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PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing the joint winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 2005:

Simone Lazaroo

and

Marcella Polain
for her story “Skins” also appearing in the No. 50, 2005 edition.

The editors wish to apologise for an error in Kate Lyons’ biographical details in Westerly v.50, 2005. Kate Lyons was shortlisted but did not win the Nita May Dobbie Award in 2002.
RW Smith edited Westerly for the first two years of its publication, in 1956 and 1957. He subsequently left Western Australia and the present editors had no knowledge of his identity and whereabouts. However, after the launch of the fiftieth anniversary volume of Westerly in November 2005 we were delighted to receive a letter from a Bob Smith in Geelong, identifying himself as that first editor. As a result of that correspondence, we invited him to write about those early Westerly years for this edition.

VALUES, DISTANCES, CULTURES: FOUNDATION OF WESTERLY

Why, I asked myself in 1955, would an art-loving mature-age matriculant be waiting for the start of the first lecture in Economics One? Having by that time embarked on a double major in English and History, why contemplate Economics, of all things? It had begun just over a year earlier, after teenage years as clerk and shop assistant, and adult life firstly on the dole, then in such varied jobs as fettler, electrical fitter’s assistant, and designer in several glassworks. Next, the helpful Commonwealth Employment Service suggested seasonal work with Co-op Bulk Handling, adding the advice: “Tell them you’re starting University next year – they give preference to Uni students.”

What could be better for someone flush with money and ideas after a couple of months up the scrub than a rewarding few weeks on campus at the annual Adult Education Summer School! “Oh,” says a farmer’s wife, “it’s easy to see you’re a university student. No? You left school at fourteen? A pity you’re not older or you could apply for mature-age matriculation – you have to be at least twenty-five.” Once convinced that the boyish appearance was deceptive, she pointed in the right direction, and a month later the relevant exams had been passed and my pretence to Co-op Bulk Handling became a retrospective reality.

Having opted for Industrial History and Economics as the one requisite “Leaving” subject made Economics seem a natural sequel. It turned out quite otherwise, seeming to begin at the wrong end, with no investigations,
but a swag of narrow definitions. “Money is a medium of exchange, a store of value, a means of investment...” What, nothing about a source of social security, luxury, prestige, power: even corruption? Yet there were redeeming features: for instance, on the staff was Wilfred Dowsett, poet, actor, Quaker—and sceptic (“If all the statisticians in the world were laid end to end, they still wouldn’t reach a conclusion”). Yet the stores not of value, but of values, lay elsewhere. Being an avid reader, already enthusiastic actor, director, writer and designer involved with sundry amateur dramatic societies and a couple of touring companies, I knew that, at best, real values reside with creative arts. I was soon to discover that they also belong with culture in the broader sense.

This was a fruitful time. World War Two, far from being the depressing period of historical fable, was in my experience a time of extended horizons and exciting populist experience for many Australians. Drastic shortages inspired improvisational ingenuity. Women were active in occupational and organisational ways previously unknown. Army and Navy education was distinct from training in warfare, consisting instead of creative and intellectual activities: writing, painting, drawing, performing, lively debate on current affairs. This carried over into the postwar era, and those Summer Schools were a seedbed of enlightening revelations and discoveries. The impact of returning ex-servicemen on university student life was still having a positive effect; and the story of “famous Belgian modernist” Jean Leps (a hoax to surpass Ern Malley) was the stuff of legend. Army Education, in which history professor Fred Alexander was a colonel, had been the formative influence in the university establishment of Adult Education, of which he was now director. The novel notion that “current affairs” was not the preserve of society’s upper echelons, but open to debate by the community at large was popularised by Sydney University’s Current Affairs Bulletin, each edition airing some issue of public concern for debate by adult education groups nationwide.

Freddy Alexander had other achievements to his credit. The Summer Schools were enriched by attendance at specially presented plays, concerts and films, which rapidly grew into the community-oriented Festival of Perth—Australia’s first. Perth’s isolation from other state capitals initially preserved the festivities from commercial debasement aimed at attracting big-spending festival tourists: an advantage, not “the tyranny of distance.” It is hard to realise today how daringly innovative in the context of Eurocentrism and Anglophilia was Freddy’s introduction of courses in Asian history offered by John D. Legge, and Australian history by Frank Crowley.

Horizons were extended in another new and unexpected way. It had
never occurred to us that Perth is the most remote capital city on earth, so we were generally unaware of how this had engendered a spirit of self-reliance in which problems were tackled in terms of local conditions and available resources (no “fact-finding” jaunts). It just seemed to us the normal way of doing things. Though there had been a commensurate ill-effect of suspicion and intolerance, especially towards those of different racial and communal origins, it was modified by wartime contact with refugees from the Japanese advance, and now with Perth closer to Jakarta than to Sydney, by the great influx of Asian students. The jet age was still years off, and since they came by ship, stopping off at Fremantle was cheaper than adding another few thousand miles to get to Melbourne or Sydney.

The benefits were mutual. Easygoing Australian attitudes helped the newcomers forget political and inter-communal strife in their homelands. Encounters with a range of different cultures broadened Australian attitudes. Both tendencies were reinforced by fraternisation on campus, in courses, and through shared accommodation, particularly in the egalitarian University Hostel – former quarters for the US wartime Catalina squadron at Pelican Point and forerunner of Currie Hall – and later by foundation of Thomas More College, since the Catholic boys’ sense of being outsiders was conducive to empathy with others similarly disadvantaged. A typical outcome was rental by overseas students of the colonial mansion “Cernay” on Stirling Highway nearly opposite Claremont Fire Station for establishment of a communal mixed-race household – where Asian students were wont to entertain Australian friends to exotic banquets.

Another outcome was organisation of a referendum on the contentious White Australia Policy. The Guild of Undergraduates’ Council, controlled by illiberal elements who had banned any discussion of politics and religion, vigorously opposed not merely changes of the policy, but holding of the referendum. What most irked them was that overseas students, although not citizens, were qualified to vote as members of the Guild. About this time Frank Crowley, forthright advocate of history as synoptic enquiry, set “Origins of the White Australia Policy” as an essay topic, probably as a deliberate provocation, since it necessitated access to statutory records held in the Law Library, then the closed preserve of those same student supporters of the status quo. He might even have intentionally assigned it to me knowing my outspoken views on such issues. If so he was successful, for the wrath of leading law students on my incursion into their sanctum was surpassed only by the chagrin which greeted disclosure of the Dean’s written authorisation.

Many involved with the University Dramatic Society (“DramSoc”) became associated with the Westerly project. The inspirational teaching of
David Bradley and Jeana Tweedie, enabling nearly half the English major to be undertaken in drama – not always English – was based on the tacit understanding that plays (especially those of Shakespeare) were composed as performance scripts, not for publication as light fiction, and even less as pedagogic exercises for the torment of high-school students. This empirical approach even involved construction of a rudimentary Elizabethan stage to demonstrate the extent to which intrinsically universal themes of plays from that era could be illuminated by original theatre conditions and performance practice. How Shakespeare filled his plays with variant values and contrasting standards of conduct thereby appeared purposely designed to send audiences forth puzzling over unresolved moral dilemmas. This was incipient pluralism, endowing performance of his plays with a fertile, even if subliminal, afterlife in playgoers’ psyches.

Enthusiastic participation in student activities was presumably responsible for the invitation to replace David Hutchison when he resigned as editor of the Arts Union journal, *Winthrop Review*. Its rather pedestrian appearance inspired the instant resolve to make it more visually interesting and topically varied. After all, it was published by the Arts Union, comprised of students enrolled in many subjects, not necessarily including English literature. The possibilities were broached with the private operator responsible for having it printed, who resisted all editorial initiative, typographical or otherwise, his arrangement with the printer being to provide enough material to fill a standard number of pages in standard format and standard layout. This was cut-rate production by a jobbing printer, with *Winthrop Review* a vehicle to serve the business of selling advertising space. Proposals to employ a more amenable printer were flatly rejected, as was editorial right to determine the content of each issue, because of potential offence to advertisers.

Our consequent decision to terminate the arrangement and take over all *Winthrop Review* policy matters including choice of printer was countered by the middleman’s announcement of exclusive entrepreneurial ownership of the magazine, registered in his name at the Companies Office. It was a pyrrhic victory, for confirmation of the claim inevitably resulted in separation. He still (!) owns *Winthrop Review* – and *Westerly* was born: not denoting regional identity, as widely assumed, but a fresh breeze blowing aside such commercial imperatives and moribund conventions. Though members of *Westerly*’s informal and amorphous production team were eager to get the first issue into print, the primary task was to raise advertising revenue, which proved easier than anticipated. Businesses patronised by students were very supportive, and so were acquaintances from other organisations such as the
pioneering and inspirational Patch Theatre, not only craft dealers and the like, but even the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s publicity manager, Grieg Frieze – known through having played Robert Browning in Patch’s production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* – who placed full back-cover promotions for the Goon Show. A regular supporter was the Captain Stirling Hotel, where the recent undergraduate “aquatic carnival” had scandalised vice-chancellor Prescott, whose moralistic strictures aroused vociferous demonstrations of student ire. A giant cartoon of him on a “Prosh” float declared “The Vice is nice, but bitter is better.”

*Westerly* enjoyed close relations with the student newspaper *Pelican*, with several of its successive editors, Tony Hoffman and Bruce Lawson, providing useful input into *Westerly*’s treatment of both form and content. A student household at 27a Clark Street became the editorial and drop-in centre, where issues were planned, contributions proposed and discussed, sub-editing argued, and proofs read. Then when an issue was being put to bed a dummy was spread across the livingroom floor, with corrected proofs being cut and pasted until the small hours. Here *Westerly* sponsored as visiting speaker Dr John Burton, formerly of the Department of External (not “Foreign”) Affairs, and advocate of alternative, equitable, international policies.

In that same period, idiosyncratic perpetual student Trevor Artingstoll had founded the Politics Club, inviting individual students and selected outsiders to expound on “My Ideal State”. Western Australians had long been proud of our “free university,” even those with no expectation of benefiting from a tertiary education. The prospects were now being taken seriously, since the war had changed things. For very many of the troops their first job after 1930s unemployment was in the armed services where they’d gained trade qualifications, recognised as equivalent to apprenticeship. Aspirations had now turned to education in general, and the “old guard” of privileged students was under challenge.

In this milieu *Westerly* flourished, with Number 1 of 1956 something of a transitional issue, though already exerting its individuality. Willingness thereafter “to open its columns to constructive comment” helped create its characteristic identity, attracting a wide range of contributors. The number of academic staff who rallied to *Westerly* was gratifying, as was the response throughout the cultural and intellectual community generally; so there was no shortage of contributions – literature, comment and criticism. How some of them were attracted is now forgotten, but may have had something to do with the dearth of outlets for free and open opinion, plus enthusiastic unsolicited reviews by Ken Inglis in the Melbourne *Age*. There was Marcus Oliphant on University and Community; J B Polya on Tasmania’s infamous
Orr case; Brian Fitzpatrick on Apartheid; Max Harris's aptly incisive review of James McAuley’s editorship of Quadrant’s first issue, only incidentally revenge on one of the perpetrators of the En Malley prank; and comments on the Outlook for Democracy in Japan by Bill Hartley, a student sent there as part of an Air Force squadron; while Ric Throssell wrote about his play on nuclear devastation, The Day before Tomorrow, which DramSoc had in production.

Then there was Don McLeod, advocate extraordinary for the Pilbara Aboriginal cooperative, Pindan. In an interplay between social activism and cultural events, about 1950 he’d written to congratulate the New Theatre cast of Oriel Gray’s anti-discriminatory play Had We but World Enough, and again after their production of the stage version of F. B. (“Bert”) Vickers’s comparable novel The Mirage, with Bert playing a part as the squatter. At Artingstoll’s invitation Don McLeod spoke on campus (causing consternation to the Department of Native Welfare), after which he contributed an article to Westerly on Aboriginal Enterprise in the Pilbara. Bert Vickers, whom Alan Marshall had taught in Army Education to master writing skills, had also been with Patch Theatre, trying unsuccessfully about 1946 to have his play presented there, while acting in a stage adaptation of Mary Webb’s Precious Bane. Irene Greenwood reviewed Bert’s novel First Place for the Stranger in Westerly 1 of 1957 – a Festival of Perth number sponsored by Freddy Alexander. Another Westerly contributor was Mary Durack, whose 1952 book Child Artists of the Australian Bush had helped publicise worldwide the art of Aboriginal boys at Carrolup, of whom Brely Bennell was among the youngest. In 1960 (deputising for Henrietta Drake-Brockman?) she opened his first exhibition, which Rose Skinner generously showed in her Gallery, responding to the growing mood of liberalism to which those early Westerly years contributed.

That was the key to Westerly’s success, due not so much to promoting specific attitudes and policies, as creating a focus for attitudes people already nurtured, while feeling themselves and their views isolated until Westerly helped provide assurance, opportunity and a sense of independence. The span of Australian contributions already ranged widely over varied cultural traditions when, despite conditions of Cold War and McCarthyism, Westerly received a broadening international response – much of it from or concerning what came to be called “The Third World.” They include Chinese and Indian views on “Freedom and the Writer;” a distinguished Indian author’s identification of English language as a cultural bridge; Dymphna Cusack’s report on a literary delegation to China; and a statement on “The Atom for Peace or War” by Germany’s leading nuclear scientists, translated for Westerly
by language students of the German department. At the same time, overseas students were keen to show through articles in *Westerly* their affinity with the values of Australian friends and colleagues by writing on aspects of their own lands and cultures.

So much were these developments an unbiased response to time, place and events that it only much later became evident that the pluralism involved amounts to multiculturalism in the most positive and constructive sense. Consequent investigation makes clear that *Westerly* of those first few years is not just Australia's but the world's first multicultural publication.

*Westerly*'s editorials dealt with currently significant subjects like “Cultural Freedom,” “The Menace of Lay Councils” to intellectual integrity, “the Open Skies Policy” of military surveillance, “On Means without Ends” such as the common good, and the need for defence of university independence, so arrival of a letter from the University’s chairman of its Publications Committee directing “You will remove from *Westerly* the words University of Western Australia” was a nice irony, indicating as it did official capitulation to outside pressure. *Westerly*’s notice, “published by the Arts Union of the University of Western Australia,” was indisputably true, and may even have been a legal requirement, but who were we to argue. As Timmy Mares of the drama staff remarked in a quote from *Macbeth*’s witches, *Westerly* looked like being “a birth-strangled babe.” The best recourse seemed to present the professor with a dilemma by not acknowledging receipt of his letter. He is still waiting, like Napoleon in Moscow, for evidence of surrender. Unsurprisingly, a demand for compliance came from one of the aforementioned illiberal student elements, the president of the undergraduate body.

Wilf Dowsett’s constructive scepticism, John Legge’s demonstration of the inextricability of Chinese history and culture; the experience of applied dramaturgy; Frank Crowley’s comparative and contextual methodology, and the liberal outlook of Fred Alexander, were only some of the factors operative in enlightened academic staff circles, creating an intellectual atmosphere engendering and supportive of values espoused by *Westerly*. So it is hardly surprising to find those values taking on a lively afterlife, comparable to that of Shakespeare’s plays, in the subsequent careers of many of those involved with *Westerly*, through circumstances conducive to development of their natural inclinations. Through personal acquaintance I am aware of one ex-student bringing back from South-east Asia experience of life at village level very different from growth in those countries of exploitive military regimes; of another working with Michael Somare in development of Papua New Guinea’s independence; others variously attempting to civilise the world of
economics and business; moving from technological preoccupations to concern with urban and regional problems; or trying to educate mining and other interests on Aboriginal attitudes and aspirations (and vice versa), tackling divergent assumptions through environmental, medical, social justice and equity projects; and in the case of overseas students, still attempting to inculcate in their homelands, up to half a century later, some of the values which impressed them in Australia, with reports of a resulting residue of good will towards Australia.

These were formative years for many of us in tackling an increasingly parious future, though application of insights from the experiences of 1956–57 was not without its vicissitudes. Personal establishment of art-historical studies at Adelaide's Flinders University in 1966 was based on the premise, applied in Perth to drama, that practical involvement with creative processes of the cultures of other times and places, rather than narrow verbal definitions, can yield real insight into the innate meanings of specific artworks of other peoples. Though the standard relationship between education in the creativity and explication of art is strictly utilitarian, mainly requiring art students to undergo didactic courses chronicling successive stylistic changes, this genuine innovation overcame that disability – until it was opportunistically subverted during the manipulative nihilism of the 1970s and '80s. An altogether different experience was writing and presenting the play Art on Trial. Like Shakespeare's histories this is based on an actual event, from which significant conclusions can be adduced: the 1944 legal challenge to the Archibald Prize's award to William Dobell for his portrait of fellow artist Joshua Smith. Playing it on open platform stages enabled us to take it on tour in art galleries, teaching us a great deal about how Shakespeare's scripts developed, how readily he was able to stimulate audiences' "imaginary forces" through direct contact without need of naturalistic spectacle, and how the fourteen roles could be "doubled" by a cast of six, including the author, and director Eugene Schliesser – a 1960s DramSoc stalwart.

In those early Westerly years there was much debate about rival value systems, particularly the seductive concept of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, eventually jettisoned when perceived as merely an emotional reaction against economic pragmatism. Now, at a time when common understanding and co-existence are even more vital to survival than they were then, it is disturbing to encounter situations where cultural knowledge is applied for expedient sectional ends in preference to mutual benefit. Recent study of body language in European painting to elucidate meanings inherent in fifteenth-century portraiture has led me to the surprising
realisation that many deaths at military checkpoints in Iraq result from use as the signal for “slow down and pull over,” of the identical gesture which in the region from Iberian Peninsula to Persian Gulf has long signified approval to proceed. But rather than disinterested application of such research results to elimination of human adversity, the tendency is for specialised knowledge to be used for exclusively partisan purposes, such as behavioural advisers’ use of multicultural learning to facilitate interrogation through techniques of humiliation and alienation. The great irony is that such cynical short-term measures ultimately prove counter-productive.

“O this learning, what a thing it is!” – William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew
When I was twelve years old I lived in the city of Nanchang in southern mainland China. My parents taught at the university and our family lived in a foreigners' compound on campus. It had a high wall all around it, and an attentive gatekeeper. In the summer when there were fewer classes to teach, we were extended an invitation to travel north to see the International Kite Festival in Wei Fang.

My mother and I accepted and we left with a small group made up of some other English teachers, two missionaries and a Chinese man sent along by the university to make sure we behaved. We flew to Wei Fang because a steam train would have taken four days. Chinese aeroplanes are rickety and dangerous, full of cigarette smoke and the smells of rice wine and pickled eggs. They shudder, which is common during takeoff and landing, but Chinese planes do so the whole time the plane is in the air.

People came from all over the world to the kite festival. The hotel lobby was unlike any place I'd ever seen or imagined. The lobby was designed, perhaps, after the curve of a cowrie, or other half-moon seashell. It had a thin, long and curving reception desk of raw wood, staffed by smiling Chinese who were of course all very thin, very polite, and due to the isolated remove of Wei Fang, unable to speak English, or German, or Romanian, or Dutch, or French, or to comprehend basic Chinese spoken badly and in an assimilated southern accent. Groups of people, whom I later saw operating together in lithe unison as various national kite teams, bustled about the lobby with intriguing luggage. They guarded long multicoloured canvas sleeves that might have concealed boat masts or technologically advanced weaponry, or jousting lances. Really these bags contained the skins and skeletons of complex and magnificent kites.

Concrete stairs guided by bare iron railings led our small party up from the bizarre lobby to numerous floors and labyrinthine quarter-mile long hallways. For some time we wandered, quite lost, through what was the
northern Chinese industrial equivalent of a western convention centre. At last on one plain wood door, one of many thousands, we read the correct Chinese numerals. In our small room we were delighted to discover hot running water. None of our group felt brave enough to drink from the tap. To slake our thirsts we drained cups of previously boiled green tea from glass thermoses which were painted candy red, and over that with dainty, stylised yellow flowers.

In the morning we boarded a small minibus – a shuttle service provided by the event’s organizers; we drove for over three hours. I imagined we were in a desert and I recalled the movie “Lawrence of Arabia” which I had watched for the first time some months before. I was then surprised to learn that we were not crossing through a desolation of desert, but that we travelled over another type of sand dune: we were on a beach. A beach with platinum-white dunes wider than the state of Vermont. We never reached the ocean that day, but stopped six miles short of land’s end. I knew the ocean beyond was the deepest cobalt blue, and wet, deep wet. The wettest, bluest thing on the planet. The dunes where we stopped were salt caked, flat and hot and white. Brilliant, radiant white. We stepped from the minibus and at once we were assaulted by powerful wind. It tore at our clothes, howling and lashing superfine salt crystals into the pores of our exposed faces and arms. Already some kites had been coaxed into the air.

They were mystical creatures as big as clouds in the lucid jewel-blue spaces of the sky. They swooped above us, and I felt my stomach flip, and it was very easy for me to empathize with a small mouse when it is caught in an open field and looks up and sees a hawk plunging down, eclipsing the sun. the kites were silent. All we were able to hear was wind thundering in our ears and the whipping of the kite lines. Some kites were built to resemble animals like whales, or fantastic birds with wing spans stretching over forty feet. Others were the apparent products of architecturally deviant minds, seeming to defy gravity with their simultaneous awkwardness and ariel grace. Some kites were constructed from many layers of smaller “wings” stacked one above the other. I believe fourteen levels was the highest count. One was a massive perfect cube, pure white like weightless marble.

