The creation of place, imaginatively and materially, where one feels a degree of comfort (if not relaxation) is a dynamic work-in-progress if this year’s selection of Australian non-fiction publishing is anything to go on. Aboriginal Australians, European Australians, Asian Australians, even “Australian” Australians are all having their say about what constitutes an Australian identity, and the nature of the spaces – rural, urban and suburban – we inhabit. Women and men, old and not-so-old (but rarely young), the writers engage with the present, occasionally anticipate the future, but overwhelmingly probe the past. There are books on philosophy, economics, literature, law, language, and science. Lives are looked at up-close in memoirs and biographies, seen at a distance in histories, contextualised politically and ideologically in sociologies, and represented narratively in an abundance of “true stories”.

Issues and interests are as dispersed as the genres in which the works are written. Nevertheless, central to a number of writers, and at the margins of others, is a view of the past, which is often ambivalent and at times contentious. Noel Henricksen, in his book on Christopher Koch, Island and Otherland, points to two dimensions of a past as it functions in contemporary Australia. He quotes James McAuley’s poem “Warning”, which includes the lines:

Beware the past
Within it lie
Dark haunted pools
That lure the eye
To drown in grief or madness.
The past McAuley has in mind is one where people grope “For comfort there”. It is the nostalgic past of an ideal world, one which is lost – if it ever existed. Desire for this world is accompanied by a disengagement with, or anger towards, the present; in its extreme forms it insists that it is a past that can be recuperated. Linked to this desire is an overarching view of the “Other”. The “Otherland” for Koch is multifaceted: it is constituted by dreams, the world of the imagination of the writer, mainland Australia for Tasmanian islanders, the exotic of Asia, the Celtic land of faery. It is also the past. Koch wrote, “The past is like a trunk in the attic here [Hobart], very close at hand; ancestors are not far away”. The challenge for Koch, and many of the writers represented in this survey, is to engage with the past, in all its manifestations, in ways that are productive for the present, rather than perform a perverse form of denial.

Life stories, whether in the form of letters, diaries, biographies or autobiographies, are by definition to do with what has gone before. The best of these works, such as Volume 2 of The Diaries of Donald Friend, edited by Paul Hetherington, enable a degree of illumination of our own lives. Embattled sexually (“To be celibate is to suffer torture, and become warped. To be promiscuous ends in debasement”) and artistically (“this extrovertish shallowness ... evident in my work”), the Donald Friend who emerges from these pages is a figure whose anxieties and contradictions point to a common human fragility, which is not limited by time, place or gender. The Diaries cover the period from June 1944 until March 1949, when Friend was thirty-four years old. There are first-hand accounts of events that impinged on the literary and artistic life of the nation: the Ern Malley affair (Friend considered Max Harris a “very bogus Melbourne intellectual”) and the controversy surrounding the Archibald Prize won by Dobell for his painting of Joshua Smith. Was it art or caricature? Friend’s uncertainties about himself as an artist – in a period when abstraction was beginning to dominate – were compounded by the comparisons he made between his own work and that of his close friend Tas (Russel) Drysdale. Sex and art collude and collide in his infatuation with the young Colin Brown. Friend wrote: “It seems, unhappily, I can only coincide with Colin on the canvas in which I express him. In flesh, never ... Colin is the whole desire of my life. I hate, fear and love him”. Rather despairingly, he wrote in 1946: “Love is tabu if it is queer”. Hetherington comments: “The diaries reveal a man who retained his love for the sensual and beautiful, but who craved deeper satisfactions – through intimate relationships and his art. By his mid thirties ... he was puzzled about how – and even whether – such satisfaction would be possible, except perhaps fleetingly”.

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The Diaries of Miles Franklin, astutely edited by Paul Brunton, also provide a picture of a deep divide between a public and private persona. As Brunton notes, “The companionable, intelligent, witty person whom men and women sought out was in private deeply unsettled”. Like Friend, Franklin wrote her diaries with an eye to publication. While she was frequently beset with a sense of futility and lack of accomplishment in her life, she appears confident that her diaries were worthy of publication — and not infrequently warned her friends that they might appear in them. The diaries cover the period from Franklin's return to Australia in 1932 at the age of fifty-three (she had been overseas for much of the time since 1906) until her death in 1954. Back in Australia, Franklin became very involved with local writers, strongly promoting the view that Australian writing must be distinctive. In a 1945 letter to Prime Minister Chifley, she wrote: “Without a literature of our own, we are dumb. In the disturbed world of today, more than ever we need that interpretation of ourselves”. Sixty years later, those words are still being echoed in the face of constant challenges to Australian content in the media, especially television. The diaries tell us of a troubled relationship with her ailing mother, record her acerbic comments on those she deemed literary pretenders, praise Eleanor Dark’s modernist novel Prelude to Christopher, and reiterate her sense of loneliness and doubts about her own ability. In 1950 she wrote, “I’ve struggled so long for nothing – long enough to prove over and over again that I have no talent for writing ... There’s not a soul alive to whom I’m of any consequence”. Another writer who spent most of her life outside Australia was Henry Handel Richardson. From the age of eighteen (in 1888) she lived in Germany and England, apart from a brief return to Australia in 1912 to gather material for The Fortunes of Richard Mahony. Michael Ackland's excellent Henry Handel Richardson: A Life provides a detailed and intriguing account of a writer who stated, “It has never been my way to say much about my private life. Rightly or wrongly, I believed this only concerned myself”. In spite of this obstacle, Ackland examines closely Richardson’s interests in music, her involvement with the suffragettes, her relationships with women (especially Olga Roncoroni), her attraction to spiritualism — and above all the production of her fiction.

Like Christopher Koch, Colin Thiele’s sense of identity is linked to his German ancestors. Born in 1920, twelve years before Koch, he is the subject of Stephany Evans Steggall’s lovingly detailed biography, Can I Call You Colin? German settlers, and their life in the Barossa Valley, formed the basis of Thiele’s writing about characters who, in his words, had to “tear their roots from the homely soil of their ancestors, and to transplant
themselves into an unknown earth so foreign and so far away that it defied imagination ...”. In a further parallel to Koch, Thiele, early in his writing career, was linked to the Jindyworobaks, and edited the 1952 anthology. Rex Ingamells was a significant influence on his work, along with Flexmore Hudson, Max Harris and Geoffrey Dutton. He went on to become one of Australia’s best known writers for younger readers, publishing over sixty titles, including *Storm Boy* and *Sun on the Stubble*.

Peter Skrzynecki’s *The Sparrow Garden* and Niqi Thomas’ *Minerva’s Owl: Excerpts from Exile* both engage with more immediate experiences of displacement. Thomas describes a return to Prague with her father after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. She unearths the history of her grandfather’s resistance against a totalitarian regime – and begins to establish her identity as a European Australian, with stories to tell. Simply and powerfully written, Skrzynecki’s memoir is a paean to his parents, both recently dead, and his European roots. Emotional, without being sentimental, it speaks of the simple patterns of lives in suburban Sydney, of people for whom, “Emigration had changed their lives externally, yet essentially they remained the same”. As Displaced Persons, their existence is accompanied by a sense of loss and sorrow, the untranslatable *zal*. And yet these “reffos” and “bloody Balts” live lives of courage and humour which provide the next generation with an enabling sense of self.

Robert Adamson, born in 1943, two years before Skrzynecki, tells a very different story in his *Inside: An Autobiography*, although both men were brought up in a working-class environment, and creativity became central to their lives. Adamson beguiles the reader with his unadorned statement of an early life of almost casual crime – stealing a rare bird from the zoo, a Gestetner from school, running away with a girl whom he later discovers is only fifteen – and finally ending up incarcerated in Long Bay gaol where, amongst other humiliations, he is raped. Interspersed with this is an account of a diligent and skilled pastry cook working very long hours. At no point does Adamson seem bitter or twisted by his traumatic experiences, and when he finally meets poetry in the form of the Bible, Hopkins and Rimbaud, it as if this were always his destination. The story of how the dyslexic becomes the poet is told with elegance and simplicity. Simply told, too, but lacking the elegance and insight, is Bud Tingwell’s autobiography, *Bud: A Life*. It is as much an account of the development of Australian film and television from the 1970s onwards as it is a life story – one remarkably free of any deep sense of conflict.

Aboriginal life-stories are again strongly represented; significantly it is the women who are recording their stories and, more generally, Aboriginal
history. Ruth Hegarty’s *Bittersweet Journey*, a sequel to the award-winning *Is That You Ruthie?*, tells of a life of courage and determination against what are by now familiar odds: an oppressive – if well-intentioned – white regime of the 1940s and 50s, poor housing, poverty, drunkenness, violence, and numerous children. Her story, told with grace and clarity, is an inspirational one. The ambition driving Ruth Hegarty is to establish control over her life. As a young mother, she did not win a battle about where to build a hut in the bush, but she did go on to become a decisive and dominant figure in Aboriginal community organisations in Brisbane, including as chairperson of the Black Community Housing Service.

Capturing very different life experiences is *Two Sisters: Ngarta and Jukuna*, a work produced by Ngarta Jinny Bent and Jukuna Mona Chuguna in collaboration with Pat Lowe and Eirlys Richards. Ngarta and Jukuna were members of Aboriginal groups who moved out of the Great Sandy Desert in the 1960s. Theirs is an extraordinary story. As the Introduction notes, they were to learn that they were “not only Walmajarri, but also Australians”. Both went on to become successful artists. Jukuna’s story is translated from the Walmajarri; however the book also includes the original text. Another story of a divided and transformed life is Hilda Jarman Muir’s *Very Big Journey*, unpretentiously subtitled “My Life as I remember it”. She was one of the “Stolen Generation” and summarises her time in the Kahlin Home for “half-caste” children in the following words: “I’d been taken from the bush, running around eating bush tucker and locked up for six years in a government institution and then sent out to work”. The children were educated to grade four level and then forced out into a world that they were in no way prepared for. The system itself ensured that these children would, as a consequence, have a problem fitting into either culture; the wonder is that so many did. As Muir states: “They gave us half an education and treated us as if we were half human, not white, not black: half an education for half-castes”.

Stephen Kinnane is also concerned with the impact on individuals and families – for many generations – of the forced removal of Aboriginal children. *Shadow Lines* is a compelling account of a search for belonging, as the author traces the histories of his Aboriginal grandmother and English grandfather. Kinnane describes the process by which he gradually uncovers the stories of Gypsy/Jessie, removed from her family in the north-west in 1905 and sent south to the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission; and of Edward Smith from London. Kinnane’s narrative is a personal one, well-informed by research and an awareness of the wider social, political and historical contexts. The “Empire” that reduced the world to “wet or
dry, black or white” collapses into the complex spaces and patterns of “shadow lines”. In his article “Land rights and progressive wrongs” in one of the themed editions of the classy Griffith Review (“Dreams of Land”) Noel Pearson writes of the hard issues confronting contemporary Aboriginal groups and individuals: passive welfare, addiction and violence. The importance of a sense of belonging is clear. Pearson says: “Let me once again state that our miserable condition is a product of our dispossession”. A wider view on an issue raised in a number of these works is evident in Dawn Bessarab’s “A Socio-Political Perspective Of Sexual Violence and its Impact on Aboriginal Women’s Health”, in Future Imaginings: Sexualities and Gender in the New Millennium edited by Delys Bird, Wendy Were and Terri-Ann White. This is a useful collection of essays, variously conceived, but not overburdened with dense theorising.

Individual stories of resistance and the development of a new sense of identity are placed in a larger historical context by Bain Attwood’s Rights for Aborigines, which tracks the changes in Aboriginal relations with white Australia from the mid-nineteenth-century until the 1970s. The narrative is divided into five deceptively simple chapters: Blacks, Whites, Citizenship, Land, Power. It is the last two issues that provide the focus throughout the book. Attwood analyses the politics and key players – both black and white – surrounding particular pleas and contestations over land and citizenship, predominantly in south-eastern and northern Australia. The imbalance of power in regard to land rights is encapsulated in the direct language of Ted Egan’s ballad, “The Gurindji Blues”, which in the final verse poses the question of what would be a proper price at which the “poor bugger blackfellers” might buy back Aboriginal land – what they were originally paid for it, flour, sugar and tea? Attwood concludes his valuable study with the observation that the moral legitimacy of the nation depends on acknowledging the disastrous legacy of the “past-in-the-present”.

Reflecting critically on Aboriginal writing is Anita M. Heiss’s Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight. The study begins by raising the difficult question of authenticity, and who has the right to speak about Aboriginal issues and experience. The roles and identities of Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo and Roberta Sykes are the cases in point for this analysis. Is Aboriginal identity a matter of “blood” or experience? Heiss concludes that Johnson, as she chooses to call him, must engage first of all with himself: “…Johnson must learn to live the life of who he really is: genetically (non-Aboriginal), spiritually (a Buddhist) and practically (an academic in a white educational system)”. The discussion that follows suggests that none of
these categories is straightforward. Who Johnson “really” is, and what constitutes Aboriginal writing, is part of a complex and ongoing debate. The book also addresses Intellectual Property Rights and contains valuable chapters on Canadian (“First Nations”) and Maori literature. The list of references is impressive. “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity” is the title of Adam Shoemaker’s essay in Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo, edited by Annalisa Oboe. This collection contains a wide range of essays engaged with contemporary theoretical practice. Oboe’s introduction points out that the contributing authors are not interested in whether Aboriginal “blood” provides legitimacy for Johnson to speak for and about Aboriginal people. She argues that essentialist concepts of identity are not helpful. Oboe attributes Mudrooroo’s constant change, his abilities as a “first-class shape-shifter” to a capacity to avoid easy categorisation by readers and critics, noting that “Aboriginality has always been, discursively speaking, in several places at once”.

One attempt to “fix” Aboriginal identity and history was Keith Windschuttle’s The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, in which he claimed that the number of Aboriginal deaths in Tasmania had been vastly overstated. He also questioned the motives, intelligence, belief systems, and attachments to land of Aboriginal groups. His particular targets were Henry Reynolds, Lloyd Robson and Lyndall Ryan. Whitewash, edited by Robert Manne, provides detailed counter arguments to Windschuttle by eighteen contributors – who, in turn, question his facts, figures, methodology and motives. Manne claims that Fabrication “contributes to Australian history what Helen Demidenko’s The Hand That Signed the Paper contributed to Australian fiction – counterfeit coin”. He adds that what was so dispiriting about both episodes is the lack of critical judgement exemplified by the intelligentsia; there was a ready acceptance of falsity. The battle between Windschuttle and others is one of a number of conflicts examined in Stuart Macintyre’s The History Wars. He acknowledges that Windschuttle does reveal some sloppy referencing on the part of his opponents (particularly Ryan), but concludes that overall Fabrication “is a shocking book, shocking in its allegation of fabrication and also in its refusal of the interpretive framework that earlier historians employed”. Macintyre analyses how the past is politically mobilised in the present to support concepts of “us” – Keating’s Big Picture on the one hand, Howard’s relaxed and comfortable, ordinary Australians on the other. Both versions involve inclusions and exclusions; this is the contested territory of figures like Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey. Macintyre
suggests that it is all too convenient to dismiss the implications of a troubling and troublesome past with the epithets “the black armband view of history”, the “guilt industry”, or “endless and agonised navel-gazing”, among others.

A white perspective on rural identity is provided by Jo Jackson King’s *The Station at Austin Downs: One family’s adventure on the land*. As with the Aboriginal life-stories, there is much detailing here of everyday events, especially of family interactions. Here too, there is a close identification with a rural landscape and an examination of how change is dealt with – as the extended family move from the familiar world of a farm in the southwest of Western Australia to the station country of Austin Downs. Here they become pioneers in the growing of fruit for the Perth market. King reflects on the challenges facing a young family in an isolated environment, and comments on the sense of belonging and identity that Aboriginal workers possess in this arid landscape: “Their fathers worked here and, I think, their grandfathers before that. I wondered if the connection they felt to this land was anything like the one I felt to the farm: out of my hands, but still part of me”. King’s is a confident, if sympathetic voice. Unlike their Aboriginal counterparts, the white owners, or leaseholders, can to a significant extent choose their moment of leaving or staying in their chosen location. Adventures on the sea, rather than the land, are the focus of John Little’s *Down to the Sea*, “The true saga of an Australian fishing dynasty”. For five generations the Warrens have been fishing out of Eden on the south coast of New South Wales. Early in the century Henry Lawson and E. J. Brady celebrated the seafaring adventures of patriarch Ike Warren, who started the fish-trading business at Mallacoota on Victoria’s Gippsland coast.

The narrative of the outback is still a potent one for a nation of city dwellers. Kieran Kelly, a Sydney-based investment banker, is drawn to the challenge of crossing the Tanami desert, located in the Northern Territory and Western Australia – a landscape that defeated the explorers John McDouall Stuart and Augustus Gregory. *Tanami* provides an account of Kelly’s journey by camel, accompanied by the knowledgeable Andrew Harper. Another “story” set away from the metropolis is Stephanie Bennett’s *The Gatton Murders: A true story of lust, vengeance and vile retribution*. The writing is not as sensational as the title; nevertheless revenge, lust, a complex network of relationships in a country town, and Irish-Catholic values are all part of the mix. Three members of the Murphy family – Michael, Ellen and Nora – were sexually abused and murdered on Boxing Day, 1898. Bennett uses an array of reports, documents and files in her
“whodunit?” investigation of the case, which was never solved. One hundred years later, there are contemporary resonances: although there is no suggestion of police corruption in Bennett’s account, bungling and incompetence are clearly evident. A childhood spent in rural NSW may be the motivation behind Bill “Swampy” Marsh’s desire to put together his collection *Great Australian Droving Stories*. It is a series of anecdotes and tall stories about droving around Australia from the 1920s to the 1960s – many of them of more interest to their originators than to a contemporary audience.

More varied and entertaining is Paul B. Kidd’s *Great Australian Fishing Stories*. And staying with the obsession with nation-defining titles is Jim Haynes’ *Great Australian Drinking Stories*. It is a serious collection about intemperate practices, if such an oxymoron is possible. Haynes provides a brief historical introduction on drinking in Australia, noting the traditional link between the “Australian character” and alcohol. He queries whether its centrality in much of Australian life is to do with the inheritance of a “drinking culture” from Irish and Cockney migrants, or whether circumstances such as rum being the accepted currency in NSW until 1814, were of greater influence. The book is divided into four sections: “The Roaring Days”, “The Dark Ages”, “The Enlightenment”, and “The Reformation”, with notable alcoholics like Henry Lawson and Lenny Lower well represented. In his “Letter to the *Bulletin re Drinking*” Lawson puts the case for drinking in minimalist terms: “A friend says that we don’t drink to feel happier, but to feel less miserable”. Other writers are more celebratory, such as Anon. in this traditional toast:

There are many good reasons for drinking—
And one has just entered my head:
If a man doesn’t drink when he’s living
How the hell can he drink when he’s dead!

These may well have been the sentiments of the subjects of Bruce Simpson and Ian Tinney’s sepulchral collection, *Where the Dead Men Lie: Tales of graves, pioneers and old bush pubs*. The title is taken from Barcroft Boake’s eponymous dirge, which announces that the final, troubled resting place is “Out on the wastes of the Never Never”. There is in fact little in the way of tales in this book; it is more a survey of pioneer graves accompanied by photographs.

