

Australian Women's Book Review

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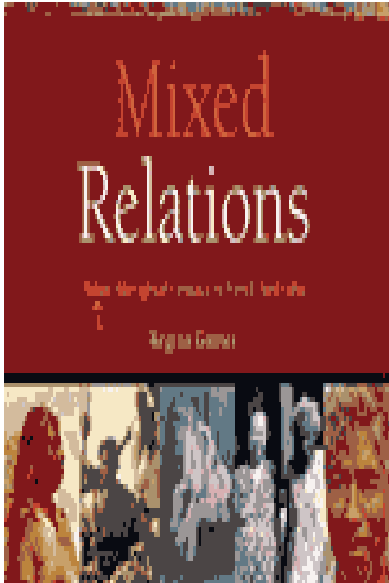
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Sunny Side Up: Australia's Top-Down History

Regina Ganter. (With contributions from Julia Martinez and Gary Lee). *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact In North Australia*. Crawley, WA: UWA Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Peta Stephenson



In *Mixed Relations* Regina Ganter argues convincingly for the need to consider Australian history from the north down, rather than Sydney-side up. The book's re-orientation of the story of Australia asks us fundamentally to shift the way we view the country, its origins and its identity. When we consider that the first reliably documented seasonal encounters between (Asian) outsiders and Yolngu (Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities) lasted some hundreds of years, and commenced long before the British 'discovered' Australia, the need to recast the stories we tell about ourselves, as a nation and a people, becomes clear.

The first two chapters of this thoroughly researched and beautifully illustrated book recount the long and close associations between seafarers from Macassar (in Sulawesi, Indonesia) and northern Indigenous people. The Macassan fishermen came each year to Australia's northern coastlines in search of trepang or bêche-de-mer.

In return for access to rich trepanging sites, and Aboriginal labour in procuring it, the Macassans exchanged hooks, knives, cloth, alcohol, tobacco and other goods. The legacy of these mutually beneficial relationships is still evident in Yolngu languages, stories, art, ceremony, and in family genealogies. These cross-cultural encounters are not historic relics of a forgotten past. They continue profoundly to influence the way Yolngu communities define themselves today.

As the authors of *Mixed Relations* ably show, the history of 'the polyethnic north' bears little resemblance to the 'White Australia' of the country's south. This is largely due to the influx of relatively high numbers of East and Southeast Asians – Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos and 'Malays' – who arrived from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s as indentured labourers in the pearl-shelling industry. The northern marine industry was so reliant on cheap Asian (and even cheaper Aboriginal) labour that those arriving from Asia were exempted from the provisions of the 'White Australia' policy. This enabled the northern economies to grow and prosper, but it also led to something that was a cause of great concern for the government – the emergence of a so-called 'coloured' population that existed in the interstices between protective legislation extended over Indigenous people, and restrictive policies controlling Asians.

Arguing that Asian-Aboriginal contact is 'at the very core of the anxious nation', Ganter points out that in their effort to curtail the emergent polyethnicity of the north, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory introduced legislation making it illegal for Asians to employ or marry Aboriginal people. For Ganter (and her co-authors), the emergence of a polyethnic community was especially threatening in the north because white Australians were far from achieving numerical dominance there. As she reminds us, it made little sense to celebrate Australia's bi-centenary in 1988 as a national achievement because nowhere in the north does permanent white settlement yet amount to 200 years'

occupancy. Indeed, it was not until World War II that whites became the north's majority.

Ganter provides exhaustive detail about the implementation of policies that sought to separate Indigenous and Asian people from each other. But she also illustrates the resistance of the legislated-against. Despite all the odds many Asian-Aboriginal families were able to circumvent the surveillance and control they faced. But Ganter might have provided more insight into the variety of official government attitudes towards inter-ethnic unions. Allowing that in many cases local police turned a blind eye to Asian-Aboriginal associations would have complicated the somewhat exaggerated image of a general populace wholeheartedly enthusing about 'White Australia'.

More space might also have been given to the many ambiguities and tensions that characterised Asian-Aboriginal contact in North Australia. While Ganter does (briefly) gesture towards such complexity, her account is sometimes overly celebratory. What is the implication of Asian labourers (including 'free' and indentured workers) in the colonial venture? Would the colonising enterprise have been as widespread without the hard work that Asians contributed to clearing the land, raiding natural resources and helping to develop the economy? Significantly, how does all this impact on the position of contemporary Asian-Australians in terms of Reconciliation and Native Title?

To narrate its story of the north, *Mixed Relations* makes use of a wide variety of source materials. It incorporates scores of interviews, photographs and other imagery, official government reports, published accounts and artistic, musical and cultural production to weave a rich tapestry of cross-cultural encounter. The oral testimony of Asian-Aboriginal people gives the reader rare insight into the lives, subjectivities and experiences of this hitherto largely overlooked minority. Their stories also reveal much about the ideological and legislative effects of the anxiety Asian-Aboriginal alliances engendered in the white imagination.

In chapters 3-6 Ganter's (and her co-authors') analysis of North Australia's rich polyethnicity indicates that while northern townships might have appeared to be spaces where a variety of cultures mixed freely, in reality this diversity was controlled. Real friendships developed between and within the north's different racial 'groups', but they were formed against the backdrop of petty apartheid that operated in places including the local cinema, one's living quarters, school and even where one worked and slept on a pearl-shelling lugger. Many kinds of ritualised contact occurred which allowed the contradiction of an appearance of friendly community—where everybody mingled—to coexist with a social environment in which all were segregated.

Different cultures were not only separated from each other, but were located within a hierarchy with white Australians at the top, Aborigines placed at the bottom, and Asians, subdivided into another hierarchy of race and class, situated between them. It is this stratification that calls for an analysis that scrutinises more closely the relative relationships that existed between and within different communities. While Aboriginal people were closer to Asians than whites on the racial ladder, they still did not possess the same social standing, cultural capital or material resources that their Asian counterparts enjoyed.

The various reasons for the near disappearance of the polyethnic north are established in chapter 7. Perhaps of most significance was the effect of World War II. With the mobilisation of troops into the north, whites finally became numerically dominant. This, coupled with the incarceration of the Japanese (including those born in Australia), the evacuation of white and Asian women and children, and the removal of Aboriginal people, resulted in the decimation of once strong polyethnic societies. Following the war the vast majority of the Japanese were deported, and those Aboriginal and Asians-Australians who did return found their houses and properties destroyed and their former enclaves razed

to the ground. As the white majority became entrenched and the policy of assimilation implemented more stridently, there was little option for these communities except to adopt the (white) 'Australian way of life' so long a feature of the south.

Given the long history of polyethnicity she has painstakingly detailed, Ganter is critical of the perpetuation in Australian policy-making circles and the media of binary thinking. Her final chapter argues that Black/white and Asian/Anglo dichotomies simply do not make sense when we consider Australia's polyethnic north. Where does this divisive way of thinking leave people of mixed Indigenous-Asian-white ancestry? Ganter argues against essentialist notions of identity and suggests, instead, that it be seen as 'situational' and contextual. She reminds us that there are many 'ways of being Aboriginal'. Even though contemporary Aboriginal identity politics does not always allow for this, she illustrates that recent musical, artistic and cultural production is celebrating 'shared histories and mixed lineages'.

Though the book's material is presented chronologically, the subject matter does not always unfold in a neat linear fashion. The experiences of those it seeks to represent are far from clear-cut. Rather, they are open-ended and fractured by histories of removal, internment, deportation and repatriation as well as those of reunion and renewal. This criss-crossing of lives and identities and the blending of blood-lines often resist careful organisation and characterisation. This ambitious book at times strains under the weight of representing the diverse experiences of a huge variety of people living across a very large area of land and during an extensive period of time. The seemingly ad hoc inclusion of interviews within the body of the text sometimes adds to the sense of fragmentation. Because of this *Mixed Relations* might be a book to be dipped into, rather than read cover to cover. But that said, it is fascinating for the sheer number of stories it recounts, and the breadth, depth and sincerity with which it approaches them.

Dr Peta Stephenson is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland. She is interested in how nations invent themselves, in whose stories get told or left out. Peta is currently researching why an increasing number of Indigenous Australians are identifying with Islam and is the author of *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (UNSW Press, 2007).

Convincing Fictions

Jane Turner Goldsmith. *Poinciana*. Wakefield Press, 2006 .

Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic



Weaving together two or more narratives has become a common literary technique in Australian literature. The correlation between them is usually associative and strikes an experienced reader as an imaginative, but logical progression. Jane Turner Goldsmith's first novel *Poinciana*, however, follows two seemingly independent narratives which for a long time have no point of connection. There is no question of an embedded narrative here, for both stories are given equal status in the structural hierarchy of the novel and they just interrupt each other without creating a sense of enrichment, of informing each other. The impression is perhaps induced by the initial promise of mystery soon undercut by a lapse into dull prose, quite strange for a poet. The novel sets off with a family desertion and the ensuing quest by a young woman for her long-lost father whom she believed to be dead until, one day... The search for identity, one of the most common themes in literature since the onset of modernity, is the only perceptible link

with the intersecting narrative of an orphaned South Sea Islander (Kanaka) boy adopted by a white family. This is well-known territory for the reading public aware of hundreds of similar experiences in its own recent past, but perhaps more illuminating because it is someone else's history, easier to deal with. For a long time the novel reads as an expression of the hero's inarticulateness, of suppressed anxiety and embarrassment triggered by poor communication skills. Rather than being an implicit critique of cultural specificities, it is an illumination of a particular state of being that is all the more frustrating because of the unawareness of character deficiencies and a somewhat infantile pride in all things Australian.

The problem with more than half of *Poinciana* is that it poses too many questions which should have been left to the reader to ask. The writer's voice intrudes into the mystery, dispelling it, as if coming from a split personality who simultaneously wants to be a fiction writer and a reviewer. Not only does the author ask redundant questions, she repeats them yelling, rather than whispering, into the reader's ear. And it gets worse, for soon she starts spelling out everything (except for the actual closure to the story), depriving the reader of the thrill of discovery, of intuiting the motives, the underlying messages and hidden truths. It is as if the author needed reminding of the golden rule of fiction: show, do not tell. It is the secret of all persuasive narratives, which do not force ideas upon the reader but invoke images that create, subtly and imperceptibly, an anticipated state of mind that, in turn, leads to a desired conclusion. This golden rule applies irrespective of the context, be it didactic or ontological. Turner Goldsmith starts respecting it only once the female hero finds rapport with the local community and the mystery she seeks to solve starts unravelling. The moment she begins to feel at ease, the author also feels at ease. This is an extraordinary development in the novel that seems to corroborate Barthes' thesis about the simultaneous 'birth' of the author and her text or, in other words, the coincidental progression of the text and the 'I' of the author. As if all the external influences competing for authority have lost their grip over the author, liberating her to speak in her own voice. Thus roughly from Chapter 15 onwards, the mystery sneaks back—prodding to life the idle fantasy and assuming again the power to convince, better than any explicit statement could.

The issues Turner Goldsmith takes up have perennial currency and are especially topical in post-colonial societies, where competing discourses have not reached a point of reconciliation. New examples of power struggles between an Indigenous population and their colonisers, which form the background of the novel, simply confirm the need to go beyond rhetoric if the questions of social justice and equality are ever to be resolved. The history of New Caledonia is only vaguely, if at all, familiar to most of the international community and the author introduces its recent chapters slowly,

through the search for the solution of the mystery of identity. When her hero(ine) confesses how limited her knowledge of the origins of political tensions on the island are, these revelations fall flat for they are too obviously somebody's construction. But once the telling stops, the narrative becomes an experience, a lived truth. The bleak reality of the dispossessed, their abject poverty after the destruction of the subsistence economy, different philosophical approaches to the land, the tribes' efforts to protect their young women, the subtleties of wordless communication contradicting the Western idea of articulateness, all build a picture of the people fighting for the acknowledgment of their own culture, their own dignity. But it's the fight for the land that alone has the power to stir to rebellion the Kanaks living on the edge of the post-colonial world. It is easy to understand why, when the lush beauty of the landscape suddenly gives way to barren hills that gape open. These excavations speak for themselves. The clash between Western materialism and a nurturing attitude to the land of those who have no control over it is more than a controversy; it is an emotional state arising from the attachment to place, a sense of belonging that the colonisers have also developed. A personal quest which seemed to be the theme of the novel up till then, fades into insignificance before this larger, master narrative of dispossession and the fight for independence. Thus personal narratives become subsumed in the cultural history of a mixed society, where the fight for the land is a fight for the recognition of identity. The unfolding stories are examples which demystify abstract ideas of otherness, of wasted potential and ignored promise.