The Australian team was having difficulty hefting their kite into the sky. They didn’t have enough people to support its many segmented shapes in proper form in a position effective to catch the wind, and then to also run and pull on its guidelines at the same time. My mother and I volunteered our help. Soon a group of about twenty people had conspired to launch the kite. Most of us were unable to speak each other’s languages, so we did this by way of hand signals and lots of laughing and tripping over lines and holding parts
of the kite first backward, and then at the wrong distance from their many counterparts. At last we stood in a long column, each self-assigned and correctly placed. The Australian fliers took hold of a two-foot wide triangle to which all the lines were secured, and at a cry from our leaders we ran into the biting wind, supporting the kite like a giant canvas centipede, shouting out for all we were worth, happy and defiant. The kite caught the wind, it hung above us – we knew how heavy it was and it seemed impossible that the wind could support such weight ... and then it soared into the air, arcing up in a massive technicolour rush. We stood, faces windburnt, eyes screwed against the cloudless and dazzling azure sky, and together we watched the kite, graceful and silent above us.
The neat hand of a poem for his father’s name day,
a tiny toy-like manuscript – was paper scarce? –
portraits of parents and two of the sisters.

Upstairs we get to Georges Sand
and a mad scrawled note from Berlioz:
_Mio Chopinetto!

That photo of him, sullen,
pale, arms folded,
sickness plain in the skin,
and a small hand’s cast,
its fine sculpted fingers.

Outside the snow is falling thicker.
By the music academy clarinet scales
swirl with bars of Rachmaninov.

Coffee in Nowy Świat.
Not far from here his heart
lies in the pillar of a church,
a new world relic like Galileo’s finger
vesselled in a Florentine museum.

In the old royal park his dominating statue
turns wholly white with frost:
the city’s silent massive ghost.
Poor Dido –
She is torn between devotion to her husband Sychaeus,
Murdered for his wealth by her brother Pygmalion,
And her feelings for the stranger in Carthage. True-souled Aeneas
Is a figure of such noble bearing he seems sprung from the gods.
She confides to her sister, “He sways my will.” She feels again
The flame that once devoured her. How easily she rejected
Her suitors in Libya and Tyre, and the chieftains of Africa,
But not this Trojan warrior with the strong chest and shoulders.
She is entranced by his stories. How keenly she listens
As he tells them about the wooden horse as huge as a hill,
Grim Achilles and wily Ulysses, Laocoon and the serpents,
Cassandra’s sad omens, the terrible deaths of Hector and Priam,
And Troy in flames. He tells them too about his vain search
For his wife, Creusa, and the wraith of Creusa herself who bid him
Escape the burning city. Apollo had foreordained for Aeneas
A place the Greeks called Westland, also known as Italy,
Where the mighty Tiber flows through rich landscape and
Rome beckons. So they toiled at building a fleet. Their voyage
Took them past the dreadful Harpies that befoul everything,
Past Ithaca’s rocks and Phaeacia’s towering heights. They met
Hector’s wife Andromache, took wise advice from a seer,
And sailed on past Scylla and Charybdis and the coast of the Cyclops.
How attentively Dido listens, her eyes often filling with tears
For Aeneas’ suffering and for memory of her own sad plight.
It was Venus herself, Aeneas’ mother, who inspired Dido with passion.
She arranged the storm, the cave and the couple’s retreat,
That momentous first day between Dido and death. Beautiful Dido,
Poor Dido, Queen of Carthage, who must hear such vicious stories
Spread of her by Rumour, the loathsome goddess, and then
Suffer the news that Aeneas will leave her to head for Rome,
The possibility that shrouded their union from the start
Repeated now by fleet-footed Mercury, the gods’ messenger
Who comes with tidings from Jupiter himself: “Why waste time
In Carthage! Consider your heir, Iulus! Turn to Rome! Etc. Etc.”
However he may rehearse the compulsion of his leave-taking,
Aeneas cannot expel her grief. She has welcomed him, he
And his Trojans, extending to them such lavish generosity,
And trust. Ah, pitiless love, when the ways are so uncertain and
Expectations are confounded with such rough alternatives
That some attribute to the gods and some to chance or error.
Rosy dawn dispels the night; the sea is favorable. They are sailing,
The Trojans in their tall ships, and Dido watches from the cliff-tops.
Her tears did not stop him. Heaven barred his compassion
And across the water, all sounds of lamentation are hidden
By the noise of waves.
DIANE FAHEY

SUMMER

A northwesterly holds sway on this
hottest day for years, sand ghosting the damp verge,
a gritty coating on oiled skin. I look out
past shirred crystal to leaf-green, cerulean;
wade in, wanting to be braced by chill pressures,
till the breakers I stand beyond arch back—
sudden tears from parched blue. Salt in my eyes,
I swim where waves turn towards the river.
Nothing for it but to lie in these
liquid inches, as if earthed in ocean,
the sun dangerous on eyelids, my weight
erasing sand ripples. Here I stay,
swathed by gold, letting thoughts evaporate,
thirsting for fresh beginnings.

TIDES

Silent as virtue, the tide enters the coast—
holding back at first, a grateful guest,
then assuredly at home, ready to bring
its whole life swiftly in. As with bird flight—
always a new concordance of darkness,
light, as they split and meld, fertilise
each other. At ebb tide, scuffed waves circle
the stream’s centre, push back to where breakers
hook down on mirrors slick with sun. Clouds mass,
tumble, in a fast sky; ibis sway on
thermals, hierophants of a primal peace—
the lilt of their languorous black wings
a footnote in the unwritten book of days,
part of the tremendous drift of things.
DAVID WINWOOD

IN PRAISE OF INNOCENCE

Language clear and see-through as poisoned
Water, deadly as a ballerina’s smile. The foal

isn’t innocent; look at the way it bites the bark
and leaves trees dying. The normal lamb will butt

you in the crotch – and rightly so. The lamb
too cute for its own good, the helpless one on

legs like unspun wool? It dies first as the Good
Shepherd talks straight with a butcher’s knife.

Language, the politician’s clay; language unclear,
the civil servant’s tool. Theirs is the Chemical

Wedding of might. The new alchemy
became the old religion. All popes called Innocent

were knowing politicians and – uncivil to mention it –
creators of endless strings of civil wars. The lamb

too cute for its own good. The helpless one on
on legs like unspun wool. It dies first.
CAMEO

Putxinel-lis.
The boy traces this word in his mouth. Yet, it is the image, unexpectedly vivid, unabashedly violent, that draws him. He leans tip-toed in concentration towards the poster affixed to the stone wall, its bold blocks of colour a discovery on this wet wintry day, and stares at the puppet-figure, decumbent and vacant-eyed, with its heavy head inclined to a bearded assailant.

Two men in fur-lined coats making their way to lawyers’ rooms observe the young boy straining upward. A child alone in the Saturday-streets is not unusual in this turn-of-the-century city. And unquestionably, the boy is less angular than the girl into whose dirty, needy palm one of the men had earlier dropped a centime. There is something particular about him, however, that momentarily diverts them. He is most certainly handsome – his mother reminds him of this each day, cupping his cherished face in her hands – though this is not it. The men puzzle silently as the boy, unaware and inscrutable, deliberates.

It is at this point that the boy’s mother steps from a café. The heavy wooden doors fitted with filmy glass panels swing shut behind her, affording only a glance into the tiled interior. She takes a sharp, involuntary breath as she moves into the extraordinary cold of the morning, pulling her fringed shawl tightly around her shoulders. But even with this sudden return to the body she seems distracted, not noticing the men in fur-lined coats lower their eyes as they pass her to ascend the staircase.

Then she sees him, half-turned and earnest in the pale light, and stretches out her arms to encircle his small waist, to encompass his solitude, promising that they will attend together the puppet show the following afternoon.
She gazes at the reflected child, this wondrous creature, as she faces a thinly framed mirror. Beyond the boundaries of her self, and like any proud mother, she makes expansive claims for her son.

However, as Senyora Ferrer relates to her neighbours, her tenant is wilfully irresponsible. She is quick to point out, as she stands on the upper-story balcony and beats clean strips of worn carpet with a wire brush, that she understands the woman's need to work. Unwisely married herself, she often cares for the child while his mother leaves for the night, her dark hair piled high and woven with flowers. What troubles her, what she simply cannot comprehend, she gossips breathlessly (the boundless dust and factory filth sees the preponderance of Barcelona's inhabitants pneumonic rather than apsiopetic), is the younger woman's alarming insistence on abstractions. She speaks spiritedly of Passion and Art (in this city! Senyora Ferrer adds parenthetically in amazed exclamation, tossing her head to signal the belching smoke-stacks and the busy port beyond her immediate vision). Once she revealed shyly to the senyora several sketches that were unlike anything the senyora had seen, with their insubstantial relations to reality. And her maternal prognostications are utterly impractical — a poet, Senyora Ferrer, why, my son should be a poet!

As it happens, the boy (then grown) will die among olive groves, blood-drenched and nameless, fighting General Francisco Franco's Rebel Foreign Legionnaires and Moors on the other side of the country in Badajoz, the scene of innumerable sieges. His anonymous entry into the literary world will be ushered in by men such as Auden and Hemmingway who will compose Great Works on war and its casualties, and who themselves, for a time, will evade historical annihilation.

For now he sits cross-legged on the edge of the bed, tracing along the iron frame a small animal shaped from wood as his mother dresses for the evening. Senyora Ferrer, purblind at night, brings her mending to the damp, candle-lit room and sits blanketed in a cushioned chair that she places near the rusty brazier where coke is burning slowly. The evening is bitterly cold and the whirring sound of the sewing machines coaxed and pedalled by women in the rooms below is carried skyward. The younger woman turns from the mirror, taking a coloured container from the clutter of pots and jars on the dresser and powders her face, her neck, her chest. The dress she wears, with its firm-fitting bodice and full red skirt, is not suited to the weather, she acknowledges, although meteorological practicality is not its primary recommendation.

(A biographical acceleration: as his mother takes her last watery breath, before he identifies himself in places elsewhere as lately of Barcelona, he will
inexplicably recollect this enamelled moment - her shoulders sculpted by the deep shadows thrown by the refracted light, her resplendence. He too will recall, in the excitement of a new year, a new century, and by his own illicit glimpses, his mother’s preposterous effort to eat a single green grape at every midnight stroke as she sits unbalanced on the lap of a man, playfully kissing his lips and drinking from a fragile frosted glass.)

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The boy’s mother walks briskly across La Rambla towards L’Eden Concert, thankful that the rain has ceased and comforted by the knowledge that her son is safely tucked into a warm bed, asleep. The red skirt whips around her ankles (her hat is awry and the seams of her long grey gloves are fraying at the finger-tips), and despite the iciness of the night, carousing merry-makers linked arm-in-arm conspire to fill the narrow streets, forcing her, an Unaccompanied Woman, to sidestep skilfully flailing limbs and bottles aimlessly discarded. It would seem unlikely, then, as she approaches the electric lit street of the Paral-lel, with its burlesque theatres, cabaret clubs, artists’ studios and rudely sentimental music halls all awash with Rickett’s blue, that she feels obscenely alive.

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She forces herself to suppress a laugh as the door shuts behind her. These men, these bohemians, with their absinthe and ideas about women! In this small ordered room above the club, she does her best to be enthusiastic, even athletic. (She glances at the discoloured looking-glass, rearranges her hair, reties her dress and resumes the requisite supine position on absurdly white linen.) But for painters, she notes, their hands are surprisingly lubberly and their eager bodies are hopelessly artless.

A light knock introduces a deep-eyed man. She knows him as Ruiz but very soon he will take his mother’s name, travel to Paris – where else? – and become the most famous artist of the twentieth century. She, by contrast, will remain an inky, unknown female figure in his early works, inconsequential to the fate of modern art.

He enters wearing a broad-brimmed black hat, narrow velvet trousers and a loose dark jacket. So young, she thinks as he rests his cane by the door and approaches her, fiddling impotently at the ribbons of her dress, his inexpert, paint-stained fingers sliding beneath her skirts, parting her thighs with mechanical insensitivity. So unlike my Love, she inwardly sighs (now
disappeared, presumed dead, his absence palpable), who moved with her in
the dark. Rapturously. Refulgent. This Ruiz, rumoured for immortality, rocks
above her invariably, self-concerned and taciturn, and the woman, refusing
diminution, redistributes her body and has them both tumbling to the
ground to illustrate the instability of things.

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Here, along this broad strip of paved streets that was once a riverbed,
he undulates. He unclasps his small fist from his mother’s hand (in the
other hand she holds a large pail), and charts a singular excursion, a child-
found world patterned by tree-filtered light and not at all ordinary. The old
men sitting on wooden benches discussing phylloxera and crop failures
give him little pause. He spins instead among the skirts of women, the
shiny shoes of men; he swoops across the Sunday-leisurely paths of the
marble cutters, the cabinet makers, the tailors, the factory-owners and
their well-dressed daughters, the dyers, the iron-workers, the fabric
printers, the bleachers. On both sides of the street, birds, oily and
brilliantly opalescent, squawk and flap in small wire cages as a young
woman, herself avian – her headdress predictably plumate, her nose truly
beak-like – calls out to passing pedestrians. Groups of women with their
hands folded into the soft crooks of each other’s arms encircle the
enclosures, pointing and exclaiming, admiring the bands of gold, the flash
of green.

Unnoticed among them the boy envisions a re-learning of the sky:
feathered bodies outstretched and scoring sharp arcs above the city, turning
mapless loops beyond the man with the rotting skin who howls and hacks as
he trails through the streets each day, and who the boy does not dare follow.

Then he plunges again, past the musicians with their midriffs wrapped in
vivid sashes; past the stiff-backed police, ever alert to anarchist malfeasance.
He dives among simple actions, men rubbing their gloveless fingers and
children watching their breath made visible in the air, and imagines himself
elemental, pellucid. He stops momentarily at a distance from the chestnut
seller who scoops smoky kernels into paper cones, before being swept by the
crowd towards the flower stalls where young women sell sprays of flowers.
Bell-shaped petals. Effuse inflorescences. Blossoms that his mother braids
through her hair.

Her irresistible pull, this inexorable undertow.

Resurfacing, he looks around. And then there, by the fountain, he sees her
tilting in conversation towards another woman. He approaches and she
recovers his grasp, a casual, precious solidarity.
A few weeks earlier the boy and his mother had stood like this, hand in hand, on the very same street as a procession of gargantuan figures, beautifully fashioned in gold-threaded cloth, strode past them, sun-lit, on tremendous wooden legs. Around these supports hoofed eagles and bulls and lions and dragons, and human bodies, disconcertingly dwarfed by colossal paper-mâché heads, lurched compass-less to the beats of the superintending drums. As the crowd bustled behind, the pageant coiled its way to the paved square outside the old cathedral where brightly-coloured ribbons were strung and blindfolded children took turns to strike at animal forms suspended from tree-branches that, when punctured, gave up their sugary entrails.

No-one notices their entrance as the heavy doors swing shut behind them; a woolen-capped boy bending down to scratch the belly of a black-eared dog, and a woman removing her carmine pelisse, draping it purposefully across a high-backed settle. Pallid men sit around massive wooden tables, some with their backs turned to the window-arches that form one side of the capacious tiled room. In the sub-aqueous light these men are turbulent, scandalous, uproarious – they are artists, after all – perforating with their pipes the purpled-smoke air.

The woman helps her child remove his coat, unfastening the big hooks and loosening his arms from the sleeves that pinch. Exclusively attentive, she is at first oblivious to the man who approaches with an intimate, polished word that has the woman’s head snap upward to meet his imperturbable face.

The café is pleasantly pungent with tobacco and coffee grounds, and it entertains the kinds of excesses Senyora Ferrer finds difficult to forgive. Potted plants with vibrant green leaves totter on impossibly high shelves. Dust-collecting chandeliers are appendant from copal-varnished beams. Large ceramic vases squat without immediate purpose on the long bar. A dado of painted tiles patterned with fish-tail swirls of blue and green and crocein stretches around the room. And the walls! A huge panel of two bearded men speeding through a dusty city in an automobile hangs on the wall opposite the window arches. Unremarkable posters announce that crazy-time of Carnival. On every other available plane, fastened at their corners with small shiny pins, pencil drawings adjust an otherwise luminous life to tonalities of black and white. Fiddlers stand disconsolate at street corners, their necks at oblique angles as dogs sniff their bony feet. Young men on

Thin fingers ruffle his hair and the boy turns to follow his mother into another room, a smaller rectangular vault also riotously decorated, with seats set before a modest stage. Watchful children form imprecise semi-circles around the theatre and gently, his mother pushes him towards them. Something small, apheliotropic, rearranges itself inside him.

The curtain is removed to unveil a confected world of orange moons and blotchy white paint resembling the trembling of stars. The hero is conjured, his glass gaze unwinking. Another puppet appears, a lacy cap askew on her hollow head. Already embattled, she takes resolute, unladylike aim with pots and spoons to check the hero's amorous advances. The auditorium hoots and stamps with delight at his dexterous flexibility, at her domestic artillery. (The scene metamorphoses magically, now an exaggeration of shadows and powdery greens.) The pursuit persists through this penumbral forest until the devil emerges, fiendishly cloaked in crimson and with an eye for abduction. Children clamour and point in warning. The hero, momentarily doltish, head bob-bobbing, misunderstands their urgent directives. Determined, the children shout again, louder, and the hero turns to club the stealthy recreant. The backdrop transforms, the piano-accompanied charivari plays, and the puppets are reunited. The audience cheers and the players acknowledge the applause, bowing and stooping, until a wooden hand abruptly cuffs the lacy cap and the bare-headed puppet stumbles sideways, pitches and crumples. The din escalates wildly, and is musically validated.

The boy laughs and claps and turns to find his mother, to share this unrestrained moment, this extravagant hilarity. He searches for her among the women leaning forward in their seats, all the better to see as men swill amber beer from heavy glass mugs. He searches for her face. Then he sees her; she is sitting there, quiescent, and not quite smiling.
“I CAN’T GO ON ... I’LL GO ON”: INTERVIEW WITH RAY COFFEY, FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE PRESS, 22 DECEMBER 2004; 24 MAY 2006

NK: A. B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* came in at number 10 on the ABC’s knock-off of Channel 4’s Book Show. While that is good publicity for your press, it also confirms the impression of Fremantle Arts Centre Press as the press that had two great successes, *A Fortunate Life* and Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. Yet FACP publishes thirty-five books a year. So can you use the ABC – A. B. Facey moment as an occasion to outline the other publishing activities of the Press?

RC: Those two books have played a very important part in the survival of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. I read a statistic put out by the Australian Book Publisher’s Association early in 2000 saying that small presses lasted, on average, six years. We’re coming up for thirty, which suggests that some things are working for us! And two of the things that have worked very well have been *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*. When we first started up, someone said that if we published only Western Australian writers we’d soon run out of writers. Well, we still only publish Western Australian writers, although it’s a broad definition ...

NK: The definition includes books by writers who have spent a significant amount of time in Western Australia.

RC: That’s right, and we have no shortage of manuscripts, solicited and unsolicited. I began with the Press in 1978, eighteen months after it had started. It had done a couple of volumes of poetry and a couple of fiction titles. One of the things I wanted to do was broaden our list into the non-fiction area. I had noticed the way British publishers were then starting to look at what has now become
known as “life stories”. I was particularly interested in the sorts of things published by Centreprise in Hackney, and the Hackney Project, stories that were away from the centre of what was then considered important and valuable. So I started to look for and encourage those kinds of stories. At the time of publication of *A Fortunate Life* we had a little social history programme running—known as the Community Publishing Project—for which we received a little bit of funding from the State Government. And this was to encourage “ordinary”—whatever that word means—people to send in manuscripts based on their own lives and on the histories of their local communities. Many of the manuscripts were quite slight, but by working with the authors we built a number of them into something more substantial.

What I’ve always thought about publishing is that you have to sow seeds in many ways to see what will develop. We perhaps wouldn’t now publish some of those early things simply because the quality of work in that area has improved markedly. But at the start, you put up the shingle, you attract people in, and you encourage them. And because we were a small enterprise we looked at things that more established publishers wouldn’t look at. In the case of A. B. Facey it was his daughter, as I recall, who dropped in that partly typed, partly handwritten manuscript. We immediately saw possibilities there, and as they say, “the rest is history”. When I first read it I thought it put a full stop on a certain kind of narrative: it was a quintessential Australian *yarn*, if you like. This was around 1979 and WA’s sesquicentenary was coming up and in the lead-up to that there was, quite properly, an increased interest in our own narratives, our own stories. The bicentenary for Australia followed quite quickly. Timing was everything. So that kind of timing worked for *A Fortunate Life*—which was a well-told series of *yarns*, basically. And I think we edited and packaged it well enough, and it really did capture the imagination. We also did some promotional work that, I guess, was a little audacious. Knowing that we had a very limited marketing budget—or none!—we approached well-known figures...

NK: Like Gough Whitlam.

RC: Yes. And historians like Humphrey McQueen and Geoffrey Dutton, and got their endorsements, and the book took off. And as a result
of that we were approached by Penguin, very quickly.

