By anyone’s count the period from July 2005 to June 2006 has been a fruitful one for the publication of Australian fiction. Many of our best-known writers produced new books – Peter Carey, Brian Castro, Robert Drewe, Gail Jones, Nicholas Jose, Alex Miller, Brenda Walker as well as the recently naturalised John Coetzee. And there were books of outstanding quality by new, or relatively, new authors, ranging from James Bradley to M.J. Hyland, Sandy McCutcheon and (a real discovery) Josephine Wilson, not to mention Carrie Tiffany whose first novel was short-listed for the Miles Franklin award.

Where to begin? I dislike the idea of first, second, third, the sort of sports mentality that wishes to rank everything into “winners” and “losers”. There have been plenty of novels that have won some major prize but five years later are forgotten, whereas other books which did not even make a short-list seem to grow in interest and stature with time (and often enough the development of their author’s corpus and recognition). I do not think The Aunt’s Story would have made any short-list when it was published in 1948, even if there had been a prize for fiction here at that time.

Curiously, I was somehow reminded of The Aunt’s Story when I read Brian Castro’s The Garden Book. I think it was for two reasons. Firstly, The Garden Book is the only novel I have read, perhaps since Patrick White’s third novel, that I immediately wanted to re-read after I got to the last page. It is mysterious, haunting, and filled with a dark passion and compassion. It is this quality which reminded me of White’s Aunt. Swan Hay, a Chinese-Australian, is perhaps the least realistic but most unforgettable female character in Australian fiction. Castro has created a compelling portrait so that you believe in her utterly, despite her feyness, her strangeness and her exoticism. He has surrounded her with studies of more conventional unconventionality and the setting, in the Dandenongs of the 1930s, is breathtaking in its precision. This is an example of research that has been transformed into illumination and a driving conviction. The Garden Book is, perhaps, my personal book of the year.
It stands in challenging company. Peter Carey’s last couple of novels have the air of being manufactured, willed into being. But Theft is his most energetic work for years. I enjoyed the gusto of the writing, the completely fascinating love relationship (and especially its cynical but triumphant ending) and the brilliantly managed counterpoint of the first-person narratives of the two brothers, including the mentally disadvantaged one. Indeed, Hugh Bones is more convincingly realised than Patrick White’s Waldo Brown (in The Solid Mandala). And this is before I mention the vividly pernicious world of New York Art Dealers.

By a curious coincidence, that same art world is part of the New York milieu searingly revealed in Josephine Wilson’s debut novel, Cusp. This is one of the first novels written by Creative Writing students in Australia that has been published by the University of Western Australia Press under the editorship of Terri-Ann White. It is a real illustration of the positive creative energies being nurtured and honed through this recently burgeoning “industry”. The ultimate interest in the novel, however, involves a mother/daughter relationship and is triggered by the return to Perth of Lena Perkins, who had escaped her mother’s stultifying dominance to attempt a new life overseas. The working through of their separate feelings is finely judged and the dialogue is completely convincing. This year has seen a number of books from writers with a Western Australian base or background, and Cusp certainly demonstrates great talent, and, indeed, achievement.

A New Map of the Universe is also published under the University of Western Australia’s new writers scheme. It is by Annabel Smith, who completed a PhD in Creative Writing at Edith Cowan University. I note this book has already been reprinted. It is perhaps easy to understand why. The first, and major Part offers an intensely romantic and idealised account of the brief love affair between Grace and Michael, before Michael abruptly (to Grace) departs on a study trip to Egypt. Grace is very much the central figure here. Michael is presented without shadows or much identity, apart from his seductive knowledge of the stars and myths from diverse cultures about their meaning or import. Grace has completed a degree in Architecture, but her disparaging mother (presented here as one of the more unattractive mother figures in fiction) has undermined her ambitions by telling Grace she will never come up to the natural talents of her (dead) father. Grace fantasises and dreams (the book is full of dreams) about Michael and tries to realise his suggestion that she design a house for him on his coastal allotment. Despite her romantic fantasies, their letters to each other remain stiff and remote. One wishes they had explored the internet. Parts II and III give us, in great detail, the histories of her parents. Perhaps if these parents had made a
greater impact on our understanding of Grace in Part I their stories might have seemed more relevant. A brief Part IV brings us, at long last, back to Grace and she learns to understand something of her own background. Her fantasies about Michael had tailed off, but in the end all is resolved, happily. If I were cynical, I would describe this book as almost wilfully romantic at its core. As it is, I will pass it on to a suitable adolescent.

I found Ffion Murphy’s debut novel *Devotion* (the author also lives in West Australia – and teaches creative writing) a stylish and compulsive read. The theme is essentially a narrow one but it is handled with such essential concern and sympathy that the reader is drawn into its intensity. Veronica is in hospital following a caesarean and does not respond to treatment. She seems indifferent to her newborn son and refuses to speak. Her doctor persuades her to write – anything – at an Apple laptop and, unknown to her, he accesses her writings. A number of lives are tugged into the slow process of Veronica’s rehabilitation, and Ffion Murphy, with great tact and clear writing skill, keeps the reader alert and involved, and even warmly sympathetic towards Veronica.

Marion May Campbell’s *Shadow Thief*, also set in Western Australia but taking her main protagonists abroad (and bringing them back), is another mother/daughter novel. In some ways it is more ambitious in that Campbell depicts two separate mother/daughter relationships, both from childhood to adulthood and, in the final pages, brings the two girls together in a more-than-likely lesbian relationship. It is told through vividly written, brief chapters, often jumping from one story-line to the other so as to lead up to that final encounter, which is presented with just enough ambivalence to leave the reader expectant but not fully satisfied. In this novel I felt some of the “research” was a little too obviously imposed. It seems a fashion to give the names of popular songs and films of the past to provide an easy guide to whole eras.

Robert Drewe’s *Grace*, a story about a stalker (among other things), is full of the author’s characteristic zest in writing and the portrayal of the psychological implications of the unnerving situation is carried through more than convincingly. Grace Molloy holds this novel together, though I did find myself fascinated by the sub-story of an old Aboriginal skeleton and the contemporary difficulties of how such remains are to be treated – or respected. And there were some stunning moments of pure satirical skill as Drewe observes groups of people as types.

Roger McDonald’s *The Ballad of Desmond Kale* won this year’s Miles Franklin award and it is easy to see why. It is, in many ways, a tour-de-force. The setting is early days of settlement in New South Wales (by a curious
coincidence, both Thomas Keneally and Kate Grenville published books with parallel historical settings in 2005). As the title of McDonald's novel implies, Desmond Kale is to be seen as an almost mythical figure, more talked about (or sung about) than actually present in the lives of the characters in the book. I think this is achieved, but at some cost. The “flogging magistrate” and parson, Matthew Stanton, really takes over the foreground of the story. Irascible, obsessed and vengeful, Stanton is clearly modelled on the real figure of the reverend Samuel Marsden, though interestingly enough, John Macarthur is nowhere invoked, even though the very heart of the novel, and its real achievement, is the subject of breeding fine Merino wool. This is a paean to the development of wool in Australia, a subject which has been taken for granted in many ways, certainly in our fiction. The sort of realistic portrayals of Macarthur to date have been cumbersome. To displace Macarthur with Desmond Kale was perhaps a masterstroke: Macarthur will never be the stuff of myth, but Kale assuredly becomes just that. The detailed approach to this subject is breathtaking and, for this decidedly non-wool-reverencing reader, riveting and, dare I say, educational. McDonald's style is almost baroque, perhaps in keeping with the historical period. His turn of phrase has that measured tone of late eighteenth-century writing, but with his own poetic nuance.

Alex Miller's Prochownik's Dream is a novel about an artist. It joins a long list, and indeed must be seen beside Peter Carey's Theft as an exercise in evoking the driven qualities of this species. I wondered, quietly, if artists in other genres, ever attracted anything like the same interest, and the short novel by Alex Skovron, The Poet, perhaps answered this question. The Poet concerns a writer who, with characteristic self-absorption, is not interested in having his work actually published – until he loses his manuscript and then finds another writer is publishing his work under their name; a theme parallel to Cary’s subject. Skovron’s novella is really a short-story, extended (sometimes by obvious means, such as the recurring bits about weather in Melbourne), so that (appropriately, for poetry) the issues of artistic validity and creativity are left for the reader to knot through. Alex Miller’s novel engages in the compulsive world of the visual artist. The complexity of personal relationships when others become entangled in either the artist or his obsession is at the heart of the book. I thought Miller was more succinct than Patrick White (in The Vivesector) but more intensive than Malouf (in Harland’s Half Acre) and the overwhelming shadow of Joyce Cary’s Gully Jimpson was avoided. The book may not have the ultimately devastating sense of revelation and horror that Journey to the Stone Country so eminently had, but, in its smaller scale, it gets inside the world of the artist. Would that
we could all live up to that romantic carelessness, in the real world, but there are perhaps enough wrecked lives all around, as it is.

Gail Jones' Dreams of Speaking haunted me and moved me deeply. It began as a typical Australian-not-making-it-overseas (Paris, this time) but really became a poignant, funny, and ultimately heart-breaking story of a human relationship, chaste but with an increasing sense of intimacy, between a young woman who has been trying to write and research abroad, and a middle-aged Japanese man, who is a survivor of Nagasaki, has a family in Japan, and who shares an interest in the lives of inventors and scientists. This shared curiosity leads to the growth of their relationship, and enables Alice, the narrator, to clarify her own personal relationships and to move forward. This is done only at the cost of realising she can only be on the outside of any real understanding of her Japanese friend, Mr Sagomo. The novel is written with skill and a deftness of touch that makes the potentially mawkish material fully realised and therefore resonant.

In some ways the surprise and discovery of the year was Sandy McCutcheon's Black Widow. It is audacious to attempt a novel based on the recent dreadful events at Beslan and their aftermath. I knew McCutcheon largely as an ABC talkback radio figure and the sheer skill and obvious research that must have gone into this writing amazed me. The narrative has all the speed and compulsion of a thriller, and the theme of revenge, which perhaps rockets out of control, is all too familiar to us. A group of Beslan teachers who were hostages in the school drama decide to track down and exert revenge on the Chechnyan rebels. The pace is inexorable, and the fact that the teachers are all women gives an added glint to the chilling meticulousness of their actions. McCutcheon has incorporated seamlessly all the strange and very foreign elements of this passionate world so that the reader is utterly convinced. I have long been interested in the Alans, a mysterious people whose shadowy history goes back centuries, and McCutcheon, in this book, gives me a new insight into their influence and presence right up to our times. This man has real writing skills and, even more impressively, insight.

If Black Widow takes us far from Australia, in bringing us a very contemporary background of events, M J Hyland, in Carry Me Down, sets her novel about the awkwardness of early male adolescence in contemporary Ireland, and she does so with a similar conviction, though I would guess that the background research needed was far less serious than Black Widow necessitated. Indeed, in a recent issue of Overland, Ian Syson, while extolling the book's virtues, suggested it might as easily have been set in smalltown Victoria. I don't know. The Irish setting has its own authenticity, especially
when situating the world of boyhood development and the curious adult silences and evasiveness; this struck me as particularly apt in a contemporary Ireland but I am not sure I would have been convinced if it had been Castlemaine or Benalla. It is a wonderfully realised story, and the writing marks Hyland as an impressive technician. She is a major new talent.

Carrie Tiffany’s *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living* is a first novel which clearly announces a talent worth watching. It is set in the Mallee, largely, in the 1930s. This makes it one of a number of recent novels that explore that period anew (Brian Castro immediately comes to mind). I thoroughly enjoyed the pseudo-scientific approach in the writing and even the layout of the book, and the ultimate revelation of the unreliability of “scientific” attitudes without consideration of other factors, is deftly underpinned and with considerable wit. This was a particularly difficult, indeed arduous, period in our history and it is refreshing to see it played so amusingly for its pretensions as well as its pathos.

James Bradley is one of the younger novelists who has attracted considerable interest and *The Resurrectionist* is his third novel. It is set in London in the nineteenth century and the theme of body snatching and vivisection is one that has been tackled before, but is always, in its gruesome way, engrossing enough. Bradley has written with a firm sense of style and his pace, if a little deliberate and predictable, carries the story and its themes of love, death and vocation, with the sort of firmness this subject demands. I only wish I could have been carried on in a surge of rather more urgency.

J. M. Coetzee, now a naturalised Australian living in Adelaide, has set his new novel, *Slow Man*, in that city. It really is a working of aspects of his previous book, *Elizabeth Costello*, and indeed Elizabeth is a major, manipulating, figure in the new book. The essential theme, how a middle-aged man, Paul Rayment, manages his life after a leg amputation following an accident on his pushbike, is one that is compelling enough, at least for other ageing men, like me, when disabilities to do with the failing body begin to intrude on one’s life. Coetzee is a remarkable writer, and by reintroducing Elizabeth Costello, as a sort of nurse and irritant, or conscience, the book takes on a whole new shape and direction, far removed from commonplace themes of ageing and disability. If this book were not by an author who has already received the Nobel Prize for Literature, I think I would have labelled it “astonishing”. I am still filled with, let us say, admiration.

Nicholas Jose, like Brian Castro, in his new book *Original Face*, deals with aspects of the Chinese community in Sydney, in the period leading up to the Olympic Games. Like Sandy McCutcheon, his novel has many elements of
the thriller. I believe film rights have already been sold, and I can understand that. For me, the delineation of various layers of Chinese culture and society is what gives the novel its particular frisson. Nicholas Jose, who was the Australian Cultural Attaché in Beijing at one stage, and has written frequently about Chinese matters, has clearly delved into the specific background of this rather gruesome story of murder, revenge and the many webs of power and influence within not only Chinese society in Sydney but also with a fair insight into what we might term Occidental strata in the same city. I read it in one sitting. It was a book not to put down.

Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* was short-listed for the 2006 Miles Franklin award. This is another novel with a Western Australian setting and it takes place initially in 1915 (Gallipoli and the First World War) but is essentially a rural lyric, recounting how some survivors (women, and returned men) learn to re-make their lives, or are eventually defeated by their traumatic experiences. The pastoral setting and the time period are evoked with minimum elaboration but with a convincing warmth and a keen eye for just the right detail. Her characters engage the reader and though it is a short book (it seems so, both in narrative length and in close attention to a small range of characters) there is a sweet compulsiveness that engages the reader. The writing itself is poised and gently persuasive. Details such as the Gallipoli sequence and the final descent into madness of Joe, the main male figure, are handled well, though they do have the slight sense of being “set pieces”.

In *Man of Water*, Chris McLeod tells about a writer with writer’s block and a PhD Creative Writing thesis hanging over his head. The setting is, again, West Australia. Novels about writers, as I should have guessed, are not as interesting as novels about Visual Artists. Chris McLeod has a good, rather clipped writing style and, underneath his character Watt’s false bravado and necessary self-abasement, there is still plenty of ego and the humour is waspish.

Manfred Jurgensen’s novel, *The Eyes of the Tiger* was a book that I felt should have attracted me more. It is the only book this year with a Brisbane setting, and the evocation of that sub-tropical environment is, indeed, graphic and sweltering. The weather of the novel is the now famous 1974 flood. The rank and riotous riverside suburbs capture exactly the summer oppressiveness of Brisbane, and the main theme, dealing with the influence of a “charismatic” newcomer Sannes, upon the immunologist Mark and his new girlfriend, Jessica, has the potential to create strong material and drama. Unfortunately, the author has a decidedly off-putting habit of telling the reader, sometimes repeatedly, and even dogmatically, the high import of all
these nuances of relationship and of event. I wish someone had whispered to the author the old adage of “show don’t tell”. One feels that the shadow of earlier twentieth-century German writers falls too heavily, particularly when Jurgensen seeks to tease out the fine nuances of love and power, of influence and duress.

If Manfred Jurgensen does not allow his characters to tell themselves, as it were, Diane Bell, in *Evil, A Novel*, is thoroughly didactic. She uses the device of a third-person narrator, Dee Scutari, but the reader cannot escape the thought that the author, herself, is only very thinly disguised. This is because we are told from the outset that there is evil afoot and predatory priests aplenty. We are not led to make any speculations or conclusions for ourselves. Professor Scutari does that all for us, and with a sort of anthropological certitude that, frankly, chills. A text for the converted, was my conclusion.

I found *Billy’s Tree*, by Nicholas Kyriacos an altogether more fascinating and genuinely disturbing a story. It is about the problems faced by young Aboriginals in modern-day Redfern and uses the historical event of the wiping out of the Rabbitoh football club to bring together the diverse and multicultural community. My real problem, though was that I found the decisively idiomatic prose style, or impersonation, pretty off-putting, rather than inviting. It is a big, sprawling book, but the material remains urgent and immediate. I hope I don’t sound too schoolmasterly (the author is a retired headmaster) if I say: a brave effort.

Colin Duckworth, in *Summer Symphony* attempts a basically erudite novel about music and I felt I should have enjoyed his allusions and references more, but the concept of a mystical chord that affects people strangely, though explored with some conviction and scientific resonance (if I can use that term), still reminds me too much of Scriabin or Hovhannes and the composer, Alan Scott, whose English lower middle class background is diligently explored, failed to energise my attention. The author has read well, and widely, in musical and cultural fields. It is an earnest, rather than an appealing, exercise, though I still feel it is haunted by a romantic identification with the essential theme. I come from a lower middle class background myself, and once wanted to be a serious composer, so perhaps I found myself distrustful, rather than sympathetic.

Gay Lynch’s first novel, *Cleanskin*, was a book I approached with some interest and a little trepidation. When I was Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, Gay Lynch completed a successful MA in Creative Writing with me on a project that showed plenty of talent and originality of outlook. *Cleanskin* was a manuscript highly commended in the
Adelaide Writers’ Week Unpublished Fiction Prize in 2004. It is a novel about suburban women and the strain on relationships when events push the thin veneer of politeness and good behaviour out of sync. The writing is tart and, in its own way, unflinching. Domestic life is portrayed as being as intense a scene for shattering moments as any. Claustrophobic, perhaps.

The development of creative writing courses has been much discussed. Several of the novels here were either written by teachers of creative writing, or by authors who have been through the system. I think that the great virtue of such courses is in the way in which craft skills can be imparted. If there has been something of an emphasis on matters immediate and domestic, family relationships and suburban angst, this is only one of the byproducts of such workshops, and clearly an understandable one: beginning writers have to start by wrestling with material they know something about, and family must come pretty high. We have not had (as in America) the surge of “campus novels” and books about the politics of universities. No doubt they will come, but wit and irony are not the most easily acquired skills for most writers. Only Michael Wilding, here, seems to have caught the sting as well as the tang of campus life.

Drusilla Modjeska, among others, a few years back deplored the state of Australian fiction, urging us all to turn to contemporary issues and material. Writers, and I think wisely, have proved that if you tackle old, or historical subject matter, you are not necessarily abdicating from involvement with the current world and the contemporary state of the world. Writing, by its very nature, looks backward as well as forward. If Kate Grenville or Roger McDonald take as their subject late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century colonial material, they are doing so in the light (and resonance) of distinctly early-twenty-first-century knowledge and attitudes. Some issues have to be re-examined again and again. If the History Wars have told us anything, it is that.

But of course, as these books show, Australian writers are tackling recent subject matter, and with some élan. I can’t help being intrigued, though, by the way earlier periods in our own history, emerge as material for new creative investigation. We had a spate of First World War novels some time back, then the Second World War provided the backdrop for some very distinguished novels (Malouf’s The Great World immediately springs to mind). I found that a new approach to the 1930s here offered the sort of creative frisson that intrigued. Castro and Tiffany are writers in a more varied and refreshing mode than the “dun coloured realists” who penned earlier books in the period prior to 1940. The Year of Living Dangerously, by Christopher Koch, was undoubtedly the success it was because it was published at a time when it
was almost impossible to write anything important about Vietnam — that war and the surrounding turmoil was still too close — but to select a South-East Asian subject — Sukarno and Indonesia — grabbed a range of material close enough yet just that little bit distanced. We should learn from that.

