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Julie Dowling - "Aunties with Cards"

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## Uncanny Beauty: Interpreting the Portraits of Julie Dowling

*Strange Fruit: Testimony and Memory in Julie Dowling's Portraits*

21 July — 14 October 2007, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

By Varga Hosseini

Julie Dowling works in a genre of painting that has a prestigious place and history in the Antipodes. The widely-publicised and celebrated Archibald Prize and, more recently, the Blake Prize for Religious Art, attest to the lucrative status and popularity of portraiture and its ability to generate controversy and debate. The past decade has seen Dowling, an Indigenous artist of Yamatji and Budimaya descent, produce engrossing and provocative portraits that have received scrutiny as much for their subject matter as their engrossing and eclectic aesthetic.



*Strange Fruit: Testimony and Memory in Julie Dowling's Portraits* is the first major survey of Dowling's prolific oeuvre. Curated by Jeannette Hoorn, this momentous exhibition traces ten years in Dowling's career and explores how portraiture serves as a powerful medium for reflecting on family, history, memory, loss and trauma.

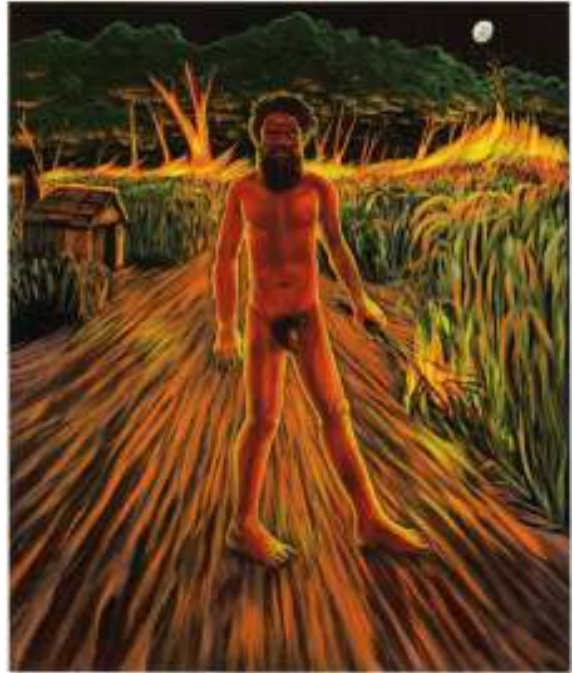
Left: *Her Father's Servant* (1999), synthetic polymer paint, red ochre and blood on canvas, 100 cm X 120 cm, National Gallery of Australia.

The task of selecting artworks for a show of this nature is a formidable feat given Dowling's prolific output and monumental repertoire of paintings. One of the impressive achievements of this retrospective is that it showcases the enormous scope and diversity of Dowling's vision and her idiosyncratic approach to portraiture. The compilation of sixty-one portraits weaves a lavish tapestry of subjects, among them family members and distant relatives; notable figures in Indigenous Australian history; dispossessed and displaced members of the Stolen Generation; unsung Indigenous Australians, and a selection of intricate and moving self-portraits.

In *Aunties with Cards* (1999) and *Her Father's Servant* (1999), Dowling provides insights into her family's history by portraying their activities and tribulations, respectively. In the former portrait, we encounter the commanding matriarchs who dominated the artist's childhood and who are pictured here partaking in a popular pastime: card games such as black euchre, stud and poker. The congested composition of this painting, with its gorgeous chiaroscuro, lush impasto and taut, symmetrical

arrangement of figures captures the communal atmosphere and extended duration of these games which would often stretch for hours or even days. The artist's penchant for drama and tension is superbly realised in *Her Father's Servant* (1999), a portrait of Dowling's great-grandmother, Mary. In this work, Dowling conveys how Mary's status and position in her father's household dramatically shifted after he remarried. The young Mary appears as a maidservant at her father's birthday party, allocated the task of setting plates for her new stepmother and siblings. Her subservience is powerfully evoked in the skewed perspective of a cramped dining-room, the looming figures of her step-mother and half-sister and her father's frigid demeanour at the harshly illuminated table.

Pemulwuy (2006),  
synthetic polymer paint  
and red ochre on canvas,  
120 cm X 100 cm,  
collection of Ken and Lisa Fehily.