Another point to add here is that someone once said of small presses, “their first big hurdle is their first big success”. That was certainly true for us and A Fortunate Life. The book almost sent us broke! It took off so quickly, before it had even been released, really. The orders were such that the first print-run was gone and we didn’t have the money to pay for a new print-run. So we took out a little low-interest loan to do that. But within weeks of those copies arriving from the printer we had to reprint again. And Penguin came to us then and said, “we’ve seen you have this interesting book, are you interested in selling it?” And we said, no, but we’ll lease it. And so we leased the rights to A Fortunate Life, and they still are leased. We are on a percentage of earnings, with the author-estate, for every copy sold and the lease has been renewed three times now, I think. The book initially was released as a softcover but it was doing so well Penguin asked if we would lease hardback rights as well, which we did, and they issued a hardback “Australian Classic” edition. There was a talking book and a condensed version too. So we broadened the number of editions of that book and sold TV rights for a television series, and there was even a stage play based on the book.

NK: Were the TV rights with FACP alone, or shared with Penguin?

RC: The TV rights were with us and the author. The TV rights bought us a warehouse and that’s worked very well for us. Local TV scriptwriter, Ken Kelso was the first to come and talk to us about doing a script of the book. He had written an award-winning film script for a film set in Tasmania, Manganinnie, that had a bit of a buzz about it at the time. Ken didn’t have any money, but because we were supportive of local writers, we offered him an option on the rights to produce a TV version, which he ultimately sold on to Channel 9, or PBL, in the form of his script.

The other fortunate thing about this, for us, was that Ken had gone to school with a woman called Sally Morgan, and they had remained friends. And when Sally told Ken she was thinking of writing her family story he told her to come and talk to me. She came down with some writing, a chapter, or two, that eventually didn’t end up in the book – well, not in that form. Like a lot of first-time writers, the chapters she brought in were made up of bits and pieces pulled together thematically rather than running
chronologically. She was unsure how to proceed at that stage. From memory, at that stage she had interviewed and recorded her mother and hoped also to record her uncle and grandmother. But she was unsure how to use that material. We talked her through it and it was out of those discussions that she found the final form that the book took. That is the usual way I go with most inexperienced writers – simply follow the chronology and tell it first-person. I suggested the oral stuff be inserted in the narrative at the point it was told to her, so it fell in naturally. It’s the simplest way for new writers, because they don’t have to create or imagine a form for it. They just follow what they know. I also suggested something I often tell inexperienced writers – focus on one era, one chapter at a time, step by step. Think, what did I do and what happened then? If, in doing this, other things not immediately relevant occur to you, take notes and go back to them later after you’ve finished the particular chapter, the particular part of the story you are working on.

First-time writers often don’t know how to manage the full range of material they’re dealing with unless they start to break it down into the natural chronological order. And that worked very well with My Place. Around the time we were working on My Place, the lease on A Fortunate Life was up for one of its renewals and we negotiated with Penguin a distribution deal for all of our books, and that deal remains in place to this day. Penguin is our distributor, under contract; they distribute outside Western Australia, we distribute within WA. We were the first people Penguin had taken on outside their own stable of imprints. Since then they’ve taken on the distribution of a number of other publishers, local and international. I think we started the arrangement in May 1984 and that was the month that My Place came out. It was the first title under this new arrangement and it just took off. Interestingly, I thought this should be a good and important book, one that should be read widely. People forget that, at that time, in terms of fiction, women’s experience was starting to be noticed, a market for it was developing, and to a lesser extent, it was the same with non-fiction. And there had been some work by Aboriginal writers, but not a great deal. We felt that with the recent bicentenary and interest in Australian narratives, My Place would do well. And we did the same thing we did with A Fortunate Life, we got key people to endorse it, and it grew from there. Within the first few weeks of getting it out into shops it began to sell incredibly well and Penguin came to us to offer another lease agreement. But we were
able to say, “well, we have good distribution now, so we can handle it, thanks very much!” So we’ve retained the rights to My Place and the figures for it must gradually be closing in on those for A Fortunate Life. My Place would have sold over 600,000 copies and A Fortunate Life around a million. Now, often you only get one book that performs like this in the career of a small, independent press and we’ve had two. And of course people start to say, when are you going to pull out the next one?

NK: You’ve diversified by genre and sub-genre quite a lot as well, and have quite a mix of books. What would you say is your main emphasis?

RC: We’ve always seen ourselves primarily as a literary publisher. That’s the core of our list and we see our task as developing literary writers and literary writing.

NK: You also keep publishing poetry when many other presses have discontinued that genre.

RC: We publish three poetry titles a year when, yes, most presses don’t do any. But it’s a commitment we have, a sense of supporting that form.

NK: You published John Kinsella early on, and he has gone on to establish Salt, has an international reputation, and positions at Cambridge University and Kenyon College.

RC: Yes and the Salt poetry list seems to be growing, certainly in England. Our relationship with John has worked very well over the years. We published his first book and he says we did a lot of work to develop his career as a poet in those early years. Now that he has so many contacts, in Australia and around the world, that has worked very well for us, in many ways.

NK: You now publish children’s picture books and Young Adult fiction. How did that development come about?

RC: It was driven by demand. We were getting manuscripts from writers even though we weren’t publishing in that area. And a few of the
people we couldn't look at went on to be successful, elsewhere.

NK: Can you name some writers who got away?

RC: Well, there was a young fella called Shaun Tan. We saw talent there but we couldn't help him because we weren't publishing in that area. Within twelve months we totally changed direction regarding picture books and went back to him but by then someone else had snaffled him. So, he's a big name that got away. Glynn Parry is another one. He was sending in Young Adult manuscripts and we were saying, “Sorry, Glynn, we’re not publishing in that area.” There were two reasons for that. One is that, as a small publisher, you have limited resources and if you try to spread yourself too widely, too quickly, you run the risk of diminishing the core of what you already are doing, and doing well. The other reason is that it takes a while to build up in-house expertise so you know what you're looking at and have a chance of making reasonably intelligent decisions. Even though you can use freelance people I still think that you have to have a good sense in-house of what the particular form is about and who the audience is. So I did a lot of homework, talking, over quite a period, to a lot of writers and academics, teachers, and librarians who specialised in kids’ books. I read a lot of kids’ books, and really immersed myself in that area for a long time. I received lots of advice – as with any area, some of it contradictory because people have strong, differing views. And after some time we felt we were in a position to begin feeling our way in this area of publishing with some confidence. And basically that’s how we work with every area. In a real sense it’s driven by authors who are looking for an outlet for their work. For example, moving into what is called “creative non-fiction” was an obvious direction to go in; it was so adjacent to what we were doing anyway as literary publishers. That was a logical, an easy step to take. Others have been more difficult, for various reasons.

NK: You also moved into crime fiction when you published Dave Warner’s City of Light.3

RC: Yes, we tried that. In order to survive this long, it's a juggling act of cross-subsidisation. We receive a small grant from the State Government of WA, through the Department of the Arts, but
that is about 10% of our operating budget. The rest has to come from sales. And poetry, you can’t publish other than at a loss. So we have to look at other ways of broadening our list to subsidise some of the more uneconomic things we do. Literary fiction is becoming harder and harder to sell now, even at break-even. For every one that does reasonably well, there are four or five that struggle to earn back their author advance.

NK: That’s a general point you’re making about literary publishing in Australia. What do you see is happening there?

RG: I hate these kinds of labels, but what is called “middlebrow fiction” is now dominating shops, along with that crossover of a personal narrative or “life story”, in fiction or non-fiction form. These have certainly taken over, or merged into, what was the literary fiction market. You’ll notice that there’s now a whole range of writing that is presented, packaged, as if it were serious fiction but is not necessarily that. So one of the things we’ve had to do is look at different ways of earning income to help us survive. To pay the wages, keep the operation going and continue to do all the things we want to do we have to try to get a proper mix, have some more commercial books to support the less commercial. So we’ve gone into cookbooks, gardening books.

NK: They are often very good sellers.

RG: They are. But the important thing we’ve realised – and this is another reason we’ve survived, and why small publishers who survive do survive – is that you’ve got to find the niche in the market that the big mainstream publishers aren’t covering. You can’t compete head-to-head.

NK: So what’s your point of entry in the cookbook area given that books by Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson are out there, tied in with TV shows?

RG: Well, you don’t try to do books like that. You wouldn’t call the books we do “cookbooks”, but rather, “food-based” books that include elements other than recipes. We’re about to do a book called Feasts and Friends. You might have seen a few months ago on SBS an item
on a programme that was run here, through St Vincent de Paul, I think, to assist recent immigrant women and refugee women who were on temporary visas and so forth. They started a thing called “Women in the Kitchen” as a support. It was a social opportunity for women from a whole range of cultural backgrounds who were isolated here, to get together once a week around a big kitchen table. They shared stories and recipes, and it became a life-line for many of them. One of the women involved in that programme approached us and said, “are you interested in doing a book on us?” So out of that has grown this book that is a combination: it includes a narrative from each of the eight women (one from the Sudan, one from Vietnam, one from Afghanistan, one from Liberia, and so on), regarding their background story and their story of coming to Australia. Then there are eight or nine recipes from each of them, and they talk about the culture of food in their countries of origin as much as specific recipes. All the preliminary feedback we’ve had from our marketing people says that this book should be really successful. Again, it’s not competing directly with the Jamie Olivers’, it’s aimed at a niche that nobody else seems to be working in.

We’ve done the same sort of thing with our gardening books, and have also done some local personality-based books. We did an autobiographical book with a local radio person and that is doing well all over Australia. Again, it’s recognising what your core market is and working hard to expand from that core. It’s true for any publishing but is especially the case with small presses. You can’t run a hit and miss kind of publishing, hope some strike and remainder the rest, you really do have to work on finding a core audience to support each title. And where you can build on that you start to earn enough to begin to support less commercially viable, yet important texts – like poetry. Now, with modern technology, the margins are better for reprints than they used to be. We tend to do small initial print runs and if the title takes off, we reprint. So you identify what your core market might be for about the first twelve to eighteen months and print that, so you’re not warehousing a lot of books if it doesn’t take off, and you’re not paying the larger print bill, say for 10,000, when you’re only selling 2,000. We are now much more careful about the size of print runs and trying to identify exactly what the market might be.
NK: What print-runs do you do across that range of books we've been discussing - literary fiction, poetry, food-based books, gardening books?

RG: First-up literary fiction would be about 1,500. For a writer who's started to get an audience you'd do 3,000 and for someone you thought would do really well, 5,000. With a general non-fiction book, especially if it has pictorial stuff in it, you're looking at a minimum of 3,000. Anything under 1,500, unless it's poetry, is not really viable. Otherwise there would have to be a strong cultural, literary, social, or political value in the material, making us see it as important to publish. But then, the extent to which we can do that involves saying, "we're taking a risk on this one, what cover do we have within the rest of the programme?"

NK: Other small and independent Australian presses have buy-in titles that occasionally help them through a difficult time. That is, their financial fortunes might be assisted by a book they didn't initiate from original manuscript to publication. This was the case with Wakefield Press when they had Australian rights for a Guide to Harry Potter and a Guide to Lord of the Rings. And Pete Ayrton said Serpent's Tail was assisted greatly by having the English language rights to The Sexual Life of Catherine M, which retired a lot of debt. By definition, FACP can't do things like that.

RG: Well, as with any business, you have your lean times and difficulties, and so far we've got through those situations. Over the years I've noticed that the year after the rest of Australia has a slump, we seem to have a slump in WA. For example, 1988 was bad in the rest of Australia and it hit us in 1989.

NK: That was the period of the $200,000 debt, mentioned in an article in The West Australian.

RG: I didn't know that had made it into the final printed article! Actually, it was a projected end of year debt on the basis of a poor first quarter performance. We had to lay staff off, and strip down to our ... underwear! And really negotiate the payment regime with our creditors. Because publishers can't "go dark", like theatres can, you have to keep stuff coming out. And we did, but we cut back our list
and delayed some titles. We had to strip the organisation back, make enormous cutbacks but that was the worst of it. Generally, with small press publishing, you never make any money. It's always a year by year, week by week, month by month affair, and cash flow is a constant problem. It's hideous. You can have a couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of books out there and you're on the phone chasing payment while someone is on another line chasing payment from you. That's constant, and ulcer-inducing, and is a reality of this life. The important thing is, never look for a single title to be your salvation. It can work for a while, and we've all had them ...

NK: As University of Queensland Press had Peter Carey for a long while.

RC: Yes, but you can never count on them. I'm not a betting man, I've never bet in my life, but I understand that when you bet, you put your money around a bit. I don't understand anything about stock markets but again, I gather the idea is to spread the investment around a bit. And that's what you've got to do when running a small press, you've got to minimise your risks and maximise possibilities. You never think, this is going to be so big we'll print 30,000 copies! No. You still print 10,000 and if it's as big as you hope, you'll do three print-runs. You won't make quite as much but you'll still be there. That's why you hear stories about publishers who invest everything in the next big thing, and then it isn't, and suddenly they are no more, or are bought out and become an imprint of another large publisher.

NK: In September 2005, The Weekend Australian ran a glowing tribute to you, Clive Newman and FACP, and yet more recently there have been reports in The Australian saying that FACP is in financial trouble.

RC: From about December 2005 through to now the book trade has gone through a particularly tough time, resulting in most small or independent publishers experiencing increasing cash flow issues. The main causes of the current difficulties are the following. First, the market for literary fiction and non-fiction - a core of our program - has greatly diminished in recent years. This has been widely reported in the Australian media, for example in a major piece in the Weekend Australian's Review lift-out in April or so this year. Second, and
in part, I guess, as a result of the trade liberalisation measures introduced in the book trade by the federal government, figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that thirty percent of the sales of small publishers have been lost to large publishers within the past decade. Third, ABS figures also show that income from sales of new Australian books has plateaued in the past five years, while production costs have continued to increase. Finally, you have the addition of the 10% GST to the cost of books. However, as a result of a strategic review of our operations and an ongoing commitment of funding assistance from ArtsWA, FACP is currently implementing a plan to address its immediate difficulties and will continue to provide a vibrant publishing program in Western Australia into the future.

NK: For many years now, analogies have been drawn between mainstream book publishing and mainstream Hollywood filmmaking: each industry invests most of its resources in a few “blockbuster” or “tent-pole” titles hoping that will carry the day. I’m guessing that small/independent publishers would need to find some other ways of going about their business.

RC: That’s why I always argue – and it’s a view that is taken on by FACP – that we are not a leading title publisher, investing heavily in a “front list,” and crossing our fingers and hoping for the best with the rest. We don’t think that these are our three leading titles for the month, or the year. Ideally, every book should be seen as a lead title! Instead of saying, “how do we earn back on these major outlays?” we say, “how do we earn an extra ten percent, across the board, for every book?” Or as many books as possible. So you’re always looking for marketing angles to represent the books into the bookshops, you’re trying to work out how you can get that little bit more out of all of them. If one, two, or three take off, that’s great but if that doesn’t happen, then at least enough of the rest have earned sufficiently to keep it all ticking over. One of the advantages we have is that we’re a non-profit organization. We don’t pay dividends, so we don’t have to look after investors in that sense. Our investors are our authors and our employees. So breaking even, although less than we’d ever strive for and settle for, is at least enough to survive on.

NK: You occasionally have a sponsorship deal with some of the books you
publish. How does that work?

RC: Occasionally, with a big art book or something like that, we’ll go to a corporation or institution because they have an established interest in the subject. Sometimes we can attract an outright sponsorship. Or sometimes they’ll pre-buy presentation copies for clients. That’s how that sort of thing usually works. But opportunities are limited.

NK: Have you ever thought of having a fund-raising drive, some kind of “Friends of Fremantle Arts Centre Press”, whereby you could generate some funds that would not be tied to any specific deal, that simply would constitute a way for these individuals and groups to show they approve of what you are doing and they want to help you continue?

RC: No, we haven’t done that. One of the problems for arts organisations is that there’s been a lot of pressure to work with the corporate sector. But there’s not a lot of money available and those corporations that want to do something tend not to be attracted to books. Generally, they tend to like big, black-tie events and books aren’t black tie events. So that’s difficult, and there is a real limit on the money that’s available in that direction.

NK: For a few years you had a joint venture imprint, Curtin Books, with Curtin university here in Perth. Although the books in the Curtin Books imprint were academic non-fiction works, the link with Curtin seemed to me appropriate given that they have the longest-running university course in creative writing in WA, and also bearing in mind that you published the early work of Elizabeth Jolley, who taught at Curtin for more than twenty years.

RC: There is so much research going on in universities. We get so many theses coming across our desks and 99% of them aren’t publishable as books but many could be, in time, given the effort. We always thought there was more to be done in that area and Curtin wanted to develop their own publishing outlet. And since it’s a small town, and we all know one another, we said “why set up your own infrastructure when it already exists here at FACP?” And that’s how that happened. It took us a while to come up with the right formula for the joint venture but it happened, and was copied by other
places. After producing a wide range of creative non-fiction books – 12 titles over three years – Curtin University was not able to continue its commitment to the program, and so that joint venture wound up in May 2006.

But the big problem with our organisation at the moment is ensuring it will survive its founding staff.

NK: Well, managing transition is a problem for all media tycoons!

RC: But unlike some tycoons, I'd be happy to pass the baton on! I'm not big-noting myself here but I doubt that we'd be able to find someone with my years of experience – and the same is true of Clive Newman as general manager – without paying a lot more than we are paid. And I guess people who have been with a press, or any arts organisation, for a long time, and have a passion for what it's all about, put up with a range of things – long hours, low pay, limited resources – not to mention headaches, ulcers, early dementia. I don't really mean "put up with" because I don't think about it in those terms. It's more than a job, it's your passion, it's your life, it's what you are. I'm not saying I'm irreplaceable, it's just that, for any organisation the transition from long-term or founding incumbents who have become synonymous with the organisation, to someone new can be very difficult.

NK: What's your time frame for working out how to plan the transition?

RC: We're in the process now. I'm 54 and Clive is 57, so over the next five to ten years we're likely to be moving on, so we need to be thinking very seriously now about succession, and that's what our Board is doing and what we are doing. Our biggest concern is to keep the place running and have it in a position such that it can continue long after we're not part of it.

NK: At the start of the interview you mentioned that on first coming to Fremantle Arts Centre Press, you admired things like the Hackney publishing project. What presses around at the moment do you admire? Who is doing work that you think is worthwhile?

RC: Well, Allen & Unwin in recent years have been impressive. I certainly have admired Text Publishing. I don't know what's going to
happen there with the change of management and change of ownership, but it's important for Australian publishing that they maintain a strong presence. I admire anyone who struggles along like us. I admire Wakefield, the fact that they've survived as long as they have. And specialist publishers like Spinifex, Aboriginal Studies Press, Magabala, National Library of Australia. And I think everybody has to admire somebody like Canongate in Scotland, an extraordinary publisher.

My first love is quality literature and so the publishers I admire are always going to be people who are being bold about doing that. I think that's why Canongate excites me, not only for what they're publishing but how they're doing it, how they're prepared to take a risk with quality literature in a world awash with a kind of safe “McDonalds” literature.

NK: Are there particular cultural events or festivals that are important for FACP to attend?

RG: Yes, our local festival of Perth Writers Week, the Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney Writers festivals are events we always try to attend in one way or another. And various other festivals every now and then. We are represented each year at the Frankfurt International Book Fair, but the problem with us, frankly, is that we're so flat out keeping the place turning over that we don't have a lot of time to go to as many events as we should or would like to attend. Every time I get to a writer's festival or even go to New Norcia for a weekend to give an address, I straight away think, "well, I'm leaving my desk and look at how much I've got to do here, what will I do about it? I'll take that stuff home and try to finish it on Saturday." And that's what you're always thinking. You just don't have the time to maintain links at the level you would like to. We've got a full-time marketing person who does a lot of the link work for us to newspapers, festivals and specialist conferences through to international things like the Frankfurt Book Fair. We've been doing Frankfurt for quite some time and have sold a lot of rights to our books to other territories.

NK: Are some countries/territories better than others, Europe as opposed to the US?
RC: Well, yes! We've had success with indigenous titles in Germany and in the Netherlands. We've done well with fiction in Spain and Greece. When it comes to translations it's pretty much into the European countries. English language countries can be hard. North America is tough because you're competing against so much.

NK: Both Brenda Walker and Gail Jones published a couple of books with you and then went elsewhere. This must happen quite a bit - you bring along, mentor, new writers only to see them go elsewhere.

RC: That's always going to be a difficulty for a small publisher. Ultimately, for one reason or another you're not seen as offering what the bigger publishers can offer, and from day one we've lived with that. Elizabeth Jolley published her first four books with us and then ended up with Penguin via UQP. There are other writers who've stayed with us. When writers leave, the reasons tend to be the larger advances that other publishers can pay. There is also a perception that the distribution is better elsewhere. And sometimes it can be a feeling that there is more status to be had elsewhere, with a big multinational publisher. And I guess occasionally they might just not like us anymore!

NK: In retaining the rights to the first four Elizabeth Jolley books, it means that readers who might have encountered her writing first by way of Penguin, will still return to FACP to get the earlier books. The more a larger press promotes the later career work of a writer in their stable, the better it is for the smaller press who has some of the earlier works. Your backlist titles enter into a dialogue with the bigger press and the later work. Pete Ayrton said that after one of his crime writers, George Pelecanos, went off to Orion: the more money Orion spent advertising the latest Pelecanos novel the better it was for the Serpent's Tail backlist.

