This is the first issue of *Westerly* in its new structure, with *Westerly* and *Salt* published annually: *Salt* in the first half of the year, *Westerly* in November. Together the journals offer the best new poetry, fiction and critical work from Australia and Asia, Europe and America.

*Westerly’s* editors welcome this affiliation with *Salt* and our new, annual *Westerly*. We wish it continuing success.

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Westerly
an annual review ISSN 0043-342X

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Westerly is published annually at the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature in the English Department, The University of Western Australia with assistance from the State Government of W.A. by an investment in this project through ArtsWA. Westerly is affiliated with Salt, edited by John Kinsella and published mid-year. The opinions expressed in Westerly are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

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Subscriptions: $22.95 per annum (posted); $40.00 for 2 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: $16.95 per annum (posted). Single copies $22.95 plus $2 postage. Combined Westerly and Salt subscription $46.00 per annum posted. Email Subscriptions $10.00 to westerly@uniwa.uwa.edu.au.

Subscriptions should be made payable to Westerly and sent to the Administrator, CSAL at the above address.

Overseas subscriptions: please see back page.

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

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FROM THE EDITORS

We welcome readers to this, the first issue of Westerly, the leading magazine of literature and culture in Australia and Asia. From 2000 Westerly will be published each November, in an issue of at least 200 pages, and its area of concern has been extended to include the whole of Asia, rather than just the Indian Ocean region as previously. Westerly is also now affiliated with the magazine Salt, edited by John Kinsella from Cambridge, and covering work from America, Australia and Europe. Salt will be published in mid-year, and readers may subscribe to both or either magazine. We appreciate any feedback from readers or writers on the magazines.

Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell
Editor

PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 1999

Jan Teagle Kapetas

for her story 'Immigrants' that appeared in the No.2 Winter 1999 edition
Robert Parish, wandering poetic footpad of sure-footed wandering and sore-footed verse, appeared on my doorstep one morning, years ago, wearing faded violet overalls. His trademark mane and beard streamed from almost the very centre of his face, leaving only eyes, nose and teeth, and he held a shiny, careworn satchel which fluttered with fresh airport tags. He seemed a little drunk.

The sky was that peculiar Melbourne shade of pale. It was cold out, the cherry blossoms lay muddy in the gutters and so, without weighing the situation, I invited Parish to stay, or at least to pause.

—Huzzah! he bellowed, giving me the first intimation of the painfully exuberant days to come, and continued as I led him down the hall (—Unscrew the locks from the doors, unstop the bottles, unleash the whores!) to the rear of my single-storey terrace, where he dumped his bag in the laundry. Then he grappled me in a clumsy hug, crying tears of relief. —Oh mate, he sobbed, —you’ve really come through this time. If ever there was a truer friend than you I’d knock him down for a bastard and a usurper.

—Thanks, Rob. Really, it’s nothing.

—Nothing, schmuthing, he said, squaring his shoulders. —I’m on to something very, very big at the moment. A ball-tearer that came to me on the slopes of Sasnak. An aching leviathan, part-Levertov, part Levi-Strauss, as if Lacan filled the dreams of Lauterberg.

Saying that, Parish moved even closer, pinning me to the washing machine, and adding in a stagey whisper, —You know how everyone’s writing verse novels at the moment?
I shrugged.
—Sure you do. Murray, Porter, that local woman, Jacobsen.
—So you’re writing a verse novel? I said, feigning feigned disinterest.
—What? Hell no, what a stupid idea. Why would I do that? I’m a leader not a follower. That’s why I’m writing a ground-breaking theoretical text in verse. You wait. The French are going to absolutely shit themselves. Blanchot, Baudrillard, Derrida, diddley-doo-dah, and every other frog-loving, arse-gazer going around for that matter.

There was a silence in which I could feel my face performing a feckless grin. The idea of Parish was still arriving, yet here was Parish the thing.
—IN VERSE I TELL YOU! he roared, as though it had just occurred to him.
—On what? I asked, sliding along the edge of the Fischer&Paykel toploader.
—Aha! he said, poking a gnarly forefinger into my chest. —You won’t catch me as easily as that, Wilson, you old shark.

Laughing at my cunning, he whacked me a couple of meaningful blows on the shoulder and alternately winked and nodded. —You old shark, he repeated, I should have known. Come on for christsake, let’s eat.

And with that he led the way into my kitchen and proceeded to make two sandwiches from a bricolage of leftover items, many of which refused classification in an endlessly deferred sequence of slippery difference, or fridge condensation, for it was difficult to tell at that distance.

the rub

That autumn was a bad time for me, hostwise. I had my own problems. It was only two weeks since I had returned from Africa and there was a travel book to be finished. The bay window of my Drummond Street terrace glowed with the white-blue radiance of a computer screen untrammeled by words. Six months in Africa for nothing. There were small Roman numerals for chapter numbers and that was it. I wrote the beginning of a sentence, Along the hollowed snakeskin of the Gwaii riverbed, scarlet and purple leaves like fragments of dull fire stretched, and then deleted it in disgust. Lush descriptive dross.

When I arrived at the Chimwara safari camp on the edge of Hwange National Park, near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, everything seemed perfect. A two-finger clap for the people at Africalink in Melbourne. Here was the
writer's dream: a cast of queer individuals, roped together in a tight mesh of tensions, inhabiting easily penetrable buildings, in a harsh, elemental landscape.

The camp was run by the whitest woman I have ever seen. Jane Celia Beech was at the airstrip to meet my Fokker 50 in clinging khakis. Her perfume shimmered across the tarmac like oily plastic wrap.

—Mr Wilson, I'm wet with delight, she said. There were speckles of perspiration on her upper lip.

Standing alongside, a black fellow in ranger greens took my case. —I'm wet with delight, he said, less fervently.

—It's an old Kalahari saying, Ms Beech continued, —Amwit wedi laat. It means 'well here you are, and that's ok with us for the time being.'

—I'm delighted, I said, squinting through my obsidian sunglasses at the incandescence of Ms Beech's white, steep-cut blouse.

parish, meanwhile

Was driving me around the twist. He was one of those rare poets who, along with a deep voice and mild alcoholism, actually appeared to write some of the time. You could watch him at it, standing at the laundry window bare-chested in the hot blast of the dryer's sirocco, herding a stubby pencil within the irregular confines of a paper scrap and mumbling synonyms and associative streams of god knows what.

—The falcon and the glove, the olive branch, the weary dove ... what presses down from above? God, gravity, time, death? ... hmmm? ... presses down, looms above, up above, from the heavens shove ... little dove, my little, my ...

Glove, dove, shove? The potted instructions of an avian fetishist? Anything was possible. What I knew of Parish was fashioned in the tepid forge of our mob drinking days and much altered by the intervening years—abraded, bronzed, creased, dimmed, embroidered—so that the him of now seemed a faded, ersatz him of then. When I first met Parish, movement was his mantra. He championed the life of the wandering soul, the heart of the sea-route, where long stints of steel-flecked ocean were tempered by the rare anchorage of a warm sea-bed—the blisters and barnacles of loneliness, a bargain price to pay for freedom. He worshipped RL Stevenson, whose dictum I heard him beerily quote in The Black Prince and The Perseverence: *Times are changed with him who marries; there are no more by-path meadows, where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave* ... to
many is to domesticate the Recording Angel. It puzzled me then, for I always thought we were the recording angels.

Now, in between bursts of egomaniacal verve, he seemed a maudlin, hulking figure, haunting the steamy recess of my laundry with his muttering. The old courage was gone and maybe the travelling act was wearing thin, but what else was missing?

dramatis personae

The Chimwara camp was situated on the west bank of the River Gwaii. A dozen permanent tents surrounded the central dining hall, connected by a haphazard network of stone-edged paths through the dust and acacia scrub. My quarters consisted of an army-green tent big enough to stand in, a camp bed, desk, kerosene lamps, and two large, waterproof trunks for clothes, books, booze and other essentials. Attached by thick, centipede stitching, a small bathroom annex hung off the back of the tent like a spider's poison sac.

The first night, over dinner, I was introduced to the whole crew. Jane's husband, Ted, was a florid and corpulent pastiche of various skin diseases who spent all his time playing chess against a machine called Fritz. There was Vince, who I met at the airport, a black guide in his early sixties, with a penchant for watercolour. He asked me if I had packed any fruit. A banana, or a couple of apples? At that time of year he was reduced to Warholian renditions of tropical fruit cans or still life with onions.

Kurt Valdemeyer was a poster-boy guide from Johannesburg. Evidently his nerves were shot. His soup spoon made a plangent fluttering against his tin bowl at breakfast and he left suddenly, soon after I arrived. And then there were the twins, Sara and Sarah, coloured girls who worked in the kitchen. They were both blind, which was strange enough, but there was something even more bizarre about them—their voices were indistinguishable, identical in tone, timbre, lisp, pitch and plosive emphasis, dental and retroflexive peculiarity. They doted on old Vince and I wondered in the beginning if he was an uncle.

The river at that time of year was a bare channel of red dirt. A few photographic safaris trickled through as the dry season ground on, but the hunters had spent their last cartridges—the few unshot animals were now slow, listless, skin-draped skeletons. Containers waited on the docks at Capetown packed with skins and antlers, escutcheoned zebra heads,
floor-biting leopards, and the occasional bull elephant in its entirety, messy innards replaced with fibreglass, styrofoam, kevlar and silicon. At the camp a similar process was taking place. Machinery was oiled and wrapped and stored for next season, Vince put the spare jeep up on blocks, Sara and Sarah and I dismantled the clients’ tents, pocketing several kilos of loose change as we went, Ted ordered extra batteries for Fritz, and Jane spent a week in Harare with the big boys, counting money no doubt.

When the first blood-black clouds appeared on the horizon, a dozen miles to the south, the drinking began in earnest, and I discovered there are insects that cry out in the African night very much like a woman ascending the rungs of sexual ecstasy, which was lucky if not a little disconcerting.

the oracle

On a whim I went to the house of a friend, the poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe, to ask his advice. We sat at his blondwood table and he poured coffee. The fruitbowl was full of bananas and I couldn’t resist a small act of homage.

—Look how his nose is black, I said, quoting from the poem ‘Bits and Pieces’, —jetblack as lovebites that blotch the yellow hide of his throat, tropical patriarch knowing perhaps the new moon four days off.

He smiled, the picture of the tropical patriarch himself, nut-brown and vigorous in his tennis shirt.

—I don’t suppose you came here to talk fruit, he said.
—No, unfortunately not. I did want to ask though, the line about the new moon, is it the image of the crescent, like the curve of the banana, that you were aiming for, or something more esoteric? Quite clever really, a phallic image by way of a lunar metaphor.

He chuckled, showing off his remarkably youthful smile and waggling a tanned forefinger at me. —You know full well, a magician never reveals his tricks.

He poured more coffee and opened a biscuit tin. —Iced vo-vo?
—Thanks.
—Well?
—Chris, I don’t want to alarm you, but Robert Parish turned up at my door a couple of days ago. He’s staying in my laundry.
—Parish, eh? he said, instantly suspicious. —Back in town you say?
—I’m afraid so.
—Well now, that will hardly do. What does he want?
—Inverse theory? You mean something that makes sense. Something readable.
—No, a theoretical text in the verse form.
—Ahh, he said, inclining his magnificent, snowy head and humming a wonderful, lulling drone to himself. —In your laundry, you say?
—That's right.
—Well I'm sure he's safe enough there for the time being. Don't worry, I'll think of something.

an encounter and a request

A month into the rains I had filled seven notebooks with character sketches, flights of description, and local legends. One particularly wet and dark afternoon I returned from my customary walk, threw my oilskin coat at the clothes horse and tossed my hat carelessly at the hook over the desk. A shape moved. I leapt into the elephant's foot wastebasket. My gun was on the other side of the bed. What species of neglected wildlife had come to claw its own episode in my narrative?

I realised it was Vince when he smiled, a black cheshire cat in the shadows, and said, —Please Mr Wilson, you have to help me out, eh chap?
—Jesus, Vince, you could have warned me. I'm stuck.
He pulled me free of the wastebasket. I poured tumblers of whiskey and handed him one.
—Help me out, eh Mr Wilson? he said again, slaking the liquor in one shaky draught.
—Help you with what? I asked, bemused, filling his glass.
—You know. The womenfolk.
—What about them?
—I'm tired, Mr Wilson, I'm dead tired. I'm not a young man no more. He leant against the heavy canvas of the tent, legs shivering with exhaustion. Sloppily, he drank off the fumous spirit.
—Is it the jeep again? Do you need me to help you re-bore the cylinders?
He laughed, almost sobbing. —Not the jeep, he choked out.
I glugged another jolt into his mug. —I don't know how to help you, Vince.
He came nearer, sat on the edge of the bed and put a hand on my
shoulder. —At least take care of Miss Beech, he pleaded, winking both eyes. —She’s making me crazy. I’ll keep up with the twins, but you got to help me with Miss Beech, eh chap? Eh, Mr Wilson?

—I really don’t know what you’re talking about, Vince. I mean, Miss Beech, Jane ... she’s her own woman. I can’t just ... I mean, we’re not talking about a game of totem-tennis here, are we? It’s kind of outside my sphere of operation don’t you think? I’m only a writer after all, trying to, you know, write.

We fell silent, staring into the gloom. I could smell kerosene from the dining hall lamps and a fork-tailed drongo struck up a melancholy, twilight song in the jacaranda outside. Tomorrow or the day after we ought to get the first tongues of water from upstream.

—That Kurt boy was no good either, Vince muttered to himself. —He tried, but he was no damn good either.

With all the kinetic energy of a pulped passionfruit, Vince picked up his hat and held it with both hands to his chest. Standing close to the bulb as he was, I noticed his face seemed noticeably grey. —Please Mr Wilson, eh chap? he said, his eyes watery with the booze.

Then the rain started again, thudding into the wet dust. —Viiiiinnnce. Vi-iinnnce, called a voice across the camp.

—Is that Sara or Sarah? I asked.

Vince shrugged. —The Lord only knows, he said, lips hardly moving.

—And it don’t matter much as far as I’m concerned. Except maybe that Sarah don’t bite. Not all the time she don’t.

He shuffled to the furled doorflaps of my tent and paused, his whole body caught in a posture of profound inertia. Without turning, he said, —She’ll have her way in the end, Mr Wilson, no matter what you or I say anyhow.

**trouble in paradise**

One sharp morning Parish and I had a run-in. He had been scribbling away since a quarter-past five, disturbing my attempts to eke out a crucial passage of febrile hallucinations from the weeks when I was bedridden with malaria. It was so cold that my nose and fingers burned, making any descriptive prose on the subject of fever hard enough without Parish’s rat-scratchings and cries of —Oh ... hummm? Maria, up here, appear, down there, derriere ... No, no, Maria, I fear, I peer, I perspire, oh dear.
Nevertheless, with a thermos gripped between my thighs I sipped scalding coffee from a stainless steel cup and wrote: *Skeins of evaporated synaptic brine cast filmy shadows on the canvas, or so it seemed in the burning eggskin tent, my head cushioned in a soak of perspiration and spilled rehydration fluid.*

Not bad, not too bad at all, I thought, forgetting the chill for a moment. Then from the rear of the house I heard Parish turn on my violently clamorous washing machine. I stormed down the hall and found him sitting cross-legged against the rattling white monolith.

—How’s it going? I shouted over the vibration.
—I’ve finished the first third, he said. —Thought I better do some laundry while the muse sleeps.
—Perhaps you should bounce what you’ve got off a publisher. See what the market’s like for that sort of stuff.
—Mate, there isn’t anyone in this country who could handle it.
—What about Duffy & Snellgrove? They did a fantastic job with Fredy Neptune.
—Duffy & Snellgrove, he said sarcastically. —That’s not even how you spell Freddy, is it for godsake?
—I could introduce you to Hugh Tolhurst at Black Pepper.
—Black Pepper? Black Pepper? Do you think they could handle something like this?
—Hugh’s an interesting guy. He’s done some out-there stuff.
—Yeah, Tolhurst’s alright. But come on mate, do you think he could possibly be ready for this?

