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Westerly

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

*Westerly* extends warm congratulations to

Tom Hungerford

on his receipt of the

2003 **PATRICK WHITE AWARD.**

**PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2001

Amanda Curtin

EDITORIAL


This issue of *Westerly* in part commemorates the life and work of two great Western Australian writers, Peter Cowan and Dorothy Hewett, and includes eulogies about each delivered by Bruce Bennett. Each had a different but profound influence on the literature of the state and of Australia; each taught in the English Department at the University of Western Australia, and each left indelible memories for their students and colleagues. Peter Cowan was an editor of *Westerly* for many years and Dorothy Hewett was a friend and supporter. Both were innovators and in their lives and writing, idiosyncratic in the best sense.

In other ways though, they were very different, almost opposites. In a moving tribute to Dorothy Hewett, her old friend, academic colleague and fellow writer, Fay Zwicky, wrote of the “passionate conviction” with which Hewett lived her life. Peter Cowan too was a person of conviction, but his habitual reticence and liking for solitude was utterly other than Hewett’s passion, expressed through her characteristic exuberance. A diary entry written when she was an adolescent and recorded in the only published volume of her autobiography *Wild Card* captures this lifelong trait: “Live wildly today, forget tomorrow.” *Westerly*’s cover photograph, taken when they received honorary university doctorates from UWA in 1995, makes these differences apparent. Cowan lived most of his life in Western Australia while Hewett went to live in Sydney; yet each shared a deep love of the landscapes of Western Australia, a love which is often present in their writing.

Peter Cowan’s writing was as spare as his person; he read the early American modernist writers long before they were well-known in Australia, and was deeply influenced by their work and by that of modernist painting. He began his long, serious writing career – publishing eight collections of stories, five novels, three biographies of family members and a number of edited anthologies – around 1939, and living in Melbourne...
during the last years of the war, was part of a circle of modernist artists, including Sidney Nolan and Max Harris.

Dorothy Hewett's writing is as romantic as her life. She was an early and active member of the Communist Party of Australia and remained a party member until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Despite her middle class upbringing as one of two daughters of a settler farming family at Wickepin in the West Australian wheatbelt, she embraced a working class politics. Her first novel, *Bobbin Up* draws on her experiences as a factory worker in a spinning mill in industrial Sydney. Hewett is best-known for her poetry and plays – she wrote at least fifteen plays; one, *Nowhere*, commissioned by the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary, only two years before her death, and many collections of poetry; the last, *Halfway up the Mountain*, published in 2001 – but she also published three novels, the first part of her autobiography, numerous articles and short stories, and wrote an operetta. Dorothy Hewett was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1996 and had a lifetime Emeritus Fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. Like Cowan, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Edith Cowan University, in 1996.

Cowan too had many honours. In 1987, he was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM); in 1992 he received the Patrick White Award for an Australian writer of great distinction and in 1995 was awarded the first honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Edith Cowan University, named after his famous grandmother, Edith Dircksey Cowan. Fittingly, the writer's center at Edith Cowan University is named after him.

In a reminiscence for *Westerly*, Peter Cowan's daughter-in-law, Diana, recalled his power of concentration and something of his character:

> He loved doing woodwork. It was his release... He hated going south after a while because it was being destroyed. Too many houses and too many people... He used to go camping down there in the '50s. They'd put up this tarp alongside the Holden van and that would be that for the summer... The woodwork and coming up and helping on the house for us made up for getting in the car and going bush... The only problem with Dad was that he had... he had one saying that, if he said it, you knew you had a problem. He'd stand around and he'd go, “Now, wait on.” And you were going to be there for the next half hour while Dad decided which nail was the particular one you had to use for a particular job, and he would almost go into a trance while he thought about this...
Another West Australian writer and close friend of Dorothy Hewett, Bill Grono, has memorialized both her and Cowan for *Westerly*. His memories of Hewett he found hard to capture, perhaps he said, because “she’s too large and various to be so easily pinned down. ... [and] there's too much to say about her.” He did however pass on one anecdote from Pat Skevington, a Perth actor, who responded to Grono's asking if she had an early memory of Dorothy with this:

Yes. Back in 1945. I hadn't seen her for some time, when I saw her at the bus stop one day. She was wearing a man's black trousers, a man's white shirt, a red bolero and a black hat. She looked absolutely marvelous. And I remember thinking, for the very first time, there’s really something special about her.

About Peter Cowan, whom he knew less well, Grono said:

I last visited Peter during a heat wave three years ago. It seemed just as hot inside his dark, book-lined rooms as it was outside. I told him it was bloody hot and he told me it had been a bit warm lately and I could probably do with a drink.

“That'd be nice,” I said as the sweat trickled down my neck. “Have you ever thought of getting an air-conditioner?”

“No, I don’t think so. A bit of a luxury at my age.”

“They're not expensive, you know. One of those pictures up there,” and I gestured at four or five lovely A. B. Webb colour woodcuts on top of a bookcase, “any one of those pictures would pay for two air-conditioners.” Peter flinched at the thought. “No. This will see me out.”

“Good God, Peter. You'll be saying that in twenty years' time. Like a character in a Samuel Beckett play.”

He brightened a little. “I often feel like a character in a Beckett play.” Then he went and got me half a can of cold, flat beer from the fridge and ten soft peanuts on a saucer.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, *Westerly* editors.
BRUCE BENNETT

PETER COWAN (1914–2002):
REFLECTIONS

Peter Cowan was one of Australia’s finest writers, but he was also a human being, with all that those two words imply.

I knew Peter first from his writings, then as a colleague at the English Department of the University of Western Australia, when I returned there from Oxford in 1967. We worked together editing the literary magazine *Westerly* and a number of books from 1972 to 1992, before I left to take up a job as Professor of English at the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1993. From colleagues who respected each other, we became firm friends. To me, this was a special relationship because I knew how Peter guarded his privacy. I always found Peter’s company stimulating and meaningful. He helped me to reimagine myself as a West Australian and an Australian. I grew to recognise the humanity and integrity of the man as well as the humour and warmth that he sometimes withheld from the world. Peter was not a man for conversational niceties or merely sociable chatter.

Peter Cowan was born in Perth in the first year of the First World War. His South Perth childhood was marked by the early death of his father, a barrister and solicitor, when Peter was eleven. His sister, Elizabeth, a family favourite, was a talented musician but she died when she was fourteen. Music is a leitmotif in much of Peter’s writing, as inspiration and solace. He once remarked to me how odd it was that someone as attuned to the wonder of silence as he was should have so appreciated baroque or romantic music – that of Bach, Vivaldi or Schubert, for example.

At home in South Perth, Peter seems to have been surrounded by strong women – mother, grandmother and aunts – and perhaps also his surviving younger sister, Mary. Peter’s biography of his grandmother, Edith Dircksey Cowan, was published in 1978, and it is her historical significance as the first woman elected to an Australian Parliament – as the member for West Perth in the Legislative Council from 1921–24 – reinforced by
Peter’s authoritative biography, that prompted the naming of Edith Cowan University after her.

Peter listened and learnt from these impressive women, and read family letters and diaries that led him to his important biographical and historical studies of earlier members of the Cowan family in colonial Western Australia. Peter led a more lonely, and in some ways a more intense and inward life as a child than his South Perth contemporary, Tom Hungerford, who describes his boyish outdoor adventures in Stories from Suburban Road. But Peter and Tom always respected each other and Peter edited a collection of Tom’s short fiction for Fremantle Arts Centre Press, the Press with whom Peter developed a strong working relationship from the late 1970s.

Perhaps the most formative experiences in Peter Cowan’s life were after he left school at Wesley, and the insurance company, in whose Dickensian offices he had obtained a job which gave him no joy whatever, for an itinerant labourer’s life in the wheatbelt. These were the Depression years. From 1933 to 1935, from the age of nineteen to twenty-one, he took up labouring work wherever he could find it in the eastern wheatbelt and south west of Western Australia. He enjoyed the outdoor work and physical labour, from milking cows to mending fences and these experiences form the basis of stories in his first collection, Drift (1944). The outdoor life appealed and it did not worry him that he was “a sort of social outcast” because, as he said in an interview in later years, he never had any liking for or trust or feeling for social things. “I quite enjoyed the isolation,” he said.

Although Peter was attached to a number of institutions through his life, I would not say he belonged, in any strong sense – or was owned or contained by any of them. These institutions include Wesley College, where he started when he was ten, the Commercial Union Assurance Company, Perth Tech where he matriculated, the RAAF for whom he worked in Melbourne during the war years from 1943-45, Guildford Grammar School and Scotch College where he taught after the war, and the University of Western Australia. Although Peter was a fine teacher, with a total grasp of his subject and the authority of a practising writer for students of English, teaching was never his whole life, and administration was certainly not. The memorable moments for Peter were his escapes from the clutches of institutions – their meetings, administration and socialising.

Perhaps the appeal of an independent artist’s life, oblique to social conventions, was set when Peter was in the RAAF in Melbourne from 1943 to 1945, and for a year or so after the war. Peter sometimes managed to go
AWOL, and it was during this period in Melbourne that he spent time with modernist bohemian artists and writers who made up the Contemporary Art Society and the Angry Penguins – Bert Tucker, Sid Nolan, Max Harris, John and Sunday Reed. Writing took on more urgency in the context of war, and Peter never forgot modernist artistic imperatives of interiority of vision along with attention to surface appearance. All his life, he went on trying a variety of ways of rendering states of mind and feeling in a variety of rural and urban situations.

Peter Cowan met Edith Howard in 1935 and they married in 1941. Their son Julian was born in 1944. When they returned to Perth after the war, Edith, a talented dressmaker, went on to become wardrobe mistress at the Playhouse Theatre. She was the gregarious side to Peter’s reticence and she enjoyed the bohemian lifestyle of the acting world, just as Peter shrank from its excesses. Together, though, they took part in a popular commercial television Word Game quiz show in the 1960s.

At Scotch College, where Peter taught English and Geography from 1950-62, “Mo”, as he was called because of his trademark moustache, used to park his International Norton motorbike in the College grounds and roar off when the day’s teaching was over. He often spent summer holidays working the wheatbins, and writing. The motorcycle was not an affectation. He was a competent mechanic and a successful competitor in motorcycle scrambles.

After he left Scotch, Peter took up a one year writers’ grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1963 and commenced as a Senior Tutor at the University of Western Australia in 1964, where he worked until his retirement in 1979, and thereafter as an honorary research fellow until the early 1990s. When I mentioned Peter’s death to my friend and former colleague and West Australian in Canberra, Harry Heseltine, he said that Peter had been his first tutor in the English Department in 1948. He is one of many generations of West Australian students who enjoyed studying literature with Peter. In Harry’s case, his memories include Peter’s moustache and his dry, laconic wit.

Peter understood the fate of those who are captives to their job, but he was not one of them. He used teaching breaks to escape to the unsettled parts of the State – first the south west coasts, then the wheatbelt, the eastern goldfields and the northwest. Edith and Julian often accompanied him on his increasingly distant treks in his Toyota “tank”. As a reminder of his love of the open air, I recall at English Department meetings how Peter would station himself by a window, open it whatever the weather, and take great gulps of fresh air to help him recover from the stuffiness of these
meetings. He was not a corporation man. He felt his life was elsewhere, and I'm sure it was.

Peter Cowan's real life was his writing. He published eight collections of stories and five novels, together with three biographies and a host of edited anthologies. One of the main threads that runs through his work is his fascination with the relationship of humans to the Australian landscape. Out beyond metropolitan Perth, in the northwest, for instance, he wrote, "there are stretches of quite pitiless and utterly attractive landscape. Even here we put down instant towns and suburbs that are replicas of Perth - or other such Australian models ... Yet a few miles outside their airconditioning and supermarts one can die in a couple of days, left alone." In Peter's view, these reminders of a physical environment that can be nurturing or destructive are neglected at our peril. Peter's book covers, and occasional photos that we ran in *Westerly*, brought images of these half-forgotten parts of our inheritance: great boulders, wide desert plains with a ruined building, or the open blue sky. He was an environmentalist before this became common and he took these interests into the popular press with a series of commissioned articles in the *Sunday Independent* in 1969 and 1970, which were sometimes scathing about current policies and practices. Native banksias were his favourite tree.

Peter was a genuine scholar, whose work was interest and curiosity-driven, not based on institutional requirements or competitive pressures. He would go and find out things because he wanted to know. His professional interest in books led to the best collection of Western Australian literature, especially of the colonial period, that I have seen. Unlike many collectors, he actually read his books and consequently had a vast knowledge of the unfortunately still neglected field of Western Australian writing. I used to sit with Peter, from time to time, on the curtained back verandah or in the darkened interior of the house he built in Alfred Road, Mt Claremont, surrounded by bookshelves, where we would talk about literature, current events and ideas. The gloom protected the books, but it also reflected one of Peter's recurrent moods, lit up by an occasional flicker of fire from the grate and a grin at the absurdities of contemporary life.

His interests were sometimes surprising. I think Peter knew all the bird species in Western Australia, and probably in Australia. He was not just an expert ornithologist, he was an enthusiast in his understated way, when he would take Julian, a camera, and a pair of binoculars from the house in Mount Claremont, to watch the birds at nearby Butler's Swamp
when it was still a bird-populated wetland. He knew a great deal too about fast racing cars as well as motorcycles. Father and son came together in these activities, as in photography. Later, Julian raced cars, with his wife, Di, and he became pictorial editor for the Sunday Times in Perth.

If Peter’s early life was punctuated with death, the later deaths of his mother and his wife in the same year, 1980, dislodged two further anchors in his life. Fortunately, his creativity did not stop, though its focus on memory and its consolations increased. He published two absorbing novels with Fremantle Arts Centre Press in the late 1980s, The Color of the Sky (1986) and The Hills of Apollo Bay (1989). The latter is his most fugue-like and lyrical work – and his most critically acclaimed – and weaves together in a contemporary style fragments of remembered relationships of the war years and after.

Peter was attuned to the experience of pain and loss, but nothing quite prepared him for the suffering of his only son during the 1990s and his death of a tumour in 2000. After that, as Peter’s daughter-in-law, Diana, said, he visibly “folded”. When Peter and I spoke about Julian’s death, Peter cried for the first time in my company. A little later, he entered the territory he had so often imagined – he became a mental hermit – but a wry, friendly and agreeable one to the staff at Guildford Village where he spent his last days.

Peter was honoured for his literary achievements. In 1987, he received an AM for services to Australian literature. He was presented with the Patrick White Literary Award in 1992 and was awarded the first Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy at Edith Cowan University in 1995. In 1997 the University opened the Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre at its Joondalup campus. He was chosen in 1999, to his amusement, as one of the Living Treasures of Western Australia. To say that these honours and signs of recognition meant nothing to him would be mistaken. But he accepted them with the modesty, scepticism, humour and grace that characterised this deep and quiet man with a great talent for writing which changed and matured over the years.

We are fortunate that Peter remains with us in his written words. He was both a risk-taker and a careful stylist with words in seeking to convey his own highly individual vision of people and places. He never wasted words: each word must count. A story should suggest rather than state its meanings: what is left out is as important as what is there; the reader must work to understand a story’s implications. I hear his voice saying these things now. But he was never a preacher. Indeed, he was a critic of flamboyant show-pony writers (and people generally) whose meaning was all surface and no depth.
Peter is thought of as a regional West Australian writer and in some respects he clearly is. But the literary figures with whom he connects are international. Two of the most important of them are a Russian and an American. Anton Chekhov’s story “Grief”, which we chose for one of our early collaborative short story collections, is what comes to mind when I think of Peter and the son who died before him and the intractability of his grief. I think also of Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” or “Hills Like White Elephants”, two of Peter’s favourites, when I think of this West Australian’s ability to convey tension, mystery and psychological conflict between individuals in a spare, stripped-back style.

I know that you would tell me I have gone on too long, Peter. So I will conclude these reflections with two brief passages from your published writings – this time from your early work. Because in your heart you were a man of the land, though not in any easy, conventional sense, I have chosen brief quotations which link people to their natural surroundings.

The first is from the novel *Summer* (1964), and it expresses something of the sense of space and silence you have conveyed about living and working in the West Australian wheatlands:

> He was aware of sudden loneliness, of existing against some endlessly alien and indifferent landscape, the trees silent in the heat, away beyond them the paddocks of stubble and unharvested grain, the thin dark lines of scrub; it was as if he found himself in some long-deserted and unused place where he, solitary, was without significance.

Peter Cowan’s protagonists are unusual. They do not mind being reminded of their insignificance in relation to the larger forces of nature. They are critical, rather, of the peculiar blindness of societies which try to hide from these realities. Peter’s character in the novel *Summer* remarks of this open landscape:

> This has a kind of reality that dwarfs other places. But it’s so remote that you can scarcely associate with it at all. Like existing by sufferance. And for most people that’s not possible.

For Peter Cowan, it was possible. More than that, such places were a necessary reminder of human transience on this planet.

Let me conclude with another, more lyrical tone of voice in an early story surprisingly but appropriately called “Requiem”. The passage describes a man and a woman at the coast, in touch with nature and everything it can mean. These are words to take away with us:
They got up and took their towels from the bushes outside the small natural cavity the bushes formed. Then carefully they went down the cliff face where they had cut the path, and reaching the sand he ran over it and he wanted to cry out, and he felt the strength in him and the sea and the sand and the timeless place about him so that when the water closed on him he felt, yes, I have lived, if they smash me tomorrow I have lived in these things that are of more reality and of more worth than us in our meanness and filth and proud smallness.

And then the recognition, the annunciation, perhaps:

I am not really part of this, else I would stay here, else this time would be all time. But we go, and these steep cliffs, the sea coast scrub, the sloping dunes, and the white beach and the sea and the rocks are here. My eyes have seen these things and something, the last real part in me, has gone out and become part of this, and has felt that alone which endures.
DOROTHY HEWETT (1923-2002)*

Dorothy Hewett plays a vital role in twentieth-century Australian literary history. Her poems, plays, novels, stories and the autobiographical *Wild Card* prove her to be a romantic for all seasons.

Born in Perth, Western Australia on 21 May 1923, Dorothy Hewett lived until she was twelve on a three thousand acre wheat and sheep farm near Wickepin in the Great Southern region of Western Australia. Her remembered rural childhood forms a central motif of her writings, early and late. It is a Garden of Eden where “the black snakes wait and slide.”

Tom Hewett, the author’s father, had taken up farming after returning from the Western Front as a war hero with a DCM and Belgian Croix de Guerre. He remained a powerful figure in his daughter’s imagination and was perhaps the main source of her tendency to hero-worship working men with a wild side. Her relationship with her mother, René Hewett (née Coade), was more fractious. In *Wild Card* Hewett wrote that the struggle to come to terms with her mother dominated most of her life. She felt programmed to play out her mother’s “romantic non-cautionary side.”

Dorothy and her younger sister Lesley (nicknamed Dessie) shared an education by correspondence under their mother’s direction. The sisters wandered the farm’s creekbeds, riding horses, daydreaming, reading, talking and inventing games. Hewett immersed herself from an early age in Gothic romance, Australian ballads, the British Romantics, and Tennyson. She dreamt of being a famous actress and writer.

