

Australian Women's Book Review

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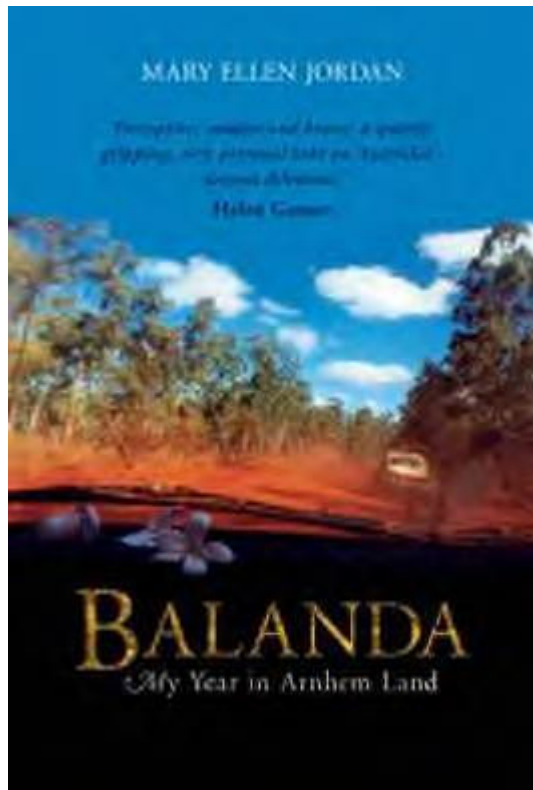
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Reviewed by Evelyn Hartogh

Out of Place

Mary Ellen Jordan *Balanda: My Year in Arnhem Land*. Crow's Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005.

Reviewed by Liz Reed



The word 'Balanda' derives from the Macassan word meaning 'Hollander' and has become an Aboriginal word to denote non-Aboriginal people in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory. The word clearly situates non-Aboriginal people as the outsiders, and Mary Ellen Jordan's choice of it for her title perhaps unconsciously resonates with the overall impression of how she and most of the other non-Aboriginal people she encountered in her fourteen month stint in Maningrida remained very much the outsiders to that community. Although there as a part of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSIC)-funded 'self-determination' program, Jordan soon comes to appreciate her complicity in the inherent contradictions of her political/ethical desires and the reality of how Balandas like her perpetuate colonialist control, regardless of an individual commitment to the principles, rather than simply the veneer, of self-determination.

Helen Garner in her cover endorsement of the book describes the writing as 'perceptive' and a 'brave ... take on Australia's deepest dilemma', thereby throwing the focus on 'Australia' by which she clearly meant white or

non-Indigenous Australia, as is frequently the case with this raced name. Unwittingly Garner's endorsement points to many of the problematic dimensions of *Balanda*, which – perhaps despite Jordan's intentions – perpetuates discourses of the 'problem' of Aboriginality.

The strongest impression gained from this book is Jordan's determination to try to understand the society into which she intrudes and carries the baggage of being a well-meaning and politically committed Balanda from the south. Not surprisingly, only glimmers of understanding emerge: Jordan appears on some levels to be able to accept that this is how it inevitably remains, whereas on other levels there is a struggle for more clarity and a desire to be able to suggest tangible answers to the questions she poses, to herself as much as to the readers. These readers are by implication also Balandas; there is little to suggest that Jordan is writing for an audience dissimilar from herself, which makes the questions both easier and harder to resolve, it seems, but also ensures that the gaze remains firmly on the failure (or impossibility as she increasingly sees it) of Balanda attempts to be of use to Indigenous people. Thus, whilst Jordan acknowledges her own privilege and that of the other Balandas she encounters at Maningrida, this awareness remains partial and does not encompass the question of her privileged speaking position in relation to Aborigines and Balanda. Nor does she ever quite transcend the enduring Eurocentric notion that 'we' should 'help' Indigenous people.

This is a fascinating and at times quite frustrating book; as Jordan notes in the opening lines of her 'author's note', *Balanda* is 'a subjective, personal account', in which she has blended aspects of personalities she encountered at Maningrida, in order to 'create typical characters, rather than depicting actual people' (vii). Nonetheless, I wondered at various points in the book whether permission had been

gained from any of the persons who had been merged into these 'typical characters', as it seemed only too likely that they could be easily identified by the at times fairly precise details about them. There is nothing in the author's note or acknowledgements on this point, which seemed to suggest that such approval or permission was not regarded as necessary, and the absence of clarity on this important ethical detail remains a fundamental concern.

Jordan's writing is at times very evocative; the title *Balanda* not only literally applies to the non-Aboriginal population at Maningrida, as described by its Aboriginal inhabitants, but also serves to situate Jordan and her experiences 'out of place' – up there, in the north, on land that she identifies as Aboriginal. It also identifies Jordan as 'white' or non-Indigenous, a realization she appears to have only come to by virtue of being 'out of place', away from Melbourne where she and her friends endlessly debated 'Aboriginal issues'. By being Balanda in this way, Jordan is able to explore the philosophical but also the increasingly personal (and possibly unresolvable or unanswerable) questions that attach to this status, as she learns 'what it means to be a Balanda' (9).

But I kept wondering where on earth Jordan thought she was when living in inner Melbourne if not on Aboriginal land. As a settler Australian I was amazed that this apparent discovery was not explored by Jordan in relation to the Aboriginal land to which she ultimately returned in Melbourne, and was disturbed that she continued the habit of exoticising and locating Aboriginality as being 'up north'. This was a pity also because her exploration of the specific meaning of 'being Balanda' in Maningrida suggested some interesting potential for thinking about cross-cultural engagements.

Jordan is able to offer some important insights into the realities of 'self-determination' and her role (and that of other white workers like her) as what she terms 'modern day missionaries' (36), away from the safe distance and idealism that 'southerners' all too often hold onto tenaciously. On the other hand, there seems a tendency to extrapolate from her own experiences, to a comprehensive analysis of self-determination as unworkable, a generalization that is not likely to match the experience of many other 'Balandas' in other parts of Australia. And she takes no account of the role of Indigenous people in successful self-determination programs elsewhere in the country, to which a passing acknowledgement would have sufficed. Thus 'self-determination' itself is framed as the problem, a dangerous generalization in this ever-increasingly conservative period. She links it to current discussions of 'welfare dependency' and seems to regard the connection as sufficient in itself, without any interrogation of the utility of this latest catch-phrase about the 'Aboriginal problem'.

While, then, I found this book at times frustratingly uneven, Jordan is to be commended for the often sensitive manner in which she interrogates not only her own implicatedness, but the dilemma itself. Thus, she does not shy away from provoking questions about what she comes to see as a form of 'covert assimilation' (92) in which she and other Balanda are inextricably bound up. Her exploration of this, and her probing of her own idealistic and idealised vision of making friends with Aboriginal people with whom she'd drink 'cups of tea and chat, as I did with Balanda friends' (53) is particularly impressive, all the more so because she is prepared to consider that there may be no answers, or at least none that suited the Balandas among whom she lived, who included 'mercenaries ... and misfits' (36) many of whom quite frankly did not wish to engage with the questions she raised, and become quite hostile to her for doing so. But she does not seem able to take the next step, as a Balanda or its equivalent around the country, and ask the fundamental questions about what this means in contemporary Aboriginal Australia.

Jordan tells us that she went to Maningrida partly because of how little she 'knew about Aboriginal cultures and a desire to learn more' (25). She observes that like many other white Australians, she knew something of the 'complex spirituality' and 'deep relationship to the land' arising from the 'Dreaming', and retains her respect for these ideas at the same time as she comes to see that they are also comforting stereotypes that provide nourishment to sympathetic whites, many of whom are reluctant to confront the realities that flow from their own influence on these Aboriginal cultures. In spite of the peeling back of these preconceptions, Jordan is unable to overcome her desire for Aboriginal people to behave in certain ways that would make them more appealing to her. Therefore, all the familiar signs of dysfunction are reproduced in this book – the fortnightly 'wet' weekends when the barge from Darwin arrives with supplies, including 'grog', leading to what appears to be acknowledged as inevitable fighting and violence towards Aboriginal women, the drifting into ganja-induced stupor by bright teenagers, and what she seems to regard as a generalized male oppression of most Aboriginal women.

What readers don't ever learn (and this point is important, bearing in mind the southern white audience that the book primarily addresses) is the ways that Aboriginal women – all over Australia – are struggling to define and provide their own responses to these questions, and the role of Aboriginal men in such responses also. Jordan seems surprisingly unaware of the extent to which, including in academic writings by Indigenous and non-Indigenous women (eg the 'Bell-Huggins' debate of the 1990s), the question of speaking positions and violence towards women has been interrogated. Similarly, the ways in which Balanda at Maningrida drink their illicit but covertly allowed spirits and wine also brought by the Darwin barge, are presented as problematic for the hypocrisy that surrounds their being allowed, but Balanda consumption of 'grog' at Maningrida is represented as benign, further emphasizing Jordan's focus on 'problem drinking' by Aborigines, which is puzzlingly generalized, given her passing rejection of the stereotype of the 'drunken no-hoper Aborigine' later in the book (146).

As a young single white woman, Jordan is literally 'out of place' in both Balanda and Indigenous circles, and this opens the way for a quite extended discussion of the sexually threatening Aboriginal male, with her account of her own very frightening experience of being harassed by a young man who repeatedly requested sex with her (118ff). Jordan's initial encounter with this young man arose immediately following a discussion with one of her Balanda friends, Alice, about two particular Aboriginal men, one of whom had been jailed for sexual assault of his daughter, the other for killing his wife. In terms of literary style, this conversation effectively serves as a device to set up Jordan's extended account of his threat and her fear. The unevenness of this book was evident again in her account of this episode – on the one hand she writes of how she was afraid of every young Aboriginal man she saw (as they all looked like this man, Rodney), but at the same time she was 'ashamed of this feeling, thinking that I was being racist' (123). For a while Jordan questioned whether she would return to Maningrida from a trip to Melbourne that coincided with this period; she did return, but her fear of all young Aboriginal men and her concern about what this revealed about her racism remained unresolved in the book. As Jordan's father also died during the time she was being threatened by nightly visits from this Aboriginal man, readers learnt of her father's violence and the fear with which she and her family had lived before her parents separated, but his violence was represented as individual, whereas the Aboriginal man's was linked to the wider problem of community-based violence.

On her fourth day in Maningrida, Jordan was taken by some Balanda friends to see the dancing for a ceremony to which they had been invited, and was 'in awe watching this' and trying to work out what it was about (30). During one of the breaks in the dancing, she also has her first experience of 'bush tucker' (kangaroo tails, probably bought at the local store, she was informed, which seemed somewhat

to diminish the pleasure of this). She observed the Aboriginal ‘kids, in bright American basketball singlets, run to drink from their bottles of Coke and chatter amongst themselves in a language I couldn’t understand. It struck me as the ultimate postmodern scene: an Aboriginal kid with a kangaroo tail in one hand and a bottle of Coke in the other’ (31), and she was excited to be surrounded by children who didn’t speak English. But after a few hours her attention wavered, and she walked home. Over the following months of being disabused of and critiquing her romantic idealism and good intentions, she comes to regard such a scene as exemplifying all the ‘problems’, the coke now being a symbol of drug-addiction, and the high rates of diabetes and heart disease, leading to early death (73).

The conflicted interpretations of this ‘globalised’ scene reflect the ways in which many of Jordan’s perceptions presented in *Balanda* remain quite binary, perhaps partly because of the ways in which society at Maningrida is clearly separated along Aboriginal/Balanda lines, not because of animosity but because of ‘foreignness [in which] it was hard to find many similarities in the ways we lived’ (53). Towards the end of the book she wrote of how the year at Maningrida had changed her thinking about Aboriginal people, during which they effectively became human ‘rather than stereotypes of the spiritual’ (186), and that she was leaving the place at which, paradoxically, she ‘now felt at home’ (200) because she had got better at living there. The stories she would tell, she was aware, would arise from her confusion, and she was unable to find good endings for them, ‘instead they unraveled in [her] hands’ (213). This was not such a bad note on which to end, given the extent to which it suggests that Jordan’s thinking about the meanings that might be derived from her time in Maningrida will be ongoing, and may over time untangle.

Liz Reed teaches at the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University.

Queensland Women's Struggle for the Vote

Heather Grant, *Great Queensland Women: Celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote in Queensland* [Brisbane], Qld.: Office for Women, Dept. of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation, 2005;

John McCulloch, *The Suffragists: 100 Years of Women's Suffrage in Queensland* (Central Queensland University Press), 2005

Reviewed by Deborah Jordan

This year Queensland celebrates its centenary of women's suffrage. Over a hundred years ago, Leontine Cooper pleaded 'Just give us a chance' to show you what the contribution of women will be in a hundred years time'. She was spokesperson for the autonomous women's movement in Brisbane and president of the Women's Franchise League. We need to be able to ask 'What have women achieved in



Queensland in the last hundred years?' 'How did women get the vote?' 'How has the feminine been constructed in Queensland with its ensuing rights, responsibilities and labour? The governor of Queensland, Quentin Bryce, honours the task of acknowledging and celebrating women's achievements, and helping to improve the quality of their lives, and calls on us all to understand and contribute to the knowledge of the place of women in

Queensland.1

'Recorded Queensland history had focused almost exclusively on the actions of men with fairly scant regard for the contributions of women, particularly prior to women's enfranchisement in 1905', John McCulloch finds. Queensland's women are poorly researched, accounted for and written about. While there are some brilliant theses on selected areas, there have been few readily accessible books or even articles. Very few research tools are available in the main research repositories, such as guides to the holdings on women! Gail Reekie (ed) *On the Edge: Women's experiences of Queensland* is still the most comprehensive work although published over ten years ago. Yet on the other hand, just below the academic scanner perhaps, fascinating work and source materials have been the focus of the Queensland Women's Historical Association which has been operating for several decades. Self published autobiographies by women in 'pioneering situations' such as Jane Bardsley's are numerous. Many of these accounts record openly the presence and involvement of Aboriginal women as significant in their lives; in addition, and not only by white women, there are autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, local histories, articles, newspapers, government reports, collections and unpublished materials from government archives as well as private diaries and letters.

When there is no strong institutional setting, feminist scholars and historians have often prepared commemorative volumes for the sesqui and centennial histories of their states. Always the best are those drawing on the widest range of contributors and expertise. One thinks of the potted biographies of *Double Time*, published by Penguin for Victoria's sesqui-centenary by a large number of historians and writers; or the *Centenary Gift Book of Victoria* (1934), a collection of mostly organisational histories with pieces by women writing about their own experiences in the suffrage movement, the trade union movement and more (and its separate project of recording pioneering women for the archives). *Standing in the Sunshine: A History of New Zealand Women Since They Won the Vote* - over three hundred pages richly illustrated with photographs, advertisements, art and cartoons - follows a thematic outline focusing on a wide range of women's activities and is an exciting collation about an extremely diverse range of women, contributed by a wide range of people. It's a huge coffee table book to dip into for all kinds of insights, wisdom and information. While there was a principal author, the editorial committee consisted of eight women; there were five major researchers, five additional researchers, and thirty-five contributing authors.

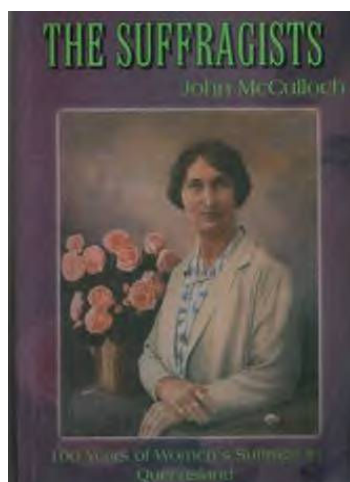
Queensland 2005 has brought forth some new and original research on women (primarily in the two special focus issues of Hecate) to begin to work the field and open up the past so that we do not have to repeat it. The Office of Women commissioned Heather Grant to produce *Great Queensland Women: Celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote in Queensland* and John McCulloch's *Suffragists to Legislators* has been launched in two volumes.

Grant's *Great Queensland Women* is a remarkable achievement with biographical portraits of twenty-one vivacious women - all highly readable and provocative, all based on some original and new research, even oral histories - and a brief overview of the fight for gaining the vote. Grant divides these women into 'First-wave activists' and 'Second-wave activists' with fourteen 'Early Achievers' - all names that every Queensland schoolgirl could know but is very unlikely to. The collection warrants a wide distribution and should be a welcome resource for secondary school students and teachers, for both postgraduate and undergraduate students - and, indeed, for any readers interested in Queensland's past and women's history.

Emma Miller, the 'mother of Labour'; May Jordan McConnel, trade unionist and educationalist; Margaret Ogg, long term NGO and women's activist - aspects of their lives come alive in the dance of Grant's pen. Often the focus of the vignette relates specifically to their place as women - Dorothy Hill the successful geologist and academic (and first woman professor) is quoted on the peaceful revolution in women's lives. Una Prentice, Queensland's first law school graduate worked for a while as a legal officer and, because there was no pay scale for women lawyers, was paid by the Crown Solicitors Office in the capacity of a typist - and on the lowest scale. The variety of stories of courage and creativity affirm women as agents of their own destinies - of Elizabeth Kenny's remarkable insights as a bush nurse and pioneering physical therapies, despite the prejudice of the medical profession. Two Murri women are included - the poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Celia Smith, the Indigenous rights activist who, when she won spectacularly at a card game, immediately used the funds to post bail for a friend whose girlfriend had died. She paid for the funeral as well. Like Oodgeroo Noonuccal she was active in the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and its federal counterpart.

What of the conception and structure of the book? The notion of 'great' women smacks of the 'great men' theory of history, you might think, but this is not the approach the book has taken. The range of women selected here is good, for we have not only the noble Greek first lady but also single mothers and working-class battlers. The work on May Jordan McConnel, union organizer and suffrage activist is delightful - all new. Few of these women appear in other places, such as the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. They are presented as gaily-coloured pieces of a rich patchwork quilt, each of interest in their own right, each of relevance to the whole - of countless stories as many as the women of Queensland. Biographies they are but not of the constrained status seeking portraits of the *A Biographical Record Of Queensland Women a Representation Of Every Sphere* produced in 1938 of the elite women of Queensland. In Grant's collation, the interconnections between the women begin to flow - we are alerted to the importance of Irene Longman, the first woman member of parliament in the section on the first two police women. Errors have crept in this grand sweep of history inevitable in such a work based on so much primary research. Leontine Cooper is better portrayed as an advocate for an autonomous women's organization, rather than a property holder, for instance, even though maligned as this by William Lane.

The book as a whole is very well illustrated - with a good selection of mostly original photographs not widely available. At the end of each, as a conclusion, in a box in the text, is an update on how the issue addressed by the woman is faring today. Lillian Cooper's entry, is followed by information about how many women now work as medical practitioners. Some of these are better than others, but overall, as a creative strategy to enliven debate and encourage the reader to speculate, these work very well. The reader is left to make their own connections. We can wonder about the seemingly extra deep divides between women in Queensland, employers' wives and working women, pro and anti militarists, the cleavages of race, ethnicity and even age and the role of white women in the sub Tropical colonization project. Whiteness was fundamental to the very core of the Country Women's Association, for instance, yet the piece on its founding president, Ruth Fairfax, suggests how complex and widespread was the kind of work they undertook. The book leaves us with a challenge from Merle Thornton about the importance of imagination in understanding other women; imagination to see the best way to enable women to flourish. Grant's book develops the historical imagination and our understanding of other ways. It is shortsighted that the Office of Women have decided not to offer the book for sale and it is to be only available through libraries.



McCulloch's book *The Suffragists 100 Years of Women's Suffrage in Queensland* is altogether different - a glorious source of information and exposition on all aspects of the struggle for vote in context of parliamentary change and initiative, and will be readily available. McCulloch has done the hard work for us - and his tables are useful and instructive. The book opens with an account of the way the Legislative Council voted for the Electoral Franchise Bill in 1904; chapter one is on the Queensland's suffragists' struggle for the vote, with a clear outline of relevant acts relating to suffrage with the changing categories for qualification for Queenslanders since its separation from New South Wales. The use of numerous illustrations, cartoons, black and white line drawings (from the Worker, the Boomerang and so on) reveal an enviable

capacity to make what might at first seem dry as dust, fascinating. He traces all the failed legislative

attempts to bring in universal suffrage from both white men and women with an excellent discussion of such bills as 'The Baby Bill'. He has sections on 'Women's Activism', 'Suffrage Organisations' and 'The Struggle for Votes for Women'. In 'The Suffrage Debates' he quotes from the parliamentary debates, sometimes torrid, mostly laughable but often weird and misogynist, in what were then two houses of parliament.

Chapter two 'Through a Glass (Ceiling) Darkly' explores parliamentary reform involving gender, the importance of gender balance and strategies different groups, such as Emily's List, have and are using. Chapter three is a fascinating outline of the different political parties, and not only the Liberal and Labor Parties, but also the Greens and the Democrats, and their policies, successes and failures in promoting gender equity to conclude with a discussion on the concept of discussion. Of course there are points we might want to dispute. The widespread categorization of women suffragists as from the upper and middle classes is largely a legacy from the past.

Nowadays we might acknowledge that they were mostly NGOs, women prepared to make huge sacrifices of money and time to political involvement, often with no masculine breadwinner, often living on a shoestring, often after a lifetime of paid work. It is more likely the suffragists could and did participate spasmodically - before or after their child-bearing years! Emma Miller is the classic example - her children had grown up and her years as a sweated tailoress were nearly over in the years of her leadership.

