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INTERVIEW
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REVIEW ESSAYS
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PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2007:

Brian Dibble

for his essay

“Mr Berrington and the Geometry of Love in Elizabeth Jolley’s Family Home”

that appeared in Vol 52, 2007
EDITORIAL

In *Westerly* 2007, *Westerly* editors announced that we would move to publishing two issues in 2008; one in June/July much like the current issue, the other an issue solely for creative work, published in November. Those plans had to be put on hold when our application to the Department of Culture and the Arts to help publish *Westerly* in 2008 was turned down. Earlier this year a further application to publish in 2008 was successful and we’re determined not only to keep *Westerly* alive but to re-invigorate it.

We are now pushing ahead with plans for two issues of *Westerly* a year from 2009. This decision has been largely prompted by our perception that the wealth of creative work we receive each year is not matched by the space we have for it. We can publish only a tiny proportion of that work, and it is clear that the publishing opportunities for the many talented writers who send us their work are woefully limited. A second *Westerly* will help to redress that lack. We hope to have different annual guest editors for significant sections of the ‘new’, creative writing issue, and in 2009 Sally Morgan and Blaze Kwaymullina have agreed to work on what we envisage will be an issue largely or solely devoted to indigenous writing.

In 2008 *Westerly* has a new partner in the R.I.C. Group, an educational publisher, whose managing director, Peter Woods, offered assistance to *Westerly* late in 2007. R.I.C. has generously agreed to print and help market *Westerly* this year.

Any journal is only as strong as its readership, and *Westerly* always needs more subscribers. Please pass the subscription form in this issue on to anyone who may use it! Or take out a subscription for someone you know. We look forward to your ongoing support of *Westerly* and hope that the new two-issue format not only enables us to publish more writers but brings us more readers.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, Co-editors
The album says we were at the lake. A summer picnic, a birthday party. Here’s me alone in the shallows, staring down through sky on the water at minnows while people laughed and sang in the background. Strange to see yourself as other people saw you – alone and astonished – but Mama always said you are who you really are when you think no one is watching, and a picture is a document: digital clock face in the corner marks date and time; stunned little girl face says, *I’m burning.* It hurts to look at, the inside of her laid open in the camera flash – the way nerves snag sympathetic while you clean another’s cut. Only here, the wound is invisible. Look at her bones, my child bones like a lantern’s ribs, and my paper skin glowing dangerously. Her urge toward the lake, to put that fire out, against the feral little face that says *watch out:* while I burn, I will touch everything in reach, and set it alight.
ORTEGA MERED

A SHACK IN FIVE PARTS

i disambiguation
it is an exercise in disjunction. if the parts fit seamlessly together it can no longer be called a shack. gaps are important. as is the smell of wood smoke. you will need the following materials – crown land peppermint trees beach access bracken fern a creek with rushes four tall poles windows nicked from breaksea island rusty corrugated iron broken bricks empty kerosene cans. when you have more children than you anticipated a masonite caravan can be bunged on with little effort. remember to take off the wheels

ii dad’s shack
the hurricane lamp is too loud. jack mcbride is quiet like me. i pole he spears. sometimes i make wishes on the stars. i’m the oldest. i don’t like being a girl but mum says there’s not much i can do about it now. the fish are ugly. you have to pull the spikes off with pliers. it’s hard. we did a hundred once. the boys always get out of it. always off somewhere. when we get back i will have to sleep on the top bunk. there are three made of sack. there’s no light in the top one. you have to watch out for the big claw nails poking through the ceiling. i always get the bad bunk

iii one of the boys
someone wrote on the back of the door p mcguckin is a heel. it wasn’t me and if you say it was i’ll make you sorry. wayne’s a toadface. i didn’t ask for a twin brother. deborah always gets the middle bunk. not fair. she broke a ukulele on my head. she didn’t get into strife. it’s not fair. she can’t pee standing up. i can. serves her right. tomorrow i’m going to kill a possum

iv grandpa’s shack
the track is sand the bottom is way down there they go slow i go fast look! swing i’m on the rope my feet on the big knot i swing off the hill see me
way up high way high high so high so sky and trees i am flying see me fly nearly at the bottom the shack is snugly all stuck together with gluggy glue a red starfish on the door cloud shaped wood made soft in the sea see the shells i like shells i can sit on the big shell see me sit on the big shell inside no elec-trici-see all dark see the bottles green purple brown i know my colours clever girl i blow on the bottle listen no i do it again listen it sounds all empty i like the easter egg sparkle paper nanna’s fingernails scraped the paper flat sparkle all flat she put it up there see my doll no mouth on my doll i take dolly outside creek here i come i scared a yabbie see it kicked sand the cold water tastes like tin i drink it all gone i go back now back track shack all along the way i skip skip skip big bull ant on my toe bull ants bite get off bull ant is all broken getting night time small blue light tilly lamp goes shhhhh more wood now more fire the billy is boiling silly billy tilly grandpa is tea making i am holding – both hands – my mug hot cordial burns my lips dolly has no lips grandpa is sitting nanna is getting sticky white bun sticky sticky icky i eat the icing water is cooking for my bath my bath before bed dolly wants a bath too

**reader’s tip**

marjory wa – what to do with those nasty cobbler stings. take a blue bag that you put in the washing to make your clothes white. rub on the affected area. it will ease the pain and reduce redness. i always keep one for washing and one for fishing
Graeme Hetherington

Lost

Unable to decide, we walked
The beach below our house in search
Of signs to sell or stay, and had
To ward off nesting plovers’ dives

Straight at our heads, sank ankle-deep
In sand and then observed a man
Mid-channel climbing carefully up
A spiral ladder fluttering like

A badly bandaged leg to mend
The navigation light. He took
The brain still flickering at least
And dropped it in the sea, tried all

The new ones after cutting bits
Off veins lying in muddled heaps,
Descended to his boat and left
Us more than ever in the dark.
What then does it answer – and why am I at the one time distraught and exulted when here in this bush thicket? This stony slope, crumbled by a weather-hand, to what does it answer? My brothers could assess its potential in bushels and bales, reduce the terrain to a monotony of cleared land, to a part of the spreading uniformity of crop and pasture, and subject its unruliness to the ‘standard gauge’ of farmland; I could study it with a naturalist’s discipline.

But it answers to something else. To a loneliness I suppose – a loneliness of the soul, reaching out for absorption into something before and beyond mankind.

Barbara York Main, Twice Trodden Ground

Heading east along the highway in the summertime, the horizon retreats beyond wide greying fields of stubble. I am caught by a feeling of desolation that, I suspect, stems partly from the season and partly from the absence of any visible signs of human activity in what is now a radically human environment. There are just these wide empty fields, occasionally bounded by straggling lines of salmon gums and jam trees. The clearing of the Western Australian wheatbelt is an event of singular scale and consequence. In just a few decades, an expanse of linked ecologies the size of Scotland disappeared. It is as if a continent had suddenly sunk, and when the churning water at last stilled, all that remained was a sporadic archipelago, each island a gesture toward a world that a moment earlier had existed as far as the eye could see. Barbara York Main calls these vestigial patches of bush, “islands of yesterday”. Her writing hovers between exultation and despair, between the celebration of stunning plenitude in the fragments of bush that remain and despair at what has been lost and what is still being lost.
In 1967 Barbara York Main published *Between Wodjil and Tor*, a natural history of an area of remnant and partially regrown bushland bordering her family’s farm in Tammin, Western Australia, roughly 150km northeast of Perth along the Great Eastern Highway that leads to Kalgoorlie and the arid interior. It is to most eyes an unremarkable stretch of open woodland and sandy, gravelly scrub known locally as wodjil. Its importance lies in the fact of it being relatively untouched by the dramatic intrusion of agricultural settlement that gave rise to the Western Australian wheatbelt, that vast crescent of grain country on the undulating plateau east of the Darling Ranges, extending as far as Esperance in the south and Geraldton in the north, and Southern Cross in the east:

It is here in a small area of the plateau, somewhere around the “middle” of the Wheatbelt … in this patch of wodjil, the granite tor some miles away, the timbered clay flats between, and their surrounding countryside, that we shall observe the unfolding of a year’s life of an animated landscape …¹

*Between Wodjil and Tor* draws on the years that York Main spent amongst the remnants of bush scattered in the several kilometres between Yorkakrine Rock and “Fairfields”, the farm on West Bungulla Road where Barbara York Main grew up in the 1920s and 30s.

**The World of Little Lives**

Barbara York Main was born in Kellerberrin in 1929, the only daughter amidst four sons. Outside of the ambit of her brothers’ play, she developed an early fascination with the plants and creatures of the bushland around the farm, particularly the insects, which she would collect.² Her father, Gerald Henry “Harry” York, emigrated from Yorkshire in 1909 to take up land in the newly expanding wheat country of Western Australia. Barbara’s mother, Gladys Beatrice Tobias, was a Perth girl, though her father had earlier run a hardware store in Coolgardie in the goldfields. Gladys followed a path walked by many Western Australian women during the twentieth century. She trained as a teacher, was posted to the wheatbelt, married a farmer and then resigned to raise a family and help run the farm. From her days as a teacher, she had accumulated a number of books that her daughter read hungrily. Barbara was particularly drawn to those books about nature and animals, like Gladys Froggett’s *The World of Little Lives* (1916).³ Froggett’s “little lives” were a series of insect studies originally published in the children’s pages of the *Stock and Station Journal* (NSW).
What stays with Barbara from this book are the illustrations which were able to unite in a single picture on, say, the life-cycle of a mosquito, each stage of its life and its habitat. The enchanting element of these pictures is that they seemed to hold in their diagrammatic unity the ecological sense of the organism they depicted.

Barbara also remembers enjoying the works of May Gibbs, who grew up on the edge of the wheatbelt in Harvey, west of the Darling Scarp, about 100km south of Perth. Gibbs’s Gumnut Babies (1916) initiated a series that would capture the childhood imagination of Australian children for much of the remaining century. For the child-naturalist Barbara, Gibbs’s work appealed as providing, despite its anthropomorphism, accurate and detailed pictures of native flora. They seem to answer not just a child’s need for stories steeped in wonder but a deep desire to find names for the intimate wilderness which she came to inhabit. For this reason, perhaps, Barbara also found particular delight in Alice Clucas’s Behind the Hills (1926) that was set in the town of “Wyalakchem”, a thinly disguised version of Wyalkatchem, the town and district immediately to the north of Tammin. In this sense, Barbara herself lived “behind the hills”, the looming form of the Yorkakrine granite outcrop lying between her and Wyalkatchem. Behind the Hills tells the story of a girl, Carol, who lives an isolated existence on a farm with a busy mother who only seems to notice her when she needs something done. Carol is running yet another errand for her mother when she befriends a magpie, Mrs Maggie, who offers her some magic seeds. These cause Carol to shrink down to the size of a fairy, allowing her to
climb atop Mrs Maggie and fly with her to the “Golden Land” beyond the hills. In this Golden Land, Carol meets King and Queen Leschenaultia (who recline in gum-leaf hammocks in Bushingham Palace) and begins a series of adventures. The Golden Land is attacked by the evil Calosang Tribe but eventually prevails thanks to the help of the Tuarts. “The Tuarts,” the book explains, “were a very progressive race, and had recently perfected a powerful machine-gun, known as the Tuart Cannon”. The story concludes with Carol waking up. Was it all a dream? No, says Carol, even though she knows this is just what her mother will say: “Mother does not believe in fairies, for she has never been to the Golden Land Behind the Hills in the Land of Imagination; but I do, and I hope to go there again some day”.

While even then the young Barbara knew this book to be hopelessly patronising, she was nevertheless struck by seeing the echoes of her own imaginative engagement with nature, her nature, printed into language. The “land behind the hills” would remain psychically demarcated as a place of possibility and fascination. In broader cultural terms we can find in these stories by Gibbs and Clucas that late Victorian sense of childhood so enduringly evoked in the writing of J.M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll and, particularly, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling is significant not just because of his popularity in Australia but because in works such as The Jungle Book (1894) and the Just So Stories for Little Children (1902), he linked indigenous knowledge, naturalism, and the occasioning wonder of childhood into a kind of corrective universe, one that registered a muted apology for the violence of empire, if not for its goals. A close friend of Baden Powell, Kipling’s children’s stories became through the Scout and Guide movements that flourished in the twentieth century, a pseudo-religion of initiatory myths and practices, advancing the virtues of imperial citizenship and self-growth. Victorian children’s writers like Kipling often used the device of making a child the perceptive centre of their stories in order to anchor the fictive world in a domain outside of the fixity of the adult order. One senses in these “stories for children” an effort to remake the stark symbolic terrain of modernity by calling upon the fairies and pixies of a disappearing oral folk tradition. Thus animated, the stories became a forum for playing out the world’s adult struggles in disguised form.

The distinctive dimension of Australian children’s authors such as Gibbs and Clucas was the way that this fairy-world was mapped on to Australian animals and plants, sometimes invoking a vulgar appeal to Aboriginal creation myths. This was particularly visible in the period of popular nativism in the decades following Federation. “Wattle Day”,

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first celebrated in 1910, was popular throughout the 1920s and 30s and Australian motifs drawn from nature – lyre birds, kookaburras, emus – began to adorn the mass-produced furnishings and window fittings of this period.\(^8\) It was during this time, for instance, that Kookaburras were introduced into Western Australia by eastern states migrants who felt the bush here was lacking their distinct aural contribution. Barbara York Main’s childhood bears the imprint of this phase in Australian nationalism, and is evident in *Granny Smith’s Book: Verse and Legends of the Bush* (1941), a twelfth birthday gift to Barbara.\(^9\) *Granny Smith’s Book* was a series of poems, fables and sheet music thematising native flora and fauna. In “The Wildflower Chorus” and “The Dance of the Gum-Nuts” plants and animals take the form of fairies, elves and sprites, while in “The Carnival of Spring” we hear the story of the Kangaroo Paw, the Western Australian state flower that blossoms in late winter and early spring:

> The little Elves then raised their heads, and seeing the smiles around them, were very relieved; but when they saw the Kangaroo-Paw Flowers, they were astounded to see such a wonderful sight, they could hardly believe their eyes; so they caught hold of one another and danced and sang through the Bush in great glee.
> Another Spring had come and the Fairy was pleased with their work.\(^{10}\)

Published in Perth during the early years of the war, *Granny Smith’s Book* emits in a juvenile register the nativism – by now a complicated amalgam of cultural and biological indigeneity – that lay beneath contemporary nationalist literary journals such as the *Meanjin Papers* (1940–) and the *Jindyworobak* anthologies (1938–1953). The 1930s and 1940s, when York Main grew up, were thus a time when patriotism sought to ground itself in the varied uniqueness of native biota. It was also a time that in the writing, say, of Katharine Susannah Prichard or the prints and painting of Margaret Preston, was beginning to align itself with (or appropriate) an Aboriginal apprehension of a spiritual landscape. The effect of these currents eddied through Australian culture in subtle yet profound ways, shaping and determining the imaginative coordinates of the generation that would come to prominence in the post-war years.

**The Other Notebook**

York Main’s scientific scholarship at the University of Western Australia in the late 1940s and early 1950s coincided with the emergence of ecology as a formal field of study. Ecology took as its basis the interrelationships
between organisms and their environment – which included other organisms. The ecologist’s enterprise was to delineate these relations.11 Her doctoral research into the “eco-evolution” of trapdoor spiders can be seen as synthesising the emergent paradigm of ecology with the earlier biological paradigm of natural history. York Main’s ground-breaking research into spiders sought to work in both these modalities, situating the spiders as part of an intricate ecological balance but also apprehending how this ecology itself was subject to the changes of deep planetary time with its climatic fluctuation and tectonic drift.12

As a trained naturalist York Main approached the study of her spiders through the disciplining practices of zoological fieldwork, in particular, a strict observational record of activity. Her research was partly conditioned by the tremendous longevity of trapdoor spiders, which can live in excess of thirty years. She speaks of going to “visit her spiders” and continues to do this on a regular basis. Yet whilst dutifully keeping empirical measurements and details in her field-book, York Main also kept a second notebook, one which contained more general meditations on the world of the spiders’ little lives. This notebook seemed to want to know in what kind of world these spiders were happening. At the same time it was a notebook where she herself became present in a way that the dictates of empirical science proscribed. Here she recorded variations on the statement: I too am of this place. It is this other notebook, in which all that was necessarily excluded from the first came flooding back, that would give birth to York Main’s published creative work.

