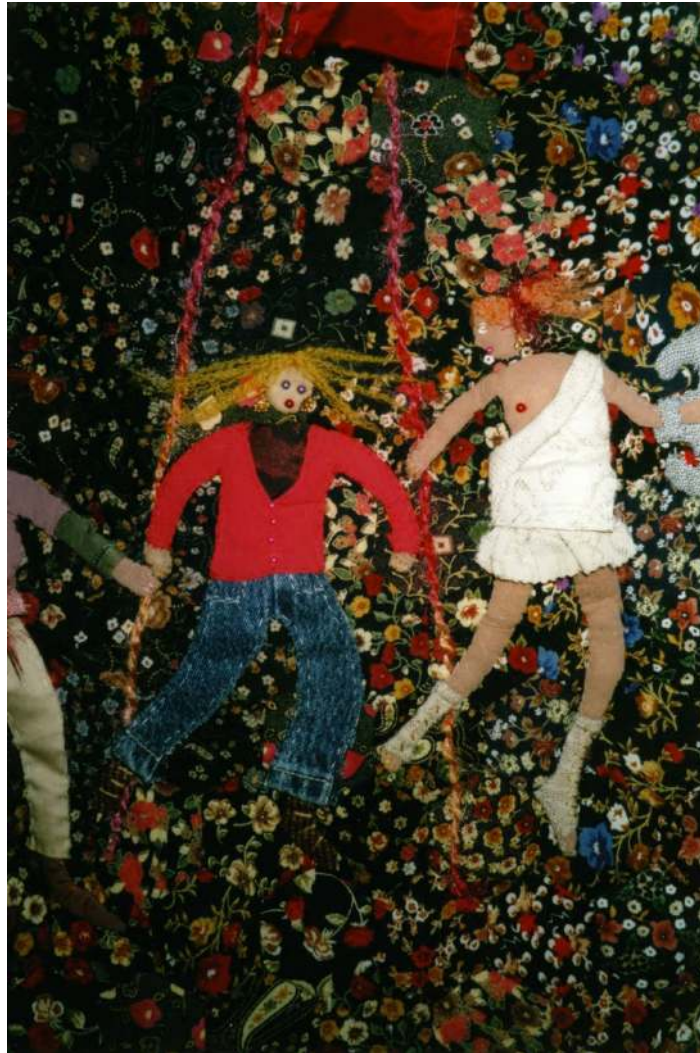


Australian Women's Book Review

Volume 19.1 (2007)



"May Day in Istanbul with Amazonâ" - Eileen Haley

Editor: Carole Ferrier

Associate Editor: Maryanne Dever

Editorial Advisory Board: Brigid Rooney, Margaret Henderson, Barbara Brook, Nicole Moore,
Bronwen Levy, Susan Carson, Shirley Tucker

ISSN: 1033 9434

Contents

4. **Mapping**
By Jena Woodhouse
6. **Digging Deep**
Kathleen Mary Fallon *Paydirt* . Crawley: UWA Press, 2007.
Reviewed by Alison Bartlett
10. **Translating Lives**
Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka (Eds). *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007.
Reviewed by Kate Stevens
13. **Modes of Connection**
Gail Jones. *Sorry* . Vintage, 2007.
Reviewed by Angela Meyer
16. **Hybrid Histories**
Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous–Asian Story* . Sydney : University of New South Wales Press, 2007;
Sally Bin Demin, *Once in Broome* . Broome: Magabala Books, 2007.
Reviewed by Fiona McKean
19. **Journey Through Murky Water**
Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* . Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006.
Reviewed by Shannon Breen
21. **Lifting History's Veil**
Kim Wilkins. *Rosa and the Veil of Gold* . HarperCollins, 2005
Reviewed by Elise Croft
23. **Sequined Hearts and Ostrich Feathers: Tales from Tightropes of Life**
Stephanie Green, *Too Much, Too Soon*. Pandanus Books: Canberra, 2006.
Catherine Rey, *The Spruiker's Tale*. First published under the title, *Ce que racontait Jones*. Paris, 2003. Giramondo Publishing Company: University of Western Sydney, 2005.
Reviewed by Misbah Khokhar
26. **There's No Business Like Dough Business**
Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy. *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia* . University of Western Australia Press, 2007.
Reviewed by Fiona Bucknall
29. **Scripting Motherhood**
Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Reviewed by Marie Porter
33. **What's In a Name?**
Rhyll McMaster, *Feather Man* . Blackheath NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2007.
Reviewed by Rachel Slater

35. **Keeping Afloat**
Susan Sheridan and Shirley Dally, *Twenty Years: Women's Studies at Flinders 1986-2006*.
Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2006. Reviewed by Claire Tanner
38. **Of Roses, the Risqué, and Risk**
Miriel Lenore *In the Garden* . Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2007;
Gina Mercer *Handfeeding the Crocodile* . Lauderdale, Tasmania: Pardalote Press, 2007;
Patricia Sykes *Modewarre* : Home Ground. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2004.
Reviewed by Alison Lambert

Mapping

By Jena Woodhouse

There were frequently tense undercurrents and surface friction between Jeannie and Anna. Jeannie was chronically overburdened with work and worries, and Anna, it seemed, had nothing better to do than think of new, sometimes provocative questions to ask. Jeannie had little patience with such distractions, and could ill afford the time it took to answer or explain. In her own childhood, children had known better than to ask, as did Anna's siblings, who were more docile and seemingly less avid for information, whereas Anna wanted to know about every subject under the sun...

But there was one point of contact Jeannie could seldom resist. This was Anna's mapping homework, which was assigned on some weekends in upper grades of primary school. Special mapping books and project books had to be bought from the newsagent. Mapping books had thicker paper, with all pages blank. Project books were like exercise books in a larger format, ruled pages alternating with blank ones. The other materials required were ink — blue and red Quink and Indian ink; a mapping pen with a special nib; tracing paper, blotting paper, coloured pencils, ruler, lead pencil and eraser. Then there had to be a model to trace from, so of course an atlas was needed... and a place to work.

Anna naturally had more homework than her siblings, and mapping occupied a special status. None of them had graduated to mapping yet. It was accordingly considered a serious business, a matter of some gravity. For mapping purposes, Anna was allowed to occupy the roll-top walnut desk in 'the office'. There she could escape from the here and now, into other places where time was suspended.

First, the coastline and the borders of the map were traced. Most of the maps were of Australian states. Then the tracing paper was laid on the blank page, and the outline heavily impressed with lead pencil, so that an impression was left on the page beneath. This was then carefully rendered in ink, and where there was coastline, shaded next to the inked line with a blue pencil. Next, geographical features were carefully added, using a ruler to gauge distances and scale, after first carefully studying positions and proportions on the original. A map assigned as homework took Anna a whole day.

Jeannie, tea towel in hand, would shuttle between kitchen and office, which were separated by the living-dining room, to check on progress, offer suggestions, and help with the shading. This was done with small pieces of blotting paper, to which patches of colour were heavily applied with coloured pencils. The coloured surface of the blotting paper was then rubbed on the relevant part of the map, leaving a soft shadow of itself: blue for oceans, green for lowlands, orange for deserts, purple for mountains.

Towns were marked with small red circles; capitals with squares; borders with red pencil; rivers drawn in dark blue. Railway lines were starkly defined in Indian ink, crossed with regular, small lines like caterpillar legs, denoting sleepers, differentiating railways from roads. Faint pencil lines kept the lettering of place names level, and were then erased before the final colour application.

Jeannie took particular interest in the maps of Queensland, variously showing geography, primary industry, secondary industry. She had spent her early childhood in limbo, adrift in a lonely, remote place, on a sheep run in far western Queensland where her parents were employed. Nobody thought to show her maps in those days.

The limits of her world had been the galvanised iron bungalow where she lived with her mother, who was employed as a cook at the station homestead — a fresh-faced woman from Sheffield until she had done a stint in the outback — and her father, when he touched base between mustering, droving and other assignments, although he often preferred to share the men's quarters where, as their manager, he

had his own room.

The fresh-faced woman from Sheffield had turned into a woman whose complexion was raddled and wrinkled by the sun, her eyes faded by its excoriating glare, with a haunted, distant expression, as if she had been exposed to the harsh light for too long, or gazed into too many fires.

There was a vegetable garden for the people at the homestead, the domain of a Chinese gardener who wore his long hair in a pigtail. All kinds of green and tender leaves were conjured out of the arid-looking earth, but they were only for the homestead. Fresh produce seldom found its way to the lonely bungalow where little Jeannie lived. Nor was she ever allowed to play with the children from the homestead. When she had the courage and the opportunity to sneak away, she would seek out the Indigenous children in their makeshift camp in the gidyea scrub, but they were shy, and afraid of being punished for encouraging the little girl to stray. They, who were so deprived themselves, looked at the strange, fair child with wonder and pity in their eyes. She seemed to have no people of her own; her mother was too busy or too tired to pay attention to her.

Jeannie received rudimentary lessons by correspondence at irregular intervals, but her mother had precious little time to help with them, so the child would often struggle alone in the heat or the cold of their sheet-iron home, trying to make sense of words and numbers. It was only years later, when she was handed over to patient nuns, that the learning she had almost missed out on became possible.

Now she gazed at Anna's maps of Queensland avidly. *That's where I was*, she'd think. *Way out there, in the back of beyond. Just fancy! But now I'm here, where there are other people ...*

Sometimes the child's voice inside her would add: *Now there are too many people, all depending on me. All depending on these hands of mine that never stop.* And the adult Jeannie's inner voice would rejoin with: *It's different, and there's no time to feel sorry for myself, but I sometimes wonder: am I better off?*

Regardless of Jeannie's fluctuating energy levels, which manifested as mood swings, Anna's maps were reassuring, helping to put things in perspective. Some of them were paths to Jeannie's past, while for Anna they were more about the future. Unlike Jeannie in her childhood, Anna already knew of places beyond Rosewood and the small town where she went to school. Maps were thresholds to discovery and, besides, the concentration they required kept her absorbed for hours on end, attending to the detail, mixing shadow-colours on the page, writing the accompanying text.

She never realised what maps meant to Jeannie, but she was glad of her mother's uncritical support, the way Jeannie would colour bits of blotter and transform white space, just the two of them, their heads bent over the desk in the light from the dusty louvres, with the inks and pencils and atlas neatly arranged as a border to the emerging map that both gave pride of place.

Jena Woodhouse's publications include poetry collections—*Eros in Landscape* **and** *Passenger on a Ferry***— and the award winning children's novella,** *Metis, the Octopus and the Olive Tree*.

'Mapping' is an excerpt from the narrative, *Farming Ghosts*.

Digging Deep

Kathleen Mary Fallon *Paydirt*. Crawley: UWA Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Alison Bartlett



Kathleen Mary Fallon's last book, *Working Hot* (1989) was groundbreaking in its experimentation with writing sexuality, with the sexuality — and violence — of writing; her new book, *Paydirt*, is groundbreaking in writing another kind of violence that is highly political and topical at the moment as it centres on race, child-abuse, whiteness, maternity, and guilt. Its release is well-timed, as the Howard government fills front pages and national broadcast news with its sudden new commitment to wipe out child sexual abuse from Indigenous communities by committing police and military forces with six months of dedicated funding just before a federal election is to be called. In contrast to the political rhetoric we receive in the news, this book approaches violence and parenting and Indigenous community and white paternalism in new and complex and entirely comprehensible ways. It should be required reading for all politicians and current affairs journalists.

Paydirt tells the multiple stories of Warren, a Thursday Island boy who was adopted by a white woman, Kate, when he was five years old. The narrative is set in the present, when Warren is now almost eighteen years old. Warren and Kate are on board an aircraft to Brisbane to meet Warren's biological Islander mother for the first time since he was removed. She is ill, and in hospital, and has contacted them after seeing them on television. The journalist evidently drew more than confessions from them, for in the broadcast documentary — the 'doctored mentality' as Warren calls it — both Warren and Kate revert to stereotypically conflictual relations of racial and generational abuse, demonstrating the strength of such narratives in our cultural imaginations. The idea of screen celebrity is appealing to the naïve Warren, and part of the language of his American-influenced generation. Enmeshed in this narrative and their lives is Kate's history as the daughter of Dell and Keith, and the family home called *Dellkeith*, which is so saturated with familiar cliché and conservatism we could be listening to commercial television or talkback radio. They have been estranged for some time, but there is a reconciliation anticipated between Kate and Dellkeith. This inversion of the usual terms of reconciliation returns it to the generations of white settlers who still cannot reconcile their own racism and family violence.

The book is divided into four separate narratives belonging to: Kate; Warren; Kate's parents, Dell and Keith; and Warren's biological mother, Flo. This apparently simple structure belies a complexity of voice, languages and conflicting positions within contemporary Australian culture and politics, and all are rendered utterly comprehensible and entangled. Warren is the small boy flown off Thursday Island apparently with meningitis and brain damage, institutionalised on the mainland in the euphemistically named Cherrymead until he is five, when all youngsters are transferred to Woodbrook — at which there is neither wood nor brook. Kate is a rebel, the bad daughter who is brought up on June Dally-Watkins' advice for young ladies in a sugarcane town in Queensland, only to run off pregnant then miscarry, and who then finds herself working at Cherrymead. Warren's status as blind, brain-damaged and black has as much potential as the destroyed foetus always referred to as stillborn, stillbirth, still dead, deadbeat, deadpregnant in Fallon's characteristic interrogation of language and narrative devices. Kate cannot bear the thought of Warren's transfer to Woodbrook to eke out an existence of sheltered workshops and drug-induced compliance, so she persuades her flatmate to marry her and files for adoption. While the

paperwork is being processed for months on end, she takes Warren out on weekend visits, appalled at the disintegration of his health, psyche and capabilities. This can only be conveyed through Fallon's powerful narrative, which breaks into verse between stream-of-consciousness voices:

And then, the next weekend when ... I went out there to see him it took them half an hour to get him ready and he was still filthy, still stank of vomit and piss and shit when they took me to this cement room just a cell really, and he was lying there on one of those metal gurney things. He was burning up with fever and they reckoned it was a recurrence of meningitis. When he saw me he reached up and took my hand ...

run ... run ... as fast as ... just run ... run

THE SINCE(E) OF THE PAST – 1

something dead and buried

in unhallowed ground

the sinc(e) of e past

just a bundle of hair and teeth

longed inside her for years

deadpregnent

deadbeat ... (17-18)

There's a refrain through Kate's narrative: Run run as fast as you can you can't catch me I'm the gingerbread man, indicating a primitive flight response to danger and risk, but also a cultural response about too-hard generational abuse and black-white relations. It's intoxicating, as the reader also becomes surrounded by the contradictions and complexity of the situation.