One reason for the predominance of “bush myths” in the Australian search for an identity that seems a more-or-less comfortable fit, can be
seen in the histories of our cities – and none more clearly so than Perth. Jenny Gregory’s handsomely produced and illustrated City of Light: A History of Perth since the 1950s provides an account of how planners, architects, councillors and politicians – and occasionally the public – have fought over the contested space of “the city”. Regardless of local governance, the city is not exempt from larger order movements – technological, modernist, postmodernist – that impact on the built environment. The title, appropriate in so many ways, fortunate and unfortunate, comes from John Glenn’s observation from space in 1962, after Perth left on its lights for the passing spacecraft, Friendship VII. The Daily News called it “a West Australian handshake to America”. Arguably, Perth has been shaking hands ever since, so that now there is not much to distinguish it from numerous other cities of similar size across America or the world. There is little sense of its origins; it is a city without a past, without memory. It demands that its citizens live in the moment. It is, however, adjacent to Kings Park and the Swan River, both in surprisingly good condition. And there is Fremantle. An earlier view of the colony and the city is contained in Pamela Statham-Drew’s engaging James Stirling: Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia. Environmentalists have made much of the fact that the very first act symbolising the birth of the city was the felling of a tree, recorded in George Pitt Morison’s painting “The Foundation of Perth”. From the beginning, too, there were questions being raised about allegiance and identity. William Leake complained of Stirling’s “imprudence” in naming the city Perth. Had the name been chosen, he asked, because “Sir George Murray was born at this insignificant place, known only to reading men or Geographers as an obscure place in Scotland?”

White Australia’s historical attitudes to Aborigines are the starting point for J. V. D’Cruz’s and William Steele’s polemical and provocative revised edition of Australia’s ambivalence towards Asia. Central to their argument is the claim noted by Ashis Nandy in his Foreword that “Australia’s ambivalence towards itself underwrites its ambivalence towards its own indigenous people and Asians”. The original ambivalence derives from an uncertainty about its status as a colonised and colonising country, combined with a conflicted sense of self, because it is caught in the “geographical trap” called Asia. The authors cross disciplinary boundaries in drawing on the comments of journalists, writers, philosophers, academics and politicians to establish that cultural and historical blindness is responsible for a deep-seated racism manifest in Australia’s structural, discursive and political frameworks. The
conventional focus for the interrogation of race and power relations between Australia and Asia is reversed in Alison Bronowski’s About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia – a book dismissed by D’Cruz and Steele because they argue that it demonstrates a fear of any non-Anglo criticism of Australia’s relationship with its near neighbours. Bronowski looks at the perceptions of Australia from the point of view of ten Asian countries: China, Japan, Korea, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines and concludes that their views are, typically, dominated by unflattering stereotypes. The mismatch between Australia’s self-image and how it is perceived from the outside is partly due to a dismissive arrogance on the part of Australia, signalled by its lack of support for Radio Australia and the sale of the Cox Peninsula transmitter to a fundamentalist Christian organization for broadcast into Indonesia. Like D’Cruz and Steele (who provide an overwrought analysis of racism in Blanche D’Alpuget’s Turtle Beach), Bronowski also turns to fiction and its writers to elaborate her argument. Here she finds a largely negative representation of Australian culture; it has a second-rate status behind Britain, Canada, and the United States. But there is also frequent criticism of the country of origin, especially by second-generation “hybrid” characters who are trying to establish an identity by straddling two worlds. Bronowski identifies “Occidentalism” as a useful strategy whereby Orientalism is reversed and helps to provide cultural scapegoats, very often for political ends. The drift of Bronowski’s argument is that racism and ignorance is evident on both “sides”; perhaps this is a useful reminder for some, but it is not a productive position in which to remain.

Jan Ryan’s sociological study Chinese Women and the Global Village demonstrates just how difficult and dangerous it is to generalise about any racial or national group. Fifty women were interviewed for this wide-ranging commentary, which among other matters, looks at family structures, attitudes to work and marriage, education, and, of course, notions of identity. Age, education, country of origin (China, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, Australia) are all important factors in how these women have accommodated the demands of a white-Anglo world. The interviews also reveal that no one can be reduced to a deterministic set of socio-political-cultural factors – although there is, according to Ryan, consensus over one issue: an overwhelming preference for friendships with other Chinese because here they found “common values, similar humour and familiar lifestyles”. Not surprisingly, all subjects found themselves in varying degrees caught between two worlds. One of the more optimistic, a Malaysian Chinese, “Anna”, stated: “I have left the old world and have
come to a brave new world where I can feel free to be myself, say what I think without doing damage to the family or anything like that. I can be as strong willed as I want, say what I like ... on every issue from politics to sex and the arts”. A personal and engaging account of Australia-Asia connections is John Mateer’s *Semar’s Cave: An Indonesian Journal*. It is a work which, as the blurb states, is “Neither travel writing nor reportage, neither exotica nor history’. Mateer, born in South Africa chooses, with a poet’s sensibilities, moments that illuminate the complexities and ambiguities of insider-outsider relationships.

In the feeding frenzy of “reality television” the demand for “true stories” seems to have outstripped the desire for fiction in Australian publishing. Gail Bell’s remarkable *Shot: A Personal Response to Guns and Trauma* describes the moment of a bullet entering the body, her own and others, and its lasting impact, physical and emotional. The experience of shooting, and being shot, is examined through a number of stories, which include those of RSPCA officers, Vietnam veterans and murder victims. Of a very different order, but also concerned with living or dying, is Robin Haines’ *Life and Death in the Age of Sail: The passage to Australia*. Through references to diaries, letters, journals, and public records she examines the vicissitudes of travelling to Australia by ship from the 1820s onwards. Her emphasis is on working-class emigrants, most of whom, she observes, greeted the new world with a sense of optimism and determination. Kirsten McKenzie explores the lives of some of these settlers from the 1830s to the 1850s in Sydney and Cape Town in *Scandal in the Colonies*. Oscar Wilde observed that “scandal is gossip made tedious by morality”; McKenzie establishes that the morality governing what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour was as fluid as the new identities being carved out in the colonies. Policies of inclusion and exclusion establish the trajectory of the development of these societies. For many, a capacity for masquerade is a necessity as colonists strive to re-invent themselves according to dominant British cultural models. Scandalous indeed was the life of Mary Broad, convicted highway robber and mother, who escaped from Botany Bay to the Dutch East Indies in 1791. Broad’s escapade is the subject of Carolly Erickson’s novelistic *The Girl from Botany Bay: The True Story of the Convict Mary Broad and Her Extraordinary Escape*.

In considering the broadly political spectrum of non-fiction publishing in the last twelve months, readers may well feel a need to be armed with a copy of James Franklin’s *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, which promises to address such questions as, “Why are the established truths of my tribe better than the primitive superstitions of
“your tribe?” Admirably lucid, it provides an account of the various debates and strands - and the key players - in the teaching and practice of philosophy in this country from the 1920s to the present. It is at its best in looking at the past; Franklin is confounded by contemporary theory, although justified in questioning the opaque language of some of its practitioners. More helpful references for providing guidance on contentious issues are Bryan Horrigan’s *Adventures in Law and Justice: Exploring Big Legal Questions in Everyday Life* and Hugh Mackay’s *Right and Wrong: How to decide for yourself*. The latter includes chapters on “Does the end ever justify the means?” and “Should we ever go to war?” Both questions are pertinent to *Dark Victory* written by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson. Under the direction of John Howard, Australia violated international conventions on sea rescue in an attempt to prevent 438 asylum seekers from reaching Christmas Island on board the *Tampa*. The book does one thing Howard and others were desperate to prevent: those on board seeking refuge become personalised - people with names, histories, desires. *Dark Victory* is a powerful and depressing account of cynical manipulation and dishonesty in a desperate, and ultimately successful, bid for re-election by the Coalition government. It was a winner in the 2003 Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards. Another writer to put a “human face” to the disowned and disenfranchised is Winton Higgins in *Journey into Darkness*. He employs his own travel diary, based on experiences in Poland and Israel, to address concerns about Australia’s lapse into moral indifference over Aboriginal reconciliation, asylum seekers, and treaties guaranteeing a wide range of human rights. He makes a case for examining Germany’s “journey into darkness” - the Holocaust - as a means of illuminating what is now happening in Australia. In both instances the authorities had to ensure there was a “*reliable public indifference* towards their abuses”. Higgins considers what characterises a national identity that is called upon, or constructed, to garner this support.

*Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation* edited by Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker and Jan Gothard gathers together papers from a symposium on the centenary of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901). The editors note that, “Any examination of the logic and history of White Australia is inevitably drawn to the question of whether Australia sees itself as a part of the world or apart from the world “in one form or another is addressed by all the contributors – with the *Tampa* episode regarded by many as a pivotal issue in establishing and reflecting contemporary attitudes. Len Ang in her chapter “From White Australia to Fortress Australia” analyses the ways in which racial anxiety - by no means limited
Hugh Mackay quotes Lyndon B. Johnson’s view: in “modern warfare there are no victors; there are only survivors”. Alison Bronowski in *Howards’s War* concludes, “Whoever won or lost, or in the long run wins or loses, we are all damaged – invaders and invaded alike”. In this polemical text Howard and his government are again in the firing line with what, by now, are well-rehearsed criticisms of Australia’s involvement in Iraq. Bronowski, like Mackay, raises the question of whether the end justifies the means. Neither writer seems too sure. Mackay at one point concludes it is best to assume the end *never* justifies the means, but then proceeds immediately to qualify this position. He notes the slippery political manoeuvrings over this issue: “When no weapons of mass destruction turned up, a different ‘end’ had to be found to justify the invasion – hence the talk of ‘liberation’”. The theme of a just war is taken up by a number of contributors to Raymond Gaita’s thoughtful collection, *Why the War was Wrong*. In his introduction he notes that, “All of us are glad that Saddam’s criminal government has fallen ... None of us believes that the war was a just means [to that end]”. The essays are in fact far more circumspect than the title would suggest. Robert Manne expresses the dilemma of many when he states that the war “originated in ideological fantasy and imperial hubris [and] was justified on the basis of an astonishing falsehood”. And yet, without it, “the disgusting regime of Saddam Hussein would still be in power in Iraq”. He concludes, “From this simple unpleasant truth there is, I am afraid, no escape”. Mark McKenna, in his chapter “Howard’s Warriors” – which closes the book – outlines the ways in which Howard has fully exploited every opportunity to welcome home troops from aboard, often taking over the role conventionally that of the Governor-General. In these performances he has consistently drawn links between today’s troops and what he calls the “Anzac tradition”. McKenna argues that the danger of these “theatrical displays” on the streets and in the media is that the more war becomes accepted, peace becomes the exception. The motivations of Bush and Blair and Howard are of concern to many of the writers. Manne cites an article claiming that Bush believes “he was chosen
by God to eradicate terrorism from the world”. John Howard is another who believes in destiny. In *The Howard Years*, edited by Manne, the section title for Manne’s chapter is a quote from Howard: “The times will suit me”. The contributions are wide-ranging and consider Howard’s engagement with indigenous issues, asylum seekers, war in Iraq, economic and environmental policy, and Australia’s relationship with Asia. It is broadly critical of Howard’s performance.

Owen Harries’ 2003 Boyer Lectures, titled *Benign or Imperial: Reflections on American Hegemony*, lucidly examine many of the issues raised by the preceding writers. He points out that the world changed profoundly with the implosion of Russia, and the arrival of the “unipolar” system where America is the only significant player. Economic, cultural and military hegemony is the result. He speculates on how the balance of power might shift again with the arrival of China and a united Europe as serious contenders for the “superpower” tag. Harries questions the conventional wisdom that globalisation will break down divisions between cultures; he claims that the opposite result is just as likely. He examines the implications of America’s post-September 11 unilateral position that it “will, if necessary, act pre-emptively”, and considers the dangers of Australia’s “cheap hawk” position of “punching above one’s weight”.

Many of the subjects that writers have pondered and analysed in the books mentioned thus far are reflected and refracted in Peter Craven’s *The Best Australian Essays 2003*. Politics, literature, memoir, war, race – Paul Kelly, Delia Falconer, Paul McGeough, Robert Gray, Robert Manne – are some of the topics and voices included. The flexibility of the genre is evident throughout the collection. The rational Nicolas Rothwell describes his experience with an Aboriginal medicine man; David Malouf analyses the phenomenon of Anzac Day; Danielle Wood considers the significance of the thylacine for contemporary Tasmanians confronting yet another extinction – that of the Tasmanian devil; Inga Glendinnen brings together Aztec civilisation, Freudian analysis and a liver transplant. Glendinnen, when very ill with “inflamed brain sickness” writes, “I clung to my lifeline of words to catch even these experiences, and so had an illusion of remaining in control”. And, fittingly, language is the subject matter of the final book of this survey, Don Watson’s *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*. Watson is concerned with the ways in which the debased and empty language of marketing and managerialism has affected the wider society, and is seeping into the domain of the personal. This does not augur well for our public and private relationships. We become blind to implications social and political, and lack self-knowledge. Such
language, he says, “could no more carry a complex argument than it could describe the sound of a nightingale”. Australia lacks a rhetorical tradition, which carries with it the suggestion of an inferiority in our relationships with other, more articulate nations. “Here we make do with language, as we make do with low rainfall and thin soil and bits of wire”. As Wittgenstein stated: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”. Watson regrets that his education did not attend sufficiently to language and that now, if he could write the curriculum, children would study for twelve years “the beautiful arrangement of words”. He cites two lines from Czeslaw Milosz that encapsulate the relationship between self and language and the need to belong:

To find my home in one sentence, concise
as if hammered in metal.

Non-Fiction Received 2003–2004

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


I walk down to the river.
I'm searching.
I'm searching for a jar of leeches.
In the distance I see something flashing so I head toward it.

As I come closer I see it's a mirror dangling from a tree. Underneath a table with six sealed jars.

I open a jar stick my finger inside pull it out – blood slides down my arm.

I feel the sharp clutch of a hand on my shoulder. I turn and see a woman's face covered in mud. She points across the water and says if I want my own leeches I have to swim to the opposite bank.

I strip my body of clothes – pause for a moment – enter the water and swim.
I stop, put my head up.
I'm half-way.
The water is colder at my feet.
I can sense the muddy floor beneath.
My arms ache and my head is numb.
I look back and see the mirror flicker.
There is no one to complain.
I see my face on the surface
and wonder why I'm here.
COMMISSION

To Ashkenazy, a writer of probity, in consequent ever deepening obscurity and neglect, came out of the blue a commission.

Write me a novel, a rich man required of him.

Although rich here a poor word for proper description.

Language has its limitations, even Ashkenazy to acknowledge, after all.

Two million dollars, he proposed, this man, to Ashkenazy his fee.

Cash.

Any currency.

Whichever country.

Whatever and wherever required.

A first half on handshake up front, he detailed, this man, to Ashkenazy the terms of transaction, its mirror million upon submission fulfilled and completed.

Ashkenazy pondered, of course, the usual practical parameters.

Of what length?

As you require.

Some preference of subject? Setting?

None.

Serious? Satirical?

Your choice.

Could be, let's say, experimental? Must be, on the other hand, of established type or style?

Entirely your own business, told him the rich man. I'll never even read it.

Two million dollars.

In crisp clean cash money.

The first million in a minute immediately up front.

Ashkenazy circled a date in his diary.

One proviso, said the rich man.

The ink already drying.
That there must be one copy and one copy only. All drafts or notes or outlines or whatever you make by way of assisting manufacture to be destroyed, your every alongside self suggestion, every least scrap or sketch or scribbled even tentative written down thought, nothing nowhere otherwise to survive. What you give me is all that will exist of your book in the world.

Ashkenazy acknowledged without hesitation.
Five months, he said.
Slamming his diary shut with a satisfying bang.

Ashkenazy bought paper, two reams, his usual setting-out amount.
Stripped and rewaxed and buffed to a sheen the pine plateau of his worktable, sweat and a soft rag, hive of industry, honey to the eye.
Sharpened his pencils, two dozen ready spears, upright in a jar of once upon a time best Scottish marmalade.
Made clean the typeface on his typewriter, the Swiss, the manual, his professional lifetime’s trusty tool.
Washed out and refilled with new ink his gold-banded black fountain pen.
Ready?
Now?
To begin?
The million minus so far not a single dollar in neat stack on his kitchen table any chance visitor to be suitably impressed or amazed.
The price of probity?
Ashkenazy ate his evening meal at the other uncrowded end.

The rich man was a phone number, twenty-four hours, no one will answer, I’ll know it’s you.
The diary said today.
Ashkenazy shaved, showered, made himself nice.
Ate his usual breakfast, in now accustomed ease at his kitchen table’s unoccupied other end.
Drank his tea.
Started a pipe.
To rise in answer, without rush, nor falsely laggard neither, staged affectation, never mind no witness, not Ashkenazy’s way, when it sounded, the exactly on time arranged and expected single sound of knuckle on his front door.
Ashkenazy opened.
The man and his money on Ashkenazy’s doorstep.
They exchanged.
The cash in a sack that might have held groceries, sturdy brown paper, perfunctorily folded, of casual closure, a take-away meal.
Ashkenazy’s five month’s work in a plastic case, transparent, hinged, closed with a clip on the other side.

Commission
A novel by
A. Ashkenazy

Two reams thick.
Held and encircled by a thick rubber band.
Did they speak?
Should they speak?
Was there indeed any word further to say?
As even a handshake of concluding civility?
Oh, and this, said Ashkenazy.
Producing from behind his back a supplementary envelope.
His posture in offering hinting at a bow.
You might even imagine a smile.
Although there wasn’t.
He didn’t.
As he closed carefully his door.
That his patron might or might not enquire of its content, a simple docket of laboratory origin, receipt, invoice, what purchased and when, or enquire then further, deeper, its property of instant incineration exposed to naked air, was, I assure you, in all probity, Ashkenazy’s least concern.
Voyage
(After C. P. Kavafy)

The ticket’s condition is clear:
No turning back on the voyage
You didn’t even choose to take,
And which, though short, is longest, since

It shadows and incorporates
All. Fearful, you can change wives, work,
Your house, country, real ships, and go
Anywhere whenever you like,

In actuality or dream,
Believe you are dodging your fate,
And still you’re chained to time that needs
No relieving shift at the helm,

So constantly intent is it
On getting you there as programmed.
You can have one of heart — a change,
That is — becoming Death’s best friend

By loving black in every form,
Hoping to be spared when at last
You sail into port, options gone,
As trapped as you were at the first.
CHRISTOPHER KELEN

HOTEL LISBOA

a bamboo scaffold
    for the neon sky
the gods of luck
    the evil eye

it's all too subtle in this place
the ploys are never untangled

see where a Chinaman
    lost his hat gambling

the view lost its centre,
    beach, sea gone

nothing rotates any more

the big come-on
    the Lisboa flashing
malignant thing among my wishes

see the man with the bent stick and cigar
prosperous of some other era
    lipstick or nicotine

see the slick pimp
    big teeth, sparse moustache

dream of
    The girls in the dungeon below

Macao, 2002
On 17 January 2004, the Australian newspaper named Nicole Kidman its “Australian of the Year”. The editorial argued that Kidman’s career is exemplary of how her country has changed: “Where once too many of us resented international success, Australians now understand we must compete on the world stage in all industries if we are to prosper”. For the Australian’s film reviewer, Lynden Barber, Kidman’s career represents “the best of modern Australia”, and he notes with approval that “she has held the world spotlight while remaining unmistakably Australian”. Struggling with these paradoxes, he describes Kidman – incorrectly – as an “expatriate” who embodies “the national character” while also living the “post-global superstar life”.