Throughout the novel, nature and human history comment on each other in a kind of intertextuality that calls for the appropriation of the language of difference on both sides. It is a reminder that every bone of contention has dialectical properties just like water and fire. The Tao River's cascade is, for example, the shared ground of romance for the young Kanaks as well as for the middle-aged white questers. Its beauty is only matched by the beauty of Poinciana, the flame tree, red fire, which symbolically denounces the pointless loss of a young life as a contradiction of the law of nature. When the young man's narrative stops, his absence is a void that memory and photos cannot fill, but only cover over. Social integration of different cultures is always a dubious affair, and the likelihood of success largely depends on the mechanisms established to ensure the balance of power.

For decades, Australians brought Kanaks from across the seas to work in their fields. The cane cutters' experience, little different from the experience of the Aboriginal population, challenges the complacent invocations of Australia, a land of paradise in the book. The story of a boy caught between the two camps is an implicit critique of this self-delusion and the only narrative that takes hold of the imagination. It is lyrical, tragic and universal, as powerful as the call of his blood. The white woman's journey of discovery, however, reads as a mere reflection of a confused personality. Her loss of enthusiasm for further search, ensuing from the discovery of a connection with a deceased half-brother, places a shadow of doubt on her whole quest and its sincerity. It is the impossibility of a white woman knowing herself that disheartens the most. The solution to mystery is not the solution to the question of identity. For the hero, it is just shoved under the carpet. For the reader, it is an unsatisfactory ending. And yet, it is a life's reality, a possibility. What obliterates the fact is an expectation of a solution assertively promised in the exposition but denied in the end. The feeling of betrayal is a natural consequence.

Jasna Novakovic is a free-lance critic and a tutor in journalism at Monash University. She has recently completed a PhD Thesis on Dorothy Hewett that explores the dialectics of myth and avantgardiste strategies of subversion in her plays.

Something Is Rotten

Diane Bell, *Evil*. Melbourne: Spinifex, 2005.

Reviewed by Frances Cruickshank



This novel, the first from Australian anthropologist and Director of Women's Studies at George Washington University, Diane Bell, is a fable of the contest between good and evil, where evil is a patriarchal conspiracy of silence and good is feminist solidarity at its upbeat best. The out-and-out villainy of the chauvinists and the indomitable optimism of the feminist heroes are somewhat grating, but the gradual unravelling of a web of sin and secrecy makes for compelling reading—all the more because the issues (if not their handling) ring true. There is genuine drama in the climactic stand-off, and while the tidy dishing out of justice in the end is unlikely, it is satisfying nonetheless.

The story unfolds in St Jude's, a Jesuit Liberal Arts college in New England, where Australian anthropologist Dee Per Scrutari (one of many punny names) takes up a tenured appointment in the Religious Studies department. Dee—mid-fifties, divorced, agnostic—observes as an outsider the rituals of this ancient tribe of non-reproducing males. Her vivid clothes and perky confidence are out of place among them, but she listens to their liturgies (and confessions) with an open mind. She is disturbed by the backward nature of their curriculum and the pre-eminence of the young white males on campus, but her efforts to promote Women's Studies and grassroots groups are frustrated by the powers that be. As Dee's anthropological enquiries turn into serious detection, it becomes obvious that there is more at stake than simply the status quo. Why are accusations of rape dismissed so quickly? Why does no-one care that women are receiving death-threats? Why will no-one speak about her dead predecessor? By sheer personal magnetism (more apparent to the other characters than to this reader) Dee draws together a group of women—teachers and students, cleaners and secretaries—and enlists her black-feminist-human-rights-activist-AIDS-researcher-doctor boyfriend, Christian, to plan a peaceable campaign of resistance. Her sleuthing uncovers the guilt of several abusers and their protectors, and the unstoppable gusto of her band of merry women works to overthrow the evil regime, bringing liberty, equality, and sorority to the decaying cloisters of St Jude's.

Scattered among the episodes of this plot are Dee's copious and unceasing notes about anthropology, feminist theory, and Catholic theology. The incoherence of these thought fragments adds a shade of realism, but weakens the intellectual power of the book. Complex ideas, rather than being integrated into the texture of the fiction, are festooned around an undemanding narrative like concept-maps or scribbled 'post-its', leaving the reader to make the connections between story and theory. The book, under its capacious title, masquerades as a cerebral exposé; a subtle exploration of the notion of evil in sociological and religious contexts. In fact it's more like a thinking woman's *Da Vinci Code*: religious cultures are subjected to journalistic scrutiny amid deepening mystery and blossoming romance. While purporting to offer a feminist critique of relationships and power, the story is in the end a fairly conventional romantic whodunit superimposed on a blurry background of sophisticated political theory.

It is also, however, a provocative dredge through the murky waters of sexual abuse and institutionalised injustice. Dee's investigations raise important questions about truth and suppression, and reveal the

power of cultures—whether an indigenous tribe in Central Australia or an academic board in North America—to defend and perpetuate evil under the habits and hierarchies of generations. Indeed its value lies not so much in its blunt defiance of patriarchy, but more in an understated questioning of cultural relativity and tolerance. Dee’s scrutiny of her own anthropological gaze is much more interesting than the object of that gaze, and her genuinely unsettling doubts about cross-cultural interventions are both thought-provoking and germane. As a feminist novel, it is theoretically underworked and politically oversimplified. As a story about culture, interesting and even ingenious flashes of insight emerge from its mid-nineties context to confront current local and international neuroses.

With its fellowship of brave and devoted heroes piecing together the clues to a grave mystery, and struggling against a nebulous malevolence, it works best as a fairy tale. The Catholic *ancien régime* is attended by all the horrors of a rotten fiefdom under the sway of brutal and bad-mannered men. The heroes, autonomous middle-aged princesses, break the spell of the powers of darkness by the stronger power of their courage and camaraderie. Like all fairy tales, its mythic simplicity requires of a modern reader the willing suspension of disbelief. Yet like all fairy tales, its precipitous possibilities don’t need to be believed to be seen.

Frances Cruickshank has a PhD in English Literature from The University of Queensland and is currently working as a researcher, writer, and tutor in Brisbane.

Living to Tell the Tale: Survival and Connection

Judith McNeil. *The Girl With the Cardboard Port*. Wollombi, NSW: Exisle, 2006

Reviewed by Janine Little



Memories too sharp for public handling most often stay in our private worlds where we all live, at some point or other, with the weight of regret, or sadness of things lost. The idea of living to tell the tale becomes in itself the story, and we keep counsel with that idea in early morning dreams, or late night fears. For most of us, that is as far as our story goes. Some women, however, move beyond that instinctive silence born of trauma. When the story they have to tell is also a trauma of nationality, of intercultural connection, and of women's shared sense of survival, it can be tough reading. Judith McNeil's memoir, *The Girl With the Cardboard Port* was set down, like this, in front of me.

Reminded at several points of my personal-familial history, I read the book in several sittings, putting it down and walking away with the weight felt, again, at a familiar image, or a resonant turn of dialogue. The last sitting ended early one morning, with McNeil telling how she wrote her story to help other women 'find the courage to struggle on, to fight against all odds for self-preservation in an unkind world where women are still used and abused... I know, too, that I am crippled,' she says (245).

And I know that she is not alone. Even as her memoir recalls a decade of abandonment, violence, and emotional degradation, McNeil's manner of recollection invokes a sense of connection made with the cast of her life drama in two countries, and so a connection is made with readers sharing her survivor spirit. Her tale starts as that of a young, working class girl in 1957 rural Australia, boarding a train with her five brothers and sisters and pregnant mother, and watching her father's coffin being carried aboard for the trip to Brisbane. After his death in a workplace accident, the family is cast from its railway housing, and moves into the orderly home of a Catholic aunt, who sets about berating the mother for her perceived failings and imposing on 15-year-old Judy the burden of 'dutiful daughter'. There is a sense, though (and this remains throughout the narrative), of Judy's resistance to attempts to subjugate her, even as her outer life turns quickly to ritual appeasement and pretence. An early scene at the aunt's house establishes the ground for the more harrowing experiences to come, in a Catholic home for 'wayward girls', and in 1960s South-East Asia.

'It hasn't taken my aunt long to firmly instruct us in the Roman Catholic religion. In my constant state of anxiety I am ripe for this devoted passion. Whenever I look at the many religious pictures on the walls I cross myself—my arm seemingly constantly moving to my forehead, chest, then left and right shoulder. At the table I fold my hands together to give thanks to God for our food, even though I wonder at having to thank someone that I cannot see. It doesn't matter, I will say and do anything to live in this cramped pretty place and continue to eat delicious food' (21).

The aunt's plan sets Judy on the road to ultimate alienation from her family, as she arranges a house for the impoverished family, and a new husband for her grief-stricken, defeated mother. Judy's consolation comes with her friendship with a Jewish shopkeeper's son, David, but results by its late 1950s aspect of 'impropriety' in her imprisonment in a Catholic home for wayward girls. There she loses her name and becomes a number: 'five'. She is subjected to the systemic abuse now repeated so often in the stories of former inmates of such places, if they can bear to tell the tale. A visit one day from her mother, and David, frees her from the home, but releases her into the world of Ken, her new stepfather: a violent drunk, who sets Judy up with a barmaid's job in the local pub, and beats Judy's mother so badly that

Judy takes to him with an axe. Her mother, without choice, and trapped by circumstance and time, tells her to go. Judy lives with that rejection to the last page of her tale. It is a rejection that weighs heavily on her own choiceless choice, years later, to leave her own two children behind in Singapore.

When Judy accepts an invitation from fellow barmaid, Maureen, to travel with two truckies to Sydney, she thinks the trip is free. She soon discovers that nothing ever comes free to a working class girl too young to have learned the trade-offs and traps of life alone in a patriarchal culture. The trip is the pivot point in the life of a young girl who has never known security, and will never really experience trust, but searches in three countries for connection, love, acceptance and comfort. Sometimes she finds it, but always from women, while men take turns in varieties of abuse, resulting in pregnancy to the Chinese university student and gambler, Richard. His strict family mores send Judy, packed with her cardboard port, from one male-dominated prison to another, in Singapore. She fantasises fragrant gardens and Oriental charm, but finds something altogether different—as romantic fallacy materialises in hard cultural and political reality. Richard's family, bound by honour to accept her as daughter-in-law, but trapped by tradition in a cold resentment of her as apparition of their misfortune, takes her in and tolerates her much as racist white Australians 'tolerate' the others in their midst. As in Australia, she, as *other* is isolated, taunted, and blamed for the inadequacies of those who wield power.

Judy looks for escape, and learns not to look for acceptance. Instead, with the wedding jewellery given to her by Richard's parents, she rescues an Indian woman, Givinda, from prostitution on the streets of Singapore. Judy makes her connections, then, not with the traditions of Chinese family and culture, but with the women sharing her relative powerlessness:

'I have successfully manoeuvred myself into a situation to keep Givinda. I told my mother-in-law's gambling friends—as I am frequently paraded before them like a prize heifer—that she bought Givinda for me, that she is my ayah, my maid. Face dominates the Chinese; it is the engine that drives their lives. The family thus had no choice but to allow me to keep her. Ah Chee [older sister] was also obligated to purchase clothes befitting an ayah in their household. It is a galling and worthy cup for the father-in-law to drink from, and for this I am eternally happy for I hate him now as much as he hates me' (102).

The theme of rejection plays with the pantomime of abundance and deprivation. Young Judy is sometimes prostitute, sometimes society wife, but always in fear so that her survival becomes dependant at once upon her ability to negotiate a deep need for love and security, with the reality of imposed circumstance. She lives, with Givinda and her two young children, in a palatial flat in Kuala Lumpur—but goes hungry until her husband's mistress provides her with surreptitious cash. She is dumped, then, in a jungle compound—the Kampong—and a Malay servant girl is go-between for Judy and the Dyak rebel, who rapes her to the tune of her stream-of-consciousness narrative. It is difficult to understand how she comes to love him, but she does. Perhaps the presence of touch of any kind is consolation—more than the disappointment and rejection of her abusive husband and his family.