Hewett’s secondary schooling in the 1930s at Perth College, which was run by Anglican nuns, provided a partial basis for her controversial expressionist play *The Chapel Perilous*. Sally Banner, the play’s semi-autobiographical heroine, rebels against the authority figures of parents, teachers, and the church. Sally’s candour is luminous, if naïve. She seeks to “walk naked through the world” carrying truth, beauty and freedom with her.
During her first year at university in 1941, Hewett expounded pacifist and atheistic views, joined the Communist Party and poisoned herself with a household antiseptic when she was jilted by an airforce lover. Thereafter, she embarked on a life of sexual promiscuity, as a means of revenge on her parents and on her idealized concept of perfect love — “Heathcliff and Cathy, and the sentimental love songs on the radio.”

Hewett was an uneasy comrade for communists and feminists. Even though she was deeply involved in both movements, she always remained a potential anarchist in their ranks. She traveled to the USSR and China as an Australian communist writer. Her last campaign within the Party was for the release of dissident writers Sinyavsky and Daniel.

Dorothy Hewett’s erotic adventures attracted wide publicity in her lifetime. Like Byron, her least favourite romantic (because she found his irony condescending), she was often presented as a libertine, but this is misleading. Her affections were intuitive and spontaneous but they ran deep. Nevertheless, she was accident-prone in love. Her first marriage in Perth in 1945 to Communist lawyer Lloyd Davies led to the birth of a son, Clancy, who died of leukaemia in 1950 at the age of three. Their marriage ended in divorce.

Hewett left Davies and their son in 1949 and moved to Sydney with one of her working-class heroes, boilermaker Les Flood. She lived unmarried to Flood in the working-class suburbs of Redfern, Rosebery and Rockdale from 1949 to 1958, and bore him three sons, Joe, Michael and Tom. Her socialist realist novel, Bobbin Up, was written from this experience, especially from a stint working at the Alexandria textile mills. She escaped dramatically and returned to Perth in 1958 when Flood’s paranoid schizophrenia took a threatening turn.

Hewett’s third attempt at a long-term relationship was more successful. In 1960 she married Merv Lilley, a Queensland cane-cutter, drover, miner and seaman who was also a poet and communist. The tall, muscular sailor and his blonde wife became a focal point for writers, students and literati at their home in South Perth through the 1960s and early 70s in what Lilley called “the backyards of the bourgeoisie”. Their jointly authored book of poems What About the People! (1963) contains some of Hewett’s most stirring ballads and lyrics. They had two daughters, Katie and Rosie. Lilley’s forty-four year relationship with Hewett survived: he was Dorothy’s devoted carer and loving husband in the last years of her life when osteoarthritis and obesity greatly reduced her mobility.

A great second flowering of Hewett’s work occurred from her early fifties, when she, Lilley, their daughters and son Tom Flood moved to
Sydney in 1974. On writers’ grants from the newly formed Literature Board of the Australia Council she wrote plays, poems, novels and stories. She became close to a group of younger neo-romantic poets, especially Robert Adamson, editor of New Poetry. She later jointly authored a book of poems, Wheatlands, with John Kinsella, one of her greatest admirers.

Her last play Nowhere was composed from her bed in three days — with “the brush of angel’s wings”, she said — and produced by the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 2001. She learnt at this time that a breast cancer had recurred yet she struggled to write more. Like Sally Banner, she had “a tremendous world in her head” and she knew that three-quarters of it would be buried with her.

Hewett won numerous awards and fellowships, and was elected a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1996.

Dorothy Hewett’s burial ceremony at Springwood Bushland Cemetery in the Blue Mountains on 30 August 2002 was proudly atheistic, as she had wished. Workers’ songs, poems and Ella Fitzgerald’s “Stormy Weather” wafted through the bushland. The crows came in on cue. One of Hewett’s five children was heard to remark, “That’s got to be Dorothy, come to see we do it right.” The hulking frame of her husband helped to carry her coffin to the grave and he read the grimly memorable Wordsworthian lines that his wife had chosen for her tombstone:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks and stones and trees.

But her words live on.

*This obituary was first published, in a slightly different form, in The Independent, London, 3 Sept 2002.
In 1995, after my father died, we discovered amongst his papers a small pocketbook, covered in watered grosgrain silk, that might have once been purple but which is now a murky grey. It opened with a date, 15/10/95, and as I read on I realised that it was 1895, a hundred years old. It turned out to be a diary kept by my grandfather when he left Stawell, Victoria for the goldfields of WA – the great adventure of his life. He was 25 years old. The diary was a gift from my future grandmother, Annie Moon.

The diary covers 20 days, from when he boards the SS *Innaminka* in Melbourne to when he is about to board the train in Perth which will take him to Coolgardie, where he has secured a job in the post office. He’s a telegraph operator, and the back page of the diary is covered with Morse code dots and dashes for him to keep in practice. He isn’t going to pan for gold, he’s just looking for the chance to leave depression-torn Victoria and make a new life in the boom time of the gold rush in Western Australia. The *SS Innaminka* is overloaded, with 430 men, and only five women on board, and when they arrive in Fremantle, there are so many ships waiting to berth that they have to wait for six hours off the Fremantle Jetty before they can come ashore. He counts his money: 2 pounds 6 shillings, and a bank draft of 5 pounds.

Reading the diary was an eerie, intimate experience. My grandfather was an orphan who left school at 12, but he had a direct, fresh way of expressing himself. I had a strange feeling of familiarity, as if I’d always known him, perhaps because there were so many echoes of my father in his account of himself. He is a solid young man of good health and strong appetite – he records all his meals. He is an upright young Methodist, a teetotaller, and a bit of a wowser – shocked when people play cards on Sundays. In spite of himself, and Annie, he has an almost wistful eye for a pretty girl. He is cautious, optimistic, individualistic, conservative.

He finds Fremantle a terribly rough place. He spends a shocking night in the Federal Coffee Palace, three to a partitioned room, where he is...
disgusted with the filthy language and low expression of the men, and is kept awake all night by drunken brawls. For breakfast he has a very tough steak. He takes the train to Perth as soon as possible.

He spends ten days in Perth, in a rooming house, is examined in Morse code at the GPO and waits for his posting to Coolgardie to come through. He swims in the Swan River, goes to church five times, waits his turn for a haircut with dozens of other men at the Imperial Hairdressing Saloon, is homesick, and takes two pages of his diary to record his observations, under the heading *Impressions of Perth.* He says:

Have been told WA is the land of sand, sorrow and sore eyes. There is certainly plenty of sand here. I suppose they have a fair amount of sorrow, although they seem happy enough. And they tell me Sandgropers have plenty of sore eyes, while we ‘Tothersiders’ are comparatively free from that painful trouble.

He goes on. WA is:

- very sandy
- has very hot days
- very cool nights
- rather a nice climate.
- troublesome flies
- roads have a white limestone surface
- straw hats and soft flannel shirts are much worn here, also white pants and coats with boots.
- Butchers shops are carts backed onto vacant land with a tarpaulin rigged to keep off sun.
- streets are crowded on Saturdays nights. There are about 50 men to each girl so far, no pretty girls in Perth.
- children are very yellow and freckled
- as a whole the folks are very uncouth compared to Melbourne.

He is glad to leave for Coolgardie. He buys a mosquito net, a khaki suit, a shilling’s worth of quinine and has 100 visiting cards printed at Sands & McDougall. He takes the train and the diary ends.

My grandfather goes on to marry Annie, have five children, four surviving, and become a postmaster at various post offices in the goldfields. Somehow, by thrift and good management, he sends each of the four children for a stint at boarding school in Perth, and thus ensures that they attain the middle class. He dies in Southern Cross in 1919, in the
great world influenza epidemic, an epidemic which, according to folk wisdom, took the strongest and healthiest of the population.

I speak of my grandfather’s diary not only because it shows my roots in the yellow sand, roots that are so common to so many West Australians. Because of the gold rush, the population of this state grew from 50,000 in 1890 to nearly 300,000 in 1910.

But also I find in my grandfather’s account, and in his attitudes, so many elements which I can trace in my own childhood. I grew up as a babyboomer in a suburb in Perth where all the children played in piles of yellow sand out the front of building sites, because there was always a new house going up on every street, and a steadily declining supply of vacant blocks where we could build cubbies and climb banksia trees. It was a place of postwar optimism, opportunity and burgeoning prosperity, of conservatism and puritanism, with an iron hold on middle-class respectability, perhaps because its attainment was only a generation away. But it was also combined with great physical space and freedom and enjoyment of this physicality. As a child I believed that Western Australia was the best place in the world to live, because my parents said it was.

It was a childhood which has of course been given its consummate expression in Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net*.

But my grandfather’s diary also traces other attitudes which form a West Australian sensibility. There is this question of us and them, of Sandgropers and Tothersiders, which reached its apogee with the Secessionist movement. An inherited resentment of those who came to gain and take, who judged and patronised us as backward provincials, or worse, of those who didn’t come, but stayed away and simply overlooked us. Perhaps a defiant self-congratulation or a self-deprecating sense of inferiority is common to any outlying province, but the issue of place, of here or elsewhere, is still writ large here.

A friend of mine who teaches creative writing at a university here describes trying to get her students to find stories in their life in Perth. They feel that “nothing ever happens in Perth”, that life is only properly and colourfully lived in Melbourne or Sydney. Yet Perth is a city of a million and a half people, the same size as many major European cities. A Norwegian member of the class said that “something is missing in Perth but I can’t quite put my finger on it”. They were astounded to hear that Perth has produced some very good writers and that even more amazingly, in the 80s, a band called *The Triffids*, attained international success with songs about living in Perth. It’s as if we don’t quite take ourselves seriously,
don't believe in our own legitimacy.

Certainly, I remember feeling this myself. In my sandy childhood, of beach and spare blocks and backyards, there was another strata of experience, which was reading, and all the books I read came from the Northern Hemisphere. There seemed to be an incompatibility, I thought, between the grainy inner life of fiction and the harsh white flattening light of Western Australia. And more than that, a kind of disbelief in the importance of the inner life itself. It has taken me a long time to learn that it is exactly this which is my material.

I've never set out to be a 'West Australian' writer, but if – for the purposes of a paper like this – I examine some of my processes, I realise that I can trace a sensibility that has been formed by living here.

Increasingly, because I've lived here for a long time – all my life – I've become aware of history, my own, and of the place itself. I only have to catch the train from Fremantle to Perth for this: first the port where all my grandparents arrived, then the cemetery where they are buried, then the hospital where I was born, and my children were born.

Like many West Australians I've always gone to the South West for holidays since childhood: for the past 20 years I've often stayed in Yallingup in a relative's holiday house. But it is also a place where my parents used to come, to Caves House with their friends when they were young working people during the Depression, and later to spend their honeymoon there. And they always used to tell stories of the Group Settlers and their struggles to clear the land in the Margaret River area. So there's always been another layer to the experience of being there, the awareness of the past, especially in Caves House, which has fascinated me ever since I was a child.

Somehow when I started to write my novel, *Gilgamesh*, it came to be set in Yallingup, on a tiny Group Settlement farm, and its time was my parents' era, the Depression and the Second World War. The values of that era were still the values that formed my generation, that in fact we had to challenge and break away from.

The narrative centres around a young woman, Edith, who transgresses by having a baby and who in 1939 sets off on a journey across the world to Armenia, in the hope of finding her son's father and making a new life. Once she arrives there, the war breaks out.

It's not always possible, or perhaps even desirable, for writers to trace the reasons why a narrative occurs to them, or why it takes the shape it does.

But if I look at the generating forces within this narrative, I can see
that it's a story of arrivals and departures. Arrivals of strangers, come from elsewhere, to this shore, to make a new life, or to see what they will find, bringing change, and often being regarded with suspicion and hostility.

Edith's story, and later that of her son Jim, is also a story of the yearning for elsewhere, so common to young Australians, perhaps amplified for West Australians, for whom elsewhere, where real life begins, is also the cities of the East Coast.

And perhaps for me, Edith's journey represents the attempt to trace the connection between here and elsewhere, from the outer to the centre, to find our place in the great movements of history, and our legitimacy as players in the great human myths.

After all, we are the descendants of adventurous people.

But then Edith comes back, and decides after a while that there is as much life and love here as anywhere else. And that reminds me that some time ago I read a review of The Shark Net by Joyce Carol Oates in the New York Review of Books, a very favourable review, and when I read it I was filled with wonder for a moment, that a work that was so specific about a place – my place – with all the nuances so familiar to a Sand Person – should be understood by an American for what it was, and that it is out of the intense focus on 'here' that 'here' becomes 'everywhere'.

* This paper was first given as a talk at the Down South Writers' Festival in Busselton, May 2002.
WHERE THE YELLOW SAND STOPS*

There’s a line I like in Louis Malle’s film, *Atlantic City*. Burt Lancaster is strolling along the boardwalk, and he sighs and says, “The Atlantic Ocean was really something then. Yep, you should have seen the Atlantic Ocean in the old days.”

I think that’s how we Australians think about our geography and physiography. It’s all bound up in the past.

The Indian Ocean was really something in the old days. You should have seen Cottesloe back then, Triggs back then, Rottnest back then ... While we’re uneasy about the present, and hardly dare think about the future, we’re very nostalgic about the past. We don’t seem to be able to get enough of it. Some of us will even vote for some quite dubious politicians if they suggest they’ll take us back to it.

As a writer interested in our history, I have some very conflicting feelings about the past. I’ve often written about it, but when I talk about it, I’m struck by a strangely familiar feeling – well beyond déjà vu. It’s the sort of feeling summed up by Barry Humphries as “the anticipatory excitement of dancing with your mother”. In this country, it seems the Good Old Past is always being trotted out for one more waltz. Why is this? What is it with us and the past? Isn’t enough enough? These are the sort of questions that can worry me on sleepless nights.

I was first in this position twenty-five years ago, writing my first novel, *The Savage Crows*. At a time when my contemporaries were all writing stories about sex, drugs and university lecturers in Carlton and Balmain, I was worried that no one would want to read a novel about both history and geography – in my case a novel also involving the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines.

Nothing much has changed. In 2000, writing *The Shark Net*, I was worried that no one would find my memoir of Perth in the 1950s and 60s of anything but the most marginal interest.

When I was a new novelist and first invited to literary conferences, it
soon dawned on me that at West Australian literary conferences they were always talking about something called *place*. You’d have a whole gathering of literary academics and writers from all over the world, and they’d all be talking about *place* as enthusiastically as fifteenth-century Portuguese navigators. Never characters, or relationships or anything remotely dramatic, it seemed to me – in WA this one literary subject, this rather nebulous-sounding *place*, always dominated proceedings.

At one conference at Edith Cowan University I had the temerity to stand up and ask why this was so. I remember the conference was full of those forbidding literary dames that WA used to produce in such profusion, and they were seated on a rather high dais above the audience.

“Why the constant harping on *place*?” I asked Dame Mary Durack.

Dame Mary gazed steadily out into the far distance, maybe even as far as the Kimberley, and then directed a firm look down at me. “Because there’s an awful lot of it out there”.

She was right, of course. There is a lot of landscape out there. The yellow sand goes down pretty deep. But perhaps we should remember that it’s still sand, and not always the most ideal foundation to build on.

When I was a boy just arrived in Perth I was keen to carve my initials in the foundations of the old house my father had found for us. I thought the limestone’s bland façade and lemony softness begged to be scratched and scraped. Especially the big, yellow supporting stones in the front of the house.

My new friends had all dug their initials in their foundations, but their initials were all arrangements of straight lines. When I carved mine with a screwdriver something strange and fascinating happened. The D crumbled instantly and gently into a powdery cave, which engulfed the earlier R. As I watched, almost hypnotised, the cave quickly grew. Out of its mouth dribbled a pale lemon stream, and then a frightening rivulet of sand. I envisaged the whole house pouring out in an avalanche into Leon Road.

The foundation stone seemed to be melting. Soon it was more crust than stone. It was behaving like a big hour-glass, with a neat heap of fine-grained sand piling up at its base. At the same time, a thin plume of dust rose into the air like a tiny signal of disaster and softly blew away.

In fright I looked around for a rock or something solid to block the hole. The only things in sight were two of my brothers’ Dinky toys: a Ford Customline and a red London bus, and my new cricket ball. I pushed the Customline in first. It disappeared entirely into the cave. Then the double-decker bus. It vanished too. I tossed in the screwdriver but still the
trickling continued. Desperately, I even offered up my six-stitcher. The cave swallowed it, and sand still trickled merrily onto the ground. As a last resort, I unscrewed the sprinkler from the garden hose, and jammed it in, vertically. The sprinkler was metal, about eight inches square. The pace of the trickle seemed to slow. It hesitated and as I held my breath it stopped.

But now I had to put back the lost sand and cover the hole. I tried to pick up the mound but it was so fine it just fell through my fingers. I decided I needed to wet the sand, and quickly. Now I don’t know how normal people would deal with such a crisis. But even though the hose was nearby, my panicked brain instructed me to urinate on the pile of sand. Then I packed the mud into the cave, jammed it tight over the Ford, the London bus, the cricket ball and the screwdriver, packed it around the sprinkler, threw more mud over everything, patted it down and waited.

And it worked. The entombed offerings held fast. The plug stuck. Maybe that’s a metaphor for something.

When I try to pin down what Australians feel about our history and geography, I come to the conclusion that we’re really thinking of myth. I think there are always two Australian myths fighting for precedence: the Myth of Landscape and the Myth of Character. For me, the Myth of Landscape also divides into two opposing myths: the Beach or the Bush. Or, as I like to think of it, the Shark versus the Dingo. The Myth of Character is largely made up of legends that have been created by folklore. As Stanislaw Lee says, “Myth is just gossip grown old”. In this category you’d probably put our few legendary human beings: Ned Kelly, the Gallipoli Digger, a growing assortment of sportsmen and women – and the occasional horse.

In this country, rather more comprehensively, we’re all inheritors of the Myth of Landscape. Unlike other urbanised, relatively new nations, our spiritual consciousness draws almost totally on the elements and our environment. Despite massive cultural inroads from America and Europe, the idea of ourselves which we twenty-first century suburbanites carry in our heads, is still either based on, or reacting against, attitudes to water and fire held by bush stoics in the nineteenth century.

It’s still a variation on the Australian Legend of Russel Ward. Taking that a bit further, what I’m saying is that when we think of the Outback we really mean the Past. When we think of the City and Coast, we mean the Present. Further, when we think of the Bush and the Past we’re thinking Moral Notions, and when we think of the City and the Present we’re thinking Problems: politics, sex, crime, drugs.
In literary-geographic terms we’ve been led or chosen to believe that the city is crude, unstable, post-modern and produces serial killers. The country, on the other hand, is stable, comfy, modernist, and, for a writer, more likely to win the Miles Franklin Award.

I believe such lazy propaganda has been reinforced by our writers over the years. There’s no getting away from the fact that until the 1980s our writers were neglectful about recording the shift from a rural to a coastal/city consciousness. While our painters and photographers and filmmakers decades ago began to register the equal cultural claims of the coast and the city, our literature, against all logic, denied any claims at all for urbanity, not to mention modernity. The reasons for this are mostly to do with our cultural cringe and our over-enthusiastic aping of the established romantic English tradition.