John McCulloch is well positioned to research and reflect of the role of women in parliament and the role of gender which he does with wonderful wit and skill, because of his years as parliamentary librarian. *The Suffragists* is the first volume of a two volume series; the second volume made up of biographies of all the women in Queensland who have been members of parliament - based on extensive oral interviews. It builds on his earlier important book on Queensland women in parliament. These are essential reference books for all interested in Queensland women's history.

Deborah Jordan is a Research Fellow in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History, and working with Carole Ferrier and Maryanne Dever on the letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer. She has also recently, with Carole Ferrier, published a brochure for a walking tour of inner Brisbane suffrage sites.


The Townsville Pool and the Tulip Were the Best Bits

Helen Reddy, *The Woman I Am: Memoir*. Sydney: Harper Collins, 2005.

Reviewed by Melissa Giles

I remember lying in bed with the phrase, 'I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman' going over inside my head. I wasn't even too sure what invincible meant, so I decided the phrase must be inspiration from above.

However they came to her, these first empowering words to Reddy's optimistic song, 'I am Woman', were composed in a spirit of protest against the negative portrayal of women in popular music. 'I searched for lyrics that reflected the pride I felt in being female and descended from so many strong women. Where were the songs that celebrated that?' she asked herself. Reddy decided she would write one. Despite strong anti-feminist sentiment and initial opposition from radio stations, the song eventually went to number one in the US, won Reddy a Grammy award and was used as the theme for International Women's Year in 1975.



As the daughter of showbiz parents, Reddy's life as an entertainer might have seemed inevitable. But it was an immense struggle for her to realise that dream and achieve internationally in so many arenas. She did everything from acting on film, to having her own television program, recording albums as a singer and performing in theatre. Reddy paid a high price emotionally, physically and financially for following the life she wanted to live, which led her to move to the United States in 1966. However, she was rewarded in many ways, one of which, Reddy says, was an honour 'which surpassed anything else': having a tulip flower named after her in Holland in 1975.

Reddy's memoir intersects on several levels with Dawn Fraser's life and autobiography, *Dawn: One Hell of a Life* (2001). In addition to mentioning the thrill she got from swimming in the Townsville pool as a teenager, because she was doing laps where Dawn Fraser had swum, Reddy draws a link between sports people and musicians. Both are glorified by the public because they are the only professions where people can 'go to work in order to play'. Fraser and Reddy were not simply occupied with homework and school friends in their youth, they worked hard and 'performed' in the public world.

Their fame also led to insensitive treatment by journalists and other people in the media. Like Fraser, Reddy uses her book to highlight some examples of this. When Reddy was in the middle of a marital break up, an article in *People* magazine, which was supposed to be about her new album release, turned into a cover story on 'Hollywood's Dirtiest Divorce'. Around the same time, Reddy says the talent coordinator of *Good Morning America!* told her there was no point coming on the show if she wouldn't talk about her divorce (which would have meant being in contempt of court) because viewers were only interested in her personal life, not her music.

Both women's books are written in a style that is readily accessible to most readers. Fraser was born in Sydney in 1937 and Reddy in Melbourne in 1941, so their books shed light on similar periods of social history, particularly with reference to restrictions placed on women as they were growing up in Australia. Both had their books published when they were in their early 60s and old enough to look back on the most well known parts of their lives with more clarity.

In retelling her life story, Reddy makes much of her achievements, but does not overlook her many failures and emotionally painful times. She believes life experience is the 'only true wealth', so accepts that everything is valuable. She writes honestly about her three terrible marriages, not leaving out her personal responsibility for the problems in these relationships. Despite divulging personal details about them, Reddy does her best to conceal the names of her husbands by calling them Number One, Two and Three. Overall, she succeeds in portraying herself as a woman with a rich and diverse set of experiences, philosophies, ambitions and achievements.

Reddy also discusses the lives of several other wonderful women in her memoir. One I found particularly interesting was Australian journalist in New York, Lillian Roxon (related to Shadow Attorney-General, Nicola Roxon) whom Reddy befriended when she moved to the US. In the 1960s, as a 'woman journalist' she was relegated to writing about 'women's issues' such as fashion and beauty, despite her talents and interests. Another was Reddy's Aunt Nell (also called Helen Reddy) who, as a world-travelling spinster-by-choice, is an inspiring example of a woman who led a fulfilling life outside the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood.

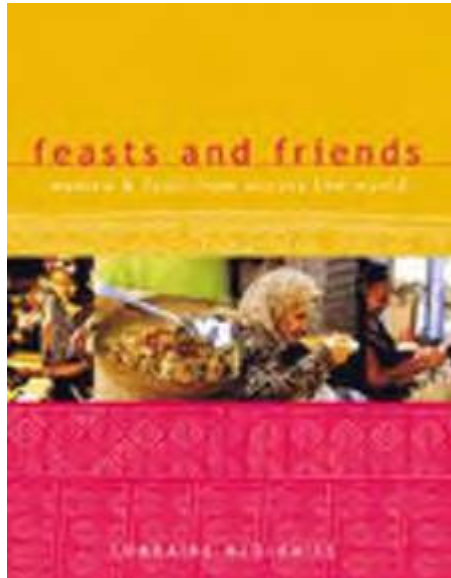
The book ends on an optimistic note: Reddy says her 'autumn years' are the best so far. After re-assessing her life and achievements, she shifted her focus from the entertainment world. She followed her calling to study clinical hypnotherapy and to help others through this practice. Reddy discusses life as an older woman who is single and while, not immune to being lonely, regularly takes herself on dates and shows herself a good time. In the final two pages, Reddy recalls one night she was in a restaurant dining on her own and noticed the people at the other tables. At two of the tables were unhappy-looking couples, but at the third, two women older than herself were enjoying themselves, laughing and talking together. She says: 'I decided I wanted to be one of them when I grew up.'

Melissa Giles is a freelance writer and journalist from Brisbane. She currently writes art reviews for Scene Magazine and Eleven Magazine.

Dining In

Lorraine McGinniss *Feasts and Friends: Women and Food from Across the World*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Debra Dudek



Feasts and Friends celebrates both the food and the spirit of nine women from Iran, Sudan, El Salvador, Vietnam, Iraq, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Brazil, who have recently arrived in Australia. What began, and still continues, as weekly Monday gatherings to share recipes and ideas has become a recipe book, a testament to the lives of these women, and a celebration of cooking as a connection to family and as a way of building community amongst new friends.

The book is divided into eight sections - visually marked by differently coloured pages, which makes for a cheerful-looking book - with each section dedicated to the women - Farangeez, Bakhita, Ines, Loan, Samira, Hanan, Esther, Najiba, and Elda - and their home countries. Every section begins with a three to seven page narrative, which provides background into the circumstances that led to the women leaving their home countries to come to Australia and insight into a history of the

country and its cuisine. These stories are one of the details of the book that I found the most interesting, not the least because of the details of historical colonisation and recent upheavals that demonstrate the reasons why people are forced to leave their homes. Additionally, these stories provide background which explains why certain foods, such as cassava, or manioc as it is called in Brazil, are much-used foods in countries far away from each other. Embedded in these stories are also important little-known facts about certain foods, which help to enhance the reader's understanding of why certain ingredients are so cherished. For example, in Farangeez's section about her Persian, now Iranian, culture, I learned about how saffron is grown and harvested and about why it is so prized: 'It is made from the golden stigmas of blue crocus flowers, which must be harvested at dawn on the morning they open in order to prevent damage from the elements. Hand-picking is the only method possible, and . . . over 200,000 flowers must be gathered to produce a kilogram of saffron . . .' (15). The book blossoms with these details, which stand alone as fascinating information but which also fruitfully supplement the recipes that follow.

This book celebrates fresh ingredients and slow food. I sense pride and admiration when I hear of cooking a soup that takes 'the best part of two days' ('Ines' 52). For me, a woman who used to live primarily by the rule that I would not spend a longer time cooking than eating, this dedication to food preparation was unimaginable. Nonetheless, I cast aside my fears of failure and began imagining myself cooking for one day. I set myself the task of cooking two dishes from the book and proceeded to read through the recipes to try to find one day of meals. This was no easy task. Both my partner and I are vegetarians, and my partner is allergic to large amounts of egg, so these restrictions limited my choices substantially. I bookmarked three options: Ines' papusas and empanadas, and Elda's formaggio al'uova. I quickly eliminated the papusas after reading in the introductory narrative that the papusas take much of the day to prepare and that when she began making them for the Monday group,

everyone rolled up their sleeves and proceeded to assist, naturally forming a production line of neatly finished patties ready for the final cooking. Many of the women said this was so familiar to them and reminiscent of the lives they had left behind. The communal nature of preparing food and the time it takes give women a chance to gossip, share jokes and deepen relationships. (50)

Given that my partner was out of the house, that my cat and dog do not have opposable thumbs, and that, as a person newly-arrived to Australia, I have few women friends with whom to share the task, I decided against the papusas, although I immediately resolved to find an El Salvadorian restaurant because the 'grainy texture and savoury crustiness combined with the gooey cheesy filling' (50) sounds delectable.

My decision now made, I set about preparing the empanadas, which, according to the brief commentary that introduces the recipe, Ines makes every morning for one of her daughters. Empanadas are custard-filled banana fritters, and my first fear was that I would not be able to make custard that was not full of lumps. Foolish me. As it turned out, my first obstacle was finding two plates that had flat bottoms, which I could use to flatten the boiled and mashed bananas. All our plates have ridged bottoms, so, after much searching, I finally found two serving platters that would do the trick. The recipe advises that I should cover one of the flat surfaces with plastic, place a dollop of banana mix (bananas and cornflour) on the plastic, cover with another piece of plastic, and then 'Press the two plates together to form a very thin patty.' I was warned that cling film does not work and that Ines uses squares cut from plastic bags. I cut up one of my shopping bags and followed Ines's instructions. Gooey plastic mess. I tried two other plastics. More gooey plastic mess. I refrigerated the banana mix for a longer period of time. Colder gooey plastic mess. I froze the banana mix for a few minutes. Frozen gooey plastic mess. Now, I am not the most patient person in the world, and I felt a low scream building. Dog and cat scurried under respective beds. Partner came home, offered a few suggestions, was frozen by my glare along with the banana mix, and, when unthawed, proceeded to run outside. My partner not the banana mix, that is. Finally, I ended up adding more flour to the mix, flouring my hands, and flouring the plastic sheets to prevent interminable gooey plastic mess. My partner couldn't wait for the empanadas to be sprinkled with icing sugar before eating them and immediately declared them 'yummy.' (It is best to wait a few moments after they emerge from the oil, to prevent the roof of one's mouth from been scalded by hot custardy goodness. Yes, my custard was a success!).

Despite all my frustrations, however, I experienced a satisfaction that I was spending time cooking food, which would bring pleasure to me and my partner and which connected me to my own family, especially to my mother, grandmother, and sister, who live in Canada and France. While folding the custard-filled banana patty into a dumpling, I remembered the many times that I sat in my grandmother's kitchen making perogies for Ukrainian Christmas Eve dinner. The pinching action to close the empanada is the same action I used to perform to close the perogy, and I could hear my grandmother warning me that I need to be sure to close all sides to prevent the cheese and potato filling from leaking out during the boiling process. Likely, Ines' empanadas are not supposed to resemble perogies (in the picture, they are more square than my half-moon-shaped fritters), but this connection across cultures through food preparation is an occurrence that peppers the experiences of the Monday group as well:

they are frequently amazed and delighted when they discover that the rules for thickening, thinning, reducing and fixing are the same for a woman who has lived in a humble shack in rural Afghanistan and a woman living in a hut in Africa. There's a similar reaction when they see people from different backgrounds using vegetables in a variety of ways, or even in exactly

the same way, despite a total absence of communication between cultures that may be from opposite corners of the world. (7)

After recovering from my gooey plastic mess experience, buoyed by the fact that the empanadas tasted delicious and that the process made me remember fond moments shared with my matrilineal family, I began making Elda's formaggio al'uova, which also required me to make her tomato sauce. The beautiful simplicity of the tomato sauce and the seeming simplicity of the formaggio al'uova quickly turned pear-shaped. The four cups of breadcrumbs combined with one and a half cups of Romano cheese and two eggs did not stick together enough to enable me to 'form the mixture into small egg shapes.' I ended up adding an additional three eggs (hoping that my partner would not have an allergic reaction), and even then, the mixture did not easily hold. The recipe instructed me to 'place the "eggs" in the sauce and cook for 20 minutes.' I did as I was told, but there did not seem to be enough sauce to accommodate the 'eggs.' I used not even half the breadcrumb mixture, and I decided to cover the 'eggs' with another can of diced tomatoes and more water. I proceeded to let the sauce reduce, which resulted in a dish that resembled a cheesy tomato casserole. I have no idea what the dish is supposed to look or taste like, but I am quite certain that my version was an abomination. Regardless, I enjoyed the flavour and texture of the meal and preferred it even more the next day.

These reports of my cooking adventures neither reveal the extent to which I enjoyed engaging with *Feasts and Friends* nor reflect the practical usefulness of the recipes. I fear my cooking adventures primarily reveal that I am an impatient woman who, instead of learning to cook from my very-talented mother, spent hours with my nose in a book or my hands on a volleyball; as a result, I lack the comfort and experience with food that might be cultivated by years of watching and experimenting, years that the women in *Feasts and Friends* recall fondly. Despite my lack of cooking success, I enjoyed the book immensely because I learned a lot about the foods and the histories, both individual and communal, of nine women across eight countries. It is impossible not to admire their strength, determination, and dedication to their families and to their futures. I also learnt to respect the time and energy put into preparing a meal that will sustain and give pleasure to family and friends (and strangers!). After trying to prepare only two of these meals, meals which Ines and Elda make on a regular basis, I utterly appreciated that cooking involves more than following a recipe; it takes a lifetime—and maybe generations—to evolve into a gift given, learned, and passed on. This book is a recipe collection for people who are dedicated to cooking and who enjoy the process of taking the time to find and prepare fresh, slow food, but this book is also for anyone who is interested in learning about connections between food and culture from nine incredible women.

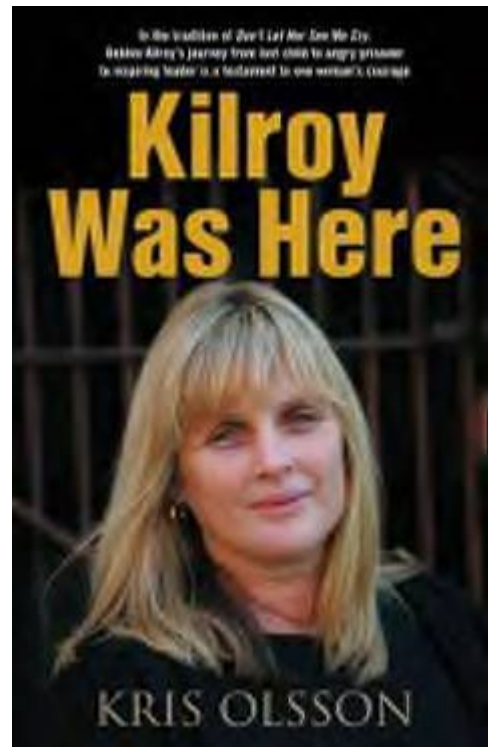
Debra Dudek holds a PhD in literature, specialising in Women's literature and Canadian literature, which she received from the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. She arrived in Australia in August 2003 in order to take up a grant awarded by the International Council for Canadian Studies to teach a comparative Canadian-Australian literature course at the University of Wollongong. Currently, she is employed as a Research Fellow at Deakin University working on a project that focuses on multiculturalism and Children's Literature.

Inside the Life of the Founder of Sisters Inside

Kris Olsson. *Kilroy Was Here*. Sydney: Bantam, 2005.

Reviewed by Evelyn Hartogh

Debbie Kilroy's life, as told by journalist Kris Olsson, follows the archetypal heroic journey. After a reckless youth, filled with alcoholism and domestic violence, Debbie was imprisoned on drugs charges. While in prison she began doing community work helping street kids, this led to her studying social work and founding the groundbreaking advocacy and prisoner support group Sisters Inside. From the very start Sisters Inside involved women prisoners in the decision-making and direction of the organization, letting them decide the services they wanted, rather than having anything imposed upon them. Debbie was awarded an Order of Australia and the Human Rights medal for her work for Sisters Inside, yet is not willing to rest on her laurels. Debbie now feels that while improving the system is practical, her ideal is to abolish prisons entirely. The main message of this book is that the current penal system does not work to rehabilitate offenders, but only further traumatises them and alienates them from society by forcing them to adjust to living in an institution. Prisoners often re-offend simply to return to the more familiar surroundings of prison because functioning in the outside world is utterly overwhelming and confusing. Debbie's work with Sisters Inside includes supporting women's re-entry to society, with the awareness that recidivism is all too common.



However, following the April 2005 publication of *Kilroy Was Here*, Debbie has personally been banned from all Queensland prisons. She emailed me to outline the extent of the limitations placed on Sisters Inside:

Sisters Inside's management committee is still not allowed to meet. From the 11 services Sisters Inside provides to women only 4 are permitted in the prison. Women cannot voluntarily access our services anymore. They have to fill in a referral form and it has to be given to welfare staff in the prison and then to the general manager for her approval. So not all women are approved to access our services.

Debbie Kilroy

Thursday 13 October 2005

During the 1990s, using a series of conferences and media campaigns Debbie and Sisters Inside brought to public attention the human rights violations suffered by women in prison. Debbie seeks to raise awareness that many of the current practices in prison are akin to torture and would be seen as socially unacceptable by any reasonable person. One particular campaign has been the exposure of the humiliation and trauma inherent in the practise of strip-searching. The majority of female prisoners are survivors of sexual and physical abuse and the way strip searches are conducted can act as a trigger to reliving such abuses.

Kris Olsson has composed *Kilroy Was Here* in a chronological fashion, blending narrative and long and short comments from Debbie, her friends and family. She opens the book at a turning point in Debbie Kilroy's life, the day at Boggo Road when Storm Brooke murdered her friend, and fellow prisoner, Debbie Dick. Debbie Kilroy was also stabbed that day but fought off Storm and raised the alarm. At first all Debbie could think about was revenge but, as Olsson documents, when the narrative returns to that crucial event, Debbie was moved by Storm's remorse. She had come to a greater understanding of the circumstances that led up to the murder, and these epiphanies, among others, triggered the formation of Sisters Inside.

The story is told in past tense, as a series of recollections often tinged with ominous hints of things that will happen next. Early events are initially presented as almost random incidents, but then they are slowly given more form and meaning as Debbie herself begins to gain a greater understanding and control over her own life. The narrative, while essentially chronological, is in a constant process of anticipating the future, recalling the past and re-interpreting the present. Alongside the chronological narrative is the story of how Debbie became more self-aware through counselling.

When Debbie speaks about the issues faced by women in prison she does so from the position of a woman who has been there and knows what it is like. Her work is direct action and her attitude of talking to every person in the same way, no matter what their social status, is coupled with the importance she places on the complete participation of those she seeks to help. Her past experiences of institutions, and the brutal and often torturous punishment she underwent, taught her that many 'do-gooders', as she often called them, want to control the helpless rather than encourage them to take control of their lives. For Debbie, much of what she went through in her younger life was about having things done to her, and finding all her attempts at personal freedom crushed. The first identity she embraced was that of a 'bad' girl, an 'an outlaw, as someone who stood apart' (5).

In later analysis Debbie discovered the seeds of her lack of trust in authority figures, especially of her parents and anyone who claimed to love her. Debbie was born with torticollis or 'wry neck', which meant she was unable to move her neck, a 'condition [that] left untreated, can cause permanent paralysis of the neck and facial muscles, and almost certain disfigurement' (6). After surgery Debbie's parents were required to forcefully knead the muscles in her neck and, even though Debbie was only a toddler, she vividly recalls the extreme pain and her parents telling her they loved her as they hurt her. Debbie learnt that even if someone said they loved you they could still hurt you, which led to the notion that love itself, 'meant pain ... something was telling me not to trust anyone' (6). Of course these realisations only occurred to Debbie many years later, after being locked up due to being a wayward teenager, having a series of violent relationships, and eventually being imprisoned as an adult.

When Debbie started high school her parents were confused at what it was that made their daughter into such an uncontrollable wild child who disrupted classes, wagged school, and took off to play pool in the Valley with her mates. By year nine Debbie was disappearing for days on end, making her parents frantic with worry. Eventually they handed her over to the care of the state. Her time at Wilson Youth Hostel was, 'one massive blur of never ending horror' (20) and instead of 'reforming' or 'curing' her, the experience only confirmed her hatred of compliance, distrust of authority, and disgust at institutions. Years later when she was admitted to Boggo Road she would meet up with many women she had met at the days at Wilson who, like her, had been taught they were 'bad' girls by the very institution which was supposedly meant to make them be 'good'.

The girls at Wilson were frequently sedated and assumed to be 'sluts' and criminals no matter why they were there. Young impressionable girls were faced with living up to the tough dangerous persona that was thrust on them, they were not given a choice, they were simply told they were bad, and so they reflected back what they were told. For Debbie things got even worse when her father died and the matron heartlessly blamed Debbie's misbehaviour on his heart attack by telling her, 'you've driven him to an early grave' (27). These words had a huge impact on Debbie and right up until she was in her thirties she held fast to the belief that she had killed her father and needed to be punished, 'and the way you get punishment is to be really bad, to become violent' (27).