Even though it is less about comprehension than need, Judy's conflation of violence and love is complicated by its cultural and political context. The jungle setting of pre-annexation Malaya in 1963 conceals the encroaching Indonesian army, while revealing something of how the rebels' struggle is personalised and, ultimately, romanticised. Extending this exploration might have generated a deeper sense of human connection as always contingent, and as always activated within more complicated negotiations of culture and identity, rather than as individualised contracts reliant upon particular notions of love and family. McNeil's narrative certainly shows, for example, how nationality and culture had little effect upon women's oppression in both Australia and Singapore. In both places, elder

women were complicit in the abuse and subjugation of young girls and, in both places, notions of family which served particular interests were psychologically (and physically) destructive. Illustrations of this are described mostly in a literal sense, with stream-of-consciousness passages engaged to perform some of the work of theme. There may not be, however, sufficient connectivity in the descriptive passages themselves for these broader contestations of gender, culture, and power to move beyond the sheer ugliness of the abuse and misery documented through the book. It is a shame, too, that the most politically interesting parts of it were not employed much in the service of bringing those contestations back into the Australian milieu from which (via Judy's experiences and travels) they sprang.

I have heard how several people who have read *The Girl With the Cardboard Port* did not like it, but had to keep reading it, and I am no exception. And I have attended its Toowoomba launch, where passages read aloud were mostly bleak, some funny. The funny, lighter parts have their edge, too, but I have set that aside for those who want to read the book themselves. The humour is a relief, after all—like setting down a heavy bag after a long journey home.

Janine Little has a PhD in race and literary and cultural production from The University of Queensland and lectures in journalism at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.

Black History

Katrina M Schlunke. *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*. Curtin University Books, Fremantle Arts Centre Press in partnership with Curtin University of Technology, Fremantle 2005.

Reviewed by Liz Reed



The only negative comment that I can make about this excellent book concerns the author's use of the word 'Aboriginals' to refer to Aboriginal people. As long as this remains the official terminology of government legislation and publications, 'Aboriginals' is a word that confuses authors and students alike. As the Aboriginal linguist Eve D Fesl has written, however, the use of the adjective 'Aboriginal' to describe people (noun) 'is that it places us into the category of being non-existent people ... Misuse of the English language in this word reinforces the attempts to wipe out our identity and our race'.

In all other respects, though, this is a timely and innovative exploration of what has passed into history as the Bluff Rock massacre. This massacre, as Schlunke observes, can be understood as myth, fact, tourist attraction, and national metaphor (20). The book is particularly timely as it offers fresh ways of thinking about 'massacre' as concept and event, and suggests that writing it as an autobiography is 'precisely the way to speak, write and embody the presence of the past'. Such an approach creates the possibility of 'an ethical, embodied relationship with the past, not a final story' (14). In this way, the relationship between writer, reader, time and the past in the present, can be understood as stories that can never be completed in the Australian context. By not seeking to engage with historians' debates beyond observing the 'fatuousness of [the] columnist-speak' on the part of conservatives who accuse academics and others of 'black armband' history, Schlunke's retort is that the 'flimsy armband is not an adequate metaphor for history of any sort' (203), as there is no single truth that the past can offer any more than the present should. The book also has an almost tactile and certainly a highly visual dimension that adds to the overall attempt to place the massacre within the larger context of its indeterminacy. Thus Schlunke writes of Bluff Rock's greyness, of the feel and texture of granite and its multiple uses from buildings to containers of nuclear waste, and that most troubling and ubiquitous structure on the Australian landscape—the monument. This greyness is then further emplaced in the provision of a seemingly benign description of its geographic location ten kilometres south of the town of Tenterfield in the New England region, where it contributes to the beauty of the place, its grey granite jostling with grey-green gums on the black hills.

So how do we know about the Bluff Rock massacre? Schlunke asks, embodying herself from the outset in the question and in the search for the answers to this inevitably elusive question. It is her own embodiment in the entanglements of place, selves, sources and stories about the massacre that constitutes the greatest strength of this creative exploration, and an important dimension of this is Schlunke's awareness of the significance of whiteness. Whiteness is central to her own placement in this history, starting with her childhood memories of passing Bluff Rock and being told of Aboriginal people being killed. Schlunke also makes whiteness central to the men who carried out and who also told about such massacres, and her reading of their various reports—as well as their silences— further implicates the whiteness of their ideas and unsettledness as dispossessors. But first, she takes her readers through the terrain of 'the past' and how this is known and how it shapes 'us' (non-Aborigines). She tells of how she was shaped by stories of Aborigines dying as a part of the land being taken by

whites; these were not told as revelatory tales in themselves but as ways of saying that Aborigines no longer existed, were of and in the past. She reflects on how such tales did not disturb her childhood acquisition of knowledge about the countryside that she embraced and loved as ‘our land’ (12), land that she owned by enacting everyday activities such as riding up and down hills, swimming in the creeks, attuning herself to the rhythms of births of sheep, and planting and harvesting of crops. Such thick description amplifies the ways that she understood Aboriginal deaths in the area that bounded her childhood and identity of belonging, to the extent that it did not occur to her to wonder how the land became hers, and how she now writes of them as a ‘shutting down of a history’ rather than the ‘continuous opening up’ (13) that they should have been.

Underpinning the book is the desire to find a model for writing a history of such enigmatic places and happenings. Inherent in this aim is the recognition that the existence of ‘the past’ as history must be questioned, thus necessitating ‘confrontation with narrative itself’, that is, to prevent narrative as productive of ‘resolution’. Such awareness of course leads to the question of how a white person can write Australian history following the ways in which Aboriginal people’s interventions have destabilized this hegemonic construct and the questions that it has rested upon. Again, her whiteness and its inscription onto the ways in which she writes, indicates that the text will emerge inevitably still, as white. Schlunke uses this awareness by situating her returning to Bluff Rock in multiple sites—as an adult and author/researcher, queer and lesbian, placing her outside of the borders in which she had safely been contained as a white child who knew she belonged on her family’s land as she was growing up, and her more recently acquired understanding that the Aboriginal children who were with her at school were not in fact from somewhere else, but were locals like her.

Thus there is an intimacy in the ways in which this autobiography is written: the massacre is placed just ‘along the highway’, if it happened at all, which is something that Schlunke forces the reader to grapple with. This is because there are no clear contemporary records of the event, but traces in other sources that locate it in time and place. On the other hand, as she asks, if a massacre did not happen at Bluff Rock, ‘why say it did?’ (121), and offers a partial answer, that by saying it happened here, the event is kept in the kinds of spaces where we know other massacres did take place, in similar ‘bad country’. Bluff Rock provides a place where whites can acknowledge such events, because it deflects their gaze from their own ‘elegant old homes ... cute cottages and well-kept gardens’ (122). Indeed, it may have been that when those she identifies as the ‘earliest killers and settlers’, discovered that Aboriginal people avoided the bluff, they filled it with ‘their own displaced stories [and] found a gap which could be practically filled’. This gap continues to be filled, as Schlunke shows with her discussion of the tantalising tourist leaflet based upon research conducted by the Tenterfield Visitor’s Association. The conflicting versions of the ‘terrible deeds of that day’ in October 1844, the truth of which will remain ‘forever in the bosom of one of the most impressive landmarks’ of the area can be read as a clever device to attract tourists but, at the same time, the certainty that a massacre occurred as expressed in this leaflet, sits alongside the physical erasure of any evidence of it. Thus, as Schlunke observes, there exists a truth contained within multiple truths, but there is also the truth that nobody will ever know the truth about this massacre. Schlunke proceeds to unpack these multiple truths written by white men who had only heard about the massacre from other ‘locals’, a term which coded whites; Aborigines, as she suggests, being too local to be local. In the process the ways in which, historically, Aborigines have been spoken and written of as ‘disappearing’, whether by way of massacres or by their removal to reserves, or the removal of their children highlights how white people have been able to both note their presence as impermanent in contrast to their own possession of places such as the paddocks near Bluff Rock. But ultimately, as this book so beautifully makes clear, by seeking to untangle the various pieces of unsatisfactory evidence, the story only becomes more entangled—a national metaphor indeed.

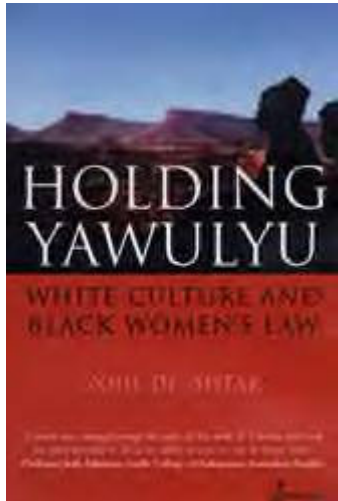
It is this inescapable metaphor that white Australians have yet to confront, in spite of the efforts of Aboriginal peoples' sharing of their oral histories and written, performative and academic interventions over the past few decades. One of the reasons why the recent conservative fetish for contesting histories that told of massacres (apart from the underlying desire to deny their very existence) has proven so sterile relates to the extreme limitations on the ways in which H/history has been interpreted, still, as providing a neat narrative of 'the past', reliant on proven eye-witness documentary evidence and other white sources such as written reports. The Bluff Rock massacre cannot be told in such a simple way. Rather, its history has been told in such varied and seemingly erratic ways—by 'tourist leaflets, gossip, collected data, published diaries, letters, me and you, him and me, poems and pictures' (244). All these are highly dependent upon a creative reading such as Schlunke's, after which they necessarily still end up with the refusal of 'the seductive known of 'a story about the past' and leave in its place [a] wash of reactive possibilities' (244). This, and Schlunke's recognition of herself in the stories of *Bluff Rock*, as well as her recognition and interrogation of her dis-location from the place in which they continue to be circulated, is the underlying strength of this skillfully woven autobiography of the Bluff Rock massacre. That this story does not (cannot?) end, is reflected in the final paragraph, in which Schlunke quotes the text written by Aboriginal unveilers of a memorial to the massacre - for them the memory of the massacre is spread over 'this area ... during settlement'. This monument and its inscription do, however, remind readers that the Aborigines of this area (like all others) did not ever really leave—this was only ever imagined in the telling of stories such as Bluff Rock.

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Race Matters

Zohl de Ishtar. *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law*. Spinifex Press, 2005 .

Reviewed by Amanda Kearney



Zohl de Ishtar has written an interesting piece of work that draws upon her personal experience of working alongside Indigenous women in the community of Wirrimanu (Balgo) on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert in central Western Australia. The book, *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law*, pivots on de Ishtar's efforts at problematising the relationships that emerge, erode and persist between Indigenous people who live within remote communities and the non-Indigenous people who come, transiently and long-term to reside in these townships. The book's contents have been described as evocative, profound, post-colonial and radically feminist, with the work being published and marketed within the frame of an ever-growing social consciousness, reflexivity and empathy among non-Indigenous readers. I see de Ishtar's work as framing Indigenous women's Law and life on largely non-Indigenous terms, for a non-Indigenous audience. This in itself is part of

an ongoing discussion and point of contention in anthropology and related Indigenous and literary studies [1]. It is in relation to these disciplines that I locate myself and therefore it is from this perspective that I approach *Holding Yawulyu*. I also identify myself as someone who works collaboratively with Indigenous women in contexts of Law and land. The reason for flagging these personal identifiers is in response to what I feel de Ishtar has attempted to do in her writing, but is not entirely successful in achieving—namely, the act of reflexive writing. Positioning oneself appears to be a large part of de Ishtar's initial commitment to this work, with the view that it is an outsider's account and response to Aboriginal women's Law and culture that is documented here. I am not convinced that de Ishtar's *Holding Yawulyu* successfully maintains this position and it is this observation of the work that I wish to speak to.