As Professor George Seddon has pointed out, the tradition is that of William Cobbett, who christened London “the great Wen” - a wen being a sebaceous cyst, especially on the scalp, but in London’s case a parasite on the countryside, which Cobbett saw as the fount of all health and reason. This tradition, based on the rejection of the insanitary nineteenth-century metropolis, was enthusiastically exported to North America and Australia, where it still hangs on, especially among poets.

Seddon has given the example of A. D. Hope, our leading poet at the time, and writing in Canberra, the most cosseted city in a relatively comfy nation, simply following the myth of Cobbett’s rural England.

In Hope’s 1950s and 1970s description of Australian cities in his Selected Poems, still widely taught, he used Cobbett’s image of the cancerous growth of Victorian English cities:

And her five cities, like teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Cobbett was speaking of the diseased and insanitary cities of Victorian England. I, like George Seddon, find it hard to accept Hope’s description of “teeming sores” for beautiful Perth or Sydney, or indeed for any of the other capital cities. That a couple of generations of academics and educators did so shows how well this inaccurate transplanted cultural tradition went down with the punters.

One thing our writers had in common with their British and Irish counterparts like Oliver Goldsmith (as Hope’s natural descendants such as
Les Murray still do) was the romantic/political notion that moral stamina was sapped by the city and nurtured by the country. In other words, that a farm labourer was a more moral person than a factory worker or a taxi driver, a National Party voter more moral than a Labor Party voter. From his home in the comfort of London, Goldsmith lyrically mourned the decline of the Irish countryside – which he had left with all speed.

We’ve certainly had our own Oliver Goldsmiths. For the greater part of his adult life Henry Lawson lived in inner Sydney (including a 12-foot wide terrace house I later owned at 28 Euroka Street, North Sydney) and made only one unhappy trip to the Queensland border – his sole adult experience of the outback.

He did visit Western Australia during the gold rush, and camped under canvas in East Perth, though not from choice, on his honeymoon. Having come all this way, even in the middle of a gold rush, a gigantic event involving people from many nations and walks of life (lifeblood, you might think, to the country’s most noted writer) he never made it to the goldfields.

Banjo Patterson lived a prosperous middle-class Sydney life in leafy suburban Gladesville and Queen Street, Woollahra. His flight from the alleged horrors of the city “to the plains where the cattle and sheep stations are” took place chiefly in his imagination. Today he’s remembered by a plaque in Queen Street, outside an expensive boutique and just across the road from the mansions of John Laws and Paul Keating.

As a fiction writer, I’m not going to find fault with imagination triumphing over experience. What intrigues me, however, is the subsuming of these populist, romantic views into a politically correct literary-historical line. For fifty years the semi-nude bodies of Australians at the beach alarmed visiting intellectuals (mostly English), and Australian academics, often English themselves, aped their attitude. The late Geoffrey Dutton pointed out in *The Beach* how that timid sensualist D. H. Lawrence, in particular, was both fascinated and frightened by the freedom and hedonism of sun-browned and slippery Australians. His novel *Kangaroo* showed his nervousness and resentment at the happy athleticism of the teenage boys frolicking on the NSW south coast at Thirroul. He thought they were as “mindless as opossums” and their “thick muscular legs” worried him more than was probably good for him. But at least Lawrence was honest enough to see that it was the fear of freedom and pleasure in himself that he was fighting. Australian writers have also been a peculiarly dry, puritanical lot. Dutton thought it was as if our writers were still
thinking of the beach as Englishmen, nervous and resentful like Lawrence.

This moral aversion to the perceived hedonism of the beach was peculiar to our writers. Our painters, of course, from Streeton, Roberts and Conder, through Boyd and Blackman and Nolan and Brett Whiteley, have always been fascinated by the coast's artistic possibilities. So have photographers, such as Max Dupain, composers like Sculthorpe and Meale, and, increasingly, the film-makers. Why not the writers?

To take one example: one wonders why the critics for 100 years ignored Adam Lindsay Gordon's extraordinary poem *The Swimmer*, published in 1870, and compared favourably to the work of Walt Whitman, while Gordon's *The Sick Stockrider* was encouraged to gallop on and on.

This was the prevailing literary climate when I wrote *The Bodysurfers* in 1983. The coast generally made university English departments uneasy. Especially in Melbourne the beach was disliked and mistrusted as personal terrain. While Australian rules football, for example, was allowed to be embraced (it was pretty well compulsory for Melbourne academics to embrace it), the beach was seen as ideologically unsound: a common and vulgar milieu without any rules or discipline, populated by dumb surfers, sandy children and the hoi polloi. Their Anglo-Celtic skins burned easily or they got grit in their private parts or they got dumped by waves. Or they worried about sharks. In other words, it epitomised Sydney.

Of course, on the other side of the continent, growing up wedged between the Indian Ocean and the desert, West Australians found it impossible to imagine an Australian culture which did not embrace the ocean and river shores. It was the natural order of things. So I discovered when I arrived here. I couldn't believe my luck. Once I'd adapted to the local customs (or my mother had, which took a bit longer), and the soles of my feet had thickened, I was immensely grateful that the Dunlop Rubber Company had seen fit to transfer my father to its most remote State branch.

I'm still grateful. If I'd been born in WA, and not arrived here from Melbourne at an impressionable age, I would have taken the harsh and dramatic limestone coast for granted. Those first impressions of the effect of climate and landscape might not have stuck so vividly: the water shortages; the women at the beach with shoulder blades spotted like leopards; the boys who urinated on moss; my new friends who ate themselves while at the pictures — nonchalantly peeling the sunburned skin off their shoulders during the Saturday matinee. After passing these
strips of human parchment around for comparison – the aim was to tear off a complete sheet of skin from shoulder to shoulder – they’d eat them with relish, washed down with a swig of Fanta.

I have a vivid memory of a particular day in our first summer here. Nothing spectacular happened this day, and if the place hadn’t been new and novel to me there would probably have been nothing about it to remember. It was a Sunday morning and while dinner was cooking I plonked myself down on the front lawn, as six-year-olds do. The grass was buffalo. After the fine, soft grass of Melbourne, I was very impressed by buffalo. Maybe only an unusual sort of boy is impressed by grass, but I liked the tough independence of the lawn’s individual blades and runners and the way matted buffalo sprang back after you’d trodden on it. I even liked its name. It sounded more interesting than couch, or bent. As I lay spreadeagled on my back I felt totally supported by the grass. It held me up. I closed my eyelids against the sun, and felt its heat, and for the first time noticed that sensation of the amoeba shapes swimming in my eyes. I was conscious for the first time in my life of some sort of meeting of body and spirit and environment – and I’m trying to choose exactly the right word – of perfection.

The lawn, the sun, the place, my lying there, the distant smell of roast dinner, were simply perfect.

I was called in then for the meal, and I was hungry, but I didn’t want to get up. I had to tear myself up out of the buffalo grass. And with the vague feeling of regret that accompanied my rousing myself, I had a flash (and I’m sure this isn’t retrospective emotion) that this was a valuable moment, one that I wouldn’t forget.

Since the publication of The Shark Net people have said to me, “But how did you remember so much about life in Perth in the fifties and sixties?” Especially what might, uncharitably, be called trivia. When they can’t even remember what they were doing yesterday. Well, exactly. Neither can I. The past is much easier to remember, particularly in special circumstances.

It’s easy to flatter one’s home town, of course. But in all honesty I must say that the reason why the place is so firmly fixed in my mind – especially the mores and Western social habits and events of the late fifties and early sixties – is because I left it.

Western Australia is part of me, my centre, and I return here whenever I can. But I haven’t lived here since my twenty-first birthday. So it’s as if the Perth of that time is set in amber for me. Everything about it at that time is cemented in my mind.
Just as the six-year-old was riveted by first impressions, the twenty-one-year-old was overwhelmed by the events swirling around him at the other end of his youth. If I hadn’t left Perth it’s doubtful whether I would or could have written _The Shark Net_. The events and the time would have naturally segued into other years and decades and happenings. Just as I needed my proximity to these events to write about them, I also needed the distance, to be at arm’s length from them.

Joyce Carol Oates recently reminded me that D. H. Lawrence formed an opinion of Western Australia, too, as well as of the east coast, where, in five feverish weeks in 1922, he would write the sporadically brilliant novel _Kangaroo_. I had forgotten about Lawrence’s stay here. He found a “spirit of place” that evoked metaphysical terror. Lawrence’s character, the Englishman Richard Somers, a thinly disguised portrait of Lawrence himself, having decided that Europe “is done for, played out, finished”, emigrates to “the newest country: young Australia”. At first, Somers’ sense of his new environment, Western Australia, is poetic-mystical:

The sky was pure, crystal pure and blue ... the air was wonderful, new and unbreathed ... but the bush ... the grey charred bush. It scared him ... It was so phantom-like, so ghostly, with its tall pale trees and many dead trees, like corpses partly charred by bush fires, and then the foliage so dark, like grey-green iron. And then it was so deathly still.

Exploring the West Australian bush on foot, alone, Somers, alias Lawrence, has a more alarming, visceral vision that stays with him through the remainder of his Australian adventure:

He walked on, had walked a mile or so into the bush, and had just come to a clump of tall, nude, dead trees, shining almost phosphorescent with the moon, when the terror of the bush overcame him ... There was a presence. He looked at weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all ... It must be the spirit of the place. Something fully evoked tonight by that unnatural West Australian moon.

Provoked by the moon, the roused spirit of the bush ... It was bidding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men.

While we can understand his view, he does seem to have been a man to take fright easily. If it wasn’t the semi-nude teenage boys in NSW it was the nude trees in WA.
Lawrence’s Western Australia is not mine, but I know what he means about the moon. Whenever I think of this stark coastline that I love, the word moonscape comes to mind. The moon plays a part in *The Shark Net*. Eric Cooke’s killing frenzies paralleled the full moon. My friend John Sturkey was murdered during a full moon. A recurring image to me is of moonshine on the white sand of Waterman’s Bay.

As an adolescent full of wonder at the birth of my first child, and full of hurt and resentment at either the acute embarrassment or gossipy glee of the hypocritical adult world, I sat on the step of my green cement-floored flat at Waterman’s Bay the night of the birth, and looked up at the moon. And I was angrily glad that the moon wasn’t full and huge and portentous; that it wasn’t like a movie director’s cliché, but was small and the simple shape of a baby’s fingernail.

*This paper was first given as a talk at the Down South Writers’ Festival in Busselton, May 2002.*
MEGAN MCKINLAY

TAKING THE PLUNGE

At the time, your salty transit
went largely unheralded.
No lawman called you forth
to drip defiantly to justice.
No concourse cheered
your brazen breasting of convention
as you rode a No. 4 breaker
to the shores of our history.
Just this: a single anonymous enquiry
into the nature of your madness,
which long after remains a nation's insanity.

For the first time on this eager coastline,
body follows toe,
and all at once,
as if unleashed,
generation after generation
tumble after you
into the surf.
The idea of immersion stays with us
for ever,
shadowing our sand-blown suburbs
and head-above-water ways.

These days, every afternoon hums
with our rag-tag westerly pilgrimage.
Reserve shed,
we weight ourselves instead
with beach tent and boogie board,
SPF200,
surf the asphalt undulations coastward
to border ourselves towel-square
in this most central of margins.

Long after you write your own passage,
a nation of salt-struck acolytes breathes
your brine into its crevices,
beaches itself on the shores
of your reckless courage,
finding your defiance
in every fearless fronting
of that first ice-cold wave.
THE SOUND OF A BREAKING STRING

The spring rains have arrived
on the second day of spring.

We drove to town today.
The country was so dry

the forest on the hills by the highway
had begun to drink the air like smoke.

I was afraid. It was the wrong way round.
But tonight the great cord snapped and

it is almost too beautiful to write of
the effect in Cherry Orchard, Act II.

It seems to come from the sky and is
the sound of a breaking string.

Tonight it broke all over again.
The spring rain moved in.

It has the sound,
the absolute sound of rain.
DEAR JACK

to Jack Charles

I remember dragging you out of bed for *Dimboola* rehearsals. The director, David Williamson, preferred punctuality. Within days I became your chauffeur, which didn’t happen often to those of the stolen generation. Brought up in a mothering religious institution, you always as a house guest folded up bedding at one end in the morning, before departing to fully exercise those feathery fingers (tea leaf par excellence), negotiate a deal, dreamily rehearse a Jack Davis play. I last saw you on a southbound tram in North Fitzroy. Though wizened, those fine shrewd eyes still pierced. I hope the book you are writing about your jagged life travels well, right back into the sources of all that strife.

W.A. INK

I’m tired of the wheatlands of Western Australia, knocked flat by Dorothy Hewett and John Kinsella, as they mythologize their pasts – not the failure of white stubble, grey townships, haunted by the black fella.
Of the many works of fiction published in Australia during the past year, two – Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* – stand above all others. Despite obvious differences of style and purpose – one is a narrative of love, loss and redemption, the other a scathing commentary on human nature and institutions – each is passionate about place. Winton situates his novel in the harsh yet beautiful landscapes of the West and Flanagan in the colonial history and topography of Tasmania.

Both have a strong sense of writing from the margins, from the outer edges of the national consciousness. Winton writes, he says, against the popular tide, “from the wrong hemisphere, wrong country, wrong part of the wrong country”, while Flanagan sees isolation as a strength, a distancing from destructive politics, literary or otherwise.¹ “At the edges”, he says, “the truths of the age are sometimes more apparent than at the centre, where they are shrouded by money and power”.² These comments are disingenuous; literature is now, as both writers know, a global commodity. Winton’s West Australian setting is almost designed to appeal to an international audience, while Flanagan’s contemporary Tasmania is by no means distanced from the more destructive aspects of literary politics. Both books have been enthusiastically received overseas and have also been in competition for a number of Australian awards. *Gould’s Book of Fish* has won the Commonwealth Award and the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society, and *Dirt Music* the NSW and Western Australian Premiers’ Awards for Fiction and the Miles Franklin Award.

Tasmania has always fascinated the literary world. An isolated island haunted by its “blood-soaked history” – this phrase appears again and again – it has become disproportionately significant in Australian writing. So marked has this trend become that, according to one commentator, we risk the Tasmanianisation of Australian literature. *Gould’s Book of Fish* and
Chloe Hooper’s *A Child’s Book of True Crime* are just two of a number of recent novels set in Tasmania (in 1999 there were four) and both have had an enthusiastic reception overseas, the attraction being in no small measure due to their “blood-soaked” setting. *Gould’s Book of Fish* begins in present-day Hobart, where a dubious character, Sid Hammet, discovers a copy of the *Book of Fish* by the convict artist William Buelow Gould in an old galvanised iron meat-safe in a junk shop in Salamanca Place and becomes obsessed with its provenance. It has magical properties: the cover glows with a mesmeric shimmer and the pages are criss-crossed with writing in inks made from exotic substances such as shark’s blood or squid’s ink. The scrawl, endless, repetitive, protean, details Gould’s incarceration in the convict settlement at Sarah Island where he is ordered by the surgeon Lempriere to paint all the fish in the surrounding seas. When the book mysteriously disappears, Hammet sets out to reproduce the scrawl, the account of William Gould’s life, from memory.

Both narrative and identity are slippery and metamorphosis is a key concept. Hammet and Gould merge, become the same person, then separate, only to metamorphose into a fish. For part of the narrative the convict Gould is a sea creature immersed in his own underwater cell, almost submerged at high tide. The narrative is fluid too, and not only in the ebb and flow, the tidal swell of the language. This is a “novel in twelve fish” and an illustration from the original *Book of Fish* precedes each section. No expense has been spared in the production of this volume, a rare treat in this age of mass production.

*Gould’s Book of Fish* quite outdoes previous convict novels in its depiction of cruelty and the grotesque. On Sarah Island the convicts freeze, starve, are tortured and slaughtered on the whims of the Commandant. On the Tasmanian mainland gangs of escaped convicts and trusties scour the countryside for Aborigines to hunt down for sport, or massacre in the name of science, their heads then pickled in brine. The fraudulence of this is exposed when the surgeon Lempriere is killed and eaten by his pig Castlereagh. His skull, concealed in a barrel of Aboriginal heads sent back to London for scientific analysis, is taken by the English anatomists to be overwhelming proof of Aboriginal degeneracy.

Excess abounds. The Commandant, rotting from syphilis behind his mask of gold, is a megalomaniac, determined to make Sarah Island a “great trading nation”, a “Venice of the South”. He builds more and more palatial structures, using the groaning convicts as slaves. Urged on by a flood of letters from his supposed sister, Miss Anne, he sets out to construct a microcosm of nineteenth-century Europe – its culture, science and
technology. A National Railway Line which goes round and round in circles and ends up nowhere, a Mah Jong Hall, a Palace, an Art Gallery containing the greatest works of European art, or copies of them, are built. Trading treaties bring the fleets of the world, the Japanese, Javanese, Portuguese and Dutch to Sarah Island and chicanery and corruption flourish. The grand edifices fall into decay, crumble and rot - as empires do - and the final fire scarifies all. Meanwhile the monstrous characters become larger-than-life personifications of Power (the Commandant), Science (the Surgeon) and Enlightenment (Miss Anne) and all are shown to be corrupt.

The book is richly associative, and not just through direct reference. There are reminders of Swift (the biting satire), Joyce (the fluid metamorphosis of language) and the apocalyptic grotesqueries of Hieronymus Bosch. But the book has far more important social and political connotations. Its scathing condemnation of all notions of culture, Empire and the Enlightenment is as powerful as in Conrad's Heart of Darkness and there are many parallels between the two books. Because of its wide-ranging condemnation of colonial history and character Gould's Book of Fish is certain to become an Australian classic. A book “with the obscene ambition of becoming the world” (291), it is, like many masterpieces, a difficult read. It’s certainly not for the faint-hearted.

A Child’s Book of True Crime, Chloe Hooper’s first novel, is a psychological narrative of adultery, murder and suicide set in modern-day Tasmania. It burst upon the international scene to unparalleled acclaim, followed by a short-listing for the Orange Award for the best novel written in English by a woman. Its structure consists of parallel narratives cross-linked by recurring motifs and enlivened by commentaries - sometimes brilliant, sometimes contrived. One is by a group of quaint and anthropomorphic animals, another by a class of children much wiser than the purblind and guilty adults. The animals, aghast detectives trying to unravel human crimes, are themselves vulnerable to road-rage, hunters and castrating vets (one of them, the Tasmanian Tiger, is already extinct). They have the most tender and “human” feelings of all the characters, while the humans behave, in the animals’ words, “like wild animals”.

The children, including the precocious Lucien, are as vulnerable to abuse as the convict children who were incarcerated at nearby Point Puer, and all the action takes place against the background of Port Arthur; haunted by its convict history and its more recent massacre.