At this point Barbara’s life was divided between her young children and her scientific research. Her growing reputation as a naturalist led to the publication of The Spiders of Australia (1964), illustrated by the author.13 Her publisher, Jacaranda Press, was founded by Brian Clouston in 1952 to publish educational literature. Clouston, though, was something of a visionary and is notable for publishing Kath Walker’s (Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s) seminal volume of poems We Are Going (1964) on the recommendation of Judith Wright who was then employed as a reader for the house.14 In 1965, Bert and Barbara took their family to Brisbane for sabbatical in order to do fieldwork on the frogs and spiders of Queensland. Barbara took the opportunity to meet with Clouston and to propose another book, one of a quite different character to her field-guide on spiders. York Main said that she had been working on a children’s book based around the animals in the wheatbelt bush she knew so well. Clouston’s response surprised her. He said, why not write the book for adults? The work then conceived, and which would become Between Wodjil and Tor, was to be a detailed account of life in the
bush through the course of one year. Clouston had extended a kind of permission to York Main, which precipitated a period of intense creativity. Whereas previously she had channelled her imaginative understanding of the ecological into the animism of her early life, which lived on in the stories she told her children and in the thoughts of her private notebooks, a path opened now for her to communicate the natural world in all its enchanting otherness in a seriousness of tone and purpose hitherto only possible in her scientific writing.

The idea of a year in the life of an ecosystem was not new. York Main had in mind both Thoreau, particularly his *Walden* (1854) and *The Maine Woods* (1864), and also earlier still, Gilbert White’s *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789). White’s *Selborne* comprised a series of letters, delightfully observant and rich, written to his friends Daines Barrington and Charles Pennant concerning the natural history of his native parish of Selborne in Hampshire where he had long served as parson. The letters span a period of two decades and bristle with reflections on the species and habitats of this locality. It is this kind of ecological calendar that Barbara York Main began to write for the country between wodjil and tor. She was melding an “ideal year” out of the many years she had spent in this place as a child and as a scientist. In spirit though, York Main’s work is less touched with the fastidious acuity of White and the Enlightenment, than the metaphysical yearning that seizes Thoreau in his less regimental moments. She would later ask, surveying the first 150 years of Western Australian literature, “Where are our Thoreaus?” And she is right to wonder where in the creative literature of Western Australia since colonisation a sensitive consideration of ecology had taken place. I have looked myself and find that while there are examples of what might be called ecological writing, there is nothing until York Main herself, and not since, that addresses the non-human in a way that is serious, searching and nuanced. York Main stops short of Thoreau’s transcendentalism – nature is not by her reckoning expressive of a sentient spirit or overarching purpose. Nevertheless, her writing remains limned by the intimation that explaining how something happens never quite takes you into a knowledge of why it happens. This step, this distance that cannot be closed, is what York Main’s prose sparks across.

*Between Wodjil and Tor*

In writing *Between Wodjil and Tor* York Main did not travel down the path of didactic exposition followed by popular naturalists since the nineteenth century. This approach, epitomised in the television era by David
Attenborough, is one in which we creep up on an unsuspecting habitat and enter into a visually-cued explanation of its more photogenic and mystifying inhabitants. Such popular educational documentary tends invariably to address us as if we were over-eager students, keen to follow the camera into nature’s hidden corners. There is something both voyeuristic and lascivious about this kind of television. York Main’s approach in *Between Wodjil and Tor* is quite different. Hers is a mode of lyrical evocation, which takes as its beginning a fundamental alterity (in other words, unknowableness) in the plane of the organism:

To climb through a wire fence, out of a ploughed and sown paddock, into a wild, wind-raked stretch of bushland is to tumble into an order of life, unmoulded by man, but one which can jolt his mind into a deeper wonderment, not only of this ungarnered territory but of the whole natural world.¹⁹

York Main is conscious of violating implicit laws of scientific writing and asks in her preface that the reader approach her book not with the ready confidence “with which one opens a natural history ‘hand book’ but with the submissiveness one volunteers on beginning a narrative”. She pleads in effect for a different reader, one who might “submit” to a kind of openness or suggestibility that she herself submitted to in approaching her environment.

This is not to say that York Main’s writing is not attuned to empirical observation and functional exposition. One certainly gains a working knowledge of the life-cycles, habits and appearances of a great number of flora and fauna. Parenthetical latin names of species flit through the text like the ghost of Linnaeus. Yet the details are conveyed in a way which is deferential and reverent. How, for instance, a Mountain Devil (*Moloch horridus*) will absorb rain into its skin and transmit it by capillary action to its mouth; how bulldog ants (*Myrmecia*) will climb into the canopies of eucalypts to forage and when sated simply leap off and tumble through the sky onto the ground before picking themselves up and returning to their nests; or how Parrot orchids (*Pterostylis vittata*) were pollinated by tiny gnats that are trapped by a sprung lid that temporarily detains them, forcing them to acquire their pollen in a frantic attempt to escape. What distinguishes York Main’s work from conventional popular natural history is a recurrent gesture towards that which is beyond the elucidation of scientific discourse. This is done by diverting from the process examined and toward the feeling that it instils, from effect into affect. Here I do
not mean the melodrama that pervades most nature shows and in which we function as pantomime audience, but a deepening of the perceptive faculty that transports the reader into the scene:

All was still and quiet … twigs crackled, bark flaked softly, a dry leaf fell with a sigh from a mallee … the last of the wattles pods cracked open and the seeds fell to the woven mat of brown and yellow phyllodes on the ground. The acrid smell of the cypress pines (*Callitris morrisoni*) rose and permeated the surrounding bush and mingled with the tannic scent of drying bark and the volatiles of eucalypts. The only persistent sound was the deep, muffled murmuring of bronze-wing pigeons.20

Science depends on the exclusion of emotional response. The paradox, famously highlighted by Heidegger, is that in seeking to understand life, science must first remove from life its life. This paradox brings into collision a view of life that is renderable as a process (as in science) and that view of life that we experience through our senses and psyches. What occurs in this passage and many like it from *Between Wodjil and Tor* is the reuniting of the senses. Scientific description is biased heavily towards the visual, not just in literalising the practice of observation but in the more general way that knowledge itself is deeply wedded in western culture to the faculty of seeing. To suddenly smell the “acrid” cypress pines and the bouquet of scents released by the eucalypts has the effect of reanimating them from their stultification in the classificatory regime. Likewise, to hear the “murmuring” of the pigeons brings them into an immediate relation that no degree of analysis can yield. In doing so York Main tactically forgoes the semantic precision of scientific language in order to set in motion associational trains – the pigeons murmuring into the dry still evening – that make us *there* in the landscape as sensate, memoried organisms rather than disembodied analytical eyes.

Of course any novelist knows all of this. Yet York Main’s writing is notable for the way that it does not forsake the scientific paradigm so much as hybridise it with the sensual or creative mode of discourse that we associate with literature. In so doing, she avoids the obverse of pure instrumental knowledge, which is aestheticism, a romantic record of sensory affects (aromas, sounds, plays of light) which trigger moods and memories. The writing of American nature-writer Annie Dillard, for instance, as beautiful and acutely observed as it is, often falls prey to these seductions. Instead *Between Wodjil and Tor* retains as one of its central objectives the understanding of, to put it bluntly, *how it all works*. It is York
Main’s determination to keep both of her notebooks open in *Between Wodjil and Tor* that gives to it its rare keenness as an ecological text.

**Twice Trodden Ground**

Four years after *Between Wodjil and Tor*, York Main published *Twice Trodden Ground* (1971), also with Jacaranda and also illustrated by herself. *Between Wodjil and Tor* largely bracketed off human agency, at least that since colonisation. Let us imagine, it says, how this place was before it was razed for cropping. However, *Twice Trodden Ground* is a human history not a natural history, although once again not of a conventional kind. It remains Thoreauvian in its ruminate qualities, although rather less prescriptive, and it is hued by an underlying, at times ineffable, loss. It is partly written as an answer to the shire histories of the wheatbelt that started to appear in the early 1960s with works such as Frank H. Goldsmith’s *The History of Morawa District: The Story of Progress* (1961) and F.A. Law’s *The History of the Meredin District of Western Australia* (1961). Today, almost every district and shire has such a work. Many were published to mark occasions like the state’s sesquicentenary in 1979 or Australia’s bicentenary in 1988, or else the centenary of the founding of the shire, which for many fell in the 1980s and 90s. These books tell a particular kind of story, usually focussing on the arduous work of establishing communities and viable industries in the hot, dry scrub and woodlands of the south-west plateau. They remind me of the kind of Christmas letter that is circulated between certain sorts of middle-class families. Their tone contains the quiet pride in achievement as various families and pioneers are remembered. The life was hard, and there was much adversity, but courage and persistence prevailed. Schools were built, clubs founded, bushfires fought – the fellowship of shared work held in the communion of memory. Through all this people kept their sense of humour, to which a number of anecdotes will attest, and progress prevailed. A life was forged.

York Main’s *Twice Trodden Ground* shares with the shire histories this sense of historical survey, of looking back and assessing all that has happened to bring us to where we are now. Yet it is much more personal, and documents not the heroic conquest of land and founding of towns and institutions, but the plume of emotional after-effects that follow it like dust from a car on a wheatbelt back-road. One can see something of this even in the conventional histories, in the faint note of exhaustion or quaver of disillusionment that occasionally surfaces at the end of the book when thoughts are turned towards the future. It is as if on the fringes of the narrative of progress there lies the question: *but, after all is said and done, what was it all for?* In these histories the concern is not for the most
part environmental but sociological. They allude, at least those since the 1980s, to the onset of what appears to be an inexorable rural decline: towns shrinking, associations closing, communities thinner and thinner. All this at a time when wheat yields are higher than ever. The logic which drove the expansion of the wheatbelt and depopulated its original species is now in many cases depopulating the colonising species – the farmer – as agricultural industry and especially crop production submit to greater and greater mechanisation.

York Main’s was one of the first voices to recognise the source of this alienation, and thus too the possible remedies, in the radical separation of wheatbelt settlement from its antique ecological patterns. She writes in her preface:

The following essays do not amount to a shire history. They hint rather at the effect of place on human emotions as much as the effect of man on place. Or is it only my own response to locality that I present? I do not think so. The potency of place – of landscape – is sometimes of lifelong recurrence, even though the response to its influence may be unformed, unvoiced.21

York Main thus stakes a claim in the field of knowledge for both the “potency of place” and her own emotional response. She refutes the implication that what she is writing might be classed as simply her feelings or that they retain only a subjective truth. She maintains instead that her writing is anchored in the specificity of the place she inhabits. In a sense what York Main arrives at in her writing is a distinctly ecological interface, a meeting of two systems, the psychic system of thoughts, feelings, memories and sense experience, and the biological system of the vestigial bushland. It is this very interface that in recent years the field of eco-criticism has sought to map.22 This hybrid field owes as much to the intellectual habits of ecology as it does to the practices of literary criticism.

In her beautiful story “Trespassing” York Main describes revisiting her family farm in later life, and seeing the home where she had grown up in “double photographic exposure”, the current state of the home overlaid by her memories of it. Details from the home bring to her mind trails of remembered actions and moments. In the backyard, now a tamarisk grove, she sees the chain swing that once lifted her “out of the mundane world and into the sky” (37). A deep ambivalence sets in that is quite distinct from conventional nostalgia, and under whose influence comes to feel like a “ghost of the dispossessed”: 
It is a painful paradox that long after one is alienated, even if voluntarily, from the site of one’s beginnings, a sense of proprietorship remains. But reality cannot recognize such proprietorship – it is trespassing! And in my trespassing I had unwittingly discovered that other self, and in my discovery, it finally withered. I fled that house, for who has the courage to look into a tomb?23 (1971: 42, original italics)

It is an evocative and complex moment. The thrust is straightforward enough: one cannot live in the past, trespass on the past. Its drama turns on the meeting of two selves; the seeking, present-day “I”, and this “other self”, later called “the child”, who is anterior and hidden until the act of trespass. It is the trespass itself that makes this other self visible and prompts their meeting, a radical encounter in which one flees and the other withers.

This poignant interior drama, a version of which we all replay at moments though not always with such lucidity, is acted out for York Main at a socio-ecological level in the story of the Western Australian wheatbelt, and she sees in each scene an answering desolation that she describes in the succeeding paragraph of “Trespassing”:

For the child had gone long ago, with the vanishment of scrub and trees. Now it was only in a mirage of fancy that this landscape lived again, when in the falsity of reminiscence thickets of tamma and calothamnus and sheoke, hakea and timber, spread out over the swell and hollow of the rolling countryside. Only a little remains, small primeval islands in the great surround of open paddocks. It is to these last relics of unchanged reality, to these islands of yesterday, that one desperately lays claim.24

York Main thus finds in her own sense of loss felt towards the missing bush in the wheatbelt the echo of a loss felt in her childhood, a loss then re-experienced as the passage out of childhood. Childhood becomes the storied location of that primal loss, but the linkage is more than a mere psychological projection. Whether or not Barbara had had a happier childhood would not change the dispersal of vegetation in the wheatbelt. The loss of habitat and the loss of “the child” are both registrations in the symbolic. They are holes which we circle around incessantly and build the fences that constitute culture and mark our entry into it as adults. It is indeed the experience of losing the child that makes feasible the discernment of shifts in the real, shifts which, once temporalised, appear
before us as islands of yesterday. It is also this experience that holds the key to a movement past the tomb of primal loss and into a living present and future.

Perhaps a traumatic encounter with loss is a necessary wound, and our adulthood forms only in the scar tissue that it instigates. In any event, traumatic loss is often the affective state yielded by modernity’s acceleration, by its combustion of the past to fuel an impending unseeable futurity. In her preface to Twice Trodden Ground York Main cites T.S. Eliot’s estimation, made in 1932, that the “happiest” lands are:

… those in which a long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both; in which the landscape has been moulded by numerous generations of one race, and in which the landscape in turn has modified the race to its character.25

This marks a shift away from the almost Nietzschean voluntarism of Eliot’s earlier influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). The later remarks posit tradition as the “reconciliation of thought and feeling”, in which “the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present.”26 It is no coincidence in my view that the shift in Eliot’s position is cognate with the appearance of an ecological consciousness in the 1930s. This ecological awareness, dawning in its modern guise in the middle decades of the twentieth century, modulated the popular vitalism of the 1920s through a yearning for sustainable balance. Like Eliot, York Main sees the landscape not as a metaphor for human concerns but, insofar as we alter it, as the actual expression of them. And both find in the act of serious literature a working through of the crucial and traumatic truce that forms inside the self between the demands and limits of the organism and what we experience as our felt reality. York Main’s writing affects me in the way it does because I find in the subjectivity it evokes something of the sense that this reconciliation might yield. It is a subjectivity at once detached and intimately engaged, disinterested and intensely interested.

Notes
1 Barbara York Main, Between Wodjil and Tor (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1967): 4.
2 The biographical details of York Main’s life are drawn from a number of meetings I had with the author in 2006 at the University of Western Australia, at which we both work. In the winter of 2007 I accompanied York Main on one of her regular visits to monitor the trapdoor spiders that have been her
lifelong passion, and visited the home where she grew up, and the country between wodjil and tor.

6 Clucas, 54.
7 Clucas, 66.
10 Smith, 35.
11 Ecology focussed on cyclical processes and in this way differed from the concerns of evolutionary biology, which was to trace origins and change through time. One can see in the emergence of ecology a shift in paradigms that typifies the relationship in terms of knowledge between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, from the governance of telos and a concomitant concern for origins, to the investigation of the atemporal system. As a science, ecology stands in a similar relation to natural history as Saussurean linguistics does to philology, or structural anthropology to evolutionary anthropology.
12 One tends to associate bio-diversity with the tropics. This is probably a northern hemisphere bias. As the glaciated northern land masses were regularly swept free of most of their organisms, it was the warmer south in which evolution reached its more baroque complexities. This is not true, however, in Australia and the temperate semi-arid country of the south-west has evolved an extraordinary degree of diversity in bird, animal, insect, plant and other life. The wide range of trapdoor spiders is a case, Main argues, of differential evolution, where a species evolves a number of different types in order to best meet the changing elements of its environment.
14 Kath Walker, [Oodgeroo Noonuccal], *We Are Going* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964).
17 The lasting wonder of White’s letters is the density and intricacy of life itself. In his final letter White notes that he had considered but abandoned the idea of attaching to these letters an “Annus Historico-Naturalis or Natural History of the Twelve Months of the Year”. White, 254.