Holding Yawulyu is composed over a number of discrete chapters, some of which document de Ishtar's encounter of everyday and ceremonial life within the Aboriginal community of Wirrimanu, while others provide the context to life in Wirrimanu both before and after de Ishtar's time there. The work deals specifically with the land and Law of the Kapululangu people. For Kapululangu women, Yawulyu is Law and powerful ceremony. De Ishtar entered into this community and spent time living there from the late 1990s into 2001. She came to live and work with Kapululangu women elders. During her time in Wirrimanu de Ishtar worked in a personal and professional capacity to assist Kapululangu women in the setting up and operation of the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre. This book really stands to document the course of events that led to the opening and, sadly, the dissolution of the Women's Law and Culture Centre. *Holding Yawulyu* is certainly a brave piece of work that will appeal to many readers across academic and non-academic terrains. It works to demystify life in Aboriginal communities and illuminate some of the points of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians but, unfortunately, in many ways it also contributes to a body of literature that exoticises Indigenous people and their ways of living.

De Ishtar handles Yawulyu with the respect and command that it deserves, and goes to great lengths to describe the importance of this Law for Kapululangu women and to share some of the details of its

practice, presumably with the cultural sensitivity demanded of her by the Kapululangu women. Yawulyu or a-Yawulhu is one form of Law and ceremony, held by Aboriginal women in various parts of Northern Australia. This ceremony is understood as pivotal to the maintenance of land and health, physical and emotional wellbeing. It is granted a power and status that is derived from the ancestral Spirits who created the Law and is maintained and enacted in the ongoing lives of these women today. As indicated by de Ishtar, Yawulyu, and similar forms of ancestral Law, are held by women today as a source of pride and cultural persistence.

De Ishtar contextualises her encounter of Wirrimanu and Yawulyu by engaging with the earlier works of Catherine and Ronald Berndt, anthropologists who worked to record details of the lives of Kapululangu people and their neighbours in the Sandy Desert Region from the 1960s onwards. She contextualises her discussion by delving into the White history of the township, with a particular focus on missionary presences and local politics. The beginning and end sections of the book sit rather uncomfortably with these contextual efforts. The contextual chapters are juxtaposed alongside intensely personal accounts of the lives of both de Ishtar and Kapululangu women. The details contained in the contextual chapters are often presented as seemingly 'objective' in their telling of the region's history. De Ishtar provides this as an unproblematic background to the current and emergent settings in Wirrimanu. One gets the sense that de Ishtar has not interrogated this literature adequately and has not engaged at length with Indigenous perceptions and understandings of this White history. I am therefore of the view that her account of the region's White history would have been strengthened by engaging Kapululangu voices on the subject and documenting individual and group accounts of Indigenous responses, resistances and resilience to the White presence within their township. This I feel is an ongoing flaw in de Ishtar's work, namely the minimal use or documentation of Indigenous voices and dialogue on the page. If the work is concerned with the lives and Law of Kapululangu people, then Kapululangu voices must be heard.

The strongest impressions gained from this book come from those chapters which document de Ishtar's engagements with the local Wirrimanu community and which relate directly to the Kapululangu women and Yawulyu (early and latter chapters). Early in the work de Ishtar is positioned as an Irish-Australian lesbian (preface), radical feminist (50), embarking on a 'solitary sojourn' (xv) into the lives of the Wirrimanu women elders, a sojourn that she claims would ultimately bind her life to theirs (40). She identifies herself on such terms as cultural worker and apprentice to these women, and writes of gaining knowledge and insight into the practices of Yawulyu that culminate in her having responsibility for, caring for and holding Yawulyu (40).

It is to be acknowledged that in the first instance de Ishtar is reflexively locating herself in relation to the work, and this is admirable: disclaimer alone, however, does not remove the authorial implications of one's position. The work would have benefited from an ongoing reflection on de Ishtar's own position, own agency and attempts to understand particular events in relation to her very identity as constructed by herself and by others. Instead there is a tendency in discussion about engagements between de Ishtar and the wider community (both those of an everyday and more profound nature - as with her having to leave the community), for the terms of engagement to be understood in relation to 'political/administrative, religious and Culture Industry elements of the settlement' (276), gender, Aboriginal and white men, rather than in terms of de Ishtar herself. As such, beyond her initial engagements with her own identity, de Ishtar herself largely exits the picture, until the latter part of the book, and then is only given limited agency in the situations that arise and fall around her and the community. Her absence from the text was striking at times, and one cannot easily gauge the means by which de Ishtar gained information, how it was recorded, how it ultimately came to be represented on

the page. She notes that efforts to record material on tape and as notes were abandoned early on (although a diary was kept and written into privately), in preference of a method that is described as “simply living—living simply—with the women” (49). One does not get a clear sense of what this entails and, again, cross reference to the words and dialogues of Kapululangu women is not done frequently enough for the reader to feel comfortable with de Ishtar’s authority in representation.

Representation is at the very heart of this book. According to de Ishtar, writing as a radical feminist offers the ‘right to delve into the subjective’, and according to her work, also brings the opportunity to be ‘intuitive’ and ‘irrational’ (50). Certainly there is great merit to this approach, and it is one that produces powerful and passionate work. However, I sit uncomfortably with these principles when they are employed in the representation of Indigenous women’s lives and Law. To what extent do the Kapululangu women themselves control this representation? Does it mirror the views of Law, life, land and people that are held by the women of Wirrimanu? I feel these issues should have been addressed in the book and openly interrogated by the author. Furthermore, I question the feminist principles that shape gender discussion in this work, and feel that the duality and opposition between Kapululangu men and women has been overstressed. In the latter parts of the book de Ishtar documents conflict and antagonism between Wirrimanu’s Aboriginal men and women, a tension that manifests itself in varied forms. According to de Ishtar one of these manifestations is expressed in men’s Law and women’s Law in Wirrimanu being equated with gendered power, and ultimately brought into competition and opposition with one another. In addition to this, de Ishtar identifies an ‘allegiance between White and Black/Indigenous male politics’ (255). I believe there are some problematic gender assumptions at work here. Gender issues in many Indigenous communities cannot be contained by non-Indigenous notions of gender, nor should they be understood on non-Indigenous terms. In many cases, Indigenous men and women will assert a symmetry in women’s Law and men’s Law, one in which the two are engaged in an ‘interdependence-dependence’ relationship, in which difference is politicised but also seen as complementary. Again, perhaps these issues could have been avoided had Kapululangu people’s voices been introduced into the text to state their position on this issue, therefore illuminating Kapululangu gender relations for the reader.

In the closing chapter of this work, De Ishtar falls prey to self-congratulatory tones. This is expressed in her review of events that have occurred since her leaving the community. It is to be acknowledged that her work with and alongside Kapululangu women elders was intensely valuable, very real and emotionally powerful for all involved. The eventual dissolution of the Kapululangu Women’s Law and Culture Centre is a point of contention for de Ishtar in the last chapter, and her level of emotional engagement with this concern is evident and honourable. However, the lasting impression is one in which de Ishtar is credited with maintaining (in addition to facilitating) the initiative, and all efforts after her departure are discussed in very negative and defeated terms. This overall impression is contrasted by a powerful comment that de Ishtar makes in this last chapter. She writes, ‘in an era when Indigenous people are increasingly demanding the right to speak, write and research for and among their own and are calling for Whites to stop speaking for them, it is far too common for Whites to respond by self-silencing’ (279). One can see her point, and I remain impressed by this, however, the surrounding pages do not create a dialogue in which I can honestly see this demand being met within the context of de Ishtar’s work.

I wish to restate that this book is intensely interesting and a very brave effort. Although I have raised many strong points, I do admire de Ishtar’s initiative. I feel, however, that there was a different story to be told here, namely de Ishtar’s story, as opposed to de Ishtar telling the Kapululangu women’s story. Given the wide appeal of the book, I reiterate my concern about the work’s representation of

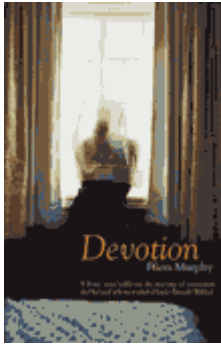
Kapululangu women and men, Wirrimanu and the relationships that govern the day-to-day lives of its residents, for what I imagine is a majority non-Indigenous audience. Overall I think the issue of representation needed to be addressed explicitly by the author, and I feel that the work would have benefited from a deeper commitment to reflexive writing.

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On Perfection

Ffion Murphy, *Devotion*. Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic



Ffion Murphy's first novel *Devotion* is a tale about yearning for perfection in relationships—yearning for a perfect mother, a perfect daughter, a perfect friend, a perfect partner, or perfect love—and the perils of its drive. It reads as intimate and truthful, rather than as an objective narrative, regardless of the context. Whether prying into the consciousness of the 35-year old Veronica before and after giving birth to her second child, or moving into the inner and outer worlds of her psychiatrist, it is always and unambiguously a tale of the mind and the body locked in a symbiotic relationship. The signs they produce are equally cryptic which accounts for the epistemological ambiguity, the characters' impossibility to 'see'.

The idea of perfection informs even the relationship between the patient and her doctor: if Veronica starts walking and talking again and accepts her newborn son, her therapist will achieve an important break-through in the treatment of postnatal hysteria. For Veronica is taking no drugs; instead, she is given a laptop into which she pours everything, her memory, her observations, her inner dialogues, her fears, and her desires. She communicates only with herself, unaware that the laptop is part of the hospital network. The success of this case is for Dr Moore more than the question of ambition, for he and his patient share a trauma, the suicide of the mother figure. Thus the mystery of reason is attributed to the weight of emotion generated by previous experience. What seems to be the key issue in this psychological novel is how much humiliation, pain and suffering the psyche can accommodate before it starts ailing and, when it does, is the damage repairable. The answer is sought by the method characteristic of our own times—the exploration of the writer's medium, the language, and its capacity to capture experience. What comes out as a problem is not so much the possibility of translating experience into words, but is the impossibility of knowing, the impenetrability of human mind in spite of a genuine effort to understand, in spite of love, sympathy and concern, and in spite of the absolute sincerity of Veronica's typed enunciations. The epistemological labyrinth begins with the impossibility of knowing one's own self, let alone of seeing through the others. Who is telling the truth, what their motives or their feelings are, is a multiple enigma that resists resolution due, first, to the delusional tendency of the psyche. Second, human judgment depends on a number of elements at any moment in time and one or more of them is always bound to escape notice or control.

The personalised and up-to-date scientific knowledge Murphy draws on is a compelling legitimating device of the entwined narratives, whose credibility is reinforced by the contemporary structure of the language: short sentences and a profusion of colloquialisms. Yet this language is also laden with poetic images and is grippingly beautiful. A little girl racing 'round on twig legs' and her heavily pregnant mother sitting 'with legs spread, toes to God' invoke the hierarchy of mythic proportions, of fragility in the face of parental divine power to give life and inspire enduring self-confidence or haunting insecurity in their children. It all depends on the signs of affection and their transparency, for children crave constant attention, to them it is the only tangible sign of their intrinsic value. What they expect is unconditional and unreserved love, perfection. Veronica sets the example herself. Her family is, rather, was a blissful safe haven until her son ripped her womb forcing his way out. The longer she types the more assertive become the scenes of unrequited love, of love ignored or even abused,

threatening to disrupt this cherished harmony she is desperate to preserve. The files she creates and then deletes gradually reveal the background of her delusions and hallucinations mostly centred on Sharny, her angry friend and her family, now troublesome ghosts. The Sharny imprinted in her memory goes about 'bitching' until it becomes Veronica's turn to hit back. These are all unconscious acts of revenge or so it seems, since this is Veronica's tale. The unfolding relationship is competitive at all times, unhealthy and always targeting the other's emotions. The point is, every character in the novel who causes pain to others is herself tormented by the disproportion between perfect love she craves and the received signs of it. The object of fixation is either the product of idealisation or of compensation, either a god or a scapegoat.