The plot is complicated, perhaps too much so. The narrator - a teacher, Kate Byrne - is having an affair with Thomas, the father of her pupil
Lucien, whose mother Veronica has written a best-selling account of a murder at Black Swan Point, a narrative which bears a striking resemblance to Kate's circumstances. In it a veterinary nurse who is having an affair with the vet is savagely murdered, apparently by the wife, who seems to have then suicided. Or perhaps the husband murdered both of them. Kate identifies with the victim after her car has been vandalised – the fan-belt cut and the brakes disabled – and is determined to escape a similar fate. She discovers that the wife, Veronica, has colluded in the affair and even Lucien is in on it. Any of the three could be planning her murder.

The pacey and witty narrative, the dramatic intensity, the novelty of the choruses by animals and children, and the overt eroticism, have ensured the success of *A Child's Book of True Crime*. Although some commentators have judged the characterisation to be thin, this certainly isn't so of the impulsive, gullible and increasingly paranoid Kate. Meanwhile the talking animals move us into a different narrative convention, that of a children's book written, according to the narrator, to explain adult crime to children. It is packaged as a nineteenth-century book for children and, like *Gould's Book of Fish*, is a quality production.

*Dirt Music*, Tim Winton's seventh novel, is quintessentially Australian. Winton has a fine ear for dialogue and a true sense of the ambiguities of Australian society. The narrative is colloquial and laconic yet, at the same time, visionary. Winton has been labelled a "late romantic, post-colonial writer" (some ambiguity there) and criticised for his use, in this novel at least, of the clichés of romanticism: the value of suffering, the healing power of the wilderness, the redemption of love. However, in the hands of such a beguiling writer these stereotypes are moving and deeply satisfying. The novel is fast moving and finely plotted. The narrative never flags from the first scene just before dawn at White Point where a feral figure sneaks in to poach his neighbour's catch, to the denouement where the fish poacher, the unlikely Luther Fox, demonstrates the saving power of love.

White Point seems at first as a typical Australian fishing village, yet its bland surface conceals old and fixed patterns of secrecy and brutality. It is, according to the narrator, a "personality junkyard" where an assortment of blow-ins with dubious pasts exist alongside the *nouveau riche* grown wealthy from the export of crayfish. The fish-poacher challenges property rights – rights to crayfish, rights to a woman – and can expect little mercy. His dog is murdered, his truck and trailer trashed, his life threatened. Add to this the brooding sexual tensions between the three main characters, each with a disturbing past. Georgie Jutland, a fortyish nurse with a history of
abysmal relationships, has drifted into the life of Jim Buckridge, the local “big man” and his two sons (his wife has died of cancer). Georgie is already bored and resentful. Luther Fox has lost his father to asbestos poisoning, his mother to a fallen tree branch and his brother’s family, the dirt musicians, to a violent accident. The relationship between the three is finally determined by Jim’s need to atone to the Fox family. Winton manages to elicit sympathy for all three, even for Jim Buckland who, we learn, is capable of murder, arson and rape. His impulse to atonement rather than revenge is one of the surprises and strengths of the novel.

Luther’s epic journey north – to become “a secret, his secret” – involves a picaresque trawl through the most rugged and beautiful scenery of the West and encounters with a progression of stock figures – a mad junkie, caravanning retirees, a wise Aborigine and others. Yet these are more than stock figures. The caravanning wife, for instance, quotes the literary classics with ever more desperate abandon as she dies an agonising death from cancer, and the Aboriginal guide burns Luther’s useless maps and points the true path into the wilderness. Winton’s strength is not only the subtlety of his characterisation but also his passion for place; not just the scenery, although there are wonderfully scenic descriptions, but the spirit of the land.

**Comings and goings: literary journeys**

The pattern of the journey, the quest, has a venerable history in Australian literature. The quest for lost love, a missing father, for metaphysical enlightenment, or just the solution to a crime, recurs again and again. It usually involves a journey, a maturation, an all-encompassing discovery. I think of the magnificent moment in *Dirt Music* when the plane goes down and Luther Fox dives deep down under the sea, into the wreckage, to claim Georgie and drag her back to life. Few discoveries are as shattering as that one.

During the last year, a number of the best novels have been quest novels, novels of comings and goings, of literary journeyings. In the past the trajectory was – in life as well as in literature – away from the drabness of Australian life towards the esteemed “other”, usually the more venerable cultures of England or Europe. The cringe involved in the traditional contrast between “home” and the “other” has all but disappeared following the post-war influx of refugees grateful to be here and eager to contribute the best of their culture. Australia is now more
often seen as a refuge; still a place of departure but, more often than not, one to return to for resolution and relief.

Moreover the focus of the quest has shifted Eastward to more exotic destinations such as Armenia, Yemen or Singapore. Many contemporary quest novels are enriched by traditional folklore or myth – the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Arabian Nights* or the book of Job. These informing myths are brought to bear in a way that adds point to Australian experience without necessarily denigrating it. Nor does their use suggest that wisdom will invariably be found elsewhere. Some few novels, such as *Dirt Music* – and we are reminded of Randolph Stow’s *To the Islands* – resolve the quest within Australia.

Both Joan London’s *Gilgamesh* and Eva Sallis’s *The City of Sealions* involve a metaphysical journey, a going and a coming back, and each explores cultural difference and identity. *Gilgamesh* is written from an Australian point of view – that of the pragmatic young woman Edith – *The City of Sea Lions* from the point of view of Lian, a second-generation Vietnamese Australian. *Gilgamesh* begins on an arid settler block on the south-east coast of Western Australia to which the Australian Frank brings his English bride Ada after the first world war. Their two children, Frances and Edith, grow up there in an atmosphere of failure and decay. Into the clearing in the bush one day come two fantastic strangers from the outside world bringing stories of romance, travel and adventure. They are Leopold, Ada’s nephew, and the Armenian Aram, wandering the world together as did Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Mesopotamian tale, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. This “old book”, which Leopold carries with him and later passes to Edith and her son Jim, provides the mythic counterpoint to all the journeying and returning home in the novel.

In *Gilgamesh* personal identity is related, in almost every case, to the lack of a father. Edith and Frances lose their father before the strangers arrive. Pairs of young men – and the novel is obsessive in its pairing – are fatherless, finding their identity in male bonding similar to that celebrated in the “old book”. Racial hybridisation, suggesting exciting cultural exchanges, is also a persistent pattern. Leopold is both Russian and English, his father killed in the first war while Aram, an Armenian, has been raised in an orphanage, his parents massacred by the Turks. In the next generation Jim/Dmitri, son of Aram and Edith, is Australian and Armenian and, because of his foreign appearance and lack of schooling, will never be “at home” in Australia. At the end of the novel Jim sets out to explore the world as his predecessors, including his mother, have done. But in his case the pattern will be broken. He will go to Leopold who, having never known a father, will become a surrogate father to Jim.
The plot is as compulsively patterned and complicated as that of *A Child's Book of True Crime* but, because spread over three generations is less hectic, more believable. The prose is restrained and elegant, with a total absence of sentimentality. The development of Edith during the course of the novel and the evolution of her relationship with her son are traced with great restraint. Jim’s separation from his mother, beginning with his preference for male company on the ship which takes them to Southampton, is handled with great tact. This generational repetition, suggesting the timeless patterns of love and renunciation within families, is one of the great strengths of the novel. As Jim sets out to “find his place in the world”, for Edith “the great adventure was to stay”. This is the quest novel *par excellence* and its high point is Edith’s improbable journey to Armenia at the outbreak of war to take Jim to his father, a romantic and heroic quest which could easily have ended in disaster had she not, improbably, been rescued by members of the A.I.F fighting in the Syrian campaign. This novel, short-listed along with Arnold Zable’s *Café Scherezade* for the Miles Franklin Award, is a stylistic masterpiece.

Eva Sallis’s second novel *The City of Sealions* is also a quest novel with, once again, an informing and ancient story, this time from the *Arabian Nights*. A narrative of alienation and displacement, it closes with some hope of reconciliation. The novel is notable for its rare psychological honesty and its symbolic unity – everything is related to the sea.

Lian, daughter of the Vietnamese Phi-Van and the good Aussie “bloke” Nev, grows up on an island off the South Australian coast. Phi-Van’s memories of family massacre are destroying her and her relationship with her daughter Lian alternates between cold rage and over-protection. There are acts of savage cruelty on both sides, the most repulsive the murder of Phi-Van’s dog by the jealous Lian.

Lian learns Arabic at an Adelaide university and goes to Yemen to perfect her studies. Here she learns that, despite her mastery of the language, her immersion in the culture – she adopts the dress of Yemeni women, the *balto* and the *hijab* – and her study of the Koran, she is still a stranger, a “woman from the peripheral lands”. After a period of deep depression Lian comes to understand her mother’s pain and, pregnant, determines to return to the island and attempt to “lead her mother back to the sea”, “to make the world her home again”.

The levels of metaphor and realism are never far apart in this novel and the sea, the guiding metaphor, is cleverly woven into its every aspect. Immersion in the sea or avoidance of it defines the characters. Phi-Van, a
boat-person, hates the sea while Lian and Nev swim, dive and fish together. Lyrical passages of great intensity describe Lian diving with whales in South Australia and sea-lions in Yemen, and riding out a great storm (metaphorical as well as literal) with Nev. Lian, at the end, determines to push herself “out into the open sea”, while her lover Ibrahim is “like a fish out of water” without her in America.

The fable being translated from the Kitab Alf Layla wa-Layla, the Arabian Nights, by Lian and interspersed throughout the narrative, adds point to her own story. A fisherman, Abdallah, descends to the undersea world with his counterpart, the merman Abdallah. Despite the beauty of the submarine world and their shared spiritual values, the fisherman is finally repelled — these were not his kind. They were “fish, eating fish, living as fish”. Lian concedes that there is “in the end, something deadly about trying to belong”; Yemeni culture will always be for her a “foster” culture, not her own. Reconciliation is to be achieved, not through attempting to become something else, but through love and reconciliation on a personal level, especially within the family.

In Arnold Zable’s Café Scheherazade the quest is back in the collective memory for stories of suffering and survival during the holocaust. The novel is centred upon the café of this name in Melbourne’s St Kilda, a place of a thousand and one stories, and the comparison to the thousand and one nights is emphasised in both title and prologue. The café becomes a rendezvous for Jews who survived the holocaust and have washed up here, haunted by their memories and desperate to tell their stories to the narrator, the journalist Martin Davis. This is the Jewish culture of Lily Brett’s stories, but without the deracination or ennui; instead it’s a culture where vigour, initiative, courage and endurance are celebrated.

Zable is a masterly story-teller and there are a multitude of stories, rapidly told, tumbling over one another, horrific in detail, redemptive for the few. There are stories of love and loss; unbearable stories of whole families walking into the mists of oblivion; stories of hazardous journeys, of legendary cities, of Odessa, Kiev, Vilna, Vladivostok, Kobe, Shanghai and Paris. There is also the story of the proprietors Masha and Avram who, after many heart-stopping obstacles, finally meet up in the Café Scheherazade in Paris and then create its simulacrum in Melbourne. Zable creates an ambience where history, fable and personal memory coalesce to re-create the old world in moving detail; the world of Tsarist Russia, of the socialist bund and revolution, of Hasidic culture and apostasy from it, of the many political betrayals as whole populations are scattered or
indiscriminately slaughtered. This is a thrilling book to read, not just for its many exciting narratives, but also for its magical and haunting atmosphere.

John Scott's *The Architect: A Tale* is also a quest novel, but one from which there's no return. It's a fast-moving narrative in which Andrew Martin, a young Australian architect at the height of his power and success, seeks further knowledge in the old world. The novel has a toe-hold only in Melbourne; most of the *Tale* takes place in the half-light of the Northern Hemisphere, in the gloomy and Gothic apartments and streetscapes of Berlin.

Andrew falls hopelessly in love with the elderly Johannes Von Ruhland, a German architect so distinguished and reclusive that he is almost a mythical figure. Martin leaves his wife and child and falls in with Johannes' suggestion that he pass off the Master's brilliant plans — for an art centre in Kyoto — as his own. He wins the prize only to be denounced by Johannes as a thief and plagiarist. Lured back to Von Ruhland one last time, Martin is set up by him to be savagely killed by a gang of neo-Nazis. He has lost his marriage, his reputation and now his life. The pace is relentless as Martin is destroyed step by step and the Prologue makes it quite clear that Von Ruhland has planned this from the beginning.

Although psychologically credible, this is obviously a moral fable. Despite echoes of the Faust myth (Von Ruhland has designed gas chambers for the Nazis and is certainly a Satanic figure) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, references to the book of Job and Carl Jung's *Answer to Job* provide a more authentic key. The God who is sometimes seen as the "Great Architect of the Universe" is, for Martin, a cruel and tormenting Jehovah. Despite, or perhaps because of his unflagging love for his Master, Martin is punished unto death.

Meanwhile new novels by Elizabeth Jolley, Marion Halligan, Rosie Scott and Georgia Blain continue the tradition of sophistication in women's writing. Jolley's *An Innocent Gentleman* deals with the difficulty of containing passion within the family and Halligan's *The Fog Garden* with passion lost. Rosie Scott's *Faith Singer* and Georgia Blain's *The Blind Eye* deal with the corruption of Australian society in Kings Cross and the Gulf respectively. Scott's vision is redemptive; Blain's almost totally pessimistic.

We read Elizabeth Jolley for her clever plotting, her sympathy for her sometimes very odd characters, and the laconic, non-judgemental way in which she presents their behaviour. *An Innocent Gentleman*, her fifteenth
novel, is no disappointment. Set in the dreary English Midlands during the second war, it concerns a family crisis and its unusual resolution. The title is the key to its moral ambiguity. Of the three main characters - Muriel, Austrian-born and a teacher of German, her husband Henry, a Maths teacher considered by both to be socially inferior, and the gentleman lawyer, Mr Hawthorne - none is innocent. The “gentleman” of the title could be either the accommodating husband, the most honest of the three, or the wealthy lawyer, Muriel’s student. The latter takes advantage of her infatuation, invites her to the opera in London (interestingly enough it’s Fidelio) and, during the visit, impregnates her. The resultant ménage a trois, for which all three are to some extent guilty, parallels the situation in Jolley’s own family, described with feeling in her Central Mischief. There are the usual delicious details we’ve come to expect from Jolley, such as the episode where Henry enjoys a “quick relief job to clear away the cobwebs” from his grotesque neighbour Mrs Tonks. The resolution, where the baby is accepted by the whole family, with the Mr Hawthorne enjoying visiting rights and no doubt paying handsomely, is given added point by the epigraph from Wordsworth’s The Prelude. Following a disturbing and frightening episode in the poem, as in the novel, “Discordant elements” are assimilated. They now “move in one society”.

Marion Halligan’s The Fog Garden hovers between autobiography and fiction, between the first person narrative of “The Lapping” – this deals with the great “Cathedral of Grief” in which Halligan shelters after the death of her husband – and the remainder of the book where this experience is projected onto the fictional Clare who, according to Halligan, “isn’t me” but “is like me”. The narrative voice throughout is vintage Halligan, clever, ironic and meditative. It’s enriched with musings on literature – seen as “balm” for the soul – as well as all the “simple glorious things” of life, like friends, gardens, fine food and wine, stories and memories and above all marriage: “you plant roses, and grow children, and one of you buries the other” (184). Readers value Halligan for her storytelling, her exquisite writing, and above all for her consummate wisdom. The Fog Garden provides all three in plenty.

Rosie Scott continues her tradition of gritty urban realism in Faith Singer. This incisive novel set in Kings Cross deals with street kids who prostitute themselves, the wheezy old men who prey upon them and the crooked cops who protect pimps, drug bosses and paedophiles. Faith Singer, an ageing rock star who has lost her beloved daughter Daisy to an overdose, can no longer bear to sing. She becomes a surrogate mother to children “so battered by the world that they were barely alive”. These
include Angel, a prostitute and drug addict, and Cosmo, who dies despite her help. This is a novel of redemption; its happy ending for Angel and Faith - who incidentally gains the courage to sing again - mitigated by our awareness that for one child rescued hundreds are dragged down into mental dissolution and death.

There is little redemption, or even resolution, in Georgia Blain's literary world. She has a talent for desolation, human and geographical. The decaying Gulf town in her third novel *The Blind Eye* is as desolate as the deserted coastal resort in her first, and both hide secrets. In *Closed for Winter* it's the disappearance of a child, in *The Blind Eye* responsibility for the death of a blind girl. The novel is organised around homeopathy as practice and metaphor - the healing of both body and spirit - and extracts from homeopathic texts preface each section of the novel (I'm not sure that this works.) The narrator Daniel, a homeopath, is treating the self-mutilating Simon who, flush with money and drugs, has gone to the Gulf to restore his mother's house. Simon falls in love with a beautiful blind girl in a secret garden, fertile and fragrant. She and her father, both homeopaths, are intent upon transforming lives as they have the wilderness. Simon's responsibility, real or imagined, for her death is the crux of the novel.

**Not to be missed . . .**

It's impossible, in an article of this length, to discuss all the worthwhile novels published in Australia in this one year, let alone short stories or detective fiction, so I'll comment on just two more novels: n. a. bourke's *The Bone Flute* and Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back*, then conclude with some remarks on emerging writers.

*The Bone Flute* is deeply tragic, *Bitin' Back* a comedy of sorts, but each in its own way has something serious to say about the treatment of women in Australian society. *The Bone Flute* is brooding, enigmatic and surreal, with all the dark fatalism of a Thomas Hardy novel. The heroine Germaine (an ironic choice) is powerless to stave off the sexual advances of her father or, later, the emotional savagery of her partner. Worse still, she's unable to protect her baby daughter, apparently "her father's child", with all the ambiguity that suggests. The music of the flute which runs through the novel culminates in a surreal and shocking sequence - real or a nightmare - where the dead baby's bones, stripped of their flesh, are carved into a flute, the music of which holds and contains the essence of Germaine's
and the child’s tragedy. This is a deeply affecting and impressive novel but perhaps too sombre for many readers.

*Bitin’ Back*, by the Aboriginal writer Vivienne Cleven, is for me the surprise of the year. I’m used to powerful Aboriginal autobiographies but this novel goes one step further. It makes serious points about Aboriginal society, its vitality as well as its short-comings, but this time through fast-moving and hilarious comedy. The narrator, an Aboriginal woman Mavis Dooley, fights like a fiend to protect her football-star son Nevil from the scorn of the community after she finds him dressed as a woman and declaring that he is Jean Rhys. Her dialogue, colloquial, profane and scatological, carries the narrative through the misunderstandings, evasions and concluding revelation of Nevil’s true situation. Her defiant thoughts, running as an italicised commentary alongside the dialogue, reveal Mavis as cunning, wily and above all active in addressing Nevil’s dilemma. Just as Mavis *bites back* at anyone who threatens her son, so the novel *bites back* at the stereotyping of Aboriginal language, character and society.

I’m not surprised that *Bitin’ Back* was short-listed for the National Award for Fiction at the Adelaide Writers’ Festival and, along with the more publicised works of Peter Carey, Arabella Edge, Andrew McGahan, Peter Minack and John Scott, judged as one of the six best fictional works of the previous two years.

