xingjian, left China in 1987, having earlier seen his work officially condemned in China as “spiritual pollution.” Accused of the same toxic effect, Ma Jian went into exile in the same year. The so-called “misty” poet Yang Lian has not returned permanently to China since 1989, and the troubled poet and autobiographical novelist Gu Cheng murdered his wife Xie Ye and committed suicide in New Zealand in 1993. The Chinese government opportunistically exploited this tragedy, labelling Gu Cheng as “decadent” – the same abuse heaped on Yang Lian and Ma Jian and other critical voices or unorthodox personalities.

Not only misty poets, decadent liberals, and young hooligans or tramps have been silenced or exiled: older Communists have also been punished for daring to write beyond tightly prescribed bounds. China’s paramount investigative journalist Liu Binyan, who joined the underground Communist Party during the anti-Japanese war in 1943, was twice expelled from the Party and prevented from writing or publishing freely in China for all but nine of the People’s Republic’s fifty six years during which Liu lived. Liu Binyan died in America in December 2005, having spent many years in Chinese internal exile and over sixteen years in foreign exile. The Chinese authorities – still smarting at Liu Binyan’s brave exposure of official corruption in China and his vocal condemnation of the violent suppression of the Democracy Movement in June 1989 – refused permission for him to return to China after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Even Liu Binyan’s ashes have not been allowed to return home to China.

Like Ma Jian’s alienated student trying to find his nomadic family, Liu Binyan was cut off from the place and the people that gave his life full meaning. They both died searching, but lost. Unlike the Tibetan girl’s body, stripped back to the bone and fed to the vultures in a traditional Tibetan Buddhist ceremony, Liu Binyan has had no rites of final passage.



Vultures have no interest in ashes.

Since Liu Binyan's death, the status of critical writers in China has not improved, as witnessed by the imprisonment of the literary critic and human rights advocate Liu Xiaobo. In 2010 the Chinese state kept Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo in prison and even refused permission for his wife or friends to attend the Nobel ceremony to collect the prize on his behalf. The empty chair placed on stage in Oslo for Liu Xiaobo drew attention to his absence: an absence of freedom, an absence of human rights, an absence of compassion.

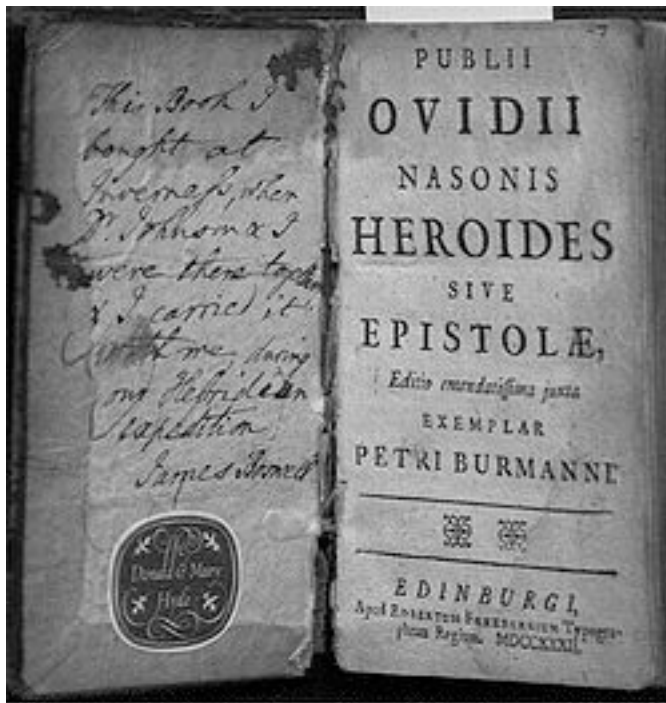


Ma Jian's writing is angry, and his imagery violent. But unfortunately there is a lot of physical, emotional, and cultural violence still to be angry about.

Ovid's *Heroides*: An Appreciation

By Gayle Allan

All quotes from *Heroides* in this article are from Harold Isbell translation, Penguin: Harmondsworth (1990).



All images copyright Houghton Library of Harvard College Library *2003J-JB128

Classical literature is not usually the first place a feminist like myself would look for inspiration, however Ovid's *Heroides* has always been one of my favourite books. In it, Ovid provides a uniquely female perspective of the predominantly male-centric tales of ancient mythology. Although many people are familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, his *Heroides* is not as well known. This is unfortunate as *Heroides* is an extraordinary text that gives a voice to many of the women featured in classical myths and legend. These women are otherwise largely silent in the myths, or

their story is mentioned incidentally to the heroes' deeds. All the women featured in *Heroides* have been abandoned by, or separated from, their "heroic" husbands or lovers, and in Ovid's text, they get to say what they think about that. The first edition of *Heroides* consists of fifteen letters written by these women to the men who have abandoned them. Ovid's choice of the letter form, and therefore a first person "complaint", puts the text inescapably in the private domain where potent heroes can be shown to be deficient and dishonourable lovers, dismantling the underpinning of

the epic and the heroic. This provision of the women's subjective experience provides a female interiority that we don't normally get from the myths themselves, and they provide fascinating reading.

The second edition of *Heroides*, sometimes referred to as *Double Heroides*, includes a further six letters which consist of three paired exchanges between some of the men and women before their affairs have begun. It is interesting to note that although the males are given a voice in these letters (not that they have lacked one in previous sources and versions of stories), Ovid could not resist the temptation to alter their voice from the traditional stories, and to a certain extent this undermines their integrity even further than their wives' and lovers' letters already do.