History and memory are powerful currents that have driven Dowling's practice since the inception of her career. One of the distinctive aspects of her portraits is their attempt to illuminate the agency of Indigenous Australians and their history of encounter and exchange with outsiders. There are images in this exhibition that shift the point of focus from Dowling's family to notable figures in Indigenous Australian history, as well as individuals whose achievements have been sidestepped by mainstream histories of race-relations in Australia. The nocturnal painting *Pemulwuy* (2006), for example, is a portrait of a traditional custodian from the Sydney Cove area who served as a navigator, negotiator and ambassador for his community. Dowling shows the naked and bearded Pemulwuy setting a lush cornfield ablaze in order to ward off colonialists from encroaching on sacred Eora country. The explosion of light and colour in this painting — flickering, fluorescent yellow, crackling cadmium orange, and tinges of blazing scarlet — accentuate the danger and extremity of Pemulwuy's role as a custodian.

In *Biddy the Midwife* (2003), Dowling addresses the pivotal, but largely unrecognised, role played by Indigenous midwives during the early years of Australia's colonisation. The demure female subject of this portrait, Bidy, worked tirelessly as a midwife for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Dowling has positioned Bidy in the garden bed of a colonial settlement surrounded by a thicket of frangipani flowers. The shimmering halo that frames Bidy's head symbolises her humanity, civility and suffering, and her stature as an individual whose life and work is in keeping with that of a saint — even though she has not been ordained as one.



Left: *Biddy the Midwife* (2003), synthetic polymer paint, red ochre and plastic on canvas, 60 cm X 40 cm.

The Christian symbolism in *Biddy the Midwife* motions toward what is arguably the most renowned and widely-reproduced body of paintings in *Strange Fruit*: Dowling's *Icon to a Stolen Child* portraits. In this series of approximately 150 paintings, ten of which have been selected and displayed by Hoorn, the faces of Indigenous children are sumptuously rendered in the format of Russian and Byzantine icon paintings. *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998) depicts a young Indigenous girl whose face is outlined in the dot and circle symbolism of Western Desert art, while her body is adorned with wings and decorated with the sacred heart of Jesus Christ. Excerpts from the Lord's Prayer float and flicker against the cobalt blue background. In *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fire* (1998), the face and figure of the subject forms the

vertical axis of an imposing Celtic cross. This powerful symbol of Christ's sacrifice (and Christianity more generally) is surrounded by a kaleidoscopic field of dots that symbolise fire. In these icons, visual references to country from Western Desert iconography are exquisitely interwoven with Christian scripture and symbology.

I approach the artworks in this exhibition as a writer working on the borderlines of cultures and disciplines. As an Iranian-Australian scholar versed in art history but perpetually fascinated by theology and spirituality, my encounter with Dowling's images emerged during the course of a doctoral thesis on the representation of Christianity in contemporary Aboriginal art. For some time now, the artist's *Icon to a Stolen Child* portraits have preoccupied my writing on account of their complex relationship to Christian visual culture and spirituality, and their audacious and stylish transformation of icon painting.

Given their powerful religious symbolism, it is convenient to interpret *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998) and *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fire* (1998) as the work of an artist who is a pious and practising Christian. Dowling's strict Catholic education as well as her Jewish and Russian ancestry would certainly lend support to such an interpretation. This reading would, however, sidestep the more fractured and ambivalent place that Christian spirituality occupies in Dowling's life and professional practice. To its credit, this exhibition offers an indispensable framework for understanding the beauty and complexity of Dowling's sumptuous and opulent "icons". Hoorn's erudite, lucid and engaging catalogue essay, *Strange Fruit: Testimony and Memory in Julie Dowling's Portraits*, situates the subject matter in the context of the artist's social milieu and history, and interprets the symbolism in relation to topical issues such as trauma, the uncanny and ethics.





Left: *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998), synthetic polymer paint and red ochre on canvas, 40.5 cm X 27.5 cm, private collection.

‘The circumstances that formed her family's life are the strongest force propelling Julie Dowling to paint’, Hoorn observes (11). The most exemplary and indelible of these circumstances, and one that forms the premise of her icons, is the forced removal of her family members — and legions of other Indigenous Australians — under the notorious assimilation policy. Dowling remarks: ‘I began painting this series of portraits as a meditation on the lives of individuals who were and are removed from their families through separation by government and religious agencies. I wanted to reflect on this because three generations of my family were forcibly removed through government regimes and church incentives’ (Dowling). The Catholic Church, Hoorn elaborates, established one

of the most successful missions in its history when it settled in Western Australia: ‘From the late nineteenth-century the church worked in tandem with the state to implement legislation governing the lives of Aboriginal people’ (16).