Kate is angry. Warren is a shit who steals her stuff and disappears for days at a time, while she wonders if he's lying in a diabetic coma or will be the next reported death in custody. He's also in danger of being Section Nine-d, in which 'the Department' can determine his fate and send him back to Woodbrook to do time, even though he is almost an adult. Kate is also processing what to say to Flo, Warren's Islander mother who insists on calling Kate 'mum'. Most of Kate's narrative is structured around what stories she is going to be able to tell Flo, and what she is to leave out. And Kate feels complicit and guilty as a white foster mother:

I hate Warren. I hate him for showing me up to myself. My coy, closet Christianity. Hate him because he's the focus for all the abuse and filth that's been directed at me, because I chose him to hold up against that as proof of some pudding and now he's the conduit for it. Hate him because I see what that violence has turned him into. The Stolen Generation's just the most recent story in a long epic. Some Christian re-enactment. Save him. Save myself. Hate him because it hasn't worked. I'm lost. I'm part of this Crusade, this maelstrom of involution. (44)

While Warren's disabilities ensure he is typecast (his 'wonkiness' appears to others as alcohol-induced), his narrative is mostly naïvely cheerful, unaware of the danger of being re-institutionalised, but also optimistically romanticising his Indigenous culture and parents. His narrative is oral, spoken into a recording device while he is flying to Brisbane, in rhythmic language akin to hip-hop and with

didgeridoo accompaniment. Warren's desire to fit back into his culture as an alternative to the white urban restrictions he's experiencing as a young man are perhaps exemplified in the recitation of the song, 'Old T.I.' A note in the acknowledgments at the back of the book cautiously advises that "Old T.I." is a traditional song from the Torres Strait which may originally have been a song sung by the Kanakas who were thrown off boats or jumped ship as they were being returned to Vanuatu. If this is the case, then T.I. probably referred to Tanna Island in Vanuatu' (166). Warren's refrain about belonging to T.I. then may be as misplaced as he feels in urban mainland white Australia. And yet without either unenviable place, there would be no Warren. T.I. operates as a place of hope for both Warren and Kate as a kind of safe haven, until we read Flo's narrative.

Flo speaks at the end of the book from her hospital bed, and her narrative is as much concerned with what she will tell Warren and Kate, as theirs are with her. The entire book is a lesson in how to shape narrative, and how narrative shapes knowledge and understanding. It turns out that Flo has been on the mainland for years now, and has no false illusions about the Island as a cosy haven of culture and safety. She would never go back, she says. Flo's section becomes didactic as it lists the historical episodes for which Thursday Island is renowned: the Coming of the Light, the enlistment of all the men during World War Two and the proximity of Japanese invasion, the Japanese pearl divers who taught Islander men to dive, Eddie Mabo, the racial hierarchies between the Malays, Japanese, Islanders. Despite these educating lists, Flo's voice remains compelling, as she carefully fleshes out the prejudices and jealousies that result in the baby Warren being thrown down the stairs and going still for days. The violence of this incident is indeed part of generational trauma and frustrated masculinity, but it pales in comparison with the muted-but-raging everyday violence of Kate's childhood at Dellkeith.

Kate's complicity in 'fighting violence with violence' is traced back to generations of white migrants, of women who were 'knocked up by the local priest' and exported to the ex-isles, continuing a legacy of class injustice into racial superiority. The Dellkeith narrative is perhaps the most difficult to read as it interweaves fonts and voices, mixing John-Laws-type cliché with aphorisms and sound-bites across time, place and generations of blood-letting and stillbirths. Let me give you a taste: this is the voice of Dellmay (mostly).

Nulla-Nulla soap – knocks dirt on the head as the old ad says. But I learnt to hold my head high and stare them down in that rotten little sugarcane town. I vowed then and there that never again — I'd work and I'd scrimp and I'd save and never would I, or my children, never have to feel what that shame felt like. Now she brings him right back into the heart of *Dellkeith* the-home-which-I've-worked-so-hard-to-make-a-haven. And she's not much better than the Blacks herself. My own flesh and blood. They say that's one good thing, no throwbacks, but I don't know if that applies to the Kanaka Race. They do say sometimes it skips a generation.

DELLKEITH CAHOOTS CHORUS

Never anything but a disappointment
we built her a BBQ
bought her a ping-pong table
we turned on the string of coloured lights
every Saturday night
of her teenage generation-gap years

only to be made the butt of her bad-girl jokes
all those beautiful pure wool ensembles
I made for her ... (88-89)

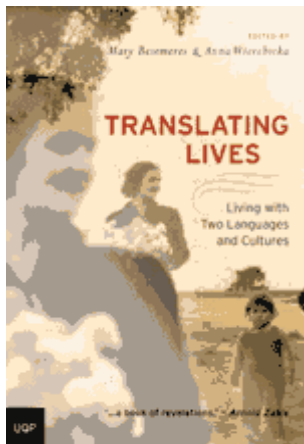
The story is driven by a race against time: getting to Flo in hospital before she dies, getting Warren to his eighteenth birthday before he's Section Nine-d, and Kate's reconciliation with her parents which is underwritten by a tension so deeply engrained that its very foundations are riven with scars of betrayal over generations. In many ways *Paydirt* has a hysterical edge, in that it is urgent, heralding the return of the repressed, sung in the voices of dialects both familiar and foreign, and manifesting current social anxieties that need attending to. It is a story of the lies and hopes, stories and rhetoric, but mostly of the emotions — the anger, love, hope, naïveté, guilt, betrayal, and agony — that are so deeply entrenched in the debates around race relations in Australia. This book should unleash an ants-nest of debate, if only it were widely read, which it should be. It marks a turn in UWA Press's New Writing Series to highly accomplished, urgent and political writing whose narrative practices reflect the demand for new stories and a new language in which to speak all our violent histories and their intersections. A thoroughly compelling and courageous novel.

Dr Alison Bartlett is director of Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia.

Translating Lives

Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka (Eds). *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Kate Stevens



Australia is home to over 200 languages other than English spoken by some two million people; yet, as this book suggests, many Australians do not know what it is like to live between languages, or between cultures. This collection of short essays by writers from a variety of cultural backgrounds who currently reside in Australia, helps to bridge the gap between 'Anglo Australians' and those living between two cultures, and two languages. With contributions from authors such as Kim Scott and Eva Sallis, as well as authors of German, Polish, Korean, Russian, and Chinese descent (to name just a few) this book is as educational as it is entertaining, and as culturally diverse as it is close to home.

The mother-daughter editing team of *Translating Lives*, Anna Wierzbicka and Mary Besemeres, gathered contributions for this book by asking writers to reflect on a number of aspects of their bilingual lives, such as whether they could express their thoughts and feelings just as fluently in either language, or whether they had difficulty finding words in one language for important phrases in another. The quality and variety of the published responses make for fascinating reading. While some authors focus on the experience of migration, others focus more keenly on the linguistic aspect of their lives, and the search for the perfect self-translation. As an introduction to these essays, the editors discuss the importance of recognising language not only as a means of communicating, but as a way of thinking and feeling. Drawing on their own experiences as Polish migrants, Wierzbicka and Besemeres touch on the significance of language in cross-cultural understanding, and go so far as to suggest that a 'monolingual perspective on the world is a monocultural one' (xiv).

In discussing the monocultural-versus-multicultural aspect of Australian society, many writers featured in *Translating Lives* have something to say about the lack of cultural understanding and tolerance in Australia, which makes this book all the more relevant. Describing Australia as a 'linguistic Third World, a land in which languages are threats and are too often stamped out and forgotten' (151), Eva Sallis writes about how learning Arabic opened up another world for her, one free from 'Western prejudice and from an inheritance of fear' (159). Similarly, Brij V Lal, an Indo-Fijian, contrasts Australia's multiculturalism with that of the United Kingdom, where 'multiculturalism is a publicly accepted fact—in popular culture, in the universities, in the media', and concludes that multiculturalism in Australia is only 'just starting its journey' (39).

One theme central to almost all of the essays in *Translating Lives* is that of defining the self. Many of the contributors are keenly aware of the different ways in which they are able to express themselves through language, and the different personalities that this affords them. This often results in what can be described as a kind of 'double identity'. One particularly touching example of this can be seen in Anna Wierzbicka's chapter, 'Two Languages, Two Cultures, One (?) Self: Between Polish and English'. In this chapter, Wierzbicka discusses, among other things, the way in which she finds it impossible to describe her granddaughter using the English language. In Polish, she is a doting grandmother, but in English, she is at a loss for words:

It is not that I am unfamiliar with the register of English used for talking about babies, but I feel that this register does not fit the emotional world to which this baby belongs for me ... Since English doesn't have any diminutives, I would have to use descriptive 'loveless' words like 'curls', 'teeth', or 'small', and I feel I couldn't do that. (99)

Similarly, she recounts an argument she had with her daughter, in which rather than speaking Polish with each other as they normally would, they switch to English. This allows them to fall into a separate set of social patterns, and to be distant from each other: 'I think I could be angry with Clare in Polish but I can't be distant' (106).

Anna Gladkova also explores her double identity, and the experience of having to tone down the 'emotional involvement' that comes with speaking Russian, when speaking English (141). Likewise, Andrea Whitcomb writes of how she lost an entire 'emotional landscape' when her father stopped talking to her in Portuguese: 'a landscape in which he was an unquestioned figure of authority but which also allowed him to express emotion' (94). But perhaps one of the most revealing chapters for me was that written by Jock Wong. Exploring some of the cultural differences between Chinese and Australian society, Wong discusses this concept of a double identity in great depth, and gives one particularly striking example:

When an Anglo Australian says something like 'you don't have to' or 'thank you' over small matters, there will be two reactions within me. The Anglo persona will, of course, appreciate the respect for my personal autonomy. However, the Chinese persona will sense that the person is keeping a distance and will feel isolated. (79)

These examples demonstrate just how challenging adapting to a new language and culture can be, and give us some idea of the kind of communication breakdowns that can occur in cross-cultural communication.

Many of the contributors to *Translating Lives* migrated to Australia as adults, and had to face the difficult decision of how to raise their children here. Which language would be spoken at home? Which cultural values would be upheld? The vast majority of these authors recognised the value of raising a child bilingually and biculturally. Michael Clyne, for example, writes of the cognitive advantages associated with a bilingual childhood, and raises his own daughter using a method known as the 'one parent one language' strategy (22). Other contributors point to the fact that by not teaching their children their mother tongue they would feel as if they had not been true to their homeland. Anna Wierzbicka uses the Polish word '*wynarodowic sie* (to betray one's nation by ceasing to be, emotionally and linguistically, a part of it)' to describe this responsibility, and explains that this word 'expresses the collective Polish point of view clearly enough' (110). Kyung-Joo Yoon found it especially challenging raising her son in Australian society, not only due to linguistic challenges, but due primarily to the stark contrasts in culture between Australian society and her own upbringing in Korea:

For example, when I went to the house of a friend of my small son Emmanuel, a five-year-old boy said 'thank-you' to his mother when she gave him a drink. I remember feeling quite awkward about the way the boy thanked her for such a small favour In Korea, it is thought that a child owes a debt of gratitude to his or her parents, and everyone knows that this debt is never repayable ... [Korean children] do not have to express gratitude in words, but are responsible for bearing it always in mind. (115)

It is these small insights into other cultures that make these essays so valuable to modern Australian society.

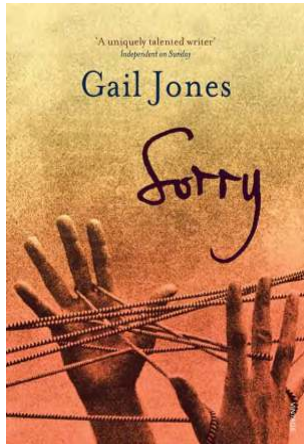
Translating Lives is the kind of book that should be compulsory reading for all Australians. If we want to take steps to make this nation less of a monoculture and more of a truly multicultural society, it is crucial that we educate ourselves on these cross-cultural matters, and that we appreciate just how rewarding cross-cultural communication can be.

Kate Stevens is currently completing her MA in Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Queensland, and is an Editorial Assistant on the *Australian Journal of Communication* .

Modes of Connection

Gail Jones. *Sorry*. Vintage, 2007.

Reviewed by Angela Meyer



Sorry is Gail Jones's most important and accessible book to date. Perdita is born late in life to immigrant parents Nicholas and Stella. They have come from England so Nicholas can study anthropology. In Broome they keep a ramshackle house with books stacked like furniture. The mother, Stella, obsessively recites Shakespeare, attempting to inject drama into her existence. Perdita is not often shown affection, and only feels at home in the arms of the Aboriginal tribeswomen whom Nicholas studies nearby.

A saviour comes in the form of Mary, an Aboriginal slavegirl and victim of the stolen generation. She becomes Mary's 'sister' and, along with the deaf and dumb Billy, they become their own tribe.

Jones's female characters often take the place of the 'other', subverting the usual role of the group of characters around the protagonist. In *Dreams of Speaking* Alice was confronted by the horrors of Hiroshima, after meeting a first-hand witness in Mr Sakamoto. She was the displaced figure, small and insignificant, in London, and later in Japan, swarming with electronic reminders of progress and digital transcendence. In *Sixty Lights*, Lucy is ahead of her time in Bombay and London; eccentrically fascinated with photography, new technologies capturing time. She is the 'other', displaced by her advanced cultural sensibilities.