A look at three recent anthologies from Creative Writing Classes gives perhaps a good illustration of the range of work beginning to appear. Anyone - editors, publishers, agents - involved with the discovery and nurturing of new talent, should be aware of these publications. Sometimes quite surprising discoveries can be made. The books I have surveyed in this field are On Edge (edited by Christy Di Frances, Susan Errington, Rachel Hennessy and Emmett Stinson) which comes from the University of Adelaide; The House That Words Built (edited by Ioana Petrescu and Kasey Kilgariff) from the University of South Australia, and Making Tracks, UTS Writers' Anthology 2006 (no editor named). The last named was published by ABC Books, which in itself gives a good indication of some benign publishing interest, though Wakefield Publishing in Adelaide produced On Edge, which is the fifth they have published in a series from the University of Adelaide writing course. Lythrum press, also of Adelaide, is the sort of very small publisher perhaps more usually associated with student work. The point, though, is that these books are reaching out beyond “student” writing, to become key anthologies of the emerging talent here. These are assuredly among the voices we will be hearing, and reading, in the future.

Fiction 2005–2006

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


DISTRACTION

Waking unwell,
worried how I will cope
with a new day,
I glance out the window to
see a thornbill
hopping lightly in the twigs
of a wandoo—
and it flits into my mind
to set that bird
in a poem, catch it in words
as a distraction from pain.

MOPOKES

Perhaps they’re simply
reassuring each other,
those mopokes calling …
Who is there who doesn’t need
sounds of comfort in the night?
But not presumed killed. You are somewhere, sharing this city, the cold touch of wet stone or bark. You, too, wait for the flowers to open.

It was a long-running skirmish. There were infiltrators on both sides. My retreat was almost suicidal. How must I put it in my memoirs?

There is love lost between us, wandering more forlorn than any child in the dark woods. Could it recognise us again? We have learnt well the art of camouflage.

We have found strange allies, no doubt. We have come to expect betrayal. It is winter and the campaign has slowed. Let us think about the spring.

You shrug at my truce messages. What further damage, reinforced by ill-trained love, can I do you? The common enemy is elsewhere: it is the past. Come, accept this surrender.
DREAMS

have no listing of ingredients on the label
no label, nothing we can read before consumption
every night we are in jeopardy, even a trace

of peanut will do it, a throat will seize up
a heart will end dreams are like the voices of violins played at high altitudes
an ice pick swung at the cranium if you have perfect pitch

dreams come for us at night; lull us into a false sense
of time, they are the shadows fallen from our yesterdays, and if we remember them, they will fall across our tomorrows

on waking dreams are like clouds, their looming
softly departs but leaves in the mouth an aftertaste
that cannot be scraped from tongue dreams are like tea leaves, fortunes

brewed at 4 am, but at the hairline fracture of dawn
beached on the inner china lip of a cup, so that the sense of ridiculous is never far
from gazing at a future trajectory in a shape that could be
ducks, a trio ascending heavenwards, or three fingerprints climbing a wall or wet shaggy moons orbiting the rim or the profile of a man composed of smudges who finds himself quaint and discreetly baffled dreams, if you remember the left-overs
they are best consumed quietly, quickly, privately on waking. don’t offer to share the rest of us are full.
The publication of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* met with an ambivalent reception. The novel is a complex and often deeply moving narrative that vividly evokes the displacement, dispossession, uncertainties and anxieties of living in the border or contact zones in mid-nineteenth century Australia. Yet it radically divided literary critics, their divergent responses exacerbated by the socio-cultural context of its publication. This was in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, and one year after the momentous *Mabo v. Queensland* High Court ruling on native title. My own position in the ongoing debate is along the lines of Peter Otto's assertion that Malouf's text inscribes an "erasure of the political" through his literary translation of the "political into the psychological, and matters of history and politics into questions of creativity and aesthetics"; and in compliance with Suvendrini Perera's postcolonial critique of Malouf's protagonist as being centred within a "discourse of happy hyridisation". However, rather than simply re-engaging with this debate, I want to offer a reading of the underlying theme of shame in *Remembering Babylon*, a subject that has so far been neglected in critical discussions of this novel.

This omission is particularly astonishing not only because of the omnipresence of shame in the text but also because ever since the Australian Reconciliation Convention in 1997, shame has had a particular contextual importance in contemporary Australia. As is well-known, the timing of the Convention coincided both with the completion of the *Bringing Them Home* report and John Howard's astounding denial of the shame of Australia's violent colonial history and the long-term impact this had and continues to have on the first inhabitants of this continent. Howard's crude dismissal of what he terms the "black arm band version of history", together with his studied refusal to apologise to the remaining Aboriginal population - which was tantamount to refusing to believe the authenticity of the stories of
profound trauma and grief that were recorded in the *Bringing Them Home* report – resulted in many of the delegates at the Reconciliation Convention turning their backs on Howard as a physical marker of shame. Indeed, Raymond Gaita argues that “Australia is a nation ‘seriously stricken by shame’, which is why so-called ‘black armband brigades’ are set up to be mocked” by political conservatives as diverse as John Howard and Keith Windshuttle.

To be stricken by shame in either a personal or socio-political context while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge this shame results in paralysis and stasis. What is more, because shame – whether it is consciously acknowledged or not – is powerful, contagious, self-propagating and profoundly hierarchically structured, contemporary white Australia protects itself from shame by projecting the contagion of this affect onto the objectified other. Perhaps the most recent example of this here in Western Australia is the way in which the white-centric media constantly and forcibly exposes the shame of Aboriginal dereliction in photograph after photograph of the dinner camp in Halls Creek, with pictures of drunken mothers lying in the dirt beside begrimed toddlers and others of scores of adults leaving the pub with cartons of beer which will be consumed amid the squalor and hunger of the camp. What this exposure of projected shame covers over, of course, is the long history of white acts of dispossession and the subsequent shameful and continuing treatment of the indigenous population of Australia.

In other words, a refusal to engage with historical shame is a highly unethical form of political evasion. However, as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, shame is both a verb and a noun and the act of shaming is central to the operations of repressive societies or groups who rule. From Steve Connor’s perspective, “[t]he wielders of shame want to silence, objectify and discipline – to make subjectivity impossible”. As a counter-tactic, then, the first move beyond the toxicity of social shaming as a method of control is to expose these acts of shaming and the power politics that dominate this affect. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, who has written some fine work on shame, maintains that this affect can be used to initiate “a fight ... against the killing pretence that a culture does not know what it does”.

When I began to think about this topic many months ago, I had intended to focus solely on David Malouf’s rather ghostly representations of whiteness in *Remembering Babylon*. However, as I re-read the text in order to write the article it became clear to me that what Malouf is questioning in a very profound way is the whole notion of the historicity of white shame in Australia. What the novel exposes, I believe, is how and why shame and whiteness interacted in a small settler community in nineteenth-century Queensland and the long-term consequences of such a toxic union. In the
first place, Malouf astutely and evocatively reveals some of the ways in which
the settlers’ shame of being white-but-not-quite in terms of a relationship with
the imperial centre transmogrified into a kind of anxiety about their status
within the safe zone of whiteness. This racialised anxiety only too easily
turned into acts of violent racism against Aboriginal others and the central
outsider character Gemmy Fairley who is considered to be contaminated by
his association with an Aboriginal “tribe”. Secondly, Malouf recreates intense
instances of white-on-white social shaming which are used as a means of
demarcating and policing the boundaries between whiteness and
Aboriginality – and in particular as this relates to mateship and the
unacknowledged whiteness attached to this iconic Australian grouping. And,
finally, he demonstrates how shame can only too easily become a tool of
silencing that can obscure or even erase the history of those shamefully
othered by the dominant power.

In terms of whiteness theory alone, *Remembering Babylon* is an interesting
text. As Penelope Ingram argues in her excellent essay on the representation
of settler whiteness in this novel, “whiteness is produced in contemporary
settler texts in ways different from those identified in representations of
whiteness by other critics.” Indeed, in the main body of whiteness studies
it is argued that whiteness is an ideology that retains its dominance and
power in Western societies because it is the *unacknowledged, invisible norm*.
This position of normativity carries a range of unrecognised privileges that
arise solely from having a white skin. Whiteness’s ubiquitous power structure
and white skin privilege are imperceptibly upheld by and through all the
institutions of power, both ideological and material. Such a theory becomes
complicated in relation to Malouf’s representation of whiteness in mid-
nineteenth century settler Australia, because his white characters are both
strongly marked as white and as racialised subjects. However, one by one,
each central character reveals that his or her form of settler whiteness is
overlaid by a sense of deep personal shame, a shame that is more often than
not connected to class insecurity that adds a defect to dominant perceptions
of whiteness. This in turn encourages feelings of aggression, envy or forms of
white victimhood or abjection that can only be displaced through projection
onto others.

The affect of shame thus turns into or magnifies “personal powerlessness,
degradation, deficiency and misery”. Shame is generally thought of as toxic,
as destructively disorientating, as a moment of heightened and tormenting
self-consciousness in which the self is confronted by the self at its most
despicable. It is often linked to the sense of being seen in an inappropriate
or wrong context – to losing face. It is an acute, painful, inarticulate
experience, which leaves its subjects feeling exposed, silenced, impotent.\textsuperscript{15} Silvan Tomkins, one of the leading shame theorists, sees it as an affect of "indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation ... an inner torment [that can only too easily become, in his words,] a sickness of the soul".\textsuperscript{16} From Gershen Kaufman's perspective, "[s]hame is multidimensional and multilayered: it is an individual, a familial and a cultural phenomenon. It is reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources and targets of shame".\textsuperscript{17} However, shame's most intimate connection is with the self. Indeed, Jennifer Biddle believes that "[t]here is no emotion that individuates, that isolates, that differentiates the self, more".\textsuperscript{18} Levinas speaks of effects of shame this way:

We see in shame its social aspect; we forget that its deepest manifestations are an eminently personal matter ... The necessity of fleeing, in order to hide oneself, is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself.\textsuperscript{19}

At the same time, the exposure of shame sets up a division within the self, a sense of splitting, of duality, in which "[t]he self is experienced as part subject and part object, or as two different selves at different times".\textsuperscript{20} There is, Giorgio Agamben contends, a "double movement" within the affect of shame with subjective (but often unconscious) shifts between "subjectification and desubjectification".\textsuperscript{21} It is this movement from being in active control of the subjective white "I" to the passivity and loss of the objectified shamed self which, I think, is central to a reading of Malouf's \textit{Remembering Babylon}.

The clearest manifestation of the shifting subjectivity of shame is presented by the "in-between" (28) character of Gemmy Fairley. Gemmy is the symbolic figure of shame in the novel, the out of place character who is always in the wrong place at the wrong time and is, therefore, both a subject and source of shame.\textsuperscript{22} Chronic shame reduces the person shamed to a state of inarticulateness or speechlessness, and Gemmy's famous first words enact his partial speechlessness: "Do not shoot ... I am a B-b-british object" (3) he stammers; and we later learn that his stuttering is not only because he has not spoken English for sixteen years.\textsuperscript{23} His stammer "belonged to someone he had thought was gone, lost" years before (14). Shame is a learned response and Gemmy has learned the hardest lesson of all. At the deepest level of shame is the "conviction of one's unlovability" writes psychiatrist Léon Wurmser: "the most radical shame is to offer oneself and be rejected as unlovable".\textsuperscript{24} Gemmy has lived a childhood of shame in a Dickensian London
with the humiliation of being unloved at its centre. Only when he becomes “Willet’s boy” (149) does the shame of unlovability pass, at least for a while, until he finally enacts a form of revenge against Willet’s abuse that ironically brings about his own enforced exile to Australia. His ability to make “himself small” (25) and his “street child’s gift for mimicry” (26) ensure him a place in the Aboriginal tribe of women and children with whom he lives for sixteen years, tormented by traumatic memories of the white world that has rejected him.

When the invasion of Aboriginal Australia begins, and the white-faced spirits drift up from the south (29), Gemmy seeks them out. He needs his shame witnessed. “He did not want to be taken back”, the text tells us. “What he wanted was to be recognised” (32). However, the one surety of this novel is that Gemmy’s shame can never be recognised, both because he represents in excessive form the white shame that each of the settlers feels in their separate ways, and because his unbidden presence forces them to confront their own hidden shames. What they all feared more than anything was losing the power of whiteness, the one thing that separated them from the feared and despised racial other. But here in front of them is a shameful “parody of a white man … He had started out white. No question … But had he remained white? … [this posed] the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It” (40).

The unspoken “it” that drives this text is the ideology of the superiority of whiteness, and it is, Malouf suggests, an ideology that is never benign. It is always about white domination – it’s just a matter of degree. Malouf’s symbols that amply portray the strength of this ideology are the make-believe gun and the imaginary stone that is said by Andy McKillop to have been passed to Gemmy by two visiting Aboriginals. These tropes also represent the two weapons that match the two sets of behaviour that manifest within the white settler grouping. Lachlan’s stick-gun represents a child’s version of the masculine weapon of genocidal power that decimated the Aboriginal population in the nineteenth century and would have been the weapon of choice of the vehement racists in the settler community who believed in exterminating the blacks as a perquisite to building a new nation (62). However, Malouf implies that the power of ideology can be almost as dangerous as physical weapons when the spectre of fear is raised. Even “the milder members of the settlement, who argued that it was surely worth trying a softer policy” (62), were swayed into violence when paranoia about the loss of whiteness becomes seemingly visible with the passing of an imaginary stone. It is this literalised embodiment of fear of the other, a stone reputed to be wrapped in bark thus conferring the notion of secrecy, which triggers
the outbreak of brutal physical racism in the community. Even Jock McIvor, in voicing what he thinks is a defence of Gemmy, feels the need to back his statement with a qualifier: “We’re no’ scared o’ stones. Ah thought that was the difference between us and them” (105). Thus, even the “good” white settler is blind to his own inbuilt prejudices.

Malouf implies that each of the settler’s individual fears has an origin in class shame or some form of shame that is related to the outsider status of exile. Jock’s “shame ... [is the shame of failed exile, because he had promised his wife Ellen] so much and provided so little” (75); Ellen’s shame arises from their poverty that has resulted in the deaths of two of her children and her sense of loss and failure as a mother; her daughter, Janet, also “felt humiliated, as if the poverty was in them” (55); George Abbot’s shame is of not having lived up to his rich benefactor’s expectations and this shame is then displaced as rage at his pupils and himself (44–6); Lachlan is shamed by his Scottish accent and orphaned status; Hec Gosper by the shame of his harelip that separates his strong body out from the others (15); even Sir George in the Palladian splendour of Government House is plagued by feelings of inadequacy and shame at his lowly beginnings: “What he fears is that if he is too successful here he will be taken for granted and overlooked; but there are occasions when he fears even more that he may be exposed, since the secret that gnaws his soul, child as he is of a Donegal rectory, is that he is an imposter” (170, emphasis in original). It is a “slow poison in him” (171), a version of Tompkins’s “sickness of the soul”.

In some sense then it could be argued that it is the compensatory factor of mateship that is offered in this novel as a defence mechanism against the separating out and alienation effect of class shame. However, the class solidarity offered by the iconic status of Australian mateship (which of course excludes Ellen as a woman and Sir George because of his class mobility, despite the pall of his shame) is unspokenly but emphatically white. As Ingram succinctly states in her commentary on the novel: the “idiom of mateship that is thought to embody a truly Australian ethos ... [is] one based on race”. Malouf makes it clear that Jock’s attempted protection of Gemmy – an act of rapprochement that was in many ways forced upon him rather than chosen – results in his exclusion from the brotherhood of white mateship:

Something had been destroyed in him that could not be put right. He ... drift[ed] back after a time to his friends, to Barney Mason, Jim Sweetman, but the days of unselfconscious trust in his standing among them, and the belief that to be thought well of by such fellows was the first thing in the world, were gone. (161)
However, this sense of settler mateship is a closed network to which Gemmy himself could never belong because he is forever contaminated by the smell of shame.

*Remembering Babylon* is an olfactory novel, suffused with rancid smells that are always associated with some form of violation and it is through this much-repeated trope that the visceral physicality of shame makes its presence. It is a smell that is connected only to Gemmy, and it was reputed to have seeped onto him from his time of living with Aboriginals, “learning [as the text stresses] their lingo and all their secrets, all the abominations they went in for” (39, last emphasis in original). Gemmy has thus truly now become a colonial object, a “thing you could smell” (41, emphasis in original). Despite all the scrubbing and the new clothes given to him by Ellen Mclvor, “he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of the mayall, half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed” (41). What could not be reclaimed, of course, was his whiteness, a whiteness read off the body that in the settlers’ eyes had taken on “the native look” (40).

The Western grand narrative of shame and indeed the basis of all shame readings in Western cultures is the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Eden after eating the forbidden apple. It is, of course, also a story of shameful exposure and the punishment of exile, a shadowy allusion to which is implied by the title and more formally enacted in the famous opening scene of this novel. Gemmy, the innocent child-man surrounded by the seemingly hostile group of settlers, tears off the salt-stained blue rag that hides his genitals (an ironic symbol both of his rotted Britishness and a parodic substitution for the biblical fig-leaf) and holds it out to the crowd. When the rag is given back to him, Gemmy merely grins and hugs it to his chest until it became “too much” for one of the settlers, the burly ex-blacksmith and ironically named Jim Sweetman who bursts out: “For God’s sake man ... cover yourself” (13). “Flushed with shame, he [Sweetman] snatched the rag from the man’s hands, pushed it at him, and pointed, then looked away” (14). The irony here is that in terms of shame, the uncivilised and contaminated Gemmy appears to exist in a state of prelapsarian innocence, while Sweetman is personally shamed by confronting the nakedness of this white man who has “gone native”. Gemmy himself merely grins at the rag’s return to his body, and “[v]ery complaisantly ... knotted the thing ... in a very ineffectual manner, at his waist” (14). He is not ashamed of his nakedness, and this intensifies Sweetman’s own reaction of shame.

Yet Malouf’s choice of a man seemingly devoid of artifice and an attachment to the ideological codes of the white society to which he belongs,
however peripherally, also provides a particular kind of character who can be excused for being unable to voice or even see the political and social erasures of the dominant white society. Remembering Babylon in one sense begins the important task of making visible and exposing the long history of white shame in Australian society as Malouf acknowledges white culpability and the constitutive power of white shame. Nevertheless, as Germaine Greer, Suvendrini Perera, Garry Kinnane, Peter Otto and many others have argued, Malouf also steps away from the depictions of white violence and barbarity against Australia's first inhabitants that were very much present in the historical narrative which Malouf tells us in the afterword gave rise to the memorable opening segment of the novel.

Once Gemmy decides to reject white settler society in order to return to his outsider status with the Aboriginal tribe, within the ideological parameters of the novel, he has to be wiped from the text. His rejection of the settler white way of being and the history of his ill-fitting life can be safely erased by the rain, though of course we as contemporary (and thus, distanced) readers are aware that it is the wrong history (181), the irony here acting as a mechanism of ideological displacement. Indeed, as soon as Gemmy’s racial allegiance is confirmed, he, along with the Aborigines to whom he returns, are euphemistically “dispersed” or killed off (196). Following this, the final chapter moves into a purified white point of view and a return to the biblical shame narrative. The disorderly scene of Gemmy’s performance of shame for the benefit of horrified white settlers is now safely separated out from the white enclosure of the new Eden. A white nun and a white politician – both synecdochic symbols of institutions that in different ways have promulgated the ideologies of white Australia – can relax in a “walled retreat (the walls were ten feet high, spiked at the top with shards of glass ...), an impressive but dangerous reminder of a world they had set themselves apart from, though not entirely” (182). Inside this safe white space, a ritualised and repeated eating of the fruit of temptation is now conducted in a “civilised” way with a knife, but one that divides “knowledge and curiosity” into regimented segments.