RC: That's true up to a point. We've had writers whose new book has been pushed by the new publisher, and we have dressed up the older work and put it back out there. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But on balance I think it is rare that a small publisher really earns back on the investment they make. Perhaps the benefit is to Australian literature, perhaps to the large publisher. Of course when a large advance is paid they not only have to earn
that back but turn a profit as well. In those cases book sales figures which may have been a success for a small publisher are a failure for the large publisher. And as a result authors can soon find themselves without a home. We have writers who come back to us, for various reasons, sometimes because they are dissatisfied with the editorial work they receive at the other press. While we don’t have big cheque books, we try to compensate in other ways. We are a very collaborative publisher, at every level of the operation. Our authors have more say about what their books will look like, what might be on the cover, than they would with probably ninety-nine per cent of other publishers. We put a lot of effort into working out the best way to communicate the author’s intentions to the reader and when authors go elsewhere, while they might have received a bigger advance, they are often disappointed to find that they don’t receive the level of attention they received with us.

I also know authors who have gone elsewhere because they thought their print runs would be bigger, and they’re not! They’re basically the same. The problem for us as a small publisher is that you must *constantly* be breeding new talent. Even if you’re the breeding ground for other publishers down the track you’re also the breeding ground for yourself in the first instance, you’re constantly investing in your own future. So there’s a lot of research and development, if you like, and it’s the backbone of the organisation, not only in terms of developing writers but also for viewing possibilities in ideas and trends. It might not be a blockbuster but it might be a solid little performer, and that’s all we need, as opposed to an investor-owned publisher. Some of those authors have a modest start but that kind of support and encouragement gives them a leg up either as a writer or in terms of their profile, and their second and third books do a lot better for us. That’s why you are constantly turning it over with an eye for what is possible in non-obvious places. We pay as much attention to unsolicited manuscripts as any publisher in the world.

NK: You receive more than ten manuscripts a week. How much of that do you farm out?

RC: Everything that comes in is looked at. We have one person who is an assessment editor. She does a quick skim of everything, identifying manuscripts she will read more closely. After that a manuscript
might be read by one or two more people within the organisation, certainly before reaching acceptance stage. We have weekly editorial meetings and look at what's there to read and if we find that none of us can look at it immediately we might send it off to an outside reader. Sometimes we cover them ourselves, sometimes not. In other cases, as with any publisher, when we get a manuscript we think looks interesting but it's not in anyone's field here, we send it off to a specialist reader, sometimes two readers. Any research-based manuscripts we handle the same as academic publishers would, we get expert advice from the field.

NK: You've done some sports books. Rugby Union is coming to Perth as a substantial presence. Had you thought of doing a book on the building up of the Perth-based team, and the place of Rugby in a predominantly AFL and soccer market? It could sell into the Eastern States.

RC: I'm not sure how many people would be interested in a book like that. I don't know how Rugby works. We did a book by Matt Price from The Australian on the Fremantle Dockers which did very well in WA but barely scratched the surface in the eastern states. AFL is very tribal and if you are a Collingwood or a Hawthorn supporter you are unlikely to read a book about the Fremantle Dockers.

NK: You said earlier that literary fiction is your main interest. What current literary fiction appeals to you?

RC: One of my little tragedies is that I'm reading and editing so many manuscripts that I do not get as much opportunity to read other books as I would wish. But of recent reading I think Michel Faber is an extraordinary writer, John Banville, Margaret Atwood, Colm Toibin, Claire Messud. As a reader I'm also particularly interested in memoir, history, travel writing, cultural studies, science. Most recently I really enjoyed Jonathan Weiner's book on the Galapagos Islands, *The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in our Time.* It's a fascinating story.

NK: I loved hearing that the TV version of *A Fortunate Life* helped you buy a warehouse. Have you pitched other books to TV and film people?
RC: All the time. But, as you know, for every film that finally gets up there are hundreds that get stalled somewhere. We’ve had a lot get to that stage of stalled finance. We have a few irons in the fire there now but there are always irons in the fire in the film and TV industry. A documentary drama was made recently of one of our older books, *The Last of the Nomads* about Aboriginal people brought out of the desert. So, suddenly that old book got a new life. And a number of our books have been read on radio and been done as theatre dramatisations, or radio plays.

NK: To return to your comment on literary fiction being a struggle to publish over the last few years, you have had recent success with two books of that type, *Rhubarb*, and *Under a Tin-Grey Sari*.

RC: Yes, we had two first-time writers who really took off in the last twelve months. Craig Silvey is a 21-year-old and his book *Rhubarb* has had rave reviews around the country and is flying through its second printing and was taken up by the “one-book-one-city” program here in Perth.

NK: What is that?

RC: It’s a reading promotion campaign first done in California, I think, and recently done successfully in Brisbane, and now we’re doing it here as part of the Festival of Perth. It’s a partnership between the State Library, Chevron Corporation, *The West Australian* newspaper and local booksellers. It promotes the reading of a single book by the whole state, like a big book club involving schools, local libraries, private book clubs, a wonderful opportunity for any writer, particularly with their first book. And, of course, pretty good for the publisher.

As soon as I read the manuscript for *Rhubarb* I thought here is a guy who will have a career. The fluency was amazing. He’s a young writer and in many ways he’s a young writer on the page but in other ways he’s very mature. Like someone once said of Bruce Springsteen, “I’ve seen the future of rock and roll”. Sometimes you see a young writer and you say, “I see a future career here, I see a writer who’s going to go somewhere”, and hopefully that career is with us, but maybe not. Still, it’s exciting just to see that.

A bit earlier than Craig Silvey and *Rhubarb*, and once again that
rare combination of a work of literary fiction from a first-time writer, we had Wayne Ashton's *Under a Tin-Grey Sari*. He calls himself an Anglo-Bango because he was born in Bangladesh, though it wasn't called that then. The book's in East Pakistan, as it was, and has sold extremely well. It had outstanding reviews, was featured on the ABCs “Australia Talks Books”, and has been a darling of the book club circuit. Both those books have been optioned for film scripts, but whether anything happens there, who knows.

**NK:** Options are relatively cheap here aren't they? You really want the big cheque that comes with the “first day of principal photography”.

**RC:** Absolutely! That was the thing about the TV version of *A Fortunate Life* – the first day of shooting you see some real money. It's a different level, the money that's involved in film and television as against the book trade.

**NK:** One occasionally hears stories of writers who feel they sold their rights, say to a film, too early for too little, or they hang out waiting for a better offer, and the deal dissolves.

**RC:** Yes, similarly with selling publication rights overseas, to another territory, and the author says, “I think we can do better than that”. We are basically acting as the agent in those situations for many of our authors and occasionally they mess around for so long that the offer drops, and nobody else takes it up. It's always a delicate thing. As an author you want to get the best deal you can when you first take a manuscript to a publisher, but it's tough getting published, so where do you draw the line in saying, “I'll accept that”? It's tough for first-time authors who often don't realise that if the book is reasonably successful we, the publishers, would earn more or less what they earn. There's this presumption that we're earning much, much more. Obviously we're looking to earn enough to cover our costs but beyond that is what you call real money and you don't see a lot of that.

**NK:** Do you always sign authors up on one-by-one book deals, or do you try to lock them into a multiple-book deal, as many large publishers do?

**RC:** We do one-book deals. It's never really been part of our thinking to try to anything other than that.
NK: Could you say a bit more about the economics of running an organisation like FACP? I have a good sense of how hard you all work, and how close to the financial edge you are working all the time. How many people are involved and how much money?

RG: I guess all up, we’re paying the equivalent of seven or eight full-time wages. That involves a lot more than seven or eight people! In broad we need a turnover in excess of a million and a quarter dollars a year. A million is a tough year, it’s survival level, just. We do about thirty-five books a year and that costs a lot of money and we’re not buying in titles, they’re all our responsibility from editing stage right through. So it’s an enormous workload. You’re not only reading and assessing a lot of manuscripts all the time, you’re doing the full range of things associated with all the various stages of assessment, editing, production, marketing and distribution, all the time. Everyone is multi-skilled in a way.

A strange thing happens when I meet authors to talk about their books. Even if I’m editing their manuscripts, I might be doing two or three others that would be at different stages of completion as well as checking proofs, and so unless I literally sit down with their manuscript ten minutes or so before they come in, to re-familiarise myself with the work, and recall what we’re talking about, I can forget the names of the characters or what the story was about. This sometimes happens when I meet authors at functions and they say, “what do you think of the manuscript?” And although it is something I’ve been working on and have read two or three times, I still have to stop and think which of the manuscripts I am currently working on, or have just completed, it is.

NK: So would $1.5 million a year be the sum that would give FACP the sort of breathing space it really needs?

RG: Yes, but by then increased costs will mean you’re still chasing your tail. Experience can easily make you pessimistic – or is that realistic? Publishing would not have survived were it not for modern technology. All the production on computers, editing and designing, has helped cut costs in significant ways. But compared with other industries our products have not kept parity price-wise with other products. Relatively, the retail price of books has moved very slowly, so while we cut costs, it’s actually in order to stand still. And in order
to stand still we have to take on more work. So, ultimately, all the technological advances really have done is enable us to get more ulcers, not make life easier. But, still it makes it all possible – "I can’t go on. I’ll go on". I’ve always been particularly attracted to Beckett’s work.

NK: Has the Net helped, in that it makes you national and global very cheaply? People can visit your site and order books.

RC: Oh yes it’s been critical. We can see the patterns starting to emerge, and I think the Net will be increasingly important. Having a good website is crucial for a small publisher, especially if you are doing texts that will readily be used in education, especially tertiary education. At that level we are dealing with people who are very web literate and the website is where they expect to find information about new titles and other news. So you have to be mindful of that, and utilise it. We’re doing a major overhaul and redesign of our website at the moment.

The other thing about the Net is that, just as we have hardback and softback publishing, and audio publishing, I think web publication increasingly will be an important place of publication for some titles. I don’t think it will replace the other forms, but certainly for research-based works, dictionaries and reference works, online publication is the logical thing. These kinds of works already exist on CD ROM and so forth. Just to be accessible online is one way that kind of publishing will go. It’s already happening but I think increasingly what historically has been called academic publishing will go in that direction. Because again, it’s being delivered to a market that is increasingly literate in that form and will be continue to be so. And for small publishers, that form of publication is multinational, more so than the traditional book form. Although the book is portable in its own way, it isn’t necessarily international in the way the web can be. Whilst I think hand-held book devices will never take over from the hand-held ink-on-paper book, electronic reading devices will be an alternative form of publishing that will develop and grow. All of that has yet to settle down. The final form certainly hasn’t arrived as yet. Whatever happens there, the basic work that we currently do is not affected. Good editing, good design, good presentation is the same thing whether you put it out in hardback, paperback or online.
I remember some years back it was predicted audio books would wipe the rest of the industry off the face of the earth. Well, it didn’t and audio books didn’t grow anywhere near what people expected, though it remains a significant, small area. But certainly, electronic publication one way or another will be a much bigger thing than audio books.

NK: Has the increasingly visible, or growing literary prize culture been significant for your Press?

RC: Prizes have been very important, particularly in the early days. Operating from Western Australia, working away from the centres of Melbourne and Sydney, has always had its difficulties, but there has been some advantage to that. In the early days, particularly, for our size and the small number of books we did, we were really very successful in the number of reviews we got from around Australia. Maybe it was novelty value.

We found with literary prizes, from the outset, that unless it costs a fortune to enter, you enter! Because opinion-makers judge prizes and even if you don’t win, if you are attempting to draw attention to your list and key people are reading for this poetry prize, or that fiction or history prize, then they’re seeing your books regularly. And they talk to other people. And then when you win one every now and then, it helps the editors of the literary pages of journals and newspapers, dailies, weeklies to start looking more closely at your titles. With some prizes there are advantages in terms of direct sales, some more than others. In our experience the Miles Franklin is the one that leads to the biggest number of sales. After that it would be the NSW Premier’s and the Victorian Premier’s awards on about a par. In terms of the response from readers, with most prizes sales drop away pretty quickly but you do see an initial little sales-spike here and there. In Western Australia we have the WA Literary Awards and we’ve had several winners of these. While that doesn’t affect Australia-wide sales, it certainly affects the local market. Because, let’s face it, when you walk into a bookshop, you can be overwhelmed by the choice. I’m in the trade and I’m overwhelmed! They’re all saying “buy me!” but it can be the Tower of Babel with so many voices of relatively equal pitch, so you can be drawn to whatever little badge or stripe is on a book, or a to a quotation from someone famous.
The other big prizes are the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards. Even being short-listed there is good because children's librarians, teachers, parents buy off those gold and silver badges. So even short-listing can lead to a significant jump in sales. And to win means a very big jump. Yes, prizes are important.

NK: And Benang won the Miles Franklin in 2000.

RC: Yes, it's a very serious, and for some readers perhaps difficult, literary novel, but an extraordinary book. Getting the Miles Franklin sticker on the cover and the media coverage that followed the winning of the award, helped sales and the author's and publisher's profiles greatly. Benang has sold extremely well for a literary title.

In 2005 we published 35 titles covering all genres. Among the notable literary titles to appear in 2005 and early 2006 were new poetry collections by three leading contemporary Australian poets, Philip Salom's The Well Mouth, John Mateer's Ancient Capital of Images, John Kinsella's The New Arcadia. We published strong life-story-based texts by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown (Kayang and Me) and Peter Docker (Someone Else's Country), and novels by Chris McLeod (Man of Water), Ffion Murphy (Devotion) and Graham Kershaw (Docketail Road).

Notes


Grasslands

On moist midgy nights
eels are slippery as lightning
in the paddocks wheezy with mist.

I wait on day to wake,
for the fences to cement their
loyalty

for the insouciant cattle to rouse,
while my eyes graze the open palms
of fields

that are having a blood baptism,
their wonder leaching
away

with the gargle of rain,
with the far sea’s choppy breathing.
ABANDONED HOUSE

I have been passing by this house for over twenty years.
I don't know how it escaped the big fires in '39 and '64.

Always been meaning to stop and take a look at it.
Before it was too late.

Now I start to walk around the house I see it is in worse condition than I
thought.
Time and the elements have done their work.

The big winds blow in this way.
I have seen several houses and sheds collapse sideways.

The persimmon tree was always loaded with mythical golden fruit in the
season.
But I think the long drought has killed it.

Blackberries climbing in the windows.
Not a pane of glass left.

The doors last longer than the window panes.

The old houses have the old fruiting trees.
Quinces. Figs. Little bitter China pears.
Often all that is left of a homestead is some gnarly old trees.
And perhaps a chimney.
Or some scattered bricks in the undergrowth.

I've never seen the house from this angle before.
The barn is in better condition than the house.
Bales of this season’s hay stacked high.

I stepped inside the house.
It felt like trespassing.
But I trespassed.

What is left of the kitchen.
The old stove where they cooked their meals.

The front bedroom.
The ceiling is caving in.
Not a quick death by fire for this house but a slow, lingering disintegration.

As far as I can guess this is an old apple grader.
After people stopped living here, they used it to store equipment.

One last look out of the window towards the road.
So as I pass by the house I know what the reverse angle is.

The finial is gone.
Probably white cockatoos.
They love to chew on finials.
I don’t know this yet but next year the persimmon tree will be laden with fruit.
my father
who may not be my father
after all (stem cell tests)
is forty years older than me

my mother
who is dead eight years now
was thirty years older than me
until she died gruesomely

my son
if he were to be born
this year
would be forty years younger than me

my illness
is only fourteen months old
and looks like a winner
wiping away my predicted life expectancy

by at least thirty years – the best years of your life!

my resilience
is yielding to steroid intake
which takes four hours to infuse
bloating me as if I had already died

my foul-smelling body
shall take just fourteen seconds to dissipate
into cinders into shards
weighing just four kilos on average

all this arithmetic
seems so fixed
against my incompleteness
my lifetime’s search for comforting
MEGAN MCKINLAY

NEW POETRY, 2005–2006

It is tempting to begin with the enormity of the enterprise: some fifty volumes of poetry, 5000 words. More alarmingly put, approximately one poem per word. The equation, of course, is nonsensical, but the dilemma remains: how to give any kind of meaningful overview of a year of poetry in a handful of pages? If Sydney Morning Herald reviewer Andrew Riemer is to be believed, the very act of reviewing at this juncture has its limitations. In his recent review of Seamus Heaney’s latest collection, Riemer says that poetry “demands to be lived with, sometimes for decades, not praised or dismissed lightly”. On this basis, he offers the disclaimer that his own comments can only be “first impressions”. There is a rather circular argument to be made here: if serious assessment of poetry demands years, then why bother to review new work at all? The answer, of course, and the reason reviews continue to appear as they do, is that first impressions matter. For many readers, that initial sense of engagement or otherwise is the difference between closing the book or reading further.

In approaching this year’s work, then, I want to argue for the importance of “first impressions”. It seems to me that these so-called “light” responses are important, that they carry their own intrinsic weight, grounded in what might be considered egregiously uncritical notions such as readerly satisfaction or pleasure, and it is from this basis that I proceed. In coming to this task, I do so partly and unavoidably as a sometime poet and occasional academic, but most importantly, as a reader, and in this last category, as someone who approaches a volume of poetry with little more than a vague sense of optimism, the hope that it will engage, challenge, surprise, shake up settled notions. With such optimism in hand, why not, after all, praise or dismiss lightly? Why not place real value on these “impressions” – that pause language gives us when it suddenly exposes the texture of the real, that internal frisson at an unexpected image, a delight in the rhythm of a piece? And why not close the book and set it aside when the work appears willfully
opaque, or pedestrian, or pretentious, or simply fails to convince? In considering this year’s crop of work, I have done all these things.

In attempting an overview, annual anthologies seem the logical point of departure. Now in their third year, both Les Murray’s *The Best Australian Poems 2005* and *The Best Australian Poetry 2005*, guest-edited by Peter Porter, provide a sampling of the work of both established and new poets. Both volumes offer numerous moments of surprise, confrontation, and pleasure, as well as poems which, despite the moniker “best”, seem to me to be less successful – slight, overly prosaic, or insufficiently imagined. Porter reminds us in his introduction of the slipperiness of concepts such as “best”, particularly when dealing with the “embarrassment of riches” he considers himself to have faced in the selection process. Personally, I think there is something marvellous about having two different volumes each declaring themselves to be “best” sitting side-by-side on shelves; if nothing else it emphasises the subjectivity which is an inevitable feature of any review or selection. This is underscored by the fact that, despite the sheer volume of work represented, there is little overlap between the two volumes in terms of content, with Judith Beveridge’s “The Shark” and Craig Sherbourne’s “The Journo”, the only work to appear in both. Porter’s volume contains considerably less material than does Murray’s, a function in large part of the extended contributor notes which are a feature of the former. The other reason Porter’s volume offers far fewer poems than Murray’s is that Porter has chosen a number of extended poems, with work from four contributors alone accounting for over a third of the space allotted. Porter addresses this fact, noting that his decision is an “act of critical evolution”, that one of his concerns is with how poetry might claim back from prose “some of its empowering scope and dramatic force” (xiv). It is with this idea in mind that I want to turn to a brief discussion of the verse novel, a form which surfaces this year in the work of Geoff Page.

It seems churlish to be resistant to something whose resurgence has been credited in places with reconnecting poetry with a wider readership, but I have to confess that on the whole, my reservations about a poem often grow concomitant with its length; when the work moves increasingly towards narrative, too often it seems to sacrifice both focus and the richness of language poetry demands. When the particular demands of narrative incumbent on the novel form are added into the mix, the enterprise becomes a very difficult one indeed. A successful verse novel must achieve a nigh-impossible task – a balancing act or fusion of narrative and poetry in which both elements must pull together. In the service of narrative and character, the quality of the poetry must not be sacrificed, as it is here that the
distinction of the verse novel lies. *Freehold* ranges from the 1840s to the 1980s to cover a broad territory in its exploration of the issue of land rights and reconciliation in Australia. As discourse, it offers a thoughtful and complex engagement with these sensitive issues; as both poetry and narrative, however, it walks an uneasy middle ground, and ultimately fails to convince as either. The characters tend towards stereotype, without either the dimensioning and development one would expect from a novel, and the dialogue, which in its volume here sits rather uncomfortably within the verse form, shows little variance in tone across the entire cast. While it is not without lyrical moments, on the whole, the piece is disappointingly flat. There are poems lurking in here, along with a compelling narrative, and I found myself wondering whether this verse/novel’s concerns might not have been better translated to novella and/or a series of shorter, more tightly focused poems.

Another extended poem, but one which does not aspire in the same way to narrative form, is Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s *The Universe Looks Down*, which is described rather innocuously as a “long poem”. The poem’s basic structure takes the form of seven-line stanzas written primarily in decasyllabics; within this framework, Wallace-Crabbe also uses patterning, with the last word of the first line echoed or repeated at the end of the stanza, and rhyme. Within this structure, the poem gives itself free rein to play, ranging wildly across places, subjects, and times, giving equal weight in a very postmodern way to the classical and the contemporary, delighting in an at-times almost absurd conjoining of the two. There are characters and ideas in abundance here, so many that at times the reader struggles to keep up; then again, one has the sense that confusion is part of the point, and the poem self-consciously addresses itself to this on occasion: “My narrative’s run off the bloody track; / I must take measures now to get it back” (36). This is not narrative in any linear or traditional sense, and those narrative features Wallace-Crabbe makes room for – cast of characters, dialogue, a sense of forward movement and development of themes – never threaten to overpower or flatten the poetic quality of the work. Although there are concessions to ongoing narrative elements, the complexity and compression of the lyric remain primary; *The Universe Looks Down* is a highly charged, zany romp which manages to balance the concerns of both poetry and narrative in a memorable high-wire act.