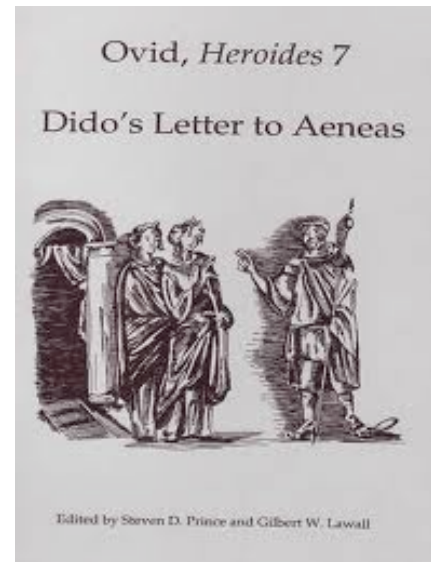
Penelope's letter to Ulysses is a highlight of the text and opens proceedings with a bang! In *Heroides* Penelope, the long suffering wife of the epic wanderer and adventurer Ulysses, finally gets to vent her spleen. Penelope's letter to her long absent husband, scolding him over his delay in coming home, encapsulates a trope that has been long popular in literature - that of the scolding, nagging wife. The opening line of her letter, "Penelope to the tardy Ulysses" (p.5), sets up the sarcastic tone that this formidable lady takes with her heroic husband.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope is cast in the role of traditional wife and mother, the epitome of wifely faithfulness, waiting for Ulysses and turning away all suitors who pressure her during Ulysses's ten year absence. But in *Heroides*, Penelope is a fully fleshed-out woman, with seething emotions - and a voice. Ulysses' reputation and status mean nothing to her - she is his wife, he is taking his time coming home, and she's angry! Penelope continually berates Ulysses for the injury he has done her by being away for so long, and eventually conveys her suspicions:

I consider the perils of land and sea
and wonder what has caused your delay.
But while I worry alone at home, perhaps
it is only love that detains you:
be sure that I know how fickle men can be.(p.5)

Of course her instincts are correct. As we know from Homer, Ulysses "tarried" with both Circe and Calypso on his way home.

Central to the collection is the letter from Dido to her lover Aeneas. The story of Dido, the founder and first Queen of Carthage, varies somewhat amongst the classical sources. While some sources say that Dido killed herself because she would not succumb to the advances of the African King Iarbus and in the process break her marriage vows to her dead husband, others such as Virgil in *The Aeneid* and Ovid in *Heroides*, claim that Dido suicided over her abandonment by Aeneas. Virgil's *Aeneid* depicts Dido's suicide as a defiant and heroic gesture, but in *Heroides* Dido is a victim of love, and her grief and shame over her abandonment is given a voice in her letter to Aeneas. In the letter, Dido takes what could be termed, in modern parlance, as a "doormat" approach. She lists out the advantages she has offered Aeneas, and contemplates the revenge she could take on him, but she continually returns to a more compliant position, finally offering Aeneas an opportunity to return to her. Dido offers to accept a lower status as hostess rather than wife, in order to keep Aeneas close to her. Why such a powerful woman would be reduced to such subservience is not explained by Ovid, but this enormous fall adds to the poignancy of Dido's painful lament.



In mythology, and in *Heroides*, the opposite extreme of Dido is the apocalyptic figure of Medea, the enchantress (some say sorceress), prophetess, and lover of Jason. Medea was known in legend as a woman of astounding and unparalleled evil. In *Heroides*, Medea's letter to Jason after he leaves her to marry Creusa, is full of the fire and spite expected of an acknowledged sorceress, but what is unexpected is the grief and hurt of a woman whose says her "heart is sad" (p. 111). In her complaint, Medea abuses Jason, but she saves her most poisonous vitriol for his new bride, who she refers to as "That slut [who] is caressing the body I saved". (p.111) This kind of abuse towards "the other women" is common in *Heroides*, and is a disturbing aspect of the voice Ovid has given these women.

The errant Jason receives yet another letter in *Heroides*, this time from Hypsiuple, the Queen of Lemnos, who was his partner before he was enchanted by Medea (who he

subsequently left for Creusa). In her letter Hypsipyle refers to Medea as “a barbarian slut” who “prowls among tombs” (p.51) in search of bones and other vile things to make her evil potions. Hypsipyle herself is a formidable woman. As the Queen of Lemnos she led the women of Lemnos to rebel against their cruel and tyrannical men folk. However, initially Ovid’s Hypsipyle reveals herself to be as vulnerable as any woman when it comes to betrayal but, like her rival Medea, Hypsipyle’s indulgence in womanly sadness is soon overcome by rage, fierceness and resolve. Not unexpectedly, a woman whose skills and experience include leading a successful mutiny, is not going to take Jason’s betrayal lying down!

There are many other intriguing letters in *Heroides* including Briesis to Achilles urging him to accept her as part of a benefits package from Agamemnon, Oenone to Paris after he returned from the Spartan wars with another woman (Helen), and Deianira to Hercules after he defeated King Eurytus and took the King’s daughter Iole as his concubine. The pattern continues throughout the text. Men behave badly. Women write letters.

Beside the alarmingly high rate of male inconstancy, one of the most notable aspects of many of the letters are what they don’t say, and this is both *Heroides’* greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The subjective, in-the-moment, emotional response contained in the letters, which give such depth to the personalities of these women, makes compelling reading. However this form does not allow for a forward or back story. Unless we know our classical mythology well, we are not familiar with the events that prompted this outpouring of emotion. So, while the letters on their own can be interesting, touching or amusing in their own right, knowing the story origins enables them to become titillating, moving, or downright hilarious. If we know what sparked the response, then we can look for hints of scandalous behaviour, or oblique references to terrible doings, or marvel at the understatement or innuendo of the letters’ contents. Without that knowledge, the letters lose much of their power.



So, while *Heroides* is a wonderfully lively and rich reading experience, it is also definitely a text that requires a good background knowledge of classical mythology and legends. But don't let this deter you! Many modern editions provide a preamble before each letter, which fills you in on the salient points of the story (the Penguin Classic edition does this quite well). However if you want to add real depth to your reading of *Heroides*, then make sure you have a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* beside you (and maybe some Virgil and Homer.) Your efforts will be well and truly rewarded.

Half Dream

Jin Xing (with Catherine Texier), Shanghai Tango: A Memoir, London: Atlantic Books, 2007

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



It cannot be easy being a transsexual in China, especially when you are the only son in an extended family with expectations that you will carry on the ancestral name. Being a famous dancer who moves from male lead roles to female lead roles after pioneering gender reassignment surgery in Beijing ensures that the spotlight of notoriety falls on you, even without the added pressure of a *China Youth Daily* journalist questioning your right to perform on stage. So it is just as well that Jin Xing is an emotionally tough character with an extraordinary sense of self-importance.

Jin Xing considers herself China's greatest modern dancer. And she believes she is China's greatest choreographer. Fortunately, Jin Xing makes no claim to being China's greatest writer.