Both *The Bone Flute* and *Bitin’ Back* are first novels; they and a number of other novels by young writers indicate the future direction of Australian fiction. Stephen Gray’s *The Artist is a Thief*, Mireille Juchau’s *Machines for Feeling* and Ingrid Woodrow’s *Goddess and the Galaxy Boy*, prizewinner for the 2000 *Australian/Vogel* Award and finalists for 1999 respectively, are evidence of this. All three are novels of great vitality and imaginative range, and all three are fired up with their authors’ views of the appalling state of our society, particularly in the way it treats young people. With writers such as these coming along, with the encouragement of publishing houses such as Allen & Unwin and the University of Queensland Press, and with mentoring programmes funded by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, we need have no fear for the future of fiction in Australia.
Fiction Received 2001–2002.

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review.


Notes
Katoomba

The Three Sisters at Echo Point rise like lions in the sea, their shapes repeated in the Sorensen cypresses that stand in scattering blue light across the mountains. A lifting mist reveals a tracery of ridges and ravines, fissures in the earth. There are cliffs that can throw a human cry from rockface to rockface, until, unheard, it drops into darkness.

Everywhere there is a falling away: rocks inclined towards the east have uplifted, folded and fractured over millions of years. Heavy layers of yellow and brown sandstone are lined with red and grey shale. Volcanic necks lie on the north and the south side of the ridge, giving a coastline to this sea of air.

Jacaranda blue, only deeper.

From the dark where Freya is sitting, the house burns in lamplight. She sees the white moonskins of the tangled scribbly gums on the other side of the valley, like smoke twisting through the bush. A distant train rattles as it pulls into the station in Main Street, sounding like the shaking of teeth in an old dead head. She has been listening to it for a month now.

She has told no one that after her last drink with Philippe in the Goodbye Café at the airport in Hong Kong, she has returned alone.

Freya turns her head from the bush and moves across the verandah to the door. Inside the room there is a piano, a desk under the window and around it are walls of books, their covers evenly stacked in tight lengths, their reflections reaching into the night. The ceiling undulates above blades of double bookshelves; a body of books rises in every space around her. There is a heap of shoes on the floor, a wooden trunk, boxes of books, enough for the winter ahead if she runs out of wood. She pauses and listens as an animal coughs in the night. The high, high poplars rub against each other as she takes a book from the top shelf. Inside Robert Lowell’s
Notebook, Philippe has numbered the names of the ex-wives in careful script, each number like a hand grenade. Placing it in a box she reaches again, and finds the book of poems he bought in the heat of the tents in Adelaide, and shyly offered to a towering Ted Hughes who wrote in the flyleaf, *Hair by hair you might pluck a life bald*.

Working like this for several hours, Freya is slowly clearing the forest of books. At night, in the heat, she has been packing them for weeks, until the walls are scraped back to themselves. She started this task the evening she returned from Hong Kong, the night’s choreography giving her days their shape and meaning.

Somewhere there is the dark voice of a dog.

Tonight she starts on the novels and finds, slipped inside them, the photographs Philippe used as bookmarks. As she gazes at the photographs she knows it will never be over.

1976. Twenty-two years ago. Freya and Philippe were in a room in the school in St Denis. They had been married for one month and Philippe was teaching in Paris. One of the teachers picked them up in a cab from the Hotel Danube in the rue Jacob where they had spent three nights listening to the wall paper crumbling, and had woken suddenly in the night when the American choir girls returned to the hotel. They were down on the street, at the door.

*Happy Noo Year, Happy Noo Year,* they called softly across the evening to each other, and for years afterwards on each New Year’s Eve, Philippe would kiss her neck and whisper to her at midnight in a soft American accent, and she would smile.

The next morning Freya arranged him against the dark drop cloth she had fashioned from her black winter coat hung by the window.

His pipe sat on its side on the table. White salt lay in the ashes.

*For the cover of your first novel,* she laughed as he rolled his eyes at her. *Keep still!*

He held his face to the darkness, and she took the picture.

Travelling to Fontainbleau with another teacher, the Spaniard, they followed a road in a forest of straight-limbed trees brushed in narrow waves up to the low cloud. Rain waited to fall upon a tall grey stone house that looked like a tree or a nest on the edge of the forest. In the gardens of the chateau were some yawning soldiers, hands on hips, cloaks spread. Three donkeys screamed at the train running behind the chateau. In the *jardin anglais*, an old man sat on a seat deeply bent upon the sway of the swan on the pond. Or perhaps he was asleep.
Through the trees a horse kicked up leaves and warmed the air with its steaming dung. An officer was exercising his big bay, his eyes flickering over them without interest as the Spaniard took the photo.

On the way back, the Spaniard’s laugh in the back seat was like the twanging of a guitar. As Philippe’s eyes met Freya’s they smiled at each other in antipodean collusion.

After driving about for an hour trying to find the school, Freya finally stopped on an overpass in fog and the Spaniard, gathering his coat about him, climbed out of the car and stood on the road in the night lit by broad, searching sweeps of orange light.

*Where are we?* Freya asked.

*We’re lost,* said Philippe.


Her sister must have taken this early picture, because he was young, his hair long. She must have held the camera into the breeze; Freya could hear the click in the rush of open air. There were miles of brown water. After the picnic on the shore, Freya and Philippe had fallen into the warm water, fully clothed, and the boat flapped beside them like a pelican. The hills were brown behind the sails, the sky white with the last of the Australian summer heat. They rolled in the dam with each other, their faces stretched with laughter.

When they were in the boat again, the breeze picked up and Philippe span the heron until the wind was directly behind them. He loosened the sheets then let them all the way out, and the sails swung free. Freya stretched out on her back and felt the warm water sliding along the edge of the boat, streaming over her arm. As he held the rudder steady, they ran back towards the shore, goose-winging, with the sound of metal clinking on the mast.

*Blue eyes,* he sang to her, *baby’s got blue eyes, on a blue, blue day.*

And they sailed back like that, happy with the expectation of being carried home on the sure evening wind.


Built from golden cypress pine on the side of a valley, it had a silvery green roof. They slept high up in the house below a pane of glass that gave an eye to the night. In the morning the house creaked in response to the warming air and they would wake to the gulping cry of a swooping currawong. Rising, they would step out onto a small deck so high above the tree line that the parrots flew beneath them, squeaking with the sound of
two branches rubbing together in a breeze. On the deck was a table where they drank tea and leant over the bow of the house, set upon the grey swell of an ocean of eucalypts.

They moved into the house one June day many years ago, away at last from the heat of the city. At nights they walked through the cemetery with the dog, Philippe sniffing up the snowy air like cocaine. Once they sat in the darkness on the verandah listening to Borodin’s Nocturne at midnight under the bright, cold sky, the dog at their feet as she told him a story:

*A tall woman was caressing her husband’s feet, stroking him to death. They did not catch her. Caresses leave no trace. It was a slow death and he died with his foot in the air, and his lips folded in.*


She took this photograph of Philippe not long after they first met.

There is the clean line of the cheek, the eyes averted. Her fingers touch his cheek. There is a hollow in the skin here, a small strawberry birthmark in the shape of a dog. His eyes are green, with hazel patches in some lights. She holds the photograph as if tempted to lower her face against it, to glean the scent of him. For Freya, in this moment, there is nothing but his eyes of woven glass and the slow pulse of memory. He is telling her the story of his family. They are young and it is the first time she has heard this story. A bottle of Mateus sits between them on the table. His fingers are brushing at the label, finding the rift where it lifts a little from the cool glass. She is listening to him and watching his hands, like birds in their shape, flashing between trees.

It was raining when they met, it was raining as the dark trees silently observed their passage between the house and the car, and inside the warm enclosure the car made, there was Rachmaninov. First it was twilight, then much later when they returned, it was the falling darkness that he stopped with his upturned palms. He whispered to her, ‘I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.’ And he took her head in one hand and drew it to that place between his shoulder and throat and she felt the warm, soft brushing of lips upon her eyelids, sealing them against a future she would not want to see. Did he know it even then?

Freya stacks the photographs in a box. Then she picks up more books, cold stones in her hands, and climbs the stairs to the bed in the room that hangs like a kite over the eucalyptus forest.

Outside oil sizzles in the gum leaves. There are the blue backs of flies. She hears the sound of a hubcap from the wheel of a car on the highway, spinning off into the night.
Her bed is her grave. On it lies a heavy body of books, the revolver that had been handed down to him through the French side of Philippe’s family. She lies against these things, her grave goods, and falls into sleep as into a dark pool below her, sleeping deeply, entombed with a copy of the book of the dead, fully clothed in a green dress and boots. Her eyes closed to her journey, she is studying the map of it in her sleep. Informed by a boatload of memory, sweat leaks from her body as she sleeps like a creature that has had a net thrown around it in the sea. Her sleep is a drowning, a slow slipping away under water. Last night she woke in the dark, swung out of bed, hitting her bones on the cupboard. He was lost in the darkness below and she must reach down and grasp his hand and pull him up from the black water lapping at her feet.

The moon outside the window is an old one and she is the sad wife, sleeping as though her pillow has been dipped in a bucket of ether. She doesn’t move. She will wake with her head still turned to the window, listening to the sound of the wind in the eucalypts, like the sound of waves reaching at the shore, falling back, failing.

She is a shipwreck, smashed on a reef of writing.

When she opens her eyes, it is because she hears the house speaking to her in the hot morning light, the wood bending, stretching, groaning like a boat on waves of heat. Below the house the grass lies down in the heat and the willows shake their heads of hair.

A bird’s line of flight crosses the stand of gums.

She lives day after day like this for months, schooling herself in solitude: a feather knocked from the body of the bird.

For company, there is only the dog who sleeps under the house in a hollow of dirt, listening to the footfall on the brushbox floor above as Freya moves like a sick woman across the room.

She thinks about telling people that Philippe has died in Hong Kong. She rehearses the story:

*We ride the sea this night on the Celestial Star. We sit at the rear on wooden seats polished by the passage of a million people. You can trace the brass star in the wood with your finger. The two middle-aged Americans who sit in front of us absorb me and I think he is kissing her foot. I lean forward to see him carefully clipping her toenails and turn back to Philippe to laugh. But he is gone. He is falling from the back of the ferry in a moment carved in the air.*

*His arms stretch out to me. His glasses are slipping on his nose. He is falling into the Fragrant Harbour. As he flies into the harbour, he parts the black water and his body makes a dark hole. Other water fills the hole. (Did I look away to see the lights of Kowloon in the soft, soft dark, and turn back to find you gone?)*
I hear five bells across the sea. A cleaving apart. 

The next morning The South China Morning Post said:
At 7.30 P.M. last night a man fell from a Star Ferry into Victoria Harbour as it made its way from Central. An extensive search of the area was unable to locate him. 

A body dipping into the sea.

From the verandah, the dog listens to her whispering story. The dog waits for him still, but somehow Freya knows better than to wait. She takes a pick down to the creek. She hooks into the earth and plants sentinel agapanthus under trees that stand like temples over her bent figure. She fills the holes with dirt and the heat dries her face. Like a Western red cedar, Freya is rotting from the inside, narcosing; slowly the blood in her body dries to a rusted mark.

Once again, the night swings deeply across the valley, bringing more than just the absence of light. She dreams there are people at the door who are knocking on the wood. A rescue party hovers in a helicopter out here in the South China Sea, as the house groans and rolls in the gale like a scuttled boat. The wind is sucking at the walls. The beams stretch and strain as it rolls for days; her mast is broken and trails in the sea. In the dark wind outside, she hears the sound of a murderous typhoon, the call of the whale far beneath her. The house rubs its back against a bony reef, a skeleton in the sea.

She wakes when a crack of thunder parts the air, and rain falls in. She lies still, as if carved, drilled, sawn. She thinks of the leap from Honeymoon Lookout, the cliffs of fall.

Feeling a worm in her heart moving, she hears the scream of the black cockatoo in the pines, like the bellow of a horse gone mad and in need of a bullet. She thinks of her ovaries with their eggs, an aviary – and delicate birds’ eggs shrivelling there. She is like the bride who wakes on her wedding day with a beard. It is only the light coming through the stained glass window above the bed that gets her into the day.

She fills a vase with tears and it is dark again. And every evening she sleeps in the green dress and boots. Night after night there are Chinese colours in her brain and she forgets to breathe.

Time is unmoving, like a stone, but one morning there is snow slipping on the roof. The world has shifted into winter while she has slept under the broken sky. Lace is stretched across the landscape. The cold edges in under her door. The grass and trees are starched and the ice makes eaves on the roof, stretches green in the bush, through the white snow. Her only meaning now is carved, shaped by snow; like the snowworm Freya is learning to live in ice.
She wears Philippe’s shirt, his boots. There is a rawness to her organs that finds a skin in his clothes. She runs through scribbly gums, encoded writing carved into their trunks, white like the trees of the brain, sad with arms of blanched bone. A graffiti of branches scratches at her as she passes. A flock of black cockatoos clouds the sky. Her wasting feet slide on rocks. The stones and leaves on the ground have faces.

The dog follows at a distance, accustomed to Philippe’s shirt with his smell moving through the scrub, but not this cold keening in the wind.

As she runs, there is her dialogue with grief and she says aloud, I am in Katoomba. It is Friday. She speaks so that the past will not take her. Throw back its head, hold her upside down above its mouth, drop her in and swallow her whole.

Looking back up from the hanging swamp, she sees the wooden house in the snow as it hangs over the eucalypt valley: a boat, a church, a violin. During the day it moves; expands and breathes, pressing soft cypress perfume into the air.

Night after night she dreams that her heart is sleeping in the hollow of dirt beneath the house. It waits, shivers. Some days she sees it sitting in the gutter, bent double, its hand over its mouth. She forgets to feed it and it grows thin and bony.

Like a sculptor, the kindly surgeon bends over her on the operating table, finding fragments of cardiac muscle caught in her teeth. The knife is poised above her like a pen. Without a word, he makes his incision and saws through the bone of breast which has the lightness of bird bone pushing out from inside her. He cuts her heart from strings of sinews, removes it, and sets it on the right stainless steel pan of a pair of scales on the floor. It burns red. The dog approaches and sniffs the heart, licks at its edges and takes it carefully, delicately in her teeth. She curls her lips back and tosses it into her mouth, eating it before it can be placed in a jar. The dog licks the cavity in Freya’s chest and she murmurs and wakes as the surgeon steps back to study his cardioectomy.

She hears a rat scratching in the room, but when she opens her eyes, sees that it was just the rain. She walks out into the rain and an aria of currawong song.

To clear her head of the dream, she chops wood for hours, then sits inside and watches the mist coming into the house through the open window. With the cloud in her living room, the past rolls in. She knows that we don’t know what life takes us to. The events in Hong Kong were like a coal train in the night. No lights. Just the moon catching the side of the
last truck. She was blind. She should have seen it coming. There was one
detail, merely pointed at, that she missed, and so lost the whole.

Philippe could never settle with one meaning, so there was nothing for
her to grasp, except the falling night as he surfed on the swell of language,
reaching for happiness; writing in the red ink on polished paper, naming
his gods with each thick downstroke, thin upstroke. She can see him
holding his breath as he wrote onto the empty space of the page.

What is a wound, she thinks, if not a longing for language?

Philippe was a man who selected his dog according to how difficult it
would be to bury; he placed his affections carefully, like a priest setting the
bread and wine on the altar. Freya learned restraint, silence, to never speak
of an experience because then it couldn’t be written about, and that was
the worst thing.

So nothing really existed or happened. His dialogue was with the page,
he kept it for the page. Everything was for the page. He wrote, with three
books open in front of him on his desk, greedy for the seduction of words.
He wrote in heavy woollen clothes, sometimes with a scarf about his throat
and his breath a white banner because he had forgotten to stoke the fire
and it had died down. When Freya came into the house just a cough told
her that he was there. She relit the fire, smelling the wood and ash on her
frozen hands, and saw that his thoughts were elsewhere, and he was falling
over some sort of edge, giving himself up to the jazz that played on the
radio – dark, muddy music. He was a scriptore in his scriptorium, scooping
up the cream of language as it came to the top, ideas as beautiful and
fragile as inscriptions on the scapulae of deer Philippe took their life,
soaked it in lime, scrubbed away all trace of flesh and hair, dried it, and
scraped again with a knife blade, then polished the surface to give
parchment to write on.

He was afraid he would lose his voice if people came and talked about
his work, so there was no one.

There was simply his sleeping early, in summer to escape the heat, in
winter to escape the darkness, dreaming that writing would save him from
a life that was a calligram: he was the shape of his texts. He did not notice
her love for him, his gaze being upon the words.

He started taking trips to the city. She realises now that he was
researching the art of betrayal, writing his spy novel, telling himself stories
of passion, assuming another of the multiplicities of self that he kept
stored away like honey in a glass jar. She wanted to say to him, beware the
stories you tell yourself, for you will surely be lived by them. But all this
time he was intently writing about fragmentation and collapse. His grief
bloomed like a black flower, and she could smell it in the mornings, when she woke beside him.

Sometimes he lay on the black couch in his black jumper in the long late afternoons. The worst times. His eyes were often closed and it was like a sentence. The unrelenting pressure of it pushed down upon him like a wool press, squeezing out life, love.

*Anhedonia,* he murmured.

She looked it up in his dictionary while he slept.

When she bent down to him lying there, she heard something else. *

*Australia.*

The grief plagued him until his heart had become a walled city, and Freya wondered if she were, after all, the cause of it.

There was just the dog, as loyal as Feather was, always with him on his wild walks, the miles he ran to escape the plague, which came without warning. It was like the beating of rain across a valley: she could hear it coming, drumming its advance, long before she could see it, or feel it.

Once he opened his eyes for a second and said that he had to remain silent to write, but for Freya, reading the silence was like trying to decipher hieroglyphics, a language stripped of vowels. It was incompatible with any alphabet she knew.

*You don't attend to the thing, Freya. Such drawing attention to love destroys it. You must not meet the gaze of love.*

Such words became weapons at her throat. It was so clearly going wrong, but she didn't know how or why. It was like wearing a dress inside out, so that the unravelling threads of her life were obvious to everyone else.

When the pipes freeze, something bursts in the toilet. She rings for help.

The plumber shuffles on the tiles in the bathroom, waves his hand in the water of the cistern.

*Australian made. Never last.*

*What should I do?* asks Freya.

*Got a replacement in the van. American, and more expensive. But you know where you are.*

*Ah,* says Freya with a smile, *I want to know where I am.*

So he moves about the house twisting, tapping pipes. There has not been another human being here for months. She is unused to movement about her, just the petal from a poppy falling from time to time, caught in the corner of her eye.

The plumber finishes his work and as Freya counts out his money, he leans on the wood of the house, which today is like a cello.

*Nice spot,* he says, looking to the fall of eucalypts hanging in the window,
where tomorrow the fog will drift across her eyes like sleep, and a river of hyacinths will flood in spring.