Given this background, Dowling's icons and their choice of subjects make an important and strategic point of departure from the Christian iconographic tradition. In Russian, Greek, Serbian Orthodox and Byzantine churches, icons were perceived as doors or windows onto the divine; living, efficacious images that manifested the divine presence of Jesus Christ and the saints (Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson 1). Significantly, the icon painter, or iconographer, was also a pious Christian whose life and work was inextricably linked with the church's tradition of prayer and devotion (Baggley 16; Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson 16). In Dowling's case, we are confronted with a different demographic and agenda. According to Hoorn: ‘in this series, the artist returns time and again to her disenfranchised countrymen and women, to the fate of those who were taken away, to the victims of a racist law and order system, to her grandmothers whose culture was destroyed’ (Hoorn 14).

*Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998) and *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fire* (1998) depict Indigenous children who were fostered out to white families and who ultimately served, according to the artist, ‘as signifiers of that family's benevolence to the underprivileged within their own faith to the church’ (Dowling ‘Notes on Artwork’). These children also signify the immeasurable loss and perennial trauma experienced by members of the Stolen Generation and their families. Dowling herself is emphatic on this point: ‘the policy of forced child removal can still be [seen] as a continuing social trauma which can last up to five generations after the initial removal from close family’ (‘Responses to Questionnaire’).

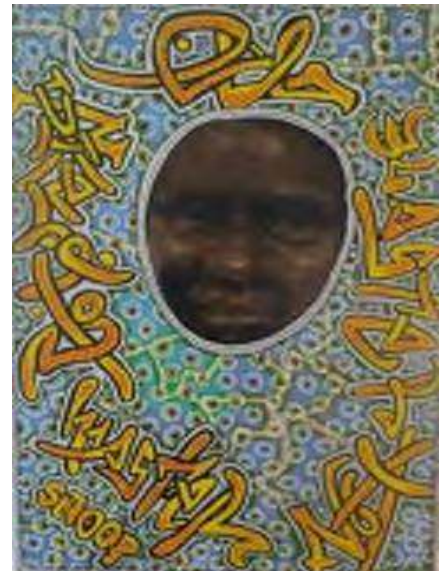
Right: *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998), synthetic polymer paint and red ochre on canvas, 40.5 cm X 27.5 cm, private collection.



In portraying the young members of the Stolen Generation in the vein of Christian saints, the artist endeavours to convey what she describes as the 'devastation [caused] not only to the individual but also to the community who are left to grieve the loss of children' ('Responses to Questionnaire'). *Icon to a Stolen Child: Perth* (1998) is a case in point. Here, Dowling emphasises the brutality of child removal and its pervasive and enduring ramifications. The subject of this painting is a descendant of the Stolen Generation who, like his forebears, was severed from his kin, placed in juvenile detention and later forced to survive on the streets. The weary face that returns our gaze in this icon is circled by the fluent, sprawling script synonymous with graffiti and street-culture. There is an affirmative, empowering and intersubjective dimension to this poignant and grim portrait. Six socially displaced Indigenous youths from Perth were asked to participate in the production of this painting by inscribing its surface with their intricate and iridescent "tags".

The deployment of graffiti in this work beautifully illustrates the unorthodox and idiosyncratic nature of Dowling's Christian-related art. Hoorn underlines this aspect of her icons when she argues that they are not so much authentic windows onto the past as distinctively 'uncanny' works that provoke 'the viewer to contemplate the meaning of conventional religious iconography' (14). This uncanniness lies in the fact that the Christian subject matter in Dowling's icons constitutes only one element of the dense and exorbitant visual language

Right: *Icon to a Stolen Child: Perth* (1998), synthetic polymer paint and red ochre on canvas, 40.5 cm X 27.5 cm, private collection.



The crosses, angels and hearts in *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fetish* (1998), *Icon to a Stolen Child: Fire* (1998) and *Icon to a Stolen Child: Perth* (1998) are ensconced in an entrancing, technicolour textile of signs and references sourced from Celtic and West African art, Western Desert iconography, popular culture and kitsch, biblical citations and hip-hop flavoured graffiti. Even Dowling's pigment shimmers, gleams and glimmers through its vivacious contamination with eccentric substances like blood and plastic.