Shanghai Tango presents powerful feelings of a boy in the grimy industrial city of Shenyang who senses from a young age that he is really female. Jin Xing's father is a military officer who works in another city during the final years of the Cultural Revolution, and he is both physically and emotionally distant from his only son. Jin Xing develops exclusively in a female world, bathing in the female washroom, enjoying his sister's clothes and developing an obvious attachment to long hair. Jin Xing's mother is stubborn and determined – like her self-willed son who goes on hunger strike until he is allowed to enrol in the army's dance school at the age of nine – but she is hurt in a loveless and unsupportive marriage, eventually divorcing Jin Xing's taciturn father.

In the military dance academy Jin Xing is trained beyond the point of physical cruelty (pulleys are used to stretch the muscles of the young students) and he becomes a prize-winning dancer. But Jin Xing always feels imprisoned inside a male body. He enjoys dancing female roles, grows his hair long to accentuate an androgynous look, and feels sexual attraction for heterosexual men.

Shanghai Tango presents Jin Xing as talented and determined, but very selfish and arrogant, with a self-confidence and lack of reflection that often grates: “My technique is impeccable and my virtuosity so precise that I can perform any sequence of movements on the spot.” The memoir also reveals Jin Xing to be ruthless and vindictive. Upset with a petty official in the dance school, Jin Xing kidnaps the woman’s six-year old daughter and glories in the woman’s despair as she searches for her child all afternoon. And in a successful bid to be released from the army school to take up an American modern dance fellowship, Jin Xing exposes a gay choreographer, telling him that his conversations have been taped and denouncing him to the authorities, ultimately ending the man’s career.

When Jin Xing arrived in America – at this stage still a male lead – he focused completely on dance and sex, experiencing his first penetrative sexual contact and frequenting the “supermarket” of New York’s gay bars. In one of the few humorous touches in this memoir Jin Xing turns the table on fantasies of Eastern eroticism: “Western sexuality! It is the stuff of legends and I finally have the chance to experience it for myself.” The short, balding man who first seduces Jin Xing may look like Vladimir Illyich Lenin, but at least “he lives up to Westerners’ reputations” for sexual prowess. Later Jin Xing dates a tall Texan cowboy, but life on the ranch lacks culture and the opportunity to star on a public stage.

In 1989 Jin Xing was so preoccupied with the variety of gay bars in New York, and with his need to move beyond dance technique to dance style, that the Chinese Democracy Movement of that year completely passed him by until someone told him about the killings on Tiananmen Square. The euphoria, idealism and social demands of the protesters do not rate in Jin Xing’s memoir. And the tragedy of the military suppression, the killings, arrests, and subsequent political and cultural winter serve merely as an excuse for Chinese students like Jin Xing to stay on in America. He accepts the suffering of others as “a gift of fate.”

From America Jin Xing travels to choreograph advertisements in Rome, where Jin Xing sees an elegant transsexual broadcasting on TV. Jin Xing also teaches dance in Belgium before feeling the urge to return to China. Jin Xing could have had sexual reassignment in Europe, where the surgery was a more established procedure, but he felt the need to be reborn as a woman in China. There is a strange sense of nationalism or cultural chauvinism in this memoir, with Jin Xing maintaining that a Chinese can never really feel at home or relaxed in a foreign country.

The memoir explores Jin Xing's sexual self-discovery and elicits our sympathy in her quest for personal liberation. She reiterates difficult conversations with her mother and friends who could not understand her desire to become a woman. Jin Xing was told that "real men" would not love her because "they want a natural woman." Jin Xing also relates some gruesome medical stories that border on malpractice, with her foot slipping from the stirrup during surgery and her left leg being crushed, leaving it numb and grossly swollen with damaged nerve endings. But Jin Xing's memoir exhibits a total lack of empathy for other transsexuals. She dismisses as misfits those Thais who undergo breast enhancement surgery but retain their penises, and for some inexplicable reason she finds Brazilians superficial: "Not for me the casualness of the Brazilian transsexuals who have operations on a whim, as though they were going for a simple facelift. For me it is a rebirth."



After prolonged therapy to regain movement in her leg from the botched operation in Beijing Jin Xing returns as a dancer, choreographer and owner of the bar *Half Dream* – where she presides as queen bee over a clientele of China's nouveau riche and wealthy foreigners. Her story is one of personal ambition and fulfilment, including the joy she receives from adopting three children, but her half dream – between East and West and male and female – does not awaken to a permanent Chinese love. Jin Xing lives in China, but her lovers are Western men.

Having been trained in a system of severe discipline, Jin Xing is herself autocratic in the operation of her dance company – so much so that a number of dancers rebelled against her – but she never reflects on the broader themes of tyranny and control in her society. The only time Jin Xing touches on the political situation in China – including the cultural phenomenon of using a network of personal contacts to get things done – is when she relies on her father to arrange for a change to her identity card or when she uses a political patron to establish her dance company and protect it from criticism.



For someone who considers herself a non-political artist, Jin Xing's memoir ends on a truly grotesque political note. Jin Xing calls Madam Mao her "heroine" because Jiang Qing supposedly turned her frustration at Chairman Mao's infidelity into a single-minded determination to produce "the ten major masterpieces of the Cultural Revolution." The autocratic and selfish Jin Xing looks admiringly at Jiang Qing as a woman who battled for her own power, but she makes no mention of the cruelty,

ensorship and artistic stultification of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a prescriptive movement which was not proletarian, cultural or revolutionary in any meaningful sense, and which was only great in the same way that the Great Plague or the Great Famine were great.

The Nature of Advertising: Pure Blonde

Lecture notes by Rebecca Lucas



One entry into scrutinizing our own past philosophical traditions is through present day familiar cultural narratives – because they are sometimes the legacy of philosophical foundations.

Cultural narratives operate at all the various levels of societal frameworks. We're going to start by thinking about the kinds of representations of nature we find in

the stories circulating in mainstream everyday life. Marketing and blockbuster movies provide a good indicator of mainstream views, and the general positioning of nature operating in our culture.

We all know that modern Western culture is a commodity culture – a consumer culture, so let's start with some ads. It sounds a bit tragic, but in some ways advertising is the culmination of an entire tradition of thought – advertising is so influential because it targets deep-rooted ideas and codes we've culturally inherited and are programmed to respond to.