In truth, as much as I wanted a needle of editorial reality with which to prick Parish’s bubble, I couldn’t bring myself to inflict his opus on anyone I knew.

—I suppose not.
—Shit mate, I’m talking about the intersection of the lyrical with the deconstructed postcolonial ineffable. Why, for instance, do words rhyme with other words that don’t make sense? Why Jabberwocky? What if the French were forced to pronounce the letter H? Why have they made the letter N virtually redundant? Is the fricative plosive truly a tool of oppression? Or only if you’ve got a cold? In which case there’s the nasal to consider. Is postmodernism the triumph of the fractal or the dactyl? What if the unconscious is not structured like a language, but rather more like an Allen Ginsburg first draft? And, he said, eyes wide, —if the words occupy the centre of the page is it ok to doodle in the margins?
With that done he held his hands up like Moses waiting for the stone tablets from above.

—Rob, I don’t know the answer to those questions. I look forward to your book on the subject. I was only trying to help.

—Mate, I know you were, and I appreciate it, he said, taking a pensive double-handed grip on his rufous beard. —You’ll not be forgotten, my friend. Oh, no. No, when they carry me wrapped in silk and vine leaves to the holy holy bosom of the Sorbonne, all those who belong to book clubs in Greenwich Village, who walk wide-eyed and drunk with the fusty learning of Oxford and Cambridge, who stand up screaming in the night in San Francisco for culture and get only croissants, who wax and wane in Middle Eastern airport lounges dreaming of words more exotic than baklava, who shadowed by the ghost of Scheherazade come shuffling, shuffling to the supermarkets of the Sudan, who ...

As there was no end in sight to this peroration, I slunk towards the kitchen, carefully at first, and then simply turned my back and fled.

**dampness follows**

The wet season was well-named, I decided. After a morning of leak repair, Vince showed me musk weavers’ nests in the ironwood along the Gwaii, three yards above the ground. A sure sign of flood, he said. I gave him three fresh onions and a turnip from the food package my mother had sent.

—Thanks chap, he said quietly. —One day I’d like to paint mangoes. Even pineapple.

—You will, Vince, you will.

As the rain continued, the camp began to resemble a child’s mudcake, and I was drawn deeper into the complicated, interstitial tissue of relationships binding the skeleton crew together. It became increasingly difficult to maintain my pose as disinterested scribe, and certainly no-one seemed inclined to pay that notion much lip-service anymore. Jane took to visiting my tent at all hours, often slick with rain and mud. Her usually immaculate khakis, de-creased by the elements, melted to the contours of the flesh beneath.

—Mr Wilson, do you think my husband is a good man? she asked on one such an occasion.

—Jane, I’m really in no position to pass comment on Ted, you know that.
—A man who’s best friend and constant companion is a plastic, electronic box called Fritz?
—That is a little strange, I admit.
—Especially for a man whose wife is hardly undeserving of some small kindnesses, she continued, drying her cleavage with my towel. —There’s a damp spot I can’t quite reach, she murmured, leaning over the bed and handing me a flannel.

Whiskey was my first line of defence to these sodden incursions, but it wouldn’t work forever. And the turning, turning, tightening gyre that Jane wound around my tent was not the only problem. Perhaps it was my strained imagination but sometimes I woke to a liquid whispering that sounded like the twins eating tinned peaches close to my ear.

paperwork

Just as I finished typing the word scortation on a morning of half-decent progress, a letter dropped through the slot and changed everything. It was from Africalink and it boded ill. They noted how the residency had been cut short. I thought I had already explained that—the bad dreams, the malaria medication. (I hadn’t said the dreams were real.) There was also a veiled complaint about my failure to make lasting and substantial connections with the host organisation. Hell, I was being white-anted, and the gambit stank of Jane Celia Beech, the silly bitch.

My book—a blankish, papery thing—was going to make acquitting the grant money hard enough. Now my performance on location was being undermined. What did that woman want? I had done my time in the camp quietly, gathering tales, peeling potatoes, taking pictures. I had pitched in.

I knew what she wanted.

pressure, a mail metaphor, spirit

Insistence comes in many colours.
—I’ve been looking at the terms of your engagement and I’m not sure you’re cut out for this residency, Jane said one night, drying her inner thigh with a pair of my clean socks.
—What’s that supposed to mean? I replied.
—I think we both know. Africalink was intended to facilitate cross-cul-
tural exchange, give-and-take, quid pro quo.

—And?
—Well so far it seems to have been all one-way traffic, if you’ll forgive the vulgar Americanism. I’m sure you’ve strung us all together pretty well by now, our squabbles and our stories, knitted into a queer puppet-play from which you remain aloof. This is a community and we have needs too, you know.

—Jane, my book’s nearly done. There’s obviously been a misunderstanding along the way. About my role here, I mean.
—We’ll see about that, she said. —The fact remains that a not unattractive woman is standing shivering in your tent. What are you going to do about it? she said, looking pointedly at the quilted envelope of my single cot.
—Whiskey? I said.

the idea of an idea

Slowly I was getting wise to Parish. My latest telephone bill showed six calls to Montevideo. Who was this Maria I heard him moaning about? What else rhymed with dove? A pattern was emerging above the subterfuge. Theory in verse, my arse. The man was heartbroken, and in my laundry.

Pretending to turn in early one night, I reappeared on the pretext of cocoa to find Parish leaning against the kitchen wall, head and beard buried in the crook of one arm, telephone hanging limp in the other. The earpiece tolled a broken connection and his broad, Ulyssean back heaved with quiet sobbing.

—Rob, I said, patting him on the shoulder. He straightened in surprise and would have jabbered explanation, but I held my hand up for silence.
—Rob, I know what’s going on.

He slumped a little and bunched his smeary eyebrows together in consternation. I took two brandy balloons from the dresser and ushered him to the table in my den. —Tell me all about Maria, I said.

The tale told to me by Robert Parish that night was one of ill-matched affections, wine-fuelled romantic set pieces, and angry in-laws. When he was done, and it took a while, I told him a story of my own. It was about a tight-knit community living in a stark, elemental landscape; a cast of quirky individuals, all characters in their own right; and at the heart of it all, something slippery and dark.

—The whitest woman you’ve ever seen? Rob said at the end. —Blind
nymphomaniacal twins, a long-suffering, sexually-exhausted black painter and an impotent, chess-playing fanatic?

—That’s right.
—There has to be a book in that.
—Do you really think so?

welcome to the jungle

In the end something had to give. We all stopped talking weeks before and Christmas was surreal to say the least. I gave Vince a book on Gaugin, and Jane, a compact umbrella. The twins served wild pig and we ate in silence, broken only by the bleeps from Fritz and his metallic declarations of ‘check’ and then ‘checkmate’ (at which Ted said the only human word spoken that day: —Fuck).

Night after night the stretched and rotting web tightened, swelled and promised to wreck itself as the rain tore strips from the mock-thatch roofs and the Gwaii slipped its banks, running and pooling over the camp as if animate. The tent canvas thrummed and sweated, from within or without who could say, and no-one went about other than by night, when all manner of intersections occurred, and those accidental meetings of flesh in the limbo-space between tents (a brushed shoulder, a collision) passed without a single word of apology or explanation. We went about our business like prey after the hunters. White on black, black on white, as a negative is to the world burnt upon its surface.

One dawn in January I tied a bundle of my things together with wire from Vince’s shed, dragged them to the road and hitched to Bulawayo in a truck with a sodden corpse due for burial somewhere. Watching the rain fill and empty from the dead man’s eyesockets, I slept. Of all my notebooks, only one survived. The first ten pages were reasonably useful. Then followed a series of disturbed erotic descriptions and stick-figure drawings as if Henry Miller had cut loose with a set of children’s crayons and a copy of the Kama Sutra. These I tore out for fear of being stopped at customs. The last dozen pages gave me reason to hope, for they traced events at the very heart of the situation. I could pick out phrases like saw Jane last night, panther-like (albino panther) entering Vince’s tent, and the twins, always the twins, four legs and one voice, but what a voice, and, towards the end, stains stains everywhere ... not her fault, god there must be salt here somewhere.

I pored over the sheets of scrawl hoping to salvage material to make
sense of the lost weeks, and to give me the substance of a book for which I had already been paid. Alas, most of it was waterlogged, washed beyond comprehension, and the last pages were covered in watercoloured onions.

*the zero sum solution*

Any number multiplied by zero is zero and any number divided by zero is undefined. Let us suppose that you have two problems. First, you want to make something go away, a poet for example. Second, there is a lack that needs filling, an absence for which you are being held responsible—say a safari camp in Africa that is at least one sexually active man short of full satisfaction. If we substitute, in the first case, the storyless writer for the brokenhearted poet, and in the second, the writerless story for the voracious, dissatisfied safari camp we begin to see what happened next.

It took me a few days to arrange the necessary details, but arrange them I did. After a last visit to the travel agent in Carlton I caught the No. 22 tram home along Lygon street. Parish was sniffling against the warmth of my Westinghouse dryer when I found him.

—Rob, I said, holding up a sheaf comprised of several maps, two visa forms, and an air-ticket, —what do you know about Zimbabwe?
SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

HOME

It is midnight. I wake up and listen.
One is snoring next to me, heavy
with sleep and middle-age. Downstairs, one
is coughing and talking to the television.
They are what I have. I dare not ask
for more. Human love is what’s at home,
dazed and on edge. Listening at dusk
to an unknown bird, learning the task
of naming, one at a time, in a new
country. I acknowledge humbly
this is all I can ask for: proximity
in a carriage carrying us forward
as one through the short night hours,
to disperse when the light breaks through.
I pick single sprays this morning, white, lilac, pink, and powder blue to form a handful of scent discreet as tears a grown woman does not shed before strangers. It is foolish to address you, sweetpeas, in the second person. Only sorrow leads to this fancy, these old-fashioned words coming from a different text than what I must read today. Yet I pick the sweetpeas, look for a long time at their frail blossoms, these with three fringy petals overlapping, like mother, father, child, a trinity that is broken. All August I've picked sweetpeas from the fence where the vines reach out to me. I'm told they must be picked if they are to bear more flowers. This is what ordinary people call nature, the integrity of a harvest for human culling, comfort from smells and colors, variety. It is our scabs we must not pick. They'll never heal, the doctor says. He knows the nature of our bodies. Both are nature, that which bears and that which never heals. We are broken by sorrow, something picks at us, like the woodpecker we hear, bang, bang, for the sustenance of the little woodworms
THE SOURCE

China is the source I have not studied, although she, he has been a constant like mother, father in memory. China was the milk that was too heavy, that made one gag. Vomit. Like the scent of burned joss. Its insolent bonzes muttered no books or instruction. Women taught other women on what was right and wrong, and they were almost always wrong. Center of the world, great lump of decay where no one is happy, was China in Malacca, a misfit dumb country; and I its misfit child bastard and deaf, handicapped and wild.
A critical culture

In a recent declaration of faith in Australian writing, Peter Craven claims enviable prescience:

it is generally true that the best Australian writing (which is all I am interested in reading) will hold its own with any kind of writing published anywhere.... It is quite difficult to believe in a world where publishing does not exhibit any marked literary knowledge, where the literary pages of the papers are hit and miss and have no bottom line and where the literature departments of our universities show no zeal in promoting any writing as better than any other, that the writing of your own country can maintain, at least at its upper levels, the highest standards.¹

In this literary context, the escape of even the smallest creative spark must be regarded as miraculous. Such deft, self-serving appraisals are reductive, however, and do little for literary activity.

It is no small matter that an eminent critic espouses this view of literary studies. If universities seem not to be handing out cut-and-dried accounts of what makes some writing better than other writing, it is because such activity would be intellectually dishonest. Pedagogical zeal is evident in the exposure of students to divided opinion, among generations of eminent critics, about how to define best-writing. Receptiveness to diversity and willingness to speculate about strengths and weaknesses in authoritative practices of literary criticism are misinterpreted as the deliberate sabotage of aesthetic and literary judgment.
It is a tenacious view. Craven (pace) is more circumspect than some have been. In 1996, with a Miles Franklin Award for *Highway to a War* lending authority to his view, Christopher Koch imagined writing students in English departments face this: 'They are taught that there is no such thing as real worth in art, and no common values for art to reflect and draw on ...'² He charged that writing traditions are devalued in favour of experimentation:

Never has a word been so inflated, and the paradox is that its cult has produced only minor and trivial work. Very little that’s original has been written to please these scholar-masters — and a writer who writes to please them is doomed. His words [sic] die on the page, since they are masters only of the sterile, the trivial and the second-hand, and they are abolishing the notion of beauty.

He enjoins writers to resist listening to any ‘critic or pedagogue’. How did these become terms of abuse? Koch is a critic himself here, of course, and doing criticism’s least valuable work, popularising a distorted view of complex issues. I am reminded of W.H. Auden’s advice: ‘The critical opinions of a writer should always be taken with a large grain of salt. For the most part, they are manifestations of his [sic] debate with himself as to what he should do next and what he should avoid’.³ However, it is far from clear that fracturing the literary context in these ways has any value.

None of this reflects my literary training over the last decade. I have only been exposed to inclusiveness based on the possibility of finding value where we used not to look, even in texts formerly discounted in literary studies (for reasons which continue to be examined and some of which have proved indefensible, but I won’t recycle the debates). The conscientiously examined proposition that all writing does cultural work has only broadened the range of texts on which critical judgments may be brought to bear and multiplied the criteria by which critics may make them. I was given more to notice, and more with which to notice it.

A decade has passed since David Boyd and Imré Salusinsky wrote their sceptical survey of ‘deplorable developments’ in English departments, which makes it clear that teacher-pleasing has a history not determined by course content:
... the one thing that students of literature at British, American and Australian universities didn’t need ... was a theory. What they needed instead was a little knowledge (who wrote what when) and a lot of taste, sensibility, perception, responsiveness, or judgement (the ability, in other words, to convince their instructors that they shared their views).4

This is the context for which the nostalgia exists.

‘... all I’m interested in reading ...’

The preemptive selectiveness, which Craven finds desirable and which critics often indicate, presumably depends on writers’ reputations, or appraisal is an effect of a text’s first few pages, or the ‘insider trading’, of which Mark Davis accused the Australian literary market and the view Craven is rejecting, does play a part in critical judgments.5 How does one determine in advance that a book exemplifies best-writing? The prior question of how to define that has presumably been answered. The tossed-off assumption that it is a given, especially by senior critics and writers deploying their remarks as attacks on universities, is unlikely to settle a question which, let’s face it, has occupied generations of senior critics and writers.

Insightful worriers about these questions offer alternative ways of thinking about value. In her essay collection, The Red Heart (Random House 1999), Rosie Scott addresses them in useful, writerly ways. In ‘Fiction and Moral Imagination’, for example, she links the concepts of consciousness and conscience to argue that ‘rich, complex and satisfying work’ is the product of a moral imagination and driven by generosity ‘rather than retribution, despair or resignation’.6 She is impressed when ‘the artist’s moral universe informs and irradiates his or her art’. To distance herself from sanctimonious prescriptiveness, Scott quotes Fellini: ‘the lyrical quality of my inspiration is always an act of love’. Such gestures towards an apprehension of quality not only represent a positive impulse, they insist on their own openness to interpretation. They are themselves irradiated by generosity of vision. They are at least as convincing as bullying assertions, or assumptions that one’s intuitively divined tastes easily eclipse the taste of others.
Matters of zeal

Highlighting one agenda of cultural criticisms, Salusinsky and Boyd pointed to a factor which still haunts claims that literary judgment is defunct: 'the greatest challenge to established literary canons has ... come from feminist theorists.' Despite persistent illustrations of its complexity by feminist and postcolonial writers, among others, the notion of 'political correctness' usually shadows concern for excellence and often springs from continuing resistance to cultural critique.

Interviewed about her anthology, *Australian Women’s Stories* (Oxford University Press 1999), Kerryn Goldsworthy reports her response to the laudable invitation from OUP to put the collection together.