There is a perfectly familiar term for the paradoxical formations of modern identity that Barber is struggling with here: it is cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism can be defined as “the capacious inclusion of multiple forms of affiliation, disaffiliation, and reaffiliation, simultaneously insisting on the need for informing principles of self-reflexivity, critique, and common humanity”. Like the nineteenth-century concept of “disinterestedness”, to which it is closely related, cosmopolitanism, at least in its older sense, is “the expression of the need ... to enact or embody universalism, [and] to transform it into a characterological achievement”.

In this paper I want to test the proposition that there is a new generation of “cosmopolitan Australians”. Whether this is a genuinely new phenomenon or not, it appears to constitute a marked change from the immediately preceding generation of “expatriates” who did not return to Australia, and who often struggled to balance the claims of British or American and Australian citizenship. As a “characterological achievement”,

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the new cosmopolitanism might be seen as a form of strategic self-fashioning that can be mobilised as a colonial response to the metropolitan, a way of overcoming the belatedness or supplementarity of provincial cultures, of making them identical with the metropolitan in space and time – in a word, of making them modern. This is close, I think, to what the Australian admires in the career and persona of Nicole Kidman.

Clearly, I could enumerate further examples of the new cosmopolitanism drawn from commercial popular culture, especially the production of celebrity in the cinema, fashion and popular music industries. In the present paper, however, I want to begin exploring these issues through readings of three recent Australian novels, where I believe versions of the new cosmopolitanism are also apparent: they are Alex Miller’s *Conditions of Faith* (2000), Gail Jones’s *Black Mirror* (2002), and A L McCann’s *The White Body of Evening* (2002). This is partly to shift the discussion – deliberately – from the domain of popular culture to the literary, and partly to set up ways of thinking about how the new cosmopolitanism might be connected – whether by comparison or contrast - with an older formation that I will call colonial modernity. Significantly, the three novels I discuss here are set in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth. This opens a potential continuity between the contemporary media’s “new cosmopolitanism” and an earlier form of cultural capital that Sylvia Lawson, in her biography of J. F. Archibald, called the colonial paradox: “The Archibald paradox is simply the paradox of being colonial ... To know enough of the metropolitan world, colonials must, in limited ways at least, move and think internationally; to resist it strongly enough for the colonial to cease to be colonial and become its own place, they must become nationalists”.

A second reason for using these three novels is that they allow me to make a connection between the new cosmopolitanism and recent work on the vocation of literary intellectuals. In Matthew Arnold’s mid-nineteenth-century sense, “disinterestedness” is the process of *bildung* or personal “cultivation” most closely connected with reading. Cosmopolitanism, then, is historically bound up with the literary and with the principled comportment of the literary intellectual. Since the early 1990s there has been a marked renewal of interest in the forms of intellectual mobility and ethical authority once offered by cosmopolitanism. This is an impulse – and here I allude to the titles of some recent books – to feel once more “at home in the world”; to “think and feel beyond the nation”. If such formulations risk sliding back into totalising and dominitative modes of thought, at stake is one of the founding
assumptions of modern literary studies: the very possibility of witnessing and interpreting others, of thinking and feeling beyond the limits of strictly local categories of identity such as gender, race and nation.

What distinguishes the new cosmopolitanism from the old is its residual suspicion of universals. At the same time, this new work recognises that post-structuralism's negative critique of Enlightenment robbed theoretical language of a certain ethical and political purchase. Gayatri Spivak's call for a "strategic essentialism" is an early example of this turn. Julia Kristeva, too, has recognised the ethical value of cosmopolitanism, which she defines as a principled "detachment from provincial identities", a "therapeutic exploration of strangeness within and outside the self". Without wanting to re-invoke universals, there is, then, a felt need for a set of middle-range terms, a form of "strategic" or "provisional universalism" that would allow us to speak about the work of literary intellectuals as both a situated ethical practice and a distanced critique. While some appear to invoke cosmopolitanism in its older, universal sense, others have turned to what Scott Malcomson calls "actually existing" cosmopolitanisms in recognition of the fact that intellectual work is always already located, historically specific and therefore, in some measure, compromised. In this sense of the term, cosmopolitanism has been scaled down, pluralised and particularised, making it, as Amanda Anderson observes, at once "more modest and more worldly".

"Utopia in a minor key": Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*

These formulations are suggestive for thinking about the complex cultural locations occupied by Victoria Morrell, the protagonist in Gail Jones's novel, *Black Mirror*. Born in Melbourne in 1910, Victoria is brought up on the West Australian goldfields before going to art school in London in 1936. After discovering Surrealism she moves to Paris where she practises as a painter and mixes with the leaders of the movement, including Breton and Dali.

A series of childhood events has led Victoria to disengage from the conjunction of identities bequeathed to her by her father and by settler colonialism in Australia. These include the failure of her parents' marriage, her father's exploitation of socially dependent women, and her brother's class-motivated violence against Victoria's working-class lover and his family. Her father, Herbert Morrell, is a "fabulously rich" industrialist who freely raids other cultures in expressing his own *nouveau riche* taste:
[he] had a passion for collecting ... and sought out objects on a criterion of radical unAustralianness. Contemptuous of the local, he chased with laborious effort and at foolish expense exotic knick-knacks, gewgaws, artworks and curiosities. Foreign was a word he loved to roll in his overdentistried mouth.

This capitalist self-fashioning is what Scott Malcomson would call an actually existing cosmopolitanism. Ironically, Morrell’s imperial acquisitiveness is also a pernicious form of Surrealism, which Victoria later recognises as the organising principle of the British Museum’s collections: a “peep-show” of “the world’s everything” (37). Herbert Morrell also personifies the sexism and racism of his class. His treatment of Japanese prostitutes and of his Aboriginal housemaid, Lily White, again ironically anticipates the Surrealists’ primitivism and cultivation of the exotic: “He was pleased by the anonymity of the [Japanese] women’s faces ... Something in their interchangability excited him” (178); “Contemptuous of [Lily White’s] race, he nevertheless believed Aborigines the custodians of some secret and defining essence, some nocturnal mystery” (179).

By the late 1920s, Victoria has so completely disengaged from the identities bequeathed to her by her Australian family that she feels rootless, without local identity. It is now another, more positive version of the “worlds-in-collision” principle that allows her to begin the hard work of reaffiliation. Her cosmopolitanism requires a willed, performative reconfiguration of the self in relation to diverse, mobile, and often conflicting cultural contexts. It is at this critical moment that Victoria encounters Surrealism at the International Surrealist Exhibition, held at the New Burlington Galleries in London in June 1936. Surrealism is significant not only for its historical role as an international, cosmopolitan art movement, but for its aesthetic of incongruity and bricolage, which provides a theoretical model for the practice of self-fashioning and the performance of new, hybrid identities: Victoria came to see “the beauty of things in dislocation” (86); “The Paris [she] arrived in ... [was] a city of ... marvellous conjunctions” (87). Yet even as she builds her new identity, Victoria remains, at some level, an Australian. This is so at the very moment of her “alchemical ... transubstantiation” into her new, Surrealist self:

Monsieur Marcel Duchamp answered the door. He peeped, flung it open, then flew his hands to his face in the sweeping gesture of a magician who has that very instant puffed something strange into existence.

Ah, voila! L’Australienne!
Victoria felt herself suddenly endowed with symbolic accessories: bounding kangaroos, vistas of orange earth ... The mantle of Australianness descended upon her, as though an invisible parasol had collapsed. ... She stood there bedraggled, pre-empted by nationhood. (18)

Even as she tries to check her nationality at the door, Victoria's Australianness is reconstituted by Surrealism's insatiable demand for and creation of the exotic: “Disbelieving in nations they still wanted an Australia” (22). As Victoria experiences it, becoming cosmopolitan does not mean moving decisively from one identity or culture to another, but the simultaneous occupation of different identities and cultures, each historically grounded, none truly universal. For this reason, Paris “was a city Victoria knew both as an Antipodean stranger ... and as a dedicated Surrealist” (140).

Surrealism, too, we begin to see, is just another actually existing – and therefore compromised – cosmopolitanism. For all their pretensions, the leading Surrealists fall well-short of their own ideals. This is evident in the role played by the “the negro” and “the primitive” in Surrealist aesthetics, which is bound up with French imperialism, and with European racism and sexism. Surrealism may at first seem to Victoria to have “the supernatural atmosphere of an entire counter-world” (70), but it turns out to be very much of its time and place. This is revealed to her by André Breton’s prurient lecture on “the negro”: “He speculated on primitivist urges and waxed racist on Black Venuses. ... Josephine Baker, [Breton declared], is a Surrealist par excellence in her pitch-black nakedness. ... Bullshit, Victoria thought” (145). Here, there can be no “pure” cosmopolitanism, for Surrealism’s “marvellous conjunctions” are, like Herbert Morrell’s nouveau riche salon or the collections in the British Museum, a production of imperialism, racism and sexism. Surrealism is a grounded, embodied, and therefore tainted universal. It allows Victoria to invent herself anew, though within certain limits: her Surrealist self remains grounded in the very Australian origins she has sought to leave behind, and the Surrealist movement, while offering her mobility beyond the local and provincial, falls short of its own cosmopolitan aspirations by being grounded in the limits of its own time and place.

This ambivalence comes close to James Clifford’s account of the new cosmopolitanism, about which he admits to having “mixed feelings”. Clifford certainly has a positive view of cosmopolitanism’s ability “to sustain and rearticulate a sense of who one is by appropriating, cutting,
and mixing cultural forms” – notice again the implicitly Surrealist aesthetic that underlies the concept of *bricolage*. “People”, Clifford argues, “have for centuries constructed their sense of belonging, their notions of home, of spiritual and bodily power and freedom, along a continuum of sociospatial attachments”. But if cosmopolitan subjectivity is a matter of “inventiveness” and cultural performance, it always takes place within certain historically and culturally constrained possibilities. For Clifford, then, cosmopolitanism is “a pragmatic response, making the best of given (often bad) situations”. For this reason he is at pains to distinguish between his own “pragmatic” view of cosmopolitan re-invention and the more utopian attitude to hybridisation found in much post-colonial theory, where it is central to the political project of personal and cultural liberation. “If there is utopia here”, Clifford demurs, “it is utopia in a minor key”.10

**Secular vocations: Alex Miller’s *Conditions of Faith***

In the character of Anna Griffin, the Australian scholar who has come to interview Victoria Morrell in London to write her biography, Gail Jones touches on the link that has long existed between cosmopolitanism and the work of intellectuals. This is a more fully developed theme in Alex Miller’s *Conditions of Faith*, whose protagonist, Emily Stanton, abandons her vocation as a student of classical history at the University of Melbourne only to find it revived by unconventional friendships formed in Paris and Tunisia, which cause her painfully to reassess the future direction of her life.

Like Victoria Morrell, Emily Stanton experiences as a young woman the urge to divest herself of a series of possible identities laid out for her in advance. Emily’s task is to re-invent “the conditions of faith” under which she can conduct a meaningful life after the absolutes of home, family, patriarchy, religious faith and national identity have been abandoned. This is, again, a characterological achievement. The events of Miller’s *bildungsroman* unfold across a single year, 1923, during which Emily Stanton not only marries, moves to Paris with her husband and gives birth to a daughter, but also gives birth to a new self, fashioned in response to new and exotic cultures.

The starting point of Emily’s reaffiliation is her relationship with her husband’s homosexual friend Antoine Carpeaux, who introduces her to modes of friendship beyond her inherited ideas of home and family, and to cultures and ways of life that carry her beyond her own nation and the Anglophone empire in which it remains embedded. She writes to her
father, “I could not imagine meeting such a man in Melbourne”. Antoine’s father was a French landowner in Tunisia, and during Emily’s difficult pregnancy, while her husband Georges is preoccupied with his work in Paris, he takes Emily to convalesce at Sidi bou-Said, his family home near the ancient Roman amphitheatre at Carthage. Here, Emily discovers an intellectual vocation in re-interpreting the life of the early Christian martyr, Perpetua. This project of cross-cultural research is gifted to her by her new friends, who invite her to enter into and interpret their worlds. The tokens of this invitation are Perpetua’s medallion, given to her by Antoine, an edition of Perpetua’s journal, given to her by the Arab archaeologist Hakim el-Ouedi, and the academic career given to her by her mentor, the American scholar Dr Olive Kallen.

Emily’s meeting with Hakim amid the ruins of the Roman amphitheatre ironically recalls Adela Quested’s encounter with Dr Aziz in the Marabar Caves. Far from wishing to harm her, Hakim is seeking to enlist Emily professionally in the cause of Tunisian decolonisation, hoping that she will initiate a scholarly challenge to the dominant reading of Perpetua’s story by the French Catholic archaeologist Pere Delattre. Hakim is an example of Edward Said’s Third World intellectual, who uses the tools of the metropolitan culture against it. Like the site of the amphitheatre, the legend of Perpetua, as Hakim describes it to her, is contested and multi-layered: “If you ask Delattre, he’ll tell you she was a martyr of the Holy Roman Church. The Christians claimed her and made a saint of her. But I say she was a misunderstood Berber woman” (164).

Like Anna’s biographical interest in Victoria Morrell, Emily’s interest in Perpetua is cosmopolitan in the sense of being a compulsion to think and feel beyond the national or provincial, but it is also deeply personal and therefore compromised: she is an “interested” observer in the sense that Perpetua’s struggle for self-representation parallels Emily’s own struggle to accept her unwanted pregnancy which may be to a Catholic priest. Far from seeing this as a handicap, Hakim is alert to the importance of a scholar’s personal motivation. He and his colleague, Ahmed, have approached her because they hope that she might open up a new and subversive interpretation of their history: “Give her the book, [Ahmed] told me. She’s a young married woman and is to have a child soon. ... Ahmed ... thought you might see something in [Perpetua’s] situation that we don’t see” (178). Although Hakim pays tribute to the British ideal of disinterested scholarship (207), the reality is that all involved in the struggle for interpretation of Perpetua’s story are deeply situated and therefore compromised.
In taking up Hakim’s challenge, Emily turns for collegial support to the American archaeologist, Dr Olive Kallen. Her Islamic scholarship, too, is deeply rooted in her own particular milieu. She possesses “an independent intellectual life that is well grounded in the robust and civilized complexities of New York and the American Museum of Natural History” (326). Dr Kallen is an “independent” scholar by virtue of her principled cosmopolitanism, her deliberate reaffiliation with a culture other than her own, but her independence is, paradoxically and at the same time, “grounded” in an enabling milieu that has its own specificity. Emily understands her new career in the same terms. She wishes to be “an independent scholar”, yet this cannot be achieved without the generous and liberating gifts of her French, Tunisian and American friends. Emily’s intellectual vocation is at once situated while aspiring to be universal; it is personally motivated but requires sympathy for other cultures; it strives for objectivity and scholarly rigour while being complicit with a number of incompatible interests – religious, ethnic, national and personal.

Emily’s experience at Carthage can therefore be read as an allegory of the intellectual vocation, which involves a difficult though ineluctable negotiation with otherness. She has entered a maelstrom of interpretation that resonates with all-too familiar debates in the humanities around the politics of intellectual work. Yet she is also performing what might be seen as the fundamental work of humanities intellectuals: working within and against the limitations of purely local interests in an attempt to sympathetically witness and interpret the other. In proposing to interpret Perpetua’s story, is Emily guilty of speaking for the subaltern? Is she following Jane Eyre’s project, as Spivak reads it, of constituting her own modern selfhood and career at the expense of the third world? Should she accept Hakim’s invitation or leave him to write Perpetua’s history from the perspective of a male Arab nationalist and intellectual? Does Emily’s own passionate engagement with Perpetua disqualify her from interpreting her story or is this a pre-condition of all intellectual work? And to what extent does Dr Kallen’s gift of professionalism offer a way through these perplexing issues?

Miller’s position on these questions of cross-cultural sympathy, professionalism and intellectual work is similar, I think, to that of the American literary scholar Bruce Robbins. In *Secular Vocations*, Robbins address two assumptions which he believes became the “common sense” of the American humanities academy in the 1980s and 1990s – the era of identity politics. First, that careers are bad – that “success in professional career making is at best an embarrassment to any scholar who ... makes a
career while and by maintaining a commitment to radical social change". And second, that “representation is bad”, that “the professional western academic has neither the right nor the ability to represent others”.12

Robbins rejects the view that intellectuals have “fallen” into the academy as myth-making after the fact, arguing instead that the institutional location is the very condition of the modern intellectual’s coming into being – its untranscendable horizon. “Let’s be clear”, he argues, “there is ... no place where thought can be free of all material encumbrance and social entanglement, and it is time to stop trying to return there again and again. ... Not disembodied freedom, but diverse embodiedness and incomplete servitudes have to become the common sense view of intellectual work”.13 Robbins advocates a self-reflexive professionalism that is mindful of its own privilege and self-interest, but without conceding that this irrevocably taints its practices or fundamentally disarms its attempts to advocate progressive principles or to practise critique.

The new cosmopolitanism is central to this work and to the ethical comportment of the intellectual, not in Arnold’s older, unobtainable sense of disinterestedness, but as a pragmatic acceptance of the doubleness of the intellectual’s location. On the one hand, Robbins points out that “no one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere”.14 On the other hand, he recognises the ethical value of what he calls “the negative relation to nationality ... an insistence that includes the possibility of presence in other places, ... a density of overlapping allegiances rather than the abstract emptiness of non-allegiance”.15 In putting the case for this “more modest cosmopolitanism”, Robbins also puts the case for a certain professionalism: “professionalism that, without presumption of ultimate totalizing certainty, believes in its own intellectual powers of generalisation, abstraction, synthesis and representation at a distance, and in the process of putting them to use. Which believes, one might say, in its own work”.16

This is a plea to accept what Mark Sanders in his moving study of progressive South African intellectuals and apartheid calls the intellectual’s “responsibility-in-complicity”.17 For South African intellectuals there was never the luxury of pure opposition because they were always complicit to some degree in the circumstances they opposed. Sanders offers this not as the exception but the rule. The intellectual’s work is always “contaminated”. This is what Sanders means, both positively and negatively, by the concept of “responsibility-in-complicity”. These formulations, I think, come close to describing the position in
which Emily Stanton finds herself when she is invited to professionally interpret the story of Perpetua, not only for her own reasons but also in the cause of Arab nationalism.

Colonial modernity: A. L. McCann’s *The White Body of Evening*

The often unstable relation between cosmopolitanism and post-colonial nationalism is also an important theme in A. L. McCann’s novel, *The White Body of Evening*. Its historical setting hinges around the moment of Federation in 1901 and the collision between an emergent Australian nationalism and both earlier and later forms of cosmopolitan identification. The novel begins with the marriage of Albert and Anna Walters in Melbourne in 1891. Anna is Australian-born but her parents are German. She has “never thought of herself as Australian” and is troubled by the exclusionary nationalism of the day. This is a time when “White Australians”, as her trade unionist neighbour explains, “are standing up for their rights more than ever” (16). In cultural terms this is expressed through the institution of censorship, which pathologises European modernism. Hidden away in a bookshop in the inner city, Anna finds books with titles like *Syphilitic Madness and the Modern City*, while in a dark corner a man reads *Therese Raquin* (25).