19 York Main, *Between Wodjil and Tor*, preface.

20 York Main, *Between Wodjil and Tor*, 16 (original ellipses).


23 York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground*, 42 (original italics).

24 York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground*, 42.

25 These remarks derive from Eliot’s lectures at the University of Virginia in 1933, subsequently published as *After Strange Gods: a Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1934). Whilst “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) had committed the literary artist to a regime of cultural immersion, nothing less than the complete totality of the “important” writing of one’s culture, from which the precious few will emerge into a position of genuine advancement of that tradition, Eliot’s later lecture draws back from this idea of tradition being acquired by an act of will. Tradition, Eliot writes in this later work, is “rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations.” And this, he suggests, “must largely be … unconscious” – “of the blood … rather than of the brain” (*After Strange Gods*, 29–30). One can see how Main was drawn to Eliot’s essay. It begins by recounting his recent train journey through the “beautiful desolate country of Vermont”:

*Those hills had once, I suppose, been covered with primeval forest; the forest was razed to make sheep pastures for the English settlers; now the sheep are gone, and most of the descendants of the settlers … those New England mountains seemed to me to give evidence of a human success so meagre and transitory as to be more desperate than a desert.* (*After Strange Gods*, 17)

They want to give me an honorary doctorate. An honorary doctorate when all I want is to lie here and drink tea on the sofa. A long time since I’ve headed west. Old stomping ground, old wilderness. No more stomping for me, I’m afraid. These fucking feet are fucked. But I get to thinking. West. The turn off at Wickepin. The weird light. Spears of grass sticking in my bobby socks and braids. Golden dust in my hair. All those ghosts. Running through the wheat, all sweat and sex underneath my pinny. A beauty I was then. A wild creature. Any bloke I fancied. And I fancied them all. I was a mermaid. Look at me now. Prostrate on the couch, a harpooned dugong. Gregor Samsa, that’s me, reclining on the fucking commission-built leather catafalque. Look at those feet. Leper’s feet. Cut them off at the knees and stick umbrellas in them.

For Christ’s sake help me up Merv, I gotta piss.

* * *

So they want to honour me. Make a big fuss. Want me to clamber up some wooden steps wearing a gown and mortarboard, prance across a rostrum, make a fucking speech. Elocute sweet thankyous into the microphone. I’ll give them a speech all right.

“No,” I tell them over the phone, “I hate flying. Perth is dead for me.”

They’d forgotten all about my forthrightness.

“It’s a great accolade,” they say, “In celebration of your work.”

“Stiff.”

But then I get to thinking; maybe I’m being a bit hasty. I’m not dead yet after all, and maybe Perth has changed for the better. Maybe they’ve gotten rid of all the drunks and mad bastards and con men and corruption and ex-husbands, and maybe this and maybe that. In a way I think it might
be kind of nice. Nostalgic. Romantic. On the road again. The last hurrah, instead of lying here rotting away on this fucking couch with a swollen, pouting pillow shaped like Mae West’s crimson lips. My lips. You bloody bet. These lips were made for kissing, and that’s just what they’ll do … Ha! This couch. My final resting place in a library where every book is out of reach, and the cracks in the stained glass let in a little whistle of wind.

* * *

Merv packs my ports. Don’t forget my red shoes Merv! I’m not going all that way without my lucky red shoes. This morning, early, he tells me, after insomnia has woken him again, he wandered into the lounge room and found a fox hiding behind the settee. Someone must have left the door open all night. The highway silent. I can picture them together: Merv staring at the fox, the fox staring at Merv, the birds outside just starting to twitch.

“I think it’s time you went,” Merv tells me he said to the fox. And the fox went. Here in Faulconbridge. It’s a nice story. Fuck knows what it means. Too brief for a play. And who would put on one of my plays? Plays have left me now. All the stories have rolled down hill into the river. Maybe a poem then. But Perth. They want to pay my airfare too, but no thanks. Bloody planes. Bloody airports. Bloody blood pressure. I’m playing hard to get. My inner ear plays up something fierce too on take-off. Bladder at landing. Even driving down the mountains in the back of the hearse shits me to tears. The river like a moat. No. I want to go by train. I want to see the desert. Wickepin. One more time. I want. I want.

So we catch the train. And here we are at Central at the appointed hour. Merv takes care of the ticketing and the bags. Sleeper compartment number such-and-such, with our own foldaway bed and a little stainless steel sink and table and a grimy railway curtain over the window looking out to the grey platform. Merv wheels me up the asphalt like a piece of luggage. Just stare straight ahead, I tell myself. Retain what grace you can. People get out of my way. I hobble up the steps onto the train – goodness the corridors are thin – smell of diesel and rail ballast. I’m holding people up. Why don’t they stop staring? Merv clears the corridor before me simply by walking up it. His shoulders touch both walls. Even at eighty he is a force to be reckoned with. Everyone gets out of his way. Everyone is afraid of what might happen if Merv were to fall on them. Fell on me once and sprained my ankle: “Merv get off me foot,” I yelped. He didn’t even know. He could clear a room of poets in a flash if he took it into his
head. Sometimes I wish he would. And I don’t mean with the tureen of mulled wine in the boot of the hearse ladled out into their thirsty cups. He has a great euphemism that if he ever has to deal with recalcitrants who want my attention: he simply places a hand on their shoulder, turns them around and sits them down on the floor. They don’t get up in a hurry. The trouble is so many people want my attention.

Merv settles me in our compartment, which is a hell of a lot smaller than my library. He takes care of the conductor. Presses a few bribes on him. Eventually we are off. Suburbs flash by, then paddocks, more slowly. Cows stand about like cardboard cutouts of cows. I settle in to our cabin to read through those bloody poems that young up-and-coming-prizewinning suck-hole of a poet has asked me to comment on. Fucked, I should say. Hopeless, I should say. What does he want my opinion for? Why does anyone still want to listen to me? But I won’t. I’ll be polite and innocuous and lie through my teeth, and people will read it as a considered judgment, as if I know what I’m talking about, and he’ll get a grant and stick my comments on the cover of his next book and people will quote me in reviews. I toss the manuscript aside. For Christ’s sake Merv help me up, I’ve gotta piss.

It’s a struggle trying to keep our balance as the Overlander rattles across the plains towards Bathurst or somewhere, but he finally squeezes me into the tiny cubicle of the dunny.

“Close the door so I can’t hear you,” Merv says. Never could stand to hear the sound of a woman pissing. Could stand a lot of other things though. He could stand more of my behaviour than any other man. Could stand the looks I gave to them, and received, because he knew he was the one and only. Turning awkwardly on my obese axis – there’s no other word for it – I manage to click the closet door closed. Mmm, nice alliteration that, although not as nice as the one about the cows, might save it for something, that new poem maybe, about the mad old woman lost in her own house. Click the closet door closed. Click or kick? Closet or corset? Dress hoicked. Bloomers to half-mast. A vicious jolt from the train and I flop onto the seat. Ahh. The sound of a woman pissing. Sorry Merv. Paper right there. Job well done. Bit of a rest while we’re here. Enough of the lady leisurely. Ah but fuck – I can’t get up. My legs are fucked. Come on old girl, of course you can get up. If I. If I. Nngghh … Shit.

“Merv! Merv! I’m stuck.”

And I am. I can’t stand up. And I can’t open the door. Jesus.

“Dorothy, what is it?” Merv calls.

“I’m stuck.”
Merv tries to open the door, but it'll only open six inches before it whacks against my knees. He pushes harder.

"Ow!"
"I'll go and get a conductor."
"No, no."
"Why not?"
"I don’t want any one to see me wedged in here with me knickers around me knees."

I can almost hear Merv cogitating.

"Well what do you want me to do? You’re blocking the door."

I make a Herculean effort to raise myself, at least to pull my knickers up, but the rocking of the train makes this impossible, and a particularly violent lurch tumbles me first against one wall of the cubicle, then the other. I bang my head.

"Ow."

I collapse back onto the bowl, slightly stunned.

‘Are you all right?’

“No. I’m stuck.”

“Do you want anything?”

“Can’t you take the door off or something?”

“The hinges are on the inside.”

“Fuck.”

He’s right. Merv doesn’t say anything on the other side of the door.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not that brave.”

Stuck all right. Whose idea was this train anyway? I’m stuck because I’m so fucking fat. And old. I hate growing old. I hate being old. I feel like every vertebra in my spine has been jolted out of the chain. Merv passes in all the cushions and pillows he can find, and I pad them around me to stop myself whacking against the walls. In other words I make myself comfortable. Hours pass. He passes me in a book, but I can’t read because of the jolting. I let it fall to the floor, out of sight. The continuous rattling of the wheels is like a dull electric shock, like holding a battery against your tongue, it’s not comfortable but after a while you get used to it.

“Do you want this manuscript?”

“Fuck no.”

He passes me in little wax paper cups of water, which I gulp and gulp like some animal at a water hole, and in pretty short shrift have to piss again. So I piss. Here where I sit. Maybe this is for the best. Maybe I’ll die here empty of bladder and pride; all honour gone.
After a while I say “Merv, I’m hungry.”
“Do you want me to fetch something from the dining car?”
“Yes.”
“What?”
“Food.”
“What?”
“Anything. Anything. Anything.”
I almost sob.
I hear Merv fossicking about in the compartment and I hear him going out, the door sliding shut behind him. Even when I know he’s gone I still think he’s out there, fossicking, and I realize I must be delirious. I call. No answer. I call again. No answer. The rattling of the wheels is like dull music, like a battery held against your tongue. I piss. I drink and I piss and I try to read. The transaction is pretty simple. A life’s work. This is where devotion to the party gets you. Stuck in a shithouse on the Overlander. Dymphna Cusack should be here, not me. That old commo with a tiara, swanning through Moscow in her fur coat. Well Dymphna did you ever see red shoes like mine? The polit bureau loved my red shoes. I try not to think about Dymphna for a while, as the music of the train fills me. More hours pass. I think I even doze a little. Merv returns with some railway sandwiches, which he passes in to me.
“What took you so long?”
“I had a cup of tea.”
“Tea! While I’m stuck in here!”
“I’ve walked the length of the train looking for a lavatory. I can hardly use this one.”
“Sorry.”
“Are you all right?”
“No. My legs hurt. I feel buried alive.”
It’s true. I practice scratching my old nails against the door. I try to project the face of several theatre directors I could mention on to the door.
“I can’t get you out unless you let me call the conductor.”
“No. What would the Vice-Chancellor say?”
“Bugger the Vice-Chancellor.”
Merv has never cared much for Vice-Chancellors. He goes on in his expedient, male way:
“If I passed you in a screwdriver do you think you could unscrew the hinges?”
“I don’t think I could reach the top ones. Anyway it looks like it needs a special tool.”
“I thought that might be the case.”
“I wish I was fucking dead.”
“You’re only saying that.”
“I fucking mean it.”
“I’m trying my best Dorothy.”
He passes his hand through the crack. It’s a familiar hand with its
great thick fingers and calluses from a lifetime of heavy work.
“Have you seen the desert yet?”
“No Dorothy. It’s night.”
“Night? How long have I been in here?”
He wafts his hand about blindly until he finds my face.
“That’s my nose.”
“Sorry.”
He strokes my hair and my jowls. He says “There there. Death gives
life its shape.”
“What shape?”
“Its meaningless shape.”
It is a great comfort to me, his hand, and his words, but it still does not
alter the greater fact that I just want to die.
After a while the rattling of the wheels is no longer like music but more
like screaming. I try to sleep. I try to die, propped up by all the cushions
Merv has purloined from somewhere. I listen to him snoring. I piss at will,
without the inconvenience of having to ask someone to help me up. I’ve
become a baby again. The light burns all night. In the morning he passes
in my medicines and food and water and pen and paper in case, he says,
you feel inspired.
“Get fucked. I’ll give you fucking inspiration.”
I wonder if I have the strength to jab his hand with the biro.
“Do you want your red shoes?”
“No. Fuck off.”
“I can see the desert.”
“What’s it like?”
“Flat.”
Strangely I do try to write. There is nothing else to do, even if it is all
delusional. My handwriting is sloppier than usual. Hours pass, and then,
presumably, days.

_A mad old woman dressed in black_
pushing an English pram
_a nun with a walking stick_
a woman with a string of camels
mirages floating in the heat

Memories, or perhaps hallucinations, come to me in my fluorescent crypt. Memories of the house at Lambton Downs, of dancing in my red shoes down Darlinghurst Road, of crusty old nuns cursing me to hell. Oh I was a beauty then. I was a mermaid. I was the embodiment of everything an evil nun should envy. Looks. Lads. Lust. Look at them in their silly wimples and Jesus-shrouds, so ugly they’d make a camel spit. Well maybe their curses worked. Look at me now. Hell is being stuck in a railway carriage dunny crossing the Nullarbor with only your husband’s cracked, familiar hand squeezed in through the door for comfort. All the fluid rushing to your feet making them puff up and burst out of your slippers. Christ my legs hurt. Tell me again the story of the fox Merv. Merv, are you there? I wish I could lie down. My arse hurts. Wish I could put my feet up on my lovely couch in my own home, surrounded by my books. Why did we ever leave? I miss the mist and the currawongs. I miss the rowers on the Nepean, even though you only ever glimpse them for a second as you cross the river. If they gave me an honorary doctorate now, in here, I’d bloody well know what to do with it. No, cut the crap. I don’t wish for comfort. Not any more. I only want it to stop. Stop all the camels and flies and heat. Merv, take me home, I wish I was dead, I wish I was fucking dead. There there, he’ll say, strong as an ox, you don’t really mean that. Yes I bloody well do. When I die Merv, when I finally fucking well die you’ve got to keep God out of the service. It’ll be just like receiving a doctorate. Promise me, no mention of God. Just bury me with some poems and some wattle. I’d like it to be hot. And my red shoes, Merv. Make sure you toss in my red shoes too. No one wants to see them anymore.
PAUL HETHERINGTON

BLACKBERRIES

Childhood, the blue-black explosion
on the palate; the stained, tell-tale fingers
rubbed with handkerchief and spittle –
this coalesced, you said,
into an image of twelve-year-old girls
straddling a fence and laughing at your shyness.
At that time you were growing tomatoes
and clusters of vines in the grey dirt of your backyard,
enlivening the soil with large, blood-brown worms.
And a mulberry tree that grew in a mixture
of manure and old hay, a pond and croaking frogs
you had gathered from a creek in the wild.
Years later the garden extended over acres,
a creek running through it, next to nine mulberry trees.
But no blackberries, you said, “which would choke
and need poison.” You mentioned the two girls again:
the one you married; her friend whom you loved,
“persistently, like a stain.” Now I find you
digging the first blackberry plant into the old soil
of the creek bank, pressing its roots gently,
firmly, with thick fingers. A diminishing crescendo of frogs
is painted on cool and eddying air.
GRAHAM ROWLANDS

PALM OR PLANE

It didn’t matter where but it had to be now to give me a break from my Doctorate she said. So she took me around the zoo. Returning, in the park we saw an old wanker lying on his back on the grass under a tree wearing old shirt, trousers, shoes & socks with his right arm & probably fingers & thumb strenuously engaged in his own enjoyment. We didn’t stop to see how long he took if he took at all. Still, we were in no hurry. We must have outlived him now by many years but from time to time, perhaps once a year as if it’s a kind of wedding anniversary we return to the old wanker’s open air & we’re surprised by our surprise and sadness that the old wanker isn’t there, wanking. For a few years we were sure of the tree which had spread its leaves of shade for him but every time now we find ourselves trying to remember some angle or marker or beacon that will help us decide on palm or plane.
Jeffrey Guess

In the Library

In the library near closing time
with the latest TLS
now all the students have gone
into their books
and the long black windows
of the closing northern lights.

The computer bank hums with that first
tonal breath of a church organ
before a key is touched
I want to believe that
lights are dimmed in a last half hour
for something other than power bills.

The reference section slides into the quiet
closed stacks of a release from enquiry
and the carpet that has agonized
all day with PhDs
is dawdling down the steps
to sleep and other things.

And in the interval before a final silence
there is a time for contemplation
even a reverie of sorts
where empty book trolleys slumber
in the return bays
and newspapers lie in a folded jumble
of neglect.
The last bus at the university stop
idles in the cold fog of where the light
slips off the edge of Union Hall.
A final paragraph on the mystery
of The Mystery of Edwin Drood

before the desk clerk nods
to the loans librarian and there is a taciturn
understanding about locks and leavings.
I cannot depart entirely –
but go on browsing with all my former selves
along the crowded bookshelves of the night.
LOUIS ARMAND

TEMPORARY MEASURES

A plain with crows stumbling over its flatness. Stony rubbish bounded by the surveyor into property – things made not revealed. Formerly, one preferred theories because they reduced the world to a single principle. Now the same reasons disgust us – tabulating all the facts into an expansive, categorical desert. Crow-effigies and the wind’s empty shibboleths advancing through it fugue-like, testing our credulity. Its myth apes us – brazier-mouthed, one ear listening to another, a manifold eye. Priapic man. The highway shudders under freight close by. An argument foundering among what it discards like mirrored wreckage strewn across the sky. Nightly visitants, pale lights distributed like points on a dial: the re-entry trails of expired satellites. Clarifying a shape out of pre-dawn’s congelated gloom – red-eyed, drawn down as though to a resting place … In preparation for the task to come.
Few customers visit my shop. They watch the animals in the cages and seldom buy them. The room is narrow and there is no place for me behind the counter, so I usually sit on my old moth-eaten chair behind the door. Hours I stare at frogs, lizards, snakes and insects. Teachers come and take frogs for their biology lessons; fishermen drop in to buy some kind of bait; that is practically all. Soon, I’ll have to close my shop and I’ll be sorry about it, for the sleepy, gloomy smell of formalin has always given me peace and an odd feeling of home. I have worked here for five years now.