In early spring, Freya leaves her isle of the dead and ventures into the town past a bare tree flowering with cockatoos, beneath skeins of wild geese flying in a strange light, billowing out across the sky. Walking quickly past the Savoy where she is known, she makes her way to the darkness of the Paragon, where no one will notice her eating the edges of food amongst the tourists. She takes the booth at the back and thinks she hears the waitress say, *No humming birds. They are off the menu today.*

A man across the room strokes a woman’s chin and holds it between his thumb and forefinger like a sparrow. When Freya looks up again, the woman is taking a piece of food from his proffered fork into her mouth. Freya leaves quickly without ordering.

Outside there is a woman waiting at the bus stop. She is old with a beautiful face. Chinese. Tall. She wears a black woollen beanie and a long dark coat that completely encloses her. It has a fluff of light brown fur at the collar. Her pale hand, holding a cigarette, emerges from the dark coat. She stares at Freya in anger, and the bright sunlight around them is swallowed suddenly in grainy cloud.

Freya walks away, close to the shop windows. The wind catches her sideways as she crosses alleys. It is a wind that knows where ice and snow still lie. She passes by her favourite bookshop, having no use for books now that the dyslexia of grief has struck her. Outside the shop, a young man, a shoplifter, screams like a rabbit as he is apprehended.

*Alas!*

Freya is startled.

*Alas!*

The young man is agitated, growing insistent, very ugly. When the woman from the bookshop appears at the door, he grasps her arm.

*Alice.*

She shakes his hand from her, turns and walks away, back into the shop.

Leaving them, Freya walks back home with fresh supplies of yellow paper. In a stretch of scribbly gums, a passing bus gives her a window of cypresses, black strokes in the purple and blues of receding shadow.

That night she dreams that she is standing over Philippe’s grave murmuring, *I am the sad wife.* As it starts to rain, he hands her an umbrella that she takes and swings over her head, showering the dark hole with confetti from some wedding long ago.
Over the months, she has given away or sold all her possessions. But one evening, before the television goes, she sees Philippe on it.

Is he in Hong Kong? Is he in some other house, here in Australia?

He’s standing beside an empty fireplace, resting his arm along the mantelpiece. He is wearing a white shirt, a tie. He looks prosperous. His hair has been cut short. The other woman is smiling at him. As the interviewer speaks to him of the publication of his new novel, Freya hears a doorbell ringing somewhere off the screen. Freya knows what he is thinking about all this. About the camera, the lights. There is a slight shine to his forehead. He makes eye contact with the camera.

*There is a camera here*, he says pointing at the truth, intent upon annoying the interviewer, refusing to play by the rules.

*Writing*, he says to the camera, *you will abandon everything for that. You will betray everyone. All that matters is the work.*

With the passing of time, Freya has understood that in Philippe’s deception of her, lay the truth.

Freya sits at Philippe’s desk under the window, a net of trees against the sky. She takes up his pen and, in a pale voice, writes, *There is a floor in me, and I am lying on it.*

She has been packing the last of his papers and pens which have lain here all this time, just where he left them. The pines groan. At her feet, the dog moves, folds her paws and tucks her head tightly into her tail to form a perfect circle. The cord of the blind hangs from the window in the precise way he had knotted it. In the months that she had been here alone, the tip of the pine tree outside has grown above the line of the windowsill.

She takes a piece of yellow paper. The black ink-drops on the page are like the shadow of a man. With her hand upon her chin, she writes a letter to the dead from the dead:

Dear Philippe,

In Dachau I am kept alive in your protective custody. I am something living, but very still.

My arms were raised on a corner in Wurzberg, as if to be taken in your arms to dance. My glasses are too big for my head. Your boots are too big for the bones of my feet. I have lost my concentration.

I place my shaven head upon the wooden bed. The wings of my shoulder blades, a swirl of bone down my back like folds in stone. A calligraphy of bone – skin over stone, cloth over bone. A skeleton after the first year, my cells are shrinking like my liver in its cage.
The organs inside my skin are playing my requiem.
In the dusk of morning light I stand, still as a Chinese warrior.
Perhaps you have spun my hair for socks? Or are you on some South American street living on my golden teeth?
I long for the warmth of Barack X with its quiet garden of snow ...

Freya

She gathers together all the yellow pages that she has written upon over the months – the yellow pieces of paper that have become her company, and slips them all in between the leaves of one of Philippe’s unfinished manuscripts. It lies, in his careful script, on his writing desk, just as he had left it when they went to Hong Kong. She places her pages amongst the bones of his story, the flesh of his language.

As she lifts the papers, it is the shape of the words The Concerto Inn that first attracts her eye, like a familiar piece of music catching in the brain. Before she can stop herself, she reads the story and hears Philippe’s voice telling her the same story when they were in Hong Kong and he had not arrived back home until early one morning:

I asked the boy at the bar where I could stay the night. When he’d finished washing the glasses, he took me down along a path to the Concerto Inn where he said he worked during the day. There was a bright lamp at the door. It looked a fragile construction of bamboo, one of those curly-roofed palaces of imperial dynasties. I could see several storeys and repeated roofs, steeply pitched with projecting, upturned eaves and ridges of coloured tiles. Inside, just opposite the entrance, there was a carved screen wall. There was no one about. He led me through passageways to a red chamber where he said I could stay the night. One whole wall was constructed of a panel of windows and mirrors. There was a bed and a basin. I lay down and slept until the sun woke me. I couldn’t find anyone around so I left some money for him on the table and made my way to the dock. I was the only passenger aboard the ferry that brought me back to Hong Kong...

Like a transparent structure superimposed over Philippe’s story, Freya imagines another voice, not Philippe’s. As the weight and density of the words shift, parallel lines finally converge in Freya’s mind, and she reads between the lines. She reaches her own vanishing point and apprehends a slippage in meaning, the resonance of another narrative. It is the Other Woman whose voice she hears singing the o of The Concerto Inn. Philippe’s words dematerialise and another story takes their place, as though a fragment of someone else’s memory has drifted into Freya’s mind:

How I tried to ignore Philippe’s attentions, the billets doux at the conference in Guangzhou quoting Yeats: ‘I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.’ He brushed my hand one night over dinner at the
White Swan. He wrote me another note and had it delivered to my room. He impersonated a visiting Indian professor, but I knew who it was. He wrote, “Since the written word is so much like an historical document, an hysterical formal amendment to ways and behaviour, it would pleasure me greatly to request the lascivious and lusty pursuits of my mind upon the joys of your body. The fruits of our love shall not pass unrewarded in the annals of time.”

I laughed then because we spoke the same language. He was lost. He told me how he sat on the verandah in Katoomba and drank whisky, his father’s revolver aimed at his sadness. There was the warm breath that his language was. It curled off his tongue. It wound around me and pulled me closer. He could tell stories in the night, stories that were like jewels, stories that were strung upon ideas so rare. So he smuggled me in to him against my will. The intrigue of the affair! Back in Hong Kong, the hand upon my breast between book-signings. The secrecy was divine.

His desire grew more urgent, driven by the betrayal he was writing about. I was his reason now to chuck the lot. He’d been wanting to do it for a while. Had decided some time ago that his life in Katoomba, Freya, had to go. Now that we had found each other he could do it in one job lot. The garage sale of his life. He quoted Lowell’s “At the Altar” to me with a grin,

“I turn and whisper in her ear. You know I want to leave my mother and my wife, You wouldn’t have me tied to them for life.”

We went to the Mandarin Oriental and I drank calvados. There was a Portuguese band playing. He drank Mateus and told me about his childhood.

In my flat I would tell the maid to have the day off. I think she knew why. I would put on my Gloria Estephan songs. The ones in Spanish. He would whisper into the intercom, then in my bed the whispering would become more urgent. His lips upon my throat until I felt like a long-necked Botticelli. The stroke of the hand along my thigh and the accumulation of flesh he gathered there. Afterwards he would go out onto my little balcony and write. I would make him coffee. He said it was the best writing he had ever done. I found little white cards all over the flat with quotations on them, like Italo Calvino’s “There is no language without deceit.”

But they were merely moments, odd hours grabbed here and there. Until one evening I was sitting beside him at Jo Jo’s bar in the Grand Hyatt in Wanchai as he rang Freya. I heard him tell her that he was stranded on Lamma Island and would stay the night at the Concerto Inn.

He was hanging up the ‘phone and smiling down at me on the stool beside him. My legs were crossed. I lifted my face slowly to his, our eyes like lovers walking towards each other on a street. I shifted my legs slightly. My hand lay at the place where the skirt ended on my thigh. Philippe placed his perfectly shaped hand upon mine.

“We have the night,” he said...
Freya is still. She does not breathe, but sits holding in her hands the cold fact of Philippe as the architect of a carefully constructed deceit. Then she takes The Concerto Inn, thick now with her own dark story, and places it carefully in Philippe's wooden trunk. Gathering momentum she packs all the precious things he has given her over the last eighteen years: the love letters, the poems. Then all the things from his desk. She is sweating. The dog licks the sweat from her legs as she drags the trunk across the floor to the top of the staircase, levers it down one step at a time. The rage steams off her back like white frost burning in sun. She drags the trunk all the way under the house into the dark, where it lodges in the damp soil. The dog sniffs at it, picking up Philippe's scent, reveling in the memory of him. Turning away to the light at the doorway, Freya spills outside again. Slams the heavy door shut. Closes the tomb.

Through the following nights she hears the howl and cry of her own voice, like that of an animal caught in a trap. She sees rabbits grazing in the garden under the moon.

One morning, many days later, Freya hears a peculiar low moan rising from under the house and drags open the heavy door to a frenzy of flies.

The dog lies on her side, her paws crossed. Freya can see where she has worn a deep hollow in the dirt scattered with lizard bones and beetle wings. She kneels down beside her. The eyes of the dog are clouded with the terrible neglect. There is blood on her claws. Thunder rolls in from the south. Rabbits dance on the grass as she lifts the dog and carries her up inside the house and places her on the rug before the hearth. She holds warm milk and raw egg to her mouth, feeds her gently, and warms her before the fire. When the dog begins to lift her head a little, Freya's weeping falls from her like a curtain.

Freya kneels down to light the fire. She struggles outside, only to find that the wood is wet. After all this, she is here still, in the dark. In the cold. The wind outside cuts short the moan of the pines. Shivering, she reaches for a book and places it in the grate carefully. She sets a match to it and the pages catch. She takes her photographs of Philippe and some of his novels and feeds them to the fire. She holds out her hands to the flame and his words warm her.

With the next match, she strikes a deal.

She is sweating by the time she has collected her things. She places them in a small suitcase, sets it by the door and heaps all his remaining books on the fire. It eats them and spills onto the wooden floor.
A bibliocaust.
Freya steps into the dark with the dog.
The windows blaze, the stars fly smoke-trails in the night. A flock of white cockatoos rises suddenly into the night sky. Words spark above the bonfire of the house which groans and twists like a body burning on a beach, and cries to the drift of ash settling upon the hanging swamp.

_I am the mad wife_, Freya says to the house.

_I give you to the air._
This shop from the street glows like a computer screen, a fairy tale game we want to tumble into. Above our heads as we go in, gold lettering gives us filigreed tiaras.

Then reality strikes. Fluorescence above a parade of ciphered prices. The baker and his assistant trading burning glares ...

You grunt – *un baguette* – hold up one parental finger, wagging it like a warning, a *don’t you dare dismiss me* hope –

and Marie behind the counter sprinkles virtual arsenic under the nappy of tissue paper she knots around the hot, about-to-wilt-in-the-middle bread.

She’s Madame Bovary deflecting her death wish. She’s dropped out of school and now she’s ready to drop out of this crummy job too – she’s sixteen and sulky, who knows why?

*Merde, ces étrangers* anyone can read the smoke cloud above her head *Merde, merde* say the snap and wilt of her neck as she asks for her money.

Spilling back change, glaring above *pain* this and *pain* that she blitzes especially out the Hansel and Gretel door

your hand on the baton of bread conducting a hopeful movement towards lunch –

while her finger, like a lost tail twitching for its mouse, hungers to click open some better game.
FALLING

1

My mother always
had dreams of
falling

she fell
each night
from the same lighthouse

the lighthouse
a thin white babel
now silent

always a still blue day
and her
falling

dressed like her
Irish mother
the white petticoat

ballooning
around her head
like white folded wings
There is an art to falling:
avoid hard surfaces
but surfaces can be deceptive
even deep water will break your neck

When falling from high altitudes
it is possible
if you dare to have the imagination
to believe it is simply flight

My grandmother never believed
you should fall in love
in her diaries she mused
on the phrase falling in love

and imagined parachutists
falling from WW1 planes
always into enemy territory

silken cords around her limp neck
limbs tangled in high trees
like pale broken trunks

she was a woman
who knew about surfaces
knew the art of surfacing

all life's lessons were useless
if you couldn't master this
though she would never use the word.
She lived in a time
where they used phrases like
\textit{the cream always rises to the top}
\textit{one should keep to one's station in life}

and it was not so much falling
as staying where you were
though she often believed
someone had sewn stones
into the seams of her pockets.

She fell all the way to Australia
even worse, Perth,
arriving in her exile
wearing arrogant black
and taking to the streets with a swagger

believing one could be free
at the end of the world
she grew careless and didn't care

and when they called her a fallen woman
she laughed showing them her body
immaculate and unbruised
free of any injury that one might expect from a fall

Is there a difference between
a fallen angel \& a falling angel,
how far do they fall
before they are fallen?
Before my mother married
she grew a vision of the future:
there was a neat house with high ceilings,
a large mantelpiece with photographs
of the children as they were growing.

She imagined herself changing them every few years;
the frames would be silver embossed
and they would be slightly turned
to the the centre of the mantelpiece
and her achievement would be visible
everytime she walked into the room.

In the garden there had to be roses,
red and white roses,
and a pathway that ran straight
from the gate to the porchsteps.

and it was only in dreams
that her own mother ever
appeared
falling from the sky

her white petticoats
balloning over her head
so her face remained
forever veiled.
Finding his wife between everyone’s sheets
but his own
the pistol ball strikes him
somewhere between honour and shame.

Scripted years earlier in Onegin
this real life re-run of the duel
splinters first with blood and bone
shatters next the mind’s imaginary alphabet.

For two days his fingers scramble after
single letters, then whole words and phrases
and lastly the sentence he loses control over
love that ultimately becomes a death of him.

Laying his pen aside a last time
before that numb malicious morning
had him falling, always falling
forward into a darkening dislocation.

An interrupted lyric
he finally succumbs to –
ink barely dry upon a penultimate page
he is hurriedly buried in his books.
Probably in hindsight the best interment:
his challenge was never with his wife's lover
but language - getting up
from this ephemeral grave as a restless ghost.

His poems unchained, unchecked, know
no restraint, untethered now, follow him
beyond Petersburg to every farm and village,
seeking not refuge but simply to be heard.

All of Russia heard the pistol's powder flash;
felt the earthquake of his wounded falling –
but drew in dumb breaths of wonder at his
speaking now as tidal wash against their ears.
‘... THE NIGHTMARE LIFE-IN-DEATH ...’ (THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER)

Do you remember when we dragged the dinghy
down to the reaching waves and shrieking with laughter,
helped the children in?
Time was counted by turning tides
and length of hours spent together.
How it sped then, how it dragged in separation.
We were aware only of proximity or absence,
and lived heedless of a time existing
without this glad acceptance, of instant recognition.
But Time holds no allegiance to those
who linger in its intervals
and if death severs time for one,
bright memories remain to heal another’s loss.

We sit together now while clocks still beat for you
who feel no absent joy. You have withdrawn:
there is no light of recognition in your eyes,
no memory of love.
The sea rolls relentlessly against far rocks
while Time holds us mercilessly,
bound only by a pulse’s beat.
The question "How does the settler belong?" is met by a pressing need for strategies which interrogate this old issue in new ways, particularly in regards to the discursive production of settler "belonging" in relation to Indigenous people. Both Peter Read’s *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000) and Margaret Somerville’s *Body/Landscape Journals* (1999), are recent cultural productions which implicitly rehearse strategies for white writing as it engages with issues of settler belonging. What I wish to look at in this essay is how both texts show that settler belonging is an expression of the "epistemic violence" (to borrow Spivak’s phrase) of settler postcolonialism.

One of the major differences between Read and Somerville’s work is how they approach questions of settler belonging in relation to Indigenous people. Both ask the conscientious settler question: "How can I have a sense of belonging in the Australian landscape?" (*B/LJ*: 128), and "do I have the right to belong in this soul-country?" (*Belonging*: 9). Both texts posit indigenous belonging as a kind of gauge, which implies a relationship (of value, or depth, or kind) between indigenous and settler belonging. While the texts share this relationship with indigeneity, what happens to settler belonging after this point of comparison, of relation, is very different. Read insists that settler belonging must be articulated separately, differently, without comparison to or appropriation of Aboriginality. On the other hand, Somerville seeks a relation, a connection, a dialogue with Aboriginal women’s stories of place in order to articulate her own belonging. As
Somerville writes: “[m]y work in the landscape has been a quest for belonging, searching for a sense of home in the outside world through connection with Aboriginal women's stories” (B/LJ:180). Both are in their own ways open to accusations of appropriation: Read because he attempts (unsuccessfully) to make Aboriginality supplementary to settler belonging, and Somerville when she explicitly states that she seeks belonging through Aboriginal women's stories of place.

I would like to tease out some of the differences posed by Somerville's text in order to suggest that Somerville’s postcolonial/feminist methods which explicitly interrogate the writer’s subject position (including, most importantly, writing under the threat of being appropriative), represent a substantial contribution to re-articulating both the risk of cultural appropriation and complicity as white writing’s inexorable point of departure. As I hope to make clear, this is not to suggest that cultural appropriation is a good thing, but that it is a feature of such questions of belonging and must be included as a genuine problem for settler writers concerned to express their “belonging” to country. Acknowledging the risk of appropriation is a means of registering complicity with imperialism – which is itself simultaneously presented as an obstacle to settler belonging (if not the obstacle), and at the same time the very reason why “belonging” is being sought after in the first place. To take on settler belonging is taking on the imperial, colonial and postcolonial history of Australia and the discursive arrangements by which such ethical and moral questions of “belonging” have been asserted. Consequently, the question of settler belonging must be situated within the epistemic violence that gives rise to it, or else it is in danger of becoming a sentiment which rejects imperialism as its obstacle and replaces it with Indigenous people themselves. I would prefer, as a white settler, to belong through a concept of belonging translated as, and translated through, the terms of epistemic violence which give rise to it. I read the work of Margaret Somerville as both symptomatic of and attentive to this paradox of settler belonging and Peter Read’s work as trying to avoid the negative (postcolonising) implications of the settler project to belong.