Significantly, the last conscious thought in the novel belongs to Janet who acts as the moral centre of the text. It is a childhood memory of her first sight of Gemmy atop the fence that divides black from white, the “impenetrable dark” (8) from the newly “civilised” white settler colony: “a stilled moment that has lasted for years [of] Gemmy as she saw him, once and for all, up there on the stripped ands shiny rail, [seemingly] never to fall” (199). But fall he did, and Gemmy’s fall into conscious shame was to prove deathly for the “black white man” (10) who crossed the racial divide of the “Colonial
fairytale” (19). In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon states that “in the colonial situation, dynamism is replaced fairly quickly by a substantification of the attitudes of the colonising power. The area of culture is then marked off by fences and signposts. These are in fact so many defence mechanisms of the most elementary type, comparable for more than one good reason to the simple instinct for preservation.” As I see it, while Remembering Babylon is suffused with ghostly hauntings of white shame that drift through mapped demarcations and pervade social imaginings, these eerie manifestations of whiteness are first questioned then evaded in this novel. Whiteness both acts as a defence mechanism and as an acknowledged form of power.

It could be said then that in Remembering Babylon while David Malouf evokes the ghostly hauntings of white shame he avoids the ideological repercussions. Moreover, the inexorable return of the ideology of Australian whiteness is almost impossible to discern because it is “ghostly at first in its feathery lightness” (181). In considering this ideological retreat from acknowledging shame that occurs in the last chapter of the novel, it is noteworthy that Malouf himself places a great deal of importance on forms of narrative closure. As he says in an interview with Helen Daniel, “I’ve always been very interested in endings ... I think I’m always working towards the ending, and I often, in shaping the novel, have no idea what’s going to happen in the middle. But I do know what the ending will be”. Yet in the final paragraphs of this novel the shameful cultural prescriptions and damage of white colonialism dissipate into an ethereal representation of an unlocated and unnamed stretch of ocean and an unbounded declaration of “love” (199) that can, it is suggested, conquer all.

However, if both the metaphorical and very real fences that divide white from black in Australia are ever going to fall there has to be a breaking open of the illusory shelter of a (white) nostalgic Eden and a politicised, self-conscious engagement with the literality of white shame. This needs to be addressed in terms of both historical re-readings and as a positive, political re-engagement with what has unfortunately become the spectral politics of Reconciliation.

Notes

Many thanks to Susan Midalia for her astute editorial advice.

1 For one of the more recent articles that begins and ends by outlining the parameters of the critical controversy, see Don Randall “Cross-Cultural Imagination in David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon”, Westerly 49 (2004): 143-4 & 152-3.


5 As Probyn states, the *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was tabled in April 1997 and the Australian Reconciliation Convention was held the following month – May 1997. The *Report* had rightly claimed much media attention and Howard’s very public refusal to say sorry at the Reconciliation Convention has been the cause of much continuing shame for very many Australians.


11 The phrase *white-but-not-quite* is a play on Homi Bhabha’s theorising of the “ambivalence of mimicry”, which he represents as “almost the same, but not quite”. See “Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse”, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 86 (emphases in original), also pages 89 & 91 for variants of this phrase.


Tomkins, 135.


Carl Schneider maintains that “we experience shame when we feel we are placed out of the context within which we wish to be interpreted”. Carl D. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure and Privacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977): 35. When the concept of being interpreted out of context is attached to race and the defining machinations of whiteness, the proliferation of shame becomes only too obvious.

See Pattison, 41–3, for a description of the way in which shame reduces the shamed person to speechlessness. As he states, “[I]nterlinguistic difficulties have also played a major part in ensuring that shame remains hidden” (41).

Jennifer Biddle describes the ambivalent duality of the psychic structure of shame this way: “As much as shame seeks to avert itself – there is no feeling more painful – shame seeks to confess. To be heard, to be borne by another, to find a witness – shame seeks to be allowed the very condition denied it in its rupture – recognition by another” (227).


28 For references to the connection between shame and smell, see Wurmser, 27 & 169.

29 David Randall also writes about Malouf’s focus on “the rag” which he sees as adding a “comic element to the text”. Randall also reads the trope as a “sign which intends to show much more than it hides”, which adds an interesting dimension in terms of a shame reading. See Randall (2004): 146.


I could have imagined the crabs;
the mud came alive and subsided so quickly.
You missed it, child-slow,
and the strange forms life takes to live are yet for you
the stuff of animation and comedy.
You laugh sideways at my story about these grave crawlers
as if you could see Daffy's beak spinning on his pin-head or
Coyote reduced, split-second, to an ashen silhouette.
Perhaps one day I'll tell you
about the seals on a desert coast in Namibia,
dragging themselves across sand-stretches and wave-crashed rocks
like swarms of amputees,
while in the hazy distance
sloped the panting shapes of hyenas.
Then there were the baboons in South Africa,
hunched quietly in the windblown sand hills above
the ancient clash of the Atlantic and Pacific,
their fur moving like grass,
while on the violent shoreline penguins teemed like babies.
With your soft hand in mine we move
over the pocked mudflats of the Tooradin foreshore.
Jellyfish drift in the murky water like ghosts,
    and further down the tideless beach, pelicans,
    with their newborn or ancient skulls,

stand before an audience of cormorants and gulls,
    ankle deep in mud.
One night in Zambia I saw

a tree full of vultures, spot-lit.
    They were hulking like souls,
    and it was as if the world itself had died there.

Will I ever tell you that?
    The stranded mangroves stink like a rare sea,
    and suddenly you let go, running

towards the boat ramp and the floating jetty.
    The sky, low-grey, accepts the motley outrage
    of the birds without ado.
Sometimes she hears their 
central stillness: 
these paragraphs, the silent house,

the way a spouse has gone to bed. 
She sees the writer at his screen 
among his myriad corrections,

musing on the lives he’s typed, 
transparent but with colour. 
She sees the diagram on his wall;

the line is like a small yacht tacking. 
Somewhere, too, there is a childhood’s 
damaged photographs.

She smiles at Faulkner’s definition: 
a novel is a narrative 
with something wrong with it.

This well-worked opening page or two 
will need to be re-written; 
some other pieces don’t quite fit;

the characters too well recall 
the models they derive from. 
The floor-plan of a crucial scene

doesn’t quite make sense –
where was that couch again?
But, even so, the world exists –

for all its imperfections.
The cast converge, conspire, make love,
enact their small betrayals.

Borne by its momentum now,
she needs to reach the end.
These people are, she knows, still vivid

inside their maker’s brain –
and in a spouse’s too, perhaps,
and one or two good friends,

just as they are in hers.
She finds she’s come to care.
Sitting in her late-night chair,

she has another five beside her,
weighted with their limitations.
Those suits who mind the bottom line,

though rarely eloquent,
must have the final word.
The minds where all these true creations

might once have bloomed and waved a while
are flipping through their eighty channels,
a scotch perhaps to sink the day,

some salted nuts beside them.
She sees the coloured shadows shimmer.
But in this room with lamp and chair

she’s reached the final page.
The characters encounter fates
both plausible and not unkind –

although a few – like life, she knows –
must run on unresolved.
She gives a sigh to see them leave –
then wanders stiffly to the kitchen,
the outline of a soft rejection
forming in her mind.

THE BOOK OF HIS ADDRESSES

The book of his addresses
is like the mind of God,
older than he’d like,
with some names down the bottom
seriously frayed.
Too many of its entries
have had a line drawn through –
and so he keeps on losing
the argument with death.
The entropy of God,
it’s clear, is heaven-sent.
Drawing near the silence,
the book of his addresses
becomes more eloquent.
THREE SKETCHES FOR AN AFRICAN IDYLL

1.
The woman’s eyes big
with wonder, beyond sorrow.
Tumid child sucking
leather purse, arms thin as reeds.
Strange birds beat croaking above.

2.
Child scratching in dust,
eyes hugely luminous, rimmed
with stubborn flies. Bleached
skeleton trees and father
feeding newsprint to the cow.

3.
Tall women erect
proceed in grave dignity
supporting pitchers on their
heads—black Caryatides
up from drying pools of mud.
“Can we go fishing tonight, Dad?”

The eleven year old boy had only been night fishing once. Walking along the high road above the beach seeing the fishermen’s lamps; the darkness of the ocean that melted into sky, and then the white splash of the sinkered line hitting the water before disappearing. He had loved that night on the beach; just his Dad and him on the beach together, silent most times but it didn’t matter. They got excited and let out hooting sounds when they thought they got a bite and he remembered the smile on his father’s face when the first fish was landed. He had caught a tailor that night. A smaller one, not as big as his father’s two. Silver. A night fish.

“Not tonight. Too windy.”

“But Dad, look outside, there’s no wind.”

“There would be wind on the beach. Onshore wind. Another night.”

His father had promised all week that they would go fishing on Friday night. He stared out the window, there was no breeze. They were only three houses up from the beach. There was no wind, but he couldn’t disagree with his father who had already grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and had sat down in front of the television to watch the News. There would be no moving him now.

His mother came in: “Another night, Michael. It is only the first week of summer. There will be months and months of hot weather and still nights.” But he didn’t trust his father to ever take him again. The beach was a hundred yards away but his father would never take him back there.

His mother seeing his disappointment added, “Lots of nights with fish jumping out of the water.” He couldn’t tell her that it was herring that jumped and boiled on the surface of the water. Tailor were a night fish that lived close to the bottom. They never jumped.

He went into his room and took out an atlas of the world. A large, green hardback with a circular vision of the earth embossed on the cover. He turned
to the page with the map of Australia and the Indian Ocean stretching all the way to Africa. Thousands of miles of water in different shades of blue that signified depth. How many fish were there in that ocean? Fish being devoured at this very minute, others being born, small and seeing for the first time water that went forever. How many in those dark blue patches on the map which lived in eternal darkness? Night lasted twenty four hours a day. There wouldn't be day, he thought, at such depths. No light could ever penetrate that far down.

“Have a shower before dinner, Michael.”

He turned to the pages at the back of the atlas that had all the facts: the lengths of the longest rivers, the great mountains, seas and oceans. The deepest parts of the earth and sea. The Marianas Trench. Almost seven miles deep. It was further than the distance between Cottesloe and Scarborough. It would almost be as far as the City Beach groyne. All that way down in one of those underwater ... what was the name of that thing ... a Bathyscape. All the way down in the Bathyscape with it growing darker and darker. They would have great lights on the front to see. Great lights that would briefly light up a world that had only ever been coloured by darkness; it would be like the sun rising for the very first time. And beneath the sea there could be anything.

“Michael.”

At dinner he refused to look at his father. He looked down at his plate and slowly ate. He knew his father would not even mention fishing; wouldn’t sympathise or promise next week. It was only his mother who tried to make conversation. “How was school, Michael?” “Was he working on a school project?” “What mark did he get for his Oceans assignment?” “Where was his team playing football at the weekend?”

He didn’t look at his father but he imagined him sitting eating; his tanned face accentuated by his grey-white hair. Without any expression on his face, just bringing up food to his mouth. He was angry with his mother for still appearing happy, as if nothing had happened.

Back in his room he went back to his books. He had a small bookcase full on books on animals, the sea, dinosaurs. He had a theory that the Loch Ness Monster was an ichthyosaurus. They had long necks and lived in the water and could have survived the meteorites that supposedly killed the dinosaurs. He was going to prove this when he got older or else be a marine biologist. But for the moment he was obsessed with how sea creatures deep beneath the sea lived in eternal darkness. His mother had told him many times that he had all the brains in the family. She would one day sit in the pews of the halls of a university and watch him walk up and collect his degrees, dressed
in a black cape and wearing a mortarboard.

He grabbed the T volume of the Encyclopaedia of Animals and looked up tailor. It wasn’t there. There were tailor-birds, a type of warbler, but no tailor. Another certainty fell away from his world. Things changed too much. It was like the countries of Africa. His atlas had names of countries that were no longer there. Rhodesia and Congo had disappeared. It was like the beach in winter. Unrecognisable with the sand washed away. At Trigg the sandbank that was crowded with surfers all summer was rocky and deep. At least the sand came back every year but some things would never come back. He wanted permanence and the more he learnt the more he felt as if he was travelling into a strange country, no, it was more like descending beneath the water where light diminished slowly till there was only darkness.

He closed his book. He heard his father close the bedroom door.

Outside was still, with not a breath of wind.
From 1829 Fremantle was the economic hub of the new Swan River Colony, and by the 1850s it became the centre of the last penal settlement in Australia. Although the town was essentially a port, shipping lines, including those carrying mail, shunned Fremantle’s unsafe facilities for decades. Then, in 1897, the state’s chief engineer, C Y O’Connor, finally created a safe inner harbour. It made Fremantle the “Gateway to Australia,” the Australian first port-of-call for almost every ship from Europe and the first contact point for huge waves of migrants. After World War II a global shipping industry and demographic changes altered the port again, especially after the 1960s, and these changes continue.

Between 1879 and 2006 approximately seventy-five novels containing Fremantle passages appeared, but not in a steady flow. In the first fifty years only three or four were published, while since 1986 around thirty-five novels appeared, and in one year, 2004, five were published. The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia devotes four pages to Fremantle, but recognises only eight novels of the forty or so published up to that point, and was too early to catch the most recent wave. Inevitably selective, the guide included most of the really important novels, but not a neglected gem by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Intimate Strangers (1937).

My interest is not in identifying “true” Fremantle novels, for such a criteria creates a difficulty, as John Arnold indicated in the introduction to the book he edited on writing about Melbourne. He scanned or read over seventy-five novels and autobiographies set to some degree in the Melbourne metropolitan area and commented: “However very little of the fiction could be classed as ‘Melbourne novels’ in the sense that they could not have been written without the distinctive geographies and characteristics peculiar to Melbourne.” He added that, with many, setting and atmosphere could be provided by any typical urban environment. Arguably, many novels with
Fremantle settings could be similarly reset in any port or small industrial town, though perhaps not to the same extent as those of Melbourne. Faced with so many novels with scenes in one place it might be tempting to write as if "place" were the sole issue. If so, Lennard J Davis’ work might be useful. He argues that all descriptions of novelistic space are “ideological in the sense that they contain embedded social meaning,” and develops ideas of how this coincides with questions of authorial power.

Some of the Fremantle novels I’ve identified tend to fall into groups that could be analysed in terms of Davis’ argument. Novels on incarceration in Fremantle for example start with Western Australia’s first novel, John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne* (1879) and penal ideology may be definitive in the early identity of Fremantle. The port’s heritage of radicalism is important too, but not as well represented in novels as one might think. However, rather than focus on embedded social meanings in a notion of “place”, I want to explore David Lodge’s idea of the narrative nature of consciousness. He cites the scientific work of Antonio Damasio, and argues that the novel is “humanity’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual humans beings through space and time.” This may be contentious but his broadly psychological approach allows me to consider issues that I am loosely calling “archetypal,” “unconscious” or “psychological” in relation to reading the ways ports – specifically Fremantle – are used in a range of narrative types. In 1994 Gail Jones wrote of Fremantle in a way that encourages this kind of reading: “the city is already an especially mythologised site; Fremantle is a romanced port,” and some of the contemporary “Fremantle” novels do make direct use of universal archetypes. A striking example is Tracy Ryan’s neo-gothic *Vamp* (1997) in which a vampire runs loose; a sight of the port waters from an outlying suburb causes a mermaid like sea-witch to be invoked, and the Whaler’s Tunnel seems to become a passage between two worlds.

There is evidence that the deeper layers of the mind are always stirred at ports, though usually less spectacularly than in *Vamp*. Throughout the age of ocean travel novelists created waterfront scenes in which characters passed through often traumatic changes of consciousness as they transferred between land and sea. And the power of a port zone to move a story from one state to another, or signify a change in a character’s consciousness is evident in a range of writers’ work. Think of the threshold role ports have in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for example. It is also hard to imagine how Garcia Gabriel Marquez might have written *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) without the purpose, symbolism and setting Florentino Ariza’s home river port scenes provide. And Bram Stoker uses ports repeatedly in *Dracula* (1897), creating one of literature’s classic scenes when
his “living-dead” Count arrives in Britain at the port of Whitby, and for several
tense days the forces of good and evil battle at the threshold of the port.

Slightly more prosaically, writers have often used the passenger arrival in
or departure from Fremantle as a dynamic story mechanism. The prime
examples of such writing tend to be in books actually written at the height of
the age of ocean travel, although some recent examples – Joan London in
*Gilgamesh* (2001), Liz Byrski in *Gang of Four* (2004) and Brenda Walker in *Wing
of Night* (2005) – have briefly revisited the port threshold in telling scenes of
memory and history. In these, and in many earlier novels, the port, with its
stark threshold between deep water and land, can be read as symbolically
similar to the boundary between sleep and waking, the conscious and the
unconscious, and is representative of this structure of sometimes traumatic,
always shifting states of consciousness.

It is perhaps important to note the difference between jetties, which
probe out into the ocean, and harbours that enclose a pool of deep water.
In *The Coast Dwellers*, Philip Drew used Coff’s Jetty, in northern New South
Wales, to make some general comments which could apply to any jetty.
He thought it symbolised “an intense externalism ... the main orientation
of Australia; the extent of Australia’s dependence on outside contacts in
the economic sphere, our role in supplying raw materials and a history of
involvement in other people’s wars ... It also indicates a psychological
orientation”.¹⁰ What Drew doesn’t state is that a jetty also gives an
uninterrupted view of the ocean, a fact which allows ships to be watched
coming and going from afar, and authors usually handle jetty scenes
differently to those in enclosed harbours.

In *Black Swans* (1925), Molly Skinner creates a scene on an imaginary
Fremantle jetty. People gather there to watch two unscheduled sailing ships
draw closer, like a slightly unnerving mirage. The author creates a sense of
vulnerability, underpinned by feelings of dependence on a very distant
economic base. The prospect of new goods arriving is stimulating and the
excited audience starts betting on which of the two ships might arrive first:

“Curious,” one of the gentleman remarked suddenly, “that the
forward ship should come so much faster, while the other lags in the
same wind”.

It was curious. They could see the gorged sails over-abundantly
spread, and yet she faltered, simply brandishing her white beauty to
the sea, the sky and the golden sun.

“She seems over-laden with good things for the new world”, said
Mr Granville. How truthfully he spoke! An orderly galloped up with
a dispatch and the grown-ups gathered round him. A soldier in his old shako, tail-coat, and white breeches ever drew Letty’s attention – and she also turned away from the sea.

When they turned back there was only one ship. They all stood bewildered – and presently aghast.¹¹

In fact one ship was an over-laden pirate vessel and had sunk while their attention was distracted. The strange incident profoundly affects Letty, opening up the young girl’s developing consciousness, and establishing a disturbing dreaminess in the story which soon billows into a somewhat incredible romantic fantasy.

The previous year Skinner had published with D H Lawrence The Boy in the Bush (1925), which presents a passage with a similar structure, the drawn-out arrival of a ship under sail, seen from a Fremantle jetty. The British migrant in the story, Jack Grant, has already been through the port once, where he expressed his shock and disgust at the port and the new country, before heading out into the bush. Now partially hardened, and indistinguishable from his fellow passengers who have a general air of “disreputable outcasts”,¹² Grant arrives back at Fremantle from the north-west in a small coastal schooner. The migrant is about to repeat his journey into the interior, where he will face his final transmutation into manhood as a new Australian, and perhaps find some resolution to his complex and troubled love interests. The jetty scene is again observed from the landside:

They could see the bulk of near islands. Farther off, a tiny white sail coming down fast on the fresh great sea-wind, emanating out of the north-west. She seemed to be coming from the beyond, slipping into the slightly-open, living oyster of our world.

The men on the wharf at Fremantle, watching her black hull emerge from the flecked sea, as she sailed magically nearer, knew she would be a cattle-boat coming in from the great Nor’West. They watched her none the less.

As she hesitated, turning to the harbour, she was recognised as the old fore-and-aft schooner Venus, although if Venus ever smelled like that, we pity her lovers ... (257)

The ambiguously named Venus reminds the reader of Jack’s love tangle which needs to be resolved, while the white buildings of Fremantle, mentioned further on, remind Jack that his soul is far away. The depiction of this jetty arrival, with its magical and compulsive quality, helps establish
the new mood of this part of the story.