One day a strange small woman entered my room. Her face looked frightened and grey. She approached me, her arms trembling, unnaturally pale, resembling two dead white fish in the dark. The woman did not look at me, nor did she say anything. Her elbows reeled, searching for support on the wooden counter. It seemed she had not come to buy lizards and snails; perhaps she had simply felt unwell and looked for help at the first open door she happened to notice. I was afraid she would fall and took her by the hand. She remained silent and rubbed her lips with a handkerchief. I was at a loss; it was very quiet and dark in the shop.

“Have you moles here?” she suddenly asked. Then I saw her eyes. They resembled old, torn cobwebs with a little spider in the centre, the pupil.

“Moles?” I muttered. I had to tell her I never had sold moles in the shop and I had never seen one in my life. The woman wanted to hear something else – an affirmation. I knew it by her eyes; by the timid stir of her fingers that reached out to touch me. I felt uneasy staring at her.

“I have no moles,” I said. She turned to go, silent and crushed, her head drooping between her shoulders. Her steps were short and uncertain.

“Hey, wait!” I shouted. “Maybe I have some moles.” I don’t know why I acted like this.

Her body jerked, there was pain in her eyes. I felt bad because I couldn’t help her.
“The blood of a mole can cure sick people,” she whispered. “You only have to drink three drops of it.”

I was scared. I could feel something evil lurking in the dark.

“It eases the pain at least,” she went on dreamily, her voice thinning into a sob.

“Are you ill?” I asked. The words whizzed by like a shot in the thick moist air and made her body shake. “I’m sorry.”

“My son is ill.”

Her transparent eyelids hid the faint, desperate glitter of her glance. Her hands lay numb on the counter, lifeless like firewood. Her narrow shoulders looked narrower in her frayed grey coat.

“A glass of water will make you feel better,” I said.

She remained motionless and when her fingers grabbed the glass her eyelids were still closed. She turned to go, small and frail, her back hunching, her steps noiseless and impotent in the dark. I ran after her. I had made up my mind.

“I’ll give you blood of a mole!” I shouted.

The woman stopped in her tracks and covered her face with her hands. It was unbearable to look at her. I felt empty. The eyes of the lizards sparkled like pieces of broken glass. I didn’t have any mole’s blood. I didn’t have any moles. I imagined the woman in the room, sobbing. Perhaps she was still holding her face with her hands. Well, I closed the door so that she could not see me, then I cut my left wrist with a knife. The wound bled and slowly oozed into a little glass bottle. After ten drops had covered the bottom, I ran back to the room where the woman was waiting for me.

“Here it is,” I said. “Here’s the blood of a mole.”

She didn’t say anything, just stared at my left wrist. The wound still bled slightly, so I thrust my arm under my apron. The woman glanced at me and kept silent. She did not reach for the glass bottle, rather she turned and hurried toward the door. I overtook her and forced the bottle into her hands.

“It’s blood of a mole!”

She fingered the transparent bottle. The blood inside sparkled like dying fire. Then she took some money out of her pocket.

“No. No,” I said.

Her head hung low. She threw the money on the counter and did not say a word. I wanted to accompany her to the corner. I even poured another glass of water, but she would not wait. The shop was empty again and the eyes of the lizards glittered like wet pieces of broken glass.

Cold, uneventful days slipped by. The autumn leaves whirled hopelessly
in the wind, giving the air a brown appearance. The early winter blizzards hurled snowflakes against the windows and sang in my veins. I could not forget that woman. I'd lied to her. No one entered my shop and in the quiet dusk I tried to imagine what her son looked like. The ground was frozen, the streets were deserted and the winter tied its icy knot around houses, souls and rocks.

One morning, the door of my shop opened abruptly. The same small grey woman entered and before I had time to greet her, she rushed and embraced me. Her shoulders were weightless and frail, and tears were streaking her delicately wrinkled cheeks. Her whole body shook and I thought she would collapse, so I caught her trembling arms. Then the woman grabbed my left hand and lifted it up to her eyes. The scar of the wound had vanished but she found the place. Her lips kissed my wrist, her tears made my skin warm. Suddenly it felt cozy and quiet in the shop.

“He walks!” The woman sobbed, hiding a tearful smile behind her palms. “He walks!”

She wanted to give me money; her big black bag was full of different things that she had brought for me. I could feel the woman had braced herself up, her fingers had become tough and stubborn. I accompanied her to the corner but she only stayed there beside the street-lamp, looking at me, small and smiling in the cold.

It was so cozy in my dark shop and the old, imperceptible smell of formalin made me dizzy with happiness. My lizards were so beautiful that I loved them as if they were my children.

In the afternoon of the same day, a strange man entered my room. He was tall, scraggly and frightened.

“Have you … the blood of a mole?” he asked, his eyes piercing through me. I was scared.

“No, I haven’t. I have never sold moles here.”

“Oh, you have! You have! Three drops … three drops, no more … My wife will die. You have! Please!”

He squeezed my arm.

“Please … three drops! Or she’ll die … ”

My blood trickled slowly from the wound. The man held a little bottle and the red drops gleamed in it like embers. Then the man left and a little bundle of bank-notes rolled on the counter.

On the following morning a great whispering mob of strangers waited for me in front of my door. Their hands clutched little glass bottles.

“Blood of a mole! Blood of a mole!”

They shouted, shrieked, and pushed each other. Everyone had a sick person at home and a knife in his hand.
“Yeah…” sighed Simon (in Russian). “And what does it mean?” He quoted in English: “The eastern lamb winked at us from a distance.”

“Nu, lamb,” I responded in a frivolous mixture of English and Russian coloured by my heavy Israeli accent. “You know, like the one I have in my room… Uh, sorry. I meant lamp. Eastern lamp.”

“So what do you mean by winked?”

“That’s not a mistake.” I defended myself. “This is my style. The lamb… ho, sorry, the winking lamp is an image.”

If I was the reader, this is where I’d drop this essay thinking: Why do I need to bother with this mess? Luckily I’m the author and perhaps less luckily (depending on your perspective) this is my life story.

Simon was a Russian poet, who immigrated to Australia twenty years ago. I was what you call, a developing writer in Israel, an author of three fiction books, but God knows what I was in Australia.

“What’s that?” whispered Simon in despair and pointed at the following words: nekudat hashaka.

“I couldn’t find it in the dictionary,” I explained, “so I wrote it down in Hebrew.”

After a heated discussion we both discovered it meant point of contact (in geometry). Simon and I met after I had already been living in Australia 18 months, gradually coming to terms with the idea that I better find a new occupation. However, as Dovlatov, a Russian writer who immigrated to New York, once said: “You don’t become a writer because of the good life you’ll lead. This profession chooses its own people.” So Simon, who believed in Dovlatov and in doing things your own way, offered to help me learn how to write in English.

Those were strange days. I’d write a story first in Hebrew, translate it into bad English and then, sitting in the Acland Street cafes, discuss it with Simon in Russian in order to improve the English version. I spent...
all my money on dictionaries, thesauruses, idiom books and other aid material. I learned how English words can be tricky, sneaking into the Russian dictionary, whilst being absent from the Hebrew one or vice versa. A word, *ephebi*, that I suspected to be English but couldn’t find in any dictionary, turned to be of Greek origin, meaning *youths who have reached puberty*, and resided modestly in my book of phrase and fable. I also learned that when English speakers say *bigwig* they don’t mean a drag queen or Mary-Antoinette. My English is gradually improving, but reading has since become tedious, like watching movies in slow motion. Sometimes it takes me two or three days of reading for the protagonist to finish a meal, depending on the richness of the author’s vocabulary.

This is my second change of languages. My first poetic enlightenment occurred at the age of three in Siberia where I was born, when I read in front of the village babushkas: “The blue bird flies up to the sky. The blue bird goes high.” They appreciated it.

After immigrating to Israel aged 12, I spent my first years there as I do today, devouring books in Hebrew, a dictionary always in hand, not skipping a single unfamiliar word. It was easier then; perhaps because modern Hebrew doesn’t have as many words as Russian or English. For the last few years, having begun to get published in English in Australia, and even in the UK and the US, I have been working on my writing with a professional editor. I treat our relationship in the same romantic way painters and musicians treat their teachers. This is my way to refine my craft.

Writer-immigrants never stop writing in their new countries. Psychology claims that an immigrant’s degree of mastery of the new country’s language is a direct indicator of their sense of belonging. Usually writers who consider themselves “in exile” (which means they view their new condition as unwanted or temporary), keep writing in their own language. Writers who see themselves as immigrants, that is, that the move was their choice, are more likely to venture into flirtation with the new language. They won’t necessarily deny their first language, but might become bilingual (or multilingual) writers.

Some of the greatest literature by Russian writers of the twentieth century was written outside Russia by those who had fled abroad after the October revolution or who were later expelled by the Soviet authorities. Most of them continued to write in Russian. Those who became known in the West prior to their immigration, such as Dovlatov or Solzhenitsyn, could keep writing in Russian, relying on the publishers to translate them. Others waited until the Iron Curtain was lifted to publish in Russia again.
Nowadays many Russian writers reside in Paris, New York or Tel Aviv, but sell books in Russia. Even though he had an ambivalent relationship with Germany and enjoyed his comfortable life in America, Remarque kept writing his novels in German. We shouldn't forget though that he was famous in America prior to his immigration; Hollywood had made movies of his novels, so he could afford the luxury of writing in his own language.

Many writers who have changed the language they write in have had the advantage of prior knowledge. Nabokov, for example, had a governess who taught him English from early childhood. The Indian-American writer Bharati Mukherjee received a classical British education while living in Calcutta. On the other hand, Joseph Conrad, the son of a Polish nobleman, knew no English at all when at age 21 he went to sea on a British merchant ship. At 27 he received his British residency and ended up becoming one of the best descriptive writers who ever lived, writing in English, his third language.

Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972 and immigrated to America, is said to be one of the best essayists in the English language. “To read these masterful essays is to experience English at its finest,” Raul Nino, a prominent American critic, wrote about his work. Brodsky taught himself English in his twenties while still in Russia by reading and translating English poetry. He had a massive English–Russian dictionary and would browse through it again and again, checking every word and nuance. Yet, after arriving in America aged 32, he began learning English once more from scratch. Eventually he became a bilingual writer. He saw English as an instrument through which to discover the world; it was as indispensable for him as Russian. He said he would go mad if forced to choose only one language …

One of the greatest challenges for a writer in adopting a new language is developing a feel for it. Not only was Nabokov a gifted writer, he was also a passionate linguist, who was fluent in Russian and English, could write in French, and understood several other European languages. This enabled him to play with words’ meanings in varied tongues, and mock both the fussiness of Europeans as well as the bewildered response they evoked in America.

Extensive reading of good-quality books in a new language helps. Good writers have a sensual and aesthetic relationship with words. They follow their natural music. Using several languages provides a kind of “brain massage”: it sharpens our thinking and our sensory perceptions. I enjoyed discovering that the beautifully elastic word “emerald” sounds similarly in both Hebrew (يزماغד) and Russian (изумруд), despite the fact that
these three languages are all from different origins: Latin, Semitic and Cyrillic. As a fresh beginner you have the opportunity to revive words long forgotten by locals and can avoid the usage of clichés through simply not knowing them.

The adaptation process for a writer in a new country reminds me of the psychologist Maslow’s theory of the *Hierarchy of Needs* which demonstrates the lovely fact that we, human beings, are never happy. As soon as our most basic needs are satisfied, instead of being content we immediately move to chasing the higher ones (e.g. love or job satisfaction).

My adaptation process as a writer in Australia followed a similar pattern of perpetual dissatisfaction. Several writers I knew in Israel had warned me prior to my immigration that it was impossible to change languages. When my mastery of English had improved, rather than feeling victorious about defeating those gloomy predictions, I immediately became preoccupied with the next step up the ladder. I had lost my “technical excuse” not to write (even though I can still always whine about my poor grammar). It was then that I was forced to face the fundamental existential question all writers dread, but which torments you even more when you are an immigrant: *What do I have to say and to whom?*

The first step in overcoming that panic was to challenge my perception of Australians as *aliens*. I know I’m putting my entire future in this country at risk when I say so, but yes, I was so terrified of being too different to be understood that I simply ignored the fact that we are all made from the same DNA.

Perhaps my panic began when I first attended a local writers’ group and was told that you couldn’t publish a short story in Australia unless you wrote something about some small country-town with an old man, a tree and clouds. The locals, well-meaning people explained to me, are obsessed with their vast, mostly deserted landscapes, perhaps because their grip on them, historically, is so fragile.

In Israel I used to lead a lifestyle of an urban creature and my only experience of the country was a little park in Tel-Aviv. My previous country lacked empty spaces, or generally any space at all, and most of my stories occurred in big cities with traffic perpetually congested and residential buildings so dense that they literally climbed one on top of each other, like lovers.

My impressions of the Australian countryside weren’t as lyrical, as the writers’ group suggested was required, either. The roadside snooker pubs with their old jukeboxes inspired my writing more than clouds and trees. When I decided, out of despair, to write this down in an article, which
was then actually published, I experienced my most significant “cultural shock”. I just couldn’t believe that what I had to say about this country was actually of interest to the Australian public. However, it was only later on when my short story about suicide bombings in Israel was judged a finalist in a short story competition in Australia, that I began to seriously question the writers’ group’s advice, and especially doubt my own cultural stereotypes.

“My language is my country,” wrote the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. What did he mean? People often mistake the idea of country for a particular culture, a certain comfort and sense of belonging within their own milieu. Immigrants who find these components in their adopted countries still tend to refer to their previous country as their true home. Yet when revisiting it they often describe feelings of estrangement. They feel they are “insiders, but outsiders” at the same time. When asked whether he would go back to Russia after the fall of communism, Brodsky replied, “You cannot return to a country that no longer exists.” Brodsky captured the fluid, non-geographical quality of this mythical country. It is the same elusive country Pessoa was referring to.

If culture and sense of belonging make a country, then my country is my imagination. Imagination can be practiced everywhere when you are a writer. Readers will always respond to a good story. Many of us grew up on Andersen’s fairytales without being Danish.

Immigration can benefit a writer in many ways: it is a source of inspiration and can enrich a writer’s cultural and philosophical perceptions while presenting him or her with new moral dilemmas and standards. One of the first people to understand this was, of course, a Greek. Plutarch, who lived circa 100 AD, once said while trying to cheer up a friend doomed to exile: “Indeed the muses, it appears, called exile to their aid in perfecting for the ancients the finest and most esteemed of their writings.”

Even though immigration is always a stressful experience, it may facilitate the development of a writer’s unique voice (if, of course, he or she has the initial talent and the originality of thought). Your perception of your new country, like it or not, will be different to that of the locals and your descriptions will be fresh. Conrad brought to England a sense of life’s strangeness that was lacking in the Victorian tradition. I particularly enjoy writing about the Casino, as in Israel this is outlawed. Its cheap glamour becomes my personal fairytale.

Baraheni, one of Iran’s prominent writers, now living in Toronto, claims that writing poetry in another language is an entirely different
enterprise, which produces different poetry. I think it isn’t just language which influences the writer-immigrant’s work; it is the flavours of the new lifestyle and pop culture, the different values and especially the fabulous details, such as the ominous (to my foreigner’s eyes …) grin of Melbourne’s Luna Park.

Baraheni also mentions that when well-known writers immigrate, they sink into anonymity. He calls this “a tragic loss of identity.” But anonymity can also be fertile soil for inspiration. The hardships experienced can be successfully transformed into fabulous fiction – this is how so-called immigration literature originated. A fresh start in Australia actually freed me from writing on the topics I used to write about (mainly urban violence and loneliness, and post-army traumas) and gave me the opportunity to further develop my themes and writing style. From a quite rough and direct tone I’m drifting now towards more soft and dreamy sentences. Perhaps this is also because of this new language’s music and the way I perceive it.

Let’s be honest, this optimistic, even romanticised, view of the migration experience does not always apply. As Goran Simic, a Yugoslav poet who moved to Canada after the siege of Sarajevo in 1996 says: “There is a question of how much a writer can be transplanted from one country to another and survive. It’s like a flower. Sometimes flowers can’t survive in another country.” After immigrating Simic himself spent two years slinging boxes, tried briefly to run a restaurant business and then retired to live on his savings and write poetry.