Debbie's violence was often in reaction to the violence of the state, 'it became tit-for-tat. If they'd just backed off and let me alone ... but they just had to keep upping it, because they've got to make out they're smarter' (35). She completely believed herself to be, 'a big bad-arsed criminal' (39) and spent her time doing break and enters and stealing money. She soon found herself in a repetitive cycle of being treated with violence by the police, being locked up in the watch house over and over, and being returned to Wilson again and again.

At sixteen she fell pregnant to a violent partner and her mother and grandmother took over and arranged an abortion. After the abortion Debbie decided she would never let someone else take control of her life like that again and, months later, when she fell pregnant again, 'she was determined that no one would interfere' (41). At the hospital when she gave birth, 'no one was gentle with me because I was a child; in fact they treated me really badly ... it was like, you're only seventeen, how dare you?' (44). The relationship ended when her partner shoved around Debbie's daughter. Years later Debbie realised, 'that was a pattern for me ... you can belt the hell out of me because I killed Dad, but touch my kid and you're out' (47).

Debbie's next relationship, with the president of the Rebels' motorcycle club, began peacefully but soon became more violent whenever they were drinking. Her partner's infidelities destroyed Debbie's trust and ended the relationship. She remained angry and suspicious when she began seeing another biker, this time from the Uhlan motorcycle club, a man whom she later married, the famous Indigenous footballer 'Smokin' Joe Kilroy.

Like Debbie, Joe had also been institutionalised as a child. His mother had died when he was two years old and his father, 'declared himself unable to care for the motherless children' (57). His mother's family wanted to take care of the children but at time the state was forcibly removing Aboriginal children, 'under the policy of assimilation' (57). Joe was placed at the Nudgee orphanage and then, when he was twelve, since there was nowhere else for him to go, he was sent to Boystown, 'even though he's shown no signs of waywardness' (59). He was shocked at, 'the brutality of floggings ... [and] despised Boystown' (59). At fifteen, once he was legally able, he left and looked for work but all the employers wondered, 'what were you in Boystown for?' (59) and none of them would give him a job. Joe went back to school but found his true calling in football, being named 'the world's best full back in an international football magazine in 1983' (60).

Debbie had just bought her first house and was working as an aerobics instructor and, 'wasn't about to trade her hard-won independence and hard-drinking lifestyle for any bloke, even a handsome and charismatic footballer' (61). She was still going out, getting drunk, selling LSD, and getting into fights, 'I was never injured though. I had a lot of energy, a lot of don't-fuck-with-me energy and a lot of personal power with going out with the Rebels and the Uhlans. There's a lot of status in those worlds' (64).

When Debbie went to hospital to give birth to their son, things were very different to when she was seventeen and single, 'the nurses were much nicer ... I was older, and I was married to Joe Kilroy, after all' (69). The marriage set into a pattern of quiet weekdays and wild biker parties on the weekends yet Debbie recalls it wasn't like living two different lives but it was just 'normal' to, 'party hard, run amok, have a blue, come home to the kids, have a birthday party, do the shopping, cook the meals' (74). Joe and Debbie frequently got into violent fights and Debbie's daughter recalls that, 'she couldn't beat him physically, but she beat him verbally every time' (75). As a celebrity footballer Joe attracted the attention of scores of groupies. Whenever he was away for extended periods Debbie began to fear he was being unfaithful like her last partner and in retaliation she would, 'provoke Joe emotionally and physically [and] the ensuing violence affirmed and validated her own suspicions and actions and underlined her deeply buried belief in her own wickedness' (77).

Years later when Debbie examined her life she took responsibility for her part in the violence of her relationships. Debbie felt that her lack of trust in people made her push them to the limit until they either ran or attacked her. She believed that she had instigated the violence so she could feel in control of it. The institutionalisation that both of them had endured taught them that the only way to survive was to protect 'your own corner ... and the only way to do that was to destroy the aggressor' (78). On top of the violence they inflicted on one another, Joe was becoming a heavy marijuana smoker and, like most of the crowd who were pot smokers, he sold some here and there to afford his 'smoko'. Unknown to the Kilroys their pot dealer was heavily involved with the trafficking of heroin and was being protected by the infamously corrupt police of 1980s Queensland. The 1987-9 Fitzgerald Inquiry would expose and bring down many of those involved in corruption, and many small time drug dealers like the Kilroys would be hung out to dry. Debbie insists that they only ever sold hash and pot, never heroin, even though they were continually pressured to do so. Unknown to Debbie, many of the new faces who kept coming around and asking for heroin were either undercover cops or drug dealers turned informants.

Debbie 'began to feel hooked by the buoyant feeling of having money' (83). While Joe was becoming more and more famous, she was feeling under more and more stress to look after their home and business while Joe went off with the Uhlans or the Broncos. She was still drinking heavily and felt alienated from Joe's celebrity world, and it was this insecurity that the undercover police played upon to encourage her to score heroin for them. She went along for the ride for a couple of 'smack' deals but felt uncomfortable.

The domestic violence between Joe and Debbie peaked during one fight when Debbie's finger was torn off. The trauma pushed her into even more heavy drinking and wild behaviour, and she was 'sick of hearing how Joe's so wonderful, Debbie's out of control, she's a lunatic, look at what she's done now got her finger ripped off, poor Joe' (89). The double standard of how the two of them were perceived would continue after their arrest when Debbie was painted as the evil woman who had led Joe astray. In 1988 their house was raided and they were subsequently charged with various counts of drug supply, trafficking and possession of a dangerous drug. However, while Joe's charges only related to marijuana, Debbie faced counts of heroin dealing and her bail was 150 thousand in comparison to Joe's bail of only 10 thousand.

The media and the police harassed them for the months leading up to their trial and huge pressure was put on their marriage. The media frenzy painted the Kilroys as big time drug lord gangsters even though they had only ever been small time pot dealers. Debbie's children were mercilessly teased at school and Debbie was trying to blot it all out with alcohol. The trial became a series of betrayals as Debbie felt everyone was against her. The worst moments came in the lawyer's closing statements.

Only two pages of court transcript document defence of Debbie's character with no references from employers, coaches or friends. Meanwhile a full eleven pages were used to defend Joe including 'background information, references, and a lengthy psychologist's report' (104) and a complete demolition of Debbie's character. Joe's entire life was laid out as evidence for why he had been led astray by Debbie and 'by a pathological need to please others' (105). Debbie's anger at Joe led her to ignore every letter he sent to her at Boggo Road, and it would be many years before the two reconciled.

Debbie found the culture inside prison a familiar one, where relationships 'were negotiated on straight terms – respect, loyalty and keeping your mouth shut' (112). As a long termer with a six-year sentence and a history of juvenile delinquency, Debbie quickly 'became one of the more powerful prisoners' (112). The taunting of prison officers had no visible effect on her and she became well known as someone who would never break a confidence, a quality that in prison is 'the highest virtue' (112). She showed no fear to other 'top dog' prisoners like Tracey Wigginton, dubbed the 'Lesbian Vampire Killer' by the media. Debbie nicknamed her 'Drac' and gained her respect by turning off the television when yet another sensationalised story about the supposed 'Lesbian Vampire Killer' was on.

Debbie's time in prison was marked by an increasing desire to make the prison a place of rehabilitation rather than punishment by giving the prisoners more of a voice and, more importantly, something to do to ensure the volatile conditions that led to Debbie Dick's murder were never repeated. Prison reform was also on the agenda for Boggo Road's new general manager George Brand and director Keith Hamburger. They both realised that Debbie had emerged as the most influential woman in the prison and that, if she came on board, they would have a chance at involving all the women in 'one of the bravest experiments in prison reform ever seen in Queensland' (144). The numbers of people in prison had escalated dramatically, partly due to the so-called 'war on drugs'. Prisons were no longer the 'place of last resort for sentencing judges and magistrates' (145) but had almost become the first port of call. Brand and Hamburger allowed the women to come up with ideas of activities and courses they would like to do. They understood that these women 'had rarely, if ever, had any power or control'; they 'had not made their own decisions and felt overwhelmed when confronted by responsibility' (150). Debbie's first activity was working to raise money for street kids and she utilised her contacts in the sporting world to organise successful events that brought media attention to the cause and made sure that, 'a few more stereotypes about prisoners were demolished' (153).

Debbie completed several TAFE courses, which formed the foundation for her post-release admission to a social work course at university. While still in prison she began to conduct community work at the Centre Education Program. Centre Ed 'provided an alternative learning experience for young people, who, for various reasons, did not fit into mainstream schools' (163). Debbie went to help out one day a week and found she had a 'natural aptitude for communicating' (164) with the kids. The atmosphere in prison also improved as a truce was reached between Debbie and Storm (the woman who had murdered her friend and stabbed Debbie). After being in prison for twenty months Debbie was moved to a low security half-way house in Albion and began working at Centre Ed four days a week as well as doing voluntary aerobics teaching at the Fortitude Valley Police Youth Club. Parole and therapy soon followed and Debbie began the difficult process of re-establishing her relationships with her children. Both of her children, especially her elder daughter, were acting out many of the rebellious behaviours that Debbie had done as a young woman. Her daughter would eventually end up in detention for fraud and it would be a long time before mother and daughter rekindled a trusting relationship.

Meanwhile Debbie was reminded of how she had promised the other prisoners that once released she would return to help them ‘to make noise if it was necessary, from the outside’ (181). Debbie formed a team of social workers and prison advocates and approached Boggo Road’s general manager George Brand about the prospect of forming a support group for young women in prison. One of their first tasks was conducting a survey to ‘identify gaps in the system’ (186). It was revealed that many prisoners were illiterate, and that ‘an astonishing 89 percent of women inside had been sexually assaulted’ (186). During 1994 Sisters Inside received funding for sexual assault counselling, research into domestic violence experienced by women prisoners, and an innovative ‘Kid of Mums in Jail’ programme (191-2). However, despite the success of their programme delivery their funding was cut in 1996 by the newly elected government in Queensland. To assist in lobbying government they enlisted the 1989 - 1994 Labour family services minister Ann Warner. Warner was impressed with the group, ‘I thought it was going to be another fuzzy welfare organisation ... what I found was a hard-nosed organisation doing it tough with the most dispossessed section of the population’ (203). Funding was returned after some media exposure and Debbie’s direct approach with the relevant ministers and bureaucrats. Several more members with various skills and backgrounds were added to the group. They created vital information kits for newly released prisoners, and ‘Sisters entered a busy and volatile period in their development ... [with] more staff, and a move to bigger premises in Gloucester Street, West End’ (207).

Debbie also worked voluntarily with the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) and was ‘its chair between 1997 and 2003 and proceeded to flip the organization “on its head”’ (209). In the middle of that, in 1999 she was appointed director of Sisters Inside and the organization became incorporated and the members inside prison became known as ‘the steering committee, a legal entity of the management committee’ (210). In 2000 Debbie travelled to Adelaide for the ‘Women in Corrections’ conference, organised by the Australian Institute of Criminology. At the conference, Debbie and her colleagues ‘would stage an audacious and controversial protest’ (231). To demonstrate the traumatic and humiliating process of strip searches three women would play the ‘prison officer’ and the ‘prisoners’ and perform a strip search in front of the delegates. With the media present they were assured an even wider audience. They also wanted people to be aware that many women would avoid having contact with their family at visiting time because they wanted to avoid the painful process of the strip search.

During the next couple of years, Sisters Inside began to make international links and in 2001 they planned their first conference. Angela Davis, a former Black Panther who had been in prison and was now a celebrity academic, was invited to be the keynote speaker (Davis also contributes the foreword to *Kilroy Was Here*). Another significant event that year was Sisters Inside borrowing money to purchase permanent premises in Victoria Street, West End. For the incarcerated members of the steering committee, ‘the purchase of the house was not only financially advantageous, but enormously symbolic’ (243). The women felt greatly reassured because, ‘no one can boot you out of what you own’ (243).

Sisters Inside and Debbie herself continue intervene on behalf of ‘women who might otherwise fall through the cracks’ (275). However, as *Kilroy Was Here* went to print, Sisters Inside were being effectively locked out of the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre, and at the same time Debbie was awarded the 2004 Australian Human Rights Medal, ‘ironically’, due to the lock out – ‘for work she could largely no longer do’ (287).

In August 2005, in a speech for the Prisoners' Legal Service 20th Anniversary, Debbie Kilroy commented that 'uncomfortable truths are revealed when the most powerless find their voice'. She feels this empowerment by making the hidden into public knowledge is something that 'irritates the government because in June last year [2004] they began a process of dismantling the organization [Sisters Inside] by stealth'.

'First was a general lock-out of our services, then a limitation on services and on their location and on the women who can access them. Then came a ban on our Management Committee meetings - which have been held monthly inside the prison since the organisation began. Then the trump card: after the publication of my biography in April this year, I was personally locked out of the prison.'

<http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/plsspeech.pdf>

The contents of Debbie's biography *Kilroy Was Here* bring up many issues of sexism, racism and the general inadequacy of current social services for people at risk of offending or re-offending. From Debbie's early years when she felt it necessary to live up to the 'bad' label which was thrust on her, to the double standard of treatment she and her husband received in the courts, to the hypocrisy of preventing an award winning human rights activist from helping people, *Kilroy Was Here* is more than just a book about one person's life, it is a documentation of the on-going struggle that women make to improve each others' lives.

Freelance writer, Evelyn Hartogh, has a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) University of Queensland 2002, and a Master of Arts (Women's Studies) Griffith University 1997.

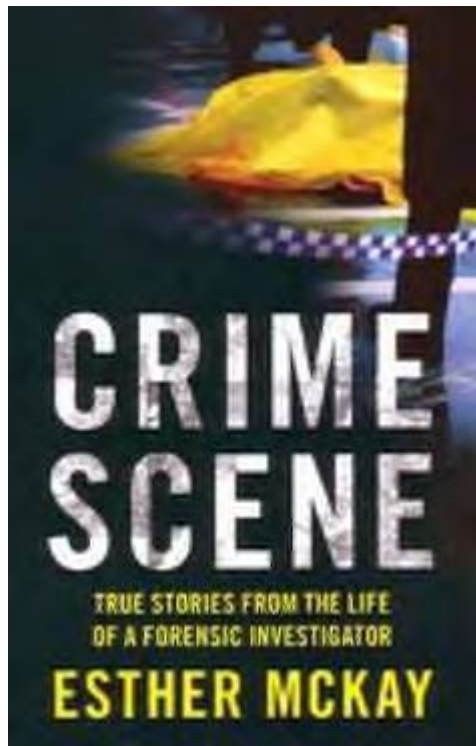
True Crime – and True Crime Effects

Esther McKay, *Crime Scene: True Stories from the Life of a Forensic Investigator*. Camberwell: Viking, 2005.

Reviewed by Zoë Morrison

As I write this, the TV show *C.S.I (Crime Scene Investigation): Miami* flickers in the background. It's the closing scene, and two male detectives, one dressed in a well-fitting suit and open necked shirt, the other in tight pants and a lime green sweater, chase a perpetrator in high-speed boats through beautiful marshland, guns cocked. It's shot from overhead and the perpetrator (complete with large blood stain across his sweaty abdomen) charges toward a row of leaping flames. When the show ends, the shorts come on for next week. We see a mess of young, tanned flesh – all legs and arms – perhaps in a club? The detective (the one in the suit) stands observing, then says: 'At a place like this, sex and murder might be indistinguishable.' Cut to ad break.

At first glance, Esther McKay's *Crime Scene: True Stories from the Life of a Forensic Investigator* appears to fit straight into this genre. In a brazen marketing move, it borrows part of its title from the above mentioned US television show, *C.S.I.* (one of the racier versions of the genre). Billed as a book which 'takes us inside the life of a forensic investigator, and reveals as never before the extraordinary demands and dangers of forensic work', it taps into an apparently huge and seemingly insatiable market for entertainment based on all things evil, fatal and gory. What is remarkable, however, about McKay's *Crime Scene* is that, as well as appropriating this current 'crime scene' craze, it also turns it on its head, ultimately saying something very different and, to my mind, very important about crime, fatality and their effects.



McKay's book is an autobiographical account of her 17 years working in the NSW police force. She starts as a young recruit, working on general duties and foot patrol, and is then transferred to scientific investigation. From the beginning we are told that she is eventually forced to retire, 'hurt in the line of duty', when she has a breakdown and is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Much of the book, however, is devoted to her 'real-life' accounts of police work. This ranges from dealing with the complaints of 'a local drug-addicted prostitute', to attending the suicide scene of a fly blown corpse in a kombi van, to the many and varied scenes of death that scientific work involves.

There's the teenage girl on the housing estate macheted to death by her boyfriend, because 'if he couldn't have her, nobody would' - and we're told the girl's mother has already lost her other two daughters to early deaths. There's the man who attempts to shoot himself in the head, but succeeds in only shattering parts of his face and skull - later on, McKay discovers to her horror a piece of the man's moustached upper lip on the police canteen floor, trekked in on the sole of a

colleague's shoe. There's the extraction of bodies from the Newcastle earthquake scene, there's road-deaths, suicides, accidental deaths of children, and so on. McKay writes all these scenes in detail - there is no doubt of the extent to which they are etched upon her mind.

At one level, I suppose, such scenes could be lifted straight from the pages of a Patricia Cornwall. Many of them are pure horror, and some of them are suitably bizarre. But this is where any similarities between McKay's *Crime Scene* and its multiple fictional versions end. While the fictional form usually has a narrative, and a plot progression that keeps us turning the pages (or glued to the scene), in this book, (with no 'whodunnit' to solve, no singular killer to capture), the continuous succession of disconnected scenes of real fatality becomes almost monotonous. By the end of the book, I found the multiple crime scenes had virtually blurred in my mind, not unlike just one of McKay's hellish police shifts. This, combined with the sheer horribleness of some of the descriptions, had me putting the book down at frequent intervals.

What does keep the reader turning the pages ends up being, quite awfully, the promised breakdown of the author, which is hinted at frequently throughout the text. McKay, and the people she worked with, are expected to perform this horrendous work under extremely extraneous circumstances. Even before McKay begins in the scientific division, the lack of care for workers in the force is clear. For instance, she describes the physical danger she was in, as a matter of course, when working night-shifts at an under-staffed and volatile MacQuarie Fields station: 'almost every shift I ended up struggling with a violent offender'. But it is the scientific work that stands out as the most difficult.

McKay begins with characteristic dryness: 'To describe my initial experiences with scientific work as being thrown into the deep end would be an understatement'. Because there is apparently 'simply no time' to give McKay any formal training, she is expected to 'learn on the job', assisting another colleague on large and complicated scenes. After 8 weeks she is working on her own, and describes how she would 'stumble through each job', hoping she was doing okay. Working 'on call' involved attendance at fatality scenes at any time of the day or night. McKay describes shifts where she is working almost non-stop, with little time for meals or sleep, attending fatality after fatality, day and night, usually alone and unsupervised.

The effects of the work get worse and worse. To begin with, there is a constant sense of irritation, urgency, and the adrenaline rush. She describes saying to herself: 'get the job done, let's get this over with so I can get out of here and onto the next one'. But then the human tragedy that 'completely absorbs' her at work becomes difficult to escape from. The office is short-staffed and, when on call, with the pager bleeping and phone ringing at home, she is never able to disassociate herself from her work. She is constantly jumpy, finds it difficult to eat and sleep, perpetually re-runs the scenes in her head. Exhausted and depressed, her physical health fails. Early on, she loses her first marriage. Later on, nightmares disturb the little sleep she does get, and she is afflicted with severe headaches. She begins to think of suicide, indeed is compelled towards it, but carries on with her work, 'trying to hide my true feelings'.

This book could be a stunning critique of the police force as an organisation. Even under more 'normal' working conditions, this is clearly work that will have severe effects, and there are no formal efforts to assist workers. On the contrary: any professional 'de-briefing' consists of drinking cask-wine with colleagues in the car-park at the end of a shift. McKay describes often close and mutually supportive working relationships with several colleagues, but it is made quite clear that according to police culture, 'emotional problems' are mostly kept quiet. Any indication on your record that 'you weren't coping' excludes you from promotion. 'This was why stress was usually resolved by a visit to the pub', McKay explains. Furthermore, there is more evidence of a blatant disregard for workers' physical safety: McKay is exposed to harmful chemicals, and even HIV, without any warning or occupational precautions.

The book could also be about the sexism and the particular masculinity of the police force, and the effects of this on police culture and welfare. McKay mentions a few incidents of overt sexism, and almost all of her working mates are men. The lack of acceptance of emotions, indeed, the lack of acknowledgement of the humanity of the worker, no matter how tough or proficient, could be directly related to a 'masculine culture', or at least one in which commonly feminised traits such as 'feelings' and care are negated.

But McKay leaves it up to us to make this link. Rather than any overt criticism of the police force, or any anger or bitterness in her tone, like the good police-woman she was, McKay simply puts down, in great detail, 'the facts'. In many ways, this turns out to be an effective approach. Far from presenting as a dissident with a chip on her shoulder, McKay presents as extremely proficient, someone who 'put work first', a dedicated and loyal member of the force, 'one of the boys', even. Initially, it is an approach that put me off-side. McKay's accounts of dealing with rape victims, for example, which swerves straight to comments about women's false allegations of rape, had me annoyed.