In foregrounding Dowling's engagement with the Stolen Generation, *Strange Fruit* compels viewers to recognise the ethical nature of her undertaking and its attempt to facilitate a process of mourning and healing. Hoorn observes: 'the compulsion to revisit and rework [this theme] through painting can be seen as an affirmative response to violation: it presents the means through which the artist can transcend the orbit of her injury' (6). This use of painting as a medium for healing explains Dowling's fixation with portraiture:

The reason I paint portraits is to break down barriers between individuals. When a person views a portrait, she or he is forced to acknowledge the image of another human being. These images reflect the subject's flaws, their fears, their history, their beauty, their inner-emotion and their existence. (Dowling 'Taking Control of Your Future' 153)

Emmanuel Levinas famously argued that an ethical relationship with another person begins with, and involves, the face (in Matthews 160). If this is so, then *Strange Fruit* bears witness to the efficacy of Dowling's portraits in facilitating a relationship to, and understanding of, the history and plight of Indigenous Australians.

**Varga Hosseini is a Melbourne-based writer, poet and visual artist. He recently completed a PhD thesis on the representation of Christian symbols and narratives in contemporary Indigenous Australian visual culture. For the past decade he has worked as an arts writer by producing catalogue essays for visual artists and institutions, and publishing articles and reviews in arts journals and magazines.**

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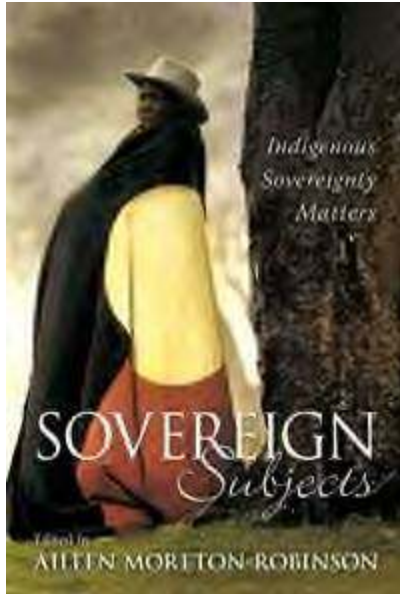
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## Sovereign Subjects

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, 2007.

By Fiona Nicoll



In 1999, the prominent historian of Australian race relations, Henry Reynolds, wrote a semi-autobiographical book titled *Why Weren't We Told?* This title is somewhat disingenuous and a question that would more adequately reflect the character of Australian race relations past and present might be instead 'What is it that we Know but are Afraid to Tell?' I see the publication of the long-awaited collection, *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, as a book that removes the non-Indigenous defence of not knowing Indigenous views about this nation's past, present and future. At the same time, it undermines our privileged capacity to indefinitely defer consideration of the issue of sovereignty as one on which only legal academics are qualified to comment. In so doing, it provides us with an informed basis on which to articulate our support for the recognition of a different kind of governmentality in Australia.

*Sovereign Subjects* mounts a considered challenge to the authority given to non-Indigenous experts to define and formulate intellectual positions, legal decisions and government policy on an array of 'Indigenous issues.' It does not purport to offer a quintessential definition of sovereignty but rather reveals its 'multiple manifestations and refusals' in relation to the three specific areas of Law, History, Writing and Policy. Since Indigenous sovereignty issues underpin much historical and current world conflict yet are rarely reported or represented as such in the media and popular culture, this book is a valuable and timely intervention. In recent years Australian discussions of sovereignty have been dominated by conservative ideologues who mischievously present Indigenous rights claims as a threat to national security and identity. And it is in this context that the collection's editor, Aileen Moreton-Robinson introduces the book with a question: 'If Indigenous sovereignty does not exist, why does it constantly need to be refused?'

*Sovereign Subjects* neither approaches Indigenous sovereignty as a question of the quality (past and present) of Indigenous governance nor as a move in the 'culture wars' that so successfully promoted the Howard government's neo-liberal and socially conservative ideologies and policies. Instead it speaks to the governmentality of racialized subjects in a nation state with a deeply contested past and a sharply divided present. By providing a forum for Indigenous intellectuals to reflect on past and present processes and experiences of being governed, it also raises important questions about the ways in which non-Indigenous Australians have governed ourselves by means of particular political, legal, literary and epistemic violences.