Marina Tsvetayeva’s lines, “On this partially severed rope/I – a small dancer/I – a shadow of somebody’s shadow. I – a lunatic,” make me shiver every time I read them. I can’t help thinking about this as a vision of her end. Tsvetayeva immigrated to Paris shortly after the revolution (in 1925), living in poverty with her work mainly published in émigré publications. She alienated herself from the other Russian émigrés when she refused to sign their document belittling Mayakovsky’s poetic achievements because of his leftist politics. Eventually her husband, who meanwhile had found employment with the NKVD, returned to Russia. Tsvetayeva joined him in 1938 and the next year her husband was executed. In 1941 Tsvetayeva hanged herself.

The next danger facing those writer-immigrants, who finally believe they can find a readership in the new country, is that of falling in love with their newly shaped exotic identities. Lavish descriptions of colourful foreign foods, landscapes and traditions cannot stand on their own. Celebration or mourning of the past and the current immigration experience are good themes, but they should not be cultivated high on pedestals cut off from
the reality of the new country. We cannot be reduced, or tempted to reduce ourselves, to being foreigners only. First of all we are individuals; we must also be observers and thinkers. Good writers are also good psychologists, able to speak to their new readers not only through the prism of foreigner-protagonist, but also from the readers’ perspective.

Milan Kundera immigrated to France from Czechoslovakia. Up until 1984 all of his novels took place in his homeland, but since then he has developed a more cosmopolitan voice. He opposed repeatedly to being reduced to a writer-in-exile, demanding for himself the broader recognition he deserves as an international writer-philosopher and defender of individualism.

Bharati Mukherjee was told in the seventies by American publishers and critics that the only way for her to succeed as a writer would be to describe Calcutta’s upper-class exotica. She obeyed for a while and the price she paid, as she states in one of her essays, was to become a part of the mainstream writing. Eventually she rebelled and developed her own voice, writing novels about American reality.

In his book *Lolita*, Nabokov described the America of the 1950s like no one else – through a European foreigner’s eyes. Using his own “outsider” identity, and enriched by his life in different parts of Europe and America, Nabokov served Americans up their own paradoxical melange of sweet naïveté and vulgarity with a new dressing. He didn’t limit himself to one language either, publishing books in Russian and English. Moreover, while living in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s Nabokov wrote a few short stories in French. Critics regarded him as a literary anomaly, a foreign genius somehow working accidentally in both the Russian and English languages.

Ilan Stavans, a Professor of Latino studies at Amherst College and a notable writer, said that there are writers who overcome being from one country. He is a bilingual writer who was born in Mexico to Eastern-European Jewish parents and now lives in America. He says: “I write in English for Americans about topics they know little about, and I write in Spanish to Mexicans … I act as a bridge, I symbolise dialogue.”

I used to see the set of my multiple identities as a burden. I spent my early twenties trying to reduce and simplify my biography while developing my own fictional voice. I was afraid of confusing my readers, but also myself. However, while observing different aspects of my life I started to accept the parallel between them and the complexity of my identities: my different occupations, names, languages, lovers, and beliefs. The same process applies to my writing, which supposedly behaves the
way the human brain behaves during adolescence: creating more and more intricate connections and paths between its neurons, making it more and more complex. Every day I learn more about how to benefit from this complexity, especially as a writer. I still have a long way to go.

V.S. Naipaul describes people like himself (and myself!) as people “of no tribe”.

The image that comes to mind is that of a ghost floating between different dimensions. Perhaps I’m being too melodramatic, but I like the weightlessness and the freedom this image grants. It is so refreshing after the gravity of the communist parades and the religious rituals of my childhood home and the Israeli army service of my youth. Of course, there is always plenty of guilt about being the observer, the uprooted wanderer, but on the other hand there is something very human at its core. Being stripped of a country of origin, a mother tongue and a clear sense of belonging means what remains is a bare humanity which enables you to relate to each individual you encounter. And perhaps this is the significance of the writer-immigrant’s voice.

NOTES

3 The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs – the old Soviet security services and forerunner to the KGB.
The past year proved to be an eventful, perhaps in some ways even an exceptional, one for Australian fiction. It saw the publication of Alex Miller’s possibly finest novel to date, *Landscape of Farewell;* Tim Winton’s first novel for seven years, *Breath;* the final part of Steven Carroll’s trilogy chronicling the lives of an ordinary Melbourne family, *The Time We Have Taken;* a novel by the English author Nicholas Shakespeare set in his newly adopted home of Tasmania, *Secrets of the Sea;* some outstanding work by young, emerging Australian novelists; and a wealth of collected and anthologised short stories.

Alex Miller is twice winner of Australia’s premier literary prize (in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game* and in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*) and his 2007 novel, *Landscape of Farewell,* was among the five shortlisted for this year’s Miles Franklin Award. In probably any other than such a “star-studded shortlist” year, wrote the Melbourne *Age,* it would have been a “shoo-in” for the prize, which this year went to Steven Carroll for his *The Time We Have Taken.*

Set in present-day Hamburg and Queensland’s central highlands, Miller’s novel is the tale of two old men, one European, the other Aboriginal, reconciling the ghosts of their pasts. German history professor Max Otto, his career over and grieving for his dead wife, no longer feels he has anything left to live for. But after his valedictory lecture is interrupted by a feisty Australian academic, Vita McLelland, who persuades him to visit Australia, Otto discovers new meanings through a quiet friendship with Vita’s uncle Dougald. Dougald shares with Max the story of his great-grandfather, the indigenous warrior Gnapun, whose story is reimagined and retold in the novel. This is the story of a massacre, one that Miller apparently first heard as a sixteen-year-old British migrant working on a central highlands cattle station, and that has stayed with him for more
than fifty years. This, a fictionalised retelling of the historical Cullin-la-
Ringo massacre in Queensland of 1861, the largest recorded massacre of
Europeans by Aborigines, forms the setpiece at the heart of the book and
is a tour-de-force of imaginative prose. The Miles Franklin Award judges
said of the novel: “Inasmuch as the novel is a European’s telling of a
rare episode in Aboriginal history, Miller’s is a bold venture into perilous
literary territory; he succeeds with distinctive panache.” For me, Landscape
of Farewell was easily the most memorable and rewarding Australian novel
of 2007–08.

Breath is Tim Winton’s first novel for seven years (his last being the
Miles Franklin Award-winning Dirt Music). This is, in a sense, Winton’s
“coming-of-age” novel, a tale of surfing, sex and death. Set in a fictional
Western Australian coastal town of the early seventies, it chronicles the
friendship of Pikelet and Loonie, two boys who become hooked on the
endorphin-rush they get from surfing. They meet the enigmatic Sando,
a former champion surfer, and his wife, and find themselves attempting
to ride ever-more dangerous waves, culminating in the potentially deadly
offshore break known as the Nautilus. The novel is in part a meditation
on why people do dangerous, potentially self-destructive things – and
not only on the sea. “More than once since then,” its narrator Bruce Pike
reflects in later life, “I’ve wondered whether the life-threatening high
jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my
adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony
of drawing breath.” The physical sensations of the “completely pointless
and beautiful” sport of surfing, the darker moods of the Indian Ocean,
and the coastal landscapes of south-west Western Australia are all vividly
evoked in the novel in Winton’s spare, transparent prose. I was impressed
by Winton’s choice of ending: the final chapter modulates into a minor key
and the story resolves itself in a way that feels both inevitable and totally
believable. No problems are solved, no rewards or punishments handed
out, and the reader is left with a sense of contemplating the untidiness
and provisionality of real lives. Winton is clearly a writer at the top of his
form here and the superlatives of the publisher’s blurb are well-justified:
“Breath confirms him as one of the world’s finest storytellers, whose work is
both accessible and profound, relentlessly gripping and deeply moving.”

Melbourne writer Steven Carroll is another mature novelist who, like
Winton, seems to avoid the merely literary conventional. His The Time
We Have Taken is a beautifully crafted novel. It is the last in the trilogy
that began with The Art of the Engine Driver (2001) and The Gift of Speed
(2004) and that evokes, in elegiac, luminous prose, the ordinary suburban
lives of Melbourne family from the nineteen fifties onwards. The year is now 1970 and the suburb is about to celebrate its centenary: Rita is still preoccupied with her home, her estranged engine-driver husband Vic has moved north, and their son, Michael, is now a university student in the city. The Miles Franklin Award judges said of the novel: “Carroll’s novel is a poised, philosophically profound exploration … a stand-alone work that is moving and indelible in its evocation of the extraordinary in ordinary lives.” Carroll himself has said of the trilogy as a whole: “I’d like the books to be read rather like somebody picking up an urn, dusting it down and turning it around in their hands and looking at this exotic tribe being depicted. At some stage you realise that this exotic tribe is us.” Coming from a less talented writer, such an analogy might seem hubristic, but in Carroll’s case it seems entirely just. From what appears to be unpromising raw material – ordinary suburban lives – Carroll has crafted a remarkable work of literary art.

Queensland writer Matthew Condon’s The Trout Opera is a novel of epic dimensions – more than ten years in the writing and around 200,000 words in length. Its narrative spans the whole of the twentieth century, the lifetime of its central character, Wilfred Lampe, who lives out his solitary, outwardly uneventful bachelor existence in the Snowy River town of Dalgety in New South Wales. The novel begins in 1906 with preparations for an unusual school Christmas pageant – the opera of the book’s title, in which the six-year-old Wilfred is to play the trout – and closes with the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics at which Wilfred is to represent “The Old Man From Snowy River.” Interwoven with this is the story of a young drug addict in Sydney’s Kings Cross, Aurora Beck, which has elements of the crime novel or thriller. The writing is, by turn, realistic, surreal, satirical, lyrical, and philosophical. The Trout Opera has been described by its publishers as perhaps “the next Great Australian novel” and it has gained some glowing reviews (not least one from Peter Carey who called it “a triumph”). But I have to voice a minority view here and say that I wondered if rather than being a unified work on a grand scale it is not two novels welded into one: the stories of Wilfred Lampe and Aurora Beck, which, although they are drawn together by the end, seemed to me to read oddly in juxtaposition. This struck me as a novel that is perhaps too self-aware of its own literariness and its desire to be “epic”. It reminded me in some ways, in its scale, its method of story-telling, and its predilection for the bizarre, of the work of the American novelist Thomas Pynchon, who is probably not an easy writer to emulate successfully. This is perhaps being ungenerous to Condon. But personally I much preferred
reading the graceful and economical prose of Alex Miller which, by saying less, says more.

English-born Nicholas Shakespeare is the award-winning author of a biography of the travel writer Bruce Chatwin, three earlier novels, and a travel book, *In Tasmania*, about the island where he now makes his home for part of the year. Frankly, I found his novel *Secrets of the Sea* a disappointment. Its publishers, Harvill Secker, describe it as his “finest novel to date.” But I wondered. I found it sentimental, slightly rambling, and far too long. *Secrets of the Sea* is basically the story of the early years of a childless marriage and a young married couple’s search for substitute fulfillment, not really enough, for me, to sustain a novel of 400 pages. It is, to be sure, set in Tasmania, and there are splashes of local colour, but whether, as its London publishers claim, ‘the timeless beauty of the land’ and “the eccentric, often hilarious dynamics of island life” play any significant part I’m not so sure. But the problems really started for me with the introduction of the character known as Kish, a disturbed teenage offender, who is rescued from the wreck of a sailing ship by the main characters. I found great deal about Kish implausible: almost like a character from a 1950s American film such as *The Asphalt Jungle*, rather than a believable present-day teenager. There also seemed to be something cinematic in the novel’s perhaps too-conventional ending, which, without giving too much away, reminded me of the closing shot of the 1942 British film *Random Harvest*, minus the violins and the apple blossoms.

Trevor Shearston’s *Dead Birds* is a novel for readers who enjoy a narrative challenge. It is (as ABC Radio National’s *The Book Show* website put it) “a story told by a head in a jar on a boat.” A New Guinean tribesman is killed by a “spirit with lightning” (a white man with a gun), his head is preserved in a jar on the white men’s boat, and it is from the point of view of an *utamu*, the spirit of a beheaded man, that the novel is narrated. This is certainly an original concept, although as one reviewer has pointed out, while it might have worked brilliantly in a short story, it does impose limitations on the narrative of the novel since the head can only observe the other characters on the boat in half-comprehending way and never itself go ashore. Having said that, I enjoyed this novel, which is based on an actual expedition by an Italian explorer-naturalist and his crew up the Fly River in pre-colonial Papua in 1877. It an unusual novel of “first contact”, told from an indigenous point of view, and Shearston manages to evoke and sustain the impression of entering into the consciousness of a pre-colonial tribesman very convincingly.

For me, there were two outstanding, although very different, first novels by emerging Australian writers in 2007–08.
Perth writer Alice Nelson’s *The Last Sky*, which was shortlisted for the Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2006, is a quite stunning achievement for a first novel. The publisher’s blurb by Fremantle Press describes it as “a painful tale of lost love in wartime Shanghai,” although this is by no means a conventional tale of romance. Heartfelt, poignant, and filled with a sense of exile and loss, it explores and laments the failure of love for two women of different times and different cultures. Set in Hong Kong in the period leading up its handover to China in 1997, the novel takes the reader inside the failing marriage of the narrator, Australian academic Maya Wise, and her archaeologist husband. Adrift in a strange city, Maya meets an elderly Chinese man, Ken Tiger. Hearing his tale of a love affair sixty years earlier with the beautiful and enigmatic Jewish-Russian refugee Ada Lang, Maya sets out to piece together the story of Ada’s life and that of her brief and doomed marriage to a Shanghai tycoon. I was particularly impressed by the quality and assurance of Nelson’s sensuous yet spare, almost lapidary, prose, which seems capable of evoking vividly for the reader whatever it chooses: the Hong Kong waterfront, the Chinese desert, a Rembrandt painting. This author is clearly a major new talent and one to watch for in the future.

*Fear of Tennis* by David Cohen, a Perth-born writer, mainly of short stories, now living in Melbourne, was another standout Australian first novel of 2007–08. It is not often one comes across a *comic* debut novel – certainly not such an accomplished one. “It wouldn’t be a bad thing if *Fear of Tennis* became a cult-book: like *Seinfeld*, it makes Fabergé mountains out of everyday molehills,” the reviewer Owen Richardson wrote of it in the Melbourne *Age*. While not quite, like *Seinfeld*, “about nothing,” Cohen’s novel is indeed quirky and offbeat with a dry wit and an acute eye for some of the absurdities of contemporary urban life. Its hero, Mike Planner, is a nerdy, obsessive-compulsive type who works as a courtroom sound-recordist in present-day Perth. He is also a man who has a fixation with hygiene and bathrooms, public and private: “The sight of a well-designed, well-maintained public toilet always fills me with pleasure.” But Mike’s closeted existence is changed in unexpected ways after he happens to see his best mate from school, now a yuppie banker and tennis addict, on a bus. The plot resolves itself in the age-old comic tradition of a satisfying, “feel-good” ending with all loose ends tied. I thoroughly enjoyed this novel: for its intelligence, its understated humour, its engaging central character, and, not least, its sure grasp of the conventions of the difficult craft of comic writing. Once again, this author is a new writing talent worth watching.
Other Country is another first novel, from Perth writer Stephen Scourfield, who is probably best-known in his home city as the current travel editor of the West Australian newspaper. Other Country is the tale of two brothers, the Ace and Wild Billy, set against the backdrop of West Australia’s far-north Kimberley region. The brothers walk out their burnt-out father to make their own way in the world as cattlemen. Given the chance to run a station of their own, each responds differently to the challenges this brings, with ultimately tragic consequences. This is a novel marked by a strong sense of place. Almost every page seems to radiate the author’s passion for, and knowledge of, the Kimberley, its seasons, landscapes, people and lifestyle. What is otherwise an excellent and original novel is, however, rather let down by its closing 50 pages, in which it seems to suddenly quicken pace as it moves towards what I felt was a rather cinematic, almost melodramatic ending. This would have been a better novel, I think, with a less conventional ending, although its author writes passages of sparkling, descriptive prose.

Lilia’s Secret, which the publishers Vintage describe as “a seductive story of chasing love and ghosts in Mexico,” is a first novel by the Melbourne-based Erina Reddan, and it is much closer, at least in intent, to the “popular” novel than the others reviewed here. Reddan is a Walkley Award-winning journalist and a former ABC foreign correspondent who met her Mexican future husband, Victor Del Rio, while on assignment in French Polynesia, and it is his exotic family history that is said to have inspired the writing of the novel. The title character, Lilian de Las Flores, is apparently based partly on Reddan’s husband’s grandmother, a Mexican revolutionary of the early 1900s, who went on to allegedly murder at least five of her six husbands and to grow rich through peddling drugs and running brothels. Yet, paradoxically, she was also a midwife and a folk-healer. Its plot centres on a quest to determine whether the fictional Lilia was “a heroine or a monster.” It must be said that Lilia’s Secret is an undemanding read. The narrative is located solely in the present, although it seems to call out for being set at least partly in the past, and the story of Lilia is told, or rather explicated, mainly through passages of rather inexpert dialogue. As a result, no real sense of “Mexico” itself, its culture, or its past, emerges from the page, except maybe that of the first-time foreign visitor. Another issue here, at least for me, was that any English-language novel about Mexico and its “ghosts” must inevitably bear comparison with Malcolm Lowry’s 1947 classic Under the Volcano, which this one simply cannot.