Yet that McKay's criticism of the force remains so veiled, and that aspects of even her own language and attitudes remain so much a part of it, is perhaps one of the most interesting parts of this book - in fact, goes to its very heart. The sheer length of the book, and level of detail involved, including of McKay's own attempts to 'cope' (strenuous exercise, religion, moving to a station she perceived as quieter, 'throwing herself' into various outside activities), read to me as an attempt to actually justify, in the fullest way possible, the legitimacy of what ultimately happened to her. McKay has gone to great lengths to record every possible thing that contributed to her break-down and long term symptoms. This is a telling indictment on how she perceived her story would be heard, and not just by the police force.

Surely, the appeal and proliferation of shows like *C.S.I.: Miami* lies in the fact that they make an attractive and titillating fantasy out of something that is actually hideous and terrifying. Crime fiction and crime shows ironically offer the reader and the viewer safety, because while appealing to our deepest fears, they also contain them, sanitise them, and 'solve them' - make them better. All the evil, nastiness, violence and death that could possibly befall us is bound up and distorted within an hour-length slot. Death is made beautiful, even, and in some of these shows is 'sexed up', with actor/models and a funky soundtrack. In such a fantasy world, women are often made into the killer, and detectives flirt wittily over bloody corpses. Through presenting these matters as entertainment, any realities of violence and death are kept far, far away. Possibly such shows are most captivating to those who know violence, fatality and crime the very least.

In McKay's book, the fantasy is shattered. Real crime and fatality are not entertaining - they are simply awful. And this awfulness is so harmful, that its effects are cumulative, wide-reaching, severe, and even fatal. However, it seems to me that it is mostly convenient and desirable for us not to realise this - to leave the fantasy well intact. It is convenient for the police force to pretend that its members are immune - 'it suddenly struck me that I was considered emotionless by both the constables', McKay writes at one point. A myth of tough, macho, 'emotionless' police means the force does not have to consider, for instance, the human resource implications that dealing properly with these issues would entail. It is also convenient and desirable for us - the reader, the viewer - to remain in this fantasy world. Thinking properly about crime and who commits it, taking into account its real effects, and the way these effects spread - ruining the lives of people who mop up after killers, for example, seeping their way into whole families and communities where a rape has occurred - the responsibility and implications of truly realising this would be vast, and deeply radical.

Reflecting on this, I am called to question my own 'boredom' at aspects of this book. I myself currently work in the 'violence field' (for want of a better name), specifically on matters of sexual abuse, sexual assault and now family violence. I found myself not wanting to be assailed by this material. I turned off, became defensive, I did not want to be reminded of the ways my work has affected me. In short, it is embarrassing and inconvenient to admit to the ways such work 'gets to you'. You feel weak, and you feel very alone. As McKay's book demonstrates, these matters are systematically individualised. We focus only on the direct victim of a crime, and things like post-traumatic stress are not routinely taken into account. We still do not recognise the real, widespread and pervasive effects of crime in any meaningful or wholesale way, either within our organisations, or society at large.

Because of this, McKay's book is brave. And if she can't be outright critical about what happened to her, I thought I would be instead: it's simply not good enough what happened to McKay, and what still happens to the countless others in her place. We need a far broader recognition of the true effects of crime, and a far better response to them. Of course, the ultimate irony is that McKay's account, in the end, is just another crime book. What I wonder, sometimes, is what it would take for people to raise their eyes from their TV screens, and turn their attention to these 'true' crime scene situations.

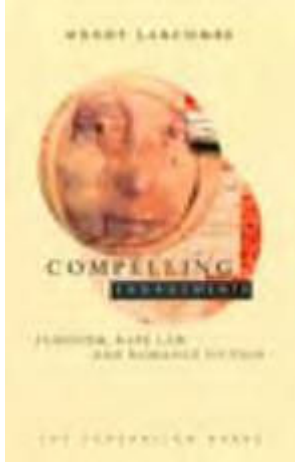
Dr Zoë Morrison holds research posts at Monash University and Melbourne University. She is the author of 'The Morrison Report' an independent investigation into the reporting of sexual abuse and response to sexual assault within the Anglican Church. She is currently working on legislative reform and family violence at the Victorian Law Reform Commission.

Scripts of Rape

Wendy Larcombe *Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law and Romance Fiction*. Sydney: The Federation Press, 2005.

Reviewed by JaneMaree Maher

Larcombe's *Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law and Romance Fiction* interrogates the 'conventionally gendered subjectivities' (1) produced in both rape at law and romance fictions. She is interested in how the scripts and narratives in both spheres regulate the 'conduct of sexual relations' (1) and how relatively narrow gender conventions persist in the face of 'extensive feminist engagement' (1). These two diverse areas of culture are thematically connected, Larcombe suggests, by their concentration on the regulation and management of heterosexual exchange. This intersection of feminist critical jurisprudence and critical literary studies is not novel – other scholars have focused on the romance scripts in rape trials, but Larcombe's account pushes beyond existing formulations, arguing that



the trust and anticipation of female consumers [of rape law and romance fiction] is secured by reproducing female subjectivity, and in particular, heterosexual subjectivity as a “problem”, a security risk. The ostensible solution in both discourses is to regulate or transform male desires (141).

The issue with this transaction, Larcombe suggests, is that the desires of the female subjects are already profoundly disciplined by institutions like law and concepts of ‘love’.

Feminist legal critics have mounted a sustained attack on Western legal systems and their treatment of women in cases of sexual assault. Many, like Susan Erlich (2001), Sue Lees (1997) and Sharon Marcus (1992), have focused on the oppressive construction of rape in legal discourses. But it is Larcombe's close focus on wrongful intent (*mens rea*) as an under-examined element of rape at law that distinguishes *Compelling Engagements*. For Larcombe, ‘the accused's, rather than the victim's, state of mind constitutes the linchpin of rape at law’ (21). This means that

the difference between sex and rape is visible on, and to, law, then, through its examination of the parties' state of mind at the time of the relevant events ... The law's only interest in the [victim's] state of mind is whether she was consenting or not to the particular act of sexual penetration with the particular person, at the relevant time ... In no way is the victim able to specify or qualify the circumstances of her non-consent/ consent to sexual penetration or, more generally, her desired or perceived relation to the accused (21-22).

This structural inequity, where the law is attentive to the state of the accused's mind diminishes the complainant's ability to ‘limit or restrict consent to sexual penetration for particular purposes’ (23). Larcombe argues that ‘rape at law has already been defined as a product of his attitude to her non-consent. That is, rape requires a specific relation between the parties' state of mind – but it is a relation that only operates one way’ (22). These constraints affect what Larcombe terms ‘the legal imagination’, since the focus on the rapist's state of mind, the disregard for the state of mind of the complainant and the law's structural alignment with the mental state of the accused shape the particular ‘sexualisation of the complainant’ (30). As Larcombe argues, ‘this is an important failing’ – for the law cannot know ‘that the “nature” of the act of sexual penetration is altered for the victim depending on her perception

of the accused's intentions' (2005: 23). 'The law cannot imagine a victim who may desire sex while not wanting to be raped' (23).

Larcombe's attentiveness to the elements of rape at law offers a cogent account of the fear of false complaint in cases of sexual assault. She argues that this fear 'outstrips the expectation of false complaint in other areas of the criminal law' and 'is not explained by the "actual" rates of false complaint as empirically measured' (103). The strength of the myth of the false complainant betrays an anxiety that

law's punitive powers may be put to work in the complainant's interests. In other words, there is a concern that the machinery of sentencing and incarceration will not only be activated by a woman's word, but manipulated and harnessed into the woman's service (110).

Justice is not available to be of service to women in cases of sexual assault, Larcombe suggests. For a complainant to receive justice, 'she must demonstrate a desire to put herself at the service of state regulation (and not vice versa)' (112).

For Larcombe, the critical link between rape scripts in law and romance fiction is the way romance fiction reproduces 'gender hierarchy and a fiction of vulnerable feminine subjectivity' (6). Larcombe explores the writing, production, distribution and content of Harlequin Mills and Boon fiction in Australia, arguing that love is the critical element that allows for the modification of 'the hero's desires' the renegotiation of the 'terms of heterosexual exchange' (34). Despite responsiveness 'to readers' desires and preferences and to changes in women's social and familial roles' (138), these fictions continue to represent the negotiation of that heterosexual exchange as 'the ultimate guarantor of feminine satisfaction' (138).

This slender volume is deeply compelling. Larcombe's premise of reading the intersecting scripts of rape at law and romance fictions extends well beyond identifying commonalities because, in her view, changes to rape law based on a call to eradicate 'outdated and unrealistic fiction(s) of femininity' (6) may not be successful when there are clear cultural investments in just such fictions of femininity in other cultural spheres. As the victim of rape is constrained by the available feminised subject position, the ideal reader of romance is enjoined to believe in the promise of the fiction. Larcombe draws attention to 'the political and financial economies of the criminal justice system and the [Harlequin Mills and Boon] publishing business' (134) in order to help explain the persistence of particular models of feminine subjectivity.

Larcombe begins this book with an implicit question - how is it that the gendered scripts of sexual assault persist? - despite the fact that feminist interventions into rape law have been heard and acted upon. There have been, in most Australian jurisdictions, substantive changes to legislation and to procedures surrounding sexual assault, although it is widely acknowledged that these have not extended far enough in many cases, or changed the experience of victims sufficiently. In Victoria, for example in 1991, significant changes to the terms of consent as well as the definition of rape itself sought to broaden the range of acts and assaults captured by the law. But the legal change resulted in a drop in the number of prosecutions mounted and in the number of convictions secured (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004). These depressing statistics provide a clear platform for Larcombe to question whether the expansion of legal effects and applications in the area of sexual assault really work to 'transform ... the application and effects of legal jurisdiction' (137). As *Compelling Engagements* focuses our attention on 'the legal construction of "rape" and particularly the investigation of the accused's knowledge of non-consent' (30) and on the operation of particular feminist critiques, it does assist us to understand the need for more direct confrontation with 'anachronistic feminine figures'

(134), both at law and elsewhere. Larcombe's work also provides some new critical frameworks to help us in this task.

JaneMaree Maher is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Women's Studies & Gender Research at Monash University

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Detention Centre Traumas

Tammy Norris, *Trapped Behind Bars*. Mermaid Waters: Zeus Publications, 2003.

Reviewed by Tammy Hatherill

Prison! This word speaks volumes. It's a place where bad people go, the lawbreakers of society, and the scum of the earth. Only the rough and tough are employed as guards to deal with such people - aren't they? The answer to this is 'NO'. Tammy Norris, a 21 year - old university graduate, got a job in an Australian maximum-security male prison in the spring of 1997. 'I had completed my Justice Studies degree and needed a job,' says Tammy. 'I saw the Correctional Officer position in the paper and applied, more so to get experience in writing out my resume and selection criteria. I never expected to get the job.'

For 3 ½ years Norris was responsible for the security and safety of both officers and inmates alike (a huge responsibility for someone so young). Tammy was dealing with violent offenders every day, convicted rapists, murderers, child molesters and drug addicts and dealers. 'I remember being sized up by a child molester, in the early days and being told, "you're a pretty little thing aren't you?" It made me sick to my stomach.'

This young officer was lucky to be selected to work in the intelligence department of the prison, on a relief basis, some years later. It led her away from dealing with the hardcore criminals daily. Intelligence is a competitive field as many officers aspire to work in the highly confidential and secretive area. The intelligence department is where the investigations take place. Due to her university qualifications in Intelligence and Security (her major), Norris had the academic advantage over others. This, however, was not the reason she was accepted into the position – there was a political component that is outlined in her autobiography – *Trapped Behind Bars*.

After six months as the relief Intelligence Officer, Tammy transferred within the company to arguably Australia's most notorious detention centre. She was 24 and a long way from home. 'This move destroyed me both professionally and personally. The stress was huge, the support for officers was nil and the behavior of the detainees was appalling. I felt isolated and alone.'

During Tammy's 10 month stint in this detention centre, she was involved in numerous riots, witnessed self-harm and suicide attempts, along with hatred and jealousy from some of the local women who lived in the tiny township. 'That I will never understand,' says Tammy, 'one woman hated me so much she smashed in the front window of my house, in a fit of unprovoked rage. So I was dealing with people such as her, and the venom of the detainees.'

With so much negativity and high pressure, Tammy's only means to de-stress was to write. Writing was her escape, her way of coping with the isolation, stress and the daily situations with which all officers were faced.

At one point Tammy became the Intelligence Officer with two days of basic training before filling in for her manager, who left on annual leave. Her role whilst he was away was to 'keep the place afloat.' On her first solo day, Tammy witnessed a major riot, on her second day another riot erupted and, on day three, seven detainees escaped. 'When this happened my body simply shut down. The stress and pressure was so intense. I worked approximately 13 days straight - 12 to 18 hours a day. I was exhausted. It's no wonder I suffered a suspected stress induced stroke.'

Trapped Behind Bars tells the story of Norris's life and as a prison officer and gives a graphic account of how prison officers cope or don't with such circumstances, interspersed with romance, broken hearts and other usual life events. Although names and places have been changed to protect the innocent and guilty, this book will entertain, shock and expose the real truths.

Tammy Hatherill is a freelance journalist, trained at the Australian College of Journalism.

Sentenced at Birth

Brenda Hodge, *Walk On: The Remarkable True Story of the Last Person Sentenced to Death in Australia*. Rowville: The Five Mile Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Megan Yarrow

In 1984, Brenda Hodge was the last person to be sentenced to death in Australia. She was found guilty of shooting dead her partner, Kalgoorlie policeman, Peter Rafferty. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and Hodge released in 1996. *Walk On* is Hodge's account of her life so far - a bewildering, and almost inconceivable chronology of abuse, violence, scattered siblings and the search for freedom.



Hodge begins her story at the point of discovery and reconciliation with siblings Janette and Carole, following the death of their mother. She precedes the backtrack into her life story with a hint of what to expect:

They were now grieving for the “real” mother they never knew. Grieving for the mother-daughter bond said to be an intrinsic part of our sense of self. Grieving for a lost childhood without siblings. They didn't miss out on much. I was the sister who had that “real” mother, had the siblings, had the family life. It was far from normal. Far from happy. (18)

By the age of eight, Hodge was world weary, having endured ritual floggings from her alcoholic mother 'Nan', and an existence under constant threat of violence and psychological abuse. Amongst other torments, Hodge had no less than four father figures, was regularly locked in the outhouse, called a ‘dirty little bitch’ when she wet the bed and molested by a teenage babysitter.

One day, Nan packed her off to school although she had not recovered from the flu:

I walked through wet grassy paddocks the next morning. There was a bitter frost, I was sweating under my jumper and my head was spinning. Halfway up the hill I stopped, looked back at the roof of our house and thought to myself: 'I will never get married, and I will never have children. I am only eight years old, but I never want a child to hate me as much as I hate my mother! (30)

An eerie emotional detachment pervades Hodge's retelling of certain events, and it is not surprising that she retreated into a world of daydreams, and often resorted to running away. Despite the overarching misery of her childhood, there were plenty of opportunities to escape, either through her imagination or wandering about the bush at Wonga Park or the park at Clifton Hill. Hodge's strong sense of self preservation emerges early as a result of her desperate circumstances. She derives enjoyment from nature and developed a poignant affection for her horse Chiquita. ‘I was in my first year at Templestowe High and the horse was my anchor. Otherwise I was adrift.’

When Chiquita was injured and had to be put down, Hodge's grief was palpable:

I didn't care about anything or anyone, and I was starting to 'float' mentally. This is a strange sensation I get that I now recognise as being a symptom of dissociation, a state in which time does not exist. I think it is a defence-mechanism I developed early in life - one that came back to me many years later when I was sentenced to death; not grieving for myself, but for the man I had killed. (40)

Hodge's reminiscences do contain rare moments of wry humour, such as her recollection of the period spent living with Uncle John and Auntie Thel (who decides to change her name from Dorothy to Brenda):

When Uncle John came home we had spaghetti bolognaise – the first of hundreds I was to have at Fawkner. Uncle John was a Chinese chef and he hated spaghetti bolognaise, but that was the only meal Auntie Thel could cook. Why he let her cook I'll never know. Apart from the occasional fish and chips from the shop we always had banana sandwiches for lunch and spaghetti bolognaise for dinner. (27)

After being raped by a man who had given Nan drinking money, Hodge is sent to a reformatory. She embarks on a cycle of institutionalisation and an associated barrage of invasive psychological cruelty, massive doses of stupefying drugs and suicide attempts. Referring to one of these places, 'Mont Park', she says:

It was a loony bin, a nut-house, the end of the road. The place of cages. People caged during the day, paced around inside like animals in a zoo. Those lucky enough to have a tree in their cage walked around and around the tree, so that a trench was left around the base of the tree – a moat between the living dead and their keepers. (81)

At Goodna Mental Hospital, Hodge was strapped in a straightjacket for crying, and underwent a bizarre array of treatments including enemas and internal examinations.

I lived in terror of ECT. I watched the women before and after treatment, and knew I did not want to share their experience. They came out of it greatly subdued and confused. Some of them could not remember their name for two or three days after and it was as though each one's self had been sucked out and only the shell of a person remained. (98)

Forever escaping, Hodge revelled in fleeting periods of blissful freedom before being readmitted. She felt safe as a transient - detached from the norms of family and the social complexities of life. Simple pleasures and random acts of kindness from strangers kept her going. Hope came in the form of saviours such as Rita Malone and Eileen, who ran a women's boarding house, and Verna, whose shack on Stradbroke Island off Brisbane was a temporary refuge for Hodge.

Hodge takes us all around Australia, from Melbourne to Goondiwindi, Townsville, the Northern Territory, Alice Springs and Western Australia. She's worked in pubs, and roadhouses, and met an assortment of characters along the way. The peculiar sociological dynamic of the Australian outback is exposed, as Hodge discusses her marriage to David Hodge, her relationship with Peter Rafferty, and her time spent incarcerated. Included throughout the text are details of her 1990 appeal to his Excellency, the Hon. Sir Francis Bur, AC, KCMG, QC., correspondence between herself and Bruce Dawe, a family tree, photos and newspaper cutouts. The addition of Hodge's own poetry enlivens the reading experience, and gives an insight into her feelings.

When discussing her trial, she says:

I don't remember a lot about my trial, only disconnected images: the grey stone walls on the outside of the Kalgoorlie Supreme Court; a large courtroom with wooden banisters, steps going somewhere, the microphone. I remember the face of one juror, who was a young man with dark hair, a goatee beard I think, and cold staring eyes. (160)

But a poem written by Hodge, expressing how she felt when she was sentenced to death is more revelatory:

The Question

When I was given the death sentence
the judge wanted to know if I
had anything to say
I should have tried to think
of something
maybe even looked guilty
for the sake of justifying jurors
and taxpayers' money
but my mind was not giving or receiving
it was as it had been on that day
so I stood detached
blindly staring at a wig
until it coughed into the silence
dismissing the court.

(Bandyup Women's Prison, 1985).

Today, Hodge is at peace, living in Geraldton:

Right now, I'm going back outside to sit under my peppercorn trees and read the paper, maybe do a crossword, or just doze off in the sun. Yes, the sun is still shining in Geraldton, even in the middle of winter. That's why I like living here. Close to the sea, close to friends. I think I am very lucky too. (204)

Walk On is indeed a remarkable journey. It remains to be seen, however, whether Hodge is yet to make another 'first' as part of the first legal action under Western Australia's proceeds of crime legislation (introduced four years ago). An article in *The Australian* on 5 August, 2005 reported Hodge had been visited by two detectives at her Geraldton home and questioned in relation to details about her book's sales. Peter Rafferty's four children had objected to the book and called for the confiscation of any

profits. It is astonishing that, as a free individual, Hodge still endures the intimidation and humiliation she thought she had finally escaped.

Megan Yarrow is a freelance writer based in Brisbane. She has a BA from the University of Queensland and GradDip of Creative Writing from Queensland University of Technology.

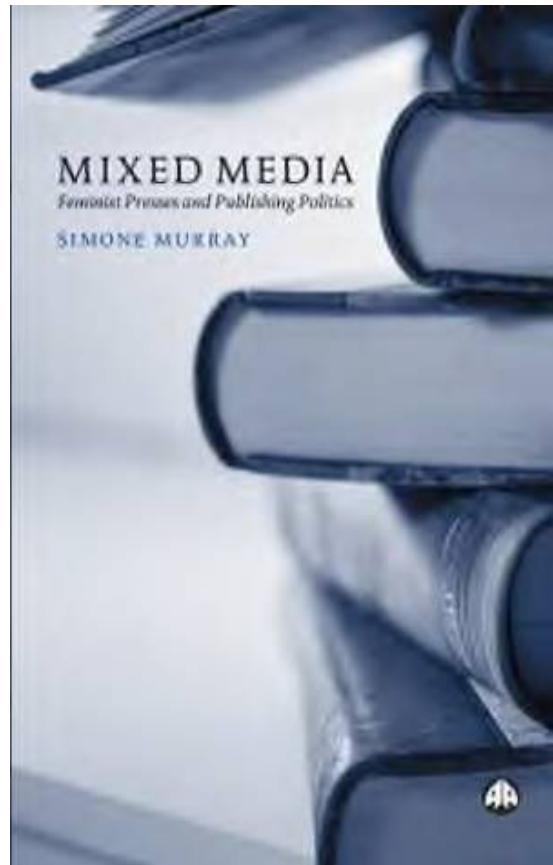
The Media-tion of Feminist Messages

Simone Murray, *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Reviewed by Anthea Taylor

In *Mixed Media*, Simone Murray provides a valuable critical analysis of feminist publishing and the political and ethical dilemmas posed by the 'mainstreaming' of feminist writing. 'Mixed media' is the term she uses to signal the dilemma all feminist presses must negotiate: profit-making or politics? That said, she persistently exposes the flaws in such binary logic to offer a complex, multilayered analysis of feminist publishing and its unique political dilemmas. In an engaging style, Murray offers a desperately needed history of feminist publishing activism, coupled with an astute awareness of its contemporary context, and concludes by looking towards the future of feminist publishing in an environment where its very *raison d'être* is being put under strain. Refusing to consider the feminist publishing industry in an isolationist fashion, she augments this focus by persistently referring back to the wide publishing industry and the place of feminism (and ideology more broadly) therein. The originality of Murray's study is not only the vast stores of hitherto un-analysed material upon which she draws, but also her critical approach. Her argument is underpinned by the idea that the debate over feminist publishing needs to be reframed, and *Mixed Media* provides the solid basis for feminist scholars to further destabilise the purity/co-optation (218) dichotomy that has thus far stymied this debate. She questions throughout the arbitrary distinction between a "core" feminism and a 'hostile mainstream "exterior"' (211); such a reconceptualisation of feminist publishing practice, she argues, is imperative if 'the sector is to survive in recognisable form in the twenty-first century' (211).