## **Law Matters**

Irene Watson's powerful opening chapter, 'Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are We Free to Roam', begins by posing a series of questions to the reader about the nature of Aboriginal identity, community and diversity within a colonizing space. 'When we are speaking into a colonized space, how are Aboriginal voices captured, echoed, ricocheted, distilled? Where does that voice of our old people go?' (15) At a historical moment when native title's recognition is widely hailed as a social justice victory, she asks provocatively 'to what extent is our sovereign Aboriginal being accommodated by the nation state's sanctioned native-titled spaces?' (15) The problem of seeing is repeatedly raised; of how the white gaze on Aboriginality inflects and is rejected by the seeing of an Indigenous self that wants 'to liberate white from its hold over power – to enable all colours to roam freely. I want to see a return of the Aboriginal horizon and its ways of knowing the world, from a place where I believe we have all begun' (32).

Phillip Falk and Gary Martin's chapter 'Misconstruing Indigenous Sovereignty' is focused on features of the Australian legal landscape, particularly since the over-turning of terra nullius in the Mabo (1992) decision. They draw on the key documents produced by Indigenous sovereignty activist organizations to show that recognition of sovereignty is possible (and in some cases partially realized) in five key areas: land rights and compensation, economic base, cultural heritage and customary law. However there is one area where very little has been achieved in spite of broad agreement by Indigenous rights proponents and their non-Indigenous supporters: a treaty. After an examination of existing models of sovereignty which could be supported by a treaty, their conclusion is that legal and government inaction on this matter rests upon 'the very same racism that has permeated white and Indigenous relations since invasion' (46).

Henrietta Marrie's chapter, 'Indigenous Sovereignty Rights: International Law and the Protection of Traditional Ecological Knowledges', approaches sovereignty from the global perspective of 600 million Indigenous people in 70 different countries in which linguistic and cultural diversity is most developed, and traditional ecological knowledge is most threatened by nation-states which encompass them and by the practices of global corporations. She argues that effective national and international legal instruments are required if traditional ecological knowledges about sources of human and environmental sustenance and healing are to be recorded, propagated and developed in ways that recognize the sovereign rights of their living holders.

## **Writing Matters**

'Dancing With Shadows: Erasing Aboriginal Self and Sovereignty' by Phillip Morrissey is an impassioned critical analysis of the problem of Aboriginal corporeality for Inga Clendinnen's celebrated popular history of the first years of settlement at Sydney Cove in *Dancing with Strangers*. He identifies a problem with Clendinnen's self-appointed role as judge of the voices relating to Aboriginal histories to which she believes the public should listen: 'the fact that angry, inarticulate, unmannerly Aboriginal voices may be speaking critically important things — or at the very least reminding us that a realistic national conversation about Aboriginal-settler issues and Aboriginal affairs will have moments of misunderstanding, antipathy and animadversion' (71). In contrast to Clendinnen's determined focus on the journals of romanticized 'naval men' who established the British settlement, Morrissey concludes by invoking pioneering Indigenous author and activist Kevin Gilbert to argue that the 'vague menace' of corporeal Aboriginality cannot be dissociated from the

psychological scars of invasion which place an onus on Indigenous writers to puncture the 'self-protective assumptions' of settler intellectuals (74).

Tracey Bunda's 'The Sovereign Aboriginal Woman' seeks to expand understandings of sovereignty from the confines of law, policy and history to encompass the embodied subjectivity of the 'sovereign warrior woman' in literature. She argues that the reemergence of the Aboriginal sovereign woman in Vivienne Cleven's acclaimed novel *Bitin' Back* is not a matter of 'authenticity or textual fantasy' but rather of 'a sovereign exchange' that calls into being 'our warrior spirit that is defined in our relationship to other Aboriginal people and our land' (85). This reading of a celebrated text performatively enacts a de-centering of the theory and body of white literary criticism to bring awareness of the precedence and pleasures of Indigenous social exchange which has always sustained those, like *Bitin' Back*'s main character, Mavis Dooley, who would 'talk up' to white power.

In 'Writing Off Indigenous Sovereignty: The Discourse of Security and Patriarchal White Sovereignty', Moreton-Robinson engages with anxieties about national security with reference to theories of sovereignty's historical emergence and codification in the juridical and political institutions of the modern nation state. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and of critical feminist and race theorists she explores the contours of Australia as a racial state in an analysis of speeches delivered by John Howard between 1977 and 2004. Howard's reluctance to engage Indigenous Australia in his speeches is presented as an attempt to evade the unsettled sovereignty issues, reinforced by his tendency to define these in relation to a 'tradition' which transports Indigenous sovereignty 'into the past rather than the continuing present' (98). Moreton-Robinson's identification of recurring patterns in the Prime Minister's speeches convincingly demonstrates how possessive investments are incited in the discourse of political and legal institutions as a collective form of white hope against the persistence of Indigenous sovereignty.