Finally, two interesting first novels each take darker themes from within the country’s criminal subculture. Andrew Hutchinson’s debut novel
Rohypnol is a “New Punk” fiction that deals with the confronting subject of “date-rape” and the drug that facilitates it. Hutchinson presents the novel from the point of view of a date-rapist himself, in brutal and brutalising language, and his novel clearly relies to a large degree on both of these devices for its shock effect. Chris Womersley’s The Low Road is part noir-thriller, part tale of urban isolation, in which a young petty criminal with a suitcase of stolen money and a fugitive doctor find themselves being pursued by an ageing gangster. It will be interesting to see if these young authors can repeat the critical acclaim they have received for their first novels with their next.

The past year also continued to show evidence of the sheer vitality in Australia of the short story as a literary form. In addition to David Malouf’s magisterial The Complete Stories, a collection of his shorter fiction (some of it of novella length), and Robert Drewe’s The Best Australian Stories 2007, Westerly received four short-story collections in 2007–08: Victorian writer Anthony Lynch’s Redfin, the Western Australian Susan Midalia’s A History of the Beanbag and Other Stories, Sydney writer Angus Gaunt’s Prime Cuts and The Rumours Are True, a collection of stories by sixteen creative writing students at Queensland University of Technology. Each of these collections is worth reading. Anthony Lynch, whose stories have a spare, snatched-from-life quality, is probably the most assured writer, although the work of Susan Midalia, whose stories tend to adopt an almost mini-essay-like form, has an engaging, idiosyncratic charm.

“Don’t let anyone tell you the Australian short story is dead. It’s thriving … It seems there are many hundreds, maybe thousands, of people out there writing short fiction,” Robert Drewe writes in his lively introduction to The Best Australian Stories 2007. And he produces the evidence to back up this statement, describing the mounds of manuscripts and magazines he sifted through while compiling the collection, which daily overflowed his post-office box at Tintenbar, New South Wales, and threatened in the end to almost swamp his home: “… so many new stories under the one roof – one thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two stories in all – that you can smell them when you enter the house.” In his introduction to the collection, Drewe challenges the “naysayers” who argue that no one really publishes short fiction in Australia today. On the contrary, he points out, there are a surprising number of small (some of them fairly new) Australian literary publications that do. He lists twenty publications that are represented in the anthology. (Westerly itself gets a mention here, and New South Wales writer Ryan O’Neill’s ‘July the Firsts’ from Westerly 51 is one of the stories included.) Drewe then goes “out on a limb” to state that “there have never been more story-friendly Australian publications than at the moment.”
All this is very encouraging for aspiring and new Australian writers of short fiction. Although, as Drewe says, the real crunch for a short-fiction writer is not getting a single story published but rather getting a book-length collection of stories into print. For established authors such as David Malouf, this is obviously less of a problem. Relatively few Australian publishers are willing to take a risk on a short-story collection by a relative unknown. Two which are, however, as Drewe points out, are Black Inc. and the University of Queensland Press. The Best Australian Stories 2007 shows just how rich and diverse the genre is—although Robert Drewe in his willingness to read unpublished material for his anthology seems to have set himself a yearly task of almost herculean proportions. The 2006 edition of Drewe’s anthology was apparently an Australian bestseller; this deserves to be one too.

Fiction Received 2007–2008

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


ROBERT JAMES BERRY

RISES

The idiom of night
is another language.

After far thunder makes a last
bellicose grumble in the gulf

garages yawn with arch lights
and the street furniture takes possession.

A moon sandwiched under the chimney pots
rises

over the antennae of houses
the scribble of power cables
the alder branches

a naked harvest crescent.

The Tuesday trash cans dream
and stones here longer than any neighbours
or human culture

confide nothing to the seldom walker with dogs
or a cold dowdy poet.
SUB ANTARCTIC

So far south rituals are slower
the surge of change creeps like ice
a name spelt out on diesel tanks
never rots, nor the giant petrels
scraping over the dead.

The whole hill moves with rabbits
chewing this island into the sea.
History here has been slaughter.

In the tussock are rusted boilers: penguin digesters.
The smell’s lasted longer than the outrage.

This island inherited from the wind
on a gravelly beach an elephant seal
lumbers out behind an old digester
and bellows.
THE LIMITS OF MY LANGUAGE ARE THE LIMITS OF MY WORLD.
WITTGENSTEIN

i.m. Tony Statkus

As bit players, the limits of everyday activity are the limits of our lives. You are half out the door, going who knows where. Perhaps you can tell us when we meet again. We don’t expect cards or letters, emails or texts, and only our limited senses would ask for photos of the other side.

Did you leave your watch behind? I picture Sue running after you, shouting, “You forgot your watch, you forgot your watch.” Time is only for us now, empty arms of the clock hold us back from joining you. When you were sick and tired of it all, you left. I can understand that. Mind the step, wipe your feet. I expect we will follow you in time. They chisel years on tombstones, don’t they, yet facts are putty in historians’ hands after deeds are done. It’s a variety show, all this song and dance. Total it up: More love than hate,
more laughter than tears. Do you need
a torch? Or is that light at the end of the tunnel
light enough? Perhaps you can send us
a clue or two, telling us, What happens next?
Eh? Tell me that.
and you, you say, know nothing of this
since it all comes to you in comfortably distant images
(this new century already proving murderous enough
suicide bombers flying to bits in their rage of martyrdom
taking non-martyrs with them wherever possible especially women and children
and the drive-by shooters from grandiloquently named organizations
who sometimes fail even to claim their proud responsibility
and the children from remote villages
sold for sex in Bangkok and cheerfully infected by those preferring virgins
and the AIDS epidemic like a tribal ghost stalking the African nations
and the child-soldiers conscripted into rebel armies of so-called liberation
and those other millions of little ones toiling from dawn to dusk
who never see school or a reasonable wage
and those thousands grateful for grass bread in Northern Afghanistan
and the drug culture shadowing every land like a cloud
– you, you look in the nonchalant mirror
of a magazine or the Plato’s cave wayang of a jumbo-size TV screen
and suppose you know what it’s like out there
where the sky is full of holes through which pour streams of fire
and jagged ice
and soup of any vile description is a luxury
and a raw potato discovered in a field
is something to fight to the death for)
M I K E  W I L L I A M S

T H E  G I G

Harp, do I look like the kind of man who would have a petty cash book?

Harp considers this for a moment, his lean face frozen, as though he’s a little stoned. Well, half his luck if he is. His dreadlocks make me want to scratch my own scalp. How the hell does he wash his hair, anyway?

He slides into a lopsided grin.

Er, no you don’t, actually.

Then for pity’s sake stop going on about it. Just get the money from the till and get thee to a bakery.

Right. Just thinking about the accounts …

Jesus, Harp, stop thinking about the accounts – not your concern. I manage to pay you every week, don’t I?

Yup.

Well then.

Okay, okay.

He opens the till, grabs a note and walks out of the shop, a thin shadow in his black shirt and jeans. I watch him stop and squint into the streaming sunlight; a creature of the night is Harp. I remind myself to get to that window, a little too grimy, even for The Creased Page.

A couple of customers are shuffling their way along the shelves, one in crime, one in science fiction, both content to browse without me annoying them. I like that in a customer. I can usually tell what kind of fiction a person is into the first time I see them.

I sit behind the counter and continue cleaning dust jackets of some hardback Atwoods, all in wonderful nick, just a little surface dirt. Some guy moving overseas had offloaded them yesterday. I put Alias Grace aside for myself.

Harp comes back with almond croissants and carefully folds the receipt and places it in the till, along with the change.
Coffee or tea? Harp asks.
Tea, I tell him.

He wanders out back to make it while I set up a display of the Atwoods on the counter. I know at least three regulars who will snap them up as quickly as look at them. Mr Science Fiction comes to the counter with an old paperback: Asimov.

Can’t get enough of the Asimov’s, I tell him.

He mutters something that I don’t catch and I glance up as I ring the sale through. He looks away as I pass him the book, which he stuffs into his jacket pocket, and shuffles off. He can’t be much more than Harp’s age and I remember where I’ve seen him – washing windscreens at the lights a couple of blocks away. He’s dressed in jeans and flannel shirt, a black beany. No shoes. A ragged beard. He reeks of cigarettes and stale sweat.

Just our crime reader remains as we clear space on the table by the old couch in the centre of the shop. Harp pours tea and I consider the almond croissants he’s put onto a plate.

So, you coming to the gig tonight, or what? Harp asks.
Oh, yeah, the gig … I’d forgotten.

Shit, you’re hopeless.

Harp plays guitar, bass, drums, and God knows what else. Songwriter. Can sing, too, in a Neil Young kind of way. He’s played the odd track in the shop from time to time. No one’s complained yet, and I’d leaned back into it myself.

Well, I’ll come. Where is it?
Front bar at Miller’s. After ten.

I know the place: the kind of bar where Charles Bukowski would feel at home. TAB on one side, pool hall on the other; cheap drinks, cheap food, and they crank up the sound. Perfect for Harp and his crew.

We amble through the morning with a slow stream of paperback exchangers, a uni researcher looking for out of print history volumes, and a Len Deighton fan delighted to come across a hardback edition of *Funeral in Berlin*: we spend a good ten minutes comparing notes on classic espionage thrillers.

The afternoon, though, is quiet so I send Harp off early to rehearse with his band. I sit down around four-thirty and drink some more tea, thinking about the evening ahead. Apart from a movie two weeks ago and evening strolls around the local nooks, I haven’t been out for ages. A couple of bands, a drink or two will do me good.

It’s still bright and warm outside as I turn the sign on the door to show back in five minutes, and walk up the road to The Class Act. Marion’s on
the phone and motions for me to take a chair. I don’t. I walk around touch-
ing various items of clothing on the racks. There’s a suit I like the cut of,
and if I had reason to wear a suit, I’d be tempted.

That would fit you a treat, says Marion putting down the phone. Could
do you a deal on it.

I glance at the price tag. Lord, you’d have to, I tell her.

So, what’s up? she inquires, writing something into her order book.

Then she puts it aside, her hands on the counter, and looks at me.

Wondering if you’d like to go and see a band tonight.

Oh? Which band?

Harp’s band – Gutter Cowboys.

God … how old are we?

Me, I’m fifty-three … I don’t know about you – you won’t tell me.

I still won’t.

Well, you don’t look it.

Charmer. So where are they playing?

Miller’s, where else?

Jesus, you sure know how to treat a woman … that place is a hole.

Sure it is, but it’s an institution.

Yes, and people are locked up in those.

So, how about it then?

You’ll have to buy me dinner somewhere nice first.

Done. Pick you up after eight.

Okay. I must be mad.

I only like mad women.

I’ve seen the scars. Off with you now, I’ve got a late order I must do.

Remember, somewhere nice to eat.

Trust me.

I never trust a man who says trust me.

So be it, I tell her, and walk out into the fading afternoon.

Marion and I had met at a book launch I’d set up at the shop for a local
poet. We’d been out for coffee and the odd meal and ended up in the sack
a couple of times. Neither of us had ever broached the possibility of a more
permanent relationship. We’d both been there and done that with little
success. Still, you always think in those alone moments that it could work
if you had another stab at it.

There’s nothing much doing in the last hour of trading, so I read some
Alias Grace and remind myself that I really must clean that window in the
morning. Here, in the ticking silence of the shop, there is only me in a
galaxy of books.
We settle into a quiet table at The Pasta Bowl. Good food, great wine list, and it’s all crisp table cloths and spotless cutlery and glassware that sparkles in the subdued lighting. Anton, who knows me from all the other times I’ve splashed out on my pasta addiction, corkscrews an Italian red with waiterly grace.

We’ll you’re off to a good start, Marion goes on. This just might make up for dragging me down to Miller’s. What time are they on, anyway?

After ten sometime.

All right ... time to prepare myself. Now, let’s look at this menu.

Go ahead, I know what I want.

Don’t tell me – you always have the same.

Er ... yes.

How boring of you.

That’s me. I rather see it as comfortable.

I see. I warn you, that’s why I left Harry – I wanted a husband, not a couch. Someone told him once he danced like a doctor or a librarian. Do you dance, Mr Books?

I dance like a horse whisperer. It’s something to behold.

Goodness, I can’t imagine.

Marion takes a sip of red, her eyes smiling at me over her glass.

We’re just good for the odd tumble, you and I. Is that wicked of me?

Very wicked, I tell her. And I was fearful you wanted commitment.

No, I’m old enough to be realistic. That’s the beauty of age, don’t you think? Anyway I’m ready to order, so why don’t you call that rather attractive young man over.

Why don’t I.

I signal to attentive Anton and he glides over, his long apron blindingly white. Marion orders. I drink some wine, feeling ... well, comfortable.

Miller’s is full on when we get there, shoulder to shoulder, a swaying herd of beer-soaked aficionados of the loud and pumping. I pay our five dollars door charge and some bored young thing stamps our wrists with purple ink. Marion shouts into my ear, God, they should pay me, and I resent being branded.

I give her a “there there poor Marion” look. She mouths fuck off, but I lead her through the dense forest of bodies to the one spot against the long bar that is miraculously free from sweating humanity. The blackboard on
the wall informs me it’s Mongrel Country dug in on the stage and giving their all. Into the microphone, the lead singer drawls, You think you’re Cinderella, but you don’t fit the shoe ... but closer to home, Marion shouts, For the love of God get me a vodka and tonic. I try and make eye contact with the girl behind the bar, but she’s got her hands full with trendier punters.

I shout to Marion, Might take a while.

Typical, she shouts back. She hoists herself onto a bar stool, clutching her bag on her lap. We are not amused, apparently. I spot Harp in a tight huddle with his band, all holding pints and looking a little worn. According to the blackboard, the Gutter Cowboys are up next.

I'm starting to tap into Mongrel Country energy and I squeeze Marion’s arm. Drink, she mouths. I have another crack at ordering and, mercifully, the girl takes pity on me. Two minutes later, Marion has her vodka and I’m gripping a green Heineken bottle. Marion actually smiles at me and I notice her foot tapping to the mongrel dogs who preach.

When Mongrel Country finish their set, the house music offers no respite for the audio senses and I give up trying to converse with Marion. I keep her supplied with vodka and tonic and she seems resigned to the fact she’s stuck here at least for the next set. Harp brushes past me and says, Real glad you made it, man. He notices Marion then, Oh hi.

Hello, Harp, says Marion, but he’s off and heading for the stage to set up. Oh to be young, says Marion. I nod in my comfortable way. Yup.

Harp’s band is some sort of folk/rock/blues fusion with mostly originals and a couple of covers thrown in for good measure. Harp’s vocals are soulful and he can turn a good lyric, I’ll say that for the lad. Looking around at the crowd, you can tell the women are drawn to young Harp, the pale leanness of him, the sombre clothes and, of course, the songs. There’s no doubt he’s the driving force behind the Gutter Cowboys. I swear Marion’s a little moist of eye when they do their cover of Famous Blue Raincoat. I must say, I didn’t expect a Leonard Cohen from Harp. But I guess it kind of fits.

Marion leans in to me a little and I put my arm around her shoulders. Harp, I owe you one.

Outside in the blessed cool air we slowly walk back to the car; the takeaways and late cafes are rattling with people leaving the pubs and cinemas. My hearing’s still a little muffled from the amps in the pub. I reckon you enjoyed that, I tell Marion.

Despite my earlier reservations, yes, I did. Though I’m not sure I’m ready for Mongrel Country just quite yet. You seemed to like them.

I did, in a “comfortable” sort of way.

Marion punches my arm. You stop that, she says.
So what now then?
Back to my place. Your sink will be full of dishes, and you never vacuum.

Outrageous … the sink’s only half full and I do vacuum, sometimes.
I’d rather not risk it, thank you.

***

The luminous hands of my watch display 3:35. Marion’s dead to the world. She lives in a quiet street, not like my flat above the shop on the main drag, where there’s always something going on. I’m not used to the quiet, or waking to it. I ease out of bed and pad quietly to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I look out at Marion’s night-shadowy garden, as I wait for the kettle to boil, thinking about the gig last night and how Harp had drawn the crowd. I’ve grown attached to the lad since he came to work for me and did his best to organise my bookshop chaos. This is one of those times I regret the no marriage, no kids scenario. My life seems suddenly tired and empty. I can’t sleep now, so I creep back to the bedroom for my clothes and dress in the kitchen as the tea brews. I write a note for Marion and spend ten minutes on thinking what to write. I end up with: I couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to disturb you, so thought it best to go … thanks for suffering the crowd last night. I’ll ring you from the shop in the morning. My love, A.