Murray's first chapter places her study within the broader context of media and women's studies, exposing the deficiencies of both disciplines in relation to the mechanics (and politics) of feminist publishing. As she highlights, the area of publishing has been relegated to a 'no man's land' in feminist media studies (18), particularly given that analyses from a political economy perspective have become decidedly unfashionable. For Murray, in a critical sense, the book and the context of its production have been woefully overlooked in favour of other more demonstrably 'popular' cultural products (19-20). Having fully established the substantial gap to be filled by a work such as this, her analysis is divided into chapters on the compromised independence of feminist publishers, the racial politics of feminist publishing, the institutionalisation (and delimitation) of feminism through academic publishing, the altered socio-political contexts that have resulted a shift in the fortunes of 'radical' feminist publishers, and the commodification of feminism through the commissioning and marketing of five feminist 'bestsellers'.



In Chapters One to Four, she treats a number of feminist presses as case studies, her focus being overwhelmingly on British publishing houses (with sporadic references to their counterparts in America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand). The first of these chapters considers how the internationally successful Virago Press negotiated the demands of the British women's movement (including in its academic forms) and those of the commercial publishing industry, demands which its owners refused to view as competing. She tracks Virago's attempts to make feminism available to those both within and without the British women's movement. Placing it in its historical context, she underscores the remarkable nature of Virago's 'mainstreaming' project. Outlining the political, ethical and financial problems posed by such an ambitious aim, Murray is not disdainful of the pragmatism embraced by women at Virago as part of its attempt to enhance feminism's marketability and popularity. As she remarks, 'in an age where politics and marketing have become increasingly indistinguishable, the embrace of consumerism in the name of the feminist cause may constitute a supremely expedient political tactic' (65).

In Chapter Two, the racial politics of feminist publishing is shown to add another layer of complexity to this fraught ideological territory. Murray looks deeply into The Women's Press in Britain to consider how being housed in a 'parent' company, and its concomitant lack of financial autonomy, impacts upon what is publicly made available as women's or feminist writing/thought. For those involved in The Women's Press, the ability to 'maintain revenue flow and political bite' (96) was complicated due to its ownership by a mainstream umbrella company that ultimately denuded its feminist workers of editorial independence. In this chapter she also tackles the under-representation of black women in both feminist and mainstream publishing houses, an elision that prompted women from Black Women Talk, Sheba and Urban Fox Press to establish their own. Murray also underscores how black women's writing has been constituted as lucrative within the mainstream publishing industry, but she presciently questions what will happen if/when mainstream publishers believe the market for such texts has been satiated.

In Chapter Three, Murray emphasises how feminist knowledge production and dissemination, and the very discipline of 'women's studies' (or, increasingly, 'gender studies'), has been overwhelmingly shaped by the mainstream publishing industry. She observes that 'feminism has been seriously remiss in largely declining to examine the material preconditions of its own knowledge and the institutional circuits for feminist scholarship's rapid dissemination' (125). Through the example of Pandora, she interrogates 'multinational involvement in feminist knowledge creation' (99). In this chapter, as in Chapter Four, her focus is on the status of feminism as commodity. In particular, she is critical of the tendency to package texts directed at women as necessarily feminist texts, with insufficient awareness of the gender politics of such publications (116). In this chapter, she highlights both the constraints and the opportunities of academic women engaging with mainstream publishing houses over independently feminist ones.

Radical feminist presses seem to have the most at stake, and are not surprisingly the most ambivalent about participation in the commercial publishing enterprise. The politics/profit dichotomy, as she illustrates in Chapter Four, is at its strongest in this context. Such presses, where controlling both the medium and the message is paramount, seek to create a production environment that does not replicate the exclusionary structures of more traditional publishing firms, hence their commitment to non-hierarchical organisational practices coupled with an underlying suspicion of the 'commercial imperative' (129). She questions the sustainability of the feminist media theory of a radical bent underpinning these enterprises and its advocacy of separatism, the currency of which has considerably diminished as feminism has become more diffuse and, in many senses, institutionalised through realms such as publishing. Like earlier chapters, this one consists of three original case studies of the radical

feminist publishing endeavour: Onlywomen Press, Sheba Feminist Publishers, and Silver Moon Books. Of such presses, Murray is not afraid to ask whether an impossible desire for 'political credibility' impacted upon their commercial solvency, seeking in particular to expose the often-dire financial consequences of a romanticised anti-commercialism. Further, she sagaciously observes that while discrediting 'mainstream presses, radical feminism failed to confront the reality that their own presses were 'profit-seeking enterprise[s]' (153-154).

Also included is a chapter on 'mainstream' publishers and works by high profile authors such as Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Betty Friedan and Naomi Wolf which have been marketed as exemplars of modern feminism; as the one that most overlaps with my own research interests, I found this chapter highly engaging. Murray addresses the relatively neglected question of feminist 'bestsellers' and their positioning within a feminist canon in many senses constructed by the 'mainstream' publishing industry itself. Instead of dismissing these texts outright, she analyses their circulation and the cultural capital of their 'celebrity' authors. She makes clear that feminist criticism has failed to adequately deal with how these texts (with authors whose connection to any form of organised feminism is at times tenuous at best), as well as mainstream media culture in a broader sense, mediate contemporary public perceptions of feminism. In this chapter, Murray also turns her focus to a specific sub-genre of the feminist 'blockbuster': the feminist sequel, a type of text which magnifies one of the key differences between independent women's presses and mainstream houses: the marketing machine (189). For multinational publishers, the feminist sequel (the most prominent of which is Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman*) is not surprisingly believed to be commercially attractive, tapping into what appears to be a pre-existing readership. As Murray makes clear, the feminist sequel can be perceived as a disingenuous profiteering exercise or as a means to further feminism's sphere of influence. This chapter most starkly illustrates the need for recognition of the interdependence of feminist and 'mainstream' publishers in the contemporary context.

The 'Afterword' of *Mixed Media* explores the future of feminist publishing in the context of wider debates about the demise of the book publishing industry. Here, Murray is forthright in her challenge to the 'technophobic' embrace of digital over print communication (214). Further, she suggests that apocryphal 'death of the book' pronouncements have lost some of their momentum, and these hyperbolic 1990s proclamations have been exposed as just that. She ultimately reaffirms feminism's continuing indebtedness to print culture, while underscoring the promotional and marketing possibilities yielded by digital technologies. To conclude, Murray makes trenchant observations about the future challenges to the dissemination of feminist thought and reiterates her book's central thesis: that the politics/profit antithesis in debates over feminist publishing needs to be transcended; her own work has shown how it is possible to perform such a critical refiguration.

For me, the text's most valuable aspect is that Murray throughout is cognisant of the difficulty of maintaining a distinct feminist counter public sphere through a separatist publishing industry when a fixed distinction between feminism and the 'mainstream' (itself a deeply problematic signifier) is no longer possible: 'Traffic between the margins and the mainstream of cultural production is now so plentiful and complex that any such attempts at watertight classifications obscure more than they illuminate' (218). The conviction which underpins her analysis that feminist cultural criticism needs to take the area of feminism's engagement with the 'mainstream' seriously is laudable and refreshing. That said, she does not uncritically celebrate the at times problematic forms of feminism that (are permitted to) circulate in and through such publications: 'The fact that the most dire predictions of separatist feminist media theorists have failed to eventuate should not tempt feminists into the opposite response – an unduly sanguine embrace of the mainstream' (192). Throughout, she skilfully attempts to

undercut the politics/profit binary in which her analysis is strategically framed, recognising that shifting contexts of production *and* consumption make the destabilisation of this dichotomy not only desirable but politically necessary.

Anthea Taylor's doctorate, focusing on how Australian feminism was figured in 1990s print media culture, was completed through the School of English and Women's Studies Program at the University of New South Wales. She currently works as a policy advisor for the NSW Government.

Public and Private Amateurs

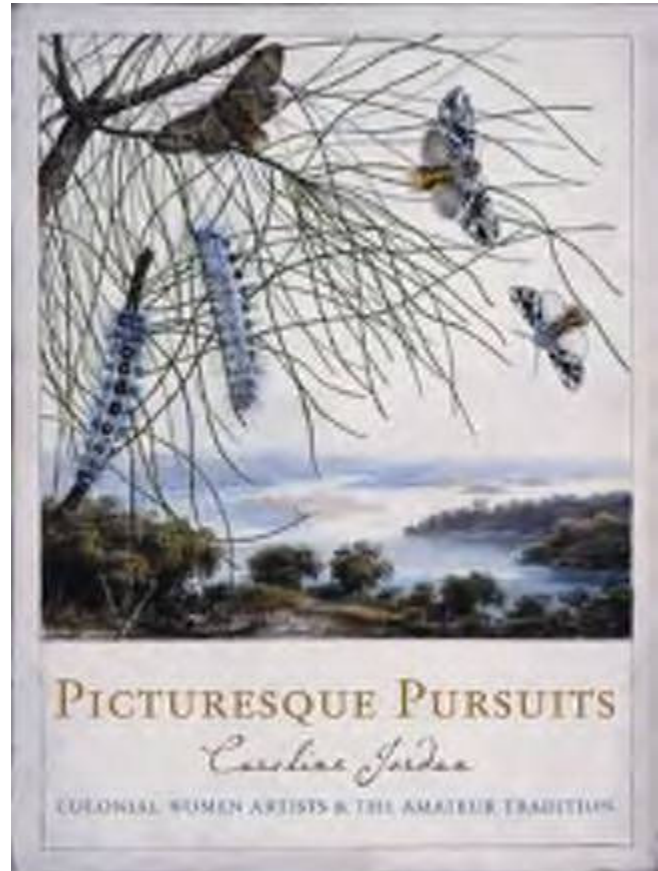
Caroline Jordan, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Catherine Speck

The terms ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ have always been vexed ones for feminist researchers and Caroline Jordan’s wonderfully engaging *Picturesque Pursuits* adds fuel to the fire. Her focus is on Australian women whose amateur work is now in public collections, although the watercolours and drawings tend to be housed in libraries, historical societies and natural history museums rather than in art galleries.

The book’s starting point was a chance remark made to the author as a young curator at Bendigo Art Gallery in the mid - 1980s. She was asked to develop an exhibition around the theme of the goldrush and suggested women artists of the era, but was told she couldn’t possibly show the work of these artists because ‘there weren’t any!’ This puzzled Jordan who was then informed, ‘there were, but they were amateurs’ (p. 4). This tantalizing contradiction, which lies at the heart of this book, whetted the appetite of our curator who postponed the idea of the exhibition and, instead, spent the next part of her life exploring the evidence surrounding this dilemma.

Jordan takes her readers into the lives of Georgina McCrae, Louisa Anne Meredith, Mary Morton Allport, Fanny McLeay, Jane Currie, sisters Martha Berkeley and Teresa Walker, Elizabeth Gould, sisters Harriet and Helena Scott, and others who settled or were born in colonial Australia. In doing so, she unravels the myriad roles of amateur art in domestic and public life for these women.



Drawing has always been on the menu of a middle to upper - middle class young woman’s education in ‘accomplishments’, along with music, languages, taste in dress and so on, but the peripatetic ways in which young ladies learnt how to draw is revealing. In today’s era where there is a school for everything, we ask ourselves: how did amateur women artists learn to draw at home? Some had private tutors, but they tended to have diverging teaching styles and tutors came and went; others turned to drawing manuals. Jordan takes us on a fascinating journey into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ prevailing beliefs about an ornamental education which deemed reading and music ‘risky’, since they inflamed the passions and led young women into decadent society. Medical texts and conduct manuals of the day advocated staying at home and engaging in ‘innocent occupations’ of drawing, botany and horticulture (16), although this involved some delicate side-stepping around a plant’s reproductive system! This cult of nature was thought to be well suited to women who had ‘delicate female nerves’.

Against this restrictive background in Britain, two determined women Georgina McCrae and Fanny McLeay learnt to draw prior to settling in Australia. Georgina had a series of tutors with radically differing approaches - John Glover taught her to paint a landscape by 'carry[ing] away a remembrance of scene', while John Varley taught her to copy his own work, another standard teaching approach then. Georgina also learnt how to paint miniature portraits in watercolour, without learning to draw the nude figure! Women faced prudish restrictions then before they gained entry in 1860 to the Royal Academy Art Schools. Watercolour too was a favoured medium for amateurs, being compact, portable and clean – in contrast to painting in oils. Fanny McLeay learnt how to draw flowers by copying. Drawing manuals even pointed out this didn't require 'anything so difficult as learning perspective, practice in anatomy or invention in composition' (34). She too had a mixed series of tutors, but was fortunate her father was secretary of the Linnean Society and, as Jordan suggests, perhaps he could see 'the benefit of having a skilful assistant to record his specimens' (42). Fanny became a good artist, as her consummate later watercolour, *Study of Australian, European and South African flowers*, c. 1830 shows. Before leaving England she exhibited work in the amateur section at the Royal Academy. The detailed study of Georgina's and Fanny's ornamental education prompts a radical rethinking of amateur status with Jordan commenting that 'their experiences show that being amateur was no bar to being able to wrest a first-class technical training out of the private system' (50).

Life in Sydney, Hobart and Perth in the early years of settlement was challenging for these amateur women artists. Their record of life then is invaluable historically and Jordan meticulously shows the place of amateur art in these early days. Fanny and her family settled in Sydney in 1826 and she completed early and now important drawings of Indigenous Australians and convicts. Jane Currie arrived with her naval officer spouse in 1829 at Garden Island in the Swan River Colony, and she too documented her new country in a panorama – but with some accommodation of the facts. Apparently following contact with local Indigenous inhabitants there was conflict, but Jane Currie shows only harmony. Mary Morton Allport settled in Van Diemen's Land in 1831. Jordan recounts how these women had to find time to draw because there were competing demands on their time like sewing, and they were presented with limited subject matter. Louisa Anna Meredith, who had settled in Tasmania, found her life as an amateur artist very difficult at first. Lady Franklin, the Governor's wife looked to art as a way of civilising this colony.

Jordan aptly calls these women artists 'public amateurs'. In the absence of photographs, women sent back 'home' drawings of the interiors of their new homes and furniture they had made up. Their art also circulated in their new environs around the immediate family circle and in the wider community, and it was held up for approval to visitors. In colonial culture, amateur art was a 'profoundly social act'; it was the 'social glue that women used to hold the extended family together and to keep the family integrated into the wider community' (94). This amateur art differs greatly from its earlier manifestations in Britain. Women also taught their art skills to others and some even supplemented the family income this way. Amateur artists like Adelaide's Mary Hindmarsh also painted key figures of the day and important public events like *Feast given to natives by Governor Gawler, October 1838, Adelaide SA*. This notion of public amateurs throws a new light on domestic art, which as Jordan observes, was inseparable from the wider public economy in the colonial era.

Other women artists are called 'private professionals'. This is the most gut-wrenching section of the book. It focuses in part on two very accomplished botanical and natural history artists, Harriet and Helena Scott, who illustrated their entomologist father's work for many years. They did so without payment, but in 1866 Harriet - whose father's affairs had deteriorated - was forced to seek work for payment. Jordan carefully details the surreptitious ways in which she sought payment for scientific

illustrations from her long time friend Ned Ramsay, curator at the Australian Museum. Aware of the social stigma and humiliation involved in accepting payment for her work, she wrote to him 'above all ... let nobody know you are paying me for doing them for you ... I should be sorry that anybody else should know and Papa would be mad' (53). Other intriguing cases of private professionals include early Governors' wives, Elizabeth Macquarie and Eliza Darling, who designed major public gardens and public buildings; and 'family firms' in which natural history illustrators like Elizabeth Gould were integral to the John Gould product. The distinguishing feature between an amateur and a professional is payment for work done but, as Jordan points out, accepting 'regular and necessary' payment which 'might indicate professionalism' was not necessarily 'a sign of increased status' (56). Finally, Jordan looks at artists like Louisa Meredith who imported the picturesque tradition into their amateur style in order to mask and even neutralise the harsh conditions in which they found themselves, where there was the killing of Indigenous Tasmanians, as well as indiscriminate clearing of land and culling of bird and animal life.

This amateur tradition was complex and multi-layered, and was deeply rooted in the conditions of its time. Jordan's fine weaving of personal accounts balanced by a steady theoretical line of argument mirrors the private/public role of amateur art in colonial Australia. This is an important book for art historians, and for feminist historians and cultural scholars too. It is also beautifully designed, in keeping with its subject matter.

Dr Catherine Speck is Associate Professor and Reader in Art History at the University of Adelaide, coordinator of the Graduate Program in Art History run jointly by the University of Adelaide and the Art Gallery of South Australia, and author of the recently published book *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime*.

Reading Displacement and Privilege

Cynthia Huff, ed. *Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Reviewed by Alison Bartlett



I picked up this book to review with interest as I have a course on women's life writing to teach next term. I'm not sure what I was expecting: maybe a miraculous publication that could deliver a ready-made course and be a set text, or maybe just an update on theoretical issues with some relevant references. Cynthia Huff's collection of essays on women's life writing doesn't sit neatly in either of these categories, but is interesting nevertheless. With fifteen chapters as well as an introductory essay it covers a broad range, reflecting the elasticity of the genre of life writing. Chapters deal not only with conventional texts (that is, books) but also girl zines, the letters produced by the women protesters at Greenham Common, the rules of the Anchorite community in medieval England, Chinese-American web diaries, and deportation narratives of Balkan women. The contributors range from postgraduates to distinguished scholars, mostly from the United States but also from British Columbia, Canada, Estonia, Sweden, the UK and there's even a contributor from Australia, Gay Breyley, who examines texts by Lily Brett and Evelyn Crawford under the rubric of

displaced Australian daughters.

This book began life as a special double-issue of the journal *Prose Studies* in 2003. I've never quite understood why an edition of a journal is republished as a book, especially as it's often easier and cheaper to access journal papers than pay the cost of an imported book these days. But editor Cynthia Huff has obviously pulled this off, and good for her I say. The book varies from the journal only in so far as it has an index and ISBN. The introduction by the editor is exactly the same in the journal, replete with references to the special edition (we're imagined to be reading) and even the same spelling mistakes. I'm sure these could have been fixed with very little effort. Perhaps this is the advantage of republishing a journal issue as a book – no editing allowed. Come to think of it, even the pages align exactly to the journal.

Casting aside publishing cynicism, the introduction by Cynthia Huff poses an ambitious vision for the book, claiming that women's life writing offers an incomparable window to the world, and anticipating that the essays in the collection will be potentially life-changing. A foray into Huff's biography tells us the story of her meeting some 'international' graduate students in London in the seventies, and gradually becoming aware of (and writing about) the ways they had to negotiate colonialism in Britain that she, as a US scholar, did not. This rather innocent encounter is in some ways emblematic of the introductory essay, which positions (theories of) women's life writing in terms of another 1970s encounter with New Criticism. Providing us with the basic arguments which have developed this genre as one of theoretical and feminist interest over the past three decades, Huff briefly skims the surface of naming theorists and propositions which separate the genre from 'the study of the lives of great men'. Benedict Anderson's 1991 book, *Imagined Communities*, offers the other support for the collection's theme, and his focus on nation-building is extended to the creation of other communities based on gender, ethnicity, place, ability and the imagination.

The chapters of this book are more complex in their engagement with current theoretical concerns, canvassing a range of feminist issues from trauma studies, whiteness, postcolonialism, diasporic studies, disability and queer theory. Many of them directly engage with Anderson's concept of community and nation, and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands emerges quite often as well. Many are sobering in their retrieval of the lives and texts of Jewish concentration camp survivors, refugees, Indigenous women, slaves and exiles. Other chapters focus on the political and the privileged, but it's difficult to find a sense of relativism: the chapter by Jennifer Sinor discussing the agonised internet writing of affluent teenagers is still searing to read.