Other prominent poets to feature in this year’s crop include John Tranter and Shane McCauley. Tranter’s *Urban Myths* brings together 210 poems, of which 40 are new, and 170 represent earlier work, ranging from *Parallax* (1970) to the present. Tranter has indicated that of the selected poems, he
chose those he was most pleased with, but that he also wanted to cover the range of different things he was doing over the years. Tranter loves playing with form, and there is much of the experimental here, along with a range of different structures, from flowing verse narrative to the constraints of haiku and haibun to the sonnet, sestina, and pantoum. The work ranges from the seemingly autobiographical to the brazenly imitative, with Tranter’s ventriloquism on show as he adapts and plays with the work of other poets; if there is a unifying quality here, it is that all of the work is seasoned with Tranter’s characteristic wit, his deep sense of irony and parody. McCauley’s Glassmaker is a slimmer volume, an elegantly designed hardback whose content in many ways seems to reflect the principles of its production values. Many of the poems themselves are concerned with the act of crafting, of representation and translation, and art as a medium for these processes. In “The Art of Sumi Painting”, McCauley explores the relationship between objective reality and representation, the way in which the “alchemy” of the artistic process can act to re-position the real in a kind of transcendent space: all it takes is three simple steps, and “loqats/have ripened beyond all withering” (88), and in the subsequent “Sumi Painting in the Rain”, the steady hand of the artist “here controls the storm” (89). In its references to the scene it depicts, the latter poem is full of movement, but in the end, McCauley reminds us of the untraversable gap between signifier and signified, as “The painting itself is still / as a mountain dawn” (89). The image of the glassblower informs the work in complex ways; the glass bubble created contains a galaxy, but is rendered fragile and potentially transient by the act of representation, always on the point of an irrevocable shattering. There are echoes here of the Japanese concept of aware, a recognition of the pathos and beauty which inheres in the transience of things; when read with this image in mind, a poem such as “Shikata Ganai”, with its evocation of the “blueness of the sky”, the “everyday Monday morning”-ness of the moments before the atomic bomb was released on Hiroshima, becomes chilling in its aesthetic. Here is a world moving inexorably towards its own rupture, in which every moment closer to tragedy is rendered all the more beautiful by the inevitability of its passing.

On an entirely different scale, Jane Williams’ collection The Last Tourist, which draws on motifs of journey and transition to explore a wide range of experiences and states of being, deals in small slices, in fine strokes. With a deft, restrained hand, Williams holds the everyday moment up to the light, exploring and illuminating with careful precision. The opening poem, “Alms”, is forthright in its approach: here, as you “find your self unsure reaching out making a wish / the light cutting off your hand the bowl falling
breaking taking flight” (13), you enter the transformative space of poetry, a space in which everything shifts: shapes are not what they seem, subjects collapse into one another, boundaries of time and space are transgressed, and the “you” of the poem moves increasingly towards uncertainty, a destabilisation of perception and order. Poet and reader traverse the familiar as strangers; under the gaze of “the last tourist”, the known world becomes a site of exploration, a landscape to be travelled and reconfigured. In the poems that follow, Williams invokes this positioning to effect a seamless movement between the visible surfaces of the everyday and the startling depths beneath. Many of these poems dwell upon themes of ageing and loss, and they do so with images that are both unexpected and compassionate. In “Sea change”, “fingers ransack faces for clues to the past ... tongues lose their places momentarily / everything leaks”. At the same time, Williams turns her exploration of the image out to larger ideas: in the line of elderly people, “there’s security in the middle / away from beginnings and ends”, and a woman’s voice “spirals up and up/in the universal language of the homesick” (15). Whatever the objective reality Williams is writing about, her eye is always on something larger, on the connections between these concrete moments and the abstract, connections she allows to speak for themselves, rather than hammering the point home. The reader does not feel the heavy hand of the poet here, but rather “the eye of the poem / blinking / surprising itself / like a paper cut” (57).

Themes of loss, separation, and desire recur also throughout Yve Louis’ The Yellow Dress and Annette Marner’s Women With Their Faces on Fire, both of which I found rather uneven. The early poems in Louis’ collection have a naturalistic quality, and it is in this mode that she is at her best. Sensual poems such as “Other Lives”, “Hub of the World (the old doctor)”, “Inheritance” and “Trust” are elegant in their restraint, engaging with themes of ageing, memory and notions of home. Louis’ work here is firmly grounded in a sense of place, and her landscapes, whether interior or exterior, are convincingly sketched. As the volume progresses, however, Louis moves into rather different territory, and it is here that her footing becomes less sure. The poems in the sections entitled “The Green Hood” and “The Yellow Dress”, are rather overwrought, veering at times towards sentimentality and cliché, and the connections Louis’ seeks to forge between the personal, the metaphysical, and the mythic seem rather strained. Marner’s work also tends towards the sentimental at points – “There is a perfect teddy bear / the child in me / cries for in a dream / but when it comes / it’s wrapped in barbed wire” (29) – and much of the language is surprisingly shallow. Words such as “hunger”, “grief”, “loneliness”, “broken”, “agony”,

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and “thirst” appear frequently; the work is full of wounds and broken hearts, of love and pain and longing, but too often this is stated, rather than felt, seeming to sit on the surface of the poems, rather than being embedded within. The image and concrete detail depicted are often insufficient in themselves to evoke the emotional resonance they reach for, and one has the sense that the poems attempt to make up for this by explaining or describing emotional states, with recourse to what is often rather empty language.

Mal McKimmie’s collection Poetileptic does not suffer the same weaknesses; McKimmie is a gifted wordsmith who seems to wrest language, hard-won, from a place of resistance and twist it emphatically to his ends. The work takes as its primary focus the poet’s own experiences of epilepsy, reaching at first towards what he terms the “blue splinter” (23) in ferocious, disruptive language, and then opening out into the quiet vulnerability of “The Brokenness Sonnet”. McKimmie plays wildly with image and metaphor, stretching language tightly in an almost manic staccato that seems at times to echo a kind of wild firing of the synapses. McKimmie uses this play to great effect elsewhere in the book where his scope is broader; his “A life in the day of a fly” (65) is one of the most effective and chilling “political” poems I read this year.

Susan Hampton’s extended narrative poem, “The Kindly Ones”, which gives her collection its name, also constitutes a kind of fusion of the modern and the classical, shuttling back and forth between contemporary Australian space and the Greek Underworld of the Furies. The individual poems in the first half of the book are a diverse bunch, ranging from wry sketches of Australian landscapes to richly detailed vignettes and narratives with an autobiographical quality. At the same time, they lay the groundwork for the second, with many of the poems evoking both the classical landscape and the moral concerns which are addressed to such compelling effect in the extended poem. In its unlikely yoking of contemporary New South Wales and Greek mythology, “The Kindly Ones” is a kind of fantastical travelogue which poses questions about the timelessness of myth: when the Furies interact with the present-day, they serve a function which parallels that of their classical existence, and the various stories that are enacted in the poem also have clear dramatic and moral connections with that world. On one level, the poem functions effectively as a satire on contemporary Australian culture, but its real achievement lies in its exploration of the nature of tragedy across the great distances it traverses through time and space.

A similar conjunction of the classical and the contemporary is a feature of Phosphorescence, the debut collection from Perth poet Graeme Miles. Miles is well-versed in the classics and his knowledge of Greek literature informs
some of his work, most notably the central, extended poem “Circle and Line”, which evokes Virgil’s _Georgics_, moving between the classical world of Orpheus and Aristaeus and the “bob-cut bush by Lake Joondalup” (34). Miles wears his debt to the classics lightly, writing with wit and humour, losing his Orpheus “up / and down on Escher stairways” (38), and many of his poems mine entirely other territory. Images of growth and fecundity abound, and many images recur and inform each other across the collection; the snakes of “Some Things the Body Knows”, “Some Hours”, and “Two Dugites” cross-pollinate, layering and texturing in dialogue with each other. There is a concern also with ways of seeing and their implications: the road in the rear-view mirror at night “appears in quick bites” (13); the sight of a tiger snake “brings you into its world” (14); on the drive home “something to decipher swings into sight / It appears in clues like an old English riddle: / flame first” (33). Much of this, of course, has to do also with the poetic process, and nowhere more so than “Perth Winter Liquid”, which opens: “To be really here / is to see the invisible liquid in a garden, / clearer than oceans ...” (76). Miles’ voice is quiet and assured; despite the breadth of his scope at times, there is no posturing here, just a sure, steady hand.

With a smaller but no less satisfying reach are Penelope Layland’s _Suburban Anatomy_ and Aidan Coleman’s _Avenues and Runways_. The former consists predominantly of concise free-verse poems in which each word is carefully measured. With striking precision and economy of language, Layland addresses subjects such as pregnancy, friendship, home- and small-town life, subjects which, if not entirely “suburban,” are certainly of the sort that might be considered “domestic,” inhabiting a tightly bordered world. However, although these may be “everyday” landscapes, they are in some ways fundamentally closed to the reader; the personae of these poems patrol her borders carefully, narrating her surroundings with a detached, deflecting observation. There is a controlling, proprietary tone here – “my horizon”, “my foreign hills”, “my dying sun” (7), “my kind”, “my folk”, “my people” (20) – even as the “I” is de-emphasised, used sparingly throughout the collection; what matters here is access, rather than involvement, and it is access which is granted to the reader, rather than entry. As Layland writes, somewhat self-reflexively, in “Within miles of you”:

... the gap between us never lessens
nor will –

I’ve always been a watcher
of yellow-lit windows across black fields.
I imagine you at your table, reading
and I at your door, hand raised
but still. (5)

In form, Coleman’s work has something in common with that of Layland – these are, for the most part, short, tightly controlled poems which sit quietly on the page; a couple are only one or two lines in length, and consist simply of a single, keenly observed image. I find myself in two minds about this: its simplicity and directness is appealing, but there’s something a little cheeky about it – after all, an image is not a poem, is it? Needn’t there be a larger landscape here, a place within which the image might embed itself, find deeper context? Can it be enough to simply say:

“Sunset”
This hemisphere, like one hand
shielding a match from the night (28)

or

“Airship”
The moon’s speech bubble (40)

I think it can. Indeed, I would argue that here is where the real strength of Coleman’s debut collection lies. Coleman is first and foremost an imagist, and his ability to let an image sit, to allow an unspoken landscape to accrete in the spaces around it, without adding context himself, is admirable. To say that Coleman’s work is sparse, unembellished, is an understatement, but it is all the more powerful for its simplicity; Coleman’s images are chosen with such precision that they work overtime, a few brushstrokes evoking entire landscapes:

Shine of weather inside-out:
sun pays your bills and writes
your essay for you;

you don’t need a big backyard
for sun: a deckchair
and a lemon tree, its pockets bulging. (13)
Unadorned and direct, these images evoke an uncomplicated innocence. As a whole, the collection is characterised by a kind of optimism, a faith in the clarifying potential of small moments and captured fragments. That is not to say that Coleman’s is a small vision; although he never ranges far from home for his subject matter, the connections he makes embed his work within a larger context, one which he distills and delivers in small, controlled bites. These are poems which don’t need a big backyard; still, their pockets bulge, and much of their pleasure is to be found in the movement between their simplicity of form and their rich implications, “the vague idea of galaxies” buried within (61).

Another debut collection comes from Melbourne-based poet Tina Giannoukos. In a Bigger City also positions itself within an urban landscape, but Giannoukos’ city is a very different one to that of Coleman. The opening poem, “Zone chaos”, sets the tone emphatically, from the title itself to its “abandoned cars,” “backpackers dumping their bombs before returning home”. The city is “[o]ne more place to decay”, and the process is inexorable: “next year more cars to impound but who’s counting?” (11). It’s Giannoukos who’s counting – her city is crumbling, empty, unfathomable, populated by “drug dealers street kids and the homeless” (13), by lovers who fail to connect. It is a space which at once possesses you, making of you a stranger elsewhere, and shuts you out; many of the poems are characterised by a sense of dislocation, of alienation. The “I” here is at once compelled and repelled by the city, which functions not simply as external landscape, but as something integral to identity; a carefully strung tension between belonging and alienation energises the work. Giannoukos ranges from Melbourne as far afield as Greece and Egypt, placing these different locales in conversation with each other as she builds the complex and contradictory landscapes of her personae. There is beauty here too, somewhat paradoxically rooted in the ugliness and contradiction Giannoukos foregrounds; there are moments of grace to be found in the negotiations one makes with this difficult environment, “bubbles of hope” which come upon one simply sitting at tramstops (24). In the context of the collection as a whole, though, such moments are hard-won. For Giannoukos, beauty and poetry emerge from ugliness, from complication and the struggle with these unruly elements; they are not, as she tells us emphatically, the easy, clean lines of “a god or two glimpsed running barefoot or something like that” (47).

Engagement with a distinctive physical environment is a feature also of John Millett’s collection, The People Singers: The Surfers Paradise Poems. Millett’s work is full of inventive imagery – a “pale bitch / invites [a street preacher] into the fog / behind her eyelids” (11), children on the beach “sing
to a meniscus" (24) and widows “walk through their own skin” (55). However, the subject matter never strays far from Gold Coast stereotype – widows whose smiles have been shaped by plastic surgeons (16), dreaming of “horny young men” (55), a wealthy CEO who “feels around for himself” in vain (40), and from this base, the poems struggle at times for authenticity. In the biographical note that opens the volume, the Gold Coast is described as “sometimes reviled but much loved”, and Millett is at his best when he allows the latter to infuse his work, when he sketches his subjects with real affection and empathy. Poems such as “Call Girl from Burleigh Heads” and “Funeral Parlour” are among the strongest here; these are understated, moving poems in which Millett does not follow what becomes something of a pattern in this collection – one in which a stereotype or caricature is sketched, and then “lifted” towards the end of the poem by a transformative moment. Too often, these shifts in tone are enabled by rather conveniently packaged images such as the night, the stars, or rivers/seas. Millett’s continual recourse to tropes such as these to dimension his subjects feels manipulative, and the “pattern-effect” is not helped by the fact that there is little formal or aesthetic variance across the collection. This cumulative sameness becomes somewhat tedious after a while; perhaps this is a collection most effectively sampled in small bites.

Another collection well suited to “dipping”, although for different reasons, is M T C Cronin’s The Flower, The Thing, which contains 121 poems, each taking as title and subject matter a specific flower, alphabetically ordered, and each dedicated to a specific individual or individuals of significance to the poet. Something of Cronin’s process is suggested in the poem “Dandelions”, dedicated to herself in which she writes:

... and dwelling
here I think, not how insignificant
we are, but how significant; pick one
flower as I put down another (20)

The contemplative poems are almost all identical in length at exactly twenty-five lines, but range across a variety of forms. A poem for Marcel Proust – “Fifteen Chrysanthemums” – appears as a numbered list (26), while “Bloom”, for James Joyce, is a stream-of-consciousness poem in Joyce’s characteristic associative “free-dream” style (8). Many of the dedicatees are familiar names, and there are clear and compelling relationships between their own work and the territory of the individual poems, both in form and theme. This is a considerable achievement, each poem at once negotiating an
intricate knot composed of its objective centre (the flower, the thing), and
the debt the poet owes the dedicatee. These are intimate pieces, complex
meditations on surface and interior, and while there is a sense that certain
meanings or resonances may be closed to the reader, at the same time, the
work is generous and expansive; while an acquaintance with the life and work
of the dedicatees significantly dimensions many of the poems, they remain
accessible and satisfying in their own right.

A new initiative from the Poets Union, emerging from the Young Poets
Fellowships, brings a debut collection from Melbourne writer Lucy Holt,
etitled *Stories of Bird*. Holt’s reach is eclectic, the poems in this small
volume ranging from a close-to-home grounding in the natural, and the
minutiae of relationships to Greek mythology, the 1864 autopsy of the
hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, and the phenomenon of youth suicide in
a Brazilian tribe. The strange and the everyday are brought close; Holt’s
particular vision opens up cracks in the familiar, tilting the known world on
a startling new angle. It is at once in the lived moment — “we dive in,
suddenly light / and jointless ...” — and referentially mapping its own
progress through time and space — a frangipani resurfaces “as a beautiful
relic” (27), and lovers offer themselves up for geological and archaeological
observation, positioning themselves in “Sedimentary Layers” (12),
“petrified in bed as two delicate spoons” (11). Holt’s territory charts always
for itself a “Third End”, a “trajectory older than bridges and far more stable
/ invisible one-way paths ...”; here, the winner is “the one to burst open the
moon” (8), and Holt does so generously. The exuberance of her vision is
complemented by the deftness of her touch, her confident formal control,
particularly evident in the collection’s longest poem “The Head”. An at-
times romantic sensibility is underscored by a pleasing musicality; Holt has
found a rhythm all her own.

Another compelling first collection and the winner of the 2006 Kenneth
Slessor Prize for Poetry, Jaya Savige’s *latecomers* is divided into three
sections. The first, “The Unofficial History Pavilion”, deals with a range
of overt themes, but each is refracted through an overarching concern with
time — the rate and effect of its passage, the weight it brings to bear upon
arrival and departure, the ways in which the present moment is always
referential to both past and future: here, new arrivals are immediately
assaulted by the heavy presence of the past, finding at every turn “a heart
in the cement” (11). The final poem in this section collapses notions of
the old and new within its title; it is “New year’s day 1239”, a new morning
in an already-dead landscape. Somewhat ironically, we reach the “unofficial
history pavilion” only here, in the section’s final poem; latecomers ourselves,
we can only move on, without having savoured the fruits of arrival. This concern with time, and with the way in which the moments of which it is composed interact across a continuum, continues in the subsequent sections of the book, surfacing as an ongoing interest in history and its implications; Savige “know[s] / it is always another / that makes this moment possible” (61). The Bribie Island poems which are a feature of the second section, “Skirmish Point” depict a landscape which is never far from its history, whether an “official” history which carries with it pervasive echoes of violence, or the more personal “memories” written upon it physically. In these latter sections in particular, there are numerous poems in which a freer form gives the reader the sense that these are intervals, fragments scooped from a running stream of language, rather than something complete in and of themselves. Poems such as “Intercession”, “Neomenia”, and “Tarpaulin muster” begin and end mid-flight, eschewing the notion of a point of departure and arrival; here, language, as well as history, is an ever-present continuum.

It is tempting to end with the enormity of the task, as something of a caveat for the great volume of new work I have not been able to consider here. Peter Minter’s blue grass is exhilarating in its visionary sweep, and John Mateer’s The Ancient Capital of Images ranges widely across physical landscapes, combining finely tuned observation of the “real” with metaphysical rumination. Craig Sherborne’s Necessary Evil and Jennifer Harrison’s Folly and Grief chart more personal territory — Sherborne blending evocative sketches of family and the worlds of racing and journalism with satirical social observation and Harrison meticulously exploring a vivid canvas, an idiosyncratic landscape densely populated with an eclectic pastiche of found objects. What the passage of decades will do for any of this work remains to be seen, and I leave such assessments for readers more patient than myself; for now, thankfully, there is much to reward a reckless, impressionistic optimism.

Poetry received 2005–2006

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


*Fraser, Will. The Leema Conspiracy*. 2006.


THAT WHICH IS EXACTING

The river is clearer today—
slicked and peppered with refuse
but the bottom is visible
sludge and rocks, streaks of fish.
The sky spreads along its surface.

Somewhere a cock crows.
You notice it first and hold out
your question to me.
The mangrove toughness
and the rankness of the day’s flow
the old mausoleum built in the rock
those other ghosts, harried
or ages old, also have place for
archaic suburban memory
chicken-wired to a back fence.

How are we prepared for that under this sun?

The rooster will crow more than thrice
as if it’s run out of excuses, memories, betrayals.
The dogs are always there, searching
the wind’s complexities, nestings
of detritus and sifted leavings.

Helmets and wheels, roll and hello
along the bike track.
The lone man will watch us and circle on.
A game will swear on the oval
until the last goal practised
that it was played straight.
I will guard you at the amenity block door.

We are playing this as straight as we possibly can.

And though the energy seems immense
as it pours from the sky
dropping fuel and the passing minutes
we only inch forward, exploring
the surface and the refractions of an elsewhere.
The newly silvered pipeline
conducts the way of waste
although graffiti will grow there again
etched, temporary and hardly pondered.

There is no way to exactly catch hold.
The minutes pour on older passings.
The cycles skim by, concentrated or laughing.
There is no way to exactly be
happy or unhappy.
Each second adds its share
the pressures
the subtle foolings, the letting go.

On the tiny beach below are clusters of plastic
the opaque milkiness of trashy juice
quick sidelines of need.
But a couple is launching a kayak
from there with effort
with muscle and slippage.
“She looks terrified”, you say
but I don’t know if concentration
is a kind of fear.
If that is too exact then determination.
It may not make you glide, it may not set you free
but she will get out to the middle
and somehow handle the tide
stroking stroking stroking
as the waters turn again to the bay.
And, yes, we see her later closing
on the other shore.

And step back over the pebbled path
past gas lines, under empty kapok branches
past the pumps and the canal
where the death birds drink and scavenge.
The dog by the goal mouth
is watching us, tongue out
in its testing way and a weariness
edges me, not exact as fear, less alert
as though a memory drags
the bones I feel forced for home.

Perhaps towards, perhaps half-way
up the hill there's an orange tree
in a front yard, each fat globe is heavy
but high. I cannot reach
the overhang. But again if it makes me
happy or unhappy
does not much matter now.