Back at The Creased Page, I make more tea and instead of going upstairs to the flat I prowl around the shop, holding the warm mug and eventually slump down on the couch. All the silent books heavy and dark with words. I’m an old book rat lost in my hole.

***

Harp shakes me awake. The lad has a coffee made, and toast with marmalade. His lean pale face is a mask of concern framed by his greasy dreadlocks.

I thought you were dead, he says, as his fingers construct a cigarette.

Thanks, I mutter. I wave a cramped arm around. Then the kingdom would have been yours.

Wow, he says, not looking up from his construction of tobacco and paper. And then he asks, So how was the gig?

It was good. I was impressed.

You’re just saying that.

You know me better than that, Harp. If I thought it was shit, I’d say so.
He nods thoughtfully, placing the thin wire of the cigarette between his lips.

Who was the chick?

I wince at the thought of Marion hearing herself referred to as a “chick”.

That was Marion, and probably still is, I tell him.

Oh, yeah, that’s right. Hey, it’s time we opened the shop, he says.

You’re right. Can you do that? I need a shower and a shave.

Yup.

Thanks.

I squint into the sunlight breaking through the grime of the window. I really have to get to that. I eat toast. I drink coffee.

Didn’t know you were into Leonard Cohen, I say.

Yeah, man … **fuck, how could you not be?**

How indeed.

I didn’t really think you were dead … you just looked kinda comfortable.

There’s that word again.

What word?

Never mind.

Harp shakes his head. I’ll smoke this outside, he says, and then we’ll open for business. Halfway to the door, he turns and, caught in a beam of morning sun, he’s like some grungy angel.

You really liked the gig?

Yes, I did.

Hmm, he says. Fuck, eh.

Harp walks out into the hard white light.

I should move, but I pick up *Alias Grace*. No harm in a couple of pages.

(*Mongrel County lyrics written by Max Ducker; Mongrel Country – used with permission*)
R O N  P R E T T Y

K A T E  D A N C I N G

Kate dancing downstairs, her shoes in hand, her hair swirling like a skirt. Hair fine as a web and just as entrancing. The spider spins by night unwinding out of itself, wrapping its flying moments in silken thread to suck them dry. For sustenance, release and the empty dawn where Kate comes dancing, her long hair swirling like a skirt like a silken web.

Night, the pallid flicker of insect flight and the dawn we wait for will glitter like a dewdrop. Don’t, she whispers, please don’t. Restless in her sleep she murmurs against the dark, the night forcing an entrance where she dances downstairs in her dreams, her shoes in her hands, her hair the web. Outside the spider building its silken symmetry.

Night hides its surprises as drifters on their filaments attest; and Kate, stripped of all but pain and a bony will to dance, comes ever descending the stairs. She does not pluck her eyebrows, now but looks in the mirror at her thin thighs, her restless arms. In her dreams the spider spins as she dances downstairs. She cries
in the night like a moth, sucked dry,
androgynous, resentful. At her desk she writes
such nightmares entitled spider web, or
descending (ever dancing) the stairs.

Omnipotent
she seems as she writes but cannot find an end
to her flight; and the spider
who spins every night – he loves her (his silken moth)
where she comes, ever dancing, the stairs.
**DIANE FAHEY**

**BEFORE THE HEAT**

Down the garden, letting the dawn wind
travel through my body, transport me
with freshened sight to here. I pluck weeds,
skirt the pumpkin vine ramping out from
the young apple tree, tapping its strength.
A door slams. Inside I find my mother
beautifully asleep, lying fish-shaped
across her bed, wrapped in a beach towel
the greens of algae and leaf; deep in her hip-bone,
the infection we live to outwit.
The touch lamp is on: light answerable
to fingertips. All night, cool air streamed in.
Soon I’ll shroud each window, draw up the moat bridge,
seal us inside this peace we have made.
BARRY O’DONOHUE

CUT GRASS

for Kaye

There is something sensual about newly cut grass you say,
something earthy and primitive and wild and seemingly abandoned,
something agricultural or entomological, even strangely oceanographic,
with the scent of farms and rainforests and sweeping drylands,
of salt winds on the breath of spring or on your lovers lips,
or the burnt autumn bark or the newly unfurled rose,
something basic and seductive the way each blade is blunt,
shredded and feather like, a tattered wing fallen from the loft

of a rowdy cage of untamed fettered birds,
or like a man’s face in the morning, its sleepy skin
and outrageous stubble,

and yes you like men

like the smell of their cologne and their sweat,
the texture of their sweat on your skin,
like the way their biceps curve when they flex or relax,
like the way their thigh muscles are weighty and the way their belly
falls gently towards their genitals,

ah yes you like men

and their summer folly or their winter mystery,
like the way they enact the endless tragedy of their love
and as newly cut grass they bleed all through the dry earth
to renew only slowly and with the languor of stone
to the soft angelic kiss of a morning dew.
A review essay of non-fiction represents on the one hand an impossible task but on the other hand allows the possibility making connections between various genres and modes of non-fiction that might not otherwise be made. But one must be cautious. Given the extraordinary depth and variety of writing that is covered by this category, it may be worth considering more but shorter essays and to a certain degree that is the strategy adopted here, probably pushing readers’ tolerance of engaging with brief overviews of literary criticism, literary history, literary biography, autobiography, biography (and other types of life writing), cultural histories or cultural studies.

So the perplexing question remains: How does one write let alone do justice to the disparate array of texts that fall within the category of non-fiction?

In the first instance I will take a leaf out of Graham Huggan’s contribution to the Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism and Transnationalism*. Here Huggan reasserts a fundamental principle important to his survey and to Australian literature in general. He argues that “Australian literature had been constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of the history of social relations in Australia” (vi). This principle can be applied to writing in general, and is particularly apt in relation to the connections that can be made across the various types of non-fiction. However, I would also like to introduce another, perhaps ludic element important to making those connections. Deane Blackler’s study of German writer W. G. Sebald, points to the circumstance that in postmodern times the contract between writer and reader is no longer underwritten by the surety of generic codes and conventions. Sebald posits the idea of the disobedient reader, but this allows the general possibility of reading to be disobedient.
I can but hope that the conjunction of the constitutive and the ludic within this review will be not only be productive but also fun. I have chosen to proceed thematically. This strategy, coupled with limitations placed on the genre of the review essay, means that some works did not get a guernsey and some did not get as much attention as they deserved. For these oversights and omissions I apologise in advance. Thematically, the review essay considers issues of place, cultural politics, literary and other lives, and finally questions of individuals and power. What follows emerges out of perceived dialogues between texts.

Country
Country or place features as an important category in this year’s non-fiction. Some literary biography might feature in such an organising category, on this occasion we have three publications. Megan Lewis’s *Conversations with the Mob* is essentially an extended piece of photojournalism, depicting an account of the author’s encounter and exchange with the Martu people primarily with the Parnngurr and Punmu communities. The book seeks to balance the photographs that provide an intimate insight into Martu life with a commentary seeking to challenge the construction of recent stereotypes that have come to dominate media representation of indigenous peoples.

However the two other collections stand out if only because they accidentally provide a provocative dialogue. On the one hand we have *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina. It is a collection of short memoirs and stories that represents a welcome addition to Fremantle Press’s growing and extensive list of work by Indigenous writers. On the other hand we have *Contrary Rhetoric: Lectures on Landscape and Language* by John Kinsella and edited by Glen Philips and Andrew Taylor. This is a series of lectures presented by Kinsella in the spring of the years 2002 – 2004 are published largely as delivered.

As I have already said, these two collections inadvertently create a dialogue concerned with different understanding and desires of what it means to be connected to country – not necessarily a connectivity that is simple and benign. The underlying theme of *Heartsick for Country* is the recognition of difference linked through a belief in and a desire for continuity. In the Introduction, Ambelin Kwaymullina notes that:

This continent, named Australia by Captain Matthew Flinders in the nineteenth century is a land of many countries – and for every country,
there is a people. We are the Nyungar, Palkyu, Martu, Gumilaroi, Worrima, Bardi, Indjarbandi, Palawa, Tanganekald, and Meintangk, and we are many others. (7)

In challenging the grand and unifying gesture of Flinders by enumerating different peoples and countries, Kwaymullina goes on to describe a shared creation story that operates across time:

We were formed with the hills and the valleys, the water the sky, the trees and the plants, the crows and the kangaroos, created by the ancestors who gave meaning and life to our world. And for each of us, our country is not just where we live, but who we are. . . . Our blood is carried by the rivers and the streams, our breath is on the wind, and our pulse is in the land. (7)

Of course, European invasion may be seen as an irretrievable rupture – that which once was can never be again. However, the memoirs and stories represent an irrevocable belief in the power of that continuity regardless of the havoc European settlement brought to peoples’ lives. In a sense lives were tragically disrupted but life as a principle of continuity was not. The problem was a European one; a failure to understand and to learn connection to country as a way of being here. This is well documented in Bob Morgan’s contribution “Country – A Journey to Cultural and Spiritual Healing,” (202-220) and forcefully expressed in Greg Lehman’s “Seal and Snake”, describing the actions of sealers:

… problems began when the British decided to stay. Killing began. Not just of cartela, the seal, but us Palawa mob too. That’s the simple truth. Lots of killing. All this happened because of one thing: the sons of England did not know tunapri nmanta. This is our knowing that comes from the old stories, handed down for a thousand generations. It gives our Law and a way to know the world that works for everyone. But the sealers and soldiers would not learn. (134–5)

In the spirit of Lehman’s argument, Kwaymullina summarises the European dilemma:

with every action taken to “claim” this continent, the British only succeeded in creating greater and greater distance between themselves and the territory they wanted to make their own. For there can be no
belonging in country without honouring and respecting the spirit of this living land. (12)

Kwaymullina’s summary is a challenge to Australian-European sensibilities, and, to a degree, John Kinsella’s lectures can be read a response to those challenges. Kinsella is fascinated with landscape – in all its diversity – and its relationship with poetic language. For Kinsella landscape is determined by the interaction between two principles – prospect and refuge: “vista, [is] all we can see in the clear open space; refuge is the “place or places to hide, most often with limited lines of sight” (14–15). And it is the interaction between the two that for Kinsella produces a “safe and functional environment” (15).

However, Kinsella precisely understands that a very long history of the domestication of landscape, perhaps culminating in modern colonial agricultural practices, contributes to the fact that “[l]andscape is a mass of contradictions and paradoxes” (15). When considering the case of Western Australia, Kinsella writes:

“Opening up” the land of Western Australia for farming or mining might bring wealth and prosperity to some, but will mean loss and oppression to others. That is on the human level. The opening of land, the changing of the surface, will inevitably mean the destruction of “nature.” (15)

The use of the term “surface” and the qualification of “nature” is telling. Nature, here, is understood to be a construct, the social opposite culture. The idea of surface throwing into light the idea of depth produces a much more complex problematic. If there is something more than “surface,” what is it and what influence does it have? Part of the answer appears to lie in Kinsella’s assertion about the dynamic nature of landscape poetry:

landscape poetry is concerned with how people go about managing, abusing, controlling and freeing the land. It is a language of control and liberation at once. (15)

In other words landscape poetry is inescapably ideological. Nevertheless, there is something in Kinsella’s response to landscape that seeks to assert a sense of belonging that can somehow transcend the ideological. Not surprisingly, if not inevitably, this desire, if you like, is interrogated in the essay “Myths of the Wheatbelt.” This is where Kinsella grew up.
He is perfectly familiar with what might be called surface stories – the social conservatism of the area, the radicalism of agricultural workers, the problems of disaffected rural youth. However, Kinsella pays deference to the indigenous people of the area believing that “the songs of the custodial owners of the land are as strong as ever” (164). He is aware that “their myths were not the myths of The Farm, and that somewhere between the two mythologies, there was a silence” (164). It is in the desire to bridge the two mythologies, to fill the silence, that Kinsella hopes to find a belonging that will allow Europeans to honour and respect the spirit of the land.

However, Kinsella is faced with a dilemma. For the moment his language draws heavily on a European tradition and perhaps this is why he regards himself as an international regionalist, not only through the circumstances of his life, but also through the discovery that similar histories within different regions might provide a key to a language that can articulate a sense of belonging without having to submit to the languages of nationalism.

**Plays, Prams and Poetry**

There are three significant contributions to the area of literary criticism and history: Hilary Glow’s *Power Plays: Australian Theatre and the Public Agenda*, Gabrielle Wolf’s *Make it Australian: The Australian Performing Group, The Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre*, and Ann Vickery’s *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women’s Poetry*. Also of importance is Huggan’s *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*.

Huggan invokes, in the first instance, the clashes between White and Lebanese youth in 2005 in the beachside suburbs of Cronulla. Huggan deploys this event to investigate and interrogate the place of race in the Australian cultural imaginary, suggesting that, as in Cornel West’s reading of the “foundational structures of American society”:

> in Australia, for all its official commitment to multiculturalism and social egalitarianism; for all its public revulsion of the mob violence and ideological extremism which periodically resurfacing in the nation’s history, provide reminders of what some persist in seeing . . . as the dark side of the Australian Dream. (v–vi)

Of course, in alluding to the work of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, Huggan also signals the importance of the debates around nationalism and postcolonialism. He avowedly argues the case for a postcolonial approach to the question of race and Australian literature, particularly as he casts
race as belonging to a “transnational imaginary” which, as far as Huggan is concerned, operates within the dynamic relation between the local and the global. Further, he also argues that Australian literature must be seen as exceeding the national and operates in a global network of production and consumption, again reinforcing a necessary postcolonial approach to the question at hand.

The work then operates theoretically as well as serving as a literary survey. Huggan makes significant use of Jon Stratton’s and Ghassan Hage’s work in addressing the complex ideological mix of the social policies of integration, assimilation and multiculturalism as they pertain to the question of race and the constitution of identity. As such, Huggan’s Australian Literature provides an important introduction to the scope of discussions, arguments and conversations about postcolonialism, race and the transnational.

Ann Vickery’s Stressing the Modern to a certain degree addresses similar concerns to Huggan’s but does so through case studies that provide concise literary biographies of seven women poets – Mary Gilmore, Marie Pitt, Mary Fullerton, Anna Wickham, Zora Cross, Lesbia Hartford, and Nettie Palmer. The list itself is indicative of the strength and importance of this work, which, in itself, is marked by an impressive combination of research and theoretical acuity. Not only does Vickery’s examination of the lives and work of these writers redress a significant absence in Australian literary history but also underscores their emergence within a critical period of the social transformation of Australia. Vickery, in noting that “the first part of the twentieth century was a prolific period for women poets,” argues:

Their work challenged previously given roles of gender and negotiated a rapidly changing social changing social climate . . . Poetry written between 1900 and 1940 reflected the suffrage movement, as well as the effects of Federation, World War 1, increasing industrialisation, emergent discourses of sexology and psychology. New subject formations were taking place around gender, race and nationalism. Women writers would also move between contrasting sensibilities and styles. (3)

These seven writers then operate at a time when Australia faces the twin challenges of trying to respond to its change from aggregation of colonies to that of independent nation, as well being subject to the radical political, social and industrialisation that characterises modernity. A feature of this radicalism was the early alliance or convergence between
feminism and socialism driven by “an increasing industrialisation” that dramatically affected “both class and gender division” (7). For Vickery poetry becomes an important vehicle to negotiate and interrogate such an alliance, particularly as the convergence is important simultaneously to the co-development of feminism and socialism and at the same time foreshadowing their divergence.

Further Vickery argues that that the nature of the change, the fluidity of new political alliances and the destabilisation of traditional subjectivities demanded the making of new “languages” that could only be provided by poetry. This is the principle that drives the critical interpretation of the writers’ lives and work. The case study of Anna Wickham is telling and powerful, almost typical or symptomatic of the intellectual and creative life of a woman writer whose work challenges outdated orthodoxies.

Like Huggan’s work, Vickery’s analysis provides the grounds for further work in the area.

Understandably two Currency Press works automatically enter into dialogue. Gabrielle Wolf’s work, Make it Australian, contextualizes and documents the emergence of Australian New Wave Theatre as associated with The Australian Performing Group and its relationship with La Mama and the Pram Factory. In one sense, history repeats itself. Just as Vickery identifies the period from 1900 to 1940 as marked by radical transformation within Australia, Wolf notes that from the mid-1950s through to the 1970s once again Australia was going through a radical transformation and marked by similar conditions – the impact of World War II, further industrialisation and urbanisation (driven in part by a US economy shifting emphasis from production to consumption, by big infrastructure programs, and by expansion of migration programs), a new politicisation coming out of the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, renewed feminist politics, the emergence of the new left. Again things were fluid in terms of social and individual being. Throw into the mix a fervent interrogation of and reconstitution of Australian identity, especially in relation to Australia’s relationship with a rapidly decolonising Great Britain, and you have a pretty heady time for creative production. For Wolf one site constitutive and reflective of these events and processes was theatre, a theatre that was unified in its nationalist position but conflicted by what this might mean politically.