The Aboriginal characters in *Sorry* are depicted with elegance and beauty—they are magicians, heroes and saviours. They are mysterious, warm and communal. Jones does not 'otherise' them except through the eyes of Nicholas and his anthropological study. With his Victorian and social Darwinist background he sees them as 'base, unintelligent and equivalent to children' (7). The majority of the novel is seen through Perdita's eyes in both first and third person, and she witnesses the Aboriginal people's intelligence and intuition. Mary shows Perdita and Billy how to track, how to search for food, and look for patterns and shapes which are pathways to tucker: 'all that had been inscribed there before them, in a hidden language never noticed, became suddenly visible' (54). There is more meaning to be found there than in all the wordy babblings of her mother. And when Perdita begins to stutter after a traumatic incident, the significance of communicating without conventional language is again emphasised. Jones does present the possibility of balance though, because Mary enjoys reading, just as Perdita enjoys the hands-on learning. Perdita half-conquers her stutter when a doctor encourages her to speak sentences in Shakespearean rhythms. But she is only completely freed of her stutter when she utters a repressed truth. Jones may be suggesting that the cure is communication, whether this be through the language we know, or less conventional modes, like the sign language that Mary and Perdita learn to converse in with Billy. This is emphasised in the book's opening lines: 'This is a story that can only be told in a whisper' (3). This line is reminiscent of the closing passage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which was a story that revealed gaps in the history of black feminine experience in America. It is an ironic statement that says that currently there is not enough representation of the voices in the novel.

There are monstrous forms of white oppression depicted, such as Nicholas's sexual abuse of Mary, and the background of World War Two looming down on the small, but disjointed unit in the hut. But the

faces of white oppression are still humanised. Nicholas is described like this: 'At this moment he seemed most human, and almost vulnerable: he was asking his young daughter to confirm his ideas' (72). This is, however, after his advocacy of an individualist culture; the idea that the Aboriginal collectivism is wrong because 'they were always poor and could never accumulate property' (71). Around this everywhere we have the depictions of war—the international fruits of warring ideals on individualism and collectivism. Perdita startlingly realises the contradictions of war while playing cards one evening:

At once she knew with startling clarity, like a punch in the ribs, one of the terrible, unassimilable anomalies of this world: that there is always war somewhere and peace somewhere else, that there are people dying and at the same time there are people playing cards, sipping, as they do, from cups of sweetened tea, preoccupied only by the pleasures and vexations of a cardboard figure. (82)

On top of this, Perdita feels she has a war going on inside, being alienated from affection by her parents. This parallels her empathy for Mary and the stolen generation experience, a shared representation of abandonment.

Unlike the horrific (yet truthful) implications in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Jones attempts to bring the reader close to the Aboriginal experience. In Mary, Perdita sees a saint. In an inversion of white cultural values, Perdita actually wishes to be Mary's true sister: 'She wanted so much to be dark. When she placed her forearm alongside Mary's she saw herself the bright negative of a surer presence. Mary teased and humoured her' (73). The problem is that Mary ends up taking Perdita's place, in a blind justice system that will willingly take her. But Mary is blasé about her fate; she is dignified and accepting. And for this Perdita feels both guilt and awe. Perhaps Jones is suggesting that while many of us do feel guilt, certain problems have gone on for so long that many are subdued into acceptance, black and white, and this creates serious manifestations on the surface of our society. It fosters cycles of stereotyping and unlearning. Jones insists that the (white) reader trial different ways of learning and communicating with those who are the true and original owners of this land. The white reader is, or was, the 'other', the invaders. Perdita also fails, significantly, to say that precious word 'sorry', which is now so loaded in Australian culture. In this one overt moment Jones is reminding us how such a small word seems so difficult for some: how a country is blind and deaf, and power is dumb.

One last thing to note about Gail Jones is her absorbingly elegant prose. *Sorry* is not as lushly descriptive as *Sixty Lights* or *Dreams of Speaking*, but it is as fluent. Where the last two novels were beautifully and blindingly lit with luminous and technological references, *Sorry* diffuses these overt visuals into insights of character—the luminescence of the spirit, and the technological progress of society (often strangely backward). There are a few classic Jones moments, as in this description of pearl shells:

The mother-of-pearl particularly attracted her. It had a beauty she mostly associated with light: the lustre of moon-lit clouds, beam-shot from below, the strange coiny iridescence on the bellies of fish, the glittery traces threaded in the border of her mother's Spanish shawl. (130)

Another is the scene where Perdita first goes to the cinema: 'Perdita watched a spectral mist waver and disperse, then experienced mobility, with supernatural powers, as she moved with dream slipperiness up a winding road' (177). Jones's intuitive expressions are what ultimately make all her novels worth reading.

The literary mode of communication can be a powerful one, as Perdita discovers in her reading:

There are always moments, reading a novel, in which one recognises oneself, or comes across a described detail especially and personally redolent; might there be in this covert world, yet another zone of connection? (145)

Jones has suggested more than one mode of connection and, in her novel, has allowed readers to see themselves not just in orthodox ways, but in those characters normally typicalised as 'other'. Her many layers of meaning are easily and enjoyably absorbed through her delicious and elegant writing. *Sorry* is a story that should be spoken about in more than a whisper.

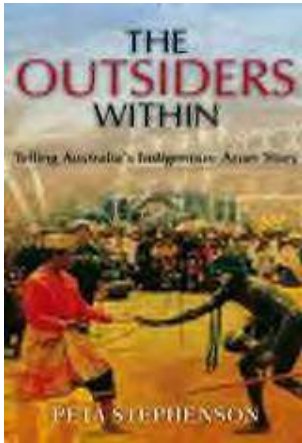
Angela Meyer is a writer, student of film and literature, and a bookseller at Dymocks Coffs Harbour.

Hybrid Histories

Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous–Asian Story* . Sydney : University of New South Wales Press, 2007;

Sally Bin Demin, *Once in Broome* . Broome: Magabala Books, 2007.

Reviewed by Fiona McKean



Peta Stephenson's title *The Outsiders Within* prepares readers for the many ironies and inversions she characterises in her analysis of Indigenous, Asian and white relationships in Australia . Her central premise is that a rich history of relationships between Indigenous and Asian people has been silenced within the Australian historical record and, further, that white Australia has constructed Asian and Aboriginal people as 'symbolic projections of white anxiety' (9), while simultaneously seeking to limit interactions between the two groups.

The Outsiders Within successfully inverts many of the stereotypes and assumptions dominant in white Australia regarding Asian and Aboriginal Australians. Subsequently portrayed as 'new Australians' or invading hordes, Asian people have been visiting Australia since long before European

contact. Stephenson comprehensively documents Makassan relationships with northern Australian Aboriginal groups extending back for centuries before white occupation, and records the sadness felt by Aboriginal people when these visits were legislated against (23). She describes how one of the most iconic emblems of Top End Aboriginal cultures, the dugout canoe, was unknown prior to contact with the Makassans (37). So, from the initial chapters, she exposes, inverts and subverts notions of belonging, ownership and identity: of who are 'insider' and 'outsider' Australians, and who lies 'within' and 'outside' certain groups.

Chapter by chapter, Stephenson gives voice to those who have been historically silenced within the dominant Australian narratives — Aboriginal and Asian people, and especially in their contact. She documents relationships between Aboriginal and Asian people in northern Australian pearling communities, paranoid concerns from white authorities regarding Japanese and Aboriginal collaboration in World War Two, and more recent Indigenous-Asian interactions. Stephenson scrutinises the ways in which white Australia sought to classify and contain Asian and Aboriginal people, sometimes with painfully ironic results: the Aboriginal wife of a Japanese man, for example, interned separately from him in a prisoner-of-war camp (119), or the man of Chinese-Aboriginal descent whose relationship with an Aboriginal woman was illegal because he had been classified as 'European' by white officials (83).

Stephenson transposes many of the techniques and attitudes of past white Australian historians, and privileges the voices of Asian and Aboriginal people in *The Outsiders Within* . Using oral histories, she allows Asian and Aboriginal people to put on record their own experiences in their own words. She focuses on Aboriginal, Asian, and Aboriginal–Asian artists whose works represent their own visions of race and identity. *The Outsiders Within* also deals mainly with northern Australia , rather than eastern and southern Australia . She has blended historical accounts with textual analysis and accounts of different modes of artistic production, seamlessly melding the artistic and historical as a cultural whole. Both in style, as well as in substance, Stephenson's work blends borders and challenges categories,

aided by her sharp eye for the ironic.

Given this underlying theme of irony and inversion, I would like to have seen Stephenson examine other parodic constructions of Australian senses of race and identity: such as Chris Lilley's creation of the embarrassingly stereotypical *Indigeridoo*, performed by the Chinese Musical Theatre Group in *We Can Be Heroes*. Although scripted and performed by a white Australian, this series addressed many of the issues at the heart of Stephenson's book. In a similar manner to that described in Stephenson's analysis of Hung Le's *Black and Tran*, Lilley uses the 'cultural cluelessness' of the Chinese Musical Theatre Group to reflect white Australians' assumptions back to them. A further layer of irony is added by the involvement of Cathy Freeman, a prominent Australian who, as Stephenson points out, is of Aboriginal and Chinese ancestry. Perhaps this programme had not been screened in the period when Stephenson was writing her work.

This is, however, a minor point. Stephenson has brought to light fascinating and disregarded experiences of people whose voices have largely remained unheard. She has condensed centuries of interactions between different groups into one, readable text. And she has largely allowed the people to speak for themselves — using oral histories and their own descriptions of their art — recognising her role, in this context, as ultimately that of 'outsider'.

Earlier in *The Outsiders Within*, Stephenson asserts that:

When dealing with marginalised communities and experiences, the most reliable sources are rarely books written by outsiders (useful as these may be), they are the stories the outsiders within have to tell. But here something else emerges: story-telling is an art form, and some of the best story tellers are artists. (13)

Stephenson's statement provides a useful lens through which to view Sally Bin Demin's *Once in Broome*. Bin Demin's mother was a member of the stolen generation who spent over fifty years in a relationship with a Malay man, while Bin Demin herself acknowledges 'I also have Asian blood in my veins' (preface), and that her partner is a Malay man. Her personal history provides unique insights into life for Indigenous and Asian people in Broome, the Australian nexus of Indigenous, Asian, and white cultures. Further, Bin Demin's memoir encompasses the period immediately following World War Two, a liminal period for Indigenous and Asian northern Australians.

<http://www.emsah.uJournal/143/images/>

Bin Demin is a visual artist, and this sensual appreciation is an aid to her childhood recollections. Her word portraits evoke a childhood where 'we lived by the cycle of the moon, and the rhythm of the tides influenced much that happened in our lives' (61). This is a Broome where 'when the sea flooded the town, it was a brilliant Ming blue' (62); where pythons sing at night, making 'a kind of low mooring sound' (143), and where a Chinese tailor known as 'Eggs on Legs' (150) runs the *cheefah* raffle. Bin Demin and her friends roam Broome and beyond, happily eating camp pie and bread, satay and rendang, and bush fruits such as *gamolon* and *mangarr*. These episodes are emblematic of her truly multicultural childhood, where:

As children we didn't know the rest of Australia was not like Broome, and we took for granted the many ethnic groups who lived together. We had the world at our doorstep. (27)

These intersecting worlds of nature and diverse cultures are perhaps best embodied in Bin Demin's image of the town's bore water, silted with red dirt, being strained through Singaporean soya sauce urns

(51).

Bin Demin's account, however, is not completely idyllic. Broome is a town where 'people were classified into racial groups and given status accordingly' (30), and 'the more you had [Aboriginal ancestry], the less you were accepted' (31). 'Full-blood' Aboriginal people were not allowed within the town proper without a permit (31), the Sun picture theatre was segregated (106), and mixed-race people were classified using terms such as 'octoroon' (30). In a poignant episode, Bin Demin identifies with the racial categories applied to slaves in *Gone with the Wind*, because they are familiar to her (107). And all of this occurred in a town that has been represented as one of the most multicultural in Australia .

Still, in Bin Demin's account, some of the 'outsiders' of her childhood were actually whites who had transgressed these social categories, such as the derelict Lofty, or white women who had married Asian men. Rejected by other whites, these women find acceptance within Asian and Indigenous communities. For all the hierarchical structures, the categories of 'insider' and 'outsider' appear rather more fluid — as of course they are for those who live and move between cultures.

Simply written, Bin Demin's memoir conveys an impression of great richness, sensuousness, and diversity. This vibrancy is enhanced by reproductions of Bin Demin's own stunning silk paintings, which appear throughout the book in sumptuous colour. This book is exquisitely formatted and presented, so it's a shame that it wasn't proofread more carefully. With such a visually oriented text, beautifully produced, these occasional errors do detract from the overall aesthetic impression.

Once in Broome is a unique evocation of an 'old Broome' that no longer exists. It is important for giving voice to a neglected experience: that of the Asian-Indigenous northern Australian. Strikingly presented and illustrated, it will appeal to those interested in learning about the 'cultural landscape' of Broome. And, for visitors to Broome, it is just the right size to slip into carry-on luggage.

Fiona McKean is an expatriate Territorian, currently experiencing concrete fatigue while completing a Graduate Diploma in Arts (Writing, Editing and Publishing) at the University of Queensland .

Journey Through Murky Water

Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* . Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006.

Reviewed by Shannon Breen



Against the backdrop of Australia's recent history wars, novelist Kate Grenville has launched a personal, heart-felt campaign for better white-black relations with her non-fiction work, *Searching for the Secret River* .

In 2000, Grenville chose to delve into her family's convict history. Her discoveries inspired a novel, *The Secret River*, which was last year's winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was short-listed for the Booker. In her follow-up non-fiction account, *Searching for the Secret River* , Grenville reveals why and how she wanted to re-imagine Australia's colonial past.

Grenville's memoir starts with the sketchy details of family folklore: her mother's tales of an English ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, who was transported to the colony of NSW for stealing in 1807. Eventually pardoned, he made his fortune on the Hawkesbury River.

It's a story Grenville says she had almost forgotten until, while taking part in the Reconciliation Walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, she catches the eye of an Aboriginal woman. Reminded of her convict family history, Grenville wonders what might have happened when her ancestor, Wiseman, arrived on the Hawkesbury and started 'the business of settling' (13).

How Grenville tracks Wiseman through historical documents in London and Sydney becomes a compelling mystery on two levels: will she find the documents necessary to piece together Wiseman's life? And how much of the real Wiseman becomes the fictional William Thornhill, protagonist of the award-winning novel? This first part of Grenville's memoir has the chance encounters, coincidences, and suspense of a whodunit. Was Wiseman a scoundrel or a pioneering hero? Or perhaps both?