I looked around me and it seemed to me that things were as they had always been. Men were dominating the publishing lists, dominating the bookshelves. Since the golden decade of the 80s when women writers were proliferating in Australia, we have gone backwards, and we have gone quite a long way backwards. So it seemed to me that this was a kind of gesture against that.8

Goldsworthy regards the use of 'correct' as a term of abuse — to charge a speaker or writer with suspended judgment, or submissive indoctrination, rather than vigorously held opinion — as Orwellian and a mechanism by which the status quo reasserts itself. I agree. A timely reminder of how fruitful it is to take female authorship as a category for grouping texts, *Australian Women’s Stories* exemplifies metamorphosis in literary tastes.

It also draws attention to a surge of short fiction anthologies; nowhere better to look for the intangibilities of quality. The re-release of Murray Bail’s *The Drover’s Wife and Other Stories* (Text Publishing 1975, 1998) points to a continuing market. Experimentation marks Bail’s stories and the pressures he places on form still yield cerebral satisfactions. Anthologies recirculate significant fiction. This archival impulse makes Carmel Bird’s edition, *Penguin Century of Australian Stories* (Viking 2000), an invaluable collection of texts for connoisseurs of the form. A criterion for inclusion was the three thousand word limit, a reminder that selectiveness includes factors other than literary discrimination. Always.

David Malouf’s *Untold Tales* (Paper Bark Press 1999) and *Dream Stuff* (Chatto & Windus 2000) illustrate that definitions of excellence are elu-
sive among texts which come from the same pen. Malouf’s prose is as consistent and compelling as plainsong. Counterpoints between form/content, prose/poetry exhibit unfussy skill: ‘Easy reading is damned hard writing’, as Nathanael West remarked. Both collections contain writing infused with an affection for humanity. In Untold Tales, four narratives, Malouf writes marrow back into the bones of myth and legend, reminds you that existing stories are an opportunity for inventiveness. These are clever pleasures. Dream Stuff is a clutch of stories for the heart. They illuminate the ordinary nature of pain, pivoting on moments of sometimes terrible exigency. In one, a writer is forced to fight for his life: ‘how close he had stood to an anguish so intense that the only escape from it was into self-extinction’ (55). Malouf’s stories stand close to anguish, quietly. They also celebrate masculinity, quietly.

Contrary to defensive currents of opinion, there is a flowering of this expression of identity. In blue (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999), a young adult novel the way Catcher in the Rye is — the market-driven category does not apply — Ken Spillman shifts perspectives to trace the vulnerabilities of a group of friends. His novel is wise: compulsory heterosexuality can cause despair, love can be truly selfless, being articulate beats being macho, and more. One of Spillman’s themes, the socialisation of young men, is handled with the self-containment that comes of generous writing. There is no sense of blue being in covert tension with recent decades of feminist writing, tension which only contracts the vision and makes writing rattle with that ‘spirit of retribution, or resignation’. blue takes its own interests to heart.

Nigel Krauth’s Freedom Highway (Allen & Unwin 1999) is a detailed narrative about corruption in diplomatic and international aid circles in Thailand before the Vietnam War. It is incisive about political and cultural difference in ways informed by postcolonial debates and suggesting deliberate manoeuvring with these agendas. The climactic image of a mutilated butterfly might even be read as a devastating metaphor for self-interested interventions in Asia. However, tensions between the central American and Australian characters, anchored in their different ways of being men, are disconcertingly mapped on the body of an Asian woman. Billed as a political thriller, Freedom Highway has all the toughness and plot-oriented satisfactions of the genre, but read against it, Malouf and Spillman offer a vision utterly released from machismo.

Bruce Russell’s The Chelsea Manifesto (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999) is explicitly an account of a man’s search for himself through psychodrama. It takes him from Fremantle to New York on a journey full of
60s memorabilia. The focus on friendship between two men has Russell’s writer-protagonist reflect on the expansion and contraction of things — time, relationships, identity, ‘stuff’. He is in a cranky dialogue with feminism: ‘I scan the news and remind myself that we’re living through the last few years of the twentieth century. Men have served their purpose. Women have changed and men haven’t. What few changes we have made don’t get reported’ (99). Such self-conscious sighs of resignation come across as more pique than quip, but the writing flickers with wit.

The subtleties of their engagements may vary, but each of these recent publications is invigorated by contemporary literary and cultural currents. And read in terms of them, they yield diverse aesthetic and intellectual pleasures.

Universities sustain fiction writers and poets, as creative writing courses proliferate, a fact to which many authors named here could attest. Scholarships can be won by writers whose excellence, established outside the academy, defies detractors. Often writers themselves, instructors in such courses accept responsibility for teaching writing, aware that the area is spiked with the difficulties of judgment. Contrary to what Koch described in the mid 90s, I have perceived chiefly a willingness to enter into students’ creative endeavours and desire to wrestle with questions of confidence and competence from within them. This is demanding. It requires the combination of scholarship and insight which W.H. Auden links to the proper functions of a critic. Nevertheless, the success of university teachers in nurturing creativity is demonstrable.

Introducing *Painted Words* (Wakefield Press 1999), a collection of stories and poetry by postgraduate students in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, Thomas Shapcott writes: ‘What I hope the reader will come away with is a sense of the energy and liveliness in a group of writers in the process of flexing their creative muscles, and having fun doing so. This is, after all, a celebration.’ Caught by the spirit of the collection which honours the work of South Australian artist, Dorrit Black 1891-1951, 1 emerge with precisely that sense. Shapcott describes the commitments of creative writing teachers in terms of pleasure: ‘One of the joys, in fact, that a teacher of creative writing can experience is the emergence and development of each individual voice.’ Clearly a vehicle for show-casing work written in the context, the creative energy in a vol-
volume like *Painted Words* bears him out. It exemplifies vital literary activity. Ranking such writing, which makes modest claims, against Malouf’s, say, which represents ‘upper levels’ and ‘highest standards’, would be more pointless than zealous. Refusing to read it would be more a pity than clever. Its pleasures are many.

A significant flexing of creative strength occurs in Morgan Yasbincek’s *Liv* (*Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2000*), a novel which demonstrates the permeability of literary contexts. Yasbincek acknowledges the work’s origins as a PhD: ‘I chose to test the fragment in some challenging ways.’ She describes her supervision at Murdoch University in terms of ‘radiance’ and ‘tireless generosity and enthusiasm’, suggesting appreciation beyond routine academic protocols. *Liv*’s qualities exceed its value as a refutation of attacks on universities. Each fragment is a suspension over moments in a woman’s history cast in terms of mother/daughter relationships and strung from Perth’s contemporary suburbs to Yugoslavia before the Second World War. As Joyce Carol Oates has remarked, ‘All writing is experimental’, and *Liv* is, but there is nothing trivial or second-hand about it.11 The vicissitudes some readers associate with experimental writing do not apply. As to the question of beauty, *Liv* offers a reading experience akin to telling light-reflecting beads.

Concern about excessive academic generosity towards experimental writing should be offset by academic receptiveness to popular genres, more likely now to be valued for their cultural interest, or read as frames over which writers drape their interpretive skills. Crime, horror, science and romance fiction are open to revisionary approaches from readers and writers. Yet, in a version of the rock/hard-place analogy, this expansion of literary purview is likely to be a target of assertions that university literary studies lack zeal in exercising literary judgment.

Author of *Superstructuralism* and *Beyond Superstructuralism*, Richard Harland exemplifies the new literary eclecticism. Genres have been described as ‘apparatuses of capture’ and in his novel, *Hidden From View* (*Macmillan 1999*), Harland exploits them that way.12 He improvises like a jazz performer on genres as disparate as science fiction, thrillers, fantasy and crime fiction. Populated by Mad-Maxish characters and dominated by sheer intrigue, the novel also displays the kind of emancipated vision which suggests genre-writing has no necessary ideological entailments, sexual or otherwise.
Virtue in 'no bottom line'

Susan Sontag offers clues to subtly different ways of exercising selectiveness. Sontag considers work which is eccentric, neglected, or comparatively unknown. Her emphasis is on what she will and will not write about: 'I am not at all interested in writing about work I don’t admire.' She applauds Canetti’s ‘cult of admiration and hatred of cruelty’ and ‘Roland Barthes’ version of the aesthete’s sensibility. Such terms are no more excessive than those sprinkling attacks on contemporary critical training. Insofar as criticism compels a critic to take up an attitude, Sontag offers receptiveness as an alternative and anchors judgment in a critic’s limitations:

It isn’t that I like it and I don’t like it: that’s too simple. Or, if you will, it isn’t ‘both yes and no.’ It’s ‘this but also that.’ I’d love to settle on a strong feeling or reaction. But having seen whatever I see, my mind keeps going on and I see something else. It’s that I see the limitations of whatever I say or whatever judgment I make about anything.

‘Scholarly humility’, J.D. Salinger called it, suggesting that creative brilliance produces work of real value only when combined with it. Good ‘pedagogues and critics’ foster Sontag’s sense of scrupulous in(con)clusiveness. They carefully maintain distinctions between critical preferences and questions of quality. Far from being ‘sloppy relativism’, another phrase deployed on behalf of questionable certainties, such training offers enriched perspectives for responding to literary endeavour of most kinds.

Criticism open to speculative impulses is no sacrifice of judgment unless judgment is confused with dogmatism. Sontag’s critical consciousness reveals none of that. For her, ‘a novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It’s a creator of inwardness.’ Informed by this spirit, literary evaluation becomes an act of noticing less shackled to ideas about hierarchies and ranking.

Novels worth reading, then ...

This year’s Miles Franklin Award was jointly awarded to Kim Scott’s Benang: From the Heart (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999) and Thea
Astley’s *Drylands* (Viking 1999). The prize insists on their quality and is better viewed as recognition than ‘a win’ in the competitive sense. Recognising Scott’s novel as a tribute to Nyoongar people when it appeared, Jan Teagle Kapetas wrote: ‘Benang is not strident in its telling — neither is it passive. Rather it has a resonating quality of generosity. This is a novel written *from the heart* which catches the heart.’ Astley’s novel, concerned with a differently significant aspect of Australian culture, is also neither strident nor passive and has vision. *Benang* opens with an introduction to the first white man born, *Drylands* with a writer, Janet Deakin, considering the possibility that her audience may be the world’s last reader, expansive gestures easily linked with a concept like the moral and generous imagination.

A proliferation of writer-protagonists enriches the debates. Embedded in *Drylands* is an informed commentary on writing and reading, and Janet Deakin’s reflections are a reminder that the struggle to define best-writing has long been vociferous. A cluster of interlocking narratives, this novel exemplifies compassionate writing in each. For instance, Astley illuminates illiteracy, as a woman teaches a man she loves to read. The story of her tuition and his mastery elicits intense emotional investment. A complementary narrative depicts the efforts of a group of isolated women to write, providing another take on quality when their city tutor reflects: ‘they read small pieces so polite, so tentative they became mounds of indistinguishable dullness — bushfires, floods, trips to the coast. Yet every now and again there would be a light, dry moment that hinted at cynicism, a humour, an eye for the odd’ (85). This story’s pungency, which lies in what is at stake in the women’s attempts to write despite their husbands’ resistance, is echoed in the threat Janet Deakin’s writing represents to someone in the town. The novel honours the desire to write.

Astley contemplates the atrophy of small Australian towns here. Her austere prose is the perfect medium: ‘The town, as a town, was being outmanoeuvred by weather. As simple as that. Drought. Dying stock. A hard sky across which white clouds massed, hovered, then rolled away to the coast. The small spatterings of rain were as offensive as spit’ (287). Regretfully tracing this cultural shrinkage, she demonstrates that compassionate writing is not mawkish by glaring at ‘other realities’ of regional Australia: violence, nepotism, misogyny, racism. Treading lightly along divides between rural and urban Australia, *Drylands* resists all glib oppositions and bears no trace of the caricaturing which curls the lip of some Australian writing.
For all its familiar Jolleyesque wit and astuteness, An Accommodating Spouse (Viking 1999) is a case in point. Elizabeth Jolley’s narratives spring from a generous vision. She presses against narrow-mindedness of every kind. This novel, however, seems finally derisive of its fictional inhabitants. It considers love and the absence of love. A professor’s tedious ‘life of the imagination’ traps him between plodding sexual fantasies and grotesque self-absorption in his relationships with the women who surround him. The familiar impulse of Jolley’s characterisation is indicated in the epigraph, a quotation from Auden: ‘Blame no one. Blame, if you must, the human situation.’ Forgiving of all kinds of deviance, Jolley usually contrives to have quirkiness and idiosyncrasy illustrate human vulnerability. Here, I am left with a sense that this gardenful of flawed beings is more silly than fragile. However, as Auden also observed, a celebrated writer’s progress is inevitably towards being jeopardised in the minds of readers by their own prior achievements, new work having ‘historic interest for us as the act of a person in whom we have long been interested’. An Accommodating Spouse decisively revisits features of the Jolley oeuvre and affords satisfying recognitions like those between works by the same composer. Perhaps this is a way of approaching art too seldom applied to writing. Sculthorpe is Sculthorpe. Jolley is Jolley.

Dorothy Hewett’s Neap Tide (Penguin 1999) also offers pleasures of reconnection. Neap Tide concerns an academic’s retreat to a coastal town to recover from a failed marriage and to write. She encounters her past and that of the artistic community there. Another writer, Jessica Sorenson is given related preoccupations as she reflects on her students. Her appraisal of universities locates the problems differently:

... perhaps they knew things she didn’t know. They hadn’t been brought up on Leavis or New Criticism, but on semiotics and feminist theory. Why was it necessary for them to know ‘Jerusalem’, except she couldn’t help herself, in her heart she felt they were culturally deprived.

The university was no longer a place of learning, but a commercial enterprise, a degree shop run by soulless administrators who cut costs ruthlessly and overworked the shrinking numbers of their academic staff. (155)

Admirers of Hewett’s writing will greet the liminal setting and sublime imagery; flirtations with the supernatural; her sexual assertiveness; the
gathering of eclectic, even unlikely characters; her social and political consciousness; and the sweeping themes, such as the philosophical poise of individuals towards death. Hewett’s vision is generally encompassing and reading *Neap Tide* might be compared with passing through an elaborate hyperbole. *The Toucher* looms in the background.

*Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop* (Penguin 1999), sequel to *I for Isobel* (1989), placed Amy Witting on the short-list for the Miles Franklin Award in a field which justifies faith in Australian writing. Recipient of the 1993 Patrick White Prize, Witting is another writer whose reputation precedes her into the pages. Isobel is a passionate writer and reader contending with how to love, so she can write about it. A sensitive enactment of the injunction to write what you know, the novel deals with her fundamental difficulty of learning self-love. Witting uses Isobel’s confinement in a sanitorium to create a nest of compelling characters. This is a wry, unselfconscious account of artistic self-consciousness and, once again, a writer-protagonist articulates the struggle to make words work. A thread of speculation about writer/editor/critic relationships and the texture of literary interactions is drawn through the novel. Witting’s gift for dialogue renders literary conversation interesting and funny. Her touch is always light: ‘the art is to conceal art’, as she has a character remark (240). The title signals another feature of Witting’s work. *Everything happens* to Isobel on the way to the shop; it’s simultaneously a joke and a pithy philosophical observation. Witting holds that balance perfectly. The novel’s gentle resistance to anti-intellectualism is a pleasurable shock.

Erudition is differently employed, and similarly enjoyed, in Brenda Walker’s *Poe’s Cat* (Viking 1999). Walker cycles facts and imagined moments of Edgar Allen Poe’s marriage to his cousin Virginia through a contemporary story of love between cousins. Given Virginia’s death of consumption, and her young age when Poe married her, *Poe’s Cat* engages with suffering and taboos, profound themes managed with philosophical understatement. Like Malouf, in *Untold Tales*, Walker draws on other stories, only more elaborately, winding them around each other. Walker’s writing is uncompromisingly clever and graceful.

Expansive vision also marks work from new writers, as two first novels demonstrate. *Playing Madame Mao*, by Lau Siew Mei (Brandl & Schlesinger 2000), is a novel which confronts oppression and suffering, and in which the political erupts into the personal. Lau Siew Mei weaves the perspectives of an actor in Singapore celebrated for her portrayal of
Madame Mao with imagined perspectives of the woman herself, offsetting both with the sceptical voice of the actor’s confidante. Shifting points of view and play with illusion and reality highlight the roles of performance and story in identity. Where the novel attends to Chinese history and culture it delivers information with elegance and generosity. It is enlightening, not only about its cultural canvas, but about the insight that oppression anywhere has implications for people everywhere.