'It all begins in the family' is the old saying. *Devotion* switches between a female and a male account of it painting pictures of different emotional colour. When told by Veronica, the hierarchy that the mother figure establishes among her children inspires the family atmosphere. The godly treatment accorded to one child invariably makes the other(s) feel inferior or lacking, never matching the ideal. This in itself is not a big revelation, but the examples, profiled as polar opposites, are a reminder of the tricky nature of the tendency and the difficulty to control it. When told by Dr Moore, the emotion is veiled by rationalisation. But again, high ideals, good intentions and the opportunities he, as a parent and a teacher, advocates and offers in practice have little to do with the eventual result of his strategies. Nothing is measurable and nothing fully predictable in the psychological mystery of existence. Total devotion to a sick child will cause other family members to suffer—we all know that, still many keep making the sacrifice. Constant praise of one child will make the upstaged sibling feel somehow inadequate, we know that too. Yet, again, the godly image is hard to resist when talking about the bright, bold and beautiful kid. Veronica thus seeks in her friend's family what she lacks in her own. The sense of self-worth she finds in her relationship with Sharny or, rather, in her perception of the role she plays in it. The compensation for love her natural mother fails to show, she seeks from Emila, her surrogate mother. Sharny's position is no different, though. She has to compete for her mother's affection with her paraplegic brother, deified by Emila, and then with Veronica. And Emila competes with nature itself, for in seeking a sign of love from Stevie, her deteriorating child, she seeks to avert the irreversible course of his illness and stop his suffering. 'Child bearing, child loving, is a treacherous business, a story of loss from start to finish,' says Emila in her elegy (197). And this is the issue at the heart of *Devotion*: the vicious circle of expectation and disappointment that few are lucky to escape.

Caught in its whirl are also the narratives of sexuality, frank, illuminating and complementary. They start unfolding with the child's inopportune discovery of her parent's 'hobby', and continue with Veronica's growing awareness of her double-edged sexual appeal, sharply contrasted with male desire. Yet all that both the young woman and Dr Moore's narratives show is that an antithetical positioning of female and male sexuality is not realistic, either. It makes no contribution to the fuller grasp of the instinct that has ontological implications. Instead, the unravelling narratives are dialectic: they reveal both the capacity of sexuality to empower and to expose the individual's vulnerabilities. Unobtrusively, in the voice of a psychiatrist, Murphy herself spells out the full range of possibilities: sex can be 'pleasure, sometimes ecstasy' but it can also be 'the source of disease, pain and criminal pathology.' It is like a virus, 'infectious, feverish.' Although euphemistically represented by the love theme, it is 'the beating heart of our stories—biological narratives, quests, romances—the fear and danger of proximity and exchange versus the thrill and beauty of procreation and continuance. Myths and fables and legends are full of its joys and agonies (61-2). But as much as it fuels creativity, sexual instinct also sends signals to the body and body can hurt. In paradigmatic terms, sexuality was once seen as the dying and reviving god celebrated by old nature rites for the purpose of rejuvenating the world. Indeed, life and death evolve simultaneously in *Devotion* and their relationship is again circuitous.

The child-like figure of Father Time that Veronica mistakes in her recurring dream for her new born son is an embodiment of a fear that her family would be forced to relive the experience of excruciating suffering. The sense of guilt, helplessness and of a looming threat, irrational yet informed by real life experience, triggers hallucinations in various guises, that of a child-monster and of a witch with the dreaded face of her friend who takes little Katie away. The mythic narrative is not only Veronica's. It is part of the Australian and world literary heritage, as the book Veronica's mother brings her aptly signifies: 'Our Tim [Winton] loves God and water, doesn't he? I can't look at the Swan any more without thinking there floats Fish, in his element, free at last' (169). It also informs Dr Moore's thinking, for mythic imagination has had a profound effect on psychoanalysis. Freud elevated the myth of king Oedipus to the level of a fundamental complex, while Jung based his theory of archetypes on mythic thinking. The fictitious Dr Moore sees in Veronica a modern Alcestis who, according to Greek mythology, saved the life of her husband by consenting to die on his behalf, but was then brought back from Hades by Hercules. Veronica's name, however, has itself a biblical connotation. It belonged to a 'devotee who offered her headcloth to Jesus as he sweated and staggered under the weight of the crucifix, intent on sacrifice' (233). Veronica's state of mind urges her to make her own sacrificial offering. In it she sees a promise of redemption, a 'resurrection', as the last words she types on her laptop reveal. The word of god once more proves to be no less delusional than the word of a demon. The psyche, however, only recognises an inhibition of the instinctual craving for perfection and its by-product—desire. The chameleon-like forms of hysteria resulting from abiding repression of this elemental force gave birth to psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century, but hysteria is by no means characteristic of a by-gone era. Getting beaten by unrelenting experience or even being enamoured of one's own demons is the danger real enough in the here and now as ever before.

The secret of well-being is to recognise both the divine and demonic forces and channel them away from destruction. But then, is it so simple or is it even possible to make this vital distinction? Dorothy Hewett endorsed, perhaps, the suggestion in T.S. Eliot that 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality' [1]. Ffion Murphy sends the same message. The enchanting melody of her language lures the reader into the profound depths of being, where the key to happiness lies forever hidden. The quest is without end, for it goes through the mythic labyrinth of reality we ourselves construct, driven by the promise of a higher order that is real. The cyclical nature of fertility and the cosmic harmony it implies both justify the hunch. That is why they are key paradigms in mythic imagination. It alone can account for the belief that unlimited availability of information, an increasing merger of public and private spaces, and text messaging, can bring an escape from the self, from indifference, from silence.

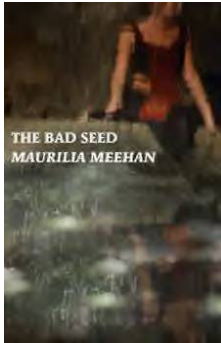
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1] Hewett, Dorothy. 'The Voyage out from Xanadu'. *New Poetry*, 27.1 (1979): 4-11.

Poison and Honey

Maurilia Meehan. *The Bad Seed*. Wigan, Lancashire: Bewrite, 2005.

Reviewed by Majella Stewart



Maurilia Meehan evokes something disquieting and oppressive in the fog that enshrouds her fictional town, Wombat, in *The Bad Seed*. The mist, like the wild brambles that feature so strongly in the author's homage to the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, cloaks old secrets and damning prophecies. Meehan however, in her exploration of loss and human desire ruthlessly subverts the soothing dénouements that characterise the fairy tale, those that fulfil the reader's desire in narratives of loss or estrangement. While the tropes of fairy tales in the stolen child, the impenetrable forest, the witch, and the changeling leave evidence of their passing through the course of Meehan's narrative, the effect of the author's systematic subversion of any expectations of soothing emotional recoveries and gentle

homecomings creates a compelling tension.

The anxieties that loom throughout the novel, largely in response to Meehan's *unheimlich* touches, respond to the tensely wrought narrative, in the author's conversion of mundane Australian landscapes into more exotic, threatening spaces and, more confrontingly, in the plot's deliberate misdirections. The first of these concerns the character of the town's reviled hermit, her life reconstructed by the townspeople who judge her. The life of Wombat's witch is mysterious, and bestowed on her by the community are three tenuous identities; the first constructed by the local children, cruel and fearful; the second a reflection of the ire of the community's affronted housewives, their offerings scorned by the object of their charity who is jaded by endless donations of dismal soups; and the final accounting of her life, more compassionately bestowed by medical professionals, those lacking both the townspeople's ignorance and their vindictive persecution of difference.

The misdirections, strewn by Meehan throughout *The Bad Seed*, are redolent of Gothic suspenses, where the reader is kept by the author in a state of disequilibrium, never entirely sure of the literary ground beneath them. Whether the ancient woman, twisted and misshapen is a witch, menacing and hostile, or simply a diseased, maligned old woman remains, for most of the novel, impossibly opaque. The narrator's description of her, 'like some ancient half-wrapped mummy,' (15) casts her as something simultaneously venerable and repulsive and, being only half-wrapped, something cruelly open both to her neighbours' hostile gaze and the reader's morbid curiosity.

The pivotal point about which turn Meehan's various characters is that of imposture. Meehan's protagonist, Agatha Hock, writes her deceptive magazine articles celebrating a lush, entirely fictional garden, the star of which is her wholly imagined little girl, Mary-Mary. The child, wholesome and adorable, is merely a charming, nursery rhyme whimsy. The English couple, Magdala and Giles Dewbank, who are moved to make the long journey to Australia, are, like Agatha, more complicated than they seem. The couple's relationship is symbiotic, each taking advantage of the frailty or abnormality of the other and, while these fetishes seem complementary, the couple have quite disparate sexual peccadillos and intellectual prejudices. Magdala is crippled by arthritis and this draws Giles to her for he has a self-confessed penchant for 'invalid women' (45). She, in turn, is convinced of the evolution of humans from aquatic mammals, and finds Giles infinitely more appealing because of the

scars left by the surgical removal of his webbed toes and gills. These she finds irresistibly erotic and the pair find it all but impossible to enjoy each other sexually beyond the watery limits of their spa-bath.

The need looming on Agatha's horizon to exhibit her alarmingly fictitious Eden, provides the impetus for her quest into the country, one that parallels a number of pilgrimages to the spa town of Wombat and the tiny, rundown hotel called 'Agatha's Springs'. The prophetic name of Meehan's witch's house draws Agatha to it, but the area's natural springs become the conduit for restive, vengeful spirits and Agatha becomes just one of a number of impostors to be caught up in an older, quite poisonous mystery. The move promises at first to be therapeutic, Agatha's flat is suffused with memories of her missing child, Daphne, who disappeared years earlier. Agatha still grieves for her and cannot separate herself from the pain caused by that loss. The earliest days after her arrival in Wombat do seem, at times, cathartic. When Agatha attempts to destroy, utterly, the towering blackberry brambles protecting the house, she becomes deeply thoughtful, even musing that, perhaps, for all their grief, she and her husband, Frank, might have conjured their child Daphne, that 'Frank and she were both mad. Their daughter had perhaps never existed, she was a case of folie à deux brought on by five years of trying and failing to get pregnant' (67).

Each of the characters in Meehan's novel is likewise damaged, or physically flawed; the arthritic Magdala, seeking a magical spring; her husband with his vestigial gills, their fishiness his wife's obsession; Agatha herself, drawn to the impenetrable, spiky fortifications encircling the witch's house, each in turn, compelled to make their own pilgrimages to Wombat. Even Agatha's husband, Frank, unable to sustain the grief that has consumed his wife since their daughter's disappearance, is driven to undertake a quest of his own. Having endured his daughter's abduction, seeing her reduced to the banner in the newspapers, 'The Milk Bar Girl', he plans his trek into the anonymity of the Great Dividing Trail. Ostensibly Frank leaves to find his daughter's body somewhere in the Australian wilderness. His efforts though, to lose himself in forbidding terrain, are thwarted by the search instigated by his wife, alarmed that his regular emails had slowly diminished before falling, inexplicably, into silence. Frank, thin and dishevelled is rediscovered by a search helicopter, and returns to a wife who has found, in his absence, a new profession, home, and lover and, most amazingly of all, their prodigal daughter, a baffling restitution.

The pilgrimages and quests seem inevitably to culminate at Agatha's Springs, where the house and its garden constitute the novel's most alarming counterfeit. The dream Shakespearean garden imagined by Agatha, designed to stand in for the paradise described in her magazine column with its flowers and medicinal herbs, honeysuckles, lavender, and woodbine, is savaged by the realities of the poisonous belladonna, hemlock, and daphne that regenerate, exclusively but unbidden, around Agatha's tiny hotel. The plants bring to the narrative something menacing and portentous. The presence that gestates in the dark spring beneath the house also seems destined to restate a claim to it, urging the lethal plants to extraordinary vigour. The novel's protagonists, drawn by their various needs and desires to take up residence, move inexorably forward toward a confrontation with its power.

The connections between the lovers, parents, and the mothers and daughters in the novel are created by the author with compelling sensitivity; each relationship characterised by its own passion or yearning. The restoration of the missing daughter, like that in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, is a cause for both celebration and agitated foreboding. It seems, at times, that Meehan, like Morrison, has disinterred a malevolent and vindictive offspring, returning it to a grateful, but nevertheless guilt-ridden parent. Daphne's return, however providential, is likewise complicated in its inexplicable, phantasmic immediacy. She seems, with her colourless skin, and her tattered black clothes, to be scarcely human, even 'her voice was still a barely heard whisper' (117). Daphne seems at times to have coalesced from

fragments of Agatha and Frank's memories and forebodings.