Searching , then, becomes a more reflective, personal journey. As she reconstructs Wiseman's life and divines his character, Grenville tests her primary school understanding of early colonial history (Aborigines were nomads who went walkabout) against the NSW governor's despatches to London. The novelist is awakened to another, bloodier history, brought to life when she visits Wiseman's actual home on the Hawkesbury. Grenville describes the Georgian building as a 'fortress', with a door like a medieval castle.

It is here that Grenville employs a novelist's imagination, feeling 'absolutely certain' there had been conflict between Wiseman and the Aboriginal people: 'But in that moment of seeing the place with new eyes, what I saw were spears and guns, and bright blood soaking into the hot dirt' (104).

Given the fierce debate over Australia's early history, these are incendiary assertions. In his book, *Sense & Nonsense in Australian History* (Black Inc, 2006), historian John Hirst takes issue with the fictionalised atrocities in Grenville's novel, *The Secret River* , accusing her nineteenth century characters of feeling twenty-first century guilt. Hirst argues that the convict characters Grenville invents based on the real experiences of the early settlers were unlikely to have felt anything beyond a desperate need to survive.

Interestingly, Grenville's memoir doesn't acknowledge these criticisms of her novel, or reveal her own

political views. It's as if she didn't much think about Aboriginal relations until the Reconciliation Walk. This posture seems disingenuous, a device to make Grenville's journey less confronting to readers who resist challenging the past. Her admission that she has just realised that white culture, her culture, is a 'learned thing' (129), sounds like a lesson for the reader.

Similarly, at times her naïveté seems more a literary device than actual. Had she really no idea that Aboriginal people and white settlers perpetuated violence against each other? She compares her shock at the extent of the violence to her teenage discovery of the Nazis' atrocities against the Jews (124).

Though she may overstate her ignorance, in telling this story of her epiphany, Grenville is a likeable narrator, and she tries to get the detail right. Wanting to write Aboriginal characters as William Thornhill would have seen them, Grenville travels to the Kimberley to see 'people of unmixed Aboriginal descent, living in traditional ways' (193). This experience reinforces Grenville's main theme: cultural misunderstanding caused past bloodshed, and the cultural divide between black and white Australia is still hard to cross today. When Grenville arrives in Kununurra, she finds the Aboriginal people exotic, 'black as the shadows', their faces 'unreadable'. And when they speak, she thinks to herself, 'they're speaking a foreign language'.

No , I realised. It's me. I'm the one speaking a foreign language . I was ashamed. My first reaction had been to think they were the foreigners. That was how backward I was, underneath those fine sentiments. In spite of all my good intentions and high-minded thoughts, I didn't understand a thing. (194)

The novelist is back on firm ground when her memoir focuses on the writing process. Apart from her critically acclaimed novels— *Lillian's Story* , *Dark Places* , and the winner of the 2001 Orange Prize, *The Idea of Perfection* —Grenville has produced guides on how to write. Throughout the book, the reader is shown the magician's tricks backstage—Grenville details how she creates her characters, and constructs believable period dialogue, avoiding 'ye olde parody' (204). Aspiring writers and admirers of her work will find it fascinating.

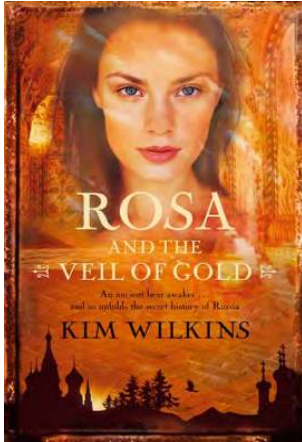
Early in *Searching for the Secret River* Grenville thinks about her 'old colonist' ancestor and poses a question: What would *I* have done? To answer this, she adopts the character of Kate as Everywhitefella, bravely examining her own family history and conscience. Grenville embodies the journey I suspect she hopes the nation will eventually take. Readers will either warm to Grenville's memoir, or find it irritating, depending on their own attitude to Australia's history.

Shannon Breen has worked as an ABC radio broadcaster in Alice Springs. She is currently completing a postgraduate diploma in Writing, Editing, and Publishing at The University of Queensland.

Lifting History's Veil

Kim Wilkins. *Rosa and the Veil of Gold*. HarperCollins, 2005

Reviewed by Elise Croft



Following *The Autumn Castle* and *Giants of the Frost* is Kim Wilkins's third book in this series, *Rosa and the Veil of Gold*. This novel places us in modern Russia and leads us into the magical world of Russian folklore. Wilkins's ability to combine myth and reality has never been better. She displaces history with myth and myth with history into a story so full of humanity that you will walk away from this book with a deeper sense of interest in Russia's history than many a text book could have provided.

Not only is this novel a continuation of the link between the past and the present that was introduced and developed in both *The Autumn Castle* and *Giants of the Frost* but it is also a continuation of a trend of Gothic motifs found in most of Wilkins's fiction. How Wilkins uses these themes in combination with fantasy is the key to another enriching and thrilling ride

into the past.

The first hint of the Gothic that we come across is the concept of the unburied secret. The unburied secret in Gothic texts initiates the journey that all involved in its discovery must undertake. It represents the connection between the past and the present, and foretells a new discovery of history. In this story a Golden Bear is discovered in an old bathhouse, traditionally a place of magic, and marks Rosa Kovalenka, Daniel St Clare (Rosa's ex-lover) and Em Hayward (Daniel's co-worker) as its guardians across the veil between the un-magical world of modern Russia, Mir, and the magical, forgotten world of Russian myth, Skazki. The bear's discovery begins the journey of the three characters and the unravelling of everything they know.

The Golden Bear throws the oblivious Em and Daniel across the veil into Skazki; the bear is their key to the forgotten mythic part of Russia. The characters and landscapes in Skazki that Wilkins creates are mythic, but the reality and danger of Em and Daniel's situation provides their adventure with terrifying and uncanny developments. Wilkins's imagery is able to mould fantasy and the horrific into a thrilling, page-turning adventure.

Although thrilling, Em and Daniel's fast-paced, continually dangerous adventure is sometimes overwhelming. Something new lurks around every corner and the expectation destroys the surprise of events and intricacies of each Skazki character. Wilkins, however, is able to break it up with Rosa's parallel story and Papa Grigory's historically corrective narrative while still continuing the use of Gothic motifs.

Rosa's story is centred around her household position on the edge of Mir and Skazki in the Chenchikov family. Rosa attempts to learn the secrets of the father, a sorcerer, who holds the key to crossing the border between the two worlds. The Chenchikov family, however, is haunted by the daughter's dead husband and Rosa's learning does not progress as well as expected. It is then that Rosa's mother's diary, the unburied manuscript that links Rosa to Skazki, and her story to the Gothic, helps Rosa cross the veil to save her friends.

Rosa also has her secrets and is not just crossing the veil to rescue Daniel and Em. Rosa intends to stay in Skazki where she can escape the hereditary disease that awaits her return to Mir. The hereditary disease and the passing on of her mother's magical abilities to herself recall the Gothic concept of the hereditary curse carried on through generations that typically plagues the central female characters in Gothic literature. Rosa is far from the helpless female as seen in such Gothic novels as *The Castle of Otranto* or *A Sicilian Romance*, in which the female Gothic plays a large role in the development of the Gothic plot. These connections with specific Gothic motifs, however, highlight Wilkins's ability to modernise the larger concepts like the female Gothic and still develop traditional Gothic themes.

Papa Grigory watches over the unfolding of Rosa, Daniel and Em's stories. His narrative weaves through theirs, telling the history of the Golden Bear as it descends through Russia's monarchy and absorbs Russia's history. The bear, the unburied secret, is the link between Skazki and un-magical Russia, but it is Papa Grigory, not the bear, who provides us with a new, magical history of Russia. Papa Grigory is the immortal character who provides us with a first-hand account of Russia's history. His character is strongly reminiscent of the Wandering Jew traditionally employed in Gothic fiction (and particularly prominent in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*). Papa Grigory weaves Russia's history and mysteries with Russian myth.

My focusing on the Gothic motifs in this book is not to say that *Rosa and the Veil of Gold* is Gothic fiction. This novel is, rather, another example of Wilkins's ability to deploy not just the stories of history but the literary techniques that history has provided. She weaves fantasy with Gothic motifs just as she weaves the magical with the un-magical and Russian myth with Russian history.

Other than these literary techniques, the impact of this novel for me came from its warmth and delicacy, arising from its characterisation. Wilkins has often asserted that she puts everything into her characters and this novel is a triumph of her approach. Rosa and Em are typical of Wilkins's female characters: attractive, independent, strong-willed and immersed in the complications of life. Rosa lives a life of quick thrills in fear of losing herself with anything more permanent, and Em simply feels nothing. Daniel leads a soft and sad existence, pushing his way through unfinished projects; never concerned with conclusions but rather with where he is now and how he can share it with Rosa. Under Papa Grigory's omniscient and self-revealing narrative the characters build themselves and their understanding, and this fills the story with such a strong sense of human involvement that we start to view history as not just the recollection of past events but as a conglomeration of everyone's stories.

Wilkins, who immersed herself in research of Russian myth and history for this novel, has stated that *Rosa and the Veil of Gold* was a product of an interest in the parallels between Russia's myth and history. As a reader, not valuing this as an alternate, magical history does not affect the warmth and sincerity that this explanation of Russia's mysteries has. It can hold you in disbelief and still have you thinking twice about how you view the history of the world.

Elise Croft will complete a BA (English)/BSc (Mathematics & Physics) at the University of Queensland this year.

Sequined Hearts and Ostrich Feathers: Tales from Tightropes of Life

Stephanie Green, *Too Much, Too Soon*. Pandanus Books: Canberra, 2006.

Catherine Rey, *The Spruiker's Tale*. First published under the title, *Ce que racontait Jones*. Paris, 2003. Giramondo Publishing Company: University of Western Sydney, 2005.

Reviewed by Misbah Khokhar



It really isn't too much and it isn't too soon. Well, maybe Green's collection of short stories *Too Much, Too Soon*, does reek of excess, but it is an excess the world needs. Her short stories are well crafted, and by this I mean there are satisfactory resolutions; fleshed-out characters whose dialogue clearly conveys their personal agendas; and a smooth relationship between plot and character. In a sense this style is quite traditional, with importance placed upon seamless dialogue between characters and setting. In other words, the characters are not free-floating, but emerge from particular environments. This is pleasurable and reminiscent of early Kate Chopin short stories, or of Jane Bowles. Sometimes stories that rely heavily on character dialogue—as do some of Green's—are very tedious to read. Green's stories here, however, are not. The women and men populating her pages are full of idiosyncrasies

(otherwise why bother turning up on the page), and of intelligent conversation for the purposes of insight, not solely for moving the plot along.

Which really does bring me to the question of well-crafted stories. I need to point out that it isn't essential that there be much of a plot or storyline to make a good story. So many stories elicit pleasure and challenge by pinning the story on structure, and the internal experiences of the character, as in, for example, James Joyce's fiction. Green's stories do tend towards character development and structure, in ways very reminiscent of the French writer Marguerite Duras.

Duras has a tendency (in *The Lover* or *The North China Lover*) to admit upfront how the story ends, though of course this is different from how the book ends. She privileges the reader by encasing the story in the narrator's retrospective. She manipulates narrative sequence by telling a tale through a jump backwards, and then forwards in time, but in such a way that the reader is caught in an eternal moment, like a photograph. This technique casts a shadow of inevitability throughout her stories, which in no way diminishes their power.

Likewise, in some of Green's short stories, the exit of the main character from the story is the start of the tale she weaves. In 'Aunt Jessica and the Ostrich Tamer', we are already collaborating, as knowledgeable readers, with the inevitable absence of the main character, Aunt Jessica, whom we are told in the first paragraph 'ran away'(1).

Green's short stories, in particular 'Aunt Jessica and the Ostrich Tamer', and 'Madame Stefani's Fortune Telling Machine', explore a deranged carnivalesque, I might add Carteresque, as a tribute to the carnival themes of Angela Carter. These stories are stuffed with games, 'wicked' women, and subversive romantics.

Her tales are resplendent with allusions to other writers, and artists. In 'A Student of Life', her characters are generous either in their scorn or love of dead writers like 'Hammerhead Hemingway'

(31), or their reverential discovery of Anaïs Nin, and Vita Sackville-West. One of my favourite characters, other than Aunt Jessica from 'Aunt Jessica and the Ostrich Tamer', is Karen. She's the woman most women dream of being, despite the whiff of self-destruction. She is wonderful, narcissistic, and loaded with handfuls of hope, sadness—and red lipstick.

She [Karen] once said bitterly: 'We are creatures of pleasure—intellectual, physical, it is all the same. No-one does anything for love. All the great lovers are dead. What is the point of it all? There are no true poets left. And I am past my prime. (37)

I guess this character is not going to resonate with everyone, but if I were her friend I would tell her that she is poetry. Wasn't it Oscar Wilde who said something along the lines of his greatest work of art was himself? Some people, whether fictional or actual, or a bit of both in the case of the better known ones, are poetry in motion. Even more crucially, certain characters, like Karen, actively shake up the lives of others in positive and profound ways.

<http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/Journal/143/images/spr>

Just as Karen epitomises wildness and life, Magnolita Rosario in Rey's *The Spruikers Tale* is all about captivity and death. Well maybe that's an extreme summary. But this is a book of abject extremes. Once she was a world famous trapeze artist, a beautiful child 'born of a snake-woman and an Irish father' (11). Who we find later on has become exceedingly cruel and vindictive. We also learn how she changed in this way and we are given glimpses of her past splendour. 'Besides, she had turned more than one head by simply batting her eyelids when showing people to their seats in the darkened aisles of the smelly music hall' (107) .

This is an awesome undertaking by Rey. The book is viscous, heavy — at once it suffocates me and uplifts me. Much like swinging on a trapeze. It's a clever technique, to pin the structure the way one might exhibit during a circus performance. It swings up and down, backwards and forwards.

We have the all-mighty eye of the Spruiker, like a strange mix of Cyclops and Pirate, weaving the tale of this damnable family, rotting on the edge of the desert in Australia. The Spruiker is a fabulous character, no less flesh and blood than the characters described. The Spruiker's tale, though it may not always be reliable, given the alcohol imbibed (10), is indeed a tale, and not a biography. This unreliable narrator aches to tell this story; enticing us, like a good ringmaster, as uncertain readers, into the blinding lights of the circus tent.