*The Hunter*, by Julia Leigh (Penguin 1999), articulates an Inuit concept of Deep Patience. In the manner of Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, this novel accumulates philosophical force and attaches metaphoric significance to its unnamed hunter as it takes us through his meticulous search for the extinct thylacine. The conclusion insists on inwardness. It forces us to consider the implications of knowledge, to question what it depends on and the uses to which it is put. It compels reflection.

Although both exemplify the moral imagination at work, these two novels are differently exceptional. The prose in one is ornate, intricate, even demanding. In the other it is lucid, concentrated. It’s a contrast not confined to fiction. Michèle Drouart’s *Into the Wadi* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2000) and Kerry McGinnis’s *Pieces of Blue* (Viking 1999) peel away from each other in similar fashion. Drouart’s memoir defies assertions that ‘political correctness’ depletes art. Exquisitely careful, it traces the unsuccessful attempt to sustain a marriage despite cultural difference. Drouart’s recollections are scrupulous, the writing impeccable.

*Pieces of Blue* is the compelling account of Kerry McGinnis’s picaresque upbringing as a drover’s daughter in outback Queensland. At one level, it is a compendium of bush craft and horse sense. At another, it is pure adventure. At another, it recounts the realities of a rigorous life without a trace of self-indulgence. The absence of introspection is striking, given the place of solitude and isolation in the author’s experience. *Pieces of Blue* induces reflection in the reader instead. McGinnis’s pragmatic, even stern prose records the exceptional response of a family to loss. She converts deprivation into the unusual memories of a carefully observed life.

Simone Lazaroo’s novel, *the australian fiancé* (Picador 2000) is enveloping. Also the story of a culturally complicated love affair, it sifts through optimism and resilience, ignorance and weakness, love and sacrifice until the novel’s core of raw pain arrives and is not where you expect it to be. Lazaroo exposes the costs of exclusionary thinking. There
is an irresistible comparison here with *The Lover*, by Marguerite Duras — the timbre of the prose, even the cover, invites it — but this is not second-handness, it is an invocation, a continuity, the beginning of a tradition. As an education of the heart *the australian fiancé* is exemplary.

**re: 'promoting any writing as better than any other'**

Good criticism is more interested in what is there than what is not. It aims to detect merit rather than its absence. Far from being mealy-mouthed, good criticism celebrates literary and intellectual endeavours alike, rather than opposing them to each other. They amount to the same thing: passion for reading and writing. Good criticism is oriented towards inclusion rather than exclusion.

Australian writing flourishes and universities contribute to its abundance in complex ways. Contrary to their apparent intention, generalised attacks on universities only undermine the arts in a culture which seems increasingly unable to value them appropriately. In fact, universities nourish, perform and examine artistic labour, including literary criticism. What might improve things is greater rigour among critics who call for greater rigour.

The books named here have been plucked from a stream of writing which erodes slick definitions and sure hierarchies of value. In the end, my selection is accidental, as the pleasures of reading usually are. Roland Barthes (whose name would be on many a hit list, not least for his famous and widely misread — indeed, in this climate of pre-emptive rejection I suspect often unread — essay, ‘The Death of the Author’) positions pleasure as a proper basis for approaching texts. So did Auden, to invoke him again: ‘Pleasure is by no means an infallible critical guide, but it is the least fallible.’ These books offer multiple, disparate and unpredictable pleasures. To do them justice, you would linger over them, commend them carefully, disentangle their qualities, quote them all, extravagantly. Certainly you would read them.

**Endnotes**


2 Christopher Koch, “Academics put the con in deconstruction”, *The Australian* (Friday 14 June 1996): 15.


5 Peter Craven, *Australian Book Review*, 38.


7 Salusinsky and Boyd, 22.


10 *The Dyer’s Hand*, 8.


16 *Paris Review Interviews*, 327.


18 Rosie Scott raises this in “Fear and Loathing on the Queensland Writers’ Train”, *Red Heart*, 71.

19 *The Dyer’s Hand*, 4.

20 *The Dyer’s Hand*, 5.
Evil, Time, Redemption

Evil’s guises

The Disney machine is so successful partly because it feeds with colour-coded morality nostalgia for a world of simpler Manichean oppositions. It’s also a relief I suppose, for people to see evil so manifest because in real life it is often not; it is a good method actor, a chameleon; more than that, it is naturalised as part of the climate, so that only occasionally where there’s turbulence, do we remember there is an atmosphere, and it’s there in it, all the time, refracting our light and inflecting the way we see. It is an acclimatisation. Banned as essentialist, chased from smart discourse, evil is happy to perform its endlessly protean incarnations insidiously, subtly, in broad daylight.

It seizes any tropes made available by new technologies and their associated cultures and pleasures. It works by telling us that the world is so complex, the machinations of international capitalism so mystifying there is nothing an individual can do. Evil inhabits the non-resistance to itself, and is enlarged by this. It is the unconscious or wilful forgetting that others are having their lives torn apart, the failure to put one’s voice to collective denunciation of systematic or institutionally reproduced violence, whether this discriminates by gender, race, or class.

Evil is a failure to recognise the sacredness of alterity, that the other also is a subject, not an object to be incorporated into a cannibalistic, infantile self. Yet the swoons of religious or erotic transport, the giddy loss of self in the other, the veering away from such categories as subject and object in mutual infolding, are not necessarily distinguishable from the sly invasions of evil; if evil came fanged and snarling, spitting toxins, Mephisto as cane toad in a suit, it would be easy. But the problem is that
Evil borrows all the guises of seduction. Mephisto is one cool dude who always makes himself attractive and is much more amusing than God. Evil offers transformation; evil comes marketing a plot. It's only Satan who can kick a narrative along. Evil seeks sweet revenge for damage long since done to its own moral being, it comes with flattery, a virus with a visa written in the language of generosity, wanting to infuse memory of its wound into the blood of the raw recruit. It's not for nothing that in the Judeo-Christian tradition Lucifer was God's favourite boy. Evil is always repetition of evil done. God gave no second chance to little Lucifer and Lucifer's pain is cosmically repercussive. Evil also can come coated as virtue wounded, as righteousness. It finds in a vulnerable candidate a site to displace the memory of its own wounding, for the infusion and relay of that venom. Evil needs a host already visited. The perpetrators of evil have suffered violence to their own beings, or been brought up in a climate where it is normalised, where sadistic acts pass without comment, habitual, casual, as a naturalised aspect of femininity (bitching) or masculinity (bullying, sledging).

**Evil as cleverness**

*Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint,* I am the spirit who endlessly negates or denies, Goethe's Mephisto said. Negativity, denial, negation. Humour is fuelled by these; people count as wits perpetrating them; evil can happen with the instantaneity of a pun, in the unreflecting side-swipe of a joke; the devil of wisecrack skewers her victim for the sake of entertaining a third party. In love with its own velocity, cleverness forgets the other; alongside, devoutly defending the complex humanity of the joke's victim, Goodness is the party pooper, looking very dumb. (Saturnine, melancholy, Moliere's Alceste turns in despair from all the froth and casually cruel wit of the salons.) Still the spirit of perpetual denial is what is also known as critical thought.

One must not look stupid: therefore trust nothing, doubt everything. After many years of gape-mouthed gullibility, unable to see irony, I eventually woke up to the fact that that negation or universal scepticism was equivalent to critical intelligence. One must doubt everything. In a sense, though, the critical mind can be a rude negator, and a cruel one. It's the tradition the west is so proud of but often what counts as intelligent debate involves slashing through the other's discourse, puncturing their reasoning, demolishing as useless anecdote their insufficient-
ly examined premise, forgetting that this might be their heart's testimony, their authentic habitation - their true story.

The decades of so called postmodernity, from the sixties at least, have implied a difficulty in claiming anything beyond a local viability for any moral position because cultural relativism has prevailed. One of the great problems of postmodern consumerism, despite the apparent good in the levelling of cultural hierarchies, is that democracy implies choice only for the Happy Few; the levelling of high and low culture through the electronic marketplace of images screens us from the persistence of hierarchies of the most outrageously oppressive kind, ensuring the reproduction of pain and dispossession. Evil has happily pursued its course with genocidal wars in Rwanda, Somalia, the Balkans, Kosovo, Chechnia, while many intellectuals and artists were promoting the positivity of 'perversion' or sado-masochistic practices and babbling about semiospheres, talking down the essentialism of those who would bring notions of morality back into cultural analysis and production.

Evil as denial

"Fuck me white", one of the Nyoongar characters jokes bitterly in Kim Scott's Benang: From the Heart.¹ In this beautiful, complex, and disturbing book, Kim Scott sets the imaginative reactivation of events alongside documents testifying to the genocidal impact in the southwest of Australia of a eugenicist dream: to breed out Aboriginality. Through the mutual imbrication of past and present, Benang shows how history denied is toxically active. Only when remembrance is allowed expression and confronted with clear-eyed recognition and apology can the massive abscess be lanced and society move on toward some health. Evil infects us all as long as we tacitly acquiesce to our leaders' denial of the Stolen Generations and promotion of a mythic version of the Anzac Generation. Policies which, in the name of 'protection', were conceived in a will to cultural genocide and were expressed in insidious forms of physical genocide, and often in outright massacre. Many non-indigenous Australians would prefer to agree with Howard that they shouldn't have to carry any guilt for policies they had nothing to do with. We non-indigenous Australians, who inherited from the invaders our privilege based on the expropriation of land and ensured by skin colour have everything to do with the past. We profited from the dispossession of Australia’s indigenous people and are still profiting. Of course guilt
reduced to sentimentalised rhetoric is useless. Action is not.

Forgetting and denial are themes I've tried to explore in my novel, *Prowler.* I try to show that in nursing one's own narcissistic wound and forgetting the pain of the other, one is condemned to a depressive repetition. Like Australia, itself. I have tried to show through a handful of characters that evil can be perpetrated through a romance of the other so sentimentalised and reductive that it entails oblivion.

**Evil as passivity**

We prefer caricatures because the deep anxiety is that we participate in it more or less passively, in a banal way, all the time. Evil is an adjustment to the habitual denial of choice. *But what can you do? The case is closed.* I only have to cast an unsentimental eye on my own sloth, my moral pusillanimity, my failure to act politically, my deep laziness, my coddling of petty grief and wounds, my numbing out, and I see something like evil at work.

Insidious, evil moves through a slow narrative. It is the slow, festering accumulation of the undone, the putting off and putting off. Death in every medieval morality play finds its candidate a beggar for time. The evil is postponement, procrastination, or being in the thrall of any morbid idea or substance-enabled numbing, which ensures the paralysis of the will. It is there in Baudelaire and to a pathological degree in Mallarmé. It is one of the great themes of modernity, perhaps because of the alienation of consciousness from the forces of production, the severance of art from labour:

Can virginal, vivacious, resplendent Today
   Ever with one drunken wing blow break
The haunting of old ice on that forgotten lake
   Transparent glacier of flights too long delayed?

What interests me as a writer, and more particularly as a novelist, is this relationship of consciousness to time, to duration. What constitutes an act of negligence is not so much the dramatic moment of denial like Peter's of Christ but the gradual, ineluctable accretion of moments when one might have acted, when inertia, or moral sloth, become collusive with the forces of oppression and consign the other to oblivion.

Sartre said of Baudelaire that he chose to be at fault, a sinner. In his study of *Literature and Evil,* Bataille asks if that isn't rather that he
chose poetry, which necessitates hard, cold self-reflexivity. "A man necessarily rises in judgement against himself and cannot recognise himself nor love himself to the end unless he knows himself to be the object of a condemnation." Unless he figures he is at fault. Baudelaire watches himself watching; never loses self-consciousness in the act of seeing. It's this relentlessly unforgiving gaze he fixes on himself that on occasion makes his poetry rise to great emotion. "Mere des souvenirs, Maitresse des Maitresses ... Mother of remembrance, mistress of mistresses/ To thee all my desire and all my distress." After all the exoticising and sadistic celebrations of his life's companion, Jeanne Duval, after all his dandified demonism and narcissistic exaltation of his wounds, this broken voice of syphilitic middle age addressing in the language of prayer the broken, also syphilitic wreck of the beauty Jeanne Duvall had been, makes it hard not to read "Le Balcon" ("The Balcony") without weeping. Cautionary notes against the waste of time and talent through indulgence and laziness appear again and again in Baudelaire's notebooks: "Hygiene. Work. Poetry. Do not go to the café."

But the poetry, when Baudelaire breaks from paralysing fascination and when, for a moment, will is wrested from its current snare (hashish, opium, wine, sex, or beauty) the voice carries the grain of authentic remorse and can attract some kind of grace. Remorse is the muse of so many of the Flowers of Evil. Remorse is the gnawing of conscience through time. It's time that makes sinners of us, the cumulative not-doing. It's recognising this through time that perhaps makes redemption also thinkable, and poetry, always retroactive, aware of its wake, kills time.

Most of us don't actively seek the pain of the other, to fill wells with the mutilated, to leave toxic sludge where once were lakes, to tear children from their families because they are ethnically "mixed". But most evil comes in the disguise of apathy or sentimental denial.

This might not be consciously intentional: one can dupe oneself, calling by the name of love the will to dominate and the pleasure in having one's ego played by the other, calling devotion this mad pursuit, this baiting of the other and then declaring 'it' over when one has exhausted her or him of their substance. The acts of seduction are heady, in the name of the seducer's self-improvisation, perhaps even in the name of experience garnered for art's sake, but looked at from the position of abandonment are frequently indistinguishable from acts of predatory cruelty.
Evil is not an absolute, of course; it is relative, all in inclination, in the insidious, asymptotic approach: to write about it I can simply magnify my own tendencies. Writing is an ethical laboratory, a rehearsal for a performance, where the what-if’s are tracked to their worst or best consequences: the notion of parallel lives, of literature as an imaginative ethical experiment, isn’t new. Writers often wonder if their need for material doesn’t plot their lives in certain directions. It’s true that for the sake of their work writers are capable of stealing other people’s stories and then out of shame forgetting that the person displaced and disguised and redistributed amongst characters might be still walking wounded outside their book. In a sense one always is at risk in writing because any representation will inevitably entail a reduction of complexity. Representing the other is perhaps always a matter of betrayal: does the pen always wound because representing always punctures the self-image of the other?

I once had a visit from Mephista.

That first day of her stay she said, smiling, as if in admiration, “You don’t understand evil, do you? Perhaps you need to, for your work. It lacks those shadows. Yes, that’s what it is,” she said, pleased to have identified the flaw. And she was launched into a torrent of denunciation. She was right. I hadn’t really considered the question of its actually lodging in a being; that individuals might nurse deeply malicious intent. For a moment there was a Faustian quiver: should I lay myself bare to the wounds she wanted to inflict, let her infuse her venom and through this envenoming, this new knowledge, write with more shadows? All the while through the house while I made her meals and tried to work Mephista’s voice pursued me with its mellifluous eloquence.

At the worst of it, when she located the pathological moment on which she claimed I had elaborated my identity, and announced there was indeed something monstrous in me, probably madness to boot, I thought if I survived this at least I would know something I hadn’t before. It was true I had been sentimental about women and had not explored in my writing how they can contrive to destroy one another, how their lust for gloating maternal power can subjugate in the name of love or friendship. I had forgotten about the way a certain slave mentality can turn into toxic jealousy. I’d been naive in my private snow-dome romance of the sisterhood. I thought, Well, here we go and to think I invited her! She came to stay! I detached myself in order to observe my own slow dismantling through the sustained lashings of her tongue.

Whether I wanted to or not, Mephista found the lesion through an old
guilt to infuse the venom of self-doubt, undoing my composure, taking me back to schoolyard again where I was orphan, impostor, cheat; one whose desperate need to call her mother back from the wax and wire mannequin she’d become made me too hungry and sly. I was almost radiant with it, pregnant with it, the more she went on. Almost for the sake of my own wounding and thus my own propensity to wound, I was going to bring into my world the idea of evil. I was going to find a character and the character would be a wordsmith like her, and manic like her, and would systematically dismantle the woman he inveigled into his house, until the sight of her, utterly broken would offer her daughter, vicariously humiliated, the embryo scenario for revenge.