Susannah Mintz's compelling chapter about the subjective 'I' of disability narratives - or autopathographies - engages with the multiple identities of women with disabilities who may also be mothers/lesbian/religious/political/ethnic. Some women, she notes, associate with unfriendly communities as disabilities are hierarchised or other aspects of subjectivity are not deemed compatible or acceptable. Margaretta Jolly's discussion of the ways in which letter-writing functioned to create a community of women peace protesters at Greenham Common in the 1980s also addresses the ways in which fractures in that community are registered in the same way, as political and ideological positions clashed. The idea of returning to communities of the past in an effort to retrieve family stories and identities is named 'reverse migrations' by Manuela Costantino and Susanna Egan, who examine two such trips in the autobiographies of European immigrants to Canada. In another chapter, what it means to be Puerto Rican in the United States is understood to be the central concern of Esmeralda Santiago's autobiographies. Jillian Sandell examines the imaginary inclusions and exclusions generated by anthologies of women's writing, as Jane Gallop has famously done in the past. Her chapter specifically examines three anthologies by 'women of color' over three decades, beginning with Cherrié Morága and Gloria Anzaldúa's edited collection, *This Bridge Called My Back* from 1981, and the ways they generate imagined communities by being taught as Women's Studies texts. The final chapter by Jeanne Perreault provides a fine summary of American critical work on feminism and whiteness, and does all but remind us of the extent to which this collection is quite white despite its diversity.

The connections between contributors and their topic are often left up to the reader to imagine, which is quite commonplace and yet in a feminist collection I would have imagined the politics of location to be quite important. Certainly Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar's chapter on Baltic women's narratives of deportation are lent further credibility and narrative power when she describes the clacking on the computer keys of a 'heavy silver ring of my grandmother's best friend, who spent 25 arduous years in the diamond mines of Inta in the depths of Siberia' where she was deported by Soviet forces. Jennifer Sinor positions

herself as an outsider to the girl zines she researches. But maybe feminist scholarship has passed the need for those moments of personal disclosure, some of which are embarrassingly bad. I do find it ironic though that the only contribution from a Chaired Professor in the collection is a reflection (from the 1970s again) on the acquisition of 'voice' through personal testimony, albeit a fractured subject. Maybe this indicates that seniority provides the authority to include personal reflection.

Overall, this collection would be of interest to those doing academic work on autobiography or on imagined communities. But then, I'd probably just download the papers from *Prose Studies* that specifically interested me, and order the book for my library.

Alison Bartlett teaches Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia. Her most recent book is *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding* (UNSW Press).

Whose power, Whose Pleasure?

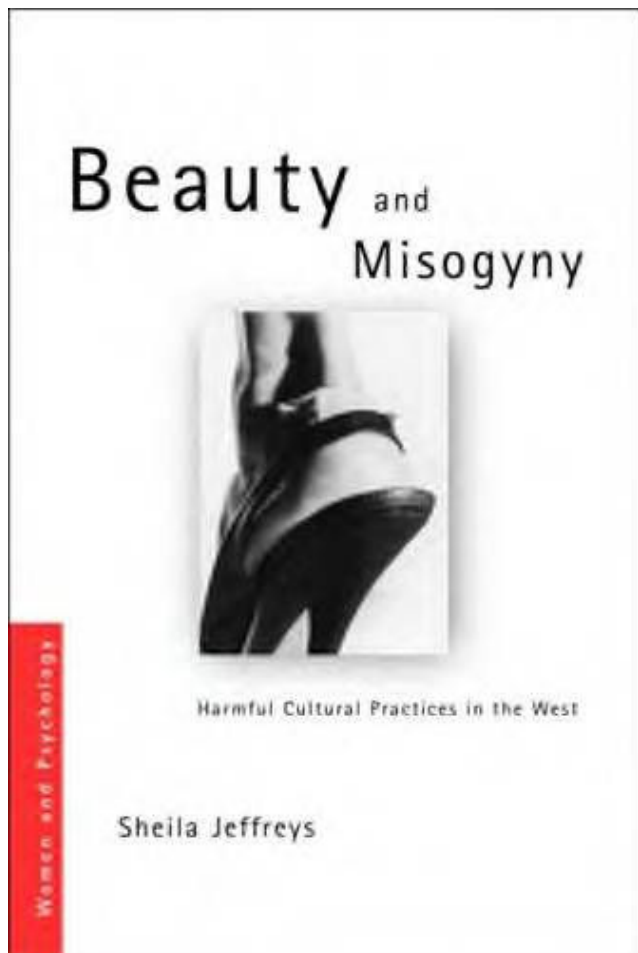
Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*.
London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Reviewed by Kath Albury

As a girl growing up in a feminist household in the 1970s, I spent a fair amount of time leafing through my mother's copies of *Spare Rib*. Many articles in this era argued against beauty practices and products (such as depilation and makeup), on the basis that they were time-consuming, expensive, and ultimately unnecessary. Similarly they argued against conventional 'feminine' fashion of the day, such as high heels and pantyhose, on the grounds that they restricted women's freedom of movement. Both beauty practices and fashion were critiqued on the basis that they caused women to court what eventually became known as 'the male gaze'.

Since the 1970s, there have been numerous feminist re-visitations of these arguments, the most recent being Sheila Jeffreys' *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. Jeffreys revisits the history of radical feminist theory, and attempts "to make sense of why beauty practices are not only just as pervasive 30 years after the feminist critique developed, but in many ways are more extreme" (2). Her central thesis is that Western 'practices of beauty' are inherently harmful to women, and that these practices are largely compulsory, rather than chosen. Jeffreys offers extensive case studies of allegedly harmful practices in defense of this thesis, but her argument is paradoxically undermined by many of them.

For example, she argues that the increased popularity of body piercing should be primarily understood as a form of self-mutilation in the name of beauty. Body modification may involve an erotic desire for beautification – it may, in some instances, be also be a form of anti-beautification. While it is productive to explore the different meanings they might have for different sub-cultural groups, this is not Jeffreys' intention. As in her other case studies, a variety of effects are ascribed to a single cause: male domination of women.



Where acknowledged masochistic elements exist (as they undoubtedly do in some of her examples) it is not sufficient triumphantly to dismiss a particular practice as ‘masochism’, while ignoring vast body of feminist (and other) literature which unpacks and complicates both the theory and practice of masochism. The intersection of sex and power cannot be denied. That doesn’t always mean though, that all intersections of sex and power are the result of ‘male domination of women’.

The implication underpinning *Beauty and Misogyny* is that all the trappings of beauty and fashion, from high heels, to lipstick to labiaplasty are not only inherently damaging to women, but that this damage is implicitly caused by a male or masculine desire to see women harmed, if not disabled. All male interactions with femininity, from gay men designing couture to married heterosexual crossdressers seem, in Jeffreys’ account, to have the same motive. This desire to do harm is never explored in and of itself, it is simply taken as given.

It’s clear that Jeffreys is not literally equating lipstick and high heels, with footbinding and genital mutilation. However, to cite the most grotesque and extreme practices of body modification (such as Belgian porn actress Lolo Ferrari’s multiple breast implant surgeries) as if they are in any way representative normative or everyday beauty practice is misleading at best. In Ferrari’s case, for example, the response by the general public to her exaggerated appearance was similar to that of another tabloid favourite, ‘The Bride of Wildenstein’: not so much an appreciation of ‘beauty’, but a cruel fascination with her side-show freakishness.

Jeffreys rests much of her argument on evidence drawn from media discussions of beauty practices. Her research is clearly extensive; her analysis, however, is problematic. Given the history of at least twenty years of feminist media and cultural studies, it is jarring to see articles in women’s magazines such as *Vogue* represented as simple prescriptions for behaviour. For one thing, these texts very rarely present seamless messages - they are often highly contradictory in their editorial content, especially around issues of diet and beauty. Many are self-reflexive in their discussions of the beauty and fashion industries. In the past ten to fifteen years, feminist approaches to these issues have been explored within fashion magazines themselves, with editors commissioning articles by leading feminist writers and activists (even while they continue to promote their advertisers’ products). Women who read magazines are not absorbing mere scripts for feminine conformity - they are consuming complex sets of messages, in the context of their own diverse environments, allegiances and beliefs.

While her case studies of print media texts are troubling, it is Jeffreys’ use of online media content that is most problematically de-contextualised. The websites she quotes are certainly valid forms of evidence – but only if the specificity of online publishing is clearly explained, and explored. This is not the case here. For example, Jeffreys’ use of online postings of foot fetishists who specifically eroticise the perceived pain and suffering of the wearer of high-heeled shoes seems to imply that men in general eroticise female pain and suffering. Similarly, she represents the erotic fantasies of particular married heterosexual crossdressers, and the advertising copy on a dominatrix’s website, as equivalent to, or representative of all the opinions and desires of all transgendered people.

Given that anyone, with whatever sexual taste or predilection can launch a personal web page, this is a very long bow to draw. Unlike mainstream or broadcast media, which are required to appeal to a fairly large audience in order to survive, a webpage (and even a webring, or collection of web-pages) need only appeal to a small number of people. Private webpages, no matter how offensive, are forms of self-published niche media; not proof of widespread community attitudes.

While Jeffreys references Naomi Wolf's popular feminist bestseller *The Beauty Myth*, she ignores the other feminist interrogations of both the Western ideal of gendered beauty, and the beauty industries themselves. Notable works in this field include Wendy Chapkis' (1986) *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance*, and Joanne Frueh's (2000) *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love*. Unlike Jeffreys, both Chapkis and Frueh acknowledge a problematised, but productive female (and feminised) erotics of beauty, existing among both lesbian and straight women. Neither author dismisses this erotics as a form of internalised misogyny, as Jeffreys appears to do, nor do they fall back on uncritical discourses of 'choice' and 'empowerment' which Jeffreys rightly challenges. Instead they raise intriguing, and ultimately positive questions around the intersections of beauty, pleasure and power.

Jeffreys argues against the concept of gender as play or performance stating instead, that feminists must resist not just the contemporary notion of feminine beauty, but gender itself. Frustratingly, she doesn't offer examples of how this is, or might be achieved, other than by abstaining from 'feminine' clothing and beauty products. This proposal, however, fails to acknowledge that in a culture that is relentlessly gendered, the alternative to 'feminine' appearance and attire is, more often than not, assumed to be 'masculine' rather than 'neutral'. That is to say, it is not possible to do away with gender and sexual difference (eroticised or not), simply by avoiding lipstick and choosing trousers over skirts.

In a book that contains such exhaustive cataloguing and critiquing of the most extreme aspects of beauty industries, and indeed the concept of eroticised femininity in general, few alternatives are offered. It is only in the last page and a half of *Beauty and Misogyny* that Jeffreys invites her readers to imagine a world free of 'oppressive' beauty practices. In this world, makeup and hair removal are unnecessary, fewer women wear skirts or carry handbags, and all women wear comfortable shoes. Women are free to go about their everyday lives, unconcerned by men's surveillance and sexual approval. Jeffreys concludes that "sexual difference/deference is the very basis of western culture and envisioning a world without it is challenging" (179). Given that men and women are both different *and* similar, it seems to me unlikely that 'sexual difference' is the only basis for inequality in western culture. There are many other differences and samenesses: of taste, class, religion, ethnicity, political conviction etc, that come into play when men and women interact with one another.

It is a shame, then, that Jeffreys herself doesn't rise to her own challenge of envisioning another world. In *Beauty and Misogyny* she implicitly rejects the possibility of *any* non-oppressive erotics and aesthetics of sexual difference. Sadly, she does so without offering a fleshed-out erotics and aesthetics 'minus gender' that might serve as a replacement. A radical feminist model of erotic beauty that celebrates female pleasure and sexual power is overdue.

Kath Albury is an Honorary Research Associate in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. Her second book, *Bed Mates: Sex, Love and Friendship* will be published by Melbourne University Press in 2006.

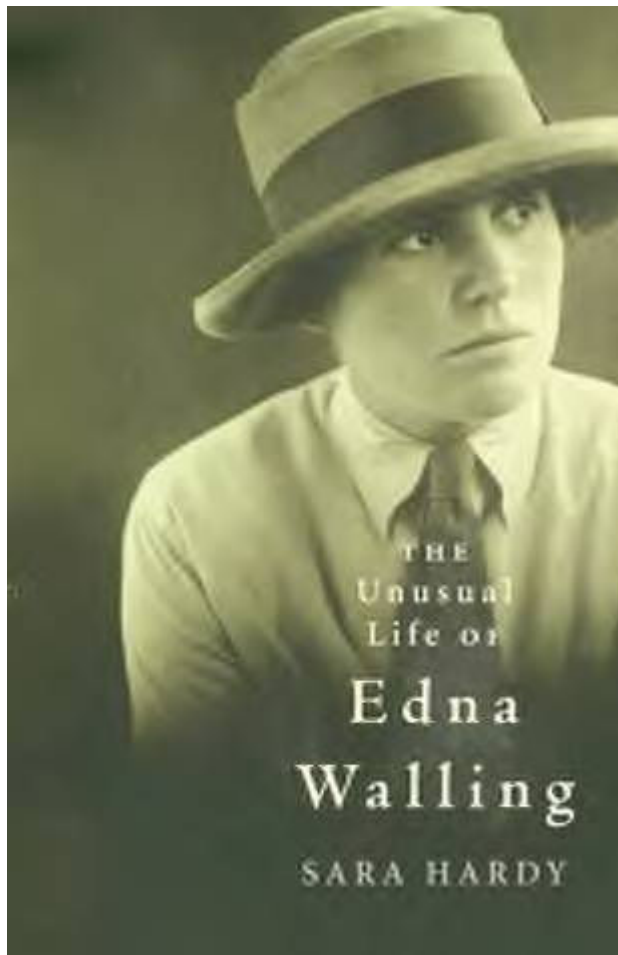
A Garden of Delights

Sara Hardy, *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005.

Reviewed by Sylvia Martin

Actor, playwright and now biographer, Sara Hardy, has surely a unique reason for wanting to write about her subject. She once played the role of Edna Walling (1895-1973) - the 'girl gardener' who became one of Australia's first and most enduring landscape designers - in a play called *Edna for the Garden*, by Suazanne Spinner, produced in Melbourne in 1989. Hardy says she enjoyed being Edna Walling: she liked 'her strength, her warmth, her vision'. She also connected with her subject's background as a Devonian as well as being 'fascinated by the faint suggestion that Edna was a lesbian'. She was intrigued by the fact that, although the landscape designer's public persona and her achievements were well-known, the woman herself remained elusive.

Acknowledging the excellent books published in recent years about Walling's garden designs by Peter Watts, Trisha Dixon and Jennie Churchill, Hardy states that, her own different purpose is 'to explore the woman behind the work'. This she does. With skill and highly imaginative writing, she takes us into the world of this independent, unconventional and creative woman. Hardy's approach to biography is also fresh, creative and unconventional.



Edna Walling's vision created magic places out of Australian gardens from the 1920s- on. After graduating from Burnley Horticultural College in Melbourne she started designing grounds for clients whose needs ranged from suburban plots to the expansive gardens of the rich and famous, including work for Dame Nellie Melba. Sometimes the task required great ingenuity as in the case of the work she did for Keith Murdoch on the country property near Frankston that he bought as a wedding present for his wife Elisabeth in 1928. The old homestead was given a complete makeover and, to Edna's horror, was reborn as a Louisiana-style plantation mansion complete with portico and gleaming white columns. Part of her ingenious landscaping to marry this edifice with the Australian countryside was to plant a winding avenue of pale-trunked lemon scented gums that 'prepared the eye for the straight white columns of the façade'.

The mention of Edna Walling's extraordinarily apt name conjures up images of stone steps and low stone walls, integral features of the secret and harmonious spaces she created in her garden designs. Her love affair with stone began when she built her first stone cottage on land at Mooroolbark

near the foot of the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne in the early 1920s. The young woman carried out her physically-demanding work in comfortable jodhpurs, which led to the curious local

residents dubbing her 'Trousers'. This first incarnation of Sonning, named after a village on the Thames remembered from her childhood, was the beginning of her vision of an integrated village/suburb where houses and landscape would blend harmoniously and people could live in a combination of privacy and community – to be called Bickleigh Vale. It was not the only visionary attempt to create beauty out of the burgeoning suburban sprawl of the 1920s and '30s; Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin held similar aspirations with their Sydney experiment, Castlecrag, at around the same time.

Edna Walling was what we would call today multi-skilled. She created unique garden designs that blended native and exotic plants; she also designed and built country cottages for 'Billy Vale'. In addition to these skills, she was a fine artist who painted beautiful watercolour garden plans, a photographer, a journalist and the writer of books such as *Gardens in Australia*, *A Gardener's Log*, and *The Australian Roadside*.

Walling's style in her gardening columns in *The Garden and the Home*, *Home Beautiful*, and *Woman's World* was relaxed and chatty. There are many examples of her writing in this book and Hardy herself has channelled Walling's style perfectly in her own writing. Commentary segues into quotation with seamless ease.

The author also uses her literary skills to draw us into the immediacy of Edna Walling's world: at one point we are taken on a tour of a Walling garden as if we were potential clients. In the chapter entitled 'Ladies Who Lunch' we are treated to a series of witty snapshots written in the present tense: we share the young woman's liberating experience of having her long red hair cut into the short crop that reflected a 'boyish face' in the mirror; we attend a meeting of the Women Horticulturalists' Association of Victoria with her; we go to a garden party attended by musicians, architects and artists, and potters such as Merric Boyd, father of Arthur. In describing events like Open Day at Sonning, where a ballet was performed in the open-air theatre and funds were raised for the Red Cross, Hardy always includes the garden as part of the scene: 'wide sweeps of grassy lawn running away into clumps of native and exotic trees, with drifts of pale mauve irises at their base, the whole backed by a young forest of slender gums'.

One important area of Edna Walling's life remains elusive and that concerns her sexuality. Her androgynous "look", her friendships with women and her lack of romantic liaisons with men all point to the conclusion that she was a lesbian. Apparently just one letter survives that indicates an intense passion and longing for another woman, but her (unrequited?) relationship with Esmé Johnston resolved itself into a friendship that continued intermittently for the rest of her life. For the rest, Edna gave nothing away. Her single life was always complemented by rich friendships with women. Successions of "helpers" lived close by her at Mooroolbark, from Blanche Scharp to Joan 'Twid' Niewand, who also helped Edna build her coastal retreat at East Point. These women managed her accounts, even acted as housekeepers and cooked for her, but seemed to remain employees and friends. If any were her lovers too, she did not speak of it. She also employed men such as Eric Hammond and another aptly-named stone worker called Ellis Stones, who became friends too. She had a close but probably platonic friendship with another woman who settled at Bickleigh Vale, Lorna Fielden. Otherwise, she expended her affections on her animals: her sturdy horse Adam and a series of much-loved dogs and cats.

Sara Hardy subtly explores her subject's sexual predilection in a chapter called 'Love', contextualising it historically since the 1920s was still very much a period when lesbianism was the 'the Love that dared not speak its name'. She also suggests that this was a time when 'many women who would now be called lesbians didn't recognise their intensity as sexual desire'. Edna Walling was a public figure working for often conservative clients. They accepted her mannish look and preference for trousers as part of her "hands on" profession, but would they have employed her if she had been open about an unsanctioned sexuality too?

The trouble is that the biographical genre has underlying conventions that create expectations, not always consciously, on the part of the reader. It is still acceptable for biographies of male public figures like statesmen or scientists to concentrate solely on their careers, but the life trajectory for women, even those who follow important careers, assumes love, marriage and children to be a part of it. Independent single women like Edna Walling disrupt this expectation and, although the author in this case has explored her subject's passionate life as sensitively and compassionately as she is able, reviewers of the book have still criticised Walling on the basis of heterosexist assumptions. The reviewer in the *Age* concluded that her emotional range was 'schoolgirlish', while the reviewer in the *Australian Book Review* asserted that 'Hardy suggests that Walling was a lonely woman whose main passion was poured into her work'. This is actually far from the truth. Hardy does suggest that at times Edna wished for a partner to help her in life's decision-making and envied a little the companionship she saw in one long-term female couple among her friends. But she also stresses her subject's independence, which was probably too important to her to risk compromising it, and quotes this extract from a letter to her niece:

Often I wish I were in double harness & pulling *with* someone [-] & then the inner voice says 'you'd be grateful you're not living with the wrong person – *that'd* drive you mad!'

Towards the end of her life, Edna Walling made a long-planned move to Buderim in Queensland, seduced by the beauty of the area. By this time she had shifted in the direction of advocating native plants rather than water-hungry exotics and had also written about the importance of retaining roadside trees, decrying the increasing destruction of these wildlife corridors. With her move to Buderim she really became 'a conservation warrior', writing to newspapers, councils and politicians, not simply to complain about the destruction of the natural landscape but to suggest alternatives. A fellow conservationist was Queensland wildflower artist, Kathleen Macarthur, whose life story has been recently written by Margaret Somerville in her biography, *Wildflowering* (UQP, 2004). That the two women were acquainted is clear by the inclusion of a photographic portrait of Macarthur in *Wildflowering* taken by Edna Walling. With these two recent books about women whose lives were intimately bound up with their love of the Australian landscape and its flora, Hardy and Somerville, in their different but equally fresh approaches to biography, are also quietly extending the limits of the genre.

One minor quibble about *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling*, which is an elegantly-designed and illustrated paperback, is the lack of signposts indicating endnotes. Even the most assiduous reader does not turn constantly to the end of the book in case there is an interesting note there and so mostly they are missed. One hopes fervently that this is not a coming editorial direction for Allen and Unwin undermining the scholarly reader's pleasure and profit. Does a little number at the end of an occasional sentence seriously disrupt readers' enjoyment of the free-flowing narrative?

Sylvia Martin is the author of *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin*. Her biography of Ida Leeson, Mitchell Librarian from 1932-1946, is forthcoming from Allen and Unwin.