I'm yearning to entertain you my good friends. I'm yearning to do it. As your spruiker, aren't I obliged to tickle your fancy? You'd like to have fun as you listen to the tale of the poor sods whose story I'm telling you, and you also want to make fun of old One-eyed who's here to serve you. (37)

After all, the book is called *The Spruiker's Tale* , and not the tale of the 'Queen Pigmy Circus', from where the circus characters come. So it is with this knowledge, already by page 37, that we have settled into our seats, not with the ease of trust, but with the hunger of 'yearning' to hear an extraordinary tale. It doesn't disappoint.

While the book does trace the rise and disintegration of the various enclaves of the Queen Pigmy Circus and their children, it is capable of great moments of beauty, erotica and joy. We pass backwards in time as we see the heights that Magnolita once reached:

so important was it for her to soar—to soar! for such was her sole desire, her heart carried away by the

swooning women, her belly clammy as she slid down from the brightly lit top of the tent, gliding down the smooth rope tightly fastened around her groin, stirring up the voracious appetite that had seized her up there to rush into her caravan to indulge it ...(26)

This book was originally written in French, and was short-listed for several awards. I can imagine the French liking this book. It's a little sordid, tragic, full of romance and off-centre. I'd like to think that its reception in Australia has been just as encouraging. Maybe her view of the Australian landscape is shaped through her early emigration here as a child. The landscape she depicts is alien and yet familiar. It's claustrophobic and evocative.

This is why we are comfortably prepared by the Spruiker. Because, just as the tale soars with joy, so the tale will show the depraved and monstrous aspects of humans, including murder, child abuse, torture, and greed. It would be naïve to assume that a one-eyed, drinking, parrot-wearing, peg-for-a-leg Spruiker would avoid giving us the nasty, ghastly snippets as well.

The show must go on, after all, and that might explain the Spruiker's drinking. Sequins to dazzle. Rum for courage.

Misbah Khokhar is a poet. She is currently working on a manuscript of poems, 'No Middle Path' for her MA at The University of Queensland. She also performs poetry and music around Brisbane and N.S.W, and has had various releases overseas. She is interested in the idea of poetic terrorism, cabinets of curiosity, and art that transports, shifts, enacts, transcends. She believes in beauty and truth and revolution.

There's No Business Like Dough Business

Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy. *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia*. University of Western Australia Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Fiona Bucknall



Australian private sex workers rarely fit the popular stereotype of the 'high-class' hooker: an exceptionally beautiful young woman from a wealthy, upper-class background who, for some unknown psycho-sexual reason, freely chooses to enter prostitution at the salubrious top end of the sex trade.

As in their previous studies, Perkins and Lovejoy aim to challenge the myths and stereotypes surrounding the sex industry and demonstrate that those who work in it are ordinary people with ordinary lives beyond sex work.

The term 'call girl' is an American colloquialism for prostitutes who use the telephone as a means to solicit clients; although in Australia, the term commonly used is 'private worker' and refers to one who works independently.

Call girls have been overlooked in Australian and overseas studies of prostitution. They comprise a hidden, distinctive social and subcultural group with a certain fascination for dominant modes of thinking. The elusive, clandestine, high-class courtesan is well documented in popular culture: but what is the reality?

Call Girls provides illuminating and frank accounts from women working in this shadowy, clandestine world: how they became sex workers and run their businesses; what frustrates and frightens them; how they maintain their health; who their customers are; and how their work affects their relationships with partners, lovers and families. *Call Girls* places the world of the call girl within social, political and legal contexts which will surprise and change the preconceived notions many readers have.

The findings indicate that becoming a call girl has less to do with one's class culture than it does with individual aspirations and initiative. The research indicates that the majority of call girls in Australia are mature women in their 20s and 30s who have often made significant financial investments in what they, unlike other prostitutes, view as their career. The data revealed a group of women who were highly educated, who had previously worked in occupations attracting high salaries (or better than average wages), and who were determined to lead independent social, economic and sexual lives.

Call girls are not a special breed, nor are they all middle-class; but they are sex workers with the initiative to start their own businesses. It is this enterprising trait that leads the call girl to perceive her job as a career and develop a long-term commitment to the industry.

This study examines the services of the call girl and the workplace from which she operates. She is expected to provide more emotional labour in her work than other prostitutes and is generally more flexible in the services she provides compared to brothel workers. She is more likely to provide kissing, for example, because a show of affection to the client is often intrinsic to the 'relationship'. She will typically work from an apartment in the inner city area where one of the bedrooms will be designated as a work room and decorated as a 'love nest', so as to make the client feel as little like a client as possible.

As well as providing information about the typical call girl, this study corrects a number of myths about call girls with respect to STDs, violence and drug use. The findings were that call girls are a lot healthier than might be imagined because of condom use at work; the fact that only two of the sample of 95 call girls entered prostitution to support a drug habit; and that violence was not common. Call girls are usually experienced sex workers and confident of defusing potentially dangerous situations.

The study found that stress was caused by client behaviour (obsessive clients, battles over condom use, or anxiety about broken condoms) as well as day-to-day experiences such as the strain of living a double life, dealing with the stigma associated with the work, and sometimes, police harassment. Physical isolation and loneliness were common and compounded that stress.

The question of whether sex workers can maintain personal intimate relationships has been a source of interest to many and there are those who have implied that they cannot maintain such relationships because they are degenerate. The study found that the majority of private workers (and brothel workers) are married or have a regular lover.

The first two-thirds of the book is devoted to providing the reader with a realistic insight into the lives of call girls and their work. It demonstrates that, despite the fact that their occupation challenges the social mores and values that promote romantic love, monogamy and compliancy in women, sex work is really just another 'day at the office'.

Chapter 6 provides data about the clients of call girls. This study found that the clients of call girls tended to be better educated than the average Australian male and that they sought the services of call girls for a range of reasons. Clients are often ignored in the research, yet they are important in developing an understanding of the dynamics of the power relationship between prostitutes and their customers. I would like to have seen this issue developed further. While the services offered by call girls were discussed with reference to the fact that they are ones in which the call girl has control (bondage and cross-dressing for example), Monto's study of 700 clients in 2000 went further: it found that 42% of the clients agreed that they visited prostitutes because they were shy and awkward about meeting women.

Chapter 7 'Society, Morality and the Law' by Sue Metzenrath, a well known sex worker activist, argues that prostitution laws reflect a historical prejudice towards what is simply a work-based occupation, and that the main focus of legislation is appeasement of the community. She advocates a rights-based model of regulation where sex work is viewed as work, rather than through criminal and health models which view it as a health or moral problem.

Metzenrath cites problems for sex workers in complying with laws which often do not distinguish between large-scale brothels and sole operators working from home. There is clearly a need for a distinction between large scale operations (brothels) and small home-based (call girl) businesses. She questions why sex workers in some states need a permit to work at home, while other home-based workers are not required to have one.

The summary of legislative provisions in different states demonstrates the differing, sometimes ambiguous—and even contradictory—approaches to the regulation of prostitution.

This book has already created controversy. Reviewers for *The Australian* have seized upon one issue raised in the book: that underage sex is not always viewed as negative. The review, in my opinion, blew this issue out of proportion and discussed it out of context. The review focused on this one issue and failed to discuss the myriad of other issues raised in this valuable piece of research.

Having said that, the way in which you view this book may well be influenced by your views on

prostitution and feminism. My view is that sex work is work, that it should be treated as such, and that to do otherwise is to define that work as a prostitute's identity—something that we do not do with other workers.

Like other workers, prostitutes have good and bad experiences with customers and colleagues. As Danielle, one of the women interviewed for this book, says: 'I don't think about work after I leave it, plus I work with other women, so I have someone to talk to about it. I've done worse jobs than this...!'

These women clearly have agency and have made conscious choices. They control the kinds of services they will or will not provide. They set their own prices, decide on the venue, market their services, and filter out the clients they don't want to meet, over the phone.

Unfortunately, the delay in finding a publisher for this book means that the work, while rightly referring to the use of the telephone as the defining feature of a call girl's employment, has not captured the sharp increase in the number of call girls using the Internet to promote their businesses, exchange information, reduce the tyranny of isolation, and discuss contemporary issues in forums.

Australia's premier call girl website (in terms of the number of call girls paying to advertise as well as their participation in forums) www.Australian-Babe.com, has advertisements placed from around Australia and a healthy forum in which call girls and clients debate issues. Call girls have used this site to share information aimed at minimising time and money lost from men masturbating on the telephone or not showing up for appointments, as examples. This is one area where call girls, previously lacking information (and hence a measure of control), have been able to develop strategies to manage some of the problem clients they encounter in their day-to-day work.

I would like to have seen more comment on issues such as agency, power, control, gender constructs, client dynamics and the role of telecommunications in increasing the number of call girls as a percentage of prostitutes in the industry. The emphasis on legal issues, while important, obscured some of these other important questions.

The unstructured interviews published in the book reveal a rich vein of data, some of which could have been explored further. In some ways, the book could not do justice to the huge amount of information obtained.

The segmentation existing in the sex industry, and the differing characteristics of those working in different sectors of it, make this work stand out from many others in this field. The literature on prostitution has to a large extent been motivated by a biased anti-prostitution agenda, or been based on street workers (a small, non-representative sample of those working in the industry).

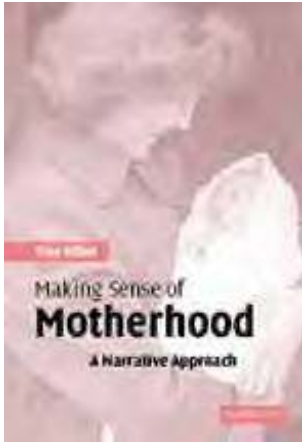
To conclude, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on prostitution and it helps us understand, perhaps despite our personal views, how to deconstruct sex work so that we can expand feminist discourse on a controversial subject which is continuing to gain momentum in the eyes of the public and is clearly not going to go away.

Fiona Bucknall is a student in Writing, Editing and Publishing at The University of Queensland, a (legal) brothel manager, and a former Board member of SQWISI (Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry).

Scripting Motherhood

Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Reviewed by Marie Porter



In *Making Sense of Motherhood* Tina Miller follows the journey of a group of women through pregnancy, birthing and the first nine months of their experiences of motherhood, examining how the women make sense of their transition from non-mother to mother in the contemporary period. She examines the social, cultural and moral context and how it affect new mothers. Her aim is to see how individuals make sense of their experiences at times in their lives when their narrative is disrupted. How do the women maintain their identity, their idea of self? In Miller's words, she focuses on the 'narrative, identity and the self' which 'reveals the complex interplay, fluidity and ultimately precarious nature of these components' (11). She refers to the contemporary period as late modernity — noting its characteristics of rapid changes and lack of certainty.

The chapters are planned so that the purpose of each is clear. In Chapter 1, Miller outlines her framework for the book, laying out the theoretical, methodological and conceptual tools which she will use. As Miller recognizes, the shift from universal agency to the recognition of diversity and complexity in human lives has led to a search for other methods of doing research. Human beings are storytellers, and Miller examines the narrative approach to contemporary academic research — an approach that frames this work. The narrative approach is particularly suited to stories collected in interviews. It enables the mothers' stories to be seen on the same critical plane as the socio-cultural 'stories'. The problems that are present in researching women's lives, especially those problems that loom when the researcher is focusing on motherhood, are explored by Miller. As she notes, a significant, although unavoidable problem is that addressing the body and its workings can risk being labeled essentialist — a risk scholars researching in this area must take.

This research demonstrates how the 'cultural scripts' (the master narratives present in the socio-cultural context) affect the interviewees, causing them to experience dislocation and confusion, contradiction and resistance. The power of 'cultural scripts' is so strong that some new mothers whose stories contradict the dominant paradigm silence themselves because they do not want to appear a failure. The interviewees, reflexively narrating this period of their lives, are able to look back and realise that their stories helped them to make sense of the immense changes that they experienced in this journey. However, at times, they confess that the extent of their problems remained untold because of the power of the 'cultural script' of the 'good' mother; they felt they must remain silent or risk being labeled a 'bad' mother. Thus the mothers' stories are alternative stories of this period: they focus upon being mothers' stories rather than cultural scripts. Miller sums up the problematic for the mothers:

For example, when experiences do not match predicted expectations or marry with intentions, an individual's ability to produce and sustain a cohesive, culturally recognizable and socially accepted narrative may be challenged. (10)

In an effort to make sense of her experiences the woman will often 're construct' her story to ensure the coherence of her life narrative. The continuity of the life story is important because this story

sustains our identity and hence how we see ourselves.

Remembering that the interviewees are both embodied and emotional beings and experiencing a time in their lives when both these constituent parts are likely to be of heightened sensitivity, it is important for Miller to examine 'selves.' She argues that these 'selves' are influenced by the context, including the moral context, in which they live. She recognizes that the 'self' is constituted in the context of particular historical, social, moral, political and material circumstances (14). Her argument is that the practiced, recognizable gendered and embodied self, which makes up our identity, is challenged by the experiences of first time motherhood: over time, a social self as mother has to be learned. (15)

This space that opens up between the women's personal experiences and the 'cultural scripts' needs to be bridged. The bridge consists of the mothers' stories that question and resist the 'cultural scripts' that the interviewees found to be incorrect. They realized that these cultural scripts encouraged them in some areas into a false sense of security.

In Chapter 3, Miller focuses on the Western context of mothering in late-modern society. A woman's ideas of mothering are shaped by the 'cultural scripts' which tell her what to expect, what birthing will be like, and what a 'good' mother is. The belief that mothering is instinctive leads to a generalised view of mothers and of what mothers *should expect and experience*. Individual differences resulting from racial, age, economic or class differences have an impact on the mother and her experiences of mothering but, as Patricia Hill argued in Nakano Glenn's 1994 anthology *Mothering*, authoritative knowledge based in a universal belief of instinct leaves no space for diversity. When the expectations learned from the 'cultural scripts' do not match a mother's lived experiences, it becomes difficult for the mother to bridge the gap.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 concentrate on the interviewees' experiences and how the characteristics of late modernity outlined in previous Chapters — 'uncertainty and risk, trust in expert bodies of knowledge, and reflexivity' — are evident in the interviewees' stories. After drawing her reader's attention to the various problems and limitations that are part of interviewing, in Chapter 4 Miller concentrates on the women's experiences of pregnancy. In this section of their journey, the interviewees relate their interaction with medical experts and their desire to do the best they could for themselves and their baby, which usually meant following their doctors' instructions. The control of their lives through their agency in a paid work environment was not continued into their pregnancy. Their uncertainties, their desire to be both responsible and 'good' mothers, the influence of the cultural scripts, the location of authoritative knowledge in the medical experts, resulted in stories that were about acting appropriately during their pregnancy.