Thus is set the relay of evil, perhaps remorse, and later, some sort of recovery through redemptive recognition. She, my daughter character, will in turn seduce and betray. But what then will betrayal be, but a kind of slicing off of her own wounded self? This kind of story needs the thickness of simulated duration, that is, something like the novel.

Evil, time, redemption

I would argue for a conservative function of the sustained narrative because it offers anachronistically a different kind of temporality from film, video, and television. The novel allows for the vicarious experience of duration: of evasion, forgetting, then jolting or shameful memory, and ultimately, perhaps, active remembrance. It can stretch its concertina miraculously to enfold landscapes within landscapes, or alternatively find shards of traumatic remembrance in its intimate tissue: thus offering away from the sped up e-world, a space for the anachronistic project of moral reflection. It engages us actively in the translation from the personal to the social dimensions of memory, a process essential to a healthy culture. To remember is only one step towards frustrating the repetition of evil. By dramatising individual acts of remembrance, and especially now in so-called postmodernity, writing can help. This is a necessary function: not to strive to rival the fast jump-cutting of video or the cinematic thrall of the visual. More importantly the novel can let readers into its imaginative cumulus, its slow spaces offering them the massive time of memory, in which there might be something like redemption.
Different versions of this paper were given at the Perth 2000 Writers Festival and at the Queenscliffe 2000 Feast of Words.

Endnotes

3 Trans. mine.
   
   Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui
   Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
   Ce lac dur, oublié, que hante sous le givre
   Le transparent glacier de vols qui n'ont pas fui.
it was gravity that broke our hearts
our rustic love felled soundlessly
by some brown man’s axe

We’d gone up to the woods in dark
my dress your boots
our cool ears and fingers
tasted there the moss and fog

But as the sun rose
our bodies broke and splintered
topped to the leafy floor
perished with the crisper light of sunrise

show me a star
to twinkle louder than
these eyes
an atmosphere
more bounty than
this love

where were you when
this wet red enigma
was born
who can escape
his eager heel

show me your colour
corals next to
this blood
your rippling tempest
of blues and greens
to drown this
luminous skin

where are you while
this gift remains
unopened?

UNTITLED

my mother dreams
in silver and turquoise
of her astronaut lover

drinks tea
chucks the leaves
from our balcony

stares each night
at an empty pillow
THE CHILD

This is the child who walks between us daily
- still so very young - yet we both know
that it must learn the lessons of all childhood,
facilitate at times, look to us and recover,
trust in our triune love, grow as we grow...

All caring couples walk with similar children
which, while being shaped, shape them in turn,
reach out to them in love when least expected,
extend endearing gestures to each parent,
in time unfurling like a forest fern...

This child of love is with us in our dreaming,
and through our sleep plays its own hide-and-seek,
runs away and laughs to tease us onward,
and, just as lovers twine their hands together,
its words are woven in the words we speak...

TWO BY TWO

If those two people whom we were
should meet right now
what would they say?
Would they with later wisdom now concur
and ratify every vow,
or would they (as they might) shrink in dismay?
The one stands to me now
as foreign as a one-time friend
whom time has so estranged
that even if we were to meet somehow
our discourse would have an awkward end
however pre-arranged.

And you ...? What talk
would pass between you and
that other earlier Liz?
Would she, too, find it difficult not to baulk
when asked to understand
what since has happened and the way it is?

Perhaps, however, instead
of alienation from ourselves as then
we were (since that same history
had its own part to play) it might be said
that we should both dismiss such gravamen
and past and present both agree

That we should always seek
to reconcile, if possible, these two
who peer across the table-top each day
and listen when we speak
– our closest friends, this other me, this other you,
folding our hands in theirs even when we pray ...
EUGEN’S FALL – Geburtstag, Vienna 1810

Eugen’s birth coincided with the invention of the waltz. And the state bankruptcy.

Technically, the bankruptcy was not conceived in quite the same way as the child Eugen or the waltz. What could it possibly have had to do with the whirling and whorling of cells, splitting violently into four four at three quarter time; faster and faster, until the patterns of linking arms, pointed toes and radiant heat had become so giddy that the survival of the Viennese line was felt to be assured.

Eugen’s mother had been the cynosure of the ballroom.

And now Eugen was the cynosure of his own gaslit interior, hooked up to a baroque column of flesh secreting food and drink at his remotest inclination.

Left, close, forward, right, close, forward

Ballroom or ballwomb. What was the difference? Neither he nor his mother understood that both were temporary comfort zones. The fact was that this crazy, unstoppable parthogenesis had to cease. Neither of them had a clue as to what would come after.

However, it is true to say that the state bankruptcy was given birth to. But it had only produced a dead thing, a vague but noticeable absence of things amongst those of a certain class. With a syphilitic treasury, twenty course suppers at the Allolsaal were now out of the question. Soft fabriano notepapers, heavier grades of red sealing wax and the little bottles of imported Indochine ink had completely disappeared. Some said they could no longer think straight without the special turquoise bottles standing thoughtless upon the escritoire. This ink had always looked so beautiful on the page that even lists of things seemed like strange new
These days, the mechanics of intrigue, and even the simplest communications were driven by thin floppy envelopes and matt, solid inks that failed completely in their objective of suggesting transparency, or the more cursive possibilities of social encounter.

But that was not the only thing. The absence of Dutch cinnamon and clove had made food bland and uninteresting. For the first time in Viennese history, shame-faced girls sold lifeless strudels from the tall cake trays of Demmels and Sachers. Batavian coffee failed to make its way through to the nostrils of landlocked Vienna. Not even the memory of the smell made its way through from the embattled ports of Hamburg and Victoria. Luxury had been stillborn, and the city glittered in withdrawal.

Motion and movement across the city had also been curtailed. There simply wasn't as much of it.

Creaseless toppers, coach and eight, and sometimes six and four, were rarely seen again after the bankruptcy of 1810. In this city of addictions, the wealthy turned as pale as baby veal; rocking themselves to and fro until they found themselves converting the rocking and the sweating and the anxiety into something formal and repeatable. Something almost useful.

It looked very much like the strange furling movements they had spied from closed carriages as they spun through the Stadt Park, fiacres whipped to a foaming speed in case they should be waylaid by shadowy figures hunting for dinners of bony pigeons, grasshoppers and fennel, growing unstripped along the licorice edge of the Donau. When the shadows did not find their dinner they danced the terror away.

At this time, fear reeked of aniseed and charred feather.

Since the collaborationist curse of Napoleon, the Viennese had been fortunate not to have seen their city streets run with blood. It had survived, as a little green eye in a European face pocked with the scars of invasion. But nonetheless, hardly any money fluttered in and around the grey colonnade of the Bourse. Lebenskunst, the gentle art of living, for which they had been justly famed, had become a thing of the past.

Capital was dead!

—Said one anonymous fellow on his box in the Tiergarten, but at that time, history did not choose to let him record it. That would be said much later. Some soldiers put him in a bag and threw him from the Prater bridge with him still calling out ‘dead, dead, dead’ as he drowned. As water filled his lungs the word sounded like a song.
But to those listening above, the combination of water and words and death was forever fused with the sounds of gaiety. It was simply a mistake of history and locality, the poor man in the bag. His timing. The soldiers. The tragic confluence of water, lung and idea. The presence of those who listened, and heard, and passed the song on. The chance conflation of all of these things.

And all the while, the buildings standing silent, their dumb stone marzipan belying interiors painted with clouds, ceilings fashioned into endless vortical skies which now only seemed to amplify the loneliness of those who lived there. The absence of things. It was a terrible time for many of the locals. And now death itself sounded like a melody.

Capital was dead. If this was true then the only thing to do was to usher in a capital time in its wake.

Eugen’s birth came after a long swollen waiting time. His mother, J, was ten months pregnant. In the first month she had tried to waltz away his existence. He paid her back by hanging on even more tightly. She had tried to count her contractions faster, six-eight for the pain.

Right, big left (spin 180 degrees on right), close, back, close, close

But with every count she felt a twisting, spinning parquetry within her, felt them all, whoever they were, beat and tap an agony of time against the walls of her insides. Counting the house no longer seemed to matter. The building would surely crumble. She was the building, she was the floor, she was shoeless, sexless, ready for death.

She pushed the midwife away and shrieked for her lover to attend to the pain in her back with a tourniquet of oil de menthe and a pinch of snuff for what was left of her mind. But Karl wasn’t there. There was only that bastard Bernard von Guerard, the sower, the husband, the painter of eyeless miniatures. He sat with his long nervous hands, holding his head like a broken lamp outside the flocked vestibule; a real bowling ball of a head that he seemed to want only to hold in a delicate concentration before abandoning it, pulling it off and throwing it down the corridor.

When Eugen finally came, it was in a rush of water and noise and
something less than three quarter time. This would predispose him to a
certain slowness all his life. On the 1638th beat his mother suddenly
dropped her head back, punchdrunk. Her nostrils were tipped red from
laudanum and her mouth was fixed so wide as if to suggest another possi­
bile exit for the late-baked thing that tormented her so. She had been
counting for forty-eight hours.

But after playing so hard to get, the baby sailed out, whooshed out,
straight into the midwife’s lap, where he sat, like a laundry parcel, com­
pact and staring; hands still neatly packed in by his sides. Looking out
towards his mother’s womb expectantly and without making a sound.
He (for indeed, it was a he) felt himself to be looking back at the archi­
trave of a house once lived in. It was still his. He was silently confident.

Until she said:

Gott in Himmel. It has killed me! I am dead. Tot bin ich! Has it killed
me? Nimm’ die verdammte Kreatur weg! It is not mine It’s his ... Give
it to him .... I don’t want to see it. Clean it up. Mach alles wieder
sauber! Der Karl darf absolut nicht im Zimmer eintreten. Take it
away! Give it back to the painter. The coward! Der Arschloch!

Eugen heard this and understood perfectly well. He did not want to
make a scene. He did not cry.

She could not take the baby to her breast. Her small bust would pro­
duce little milk. It had been pierced by too many camellias and nosegay
pins and by the odd, daffy-blooded aristocrat who had lodged himself
there, all toothy and curious.

The midwife, furious, jammed the courteously silent Eugen against
her own copper coloured teat as if to remind him, violently, that moth­
erhood could exist. And the milk drained over him and over his blood
spattered face in a cool, pale waterfall so that eventually, he was able to
detach tiny prosthetic arms from the ovoid shape that he had made
upon arrival, and clutch up at something clothy, musliny and fleshy
above him and feel that he was hanging on to the edge of the earth at
least.

He felt sure he had arrived in _verdamnte Nacht_. Not _stille_, or _heilige_.
In this vast atrium of a place he felt all loose and heavy and dangerous.
It was a place where he felt himself to be constantly falling toward some­
thing. Some object. Some landscape of some new terror. He did not yet
know the difference between a river or a field, an arm or a leg, a body or
bodies. The meaning of oxygen and water. It was terribly cold. But he had
already worked out the difference between kindness and cruelty.
He missed his aqueous world. His float palace of all care and no responsibility.

He had never felt so unsure of anything in his life.

And so he decided then, at the age of two minutes, that, as they didn’t seem to want to let him back, that that was the way things were. That he would in fact be in a state of constantly falling, falling towards something, questing for the fall. That the risking of this was the way things were.

He had been born in a shape to resist the world. Or at least to fall against it without the risk of any protuberances getting hooked or caught up in its spikes and nails and irregularities. He hadn’t helped his mother by opening out his arms and swimming. In this, Eugen had been born wise.

He could not know then that he had been born without rhythm or schilling.

Milkless, he had no idea how he might fall into his own future.

Colonial landscape painter Eugen von Guerard emigrated to Australia on the Lady Windermere in 1851. He was separated from his mother at an early age and his father, Bernard von Guerard, pre-deceased him in a cholera epidemic that toured through Naples in 1836.
A GARDEN GLOSSARY

i. axil

the corner formed between a leaf or a branch and a stem

all taped and bulbous, all bulky with the idea of support, there is a rush of green. a leaving home: a ruckus of awkward stacking. and this turning, this departure, it is like a cardboard death for the one; an engineered end. all dry and faded brown, there is a possibility of brittleness, of a break. as for the other: it dreams of indeterminate things, of the possibility of rain for itself.

ii. runner

a stem growing along the surface of the ground that often gives rise to new shoots, roots, or plants

a desperate escape, this mining disaster's logic
of tunnels and passages and connections. A trench’s perverse ecosystem: all topsy-turvy life and burial, death and earth.

**iii. thatch**

a layer of organic material, between green grass blades and roots

this is the stuff of the process of remembering: the dust

on the lp you’re trying to play on your father’s circa 60’s rca with the broken needle. it is the jam on the pages of that library book. these are the in-between bits of context and liquor and age that scratch faces and colours and names off a list; these are the mechanics of forgetting, the active ingredients of loss.

**iv. stipling**

fine speckling caused by insect feeding

in retrospect, it could be seen as the beginning of it all; the freckle of a malignancy. it is the way the sun dances off the face of a watch’s wrist infirmity, and how that reflection of light is set off
by the skin's aging play, its loose brown juxtaposition. 
the one creates while the other illuminates.

the way the markings of a trout are most brilliant as 
it struggles with the mechanics of death, flailing

against the spurious buoyancy of science 
in the moist light of mid-morning or

afternoon. perhaps there is a longing for a cool fluid 
place, and a confusion simply as to how to get there.

v. rhizome

an underground stem

and in culmination, there is this 
 secretive growth, a development of

something, hidden. a reversal, a movement 
backward, underneath – undoing all

the complication until it is reduced 
like long division or fractions or something

else that confounds the majority. this is the 
algebra; the inequation; the remainder.
Brendan Somes

There is a Car Travelling

There is a car travelling. Datsun 1600. Early 70’s. The stereo is worth more than the car. There are four people in the car: James Flood, Anthea Wellman, Anthony Hopstapple and Bridget Stirling. James loves Anthea loves James. Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony. That much I am sure of.

Now that I think about it, I am less sure. James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony has the march of a slogan eering send the ambiguities off to the Gulag advertising totalitarianism. I am reminded of Bridget saying to Anthony, How I am supposed to know what your silence means? Anthony to Bridget: So what! when Bridget was jabbering on about something. Or Anthea not saying to James, This is so boring. More than once. Or James’ taut okay. Okay! Does James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony acknowledge these times? Everybody knows each relationship has its ups and downs but in the end. Does that little homily come free of charge with each James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony?

James is Anthea’s boyfriend. Anthea is James’ girlfriend. Duration: 18 months. Anthony is Bridget’s boyfriend. Bridget is Anthony’s girlfriend. Duration: 12 months.

Anthony and James are close to best friends. Only close, for the time they spend with each other is more often than not spent in verbal guerilla war. James is the more verbal; the more bugger the silence, I know Anthony will tear me apart, but stuff it, he doesn’t say anything. ‘Shit a brick ya dopey bastard you could have got us all killed.’ Anthony is to speak only after a five minute silence. Or so it seems. He jokes or not of strict border controls on the brain mouth crossing.

Best, for Anthony and James have simply spent so much time in the other’s company. Not pretty to watch, but just the sheer amount of runs
demands his inclusion in the team, wrote the former Australian captain, Allan Border.

We should get on better but we just don't, Bridget says to Anthony as they do the dishes. Talking about Anthea. I don't think she likes me, Anthea says to James as they are having a Saturday post shopping coffee. I actually quite like her, Anthea adds to the zero of James' silent reply. Talking about Bridget.

This paragraph should contain how Bridget and James get on. Or Anthony and Anthea. But I couldn't be bothered: I see Anthea fuming after the two couples had gone to the movies together, God Bridget is a bitch. James didn't pick up the whole story; something about Bridget not telling her that Tricia was in town. And she knew we were good friends. I see Anthony talking non-stop with James as they walk into the city. Bridget and Anthea shopping. Laughing as Bridget tried on the thigh high boots.