### **History Matters**

In 'The Invisible Fire': Indigenous Sovereignty, History and Responsibility', Tony Birch presents us with a kaleidoscope of images and ideas offered towards a 'post-colonizing' future in which the nation ceases to bury the past to avoid the necessity of an apology. Media representations of even the highest achieving Indigenous individuals such as Cathy Freeman and award winning actor, David Gulpilil as indebted to a white nation built on their dispossession and labor, frames a highly original discussion of the problem of remembrance in the context of debates about history waged by different camps of non-Indigenous historians staking claims to empiricism. Ivan Sen's film *Dust* where the atrocities of the frontier past and the complexities of migrant and Indigenous belongings and identities collide, is used as a platform for some concluding reflections on the mutual responsibilities of sovereign Indigenous subjects and excluded migrant subjects towards one another in the face of a historical amnesia that enables white violence to be continually reproduced.

'The Australian Labor Party and the Native Title Act' by Gary Foley offers a forensic account of the party's trade in Indigenous rights and positions established and maintained from the 1970s to the present. He shows how Indigenous negotiators, together with the governing Labor Party, produced an inferior form of title allowing mass extinguishment of native title retrospectively without addressing the sovereignty issues posed by the overturning of *terra nullius*. This created the current political crisis whereby 'to defend native title is to defend the *fait accompli* of the most extensive single act of

dispossession since 1788, and to further impose colonial ‘solutions’ on Indigenous people’ (139). Meanwhile the unresolved issue of sovereignty posed so clearly to Australian law by Mabo remains waiting for a just determination.

In ‘That Sovereign Being: History Matters’, Wendy Brady explores the tensions between membership of a non-Indigenous nation state and the experience of being subjects of a different, Indigenous kind of sovereignty. She shows how the dual loyalties and conflicts that arise as a consequence of this position are frequently misrecognised as dysfunction and self-destructiveness rather than as reflections of positive connections to land and a sense of belonging to specific Aboriginal nations. From the standpoint of this Indigenous sovereignty, Western sovereignty appears as a self-serving myth offered to justify the continued occupation of Indigenous nations.

### **Policy Matters**

Maggie Walter’s chapter, ‘Indigenous Sovereignty and the Australian State: Relations in a Globalizing Era’, writes of two challenges that globalization’s erosion of the nation state poses for Indigenous sovereignty. Firstly, market economy principles have come to pervade social and economic life; and secondly, there has been a corresponding rise of nostalgic nationalist discourse in response to rapid changes. While transnational corporations and global governance bodies require nations to adopt ‘enabling frameworks for global capital’, Indigenous representative and governance bodies within the nation have been subject to government attack in the name of ‘efficiencies’ that are supposed to be delivered through a process of ‘mainstreaming’ Indigenous housing, education, employment and health. She concludes, in this context, that the prospects for recognizing Indigenous sovereignty look bleak.

Steve Larkin’s contribution, ‘Locating Indigenous Sovereignty: Race and Research in Indigenous Health Policy-Making’, argues that Australia is a ‘racial state’ to which whiteness is central, with ‘the sovereignty of Indigenous people ‘subjected to and often diminished by white sovereignty.’ This white sovereignty assumes the form of a universal humanness with reference to which others are constructed as actual or potential ‘problems.’ A consequence is that situations arise in which, as an Indigenous participant into a health workshop, articulated it: ‘Research gets done to you rather than by or with you’ (175). Larkin concludes that the field of health research is one in which active struggles over ownership will continue to rage until such time that ‘whiteness’ and its effects are rendered objects of ‘evidence-based research’ shaped in conjunction with Indigenous epistemologies.

In ‘Welfare Dependency and Mutual Obligation: Negating Indigenous Sovereignty’, Darryl Cronin focuses on the ‘new paternalism’ which is shaping Indigenous welfare reforms. The neo-liberal commitment to a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to welfare recipients entails a refusal to recognize the extent to which the inherited and conferred privilege of being white in Australia is based on theft and exploitation. The current lack of public leadership on rights and social justice is a reflection of changing values within the broader community highlights the importance of relating the current moment of ‘colonial welfare’ to its nineteenth and twentieth century predecessors. In this context, Cronin demonstrates how white possessive investments actively perpetuate the position of Indigenous people as objects of welfare reform rather than recognizing their rights as sovereign subjects.