The new mothers' narratives of giving birth and the first difficult weeks at home show the differences between expectations and reality. Miller heard stories of how the desired 'natural' birth with the mother in control of the process was expected, but not achieved. The new mothers did not feel that they had been adequately prepared for birthing or for the reality of mothering. Giving birth, instinctively knowing how to mother, or identifying themselves as mothers were problems for many of the women. Many of the new mothers felt isolated and out of control, but were not given space to acknowledge these feelings. Even women who were experiencing similar problems and actually knew each other failed to confide in each other. This lack of social permission to acknowledge their contradictory experiences and confusion was an added difficulty.

Miller has aptly titled Chapter 6, 'A return to normal: becoming the expert'. In these nine months, the prominent stories relate how interviewees change from confused mothers looking for answers from the 'experts', to confident mothers who realise that their main support comes from other mothers whose

advice is grounded in maternal practices. The mothers' development of new selves is a process that is based in their practices, as they learn about their 'motherwork'. The interviewees develop a 'social' self because any expectations of instinctive knowledge of motherwork has proven false. The majority of the new mothers return to the paid work which supports the emerging self. The return to paid work ends the loneliness many of the new mothers experienced when they were at home all the time, but it also emphasizes the lack of value and legitimation of mothering in Western culture. The outcome is the difficulty of establishing an identity that can be interwoven into the pre-mother identity; specially for those women who did not go back to paid work.

A strength of Miller's work is the international stance she brings to it. She uses her experiences in Bangladesh and the Solomon Islands as contrasts in Chapter 2 where she demonstrates that different countries develop different 'cultural scripts'. Moreover, cultural scripts support the dominant forms of 'authoritative knowledge', and they reveal how women and their bodies (including their reproductive processes) are depicted in different societies. These dominant scripts can, and usually do, mislead women as their pregnancy proceeds, in their birthing and as they struggle to become 'good' mothers. For example, while in Western nations authoritative knowledge is located in medical system 'experts' and births are usually in hospitals, in Bangladesh most births are at home and the majority of birthing mothers are attended by various women, including the traditional birth attendants, the *dais*, who are ill-educated and there to do the menial tasks (33).

Miller also highlights the different effects of cultural scripts that support authoritative knowledge. Authoritative knowledge in Bangladesh and the Solomon Islands is more horizontal than in the West, where it is more hierarchical. A consequence of the Western system is that:

Any knowledge a woman may have about her own body is regarded as less accurate or relevant when placed alongside biomedical ways of knowing. (43)

For me reading this book was particularly disturbing. I had in-depth interviews to research the experiences of Australian women who became mothers between 1950 and 1965. Comparing the experiences of older women in the same period of their lives, approximately 50 years ago, it is disappointing to realise how little has changed. Nearly all the older women had relied on medical experts. The first birthing experience was an indelible memory for most of them – a memory of lack of knowledge, pain and unkindness that nearly all experienced in the midst of being alone. The earlier first time mothers experienced the same gap between the cultural scripts and the reality. The mothers in late modernity had an advantage in having more knowledge of the process ahead of them and seemed to be treated better than women were in the 1950s, but they still had to bridge the disjunction between their expectations and their experiences. The 1950s mothers had been socialized into wanting to become mothers and, hence, found it easier to identify as mothers.

Both groups of mothers had found that motherwork is learned, not instinctive. Motherworkers develop skills. These skills are not generally recognised or valued, but denying their existence does not obliterate them. Despite decades of feminism, we have not managed to have motherwork recognised as *work* that is difficult, but necessary. The expansion of feminist academic research in mothering at least gives hope.

Miller highlights the 'silencing' of the new mothers — an outcome of the 'good' mother narrative and the lack of recognition of the valuable work done by mothers. In my research I likewise found the effects of silencing. I was amazed to find some mothers in their sixties who still thought that they were the alone in experiencing severe problems, dislocation, confusion, weariness beyond measure and other habitual dilemmas that can accompany motherwork. Such is the power of silencing that 'guilty' secrets

remained hidden for half a century after the birth of second wave feminism.

Ann Oakley's *Becoming a Mother*, first published in 1979, likewise highlighted the gap between the expectations and the experiences of mothers. With all the change that has occurred in Western societies in so many areas of life, in 2005 Miller can authentically write this about mothering:

Disclosure of experiences which do not resonate with expectations, both personally held and socially constructed, may, then, be perceived as too risky. The complex and contradictory dimensions of motherhood — the embodied physical act of birth, essentialist notions of mothering, the social and cultural contexts in which mothers and their children live their lives — make understanding and voicing normal difficulties problematic. Yet, paradoxically, the very act of not voicing difficult experiences maintains and perpetuates the myths that continue to surround motherhood. (64-5)

The power of authoritative knowledge is clear for all to see when mothers from such diverse time periods as the 1950s/1960s, 1979 and 2005 all share similar reactions to the dominant paradigm. As Miller argues, the situation is made worse for mothers because of the link between identity, especially moral identity, and motherhood. This book, in common with Oakley's in 1979, would be more enlightening for new mothers than many of those that are recommended reading.

It is incredible that mothers continue to experience many problems that were in evidence more than half a century ago. Because the work of Miller, Oakley and myself is based upon the analysis of a relatively small numbers of interviewees, it is possible to dismiss the outcomes as localized. However, when three lots of research carried out in two different nations, in three different historical periods suggest similar problems, as researchers we must ask ourselves what we can do to highlight this situation. Miller's contribution is extremely valuable in this regard.

Marie Porter is an Honorary Research Advisor in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at The University of Queensland. She completed a PhD at The University of Queensland in 2006, entitled 'Transformative Power in Motherwork: A Study of Mothering in the 1950s and 1960s,' and is President of the Association for Research Into Mothering, Australia.

What's In a Name?

**Rhyll McMaster, *Feather Man* . Blackheath NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2007.
Reviewed by Rachel Slater**



Although *Feather Man* is Rhyll McMaster's first novel, she is an accomplished poet with six books of poetry published to critical acclaim and this is evident in the flow of this story; the cadence of its sentences and its imagery. Moving from a sleepy 1950s Brisbane to a grubby London of the 1970s, McMaster's narrative is at once both intense and detached; she renders the lived experience of both cities and the characters in them with painful clarity.

The story is reminiscent of Christina Stead's 1945 novel *For Love Alone* in its movement between Australia and London and its strong-willed protagonist who nevertheless traipses to the other side of the world for the 'love' of a contemptuous and narcissistic man who uses her devotion and naivety to achieve his own ends. Sooky, like Stead's protagonist Teresa Hawkins, idealises romantic love as a result of her own desire to escape the stifling restraints of a dreary Brisbane, as well as the expectations both of her mother and of society, and both women try to live up to this ideal before discovering that the person each is looking for is actually inside herself.

The novel's confronting opening chapter depicts a sexual assault on child protagonist 'Sooky' (a nickname only, her real name is not revealed until the end of the novel) at the hands of a trusted neighbour (29); this marks not only the moment of lost innocence and the discovery that she could never again feel untainted happiness, but also the beginning of a lifetime of dominance by men.

Each section of the novel, and of Sooky's life, is presided over by a domineering male figure, from the harrowing first chapter 'Lionel', through 'Peter' and 'Redmond,' to the final chapter which sees her in an adult relationship with an older and, it is suggested, wiser man, 'Paul'. The men in question all want ownership of Sooky; they all take possession in different ways and much of the story is characterised by gendered power relations; 'Dad said he called me Sooky because I was a girl.' Lionel is the predator, making home 'unheimlich'; Peter the empty-headed football player attempts to take ownership via an engagement ring while Redmond (Lionel's son) uses Sooky's artistic gift to marginalise and manipulate her. Paul, although less obviously proprietorial than the other men in Sooky's life, nevertheless takes on the self-assumed mantle of mentor. Her father belittles her mother who is ineffectual and 'faded' in his somewhat manic presence and although Sooky's caring and independent Grandma offers some respite, this is a man's world.

Ultimately *Feather Man* is about the search for identity in all the wrong places. Sooky has no real sense of who she is — she feels invisible but also seeks out invisibility, and often expresses a desire to transcend or to disappear. After Lionel forces himself upon her, Sooky chooses a remoteness; retreating inside herself to a place where emotions are not immediately felt but held in stillness and carefully examined at a later date. Part of this self-imposed exile is the rejection of her given name and the acceptance of the nickname 'Sooky'. Although she has been renamed by others to correspond with their perception of her, and her sense of autonomy is eroded as a result, Sooky believes naming to be an intimacy and welcomes the chance at some level of anonymity; she states

I wasn't going to tell Lionel my real name. I gave him my nickname, and even then I was reluctant.... Because I believed that intimacies such as names were a form of sentimentalism that only common people practised, Catholics or dowdy Baptists. Dad said we were Presbyterian but he also said that God didn't exist. I was the only one in my class who could spell atheist. I knew no-one used my real name because I, too, didn't really exist. (29)

The story shifts from Brisbane to London when Sooky accompanies Redmond there — ostensibly to follow shared hopes of careers in art, dreams quickly dashed when Redmond forbids the purchase of art materials on the grounds of limited income. Sooky idolises Redmond (as she did her father) but, as time passes, she begins to see he has feet of clay, and in a small act of rebellion she decides to buy art supplies in the gallery of an inscrutable Eastern European art dealer named Paul. It is the ensuing relationship with the kindly, older man which enables her to break free of Redmond's control, to establish herself as a painter and, to some extent, as an independent woman.

This final section of the novel is where everything comes together — Sooky is finally named (I won't spoil it for you), a significant moment which coincides with her finding some strength and a sense of self:

I was sick to death of the rigmarole of other people's plans for me, their admonitions, their injunctions. Sick to death of being torn by the wish to please and the wish to move against, to succumb or to rebel, to admire or to invalidate. Sick of staring, petrified, at the pasture on the other side of that hollow wooden bridge. I was sick to death of compliance. It was high time I made a decision to clatter out into the middle of the bridge, troll or no troll. (309)

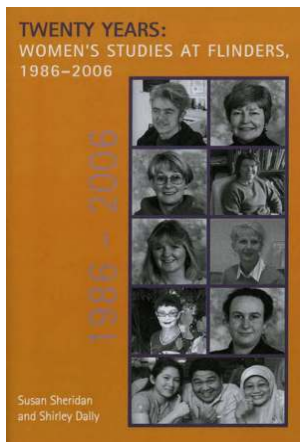
Redmond is punished horribly for his cruelty and vanity, and the spectre of Lionel is finally blown away. Despite the satisfaction of these events, of the bad guys' comeuppance and the discovery of self for Sooky, this last section is not quite as compelling as the rest of the story. Another reviewer has suggested that there seems to be an uncomfortable mixture of feminist tract meets Mills & Boon in this part of the novel (and here again are echoes of *For Love Alone*). There certainly is a sense of that, just as there are moments where the narrative wobbles on its usually well-laid track, but McMaster pulls it back from the brink and delivers an impressive first novel — rich, darkly funny and disturbing; it works.

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

Keeping Afloat

Susan Sheridan and Shirley Dally, *Twenty Years: Women's Studies at Flinders 1986-2006*. Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Claire Tanner



Twenty Years: Women's Studies at Flinders 1986-2006 begins with the unit's birth as a 'better-dressed' daughter to the radical women's studies course that ran from 1973–1983. Due to the 'lack of funding and ideological differences', the future of the women's studies course of the 70s was placed in jeopardy in 1983 and, in turn, members of the community, inside and outside the university, rallied against this possible loss. A 'Working Party' was organised, and proposed that Women's Studies 'should be recommended as a proper academic enterprise, of value to the university and society' with 'two full-time academic staff'. The recommendations were successful, and in 1986 'Women's Studies was set up ... in its new best dress' and 'had to expose itself ... as well as be suitably gowned for academia — no mean feat'. This book, co-authored by graduate, Shirley Dally, and one of its

founders, Susan Sheridan, is a story about this ongoing feat — one not unfamiliar to women's studies departments elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, then, the tightrope-walking that characterises institutionalised feminist activity is threaded through this narrative. This history is also, to some extent, a product of this tension; the authors acknowledge but do not analyse, to any great extent, the institutional constraints and resistance the unit encountered since its inception in 1986. Rather, they concentrate upon the involvement of the various inspirational women who worked in spite of, and strategically to counter those constraints to ensure the department's survival and development. In such a way, Sheridan and Dally set out to show the various ways the department worked to keep Women's Studies 'afloat' by 'constantly taking on new ideas, discarding others' and 'reshaping itself'. What emerges is an intimate story of people and their work: teachers, administrators and students; relationships forged across disciplines, state, inter-state and international universities, and between individuals who formed, believed in, contributed to, and have benefited from an ever-changing Flinders' Women's Studies department over twenty years.

In so doing, the book also conveys the interdependent relationship between the personal and the structural, as different women worked with each other to construct and re-construct Women's Studies as an 'intellectual craft,' navigating 'the seas of its institutional life'. The book is structured thematically, covering changes and continuities in women's studies': formation, structure, running, staff and development; pedagogical practices and students' experiences; honours and postgraduate coursework programmes; research strengths, specialties and projects; academic and ethical contribution to University life; role in the academy nationally and internationally; and involvement in the community, individually and as a department. Sheridan and Dally rely heavily on interviews, conversations and e-mail communication to compose this brief history and, in so doing, tell a structural story about institutional content, form and development that is inextricably linked to human relationships. Visually, photographs of many of the women important to this history are scattered through these pages, as are images of the covers of relevant crucial texts.