For the purposes of this story, I will write that Anthony gets on fine with Anthea, an eight out of ten; whilst James and Bridget score a six and a half.

These four friends are travelling down the coast on a Friday afternoon for the weekend. Back Sunday night. This is the fourth time this year that sentence has been delivered to friends, family and house mates. 'Here have a sentence.' A complimentary pen. This time it is May 15.

Silence. Well not quite. Hear the car, the traffic, the gears change, the air conditioning, moving bodies and so on. A near enough silence. A no one is talking silence.


There is one car stereo, there is one car, and the right now scene of road, traffic (that looks like Elly's car), trees stretching, Anthea rubbing her eyes, and Bridget moving Anthony's jumper from the back window to the middle back seat (James gets the shits), will never ever happen again. No (Rpt).

Now at the lights, James fills the stopped silence with, Shall we put some music on?

Yeh okay Whatever Yeh if you like overlap. Bridget Anthea Anthony. None particularly enthusiastic. A nothing else to do response. An okay let's get to the main questioning attraction of what music will it be
response. The ex-champion footballer may commentate, 'This question is bound to produce fireworks.' But that would be a stay tuned exaggeration; a more accurate comment would be, 'This question has the potential to produce fireworks.' For the history of this question, 'What music to put on?', is a history of unrealised fireworks potential. Bridget has not said, Who cares, it’s music, music that’s all, who cares what we listen to? Hence Bridget has chosen Sgt Pepper’s (everyone likes the Beatles), hoping for a Sgt Pepper’s Peace Accord. Anthony has not said, James have you realised that the calendar actually says 1998. 1998. Hendrix has being eating spew for nearly 30 years. Anthea has not said, Can’t we just have silence? James has not said, No fuck it, I like Hendrix, it’s my car, my stereo, I’ll play what I bloody well like. At least not out loud. No that’s not true. At least not within earshot.

What shall we listen to?

Whatever Who Cares The King’s College Choir. Bridget Anthea Anthony. A dead balloon speaks. The directions of Whatever Who Cares The King’s College Choir read not Whatever Who Cares The King’s College Choir, they read stuff this music thing all together. Anthony’s typical smart arse King’s College Choir also has the directions, what is the point of the question if the answer is always Jimi Hendrix.

James see saws between silence and Hendrix. Hendrix to shit Anthony off; possibly also to shit the whole car off. Why say Whatever when it’s not whatever? Why say Who cares when you care? Silence also would shit off the whole car. James is in a shit shit situation. He is tempted to blow the whole caboodle open with What the hell is wrong here? Aren’t we friends? We can’t even decide on what to listen to. But no. Not the best start to a weekend down the coast. An intra-car barney. Best leave all out on the table grenades for places compatible with quick getaways.

I’ll put on Portishead if you’re not going to play anything.

James replies, Yeh whatever.

Anthea reaches for her bag and the tape. James is probably heading for introspection. Anthony is thinking that this weekend best be spent drunk. Bridget is just sad.
AUTHENTICITY IN BRIAN CASTRO’S *STEAER*

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them ... to send multiple transmissions ... open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths?¹

Castro’s sixth novel *Stepper* is an examination of the fraudulent identity of the spy, and an inquiry into spying as a way of seeing, and thus composing, the world. It is predicated on unclear dichotomies: whose side is the spy on? what is true and what false? As is typical in a Castro novel, there are no straightforward answers to these questions; how you look at things will determine what sort of conclusions you reach. The simplicity of binaries – good/bad, East/West, honourable/dishonourable – is inadequate, and we are obliged to work in the spaces between the categories we seek to apply to the world. We are in the world of Escher, looking first from one viewpoint, then switching to the other side to see everything mirrored and prismatically split. The novel also draws parallels between spying and writing, raising questions of duplicity and authenticity.

Written with enormous flair, *Stepper* is an ambiguous and poetic novel, in which Castro often describes the action metaphorically and incompletely. Typically for Castro, this action takes place in the minds of the protagonists. The structure of the novel is non-linear: the main narrator is speaking about events that happened fifty years ago, and he shifts between eras to tell parts of the story. The written record is patently unreliable. So the reader becomes a ‘player’, with no privileged access to the events of the narrative, and must work out what is happening in this convoluted game of deception, dissembling and doubleness. Therefore it is not surprising that the reader will feel as if he/she is stumbling around in dark labyrinthine alleys, scared of missing a vital (‘fatal’) clue.
Castro got his lead into the spy world from Australian theatre director Jim Sharman:

... he mentioned in passing that when he was directing the musical Hair in Tokyo in the early seventies ... after one of the performances a beautiful Japanese woman, who must have been in her early sixties, approached and confided to the director that she was once the lover of a Soviet spy. Sharman suggested that I should make something of this story. Could I be trusted with it?

Castro and Sharman set about tracking down the woman in Tokyo in 1994, to no avail. However, Castro found himself 'looking for models' to flesh out the story of spy-lover, and, in the process, himself 'spying'.

Graham Greene once said that writing novels was like espionage — violations of faith and trust. Spying was a familiar sensation. As a writer, one is a voyeur, an eavesdropper or gloriously, both. But while writing aims to sustain that imagined split between public and private, its very practice publicises the private. So to be a writer was simultaneously to conceal and reveal; to deny and to confess.

This set Castro to thinking about the connections between spying and writing. Voyeurism and custodianship of another's (life-)story are familiar concerns of Castro's novels. 'Could I be trusted with it?', quoted above, is reflexive; not so much 'Could Sharman trust me?' as 'Could I trust myself as author?'.

While researching Stepper Castro found himself emulating the role of a spy, living in cheap hotels in a foreign environment.

Japan became familiar and then at the same time, even stranger. Anyone existing between several cultures was always a spy, a migrant in a space which could not exist, except as memory and as fiction. I was interested in the migrant-as-spy, in how this position simultaneously privileged the seer while it dispensed an indescribable loss. I was interested in characters who dissimulated their identity when faced with the impositions of loyalty and the crude practices of politics and nationalism. This counterfeit was a form of spying ...

The writer's role has always been to question, ironise, demythologise these issues. I wanted to place this notion of writing as dissimulation and authenticity alongside questions of patriotism, questions about the individual in relation to culture, questions of the public and the private.
Thus on the surface level *Stepper* deals with the inauthentic world of the spy, who inhabits the interstices between competing ‘truths’, and only loosely occupies his/her mutable ‘identity/ies’; at the same time this world provides an analogy for the writer, who inhabits a similarly interstitial world between the ‘truths’ of factual reality and the pseudo-truths of fiction.

The theme of writing is introduced early in the novel by the narrator, Isaku Ishigo. He himself is equivocal about writing, but the person whose story he is recording, Stepper, has been a master: ‘... but he, oh, he loved to write. Lived for it and knew he was living dangerously’ (9). Writing becomes a central metaphor throughout the novel. It is linked with the notions of recording/encoding, of making stories out of what is going on around (summarising, ordering, contextualising, narrativising), and of the danger of committing oneself to paper, where others may discover the hidden self. Isaku possesses Stepper’s ‘memoirs or confession’, but otherwise must rely on his own compromised memories.

Stepper, on the other hand, is an excellent journalist (his public vocation), able to interpret world events and set them down in persuasive prose, and able to encode and decipher messages. He can compose convincing ‘realities’, for others and, for most of the time, for himself.

An author, likewise, ‘spies’ on the world around him/her, and gathers information that is worked into a story. The author has an ambivalent role in this process; at times he will use information that has come from his friends and acquaintances, perhaps ‘betraying’ their trust in him, and at times he will covertly ‘spy’ on people in his surroundings, listening to conversations, observing behaviour, imputing motives.

This information then becomes a story, in which the author controls the master narrative; only he determines how his information will be presented (though not necessarily how it is read/decoded). The author ‘codes’ his information into a system of symbols, not just the words he chooses but the tone and register of the prose, the amount of ‘poetry’ or connotative information that the work is imbued with. The final ‘message’ will invariably contain traces of the author, a characteristic signature.

Castro is also fascinated by the comparisons between the psychology of the spy, who must deny his inner being by concealing it and by adopting false personas, and the writer, who, similarly, dissembles.

To understand the psychology of the double-agent, the one who pushes the ineffability of language to the extent that it cannot be owned,
way beyond reasonable limits, one must understand the psychology of spying. Because a spy cannot reveal himself or herself, the consciousness and understanding of a hidden Being is vital. After all, revelation usually means death. It is not an understanding of who one is, or where one comes from, but how one cares for the self. As a purveyor of inauthenticity, such a measure of authentic being is one of the serious projects of the spy as well as of the postmodernist.

In questioning the authenticity of the spy, and his ability to take care of his own ontological cohesiveness, Castro also questions the writer’s position.

**Writing Stepper’s story – authentically?**

While Victor Stepper is the focus of the novel, the point of view is Isaku Ishigo’s. Isaku, a Castroian doppelgänger, is an intentionally problematic character in terms of our reading of the novel. Isaku’s complicates the novel by being an unreliable narrator. As well as being the ‘author’ of Stepper’s story, Isaku also represents the (unreliable?) writer of novels.

Isaku is a typical Castro meta-narrator, not very firmly attached to the character in the novel. When he does take part directly in the action of the novel, he is often working as a rival to Stepper, jealous of Stepper’s prowess, and therefore narratorially unreliable.

He is also a postmodern interpreter of events, who views life around him as unstable, and who is himself ontologically insecure and potentially unstable. Isaku admits early in the novel that he is aware of the impossibility of telling Stepper’s story in an impartial manner? It becomes increasingly apparent that Isaku is actively writing/rewriting the Stepper story in ways that suit his needs – ‘collaborating’ with reality, as he calls it.

As narrator, Isaku is an old man of seventy-five, recalling the story of Stepper and the spy ring of which he was a part. He is troubled by the story he is about to recount, and admits that as a writer or narrator his material will be unreliable.

I wrote some notes. These are but pasty words, a crumbling vellum, a degenerating cerebellum. I’d made a practice of never writing. Dirty business really. Difficult to destroy once down. I thought I’d coded it ...

... I pencilled some notes in the margins ... (9)
He is clearly ambivalent about his task, but, like the Ancient Mariner, obsessed by the need to tell, and to set down the competing narrative of his own involvement as a spy against Stepper’s narrative.

But the reader can never get much purchase on the character of Isaku. As a spy he is, generally, incompetent. (He loses the radio transmitter while staying at Reiko’s inn, he transmits jumbled messages, he is inclined to blab to friends, and he is often referred to by the others as ‘the kid’.) Although he is narrating the story, he tells us very little of his own actions, seeing everything through Stepper’s eyes.

He sees all narratives as problematic, and is actively involved in interpreting the life of Stepper, to the point that he is mythologising it and thereby fictionalising it. In this way Isaku opens up the novel to a discussion of linguistic concerns, which are tied into the spy theme: how can we rely on words, interpret codes, piece together consistent information/narratives?

Isaku draws attention to the similarities between spying and writing. He tries to rationalise Stepper’s callousness, and in doing so draws parallels between the two vocations:

They said he would use anyone providing they served his purpose. That, I know for sure. It’s the writer’s motive. And the writer’s callousness. Shoot the muse when it doesn’t come across. But he loved her [Reiko]. Isn’t that enough? Not for a writer... love is never enough. Not for a spy... love is always too much. At least that’s the way I saw it. (180)

Losing his faith in writing as an authentic mode, Isaku takes an aleatory approach, and as the spy ring’s coder is soon disinterestedly transmitting nonsense.

He decides at random what he will send. Skims the information Stepper has so resolutely and assiduously gathered which warns of an imminent German invasion of Russia. Rewrites it as though it were a fire-drill. So what. Condenses forty pages into half a paragraph. Good editing practice ... And so he taps out the least amount of information, infusing it with sub-texts, innuendoes, metaphors to liven it up. (198-199)

At a metaphorical level Castro implies that language is potentially ‘betraying’ us at all times: it is hard to assemble meaning in a text; it is always open to corruption or slippage in the transfer into codes and sub-
sequent transmission. 'Betrayal' is a natural part of the world. As Isaku rationalises:

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them in a way which defuses and diffuses their meaning to spread multiple transmissions across the airwaves, render secret knowledge public, open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths? (218)

Literature itself becomes implicated. The Russian spymasters insist on being given photographic evidence because their field spies by nature turn 'literary', and start 'encoding' their reports in literary language:

... no matter how learned and trained and politicised, they soon returned narcissistic reports, couched in literary language, sometimes playing with codes, the first four notes of Madama Butterfly, for example, which you then had to decode, and after four hours realise you were the butt of some ciphered foreplay. (124)

In this way Castro draws literature and all art into his nexus of instability of meaning.

Stepper and Sorge: authentic doubles?

Like Castro's novels Double-Wolf and Drift, Stepper is highly intertextual. Although the fact is concealed from the reader, Stepper consciously interprets the story of the real life spy, Richard Sorge. But Stepper occupies an interesting position on the fact/fiction divide. Double-Wolf and Drift draw attention to the works they are counter-writing: Stepper does not. At face value Stepper could be seen to be relying on the base material of Richard Sorge's life in the way that Birds of Passage used the history of the Australian gold rush era to provide its setting. But Castro is prepared to blur the lines between art and history. His retelling of the Sorge story is, for him, as valid an interpretation of the real events as the historical chronicles.

The Sorge case offers a temptingly open paradigm with which to work. As a real character, Richard Sorge left his mark on the public record. When captured, his interrogation and 'confession' were recorded at length. But Sorge was a spy – he promulgated several identities over his career, and effaced 'identities' as and when required. None of the
bureaucratic files on him can be trusted. Towards the end of the War, much of the Japanese case material on Sorge was destroyed by bombing, and the last direct record of his career is also now incomplete.

The Sorge case was reconstructed by Gordon Prange during the 1960s, using both traditional research methods and interviews with survivors of the period. Ironically, Prange died before Target Tokyo was published, and the book was posthumously completed by colleagues. As if this does not already offer enough leeway for Castro to reinterpret the case, Target Tokyo is written in a curious style that often deviates across genres from ‘history book’ into ‘thriller’ mode, and is itself questionable in its authenticity/reliability.

But even granting Castro this room to manoeuvre, what he has not done is set out to relate ‘the Sorge story’. His Stepper is a spy thriller that often runs parallel to the Sorge story, but is not that story. As his career has progressed, Castro has moved closer towards the use of biography in his writing. The reason is given in his essay, ‘Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance’,11 where he speaks of moving away from the novel form as it is traditionally construed, and adapting it to deal with real events. The result is a hybrid of fact and fiction. This is the form he is using for his forthcoming work Shanghai-Dancing.

I began to write what I called an ‘autobiography’. I didn’t call it that to impress anyone. I wasn’t making any claims about truth and lies and real events. I knew that the word autobiography carried a freight of meaning it didn’t really deserve: real life; true stories; family secrets ... why not write a novel instead?

I think I would have ... if it hadn’t been for one thing ... the element of risk. A novel usually risks one thing: its form ... An ‘autobiography’ however, does make some claims. Claims about oneself, one’s family, lineage, history.12

What Castro is elaborating is his ongoing argument on behalf of the novel, that it is only a form and needs constant re-imagining and risk-taking. Stepper is a novel that reinterprets history, but which veers between recording ‘accurately’ the facts of a given story and adding to them, via imaginative fictionalising, to suit the author’s requirements.

Thus Stepper follows the Sorge story in great detail at times, and creates new lines of action at others. In most respects Victor Stepper is a realistic simulacrum of Richard Sorge.13 Stepper is only slightly romanticised for narrative purposes.
Reiko as a character is not filled out in great detail: she remains a figure of erotic allure, slightly naive honesty combined with honour, and mystery. This suits Castro’s purposes, but it seems consistent with Sorge’s girlfriend Hanako Ishii as portrayed in *Target Tokyo*. Both heroines speak about their spy lover, but rarely about themselves or their feelings.