In closing, *Sovereign Subjects* is recommended reading at a moment when the most progressive and theoretically informed scholarship about Indigenous Australians often perpetuates what Moreton-Robinson defines as a ‘possessive investment in patriarchal white sovereignty’, which is perhaps most simply apparent in the everyday way non-Indigenous Australians across the political spectrum refer to the ‘issues facing our Indigenous people.’ This collection provides a glimpse into a different world wherein Indigenous people are not ours to be managed, known, taught, helped or otherwise ‘saved’ from themselves. In sharing this world, the contributors make visible the toxic white fantasies and discursive practices that shape their everyday encounters with literature, philosophy, politics and histories.

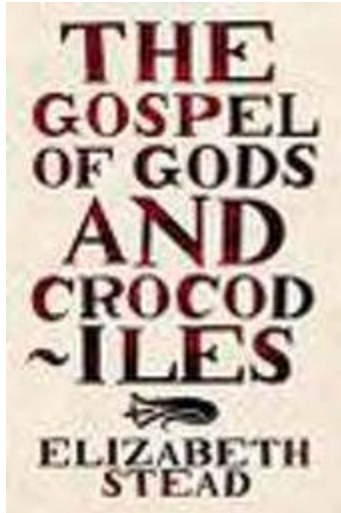
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## Mythical Tales and Perilous Psalms

Elizabeth Stead, *The Gospel of Gods and Crocodiles*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007.

By Shanthini Pillai



Elizabeth Stead's *The Gospel of Gods and Crocodiles* offers a rendition of the dynamics of cross cultural encounters through a dialogic imagination that interweaves the various viewpoints of the inhabitants of the island that remains the primary setting of the novel. What is most significant about the articulation of these stories is the interspersing of two worldviews, that of the islanders, steeped in the oral history of their home, and that of the newcomers, mainly missionaries who hearken to perceived biblical decree. This dual perspective is encapsulated in the title of the novel. There is the gospel of the gods of the missionaries and that of the guardian crocodile spirit to which the islanders pay homage. The former, it becomes quite apparent, pales in comparison to the latter.

The first missionary to arrive on the island is Pastor Evan Morley.

Acceptance of Evan begins on a note of incredulity and humour. Unable to understand his language, the islanders ensure that the newcomer learns their language; unable to pronounce his name, they rename him 'Amen' based on the fact that that is the word they hear most from him. They are at times amused by his attempts to learn the language and thus the imperial strategy of mimicry is turned on its head as it is the white man who is the mimic man.

Following closely on the heels of 'Amen' Morley are a number of other missionary communities as well as individual newcomers. Through Morley, we witness the dynamics of missionary rivalry as well as the perilous consequences of the depraved actions of that community. This last is vividly etched into the story of the young island girl, Gemini, a fate that is put in motion only as a result of an even greater betrayal by her own island community. Yet in Gemini we witness, too, the strongest evidence of Indigenous feminist agency, metaphorically articulated in her regaining her sense of hearing towards the middle of the novel. As she aptly puts it, 'having lived through the terrible beliefs of white and black [...] I live with what is real' (255). This keenly encapsulates the dual perspective that informs the novel as binary oppositions of the vilified white imperialists and the idealized islanders are virtually absent from the novel.

This holds true in the individual revelations of the various testaments that unfold in this gospel of gods and crocodiles as we witness the dynamics of a cross-fertilisation of white and Indigenous culture. Sam Maitland, alienated from his own family and the larger white community, is initiated into island life and takes on the legendary role of the Crocodile Man, an Indigenous inversion of a Christlike figure.

The dynamics of these cross-cultural dialogics are reflected further in the characters of Missy Wing, the Chinese trader and Yasmin, the 'sari-clad' Indian woman who remains the focal interest of Herbert

Glass, the local medical practitioner (better known as the 'doctor who cures clocks'). On the one hand, this reflects an awareness and recognition of the often varied backdrop of early settlements and thus works also to counter traditional binary viewpoints. Added to this is the development of a variegated feminine lens. On the other hand however, there appears to be a tinge of the stereotypical in these portrayals, especially with regard to Missy Wing. As much as the novel attempts to reflect feminist agency in her various actions, images of the callous, calculating, and materialistic Oriental remain tightly wound around her figure, to the point where she remains rather one-dimensional. Yasmin, because filtered into the narration for the most part through the letters of Herbert, except for when she arrives on the island at the end, remains a shadowy figure known more for her customary act of adjusting her sari at her shoulders.