As a narrative, in part, about the changing face of women's studies, feminist visions and their inter-relatedness, characteristics and trends emerge that can be considered as particular to Women's Studies more generally, yet they are teased out in detail in relation to the development of the Flinders women's studies unit specifically. For example, the value of difference, stemming from refusal by non-white, non-middle class and non-heterosexual women in the 80s to be spoken for by white, Anglo feminists is traced in changes to course content, structure, and academic research. As Sheridan articulates, 'debates on difference and identity that took off in the 80s continue to this day in feminist theory and practices, and are exemplified in the courses on offer in the present Women's Studies program at Flinders'.

Additionally, belief in the value and importance of teachers providing a safe, respectful and challenging teaching environment is emphasised in the stories of student experiences, and in academics' approaches to their work in the classroom. Typically, commitment to progressive teaching practices, and an egalitarian approach to the teacher-student relationship, has set women's studies apart from traditional pedagogy, a fact reflected in much Women's Studies student feedback. The testimonies of past and present Women's Studies students at Flinders, selected by Sheridan and Dally, are no exception. Similarly, awards and institutional recognition of various teachers' work in the classroom are also recorded, and the reader is fortunate to be briefly offered a seat in such classes, where a few practical examples of contemporary progressive teaching practices are described.

The benefits of, and changes to Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary course and in relation to student experiences, academic networks, structural support, programme development and survival, and academic influence, are outlined. So, too, is the importance and influence of international relationships and communication to research diversity and development. The opportunities made available by technological advances, particularly the use of the World Wide Web in teaching practices and in relation to international relationships, are also acknowledged.

The tension between 'keeping up with the times', and 'on the edge' but not *too* close is revealed in Sheridan's, and Dally's, implicit construction of the Women's Studies department as adept, and up-to-date with (post) 'modern' trends. As such, at times this book reads as an extended web site, detailing undergraduate and postgraduate courses and research, and the benefits of Women's Studies over time, selling itself in its changing 'new best dresses'. Sometimes, then, the characters and relationships fade and bureaucracy takes the stage. Yet true to life in a Women's Studies department, the story takes you through the day to day of academic life: the structures, courses, conferences, seminars, research, grant applications, meetings, classrooms, and relationships. It is a sometimes onerous and repetitive, mostly interesting, and ultimately inspiring journey of different women with visions, working hard and together to create, maintain and develop something they believed/believe in, and also had/have to sell.

As heralded in their call for 'loud applause for Women's Studies at Flinders', the authors' personal pride and celebration of this is explicit throughout the book. As such, this history is presented as both a record of, and a tribute to the women and men involved in the department's existence and success. From the outset, the reader is welcomed to 'savour, enjoy, laugh, cry, sigh, cheer, jeer, stamp, and clap as you get into the story'. For readers who are, or have been, involved with the Flinders Women's Studies department in some way, this book may well offer such opportunities. For me, its strength in relation to (albeit not its entertainment value) is its practical utility—how it relates to the present state of (feminist) politics, of which Women's Studies departments (by any other name) are both affected, and influential.

Given the current political, economic and ideological climate—the increased pressure on academic staff due to structural changes within a privatised university system, third-wave post-feminist claims, liberalist rhetoric that assures us that women ‘have it all’, cultural conservatism hostile to the left (as evident in the distribution of ARC linkage grants), and a dominant mainstream infused with a fear of feminists, or belief in the redundancy of their existence — Women's Studies departments face new and particular challenges, including the existence of the anti-feminist gender studies student. Sadly, the University of Queensland's women's studies honours programme and double major were also shut down in 2005 due to insufficient enrolments and institutional support, leaving a single major still on offer. In this context, attending to the various strategies of Women's Studies to counter particular institutional and ideological pressures, attract research dollars and students, and tick the boxes for institutional survival over time (and their various failures or successes), is important.

As this history demonstrates, Women's Studies' commitment to social change and justice — through the analysis of the intersections of race, sexuality, ethnicity, gender, class, and politics in relation to personal and institutional power — places it precariously within systems upon which it depends; and critiques and which it challenges. Thus, the changes it makes, what form it takes, and what it looks like from the outside is, always and already, politically significant. The changing title of the Australian Women's Studies Association to the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association in 2006 (AWGSA) can be taken as an example (‘signs of the times?’). And as this history indicates, (like others), when it comes to identity politics size does matter, as does what you wear, and often in inter-dependent and complex ways (‘horses for the courses as well as courses for the horses’).

This important ‘little history’, of an important, little department, closes with an image: a photograph of a wall spray-painted in 1991 testifying that ‘FEMINISM LIVES’. How, in what form, and what it is called is pertinent now, and crucial to the continued existence, growth and development of Women's Studies in all universities. This history is written as a success story that whets the appetite for more, in-depth engagements with how Women's Studies has survived and developed (or not) in relation and response to specific social, political, economic, theoretical and cultural contexts and trends, and to what effect. It also attests to the persisting need to justify and represent Women's Studies ‘as a proper academic enterprise, of value to the university and society’, making self-evident the importance of its existence and, perhaps also, that it is continuing to do something right (left). And in the case of women's studies at Flinders, as Sheridan and Dally have compellingly demonstrated, there is no reason to hold the applause.

Claire Tanner did her Women's Studies Honours at The University of Queensland and is now a PhD Women's Studies candidate in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, writing ‘A Cultural History of Women's Suffrage in Victoria’.

Of Roses, the Risqué, and Risk

Miriell Lenore *In the Garden* . Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2007;

Gina Mercer *Handfeeding the Crocodile* . Lauderdale, Tasmania: Pardalote Press, 2007;

Patricia Sykes *Modewarre* : Home Ground. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2004.

Reviewed by Alison Lambert



Reviewers risk getting it wrong, and comparative poverty creates unwanted necessities. New poetry books rarely come my way, so the task of reading and commenting on these three reminds me of dancers learning the Cancan; at some stage they must take the leap and drop to the floor in the splits, head to knee, legs a terrifying 180 degrees apart.

For women, writing anything at all mostly involves the splits of head bowed to domestic duties, with poetry on the back foot. No wonder the domestic, the body, and the visual frequently emerge as subject matter. Miriell Lenore's *In the Garden* invites the reader to a stroll by the plants in the Adelaide Gardens; Gina Mercer's *Handfeeding the Crocodile* offers the support system of a warm and sensual woman friend; Patricia Sykes's *Modewarre: Home Ground* evokes primarily a lake in Victoria, with the musk duck at its heart.

But there the similarities end.

These three works arranged themselves, for me, into a hierarchy of accessibility, once their sheer glossy confidence, their unmarked newness (untouched by the pillar-to-post history of second-hand and library books) had ceased to intimidate. I hesitate to assign a similar relative merit, yet a stroll through Lenore's garden is the task most easily accomplished and set aside, while Mercer encourages repeat visits to her warmly robust view of life's realities. Sykes, initially daunting, took me deep into my own home ground of poetry, and the journey more than repaid the effort of getting there.

Yet these are works by women, reviewed on a site specifically devoted to work by women (is there a comparable site for men, I wonder?). What whiffs of womanhood, by what names, are offered? Take that figurehead of the feminine, the rose, to which all three poets allude in some way.

Lenore is an obvious place to start; her scholarship in matters botanical is laudable. Yet the inscription by Sappho to 'Rose Garden' (51): 'all the lovely and beautiful times we had/All the garlands of violets and roses' hints at views not elaborated upon in the poem, unless you count 'emblem of woman's mystery.'. Indeed Lenore's narrator comments on her own confusion when faced with the profusion of rose varieties: 'In this paddock of excess where to start?' And concludes:

At the trial beds a competition has begun
To compare the incomparable
No poem comes
The roses like good wine need no bush

An end note reminds that ivy bushes were used to advertise taverns and wine sellers in Roman times,

hence the saying 'Good wine needs no bush'; but it seems too long a bow to draw for bush here to be associated with the feminine. The following poem, 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' (53) conveys adeptly a history about a famous rose, succinctly listing its salient points, and citing various associated notables. Yet the poem, while making some nice references to the present day rose under a painting of an early specimen: 'perfume envelops the roses/the painting, the viewer,' asks and celebrates no more than this intoxication with itself.

Lenore does acknowledge the territory of the 'toothed vagina' in the poem 'Mammillaria' (46), while describing the 'nourishing' and 'welcoming' nipples of this cactus, asking 'is this a sign of men's/fear-desire ambivalence?' The final lines:

Fine axillary wool
cushions the spines
masking their threat

Circlets of bright flowers
encourage risk

make me wonder if this poet wasn't censoring herself under the constraints of some male fund-related gaze; she is willing to take the risk of mentioning vagina dentata, but engaging further in public with it is another matter altogether.

Not so Mercer, who is overtly feminist and unafraid of bodily parts, as in the luscious 'Molly Brings Roses' (53):

all the women [...]
burying their faces
in delicate corolla
fuchsia, cream, lilac, claret.
[...]
perhaps we women
like any excuse
to bury our faces
in symbolic petals
in satisfying aromas
[...]
a public affirming
of our secret belief:
our labia are subtle

perfumed corolla
in which we long to bury our faces

The idea of further explorations of sexuality is at least entertained, whatever the actual constraints might be. The preceding poem ('Spice') (52), speaks to 'my solid male ballad,/beard familiar as our daily bread' as an established presence in the narrator's life, while the title poem, 'Handfeeding the Crocodile' (54), carefully leaves the lover ungendered, while the following 'Our Frequency' (55) suggests a clandestine meeting which leaves the narrator imagining 'caressing the cilia of soft-dark crevices/my fingers will never touch'.

Sykes' 'family Roseacea' (78) give roses a laconic nod: 'family of beautiful glow/and desirable smell '. The poem begins with strawberries (part of the rose family) and moves swiftly into the politics of food, agribusiness, and refugees. No dallying with sexuality here, unless you count the co-opting of its imagery:

to eat this fruit therefore
would be to tongue-stroke
the bank roll
of any chief executive
[...]
the fruit knife's
a more succinct edge
[...]
each slice into flesh a chant
each a blatant economy

This is the nature of Sykes' subject matter; the most ordinary things become starting points for startling leaps into wider issues, sometimes glanced at sideways, at once 'elusive and allusive' (Bev Roberts, blurb for *Wire Dancing*, end pages of *Modewarre: Home Ground*). There are plenty of references to women and women's issues, for example:

in this house the tended walls tended
by a woman losing her finger-prints
her hand palely on his shoulder
like a vagina defecting from itself
('the efficacy of a lantern on the forehead', 55);
and:

the house of sex
keeping a woman pregnant
as if passion were a weapon
annual and fatal
(‘the honey lands’, 49).

But we do not find in Sykes the direct, the frontal approach to the feminine, though I will discuss later how I believe she is writing very much *from* that mode. There is no apparent angel in the house here.

Lenore's *In the Garden* disappoints in that the redolent possibilities of the feminine metaphor are relatively neglected. One doesn't wish to be prurient; it's just that the struggle continues in establishing a climate that allows women to speak their truths. Here was an opportunity to reassign meaning, via the most obvious symbolism of flowers, to the currently degrading nomenclature of female parts. Was it the founding fathers of the Adelaide Botanic Garden she sensed looking over her shoulder? But no, the book is published by the independent Wakefield Press. The device of a poem per plant, or group thereof, is as good as any for serious and poetic comment or revision, and is indeed ‘so full of metaphors one hardly knows where to begin’ (Jan Struthers quoting Mrs Miniver, inscription to *In the Garden*).

I may well be underrating Lenore: her subject matter is well-researched and nicely described. The book is divided into four parts, roughly encompassing the establishment of the garden, trees, individual flowers and plants, and structures. Mythology and history weave through the poems, which are mostly written in the present tense as observed by the narrator coming upon various items and musing thereupon. She is respectful of the founding fathers and mothers, carefully listing them in litanies that often read more like notes for a poem than a fully realised work of the imagination:

Planted twelve years ago by
our Premier and Okayama's Governor
To grow friendship between two different
and distant lands

(‘The white goddess: prunus persica, flowering peach’ 18-19).

One reads to the end, awaiting a revelation of what can be done with this image; the tree, through a trick of the light, becomes ‘Australia's White Goddess of corn and honey/[...] ancient mother of states and people, [and] may even bring us peace’. By what connection is unclear.

Where is the poet's inner garden? Mythological references abound: Sappho beautifully prefaces the plant of her namesake, Rhododendron ‘Sappho’: ‘Shiver when Sappho speaks of her Heart Beat’ (‘Sappho’, 27). More is hinted at than the narrator will give away, and one wonders if self-preservation in this still-patriarchal world isn't the issue:

Shiver at this world
of dramatic blossoms:
dark eyes in white faces
inky flares at each heart

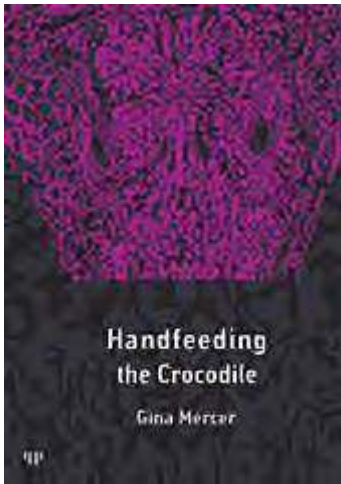
Or perhaps it is a slant look at those perceived to be very much other?

Little of the personal is foregrounded here; the poems could almost as easily have translated into a catalogue of notes on the plants, with the addition of a few carefully calculated risqué comments. The book is perhaps aimed to please those who stroll through the garden on a Sunday afternoon, whose gaze might be caught by the pure botanics of the glossy pink lotus on the cover. The economic rationalisation of poetry? Why not? Poets have to live too. My suspicion is that Lenore has deliberately chosen the safety of her enclosure: a poem discussing 'people-sized weather stations' which invite participation during Artists' Week is titled 'No wind no rain':

these stilted boxes invite me in
limit my sight to sky and sign
encourage me to listen
to explore more and more
focus on the weather of my mind (76)

Clemency of focus is the norm, raising the question of readership. Certainly there is little to shock mainstream sensibilities in this floral poetry, even when it appropriates some of feminism's snider modes: 'On the lawn/the page-boys scuffle/dressed to kill' ends a comfortable nuptial description in 'Wedding Photos' (70). Even the most steely-eyed conservative matron would surely allow herself a knowing smile, despite the deeper menace encoded. The same reader might also lift an unalarmed eyebrow at the concept of 'the immense buttocks of coco de mer/double coconut of the Seychelles' being dubbed 'the Viagra of its day' ('Coco Indecent', 71).