For example, we respond so strongly to *ideas* of 'Nature', that it provides marketers with lots of powerful imagery. It's a common way to sell a product. If a product's associated with nature it might convey messages of being 'natural' or, in other words, it's a norm or mainstream - it's the right choice for most people, or it might be trying to capture a sense of 'goodness' and healthiness, or it might conjure feelings of freedom and purity. There are lots of car ads that use panoramic scenes (Land Rover does it a lot), or just using the colour green, or animals has an influence.

But what sort of reality of nature are we engaging with here? It's a reality whereby somehow it's natural to see an awesome desert terrain and very big cars as belonging together. Or a wild animal a good fit for a telecommunications network (OPTUS). And the manufacturing processes are hidden in this kind of narrative. It wouldn't capture the right mood to fill that desert expanse with a car factory, because that would reduce the objective, which is to sell product. An idea of nature is packed into the product. You'd be familiar with the criticism of the natural world reduced to a resource for human use. Here nature is used not just a physical resource but as a conceptual resource which is exploited with the aim to sell more, to buy more – but what would be really helpful environmentally, what would not exploit nature, would be to buy less.

I'm sure you can think of loads of ads that represent nature. I want us to spend a moment critically analysing one television commercial, for a low-carb beer: Foster's Pure Blonde - it only goes for 1 minute. You've probably seen it. While we watch it, look out for how nature is represented, but also how women, truck drivers, and ideal humans, are represented. It's funny because it plays into extreme clichés and stereotypes. Also look out for how the making of the beer is shown as a tranquil natural process, from the moment the hops fall from the tree.

FOSTERS PURE BLONDE: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ml3ybCxxMRk&NR=1>

There are a two things going on in this ad. One, it shows a swag of problematic representations. But two, most of us find it funny, we don't get offended. Why don't we get offended by its prejudice against truck drivers as sweaty perving slobs, or by an ideal race of people that may as well be based in Nazi ideology? We probably don't because the ad is very self-aware – it takes a dig at how other products might in all seriousness try to associate with concepts of purity or perfection through unreal imagery. But, we also should remember that just because the Pure Blonde ad uses stereotypes to be funny doesn't make these actual stereotypes less problematic. And, the ad doesn't break them down, or move beyond them, it just uses them.

Through parodying one way nature is represented in cultural narratives, the ad helps us identify a strong cultural view of nature. Romanticised Nature, and romanticised human relationship with nature, is a common western cultural narrative. There's also another opposite way for representing nature: nature as hostile threat – keep it out – eradicate it - the dirt, the germs, the bugs, the uncomfortable air temperature. But we're going to think about the Romantic representation.

What images of nature do we get from the ad? It's a utopia – a picturesque ultra-lush landscape, playful baby animals like lion cubs, skipping lambs, Bambi at the end. Beer is a gentle natural phenomenon: hops falls from the tree into a pristine waterfall, pure white doves doing

something with a net - natural filtering, puffer fish blow bubbles into the beer, 'Pure Blonde' people, at one with nature, in skimpy pure white togas, leisurely, or almost in a day-dream state, fill bottles.

It's all very...untainted, and a bit dull. Until there's a blast of glam metal music – Cherry pie, a monster truck comes in, there's the slob truckie who loads up, pervs, trashes everything, burns off. The final slogan is: "From a Place Much more pure than yours"

Or ours! Often a product is persuasive because it promises a better you – a more beautiful you, a more successful you. What's interesting in the Pure Blonde ad is that the audience identifies with the truckie, who has a more real



presence, and whose existence seems more fun. The extremity of the idealization of nature, which includes the Pure Blondes, makes its purity an obvious delusion.

I think the ad is clever and funny, some people do find it offensive. One of the comments under the upload on Youtube is that it would never be shown in Sweden, because it would be considered right wing extreme and hateful. That's because this ad reflects back at us, through its representation of Nature, of women, of a perfect race, some of the oppressive assumptions we are socially immersed in. Outside of this ad deeply problematic assumptions that cut across sexism, racism, capitalism, colonialism, domination of nature exist. You can think through those complexities, but what the ad does seriously emphasize, is how cultural narratives regularly reduce particular bodies to a few culturally constructed myths or distortions, which we need to critically navigate. These things participate in constructing the way we see the world and ourselves, the way we relate ourselves with the world.

We're constantly exposed to such constructions, and any relationship real people might have with say, the real natural world, is filtered through such conceptual reductions. There's the risk that a healthy conceptual relationship with real nature can be partly displaced, or substituted, or simulated. Real nature gets positioned as the background to social constructions of nature, to cultural stories and descriptions of the world.

Good Evening

**Preeta Samarasan, Evening is the Whole Day,
London: Fourth Estate, 2008.**

Reviewed by Pat Porter



Preeta Samarasan's first novel, *Evening is the Whole Day*, a mystery set in Malaysia, is confident in its control of events, themes and characters. The novel's main strength is that it appeals to and satisfies different levels of the readers' intellect and emotions. Furthermore, although it may be considered reminiscent in some ways of the styles of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and even Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* as it unveils the Rajasekharan family's secrets, and perhaps Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Anos de Soledad* with its elements of magic realism, Samarasan can not be accused of lacking originality as each element of the novel is integrated in a confidently individual manner.

On one level, the secret causes of the unhappiness of the apparently perfect, affluent and achieving Rajasekharan family are gradually unravelled for the reader. The plot follows the history of the Tamil family in the Big House in Kingfisher Lane, in a town in northern Ipoh, a part of Malaysia "stretching delicate as a bird's head from the thin neck of the Kra Isthmus". The Malaysian history of the family starts with the grandfather, a coolie from Bengal who arrived in Malaysia in 1899. It follows the success of his son, Tata, who moved from being a clerk to being the owner of a shipping company, "Rubber Baron, Cement King, Duke of Durians, Tapioca Tycoon, Import-Export Godfather". Tata bought the Big House from the Scotsman, Mr. McDougall, in 1956 and moved in with his wife Paati, three daughters, and sons Raju (or Appa, an Oxford educated Lawyer) and Balu (or Uncle Ballroom, the non-achieving, black sheep of the family). The novel reveals how yet another achiever in the family, Appa, surprised his peers and mother by marrying his beautiful, but ignorant, next door neighbour, Vasanthi (also referred to as Amma). However, most of the novel is set during 1980, and concerns Appa's and Amma's three academically talented offspring. It moves towards the departure of their eldest daughter, Uma, for Columbia University in the USA, and the resultant unhappiness of the youngest daughter, six year old Aasha, and apparent disinterest of the eleven year old son, Suresh. The mystery centres on the experiences and reactions of Aasha,

how Paati died, why Uma is so distanced from the rest of the family and how each family member's reactions are affected by the past.