Compared to jetties, a flat wharf in an enclosed harbour, like Fremantle’s Inner Harbour, creates a different mood and perspective: the psychological energy flows differently there, and it leads authors into different treatments. A harbour’s enclosed domesticity is tangible and so is its lack of an uninterrupted view of the ocean. At the same time, any security this may offer is ambiguous. The opening of Ainslie Spence’s *The Mystery of Red Gum* (1946) is a good example of the way this ambiguous quality may be used, as well as novelist’s tendency, in harbour berthing scenes, to begin the observation from the ship:

A young woman leaning on the rail of the mail boat Kama gazed down with mixed feelings at the busy wharf beneath, upon which she was shortly to land. So this was sunny Australia; the country of vast spaces and wild bush, about which she had heard so much from her husband in the grey winter of far away England. Her heart tightened a little. She was about to embark on a new life among strange people of different habits and customs, so she thought, and it alarmed her. Alarmed her more because her husband was still more or less a stranger.

The decks were thronged with the usual crowd of excited people, collecting luggage, waving to friends ashore, and bidding farewell to shipboard acquaintances. The ship had drawn steadily in until a sudden bump announced the fact that they had come to a standstill.

"Here we are, Mary".13

Spence depicts a shift in Mary’s consciousness, where her deep misgivings rise to the surface. As the couple pick up their luggage and head for the train the mysterious husband, her supposed protector, becomes markedly more threatening.

Writers need not be literal about arrival or departure, or even about a character’s feelings, for the port’s threshold energy is available as a source of artistic metaphor. In *Intimate Strangers* Katharine Susannah Prichard’s principal character, Elodie, is about to enter an adulterous relationship with tramp-ship skipper, Jerome. Wearied and shaken by emotional upheavals into an almost reckless state of trust, she allows him to steer her to his car, then later to move her to a place under trees near the river, and take her protectively in his arms, when “floodgates of her sorrow burst”. Finally he guides her towards his ship in the harbour. The man and ship become a
united embodiment of ambiguous enclosure; Elodie a kind of passive vessel, then living-dead cargo needing discharge after a traumatic months-long voyage:

They had come to the harbour. He led the way across the deserted end of the wharf where the *Ikan* was moored. Dazed yet acquiescing, she followed him up the gangway on to the ship and his quarters. An indefinable compulsion underlay what she was doing. Drugged by her weariness, she could not think, except that Jerome had dragged her from some unfathomable depths of mystery, and was assuming his right to dispose of the corpse ...

Jerry helped her to undress, kissed her bare shoulder. Elodie was conscious of him beside her, of caressing hands, and infinite protective tenderness.

Yet it transforms her:

In the morning, she wakened to find herself in the trim white cabin behind Jerry’s sitting room: the hooting of sirens, the clatter of derricks, the busy life of the harbour going on all about her ...

Slipping out of bed, she confronted herself in a long mirror surprised at the vitality, the strange happy confidence which had taken possession of her.

In a later scene though, in the same harbour and cabin, they are about to discuss the end of their brief liaison. This has become threatening for Elodie, an unstable source of danger because of Jerry’s exotic expectations of her as a travelling partner; his are the wild romantic dreams of a lonely seafarer. Prichard’s appropriation of the energy of the port is now different. In a single paragraph she uses words like “rattle”, “distant”, “thudding”, “heavy”, “clatter”, “harsh”, “noise”, “shouting” and opens a long clause on the port’s odours with the phrase “faint, fetid smell” so that the language expresses the sense of threat and depression that Elodie feels at this moment (302). As she leaves, to return to the relative security of life with her husband, the whole harbour reflects her deeper feelings: “It had become dark and quiet along the wharves and river. One of the Malay seamen was singing eerily, homesick and yearning for the sights and sounds of his native village” (310).

Judah Waten uses a similar expressionist technique in *The Unbending* (1954). The idealist dreamer, Kochansky, is at first excitedly anxious and optimistic as his ship arrives. But his oldest friend from their radical Russian student days, on whom he was counting on for help, is now a wealthy
capitalist and belittles Kochansky on the wharf. The new migrant is suddenly overwhelmed by fear and feelings of alienation and Waten reinforces these emotions with images from the port’s inner harbour infrastructure. Kochansky’s feelings extend even to the ship itself, which has been his home for weeks.

Kochansky walked behind his wife and son, glancing back again and again at the wharf. The human uproar was subsiding as the migrants departed, to be replaced by the hard mechanical sounds of winches and engines. The low slung cargo trucks clattered as they were pushed by the lumpers to-and-fro between ships and sheds. And a loose steam engine was trundling back and forth with single empty rail trucks and on another line a loaded train was sitting comfortably alongside a row of sheds. And rising above everything was the Frederick the Great—now strangely remote and inhuman. 

A long ocean journey created complex layers of anticipation, excitement and anxiety. Sea voyagers made a sort of home of the ship, while the expanse of sea, its almost unfathomable depths, was unpredictable and dangerous, full of mysterious and perhaps threatening underwater creatures. This has clear parallels with the depths of the unconscious mind, with its often startling thoughts and dreams materialising like mysterious sea life from the deep darkness.

The point of transition unleashes this energy and it need not be a simple ship scene; it is open to an even less direct approach than the one in Intimate Strangers. Peter Cowan, in The Hills of Apollo Bay (1989) needs only to invoke the wharves: “He’s got a sideline. He’s a kind of runner. And he’s at the wharves a lot. A mover. I don’t say what he moves from the wharves. I don’t know where it comes from. Anywhere probably”, to initiate a sub-plot opening at Fremantle, which climaxes in a brutal “noir” crime-film style murder, complete with a bloody body in a V8 sedan parked in a dark alley. Here, the very idea of the waterfront also seems to create a kind of entrance to an area of outlaw consciousness and behaviour. A number of novelists have used this ambience to develop crime themes, with the most completely realised example Dave Warner’s hard-boiled thriller, City of Light (1995). Warner exploits the port’s streets, the sleazier parts of its industrial landscape and glimpses of the waterfront to help reinforce the dark mood of his story, which is about serial murder and corporate corruption. Warner does not need a ship arrival or departure.

A scene involving a ship is more common in the novels though, and most
often it is an arrival. Although in maritime terms there is no precise moment of arrival, but a long and complex sequence of connected events, the moment when the ship is tied safely to the berth is probably the most significant for seafarers. But for both J. M. Harcourt in *It Never Fails* (1937) and Nicholas Hasluck in *Our Man K* (1999), the threshold moment at Fremantle begins while the ship is still out at sea, with the arrival of the pilot’s launch. In Harcourt’s story journalists accompany the pilot aboard and one of them persuades the main character, Julius Windowen, to pose as an English aristocrat for a gossip story, a subterfuge which has important semi-comic consequences later in the novel. In Hasluck’s book a fictionalised Egon Kisch, based on the true life radical 1930s Czech writer, realises from mail that comes aboard with the pilot that he may face difficulties. This is confirmed when the ship docks at Fremantle and he is refused entry. At such threshold moments, characters begin to grapple with information which is often disturbing. Senses intensify, emotions churn and, as in these two novels, writers key in a psychological dilemma or an inciting incident as more or less essential to the subsequent story.

The less featured departure has a different dynamic, a more structured ritual mood, with bands playing and passengers throwing paper streamers from the ship. In Alfred McKenna’s *Tryst* (1945), a drab little flat-bottomed ship departs for southern Asia. When it reaches Hong Kong, Peter intends to meet a travelling part Russian “specialty dancer” with whom he has fallen in love. His parents oppose the match, preferring the less exotic local girl, Helen. Water-side vendors press streamers onto the passengers and some of the brightly coloured strips are already held taut between people on ship and shore. Others have broken and float in the breeze. It is simple but effective symbolism for the fragile relationships in the story.

Suddenly Helen materialises on the deck beside Peter, as though she has arisen from Peter’s mind. The pair conduct a strained conversation and his resolve to finish with her momentarily weakens. The ship’s whistle sounds, then a purser with a booming voice, like a seaborne archetype of fate, hustles Helen off the ship: “Sharp at noon the *Yindaroo* drew away from the wharf. Farewells were called; streamers snapped; last messages were shouted; general excitement altogether. Peter was on his way.” This launches the second half of the novel, where the loose ends of the story come together in a violent climax.

In *Wing of Night*, Brenda Walker creates a World War I troop departure scene which invokes a memory of cattle going to slaughter, as bands play and people sing “God Save the King” but the war metaphor is not the main point. Elizabeth Zettler is searching the ranks and decks of the ship for a last
glimpse of her husband, a farmer in peacetime, when she sees less well-off Bonnie Fairclough, a farming neighbour, impulsively embraced by her sweetheart, Joe Tully. The embrace causes the crowd to roar. The ritual mood of the departure, at this novel’s opening, emphasises the moment as one of psychological transition, and helps to create the beginning of a bond between the two women, while the memory of the departure and of the impulsive embrace becomes significant later in the story.

Joan London almost completely eliminates the ritual of departure and creates a lonely, bleak dynamic in *Gilgamesh*, when Edith takes her small child, Jim, in search of his father. They are the only passengers boarding a small cargo vessel, heading for a Europe under the looming shadow of World War II. In spite of the solitary nature of their departure, the reader still gets a hint of a rite of passage. “The *Touchpole* sailed that evening, but Edith was too intimidated to go on deck for a last glimpse of her native shore”. Such muted isolation is not the usual mood in fictional departure scenes, but it is apt for *Gilgamesh*.

Judah Waten’s family first migrated to Perth in 1914, then moved to Melbourne in 1926. In his innovative autobiographical novel *Alien Son* (1952), he links an arrival and a departure at Fremantle harbour. Waten does not narrate his novel chronologically and the highly atmospheric departure scene, complete with band on the wharf, is really a kind of ending, but comes early in the book. His father is sending the family ahead to a port in the eastern states and his mother is stirred by the energy at the threshold:

“The ship was vigorously belching smoke that quickly covered the sheds in a dirty cotton-wool blanket. It vibrated from stem to stern with impatience and infected Mother with its restlessness. She wanted to move about and seemed afraid to stand still.

“We must go aboard”, she said suddenly and holding my little sister in one arm and clutching my hand firmly, she almost ran up the gangway while Father, sweating and grumbling, followed behind with two suitcases.”

However, before the ship leaves the mother’s deepest obsession, a far more profound feeling than the prospect of a temporary separation from her spouse, surfaces:

She was absorbed with her own thoughts and she glanced resignedly at him, smiling like a deaf person. Then she suddenly came out of her reverie and caressing Father’s fleshy white hand said, “Even if
you make money we must leave this country. We mustn't lose ourselves here. We should only be living dead in a graveyard". (37)

This is her mainspring emotion. At the close of the novel it is explained by what happened years earlier at the moment of the family's arrival:

The impressions she gained on that first day remained with her all her life. It seemed to her there was an irritatingly superior air about the people she met, the customs officials, the cab men, the agent of the new house. Their faces expressed something ironical and sympathetic, something friendly and at the same time condescending. She imagined everyone on the wharf, in the street, looked at her in the same way, and she never forgave them for treating her as if she were in need of their good natured tolerance. (178–9)

These examples show the how the port as a threshold is given a symbolic power to unlock difficult areas of consciousness that are not connected with the sea journey being described. E H Brewer's short story, "With the Daybreak came Light", which appeared in The Westralia Gift Book (1917), is a very interesting early example, though it may contain an element of denial. Here a returning sheep farmer goes on deck at dawn to get his first glimpse of Fremantle. A beautiful dark-haired woman is doing the same and they are thrown together, literally, when he saves her from a sudden wave, "which licked after her".

He does not at first realise the woman is Aboriginal, but later marries her, against his family's advice. When their child is born black he rushes into the bush with it, presumably intending to kill it, before having a kind of benign vision and returning to his senses. I would agree with Bruce Bennett who argues that the story "purports to vindicate nature and the natural over the dictates of civilisation, but reveals in the process deep chasms of anxiety and fear about relations between white and Aboriginal Australians, which have persisted across three-quarters of a century in Western Australia". And it is these "chasms of anxiety and fear" that are embedded in the dawn arrival at Fremantle.

Patrick White's Fremantle arrival scene broaches searching questions about gender and narrative. The Twyborn Affair (1979), almost his last novel, adopts a transsexed narrator. In the first part there is a female alter ego; the second opens on the Fremantle waterfront, where she becomes he, Eddie Twyborn, a returning World War I soldier. Rather than begin at the ship or
White emphasises the symbolic crossing of railway lines, analogous to the criss-crossing of the gender of the novel’s narrator, which run parallel to the waterfront at Victoria Quay:

No heat or is it the glare? more quenching than that of Fremantle ...

After letting the party make its getaway, I went down into the town. Rusted railway-lines are strips of red, solidified heat. Wharfies sweating round their hairy navels. I am the stranger of all time, for all such hairy bellies an object of contempt – a Pom, or worse, a suspected wonk. If only one had the courage to stick a finger in the outraged navel and await reactions. Nothing minces so daintily as an awakened male ...

Perhaps I should have gone with the Hoorah Party, fun finding in Perth. Fremantle is something to be passed over because so painfully personal. No doubt that’s why I chose it – the expatriate masochist and crypto-queen. (142–3)

White wrote this in the twilight of the age of ocean travel. Some ship scenes continue to be written, but by necessity are a re-examination of the past or explore the nature of memory. In Gang of Four, for example, Liz Byrski creates a brief but powerful waterfront memory. Isabel, outgoing Mayor of Fremantle, undertakes a journey of self-discovery abroad, during which she remembers a profound moment at the wharf:

Isabel had been bitterly disappointed when Eunice and Eric returned from Europe. Her excitement had evaporated the moment she saw them. Her mother was neither the glamorous dancer of the photographs nor the vivacious mother who had lived in the pages of her letters, but a thin, pale woman whose face was lined with pain and whose wheelchair was carried down the gangplank onto the Fremantle wharf by two sailors. Isabel’s jealousy was born in that moment, for as the chair was set down it was pushed to the terminal by a tall blond man in a Harris tweed jacket, the bowl of a pipe sticking out the breast pocket. A stranger who talked like the men who read the news on the radio, and who seemed to have first claim on her mother. Poor Eric, he had shown such patience.24

For at least two years after this threshold moment, Isabel is consumed with deep feelings of anger, disappointment and jealousy.

Now that the ocean passenger era has been almost completely
superseded by air travel, will novelists continue to capitalise on the energy at the waterfront? Perhaps there will be more retrospective explorations, like Liz Byrski’s, and others such as those of Nicholas Hasluck, Joan London and Brenda Walker. However, one contemporary writer has turned to the small modern boats. In Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001), Georgie Jutland has reached a life crisis at a mid-West-coast fishing village. She returns to Perth, and at Fremantle her father gives her a boat, but with emotional strings attached. The waterfront moment opens up an uncomfortable insight into a certain kind of parental love:

Her father and Cynthia were on the dock in their poncey sailing outfits, all deck shoes and polarised shades on lanyards. Cynthia wore so much make-up Georgie figured she used it as sunscreen. The old boy’s legs were white and scalely. The three of them kissed awkwardly.

Before Georgie could get to the point, which was surely Jude’s immediate future, the old man placed a sheaf of papers in her hands. These were the registration papers of a vessel called *Closing Address*. It was already in her name.25

Then the old man steps down into his own big boat, *Summary Affair*, its engines already running, and departs to Rottnest. As Georgie watches it glide from the marina she has to face the nature of her father’s love. She feels he has served his gift upon her like a “writ”: “canny entrapment, even in fatherly love, the great game. To serve upon. That was his idea of service. This was love” (276). And in *Cloudstreet* (1988), there is a long, emotionally charged passage involving a small boat purchased in Fremantle, which Winton develops from an old family myth.26

The small boat scene by definition is usually about a short trip, and from the 1970s on passengers arriving across deep water to Fremantle were increasingly limited to big cruise ships. These vessels have size, power and glamour but most of the voyagers are undertaking a leisurely cruise to nowhere in particular. Perhaps because these journeys lack the driving sense of purpose of the earlier sea passages, the threshold experience of cruise ship passengers at Fremantle have so far not attracted novelists. Yet, as Gail Jones noted in the quotation cited earlier, the port of Fremantle has itself become “romanced”. New writers such as Samantha Ellen Tidy with *Cappuccino Diva* (2003) and Craig Silvey with *Rhubarb* (2004) have moved on to find narrative possibilities in the evolved social fabric of modern Fremantle, virtually ignoring the waterfront.
Notes

1 Result of research undertaken in recent years. The starting points were Bruce Bennett et al. *Western Australian Writing; a Bibliography* (South Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press in association with CSAL, UWA, 1990), and *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987). Talks given by Bob Woollett, former president of the Fremantle Historical Society, were important as was his typescript, *Fremantle: A Place in Literature* (2004), in the local history section in the public library in Fremantle.


5 I explore these in my not-yet published book *Fremantle and the Novel 1879–2006*.


7 There is for example no Fremantle waterfront novel like John Morrison’s *Port of Call* (London: Cassell, 1950) or Criena Rohan’s *Down by the Dockside* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963), both set in Melbourne.


9 Extracted from her jacket comment on *Fremantle Stories* (Fremantle: Cliff Street Publishing, 1994).


17 At Melbourne Kisch literally jumped ship, breaking his leg on the wharf but, amid a ludicrous language test and court battles, managed to complete his tour.


22 Patrick White, The Twyborn Affair (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1981, first ed. 1979). White’s leading epigraph to this novel, taken from David Malouf’s An Imaginary Life (Sydney: Pan Books, 1978), encompasses both the maritime and the psychological: “What else should our lives be, but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have yet to become?”

23 Suzanne Falkiner in The Writer’s Landscape: Settlement (East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1992), argues on p15 that Fremantle in The Twyborn Affair is just a reincarnation of Sarsparilla, White’s imaginary suburb of conformity and self-satisfaction, which appears in his earlier fiction and dramatic works. Yet the real port town is quite recognisable and one scene, in a Fremantle pub, is directly comparable to that of local writer, Peter Cowan, in The Tenants (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994).


26 Private letter from the writer, February 2006. He lives in Fremantle but also has connections to the ports of Albany and Geraldton.
It's a matter of public record now
that Percy Grainger
when in America
and playing at a concert
a very long Faure piece
left out
six pages of the score
because he had to catch a train
and no one
noticed.

During the interval
while men smoked cigars
and women sipped champagne
there were overheard
whispered conversations
and snatches of gathered speech
about the integrity of the music
the unity of the thing
the stunning wholeness
of all the notes and parts.

I admire that immensely
and I like the sense too
of a perfect kind of abridgement
even Faure
might have approved of
while Percy sat back
in his plush first class seat
giving of course a kind of damn –
but having completely
got away with it.
Blokes

Blokes are always coming over in their droves or in their ones. Wear thongs in summer, boots for weather. Won’t be tied, won’t be predicted. No one says mind my good floor love.

Triumphing in their utes and vans, they’re around here day and night. They’re courting our Penelope. They know what’s next, what’s what, when, why. Blokes know what to do and what you need and even if you can’t decide. Blokes’ll sort your trouble out. If it ain’t broke it’s easy fixed. Take care but not responsible. They’re always late and rude and wet. Blokes like to be outside the best. They dare the ozone at their backs. Sleep with someone else. They say things you wouldn’t. Feel less, do more. You’ve got to love them though. Hide in their frothy beards to weep. You feel for them. The camera shies. Cuddle them and know they’re bad. Take them all for granted.

Don’t like to be told. Won’t take hints. They slink away to shed when dark.
Grow blacker under moody trees, shed their lacks among the fauna. They won’t be caught, they get away. Get down to pub and dob and dob. Until they’re almost in the clink. They tell their temporary comrades. Blokes all tell the truth and when they don’t they’ve got the story all worked out.