Wolf periodises the history of the APG (1967–1970), (1970–71), (1972–73), (1974–76), (1977–81). The periodisations indicate various intensities and productivities, political and aesthetic struggles amongst writers, directors and actors, almost as if, along with other elements of
a radical counter culture, the APG was born to burnout. Wolf’s study is
a wonderful historical account of the transformation of the APG from its
commitment to interrogation and reconstitution of what Australianness
means, through various moments of paralysis when perhaps dogmatism
got in the way of being critical, through to its demise when it became
directionless and nostalgic, or as Wolf argues:

Ultimately, the APG’s belief in the value of experiments was not
even enough to sustain it. Moreover, the APG never acquired the ability or
discipline to adapt to a changing world and recharge its batteries in a
different climate. (222)

However, Wolf also notes the APG’s remarkable legacy, not only in
terms of the number of writers, directors and actors that have gone on to
achieve outstanding careers outside and after the APG but also in relation
to the number of those same writers, directors and actors who have gone
on to work in educational institutions and who are being formative of
contemporary Australian theatre. Further Wolf opens a space to explore the
relationship between the APG and the renaissance of the Australian film
industry, which also gave renewed expression to a critical and celebratory
view of Australian national identity.

In a sense Hilary Glow’s *Power Plays* takes up the trajectory developed
by Wolf, but of course the context Glow considers is the Hawke–Keating
and the Howard–Costello years. One of the paradoxes of this period is that
while the Hawke–Keating government avowed an open and reformist social
and cultural agenda (the question how this was resourced is nevertheless
a vexed one, its economic reform agenda set the foundations for the neo-
conservative social and cultural agenda of the Howard–Costello era. So
regardless of the conservative social milieu in which the APG emerged,
the APG did enjoy an increasing openness that provided a space for
experimentation, debate and contestation. However, for those that
followed, the potential for social and cultural change was and perhaps still
is increasingly circumscribed by the dominance of an economic rationalist
agenda that is openly hostile to any form of social or cultural critique which
is invariably dismissed as un-Australian.

For Glow, it is in this context that the idea and nature of political theatre
in Australia needs to be rethought. Glow notes the problematic that since
the feminist assertion that the personal is the political, the power of such
a principle has been diminished in the light of everything that has become
political (4). As a corrective to this situation Glow cites Terry Eagleton’s
observation that “Keeping goldfish could be political but isn’t inherently, like any social practice, it becomes political only when it assumes reference to the processes of legitimating or challenging systems of power” (4–5). This becomes Glow’s guiding principle in selecting plays and playwrights. Important are the ways in which theatre interrogates systems of power and how plays “seek to understand how politics shapes who we are; [how] it informs how we live and work, our beliefs, values and aspirations” (5). At the heart of the work then is a concern with how political theatre is constitutive of and engages with a cultural and social ethics.

Power Plays is organised around themes. The six chapters address: Indigenous Identities; The History Wars; The Politics of Place; Globalisation and Class; Fortress Australia; The War on Terror. This thematic organisation is indicative of and provides a narrative for the various political contestations at work within Australia. And while questions of class and gender politics are significant here, the narrative thread weaves around questions of race and ethnicity, encapsulated in the idea of “whiteness”. It seems the assertion of difference over a monoculturalism represented by “whiteness” is somehow the greatest threat to what might be described as lingering but still powerful Anglophilic Australian nationalism. For example the articulation of indigenous identity through the dramatisation of the autobiographical and the experiential not only seems to be an important political corrective but is also seen as an unthinkable threat to the moral and epistemic orthodoxy of neoconservatism centred in the idea of “whiteness”.

To underscore this further, in the chapter “Fortress Australia” Glow mounts an impressive critique of Andrew Bolt’s attack first on Hannie Rayson’s play Two Brothers and then on Hannie Rayson herself, demonstrating a curious paradox which gives testament to the continuing power of political theatre. That a powerful media figure such as Andrew Bolt should take such offence at the play and then attack the playwright suggests a certain vulnerability to that power. Of course, that vulnerability is bolstered or disguised by the populist play of Bolt’s assumption of speaking for the ordinary Australian. Wolf and Glow together provide a significant and powerful historical and critical account of Australian theatre over the forty years.

Distant Lives and the Need for Belonging
Non-fiction tends to be dominated by auto/biography in general and also by a sub-category of literary auto/biography, and while this year’s offerings produce some surprising convergences (which will be taken up in the next
section), at least three works give an indication of the range of possibilities. Deane Blackler’s *Reading W.G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience*, presents a perennial challenge when considering Australian non-fiction – an Australian writing about a German-British subject. Blackler’s work traces the career trajectory of W.G. Sebald from Germany to his appointment at the University of East Anglia where he completed a doctoral thesis on Alfred Doblin, to his becoming based in Modern Languages and European History before moving under university financial restructuring to the School of English and American Studies where he was increasingly under pressure to teach creative writing. Blackler notes that Sebald felt his role at East Anglia was increasingly problematic, finding the mix of being a Germanist and a writer and located in an English milieu was not one in which he necessarily felt confident. Nevertheless, it was probably precisely this context that allowed Sebald to not only come to understand and theorise a postmodern relationship between writer, text and reader as one of distance and disobedience but also a context in which he emerged as a significant mentor to writers in Britain.

Turning then to another Australian writer but in an Australian context, Maureen Clark’s *Mudrooroo: A Likely Story; Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, for the most part is a conventional literary biography providing critical readings of Mudrooroo’s novels in relation to the personal and social contexts in which they are produced. Of course, what makes Clark’s work of importance is the controversy surrounding Mudrooroo’s claims to indigenous identity and his relation to indigenous writing both as historian, critic, practitioner and champion. Clark notes that Mudrooroo’s writings are marked by a strong sense of the political critique of the colonial experience and history of indigenous peoples. As Mudrooroo’s work attests and as others have argued the experience is a lingering and haunting one as indigenous peoples continue to struggle to both articulate a contemporary identity while seeking to maintain a sense of continuity and belonging with the past. For Clark, Mudrooroo’s Vampire Trilogy – *The Undying*, *The Underground*, and *The Promised Land* – represents a continuation of Mudrooroo’s early project but also embodies Mudrooroo’s personal experience of having his claims to identity disputed. Mudrooroo’s life becomes an enactment of the problematic politics to which he is committed.

Finally, in addressing the question of distant lives and belonging, I consider Richard Freadman’s *This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiography*. Freadman divides his work into two sections. The first provides a critical understanding of the types and range of Jewish
autobiography; the second an exemplary and extensive sample of writing. The first section gives an insight into the various modes and themes within Jewish writing. He is careful to outline the convergences and divergences of types of writing such as conventional autobiography, memoir, testimony and other forms of life writing because to a certain degree they have synergetic relationship to the themes or perhaps more properly the “times” the writings address. That is to say recollections of pre-World War II Europe, of the War and the Holocaust, and post-World War II experience, mainly life in Australia may adopt different forms. Freadman outlines the difficulty each “period” presents in terms of negotiating the experiential and the objective. If event and period present one set of problematics, then this is complicated further by questions of identity and subjectivity. Freadman understands that within a multicultural, postcolonial and postmodern context the definition of subjectivity and identity is something of a trial. How does one define Jewish-Australian? What characterises Jewish-Australian writing? One can infer from Freadman’s work that the answers can only be found in our encounters with the writing. However we do need to be alert always to the complexities, best embodied in the experiences and understandings of second-generation Holocaust survivors:

For the second generation … including the child survivors, the construction of personal identity is a more complex matter. They have had to face the sense of existential doubleness that can occur when early processes of identity formation undergo revision, or take shape, in an adoptive culture. Such existential complications place much of the onus on the individual, since the surrounding culture tends to seem too new, ambiguous, threatening or remote from ancestral cultural worlds to function as the source of secure identity-formation. (84)

Freadman, in effect, not only points to the complexities of the relationship between identity and reading, but also adumbrates an ethics of reading. Perhaps, necessarily, we need to adopt an affective engagement with the writing, to become disobedient readers of sorts.

The Tycoon, The Judge and the Politicians
This year saw the publication and reissue of a number of biographies and works of political analysis, which collectively produce a fascinating insight into the transformation of Australia over the last sixty years. George Megalogenis’s The Longest Decade is a revised and updated version of a work first published in 2006. Similarly, Paul Barry’s The Rise and Rise if Kerry Packer, Uncut, was published initially in 1993 but revised and updated in 2007. First publications were Antonio Buti’s Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of
Conscience and, of course, Wayne Errington’s and Peter van Onselen’s John Howard: The Biography.

The coincidental publication of these works inadvertently provides an iteration of the idea of history as driven by the actions of great persons. But we need to avoid such clichéd and outmoded ways of approaching the works and the historical context they outline.

In order to bring these works together I would like to invoke here another publication: Anna Haebich’s Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970. Haebich’s time frame is significant insofar as it is a period marked by a highly protected economy and by a conservative social and cultural milieu but one under pressure from an expanded migration program and from an emergent civil rights movement focussed on indigenous rights and influenced by American politics. Paradoxically, the period represents a moment of complex ideological work. On the one hand the desire for sameness, for assimilation, is understandable in the context of a long history the isolationist White Australia policy (until the 1950s Australia’s position internationally was by and large dependent on its relationship with Britain). On the other hand the booming US economy fed in to a myth of expansion and progress, a story that also requires a commitment to sameness “going forward”. It might be argued then that on all fronts the conservative assimilationist foundationalism of this period easily becomes an originary myth for more recent neoconservative social and cultural structures. Haebich opens her argument by asserting:

Nostalgia for an assimilated nation haunts current public debate on national identity and nationhood, and spills over into … issues of race, ethnicity, Indigenous rights and immigration. Commentators … deny that the pages of government are being turned back to the assimilation policies of the 1950s … We celebrate cultural diversity and acknowledge Indigenous rights, cultures and histories. Yet while the word assimilation is rarely mentioned, more than a trace of its essence remains in official announcements on national values, citizenship and the practical integration of Aboriginal communities. The paradox of public denial of assimilation and hidden allegiance to its tenets can be explained in terms of “retro-assimilation”:

From the perspective of retro-assimilation, current visions of the nation can be seen as yet another example of nostalgia and clever marketing. Retro-assimilation mixes 1950s dreams of an assimilated nation with current ideas of nationhood … to create an imagined world based on shared values, visions and agreements where all citizens will be treated
equally … and share fully in the benefits of Australian society, once they agree to cast off their difference and become the same … Retro-assimilation has strong appeal in today’s climate of social turmoil … we are irresistibly drawn to its retroscapes, its nostalgic memories of safer and simpler times. (7-8)

Important to the politics of the 1950s, and to the myth that grew out of those politics, was the articulation of a belief in a progressive and utopian future that could override or occlude an underlying sense of anxiety marked by the Cold War and attendant paranoia about communism. It was essential that the ideological work of the day envisaged an optimistic future based on the elimination of difference, to be achieved by assimilationist policies and practices.

The question Haebich’s study puts to the biographies here is to what degree were the figures, Kerry Packer Sir Ronald Wilson, Paul Keating and John Howard made by the ideological work of the 1950s and to what degree are they part of the constitution of our current retro-assimilation. An extensive exploration of this problematic is beyond the scope of this essay but the coincidence and convergence of these works certainly invites such an undertaking. Nevertheless, I believe a number of observations can be made.

Barry’s biography of Kerry Packer for the most part casts the story of Packer’s life in terms of a mythic perhaps psychological dynamic between father and son. Kerry’s life both replicates and departs from his father’s life. As the title The Rise and Rise suggests the story is one of continuity and “progress.” So in one sense, the story, regardless of how one feels about Kerry Packer, replicates a narrative of inheritance as well as reproducing the narrative of utopian development. And given that Kerry Packer’s life crossed paths with countless politicians, including Keating and Howard, it should not be surprising that the narrative is punctuated by an economic self-interest that balances, as needs be, a free market or protectionist pragmatics. Packer, by dint of privilege, is isolated from the social and cultural effects of assimilation but at another level embodies the economic drive that supports it.

Megalogenis’s The Longest Decade provides an astute political analysis of the Keating and Howard economic reform agendas. Not surprisingly these shared greater similarities than differences with perhaps labour market reform being the most important point of departure. Both Keating and Howard were committed to the opening up of the Australian economy – the floating of the Australian dollar, the freeing up of the Reserve Bank,
the privatisation of Government authorities, the commitment to the long term phasing out of tariff protection. Keating envisaged such reforms as not only a way of unleashing Australian economic potential but also felt that such circumstances would also drive progressive social and cultural reform. In comparison, Howard, an avowed social conservative, while supporting economic reform would be less enthusiastic about social and cultural change, clearly underscored by his expression of a type of Anglophilic nationalism at the time of the republic debate.

Paradoxically, it could be argued that in terms of economic reform both Keating and Howard are representative of the ideological work of the 1950s. The story of progress, as exemplified by the apparent openness in the 1950s of the US economy, demands an open economy. However, Haebich reminds us that change can produce an anxiety that is ameliorated by a conservative social and cultural ideology that supports an assimilationist policy that privileges sameness over difference.

Buti’s *Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience* reproduces a classical Australian story, a narrative of a country boy made good, rising from court clerk to Supreme Court Judge to the head of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, not to mention a non-legal career as national president of the Uniting Church. Wilson’s life is characterised by a passionate commitment to social justice, but his career also demonstrates a shifting understanding of what that means. Buti’s biography depicts a life completely naturalised to Wilson’s social and institutional context. During his early career Wilson was known for his power of argument and also for his adherence to process and in that regard the relationship between law and justice was clear cut, the best system that could be devised. And in terms of his life in the Church, Wilson was completely in accord with the Church’s position at the time. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wilson would not have thought of questioning the well-meaning (but now regarded as patronising) attitude of the Church towards Indigenous peoples. In a sense, Wilson was an exemplary subject of the period in which he grew up and matured.

However, as the Uniting Church’s view of what social justice means changed, perhaps influenced by the civil rights movement in the US and its influence on Indigenous peoples’ struggles in Australia, so too did Wilson’s position. The full transformation comes with his work with HREOC and writing of the *Bringing Them Home* report. This account of the Stolen Generations, and the parts played by governments, churches and other institutions resulted in a broader understanding of the delivery of social justice. Delivered to the Howard Government, the report variously
was attacked as methodologically flawed or dismissed outright. Wilson’s reputation was questioned and to a degree his commitment to social justice was undermined. Ironically, then, for someone who could be seen to be a product of the ideological work of the 1950s Wilson’s report represents a challenge to the processes of retro-assimilationism that seem to characterise the Howard Government and the right of politics in general.

Curiously, the Bringing Them Home report does not feature prominently in the Errington and van Onselen biography, John Howard: The Biography. Again the narrative is classical Australian – the boy from lower middle-class suburbia attains the highest office in the land. Errington and Van Onselen present a fascinating portrait of Howard. While they go to great lengths to argue that Howard’s political life, especially his prime ministership, should not be read in terms of a return to some imaginary 1950s, they do emphasise that John Howard is very much a product of the ideas and values of the time, which, for Howard, seem to have been embodied in Sir Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister he most admired and to whose style of leadership he aspired.

However, even in Errington’s and Van Onselen’s assessment of Howard, we can see a form of retro-assimilationism at work. Quite rightly they challenge the popular view of Howard as being anti-Asian. This belies the increase in migration from Asia during the period of Howard’s government. What is critical for Howard is the policy of multiculturalism that emerged in the Whitlam/Fraser years. For Howard multiculturalism detracts from and undermines a commitment to a unified national identity grounded in disavowal of difference while celebrating and supporting a neo-conservative belief in singular and individual endeavour. In other words, Howard participates in the ideological assimilationist work as it pertains to a social and conservatism, and to an economic progressivism.

Conclusion

No doubt this review represents some personal bias on my part but the broad selection and variety of non-fiction works suggest a cultural interest in the 1950s and 1960s and their mythic and ideological influences on contemporary Australian society. One could argue that over the last few years there has been a general feeling of a change about to happen, not just that the Howard government was defeated, and the Rudd government elected on the promise of something new, but perhaps because Australia has reached a certain distance in time where separately and collectively people can begin to make an evaluation of the significance of the 1950s and 1960s in light of popular and media generated speculation about similarities between then and now.
**NON–FICTION RECEIVED 2007–2008**

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