By the first decade of the new century, Albert’s son Paul has begun his career as an artist, writer and theatre producer. His rebellion against colonial nationalism is expressed through identification with European modernism and bohemianism. McCann depicts a local colonial art culture that is provincial and belated. At Melbourne’s Gallery school, Paul Walters is taught a tepid form of tonal realism that he rejects as philistine. He and his friends pose as bohemians in Fasoli’s, “a little restaurant on Lonsdale Street where, so it was said, one might be able to imagine oneself in Soho or Montmartre” (117). McCann develops a sharp opposition between Paul’s cosmopolitan sympathies and the realist aesthetic of the new White Australia, which is associated with the *Bulletin*. Paul and his sister Ondine disparage the nationalist aesthetic: “Besides the Red Page all they publish these days are eulogies to the nation, satires or bush vignettes... perhaps that’s why artists are fleeing Australia like rats from a sinking ship” (118). As a painter, Paul rejects realism for a crude form of expressionism, and looks to his German background: “Ondine and I, well, I’m not sure what we are. Not Australians, not Germans either. We’re caught in the middle, which is nowhere” (118).

As Paul sails away from Melbourne for Vienna, his imagined artistic home, he experiences an intense vision of Melbourne’s colonial belatedness:
in the grid-like uniformity of the city, in the emptiness of its streets and the crushing conservatism of its terracotta-tiled villas spreading out into a vast suburban wilderness, the imagination, if it wasn’t beaten flat with national sentiment and the spirit of the land, could only turn in on itself and devour its host like a parasite. The future of Australia lay in either individual sickness or collective subservience to the blandest and most brutal invention of modern times: the nation. (182)

Cosmopolitanism is central to Paul’s image of himself as an artist: he believes himself to be a citizen of the world whose imagination transcends the particularities of colonial Melbourne. But in Vienna, he meets the poet Klessman, an anorexic, epileptic and truly “rootless” (212) Jewish writer, who translates and re-writes Paul’s father’s journals to produce a slim volume of great modernist poems. Klessman defines the limits of Paul’s aspirations as a colonial artist. He personifies the modernist notion of the artist detached from commodity culture to which Paul can only aspire by falsely claiming authorship of Klessman’s poems after his death.

When he returns to Melbourne in the 1920s, Paul attempts to introduce a form of avant garde theatre inspired by the French Grand Guignol, the theatre of fear and terror, but he fails for two principal reasons: first, because his modernist ideal of the separation of art from the market is unsustainable; and second, because Melbourne’s is an irrevocably belated culture. He believes himself as a playwright to be on higher moral ground than the society he writes about: he “talked about being part of the avant-garde. He took it all very seriously” (286). Yet when he debates these issues with his sister, Ondine can see that his plays use similar techniques to the commercial entertainments and tabloid journalism he despises. Paul blames Melbourne for his failure, invoking the concept of colonial belatedness and recommitting himself to an idea of art that he can only associate with Europe, or a colonial’s idea of Europe: “He had been brought low a third time by the cursed colony and was now ready either to leave for good or to sink lower still” (333).

By and large, discussions of colonial modernity in Australian scholarship have followed two contrasting models of the temporal and spatial relations between metropolitan and provincial cultures. The first focuses on the burden of colonial belatedness, the second on the attainment of simultaneity. The concept of belatedness finds its exemplary expression in Homi K. Bhabha’s reading of Fanon in the final chapter of The Location of
Here, modernity is an epistemological structure that offers simultaneity, agency and inclusive identity to individual subjects belonging to a shared culture and of the present. But because of the uneven development of international capital, this opportunity is not evenly or simultaneously distributed in different global locations. In postcolonial contexts, the enunciative repetition of modernity is subject to both a spatial and temporal lag, and it is in this space, which both translates and deforms the project of modernity, that Bhabha locates the possibility of a postcolonial agency. It is this version of colonial modernity that we find in Andrew McCann’s articles about Marcus Clarke’s career as a colonial journalist\(^{20}\) and in Paul Walters’s fictional career as a colonial playwright.

A second way of understanding colonial modernity is to see the circulation of cultural capital as closing the gap between colony and metropolis. In Australian scholarship, this second model has emerged most strongly in work on commercial entertainment, such as Richard Waterhouse’s research on international vaudeville and minstrel shows,\(^{21}\) and Veronica Kelly’s on the nineteenth-century popular stage.\(^{22}\) In this model of colonial modernity, the idea of belatedness appears as something internal to high culture’s own mythologised self-representation. In contrast to McCann, Kelly argues that in the domain of popular entertainment there is no evidence of either temporal or spatial distance, the so-called time-lag or cultural cringe: “Founded in the wake of the industrial revolution, Australia as a series of six British colonies was meshed into the global commercial popular entertainment industry, linked by continuous touring by artistes and companies via the international and intercolonial shipline, road, and later rail routes. Constructions of insularity speedily disperse in the face of the abundant evidence of the international and intercultural nature of colonial theatre”,\(^{23}\) The strong form of this reading, as in Catherine Brisbane’s introduction to *Entertaining Australia*, is that the myth of colonial belatedness has actually obscured the “cosmopolitanism” of colonial culture, which it is the scholar’s work to re-discover.\(^{24}\)

As Kelly’s work suggests, it has perhaps been through international, urban, commercial popular culture rather than through high culture that colonial Australians have most strongly experienced that sense of simultaneity and mobility, that breaking down of the distinction between province and metropolis, that I want to invoke by the term colonial modernity. All of the novels I’ve discussed here, however, depict forms of
colonial belatedness that are increasingly felt in the period up to the 1930s. This suggests a need to distinguish between different registers of cultural practice. All three novels focus on forms of high culture – Victoria Morrell’s Surrealist art, Emily Stanton’s classical historical scholarship, and Paul Walters’s expressionist art and theatre. From the perspective of these practices, colonial culture appears to be belated and the protagonists’ cosmopolitanisms are forms of response to that felt condition of colonial supplementary. The protagonists either elect to remain in Europe or, in Paul Walters’s case, hold out the option of returning there. And all three novels end historically around the late 1920s, when the split between high and low culture might be said to have become institutionalised in Australia with the emergence of modernism.

The kinds of cosmopolitanism cited by historians of popular entertainment like Waterhouse, Brisbane and Kelly appear only in the margins of these three novels. In McCann’s, for example, there are passing references to the gramophone and the latest international recordings of popular classics available in Melbourne. In all three novels there are references to Australian tourism in Europe. In Conditions of Faith, Georges Stanton’s career as an engineer and his aspiration to take part in Bradfield’s Sydney Harbour Bridge project place Australia at the forefront of modernisation, if not of modernism. And, in The White Body of Evening, there are references not only to international vaudeville troops, but to early cinema: Paul Walters attends the Melbourne screening of Frank Hurley’s film of the Ross Smith flight from London to Sydney, which creates a sense of Australia’s participation in the expansion of modern transport. All these instances belie the theory of colonial belatedness.

It follows from this, I think, that we need to be cautious about seeing Australian cosmopolitanism as a generalised mode of response to colonial supplementarity without being sensitive to the different registers of cultural practice and to the history of that cosmopolitanism, which changes markedly in the period from 1890 to the present. We need, then, to distinguish at least two axes across which the history and forms of Australian cosmopolitanism might be mapped: the first is the relation between high and low culture and the different forms of cultural capital and mobility they respectively offer at any given time. The second axis is historical. It appears, for example, that the modes of popular cultural practice Veronica Kelly discusses take place before the modern split between high and low culture becomes institutionalised. McCann’s novel, in particular, spans a considerable period, from the 1880s to the 1930s, but does not register any change across this time – roughly the generational
gap between Albert and Paul Walters. Then, too, something happens after about the 1930s, when all three novels cut out historically – that is, the onset of modernism and the almost exactly contemporary phenomenon of expatriation for figures like Christina Stead and Patrick White, for whom Australian culture was indeed belated. These historically earlier forms of cosmopolitanism and expatriation did not necessarily provide the same kind of cultural mobility attributed by the Australian newspaper to contemporary actors like Nicole Kidman. This is partly because we cannot legitimately compare the present day flows of personnel, technology and capital in the cinema industry with the more constrained economy of imperial culture treated in these novels. What intervenes here is the gap between contemporary conditions of globalisation in the cinema and other popular culture industries, and their late-nineteenth-century equivalents or predecessors. Imperial patterns of cultural exchange to some extent foreshadow the contemporary entertainment industry, but there are also marked differences. It is precisely across this gap that Gail Jones’s researcher, Anna Griffin, confronts Victoria Morrell, whose career is the product of an earlier set of cultural formations and earlier – and therefore different – forms of cosmopolitanism.

My claim for the evidential value of these historical novels must therefore be circumspect. What I think we can say is that they represent a marked contemporary interest in re-discovering forms of cultural mobility, cultural capital and ethical authority once offered by historically earlier forms of cosmopolitanism that foreshadow what I’ve called the new cosmopolitanism. But in remaining focussed on the high cultural practices of painting, poetry and avant-garde theatre, and by ending their historical coverage around the 1930s, these historical novels do not allow for any general assumption about continuities between these older and newer forms of cosmopolitanism, nor to understand the period of expatriatism that punctuates them – from roughly the 1920s to the 1990s, when the “new cosmopolitanism” began to be named.

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Notes

7 Scott L. Malcomson, “The Varieties of Cosmopolitan Experience”, in Cheah and Robbins, 238.
14 Robbins, 26.
15 Robbins, 250.
16 Robbins, 188.


Look out, the grass is green! The earth pulls at your flesh. The pain in your chest insists. The lawnmower stutters. Summer. 1973? You sit in the backyard, stripping copper wire. The scavenged copper pays for Bett’s anniversary present. Your twin brother Dick looks nothing like you. You leave behind the silver birches, leave behind the still lake; the shaft of a nickel mine swallows you up each day. How close the lawn is. The foreign beach is bullets and gore, is machines, and gobbets and limbs – and somehow you climb the cliff, you climb the cliff, and marry, and marry again, your first child is born, and when she sees that movie, she says, she knows it doesn’t capture the time you never speak about. The green grass is closer. Shelley’s hair flashes strawberry in the sun as you pull her into your arms – “Not lost, not lost” – the search party hangs back awkwardly; the tears run down your face. You build a house. You build another. Your initials are traced in the sidewalk. The hammer is balanced; you choose a nail punch to fit. A gravid woman who is not yet your wife stands beside you. You have two children. Your brother Dick looks just like you. The grass is too green. You go to England. You leave England. The ocean bears you out and home. The ocean bears you. Waves thirty metres high wash over the destroyer’s deck, and wash away the chest of Bermudan cedar you have made for your bride. You make another. The grass is closer now. You work. You smoke too much. You stop too late. You start again. On long car trips, you sing a song about a man who left a lobster in a chamber pot, to the great delight of your daughters. The green grass is sweet. When you wreck the Hudson, Bett forgives you. Dick and you and your little brother Les
take the wagon down to the Grand and fish. From the plans for the house in Halifax, you build a scale model for your daughter. She chalks your name on its slate roof. Its slate roof makes a good chalkboard. You wake, put on your overalls, take the bus. The sun rises. You make a coffee and check the chemicals in the boiler. You wake, put on your overalls, take the bus. You play scrabble with your sister. Sometimes you win. You jounce Shelley on your knee. Shrapnel makes it ache. Outside Bett’s hospital room, the doctors say she will die. You gather your young daughters. You wait. You are patient. And frightened. The grass is so green now. Your daughters become women. You do not approve or disapprove of their choice of mates. Bett struggles to walk again. Your daughters borrow your tools. You lend them your hands. Bear them up. Must this earth call so insistently? Must this grass be so green? You braze two pipes and solder the fitting. You tilt the baby bottle into your first child’s mouth. She squirms in your cradle of sinew and brawn. The lawnmower stutters and almost dies. You’ve drunk too much rum, and argue a little. And sing. Around you, no one ever fights. Your eyes are serious brown. Here is the grass now, and now you are gone.
THEOLOGY OF LUCK

Try as he might God couldn't waste him.  
Whittled him down, over the years, piece by piece.  
A toenail a man can live without,  
can boast with at parties as a war wound.  
Two eyebrows missing in more than stunned  
amazement takes some sweet talking  
to explain the theology of luck.  
And when your hair ignites (twice!)  
for no other reason than standing in the wrong  
place at the wrong time, well, a wise  
man reads the signs.

For a human lightning rod Roy C. Sullivan  
was in the wrong profession. Even in leisure  
(fishing ever fraught with danger) he was a marked  
man, distrusting the optimism of blue skies,  
the cheery smiles of weather girls.  
He sickened of showing the calligraphy  
of scars: his seared left shoulder  
the chest and stomach burns  
the roasted ankle  
the legs cooked to a turn.  
His glowing core a wound.

Seven times struck by lightning  
(don't count the near-misses),  
as though God's magnifying glass had a yearning  
just for him. Rejecting awe and pity  
did he venture out in thunder storms  
screeching for peace to the barren Heavens?
Did he offer cinders of himself to false idols?
Throw his own ash from the hill top to the wind,
extinguishing a private conflagration.
Mocking God with an epitaph:
*die at his own hand, rejected in love.*
MUMMY-LONG-LEGS

i
Too late daddy
learnt mummy-long-legs only
wanted his body.

ii
Long-legged mummy
simply cannot stop – she finds
daddy so yummy!

iii
Legs numbering eight–
all that’s left of daddy since
mummy-long-legs ate.

iv
Merely a reflex
mummy-long-legs told daddy’s legs
shortly after sex.
A critical controversy marks Remembering Babylon’s immediate reception in 1993, its publication year - also, pertinently, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, and the year following Mabo v. Queensland. In early November, Germaine Greer publishes a review titled “Malouf’s Objectionable Whitewash”, challenging Malouf’s representation of indigeneity and denouncing the principal character Gemmy Fairley first as the enabling centrepiece of Malouf’s “supremacist fantasy” and then more simply as his “fake black”. Peter Craven promptly rebuts Greer in “An Ad for Philistinism”, affirming that Greer’s hostility merely reflects her “own post-colonial condescension towards her former country”. The gloves now off, further debate ensues. Peter Otto, in an article-length review, seems to align himself with the detractors when he asserts that the novel performs an “erasure of the political”. However, Otto engages thoughtfully with the figure of Gemmy – the character Greer treats so dismissively – and finds in Gemmy a revelatory “locus or catalyst for certain kinds of disorientation intrinsic to the colonial experience”. In the following year, 1994, Veronica Brady publishes in an American journal: Remembering Babylon, in her view, responds productively to the challenge of Mabo and aligns itself with Mabo’s demonstration that the argument of terra nullius “has no standing”. The debate within Australian publications seems to culminate, however, with the appearance of a full-length scholarly article by Suvendrini Perera, which remains the novel’s most fully elaborated adversarial critique. Perera’s argument in brief is that Malouf misappropriates “the indigenous body” and mobilises it within “the discourse of happy hybridism”. In so doing, Malouf produces a “transubstantiated” version of indigeneity, which then allows for the “evacuation” of the space of the indigenous and “the substitution of colonising for colonised bodies”. The overall outcome is “a Providentialist narrative of colonisation”.
After 1994, the voices in favour of Malouf’s novel seem to outnumber and overpower those that speak against it. *Remembering Babylon*, which had been short-listed for the Booker Prize (but without ultimate success), is honoured in 1996 with the inaugural International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Upon the announcement of this award, Gia Metherell publishes a strong statement in the novel’s favour, recognising and validating its expressed will to reconciliation of Australian society’s divided elements. *Remembering Babylon*, she observes, “presents the story of white colonialism as inextricable from the story of black Australians”, and this acknowledgment of “a shared history” coincides with the position adopted by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. In the broader international context, some critics express reservations about the work, but these are more modestly presented and embedded in largely favourable appraisals. So Sheila Whittick, publishing in France, suggests that it is “difficult to identify” Malouf’s final position with respect to the Eurocentrism of his principal settler characters. Other commentators extol the novel in terms that suggest awareness of the early denunciations, but without confronting them directly and explicitly. Thus Michael Mitchell credits Malouf with undertaking a “perilous but necessary transgression” of conventionally understood cultural boundaries; Carolyn Bliss asserts that the envisioning of Gemmy as a bridge-between must be understood as failed myth. However, the early arguments against the book are not countered so much as skirted; the challenges are left largely unanswered.

The adversarial criticism, from Greer through to Perera, unites in its will to defend cultural and racial borders. The contemporary world is understood as an assembly of cultural territories, all of them representing and defending their borders and constituencies with greater or lesser degrees of success. This critical perspective is acutely problematic with respect to Malouf, because his work so insistently involves the testing and questioning of borders, boundaries, and boundedness – already in *An Imaginary Life* and in the subsequent fictions, up to *Remembering Babylon* and beyond. Malouf’s creative wager is that one can cross interpersonal and intercultural borders imaginatively; his ethical belief is that one should try to do so. In Malouf, boundedness exists to be surpassed. Self-overcoming, through responsiveness to the appeal of the other, is one of his principle themes. Indeed, a common motivation for Malouf characters, albeit often unconscious, is the quest to find the perspective of the other – to see the self from the other’s perspective. Clearly, orientations such as Malouf’s may open an author to the charge of cross-cultural transgression
to the charge of venturing into realms of representation in which the
author has no valid claim - but one should ask then if Malouf’s imaginings
duly recognise and respect real-world issues of cultural difference.

Concerning the case of Remembering Babylon, the evaluation of Malouf’s
cross-cultural vision must turn upon the figure of Gemmy Fairley, the
novel’s “black white man”, or again, its “white black man” - Malouf uses
both phrases. In preceding novels, Malouf had mainly explored the
dynamic, mutually articulating relationship of self and other in relation to
pairings of intimately bound but antithetical characters: Ovid and the
Child, Jim Saddler and Ashley Crowther, Digger Keen and Vic Curran. In
the 1993 novel, Gemmy stands as the principal instance of difference, of
otherness, for all other major characters. And of all the characters, Gemmy
is most clearly presented as a site for the reconfiguration of postcolonial
subjectivity and identification. If such reconfiguration - or transfiguration
-is a problem in Malouf’s text, the problem must centre on Gemmy.

Gemmy’s cultural performance, to begin with, needs to be recognised
as productive rather than merely reproductive. Gemmy stages questions of
cross-cultural perception, puts into performance an exploratory reading
that aims to cross the bounds of difference. Such perception, such reading,
which aims not at appropriation but at recognition, enables rather than
impedes effective, productive cross-cultural negotiations. The question
Gemmy poses within the text is not primarily - what is Aboriginal
identity? His advent raises much more pressingly a series of differently
focused questions: what is European settler identity; how (and to what
degree) is this identity posited upon conceptions of Aboriginal difference;
how does the case of Gemmy perturb and challenge these conceptions;
how does Gemmy represent in himself, and stimulate in others, a work of
re-evaluation and rereading?