On a second level, Samarasan adds interest, depth and complexity to her fictional story by revealing details about the friends and acquaintances of the family. For instance, the novel also traces the tragic journey of one of the family's servants, Chellam, who “is the same age as Uma, the oldest daughter of the house” but “brought [to Ipoh] by some bustling, self-righteous Hindu Sagam society matron eager to rack up good karma by plucking her from prostitution and selling her into slavery far less white”. We learn at the start, that within a year, at Chellam's cremation, “the air will smell salty from all [her] tears” , but as with the other characters, Samarasan only gradually reveals Chellam's complex emotions, relationships and experiences which will lead to this death by moving backwards and forwards in time, and using links and contrasts to other characters.

On a third level, *Evening is the Whole Day* also depicts the development of Malaysia as an independent country, and reveals the problems it encounters as a multicultural nation with three strong ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian - each seeking to attain influence in the new state, and improve on its British legacy. The lack of a glossary combined with the use of authentic language reflects these ethnic backgrounds and enables the reader to experience the problems the Malaysians face in communicating, without interrupting the development of the story. Perhaps because she has the detachment and objectivity of an expatriate, Samarasan assiduously handles the potential land-mine of criticising the faults, selfishness and prejudices of each of the ethnic groups, “Coolie...Village idiot fed on sambal petai. Slit-eyed pig eater”, and presenting the stereotyping of each group, by using gentle cynicism, humour and sympathy. Rather than being a racist diatribe, the novel explores one element of Malaysian society to clarify the immense problems faced by the whole nation. The use of techniques like the personification of Rumour and Fact, and combining an omniscient author with the use of dialogue to reveal the individual voices of the characters, enables the author to avoid preaching and allows her to trust the reader to make inferences. Because of this, the relationships between the characters and their friends, family, ethnic group, religion and country, and other countries raise questions for the reader rather than offering glib answers. These questions involve several themes, including those of justice, morality, self-serving, cowardice, the role of family and nationality.

In all three levels, humour balances the darkness throughout the book. Suresh's clever rhymes about the death sentence of a murderess, the neighbour Kooky Rooky's fantasies about conflicting versions of about her past, and the description of the development of the career of the fortune-teller, Anand, not only contribute to the reader's understanding of the characters, but are also very amusing. Some of the humour is also created by the way Samarasan uses authentic language to develop the plot, nuances, similarities and contrasts. To illustrate, the voice of

Scottish Mr. McDougall, appalled at the renovations to his family home by the Tamil family (“These bloody Nati’es. That’s whit ye gie when ye gie a boorichie ay wogs ‘eh reit tae rule”), reveals as much about the British rulers as it does about the new Malaysian rulers, anxious to both emulate and differentiate themselves from the past. The Malay “Keratapi Tanah Melayu” Uma tries to pronounce as “Carry-tuppy Tanah Melayoo” and that Anna can not understand, declaring it “Nothing so great”, shocks a fellow Malayan passenger into exclaiming “ No shame ah you, living in Malay Land but cannot speak Malay? Your mummy and daddy also no shame ah, living in Malay Land and never teach their chirren Malay?”. Other humour comes from the visual images – of Appa walking “cock flopping, balls swinging like two mangosteens in a net bag” in front of his lovers, of the “Bare midriffs [of the women, which] wilt and droop like old tire tubing”, of Amma’s thoughts, “so clear they seem to scroll across a blinding white screen behind her eyes. Needlethoughts. Knifethoughts. Sour-as-green-mangothoughts: they make her eyes narrow and her mouth pucker”.

Preeta Samarasan’s *Evening is the Whole Day* succeeds as a history which “is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret” as the prelude taken from Graham’s Swift’s *Waterland* informs us. It also succeeds as a description of the paradoxes of disillusion and despair which are involved in love and hope for things to improve, as is conveyed by the title, which is taken from the Tamil poem Kuruntokai 234, translated by George L. Hart:

The sun goes down and the sky reddens, pain grows sharp,
light dwindles. Then is evening
when jasmine flowers open, the deluded say.
But evening is the great brightening dawn
when crested cocks crow all through the tall city
when evening is the whole day
for those without their lovers.

The Simplest Thing

Tariq Ali, The Idea of Communism, London, New York & Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009

Mo Yan (Howard Goldblatt trans.), Change, London, New York & Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010

Reviewed by Glen Jennings



Tariq Ali is series editor of a new collection of essays, memoirs and short stories provocatively titled *What Was Communism?* Ali's own contribution to this collection, *The Idea of Communism*, starts from the premise that "official Communism" failed in the twentieth century and capitalism was restored in Russia and China. But Ali argues that these facts do not negate some of the basic principles of the initial communist project. His work contextualises Marx's historical materialism, provides a defence of pre-Leninist communist theory, and discusses the conditions in which "socialism in one country" and Party dictatorship failed. Ali follows Marx in promoting revolutionary views and active democracy with a genuine commitment to such fundamentals as press freedom, diverse (and quality) literature, and critical self-analysis. For Ali, communism is the unachieved but attainable realm of freedom. The bulk of Ali's series is devoted to voices from within the beast of Stalinist, Maoist or Titoist states, or what Ali calls Utopia's "misshapen Communist and socialist children." *What Was Communism?* includes one contribution about Cuba, individual works from residents of the USSR, Yugoslavia, and China, and a collection of short stories from West Bengal.



Mo Yan's *Change* is the fifth book in Tariq Ali's series, presenting a memoir from one of contemporary China's greatest writers. Mo Yan is best known for *Red Sorghum*, his rural love story set during the Chinese resistance to Japan. Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Change* reveals the ironic power of Mo's prose, and Mo's work is both a record of the dramatic transformations in his personal life from the 1960s to 2010 and an accessible means of reflecting on China's unprecedented reforms from the earlier age of Maoist autarky. Mo Yan's narrative flow and anecdotes draw attention to differences in economic relations, political outlook, city landscapes, and even in social, culinary and sexual attitude. The overall picture is one of a decline in Maoist political distortions and increasing economic prosperity, but of a society riven with tensions and plagued by personal and systemic corruption, particularism, and massive social inequalities.