Blokes all know the pecking order, how to fit, not rock the boat. They make a play for the affections. Trust the passing moment, loathe permanence of plans. Won’t stand still in all that distance unless it’s advertising beer. They have terrific urgency. Already, yes they’ve climbed your tree, know what you’ve lost before it’s gone, what’s down that pipe, what ails your pet. Blokes give each other pointers. They stand off when the strain requires. Keep their level on the job, the issue well in hand. And prime themselves with jests, digress.

Blokes are slaves of circumstance. It’s not their fault the way they are. Was done to them as blokelings. They can’t help being rough with stuff, have to give it all a test. See if it’s well made or not.

Blokes are mates or so they say. Won’t Let a bastard down. The blokiest are Your best mates. Your mates are blokes If you’re a bloke. Women can be mates or ladies, can’t be blokes. Mate with them to make new playmates. Blokes or no. If you’re a bloke you mustn’t mate with other blokes. It doesn’t work. A dreadful thing. Unblokemanlike. Besides – how could you ever tell your mates?

Some things are better left unsaid.
And out of earshot of the nagging  
Blokes won't need your looking after.  
Dinners tabled, washing done.  
Blokes go lean in filth and glue  
their rotting jeans together.  
Blokes know it's bad luck to speak  
when gesturing would do the trick.

As insects lead the faster life  
they've lost a leg before you've  
finished telling them precautions.  
Enemies of labour saving, scoff  
at ingenuity. They do a thing  
the hardest way. Heaviest, most  
arduous, most danger to their backs,  
their hearts. They use their tools  
with no protection. Clog noses  
and their ears fall off. Eyes are  
full of filings. It shows what  
blokey blokes they are. Drown  
in beer to build a gut. They suffer  
beef to have the dripping. Sneak  
from the ward at last for fags  
and curse their curtailed freedom.  
That's with their last breath.

Bloody this and bloody that is what  
your bloke ghost says at last. And  
when the dirt's dug and well sifted  
where are those blokey souls all fled?  
They've gone to blokeland. Hellish  
spot. Celestial shed. And dim  
or bright to their deservings.

There's always more after.  
There never was a drought of blokes  
not since the war. Blokelings grow  
to blokehood's full bloom. Blokes  
abound, they pull their weight.
Just ring for blokes, they will appear.
Show some leg, offer beer. When
all else fails you needn’t fear.
Just stir him up.
Your bloke is here.
—1— To John, This Offering
Returning to friendship, a force that sustained
across hemispheres and the demonic rage of history,
to tears and the wrestle of dreams,
neither of which I understand,

Returning to the most intimate conjunction
Because I was listening to other things, other ways of knowing,

Returning to a place where names
are unreadable, where slate-blue rivers
run calmly through the reflective, shimmering mind,

Returning to the conjunction and green flame
of the self, to grammar
we can never escape, to a dawn
crimson with confusion,

Returning to the rhythm of a phrase
that is both disturbing and beautiful,

Returning to a raging habit that breaks my heart
but I fall back into like sleep,

Returning to offer you this:

Because there are invisible words under these,

Because Kobodaichi sat on the mountain
without food or water for one hundred days,

Because his fire still burns on Miyajima, tended by monks and devout laypersons hundreds of years later, and because

There is no other word for because...

—2— Returning to August 6
I was listening to other things, eyes closed for other sight.
The cicadas had stopped.

The superfortress has been up there for hours heading this way. The war has been over for years.

At the news, each member of the family, starting with grandfather, rose and reached for the other. Holding hands, they observed

Silence. Listening for other things. My eyes were closed but I could see.

Clinging to bark, the cicadas had stopped. The great thrumming of engines filled the heavy chamber of a still summer evening.

Why return to this approaching? Why let years circle like a stunned family? I have no answer but

Silence like a kind of listening. The world and all its paces tuned to a pitch just out of reach, a band of color just out of range.

—3— The Hungry Ghosts
The old monk said the streets are thick with them, wandering homeless. They grope, desperate to be at peace, ghosts in a world that does not believe in ghosts. You must be careful, walking, driving, even bundling along the arcade, shopping, you must take great care.
Every step is shadowed by their ghostly fingers grasping the air turned by your passing pant leg. Every step you take in this city where you are an alien. Your decisions, take care: how you choose and what. As you move from task to task, filling your hours with meetings and happenings, you are pages ahead of the seasons, miles ahead of your souls. This is the space they inhabit, the kingdom you don’t even know about let alone rule. The old monk says the more we dismiss as superstition, the more hungry and desperate their longing, the more we owe them. In this city, the blind monk said, the streets are thick with these ghosts, yearning to be at peace, longing to come home.

—4— The Place of the Seed
I am told that seeds buried in earthen walls seeds dormant for years burst open in the sun-centered heat

Listening that dry yet accessible place I am leaning close listening to walls and ghosts

Returning a long slow circle in the wrestle of history I am returning to my life the larger one

I am returning to the place of that seed the shriveled homeland the spirit-clogged place I come back here to live
There are books scattered across my desk, across the floor, too, to be honest, in an arc around my chair – books hardback and paperback, fat and thin, tall and squat, down-market and up-market, sober and extravagant. Twenty-five new books have arrived from *Westerly*’s editors as “the year’s work in Australian non-fiction”.

Strictly speaking, of course, they are nothing of the sort. For 2003–4, the last year that figures were collected as part of the federal government’s post-GST sweetener package for the book trade, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 1695 new Australian non-fiction titles across the general, trade and mass-market sectors, alongside a further 4610 in the education market. I have no cookbooks or textbooks, no celebrity biographies, no *feng shui* or financial management titles, no Lonely Planets or CSIRO diets.

What I do have are the books that happened to land on the editor’s desk, a fraction of Australian non-fiction publishing. But while there is doubtless something haphazard about the group of books which have arrived, it is not altogether a random selection of titles. These are the books that publishers and marketing divisions think might appeal to a certain kind of reader or consumer – the *Westerly* reader – whose profile probably fits that most elusive of all categories, the “general educated reader” (a form of the “discerning consumer”). This has traditionally been a difficult area for Australian publishers, with a domestic market too small to sustain a high volume of “serious” non-fiction publishing outside the education sector, certainly too small to sustain high-level, regular scholarly publishing, but large enough for a steady output of books that cross from the scholarly to the general, from the literary to what we might call “public opinion” publishing, the book form of the broadsheets’ opinion pages. This is where we (academics) in Australia often find ourselves, writing on the back of our scholarly experience and expertise, but for better or worse not being able to write only for other scholars in the field even where we suspect that our only readers might be
other academics or their students. Come to think of it, that's exactly where I find myself writing now, half in and half out of my academic self, writing for a university-based journal, but for readers rather than scholars.

To put it another way, our scholarly publishers are often nervous about scholarship and scholarly books, and for the most part have to function as general or trade publishers as well as academic presses, certainly in the humanities. Thus their presentation of academic books in trade formats and their search for cross-over titles, books by academics that might just strike a chord among general educated readers, find a place outside the university sector in the “good bookstores” and even the chains, or win a Premier’s Prize and make it into the newspaper review pages. Robert Manne has the knack; *Ganglands* and *The History Wars* were recent and unexpected successes. Inga Clendinnen, Robert Dessaix, Geoffrey Blainey and David Day, with his biography of John Curtin, have all, in their different ways, had cross-over bestsellers.

A task like the present one, to survey the year’s work in Australian non-fiction, is likely to encourage diagnosis of the state of the nation or at least the state of its intellectual life. Robert Dixon, writing last year’s review of the year’s non-fiction, focussed on a selection of key books in the broadly-defined area of Australian studies which manifested an intellectual shift from national to transnational and cosmopolitan frameworks. This year’s selection seems much too scattered to allow any such prognosis. I can announce that writerly memoirs and essays and up-market accounts of maritime explorers are still in vogue. More seriously, questions of race and culture (local, national and transnational cultures) are still driving Australian studies. This emerges in Regina Ganter’s major new work on Asian-Aboriginal contact in northern Australia (my pick among the present titles), Gwenda Tavan’s history of the *Long, Slow Death of White Australia*, Zohl dé Ishtar’s memoir-ethnography of her two years with Wirrimanu (Balgo) women, Michael Clyne’s passionate study of Australia’s multilingual potential and current monolingual complacency, even Richard Waterhouse’s cultural history of rural Australia. In effect, in a number of these studies, we see the repositioning of Australian studies that Dixon noted turned back onto sites and histories within the nation’s borders but no longer “national” in any self-evident or self-contained manner.

In rather different ways, the nation is located within a global framework in Anthony Moran’s *Australia: Nation, Belonging and Globalization*, a work of political and social theory, and in Ann Curthoys and John Docker’s *Is History Fiction?*, which takes on the full range of “western” historiography from Herodotus to Holocaust history, sliding-in its Australian
examples as part of the ongoing, contested and “multi-national” history of histories. Australian history wars, for example, appear within a broader sweep of history wars in the USA, Japan and elsewhere.

For the moment at least I want to put aside any larger speculations, and instead concentrate on what these books do tell us about more directly: the conditions of publishing and getting published in Australia, in this particular sector of the global publishing market. On this level, the collection of books can be taken as symptomatic after all, but of the structures of Australia’s publishing industry and book market rather than of the nation’s cultural health.

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First, the publishers. All but five of the books are published by independent Australian houses: ABC Books, Black Inc (Schwartz Publishing), Central Queensland University Press, Curtin University Books/Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Giramondo, The National Library of Australia, Pandanus, Scribe, Spinifex, University of New South Wales Press, University of Queensland Press, University of Western Australia Press, and Wakefield Press. Another is from Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand.

Of the remaining titles published by overseas or multinational corporations three are from the Random House imprints of Jonathan Cape, Harvill Press and Vintage: respectively, Carmen Callil’s blockbuster account of French Nazi collaborator Louis Darquier and his Tasmanian wife, Myrtle Jones, first published in Great Britain; Murray Bail’s Notebooks, published simultaneously in Great Britain and Australia; and Michael Fullilove’s collection of “great Australian speeches,” an Australia-only title. Random House represents one model of multinational publishing in Australia. It has itself been owned since 1998 by German publishing and media conglomerate Bertelsmann AG – one of the big four or five – but it has its own local publishing operation, Random House Australia, and together with stablemate Transworld issues Australian titles under a number of its many imprints (including Arrow, Bantam, Century, Doubleday, Knopf, Vintage and William Heinemann).

Moran’s Australia, from Routledge (London and New York), represents a rather different, newer model. The book is pitched directly into a transnational academic market – an Australian-authored book about Australia, written for an international series, and marketed back into Australia. Routledge is now an imprint of international scholarly publisher Taylor and Francis, who have an Australian office but not an “independent” Australian
publishing arm. Taylor and Francis, alongside Sage perhaps, is the leading international (i.e., not just “overseas”) publisher of new work in the humanities and social sciences, at least in fields such as cultural studies or social theory that travel internationally. I can’t think of any Routledge titles in Australian literary studies or Australian history.

The book that really does seem the odd one out in my list – though strangely a form of publication that we might once have imagined to be standard and mainstream – is Clare Archer-Lean’s book of literary criticism, an extended “cross-cultural,” postcolonial and intensely textual study of the works of Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo and Canadian Thomas King. It is sobering to reflect how absolutely rare it is to see book-length literary criticism published in the Australian market, even (or especially) those based on PhDs, as this one seems to be. The only other book close to this end of the scale is Ann McCulloch’s *Dance of the Nomad* (from Pandanus/ANU), a substantial selection from A. D. Hope’s notebooks with interspersed analysis from McCulloch. But the book probably appeals as much to our biographical interest in Hope as to a literary interest, although McCulloch insists that her book “presents an argument,” and her own interests are theoretical and high aesthetic. While it is difficult to imagine who the book’s readers might be outside a small group of scholars and poets, again one is surprised and grateful to see such a book published in Australia, especially so generously, this one a large 366 pages, with wide margins and quality paper. It almost seems old-fashioned, despite its very contemporary Deleuzean rendering of Hope’s attitudes and practices.

The publisher of Archer-Lean’s book is The Edwin Mellen Press, based in Lewiston, NY, Queenstown, Ontario, and Lampeter, Wales, and it is a heavy and handsome hardback. So rare is this kind of book in the Australian market that I had to go googling, and I was not surprised when my search revealed a series of controversies about the publisher. According to some, it is a business committed or at least willing to publish in areas of scholarship that other publishers won’t touch, such as African studies; according to others, it is a kind of academic “vanity press”. While it does not accept author subventions or other subsidies, it will publish almost any decent scholarly work, without paying royalties, and relying on the research library market for its sales (although apparently some libraries in North America refuse to buy from its list). It would appear from the present example that they don’t do much proof-reading for their authors.

By drawing attention to the contested reputation of The Edwin Mellen Press I do not mean to imply anything negative about Archer-Lean’s book, which is a wholly respectable work, worthy of its PhD; but the fact that such
a book, to appear at all, probably depends upon this kind of publisher is
telling. Extended analysis of Australian writers and their works is scarcely part
of our public conversations, except sensationally when the occasion allows an
attack on the literary establishment or the chattering classes. As I write, ten
Australian publishers and literary agents have been “exposed” by the
Australian, having been sent a chapter of Patrick White’s The Eye of the Storm
as a new work, and having rejected it. Odd how a newspaper aggressively
committed to market principles can criticise the “literary establishment,” if
that’s what it is, for adhering to them; but then again, the newspaper is also
aggressively committed to the self-evident values of the western cultural
tradition, to which White “self-evidently” belongs. White, one can only think,
would have been appalled by the newspaper’s stunt, whatever he might have
thought of the publishers and agents. That none of them recognised White’s
scarcely miss-able style perhaps indicates, more significantly, just how far
advanced the disjunction is between “Australian literature” as an enterprise
and Australian publishing as an enterprise.

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So: thirteen Australian publishers and three international (the New Zealand
example is closer to the former than the latter category). What does this
particular spread of publishers tell us? Perhaps most obviously that the
domain of “ideas and opinion” publishing in Australia – books based on
research and expertise written for academic and/or general educated readers
– is almost entirely reliant upon independent Australian publishing houses.
With the exception of those few runaway titles that ride the wave of a debate
or appeal as intelligent Christmas presents, this is small volume publishing
for a restricted section of what is already a relatively small domestic market,
not necessarily high risk, as relatively small investments are involved and
subsidies are often sought, but at best modestly profitable. It’s unlikely to
appeal to the big operators unless a very broad or very delimited market
segment can be identified.

To take Random House as our case study for the big companies, the
multinationals will enter the market at either side, as it were, of the quality
non-fiction domain occupied by the locals, taking on books that are either
more international or more popular in appeal. Bad Faith, Callil’s book, is big,
bold and biographical, full of research, archives and appendices (ironically the
kinds of things Australian publishers often want us to remove because they
look too academic) but also framed in reader-friendly fashion as a personal
search, from Paris to Launceston, written in straightforward prose and with a
theme that touches both great historical movements and the intimate details of family life – the Holocaust with an Australian connection. Bail’s book, by contrast, is expressly “small,” its pitch to an international niche market of literary readers reflected in the book’s expensive, small format, hardback design and minimalist content: the shapely, fragmentary jottings of Bail’s notebooks, framed by a good proportion of blank page. Everything about it says “rare” and “precious”. (Interestingly, Notebooks is an extension of his Longhand: A Writer’s Notebook, first published by independent local McPhee Gribble in 1989. The independents often play the role of talent scouts and training schools, rather like SBS for the commercial TV stations or Australian cinema for Hollywood.) Michael Fullilove’s collection, different again, is a soft cover trade paperback, designed for what we might call the popular educated market. It probably made it into the chain bookstores, while very few of the other titles under consideration would have – perhaps only Callil’s, Robert Dessaix’s The Best Australian Essays and, given its topic, Roger Bourke’s Prisoners of the Japanese.

Routledge, as suggested, has aimed Moran’s study of Australia and globalisation at a very different market: an international scholarly network within which Australia is one node, at best a middle-sized market, but reasonably profitable nonetheless. Here the appropriate model is network rather than one-directional export; that is, it is less about exporting British or American books into a dependent market than servicing a dispersed, transnational readership (although we know where the power lies). Thus we might also say that Australian academics represent a medium-sized but reasonably profitable group of “content producers” for this same market. The book is the first in a series, “Globalizing Regions”, which will include other titles on Ireland, China and South America, concise studies designed primarily for university students and scholars.

Few independent Australian houses can enter these international markets, despite the increasing success in the sale of international rights for Australian fiction, self-help and children’s titles. Inversely, the multinationals see little profit in the local “public culture” market. The optimistic view of this stand-off is to note just how varied the publications and publishers are, to see in the list of locally-produced titles evidence of a bold, active and expanding local publishing scene, indeed an active and engaged intellectual and cultural life. The pessimistic view is to note how little interest overseas-owned publishers, even those with local publishing offices, appear to have in this particular market sector. The field, with its mostly small-scale print runs and profits, is left to the locals. (Cambridge University Press is something of an exception, but where, these days, are the Penguins?) Still, to return to
optimism, we can point out how local publishers have grabbed the opportunities this imbalance presents, indeed created their own occasions by bringing new publishing fields into existence, making a virtue of necessity. Thus the expansion of university presses into general publishing, Giramondo's move into literary essays, or the creation of new public spaces in print through initiatives like Black Inc's *Best Australian Essays* or the Agenda series, the imprint for Robert Manne's *Do Not Disturb*.

There are, nonetheless, two kinds of imbalance operating to structure publishing in Australia. The large publishing houses, mostly foreign-owned multinationals, are responsible for the vast majority of new Australian titles across all sectors of non-educational publishing. In fiction the top three houses publish more than a third of new titles annually, while the top six publish around one half (independents Allen & Unwin and UQP come in at number 5 and 6 respectively). At the same time, small firms – those with less than twenty persons employed – produce around one third of new Australian non-fiction titles per year, but only nine per cent of the more profitable sector of mass-market fiction. By contrast, as we've just seen, in the particular sector of "public culture publishing" represented by the books that cross the *Westerly* editor's desk – mostly local authors on local topics of cultural, historical or political interest – the vast majority of new titles are produced by the smaller local publishers.

It would be misleading, though, to read the imbalance between large multinationals and small, local independents as a sign of either sudden crisis or terminal decline in Australian publishing. It is rather one of the structural features within which the industry has always operated. The conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability produced by this unequal situation and by the relatively small domestic market are defining features in most sectors of Australian cultural production – publishing, television, cinema and popular music, for a start. It is difficult to point to a golden age before this situation pertained, despite the flourish of Australian publishing in the late-1970s and 1980s. Indeed, I'd be prepared to argue that more and better books about Australian history, culture and politics are appearing today than ever before, although some areas, such as literary criticism, are doing less well. The distribution of the field is such that the boom in celebrity bios and self-help pop does not mean the death of serious publishing. Further, there is nothing to say that large or foreign-owned publishers will not be committed to local markets, and they are normally better placed to offer professional editing, publicity and distribution services. Nonetheless, uncertainty and vulnerability remain key features of Australian publishing outside the educational or mass-market sectors. As a striking illustration of this fact, at
least three of the publishers active on my list of books from the last year have closed down or restricted their activities. Pandanus is accepting no new manuscripts, Spinifex will cease publishing new books at the end of this year, and Curtin University Books ceased operation in May.

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Perhaps even more telling than the presence of independent Australian publishers in the quality non-fiction sector is the role being played by our university presses and other public institutions. Eight of the titles have been published by four university presses – Central Queensland University Press, UNSW Press, the University of Queensland Press and UWA Press. In another year, no doubt, there would be additional titles from Melbourne University Press. To add to these we have the one title, *East by South*, from Victoria University Press in New Zealand (Charles Ferrall et al.); *The Vision Splendid*, from Curtin University Books, an imprint of Fremantle Arts Centre Press “in partnership with Curtin University of Technology”; McCulloch’s work on Hope, from Pandanus Books, published by the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University; and McCulloch’s work on Hope, from Pandanus Books, published by the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University; and Gerald Murnane’s essays, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*, from Ivor Indyk’s Giramondo, “published from the University of Western Sydney”. Two further titles are from public cultural institutions: a short book about Ray Mathew, attractively produced by the National Library of Australia, and from ABC Books, film-maker Bob Connolly’s *Making Black Harvest*, a trade paperback, based on his wife’s diaries, the story of the making in PNG of the film referred to in the book’s title.