Gemmy’s specific capacity to raise questions about cultural identity
and cross-cultural interpretation is clearly signalled in Malouf’s canny
handling of the first encounter - Gemmy’s first confrontation with a North
Queensland settler community. As Paul Carter has affirmed, the cross-
cultural interpreter should strive to recognise “the theatrical nature of
cross-cultural relations”, especially in situations of encounter. Thus,
historical actors perform, and events are staged, in accord with pre-
established (albeit often unconscious or unacknowledged) scriptings. One
may note here too, Carter’s suggestion that historical writing often
presumes to stage for the first time what it can only restage. However
Malouf (an erstwhile collaborator of Carter’s) is alert to both the pitfalls
and the possible advantages pertaining to the theatrical character of cross-
cultural encounter; he plays upon the pre-established elements of encounter scenarios, inscribing critical difference upon a familiar territory.

While portraying Gemmy's first attempts at self-representation, Malouf focuses attention on "the rag" with which the newcomer covers himself - or perhaps one should say, the rag with which he doesn't quite manage to cover himself. The rag's ineffectiveness as a covering adds a comic element to the text, but also carries the suggestion that the rag is not, most crucially, a covering. This rag is Gemmy's only piece of clothing when he first encounters the novel's Anglo-Celtic settler community. While being examined, sized-up, by the settlers, Gemmy removes the rag from his waist and presents it for examination. He then becomes anxious as he watches it passed from hand to hand and mutely communicates his will to have it back. The basic terms of this encounter scene are familiar enough: naked savagery confronts clothed civility. Yet Malouf, in his narrative detailing, works carefully to defamiliarise the episode; the easy, recognisable oppositions are not allowed to determine its development or resolution.

Crucially, the rag that Gemmy proffers then reclaims is not savage garb, is not Aboriginal clothing - though the settler community clearly misreads it as such until it is presented for closer examination. The rag, once examined, proves to be "the remains of a jacket," begrimed but originally "blue, perhaps royal blue" (12), a child's sea-jacket of European, and almost certainly British, origin. Gemmy evidently retains it not as covering but as sign; it intends to show much more than it hides. As this jacket-rag confirms, Gemmy presents himself to the settlers not as a reassuring transfiguration of the other but as a troubling transfiguration of the same. Malouf's reworking of the scene of colonial encounter does not, then, offer Gemmy as an assimilable stand-in for the absent and unassimilable Aborigine; it does not presume to render Aboriginal otherness as naked fact, nor to consolidate a fantasy-inspired misrecognition of the other. Gemmy's rag is unmistakably an uncanny object that synecdochically confirms Gemmy in his status as the familiar defamiliarised.

The presentation of the jacket-rag is Gemmy's first assertion of his peculiar claim to inclusion in the white settler community, but it is also the initiation of his production, within this community, as a "mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness" (43). This notion of "mixture" strongly suggests a hybrid status, but one that is, crucially, a matter of settler perception; the settlers begin, now, upon presentation of the rag, to think of Gemmy in terms of mixture or hybridity. Readers concerned with Malouf's treatment of cross-cultural negotiation may find
this outcome rather too easy, but one should note that Malouf's concern is with perceived hybridity, and that the author does not undertake to confirm the rightness of settler perception. Moreover, this perception of cultural mixing disturbs the settlers rather than reassuring them. It does not resolve for them the problem of cultural difference; mixture is, on the contrary, the most anxious and unsettling possibility that difference suggests to Anglo-Celtic settler minds.

But is it accurate to perceive Gemmy as a hybrid? Certainly he fails to manifest the quite pronounced degree of syncretism, the intermingling of two or more cultural formations, which one would typically associate with hybrid status. Gemmy is never able to integrate his personal history. His English childhood remains split off from his subsequent Aboriginal acculturation, asserting itself, always disruptively, in stammering English speech, in unwelcome memories, and in nightmares. It is precisely the violence - indeed, the deep personal violation - marking Gemmy's experience of English culture that makes his English identity unassimilable. And the violence he meets with in the settler community consolidates the constitutive breach in his personality rather than mending it; English and Anglo-Celtic forms of culture first provoke and subsequently maintain the splitting of Gemmy's mind. The character's only hope of happiness lies not in a successful syncretism but in the symbolic, almost ritualised dissolution of the script of his English colonial identity. This dissolution, under purging rain, into "bits all disconnected" (181), is the necessary precursor to Gemmy's final acceptance of the Aboriginal gift of "the land up there" (118) - his only possible place for validated being-in-the-world. Moreover, the identity-documenting script that Gemmy has reclaimed from the schoolmaster Abbot is mistakenly reclaimed; it is not of course Gemmy's own story. This error, however, is as perfect in its way as Gemmy's inaugural slip of the tongue - his substitution of "object" for "subject" in his first characterisation of himself. The script of English colonial identity is an imposition by an alien and alienating power, a consecration of dispossession. This misrepresenting script, and Gemmy's ineluctably mistaken relationship with it, together demonstrate that imperial culture bars Gemmy from the path of syncretic biculturality. Gemmy can never reclaim, own, and incorporate his legacy of "Englishness"; only symbolically can he play out his relationship with it.

One character in Malouf's novel, the minister Mr Frazer, does nonetheless put forward a thoughtful envisioning of Gemmy as a hybrid and, all told, as a successful one. In the writings that later become his
“report”, Fraser represents Gemmy as one who has felicitously “crossed the boundaries of his given nature”, and thus, as a “forerunner” and “exemplum” of the future development of Australian cultural identity (132). Such utopian optimism no doubt accounts for a certain tendency among critics to read Frazer as the representative, within the fiction, of Malouf’s own thinking: Perera names Frazer as Remembering Babylon’s “recording conscience”; Philip Neilsen asserts that Malouf “leaves us in no doubt” as to “the correctness” of Frazer’s “insight”.\(^\text{12}\) Although it would be foolish to deny a significant utopian strain in Malouf’s work, the understanding of Frazer’s vision as Malouf’s very much needs to be questioned.

Malouf’s narrative represents the writing of Frazer’s utopian text; that is, one does not simply see what the character writes, one witnesses a very noteworthy portion of the character’s writing process. While penning his utopian vision, and more particularly, Gemmy’s place within it, Frazer falters and interrupts his composition. Just after Frazer writes of Gemmy as a hybrid exemplum, Malouf makes a shift into the immediacy of present tense, and writes, “[Fraser] breaks off, his hand pausing above the inkwell. He has come to a knotty place in his reflections, feeling a lapse of the high emotion that has carried him on” (132). Clearly, this breaking off has among its textual functions that of alerting readers to the need for some thoughtful circumspection. Frazer’s vision is not to be gobbled up or swallowed whole. His writing needs to be read and interpreted in accord with its process – with some thoughtful interruptions rather than a too free-flowing ease.

Frazer, one should recall, first plays an authoring role when composing the “Colonial fairytale” of Gemmy’s life (19). Subsequently, during his botanising excursions with Gemmy, which constitute his quite limited initiation to Aboriginal cultural knowledge, Frazer does not reveal himself as a particularly quick and able learner – indeed, his bumbling efforts in this regard yield some of the novel’s best comic moments. Generally speaking, the character is notably bound up in his own thoughts, his own private projects, and enjoys at best a sort of respected marginality in relation to his community. An utterly sincere but all too frequently inept sympathy characterises his relations with Gemmy. And when Frazer attempts, on Gemmy’s behalf, to communicate his vision to the powers – that is, to the colonial government – he fails utterly. To sum up the case, Frazer and the Romantic, Providentialist utopianism he represents have their place in Malouf’s novel, and it is a carefully circumscribed place.\(^\text{13}\)

Gemmy is not easily subsumed by the term hybrid, nor certainly can
one discern in him the cleanly limned exemplum for modern Australian self-fashioning, which Frazer too optimistically, too idealistically portrays. One may yet ask, is Gemmy presented as a version of Aboriginality? Does Gemmy in moments manifest himself as a fake black man or a transubstantiated indigene? Certainly, his learning to live with an Aboriginal tribe has transformed him. Between transubstantiation and transformation, however, there is an appreciable conceptual distance. One should note, also, that if Gemmy were not transformed – deeply transformed – Malouf’s imagination would be paying little respect to the specificity and coherence of Aboriginal forms of culture. But in any case, the instances of transformation, or perceived transformation, are several, and they deserve some consideration. There is “the whole cast of [Gemmy’s] face” (40) – which is analysed, it should be noted, as an understandable effect of a particular non-European acculturation: “his teeth had been worn down ... from eating the native food”, “his jaw, over the years, had adapted itself” to produce “the new sounds” of Aboriginal languages (40). Gemmy’s movements are unsettlingly silent; in this too he signals Aboriginality for the settlers. More crucially, he has a deep and detailed knowledge of the land: he understands it in Aboriginal terms and interacts with it in accord with Aboriginal codes. All these details serve as readily understandable, modestly concrete manifestations of a sixteen-year process of cultural initiation.

Malouf ventures into more difficult and delicate areas of representation when he ascribes particular forms of intuitive knowledge to Gemmy. A brief and not very daring example of this occurs when Gemmy feels “the hair on the back of his neck stiffen” at the approach of unseen, unheard black visitors (93). A more extensive, more imaginatively venturesome instance of such intuitive knowledge occurs elsewhere, however, in relation to Gemmy’s botanising excursions with Frazer. The presence of Aborigines – always unnoticed by Frazer – receives this handling:

As for what the blacks would be seeing, Gemmy knew what that was. He himself would have a clear light around him like the line that contained Mr Frazer’s drawings. It came from the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through.

All they would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone. (68)
In accounting for this passage, one must focus first upon the assertion “Gemmy knew”. Malouf very typically locates knowledge in the consciousness of a specific character, and clearly this is the case in the present instance. Malouf is here registering the experience or feeling of knowing, something that is more akin to what is called conviction than to objective knowledge. Gemmy does not feel his thought as belief; he feels it as knowledge. He is in the midst of what one may call an acculturated sense of the known and the true. What Malouf has put forward then is not an assertion of his own true knowledge of Aboriginal experience but rather a credible portrayal of Gemmy’s inner life and world-view. The writer shows what his character has learned to believe, and in so doing demonstrates that individual knowledge needs always to be evaluated in relation to cultural contexts.

Yet one should also note that Gemmy’s mind immediately likens Aboriginal perception to something pertaining to his other world, his other life: in Aboriginal eyes he, Gemmy, will have a “clear light” around him, “like the line” he has seen in Frazer’s drawings. Thus, Gemmy’s consciousness, even in this quite adventurous moment of its imagining, does not ape or mimic or fake black consciousness. Again one has a sense of this mind’s specificity: it is a mind divided between two distinct cultural worlds – and a mind ever hungry to make associations between them, because, as a general rule, the two don’t fit together at all well. Thus one can see that Gemmy’s imagination does incline toward the work of integration, of synthesis – the more active, agential pursuit of hybrid self-fashioning. This work ultimately fails, unfortunately. One finds in Gemmy a desire for hybridity, though not its well-resolved actualisation.

But the most engaging and suggestive aspect of the passage in question is its delineation of the problem impeding effective cross-cultural encounter. Encounter between white and black, settler and Aboriginal, does not occur during the botanising excursions. It does not occur because of limited visibility, which Malouf understands, quite unusually, as a bilateral problem – not simply as a problem of the white colonist’s vision. Frazer’s ways of seeing do not discern the Aboriginal watchers; but the watchers cannot clearly see Frazer either. Gemmy’s importance, as the witness of failed encounter, is not so much that he has access to black vision but that his particular position, both in-between and divided between, allows him a unique comprehension of the problem of cross-cultural gazing.

Gemmy’s textual role, then, is quite clearly to raise rather than resolve questions of identity and difference. Most acutely, this character
problematises the understanding of hybridisation as an easy resolution of cultural difference and the antagonisms that may attend it. There remains, however, the possibility of electing another character, Janet McIvor, to fulfil the role of hybrid exemplum for a utopian Australia-in-the-making. Janet’s experience of bee-swarming, her ravishment by bees, most strongly suggests this interpretative possibility. Indeed, the swarming incident is right at the core of Perera’s denunciation of Malouf’s supposedly facile and irresponsible deployment of hybridism. According to this reading, “hybridised European bees” claim Janet as a bride, and thus consecrate her privileged (and pointedly non-native) hybrid status.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, hybridised spirits of place—of a land already colonised and hybridised—elect and by the same gesture create a duly hybrid (but nonetheless white and European) preferred inhabitant for the land. The notion of the ravishing bees’ hybridity is not, however, Malouf’s. Janet, it is true, will become in later life a hybridiser of bees, a creator of new strains, but the swarming incident has to do with Mrs Hutchence’s bees. Mrs Hutchence, as one learns, keeps “stingless native bees” and also “imported ones” (139). The bees that swarm upon Janet are “armed angels” (143); they carry the threat of the sting. So, the swarvers are “imported”, it would seem, and likely as not Europeans, but their hybrid character is neither stated nor suggested. Whatever its relation to the theme of hybridity may be, Malouf’s bee swarm clearly intends to manifest unassimilable otherness, an order of knowledge and being that is beyond the human, a superhuman ravishing force. (One recalls the transfigured Zeus’s claiming of Leda—and others.) In this moment, the text strains toward realms of experience outside the human intersubjective realm—beyond society, culture, and ideology. One may not favour such a fictive move, and one may question its validity or its success, but Malouf’s imagining nonetheless maintains, upon examination, its integrity; the writing’s real details resist its reconstruction as a neocolonial allegory of cross-cultural encounter.

Determining the degree and character of Janet’s hybrid status is a matter of quite substantial critical and interpretative consequence, because Janet is, indisputably, the ordering consciousness for the novel’s resolution. This mature Janet, however, is a nun and a scholar-scientist. Both of these roles discourage the reading of Janet as somehow representative, as some broadly applicable model for modern Australian self-fashioning. Far from manifesting an empowered hybridity, Janet occupies a marginal place within her social world, willfully apart from this world though inescapably drawn into its on-going legacies of violence. Her
final role, as the narrative’s orienting consciousness, is most pertinently to situate prayer at the novel’s resolution, to establish prayer as its final defining gesture. Prayer, of course, manifests aspiration rather than achievement. Janet aspires to discover and inhabit a world in which borders, thresholds, are radiant – as with the sudden, briefly luminous, shoreline meeting of continent and ocean in the novel’s final moments. Yet this blessed reconciliation is crucially a matter of “approach” (200). Within the world of experience the novel records, difference rubs roughly, or is roughly rubbed; the border, the margin or edge, is a site of contact and learning, but also of lesion, of wounding, even scarring – as is quite typically the case in Malouf.17

How then does Remembering Babylon take place in our contemporary world of cultural and racial borders? How does it participate in negotiations, often conflictual, of Australian cultural actuality? My preceding analysis strongly suggests that Malouf is a tester or questioner of borders and not an inattentive or irresponsible transgresser. His novel reveals an acute and thoughtful knowledge of where the borders stand, how they have been drawn and how sustained. It represents the difficulty of entering and effectively inhabiting new cultural territory, and despite its clear commitment to reconciliation, it maintains a measured circumspection with respect to the resolution of difference presented by hybridisation. The writing arises out of its confrontation with the nettled questions of how to represent difference and the encounter with difference, of how – in what ways and on what terms – one may represent the cultural other. Malouf’s Frazer stumbles upon such questions, and so, one surmises, has Malouf. As Lee Spinks acknowledges, Malouf does not resolve “the intractable problem of representing but not speaking ‘for’ the ‘other’”, but he is clearly aware of the problem and self-consciously wrestling with it.18 He offers a “writing that is struggling, of necessity only partly successfully” to reshape the world in and by which it is shaped.19 Authenticity of voice cannot be ratified by bloodlines nor by the demonstration of appropriate ethnic indices – not least because no writer, whether pertaining to a relatively empowered or disenfranchised group, can lay claim to freedom from the power systems of the social world. The writer’s responsibility, then, cannot be to resolve her or his relationship with power and violence – their history and their actuality. The writer must register conflict and contradiction, in the world and in the self, and must struggle. Gemmy Fairley – already established as a complex, multivalent figure – may also serve as a textual embodiment of this necessary struggle.
The provocatively titled collection *De-scribing Empire* was published in 1994, the year after *Remembering Babylon*’s appearance. In the concluding text of that collection, noteworthy titled “Reading Difference”, editors Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson laud “the resilience and ingenuity of textuality in eluding forms of constraint and control”.20 This statement affirms implicitly the existence of a diversified body of contemporary texts, in which each text in its own way counters, eludes and thus counters, the representational limitations imposed by the power systems of its social world. It may be that by reading differently, by reading for difference differently, one could ascribe to *Remembering Babylon* a portion of the resilience and ingenuity Tiffin and Lawson so hearteningly evoke.

Notes
1 Germaine Greer, “Malouf’s Objectionable Whitewash”, *Age*, 3 November 1993.
9 David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (Toronto: Vintage, 1994): 10, 69. All subsequent references to this text are presented parenthetically.
The works presenting these character pairings are respectively: *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Fly Away Peter* (1982), and *The Great World* (1990).


Mitchell coincides with this view of Gemmy, arguing that the character is “a victim of the metropolis” and thus “not a representative of Aboriginal culture”; his hybridity is at best “a hybridity of victimhood” (*World Literature Today* 74.4 [2000]: 771).

A difference of degree is noteworthy registered: the Aborigines’ capacity to see Frazer is limited, but Frazer sees “nothing at all”, even when the Aboriginal watchers are “meant to be seen” (68).

Perera, 18.


It’s better here in the country, the heat. In the city the heat is filtered through the buildings, through the warm bitumen and it rises up off the pavement like steam. Night and day, it’s there, even if you can’t see it. It’s there in the high, airless rooms, in the grey courtyards full of dead wisteria stubs, in the distant roar of the freeway. Here it hangs in the air like a curtain, shimmering, it’s part of the landscape. Beyond every hill there’s that great emptiness in the distance and the sky is different too. Bluer, you might say.

People say that it’s the cities where you find the market in death. That it’s there that old ladies get murdered and bodies are found in alleyways, a knife slipped in the space between the ribs. They think that a crime like a murder is unimaginable anywhere but in the cities, that it’s there that you can cover up, protect, absorb crime.

Here you can sit for hours on the low steps, the grass like dry feathers around the feet. You can spend hours watching the light, hollower here, and brighter. And it’s true that the birds are louder here, over the fields, over the creek.

There are geese down by the dam. Geese take to the air clumsily, they have to make a run, skimming over the water. They lift their wings heavily. I found a goose once, tangled in the sharp wire of the old boundary fence. It was half dead when I found it. I bathed its wounds and stuffed bits of bread and fish down its throat and made it a place to sleep on the verandah. In the morning it was very still and when I held it against me I felt a ribbon unfurling and something like a white arm brushing against my face. It was the long, sinous neck falling. I buried it under the peppermint trees.

At the back of the house one of the peppermint trees has been uprooted and it lies with its roots twisting darkly towards the sky. I don’t know what happened, don’t know if it was a storm or an axe, or a long ago shearer wanting a fire to warm his feet by. Fallen, it disgorges beetles,
spiders, small flickering lizards. Yesterday I saw a brown snake spring out of the rotting body like a sudden breath.

I am thinking about the word house.

A house: the space a woman must create around men and children to protect them, to restrict them, to prevent them from the waywardness that makes them want to leave the house, leave the woman.

The shearer's house is the kind of house that children love. Dim and narrow, it offers up long passages and dark nooks. There are spaces, shadow-bright and mysterious, and long cracks between the planks of the walls. In the afternoon the light falls like tiger stripes across the room.