Cloud masses behind the hill
a car chokes into the kerb
the neighbours are flicking a frisbee
across the street, lime green plastic
skating seconds of energy
not allowing afternoon its balmy end.
And no one can exactly hold
or catch it straight.
in a small company town lounge room the women whisper about the mad woman like fourteen year olds in the toilet block at recess

the popular one declares the mad woman too freaky to fit in here her tattooed body and shaved head doing her no favours at all

a nurse not naming names (of course) tells of numerous help calls made by someone late at night while her husband works

& the women feel sorry for her for a few moments it can’t be easy to be different in a place like this to not fit

but hearing about a certain incident from someone who knows someone who knows something they change their minds

& laugh about the crazy one always threatening never meaning it attention seeker making no effort with anything

until the day she cleaned her house, mowed the lawn, paid all her bills & splattered her brains over her lounge room walls
Almond Blossom

for Yves Bonnefoy

One thousand eye-shaped shells enclosing nuts have watched their brides, the flowers, die for wind, for the river, for rain, the earth and clouds. All escaped fire – that was for the other hill where the shepherds grazed themselves on love and the memory of their women – but all succumbed to time, rushing finally from the tree as if startled birds in an upside-down world. And, at completion of the word, death finishes blossom and the image takes itself to the still pool that settles at the end and satisfaction of all desire and floats there, inseparable from what slyly casts its reflection. What a quiet time for the tree! Now there is only the eternal moment in which to sculpt a space to insert oneself into and the tree fits finely into a sky that destines the soft earth to be its bed. It curls roundly over the small hill’s curve – which is to have a shoulder: that earth or that sky? They both lie pressing against the other like lovers with the almond tree a thorn in their side. Many many eyes of the thorn cut the day and watch how light seeps through the horizon’s bloodied gap. Soon, of course, it is dark and every flower given up to a hundred years of blindness. They smell, tantalizing, of the sun in another place, small voices coaxing the living to indeterminance.
For the first three months it didn’t rain and I didn’t have any friends. The heat was everywhere in this new place, under my feet the ground was as brown and soft and loose as a lizard’s back. The gardens of Perth wilted around me, then became crisp to the touch.

On this side of the Nullarbor my skin felt parched and the cowlick that had always been there dropped out of my hair. My whole world had been turned upside down. Mum had sold our house in Melbourne and moved with him to Benalla. She said I had a choice, but where the hell is Benalla? I didn’t want to leave Melbourne, but no one asked me anyway. I was thankful when my brother Dion flew over from Perth to help us pack up the house.

“Finish your exams and come live with me if you like, Spud,” he’d said, “Perth’s not bad, you can get a job there, or study. The fishing’s alright.”

I’d been here for six weeks before I saw a cloud. It was the end of January, hot as hell when it came. I was resting on the crest of the Joel Street hill on Dion’s bike, my fishing line under my arm like a javelin. The cloud was almost transparent, nothing more than a sigh really. If I had been anywhere else I would have missed it. As it was, I pulled off the side of the path and sniffed madly at the air for that bloody, dirty smell that means it will soon rain. But the air was just salty and dusty and smelled faintly of the sulfuric algae that had clogged the Swan over summer, giving it a red skin, like the sun had given the rest of us.

Apart from that single day, the sky remained a flat, blue plain right through to the end of May. As the days went by I started to grow suspicious of the sky. It was impossible to tell if it was real, being so big and bright day after day. Lying on my back on the stiff grass out front I would pretend that I was looking up at the painted bottom of a back-yard swimming pool. Some days I thought about taking a hose and trying to fill up the sky, just so it could spill water back down on me and the lizards that dozed in the grass around me – but there was a water ban on and anyway, Dion’s rubber hose had split...
open in the heat.

It wasn’t just the sky I was suspicious of, so many other things in Perth seemed too bright in colour, too vivid, too strange – the sea was so blue that it almost looked purple, the bush flowers smelt just like lollies, the soil was sandy even miles from the beach. In the beginning, I distrusted almost everything in this whole strange city. Except the lizards. There were lizards everywhere, little geckos (Diplodactylus family) on the walls, fat bob-tails (Tiliqua rugosa) swaying across the roads, huge bungarras (Varanus gouldii) stuck to tree trunks where the bush got thick and my favourite species, the hostile but harmless blue-tongues (T. occipitalis) in our yard. I liked the lizards. They were quiet and un-assuming and they drifted around like the sun would never bother them, even if it burnt right through their tanned skin and cooked them alive.

Around the time of the cloud, I was invited to a party by my brother’s girlfriend. Someone she knew was turning eighteen she told me, wasn’t it time for me to try to meet some people round my own age? Maybe make a few friends to go to the movies with? I wanted to tell her that I would have made friends long ago if this torturous climate didn’t keep everyone barricaded against the heat in their homes, their doors and windows and curtains all pulled resolutely shut. I wanted to paint her a picture of me running down the street calling at the top of my lungs:

“Come out and play! Come out of your caves! Get up off those cool floor tiles, you stole that trick from the dog!” But anyway, who could run with the whole sun pressing on their head?

My brother listened to the conversation from the kitchen, where he was drying dishes. It was obvious that the two of them had already rehearsed it.

“Dion,” I said.

“Yeah, Spud?”

“I’m not a loser. As if I need you to go round getting your girlfriend to find friends for me. You really piss me off sometimes, you know that?”

He shrugged and mumbled something. His girlfriend looked over at him, wide-eyed and blushing. I didn’t mean to be quite so harsh, but well, things happen how they happen, don’t they.

I left the room and heard the front door slam a little while later.

“You made her cry,” Dion called as he passed my bedroom door.

Good, I thought. You see, that is how I am when I am angry, I’m tough and I’m full of insight. I know a lot of things that other people don’t know and most of all I know that I am right. But anger doesn’t stay with me long, being angry gets boring. And usually after the anger drifts away I get the guilts. I get them pretty bad.
On the evening of the party Dion lent me a pair of suede shoes and a belt for my jeans. He drove us there in his Valiant, with towels laid over the vinyl seats to stop our arses burning. I liked that old car. The black dashboard, like everything else around here, had lost its true colour long ago and had cracked up in the sun. A line of dead flies, at various stages of decay, ran the length of the dashboard at the front where it met the dusty windshield. Under the setting sun those flies looked like a string of black beads, pearls even, and made the car seem girlish to me.

"Val’s are good cars," Dion told me, "This engine runs and runs. Think she must have belonged to surfers though, the amount of rust on her body."

"And Val’s a girls’ name too," I said. It made me feel good that we agreed on her being a "her".

"Huh?"

"Nothing." I hate explaining myself.

At the party there were a lot of girls and women. The house was open-plan and the living area looked out onto a paved back-yard with a pool. A few little kids were bombing each other and scrambling on a lilo. There was water going everywhere, making rainbows under the floodlights. One of the women pressed a sweaty beer into my hand, smiled a red-lacquered smile and said,

"It’s so lovely to meet you! You look just like your brother!"

The same woman offered me a little fancy cracker thing from a huge white plate.

"What are they?"

"Pate with green marinated olives on German pumpernickel." She had lipstick on her front teeth.

"Oh. No thanks, I’m vegetarian." I have been vegetarian forever. I don’t care about animals so much that I don’t want to eat them, and I don’t mind the taste of meat, I just don’t eat it. I don’t believe that the world can keep on coming up with enough meat for us all to eat for much longer so I’ve opted out early. I could go on about this forever, and I could have told it all to the red-mouthed woman, but again, I hate explaining myself. And anyway, the next thing she said to me was, "Oh but it’s okay, this is only chicken pate!"

Right about then I started to get that sick feeling I get when I am way, way out of my comfort zone. It’s like being dropped from the sky into the middle of the ocean, I know that I’m supposed to swim but I don’t know which way because I can’t see any land.

Dion hung round at the party longer than I thought he would. I figured that it was because his girlfriend was still there, or maybe it was so he could protect his girlfriend from me and my "attitude". He needn’t have been worried though, if there is one thing that scares me, it’s when girls cry. I’ve
stepped lightly round his girlfriend since that day when I caused the upset, I've come to realise that she isn't just pathetic, she is also inherently fragile. I'm not going to make that mistake again.

Anyway I was kind of glad that Dion did stay. On the one hand, it didn't really help the nerves to have him around to witness my lack of social cool, but on the other, it was easier to be introduced to girls by him than to have to introduce myself.

The girl who was turning eighteen had a nice face and eye-lashes like palm fronds. Her parents were big and white and she was small and brown.

“Her name is Lila. She was adopted a few years ago, from some war zone, I can't remember which one,” Dion's girlfriend whispered to me. “Isn't she stunning?”

She was. Stunning in the way that a musical instrument can be stunning. A guitar or violin or something. You know, all polished curves and with no sharp edges for the notes to snag upon. It was easy to think of something to say to her too:

“Happy Birthday Lila.”

Her teeth were white and nicely lined-up when she smiled. I found myself wondering what it would be like to be bitten by them.

I don't like to admit it, but I followed her round like a dog all night. Alcohol makes me brave, just the way it is supposed to, and she was so god-damned cute in that dress that showed her brown back and those tall shoes that looked like pain. I took her glass whenever it was close to empty and filled it with champagne. I even switched from beer to champagne myself and when Dion hissed “You might want to slow down,” I rolled my eyes at him and drained my glass.

I didn't say much else to Lila, I'm not a big talker - more of a thinker. Someone once told me that if you are quiet you can steal the whole intangible universe, I kind of believe that. She didn't nag me for words too much either, she just introduced me to the other girls who floated by in short summer dresses, layers gaping open in almost the right places as they stopped to hug her and kiss her cheeks.

“This is Dion's brother Spud, he just moved here from Melbourne.” That was how she introduced me. Was I cringing at being called “Spud” by this pretty girl who I'd only just met? Nah, everyone calls me that and nothing else. It's just who I am. Anyway, she squeezed my arm when she said it and it made my chest thump like there was rabbit paw in there.

Midway through the party Dion and his girlfriend went home without me. He signalled that it was time to go, but I shook my head and waved him away. I wasn't ready to leave, to go back to our splintered little place and my sandy,
smothering bed. But after he’d left I realised the shoes he had leant me were
giving me hell-awful blisters and my socks were already squelching with
sweat. The booze was starting to bubble in my guts and tickle my head. I
swayed a bit, trying to stretch my toes, and spilt some champagne on Lila’s
dress. She just giggled, making her curls bounce all over her bare shoulders.

“I’m going to sit by the pool,” she said. And so I went and sat by the pool. She
took off her shoes and laid them next to each other, close together on the
lawn where the edge had been clipped in a perfect line along the red paving
stones. Then she dipped her long waxy legs in the water. I pulled off Dion’s
shoes and plunged my feet in, quickly before she got a whiff. A boy drifted
by us on the lilo and called out “Lila, Lila-loo-ila! Look at my grandpa hands!”
She giggled with her eyes almost closed and legs swinging through the water.
I wanted to slide her gently into the pool to see how that dress would stick
to her, but instead I just sat beside her and felt drunk.

“Do you get many lizards in this yard?” I asked her.
“Umm, I don’t know. Not really, I’ve never seen any.”
“Oh, that’s weird isn’t it?”
“Is it?” She was smiling at me with those white teeth again. I grinned
back, forgetting about the lizards.

“Do you like it here?” she asked.
“What, at your party?”
“No, here, Perth.”
“I don’t know yet.” I couldn’t bring myself to lie to her.
“I love it here.” She traced a circle on the surface of the water with a
pointed toe.

“The sky never changes, every day it’s always blue. It makes me feel
weird.”
“It’s black now.” she said. I looked up.
“Nah, it’s still blue. We just can’t see it right now.”
She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but I could see a giggle hiding
just behind those pretty lashes.

“Whatever.” I shrugged.

“It does change, just not much over summer. Well, not this summer
anyway. When winter comes though, there’ll be storms and rain and then the
whole world will turn green for a while – you’ll see.” I tried to imagine that.
I wondered where the lizards would go in a storm.

“I guess Perth’s just really different to where I’m from.”
Lila pulled her wet legs out of the water and hugged them against her
chest briefly.

“Me too,” she said, “People I care about don’t get killed here.”
I hadn’t thought about that. How come a girl can make you feel like such a loser while she’s just being friendly?

The next thing I said was, “Lila, do you have a boyfriend?” It was a bit cut-to-the-chase I know, but it was more appropriate than the “I think I would die for you,” that I wanted to blurt out. I’d never been confronted with such a warm and graceful person, and nor had my life ever felt so arid. Sitting so close to her I realised that I had hardly touched another person, not even Dion, since I’d landed in this salt-burnt place. The only living creatures I could remember stroking, were the bob-tails (T. rugosa) who crept past me on the lawn. One I remembered had a ripe black tick stuck in the scales behind its head and had held still long enough to let me pluck it out and squash it flat between my thumbs before meandering away.

In response to the boyfriend question Lila nodded, caught my eye briefly then looked down at the water with an embarrassed smile.

“Where is he?”

“Oh he’s away, he works on the mines.”

“He didn’t come home for your party?”

“It’s not that big a deal.” Maybe she meant the party, but I wanted to think that it was the relationship that wasn’t a big deal.

“If I was your boyfriend I’d want to be round you all the time.” I was drunk, my tongue was getting lazy and the words came out sounding ridiculous. And I suppose they were.

She giggled and pushed me away. “You’re a sweetheart Spud,” she said, or maybe she said “You’re sweet Spud,” I don’t know, it was something like that. Whatever it was that she said, I took it to mean something like “Let’s spend the rest of our lives together, you and me and the lizards, we’ll never be lonely again.”

“Where is your boyfriend again?”

Maybe she was feeling uneasy sitting beside me at that point but I didn’t notice, I was concentrating hard on my variation of a Heath Ledger “meaningful” look. I should have known it wouldn’t work, acting like an actor.

“He’s up north, Port Hedland, he works for BHP,” she said.

“I wish he was here.”

“How come?”

“Because you’re here on your own and you’re fucking beautiful. If he was here I wouldn’t be thinking about kissing you.”

Lila frowned and stood up, her legs making a sucking noise as she pulled them out of the water.

The sky really felt as if it was falling on me at that moment. It came down as an old, motheaten blanket, pouring over me in heavy folds. Meanwhile, the
lovely Lila re-joined a group of girlfriends on the patio and slipped her wet feet back into those killer shoes. I watched as the girls nodded and swayed with laughter. At me, I thought, probably they were laughing at me, sitting there on my own, wearing my brother’s clothes, ugly with drunkenness and stinking of loneliness. I got up and walked inside without putting my shoes on or looking back. I guess the red-mouthed lady wasn’t too thrilled that I’d padded all over the carpet with wet feet, but she smiled at me anyway, stopped me on the way to the front door and insisted I waited “One minute!” while she cut a huge chunk of chocolate birthday cake and wrapped it in a black paper napkin. I didn’t want the cake, but I took it anyway and closed the door quietly behind me.

Outside I started walking, not sure of which direction I was heading in, or how I was going to make it home. The roughness of the pavement hurt my feet and I wanted it to. I wanted to feel that pain in every bit of my body. I pictured myself stripping off and rolling down the road, naked, stones biting into my hips and knees, the warm bitumen rubbing my chest raw and grazing my forehead. I unwrapped the cake and threw it into the middle of the road. It made me immensely happy when it landed icing-down with a loud splat.

“Haaaa!” I shouted, “Happy fucking birthday Perth!”

Then I tied the shoelaces of Dion’s shoes in a knot and hurled them into the sky. They tumbled over each other upwards and outwards, until they snagged on the branch of a tall gum and stayed there, the shadow rocking back and forward on the road under a street lamp. I ran the rest of the way home.

When Dion asked me, a couple of days later, about the end of the party and the whereabouts of his shoes, I hissed at him – something I’d learnt from the bob-tails. He didn’t bring it up again and I did my best to put the whole night out of my mind.

A few weeks later, on the six o’clock news, the weather man did an amazing thing. He showed a pie chart that said there was a small chance of rain in the Perth Metropolitan Area for the following day. My heart grew almost unbearably loud and fast when I heard that and so I switched to the ABC channel and waited for the seven o’clock news for confirmation. The ABC weatherman described the likelihood of rain as “very small”, but there it was – a chance of rain. A chance of clouds – white and grey and fat and fast moving. Clouds that might have rolled over themselves and torn open with the force of cold rain. I wanted to be the first to get to those clouds.

“Hey, Dion, I’m going out.” I yelled as I left, “Might not be home tonight.”

The night was cooler than normal and my bike moved through it quietly.
I pedalled slowly, there was no hurry now, just long hours until dawn. I rode out from our place, along the train tracks to where I could cut across to meet the cycle path that ran beside the river. My legs and heart felt light as I rode. I think I was even humming a song, but I don’t remember what it was. The algae in the estuary weren’t as pungent as the last time I’d been down there and under the city lights the Swan was awash with ribbons of colour. I noticed how snugly the city sat between the rise of Kings Park and the curve of the Swan, the few tall buildings clustered together in the middle and the smaller buildings stretching away to the east. There were still a few boats out and people were fishing from the pillars under the Narrows Bridge.

It didn’t take long to reach the Joel Street hill. When I got there I pushed my bike into the scrub beside the path and climbed up onto a pile of yellow builders’ sand in a vacant section. There was no one around and I dozed through the night, nestled in the sand. I dreamt of Lila.

Dawn was hot from the moment the sun came over the hills. I lay on my back and waited while the darkness retreated, giving in first to a dull grey haziness, then to the everyday cartoon-blue. There was a single cloud, thin and high in the sky. It was long and stretched out into a number of parallel strands, tapering away to nothing at the ends. The cloud was the colour of water rather than white, but it offered nothing in the way of a hope for rain. Disappointed I stood up, shook the sand out of my pants and t-shirt and retrieved my bike from the bushes. A little sliding skink (*Lerista lineata*), covered in a fine gold stripes was sunning itself on the seat and clung to the spot with its stumpy legs even as I pulled the bike upright. I stroked it lightly and it slid away like a snake, into the palladium of the scrub.

There was no point in staying up there if the rain wasn’t coming, so I rode down the hill and veered away from the river, north towards Lila’s suburb. I couldn’t remember where she lived but cycled around the quiet, palm-lined streets until I came across my piece of chocolate cake, still sitting in the middle of the road. I picked it up and found that it was as hard as rock, baked again over these weeks in the sun. The icing had melted away, but aside from that it hadn’t been touched, it was just a hard brown cube. It didn’t seem real. I put it back on the road and squinted up at Dion’s shoes, swinging in the breeze above me. I wanted to get those back for Dion. I ditched the bike and scaled the gum tree in a hurry, I needed to get out of that neighbourhood, before Lila or her parents or anyone else from the party saw me. The tree trunk was solid and oily which made it hard to climb, but I got there by hugging tight and pushing up with frog-legs. I couldn’t reach the shoes but managed to shake the branch enough that they snapped free and hit the road with a rubbery clatter.
Dion was happy to get them back and didn’t ask me where they had been or why there was a huntsman spider in one.

“Here, I thought you might be interested in this.” Dion’s girlfriend was on my case again, she had made it her mission to make Spud happy. It was embarrassing and made me feel even more pathetic, but she was tireless. She handed me a pamphlet for something called *Friends of the Fork-tongues*, a local herpetofauna rescue group.

“Thanks,” I said and made a point of not looking particularly interested.

Anyway I did join *Friends of the Fork-tongues*, but that’s confidential information. As far as she and Dion know, I spend a hell of a lot of time fishing these days, but not a lot of time catching anything. The group’s okay, the people aren’t really my cup of tea, they’re all kind of weird. But weird is better than boring. We look after native lizards and frogs and snakes that have been injured by cars and cats and dogs and people. When they die, we pickle them and put them in labeled jars that get sent off to the universities and schools. I spend a lot of time pickling, mainly because I don’t mind doing it, and also because the smell of the formaldehyde makes it feel like real science to me.

Summer is almost over now you know. More than three months in this place already – a quarter of a year without rain. There have been more clouds on the horizon lately, but it’s smoke from bushfires more often than real clouds.

I rescued a rare specimen from a burnt-out block near Swanbourne a couple of weeks back. I say “rescued” but the poor bugger died the next day. He was a skink, *Ctenotus delli*, with long brown stripes down his side and back feet that turned outwards. I pickled him, like the others and thought about taking him home for my bedroom. But it didn’t seem right. Instead I rode my bike back out to the bush where I found him, and hung him, in his labelled jar, from a charred Mallee branch. Just thought he’d be happier there.
Robert Drewe’s investment in the past and history is much commented on but not always understood. Its very obviousness, together with the variety of subjects chosen, has deflected attention away from the evolving, subtly changing nature of his response to the historical record. This has, of course, ranged from the adversarial to the nostalgic and elegiac, and a similar diversity characterises the historical sources drawn on for his major fiction, beginning with genocide in Tasmania and Australia’s place in the Asia-Pacific region, through the making of national folk-heroes, to an autobiography and stories based on his early life in Perth. Nevertheless, there are discernible continuities in his writing, as well as attitudes towards history that cause him profound misgivings. The latter were touched on in a talk presented at a number of venues, entitled “Where the Yellow Sand Stops,” in which he gently mocked Australians for their attachment to bygone days:

While we’re uneasy about the present, and hardly dare think about the future, we’re very nostalgic about the past. We don’t seem to be able to get enough of it. Some of us will even vote for some quite dubious politicians if they suggest they’ll take us back to it.