The crisis of belonging that we see in both Read's Belonging and Somerville’s Body/Landscape Journals is one of the foundational issues for settler postcolonial studies. As Terry Goldie⁶ and Stephen Slemon⁷ have both pointed out in their work on postcolonial settler cultures, that the presence of the indigene marks for the settler a kind of nostalgia for a sense of belonging that is associated with indigenous people themselves. According to Goldie’s Fear and Temptation: Representations of the Indigene, in
confrontation with the indigene, the settler manifests a desire to “erase” the “separation of belonging” (12) by seeing themselves as “indigenous”; a position confluent with an imaginary ‘true belonging’. Goldie writes:

Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians have, and long have had, a clear agenda to erase this separation of belonging. The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? (12)

In the articulation of belonging to the land of occupation, the settler has two options according to Goldie; one is a form of mimicry of the Indigene, the other is an outright erasure of their presence in the land. While the manifestations of these strategies are diverse and complex, both betray an intense anxiety of “place” for the settler. Read’s text falls into this category of mimicry (which is itself a form of erasure), in its attempts to situate a dispossessed settler-belonging as affect of postcolonial settler culture as it engages with the fact of Aboriginal dispossession. Such an emphasis is clear from the outset where Read provides an anecdote to demonstrate the experiential grounds for his textual adventure into “belonging”. Coming across signs of an Aboriginal shell-pile alongside a childhood haunting ground, Read is struck by self-doubt about his belonging. He writes:

My discovery revived in me all the problems of wanting to belong in this breathtaking country of deepest personal and family memory. The hushed shell pile reminds me that Cowan Creek is deep Aboriginal country also. I ask myself: Do I have the right to belong in this soul-country? Do Aboriginals belong in some deeper way than the rest of us, even though none as yet lays a Native Title claim to it? Would such a pre-emptive claim of belonging – if that is what a Native Title claim is – reduce or disqualify my own sense? If so, must it always? Considering those questions, and how non-Aboriginal Australians are grappling with them, is the subject of this book. (my emphasis: 9)

Given that this scene is portrayed as the genesis of the book, it is worth analysing further. The “discovery” of this shell midden is said to “revive” all these feelings of anxious belonging that he had presumably experienced for much of his life, suggesting that this book is a kind of catharsis of these anxieties, or at least a presentation of them. It is clear that Read experiences the Aboriginal absence as a challenge to his belonging.
Therefore, Read’s belonging is inextricably related to Aboriginality. But this, Read concludes throughout the book, is a mistake; settler belonging should be articulated separately from Aboriginality. Read thus attempts to make Aboriginality a supplementary term in the explicit debate, which has the effect of appearing to bypass questions of appropriating indigenous belonging. But there is a telling contradiction in Read’s insistence that Aboriginality is supplementary to settler belonging which is that his work circles around Aboriginality continually. The following comments illustrates what he doesn’t want to say – which is that settler belonging is, in fact, supplementary to Aboriginality:

I’m not envious, nor do I wish to incorporate myself spiritually into Aboriginality. I want to feel I belong here while respecting Aboriginality, neither appropriating it nor being absorbed by it. (15)

I seek a solemn union with my country and my land but not through Aboriginality. (21)

Let’s intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. (204)

My sense of the native born has come – is coming. It comes through listening but with discernment; through thinking but not asserting; through good times with my Aboriginal friends but not through wanting to be the same as them. (223)

There is no sense, for all this insistence, on how settler belonging is to be achieved other than the guideline of not through Aboriginality. There is no sense either of how that might be possible (must we ignore Aboriginality entirely?) and why indeed that is necessary (the supplement threatens the “purity” of the object framed). What Read’s book has performed (despite its explicit claims to avoid it) is a recuperation of settler belonging via an identification with Aboriginality. This is achieved partly by means of an oblique manoeuvre which sees Aboriginality replaced with “depth”. The depth metaphor is an interesting one (used three times in the previous quotation) and is most commonly used to refer to the complexity and longevity of feeling. In the quotation it brings the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences of place together as if they were on par, as in not different, not differently conceived, not differently valued in social, politico-legal terms but different only in intensity of feeling. Hence Read’s “deepest personal and family memory” in “deep Aboriginal country” leads to the question: “do Aboriginals belong in some deeper way than the rest of
us?”. The possibility of Aboriginals belonging in a “deeper way than the rest of us” is rhetorically suspended by Read’s use of the word “deepest” to describe his own triumph of belonging.

Tom Griffiths also uses “deep time” as an alternative way of reading history and “place” in Australian settler culture and, like the work of Peter Read, his use of “deep time” echoes a desire to “erase the separation of belonging” (Goldie 12). An example of this appears in his article on “deep time”, “Travelling in Deep Time: La Longue Durée in Australian History”, where Griffiths asserts that “deep time” and “dream time” are not “as different as they might first appear”, which is perhaps the problem. He suggests that deep time “approaches that poetic relationship to the past captured in settler characterisations of Aboriginal cosmology as ‘the dreaming’. But we cannot be surprised that settler characterisations of dream time approximate settler understandings; what Griffiths’ comparison reveals is a methodology which privileges sameness rather than anything about “the dreamtime”.

In Belonging, the desire for origins and for belonging finds itself resolved only by being suspended by utopianism which signals an ending: “I think now that I am almost ready to belong” (223). There is very little sense that Read has in fact posed his non-belonging as a serious issue from the beginning, partly because of the book’s untheorised presentation of the substantive issues at stake, cast aside as what he sees as the “self denigration that portrays us as morally or spiritually deficient” and the “self defeating moral universe” of “well meaning confusion and doubt” (3). I would argue that part of the case with which Read comes to the conclusion that he is “almost ready to belong” as a “native born” is that his belonging is not really ever under any serious threat, nor are the ramifications of postcolonialism’s challenges to affective liberal humanist reassurances adequately explored. It hardly needs stating that there is no real threat to the belonging of Peter Read as white settler in terms of citizenship, access to land, access to full entitlement under the law, as is the case with the experience of indigenous people. The threat that he experiences, with an emotional force as if it were undermining his very rights of citizenship, is an ethical (rather than material) one (as Read himself admits), and one which Read seems to easily resolve by returning to an assurance of moral goodness – untroubled by questions of what weight this moral goodness might carry in a debate over differences. Read doesn’t have to negotiate a sense of belonging through a different set of cultural beliefs, he doesn’t have to deal with a legal system that is incommensurable with his own, he doesn’t have to negotiate his belonging
to a specific place (he is, at times, interested in the whole country), and he doesn't have to foreground his indebtedness to the experience of Aboriginal dispossession. It is no surprise, therefore, that the book ends with a feeling of success and a rehearsal of common aims: "belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership" (223). This is uncontroversial precisely in the sense that it doesn't really go anywhere—and it doesn't go anywhere because the author has not had the opportunity to experience the dispossession that he uses as an existential prop for articulating a sense of "belonging". Read moves, perhaps unknowingly, into the very territory that he fears, that of colonising the marginalised position that he identifies. But here, the identification of this marginalised position (which invokes the shame of liberal humanist discourse both from within and without) has engendered an identification with this marginalised position. I would argue that this is a problem related to the way in which the writer occupies a panopticon view of "Australian" belonging which curtails a self-reflexive awareness of his own complicit position. I do not wish to suggest here that there is somehow a position outside of complicity awaiting the patient critic, but that complicity is, at this point in time, the most useful and, I would argue, the only starting point for white writing.

Unlike the work of Somerville, as I will demonstrate further on, Peter Read does not take on the substantive issues underlined by aspects of postcolonial theory. In the opening pages of Belonging, Read complains that "we writers criticise ourselves more trenchantly than our indigenous critics"(3), suggesting that the book is primarily a defence of settler belonging against other white writers who (situated as obstacles), have articulated a profound sense of unsettlement in their interrogations of white settler culture. Read seems to perceive the challenge to settler belonging as stemming from the work of other settlers (a select group at that), and not from critics who may challenge the very terms of the debate. Those settler critics whom Peter Read sets up as peddling "unsettlement" by presenting a morally denigrated settler subject, are those whose work operates largely within the same liberal humanist parameters as Read himself (including Ros Haynes, Judith Wright, Robert Dessaix). While these critics/writers have asked extremely important questions in regards to settler culture (as does Read), the debate has been radicalised (in an extension of their arguments) by postcolonial approaches which take on not only these questions of unsettlement, but the very methodologies and philosophies which bring those question to light in the first place. What I am suggesting therefore, is that part of the problem with Read's approach
is that he begins his argument or defence of settler belonging by constructing a “straw man” of liberal humanist persuasions, when that is simply not where the most urgent challenges to settler culture are coming from. By locating a very select group of “we writers” as the most trenchant critics of settler culture, Read effectively closes down and sidesteps this avenue of debate, and therefore does not have to engage with questions as to how the very notion of belonging itself might operate within a Eurocentric framework which attempts to incorporate or erase disruptive elements. Furthermore, making “we writers” his Others supports the critical positioning of Aboriginality as a supplementary term in the explicit debate.

But what is “Aboriginality” in Belonging? While it remains rather vague (referring more to ‘true belonging” or depth than Indigenous people themselves), it seems that it is predominantly the Aboriginality heralded in the works of those critics (Read’s Others) whom Read perceives as denigrating settler belonging in favour of Aboriginal “ways of seeing”. Read has replaced their heroic Aboriginality with heroic settlerdom, rendering the battler/settler the new Indigene. Indeed, it would seem that the challenge for Read is to reinstate the settler in a position of moral goodness, something which he has been dispossessed of because of the work of these critics and because of the very fact of Aboriginal dispossession in Australia’s violent history. The solution is to assert the settler as the appropriate Object for the critics concern. This necessitates drawing the two (settler and indigene) together so closely that there is significantly less room for difference or detail, as in, “all of us are in place and out of place simultaneously” (20).

Similar concerns have been raised by Ken Gelder in his review of Belonging, where Gelder points out that the book continues a problem which began with Read’s previous work Returning to Nothing (1997) where Read draws a connection between settler dispossession and Aboriginal dispossession. Of Returning to Nothing, Gelder writes:

the non-Aboriginal or settler transformation of land into country, of a house into a home, is enabled only through the experience of dispossession. What is “shared” with Aboriginal people, then, is not just that “deep relationship” but the very experience of dispossession that enables that relationship: settler and Aboriginal people, through this strange mirror effect, have dispossession in common. Dispossession is in fact necessary in order for such belonging to occur, which explains why this book came first and Belonging came afterwards.9
Jane M. Jacobs also notes that *Belonging* has an “indigenising impulse” and, like Ken Gelder’s article afterwards, takes issue with Read’s depiction of the white settler’s (Margaret Johnson) comparison of her loss of her grazing property (through retirement) with that of Aboriginal dispossession. For Read, this comparison that the retiring white grazier makes with Aboriginal dispossession is proof of the depth of feelings of belonging that settlers experience. But for Gelder and Jacobs this “indigenising impulse” is suggestive of the “uncanny” senses of place within Australian postcolonial modernity. It is also possible to see the settler’s claim for comparison with Aboriginal dispossession to be indicative of the former’s ignorance about the latter. When the relationship between Aboriginal and settler belonging is presented as one of equivalence, it does not suggest to me that both are actually similar in tone, kind or intensity, but that the settler is in search of the indigene’s “privileged” (within settler culture) power to signify “true” belonging. Settler culture thereby attributes greater symbolic power to the dispossessed while maintaining for itself significant material power to determine the actual and symbolic status of both itself and its Other.

If both groups have dispossession in common, as Read wants to suggest, then what about possession? Read suggests that “[w]e cannot share the land with Aboriginals until they have their land to share with us ... belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership” (223). If Read transforms Aboriginal dispossession into a white sensibility, then in all likelihood he may then pose Aboriginal possession as a white sensibility as well. Indeed, this has been the problem for Native Title. Aboriginal possession of the land is only realised on the terms dictated by the fact of their dispossession in the first place; Native Title legislation and the recognition of Aboriginal custodianship is itself implicated in the colonial machinery in as much as Land Rights relies on the permission of settler culture, something which Read glosses over in his reference to Aboriginal custodians being granted “a simple declaration of ownership and joint custodianship of the parks and bush reserves of Gai-mariagal country” (223). Aboriginal custodianship and Native Title have never been a matter of a “simple declaration”, as Read’s own text demonstrates.

The politics and epistemic violence of settler belonging are more subtly explored in the work of Margaret Somerville. *Body/Landscape Journals* (1999) is a testament to the difficulties involved in the act of thinking through the profound and necessary anxieties of the settler position. The book is not in the service of a national drama in the same way that Read’s is (as shown by his interest in “we”, “the nation”,

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and nor is it explicitly concerned with reassuring an anxious settler subject of his/her place. Perhaps this is why Somerville's work has not received the same level of critical and public attention. But Body/Landscape Journals is also a difficult text and one that will not resolve itself into any neat category of genre or thought. It is multidimensional, containing many stories in different modes; journal writing, poetry, anecdotes, extensive quotations, the voices of Aboriginal women collaborators, feminist theory, history – and in its crossover of genres and disciplines it strikes a deliberately awkward pose. It is not simply ethnographic writing, nor is it an autobiography, or a work of fiction, history, philosophy; it is exploratory, it meanders, it travels, it appropriates and it takes risks in going into Aboriginal epistemologies and the archives of western knowledge. Somerville's book builds on the questions posed by Read's "we writers" (his Other critics), and she also takes issue with the very terms of the debate as conducted within Eurocentric and masculinist discourses.

Body/Landscape Journals is partly the result of Somerville's years of work with Aboriginal women in the "weaving" of two collaborative texts, The Sun Dancin' (1984) and Ingelba and the Five Matriarchs (1990), where in differences between "white ways" of knowing/speaking/writing and the Aboriginal women's ways of knowing/speaking/writing there is significant movement and slippages – spaces in which western modes of thought are challenged by its incapacity to know cultural difference. Somerville has argued that in her collaborative projects with Aboriginal women it has been critical for her to address the "issues of relationship and the process" of constructing the collaborative texts, issues which she feels that she "as a white woman, can address freely" ("Life" 95). Central to her role as collaborator was seeking the right to speak through heeding the politics of representation and the limitations posed (partly) by the epistemological tools with which she had to work. Consequently, Somerville's work in Body/Landscape Journals is an account of working through the issues raised by her collaborative projects where she avoids the position of the "nonrepresenting intellectual" criticised by Spivak as an "absurdity" (288) in order to foreground the representational anxieties and epistemic violence in cross-cultural, collaborative work, as she says: "What stories does mine make space for and which ones does it displace?" (5). Her challenge is to write an "embodied presence" in the landscape of the stories and not surprisingly therefore, her work is concerned with situating the critic in the field of inquiry itself. It is perhaps useful to think of Body/Landscape Journals as caught in the act of hybridising, getting to know
difference through disrupting a traditional form of authoritative writing that is associated with the mastery of objects through disembodied strategies of engagement.

Somerville makes the issue of colonialism's (and postcolonialism's) "epistemic violence" central to her work though is, of course, no less implicated in it for this awareness of its critical importance. The concept of "epistemic violence" (described by Leela Gandhi as "authoritarian knowledge") is most usefully elaborated by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" on the recuperation of the native voice in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, and Spivak uses it to indicate that the knowledge we have of the subaltern is itself a product of an imperialistic relation of power that suspends the possibility of her ever speaking for herself within the episteme that locates her. Spivak's essay still represents a challenge to and a warning of the problems associated with writing the voice of the Other, especially relevant to those texts which foreground Aboriginal women's stories of place, such as the collaborations The Sun Dancin' (1984) by Margaret Somerville, Marie Dundas, May Mead, Janet Robinson and Maureen Sulter and Ingelba and the Five Matriarchs (1990) by Patsy Cohen and Somerville. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak criticises the Subaltern Studies Group (a group of Indian intellectuals concerned to write about Indian colonial history from the perspective of subaltern groups), for not attending to the "epistemic violence" of imperialism which renders the recuperation of the "real" native voice impossible, and indeed makes the project in fact complicit with this epistemic violence in its repetition of claims to intellectual transparency. Benita Parry, on the other hand, finds that Spivak's deconstructive practice mitigates against the "development of an anti-imperialist critique" because she attributes too much power to the coloniser in his/her construction of the colonised, native subject. According to Parry, Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak is not an accurate reflection of the material conditions of the subaltern but is instead indicative of Spivak's "deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard". More recently, Spivak has returned to this debate and emphasised the extent to which both positions are perhaps more empathetically situated in relation to each other; Parry's desire to hear the subaltern speak is not entirely refused by Spivak's interest in what this "voice" might actually be. Suffice it to say, any attempt to represent, speak of or with the voice of the Other must maintain a certain level of circumspection about the politics of representation, or indeed, the politics of the crisis of representation. One of the questions for settler postcolonial
writing which seeks to “undo its privilege as a loss” (to use Spivak’s phrase), is what kind of violence can be done to settler writing in order to make it prick up its ears and listen to alternative ways of seeing/being/writing/telling stories? A dialogue with Others that is attentive to positionality and the politics of listening." On the effects of collaborative writing on settler discourse, Stephen Muecke notes in *No Road*:

> Something new begins when the answer the local gives is not forced into a universal language of rationality in order to have an understanding determined by this interrogator from a more powerful place.

> Something new begins if such interrogators have to invest something of their subjectivity, if they have to negotiate, change, and learn to belong.

Somerville and Muecke’s writing is changed by their self-reflexive (and self ironising) dialogue and writing with Aboriginal collaborators. Somerville depicts an act of giving up the position of rational, all-seeing, all-knowing humanist subject – who takes the world as an object that is available to be Known, open to the penetrating insights of the intellect. The giving up of this privileged position causes her some anxiety, as she goes on to describe getting sick, suffering from the dis-ease of not knowing where to stand if she doesn’t want to stand in this position of all-seeing, all-knowing intellectual after all.

Somerville documents how her writing praxis changed in dialogue with not only the stories that the Aboriginal women tell but also the challenges of writing oral stories. While cognisant of the dangers of effacing difference through the act of translation, Somerville nevertheless takes editorial control of the text and, in the example below, negotiates with Kathy, her interviewee, to allow her “orality” to mark the text. This causes considerable difficulties between Kathy and Somerville, as the following excerpt shows:

> After our initial disagreement about the way I had transcribed her talking, Kathy listened to the tape again and agreed that I had more or less got her way of speaking right. She realised that this way of speaking is regarded as of less worth, even so far as to describe it as sounding “as an old black gin”. When that way of talking is translated into written form it is subject to all the power relations of written discourse. It is there, fixed, for all to see and perhaps to pour scorn on. For Kathy, the translation of her way of talking into written form symbolises a lifetime of striving to achieve acceptability in the face of shame and inadequacy about the way she is. On the other
hand, it is the way the women talk, both the individual sound of their voice and the characteristic rhythms, that is so important to me. (*The Sun Dancin*:15)

There is a difficulty here in the act of translation and transcription; for Somerville and Kathy’s perceptions of “voice” are opposed and both express the kind of epistemic violence that Spivak writes about. Somerville argues that Kathy should not be ashamed of her “broken English” because to her it “uniquely expressed her sense of the place” (*B/LJ*: 144). Somerville reads Kathy’s rejection of the transcript as an example of “the struggle to attain acceptance” by white hegemonic standards and, implicitly, as an example of the “pressure to conform” (*B/LJ*: 144). But Somerville’s sense that Kathy should allow her “broken English” into the text is also a pressure to conform to Somerville’s sense of the stylistic and cultural demands of a postcolonial archive which seeks to preserve the difference of Kathy’s voice. Disclosed here are two pressures to conform, two different strategies linked as vicissitudes of epistemic violence. Somerville, as scholar, critic, white writer, collaborator, is implicated in both. The difference in Somerville’s text, is that the questions that she raises (such as “[w]ho has power, who chooses what is spoken into existence?” (*B/LJ*: 63) brings these issues to the fore as part of the text’s starting point (and conclusion). Somerville’s text does not avoid this postcolonising aspect of collaborative texts, but it does alert the reader to the fact that the grounds for such work is not free of the politics of representation. This marks a substantial and critical difference between the strategies of Somerville and Read in their concern with settler belonging.