Castro’s master stroke is to invent the character of Isaku Ishigo, who is only loosely based on the real Miyagi Yotoku. In the Sorge story, Miyagi remains loyal to the end, and is a valuable member of the intelligence gathering mechanism. But Castro’s figure, Isaku, is ambivalent towards Stepper. Although on the surface *Stepper* relies dramatically on the attraction – and tensions – between Stepper and Reiko (the ‘love story’ component), it is the subliminal tension between Stepper and Isaku, or, at the literary level, their competing narratives, that drives the deeper drama. Castro points out that ‘It is very important that one makes the connection between [Isaku] “Ishigo” and Shakespeare’s “Iago”.’ This may not be immediately obvious to readers, but it is typical of Castro’s novels that the reader can read deeper and deeper levels of symbolism into the text with each re-reading.

In fact there is a still deeper level of symbolism in the novel. The critical word in *Stepper* is withheld until late in the novel. It will not be obvious to the average reader that Stepper is modelled on Richard Sorge, nor is this connection necessary. But the important clue to understanding the novel is the German word *Sorge*. The hint to its significance is given on page 298. Isaku has asked Reiko:

> whether [Stepper] wrestled with his existence, whether he had a concern for it, for surely it was care which made existence meaningful? Care? he had said to her, using the German word ... *Sorge* ... which also meant anxiety ... and he flicked his thumbnail at the sky. He never did take care, always standing at the blind spot between delusion and ambition. (298)

This makes manifest the central concern (as opposed to the central metaphor, spying) of the novel – an investigation of existential care, literally caring for one’s self or identity. Some readers may make the further connection that *Sorge* was given a specific, philosophical/psychological meaning by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger’s ontology, *Sorge* is explained as follows.

What is the organic relation between the necessary inauthenticity of being-in-the-world and the equally necessary striving for authentic
Dasein? The answer, given in ... Sein und Zeit, is Sorge.

This arch-Kierkegaardian term is translated by ‘care’, ‘concern’, ‘apprehension’. Heidegger invests it with great positive value and range.

... As we flail about emptily, the familiarity of the everyday shatters. It is as if we had been caught, all of a sudden, in the interstices of the busy mesh of being, and stood face to face with the ontological, with Daseinsfrage. It is striking how closely Heidegger’s evocation of the uncanny resembles Freud’s famous use of the term.\(^15\)

Hence this key word evokes Castro’s perpetual concern, ontology, and connects it very closely with his view that life is renewed or given meaning by engaging with the strange, or the uncanny (Unheimlich).\(^16\) Thus Stepper is a vehicle for investigating a person who does not take ‘care’ of his ‘being’. Steiner’s exposition of Heidegger continues:

Sorge, signifying ‘care-for’, ‘concern-for and -with’ ... can and must take myriad forms: care for the ready-to-hand, for the tools and materials of our practice; a concern for others which can be defined as ‘solicitude’. But principally, ... Sorge is a concern with, a caring for, an answerability to, the presentness and mystery of Being itself, of Being as it transfigures beings. And it is from this existential ethic of concernedness that derives Heidegger’s subsequent definition of man as the shepherd and custodian of Being.\(^17\)

The real German’s surname provides the retrospective clue to Castro’s underlying ‘message’ in his novel.

The interesting thing about Stepper is of course ... ‘the care of being’. [Heidegger] said that we can only understand our notion of being when we take care of it, in other words, we are conscious of it. In our day-to-day affairs, our day-to-day lives, we are so busy we don’t even notice our being. He says when you step back a little bit – this whole Existentialist thing – and take care, have some consciousness of your being, it’s quite an uncanny notion: ‘I’m alive. Why am I here? I’m alive.’ This notion for which Heidegger used the German word ‘Sorge’ ... that’s the spy’s name! And this whole play on the idea of the word Sorge meaning ‘care, of your being’ and a spy who has to completely and utterly travesty that word by taking on different identities ... [parallels the contemporary writer who is] hiding, concealing, waiting for your reader to find out about you ... \(^18\)
To simplify Heidegger's ontology, the crux of our living comfortably with ourselves and operating successfully is to live 'authentically', that is to be aware of what is happening in our own being and in the world around us and to respond openly and honestly. Any blocking of our expression of ourselves, or any dishonest approach to living (such as 'living a lie'), results in 'inauthentic' existence, which is unfulfilling and potentially pathological.

So Stepper is 'about' the protagonist's inability to lead an authentic life because his chosen vocation is that of being a spy: a dissimulator, a shifter inhabiting multiple existences which he changes at the slightest outside cue. Unable to inhabit a stable 'authenticity', or in everyday terms 'identity', Stepper is doomed to an uncaring existence. And being yoked to his vocation for ideological reasons he does not make the effort to 'care' for his own 'being'.

But Castro is also working on a self-referential level, equating the business of spying with the business of writing. Writing is the vocation of dissimulation, and Castro is quietly questioning the position of the writer. Is he being/can he be authentic? Once again, Castro has written a novel that not only investigates the existential possibilities available to its central characters, but reflexively questions the processes of writing (and reading) that author and reader are involved in.

Endnotes

3 "Brian Castro discusses Stepper", AHR.
4 The familiar Castro paradox of strangeness-in-familiarity, the uncanny.
5 "Brian Castro discusses Stepper", AHR.
7 Like Seamus in Castro's Birds of Passage, or Catacomb in Double-Wolf.
8 Castro is deliberately playing on the autobiography/fact/fiction divide.
9 In fact, Castro uses lines from Modernist poets as examples of the coded messages: e.g. "The gilded phaloi of the crocuses/Are thrusting at the spring air", the opening lines of Pound's 'Coitus'; "I read much of the night, and go south in the winter" taken from Eliot's The Waste Land. Artists such as Magritte and Hokusai are also drawn into the game of coding.
10 Or more accurately, the story as it is given in Gordon W. Prange’s Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). At the time Castro was researching, this appears to have been the only commercially available publication on Sorge’s exploits.


12 “Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance”, AHR.

13 I have dealt with this in more detail elsewhere: see “‘Apart from the Expected’: The Novels of Brian Castro”, PhD thesis, Flinders University, 2000. I also comment on Castro’s symbolic use of names.

14 Letter to MD (16 February 1999).


16 A key term in Freudian as well as existential psychology.


THE BIG HOLE

Bottomless, dark, so cold
we fill it with stories
the outflow from dairies,
Pat Kelly raking his fingers
through the mud, telling us
he has seen
the bottom of the world.

On the strength of a dare
I was dog-paddling toward friends
drying off on the other side.
Their conversation out of reach
of the chill beneath my legs,
the relaxed Sunday calm
I perfected through gritted teeth
as I groped against the thought
of how simple it might be
to drop away from their voices,
below the warm patches of water
down past reeds
rocky outcrops
into the quiet
depths of memory
where the darkness
is kept alive
with the bones of bullock drays
tanker drivers missing the turn,
farmers skinny-dipping after Cabaret Balls
children shivering into the stare
from the diving board.

CHOPPERS

Skin and bone cows
cast out from the herd

lame, slack-bellied and undershot
they get head-butted into gateposts

and put in a paddock of thistles
to raise abandoned calves.

Between April and May
the chopper season begins.

herds are cleaned up
any mongrel not pulling her weight

is sent up the road.
For two hundred bucks

they might be worth the gamble
to young farmers hungry for a quick grand,

but who wants a barren cow
even the bulls have lost interest in.

You know what a chopper is worth
by the way she carries her head,

how she walks into the sale ring.
If nobody raises a finger
she is knocked down
to the Abs and knackery buyers,

always in the bidding.
Someone came in the back door at seven to three. I heard it open and close, and I heard Randolph say “Good Lord” in his usual stentorian tone. Then there was only a sound that was near to silence, a sound that could have been whispers.

In one hand I held the crystal clock that Randolph’s mother, after she left his father and after the first of her trips abroad, had given to Randolph. In the other I held the cloth with which I was dusting the shelf. I stared at the bright swipe where the grain in the wood shone clean.

Then I edged closer to the door, but nothing, I heard nothing more, until “Goodbye then” was said. By a voice that was anyone’s voice but was not Randolph’s. I listened hard as the door opened and closed, and I stared hard at the clock.
Then I dusted the rest of the shelf and with infinite care
I placed the crystal clock back
in the precise spot on the shelf
in which it had stood.
for Campbell McGrath

They lock you up in pantoum chains
and feed you, one fingernail at
a time to old Walt Whitman's ghost,
that mean red specter with black teeth.

Everyone worth a plugged quarter
is there, having confused trochee
with spondee, or iambed once too much; BLAMO, the jail door banged shut.

James Tate's there, regretting it all.
Don Justice, too – no one knows why.
Martín Espada (politics?),
his words like stars into our eyes.

William Carlos sits on his hands,
mumbling it wasn't his fault.
Pound's lost there somewhere, that old curr.
Shakespeare? Third cell from the corner.

The Sheriff of Poetry Jail
could be anyone, – Robert Bly,
the hawk-beaked postal carrier,
your father, who says, "Dactyl who?"
Be careless and mix metaphors
or blow a high-power line break
and you'll be banging out metrics
all night, wanting your sole phone call.
Despite the much-lamented decrease over the years of space-in-print for Australian poets (publishers closing lists, or reduction in output from those publishers who do persist), the number of books emerging here in any given year or two is still too great to permit anything like an in-depth survey here. Neither can those books that are discussed be grouped into anything like "camps" or "movements". You might note that, across a sample of what 1999 and the beginning of 2000 brought us, there are generic tendencies — a revived interest in narrative poems and the verse novel (though not restricted to this period by any means) perhaps riding on the back of the earlier success of The Monkey's Mask, a recurrent interest in the long poem or long sequence of poems on "big" issues, what I tend to think of as the "Newcastle prize attempt"... if that doesn't sound ungenerous. These tendencies might be linked in a crude and obvious way to the need to earn: too little analytical attention is usually paid to the real-world constraints that make all our writing a "trade-off", to a greater or lesser degree, between what we wanted to do and what we had to do (assuming a basic purity of intention on the individual poet's part, which isn't necessarily the case).

But you don't get outside genre anyway, so it's more instructive to ask what is being done with it, and how. Dorothy Porter's recent offering, what a piece of work, is every bit as competent and confident as her previous big seller in the genre, but something has clearly happened in between. When The Monkey's Mask was attacked for its non-PC quality by Finola Moorhead, there was a rather puritanical and aesthetically naive agenda behind the criticism, which I thought quite unjustified; here I am some years later asking myself if this new work, basically a bleak sketch of the insides of a warped psychiatrist, doesn't rather wallow in sex and perversion! It's not that I've become a puritan in the inter-
im; it’s more that, where the detective-story impulse of The Monkey’s Mask provided a rationale for its gore and darkness, here the darkness seems there for its own sake. Reviewers probably ought not to use words like “coarse” (think back to accusations levelled at the Brontës, and how silly they sound now), but that is what springs to mind. It’s very hard, of course, to pull off a book without an endearing character, but it can be done without repelling the reader entirely.

Geoff Page’s offering for 1999, also a verse novel, is a case in point. Written in more traditional metrics, which you might think at first threaten to make it monotonous, but which are soon rendered “organic” by the narrative pull, The Scarring looks at the mores of a generation (and a class) through the story of a married couple on the land, “the stockbook at the core of all they do”. Peter Goldsworthy’s blurb says “I read it in one compulsive sitting”, and there’s no doubt that it does compel – partly, for a feminist reader, because the issues are such that you want to see how the text will come down in its judgement, partly because Page simply knows how to tell a story.

In fact the text attempts to remain neutral toward what it depicts, though at every point it is subtly rescoring the connective lines between the personal and the political. I am reluctant to go into the plot for fear of spoiling the experience, as with those who tell the end of a movie! The Scarring raises concerns of a previous era that still resonate in ours, and achieves that difficult thing, the portrayal of a mindset that no longer prevails, with a fairness to the protagonists that yet doesn’t baulk at showing their tragedy warts-and-all. Readers looking for poetic experiment and linguistic innovation may look elsewhere; but those are not absolute values, and it would be shortsighted not to spot that there is much to learn from The Scarring.

Without wishing to class all this last year’s output along gender lines, as is often done when all “women poets” are reviewed together, and only that way, there is nonetheless to my eye a clear set of preoccupations among many of the male poets who published volumes in 1999. Just as Page’s book is preeminently about the relationship between a man and a woman, and the needless tragedies it can entail, so too others dwell on the position and condition of the heterosexual male at the end of the nineties; but also on what you might call the need for fathering. It is remarkable how many poems have appeared on that subject — as if this generation is not simply having a kneejerk reaction to the concerns of feminism, but even genuinely engaging with it — whether for or against. The fathering note, both that received and that given, crops up in Mark
Reid’s Parochial, more generally about Fremantle life and death and the observation of sufferings in between, particularly in the poems drawn from work in a hospital. And in Every night they dance, Andy Kissane expands on the father theme

“Please find enclosed” is how my father usually starts his letters ...

or in “For My Father’s 70th Birthday”, with its opening line:

Remember when I hit you? I was sixteen.

Kissane too is big on storytelling; as I think I’ve said in print before, there are echoes of Anthony Lawrence in his easy facility with character voices, though I don’t mean “echoes” in any negative or direct sense. The phrase “no stone unturned” might best describe this book — it is wide-ranging and energetic, it doesn’t see anything as closed to poetry. I am not sure that his Arthur Streeton voice is entirely successful — it is tricky to project a voice backward in time like this — but the choice of persona in this instance indicates one of Kissane’s aims — he is keen to deal with the culture of “the people”. The poem was also a runner-up in a major prize, so the reader may well beg to differ with my opinion. As in Reid’s book, the world of work is a primary source, as seen in an engaging set of poems, “The Ghosts of Marrickville Metro”, though it had me asking myself half-consciously whether work wasn’t also being a little romanticised here (is it pre-high-tech nostalgia?). Nevertheless, the doubts are in this sequence overpowered by the writer’s infectious interest in everything; it’s as if Kissane has a project to fill in the chinks, to imagine his way into the stories that haven’t yet been fully explored.

If I feel the urge to argue with a lot of what is in the book, it’s more a sign of the poems provoking and holding interest than of any aesthetic failure. Kissane, among the poets I mentioned as clearly having engaged for better or worse with feminism, is probably one of the more overt at this, as poems with titles like “Jean Devanny Writes”, “Arrest of a Suffragette, 1912”, “For my Sister”, “Breast Triptych”, “Miscarriages” and “Birth” might suggest. This runs of course the risk of being taken for bluster or special pleading; but we women have been asking so long for dialogue, I wouldn’t easily sniff at it when it’s given, even where I disagree. “Breast Triptych” is very moving, because there is no attempt to make cheap drama out of the material, but a respect for the suffering
laid on others (in this case the speaker’s mother and Fanny Burney).

I would have liked to see, in poems like “Birth”, some interrogation of the myth, birth being every bit as “cerebral” as any other human experience or activity, that is to say, as cerebral as we make it, despite the obstetrician’s near-sigh to the contrary, “demonstrating the sort of solidarity/that only men can share with men”. This is not to miss the possible subtle irony in the way the obstetrician is quoted, of course. It’s just that Kissane often treads an edge that makes you wince, laying his poems open to directly contrasted readings — as in “The Station Owner’s Daughter, Narrandera”. Apparently based on the true account of a young woman helping an Aboriginal man, you could read it as either an attempt to tell an affirmative, “reconciliation”-driven story, or as a sop to consciences (we know that evidently not enough whites cared, or perhaps even now care, in the way this woman does). Kissane constructs the daughter’s act against the context of her father’s domination — is this insightful, or again too easy? — there were/are plenty of women supportive both of male power and of the oppression of Aboriginal people. But all these comments are in one sense quibbles: the questions are raised because the poems are bothering to deal with the subject matter, rather than comfortably avoiding them as other poets might.

Kissane doesn’t avoid the relationship theme either, plunging right in there with “Tristan and Isolde”, the long, Plath-headed sequence that ends the book’s first section, and is deftly balanced (tight ordering and construction are apparent throughout the volume) by the Hass-headed “The Separation Sonnets” that end the book. Now these were a Newcastle-prize runner-up, but I don’t want to be facetious about that context: they are well-crafted and coherent, and as a feminist I would be the last person to object that strong bitterness can’t make good poetry (we know what it feels like to be accused of self-pity and have the whole point missed). There’s that uneasy edge again, though: how responsible is it, no matter how based in “true” experience, to let stand a poem like “Apprehended Violence”?