As a writer interested in our history, I have some very conflicting feelings about the past. I’ve often written about it, but when I talk about it, I’m struck by a strangely familiar feeling – well beyond déjà vu. It’s the sort of feeling summed up by Barry Humphries as “the anticipatory excitement of dancing with your mother”. In this country, it seems the Good Old Past is always being trotted out for one more waltz. Why is this? What is it with us and the past? Isn’t enough, enough? These are the sort of questions that can worry me on sleepless nights (25).
The questions raised here go to the very heart of his fictional project. Most crucially, how are we to resolve the apparent contradiction between this confession of unease and his own repeated recourse to the past for material? The answer lies arguably in the notion of "the Good Old Past". This is a past agreed on by consensus, that is thoroughly familiar and safe, even if prosaic, like the easy option of dancing with one's mother rather than with an unknown, unfathomable stranger or acquaintance. Drewe's abiding ambivalence towards history arises, then, not simply from the contestability of specific accounts, such as the received version of early black-white interaction in the colonies, but also from his struggle not to be co-opted by the conventional and homely, and from a related sense of writerly responsibility towards probing and problematising "the Good Old Past".

To an author avowedly preoccupied with what lies outside the frame of standard reporting, or of the camera's optical field, the widespread pandering to "certain certainties" provides the stuff for insomnia, and for dissident creativity. Hence his novels are concerned with defamiliarising the established record, with highlighting lacunae and neglected episodes or aspects, as well as with investigating what propels a Ned Kelly to national prominence, or a Spargo to ignominy and suicide. His most recent novels, *The Drowner* and *Grace*, are, however, significantly broader in scope and make considerable demands on their readers. For they embrace the whole sweep of human history on the Australian continent, offer mutually supportive findings, and avoid both reassuring maternal figures and his earlier preference for male leads in favour of talented but confused young women, whose salvation ultimately depends on them realising when enough is enough, and acting decisively to shape their own destinies.

An analogy for this latest phase of Drewe's fiction, and a potential key to its concerns, is afforded by a deceptively straightforward incident from childhood that formed the centre-piece of his talk "Where the Yellow Sand Stops". There he narrates how, as a six-year-old recently arrived in Perth, he longed to leave a lasting mark by carving his initials into the "bland," limestone facade of his family's home, just as his new friends were doing at their parents' houses. But this childish ambition went terribly wrong. Instead of forming neat, enduring letters, the attempt to carve "R D" into the soft limestone led to an accelerating flow of sand from the building. The initials collapsed to form an expanding hole; the trickle threatened to become a rivulet and worse. "The foundation stone seemed to be melting. Soon it was more crust than stone" (26). Quickly the pellucid, daylight world assumed the resonance of nightmare and young Drewe, like an Austral version of the
Then I packed the mud into the cave, jammed it tight over the Ford, the London bus, the cricket ball and the screwdriver, packed it around the sprinkler, threw more mud over everything, patted it down and waited.

And it worked. The entombed offerings held fast. The plug stuck. Maybe that’s a metaphor for something. (27)

The concluding line should warn readers, if the scene itself has not already done so, that far more is at stake here than the inadvertent undermining of a valuable asset.

An important clue to its meaning comes in the preceding, reported exchange with Dame Mary Durack. “Place”, Durack explains to the brash young novelist, is a recurring preoccupation at literary conferences because “there is a lot of landscape out there” and “the yellow sand goes down pretty deep” (26). Nevertheless, as Drewe interjects, “it’s still sand, and not always the most ideal foundation to build on” (26). In this instance the recycled Pauline adage, together with the childhood anecdote, indicates a conviction that the frequently revisited historical record is not nearly as sound and solid as the public presumes. In fact, the apparent unshakeability of the old house is an illusion, the heavy foundation that seems ideally suited to support a stable, dignified edifice proves, on closer examination, soft and friable – an insight confirmed by today’s protracted “history wars”. Moreover, the ubiquitous sand or native landscape, far from being tamed, threatens to consume without trace the modern, Transatlantic heritage evoked by Dinky toy models of “a Ford Customline and a red London bus” (26), as well as to engulf metonyms of sporting mastery and civilising culture (“the cricket ball and the screwdriver”). Western man’s constructs begin to crumble and disappear, and the whole scene is likened to “a big hour-glass” (26), with the implied message: “White fella, your authority is built on sand; your venerable ‘house’ of history and civilisation more show than substance.” Described self-deprecatingly as “a metaphor for something”, Drewe’s anecdote is a dazzling reminder of his understated art and a warning that, in his hands, apparently banal or mundane matters can resonate with unexpected meaning.
As in this incident, so in The Drowner and Grace, the great explanatory codes of Western society are arguably marshalled against the void left by the current dearth of spiritual and ideological certainties, and efficacious alternatives urgently sought. “I like to have a lot of ideas in my novels”, Drewe has stated, and nowhere is this more evident than in his latest books. Despite their very different subject matter, they offer complementary investigations of the claims made in favour of empire, parenthood, romantic love and empirical science, and highlight their shortcomings. Similarly, they interrogate the West’s compulsion to create comprehensive historical narratives. In place of coherent, univocal versions of the past – that perennial dance with one’s mother – they emphasise the role of discontinuities, diverse subjectivities, myth and chance in the formation of national self-understanding, while their tense, central parables underscore the contribution that ordinary individuals, as distinct from corporate heads and renowned politicians, can make to the shaping of events, and ultimately the national record. The “yellow sand” remains ubiquitous, but it is particularised by human activity and made the site of unexpected revelations. Rephrased in terms of the literary tropes of the past, the eerie landscapes and ghastly crones of colonial writing give way to the beach of today, to life-giving, life-buoying water, and to fecund, empowered young heroines symbolic of future promise.

Superficially The Drowner and Grace are unrelated books; however, recurring motifs, actions and concerns suggest that they constitute parts of a thematically linked project. The novels share both a broad range of preoccupations, including issues of migration, prehistory, aridity and the place of young women in the race’s struggle for survival, as well as major and minor details, from having female characters named Grace to a male lead who, in idle moments, picks at congealed lumps of paint on the deck of ships. And Drewe has, in the past, viewed works that formed no obvious sequence as cognate investigations. Writing in 1977 to the Literature Board of the Australia Council, for instance, he described his present and future novels as a loosely linked exploration of key influences on Australian identity:

Rather than being a trilogy in the normal sense, the first three novels spread outward from the Australian setting of the first (The Savage Crows, Collins 1976, Fontana 1977) to Asia (Ice On Summer Seas) and America (All the Good Times). Perhaps this pattern parallels Australia’s place in the scheme of things. Anyway, if the first could be said to represent its Australian characters as self-absorbedly materialistic (albeit guilty) conquerors, the second … sees them as
aliens, exotics, in a different environment. Continuing that pattern, rather like the widening ripples in a pond, the third features the Australian as Would-Be American; as a frantic participant in the Master Culture, in the West Coast media-show business scene, who nevertheless needs to have that familiar and consoling Pacific Ocean in the corner of his eye."

Presumably Drewe conceived of similar, or even far closer ties between his most recent novels. Certainly they are linked by numerous patterns of "widening ripples", most evident in the prominence accorded Grace as both title and given name. In The Drowner Grace plays a minor, cameo part as the devout, Baptist mother of the novel's hero, Will Dance. She is divided by many generations and continents from her two namesakes in the ensuing novel: a twenty-nine-year-old woman, who has fled to the Kimberley to escape a stalker, and an indigenous woman, in her "late teens or early twenties" (G 101), who was ritually interred approximately 100,000 years ago. Yet the main action of both books takes place in Western Australia (although at different extremities of the State), and is separated by a mere century. The final scene of The Drowner coincides with the completion of the Coolgardie Pipeline in 1903; Grace is as contemporary as lattes and ecotourism. Also both works emphasise the importance of hereditary traces, whether from a shared Anglo-Celtic gene pool, or in atavistic memories that make individuals feel they have met in previous existences. In short, the two books share a common imaginative and chronological trajectory, with the century-long hiatus serving as a reminder of the incompleteness of national as well as family or individual histories.

The version of "the Good Old Past" most clearly targeted in these novels is the myth of benign, clear-sighted British imperialism, and its related theses of biological and social progress. In each novel the empire, or its representatives, is deeply flawed and contravenes conventional parental codes. Far from being responsible, caring and enlightened, it is typically motivated by self-interest, as the orphaned Molloy early learns. In spite of inquiries, his parents and genetic blueprint remain an impenetrable mystery. British institutions, he surmises, have systematically destroyed any reference to his origins ("Better for all concerned to clear the decks, burn the bridges, start life afresh" [G 185]) and responded to his plight with the time-honoured tradition of shipping human detritus off to the far reaches of empire: "the British Government had since apologised for such nineteenth-century colonial behaviour prevailing into the mid-twentieth century" (G 185–86). Nevertheless Molloy, and millions like him, are subtly inculcated
with the belief that British dominion is racially predestined, and that it represents the acme of civilisation. This view is still circulating even after the Second World War when Molloy, as a convalescing adolescent, chances upon *Humanity's Onward March*, a pseudo-scientific tract that “celebrates the romance of mankind’s relentless migrations ... [and] British wanderlust in particular” (G 196). There migration is depicted as producing optimal racial distribution and allowing “the bravery and navigational acumen of eighteenth-century English explorers’ to come to the fore”. Its bloody record is glibly re-envisioned as a grand sporting event: “with the *Homo erectus* runner passing the baton to the *Homo sapiens* athlete and then expiring politely on the side of the track” (G 197). Although these sanitised examples avoid any mention of Hobbesian nature red of tooth and claw, or of Darwin’s relentless and unpitying battle for survival, Will Dance will experience them within the charmed circle of the family and Molloy through his field-work, which brings him face to face with reality, not as it is enshrined in polished textbooks, but as a discontinuous, provisional and brutal narrative.

The standard Victorian transcript of imperial adventure and altruism, on which both Dance and Molloy are nourished, is trenchantly critiqued in terms of the natural imperatives it glosses over. On arriving in Australia, for example, Molloy is selected for special service: not to perform heroic deeds, but “to scratch dandruff from the sergeant’s scalp” (G 188) in a ritual close to preening among the great apes, that firmly elevates yet subordinates him in the camp, or tribal hierarchy. Also, years later, his confrontation with a young man who has stolen his bicycle triggers, not paradigms from the well-ordered “Good Old Past”, but impulsive hereditary responses. The youth, playing up to a female audience, is aggressively defiant, while his mother leaps instinctively to the defence of her offspring: “She knew the script by heart” (G 317). So, too, does the anthropologist and survivor of three orphanages, Molloy, who is swept by “an odd sense of déjà vu”, then by recognition that the scene played out between them “was ageless” (G 316). Even older perhaps is the script enacted at Victoria Falls which Will, inspired by the heroic story of the falls’ “discovery” by Livingstone, longs to visit. There the spell of the fervently anticipated scene is rudely shattered by a male baboon, with erect red penis, who leaps on Will’s lover, forcing a bluntly animalistic response from him which Angelica glosses with: “At least it wasn’t a leopard ... But he thought you were” (D 158). Both then and now power and its adjuncts, such as territory and the drive to procreate and control limited resources, are the dominant forces in play – as they are throughout *The Drowner*. With a plot set in the years around Federation, England and its imperium are very much actualities, and Hammond Lloyd
their ambivalent analogue at a family level. A feted king of nineteenth-century melodrama, he brooks no male contender. All the women in his entourage are his, as he demonstrates by French kissing his daughter and lying naked with her child. Like Britannia ever-prepared to intervene in events, this “ham” actor projects his stage personality into every part, and is equally ready to mangle Shakespearian texts or a would-be suitor of his daughter to ensure his unqualified adulation and dominion.

Fortunately other sources of knowledge exist that contest the grand narratives, like the buried testimony which, in both books, shakes the historical record. Will’s father recounts how he and his labourers have come upon uncharted graves and parts of skeletons. Their picks struck an apparent geological formation consisting of the calcified remains of a mass burial. These could have been remnants of a fierce battle from the Civil War, or date back to “Bronze and Iron Age hill-forts” (D 25). Precise, chronological dates are in short supply, and less important than the bones’ lasting lesson that there were “human sacrifices and plague and wars from Day One” (D 25). Grace conveys related insights into the fallibility and incompleteness of history’s archive. There Molloy achieves precocious fame when, as a fledgling palaeoanthropologist, he literally chances upon the continent’s oldest human remains, laid bare by a cyclone. They consist of a young woman’s skull, smashed into hundreds of pieces, together with fragments of other bones. Dubbed officially “Salt End Woman,” to her discoverers she will be known as Grace, because of her gracile bone structure. Carbon dating soon triples the original estimate of her age, later revised dating pushes it back still further into the shadowy past. Grace can be approximately placed on a prehistoric timeline, her anatomical particularity appreciated, but “the mystery of her death” and life remains (G 105). At best Molloy can surmise, on the basis of comparative anthropology, that great pains had been taken to prevent the return of her spirit; however, the limitations of scientific inquiry are plain. The issue of originary migration out of, or into, Africa is no closer to resolution than he is to fathoming why, at that particular moment after untold millennia, he should have been chosen to witness her dramatic reappearance: why, in short, “the woman had risen to the surface” (G 98).

Folk lore, too, is another repository of wisdom independent of science and history. The response of Will’s father and local villagers to nature is essentially pagan, commonsensical and based on working with, rather than trying to dominate, her moods. He takes pains to observe her lead closely, so that he sites ponds only in natural collection points and brushes aside the dictates of calendars with: “it’s not true spring till you can put your foot on three daisies” (D 28). Tipsy locals are similarly down-to-earth, using “the skulls
and jawbones of horses" (D 32) as impromptu toboggans to slide down a steep slope. They accept the human condition with age-old "bravado and mockery", whereas Dr Curthoys, the superintendent of an insane asylum and hence an official reclaimer of natural aberrations, responds to similar material as "an amateur archaeologist and phrenologist" (D 52). But his desk, personalised with "neolithic skulls and a mounted cricket ball" (D 52), recalls disconcertingly the alleged actions of young Drewe, trying feverishly to fill the gaping cavity with a screwdriver and "six-stitch" cricket ball - a kindred set of metonyms for vain endeavours to achieve control. Instead the opposite, acquiescence, is often called for, or as the narrator comments matter-of-factly: "Dead man's float: the first sign that water requires not only mastery from humans but surrender" (D 220). The one infallible cure for typhoid, too, is to let nature take her course. If by the end of the third day ulcers have not pierced a sufferer's vital organs, then recovery, assisted by patient nursing, is likely. Molloy is a more professional, enlightened and humble version of Curthoys. He keeps a brick room behind his house for prehistoric remains and anthropoid casts as a record of the provisional pieces in the puzzle of human descent, but he is also conversant with indigenous beliefs. Consequently, he is trusted by the custodians of both systems; however, their irreconcilability emerges when a second prehistoric skeleton, this time of a man, is revealed by further cyclone activity. For Molloy, the chance to examine it scientifically might bring confirmation, or at least a strengthening, of his speculative claims. Yet according to the indigenous people the lost couple have sought out each other, and must be returned to their point of arrival in the land - not handed over to a laboratory. The elders' decision is respected by recent legislation, and by Molloy, who cedes precedence to customs born of the heart and spirit, and to a people far removed from Western hubris and the dictates of empirical science:

History awaited and the people waited on history. The same old two-way relationship. In the meantime they didn't see any rush. They had been around for a long while. These were the world's most patient people. (G 397)

Nature, in short, proves stubbornly recalcitrant to man's drive for mastery. He is fortunate when he can interact reciprocally with her, like the tribal elders; more often he is the sport of unforeseen events and genetics. Nature decrees when Salt End Woman and her putative mate will re-emerge from the sand, reducing the archaeologist to an ancillary role. She dictates alike when rain will fall and the instinctive response of all species. Similarly, she
decides that Will shall bond with Angelica, over whom hangs the possibility of mental instability, inherited from her mother. The only example Will can offer of an individual controlling his destiny is “Henry Porteous, who has stood in the one position for four years” (D 62). But this so-called “complete control” (D 63) rests on the abdication of movement, and even then Porteous is subject to shifting subsoil. Similarly engineering, in spite of its vaunted ability to change the order of things, has to acknowledge that creation retains a will of its own. In exceptional terrain, “everything broke the laws and threw out the angles” (D 75). Rails need to be constantly reset, buildings underpinned, because nature is “irritatingly illogical and drawn-out and ... creates freaks” (D 23). As in The Drowner so in Grace, momentous life-changes come unexpectedly. Molloy, deeply in love with Kate, the young mother of Grace, is shattered when she abandons him for a former female lover, much as years later Grace’s life in Sydney is destroyed by the delusional fantasies of a stalker. Far from exerting control, individuals remain the victims of psychotic imaginings, instinctive reactions and tribal memories, repeating behavioural patterns that, down the ages, have frequently doomed them to mindless violence. Hence decades of diverse experience have carried Molly far beyond the sanguine vision of the race’s inevitable triumph, enshrined in Humanity’s Onward March, to a recognition of life’s unfathomability and the distinctly limited nature of human agency: “We underestimate our complexity. Evolution is not simple – it’s an intricate and tangled process and the forces behind it are greater and more irresistible than we realise” (G 291).

The other great Western shibboleth overturned by these novels is the gospel of fulfilment through passionate, romantic love. They show it to be, at best, a passing phase, at worst a masquerade, disguising dark motives. Its most extreme and pathological expression comes in the stalker, alias Carl the Icelander, who brings to Grace adoration, as a chapter heading underscores (G 58). In his letters she is described as his darling lover, his betrothed, or as a creature of rare gifts and beauty and, in his boundless passion, he even dotes on her fingerprints: “Such delicate spirals and so complex, like the amazing vortex of your mind” (G 59). A true psychopath, he is entirely deluded, seeking to transform his pathetic existence through a rich fantasy relationship, as well as utterly unrelenting and unforgiving. Love easily shades into hate, the gorgeous damsel into a whore, the beloved into a vile woman fit only for vengeful immolation. Even the relationship of genuine lovers, like Will and Angelica, is rarely marked by moments of joyous elation. Instead, its evolution produces, not a romantic fusing of two souls in one, but bitter misunderstandings and irreconcilable views of existence. Will holds fast to
the rational, to the belief that the physical environment can be managed; Angelica is more open to the paranormal, more given to self-abandonment. And Molloy, who like him has measured love in terms of the number of acts of copulation per week, or per day, wonders too late: "what did he know about women?" (G 326). Finally, Hammond Lloyd is a stalker of a different sort. He acts out his fantasies, becoming the adoring suitor to every leading lady, and favouring the role of Hamlet, even if his self-centredness pushes his female victims into that of Ophelia. Alternately beguiling, lascivious and obscene, he hovers like a baneful yet allegedly loving spectre beside his daughter, and reveals his unlimited egotism by debauching her childhood friend, Kate.

The act is never consummated before the reader or Angelica, but it is memorably evoked as the two young women clamber up a hill outside Bath, laden with a picnic hamper and tumultuous feelings. The episode opens with a flash of delectable young flesh and a question, never shared with the reader, that Kate strongly denies — only to reverse her original answer fiercely at the end of the scene:

Waves of strange air roared between them. A barrier of meaty, intestinal air forming for ever. Black rain in the eyes. Taste of blood in the mouth. “Yes, Yes!” (D 49)

The striking mingling of ethereal and visceral testifies to an emotional shattering, as well as to an enduring severance between the girls. In between her contradictory rejoinders they have found a hot-air balloon with an empty basket, identified only by an attached “woman’s silk scarf” and a man’s visiting card. To the romantically involved Kate “the scarf — [is] like a knight’s favour” (D 48). More darkly, the cryptic stage prop of the Montgolfier evokes an absent deus ex machina and lofty Ham, full of hot air but distinguished by attractive panache, like the respectable associations on the gentleman’s card. The incident quickly passes, only to be obliquely recalled many years later when, in a final twist, a minor character on “his” deathbed yearns to “go ballooning ... to see the landscape from the air” (D 285). But instead of soaring to the heights, of kicking themselves free of terrestrial impediments, humans remain, as the delirious Axel Boehm remarks, “prisoners chained to trees” in anguish (D 285), like Kate. The dupe of romantic love, eventually she takes her life amidst whispers of pregnancy, while her namesake in Grace is her direct descendant in suffering, being forced to witness her lover, Judy, have a leg severed by a ferry rope rather than a chain.

The repeated failure of master narratives to contain primal threats complements, and has a counterpart in, young Drewe’s discovery that a
“cave”, or void, could emerge in the midst of the most solid-seeming surface. In these novels existence, though lullingly benign at times, is usually troubling, or grim and austere. Not only have disease and warfare existed “from Day One” (D 25), but they and “human sacrifices” persist. The precondition for Will and Angelica re-establishing their union is that they drown Ham, for Kate and Judy re-uniting: bloody disfigurement. Happiness is achieved only in snatches, success and semblances of order are hard won and often transitory, as when Will observes a neat, triangular flotilla of swimming ducks “disintegrate into chaos” (D 22). Admittedly, The Drowner begins with an epigraph from Thoreau that balances, and virtually reverses, the disposition of these antithetical impulses: “The man must not drink of the running streams, the living waters, who is not prepared to have all nature reborn in him—to suckle monsters”. But a comparably positive viewpoint within the novel, of “life ... prevailing ... [and] always the prospect of love” (D 300), is associated specifically with an American sensibility, coloured by Transcendentalism: “He [Felix Locke] is an optimistic man (an American, after all) and he has the help of Whitman and Thoreau” (D 300). What then, to pursue the paradigm outlined in Drewe’s public address, do these books offer to an Australian audience in terms of saving, if only temporary, mortar to maintain the crumbling facade? Where in the unpitying desert, among the dust of demolished idols, does Drewe locate the possibility of grace? The case for hope, as we shall see, is based on humanity’s capacity to inquire clear-sightedly into its circumstances, to modify them and itself, and to take radical action, even to kill, be it a former self or a blocking presence, if this threatens the individual’s, or the race’s chance of survival.