I do not know the details of the various commercial arrangements that exist between the individual universities and their presses, although the overwhelming tendency in the last decade has been towards having such presses operate on a wholly commercial rather than subsidised basis, aggressively so in a number of instances. So too the publication arms of the public institutions (indeed I understand that ABC Books is one of the broadcaster’s most profitable operations). Of course, as institutional subsidies have been withdrawn, costs have been shifted so that requests for publishing subsidies from authors or responsible organisations have become a commonplace part of commercial calculations for scholarly publishers. Nonetheless it is striking that by this count fourteen of the twenty five titles are from institutional presses; presses which retain a commitment to public or “subsidised” culture, to books that won’t make anyone rich, even when operating on a fully commercial basis.
University of Western Australia Press offers the outstanding example among this present selection of books (no doubt there’s a local bias). It is responsible for four titles: Ganter’s *Mixed Relations*, a large-scale, multi-authored project co-ordinated by Nonja Peters; *Ernest Hodgkin’s Swanland: Estuaries and Coastal Lagoons of South-western Australia*, by Anne Brearley (UWA); and Nigel Rigby et al., *Pioneers of the Pacific: Voyages of Exploration, 1787–1810*, from the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich). All are large format, generously illustrated hardbacks. *Mixed Relations* is especially important in reshaping the agenda of Australian studies (the term seems inadequate). As Ganter writes in her opening sentence, “This book approaches Australian history from the north, where it begins”; and later:

The idea of an isolated continent does not stand up to historical interrogation, either in the north of Western Australia, or in the north of the Northern Territory, or in the north of Queensland ... On the contrary, for the Yolngu ... a period of isolation commenced with the establishment of British sovereignty. (28)

It’s not clear how or why, or through what publishing agreement, UWA Press released *Pioneers of the Pacific* (although it will probably be the best seller of the four). It is for the general rather than the scholarly market, but more to the point it seems to belong to another time and place, to an earlier, untroubled, Eurocentric view of Pacific exploration — it might be contrasted to *Encountering Terra Australis* for a more complex, locally inflected and less imperial view. *The Dutch Down Under* is an impressive, comprehensive work, if primarily in the “making it” and “contribution” modes of migrant history. It is published by arrangement with leading business, tax and legal publisher, CCH Australia (who hold copyright), and their owners, the multi-national group Wolters Kluwer, also a sponsor of the book. *Ernest Hodgkin’s Swanland* (Hodgkin, from UWA, put the estuarine “Swanland” on the environmental map) is again a wonderfully illustrated and comprehensive study. It has six government or corporate sponsors, plus the university, the National Trust, and the Ernest Hodgkin Trust. Even *Mixed Relations*, presented in an unusual horizontal format (attractive but not altogether reader or librarian friendly), notes the financial assistance of the Australia Council, the Australian Research Council, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, ANU and Griffith University. In short, perhaps none of these books would have appeared if the decision to publish had been governed wholly by the marketplace — yet they have all appeared.

Again we can interpret the prominent role of institutional publishers (and
their sponsors) either optimistically or pessimistically: evidence of how well our institutional presses are doing or how badly our large commercial presses are doing on behalf of public culture. On the one hand, the institutional presses are making a major investment in publishing in the quality non-fiction domain. On the other, the rest of the industry isn’t much interested. This makes even more remarkable the commitment of the independent non-institutional publishers such as Morry Schwartz’s Black Inc, Henry Rosenbloom’s Scribe, Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein’s Spinifex, and we should add Ivor Indyk’s Giramondo, despite its new institutional setting. These are all presses driven by individual commitments to cultural and political ideals.

Scribe concentrates on non-fiction, particularly politics, biography and history, often from a left-liberal perspective, although its greatest success has been the autobiographical travel-thriller novel, Shantaram, the controversial life story of Australia’s erstwhile “most wanted man”, Gregory David Roberts. Scribe was founded in 1976, releasing only a couple of titles annually until 1997, when Rosenbloom committed himself to publishing full-time. It now publishés around thirty “quality fiction and serious non-fiction” titles a year (and some pop-psychology). While I’m not quite sure what the significance is, I’m convinced it’s more than coincidental that both Rosenbloom and Morry Schwartz are the sons of Holocaust survivors, born overseas, resident in Melbourne. Schwartz, a successful property developer as well as publisher, helped establish Outback Press in the early 1970s, before Black Inc was founded in 2000. It has been remarkably successful in doing what the large multinationals were never going to do, launching a number of new series alongside an impressive list of individual titles, some literary, the majority in the critical “ideas and opinion” market, and not all from the left (the Quarterly Essays series, The Monthly magazine, the Best Australian essays, poems and stories series, the many Robert Manne collections). Indeed, Black Inc has played a major role in that very Melbourne task of inventing something like a new “public sphere” in neo-liberal, neo-conservative Australia, although the Quarterly Essays, for example, have only recently broken even with a circulation of 8–10,000.

Giramondo has taken on a more literary task, successfully finding – or making – space in a small niche of the fiction and non-fiction market by publishing literary fiction, poetry and individual essay collections unlikely to be commercially viable for the larger publishers (but potentially prize-winning, as in the case of Brian Castro’s Shanghai Dancing, Emma Lew’s poetry, and John Hughes’s essays, The Idea of Home). Giramondo was established in 1996 to publish the literary/ideas magazine Heat, and began
publishing books by individual authors in 2002; it now publishes around six books a year and two to three book-length issues of the magazine. Its list is an impressive one, its literary standards sophisticated without being stuffy, its design qualities high. Alongside Hughes’s book and Murnane’s wonderful, intriguing essays — that somehow manage to be literal-minded and literally marvellous, understated and baroque all at once — Giramondo has recently published two other volumes, Louis Nowra’s *Chihuahuas, Women and Me* and Beverly Farmer’s *The Bone House*, as a deliberate strategy to establish the (non-academic, literary, autobiographical) essay collection as a commercial genre in Australia. This is a “courageous” decision. Essays are certainly an expanding field, as represented in the *Best Australian Essays* volumes and new magazines like the *Griffith Review* or *Heat* itself, and the successes have included self-reflective, artful essays — the Dessaix-Clendinnen-Modjeska genre — as well as public issues pieces. But still, away from the public issues and the autobiographical, this is a small, even delicate market, and not one the bookshops know what to do with.

The other non-institutional independent is Wakefield Press, from South Australia. Established initially by the South Australian government in 1983 to produce books for the state’s sesquicentennial celebrations, Wakefield subsequently became a private firm, first achieving national prominence, perhaps, for its classic Australian crime fiction. It is now a very active publisher, with more than thirty titles on its “What’s New” list, but still strongly committed to regional publishing. Current titles include *Grasses of South Australia*, *State of Mind* (on SA entrepreneurs) and collections from the Friendly Street poets and University of Adelaide’s creative writing students. The dominance of Sydney and Melbourne in Australian publishing remains as strong as it was a century ago, but the role of regional publishers in the public culture non-fiction sector, and in fiction and poetry publishing, is a significant feature of local publishing. UWA Press, UQP, CQU Press, Wakefield and Curtin/FACP collectively are responsible for nine of the titles on my list.

Wakefield’s books in the present bunch are of two very different kinds. *Drawing the Crow* is literary scholar Adrian Mitchell’s memoir of growing up in Adelaide, presented through a series of essays or meditations which find an intriguing perspective and voice — modest, disarming and insinuating — from which to evoke the profound kinds of “modesty” he finds in South Australia itself: a place that “in anyone else’s terms … isn’t anywhere. It is not one of the eastern states … nor is it of the west; and it is not south. It certainly doesn’t feel south. It feels closer to the centre, for it has a common border with all the other mainland states, but it isn’t the centre” (7). The book is a
modest paperback, though with a striking cover (a Clifton Pugh painting, appropriately featuring crows, less appropriately perhaps from Victoria). By contrast, *Encountering Terra Australis* is a weighty, illustrated hardback, a comparative study of the journeys of Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin which interweaves their contemporaneous diaries, plus commentary from the co-authors (Jean Fornasiero, Peter Monteath and John West-Sooby, from Flinders and Adelaide universities). Part of the book's purpose is to redeem the reputation of the French explorer, indeed to claim him as something of an Australian hero. It has an important chapter on the clash of cultures between Indigenous Australians and the explorers' parties - Baudin who could leave for home with his equable Enlightenment views intact, Flinders much more entangled in the histories of colonialism. This was clearly a major production for the Press (with Australia Council assistance), and the result is outstanding, a significant piece of scholarship as well as a handsome book for enthusiasts. It is also prize-winning: the 2005 Frank Broeze Memorial Maritime History Book Prize. This potential for a wider readership - given the hunger still for explorer stories - probably made the investment worth the risk.

Spinifex is perhaps the most remarkable story of all. Emerging from the feminist movement, the rise of feminist publishing and uptake by mainstream houses of women's lists in the 1970s–80s, and the consolidation of academic feminism over the same period, Spinifex was founded in 1991 with a clear eye to the significance of commercial imperatives, necessary if feminist publishing was to survive beyond its "collectivist" founding moment. Spinifex successfully positioned itself across feminist, women's and academic markets, internationally as well as locally, selling feminist titles from Australia into international markets and international titles into Australia. As Diane Brown has shown:

Spinifex has successfully exported and secured international rights trade agreements in five main ways: exporting finished books to overseas distributors; selling English-language rights to overseas publishers; co-producing English-language books with one or more overseas publishers; selling translation rights and buying territorial, co-production and translation rights. [It] contracts for world rights on almost all of its originated titles.6

Spinifex titles have included biography and memoirs, books on the body and health, Asian and Pacific literature, and titles on the environment, development and globalisation. The current title, dé Ishtar's *Holding Yawulyu*:
White Culture and Black Women’s Law, is a mix of history, anthropology and personal memoir, based on the author’s time with the Wirrimanu community on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, and its Women’s Law and Culture Centre or Tjimili. Although sometimes finding its way awkwardly through citations and uplifting clichés (“academic in the bad sense” perhaps) the book is a moving, important study, not least of the bureaucratic and political obstacles to developing genuinely new relationships between White and Indigenous cultures.

Although Spinifex announced in March that they would cease publishing new books from the end of this year, distribution of its list will continue in Australia and overseas. Klein and Hawthorne explained their decision as being due to the disappearance of independent and feminist bookstores worldwide, competition from global superstores and global marketing, “postmodern prevarication” in intellectual fashions, which saw the sharp edge of feminism replaced by the blur of “gender,” and universities moving away from women’s studies programs.²

For all the criticism we might want to make of our current universities, another vital point underscored by this present bunch of books is how well served we are by our much-maligned academics. On the whole these are not “academic” books, at least not in any narrow sense, but of the sole or co-authored titles, all but four are by academics or based on doctorates. The exceptions are the two literary titles, Murnane’s essays and Bail’s notebooks, the National Library publication, and Carmen Callil’s Bad Faith. Of the edited collections, East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination is, as it sounds, edited by academics and largely written by and for academics; two other titles are also edited by academics although their contributors are a mix of academics, journalists, travel writers and others – journalists in the case of Robert Manne’s Do Not Disturb, a collection of essays under the heading Is the Media Failing Australia?, and fiction and travel writers in the case of Travellers’ Tales, an odd collection of past and present travel writing, assembled by David Myers and former academic Michael Wilding. The other edited collections are Robert Dessaix’s Best Australian Essays, where a third or more of the contributors have past or present academic connections, and Fullilove’s book of speeches (Fullilove is a “lawyer and historian by training” and director of “the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Politics in Sydney”).

It ought not be necessary even to make the point, but given the relentless
media and political campaigns against the humanities academy in Australia
(loony research projects funded at taxpayer expense, out of control political
correctness and cultural relativism, betrayal of the western tradition,
impenetrable prose, and so on) it is necessary to state and restate it: authors
working in and trained by Australian universities are doing the work of
remembering, recovering, arguing, interpreting — in short, researching and
writing the books of our cultural and social memory. They’re not alone of
course, for working alongside them are film-makers, museum or library staff,
journalists and broadcasters, and other kinds of professional writers
(chattering away between the lattes and the chardonnay). But the sheer
cultural productivity of our universities deserves to be acknowledged and
celebrated. The point is not about any romantic notion of the agonistic
intellectual, always at odds with society’s home truths — some of these books
are eminently respectable, and only one or two are consciously “radical” — but
rather about how work in culture and history gets done across a broad
spectrum, from radical feminism to mainstream political critique to literary
meditation to celebratory maritime history. Let’s tell the columnists.

At the same time, however, the other side of this contribution by
Australia’s universitaires to the public culture is the absence, by and large, of
any distinct “scholarly” publishing domain, at least in the humanities. As
suggested briefly above, Australia’s university presses, although the main
publishers of Australian academic authors and dependent upon academic
authors for the bulk of their output, are not quite fully-fledged “scholarly”
publishers on, say, the North American model (i.e., Canada as well as the
USA). They cannot survive by producing scholarly books for scholarly
purposes. For the most part, this negative condition has been turned into
positive policy, manoeuvring scholarly work towards a broader audience.
Academic authors are encouraged to rewrite for a general readership,
scholarly books are published to look like trade books, and instead of being
subsidised to publish PhDs, university presses support public programs to
train young authors how to turn their doctorates into books. There are good
reasons for these policies and preferences, and real advantages too. The
proximity of scholarly cultures to public-political cultures in Australia has
meant scholarship readily engaged in that public culture in a robust way,
scholarship willing to risk moving outside familiar disciplinary boundaries and
audiences, scholarship not protected by its own disciplinary traditions.

But there are losses as well as gains. There’s little place for mandarin
theory or intense philosophy, little place for work on literature unless it’s
biography or chat, little room for the kind of excess, the weird theory, that can
suddenly change paradigms; but also little space for the massive scholarly
tome or bibliography, or the intensive exercise in textual analysis that might also change paradigms or at least help to build scholarly traditions. I suppose if we followed the Australian's example and sent around a chapter of Derrida or Deleuze to our university presses they'd ask the authors to rewrite for the general reader; but then we'd only have proven (to the Australian at least) how whacky euro-theorists really are.

Perhaps the only books here pitched wholly at academic readers are Moran's short book on globalisation, McCulloch's book on Hope (which seems aimed straight at the library shelf) and Archer-Lean's lit crit (which seems scarcely to belong to an Australian context). Even Curthoys and Docker's Is History Fiction?, which takes on the complexities of historical discourse and its truth-telling claims across an ambitious theoretical and historical reach, has its eye on a wider market, the History Wars market perhaps. Of course, most of these books are likely to find the bulk of their readers within the university (or schools) sector, with some spill-over into the "para-academic," other knowledge professionals in the market for history and ideas. The imagined general reader will often turn out to be a student after all. But while the dream for some of these books is to be "set", they all dream, too, of a wider readership, indeed a wider impact on the public culture. Richard Waterhouse's The Vision Splendid, with its soberly academic subtitle, A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia, is a substantial piece of historical research, and probably unlikely to be read much outside the research and educational sectors. But it looks like a general trade book, in a form that asks to be read, not merely studied. The same can be said of Gwenda Tavan's The Long, Slow Death of White Australia (not quite a scholarly title for a book, perhaps, although the book itself is serious historical work). Michael Clyne's equally research-based book, Australia's Language Potential, argues a stirring case against Australia's "monolingual mindset" and present government policies that encourage it, versus the progressive policies of a decade or so back; it asks how much longer can Australia afford monolingualism. In short, it addresses the public domain. As Clyne explains, the "book is written for the general reader interested in exploring some issues of multilingualism in Australian society".

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This list of twenty-five books teaches us to be wary of any doom-laden or nostalgic vision of the end of serious or independent Australian publishing. Small, independent Australian publishers have been extraordinarily successful and committed not only to picking up important individual titles
but in opening up whole new sectors of the marketplace for public culture publishing. They do so, of course, because by and large the field is left to them by the larger multinational corporations, either because they’re too big to see it or because they reckon it’s not worth the investment. But in any case, as a general rule, the local publishers read the local audience best. Both independent and institutional publishers read the public culture and publish to it.

But the fact that the field is left to the smaller publishers means that there’ll be ongoing problems getting the books into the bookstores and review pages. A selective search indicates that of all the books covered here, those that scored best in terms of reviews or features were the two internationals, Callil’s *Bad Faith*, with two feature spreads, over two weeks, in the *Saturday Australian*, and Bail’s *Notebooks* (all the Australian broadsheets plus the *TLS*). Size matters. Among the local productions, only *The Best Australian Essays* and Murnane’s collection, the more literary titles interestingly enough, received good coverage in the newspaper books pages. Most of the others will rely on *Australian Book Review* or academic journals, and they might miss out altogether. Market realities mean that to a fair extent this kind of non-fiction, literary/academic publishing remains a subsidised form, and not one that can support a dense or developed scholarly sector. But small to medium-sized houses can still generate important lists (in the range of three to thirty new titles a year) and so publish creatively into the public culture. Perhaps the unresolved question is the degree to which the idea of Australian literature is still a part of that public culture.

**Non-fiction received 2005–2006**

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


*Wilding, Michael and David Myers, eds. *Travellers' Tales* (Rockhampton: CQU Press, 2006)

**NOTES**


4. The information on Scribe and Black Inc in this paragraph is derived largely from Susan Horsburgh, “Independents’ Day”, Age, 28 July 2005.


ON LEAVE

that's where I am where that scrap of orange

towel is not many to see me

at this hour but I had to break

out try & reverse the gender immersion

of camp that's what we all like no dancing

or lovers writing us letters

but bobtails approaching us quietly & finding dugites

in our bags gives us a thrill.

they try to leave me, on weekends

weeks all: go go go

hardly time to point or,

siphon though hours come from

nowhere like a third stomach gas, & I'm stranded

here with a bag full of leaves

& not a few

needs a guy that lives under the tower could

relieve with drumming but he won't.

the firing range gives off boring music

the signs say you're-not. & do not

even a pole with nothing but

a can signifies. piss doesn't

dry in the relatively mild heat

what's the point of smoking if that's all it

is sending unwanted messages to now unsmiling

faces would anyone think me a

soldier with my cartoon shorts

my unshaking hand?
THE KINGSBURY TALES: WRITING A POEM, IN THE SUN

The blinding sun of Wuhan, at my East Window
I have been reading like I have never done before
One nostril stuffed, I sip tea from a shadow
The sun is shining on a smoggy lake sandwiched
Between two high rises and behind what looks like a stadium
She puts her hand out towards a tip of my hair:

"It's definitely greyer than before
You left Australia"

In an ancient country one gets ancient quick
One's thoughts slowed down by the futility of even thinking
If there is anything colourful it is the bed linens
That they hang out to sun on the open tops of those high rises
There is an Australian quietness here
Broken only by someone announcing his collecting 2nd hand televisions

"Is the moon walking in the water or is the boat moving between the lake and the hills
Not knowing where I am, I feel like turning into a deity beyond the dust"

These words come to my mind facing a world of dust and dusty faces
The sun warming my shoe on the windowsill
An autumn mosquito, dying, is crawling between the patches of the sun
And the patches of the sun-shadow
My life becoming extremely small at this moment
Turning into this poem and, that's it

(Morning of 20/11/05, Room 402, Gate 3, Building 28, Zone 9, Wuda)
THE KINGSBURY TALES: A WUHAN TALE

City of Macho Men in direct translation
And of women wearing their desires on their heels
And of a woman beating up her man outside New World last night
And of days and days of winter under hoary clouds
And of Han Mouth, Han Sun and Macho Prosperity
And of German English Japanese Russian settlements in the 19th century
And of a boss having seven wives in the 21st century
And of a man keeping spitting outside a window on a bus
And of salted fish and pork hanging out on the railings
And of a prostitute wearing expensive fur escaping from a taxi without pay
And of taxi-drivers telling you off because they are changing shifts
And of footbath salt bath milk bath double fliers oil pushers
And of the unwanted trees near the Yangtze looking dark brown
And of the Yangtze swallowing up the sky in its tons of pollution
And of a desire to write about no Beijing or Shanghai but just Wuhan
And of a man tortured to death for his belief and a young girl killed by unintended hands
And of a French consulate stationed out of all proportions to other Chinese cities
And of me having nothing to do with poets, Chinese or otherwise
And of me getting smaller and smaller till I disappear into a word, a character

(28/1/06, afternoon, Room 402, Wuda, Chinese New Year the next day) (revised on the night of 13/06/06 in Kingsbury)

DEBORAH WESTBURY

THERE WAS A TIME,

nights:
hugging your knees
to your chest in the dark,
you wanted to hear
a voice not your own
counting
inbreaths outbreaths
the stars.