For this much progress to be made since the time of Virginia Woolf, we must be thankful. Lenore's work is very readable, and its very lack of challenge may be its strength, making an appeal to the general reader who might not otherwise venture much into poetry. I'd easily give a copy of this book to a dear friend whom I've known most of my life, who did everything I didn't: she stayed with her husband, she stayed on in nursing, she last moved house perhaps 30 years ago. She goes pink and giggles when I tell her some of my stories, and knowingly agrees when I rant on about the parlous state of this and that. And in case I appear to be belittling either Lenore or my friend, rest assured I deeply admire their achievements, born out of staying power and devotion. Thus are gardens created and maintained as a place of refuge from life's more difficult issues.



To Gina Mercer, then. This is the kind of book I'd be happy to give my sister, knowing she'd love its delicate and straightforward raunchiness, its sensitivity to suffering and the deeper issues.

Years ago I did a drawing of snail shells, making their shadows quite black and dominant. A sage artist friend saw it, and commented: 'Yes, but what are you doing with the shadows?' Mercer's title poem, 'Handfeeding the Crocodile' (54), engages the shadow of potential loss in whatever forms it might take: '*some mundane* day/the crocodile may not/just lurk/in our milky tranquillities'. Death, physical and metaphorical, comes in many forms; in this poem the lover may be the agent of the relationship's demise, someday inviting the crocodile 'to crunch us/to blood and gobbets'. And blood and gobbets are mostly just words to us in this country, where we can expect 'unpacking the dishwasher', 'the

getting of breakfast', 'the morning hugs', and 'the last minute rush' to be the same ('Never the Same', 59). It's just the news on the radio, until the narrative voice reminds us of the 'people for whom no morning will ever be the same' after 'Australia has invaded Iraq'.

Repetition is used to great effect in 'Never the Same'. Mercer uses a variety of forms, including several concrete poems, in this collection. 'Beach Bellies' (19) unashamedly protrudes across the page, as does 'Bulbs' (11), celebrating pregnant women. There is no judgement of the diversity of bodies and bellies; they simply are

citizens of the world as they

release to surge and ripple and flubber

rioting in rich magnolia pinks and creams ('Beach Bellies', 19).

Grounded in everyday realism, robust yet never trampling, the poems romp and whisper through a variety of forms. 'Clothes Lines' (57-58) observes three diverse sets of washing: that of a young mother's line 'bearing a sag of unwhite nappies'; a bachelor's 'cycling shorts with padded crutch/for his European tenderness'; and 'butterfly washing [draped]/over time-honoured bushes' in a rainforest. The fourth stanza, as in 'Never the Same', shocks with the reality of a Darfur mother who 'longs for the feel of damp washing/against the flint of her skin' and:

lusts for enough water

to wash the desiccation

from her daughter's freshly raped flesh

The notorious Melbourne weather is used as a clothesline for a collection of sage comments on life and loss, finishing with tomorrow's forecast: 'it's kind of like Melbourne weather it's unpredictable but it just keeps going on and on/and a lot of us go on living there in spite of it being like that' ('Melbourne Weather Forecasts', 45-47).

Mercer's poems are like nests on the narrow ledges of cliff faces. The material, the closely observed matter of women's lives, is woven into a cosy refuge, a place from which one's own experiences may break out of their shells ... yet always there is the vertigo, the reality of the drop to the abyss right there

at the edge. Thus, veneers of comfort may be masking a dysfunctional world, as in:

her father
sits in state
at the lemon laminex
waiting to be served

yet 'the whole weekend [will be] contaminated rubble' if the slightest thing is out of order ('Every Saturday', 29). This is a world where the litter of 'skin, soil, pods, grubs or leaves' is sealed off, where 'the oven bag made sure/the oven was never splattered' ('Every Friday', 28). The domestic horror stories, referred to here with an unerring metonymic touch evoking rigidity and fear under the threat of violence, are all too familiar.

Can such telling be effective in the ongoing struggle for justice, when it comes to gender issues? We have to think so; at the very least, solidarity is created at the secret level when one reads of such experiences and thereby knows them to be not solely an individual thing. More is going on when women speak in everyday terms of familiar subject matter, than simply exchanging recipes. Mercer has as light a touch with language as our mothers did with scones, and offers sustenance of a kind we hunger for in her metaphoric connections. In 'Stirring the Porridge'(61-62), the meaning of the title's term is discovered to be also that of taking one's turn late in a pack-rape. She counters:

I want to create
right now
a world where
to stir the porridge
is only ever
a charm
involving
oats and clean water
the muscled hand of a woman
worn kitchen spoons
a steady old saucepan
and comfort on cold mornings

Her narrator is empowered; any stereotype of a harmless housewife who dabbles in poetry is demolished in 'Don't be Fooled' (63). This quiver of arrows lists the abilities of two poets: 'fire builders', 'meal makers' and 'valkyries at the boys' bush bash', who:

...scan the subtext of a silent breakfast
acutely analyse the mansion's semantics

in less time than it takes

a currawong

to shuck your oyster eye

They are nonetheless capable of immense tenderness and delicacy of feeling.

With respect, I venture to suggest that many women write poetry at what might be termed 'entry level', out of full hearts and empathy for the beauty and pity of the world. To write from this perspective in a way not banal or cliched, yet not so abstruse as to alienate itself, is Mercer's gift. Occasionally there is a narrative poem that may work better as a story, as in the poignant 'Sprinkler Waltzing' where a wheelchair-bound woman is taken by her partner into a private space under a sprinkler in the sun, where 'they waltz through their temporary fountain' (50).

The extreme delicacy needed to handle this kind of material perhaps arises from a strong groundedness in a feminist identity, fierce yet tender, as the saying goes. The poem 'Lizard of Loss', in honour of a drawing by Rebecca Edwards (9-10) describes a drawing of:

a dead lizard

casualty of your slamming window

pressed flat against its own skin

sheer as dried violets

— while asking for the meaning conferred through the title 'loss'. In the artist's responses may be read echoes of losses associated with motherhood, such as the eggs '...pliable/to the small pressure/of a child's annihilating fingers'. Contrast this with the sassy tone of 'The Houses Here' (18) where houses, presumably somewhere south:

huddle

as if they dread

the next beating

from that unpredictable husband

the weather

are compared with houses in the tropics, which

flaunt their long, slender legs to the breeze

[...]

flounce their verandah skirts

and laugh long and rude

at the mere weather

So Mercer's work puts on a sensible apron, and takes it off too when the occasion warrants. No doubt she'll cock a snook even if shaking in her boots before the crocodile's terrifying eye.

And so to Patricia Sykes. If Lenore offers a café lunch, and Mercer an organically grown and home-cooked meal with a dash of something wicked, then Sykes is more like the Mad Hatter's tea party. An antipodean and female Hatter, to be sure, of acute personal and political sensitivity, whose poetic beverages produce altered states not to be missed.

It's difficult to pin *Modewarre* down, to isolate meaning from a few lines lifted out of the body of feeling and meaning that the collection constitutes. It's more like a place to be, a lake with birds/sun/rain that asks no words—until the disjunction of the overlaid world kicks in, as it does: patriarchal capitalism, loss of habitat personal and environmental, our black history, our current political shames.

The book's title refers to the Wathaurong people's word for the musk duck, and to Lake Modewarre in Victoria. Sykes introduces the reader to her central image in the first poem, which has five parts: 'Modewarre—ways you might approach it' (3-11). One senses the narrator allowing the flow of images relevant to her understandings; the reader collects clues to piece together a picture (and many pictures are possible), yet the work permeates as though by osmosis:

ink

mimics the intrinsic knowledge

of worms who being earthed

have their heads deep into it

doubly advantaged by there-ness

and an un-need for meanings (4).

Her searching of the archives produces:

...a bare desk

and you a dark-feather creature

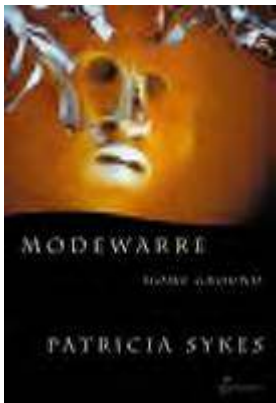
since the time before biblical

like wings against distance
growing now more lucid
now less clear unto yourself

and a speck also burning
and watering in the eye like a splinter
out of this a lake rises and rises

it may yet prove an inland sea
the wraith of it says yes let the eyes weep
let them they have need of
consequence (4-5).

I quote extensively to illustrate the mood, the tone of this work; for me it is emotional, feminine, and deeply personal, yet well informed in the 'outer' world too, so apparently inimical to the other. Weeping is allowed, privileged; the narrator takes the risk of probing deep into her material, a place too often glossed over, where people 'don't want to know'.



An Internet search confronts with its usual plethora of sites, hideous and hilarious in their juxtapositions to the subjectivity of the book. The National Register of Public Toilets states there is no public toilet at Lake Modewarre; real estate parades land as commodity; *The Geelong Advertiser* runs this story:

Modewarre footballers gave each other a bottom-spanking in the showers after their loss to Newcomb last Saturday ... Modewarre president Chris Ovens said the bum-spanking exercise was a soft version of 'a good kick up the backside' and was laughed off by the players at a post-match function Modewarre is no stranger to alternative methods of lifting team morale. Back in 1993, the Warriors dressed in women's clothing for a training session with their coach [who later explained] 'we thought the guys had been burdened by a lack of

success and felt we needed to enjoy ourselves and have a bit of fun.' (Jason Shields, 'Modewarre loss has a sting in the tail', 11 May 07)

Such shenanigans could hardly be more opposed to the natural world, the feminine, the poetic. One wonders if some of the footballers might be the sons of the 'schoolyard pack who craved a target, limpid,/mother-sheltered' ('proximities', 45).

While plenty of references are made in the poems to horrors such as colonisation and refugees, there is no overt opposition established, unless you count as the poet does, poetry as a subversive act (Andy Jackson: *Cordite Review Poetry Archives*, 'Andy Jackson Interviews Patricia Sykes', May 2005, Internet.) Rather, the work dives deep within, with bubbles floating upward like fragments of thought processes. We can only construct meaning by our own understandings and associations; this work is so

dense with possibilities as to be confusing, if traditional notions of meaning are sought.

The book is presented in three sections: 'House of the Bird'; 'House of Water'; and 'House of Detention'. From the middle section, 'sanctuary: Swan Lake, Phillip Island' (52-54, winner of the Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2002) asserts 'how the eyes like linguists are never satisfied/how they'll poke and pry into any lexicon'. The narrator is watching the ducks from a hide, while meditating on their 'dictionary/of indifference' and the 'failure of image/as language'. The notion of human presence is also under scrutiny: the light's 'slow/fingering drift against the skin' may be 'how trespass/might be tamed'. Once you learn to swim in these waters, to feel and listen rather than to probe as a reductionist vision might, every poem is at once a delight and a wounding. The hide constructed by more 'outsiderly' critiques, reveals itself to be full of holes; the material under our gaze may leak back in on us, and open up material hitherto kept under wraps. Childhood, the home ground of the book's title, is evoked in its terrors: 'her father's knife in the yesterday sheep's throat/as the same dread now rushing her pulse' (39, 'girl at play on the occasion of her mother's death', part three of 'three years in the flooded paddock', 37-40).

Sykes grew up at Modewarre. In the fascinating and revealing interview with Andy Jackson, she spoke of the associations that began falling into place when researching the meaning of 'Modewarre':

In attempting to re-create, re-shape the swamp, poetry disturbs equilibrium, especially that of the status quo. How intoxicating: activism, celebration and sleuthing in the one activity. I keep at it because I'm hungry. Each poem is a kind of failure, a mere inkling of the complexity of the swamp. [...] for me poetry is very much about the 'hidden', so to simplify it is also to falsify. It's a difficult tension, at least for those who require justification. I prefer that readers meet me halfway. [...] I wasn't hunting a motif when I began researching the English translation, the duck turned out to be a gift, an unlooked for presence. I've been fascinated by birdlife since childhood and I relish being in water so to discover a water-bird at the core of what I was wanting to explore made me a little breathless, even wary. It felt both too easy and too daunting. The themes were a given. I've always associated Modewarre with the themes of belonging, identity and loss. It's a small step from the personal to the communal. On the one hand a white child's loss of a mother and the dislocation that followed: loss of home, family, school, friends, an entire mini culture that for her equalled 'the world'. And for the Wathaurong the displacement of themselves, their culture, their connection to the Modewarre land. As I wrote, the ripples kept widening: the duck as endangered species, the fragilities of occupation, the self as witness, as possessor and dis-possessor, succeeding waves of migration into arrival or mis-arrival. And always the modewarre slightly out of reach. An indifferent vortex? At the very least a possibility rather than an answer.

(Sykes, Andy Jackson Interview, May 2005, Internet.)

Any writer takes a risk in putting her work out there on the line. For Sykes, the risk is real that readers will take a glance and find the work inaccessible. Some attention is needed and well repays the effort. The poems offer a dreamlike escape, yet one spiked with enough referents of pain and loss to allow one's feet just to touch bottom, albeit squishy, in the lake. As an exploration of one's place in the world, from the ruptures of childhood to a stance on deeply troubling political issues, I found it opened 'multiple gateways' (Sykes, Andy Jackson Interview) into my own life's material. I urge readers to consider the ecology of the book, and to see the poems as you might the musk duck, on home ground.

On my bemoaning the penurious state of poets, an acquaintance quite seriously asked—'but couldn't you do birthday cards?' (bless her cotton socks...). Sykes has reminded me of the richness of the inner life; 'to go deep into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows' (Rainer Maria

Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, 2001, 9); and how poets, in all their diversity, slake the soul's thirst: 'In the country of few taps/succour can dry up like water' (Sykes, 'visa as pessimist' part ii, 75). *Modewarre* is the book I'd buy for myself. My thanks, though, to all three poets reviewed for taking the risks of going public, and for getting the work done.

Alison Lambert began writing poetry and short stories while studying as a mature age student at The University of Queensland. She lives on the Blackall Range, north of Brisbane, with her extended family and one-eyed cat.