You start shouting at me in the supermarket
and the manager calls the police. I tell
the sergeant that I haven’t punched anyone
since that fight with Len Smith in grade five.
He doesn’t believe me. Stubble stains my cheeks.
Your suit, your stockings, your lipstick smile.
I need an AVO, officer ...
Okay, yes, poetry is perhaps best made out of the things we don’t expect — or necessarily like — to hear, and the manipulations of some women against some men are an untold side to the progress that has been made (I hope) on the issue of domestic violence — but decontextualised, like this, the portrayal sails close to a poetic and more sensitive version of the ranting man in my district who stands in a sandwich board outside the Child Support office every day. In a world where our state newspaper reports a survey showing a majority of men still think violence against female partners is justifiable under some circumstances, this poem needs more context to shore it up if it is not to be mis-taken.

Kissane’s book is not only about these issues, of course, and there is a fascinating obsession with breath as image and its attendant opposite, the death wish. If he is primarily an experiential “poem-maker” rather than an abstract, intellectualising poet, there is no less of the spiritual dimension to Kissane’s poems than you might hope for.

Spiritual things of a more concrete nature underpin two other books of this period, first Kevin Murray’s Jaywalking Blues. I mean the underpinning in the sense that the poet’s Catholic childhood, however intellectually distanced, informs the work not only literally in some instances, but in its constant approach to the fact of mortality. The book is described by the publishers as a “début collection”, but Murray is no beginner-poet: his work is already known through fairly wide publication in periodicals, and the poems already “know” what it is they want to do. The measured, muted style might at first suggest the book’s title as a misnomer — is it a blues wail? — but a closer read reveals, despite the controlled tone, much sadness and disappointment playing as a kind of steady low-note through the collection.

The “jaywalking” too is appropriate, not only for its sense of the poet at cross-purposes (though it might throw down the gauntlet to the word “pedestrian” in a mean reviewer!) but really for the book’s near-obsession with spatiality. You have the feeling not so much that the poems were written with an eye to extending and making variations on this central idea, but that they can’t help repeating it — that movement through space is part of Murray’s way of building the world. In the title poem, the speaker in the second half acknowledges

Bifocals and a cooling heart bring me to
the crossing lights, trading the poetry of the old passages
for this flat prose ...
and this points up the collection's other motif, whence its lament: age-
ing, with its no-longer-deniable sense of an ending. The poems are not
striving to accept that state; they are recording its onset and casting a
gaze backward to try to make meaning out of what has been. Murray too
is much taken up with estrangement between men and women, with
abandonment — and this again is embodied spatially: the amplified
noise of an empty house, the alteration in the physical that follows on
being alone. There is much imagery of undoing, of the house, with all
its connotations, being demolished, dismantled, of the tree that loses its
limb.

If sometimes there are easy effects — an obvious last line pulling a
poem up short, as in "Family Group, 1891", or "Tree" — the poems are
more often neatly crafted to the end ("Getting On", "School Closures").
The "gaze" I mentioned is not always a backward one, and sometimes it
is distinctly uncomfortable for the reader: "an old god-Swan//come drip-
ning, sag-winged, from the lake/who pads hot-eyed to his Leda/and is
refused" (hard to do this image after Carter's "Magic Toyshop" has
wrung the last say from it, though that's not poetry of course) or in the
poem "In High Street", which is spoken by the "Bald Man With
Newspaper And Long Black" whose gaze is met first fleetingly and then
confidently by a schoolgirl; the poem ends

Honoured to be her trial-horse
I raised my coffee in salute
as she moved on with style.

This is one of those edge-treading poems I mentioned in discussing
Kissane: we may read it as the unusual giving-of-a-perspective, that of
the harmless man acknowledging the girl's right to freedom and safety
(again conceived of in spatial terms, a kind of Reclaim the Streets or
demolition of the nun-cherished injunction to keep "custody of the
eyes"), and that would seem to be the surface intent; yet finally the girl-
character is possessed and is broken in by the man's gaze, for it is his
implied benignity that grants her safe passage. Nonetheless, this kind of
risk is going to arise in any poetry subtle enough not to close down its
own possibilities of interpretation. Murray is not always so subtle; where
he deals directly with Irish-diaspora content he gets too sweet for me
("The Rose of Tralee"), despite its attempt to distance itself from the
sweetness.
Cath Kenneally shares some of that heritage, but her approach to it and to poetry is loudly different. *Around Here* is the sort of book you read in one sitting, not because it is in any way flimsy, but because it is as colourful and inviting as the jokey cover suggests. It’s been a long time since I read poems that were so *apparently* easy, so colloquial and casual, but *actually* minutely textured and informed. And what’s more: moving, without a trace of sentimentality. Sentimentality, in fact, is precisely what won’t wash with Kenneally. The flippancy with which she trashes its pretensions springs from an underlying toughness, a poetic spirit that seems to have survived much while losing neither its detachment nor its ability to feel, such that she can place “Don’t Look Down”:

nostalgia is something
incapacitating, like
rheumatic fever
must have
been
it weakens the heart.
...

Even flashbacks are
mutinous in that old
friends or enemies
play them
selves

while you’re a revenant...

...
left to itself, the mind
scabs over. Don’t
video the kids
with your
fuckwit

first husband on
lawns or beaches...

with its lively and typical mix of register, in the same volume as the tersely poignant “Patrick: in memoriam”.

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The fact that Around Here will have particular points of identification for those raised as Catholics should not lead anyone to think it is one more post-Catholic lament or satire upon roots. Kenneally is clear-sighted here as elsewhere: the sillinesses and incongruities of her experiences with the nuns are laid alongside a maturer scrutiny well able to name what was also useful and positive in these experiences.

But setting aside those experiences, which are only the “evident” thrust of the poems, together with family life, social and physical environments, even and especially television (!), it is fruitful to read this book in terms of craft, in terms of its whole view of, and approach to, poetry. Consider for a moment Ken Bolton’s comment on the book’s back cover:

What is most valuable in these poems, and what is rare, is Kenneally’s avoidance of metaphor and of the conventionally poetic in favour of intelligence and educated plain-speak — a plain-speak that, of course, isn’t so plain, so unitary.

This final qualification of Bolton’s is important: as I’ve said above, the poems are only apparently simple. While it isn’t strictly true to say that Kenneally avoids metaphor (indeed, unforced metaphors are strikingly in evidence!) Bolton’s point about the “conventionally poetic” remains relevant.

What is the “conventionally poetic” for Australians now? Too various to pin down, of course; but we know when we see something different. Kenneally’s book is fully au fait with theoretical concerns, but not driven by them. Its self-consciousness is not of a kind submissive to fashions in thought — but analytical, fastidious, tongue-in-cheek. Poems like “Mayday” and “Mother Bear” accomplish what no labouring and earnest feminist theorist could quite convey; Kenneally inscribes within the actual waiting the condition and relative value of its making. She plays with “real time” and with literary precedent in order, finally, to put things in their places. Sometimes this is outright, as when she goes over the top to take to task a whole tradition in “The Art of Poetry”; do not suppose for a minute that the “clarity” of Kenneally’s style indicates a naive position vis à vis language. She outdoes any single position.

One of her poems re-examines Anne Sexton (small cries of disapproval? — it’s in vogue currently in many quarters to ignore Sexton altogether as too loose, too blathering, too “uncrafted”, which despite her flaws does her work a disservice); Kenneally comments here though on
the life and perhaps only by our extrapolation on the work, with a
telling empathy:

Trapper Kayo

broke Anne with
the necessary force

lovers she loved and left
laid at his feet

house-cat's gift-mice
on the back step ...

With all respect to Sexton's gifts and her limitations, that very exact
"house-cat" seems to me an entirely apt image. But if Kenneally is able
to point out the Kayos of the world, she has no illusions about the Annes
either, as in "Persons on the Verge":

Women lay cards on the table straight off
the awful things there've been in our lives

as a kind of propitiatory offering, Barbara Pym
would say, if she was watching us

trying to placate each other
or some presiding angel.

I can do it sometimes and sometimes I can't.
At George's today I got through my story

in two minutes flat. By now I handle
raised eyebrows and double-takes okay

preserving a cavalier manner through
the startling parts of the account

until the talk flows on
and I go with it
I'm just congratulating myself on my sang-froid when I start to feel like I'm haemorrhaging from a major artery ...

Kenneally can be deeply serious too, though, as in the poems “Lumen” and “Comeback”. Possibly an underestimated poet, she is, in this latest volume, one to read more closely than her initial “vivacity” might suggest.

Entirely different in tone, but equally unsentimental, is Deb Westbury’s *Surface Tension*. Dedicated to a deceased teenaged son, the book deals not only with this subject matter — handled with grace and poignancy in a poem like “Wrapt”, or more directly confronted in “Reading the Signs”: “… I wonder when I gave up the fight/against talking about him in the past tense” — but also with a broad range of human experiences and aspects of the natural world. Birds, trees, the ocean — all are sensuously present in themselves, but apprehended too as part of a larger meaningful process: the “flashing yes/no” and “life/death” of “Reading the Signs” repeating as a motif through the collection. In “Homing”, the “nameless bird is dead”, but the minute life that feeds on it

bristles with the half-formed wings and claws of dreams that want to fly

— in “Food”, we have that interface between the human and the bird, the transmutation of a banal moment into something more, pigeons settling around the boy’s feet like a wishing pool.

He throws them hot chips that steam like manna in the frozen morning.

— so too in “Birdwatching at Coledale”, with its woman who leaves out “a strawberry and cream layercake/for the black and white birds”.

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Westbury's poems evoke the people around her as vividly as they do the natural world — she is a close observer who is nonetheless aware of illusion and the transitory nature of physical presence:

... the awkward angles,
the false solidarity
of my body

which, they say, is no more
than water and stardust
held
in a pattern of light
(“Door”)

though we should note that subtle, qualifying “they say” and the weight it carries throughout the collection. This sensitive and responsive poetry, though, is done something of an injustice by the physical quality of the book's production: while the cover is clean, and well if blandly designed, the interior is all buckled pages and accidental changes in typeface.

There's a slight injustice done too, to Jennifer Harrison's accomplished volume, Dear B, though the physical problem here, aside from the appalling cover, is an apparent carelessness in proofreading and copy-editing which no publisher should let slip by if it can be helped. We all get typos, and we all know how easy it is to swear they weren't there at the time, but a special signed edition somehow seems to invite greater care.

This minor point cannot destroy the work, however; the poems themselves are interesting and deftly handled. The sequence “Boston Poems” deals with breast cancer, but where Kissane spoke of it inevitably from the outside, this is the insider's view:

you wrap-around smile
everything I hate

control-freak machine
you radiotherapy

don't forget
everyday I walk out on you ...
There is rarely anything obvious about where Harrison’s poems are taking you. They can range from the quietly understated diction of “Doubtful Sound” to the sudden manic quality of “Lot’s Wife”:

I’ve been ambiguous  
I’ve lied about my motives  
I’ve smoked a cigarette  
I’ve burned my palms  
with the well bucket  
I’ve sorted olives  
and scented men  
You might say I’m not so different  
from other women  
I’ve looked into puddles  
and seen my face shatter  
and reform ...

There is the odd poem that falls a bit flat, like “The Society of Psychoterapist’s [sic] Fantasy Ball”, being little more than an extended joke — but generally the poems, typically short and well-shaped lyrics, or pieces in sequence, do not disappoint. Harrison’s humour works best when it is wry and implied, as in “Ceremony”, which describes the taking of Australian citizenship, with participants each given “a native plant, a plastic bag of roots”:

... I overheard a Malaysian  
woman say that she would like to plant  
her tree in the bush somewhere  
so that, if she moved house, her gift  
would be safe — and then somebody asked  
how she knew which part of the bush would be safe  
from fire or development and did that mean  
she would be needing advice concerning Australian  
property law ...  

Christopher Kelen in Republics takes up the topic of Australia and Australians more explicitly and extensively: his is in one sense the book that had-to-happen given the topic — it is passionately concerned with politics and, though there will always be those who maintain that poetry is no place for that, or not overtly anyway, its very rough colloquial
insistence makes for a refreshing change from what Dransfield designated "genteel iambics". The most impressive poem in the collection for me is the near-title poem, "Republic", with its long lines and structural repetition – Kelen’s poetry is not just intensely felt, but can suit its form to its impulses:

Republic of uncontrollable nights, thighs danced till dawn
without fear or favour or memory either. Of the world’s weary
paws come to rest here at last. Of the happy-go-lucky sat up like
Jackie ...

... Republic of gullet,
of gulping it down. Of half-pissed regrets for same follies
repeated. Republic of not knowing how it got home
or forgetting to go or wherever it came from.

Not all the poems, though, manage the persuasive rhythms of this one. Some of the work falls into what seem to me prose patterns, though of course such judgements are to some degree idiosyncratic. When the poems slow down to abstraction and questioning, they seem to lose the verve of the more declamatory pieces. Lines like these from "Treaty" seem to wander into another kind of diction where the poet is less sure of his expression:

in those forevers I have fled
faith holds me down
faith finds willing

yet I will
and I will
what will I honour
the way I was, or I forgot,
the way I wanted then to be?

Nevertheless, all the myths of "Australianness" are addressed with a critical but fair eye, and the relation to colonial "centers" examined; in "America" ("everyone says you’re so friendly at home") and at greater length in poems like "rules the waves", which gives an Australian view of living in Britain, from "the Tory bus seat which cannot be lain down upon" to the "careless lyric calling trees convincingly gone". It's a hard-headed book that is capable of affection for its subjects but not indulgence.
Equally hard-headed, but in an entirely different vein, is the long-awaited new collection from Wendy Jenkins. The drive behind *Rogue Equations* is primarily language, and specifically metaphor and image, with a precision that you would expect from someone who has spent so many years as an editor, fostering and developing a sense of discipline in other people’s poetry and fiction. The book begins with a selection of poems from Jenkins’s much earlier collection published in 1979, *Out of Water Into Light*, which both provides a link across the years and underscores how little the essence of her approach has dated; the older poems sit well alongside the more recent. To say that the poems generally are sparse ought not to suggest there is little to them — it’s the concentration of the work that jolts the reader, on practically every page, into perception:

The bandage
unwound
released a line
of tiny suns
equidistant
repeated
each perceptibly
larger and brighter
than the last

You don’t want that
the nurse said
gathering it away
but she did
see it as proto film
with the title Sunburst
the action quite reversible —
a star having winked out
or exploded
against her knee.
(from “Bandages”)

It’s not a case of visual gimmickry, but a detailed exploration of the operations of poetic language (“to find a way/into a said geography”) that is serious yet often witty, and also erotically and emotionally charged. Best of all are the poems that apprehend and create landscape,
as in “Imaging the Nullarbor” – “shapes take hold select/themselves through repetition” – in the poems as much as in the place; or in “Caddy in Antarctica”, where the connections with poetry and the human are just as explicit:

... does memory still feed the reds
that swept your land those years ago
‘Fire 1’ ‘Fire 2’ you salvoed back
as if poems could be
lines of fire
and back
burn in the positive

The last section of the book, “Three Into Four”, is more spatially and conceptually playful, laid out like prose or prose poems with empty numbered frames that imply the photographs referred to in the accompanying text. It follows four shots taken by the familiar passport-picture booth and the relation or non-relation between them and the “self”-concept (“My dialogue with the machines …”), as well as questions of artistic balance, texture and process:

She has become fascinated with threeness, seeing it everywhere ...
three trees suddenly moved together when a turn in the road changed the perspective. She has started to see threeness in people ...
Beyond these signs, she senses the larger forms; past-present-future
time/my mother-myself-the child I do not have.

Form and strategy may be different from that of the material earlier in the book, but concerns are linked throughout. It’s a volume, to pinch a phrase from the work itself, “of such keen weather/such clean lines”, that you are immediately aware of the prolixity and self-indulgence of much other writing, and recalled, finally, to a sense of how acute and startling poetry can actually be.