You wound yourself back,
to the room, the phone.
Your fingers stabbed four digits
and waited
for the machine to speak;
“At the third stroke it will be . . .”
You put the hand-piece down
and dialled again
and again.

It never changed the subject
or asked you questions.
The stars came closer,
your breath quietened;
“At the first stroke it will be precisely . . .”
You placed the receiver in its cradle
carefully,
and at a time undetermined,
fell asleep.
Enter from the gate. A weatherboard house. Hard red borders slashed everywhere: the window frames, the eaves, the doors and the door frames. The smell of fresh paint, even from the gate. This smell of fresh paint from the crusting, darkening red and from the brightening cream glaring between blood borders. The late day summer sun: a blinding reflection, flashing about the eye with each footstep and stumble over the loose rubble of the drive. Pass through the drying garden whose edges blur into the forest. Notice the pot plants: geraniums, succulents, paper-petalled daisies. Tough plants, the type that find it easier to live than to die. Approach the wooden wheel propped against the wall facing the gate. Anyone would notice it straight away: huge and old, as tall as a person. It is just propped there, between the wall and the weather, neither beginning nor ending, just existing as it does and has always done. Next to the wheel, the door. Not quite a front door, not quite a back door: like the house itself, it is oriented to nowhere and everywhere at once. From the outside, look in: the kitchen. The wooden benches, the wooden floor; the wooden everything. A kitchen patterned with the rough checks of bits and pieces thrust together, dove-tailed, mitred, routered into shape: a patchwork of ancient wood, wood that took hundreds of years to grow, days to chop down and months to twist into this house where whole lifetimes have been lived out.

She stands at the sink, peeling potatoes. Arms and legs and feet bare, hair pulled back roughly, unflattering, unflattering like the loose cotton dress she is wearing. Her forearms gather starch freckles with each vicious flick of her wrist. With each burst from her peeler’s stroke her toes and the hairs on her legs also begin to gather the stray blood-dots of the potato. But all she can see is the action of her hand. How well peeler and wrist burst skin off potato, cell off cell, insides from outsides. Oblivious to the starch patterning all over her, she is fixated on the peels piling up before her. Notes how useful a thing it is, this peeler of skin. Wonders who and when and how it was invented. Wonders why she wonders such things at all and, wondering this, stops. She looks out the window to quieten herself. The bits and pieces of her just-
begun garden dwindle into the forest. The forest spreads thickly into the distance, subsuming the mountains under its canopy. In places, the canopy thins and disappears. Through these keyholes she can see the lawns of ferns: the forest under the forest. This scene lulls her, calms the random assaults of her mind. This scene, plus the quiet transition from the wet sounds of her peeling, to her pause, to the birds out there: the kookaburras, the magpies and the parrots fighting it out. Then, the rough music of the wind as it picks bits and pieces of things up, shakes them about and casts them back down to the ground.

She peels four potatoes. She walks across the kitchen and from a hook hanging above her she gets a pot. Dashes salt into its base. Fills it with water, puts it on the stove. Gets the potatoes from the sink. Carries them over to the pot and puts them in. She stands next to the stove for a while, till the water steams, till a white froth builds up on its surface. She takes a fork, rushes it across the foaming liquid. The froth drifts to the edges of the pot and she can see the potatoes, naked and stupid, on the steel base. She puts on the lid.

Back at the sink she cleans out the peels: one sopping handful. She slides open the screen door next to her, steps outside, closes the door behind her. She holds her dripping hand away from her dress, as if her dress is something special. She walks to the compost bin, puts the scraps in. The stench hits her like a spray of muck in the face. As it disperses, the smell of eucalyptus, sharp and constant, moves in from the forest that grows and rots all around. Then, competing, and winning, is the dull headache of fumes from the hot paint, crying itself dry on the walls.

This smell, she thinks, this smell of paint. She looks at the shine of it on the weatherboards. Is that all it takes to string a life together across time? This reek from the compost. Are these the only constant things, the only things that do not change? She stares at the bin, fat and powerful with its common stench, stinking the past right here into the present. A whack of nausea hurls up from her gut, distracts her. She clutches her stomach. She steps up to the door, memories skirting the edges of her mind like words lost on the tip of a tongue. She slides the door open.

She stops. Suddenly stops. Does not move. Her ears, momentarily deaf, try to pick out the problem: a crackling somewhere in the scrub near by. Something there. She listens, looks. But the sound is gone. She walks into the scrub to see. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

She returns to the kitchen. Slides the screen behind her, halts a moment,
her back half-turned to the outside.

She wanders towards the track that leads to the main road. She passes the stuck and rusting gate: permanently half open, permanently half shut. She walks with the lowering sun shining onto her bare neck. By the time she sits to eat her dinner, the light will be yellow, and everything else will follow suit, morphing into those warmer shades and softer textures that she'd always imagined. Strange, how she has always known this place. Strange, that all her life she has looked, literally looked forward to this point: the abstract daydreams of her childhood; the painful wishing-aways of pubescence and the more recent, distinctly purposeful imaginings of her supposed womanhood. Yet her presence here must look to the world like chance, an accident, a mere reaction to circumstance.

Of course, her daydreams could tell her only so much. She had never counted on the daytime, this pregnant glare off everything, the heat immovable and dangerous, pressing into the drying earth and the crisping plants. Never understood the stretching quality of time. Never predicted the exposure and growth of the small sore wounds that have itched and irritated themselves into acknowledgement, these sore little absences that she unwittingly created in her final act of leaving, absences other than those for which she planned. These past months have seen the inscription of details onto an image of the heart. But she won't dwell on that. She can't dwell on such things now.

Ferns take ten years to grow each foot of their height. The ferns that line each side of the track, like a guard of honour, are twice her size. In their presence, she feels the roughness of her look, the fadedness of her dress like a defiant but ill-judged statement against the rich opacity of green around her. The sticky mess of her hair plastered to the sweat on her forehead and neck. The sweat trickling behind her knees, as she wanders along, trickling warmly like an accident. She can't feel much under her bare feet, their brittle and cracking heels too thick now to notice such things as the rough-cut rubble. As she walks further from the house, the ferns on either side of her move a little closer together till they stand right over her, creating a cool, shadowed corridor for her walking. As she goes, she puts one hand out, so that her fingers trail over the black thatched fur of the ancient plants' bodies. She stops before one, pauses, then pushes her fingers deeply into the bristles. She feels like a pervert, a desecrator. Through her skin, the thrill of fear, of not knowing what she might find. Is this what men feel when they cross such boundaries, with permission, without permission? How different it is to be the one who enters, who intrudes. Her mind flutters back but is stopped
short as her fingers reach the fern's body. There, just roughness and hardness. Just roughness, and hardness. No explanation of how it is that these plants so persistently, so elegantly, so competently succeed in their project of living.

She continues down the track. Her home is in this rainforest, but around her house, that place where people have lived, is a circle of yellowing dryness. A fire hazard. A spotlight on her home alerting the elements to its presence. But the forest doesn't need to be alerted, the same way a person doesn't need to be shown that they are missing a finger, a leg, a chunk of their heart. Like skin smothering a scab, the forest is trying to reclaim this turf, her turf, its turf. She can see its reaction, even here, on the track, how the edges are fatly overgrown with creepers and runners and weeds that have picked out soil in the sand and the rubble. As she walks, she stuffs dead any plant that encroaches upon the path. With her toes, she uproots these broken bodies and flicks them back into the scrub: a warning. She doesn't do this for spite alone. This is a tactic. She knows the forest, how it waits. Waits for the gone-wild, homesick orchards around her home to die. Waits for the crumbling of these tracks and roads obscenely cut into its belly. Waits for the buildings and the old, left-about machinery to break down or burn up. Waits for all that people and time have left here to dissolve. Then it can win back its loss. But the forest's loss is her gain and she has painted and planted her battle cry. As she tends to her home, as she treads and retreads, treads and retreads time and this path, she is picking the land's scab. It will stay open and fresh and hers. Theirs is a battle of the wounded: a fight between two forces hell-bent on healing.

She walks on. She can smell the road before she can see it: the strong, comforting weight of oil and tar released like steam from cooking asphalt. Her fern canopy recedes as she approaches, standing back as if conceding defeat to the immutability of the road ahead. As she rounds the bend, a snap.

A sudden snap to her left.

Another snap and a shuffle.

Something rustles.

She stops, her breath a pain, caught like a hiccup in her throat.

The fear clenches her muscles and throws her heart beat up into her head. She can't look. But she must look. She slowly turns her head, body still, to the direction from which the sound came. And from that direction, like a magnet, she feels a tension resisting and reacting to hers. It can see me, she thinks. It can see me. Her dress feels like a big, blank billboard advertising her fear like a white flag. She can only see dark, dense scrub. She stares at this, at the scrub.

All at once, a branch hurls itself into her vision.
It doesn’t fall from above her. It flies right at her like an arrow shot from
the tense poise of a bow hidden in the ferns and bushes infront of her. An
entire tree branch, heavy enough to crack her skull, lies at her feet, its
splintered butt-end aligned with the edge of the track. Its foliage streams
away from her, into the fernery.

She stares at it. The impossibility of it.

Slowly, her breath returns with the normal sounds of the forest. She stares
into the scrub, trying to work it out. But there is nothing there. She stands
still, stretching her minutes, waiting for clues in the ear or the eye. But there
is nothing to hear. There is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kitchen: steam filled and clattering. She rushes to the pot. It is boiling
over. Volcanic white blotches spew around its lid and down its steel sides. A
puddle grows on the stovetop. She pushes the pot off the gas flames and
within seconds it calms down. The kitchen fills with quiet. The sounds of the
outside slowly creep in. She stands before the stove, looking at the white-
stained pot. She must have taken longer than she thought. She tries to recall
what it was that she did, what it was that took so long. But she can think of
nothing. She sees the letter, fat and inevitable, placed by the side of the sink.
Must have dumped it there, rushing to save the pot. Yes. It is the letter that
she got from the letterbox, the letterbox that she walked to after the scare in
the scrub, the scare that happened after touching the fern. It all happened
today. She looks down at her arms, crossed against her chest. She remembers
remembering her dress in the confrontation. Yes, all of these things happened
today.

She looks again vaguely, at the stovetop. She realises that the gas is set to
its highest setting. She sits by the kitchen table. Hadn’t she left it set on low,
like she always does? She can’t remember. Every day she peels four potatoes
and sets them to boil slowly while she checks the letterbox. Everyday she
does this and so she cannot distinguish one day from another. Did she turn
the heat down, today, as she should have? She laughs. Of course she didn’t:
Who would have turned it up? She shakes her head. Shakes it harder than a
gesture. Shakes it as if she is trying to rattle something out of it, as if she
needs to exaggerate to herself her foolishness. She laughs, at herself, to
herself, till she realizes she is laughing out loud, right out loud. She registers
with a shock the strangeness of the sound. For as long as she has been here,
she has not laughed aloud. Has not a single word been spoken? No sound
other than her breathing? Can this be right? It must be right, she can barely
recognize her laugh. And now, when she tries to say something to see if she
recognises her voice, she can think of nothing to say and so says nothing, just
sits there, stupidly shy.

She stands, not remembering how or why or when she sat down. She gets a dishcloth and picks up the pot of potatoes. She skews the lid to one side and tips the water into the sink. The steam rushes up, threatening to burn her hands. She puts the pot back on the gas, gets some milk, butter and cheese out of the fridge. With her own careful measures, she places these ingredients into the pot. She inhales the sudden flush of steam as the milk recoils from the pot’s hot base. Salt. Pepper. She roughly mashes everything together. Puts on the lid. Turns off the gas, and leaves the food to melt into itself. She stands there, her hand and her weight against the stovetop. She stares at the starch-streaked pot. Remembers, again, the letter by the sink.

The writing on it is blurred in places, splashed from the water she poured out of the pot. She picks it up, looks at her address written carefully on the front. Notes the postage stuck in the corner: twice as many stamps as needed. She turns the envelope over. On the back, the sender’s address carefully printed, even the country underlined and written in capitals beneath the state, as if the letter had been sent from a different country, from a different state. A phone number and an email address under the sender’s details. So many details. The familiar writing spews an excess of details that she can feel the weight of, in her hand, on the enclosed pages.

Not her details.

The man the house the car the job. Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. These are the details she has left. Domestic details. Details of the familiar, born from the comfortable repetitions of a life insistently, competently, lovingly knitted by someone else. By someone with a reliable pattern, ‘tried and true,’ the pattern everyone seems to admire: the man the house the car the job etcetera etcetera etcetera. So comfortable was this life that she hardly realised she was wrapping herself right up in it, like a blanket. Hardly noticed that it was comforting her to sleep. Hardly noticed that she was going to sleep herself to death as if repetition and comfort, the repetition of comfort, were drugs: the stupor of having all needs met, a future full of certain certainties, a big fat life directed by the crushingly concrete details of another person’s plans.

A paper-perfect life. All the right details: she weighs them, again, in her hand.

Not her details.

She puts the letter back down onto the edge of the sink. Returns to her pot. Opens it, inhales the buttery hot steam. She gets a plate and a fork. She piles the mash onto her plate and goes to the sliding door. She opens the door and sits down on the few splintered steps that connect the house to the yard.
Warm on her knees, the plate. The sun, absurdly sweet, stupidly golden. The kind of light she came here for. Everything around her is flushed and distinct. The patchy grass that grows and dies in clumps leading to the forest's edge is lit up. She can see each blade with surreal clarity. Through each blade she can see the shadowed outlines of the blades behind as they compete for the last and the best of the sun's rays. This is her favourite part of the day. The purposefulness of cooking: the guarantee of being able to make something from beginning to end, to control its making, to see and enjoy its result. The sheer privilege she feels, still, of eating her dinner here with the entire forest around and before her, the trees and the birds shifting themselves into their evening poses. Everyday works up to this point. Then, with reluctance, with a small and immediately suppressed panic, she finishes her meal.

The pinnacle passed, she notices the mosquitoes and the cold shadows of the dusk. All that was warm and solid a moment ago is now pallid and translucent. She takes her plate and her cutlery inside. As she slides the screen door behind her, her thumb pauses over the door lock. After all of this time, she still hesitates. She looks out into the shadowing garden. How flat it looks, as if all perspective goes with the light. She scans the garden's familiar form. She is looking for shapes and movements that she does not recognize. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kettle squeals. She moves around the letter. She ignores it. Makes her tea. Then she settles, as she does every night, to read at the big kitchen table. Against the windows the moths, the dragonflies, the spiders and the spray of tiny bugs that throw themselves against the glass. She has learned the patterns of their sounds and now their presence reassures her. Keeps her company. Every night, when she sits to read, the rest of the day pushes and shoves into her mind, begging her attention. Begging for the same sort of analysis that she is about to apply to the pages infront of her. Tonight, unwelcomed, the memory of her dinner carelessly and dangerously boiling over in an empty house. Tonight, unwelcomed, the image of the letter on the sink. Tonight, and every night, unwelcomed, the image of herself reading, taking pages and pages of notes that she has, and will, carefully file away in one of her big old cupboards. What else is she to do with them? Her daydreams dreamt of the reading of books, of the recording of reading, but she never wondered what this reading would, or could, be applied to. Just as she couldn't predict the harshness of the daytime, she could never have contemplated the seeming futility of her nights. She looks and listens to the bugs, pattering like confetti on the pane. Their presence brings her back to the space in the room, to the tables and chairs, to the wooden floors, to the
For two hours she reads. She notes onto lined paper what she notices in the words, what she understands, what she needs to understand better. Once or twice she gets up, wanders the wooden house. Goes to the toilet, washes her face, looks closely at her skin in the mirror. She drifts into her bedroom, turns on the lamp by her bed and makes up the sheets so that the room is waiting for her. She returns to the book. Sits, continues to read. Then, as so surprisingly often happens, something leaps up from the pages. Something hits her in the face. She traces the words with the tip of her finger, mouths the phrase to herself. In big, pressed-in capitals she copies down the quote that has knocked her awake. She carefully copies the words that are kicking and slapping and shocking her mind into working again. She sits back, looks at the truth on the page. Circles it again. Highlights it as if it matters, as if one day she might need reminding that these things mattered to her, once.

Eventually she realises that she is reading and rereading the same words. Her mind is wandering. Her eyes are tired. She puts down her pen. She looks over at the swarms blurring the corners of her windows. She walks over for a closer look. She is never sure whether or not to leave the lights on for the insects. Never sure if turning them off will spoil their fun. Never sure if darkness will instead relieve them of the object of their mindless pursuit, destroying the cruel and invisible wall they keep bashing themselves into. Tonight, she turns the lights off. She stands, listening, as the dusty sounds of their feet and wings slowly diminish. She moves back into the darkened room. She picks up her tea and her teapot and returns them to the sink. She won’t clean them now, she will leave them for tomorrow morning: her way of connecting one day to another.

She turns to leave. She notices the letter. She is pleased at how well, for a while, she had forgotten it. She picks it up. She looks again at the familiar writing all over it. Thinks of the promise of pages inside that are written to her. Just to her.

Of course she will not open it.

The moment that she does their eyes will roll out into her palm. They will stare at her from the pages with their wet, confused goodwill. They will look at her. They will ask her to explain, to share, to justify. To be a part of their life. To be their wife. To be their daughter-in-law, their sister-in-law. To be the mother of their children, their grandchildren. To be the source of their futures. To be the mechanism through which meaning can be born, literally born from her, and stolen back into their lives. She looks out into the night-cast garden. She sees nothing in the pitch-black density of the scrub, just silhouettes against the sky. The spaces that she has cut back and emptied.
make catchments for the light. She can see the starlit details of objects that she has carefully placed in these lit up hollows. She is her parent’s daughter. She is her sibling’s sister. She can only be these things, for she has always been these things, and these things are herself. She cannot bear to have their children, yet she cannot have children on her own, and of her own. She looks out into the garden, at the only solution she could find.

Of course she will not open the letter. This place is for the anonymous: the unnamed and the unnaming; the unspeaking and the unspeakable. Opening the letter, seeing her name written in his hand, would be like letting the weeds encroach onto her dirt track. The forest, watching, watching, will take the moment.

She opens the sliding door. A few disconcerted moths dust about her face and her hair as she passes through them. She goes to the compost bin and takes off its lid. She rips the letter up and throws into the bin’s warm, dark guts. She goes to the water tank and fills up a bucket, the sound of the water obnoxious and loud in the private quiet of the forest. She tips the water into the bin. She refills the bucket and, again, tips the water in. She read somewhere that water helps compost to rot, helps it to disappear into itself like invisible ink. She stares into the bin. She looks down, staring into its dark insides.

But there is nothing to see.

There is nothing there.

Watch from the gate. Look at the cream and blood house, colourless in the starlight, blank in the moonlight. Watch as the house turns out its last light. Watch as it rests in its own quiet, as it sits in the blue, spot-lit space it has forced around itself.

The forest is turgid with black. It isn’t asleep.

A branch snaps outside her window.