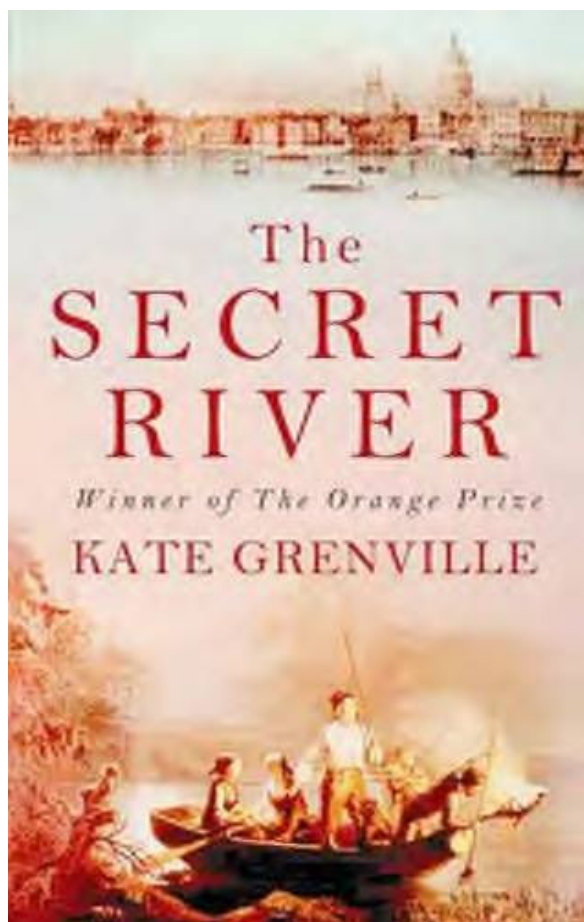
Re-viewing the Past

Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005

Reviewed by Rachel Slater

According to Freud's description, the uncanny derives its terror 'not from something externally alien or unknown but, on the contrary, from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it.' Kate Grenville's latest book, *The Secret River*, addresses the familiar history of the white settlement of Australia and re-imagines it, bringing to life its horror and its ordinariness in a novel that straddles fact and fiction.

Based upon research into her own family story, the novel takes readers from early nineteenth century London - a city of squalor and poverty for the working classes, soon to be immortalised by Charles Dickens - to a fledgling Sydney and the banks of the Hawkesbury River. Transported for stealing a load of timber, the clever and industrious William Thornhill is dispatched to New South Wales, along with his wife Sal and their children, for the term of his natural life. Whilst his wife feels her displacement keenly and longs for London, Thornhill yearns to sail up the Hawkesbury to stake his claim to one hundred acres and with it a new life as a free settler. For him, the land becomes "the blank page on which a man might write a new life", in order to fulfil his dreams and those of the colony, he must negotiate a contact zone with the Indigenous owners of the land. Despite the misery the reader knows must ensue from this meeting of cultures, Grenville produces a sense of apprehension, creating both fear in familiar events and hope that the situation may end differently.



Central to this is the protagonist Thornhill who Grenville does not allow to fall into the usual victim/victimiser model so often used to depict early settlers, opting instead to create a complex and multifaceted character. When Thornhill first sets eyes upon the land that will later become 'Thornhill's Point', 'a chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground... To say *mine*, in a way he had never been able to say *mine* of anything at all.' The tenets of British social class are a key driver both for Thornhill and for the novel as a whole - the settlers, despite their loneliness, their fear and their cruelties, created a society that seemed to dismantle class barriers in one generation. Fear of a return to the slums of London fuels Thornhill's ambition of land ownership and, as he makes rapid progress in terms of accumulation of wealth, his insistence that servants (who once were friends) address him as 'Mr. Thornhill' enables him to have a sense of power and social mobility in this new society. Sal Thornhill also welcomes her newfound status, although she is never able to embrace this new experience as fully as her husband, building instead a 'home away from home'. She treasures a piece of roof

tile found on her last day in London, vowing to return it 'right back where it came from'. The thing was like a promise, that London was still there, on the other side of the world, and she would be there too one day.' The myth of return hangs heavy over Sal and she tries to create England under the Australian sun, planting daffodils and rose bushes only to watch them wither. Her dislocation is sensitively handled by Grenville, drawing attention at once to Sal's own suffering and to the marginalisation felt by the Indigenous people she lives amongst.

The novel's Aboriginal characters are depicted not as the objects and passive victims of the historical process, but as agents in it, acting to ensure their people's survival - Grenville writes them back into that history in a balanced and credible way. Thornhill's dealings with the Aboriginal people who already occupy 'his' land are based on a fear of losing his dream of belonging but also on an understanding that the Indigenous people are 'here like we were in London'. Thornhill is torn between his powerful love for the land and his private acknowledgement that 'there was an emptiness as he watched Jack's hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There was no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him.'

Whilst Grenville she does not provide answers to questions around Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, she does offer a re-examination of a familiar and distressing history. *The Secret River* is a historical novel, but it explores contemporary questions including the complexities of belonging, injustice and exclusion, and one of Grenville's great achievements is in her power to do so with admirable balance, understanding and restraint.

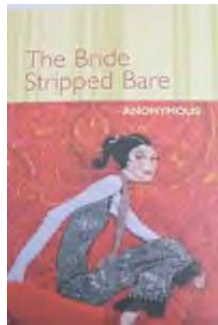
Rachel Slater is a freelance reviewer and is currently working on a PhD in contemporary women's literature in the School of EMSAH at the University of Queensland.

Sex and Sad Spaces

Anonymous, *The Bride Stripped Bare*, Harper Collins, 2003.

Sophie Cunningham, *Geography*, Text Publishing, 2004.

Reviewed by Gaylene Perry.



On the surface, both of these novels are about sex, specifically, perhaps about women's sex. But both novels are also about power dynamics and about illusions and disillusion. Each can be taken as a light, even ephemeral read, a novel to eat chocolate over or to read on a beach, and swap around with girlfriends. Yet both seem bound up with a sadness that demands even more attention than the sex.

The Bride Stripped Bare and *Geography* are both thematically concerned with intertwining sexual and romantic relationships, and also with friendships—between both men and women—that at times cross lines and become sexual or obsessive or in some ways abusive. However, both novels are focused strongly on the narrators' selves. The stories are told by narrative voices that have the hint of damage in them. These novels seem to be about *others*, about *togetherness*, yet both narrative voices feel isolated and quite alone. It's easy to write off such an approach as being part of a so-called culture of confession; the me-generation; an age of disclosure that verges on hysteria. Perhaps these novels *are* part of these moods in contemporary Western culture—many of us enjoy our reality tv, explicit, self-centred soaps, bestselling tell-all memoirs, magazines, racy internet journals or blogs. But, at the same time, the sadness of the young women characters in these two novels demands a deeper and more sympathetic analysis.

We could consider how identity and selfhood are bound up with these novels, within this age of disclosure and apparent exhibitionism. *The Bride* and *Geography* are both, on the surface, *confessional* novels, involving private painful or provocative issues spoken of by narrators who could almost be speaking aloud to their girlfriends. Strangely, though, they're not speaking to girlfriends, or to partners and lovers. They're whispering into thin air. The reader—who could be a voyeur or could be a listener who empathises so deeply that it hurts—is the one who gets to know what each of these narrators seems to need desperately to say. As with published memoirs or journals or letters, the confessions in these novels are private yet made very public. Confessing may be an act of exhibitionism, but in this kind of fiction the secrets that are being spoken remain secrets, somehow, because of the gentle (if insistent) voices; because of the fragile, tender nature of what's being said. This may be the appeal of such a mode of fiction. The reader hears a secret, just between the narrator of the novel and that reader... right? But of course, it's not, it's published, it's mass-marketed.

Nikki Gemmell published as 'Anonymous', but her cover was blown even before the book arrived in the stores, and then Gemmell was all over the world, giggling and blushing on chat shows, appearing in full colour in newspapers and magazines. She seemed like everyone's best girlfriend, except that these days it can be hard to remember that the girlfriends of most of us aren't to be found on TV or in a magazine.

In *The Bride Stripped Bare*, the narrator suddenly becomes aware of dissatisfaction in her marriage, and of a distrust of her husband, during their honeymoon. She explores her own sexuality, pushing her limits and that of her husband, becoming self-destructive as she explores her repressed—or created—selves. Gemmell's narrator is not having a happy time. She's angry, sad, damaged, at a time in her life when society tells her she should be feeling blissful. At times, oddly, *The Bride* verges on being

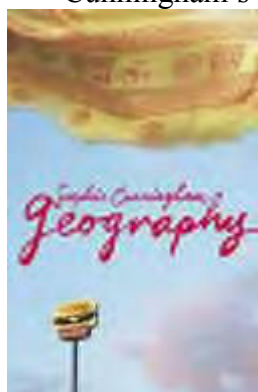
a morality tale. The narrator moves from imagining fantasies to acting out fantasies; the story grows more and more troubling until her expectations and hopes are twisted back on her one last time. Is that twist her punishment for not being satisfied with marriage: for acting like a slut? Perhaps.

But the earlier parts of the novel are powerful. A reader could almost be lying about with friends, champagne flute in hand, chocolates and Turkish delight strewn between, reading aloud parts of the novel and sharing their secrets. The book itself is strewn not with chocolate and Turkish delight, but with quotations from Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. These quoted passages reinforce the sense of secrecy and hidden delight and detritus. The pillow books of Japanese noblewomen were ostensibly record books for housekeeping, gently subverted by enigmatic, sometimes coded messages.

There is little joy in the sex or the love in *The Bride*. The depictions of repressed anger, the passive cruelty within the marriage and friendships are, in places, awfully close to the bone. But the author seems to lose her nerve partway through the novel. Any real subversiveness to be found soon dissipates. The narrative creeps into more mundane space, predictable and less real, somehow, until the reader has little reason to care about what happens to characters that no longer feel close and true. A plainly ridiculous framing device—a letter and postscript from the narrator's mother—that starts and ends the novel, exacerbates this breaking of the connection between writer and reader.

Early on in *The Bride*, it seems Gemmell has the gist of an unspoken yearning, something important, something rarely spoken even amongst close friends—concerning the damaging secrets that couples and friends sometimes keep from each other and from themselves. A jagged kind of grief exists in those early pages, a focus on a sadness that can be hard to talk about in these days when pornography and erotica are sometimes mistaken for one another, and when mentioning sadness, tragedy, oppression and exploitation in relation to sex is considered conservative and not much fun^[1]. The sex scenes in both of these novels do not equate to pornography, but it's weirdly hard to call them erotic, either. They feel like masquerades. They feel like someone is going through motions, and it's uncertain who the someone is: the characters, the authors, and/or the readers.

Sometimes, Gemmell writes delicately around such concepts. When she does, her work is raw and sharp. And then the moment is gone. The nerve seems lost. The work loses its sense of the edge of something important that needs to be talked about.



Cunningham's novel is less dangerous. It too suffers from a perfunctory framing device, although Cunningham's device works far better than Gemmell's. Cunningham's framing story of a blissful new relationship—in the honeymoon stage, maybe—set by the sea in Sri Lanka, is soft and mellifluous and also sketchily written when compared to what seems the larger story of the novel—that of the narrator's past experience of an exhilarating relationship spanning years, cities, and countries.

But in *Geography*, too, we find hints of something discomforting that is prevalent in contemporary life: the something that nobody seems quite able to find the pulse of or quite willing to speak about lest they are shushed with accusations of conservatism. Cunningham's narrator, too, is almost talking to herself, saying what could have been said to her lovers and friends, instead of in whispered, prettily nuanced asides to an unknown reader. Is what needs to be said really too terrible to say to those we trust? Or is the point of these two novels that many of us actually don't know who we can trust now, and it's safer to tell a stranger than a friend. It's safer to confess than confide? It's safer

to vent than discuss?

Geography, like *The Bride*, concerns itself with the pain that can result when one tries to act out the sex of fantasies. The narrator, Catherine, has finally—it seems—left behind her exciting but destructive relationship: a hot, sexy liaison with Michael. He's an obsession, as is the dirtiness of the sex. This relationship makes her do things she would not have imagined before—sexually, but also in the form of stalker-like acts that even a 'normal' person can be driven to do if the obsession is intense enough. A reader may find herself in turns furious with Catherine's foolishness and wanting to hug her and tell her we've all been there, we understand. As the relationship drags on and gets darker and nastier, we follow Catherine back and forth through her desire to distance herself from Michael, and the fact of her still being close enough to her obsession to hunger for the taste.

Strangely enough, the charm of *Geography* may to be found in that not-quite-baked part of the story set in Sri Lanka. Unlike *The Bride*, *Geography* has a glimmer of love in it, a touch of glitter smeared on the shoulders, tinkling music heard through warm night air. We can't know if this new relationship with Ruby will last. But for now it's romantic and fragrant and it hurts less to read about than it does to read about Catherine and Michael.

Like Gemmell, Cunningham seems to be questioning what women are willing to take, what we sometimes keep secret even from ourselves, in our desires to be modern, to be like what we think other women are like, what the media tells us we should be like. And if that makes us sad, can we find the voice to say so?

This is a lighter novel than *The Bride*. It has a warmer heart and ultimately a greater sincerity. The story is not remarkable, but the ways dichotomies of sadness and happiness, bliss and despair, sex and love, are explored here, touch nerves.

The Bride Stripped Bare is something of a misnomer for Gemmell's novel, just as the 'Anonymous' tag is now slightly nonsensical. The narrator almost strips bare. She thinks about stripping bare. For a number of pages, the reader can almost look in and see her most fragile secrets and her deepest bruises. But then the novel wraps itself up tightly, and nothing surprising or daring is laid bare from then on. *Geography*, though, is an apt title for Sophie Cunningham's novel. This narrator—and this write—is tracing through space, somewhat innocently and girlishly trying to find a way into issues that seem urgent but are too elusive or just too scary to contemplate. We leave Catherine and Ruby in gentle images; it is an ending to be enjoyed, a perfect ending to a novel packed for a summer holiday. But the heavier weight of the rest of the novel is palpable. A honeymoon is ephemeral, but the issues trying their hardest to burst out of these novels, and not quite succeeding, seem set to linger.

Gaylene Perry's memoir *Midnight Water* has been published recently by Picador. She lectures in fiction and life writing at Deakin University.

[1] In the recently published anthology *Not For Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*, eds. Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant, Spinifex, North Melbourne, 2004, for instance, Whisnant writes:

Sniggering jokes about porn in mainstream sitcoms and other TV shows are as common as dirt. Girls of ten and twelve know how to mimic the poses and conventions of the industry, having watched shows like *Can You Be a Porn Star?* on cable TV. Pornography has become the ultimate cool – quotidian and yet thrillingly audacious. Constant pop cultural references teach us that men's pornography use is both inevitable and completely legitimate, and that the way to be a cool, modern, liberated woman is to not only tolerate it but join in (p. 16).

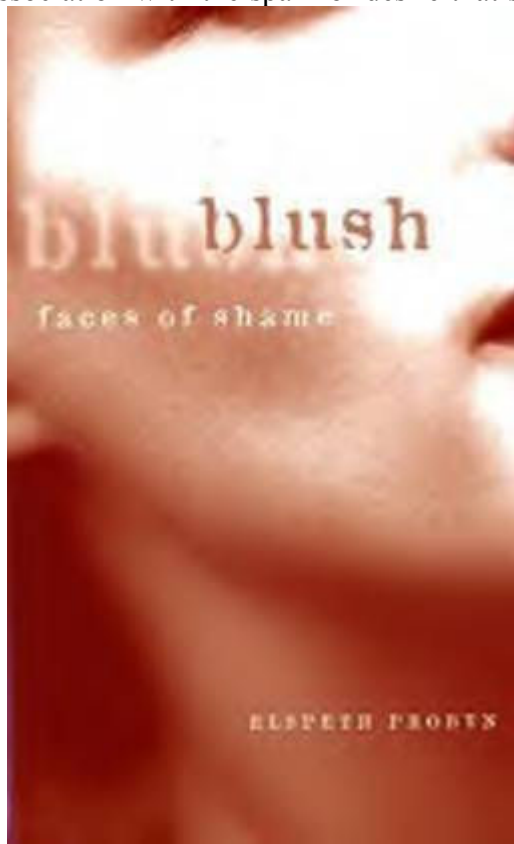
Shame: The Effects of Affect

Elsbeth Probyn. *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Alix Winter

Shame is shameful. Which is why most people prefer not to talk of shame too much. Steven Connor writes that ‘shame is bottomless, there is far too much ever to tell of it, and so it holds its tongue.’ Elspeth Probyn in *Blush: Faces of Shame* is compelled to speak of shame; it has, she says, got under her skin. Where pride has been an important feature of the new social movements, Probyn examines shame (the limits of pride), and argues for its potentially productive effects. Tracing some of the manifestations (faces) of shame, personal and collective, Probyn suggests that shame can compel an examination of the causes of shame. This re-examination may instigate a reappraisal of actions, our selves and, ideally, of our politics. In these ways, shame is productive.

The productive role of shame is, for Probyn, a consequence of its deeply human qualities, and its association with the spark or desire that signals interest. That is, we can only feel shame when we are



interested in something or someone, and our interest is shunned. I am, for example, ashamed when I approach someone I have met before, whom I admire, and they do not recognise me. The link between shame and interest, drawn from the work of psychologist Sylvan Tomkins, is the common denominator that links the different faces of shame explored in this book: the shame of being out of place; the politics of shame and shaming; the shame of the past; shame and writing; shame and bodies. Shame is a result of proximity between people that reveals how we ‘embody the social’ (27).

Theoretically, *Blush: Faces of Shame* brings together sociology, theories of affect and emotion, cultural studies and psychological theories of shame. *Blush* is positioned as a meditation on shame, pursuing lines of enquiry across theory, literature and cultural moments. It implicitly uses a feminist methodology, drawing on personal narrative which is a starting point for an exploration of the political and social ramifications of shame. In disciplinary terms, shame is drawn upon to question the biological/social divide between the sciences and humanities, specifically to rethink the role of the feeling, blushing body as capable of shaking up categories of the social and physiological. Probyn

explores the capacity of shame to disturb both personal habitus and politics. At its most powerful, shame provokes a revaluation of the self, and incites a will to know that is political in its effects. For example, the white shame associated with Aboriginal dispossession in Australia may trigger learning about the effects of land loss, debate and discussion that in turn engenders political change. The potential inherent in shame lies in its affective qualities which entail a biological commonality, while its anacletic emotional qualities mean that shame is deeply personal and social, differing across cultures. Both the physiological commonality, as well as the emotional and personal components of shame can be mobilised to investigate and change the social.

Studies of shame have largely been associated with psychology and anthropology, while feminism has analysed the gendering of emotion. Recent feminist studies of affect, including Elspeth Probyn, Sara Ahmed and Teresa Brennan, are a rethinking of the intersections of the social body, the biological body and politics. Where much previous work on bodies has emphasised cultural and linguistic constructs (Judith Butler, Susan Bordo), or desire and desiring bodies (psychoanalysis, queer), feminist considerations of affect revisit the biological body's interface with the social. *Blush* extends Probyn's academic interest in the interstices of theory, surfaces and the social (*Sexy Bodies*, *Outside Belongings*), and the sensitive interface between the body/self and otherness ('Eating Skin Well'). Unlike these previous works, however, Probyn draws on psychology and psychoanalysis, which compels a recognition of the normative roles of shame. More broadly, the rethinking of the social/biological body through the lens of emotion and affect flag a new theoretical domain for feminist cultural studies.

Though the scope of *Blush* is wide, place, bodies and the shame of being out of place are recurring tropes. In particular, white shame about a colonial history is a form of being out of place in an Australian context. Probyn suggests that the public manifestations of shame that accompanied the 'Bringing Them Home' report on the Stolen Generations, experienced both personally and collectively, 'allowed for knowledge to circulate, softened by the affective cloaking of shared emotions' (99). As such, shame keeps issues alive. In her consideration of ancestral shame, in which individual shame is connected more broadly with history, namely colonialism, Probyn argues that shame is not only passed down through history, but through generations. This ancestral shame necessarily entails an affective and emotional inter-relation of the oppressor and the oppressed. Shame becomes a form of 'contact zone' and holds the potential for an exploration of new ways of connecting, and a new form of proximity.

Probyn's explorations of the possibilities of shame for self and social re-evaluation are compelling. There is, however, a powerful component of shame that perpetuates the status quo. While *Blush* explicitly wants to consider the productive role of shame, there is also a need to examine the politics of shame in maintaining hegemonic models of gender and sexuality, among others. As Probyn acknowledges, mobilising shame for positive political outcome is challenge—the shift from personal shame to the collective entails a different way of making shame work productively. The challenge is to draw on shame to find 'a more affecting way of engaging in politics' (106). At best, a collective shame provokes a desire to learn more, to engage in debate and discussion. Not everyone, however, will be goaded into action by shame. I am therefore cautious about shame's transformative potential when shame is still mobilised in normative ways. The challenge of the revaluation of shame is in ensuring these positive political outcomes: how do we mobilise shame so that it does not simply entail personal transformation (in keeping with current narratives of self improvement), but personal, social and political transformation? The absence of a consideration of shame in relation to gay and lesbian politics in this book is surprising. While Probyn does not wish to interrogate pride, it seems that the politics of pride involve a shake up of the self and the social that has its origins in shame, and that this could be instructive for the political and transformative capacity of shame more generally. More broadly, I wonder at the resurgence of the affective body in a highly mediated, bureaucratised society. Is the affective body a locus of 'truth' in postmodernity, or another symptom?