The sudden return of the mysterious Daphne, however longed for, affects Agatha and Frank in different ways, but the weight of her presence robs them of the possibility of any passionate reunion, even infantilising them, 'in bed, they hugged like Hansel and Gretel in the woods' (129). The authority exercised by the young woman, by virtue of her parents' gratitude at the return of their child, five years after her disappearance, is absolute, the narrator holding that 'a child snatched away then given back is a child with enormous power' (116). Meehan's narrative, contemplating the possibility of the fantastic against the mundane, of witches, dark with knowledge, and other lurking, vengeful creatures, her thickets of thorns, poisons, and old secrets, builds to a series of small revelations.

Meehan's suspenseful confrontations between the characters that people her novel take place at ever-greater distances from the reality of the nameless, urban poseurs that inundate Wombat each weekend. The author, who began by juxtaposing the frivolous, malignant atmosphere of the city with the bucolic wonder of bush tracks and bubbling springs reshapes them in a shift toward a more malevolent view of nature. This change condenses the events of the story until the power of the narrative is concentrated almost exclusively in Agatha's Springs. The effect of this increasingly insular field of engagement is tantalising. The histories and compulsions of the protagonists in Meehan's story are governed by a narrator who jealously guards the motivating forces at work in the construction of each of the characters, fully revealing the power of revenge, love, and self-preservation only when the narrative is complete. That confidence constitutes the author's final, extremely effective assertion of literary power. Of all her literary references, that which refers to Titania's speech from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, resonates best at the end of the novel, 'Sleep then and I will wind you in my arms/ Fairies begone and be all ways away' (57).

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An Unwilling Queen of Crime

Gabrielle Lord. *Dirty Weekend*. Wakefield Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Chris Broadribb



Gabrielle Lord is one of Australia's most popular and successful authors, having published 13 adult novels and one children's novel to date. Her publishers market her as a crime fiction writer, however, she has said at writers' festivals that she dislikes the classification because her main interest is in writing about social issues and crime fiction is merely a convenient medium to use for it. Her favourite theme is child abuse/neglect and its effects, which, sadly, is partly based on her own life. Her books are very contemporary and realistic.

Her latest novel is intriguingly titled *Dirty Weekend*, and the cover design is obviously sexually symbolic. It seems to be a deliberate attempt to attract buyers by giving the impression that the story has a lot of sexual material in it, even though in reality it's a thriller. The blurb on the back cover mentions a swingers' club that the protagonist investigates: This is, however, only a minor sub-plot, not covered in detail and not related to the main storyline. The book covers a period of several weeks, and the real reason that matters are dirty is that the protagonist keeps on being called in to investigate murder scenes.

This is Lord's third novel to feature a forensic scientist named Jack McCain. (The previous two were *Lethal Factor* and *Death Delights*). The book continues on with the story of Jack's career and relationships, however, it's easy to follow even if the reader hasn't read the earlier two books. Jack is now an acting chief scientist working for the Federal Police in Canberra. He's living with a woman named Iona and is sometimes visited by his son and daughter from a previous marriage. The story starts with him receiving a 5am phone call from an acquaintance whose ex-wife has been found dead in a nightclub car park. Soon afterwards, he's called in to investigate a murder at an agricultural research station and, later, he discovers an elderly man dead in a house in a hamlet.

The book explores a number of social issues, particularly in its subplots. One of them is alcoholism and drug abuse. Jack's mother was an alcoholic who neglected him. He later becomes an alcoholic himself, which caused serious problems in his first marriage. However, he eventually joined AA and became a teetotaler. His ex-wife still despises him but his relationship with his children is improving. His daughter Jacinta ran away from home and became a heroin addict when she was younger, but has now overcome her addiction, found a boyfriend, and started studying at university. Jack meets another woman who became a drug addict after losing her job, and sees yet again how drug use leads to dependency and the destruction of relationships. It takes courage and hard work to overcome it.

Another serious issue Jack confronts is domestic violence, when one of Jacinta's friends turns up with a black eye after being beaten up by her boyfriend. Jack finally convinces her to leave him, but she later goes back to him, with tragic results. The problem, Jack discovers, is that her father often assaulted her mother when she was young, leading her to think that violence is normal and to believe that her boyfriend loves her despite his actions.

These illustrate Lord's favoured theme of people's past (especially their childhood) influencing their present attitudes and behaviour. Jack's motivation for spending much time and effort trying to solve the murders partly arises from his guilty feelings about having been unable to help his mother or his

younger sister, who was murdered when she was a child. His anger at his mother neglecting him causes him to try to locate a woman who appears to have abandoned her son, which leads to an important clue to a murder. When he identifies a suspect for another murder, he has doubts about the young man's guilt because he didn't come from a violent family background, as most murderers do in his experience, and this leads to him investigating more thoroughly and finding out the truth.

A less personal, but significant, issue comes to light when Jack investigates the murder at the agricultural research station. It transpires that the scientists had made a potentially dangerous discovery and were in a quandary over whether to cover it up to prevent its misuse or release the information to the public so that other scientists could study it. The situation is similar to a real-life scientific discovery in Canberra a few years ago.

These days, there is a trend for writers, particularly crime fiction writers, to do extensive research before writing their novels, and Lord is no exception. She's talked about her research methods at writers' festivals. Over her years of writing she's built up a network of experts to talk to about weapons, police investigations, forensic analysis, DNA testing etc, and she's also studied scientific books, researched information on the Internet, visited morgues and jails, learned to fire guns etc. *Dirty Weekend* clearly shows the results of some of this research. It mentions the procedures that scientists follow when collecting evidence from crime scenes, discusses genetic engineering techniques, and mentions pollen analysis used to help solve one of the murders.

Whether such extensive research is really necessary in order to write a novel is debatable. Books, movies and TV all seem to emphasise realism these days, but that wasn't always the case, and classic crime novels, like Agatha Christie's, aren't all that realistic, yet are still popular. Readers are probably more interested in the storyline and the characters than in scientific terminology and procedures. The vast majority of them don't have a scientific background and wouldn't know whether the details were correct or not.

Although Jack is a scientist, he spends more time following up leads and talking to witnesses and suspects than he does in the office or lab. This is a good choice as these activities are more likely to be of interest to readers. However, it makes me wonder why Lord made him a scientist instead of a detective, the more usual choice for a protagonist in a crime fiction novel. She makes the discrepancy part of the plot by having Jack take over the homicide detectives' work as an excuse to keep himself busy and then become annoyed at himself for doing so. However, he could still be busy even if he was a detective, so there doesn't seem to be any compelling reason for him to be a scientist.

Likewise, Canberra is a rather odd choice for a setting for a murder mystery. The novel mentions that there are usually only about eight murders a year there, however, three of them occur within a short space of time in the story, which is out of keeping with the otherwise realistic details. Canberra doesn't have as many interesting locations and events as the larger cities, and probably it was chosen because there's a forensic science laboratory there.

The novel is not a romance, but, Jack's relationship with his girlfriend Iona forms a backdrop to the main story. He is living with her, however, she's annoyed at the amount of time he spends working and they have frequent disagreements about it. He keeps on thinking that he should spend more time with her but then finds excuses not to (for reasons related to his previous relationships and his family life). Yet he regards her as an equal and wants to develop a relationship based on mutual respect and honesty, different from his first marriage, which he describes as a 'war zone'. It adds some additional conflict to the story.

Lord likes to add some psychological material to her novels, so she usually has a minor character who is a psychologist or therapist. Jack's brother Charlie is a psychologist, as in the previous two books in the series. He provides some comments about how Jack's relationship with Iona is affected by his relationship with his mother when he was younger, and at some point talks about how Jack doesn't know himself well enough in order to be intimate with someone else. He believes, however, that Iona is a good partner for Jack because she isn't so traumatised by her childhood as to be unable to have a meaningful relationship. The psychological parts could be interesting to some readers, although Jack's actions don't seem to be greatly influenced by his discussions with his brother, so it doesn't affect the plot much.

Another of Lord's trademarks is to add in disturbing anecdotes or gruesome details now and then, even if they aren't part of the plot. Maybe it's to add realism (because they're taken from her research) or maybe it's to shock the reader. *Dirty Weekend* mentions that Jack once set up an innocent man for a serious crime and caused his death. Given how dramatic this incident is, it would have been better if it was integrated into the plot, causing Jack personal trauma and motivating his actions, rather than being mentioned near the end of the book.

Dirty Weekend is written in first person, from Jack's point of view. The plot is complicated, with a number of different things going on at once, and has dramatic twists that keep you reading.

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Talking About Policy, Mothering And Work: A Review Essay

Judith Bessant, Rob Watts, Tony Dalton, and Paul Smyth. *Talking Policy: How Social Policy is Made*. Crow's Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005;

Patricia Grimshaw, John Murphy and Belinda Probert. *Double Shift: Working Mothers and Social Change in Australia*. Beaconsfield: Circa, 2005;

Anne Manne. *Motherhood: How Should We Care For Our Children?* Crow's Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005.

Reviewed by JaneMaree Maher



Carol Bacchi argued in 1999 that how we perceive a social policy problem will impact on what we think can or should be done about it in terms of institutional responses and policy development (1). In contemporary Australia, the intersection of social policy, families and work is generally perceived as presenting difficult and intractable problems: as noted in Grimshaw *et al.* *Double Shift: Working mothers and social change in Australia* (2005) it was identified as the ‘barbecue-stopper debate’ for Australian society by Prime Minister John Howard. Labour market shortages, fertility rates and family pressures have focused governmental, union and academic attention on how we assist women and men to combine successfully their work and family responsibilities. As shown by the number of recent inquiries into the work/life nexus: the *Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family* (2005); *Striking the Balance* (HREOC 2005); the ACTU’s *Fifty Families: What Unreasonable Hours Are Doing To Australians, Their Families And Their Communities* (2001);

the OECD *Babies and Bosses* (2002) and the paid maternity leave proposal from HREOC (HREOC 2002a; HREOC 2003b), simple effective solutions are not very easy to generate. Polemical academic accounts such as Barbara Pocock’s *The Work-Life Collision* (2003), Anne Summers’ *The End Of Equality* (2003), Don Edgar’s *The War Over Work: The Future Of Work and Family* (2005), Leslie Cannold’s *What, No Baby? Why Women Are Losing The Freedom To Mother, And How They Can Get It Back* (2005), and *Motherguilt* by Ita Buttrose and Penny Adams (2005) have all charted the conflicted contemporary landscapes of mothering, fathering, childrearing and paid employment and have attracted significant public attention.

In view of the degree of public attention, policy analysis and academic inquiry, it is tempting to ask what more needs to be said, especially since key policy reforms like paid maternity leave are no longer on the agenda and the new industrial landscape seems unlikely to reinvigorate such debates. But two of these volumes reveal some critical limitations in the contemporary debates and public discussions to date. The authors of *Talking Policy: How Social Policy Is Made* map out some new avenues for thinking about contemporary social and political conditions in Australia by looking at the social and discursive processes that underpin policy development. In *Double Shift: Working Mothers And Social Change In Australia*, the crucial dimensions of class and Australian history for how we understand work-life experiences, individual dilemmas and contemporary conditions are revealed. Both volumes make a salient contribution to the ways in which we might think about strategies for change in social

policy generally and in the vexed areas of support for workers and families. In contrast, Anne Manne's *Motherhood: How Should We Care For Our Children?* charts an idiosyncratic and often nostalgic course through the politics of motherhood.

Talking Policy is an engaging and informative account of policy making that offers key definitions and frameworks, a reader friendly account of key processes involved in scoping, developing and defining policy, and an accessible introduction to policy literature. It steps out the links between social attitudes and discourses, institutional processes and 'policy-making communities'. There are two critical points that the authors of *Talking Policy* are keen to communicate: that 'talk' is a crucial aspect of how policy gets generated, and the second related central point, which is the influence of the media in shaping the development, formulation and implementation of policies. For the authors, policy is made out of human interactions as well as out of as sometimes abstracted processes of government and governance.