Wait. Feel the change. How the house tenses. How the forest braces.

Watch. One by one, as each room in the house is lit. See her jump, each time, as her reflection flashes up at her in the night-mirrored windows. She wears no clothes. She walks, room to room, checking behind doors, in cupboards and under beds.

When she cannot sleep, when her mind begins to assault her, when a strange sound teases her, this is what she does. When her day-dreams fail her or her nightmares shake her awake, this is what she does.

Rattle her bedroom window.

Splinter wood in the middle of the still, summer’s night.

Watch her as she rises. Watch as the house pulses, slow and defiant, a silk-worm spinning itself a home that will glow, and continue to glow, in the forest’s dark gut. Watch as she passes through the house, lighting it up, searching for nothing, making sure that nothing is there.
QUEEN'S PARK

1. Queen Victoria's Statue

Pigeons invade an island of green
between granite monoliths
hedging closer, crowding in.

Couples taste the saliva of love
in their bodies,
smell the cut grass

on their hands. Under fixed eyes
a monarch from her exile of death
looks down, a stranger now

in a war absent of enemies,
silent in her bronze limbs.
There is no grief, merely a void

of emotion. Inwards
the gentle lovers
speak a language without words.

Sensing alarm
the pigeons wing softly
to a bony ledge,

look down on a Queen
ageing slowly into ruin,
the grave she will cherish

is shivering, and its earth torn with empires.
2. Grass

At dawn or dusk, if you have a certain sensitivity
you may see the ghosts spring up from the grass,
or the tall ships don sail down by the river,
masts furling and upsetting the anchor
across from government buildings
designed to arrest them.
During the day you can see just the lunch time crowd,
some lovers and Uni students sprawled as wounded or dead
on the battlefield of their ambition. Hope is a sprinkler system
stuttering twice a day and this is a farmers dream,
water, food, green around the verges. And then they go,
the tall ships slip down to the port,
while frontier men and women
crawl once more into the ground which houses them,
their children’s laughter echoing within the roots
and the shale, echoing like rippling ploughs
across farm soil certain to become city.
I scrunch the satin of my sheets
and see November – its
cobalt flakes, purple jelly & blurred moons.

My bed has turned to sea
– crystalline –
and I’m floating above it.

My father waggles, fluffy
& anaemic, tussling himself
out of the bottom of that water.

He grins. He says, I’ve missed
you baby, and something sluggish
like silkworms dazzles out of

his mouth, sexual & squirming.
How’d you get down there?
I slipped, and a flock of willowy

geese slivers its way up, as
angels might, whipped in yoghurt.
A vellum of them cover

my father in titanium-white,
and his retinas freeze with
their arctic-breath, so

when I breathe in, it’s like a
chilled tunic over my face.

*Just look at these geese...*

do you want these geese?
You always loved geese...
if you come down here, you can

swim with them too,
and before I can say anything,
he hauls me in & the splurge

of November encrusted my hair.
Then I’m writhing in hazy scuffles,
fibulas dissolving like sugar,

and my father glares up, and screams,

*We’re only swimming baby... we’re only swimming.*
It is July the first.

And Ernest Hemingway is cleaning his favourite shotgun, the one with the silver edged barrel, which he will next day place in his mouth, and Charles Laughton is born and Thomas Moore is on trial for his life and I (1970-present) am lying awake in Newcastle. On this day Vespasian was given the purple by the Egyptian legions and Napoleon captured Alexandria. The first television advertisement, for watches, was broadcast in New York City, costing the company nine dollars. It is 12:50 am. In 1971, in a Brisbane hospital, my wife Sarah has just been born. Four years ago at this time I lay in bed awake, listening to her stir beside me. She had wanted to make love, but I had said I was too tired. In truth I was bored of her. By then I already knew the history of her body, the provenance of every scar and blemish. I pretended I was asleep.

This year (2004) I have taken to sleeping in old piles of the Newcastle Herald which I bought from a pensioner in Charlestown. The past week I have been napping in the 1988 earthquake, but tonight I cover myself in a more recent pub brawl and the football results. For some reason, I find I enjoy most rest in December 1979. Yet just now I cannot sleep and so continue the introduction to my History of Newcastle (Newcastle University Press 200?). One hundred and twenty notebooks filled with my handwriting are stacked on the floor around my desk, along with the dozens of history books and journals that are referenced in the 90 pages of footnotes. And still I have not arrived at the First World War. I once wrote a history of Africa that took less time and research than this history of a small Australian city. And yet still I believe I was born to be an historian, exiting from my mother backside first, in order that I might better understand where I came from. I take a new page in the introduction (p104) and write, Abraham Lincoln once said, “We cannot escape history”.

Then the Beatles start singing Paperback Writer on the radio, number one...
today in 1966. There are more songs and I stop writing for a time and listen to them, *My Foolish Heart, Why Don't You Love Me*. Then I hear *Guess Things Happen That Way* and I run barefoot to turn the music off, trailing a Lambton murder from December 14, 1983 on my heel. My feet are dirty. The floor is filthy with my dead skin and hair. Historians should not sit in ivory towers after all.

Now it is four am on July the first and in 1993 I have just proposed to Sarah. We lay in bed together in an Edinburgh hotel. I had bought the engagement ring earlier that day at an antique shop – I wanted it to have history. She told me it was the best birthday present she had ever had. She told me of each of the men she had loved. She asked me about the women I had been with. “I don’t want our pasts to ever come between us,” she said. I had a cold that night, I remember.

My medical history; measles (1975) appendicitis (1984) a fractured left arm (1992) malaria (1990, 1991) and of course, clinical depression (2001 to present). Outside the house, a red and green and yellow bird is whooping in the dawn, but I don’t know its name. I have no knowledge of natural history. It is a cool morning. I decide to go for a walk and dress in my second-hand clothes. I leave the house, cross the street, walk past the undertakers where an Australian flag is displayed against black curtains, as if the country itself is to be buried today. My house is near the harbour. The roof was destroyed by a Japanese submarine that fired 34 rounds at the city on June 8, 1942. Three drunken young men shout at me and I hurry past them and think of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. I could never fight. I have no history of violence.

I walk down to the foreshore and look out at the ocean where in the pale light I can see five identical coal ships spaced equidistant along the horizon, like a time-lapse photograph. Long ago today the French frigate *Medusa* sank and the survivors escaped in a raft which became stuck in the sea of the famous painting. There is a strong smell of seaweed. It is Estee Lauder’s birthday. In 1998 at this time I was still asleep in bed, but not with my wife.

I walk back and forth along the sand for a while, and then return to the road. At this early hour I am surprised to see an old man reading on his front door step, with a faintly astonished look on his face, as if he had just seen his own name in the book. I pass him, then charge back up San Juan Hill with Roosevelt and take my street without casualties.

It is eight o’clock in the morning on July the first and I still cannot sleep. I return to bed and sit and watch old black and white films for some hours, looking for Olivia de Haviland to wish her happy birthday. Then it is midday and the postman rings the doorbell once and I wait until he rings again, in
honour of James M. Cain, also born this day.

The postman is a Barbarossa of a man. Ink has come off on his large hands as if he has been making words with them. He has a package for me from Melbourne which I must sign for, and as I do so I entertain him with the history of my surname. He does not seem very interested. I take the package inside. Some history books, including one that I once wrote about the Mau-Mau rebellion. Years ago I lent them to Sarah’s sister, but I need them now for my history of Newcastle. Sometimes I think I will need every history book, from the time of Thucydides to those yet unwritten, for my history of Newcastle.

When I open the book a photograph falls out. I stare at it for some time, for it has been so long since I have seen a photograph that was not stapled, captioned and dated. A man and a woman are standing outside a dark stone cathedral, smiling in a sunshower. The picture was taken on the July the first of 1989 in Glasgow, when I met Sarah for the first time. I could hear her in the next chamber in the cathedral before I saw her. She was leading a group of Polish students. Her Australian accent I noticed at once, but then certain other words that she pronounced differently, some rising unexpectedly, some falling. I imagined numbers over these words, leading to footnotes which explained that she had once lived in China, India, England. I watched her, fascinated. For when she spoke of the past, she threw her hand back over her shoulder, when she spoke of the present, she pointed in front of her, and the future was a sweeping gesture of both her hands. She had begun these motions to give her students visual clues for their tenses, but eventually they had become habit. She had sent her students away to look at a tapestry and she was finishing a book on a bench outside.

“What are you reading?” I asked her, and she looked up at me.
“Oh. How does it end?”
“Well, she dies,” she said, and we laughed.

I remember how her hands moved when we arranged to meet the next evening. Later, I watched her students sing Happy Birthday to her. The next year, we were alone when I sang it to her.

In 2004, now, I return to the one hundred and fourth page of my introduction. Outside, above the houses, there is a picture of the sun in the sky that is already some minutes old. I wonder how it compares to the sun the Americans made in the Bikini Atoll, the fourth time of splitting the atom. It was on this day of course, years and years ago. After some time writing, I fall asleep and when I awaken I look at the clock. It is 5pm.
In 2001 the conference I was attending at Sydney University to discuss trends in African historiography had just ended. It was Sarah’s birthday, and I was going to call her from the lobby, to tell her that I would be home soon. There was a black woman at the hotel bar. I recognised her accent as Burundian from the speech she gave about French colonialism. Her name was Clio Mbabazi. She was quite pretty and invited me to join her for a drink. “It is July the first,” she said, “and Burundi is celebrating its independence.” She looked at my wedding ring and my whisky. “And so it seems are you.” I called Sarah at nine o’clock to wish her happy birthday and tell her that I would not be home that night, as we had planned. There was too much work to do.

And then I am hungry and I eat using November 23rd 1997 as both tablecloth and napkin. The bread is four days old, the cheese is six days old, and I am 12,875 days old. It is evening and I go to shower off the history of the day. The ink, the sweat, the dirt. It is still July the first, still, and Marlon Brando has just died on television, though he is there in the screen screaming, “Stella! Stella!” I sit on the floor. Something cuts into my leg. One of Sarah’s diaries. She kept them from when she was fifteen years old. I have read them several times. In them I appear as an historical figure, like a Garibaldi or a Caesar. Herein, all my lies and my infidelities are recorded. “For an historian,” Sarah wrote on July first 1997, “my husband is no good at fabricating the past.”

Suddenly it seems, it is 9:02 pm. In 2001 at this time I was in a Sydney hotel room. On the radio, Johnny Cash was singing. I kissed Clio Mbabazi and we took off our clothes. Afterward I could not sleep and I idly read the Gideon’s Bible. Much later I learnt that the society had been formed on a July the first by some Wisconsin travelling salesmen.

It is 11:41 pm and in 2001 Sarah is dying on her thirtieth birthday alone in our bed in Newcastle. A sudden heart attack. The doctors could not explain it. There was no history of heart disease in her family. If only someone had been with her, they said, she might have been saved. In Germany, Chekhov was dying too. They would take his body back to Russia in a crate marked “fresh oysters”. Like Shakespeare, whom Chekhov greatly admired, Sarah was born and died on the same day.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “We cannot escape history”. It is July the first.
MICHAEL ACKLAND teaches English and Comparative Literature at Monash University, and is currently a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University. He has recently co-edited a volume of essays on Australia-Japan relations and is now preparing a monograph on Christiana Stead.

JAMES ALLEN ANDERSON was born in Papua New Guinea, and has lived in Rabaul, Port Moresby, London, China and Hong Kong. He has a Post-Graduate Certificate in Chinese from Thames University, London, and has had essays published in Walking Rain Review and poetry in Antipodes.

ROBERT JAMES BERRY lives and writes in Auckland, New Zealand. His work has been published widely, and he is currently preparing his fourth collection, Sky Writing, for publication.

VICTORIA BURROWS has recently completed a three-year postdoctoral research fellowship in English, Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia, where she is now an Honorary Research Fellow. Her first monograph, Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2004. Her current project, Whiteness and Shame in Contemporary Literature: Marguerite Duras, J.M. Coetzee and Arundhati Roy, is near completion.

DAVID CARTER has been Director of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland since moving from Griffith University at the beginning of 2001. He is currently Project Manager for the Australian Studies in China program for the Australia-China Council (DFAT).

MICHELLE CRAWFORD currently lives in Perth and recently commenced a Creative Writing PhD at Murdoch University. She has had fiction and poetry published and placed in various competitions, a play professionally produced, and in 2001 was awarded a mentorship with the Australian Society of Authors.

JENNIFER COMPTON lives in Wingello on the Southern Highlands of NSW with her husband. She was resident at the Whiting Library in Rome from February to July and during her tenure was a guest at the Sarajevo Poetry Festival.

TANYA DALZIELL is a Senior Lecturer in English and Communication Studies, the University of Western Australia.

EDWARD A. DOUGHERTY’S first full-length collection of poems, Pilgrimage to a Gingko Tree, will be published in 2008. He lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York state and is active in his Quaker Meeting. “Conjunction” was written after volunteering at a peace centre in Hiroshima for two and a half years.

BRIAN EDWARDS writes theory and criticism, poetry and fiction. His recent books include the critical study Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction (Garland, 1998), two collections of poetry All in Time (Papyrus, 2003) and The Escape Sonnets (Papyrus, 2006) and a collection of short fiction Corresponding with Thomas Pynchon (Mattoid/Grange, 2006).

DIANE FAHEY’S seventh poetry collection is The Sixth Swan, based on Grimms’ fairy tales. Her forthcoming Sea Wall and River Light centres on the natural environment at Barwon Heads on the Victorian coast, where she lives.


In 2005 SARAH FRENCH was awarded an ArtsWA Grant to complete her first poetry collection. Dreams was the winner of the Trudy Grahman Poetry Award that same year. In 2006 she was Emerging Poet In Residence at Tom Collins Writers Centre.

HELEN GILDFIND lives in Newport, Melbourne and is currently studying Honours at Melbourne University. She has had short stories and poems published in Poetrix, Veranda, and Voiceworks and has had essays published in Idiom.

From a background of teaching English in high schools JEFF GUESS now tutors at the University of South Australia and teaches poetry at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. His eighth collection of poetry Winter Grace was launched during Writers’ Week in March 2004.

JILL JONES’ latest books are Broken/Open (Salt, 2005), which was shortlisted for both The Age Poetry Book of the Year in 2005 and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in 2006, and Fold Unfold (Vagabond, 2005). She won the Kenneth Slessor Prize in 2003 for her fourth full-length book, Screens Jets Heaven, and has collaborated with photographer Annette Willis on a number of projects.
CHRISTOPHER (KIT) KELEN teaches Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Macau in South China. His sixth and latest volume of poetry *Eight Days in Lhasa* has just been published by VAC in Chicago. A seventh volume *Dredging the Delta* is forthcoming from Cinnamon Press in the U.K.

NOEL KING teaches in the Department of Media at Macquarie University. His interview with Ray Coffey on Fremantle Arts Centre Press is part of a larger project ("Cultures of Independence") investigating the fortunes of various small/independent presses in Australia, England and the United States.

ANDREW LANSDOWN'S most recent books are a collection of poetry titled *Fontanelle* (Five Islands Press, 2004), a collection of short stories titled *The Dispossessed* (Interactive Press, 2005), and three fantasy novels titled *With My Knife, Dragonfox and The Red Dragon* (Omnibus Books/ Scholastic Australia, 2006).


DAVID LUMSDEN currently lives in Warsaw, Poland. He designs large software systems. His poems have appeared in various periodicals, including *P.N.Review* (Manchester, UK) and the *Mississippi Review*.

AMANDA MAXWELL currently lives in Melbourne, where she is at work on her first collection of short stories and her first novel. She is also a scientist sometimes.

MEGAN MCKINLAY teaches in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia.

SHANE MCCAULEY was born in England in 1954, but has lived and worked in Perth for most of his life as a TAFE lecturer. He has published five books of poetry, the most recent being *Glassmaker* (Sunline Press, 2005).

GRAHAM NOWLAND has been a bookseller, a book reviewer and journalist. He began publishing short fiction in 1993 and won the Lyndall Hadow/Donald Stuart short story award in 2003. He is now finalising his non-fiction book *Fremantle and the Novel 1879–2006*.

BARRY O'DONOHUE lives in Brisbane. He has published several volumes of poetry, but for the past 10 years has been unproductive. He was the editor of *Image Magazine, The Border Issue and Place and Perspective, Contemporary Queensland Poetry*. He is currently writing a new collection of poems.
RYAN O’NEILL has had two short story collections published by Ginninderra Press; *Six Tenses* and *A Famine in Newcastle*. He lives in Newcastle with his wife and daughter.

GEOFF PAGE is a Canberra poet. His most recent works are *Agnostic Skies* (Five Islands Press 2006) and *Eighty Great Poems from Chaucer to Now* (UNSW Press 2006). He also published his third verse novel, *Freehold*, in 2005 with Brandl & Schlesinger.

OUYANG YU has to date published thirty-five books in the field of fiction, non-fiction and literary translation, in both English and Chinese. He’s now professor of Australian literature in English Department, Wuhan University, China. His forthcoming book of non-fiction is *On Third Thoughts: speaking English, thinking Chinese and living Australian* with Wakefield Press.

This is LUKE SIMON’S 20th published poem. He has just finished post-production on *My Stamp Collection*, a short film he has written & directed. Luke was diagnosed with Stage 4 Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma in 2003. He manages LS Language Services (www.lslanguageservices.com)

ROBERT SMITH, a member of the International Council of major artist-reference *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon*, is its Australian commissioning editor; has honorary research appointments with Curtin University and the University of Melbourne; and is occasional curator at The Counihan Gallery in Brunswick. Currently he is working on decipherment of the Wilton Diptych; recovery of attitudes and insights in Shakespeare’s plays; and preparations for a screenplay *The Trials of Bill Dobell*.

DIMITRIS TSALOUMAS is a bilingual poet who has published eight books of poetry in Greek and seven in English, published in Australia and the UK. This poem is from *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*, to be published by the University of Queensland Press early next year.

TOM SHAPCOTT was Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide from 1997–2005. He is now retired and lives in Melbourne. His most recently published novel is *Spirit Wrestlers* (Wakefield Press 2004) and he has a collection of stories, *Collectors & Hunters* due out shortly. It has already been published in a Macedonian translation.

JUNED SUBHAN is a graduate from Glasgow University, who has completed his second volume of short fiction entitled *I Was Someone You Once Knew* and is currently working on a novel. He has short stories forthcoming in *Wasafiri* (London) and *The Ontario Review* (USA).
MARIA TAKOLANDER is a Lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University, Geelong. Her poetry has been published widely in Australian and international journals. She is the author of the chapbook *Narcissism* (Whitmore Press 2005) and was Emerging Writer at the Mildura Writers’ Weekend in 2005.


SHIRLEY WINSTANLEY is a Western Australian artist based in Perth who works mostly in acrylic and oil and uses a wide range of subjects. She has exhibited several times as part of a group and held two successful solo exhibitions.

DAVID WINWOOD has contributed to newspapers and magazines in Australia and New Zealand, in the British Isles and in the United States and Canada. His first e-book, *Erasmus in Stepanakert*, was e-published by Blesok, and a small pamphlet, *Dive For Cover* (with three prints by Rigby Graham) has recently been published by In De Bonnefant, a small firm which specialises in books for the bibliophile market.
Lilith: A Feminist History Journal is a peer-reviewed academic journal based in the History Department at the University of Melbourne. Since the early 1980s, Lilith has provided a valuable forum for new and established scholars to present research in feminist history. The journal is published annually in November and includes a substantial book review section.

Our upcoming issue of Lilith (available end of November) begins with a feature article by Katie Holmes on "The Future of Feminist History" and reflections by Zora Simic and Mary Tomsic. It includes articles on the relationship of young Australian women to feminism, the links between contemporary Australian women writers and earlier female literary pioneers, the historicized construction of gender identity by young women in contemporary China, Antebellum American feminist thought, the racialisation of the maternal body in late colonial Australia, and the racialised pro-natalism of the Australian Nazi community of Auslandsdeutsche in the 1930s.

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