Mo Yan was born in 1955 in Shandong Province, the son of ordinary middle peasants. This fate situated Mo Yan within a less-than-ideal social and political class. Mao Zedong's revolutionary structure placed a premium on the trinity of Party membership, military affiliation, or an inherited political blood-line traceable to the poor and dispossessed from before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

Expelled from grade five on the false charge of giving his teacher (and most importantly the deputy chairman of the school's revolutionary committee) the nickname "Big Mouth Liu", Mo Yan busied himself reading classic novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West* and thinking of a career in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He later fantasised about fighting the Vietnamese enemy in the war of 1979 and becoming a revolutionary martyr. (So much for socialist internationalism and peace!) Mo Yan's death would elevate his parents' political status: "They would not have raised me in vain." Mo Yan was not the only Chinese who thought that way: "It may have been a simple, immature way of thinking, but it was the twisted mindset we children of oppressed middle peasants had developed. A glorious death was better than a demeaned existence." If he survived, Mo Yan would return home to be promoted for his valour. Nationalism and political calculation shaped the destiny of "Mao's Children." These children struggled with the class labels placed on them and their families by the Maoist state, and schemed for a way forward.

As a young boy, Mo Yan lived in a village bordered by a state farm housing “rightists” sent down for reform through labour. Mo Yan’s narrative naturalises and localises China’s mass system of state punishment: inmates were always on hand to carry out menial tasks, to serve as substitute teachers, or to be the objects of political struggle. For Mo Yan these “rightists” were just part of the physical and mental landscape.

Despite Chairman Mao’s rhetoric of women holding up half the sky, Mo Yan’s memoir reinforces the sexist nature of Chinese state socialism. For example, he shared the typical boy’s dream of becoming a truck driver. (It was definitely a *boy’s* dream: driving was an occupation reserved for men in the 1950s and 1960s, just as Chinese navy ships in 2011 do not allow women to serve.) Trucks were rare and exciting for Mo Yan and his classmates. In the same way, machines became an obsession for Soviet apologists and Chinese fellow-travellers who charted communism’s progress by counting the number of tractors and by weighing the tonnage of steel produced. For these secular dogmatists, as Tariq Ali calls them, Speed + Steel = Socialism.



The state farm’s truck was a Gaz 51, a Soviet-made veteran of the Korean War. It would race down the single dusty road and send chickens and dogs flying out of the way. For peasant children, the money, status, and travel associated with truck driving were enticing. After a short period as a temporary worker, Mo Yan gravitated to another Gaz 51 veteran of the Korean War when he joined the PLA, seeking a way out of village life. Like millions of peasants trapped in their villages by the government’s system of residency permits, Mo Yan did not want to be a racehorse permanently stabled in a cowshed. To be a driver’s apprentice was a sought after prize, and although Mo Yan managed to travel with his master to Beijing, he was disappointed that the driver’s mantle was eventually passed to another soldier.

Mo Yan knows now that Beijing in 2010 is ten times bigger than when he first visited the capital in his old truck, but “humungous and damned scary” Beijing taught the young soldier many things in 1978, with its massive buildings and unusual foreigners with high noses and blue eyes. He queued to enter the Mao Mausoleum to pay his respects “to the Chairman’s remains.” And this experience inspired iconoclastic (and potentially dangerous) thoughts:

“As I gazed down at the reposing figure in its crystal sarcophagus, I thought back to the day, two years earlier, when the cataclysmic news of his death had reached us and when I realized that the world had no place for immortals. We’d been convinced that Chairman Mao would never die. We were wrong. We’d also believed that the death of Chairman Mao spelled China’s doom.

But two years later, she not only continued to exist but also began to thrive. Colleges and universities had opened their doors again; rural landlords and rich peasants had emerged from their demeaned status; peasant families were eating better; and oxen belonging to production teams were fattening up. Why, even someone like me was having his picture taken in front of Tiananmen Square.”

The young rustic also saw a Beijing machine that made dumplings, the product of some mad genius. (His mother refused to believe that such technology could exist.) At this time of increasingly mechanised socialism and incipient rural reform, meat was gradually becoming more available to ordinary Chinese. Meat was prized both as food and as a symbol of development. And a dumpling machine unequivocally marked progress. “Now, when I think back, the dumplings that machine squeezed out had thick skins and not much filling, half of which remained in the cauldron from breaks in the skin ... These days, dumpling shops take pains to advertise that their dumplings are handmade. Fatty pork was the ideal back then; now, vegetarian dumplings are all the rage. That’s a decent illustration of how things change.” Mo Yan's book provides many small examples from ordinary life that accrete and accumulate to demonstrate massive change in China from the 1960s to 2010, none more so than in the shaping of Mo Yan’s own career.

Back from Beijing with dashed dreams of becoming a PLA truck driver, Mo Yan taught himself mathematics, physics and chemistry in an attempt to qualify for university. Higher education was gradually re-opening at the end of the Cultural Revolution, but entry remained subject to political recommendation. When this rare opportunity was rescinded at the last moment, without explanation or apology, the PLA political instructor told Mo Yan to respond with the “proper attitude.” Mo Yan then threw himself into fiction writing, submitting stories to PLA literary journals. But he threw his early manuscripts away when his first efforts were rejected or ignored.

In 1981 Mo Yan finally had his first story published in a small magazine, *Lily Pond*. In 1987 *Red Sorghum* was made into a film directed by Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li and Jiang Wen. *Change* discusses the making of this film in Mo Yan's home village, and the paradoxical excitement and disappointment felt by the peasants. Although Gong Li and Jiang Wen stayed in a simple county guesthouse with no air-conditioning or private bathrooms, the poor villagers were unimpressed with Jiang Wen's extravagance in making a four-hour long-distance phone call. (To be fair, Jiang Wen paid for it himself.) As for Gong Li, with no makeup and with her hair kept in rustic fashion to suit the character of a rural woman at the time of the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s, this celebrity looked just like other peasant women. "Who could have predicted that a decade later she would be an international star, gliding through life with the grace of nobility and flirtatious looks, always the coquette?"



In passing, Mo Yan notes the nationally reported scandal of an actor in the 1980s. He was sentenced to ten years in prison for having mutually consensual sex with a number of adult partners. "Most people were convinced that he got what he deserved. No one felt that the punishment did not fit the crime. If we used the same standards to judge relations between the sexes these days ... how many more jails would we need to lock the miscreants up?"