This text is divided into two parts—the first concerned with providing an intellectual and conceptual framework to consider issues of social policy and the second offering an application of these to the central concern of how policy gets made. *Talking Policy* is very reader-friendly: there is a comprehensive glossary at the beginning of the book; each chapter begins with a series of key questions, and proffers working definitions, historical contexts and contemporary issues and developments of all key ideas and themes contained within. The authors insist on the importance of being specific when engaging in policy discussions: suggesting for example that blaming 'the Australian state' for its failure to deliver for lower-income Australians, doesn't account for the complexity of inter-governmental relations within the Australian state and the impact these relations have on the development and delivery of social services. The first part of *Talking Policy* offers useful expositions of key thinkers, like Adam Smith (33) as well as an introduction to welfare state theories. The authors propose a more nuanced account of the development, operation and classification of welfare states, building on Esping-Anderson's typology of welfare states from the 1990s. The second part of *Talking Policy* examines the processes by which social policies get developed; examining governments, agencies and the role of the media. It concludes with a series of three quite specific Australian case studies: mandatory sentencing; drug using in youth facilities; and the re-introduction of higher education fees in 1987 in Australia.

Talking Policy traces the development of the contemporary social policy fabric of Australia, considering the on-going tensions between ideas of small government as a political good and the consistent expansion of various arms of government throughout white Australia's history. The authors point out that, since the 1960s, there has been sustained growth in government portfolios and reach, and that much of this growth has been in the social arena (216). Despite this pattern of growth, they argue that early decisions not to use a 'universal national insurance model' (21) have presented on-going challenges for the funding of income support schemes and continue to shape policy responses. The authors look at persistent income inequality in Australia and the availability of the mechanisms to genuinely redistribute income. They argue that the mechanisms used to date have achieved little measurable change apparent in the markers of income inequality since 1915 (171).

Throughout *Talking Policy*, the authors argue for recognition of the importance of many forms of talk for understanding how social issues get 'discovered', how responses are framed and how policy gets made. They argue for attention to the discursive construction of social problems and how these shape policy making and responses. They press for a nuanced and wide understanding of policy networks suggesting 'these networks extend out from the state apparatus, where politicians and bureaucrats work, to include groups and interests such as trade unions, churches and community agencies—or Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) (261).

Interwoven with this highly informative account of policy-making, which would work extremely well as a foundational text for students of policy studies, is a more complex and combative argument about Australia's status as a liberal welfare state, about the impact of recent policy developments on equity, and about the need to 'enlarg(e) the space in social policy making for ethical analysis and debate' (*Talking Policy* 177). When talking about 'poverty', for example, Bessant *et al.* caution against accepting that poverty can be simply empirically measured, since 'what ever 'poverty' is, we need to make certain value judgments about the 'adequacy' of resources available to lead to a desirable or worthy life' (176). The approach adopted here, which opens out 'the interplay of social and political relations and processes' (346) by examining how policy talk shapes policy, brings ethics to the centre of policy debates. The authors argue that policy making must be underpinned by 'the most searching conversations about what it means to think well and to act well' (348). When the authors examine the Howard government response to the 'Stolen Generations', they propose this offers a clear demonstration of how a narrow evaluation of policy-making and its contexts (in this case, the practices of removal of indigenous children) produces unjust outcomes with long histories and serious impacts. In *Talking Policy*, Bessant *et al* argue that the development of the Australian welfare state and the social frameworks we inhabit reflect a 'distinctively Australian answer to the perennial question of justice: what do we owe to each other?' (85) They challenge their readers to rethink contemporary responses to that question and offer key critical tools to help them do so.



Anne Manne's *Motherhood: How Should We Care For Our Children?* (2005) is also interested in challenging the ways we act, but her sustained focus is on the care of children and what this suggests about contemporary concepts and practices of motherhood. In *Motherhood*, Manne suggests that 'the contemporary redefinition of motherhood is profoundly shaped by the new capitalism' (242). In her exploration of contemporary modes of work, current practices of child caring, patterns of globalization and the desire for luxurious commodities, Manne wants to point to 'the heart of the human condition under postmodernity, to a certain loss of meaning' (25) that has set relationships, people and children adrift. The 'culture of paid work and the value we attribute to it has expanded at the expense of family culture ... What we are looking at is an emptying of the family nest' (264). Manne's project is an ambitious one and arguably somewhat ill-defined: she wants to

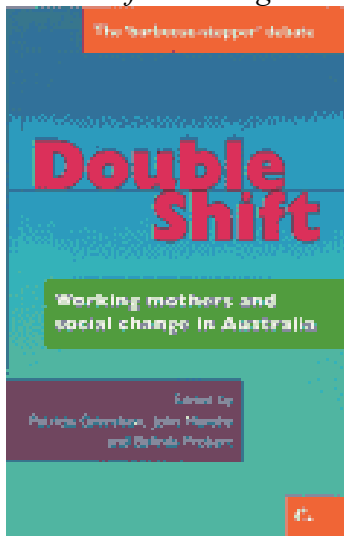
analyse the role that feminism has played in the conundrum facing contemporary Australia as it seeks to care for its children; chart the impacts of globalization on workplaces and workforce patterns; expose and contest the prevalence of excessive consumption; revisit and contest some interpretations of twentieth century thinkers regarding 'good enough care' for children, and offer a way forward for policy makers. Manne rightly situates mothering practice in this broader context arguing that a task as complex as caring for children needs to be understood as embedded in contemporary social and political conditions. But her material—an analysis of feminism's 'failures', the promotion of John Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation, an investigation of the Kathleen Folbigg case where a woman smothered her four infants—offers the reader a highly individual and non-contextualised account of contemporary mothering.

Reading Manne's account through the lens offered by *Talking Policy* is instructive and the introduction to *Motherhood* suggests that an engagement with policy makers is one of the key aims of the text. The final chapter, in which Manne argues for a move toward some of the more generous parental leave

schemes in European countries, is broad and contains little specific analysis. It doesn't engage the policy making communities and forms of discourse that Bessant *et al.* suggest are crucial to form policy. It adds little to programs for reform already outlined in international reports like *Babies and Bosses* (OECD). Manne's call that 'all social policies should have a gender equity aspect, honouring and respecting that 'beautiful idea' of equality between the sexes' (310) won't attract serious attention in a social policy environment where individual responsibility and accountability penetrate every policy setting.

Few of *Motherhood's* arguments are really new; there are no concrete suggestions for women or for policy makers, and there is a clear tendency to focus on the extremities of the work/family debate, like long daycare for babies. There is no attention to how the Australian industrial landscape with its very limited family friendly workplace measures (OECD 2002) is to be changed or challenged; and very little to the potential effects of the radical industrial relations reforms currently on the agenda on family life. Surely these should be the grounds for the 'political campaign' Manne says she is launching. And as both *Talking Policy* and *Double Shift* make clear, issues of economic security, race, ethnicity and class are crucial to the experiences of parenting. While *Motherhood* nods towards the big intellectual issues of our time, like globalization and the growth of work time and expectations, the overall message is essentially these decisions about work and childcare are individual and moral. Manne's *Motherhood* is nostalgic for an experience of motherhood that the historical analysis of *Double Shift* would suggest never existed for most women.

Double Shift: Working Mothers and Social Change In Australia charts 'the changes that have occurred



in the way motherhood and paid work have been combined in Australia over the last hundred years' (1). It brings together the insights of 'historians, sociologists, demographers and social policy analysts' (1) to explore the contours of mothering and employment at a time when these intersections are 'hot' topics. *Double Shift* eschews simplistic or individualized explanatory frameworks for women's labour patterns, their mothering practices and the 'contradictory and largely unhelpful policy framework for managing these two basic activities' (2) by showing how women worked at the turn of the twentieth century (Swain); in the 1920s and 1930s (Damousi); and in the 1950s (Murphy and Probert). These historical interventions in *Double Shift* add very satisfying depth to contemporary debates about work and family. These chapters reveal the thinness and class specificity of many contemporary discussions about mothers' employment and social change. They show that women's mothering labour in Australia has always been linked to the labour

market and the options available there. As Shurlee Swain's account of the dilemmas faced by working mothers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals, 'decisions about work were made within the context of the family economy' (87), and that is something that has remained remarkably consistent for women.

These accounts of experience are extended by historical analyses of various policy shifts in family benefits and employment which demonstrate how policy frameworks simultaneously encourage and deter women from full and fair participation in the labour market. As Murphy and Probert suggest, the 1950s saw 'an expanding economy ... tugging more women out of the private sphere into employment' (*Double Shift* 150). But they foreground how difficult the work structures and social expectations of

the period made this process. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, ‘the moral framework within which hostility to mothers working has been constructed, and its Janus face—the moral framework within which support for mothers who stay home has been constructed’, (3) is on show.

Alongside these historical analyses are contributions that examine contemporary conditions for working women and their families; contributions that force rethinking of current ‘truths’ about work/life balance and socially equitable outcomes. In particular, these contributions recognize the differential impact that contemporary labour market conditions have had across Australian society in the last several decades. Mark Peel’s contribution focuses on the impact of the feminization of the labour market on working class women and men. As Peel points out, in contrast to the dominant trend of increases in women’s paid work, growth in women’s employment has been slow or stagnant in some working class areas since the 1970s (*Double Shift* 24). And this divergence from the script of ‘career-care’ tension has intersected with significant falls in full time male employment in the same locations and a diminution in social support structures. ‘For these women, the dominant story of the past two decades concerned the lost jobs of their husbands, lovers and sons’ (Peel 25). Gendered analysis of work and care in this context, as Peel argues, might prompt a discussion about ‘work, wage levels and job security for men’ as well as a focus on women’s work (34). The importance of socio-economic differentials in understanding patterns of paid work and parenting is stressed by Howe, Cregan and Grimshaw too; they argue that the deregulation of the labour market has benefited women of the middle classes, but many working class women have fared worse (*Double Shift* 71). In particular, they draw out the experiences of migrant women workers and contrast conditions in 1975 and 2000. Child-care access is still provisional and fraught and conditions of work still leave women open to exploitation (Howe *et al.* *Double Shift* , 83).

Changing family forms are critical in how we think about the work/family nexus. Jane Millar’s analysis of lone mothers’ access to paid work maps the growing sense that ‘paid work is now the norm for [all] mothers’ (*Double Shift* 186), but she argues that policy supports to this group of mothers have to address different issues than do supports for dual-earner families (196). Bettina Cass’s deconstruction of the development of the Australian welfare system outlines the ways it ‘entrenched women’s roles as unpaid carers and intermittent, marginal labour force participants’ (*Double Shift* 203) and points out the potential that, after a period of movement toward gender equity, the male breadwinner norm will be re-instated. Echoing the critical evaluation offered by the authors of *Talking Policy*, Cass suggests that the twin trends of re-commodification (establishing paid market work as the centre of value and necessary for able-bodied adults), and re-familialisation (re-legitimizing the male-breadwinner norm) (*Double Shift* 205) are having an effect on equity and access in Australian society.

In Belinda Probert’s introductory chapter in *Double Shift* , she draws attention to the aspirations of young women from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (1), which were remarkably consistent. Most of those young women articulated the desire for work, stable relationships and children. And although demographic patterns of family labour and paid employment show clear change in how women and men parent and work with greater acceptance of women’s work and men’s fathering (De Vaus 2004), there are major challenges that face young women in achieving these goals. As Murphy and Probert argue, ‘there is little sense of public responsibility for social care, with child care increasingly shifted from the public to the private purse, and with work-family policy being more concerned to ensure that family does not impinge on work’ (151). If we are to successfully and equitably negotiate global change, labour market demand and ‘a principled commitment that caring for all children is everybody’s business’ (Peel, *Double Shift* 34) in Australia, we need to understand the social and political framework in which we operate and to have a clear vision of how we got here.

Talking Policy and *Double Shift* make significant contributions to our capacity to think and talk about these challenges, to understand the ways in which social problems are constructed and to work towards the development and protection of robust policy-making communities that can deliver equitable and desirable outcomes to all Australians.

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Girl Culture

Bloustien, Gerry. *Girl Making: A Cross-Cultural Ethnography on the Processes of Growing Up Female*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2003.