The day unrolls into moments, the light shifts, you notice a small lizard on the wall above the fireplace. There is a stillness to the heat and a sense of things moving and shimmering in the haze filled afternoons. The gum trees lean over the roof of the house and the leaves shift against the tin.

Sometimes I sleep late into the morning. In the long space between waking and the first breath I see a pair of hands folded against the pillow. Pale, thin, they belong to another woman.

In the bedroom the shearer, or someone after him, has hung a print. Under the cracked glass is an open sky, clouding in the distance, and beneath it, three young and beautiful shepherds and a serene woman by a stone tomb. One of the shepherds is kneeling before a low plinth, reading the words that have been carved into the stone. Et in Arcadia ego. Another shepherd is relaying the reader's words to the serene woman who looks as if she has already heard them, looks as if she understands everything in the world.

So far away, Arcadia, where the light through the trees, and the trees themselves, and the shepherds and the serene woman are bathed in death. For it is death that has written those words.

There is no writing, no words upon a page. I sit for hours by the window, the tea cooling in the pot, and watch the gum leaves against the glass like small silver fish.

Within the story of this summer is another story. It lies, coiled like a small tight spring. It's a story I read three or four years ago and can't get out of my mind. It happened a long time ago, on another summer's day, in a village in the south of France, in the late afternoon. A man from the water board came to cut off the water of a woman who was slightly different, slightly strange. Retarded, the townspeople said. She lived by the train
line. The new high-speed train cut straight in front of the house. Every hour the house shuddered with the force and the roar of it. She had two children, this woman they called backward, a boy of three years and a baby. How did she survive, this backward woman? I suppose she made a living somehow. I suppose she did odd jobs in the village. And perhaps she had some help.

She couldn’t pay the electricity bills, or the water bills, and one day in the summer a man from the water board came to cut the water off. It was a very hot summer, the grass dry, leaves dry, sky very high and clear. He knew how hot it was, the man from the water board, because the sweat pooled between his shoulder blades as he turned the water off and he had to use the bottom of his shirt to wipe his face.

He saw the woman there. He saw the woman and the children there in the dry garden, watching him as he worked. She didn’t say anything to him, didn’t ask him not to cut the water off, just watched him. She had strange eyes, he said later. Eyes that seemed to have no centre, no pupil, so that it seemed the whole eye was looking at you.

He knew, the Cutter-off of Water, how hot the days were and how long, and that she, the backward woman, would be left without any water to bathe the children, without any water to give them to drink. He knew this but he did his job, he did what he had been sent to do. He cut off the water and he left.

That evening the woman took the two children and went and lay down on the rails of the new high speed train. They all died together. Feel the sun-warm iron against the backbone, feel its firmness, its utter lack of give. Hold the children, one under each arm, whisper to them perhaps.

They say the driver didn’t even see them there, dim shapes in the warm dusk.

Dusk. Across the fields the light of dusk. It’s everywhere, the narrow rooms of the shearer’s cottage, the twisting grass of the paddock, the far-off creek. Purple, a blue and purple light that’s reflected back from the oily surface of the dam. If you look at the water you can see the peppermint trees and above them, the last shred of sun unfurling like a ragged flag against the sky.

For a long while I don’t look at the light of evening, don’t look at the fading sunset. They don’t interest me. Times goes by around me, so
much of it must have already flowed by.

I'll go on with the story.

It was not, in fact, the first time the Cutter-Off of Water had seen the woman. Before he worked for the Water Board, he was a conductor on a ballast train. Few people know what a ballast train is. They haven't seen the south, haven't seen the violent gales that come down like a whip and leave a blue sky in their wake. In the winters the rain would wash away the train tracks if gravel wasn't poured between the railway sleepers. The ballast had to be hauled from the quarries and dumped coarsely onto flatcars and spread along the railways in the south. This was a long time ago. The tracks are swifter now, and sturdier and the quarries are only empty gashes.

After the day's work, The Cutter-off of Water would walk back along the railway line to the village. See him, this man with his thick fingers and his peaked cap, strolling through the French countryside on a summer evening.

See the French countryside: wavering tips of cypress trees, pathways, twisting and red, some blackbirds whirling in a field of corn, night skies simmering with stars.

But wait. What are these? Exclamations on wonders natural and touristical? It's not a painting behind glass, this place where the coil of the story springs open. Not a place where pale flowers reach towards placid skies and men stroll homeward to down dark beers in quiet cafes. No this is a place of shuddering trains and coal mines. A place where the earth gives up the burned bodies of miners, picks still frozen in their hands, lumps of coal glistening in their soot-black hair. A place where purple men freeze in baker's doorways and children sleep under burlap and newspaper.

It's in this country that the Cutter-off Of Water walks home past the house of the backward woman. She would be standing in the garden regarding the bare field and its crop of yellow boulders with her distracted stare. Alone, her hands a bit thick, the children playing in the dirt behind her.

He would nod to her and touch his hat in the way that men had then. She never spoke to him, never arranged the face into a smile of greeting, but once, trapped between her hands, she held out a beetle, dark and shiny, its shell the colour of a shotgun barrel. Inside she had a tin chest full of them, glistening darkly, glistening images of the Cutter-Off of Water and the woman they called backward.
Her dress slips easily off the shoulders. Unclothed, her skin is strangely soft to the touch. There is a low cot against the wall. She doesn’t say anything, doesn’t fight him and he is not rough. When he pushes against her he worries, for a moment, about the thinness of her bones. He can feel her small ribs, pressing like ridges into his flesh. On the window ledge he sees that she has put a green branch in a flower pot.

In the shearer’s cottage there is another picture, a photograph. Not a coloured blow-up but an older photograph, finer and delicate like the daguerreotypes pressed between paper in the parlours of the city. It’s a picture of a woman dressed in black, slender, with a faraway look. She could be the shearer’s mother, could be anyone’s mother.

There’s nothing left of anyone’s face or body after they die, no record of their smile. They say that photographs are for remembrance but it’s not true. They are forgetting. The countenance of the dead, flat, fixed forever in light and shadow is only one image among the hundreds of images in the memory. We think that photographs enable us to see the dead again but they don’t, they restore them to silence.

She’s been abandoned to silence, the backward woman. No one will ever speak about her again. Her name, if she had one has been forgotten. She didn’t argue, didn’t ask the Cutter-off of Water, didn’t ask anyone for help. The case is closed.

She gathered up her children and all three of them went and lay down on rails of the high-speed train line. She held a child under each arm and waited for the train. The Cutter-off of Water was drinking marc from a white cup in a café in the village.
Summer loses itself in off-hand winds,
dishwater rain from low skies — so sparking
a thirst for extremes: to be beyond it all,
stand in a flooded plain of goose-pimpling green,
the steel sun driving a stake through noon, legs braced
against shunts and whorls as the tide pivots.

Submerged: a boundless room of dream colours
where doors of opal glass swing open, shut,
starburst fronds stream like squid. Nylon threads of
sunlight hook you upwards along spritzed trails
to emerge one breath, a lifetime, closer to things,
sight lent to the other senses, this moment
an elegy for all moments, a warrant of
desire edged in gilt haze, in salt fire.
“Her White”

The white
woman lay down
naked beside the coloured
bowl of fruit.

The blue
tree blew next to the yellow
birds which remained encapsulated
in some space
of their own.

A red
scarf covered
the woman’s feet.

The village in the background
was in the background.

Her own house crept closer
to her and the patchwork
rug she lay upon
gave only shallow meaning
to the enduring curve
of her hips
and breasts.
Both arms wrapped
around her head swept
back the dark
hair from her bland
face.

Her nudity was untranslatable
by my eye
into the nudity
I knew
and the sky in my blood
lifted me away
from any vision
while in the earth
a most visceral step
*Her White*
conceived as hunger.

**Three Birds**

Three birds face
in different directions
and they all see
sky.

Where is the god
we call on the way
through all the rooms
we pass.

The sky seems flat enough
to walk on, not an accident
of this round world
without purpose.

I need the god, I cry
as too much of myself
builds up
in solid objects.
The birds split
into six and the sky goes
over here
and over there.

Sacredly, the last
remaining direction
stops resisting
and enters the fray.

The earth shakes
as God enters a bird’s breast
with my belief
that it can fly.
This year the finalists for the Miles Franklin prize were a rather international lot of novelists – Shirley Hazzard for *The Great Fire*, J. M. Coetzee for *Elizabeth Costello*, Peter Carey for *My Life as a Fake*, with some Australian domiciles – Peter Goldsworthy for *Three Dog Night*, Elliot Perlman for *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and Anna Maria Jagose for the historical novel, *Slow Water*. While this was acclaimed as an impressive field for the prize, the dominance of the “internationals” Carey, Coetzee and the ultimate winner, Hazzard, invites reflection on the performance of more “local” writers over the past few years. There were no contenders by Murray Bail, David Foster, Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, Rodney Hall, David Malouf, Frank Moorhouse or Tim Winton, and, sadly, Elizabeth Jolley has retired and Thea Astley, a regular Miles Franklin winner, died in August.

Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing* scooped several other prizes, including the New South Wales Premier’s prizes for fiction and for Book of the Year. The history of this novel presents further matter for consideration: Castro’s regular publishers, Allen and Unwin, rejected the manuscript and it was finally published by Giramondo, the small press run by Ivor Indyk from the University of Newcastle. At the dinner where his awards were announced, Castro expressed some satisfaction that his rejected novel had won such prestigious prizes, but the publishers appeared unrepentant. Apparently for them, this *tour de force* by a novelist with a string of original and brilliant works behind him was not a commercial proposition. Castro’s novels are difficult to read; he demands a commitment from readers who will follow his dazzling and digressive wit, and can tolerate his shifts from one moment of historical time and perspective to another without clear direction signs. These readers exist in Australia, but they are a small elite. Australian publishers long for the Booker-prize kind of novel, intelligent and sophisticated, with a clear narrative and a strong commitment to
entertaining the educated readers who buy the winners each year. As Lisa Highton, the publishing director at Hodder Headline, told Jeremy Fisher (ASA Newsletter, July 2004) publishers are looking for “books that will appeal to reading groups”.

The judging panel for the 2003 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal (which I chaired) found Shanghai Dancing the most serious novel contender for the prize, but gave the award to Laurie Duggan’s collection of poetry, Mangroves (discussed at length in David McCoey’s review of poetry for Westerly last year). Castro’s novel offered a level of poetry in many respects equal to Duggan’s, and the readership for poetry and for Castro’s fiction may well be the same group of people. We all know about the tiny market for poetry.

The novel can appeal to a range of audiences and performs quite different services for different readers. For most readers, a novel is a time-filling entertainment providing a satisfying excursion of the imagination. Some readers enjoy the way that novels address aspects of experience beyond the range of the daily newspapers, or political discussion, or histories. Some want a book that will please everyone in their reading group. Some may share my desire for challenging ideas, thrilling language, transforming emotions, the whole excitement of living in a world that the novel has transformed into something mysterious, emotionally extreme, full of possibility. Philip Roth’s American Pastoral trilogy stands as my current model of this kind of novel, but Colm Toibin’s The Master about Henry James’s life at Rye is my most recent experience of it. This is too much to expect from every novel or even every hundredth novel, but one can live in hope.

From a writers’ point of view, the novel also presents a range of opportunities – to explore obsessions, to enjoy the possibilities of language, character and narrative, to analyse society, culture and politics, to argue about the current state of the world, to write history from an unusual viewpoint, and, increasingly, as a form of personal expression mediated by the creative writing course. The match between readers and writers is not often perfect, and it can be no surprise that none of the novels in this pile of books published in Australia through 2003 to July 2004 offers the engaging and transforming power of my ideal. But there is plenty for the reader who wants intelligent diversion.

Janette Turner Hospital’s Due Preparations for the Plague and Rodney Hall’s The Last Love Story demonstrate the skill of consummate prose writers. Both invoke the atmosphere of a post 9/11 world where terrorism and oppression threaten the freedoms of the West. Hospital’s central
characters are the children of those who died in an airline hijacking in 1987. As adults they find themselves obsessed with exposing the conspiracy that led to the hijacking, consequently endangering their own lives. The novel combines murder mystery, spy thriller and family drama, shifting between the USA, France and the Middle East. Hospital judges the pace and the dialogue finely, leaving us with a pertinent question for our times “What possible preparations can be made?” (390)

In a note at the end of his *The Last Love Story* Hall tells us that he got the idea from a conversation overheard in a Berlin restaurant where a group of Germans told GDR escape stories to some American visitors. Hall makes his story of a man deceiving one woman in order to free another into a more general vision of a totalitarian future, and subtitles it “A fairytale for the day after tomorrow”. In his novel the City is an archetypal city divided by a river that keeps the industrial workers from the wealthier sections of the city. The decadence of a globalised world has incited Christian fundamentalists in the industrial section so that:

A preacher with the clenched rage of the stillborn – the next best thing to a charismatic visionary – whose call for committed Christian principles, in a world of rampant drug-use and the rise of the Ayatollahs once Saddam Hussein had fallen, sparked so fanatical a response that armies immediately began massing on both sides of the river and, after a brief period on red alert, made their move. (7)

Though the novel is a warning against a possible future, its narrative follows a more personal story of divided allegiances, subterfuge and suffering. Hall does not try to understand the rationale behind those committed to oppressive regimes, or even to sympathise with the bourgeois mother who almost loses her simple daughter to the escape plan. These characters perform the stereotypical roles of the fairy tale that he declares himself to be writing. Anna Funder’s account of the GDR’s love stories and suffering in the non-fictional *Stasiland* provides a more complex and shocking version of real possibilities than Hall’s simpler imagining of a future. Nevertheless, Hall is so experienced and skilled a writer that *The Last Love Story* appears effortless, as if he has tossed it off as relief from his more ambitious work.

Those of us impressed by Andrew McGahan’s first novels watch with interest as he develops a career as a writer who can move beyond the limits of fictional autobiography. While *Last Drinks* (2000) operated in the thriller
McGahan's latest novel, *The White Earth*, returns to the examination of the meaning of Australian history that underpinned 1988. He closely examines a particular area of land—the point where the Darling Downs meets the ranges north of Toowoomba—and explores the history of white ownership. He creates two characters: William, a nine-year-old boy who has grown up on a wheat farm and his great uncle John, who has battled to own Kuran, one of the old grazing properties. The Aborigines have long disappeared from John's land but the signs of their occupation are everywhere in bora rings, rock cairns and tree-clearing. McGahan describes Kuran in detail, even providing a map of its major features, in order to ask serious questions about human intimacy with the land and the meaning of land ownership. The dramatic crisis comes when John's anti-native title league friends turn out to be Australian adherents to the Ku Klux Klan and William discovers clear evidence that Aborigines have been massacred at Kuran. This melancholy novel serves as an elegy for the land and the lost opportunities for black and white Australians to share their love for it. Nevertheless, McGahan's decision to tell part of the novel through the point of view of a child restricts the sophistication of his discussion of the issues, and it moves at a fairly slow and predictable pace. *The White Earth* will disappoint readers who loved the self-mocking wit and humour in McGahan's early novels, but it assures us that he remains a serious and committed novelist.

In this post-postmodernist era, new and playful versions of history remain a prominent mode for the novel. Nerida Newton's first novel, *The Lambing Flat*, splits her narrative between the story of a Chinese boy accompanying his father to the goldfields of New South Wales and the lives of a son of convicts and his immigrant bride setting out for the bush of Central Queensland. This allows her to combine the Lambing Flat riots—one of the most racist events in Australian history—and the struggles of women on the frontier in one novel. It is a stretch, both artistically and geographically, and we wait in anticipation of how she will bring her Chinese boy and Australian bush girl together. This is not history as an exploration of the cultures and attitudes of the past, but as a repository for stories about racism and sexual hardship to serve the enlightened contemporary sympathies of the novelist. Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* demonstrated that postmodern games with such history can imply the complexity of the past but *The Lambing Flat* simplifies matters.

Kristin Williamson's rollicking and enjoyable account of the lives of convict women, *Women on the Rocks: a tale of two convicts*, sticks much closer
to the historical record – she cites her historical sources in some detail at
the end. The novel purports to be the journal of Mary Jones, a woman
transported for forgery in 1820, and Williamson works from the records to
invent Mary’s journey from maidservant to successful seamstress in
Sydney. While there is murder and mistreatment aplenty, the novel
celebrates the vitality of convict life, clearly endorsing the comment from
Mary’s friend, Jane, that they have been “transported to a better world”. At
times Mary’s narration may seem a little too prim for credibility, but
*Women on the Rocks* achieves what it clearly sets out to do – entertain readers
while educating them a little about Australian history.

Of the other enjoyable novels published over the year, Mardi
McConnochie’s *The Snow Queen* stands out for its lightness of touch.
McConnochie creates a character called Edward Larwood, rather like
Robert Helpmann, who returns to Adelaide to direct the ailing Ballet
South. Her description of Teddy’s response to Adelaide offers the ironic
pleasure of recognition to any reader who knows about Helpmann – and
Adelaide. The story of Teddy’s return to his home city runs parallel with a
memoir by his earlier mentor, Galina Koslova, a veteran of the Ballets
Russes who has now retired to the life of an Adelaide socialite. This story
allows McConnochie to reflect on the possibilities for the creation of
serious art in the provinces, the obliteration of the contribution of women
to the history of performing arts, and the nature of artistic commitment.
Posy Foster, an unpretentious Adelaide girl, choreographs the beautiful
ballet, “The Snow Queen”, but lives the rest of her life as an unknown
ballet teacher in Adelaide. McConnochie’s novel is so skilful and
unpretentious that it suggests Posy Foster’s businesslike approach to art
may be her own.

Malcolm Knox’s *A Private Man* also examines familiar urban territory –
this time, the middle class lives of a North Shore Sydney family. But the
subject proves less comfortable than it might appear at first, as John Brand,
the respectable doctor, is seduced further and further into the world of
pornography and internet sex. Knox is curious about the underside of the
respectable lives of men: John’s three sons follow the divergent paths of
doctor, cricketer and pornographer, each confronting masculine corruption
from a different point of view. The second son, Chris, is in the Australian
Test cricket team and the novel has some sharp criticisms to make of that
team’s racism and dishonesty. Chris belongs to the old school of cricketer,
whose vices only extend to drunkenness and picking up admiring girls in
bars after a game; his younger team-mates now prefer the more
professional consolations of video sex and prostitutes. The eldest son,
Davis, offers a kind of moral centre for the novel, though he appears ineffectual (less masculine?) for much of its length, while Hammett pushes the family tastes into the open as a purveyor of sleaze. I’m not sure that Knox is saying that a propensity for pornography is genetic, or whether he sees it as part of the range of male sexuality. He does depict Hammett as a little boy with a precocious sexual curiosity who loved to run around naked – are these the signs of a potential pornographer or just an astute businessman? John’s addiction is presented as sad, pathetic and humiliating, rather than immoral. Knox does make the interesting comment that internet sex may appeal more to elderly men who have never had access to pornography before than it does to the young.

_A Private Man_ presents North Shore social aspiration and the masculine addiction to pornography and sport with more solemnity than it may deserve; I can’t help feeling that this material calls for a sharp satire. There are times when this possibility comes close to the surface, as in the descriptions of Davis’s modern marriage or the tawdry pornography exhibition with its ludicrous strip routines. Knox, however, resists any temptation to mock his subject.