Mo Yan states rather optimistically that "Moving from 'everyone is involved in everyone else's business' to the protection of individual privacy has been a significant step forward for the Chinese." But this progress is relative and inconsistent. In May 2010, for example, Ma Yaohai, a Nanjing college professor, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for organising private swingers parties. Eighteen others in the same case were found guilty and sentenced for the Chinese crime of "group licentiousness." By contrast, everyone knows that the crimes and misdemeanours of China's rich and powerful are seldom exposed let alone brought to court or punished. Party leaders and their families are protected by a web of mutual self-interest, media control, and a politicized judiciary, just like the Soviet *nomenklatura* decried by Tariq Ali or the "New Class" exposed by Milovan Djilas.

Although Mo Yan did not know it at the time of filming *Red Sorghum*, the vehicle used in the dramatic scene where the local civilians use a truck bomb to attack the Japanese invaders was the same farm specimen he admired as a boy. In his memoir this truck serves as a metaphor for the

changes in society and human relationships. The Gaz 51 not only resonated throughout Mo Yan's life, it marked the journey from rural poverty to urban wealth of an exemplar of China's new breed of assertive businessmen.

After defying his teacher, disrupting the class, and driving a girl to tears, Mo Yan's rebellious classmate He Zhiwu left his hometown to make his fortune in Inner Mongolia. He succeeded in becoming rich in the politically uncertain years of early economic reform, sometimes through unlawful means such as smuggling cashmere across provincial borders. He returned to Shandong to prove that he had made it. He purchased the Gaz 51 at an inflated price in a futile attempt to marry the girl of his childhood desires. Lu Wenli was the pretty daughter of the farm's original truck driver. She was popular with her teacher, Big Mouth Liu, and she was the one He Zhiwu had made cry by stating in his "essay" that he wanted to be her father when he grew up.

Lu Wenli did not marry this upstart businessman despite his wealth and confidence, instead she married a politically stable cadre who turned out to be an abusive drinker, gambler and whoremonger. After her husband's death in a motorcycle accident she refused to become the kept mistress of He Zhiwu, who by this stage had offloaded the truck to Zhang Yimou's film crew and acquired a pragmatic White Russian wife. The hustling entrepreneur had two children, great wealth, expensive foreign cars in place of the old Soviet clunker, and a desire to claim Lu Wenli as his "little wife" (*xiao laopo*) in these more affluent and indulgent times. He also had a history of giving and seeking favours - the notorious particularistic ties or *guanxi* of Chinese culture that defy universalism and egalitarianism.

At He Zhiwu's prompting, Mo Yan had written a letter to Party officials to help his old classmate relocate from Inner Mongolia to Shandong, and in turn He Zhiwu always provided Mo Yan with lavish food and accommodation. This network of favours among classmates provides insight into the network of relationships, special deals, and back-door arrangements that characterise China today. Relatives, friends, classmates, Party members and "sworn brothers" operate in a web of mutual obligation and interest.

Mo Yan is not moralistic or hypocritical about this reality, and his view of He Zhiwu is perhaps shared by many across the world who blend admiration and alarm when appraising China's recent wealth and assertiveness: "There is a heroic side to the behaviour of a thug, and a thuggish side to the behaviour of a hero." Mo Yan is neither sentimental nor laudatory, and he does not gild his own actions: *Change* ends with the rich and influential author accepting ten thousand *yuan* from twice-widowed Lu Wenli for securing a place in a selective cultural troupe for Lu's daughter, a young girl who had already qualified for this place through her own talent and efforts. China has achieved extraordinary things in Mo Yan's lifetime through the talent and efforts of people like Mo Yan, He Zhiwu and little Lu – including leading the world in freeing

hundreds of millions of people from absolute poverty – and yet there remain doubts, suspicions and a sense of illegitimacy or missed opportunity in China's uneven development.

From a position of communist theory and historical research, and from the experience of living in China during a period of unprecedented economic and social transformation, Tariq Ali's polemic and Mo Yan's memoir combine to emphasise extraordinary material development, cultural resilience, and political complexity. But they also highlight a total failure to implement socialist democracy. As Bertolt Brecht wrote of communism in 1932: "It is the simplest thing so hard to achieve."

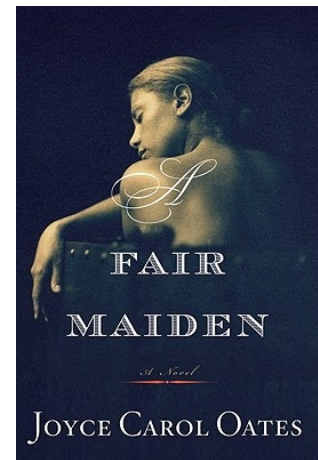
Guilty Pleasure

Joyce Carol Oates , A Fair Maiden, New York: Otto Penzler Books, 2010

Reviewed by Gayle McIntyre

You didn't hear it from me. I'll deny that I recommended this adults-only page turner. What can be so engrossing about a rich, sophisticated, well respected man befriendng a young woman at the Jersey shore? The sex, violence and sinister manipulation that ensue, might be the answer.

Joyce Carol Oates' 2010 novel *A Fair Maiden* lures the reader in with a seemingly simple plot of boy meets girl at a summer holiday town. The charming and handsome Marcus Kidder convinces the young and insecure Katya Spivak that they were destined to meet and be friends. Unlike the children in her care as a nanny, she has had a harsh childhood and is trying to better herself, distance herself from her alcoholic mother, and desperately wants to be loved. Receiving the attentions of the local artist and a long-standing member of the privileged society of this seaside resort has boosted her self-esteem considerably.



She sees the way he looks at her tanned legs and young body. The catch is, he's four times her age. Is he really interested in her only as a model for his paintings? He certainly pays her more than she earns as a nanny.

Well, If I started out denying that I would admit to recommending Oates' new novel, one would surmise that Marcus has more in mind than painting. But he has more in mind than the obvious. He needs her, and it's more complicated than sex. This fair maiden of the title has a role to play in his scripted and planned life. The exact role she is to play comes as a complete surprise to the reader, and how he gets her to agree to it, is manipulation at its best. Although disturbing reading at times, I immediately went to the shelves for another novel by this author who has over fifty novels to her credit and counting.