Reviewed by Margaret Henderson



Gerry Bloustien's *Girl Making* joins a growing list of Australian feminist research into adolescent girls and their cultures, for instance, work by Catherine Driscoll, Susan Hopkins, Chilla Bulbeck, and Anita Harris, with Bloustien's ethnography complementing these more sociological or cultural studies approaches. [1] As such, this research contests the residual gender blindness of youth studies and, as Bloustien's title suggests, add to feminist understandings of just how one becomes a (young) woman in supposedly post-feminist times. *Girl Making* is based upon Bloustien's doctoral research - a longitudinal anthropological study of a group of ten Adelaide girls, aged between 13 and 16 years - so it is something of an academic revisiting of the territory of Gillian Armstrong's documentary, *Bingo, Bridesmaids and Braces*. Bloustien aims to

explore the processes of gendered selfhood, particularly in the transition stage of moving from childhood to adulthood. To ameliorate, if not overcome, some of the ethical and intellectual limitations of ethnography, specifically, the academic observer trying to enter and observe 'other' cultures, Bloustien uses an innovative research technique of giving each of her subjects a video camera with which they record their everyday lives. The result is a detailed, sympathetic, and highly readable study that locates the key sites where girls become young women: the body, private space, public spaces, friendship groups at school, and popular music. Further, *Girl Making* gives voice (or is it the power of image making?) to the young women themselves, and thus 'fleshes out' and hence corrects or complicates popular notions of teenage girls. Which is not to say that the news is all good. But more of this later.

I read this book as a feminist working in literary and cultural studies, not anthropology, though the limitations of textual based studies have become obvious to me at various times. Indeed, the cultural studies type approach to youth cultures comes in for some deserved criticism from Bloustien. She is critical of cultural studies' overemphasis on cultural texts, its conflation of text and everyday life - particularly apparent in its focus on the consumer as maker of meanings and identity from texts - and a concomitant lack of empirical evidence to support these readings (17-18). She also takes issue with cultural studies' early tendency to see youth cultures as almost intrinsically resistant to, if not subversive of, the dominant culture, something her findings will dispute. It is not that Bloustien is insensitive to cultural texts or their role in making identity (as her study shows), rather, she argues for a distinction between texts and lived experience, so that "The question should be: How do texts emerge from everyday life to become so meaningful? What exactly is the relationship between texts and lived reality?" (18). Accordingly, Bloustien's ethnographic focus is on 'how subjectivity is negotiated, reflected upon and constituted through everyday social practices', with the textual form of the amateur video tape an intrinsic and unique feature of this project (18).

Girl Making's theoretical framework draws heavily upon Bourdieu's work on social fields and habitus, Michael Taussig's notions of mimesis and mimetic excess and, to a lesser extent, Derrida's concept of différance. Linking these is Bloustien's emphasis on play and bodily praxis as making identity. Bloustien argues that play, whether serious or fantasy, is the process in which the individual tries on

various identities during adolescence. Play denotes a bodily technique whereby the individual's habitus negotiates various social fields and their differing constellations of power relations. Taussig's work on mimesis, or, 'embodied mimicry', is used to explain some of the varieties of play enacted during the videos, and their relationship with the broader contemporary culture of media and performance. For these girls, certain forms of play are a strategy to incorporate the dominant culture's representations of them, that is, to make the other into the self, and thus to seemingly control the other. As Bloustien argues, 'Their play, their image-making, their use of fantasy highlighted a simultaneous testing, stretching and affirming of the symbolic and structural boundaries circumscribing and constraining them' (51).

While Taussig and Bourdieu offered powerful insights, I am less convinced by Bloustien's use of Derridean *différance*, which she tends to use as synonymous with difference. I am not sure that *différance*, a concept denoting the specific operations of language (namely, the endless deferral of meaning and hence instability of language), can easily be applied to identity, as when Bloustien suggests that 'It is Derrida's concept of *différance*, being a separate 'individual,' who requires an 'otherness' for its emergence' (68). Of course language is fundamental to identity, but theories of language may not be analogous with processes of identity formation.

Bloustien is interested in locating shared processes, but also individual differences, of girl making within a group of young women, therefore she selects a diverse range of participants from the Adelaide area in terms of class, ethnicity, and lifestyles/interests. Apart from the desire for a less exploitative way of doing ethnographic research, Bloustien finds that the video camera gives her a much easier *entrée* into these girls' lives and families than do the standard research tools of interviews, surveys, and the academic observer. In an inadvertent comment on the role of media and technology in our culture, and something that the producers of reality TV shows have known for years, sceptical or unwilling participants and their parents become enthusiastic and open; personal spaces and experiences become accessible. The participants are asked to tape (or to get friends to tape) any aspects of their lives, so that the camera moves from personal spaces to social spaces. Instead of giving them instructions as to what kind of video to make, the girls are encouraged to 'play' with the camera. In a way, the video functions as a visual diary. During the fieldwork stage, Bloustien regularly visits each of the girls to discuss the contents of their videos: why they filmed and edited out what they did, and what they didn't film. At the end of the project all the participants contributed material to one final collaborative video.

Bloustien is under no illusions that the video camera is giving her access to the unmediated real. She is deeply aware that the camera, its techniques, and the participants are enmeshed in the images, poses, conceptualisations, and narratives of the wider culture which will inevitably frame the self-narratives. In fact, one of her strongest chapters is the one that discusses 'camera power'. Nevertheless, Bloustien's approach allows her to position the individual subjects in their wider social networks and contexts, and to locate the sayable and the unsayable for adolescent girls and contemporary culture (plus the girls get to keep the camera). The only unavoidable and ironic drawback is that the reader does not get to see the videos, and must rely on written synopses.

Girl Making's chapters are organised into a spiral shape, beginning with the intensely personal sites of subject formation, that is, the body and the bedroom, then moving outwards to public spaces, friendship groups, and music. What Bloustien tracks is not the rebellion of girls, but rather, their quest to be 'normal'. Bloustien notes the girls' hyperawareness of their bodies, clothes and skin, and the physical intimacy between friends (though their terror of being labelled 'lesbians'). In a surprising finding, she argues that the girls' bedrooms are not some space of retreat or rebellion; instead, 'each girl's creation of 'the real me' expressed through the ambience and style of the room itself, were very much in

keeping with her wider social and familial values' (113). Bloustien's observations of the girls' use of public spaces, including toilets, raves, and shrines, showed the role gender, ethnicity and class plays in determining how much public space can be appropriated for identity play. One of the best sections of the book is the description of our anthropologist as a volunteer at a Blue Light Disco which, while really funny, was sad too. Throughout the night the adults were in a barely suppressed state of moral panic, the children and teenagers just wanted a bit of fun, and the music sounded plain awful.

The chapter on friendship groups similarly demolished some myths. Bloustien gives a nuanced account of the importance of friends to girl making, defines 'coolness', and reveals just how hierarchical friendship circles are—replicating the value systems of the adult world. Music is the final site of girl making, and arguably, the most critical. The chapter begins with an interesting theoretical discussion of music and dance, and their relation to bodily praxis. And then our anthropologist is off to some raves and a Madonna concert (an improvement on the Blue Light disco). The final chapter provides the cross-cultural analysis, in which Bloustien details her fieldwork with six girls in the United States and Britain. Although the book's subtitle suggests the centrality of a cross-cultural orientation, it is actually quite a minor focus. This chapter is somewhat perfunctory, and does not really fit with the rest of the book's exhaustive detail.

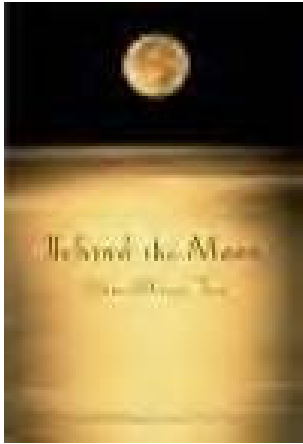
When teaching first year university students, I am always struck by the passivity and reserve of the young women compared to the young men's energy and confidence. Bloustien's *Girl Making* goes a long way towards explaining that foreign country young women have to inhabit, which is really about learning the codes of the dominant 'country'. She does so in a respectful and self-reflexive manner, being very aware of her own positioning in the study (and sometimes, humorously so). My only concerns are that at times it seemed that class as determinant of identity was downplayed, and that there was a related shying away from making generalisations about the processes and 'forms' of being young women. (It is notable that 'ideology' is not listed in the index.) Instead, identity is seen as processual, and comprised of the shifting relations among class, ethnicity, and family background. This reticence might be an unintended result of using Bourdieu, and of the contemporary feminist emphasis on 'difference' (which can end up as individualism). Nevertheless, *Girl Making* is an exhaustive study, theoretically sophisticated, beautifully written, and an enlightening read. And I will now be less impatient with groups of young women in public toilets, as there is girl making underway.

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Rice Queens and Baked Potatoes

Hsu-Ming Teo, *Behind the Moon*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2005.

Reviewed by Rachel Slater



Hsu-Ming Teo's debut novel, the Vogel award-winning *Love and Vertigo* (2000) had as its main themes displacement, dysfunction and family, and her second novel *Behind the Moon*, picks up these threads again in order to explore the lives and loves of three families; the Cheongs, Gibsons and Hos. Teo places her characters on the fringe of inner-western Sydney, a region where the writer herself grew up and lives still. She has described it as a place of 'endless fascination' due in most part to its multicultural hybridity and middle-class suburban mundanity: 'its complete lack of 'cool' and unfashionable 'westiness'; the tragicomic dramas of my neighbours, and the quiet tales of heroic Cold War survivors and postcolonial migrants'.

The novel's title is taken from the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy asks Toto if there might be 'some place where there isn't any trouble. Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. Not a place you can get to by a boat or a train. It's far, far away—behind the moon—beyond the rain'. It is an early signpost of the quiet desperation, confusion and frustration the protagonists will experience and dream of escaping throughout the novel. The story is framed by two 'tragedies'; the Strathfield Plaza massacre which took place on Saturday, 17th August 1991, resulting in the deaths of seven people and the wounding of six others and the funeral of Princess Diana on Saturday, 6 September 1997. These events sets the tone for what is to come as the three main protagonists face their own small suburban tragedies in an attempt to negotiate their teenage years, painful rites of passage into adulthood and the burdens of parental expectation. Justin Cheong is the adored only child of his Singaporean-Chinese parents, Tien Ho, who lives with indifferent relatives, is the daughter of an absent Vietnamese mother and an African-American soldier she has never met and Nigel "Gibbo" Gibson is a walking contradiction in terms—at least as far as his father is concerned—a 'true blue' Australian boy who dislikes sports.

Teo has created an almost impossibly hybrid threesome (Tien for example is the daughter of a Chinese-Vietnamese mother and a half African-American, half-Cajun father, and the granddaughter of a Francophile Vietnamese intellectual) who form a high-school friendship based on their outsider status, but it works because in doing so she challenges stereotyping and avoids appropriation. Relationships in their myriad forms are at the heart of the story; mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, mateships, platonic and not so platonic love between friends and obsessive love and hate. It is a novel about the powerful ties of friendship, love and history as the publishers suggest, but it is also a story about what threatens those bonds. Cultural borders between immigrant and 'Australian' culture and between different Asian communities are examined alongside heterosexual, homosexual, gender and generational divisions.

Food is appears frequently throughout the novel and highlights the characters cross-cultural relations; Justin declares himself a 'Rice Queen' who attempts to buy into white multiculturalism through relationships with white men—known as a potatoes among the gay Asian community—searching for someone who was 'a closet rice eater' and finding himself rejected and vilified. Other characters

frequently come together over meals and there are several nods to the cultural importance of food. Gibbo crosses a border by successfully learning to cook Chinese food, Tien is encouraged to carry 'home-made Mace' in the form of crushed chillies by her Aunties and Gillian (Gibbo's mother) makes a faux pas by taking curry to the 'Dead Diana Dinner' on the assumption that her hosts would be making 'something Asian'—only to discover they are serving roast beef and Yorkshire puddings.

The friendship which holds together Justin, Nigel and Tien deteriorates over the years—aided in part by misplaced affections and resulting betrayals—until their mothers decide to hold a 'Dead Diana Dinner' on the stated premise of watching the funeral on TV and the barely disguised intention of bringing the three friends back together again. The explosive events that follow are unexpected, painful and ultimately life changing for all three families and the novel ends with the characters 'no longer living on the fraying fringes of a difficult and hostile world; they are at the stable centre of the universe and life is simply the way it should be'. Despite its message of redemption through familial, platonic and romantic love, *Behind the Moon* is not cloying or formulaic because its characters are not reducible to their ethnicity, sexuality, gender or occupation; they demonstrate a workable 'multiculturalism' based on connection rather than culture.

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