Other novels that examine aspects of contemporary experience in interesting ways include John Clanchy’s _Lessons from the Heart_ about two adolescent girls experimenting with sex and love on a school excursion, and Terry McGee’s first novel, _Misconceptions_, based on her experiences as a gynaecologist. McGee provides detailed and credible accounts of her central character’s working life (you’ll learn amazing things about the female body) as she negotiates a negligence claim and the difficulties of love. It’s also that rare accomplishment – a well-written and energetic novel about contemporary working life. Wayne Grogan’s first novel, _Junkie Pilgrim_, reports from the underworld of Sydney drug trafficking, prison and the Cross, a genre now familiar from Australian film and television. Grogan’s protagonist is a North Shore Catholic boy gone wrong, and his experiences are recounted with a sharp observation of detail. Grogan worked on the waterfront in Sydney and Newcastle and, like McGee’s novel, _Junkie Pilgrim_ conveys a convincing sense of insider information.

In _Turtle Nest_ Chandani Lokugé writes sensuous and restrained prose (reminiscent of Arundhati Roy) on a suitably exotic subject – the return of an Australian girl, called Aruni, to the Sri Lankan fishing village where she was born. But Aruni’s search for a homecoming, her desire to belong to her mother’s beach people, ends with her pack rape on the beach by the village boys. At this point the sensuous writing creates problems of interpretation: is the rape some sort of initiation that returns Aruni to her
lost family? Or is it a violation, a warning against too close an inquiry by the sophisticated Western woman into a more brutal culture? Lokugé calls it “rape” but describes the act in a relatively soft way, suggesting that Aruni has been seeking this all along, that she “asked for it”. The last paragraph describes the abject state of the beach cloth that Aruni was wearing, but there is a residue of longing for a more “earthy” and authentic world even here:

Later that morning, the women discovered the cloth washed ashore. It was too soiled to sell even to the poor local folk. Just fit for those beach dogs which dragged around anything even faintly smelling of blood.

Once feminists would have raised their voices over this (remember the arguments about Beverley Farmer’s rape story “Darling Odile”?), but Lokugé’s novel appears to be firmly encased by the kind of postcolonial theory that renders the Third World more authentic than the First. Surely such a sensationalist ending invites us to reflect on the freedoms of women living in Australia compared to those surviving on a beach in Sri Lanka.

Last year, Paul Genoni singled out Gail Jones’s novel *Black Mirror* as the first novel most likely to be read in ten years’ time. She has followed it with *Sixty Lights*, a beautiful, if rather self-conscious, contemplation of ways of seeing, which has just been listed as a contender for this year’s Booker Prize, together with the other Australian contender, Shirley Hazzard’s *The Great Fire*. Her protagonist, an Australian orphan called Lucy Strange, has the gift of seeing with an artist’s eye and develops an interest in photography. The book is divided into sixty short chapters - the “lights” of the title - each offering some carefully rendered visual image as Lucy’s life progresses.

*Sixty Lights* is also an historical novel – Lucy is born in Melbourne in 1852, and her awareness of the visual coincides with the invention and popularising of photography. Her mother’s death in childbirth and her father’s subsequent suicide puts Lucy and her brother Thomas into the care of their uncle, an Indian Civil Service officer who takes them to London. Both Lucy and Thomas are drawn to the possibilities of photography with Thomas finding work as a projectionist for a magic lantern show, and Lucy in an albumen factory. Lucy travels to India on the prospect of marrying her uncle’s wealthy friend, Isaac Newton (having
assigned these names, Jones has no shame in commenting on them as if they were genuine), but she becomes pregnant on the voyage and returns, with Newton's blessing and support, to London. There she establishes herself as a photographer before succumbing to consumption.

This slight narrative allows Jones to invest each turn of Lucy's life with her own poetic image-making – from the startling description on the opening page of the Indian servant pierced by the mirror he has been carrying, to Lucy's own death "a slight tilt of vision, as when one tilts a daguerreotype in its box, and the image slides suddenly away, into shiny nothingness" (246). The story is little more than a premise for the series of images that Jones wants to create. These are vivid, poetic and always interesting, but there is a studied carefulness about the writing that deflects engagement. From time to time, Jones's characters think in the terminology of the literary theorist: they notice "interiorised concentration", feel "extenuated abjection" wonder at the "alien quality of autonomy" of objects.

The novel repeatedly refers to *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations* and the opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, as if these are touchstones for a Victorian sensibility. But her characters operate free from the Victorian restrictions of financial need, sexual custom or social sensitivity. So Lucy's unmarried pregnancy creates no real difficulties, and Isaac Newton provides the wherewithal for her future as a pioneer photographer/artist. In India, Lucy can enjoy herself among the bazaars and temples without fear or offence. No doubt this is deliberate postmodernist anachronism, and the novel recalls Peter Carey in his *Oscar and Lucinda* or *Illywhacker* mode. Nevertheless, this selective gleaning from history and Indian culture appears reductive, even exoticising. Jones began the novel during a writer's residency in India sponsored by Asialink, "an institution dedicated to cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the generation of artworks inspired by the honouring and celebrating of cultural difference". Cultural difference – between Victorian people and the present, between India, England and Australia – here emerges only in the service of the poetic image.

Philip Salom also uses the novel as a vehicle for poetic image-making. His *Toccata and Rain* tells the story of a man with two lives. In his late forties, Brian has driven out of his rather dull and idle life in Perth to turn up as Simon, an idiosyncratic artist, in Melbourne. A television documentary about the strange tower structures he is building in a Williamstown backyard alerts his estranged wife in Perth to his new life, and the novel begins a quest for Brian's/Simon's memory. Back in Perth,
Brian consults a psychiatrist who believes he has a case of "dissociative fugue"—occasional bouts of amnesia—and he can no longer recall life in Melbourne. Money is no problem as Brian's parents have left him a block of apartments, so he can retrace his trip to Melbourne and try to discover his other self.

Immediately, he finds that Simon has a lively sexual life, with a beautiful blonde dragging him to bed and a plump brunette providing lodging, food and love. Even his Melbourne psychiatrist finds him sexually attractive. It's a pity he has to worry so much about his mental state because Simon clearly has lived in clover. Though the council is not happy with the tower structures, most people of taste find them wonderful, and Simon is soon working on them again. Of course, the cause of his memory loss is eventually revealed—childhood trauma over his father's death—and Brian/Simon lights out for still another life.

The prose of the novel slips into poetry as a way to convey Brian/Simon's mental state, and to suggest his detachment from the lives of the women around him. It is difficult to sympathise with this male self-obsession, however, and, while the novel explores the relationship between art and memory it does not reveal anything profound. Brian regards the woodwork craft of his ex-wife as kitsch, presumably by comparison with the ceramic-studded towers he builds as Simon. This appears to be the traditional derision of women's craft by the artist-man, but I missed any irony on the part of the novelist. Salom's poetry can be sharp and witty; framed in this story of a male ego it appears another form of masculine self-regard.

Reading a lot of recent fiction in quick succession reveals some of the conventions of contemporary Australian writing. Most of the novels surveyed here are structured as split narratives, usually with the past and the present time sequences as separate narratives offered in alternating chapters, but often with the points of view of two different characters. The novels by McGahan, Knox, Newton, Clanchy, Lokugé and McConnochie all work in this way. This may seem an interesting and appropriate approach to some material, but for a reader it can be all too predictable and even formulaic. In most cases, this strategy withholds information from the reader so that a revelation can occur in the second last or last chapter—leaving the reader with an irritating sense of being manipulated. Often we are led to a melodramatic or sensational conclusion, the "terrible truth" that will be revealed in the course of the double-narrative novel if the reader will only stick it out. Many of the novels begin in the present tense, some only breaking into the past tense.
under the pressure of length, making for a monotonous reading experience.

In some cases the decision to tell the story from the point of view of a child, foreign or mentally handicapped character – granted that Faulkner did it successfully – limits the language possibilities of the novel. The choice of the voice for a novel must be the most crucial element in its range; Jones and Salom may err on the side of self-indulgence but they announce from the beginning of their novels that a skilled writer is at work.

Let's rejoice then, that Brian Castro, the self-professed 'disorientalist' can produce such a rich and complex work as *Shanghai Dancing*. Castro takes the experiences of his own family as the loose basis for a narrative of dynasties that parodies any solemn notion of family history. The novel begins with a pose of autobiography as, after the death of his father, the middle-aged narrator decides to go back to his birthplace – the straits between Shanghai and Hong Kong – and seek out his family stories. Here, Portuguese adventurers, Chinese warriors, prim English missionaries, simple Chinese girls, gangsters and whores struggle their way through the twentieth century. Castro plays with the interchange between history and personal experience, fact and invention inserting a series of evocative photographs into the text and commenting on them. These include the wonderful cover photograph of Castro’s father’s Portuguese Latin American dance band in China. The novel is full of matter, historical, personal, reflective, with the urbane voice of Castro’s narrator carrying us through it all.

What is there here for the reading groups? Certainly the novels by Hall, Hospital, McConnochie and Williamson provide thoughtful entertainment, and those by McGahan, Lokugé and Knox should start some arguments. While the “art” novels may disappoint this reader, the talent of their authors is not in doubt, and a range of skilled Australian writers is clearly waiting for the kind of urgent material that can engage their full talents – and their readers’ commitment.

**Fiction Received 2003–2004**

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


Byatt, A. S. *Little Black Book of Stories*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House


ANTHONY MAY

PEGGY WALKER

David Duper was in the kitchen. He was deep into the rolling of sushi. He spread his nori on a thin bamboo mat, packed the rice and layered the vegetable and tuna in an overlapping line. As he rolled the mat and the nori he kept an even pressure stroking out from the middle. It was a trip. He loved to do this. Slow and patient, he knew that he had as long as it took Gail to get out of the shower to finish it. He couldn’t concentrate after that.

He made six rolls and left the cutting for later. He put them in the fridge, washed his hands and thought about the casserole in the oven. It’s cool. He picked up his rosé and made the final decision on dessert. Ice cream with a joint. He’d leave both for the table.

While he waited for the shower, he put on a pot of coffee and changed the CD. Warm up the mood.

Gail came into the kitchen wearing shorts with a halter top and poured herself a small glass of Hennessy. They were both moving to the music, not quite dancing.

“What do you call it when you wash the car, that thing how the water runs in little lines down the paint?” she asked.

“Beading,” he said. He put his glass down, moved around behind her and put his hands on her hips.

“I’d like to be like that in the shower. Not the water to run down the curves of my body but to bead. I want water to bead on me,” she said, sounding the word twice.

“Do you want to be a car?” he asked.

“I’d be a good car,” she said.

“What car would you be, a sexy car?” he said.

“Sexy cars are trashy. I’d be sleek and powerful and classy. Expensive cars are boring and cheap cars are trashy and middle cars are too middle class. I’d be a Passat if it could be one income bracket higher. Midnight blue with leather upholstery,” she said.
“Back it in here,” he said, pulling her into him.
“I can reverse. I can go forward. I handle very well,” she said. “I can take you to destinations.”
“Don’t go too fast, that’s dangerous,” he said.
“The road’s not wet,” she said.
“But you’re drinking at the wheel, that’s bad,” he said.
“Are you going to give me a ticket?” she said.
“Just a warning,” he said.
“It’s not my first offence,” she said.

He moved his right hand to her shoulder and his left around to hold her belly. He began to squeeze.

The phone rang.
Red light.

The guests arrived at seven-thirty. Billy and Janice and Errol and Patti. The weather was beginning to turn and David commented on the fine woollen lavender pashmina that Patti was wearing.

“You’re wearing a new purple shirt,” Patti said, “Was it a gift?”
“A pre-birthday present from Gail, just for this dinner,” David said. He went back into the kitchen. Janice watched him go. Gail came to the door to walk them in.

“Something smells good,” Errol said.
“David’s made a Tuscan rabbit casserole. He’s a sweet,” Gail said.
“Come in, you two,” Gail said to Billy and Janice. “Stop dragging your heels.”

“Billy’s pissed off with the taxi driver,” Patti said.
“You all came together?” Gail said.

The conversation took them through to the lounge room. Billy sat at the coffee table and began to roll a joint.

“Get in a good mood,” Gail said. She picked up a cigarette from his pack and mock-glared at him while she lit it. He smiled at her.

“Where’s the birthday boy?” Janice said. She was holding a wrapped present in her bag.

“He’s in the kitchen speaking Italian to his casserole,” Gail said.
“Does he speak Italian?” Janice said.

“Janice,” Patti said.
“House looks good,” Janice said. Gail was pouring drinks.
“The ugly bitch next door passed on a cleaner and her husband. They’re ex-Russian, sort of a dynamic duoski. They come once a week and put everything back in order,” Gail said.
David walked in with a tray of sushi. Janice and Errol and Patti cheered. Billy was still rolling.

David knelt down and put the tray on the coffee table. Billy lit up and passed it to David, who took a hit and passed it to Gail who passed it straight on to Errol.

“There’s a theme,” Gail said. “We’ve decided that there’s going to be a theme to the evening.”

Behind her David stood on his toes and pointed down at her.

“We decided this,” Gail said, stressing the pronoun, “and the theme is mistakes. If getting older is a mistake whose only benefit is birthday dinners with dear friends who are like family, then what are the other mistakes that we survive?”

“I don’t think getting older is a mistake, it’s a good thing,” Billy said. “It’s not a debate, Bill. It’s a game, a theme, get with it,” Errol said. He leaned across the table and passed the number back to Billy.

Dinner went well. Everyone enjoyed the food. Everyone played the game. They talked about mistakes, errors of judgement, flaws of character. Like all modern dinners, they were talking about property by dessert.

“We have to talk about break-ups,” Gail said. “What are the best and worst break-up stories that you know? Personal experience is worth extra points.”

“This is not fair. I have no personal experience,” Errol said. “I have never broken up, never been broken up with. Neither a breaker nor a breakee.”

“Why?’” Billy said. “I don’t get it.”

“Not a lot to get, really,” Errol said. “Before I met Patti, I had never had a relationship that could be called solid enough to begin or end. I met Patti, fell in love, told her, that was that.”

“You were a virgin before you met Patti? He was a virgin?” Billy asked Patti.

Patti shook her head, smiled.

“No. I was wildly and wonderfully sexually active. I had more sexual encounters than all of you and the rest of the people in the street put together. And that was before I started going to brothels. Then I really stepped it up. I was a love machine. I could have represented Australia in the Olympics of Sex. I was gold. Just never had a girlfriend,” Errol said.

“Patti changed all that,” Errol tagged on.

“He’s sort of serious about relationships,” Patti said. “He nearly broke up a relationship once though. I wouldn’t let him.”

Gail smiled because she knew the story.
“OK, this is my break-up story and its going to have to be Errol’s as well because the poor dear doesn’t have one of his own,” Patti said. She smiled at Gail.

“Gail knows the story. A few years ago before I knew you, David, or you two,” she said, “I was in a thing with a very wealthy guy. It was a very different life, believe me. He had squillions. He was a stockbroker, big flat in Hamilton looking out on the river and his boat and the view over the city and, like, everything. It sounds like I’m making this up but I’m not. It was real fairy tale stuff.

“I was working at the hospital and then I’d go to this flat and I could spend hours just looking out of the window. Or the paintings. I’d spend days just looking at the paintings that he had on his wall. It was very big luxury.

“He had this boat that he used to take up to the Whitsunday Passage and all over the place and have parties on and all that jazz. I have to say, it was quite a time.”

“Did you like that stuff? The big bucks life?” David asked.

“I never thought of it like I do now,” Patti said. “He was totally at home in it and I sort of just went along. I met him at a party and he asked me out and he was very nice. You’d think that he was stuck up or snobby but he wasn’t. He was a really nice guy. But he worked really hard and he played really hard. I know they all say that but anyway,” she said.

“It was a bit difficult with the work at the hospital. I was forever jumping in and out of taxis. He wanted me to move into the Hamilton place but it didn’t feel right. I had a bit of trouble with the changes. One minute you’re changing catheters on some poor bugger from Inala and then it’s in the cab back to the flat, get changed, on the boat and you’re drinking champagne in Moreton Bay. I’m not saying that I had too much trouble but nothing felt lasting or anything like that. There was a sense that nobody had all this money and that there was going to be a bill to pay someday. I don’t think that day has come for him yet.

“Anyway, one day Errol came into hospital. He had a polyp on his throat so he couldn’t speak. I was looking after him and thought he was sort of good looking, nice clothes, good body,” she smiled at him and he raised his eyebrows.

“He knows this bit so ignore him. He was in for a couple of days and he was on my ward. Then it was weekend and I was actually off for the whole weekend. So it was in the taxi, off to Hamilton, yadda yadda yadda. But we were running late so I grabbed some clothes and went straight to the boat. Big night on the bay. Lots of champagne, music, some businessmen from
Melbourne that were being entertained. Sort of blah, really but a lot of fun at the same time.

"By this time though, I'm starting to get tired of it all. These businessmen are very funny and some of them are really smart. I met one guy once. He ran some company that did something incredibly boring with plastics. Extruded plastic or something. Had a factory outside of Melbourne, thought he could bring it to Logan and have another factory up here or something. We went to dinner with them. It was a big deal. His major thing was if there was enough for his wife to do in Brisbane. She liked Melbourne and she had grown up there but was willing to move to Queensland as long as she didn’t feel like she was coming to the backblocks. That sort of stuff was very ickey.

“But the guy himself was like this expert on the American Civil War. And he made it really interesting. He knew everything, he’d read everything, knew how it came about, like in detail, knew what happened afterwards. All that. Now meeting people like that was really good but it was getting harder and harder to ignore all the crappy pretty-girl-on-the-successful-money-man’s-arm stuff.

“So this morning I’m on the yacht, on the bay and I wake up and see my nurse’s uniform slung over the back of a chair and I went fold it up, put it in my bag. As I do, a note falls out of the pocket. From Errol. It said, “When I can speak again, I’m going to ask you to marry me.”

“Aww,” Janice said. She lowered her left shoulder, leaned her head to that side and smiled at Patti. Gail put two fingers down her throat and made a gagging sound.

“Yes, I know. Maximum cute. But he did. When he recovered his voice, he came back to the hospital, found me and asked me to marry him. I don’t why I believed him or why I thought it was a good thing. No paintings, no boat, no snazzy apartment on the hill with this one. But it seemed like a good idea at the time. So I went back to Hamilton, got everything I’d left at the flat and took it all home. When Justin came home I was waiting, we had a scene and that was that. No biggies really. I don’t think he was that bothered.”

“I thought you said that Errol had nearly broken up a relationship. It sounds to me like he did,” David said.

“Not really. He wanted to go and speak to the guy but I wouldn’t let him. I wanted to keep the two things separate.”

“I’m next,” Janice said. “But I want to give David a present first.”

“You guys gave me a present,” David said.

“I know but I saw this this morning at the markets and I couldn’t resist and then when I saw your shirt, I just knew it was the right thing,” Janice
said. She leaned back from the table and reached for her bag. From inside she pulled a wrapped gift and handed it across the table to David.

David smiled and smiled again at Gail. Gail smiled at David. David unwrapped the gift. It was a small purple leather case.

“It’s for your iPod. I saw it at the market. This woman makes them and she has them in all different colours. That’s the best. And it matches your shirt,” Janice said.

“Thanks, it’s beautiful,” David said. “I’ll go and change it over now.”

“No, wait to hear Janice’s story,” Gail said.