Deprived of the conventional assurances of directive orthodoxies, Drewe’s characters stand “naked” before the great questions of origins, entropy and mortality. As science has shown, and as Grace’s pregnancy resulting from a single sexual encounter with a refugee confirms, opportunistic couplings are especially favourable to procreation. And death is similarly indiscriminating, as Axel Boehm’s bust of a young woman drowned in the Seine underscores. So, too, are death’s principal agents in the two novels: typhoid and the crocodile. Clearly neither operates according to the will of a putative deity. On the goldfields speculative theories about the origins of typhoid, that predate the discovery of bacteria, enjoy a belated second life. Climatic extremes, “the breaking of virgin soil” (D 128), the lack of moral discipline circulate freely as bogus explanations, as do equally impotent cures. Rich lore has also grown up about the great reptile. According to the Egyptians sacred to Osiris, a mythical creature in aboriginal creation songs, as well as featuring in “Jung and pop dream psychology” (G 345), the
crocodile has inspired diverse attempts to explain its place in life, yet there is no diffusing the fundamental threat it embodies as “an indiscriminate, opportunistic feeder, taking every prey from water beetle to water buffalo. And humans” (G 345). Like typhoid it is another grim reaper, whose mere existence can open up vertiginous, existential vistas, like those glimpsed at times by Drewe’s protagonists. Young Will notices this out in the field, where the trappings of civilisation drop away, until his tarpaulin-clad father resembles a druid, beyond whom there is “nothing ... but the swirling of the void” (D 25). Angelica, too, experiences related moments. In the bowels of a mine, the intensity of “black nothingness” (D 308) may shock but is hardly unexpected; however, even daylight is not proof against kindred perceptions, such as Angelica experiences when, in passing beyond her sleeping father and daughter, she “looked out into the stark world and saw nothing at all” (D 304).

The search for ultimate answers may be doomed, the motives for the quest mixed, but Drewe repeatedly affirms the brave endeavour of questers who try to chart the mysterious scheme of things. Their prototype is the palaeoanthropologist Molloy, who “transfers his longing and curiosity about his background to the bigger picture, the study of mankind” (G 198). Yet after a life-time’s work, the best he can offer are provisional answers, like his precursors in the Kalgoorlie subplot of The Drowner, Axel Boehm, Felix Locke and Jean-Pierre Malebranche. Each of them probes the well-springs of existence according to his own skills and training; however, their insights depend less on empirical than imaginative findings. Malebranche uses his microscope not, as his eighteenth century namesake and other natural philosophers would have done, to seek “to know God in his smallest works as well as the glory of his vast heavenly bodies” (D 133), but to discover the carriers of the typhoid epidemic that is ravaging the mining community. What he sees bears little resemblance to a benevolent order, with a single drop of water revealing “a world in which monsters seethe and pass” (D 133); moreover, his straightforwardly scientific approach fails. His two intellectual peers and drinking cronies endeavour to manipulate this seething flux. Locke practises “the art of distancing” (D 136), selectively simplifying an incident or scene until “abstracts as well as tangibles” (D 91) emerge that he can formulate in a sonorous line like: “Slithering mysteries of the night drawn by the glancing angles of the light” (D 93). Similarly, Boehm’s photographs, that “capture such picturesque proof of human existence, its industriousness, optimism and diversity” (D 304) are, as Drewe repeatedly shows, produced by careful selection, props and adroit processing. Their promise of purpose and stability is as illusory as that of Drewe’s limestone block. Ultimately all
his seekers are obliged to impose their version of "truth," rather than being able to lay bare its bedrock, while the menace of confusion, variously designated the void, entropy or disorder, is always present. Individuals may ignore or forget it, but it will reclaim them, as when inattentive Grace "almost fell into the skeleton pit" (G 369).

Faced with intransigent circumstances or an overwhelming threat, others choose flight or migration as a remedy to their problems. Like Grace, Angelica says simply she wants to escape. In her case, the unspecified causes are primarily parental: the shame of a confined mother and the smothering presence of Hammond Lloyd — much as Inez, a nurse on the goldfields, changes the luxury of Toorak for the privations of waterless Kalgoorlie to flee the shame of her father's financial ruin and suicide. Will, on the other hand, is disenchanted with the old order. He wants to put the weight of custom behind him, to cast off "this cobwebby century! ... to experience different surfaces, risks, landscapes" (D 60). Pursuing science rather than his father's profession and accepting employment on the Coolgardie Pipeline are its logical consequences. In Grace, the young refugee of Middle Eastern appearance was originally part of a family's attempted flight. But changing countries is not enough: he, like the aforementioned characters, must overcome his earlier acculturation. The naked flesh of Australian women shocks him, and he is obsessed with recreating DiCaprio's hair-style from Titanic. Dangling locks hold for him a magical promise of attractiveness and success, much as Grace mistakenly believes herself healed from the stalker's menace by her newly found persona as bronzed adventure-guide, unfazed by the wildlife of mangroves and tropical estuaries. Each protagonist affords a variation upon what Felix Locke terms "the mysterious disguises of the private self" (D 300), whose potential impenetrability is exemplified by Axel Boehm. She hides her womanhood under male Teutonic attributes, never offers insights into her past and dies an enigma, her choice of self-effacement and sterility sealed by typhoid.

More important than change of location or appearance is emotional and psychological growth, shown at its most radical in the two female leads. Both of them suffer traumatic disjunctions. Severe illness and relocation lead to a cracking of Angelica's core identity: "She felt disassembled ... [as if] her soul had left her" (D 193) — she becomes a personal version of the friable limestone block. Consequently, she is "desperate to fill the vacuum" (D 193). Grace's disorientation is almost as profound. At the outset of the novel she acknowledges having "escaped the loony bin by the skin of her teeth" (G 10): she, no less than the refugee, is seeking "alignment and coherence" (G 149). The stalker's intervention has destroyed her equilibrium and undermined
her critical faculties. Insomnia, depression, paranoia are the predictable “step[s] in her disintegration” (G 91), till like Inez and Angelica before her, she asks: “what choice did she have but to leave?” (G 94). But what is fled must one day be exorcised, as Angelica’s recurrent nightmare of a childhood incident suggests. In it Ham, dressed as Neptune and acting like an unstoppable primal force, almost drowns her. Fittingly, her liberation takes place in Kalgoolie’s new source of life: the reservoir of water pumped from the coast. There realism shades into fable as Angelica, growling atavistically, mounts on Ham’s shoulders like a demonic St. Christopher to prevent him from drowning Ada – homicide being implicitly justified by maternal instinct and Ham’s own acquiescence: “Festooned, ballooned, in the wet and smothering folds of dress and petticoat, Ham allowed himself to sink – encouraged it – and disappeared” (D 325). The sensed but invisible presence associated with the empty-basketed balloon, in the earlier scene, is finally fixed in place and dispelled, after he has served to reactivate Angelica’s vitality and reunite the lovers. “To love”, she remarked at the outset, “is to change” (D 60) and this young couple, by the end, has amply shown this ability on life’s ever-shifting waters.

*Grace* offers a reprise of these motifs in its climactic action where, once again, the death of an oppressive figure acts as an existential caesura, dividing a confused, directionless past from a purposeful future. The stalker Carl Brand, fixated on taking his victim’s life for imagined gross indecency, penetrates into the building that contains her father’s anthropoid collection as well as a musty wall vault, labelled Grace and decorated with her childhood scribblings. Brand strips naked among the assembled skeletons and, armed with a knife, invades this personalised “cabinet” as he has her life. Inside it he adopts a foetal posture and waits to surprise her. Some time after Grace arrives, suspects his presence, and decides to quell her terror: “Fuck you, you fucking madman” (G 411). Toxic inhalation, however, has dealt with Cari and, as in time-proven fairytales, she locks him behind “three sealed doors” (G 412). There he will sit inside the cabinet Grace, in a macabre parody of the foetus she carries and of the primitive burials that have shaped so much of her father’s research. Depicted here, as in *The Drowner*, is a return to a primal, originary scene, where a feared bogeyman is laid to rest, childlike dread and powerlessness are overcome, and full responsibility assumed for one’s own existence. Unlike Angelica, Grace is spared the taking of life, but not creation’s mark of blood. She is bathed in its colour (“suddenly she was standing in the pool of wine-coloured light in front of that drawing she’d done years ago” [G 411]) and takes a knife in hand, as she prepares to grapple with the stalker. Everywhere in nature she
has witnessed a thousand violent acts, while, unbeknown to her, both her parents were dealt the mark of Cain by the stinging rope that severed Judy's leg; and this preparedness to shed blood, as well as to give life, signals her hard won maturity.

The re-establishment of order and affirmative life forces in both books is, however, as studiously orchestrated as a photograph of Axel Boehm. The evocation of complexities, of the workings of chance and agents of disorder, has been so powerful and convincing that transcending them is marked by a shift from a predominantly realistic to a symbolic mode. This ushers in the narrative equivalent of Felix Locke's fictional world, where hope nevertheless prevails, and the prospect of love endures (D 300). Repeatedly stock plot situations are invoked in Grace, such as the woman alone in a carpark, or the unexpected lunge by a previously incapacitated assailant, only to be passed over. The final scene in the “skull cave” of Molloy, however, is a variation on standard “WOTO” themes (“Woman Overcoming The Odds” [49]) – minus violence – as well as a virtual comic-strip dénouement that condenses action into a few stark tableaux, as diverse allusions to “The Phantom” hint. In addition, dead Carl locked in the wall vault eerily recalls “the entombed offerings [that] held fast” – enabling young Drewe in the anecdote to repair the “cave” that had suddenly appeared in the midst of quotidian reality. The resemblance is illuminating. For in both novels the main source of threatening eclipse has been thrust symbolically into the nihilistic void opened up by his actions, and is deftly counterbalanced by his former victim's fecundity. An optimistic verdict on the predominance of life-sustaining over monstrous forces within creation, once identified as typically American, is revalidated in an Australian setting. Yet the neat narrative resolution remains an imaginative contrivance which, like young Drewe's desperately concocted “mortar,” neither precludes future threats nor answers ultimate existential riddles.

Such a challenging, diversely shaped universe is, according to both books, best met with a mature mixture of agency and wise patience. Even the tribal elders must, from time to time, assert their rights, while the passive mindset that needs to be overcome is articulated by Grace, midway through her journey: “At first you hope for a nice ride. Then you just hope to reach your destination” (G 247). Eventually she will grasp that she can help define her own destination, like Molloy. Despite being a failure as a lover, he is sufficiently clear-sighted to realise that his one significant relationship is with his daughter, and that he can best serve her with a combination of intervention and steadying support. Similarly, Will learns to confront adversity with measured resolve. By holding fast to his vision of winning
Angelica, and of social conditions improved through engineering, he finally succeeds on both fronts. In the last scene he and Angelica cradle Ada protectively while calmly treading water ("They had told each they could be patient" [D 326]), their setting, burden and reunion suggesting powerfully the likelihood of further progeny. The alternative to enabling choices is a state of helpless nonage, represented by Ada, a "marionette joyeuse" (D 297). As Angelica explains, "mental and physical handicaps" incapacitate these children. Although Ada has a happy, lovable disposition and, in appearance, is "a picture book angel", she is, till the age of six, essentially powerless: "she needs us to pull her strings" (D 297). The etymological link of angel with Angelica draws attention to disturbing characteristics she shares with her daughter, and underscores how crucial it is that both she and Grace seize the decisive moment when action is called for, so as to take charge of their own lives and fertility.

Linked with the issue of individual destiny is that of Australia. In place of the metaphor of the dignified limestone edifice, Grace offers two images of alternate futures for the nation. To the refugee, it seems "the careless country of crocodiles and blond children down below" (G 154), relaxed, amoral and self-centred. Later Kelly, the young partner of a conservative publican, reminds Grace that "this was almost the Promised Land ... We came this close" (G 372), referring to a proposal to resettle Jews in Australia rather than Palestine. In the same exchange she warns Grace that her partner has reported the refugee to the authorities – adding her small act of grace to those of the eponymous heroine, the politicised nun and nameless others who aid the young asylum-seeker. The notion of Australia as a Promised Land for humankind had, of course, earlier inspired colonial Republicans, such as Charles Harpur, and has featured in recurring debates about migration and population density. Its antithesis, in the call for a return to "the Good Old Past" of quarantined, white Australia, is represented by the outback townspeople who, in an area subject to cyclones and "gusts [of wind] from Asia" (G 382), have turned their pub into a pro-white fortress. Waves of disapproval and mistrust greet strangers in the bar. Photographs in the lounge remind grimly of town catastrophes, while "old sepia pictures" document the degenerate threat that needs to be held at bay: "Ragged Aboriginal lepers were arranged in descending physical condition around a stern-faced nun. Gaunt black men in loincloths, fierce cicatrices striping their bony chests, squatting in linked leg irons between two boab trees" (G 381). The wages of intolerance are a community at war with itself, where at night stores are "fortified like bunkers against the tempests of nature and man" (G 383), and juveniles maraud unchecked in the streets. Yet unity can exist, as Molloy
insists, “despite extraordinary complexity” (G 291). The survival of Australian society, Drewe implies, depends on accepting those elements and sources of wisdom it has traditionally rejected – exclusion will no more lock out foreigners and threatening ideas than dangerous bacteria.

Apart from radically widening Drewe’s ongoing re-evaluation of national myths and the historical record, his latest novels unambiguously advocate an open and racially mixed Australia. His focus in Grace on the detention and treatment of boat people is, however, not simply an opportunistic exploitation of a highly topical issue – the theme of migration has long concerned him. In the 1977 letter to the Literature Board, for example, Drewe announced:

It may seem premature, but I have clear plans for a fourth novel based on the detention and deportation of an immigrant Italian cloakroom attendant at Romanos during World War Two, and a fifth based on a small but symbolic incident in western New South Wales during World War One."¹

Neither has appeared. But Grace touches on concerns that originally drew him to this material and migration, too, is at the heart of The Drowner. There the main characters are born outside Australia, while Western Australia, with its mineral wealth, is drawing adventurers from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. Afghan camel drivers win silent accolades for gathering up corpses, ferrying water and supplies, and feeling no superstitious aversion to Felix Locke’s role as undertaker. For unlike the atheists or Christians of Kalgoorlie, Muslims had “no fear of death ... they saw his role as that of an honourable and patient helpmeet to God” (D 107). The racist countercase is only articulated in Grace, where it is dammingly attributed to the repulsive, corrupt, former policeman-turned-publican, Strachan. He blames the aborigines for everything from his own financial misfortune to the alleged demise of science, citing government concessions to them as proof that “lately something had gone wrong with the brains of the nation” (G 262). Yet as the novel diversely reiterates, “Australia was always a recipient of many different people” (G 290). The arrival of diverse cultures and boats, from the time of Salt End Woman on, has been a constant in the continent’s history, as the setting in multiracial Port Mangrove (a thinly disguised Broome) emphasises. And the future in both books belongs to chance progeny and a multiracial cast. As Molloy, the spokesperson for “a world beyond nationalities” asserts, “evolution is happening everywhere and all the time, where any man and woman can produce children with each other” (G 291).
Ultimately both The Drowner and Grace are concerned with the past primarily as a guide and inspiration to future conduct, not as an object of nostalgic longing or veneration. Hence they affirm the deeds of those who slough off despondency, convention and victimhood to assume responsibility for their own and their country’s identity. What the boy achieved in Drewe’s parable of the dwindling foundation is granted, in heightened form, to his leading characters. Their capacity for positive action is ringingly confirmed by the central moral fable of The Drowner, where the reunion of the lovers and its natural equivalent, the arrival of water, guarantee that the red sand will bloom, that life will be sustained. In Grace the verdict is more nuanced but no less affirmative. By the novel’s end Grace, like Angelica, has conquered all that was most fear-inspiring and stultifying in her existence. Empowered and pregnant, she is about to fulfil her part as a bridge between scarcely imaginable times, past and to come. Her well-meaning father, however, insists on returning to Lion Island, the scene of his youthful love and separation from Kate, to fill in details from Grace’s childhood, believing firmly that “you couldn’t live with gaps in your own story” (G 413). But this is unequivocally disproved. First, any notion of an automatic hankering after the past is dismissed: “It was hard to be nostalgic for something you didn’t recall” (G 413-14) Grace reflects, though she decides to humour her parent and enjoy the fine weather. Then the impossibility of returning to “the Good Old Past” is driven home by numerous signs of massive change and commercial development. Finally, Grace chooses self-defining action over words. On a distant sandbank, decades earlier, the ferry bearing maimed Judy had run aground and Kate had given Molloy “custody of Grace’s life” (G 331). Amidst mayhem, tears and shipwreck they had begun their existence together – clinging to each other to form a solitary “island” on an equally desolate “island” (G 331). Now his daughter, with bulging belly, becomes part of the migratory, shifting natural world around them, as she strikes out strongly from the shore towards the same sandbank – a portentous image of independence and regeneration. Certainly Australia’s time as the Promised Land has not yet arrived, for the refugee must be flown clandestinely on to Auckland. But the ending leaves no doubt that fulfilment is possible, even “with gaps in your own story”. Self-understanding and resolve in the present afford a firm basis for taking responsibility for one’s own future on fresh, yellow sand that awaits the imprint of coming generations.
NOTES


3 Describing the genesis of his first book, *The Savage Crows*, and of his authorial ambition, Drewe recently quoted Saul Bellow’s protagonist Moses Herzog who, like himself, “had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends”, referring to his own and the nation’s past (“First Voice: Robert Drewe looks back on the writing of his first novel,” *The Age* Saturday March 11, 2006, A2): 29.


6 Commentary has been uncertain about what is at stake in his most recent books. Reviewers have contented themselves with general remarks about *Grace*, describing it as an “ambitious, multi-themed novel ... like *Capricornia*, full of ideas and energy” (Kerryn Goldsworthy, “The Year’s Work in Fiction,” *Westerly* 50 (2005): 63), then giving a plot summary, while the most extended essay on *The Drowner*, Alistair Rolls and Vanessa Alayrac, “Changing the Tide and Tidings of Change: Robert Drewe’s *The Drowner*”, *Southerly* 62 (2002): 154–67, focuses on intertextuality, both within the novel and between it and earlier short stories.


8 Drewe’s treatment of their many areas of thematic overlap is often tantalising and highly inventive. It tends to yield variations, expansions and inversions rather than simple repetitions of motifs and ideas. For instance, water for Molloy, unlike the two lovers from *The Drowner*, is a foreign, anxiety-creating element (“Water has never been his forte. First a London orphan boy, then an Australian farm boy, he’s never been a swimmer” [G 329]), while Will’s passing aside about culinary habits (“I bet the natives don’t eat crocodile. I think there is a rule: Don’t eat anything that eats you” [D 161]) recurs in *Grace*, but there the immediate context is a highly successful crocodile farm and the human-reptile equation is a major plot element.

9 The second and third works mentioned here became respectively *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* and *Fortune*.

10 “A Cry in the Jungle Bar”, Ms. 49/A, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

But by this date the book, if not untouched, “has stayed intact, attracting no envy or vandalism from his companions. No other child ever coveted” it (G 194).

No cause is adduced to explain Mrs Hammond Lloyd’s state, that has led to incarceration. Certainly her husband’s serial adultery could have been a contributing factor, but she is devoid of rancour, and subsequently Will is also explicitly absolved of blame for Angelica’s mental aberrations (D 193).

For further discussion of their roles and métiers see Ackland, “In the Service of Complex Truths: The Aims and Art of Robert Drewe’s Fiction”, 37–39.

They afford a modern version of “elective affinities,” drawn together by their respective experiences of adversity that began three years earlier, and led to their former lives being “submerged under fathoms of loss and stifled memory” (G 149).

For example, after prolonged exposure to pornographic sites on the internet and already mentally fragile, Grace concludes that millions of men “hated women and wished to degrade them”, that “all the average Joes logging on around the world” were potential stalkers or worse (G 88–89).

The motivation behind Ham’s actions in this final scene is unclear. Rolls and Alayrac argue that his leap into the reservoir represents “his final attempt fully to live out his Ophelia complex and take his role of drowner to its furthest limits” (“Changing the Tide and the Tidings of Change; Robert Drewe’s *The Drowner*”, 165). In addition, the concluding pages, which associate water with death (D 324) and Ham with “The Spectre Bridegroom” (D 320), invite us to see him as belonging to the world of death and bound to return there with his latest victim, Ada.

In this scene complicity in adulthood and tearful fallibility, rather than in murder, earns a burning ‘brand’, as Drewe recasts this stock, postlapsarian motif: “On the jetty, half stunned from the rope blow across his brow – it felt more like a metal rod! – all Molloy can do is shout their names ... Kate’s forehead is bleeding from a similar whip slash to his” (G 328, 330).

My point is not to criticise Drewe’s choice of an ending, but to tease out some of its consequences. Novels require closure and, as Grace herself notes, before this “her own situation defied the screenwriters’ manuals. Motive remained unclear; conflict was irregular but traumatic, and maybe never-ending” (G 47).


“A Cry in the Jungle Bar”, Ms. 49/A, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia. Their proposed titles were A Wolf Forgiven and A White Cleaning.