A Universe Bereft of All Signposts

**Gabriel Josipovici, Whatever Happened to
Modernism? New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010**

Reviewed by Jennifer Mitchell

WHAT EVER
HAPPENED TO
MODERNISM?
GABRIEL
JOSIPOVICI



Reading this book over several months was not long enough. I took advantage of the requirement to concentrate this book demands to breathe slowly and allow myself to re read and re read again Josipovici's carefully crafted phrasing. To take on this book requires a certain appreciation for the historical and persistent presence of modernism in literature and art. Josipovici does not take his readers through a mundane history of modernist literature. Rather, he draws them seductively and skillfully into certain key moments within certain creative struggles by certain writers, and asks them to enjoy with him the particular pleasure, and pain, of uncertainty.

It is the complex and terrible beauty of these moments that, once recognised for their intangibility, assume for Josipovici the essence of the modernist project - or rather, it's necessary crisis. He strains towards each successive articulation with the same sense of yearning for the words to express the inexpressible employed by the writers whose work he explores. But where modern writers sought to render visible the alienation and suffering of a single character, or of a whole generation, Josipovici seeks to explain why the modernist project was, and is still, the benchmark of worthwhile art.

The uncertainties modernist writers and artists articulated in their work were not easily expressed, nor easily accepted by critics, or, indeed, by the writers themselves. Kafka wrote to Max Brod about his work in 1909: 'each word, even before letting itself be put down, has to look round on every side' and 'the phrases positively fall apart in my hands' (4). This uncertainty, even

fearfulness about expression is partly what gives the works discussed in this book their essentially modernist credentials.

To understand modernism one must understand what came before. The modern is only modern in relation to its predecessor. Josipovici quotes Roland Barthes: 'to be modern is to know that which is not possible anymore' (139). If one cannot stay still or go back - if history or the loss of certainty or fascism or emptiness of spirit or pain cannot be borne - one must go forward. But into what? What if there is no language for the future? What if the ways words have been arranged in the past no longer fulfill the needs of the present? Then one is silenced. Or one struggles to speak in a new as yet unknown language.

A major aspect of what Josipovici describes as the crisis of modernism is this lack of reliable means modern artists and writers have to express their helplessness. In whichever era 'the modern' can be argued to exist - anywhere from the Renaissance to World War Two and beyond - the common thread is the fading away of some former means of certainty in expressing an understanding about the world. When the modern emerges, traditions, old world orders and religious certainties have been swept away by tides of enlightenment thinking, science, humanism: new ways of thinking and acting. The modern also has to grapple with the vacuum left by that which has been lost or surpassed. The modern artist comes to see "A universe for the first time bereft of all signposts" (92). Josipovici explores how modern artists, writers and composers - like Mallarmé, Wallace Stevens, Samuel Beckett, Kafka, Picasso, and Stravinsky - seek for a new voice to express the experience of a new, signless time with images or sounds that had not been seen or heard before. This is what makes modern art the opposite of "Art" as a recognisable category. It cannot help but be original in its moment of creation as it is born out of a unique experience of struggle. Josipovici argues strongly that modern art does not depict the struggle for a path through the new array of choice born from the loss of old certainties - but that it *IS* the struggle. It doesn't represent life - it is itself alive.

For me, the most powerful connection Josipovici makes to illustrate this vitality is that between the crisis of modernism and the philosophical writing of Søren Kierkegaard. By first linking this nineteenth century religious thinker with another famous Dane, Hamlet, we get a sense of the role Kierkegaard's work will play. The plethora of choices available to a young intellectual in a world of crumbling certainties can lead to melancholy and inaction (43). The crisis of modernism for Kierkegaard was anxiety: 'Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom' (44). So many possibilities were made available by the loss of tradition, but it was equally anxiety-making to be floating so freely, no longer guided by the past. But to be harnessed to the chains of tradition, repetition of past patterns and the certainties of a responsible life was to be swallowed up by necessity. Thus, Kierkegaard says 'necessity's despair is to lack possibility'. Josipovici then reminds readers of the companion dialectic which the crisis of modernism evokes: 'possibility's despair is

to lack necessity' (46). In between these positions, as between all the tensions which make up the fabric of modernism, lies the abyss.

Josipovici only looks briefly at D.H. Lawrence, but when I consider the tensions at the heart of this book, I'm reminded of a passage from Lawrence's novel *St Mawh*. The well-to-do daughter in the story who regularly goes out to ride her horse, St Mawh, is suddenly overcome with the boredom and futility of her petty existence, and she pleads to her mother: 'I've got to live. And the thing that is offered me as life just starves me, starves me to death. Mother ... I want the wonder back again, or I shall die'. When all that is left to an artist, writer or musician is to mimic his or her predecessors, to rehash the old ways, there is no life in the enterprise. It is a dead thing. The voices of modernist artists aimed to articulate this loss of traditional certainty, to grieve for it at the same time as they tried to formulate a phrase to express what might lie beyond. They reach back as they reach forward across the abyss which surrounds them, and their art is the expression of this suspended, trembling moment.

There might well be readers of this book for whom Josipovici's later chapters, complaining about the unoriginality of contemporary realist fiction writers, will be viewed as unfair perfectionism. But to Josipovici, gritty realism can drift easily into an impoverished spirit closed to possibility, and cynically predisposed to distrust romanticism of all kinds: 'All of them ultimately come out of Philip Larkin's overcoat' he opines (174). The Britons are marked out for particular scorn as anti-European and tending towards philistinism, but Josipovici owns his partiality proudly. For him, most realist fiction is distanced from intensity and immediacy. It is mere repetition lacking in courage.

When we stand in a gallery before a painting in the modern tradition and ask ourselves, maybe derisively, 'but what does it mean?' that moment of incomprehension is the meaning. It is alive because of its inchoate quality. Our confusion in some ways mirrors the abyss the artist confronts in his or her effort to be heard and understood. When Prufrock says 'I have heard the mermaids singing each to each, I do not think that they will sing to me,' Josipovici remarks that 'because they weren't singing to him, he is in the unenviable position of having to live with the sense that what would give meaning to his life is there, but just out of earshot' (126). The paintings on the walls whisper together, but we can't make out the conversation unless we take the time to open ourselves to doubt, and to possibility. The modern is expression born and articulated on the edge, turning regretfully away from the loss of certainty, while straining towards something still out of reach. Thus it sings, and shimmers, and lives.