Probyn is highly readable and this reconsideration of shame is provocative. Probyn positions *Blush* as one response to the challenge of thinking shame. Further challenges include a consideration of the reasons why shame and affect more broadly are becoming sites of political intervention.

Alexandra Winter did her PhD thesis on skin in the School of EMSAH at The University of Queensland, St Lucia. Alexandra has taught in EMSAH and also in the Contemporary Studies programme at the Ipswich campus. She is currently a research fellow at Eidos, a cross-institutional research centre.

The Young, The Old, And The Motherly: Three Generations Of Contemporary Poetry By Australian Women.

Julie Beveridge, *Rock n Roll Tuxedo*. Brisbane: Julie Beveridge, 2005;

Lesley Singh, *Organic Sister*. Flaxton: Post Pressed, 2005;

Melissa Ashley, *The Hospital for Dolls*. Flaxton: Post Pressed, 2003.

Reviewed by Evelyn Hartogh

Julie Beveridge, Lesley Singh, and Melissa Ashley's recent collections of poetry display remarkable differences in style and subject matter. All three have been participants in the ever-growing and very lively poetry performance culture of Australia. However, sharing that activity in common and being women are the only qualities that bind the authors together as a group. In all other respects their work presents completely different approaches to poetry and, indeed, to life itself. The three poets are also from different generations and the central themes of their works are highly reflective of their age groups. Even the venues they perform in differ in location and audience. Julie Beveridge takes the stage in urban poetry gigs in Fortitude Valley, Lesley Singh has appeared in the more rural setting of Maleny poetry events while Melissa Ashley has organised and performed in the early years of the now well-established Queensland Poetry Festival.

Julie Beveridge is the youngest poet and is relatively new to the poetry performance scene. She is currently a regular performer at Speedpoets, a poetry event held at the Royal George Hotel (the corner of Brunswick and Ann Streets in Fortitude Valley) on Sunday afternoons at 2pm. Her poetry is often short and usually in a narrative style, and centres on her life experiences, often full of a cynicism that is bitterly funny. The urban settings of her subject matter directly oppose the more traditional romantic genres of poetry that embrace and praise nature. Beveridge's collection *Rock n Roll Tuxedo* is full of the iconography of youth culture, especially the desire to identify herself with her passions for particular genres of music. Many of the poems also celebrate rebellion, embodied not in political involvement but in nihilistic intoxication with cigarettes, alcohol, pot and acid. Beveridge's work predominantly deals with the ways in which music and intoxicants offer an escape from the painfulness of growing up in a world that seems to render the artist powerless.

Lesley Singh is the eldest of the group, yet her poems have more in common with Julie Beveridge's collection than with Melissa Ashley's work. Singh, like Beveridge, writes many short poems and is deeply concerned with narrative and story telling. Like Beveridge, her poems tend to relate incidents and dialogue more than description or metaphor. For the most part the poems in *Organic Sister* are biting and sharply critical of human behaviour, and full of a desire for revenge towards those who have darkened the poet's path. Julie Beveridge also spends a lot of her poems making cruel (yet amusing) and unflattering judgements about other people. While Singh's comments on human behaviour are tempered with the bitterness and weight of experience, Beveridge's critiques have a quality of the arrogance of youth, filled with anger and smugness and a strong belief in her right to cast judgement on others. There is a quality of dark humour in both collections and a sense of frustration with the people they encounter, as if both are somewhat tired of the predictability of human behaviour.

In complete contrast, Melissa Ashley writes with a passion and love of life and her poems are filled with dense imagery and rich description, as she artfully uses metaphors and metonyms to conjure entirely fresh ways of seeing the world. Most of her collection is centred on the body, both as giver of life, as in motherhood, and as an almost destructive force, as in her poems on anorexia and disfigurement in the pursuit of beauty. She uses language in a very playful way, displaying a

remarkable talent in reconfiguring ideas to produce highly original and visually vivid poetry. However, her work is in no way lightweight, as she deals with some confronting and controversial issues relating to women's history and equal rights. Her work is the most explicitly political of the three, as it directly examines women's experience in terms of its difference to male experience. Beveridge's work seems to deny her femaleness, embracing instead a more androgenous, tomboyish identity. Meanwhile, Singh's work displays a great deal of anger to men who were irresponsible and immature. Singh even has one poem 'Can you Guess?' (37) that directly attacks patriarchy. However, there is no analysis of the structure of oppression, such that it offers little in the way of illumination, but much in the way of frustration.

Julie Beveridge's self published debut work *Rock n Roll Tuxedo* concerns itself with the day to day life of a young woman still finding her place in the world. Love, relationships, finding work and going out to bars and clubs are the dominant subject matter. Despite the seemingly trivial nature of these subjects her work is full of depth and irony. Her poems are often in the form of a short descriptive narrative with a punchline. 'My Mother' is solely comprised of the lines: 'My mother/ says I swear/ too much/ Fuck her' (15). She also has many very short untitled short poems such as, 'smoke curls in my mouth like guilt' (58) and 'sometimes your touch is like nothing on my skin ... sometimes it's like nothing else' (11). In 'Where Lowest Wages are just the Beginning' a poem about an awful job filled with 'ten hours of/interpreting the ignorant/ getting yelled at by angry fuckers/who haven't heard me/ agree w/ them the whole time' (8) she finishes with the joke: 'There's twenty six letters/ in the alphabet &/ I spend my life/ trying to get from A to B' (9). In 'Royal Oak 1.15am' Beveridge describes the people at a nightclub in a series of clichés which stereotype them as all as the kind of people she has encountered before and give her no surprises. She reserves perhaps her most scathing assumptions for '40-something in a suit/ that no-one knows' (53), but after imagining his potential behaviour and innermost thoughts in highly unflattering terms she concludes: 'as long as he keeps buying me drinks I couldn't give a fuck' (53).

Frequent references are made to drinking and smoking in both the long and short poems. In short untitled works Beveridge declares, 'I smoke Marlboro Lights/ they're my cigarette of choice/ My prepaid hitman' (35) and, 'sandwiched between scotch and dry/ it's your glass that melts me' (44) and, 'there's something about the weight/ of sobriety isn't there?/ Something heavy & sober' (24). Almost every poem has a reference to smoking cigarettes; whether it is a poem about love, another person or an evening at a nightclub, cigarettes remain consistent subject matter. Among the works about intoxication are many which refer to self destructive behaviours and abusive relationships, such as the untitled short poem which rather disturbingly declares, 'happiness is the comfort of knowing/ that its my lipstick on your cock/ & blood on your knuckles' (36) and, 'hurt myself again today/ w/ no-one there to see except *James Dean*;/ looking down at me in that way he has - / concerned & indifferent' (39).

Sex appeal is characterised in the stereotypes of, 'Cowboy renegade pirate/ gangsters' 'Inside you I see Jazz II' (42), and even more explicitly in 'Pirate' where the images of, 'leather jacket Camel straight/ Easy Rider mystery' and, 'Cowboy boots' and, 'a Gangster's tired tuxedo' are all found wanting in comparison to the sex appeal of, 'a fake jewel bearing/ alcohol drenched/ Wooden sodden careless/ Motherfucking Pirate' (32). There is a disturbing sense of danger to the author's concept of sexuality, with violence and drug and alcohol abuse taking centre stage in relationships. These poems seem to celebrate masculine wildness and show a desire to embrace and live out that recklessness.

Music is also a central focus with the author making references to Nick Cave, and The Cure, (alternative a decade ago but now comprising part of the mainstreaming of gothic music and fashion), Mike Patton (a musician who artfully bridges the gap between experimental Avant Garde in his bands Mr Bungle and Fantamas and popular Heavy Metal in his bands Faith No More and Tommahawk) and local Brisbane bands such as Soma Rasa. These references suggest the seeking of identity among these choices of popular culture interests, and the poet's personality is further demarcated by the use of titles of Elvis Presley films to mark sections of the book such as 'Jailhouse Rock', 'Viva Las Vegas' and 'GI Blues'.

A self-awareness of the influence of popular culture, especially pop songs, is wittily expressed in the poem 'Imposed Resolve' (26-7). Here the poet describes the impact of the songs that she hears at the stroke of midnight at New Year's Eve parties. Each song serves as a suggestion and illustration of choices made in the year that follows and the poem finishes with a list of songs she hopes she never hears at that fateful stroke of midnight such as, '*Fire Starter/Smack Your Bitch Up or/ ever ever ever/ I Spent My Last Ten Dollars on Birth Control & Beer*' (27)

There is a general mood of cynicism invading most of the poems, strongest in the work 'Inside You I see Jazz II' where she recalls when she was younger that she was, 'wishing we were born 10 years earlier so we could think of fucking/ Michael Hutchence & being in a generational position to fool/ ourselves into thinking we had a chance' (42). Music and intoxication such as, 'something to drink w/ a little to smoke,/ cardboard on my tongue & some kinda beat' 'Spontaneous Formula' (46) provide the escape from the sense of pessimism that pervades Beveridge's poems.

In contrast, Lesley Singh's collection of poems in *Organic Sister* embrace sobriety, and frequent references to Buddhism reflect a lifestyle that rejects intoxication as a means to cope. A particularly humorous reference is made in 'Housing Commission Summer', when the neighbours' noisy drinking parties and arguments are described in lurid detail until the angry poet declares, '*Anyone!! I dare you/*



to meditate' (74). Like Beveridge is, Singh's poems are narrative based and she also often writes extremely short ones. However, while Beveridge uses language in a heavy handed way, dense with pop culture references and slang, Singh has a refreshing sparsity of language. She is very economical with words, and her poems are the linguistic equivalent of a minimalist work of art. 'Autumn Caress' is entirely made up of four lines, 'I allow my neighbour/ this one indiscretion -/ his pumpkin vine's tendrils/ on my neat lawn.' (13). 'Thank Goodness', offers similar brevity in its composition, 'thank goodness I keep notebooks./ how else to recall/ old lovers' names?' (2).

Often her poems take on a theatrical air with the way they evoke one pivotal scene in a dramatic fashion. In 'Never' she manages to evoke the humour and sadness of an entire relationship by just describing one afternoon where, 'we swallow camembert on rye/ embarrassed for each other – our last date' (13). In a 'Radical Proposition' she tells the story of a home birth by recording the dialogue of reactions from friends such as, 'Brave! How Brave!/ Always the individual./ Always like to be/ that little bit/ different ...' (18). Dialogue is often used, and even the act of moving house takes the form of a conversation between the woman and her house. Her house is personified as a slightly annoyed and shocked character who luckily, 'forgives/ my omissions – a window frame unpainted, a hole/ unplugged', in 'This Woman, This House' (27).

Failed relationships are picked apart as if an attempt is being made to find some solace and self esteem in having survived the break ups and the disappointments. These poems are written in past tense, and use hindsight to critique the former partner, but they lack any exploration of what motivated the woman to enter into these relationships or what she may have learned about herself after them. ‘Willy-Willy Man’ is told:, ‘Don’t be so snapping string/ be the whole song/ all night long – that would be/ so *damned good* for me’ (9). While the ‘Gentle Eccentric’ is more fondly recalled as ‘the quiet man with no fridge/ [who] cradles me in his arms/ sings to me./ in lotus position/ he makes love’ (10). In ‘after his wife died I met him and oh ...’ there is an emphasis again on the actions of the man, in contrast to the more passive patience of the woman when Singh comments, ‘he need space/ time, he needed, space/ I tethered my heart/ and watched grief’s curtain thin’ (12). Another ex-husband is dealt with more harshly in ‘Warning to Computer-semi-literate Ex-husbands’ when he is told, ‘If your Emails Should Fall/ into the Hands of an Ex-Wife, She Will Not Hesitate/ to Print Them Out – to Cause Embarrassment to You/ Today – and for the Rest of Your Life’ (33).

Other couples also come under scrutiny in ‘the Pontificator’ as she describes a man as a ‘cock’ and his girlfriend as, ‘his pretty pullet/ [who] produced no brilliant conversation/ no political witticisms facts figures/ nor had she seen any of the films/ met any of the clever creatures/ read any of the books/ that *he* had’ (36). The love affairs of other people recur as subjects to be criticised such as in ‘Shameless’ where a woman is condemned for her behaviour in the lines, ‘your association with your “ex”/ exasperates me/ as does your current crush./ You know for every pleasurable encounter/ there’ll be a painful one./ Stop digging up the past/ and badgering the future./ Stop trying to manage it all./ the desire to label you *tramp/ no-good tramp* ... arises’ (72).

Anger and revenge feature strongly in many of the poems, anger towards ex-partners or at other people’s behaviour dominates the collection. Beveridge also displays much anger in her poems, showing self-awareness of it in her poem ‘Anger Irony’ where she talks about the frustration felt at having to go to Anger Management classes. Singh however, seems unaware of how vicious her poems are, unless her self-description as *serene* in ‘Lesley and Elle in the Composition Process’ (58), for example, is intentionally ironic.

People who have not fulfilled their dreams are looked down upon in the dialogue-based poem ‘Nice Work (if you can get it)’. The conversation among friends is related as, ‘the wishful potter/ the would-be-fashion-designer/ and me/ ‘You’re already writing,’ they observed./ ‘How do you do it?’/ ‘Work my butt off. Is all.’/ Sounded too easy, I guess/ The would-be fashion-designer/ decided a husband was the answer./ Mine’ (63). Even mental illness is not deemed worthy of compassion or sympathy in the rather offensively simplistic and patronising, ‘Advice to Dead Poet’ where, it is suggested, Sylvia Plath would have not committed suicide, ‘if you’d let yourself sing, Sylvia’ (42).

Poetry itself and the creative process concern all three of the poets. For Beveridge, people who don’t take their poetry seriously enough evoke anger in her in the poem ‘Casual Poets’ where she tells such people to ‘read some fucking Chaucer/ & get back to me’ (18). She also demonstrates a desire to impose her own interpretation of her work on others. She seems angry at criticism of her work in the lines, ‘critics don’t need to write rude poetry/ They are rude poetry’ (18). Singh has a similar lack of tolerance for having her methods challenged. She contrasts her way of writing to that of another creative writing student in ‘Lesley and Elle in the Composition Process’ and, even though she describes herself as being organised, she also admits to frustration with the demands of the course and recalls, ‘when the malicious/ enquire about status, Lesley lies *All Serene*’ (58). A student who seems more emotionally involved in the creative process elicits a certain amount of envy and disdain in the lines, ‘Elle cries/ when her characters suffer’ (58). Her poems about teaching and being taught writing place

scholarship and creativity as antagonistic realms, and these poems are filled with complaints about the tutors and the students. In 'Pique (in free verse)' she complains about being asked to teach poetry in a traditional framework in the lines, 'I knew I was stampeding all over The Rules for New Staff/ but had to speak / 'I can't teach poetry that way'/ The Poetic Device People replied/ students "like" having terms to learn/ instead of something nebulous/ such as meaning or/ feelings' (49). This desire to abandon organised method and embrace free verse is clear in Singh's style but seems contradicted by many other poems that seem to boast about her, 'aversion to imperfection' in the poem 'Nothin' to Lose but my Chains' (52).

Even though Melissa Ashley's poetry is richly visual, vivid and dense with metaphor and strong imagery, it nonetheless manages to have much greater clarity and unity of ideas than Singh or Beveridge's collections. Ashley plays with language to create whole new categories of ideas and a wonderfully original approach to women's history. She brings together artefacts and sensations in ways that startle and delight such as in the line, 'her ceramic flesh/ like bleached honeycomb' in 'Integument' (12). The sea and water feature strongly in her poems, as a place that seems both lonely and crowded at the same time. In 'Demeter's Lament', Ashley locates the myth of Demeter searching for her daughter in an ocean where, 'the urchins retract their spikes, the polyps stiffen, the shells fall



silent as I pass' (22). A visit to the ocean allows for Ashley to feminise the water by saying the 'ocean is tucking in her skirts' (52) in 'picking shells'. In the poem 'Her Kind', a poetry festival is attended by a woman who emerges from the Brisbane River and, before deciding to recite some verse, 'she yawned and a couple of frogs slid from her mouth' (56).

Most of Ashley's poems concern the female body either in the act of the creation of life in motherhood, or in the self-destructive behaviour of the anorexic. The order in which her poems on motherhood are collected give rise to a narrative, which begins with a miscarriage, followed by another pregnancy and, finally, the birth of a child. The title poem, 'The Hospital for Dolls', concerns the experience of being in hospital when a pregnancy has miscarried. It is a frightening and mysterious poem which at times seems ambiguous – has the woman had a miscarriage or an abortion?

There is a sense of things being out of control, and a deep tone of grieving, and the lines, 'the sister/ laid out in a neat glistening line/ scalpel speculum curette/ vacuum cleaner' (17) suggest perhaps that the woman is overwhelmed by the need to induce a still birth. Like many women who experience such a tragic loss, this woman needs to see the child to be able to begin the process of mourning, and she talks about wanting to find the corpse, declaring: 'I would find the basement oven./ I wouldn't care about the alarms - / I would upset the bins/ like a dog' (19).

After this tragic and disturbing poem it is a relief for the reader when the tone shifts to more happier times in 'home birth' where the mother says she is, 'wrapped & moaning in nothing but the thinnest sheen of grease/ I am lowered into the river of Cyane. I grasp its plastic banks. I/ perceived my pores enlarging; a briny mucus fluid seeps through/ my pelvic floor' (25). The experience of motherhood is further explored in the very funny and informative poem 'The Origins of the Milky Way' which looks at the cultural and social history of breast milk. Myth, medicine and spirituality are all explored, from Greek goddesses to Medieval cults that concerned themselves with breast milk, for example, 'an entire school of *Virgo Lactans* iconography developed, and/ along with it frequent recordings in the journals

of female/ mystics, of instances of spontaneous lactation' (28).

In one stand - out work 'this is not a poem about a woman turning into a flower', Ashley looks at the life of porn star Stacey Valentine, including her experience of cosmetic surgery when, 'following a "boob job" sexual sensation is lost in the nipple as is the ability to breastfeed, which doesn't appear to bother ms valentine' (35). Rather than judging her choice of occupation, Ashley wryly points out 'Stacey Valentine charges a thousand dollars (US) a day for a *dp [*double penetration] and lives with three cats. She doesn't do drugs. She's loaded' (35).

In her series of poems on anorexia, Ashley not only describes women's personal experiences of the illness but also the cultural history of hunger strikes, in particular the strikes by the suffragettes, such as in the poem 'how it feels to be force-fed' where she imagines, 'no surrender crackles inside the dryness of your mouth' (39). In a witty poem 'Poststructuralist Interpretations of the Signs of Self-starvation or the Linguistic Rationalism of High Culture' Ashley pokes fun at the ways in which this debilitating condition is often romanticised by artists and academics in lines like, 'self-starvation: a struggle to free the body of all its contexts? **Nihilism. Emptiness.** Body dysmorphic disorder" [author's bold emphasis] (41). This difficult subject is dealt with very respectfully and with the greatest emotional impact in the poem 'Anorexia Sweet' which documents the last days of an anorexic woman who is controlling every morsel that goes into her mouth. Ashley's use of imagery strikes right to the heart of the woman's tragic rigidity and desire for control in such lines as, 'the uncooked rice in her cup is tough as tiny shards of bone' (42) and, 'she is invincible and frequently rests her head in her hands in order to feel the fresh hardness of her cheek and jawbones' (44).

Ashley's focus on the female body highlights the lack of attention to the body that is present in Singh and Beveridge's work. Identity, for Singh and Beveridge, is a quality that is gained from outside the self, done by a process of comparison to others and manifesting in what parts of culture the poet is interested. When other people comprise the subject of her poems, Ashley shows a great deal of empathy toward them, always exploring and imagining their sensory experience. In contrast, Beveridge and Singh rarely attempt to place themselves in another person's shoes and instead leap to cast judgement or show disapproval. Ashley tends to internalise other people, rather than cast them away from her. Beveridge and Singh attempt to define themselves from what they are not, and concentrate on describing where they are, and where they have been, rather than imagining how the other person might feel. Ashley focuses her attention on what happens to the body and the emotions – her work is concerned with how the environment affects her, and how she interacts with it. Singh and Beveridge's work shows a desire to become separate to what is around them, even to deny their own participation and influence in their environment.

Stylistically, the three poets are a prime example of the current great variety of approaches to contemporary free verse. Ashley's work manages to bridge tradition and modernity with its use of poetic devices and a concentration on description, while at the same time taking on decidedly modern subject matter. Beveridge's poems embrace the post-modern world by being steeped in media culture references. Her poems show how popular culture and the mass media have become a dominant environment from which younger poets draw inspiration. Singh draws both from nature, the traditional inspiration for poets, and the modern urban world filled with complexities and contradictions.

While most of Ashley's poems are long, in comparison to the shorter more punchy works of Beveridge and Singh, she covers less subject matter, preferring to focus her collection on the clear theme of the female body. While Beveridge and Singh deliver a greater variety of subject matter, their collections are mainly about their day-to-day lives. Both of them deal with the ordinary events of life, like work,

relationships, study, dating, clubbing, and family tension. Their poems deal with subjects we can all identify with, while Ashley's poems express more unique experiences. Not all women have been pregnant, nor have had anorexia, yet her poems are so rich in description they do not alienate the reader. Ironically Beveridge and Singh, although dealing with topics far more common and mundane, may alienate many readers in their anger, bitterness and lack of empathy for others.

Freelance writer, Evelyn Hartogh, has a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) University of Queensland 2002, and a Master of Arts (Women's Studies) Griffith University 1997.