This insistence on the part of Somerville that Kathy’s text should appear in its “broken english” form is repeated in collaboration with Patsy Cohen. On the subject of Somerville’s editorial control and its effects on her collaborators, Michele Grossman has criticised Somerville’s work for what she sees as “elements of the editorial method employed ... [which] generate the conceit that the textual authority of the editor is not a form of social power either seized, negotiated or assumed, but a displaced ‘gift’ conferred by virtue of abdication on the part of Aboriginal authors, whether by circumstance ... or by choice”.21 While Grossman’s identification of a “ritual of abdication” in collaborative texts is certainly an important point to observe, I would like to add that Somerville does not appear to be as accepting of this “abdication” as Grossman suggests; the lack of interest that Somerville says Cohen had in the written form of the
book itself, is not seen by Somerville as a liberation but an even greater problem for Somerville’s concern with her own representational power in the text. Moreover, Cohen’s reticence to contribute to the written aspects of the text does not appear to be representative of all the Aboriginal women’s attitudes, as in “[e]very person I worked with in this community took a different position with regard to the important question of orality, language use and representation” (B/LJ:142). The “abdication” that Grossman suggests inhabits the text is presented more in terms of Patsy and Kathy’s rejection of Aboriginal (oral) English (which Patsy disparagingly describes as “wandering round and round”, [“Life”:102]), linked with a preference for a “written”, linear style English. I have already discussed this as an expression of epistemic violence, both colonial and postcolonial. Grossman goes on to suggest that in *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* “it is Cohen herself who is ultimately produced by Somerville’s editing as a ‘beautiful object’ to be held in the hands of white readers” (164). A similar criticism is levelled at the Subaltern Studies Group by Spivak (in regards to the Subaltern as an object of their own discursive intervention) and a similar criticism is levelled at Spivak by Parry and vice versa – each questioning the authority of the critic to speak on behalf of and create the Object/Subaltern. Each critical perspective is (and Spivak is of course implicated in this) marked by a kind of “authoritarian knowledge” which recognises itself only in the Other’s production values, and each goes on speaking about the subaltern regardless of whether she/he is silent or self-representing. What marks each of these arguments is, implicitly, the sense that the Critic is able to locate the Other either in the terms of the argument itself, or in the “real world” in which the Other is extra-textually located. In regards to the relationship between Grossman, Cohen and Somerville, Grossman suggests: “if we want to locate Patsy Cohen through her own words and choices as a textual subject, we will have to look and to read elsewhere” (164). I wonder whether or not such a desire for Cohen to be “elsewhere” isn’t also expressed by Somerville’s work in *B/LJ* and by *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* itself, in the sense that the text represents the failure to present Cohen as a full, textual subject; after all, it is a woven (fabricated), collaborative, cross-cultural text containing a multitude of differences which renders the textual agency of any of its collaborators (including Somerville) suspect, or at least dependant upon multiple layers of culturally differentiated meaning which cannot be sufficiently separated; in other words, it is a product of epistemic violence. In expressing the desire for Cohen to be “elsewhere”, Grossman is caught in the same bind
as the white editor/collaborator – wanting to assert the ineluctable difference of Cohen from the reading/writing strategy that also locates her textually. (I would suggest that the problem that Grossman locates is indeed the problem of the text, as the text itself seems to suggest.) But as Grossman points out, the editorial conceits that Somerville’s text present for inspection can never be a comprehensive critique of the text in advance, but then nor can they be a comprehensive account of the status of its object/subject’s textual agency either. I do not want to position the text as either having the last word or the first word on the textual agency of Patsy Cohen, but I do wish to point out that the kinds of issues that the text raises (both implicitly in Ingelba and explicitly but belatedly in Body/Landscape Journals) are problems of epistemic violence more generally – problems which effect, nay characterise, cross-cultural analyses in particular (though not exclusively). Spivak warns the Subaltern studies group and those who endeavour to liberate the Other’s voice that it is necessary to foreground the fact that such projects are implicated in what they seek to subvert. Therefore, the project must “rewrit[e] its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility” (Spivak; 1985: 285) by foregrounding the limitations, failures, and problems in the act of writing and representing the “Other”. It seems to me that this is precisely what Somerville’s work suggests, both in terms of her collaborative work and in terms of her own sense of belonging with and through Aboriginal women’s stories of place.

And it is the limitations of “place” and the desire for an “embodied presence in the landscape” that locates Somerville’s impossible position. In pursuit of an embodied presence in the landscape, Somerville traces the work of Paul Carter, Elspeth Probyn, Liz Grosz, Liz Ferrier, Victor Turner and Trinh T Minh ha (mainly), in order to gesture towards a way out of what she describes as the “abyss of Western dualistic thinking predicated on separation rather than connection” (B/LJ: 12). She sees the Aboriginal women’s stories of place expressing their belonging and “body/place connection” which she covets: “I sensed the body and body/place connection always already there in the stories but didn’t know how to do it for me” (B/LJ: 13). Somerville suggests that it is her fragmented journal writing (which makes up the bulk of Body/Landscape Journals) which constitutes a performance of her body/place connection. It is the act of storying the storytelling (the collaborations) which becomes an act of belonging, as she writes: “[t]hrough listening, telling and writing the stories of Forky Mountain, I belonged to Forky Mountain in this sharing of the breath” (B/LJ: 130). Again, this claim to belong is disrupted by
Somerville's sense of how this would be perceived "from the outside" (which includes herself as critic) as a problem "articulated as one of crossing boundaries" (B/LJ: 130). One solution to this problem (suggested by the publisher it seems), is to remove her voice from the text (The Sun Dancin') entirely, but Somerville rejects this as a strategy because it obscures the production of the text; it is the way that this text is produced which is of importance to how it means. Moreover, removing Somerville's voice from the text would render her a transparent observer, disembodied from the text and landscape which she is so clearly seeking to connect with. This disembodied voice (which she associates with academic writing and a masculinist tradition) is one of the major impediments to the kinds of (implicitly feminised) connectedness that Somerville wishes to explore.

Not unproblematically, Somerville sees her own problematics of belonging being partially restored by her proximity to Aboriginal women's stories of place: "[w]as there a possibility of belonging through and with Aboriginal women's stories of place?" (B/LJ: 8) The risk of appropriation is flagged here, as it is elsewhere. Somerville seems anxious to avoid the arrogance of claiming to get everything right, and also foregrounds those aspects of her text that invite criticism of its post-colonising aspects. Small consolation perhaps, but a significant departure from strategies like that employed by Peter Read (and to a similar extent Tom Griffiths) who attempt to settle differences by broad strokes of knowing. These leaps of positive faith appear to avoid the kind of "paralysis" which theorising has often been accused of inducing.

Postcolonial/feminism (I note the risk in naming such a thing) consists of many moments where there seems to be a kind of "paralysis" of theory (which Peter Read locates as a problem for settler culture at large), where one cannot say a definitive yes or a definitive no to the situation at hand, where the theoretical and political problems associated with speaking about cultural difference seem to outweigh the benefits of speaking at all. But the "paralysis" doesn't ever seem to eventuate - there are no records of writers not writing or speaking for fear of colonising/appropriating. It seems that critics often confuse "paralysis" with dialogue, like that which occurs between postcolonialism and feminism: a continual re-negotiation of terms, a continual yes-no, a continued debate, and perhaps a willingness to give up on the idea of there being a happy synthesis in the long run, as Jen Ang has suggested. One of the most useful concepts that postcolonial/feminism includes is taking discursive and cultural limitation seriously - and that continues to be one of the most important issues facing projects such as Somerville's, written
as they are in the wake of critiques like that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, where she challenges western feminists to rethink analytical strategies to avoid the “use of women as a group, as a stable category of analysis .... [which] assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalizable notion of their subordination ... bypassing social class and ethnic boundaries.” Such a challenge is taken up in Somerville’s accounts of her work, where projects are couched in terms of the potential for connection and disconnections between multiple voices which may or may not privilege “gender” as the structuring category for thought and identity. I raise this partly in response to criticism of Somerville’s work by Gillian Whitlock who misreads Somerville’s project and confuses Somerville’s starting point with her conclusion. Whitlock has argued that Somerville’s “use of feminist methodology here [in Ingelba] constructs a bridge which takes [her] home free, across the chasm of race and colonial relations” (165), an argument which echoes the concerns raised by Mohanty and Spivak vis-à-vis western feminism. It is a valid and pressing concern, but does not apply to Somerville’s project as simply as Whitlock suggests. Somerville does not seek to bridge differences, but maintain them where possible in the text’s multiple voices and “overlaying of multiple ways of being” (B/LJ: 109). To argue that the text “elide[s] gender and race” (165) as Whitlock does, is to mistake Somerville’s conclusions with her point of departure (as a western feminist this is part of the tradition that Somerville writes out of). For instance, in the article from which Whitlock quotes, Somerville details her initial reluctance to start the collaborative project with Patsy Cohen because she could not use gender as a structuring principle on the grounds that “for these women, gender was not a structuring category of thought” (“Life”: 108). Instead, Somerville and Cohen decided to use Cohen’s concepts of identity, kinship and place as structuring categories for the book. Nevertheless, Somerville herself locates her own voice within feminist terms, as in, “I have aligned myself with the female voice” (“Life”: 108). It is not surprising given the cultural differences between these women that they should identify (textually as well as contextually) with/through different structuring categories. Whitlock’s mistake is to assume that because Somerville identifies in this way, then questions of race and colonial relations are then elided in favour of gender in the text as well; such a reading elides the multiplicity of voice and centrality of other concepts of kinship, place and identity that run throughout the book. Somerville suggests that given that Cohen and she approached the text from different perspectives, connections and disconnections would themselves be foregrounded, as in “[o]ur two basic
speaking positions, that of reclaiming the female and that of speaking from outside fixed gender categories, appear to be in some fundamental sense contradictory. They can however, through the use of multiple voices be located in the one text” (“Life”: 109). Rather than eliding race and gender, *Ingelha and the Five Matriarchs* attempts to display differently articulated and valued categories of thought for the collaborators. Rendering her own voice into the text in this way, Somerville had to depart from the “traditional” model of the life history writer and “abandoned” (“Life”: 109) the figure of the ghost writer²⁷ because such a figure allows the illusion that the white editor / writer and collaborator does not complicate the production of the text.

The fascination with position (and discursive limitation) in Somerville’s text leads to a kind of strategy for collaboration that Somerville sees as linking both herself to the Aboriginal women’s stories of place, and herself and the land itself. She belongs with the land (as Other) only through strategies of thinking which address cultural difference. Somerville theorises the methodology in the following list of ingredients with which to approach collaboration (and implicitly belonging). Those strategies include: “story-telling”; “Laughing at, and in our stories, and “making it good for ourselves to go forward”; “opening up a symbolic space of exchange”; “devising new movements between these intervals of difference”; “moving to the limit-edge of self, towards the other, with attitude, empathy and imagination”; “imagining what it might be like to experience, to see the world as other”; and “empathy, enabled by imagination, to participate fully in the feelings and ideas of others” (*B/LJ*: 220–221). This is a useful starting point for a consideration of the importance of *Body/Landscape Journals* and texts like it, texts which anxiously position themselves in terms of theoretical and personal risk posed by the necessity of cross-cultural engagements articulated as epistemic violence trying to know itself. This epistemic violence (which inhabits all critical manoeuvre including this one), is an issue which is not resolved by seeking to remove questions of Aboriginality from issues effecting settler discourse, nor by disrupting and hybridising all claims to know (as I have argued in relation to Somerville’s text). As we see in Somerville’s work, epistemic violence, as a feature of discourse itself, is implicated even in the ways that it is displayed! Consequently, “belonging”, as a sense, sentiment or legal / ethical principle which is imbricated within the very signification of indigeneity, is implicated in this epistemic violence as well; settler belonging is an expression of epistemic violence.
Peter Read’s attempt not to write as the Other and Somerville’s attempt to write with the Other represent two different strategies of white writing as it approaches questions of settler identity and belonging. While Aboriginality in both texts is critical to these elaborations, it is also necessarily subject to (and a subject of) the networks of power inherent in the operations of settler discourse. Both writers position settler discourse as potentially appropriative, and to differing degrees both are marked by the issues of epistemic violence. The effectiveness with which both texts deal with the questions raised by these issues depends on their use of writing strategies which place the writer’s subject position under question. While Read makes a claim for non-appropriation of Aboriginality, his text does end up being appropriative. This is partly because he identifies the power of Aboriginal stories of dispossession, Aboriginal histories and stories of place as being partly responsible for his “weakened” sense of “moral belonging”. That which he identifies as being powerful is therefore identified with as the source of his potential strength. While Somerville makes the same kinds of statements, as in “[w]as there a possibility of belonging through and with Aboriginal women’s stories of place?” (B/LJ: 8) she is also more interested in how her writing position informs these appropriations and, furthermore, how forms of knowledge and knowledge production produce “belonging” itself. This does not mean that Somerville steps outside the problems of epistemic violence (impossible given that she intends to investigate questions of settler belonging), but that her writing makes epistemic violence a condition of her point of departure.

Notes
1 I would like to thank Brian Rapsey, Elizabeth McMahon and Michele Grossman for comments on earlier drafts of this article.
5 This was also argued in Somerville’s 1991 article on writing life stories. “Before I came to do life story research I had spent several years living with Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory where the prior question emerged for me of
my identity in the Australian landscape. I felt alienated from the desert landscape which was so much a part of these women's lives, and came to believe that I could only achieve a sense of belonging through my relationship with Aboriginal women. This was not through exploiting their identity or belonging, but through an interaction that was essential to us both.” Margaret Somerville, “Life (Hi)story writing: the relationship between talk and text” in *Hecate* 17: 1 (May 1991): 95–109, p. 97. Further references to this article cited parenthetically in the text, abbreviated to “Life”.


12 Belonging has been shortlisted for numerous literary awards, and the NSW Premier's Community and Regional History Prize 2001. Peter Read has been invited to speak at launches, festivals, and discussions of the issues addressed in the book, as well as having its issues picked up by writers for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.


16 Parry, ibid.

17 Spivak has more recently commented that, “I have no objection to conscientious ethnography, although I am forewarned by its relationship to the history of the discipline of anthropology. But my particular word to Parry is that her efforts (to give voice to the native) as well as mine (to give warning of the attendant problem) are judged by the strange margins of which Friday with his withholding slate is only a fictive mark.” The Friday to which Spivak here refers, is from J M Coetzee’s *Foe*, and refers to the silence of this character which Spivak and others have interpreted as emblematic of the “wholly

For a discussion of the importance of the politics of listening see “Questions of Multi-Culturalism: Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak” Hecate 12:1-2 (1986): 136–142. reproduced in The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, (Edited by Sara Harasym), London: Routledge, 1990, 59–66. There Spivak remarks that in listening to and speaking with the Other, there has to be a persistent critique of what one is up to, so that it doesn’t get bogged down in this homogenization; constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on. I think as long as one remains aware that it is a very problematic field, there is some hope” (63).

Stephen Muecke, No Road (Bitumen all the way), Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987, 184–185.


In a forthcoming interview with Somerville, the question of collaborative writing comes up in relation to her work with Patsy Cohen. Somerville says that, “I did everything in my power, apart from refusing to do the work, to persuade her to take a more active role in the writing process but Patsy had limited writing ability and so she preferred to talk her story”. Probyn, forthcoming.

I have used the term “postcolonial/feminism” to describe works like Somerville’s which address issues relevant to both postcolonialism and feminism, and like that text itself, the phrase does not have to resolve itself into a synthesis of issues but is more usefully thought of as keeping them in a productive tension.

On the subject of feminism’s universalising tendencies, Jen Ang argues that, “we can talk with each other, we can enter into dialogue – there is nothing wrong with learning about the other’s point of view – provided only that we do not impose a premature sense of unity as the desired outcome of such an exchange.” “I’m a feminist but ... ‘Other’ women and postnational feminism” in Transitions: New Australian Feminisms, (Edited by Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle), St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995, 57–73, 64–65.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial

Gillian Whitlock argues that, “Margaret Somerville characterises her role as a “white ghost” in the production of *Ingeleba and the Five Black Matriarchs*” (164). In the article from which Whitlock quotes (“Life”), Somerville actually states the opposite and seeks to “abandon” such a fiction with the view to positioning her voice within the text.

Read writes: “If anything my sense of moral belonging has been weakened by so many years of painful interview and conversation” (*Belonging*: 19).
THE LIGHT GREEN WAVES

The light green waves of the grasses begin. 
On the left, 
   above the shoulder of the field, 
under a weighted sky 
Someone 
parallel to me 
moving and not moving 
to my rhythm – 
black and sharp, 
feet cut off by the horizon, 
like an amateur snapshot 
printed on hard paper. 
And then the forest begins. 

My life, 
the red lips, 
wells to my lips. 

*Translated from Russian by Peter Porter with the author.*
The Whisperers

I heard them talking
or perhaps pursing their lips
like snapdragons,
whispering.

I wonder what it would be like
to lay her and her and her jaw
upon my open palm,
one after another, each one.

I pass fish in the market.
their naked bodies float behind a window,
slanted sun bathers
on a bed of ice. Fin to fin.

I think of them
in the bottom of the boat,
twitching, the sun still twinkling
on their silver skin, their gasping

making them look
as if they were breathing,
as if they were talking,
as if no words even half uttered

could quite explain
their thoughts,
their pending doom,
the wilting vacancy upon their lips.
VIVIENNE PLUMB

DRY RISER INLET

You drive just like an ex-uncle of mine, parking well in a tight spot. Early in the morning I practise my yoga. Sukhasana is easy, Bakusana is not.

After lunch you embraced me a little longer than the others, and last month you sent me a note that was too familiar. My favourite pose is Savasana, the corpse position.

The Chicken Palace has become Super Stock Clearance of Sweets, I buy a bag of snifters and force myself to think about you. The sickly honeysuckle hangs over the fence in claustrophobic festoons. Each day I pass Dry Riser Inlet, the metal fixture on my way to work.

I dream we are making labels together, that we will stick on everyone’s door. We live like cosy neighbours in a New York sit-com style apartment block. That will never happen, I think in capital letters when I wake up.
You ring, you send me tiny silk flowers in hard hot colours, funny ha ha cards and a packet of your favourite muesli bars.
Each day I have to pass Dry Riser Inlet, the safe metal fixture on my way to work.

Over winter I leave the phone off its hook, lock the door and shut the windows.
My arthritis makes it difficult to do *Halasana* (legs over the head).

Someone says, *your friend left town*. There is a rumour that you are teaching English in Hiroshima. Standing at the stainless steel sinkbench, I roll the rice in a banana leaf and secure it with a sharp toothpick. Tomorrow I will change my route to work.