“Well,” Janice said, “my story begins before I met Billy. I was sharing a flat in Highgate Hill with a really nice girl from Casino, in N.S.W. She was so pretty, all legs and smile and boobs and hair and skin and manner. She was gorgeous. We didn’t know each other very well but we worked in the same building in Mary Street? There was a sort of e-bulletin board for the Education Department and she put up a notice for a person to share and I went and we got on pretty well. She was a real country girl. Very beautiful but sort of naive. Too giving or something like that?

“Well, after I’ve been there a few weeks, she starts to see this guy. She fell very hard, from the start. I’m not sure where they met but he didn’t seem like much on paper. He didn’t have a job.”

“He did,” Billy said. “He was a barber. He had an identical twin brother that was a dentist. They both had bad feet from standing behind chairs all day.”

Errol rolled his eyes.

“Is that true?” Janice said. “I don’t think that she, India, ever mentioned that. I don’t know how much you want me to get into this. I mean it’s part of the story and it’s not.”

“Just tell it, Janice,” Gail said. She was smoking the joint that Billy had passed to her. It wasn’t circulating very far.

“Well, the point is that India really loved this guy, whose name I cannot remember,” Janice said.

“Willy, William Moore. I went to Dutton Park Primary School with him and Warwick, the brother,” Billy said.

“OK, Willy, that was it. So she loved him but you got the sense that he didn’t love her. You know the thing. She’d be telling stories about him and the things that they did together and he sounded, well, a little indifferent or callous or something. She couldn’t see it because she was too close but it was there.

“But you never say anything because you never know whose toes you’re going to be standing on. It was like one day she bought him a CD that
apparently he'd heard this thing on the radio and was going on and on about it. What was it, Billy?"

"Outkast," Billy said.

"Yeh, Outkast. So she bought him this Outkast CD that he was going on and on about and when she got home it was like, Did he like it? and she said, Oh, yes, but you could tell that she was really down in the mouth like he didn't care or something. It wasn't nice. She was always frustrated that she couldn't do enough for him or whatever. I never met him but I got a really bad vibe from the stories that she used to tell.

"Anyway, one day she comes home from work. We would sometimes finish at the same time and walk home together but I'd flexed a half day that day to go to do some shopping at Garden City. Well, I get back from the shops and she's got home from work and she's sitting there with this letter in her hand crying her eyes out. He's dumped her. It was so sad for the poor thing.

"I tried to comfort her, hot, sweet tea, lots of cuddles, lots of listening, all the good stuff and it wasn't really getting anywhere. Then I noticed the letter that she'd dropped on the floor and I noticed that it had a return address on the envelope that was in West End, just about three streets away.

"I thought, You lazy bastard, you don't have the decency to walk three streets to speak to her. You write her a cold, bloody letter.

"So I grab the letter and storm out of the door. I was furious. I'm going like a woman possessed down Vulture Street with this letter in my hand.

"Well I get to the door and I start banging and banging and eventually this guy comes to the door. I ripped into him about what a loser he was and how he'd hurt India's feelings and that he wasn't worth her tears and all this dramatic stuff, I was so angry. And all the time he's just standing there with this blank look and these red eyes like he'd been doing bongs all afternoon. I went ballistic. Get off your fat arse and go and apologise to her, I screamed. He scratched his head. We'd never met so he didn't know who I was. You're a low life piece of shit and I hope you rot in Hell, I screamed. Still no big reaction so I decked him. I went whack at the side of the head and he went down.

"Well I hear from the ground this, I'll be sure to tell him when I see him, which I recognise as a line from "Blood Simple" and I think, Oh shit. Yes, I've got the wrong guy. It was Billy.

"It was me," Billy said. He was eating Neapolitan ice cream. "She just whacked me and I went down. I was just up to realising what was going on when she king hit me. I was impressed. It turned out, when we got things
sorted, that we liked the same movies and that was that."

Janice reached over and touched Billy’s hand. Gail smiled at Patti.

“I don’t have a funny story,” Billy said. “Mine’s just a sad one really.”

“Tell it. Sad is good,” Gail said.

“Who made you MC?” Patti said.

Gail shushed her.

“I’m going back some years now,” Billy said. “It was the time of the
great slide to Sydney. Back in the days when we all thought that you had
to go to Sydney to actually come alive.”

“Instead of go to Sydney and pretend not to be from Brisbane,” Patti
said.

“Something like that. Right. No names because these people are still
living and working in your town and I’m sure that they don’t want these
memories thrashed around the dinner table.

“He and she were an item, a big item. They hooked up in student
politics. He was going to be a poet, she was the politics major with a
future. All quite nice, really. Until he got the grass is greener bug, which
as we all know in the inner life of provincial cities means the outmigration
to the metropolis. He couldn’t help thinking that he could do better in
Sydney. And that wasn’t just in terms of being a poet. He couldn’t help
thinking that maybe he could do better in the romance stakes. I don’t
think that compatibility was an issue. These two were locked in. I think
he just wanted someone prettier.

“So one day he just pulled up his stumps and went to play in the big
league. There was a big scene but he tried for the clean break. He thought
that she was handling it. She was very pissed off but handling it, so he
thought. And he went.

“When he got down to Sydney he moved in with his sister who lived in
Coogee. Not exactly the literary centre of the world but it was a start. At
least it wasn’t western suburbs. His sister was an office worker, public
servant, something like that. She lived in a little flat a few streets back
from the beach. I remember him telling me that he thought he was set. He
had the beach and one bus into town. No rent. He was going to do well.

“He didn’t know but the girl he left behind him hadn’t stayed behind
him. She had followed him down to Sydney and was watching the flat in
Coogee. She didn’t know that his sister was his sister and she thought he
had moved in with another woman. She was sort of prepared for stalking
him and then confronting him and getting him to realise his error and
come home but then the other woman thing sort of threw the plans all out
of whack.
“One morning they woke up to find her standing in the street outside of the flat screaming at the windows. What a bastard he is, how he had wrecked her life, how he was going to hell. All of it. Then, when they had opened the windows and looked out, in their pyjamas, she whipped out a kitchen knife and slashed her wrists. It was awful. They got her to hospital and they patched her up. They’re both back in Brisbane now. They’re with other people and they lead fairly quiet lives. That’s it. I don’t know if it’s a sad story or not now that I’ve told it.”

“It’s definitely sad in some way, Billy,” Errol said.

“Gail?” Billy said.

“No,” Gail said.

“My turn,” David said.

“This is a difficult one because it hasn’t happened yet,” David said. Janice looked at Gail but Gail didn’t look back.

“You are all very good at taking this piss out of the fact that I come from out west. Well this is an out west story. When I grew up in Boulia there weren’t many people around. There still aren’t many people around. You tend to form pretty strong bonds and that’s always a problem because you know that a lot of you, the kids, that is, have to leave. It’s not anything so dramatic as the farm won’t support you all or anything like that but if you want a life, you have to go. So you get really strange about things. On the one hand, you get close because you’re all in this together, Boulia against the world, and on the other hand you know in the back of your mind that you’re going out into the world and possibly not coming back. This is teenage life out west.

“I was coming back. I was always coming back. I didn’t even entertain the notion that I wasn’t coming back. So when I fell in love with Peggy Walker, it wasn’t a problem. I was coming back. My mum tried to warn me and my dad was pretty blunt. He said that I had to go to Brisbane to get a degree and I could leave all the emotional stuff until later. I didn’t listen. I fell in love with Peggy Walker and I promised myself to her. I told her that I wouldn’t even look at anyone else and that I wanted her to wait for me and I was coming back to marry her when I had a degree and a job and I could support a family. Sounds very fifties, I know, but, well, dramatic love.

“So I came down to Brisbane. I studied hard being a good country boy. I lived on campus until I met Gail. And I fell love with her. You know the rest except that I just feel this terrible obligation to Peggy Walker and I don’t know what to do about it. Gail tells me to ring her or go back and see her but I don’t know what to do. Things are different out there. I feel like
I've wasted her life and the longer I leave it, the worse it gets.

"So this is a break-up story about a break-up that hasn't happened yet. Crap story, eh?"

The table was quiet. Janice held back tears. Errol pushed back his chair and stood.

"It'll work out, mate," he said.

Slowly they got their things together. Patti rang a cab. The evening was over. Gail went to bed. David sat up and drank some wine, listened to some music.

In the morning, Gail went to work and David took the day off. He sat in the winter sun and read the paper. He tidied and cleaned the house. He went for a walk and bought some things to make Gail soup for dinner. The day went by.

In the early afternoon the mail came and he wandered out to collect it. In the letterbox was a phone bill, a real estate flyer, a hardware store discount brochure and a letter. The letter was from Peggy Walker of Boulia. It said, Dear David, I've been meaning to write to you for some time now. I want to let you know that I am getting married at the end of the year. I hope this doesn't come as a shock to you and I hope that you can be happy for me. Love struck out of the blue and I have to follow my heart. Love, Peg."
It was here you saw the similarity
Tagore, Rubic, Gandhi, Lee Kuan Yew
The last came a little slowly
Pragmatism unbound can be dangerous
You said, reflecting ominously

As we travelled and engaged
You cautioned me against being frank
Ours, you said, was not a society
Tolerant of robust, opposing views
We prefer, you advised,
More public agreement, less public argument

And so I took the road less travelled
Even as your lickboys soiled victories
With your knowing gaze, unmoved.
What do all these matter in the end
You so often chuckled, grinned and guffawed
Chiding me for my little tokens of difference
Tokens which now lie heavy between us
Even as we still travel that lonely road
To each our own lake balatons
Where certain truths emerged and died.
KiM YOUNG-MOO

PERTH: RIVERSIDE WITH SWANS
Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé and Jongsook Lee

I want to build a nest and spend some time here.
Becoming a water bird

I want to visit that forest of masts
across the river, moored with sails furled.

No matter how dazzlingly the lake waters
shine somewhere in the sky
today,
I want to go flying

low, low
over the blue rippling waves

feeling the wind blowing on my breast
like a bare winter tree

on some snow-covered slope.

ONE MORNING IN PERTH

In this southern land
a pigeon is sitting on her eggs
in a lemon tree in our back garden
with yellow fruits ripening.
Each day here is like the fifth day of creation
a day for spreading a daily layer of down
and sitting brooding, waiting for the world to hatch.
The down drifting beside the river –
what nest can it have come from?
Is it seagull’s down?
Holy Spirit’s down?
A scent of lemons drifting in the breeze ...
a still creep sidles up inside me

purple berries hide the fig in moonlight

their golden bloody innards
marked with the fox’s gash

the softest parts spread across his lips
slip satisfied, replete
of all remorse
that should find ripening
a place to hold secure
remembering blossoms’ fleshy door

prefer the gory plunge
to find the core
i can look inside my window or inside my head or inside this never-ending writing and always make out a vision of a shifting shining perth city ... perth, western australia – australie occidental – accidental australia (almost french) with this one faraway accidental place reaching out to bask in the reflected skyscraper sunshine of its own daydream citidom ... but because i can only see it through this here looking glass or the shattered makeup of my memory or the garbled lawlessness of these words, i still can’t be sure that it actually does in fact exist ... and how can it? what an impossible dream of a place it is ... especially when i try to conjure up images of its workings, and especially its summers ... those long-line mirages of afternoon sweats and soggy footpath shirtfrontings, or the front-room head reclinings that roll back through the memories of this place, this illusion, and join together with all the headbutting and struggling rehashed memories of everybody else lazy and liquid, rolling and dalloping their way around their melting houses, their suburbs, their city that floats from time to time out on a haze into the indian ocean past rottnest island, and on other days back up and over the hills into the wheatbelt sea and past it into the raggedy bush of empty desert tossings which turn it inside out, turn it north or south or back in on itslself until it wakes and the people wake with it back in the usual and nominal and relatively-conventional place in which we find it now ... or i think of it mid-year, especially in the swaying sighing trees that drip slippery and witerly with the dipping crippling winds and waters and waves that wash away the unsure shore and the land on which this whole place makes its stand ... or in autumn i remember school detention and the sweeping together of endless maple leaves that scrunch and scratch like sunburnt skin on the back of my old man’s hands, blowing away in time ... or in spring the smell of mowed lawn that always makes me think of tennis courts and cricket pitches lined with cracks that open up longer and wider the more you play, the more you stamp your feet there, the longer the whole thing goes on ... i think i can remember
growing up in the hills never really a part of the city but never really a part of its opposite either, but lost always in some kind of observant middle-ground, surveying and watching its bits grow and shrink and pulse their way wider and deeper, uprooting the soil as it bulges like a giant thirsty redgum reaching towards its own painful realisations and a final and sorrowful ultimate definition that keeps disappearing like a forgotten name or mixed-up siesta dream just as you approach it once more ... i think about years of living on the coast that don’t really amount to much now except the faint sound of night-time waves blowing and throwing themselves constantly ashore, lapping further until they reach the feet of the street and the pubs behind them and maybe even further until they come sliding past the bouncers and under the slit of the door to the front bar where they mix with the foam of spilt beer, picking up cigarette butts and coasters until my friends and i look around the bar and notice we’re once-and-for-all finally drowning in it, and it’s only then, in that realisation, in that need to breathe, that the water finally recedes and tumbles back out with the tide – or maybe it’s just because the doors open and it’s closing time again and we’re thrown back out onto the streets and the night ... it’s a city i see as both beginning and end of the line, depending on which way you turn it, which way you turn yourself and which way it picks and points and turns you ... while you’re in perth it’s always silently encouraging and hoping and wishing you leave to do whatever it needs to do and yourself the same, but when you’re away it calls out across whatever morning dawn you’re watching in whatever part of otherplace australia or world and pleads for your return, and there’s always something in the sound of its voice or the desperation of its pleadings that reminds you of yourself ... again i say it’s a conjured up magical place, a lonely and terribly beautiful place overcome with water, and not just ocean but the river that washes the city this way and that and all the other water that surrounds it in wheat and desert and minerals and more underground water that connects with all the rest of it, even the bits beneath your skin between your bones, and on the water the city again goes wandering, sometimes far from home, like all the people and friends who’ve ridden the wave away, like actors and musos and sportstars and artists and writers, businessmen, schoolteachers, journos, plumbers and students who wash up confused and alone on the sandy or concrete shores of another place and wonder if perth was actually real at all, spending the rest of their lives trying to find out, trying to find it, trying to even things out, even things up ... but i can sympathise ... and you can get bored with paradise and quietness, and in the end it’s relativity that pulls at you and
directs your choice, but a choice it remains – that is, to go ... but to go from what, exactly? ... something non-existent and shining? something summer and always? what choices bark at the hearts of all, lurk in the hearts of men, lark and jerk and park in the hearts of heads? especially in this place that is no place but a silver-rimmed spectacled reflection of afternoon fremantle windowglass and american cup lustres that bounce off an eye and shoot it all the way back to cbd buildings erect and erected on the back of many a farmer and many a miner, including those still coughing their pillows red every morning with the memory of blue tailings and underground gloom and doom and witenoom ... and what of the original man? – the one who first called this illusion home, or maybe it wasn’t an illusion then – the unseen, unknown, unrealised, unrecognised, unheard first man who lies in the shadows under trees in backblock city parks in the dry heat of flyswatting evening summer and does the same in howling tuesday night winter wilds – maybe he’s just part of the illusion too, but the difference is he knows that it’s nothing but a sad cruel joke, making him in fact more real than anyone and anything, this city included ... and funny to think that this place can be included in anything, because it seems so far alone and so far misplaced that there might actually exist nothing else to compare it to ... no sydney, no melbourne, no brisbane, new york, oldhome london, all of these imagined far-off places giving definition to perth by what it is not, but at this distance we can only imagine the other to exist and hold onto it as real because if it isn’t then gawd-damn maybe this here place ain’t real after all (and neither am i) and how could it be when so many things go into making a person, making a place, making a perth cit-eee ... yip-eee ... like all the western suburbs businessmen who wake in the soft white silk or cotton of monday morning bedsheets and pillow slips with wifey nestling and nudging by his side before slipping into shower and breakfast and brand new beaming beamer and off to the boardroom and boredroom boredom ... and all the women in northern suburbs red-tile look-alike madness houses rising in early-dawn pink robe stolen from balinese hotel to wake up kids for school before feeding them rice-bubbles and driving them to class and coming home to wash and clean and watch american midday talkshows and shopping channels ... all the labourers and tradesmen on building sites and other places laying and fixing and twisting and mixing until the job is clean enough for the next tradesman to come along and add their touch, like a stationary backwards production line that brings the workers to it ... all the kids in eastern suburbs taking buses and trains to school in green and blue uniforms, or whatever they want, lounging and swearing in great huge
bird-like mobs and full of weekend stories and messages of who likes who ... all the hospitality workers, public servants, retail staff, roadworkers, dole-earners, uni students, academics, artists, city bums ... all of everyone everywhere leaning and pushing toward the final swinging bell of friday afternoon when it’s all released out onto the streets and it doesn’t matter what time of year or what shrouded pocket of the city it is, everyone unfolds themselves excitedly and blows great huge imagined weekend bubbles that (in the moment of dreaming them) can last for minutes, four hours, for forever in that one and ultimate act of blowing that sees them finally able to chase whatever it is that really and absolutely burns at them, for them, because of them – or to let it all go, pouring out into the gutters of northbridge or the alleys of fremantle, the train station terminal end-of-the-line seats of midland, even the freshly repaved footpaths of st. quentin’s avenue claremont that run parallel to stirling highway, following the river from its mouth into kings park mountsbayroad and on to the central-building city itself before shooting off towards greenmount hill and the clouds and all the rest of australia somewhere hopefully behind it ... but after all this it’s still just a white-line conjured up nothing-place for everybody and nobody ... a figment of my imagination and of yours ... it’s every city and no city and all the clichés – “the biggest country town in the world trying to be a city”, “the most isolated capital city in the world”, “closer to cities in asia than other cities in australia” ... it’s a secret wish, a child’s boast, an unforgettable, unmemorable place that makes and draws its own maps in solid buildings during the day and creeps out onto the streets at night to destroy the lines that it itself has drawn, especially the one that colours and cuts the constantly crumbling horizon ... i see it in my dreams sometimes as a beautiful and sad poetic drunken soul, immeasurably old and immeasurably young, wandering forgotten and out of control across the lanes of some massive midnight superhighway that can only belong to a future we ourselves are creating ... it tumbles and lurches through occasional traffic not knowing exactly where it’s headed, only hoping that eventually a driver might respond to its up-turned thumb and slow down long enough for it to hitch a ride ... maybe it’s not just perth i see in this dream but australia and the world as well, with all its people and all its places lined up on the side of the freeway, desperate and desolate, trying to wave down cars with only the slightest and gentlest twist of the hand or nod of the head, unsure which future is coming but resigned to the fact that it’ll ride whichever one comes first ... as i say it’s an accidental place full of infinite and improbable parts empty of independent existence that through whatever crazy design of cause and
effect have managed to conspire together to fashion a city, a country, a
world, a person that's crying out to be heard, to be itself, to be real and
independent and fixed ... it's a place that i look at down the long end of
many a blurred kaleidoscope that flips it, cracks it and distorts it in wildly
hallucinatory cuts and colours that go spiraling around in mixed-up
blurrings almost out of control if it wasn't for the rounded borders of the
filter, of the memory, of the imagination that keep it together and make it
all whole ...
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