However, the last should not deflect from the core of the novel, which compellingly dramatizes Indigenous resistance through a creative interpolation of mythic tales interleaved with the perilous psalms that resound on the shores of the island that is, aptly 'shaped like a fist on a fine wrist' (1).

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## Private Desires

Sara Knox, *The Orphan Gunner*. NSW: Giramondo Publishing, 2007.

By Liz Bissell



One of feminism's paradoxes—one that challenges many of its optimistic histories—is how patriarchy remains persistent over time. While Sara Knox's *The Orphan Gunner* recognises women as historical actors during World War Two, the novel also emphasises the ambiguity of women's position as members of the armed services in relation to dominant constructions of sexuality.

*The Orphan Gunner*, Knox's third novel, is a romance between two young Australian women stationed at Bomber Command in Lincolnshire during the Second World War. Evelyn McIntyre is an accomplished aviatrix and one of the few female pilots with the Air Transport Auxiliary; Olive's father is the manager of the McIntyre family's farm in the Canabolas Valley. At the outbreak of war, Olive is dispatched to bring the recalcitrant Evelyn home. Unable to persuade

Evelyn to renounce flying and return to the farm, Olive eventually ends up enlisting with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Eager to be part of the action and inspired by his sister, Evelyn's brother Duncan joins the RAAF. After being rejected as a pilot, Duncan enlists as a gunner and befriends a young recruit from New Zealand named Lofty. The two novice gunners are crewed together for a number of operations in Lincolnshire, including the perilous Battle of Berlin. Duncan soon succumbs to physical and emotional exhaustion, and the four friends are drawn into a plot to get Duncan out of service in which Evelyn assumes her brother's identity and flies as rear gunner with Lofty during the raids.

The novel begins in the narrative present, with Olive and her cantankerous husband, Norm, travelling back to Lincolnshire to visit Bomber Command and Olive's old billet; the house in which she and Evelyn spent their last months together. The main section of the book recounts the four friends' experiences during the war, charting their geographical movements against the external conflict and demonstrating the way in which war is a profoundly individual experience at the same time as it is a shared cultural event. The epilogue is set in 1958, when Olive visits Lofty during a trip to New Zealand. The book is structured around Olive's memory of the war, suggesting the way in which memory collaborates between past and present and interrogating the relationship between the experience of war and historical forms of masculinity.

Most interesting is Knox's evocation of the way in which gender and sexual identities are profoundly disrupted by the experience of war. Although Evelyn indicates the sexual potential of a uniform by pointing out the flirting couples in the army canteen, Olive is initially attracted to military service for its capacity to neutralise conventional sexuality, 'its ability to *foreclose* the question of romance' (97). The novel captures the way in which life in the services during World War Two offered women freedom in which to forge friendships and sexual relationships, and gave desires not sanctioned by the dominant culture opportunity for enablement. Evelyn's various uniforms—the Irvin jacket and trousers,

the Mae West flying suit, the gunners brevet—offer her a form of social objectification throughout the novel. After she performs a heroic crash landing in a damaged Lancaster after a Nuremburg raid, Evelyn's burned body is eventually revealed at a hospital in Raucedon. Her flight suit has become fused with her skin so that the removal 'of the armour of a uniform' (350) is a slow and painstaking procedure. With the exposure of her true identity, Duncan/Evelyn's heroic status is immediately and unequivocally revoked. 'Imagine,' opines the Wing Commander after the scheme is uncovered, 'what Lord Haw-Haw would make of the information that we had a woman in our bomber crews. Not to mention the House. Unconscionable' (355).

Knox's novel is not overtly polemical; rather it delivers a subtle critique of masculinist bureaucracy. The novel accurately captures the sharp delineation of sexual roles in the military, and illustrates the popular belief of the period that the admission of women would fatally disrupt the armed services. Knox also treats the concern that militarism would produce homosexual bodies. Lofty is questioned about the sexual orientation of flight-commander Cameron Crowe, and Crowe's attempted heterosexual relationship with a friend of Olive's is thrown into jeopardy by his 'suspicious' sexual past. Evelyn and Olive's relationship develops slowly throughout the novel. The intimacy between the two women is often tempered by a mutual frustration with each other, and affected by their respective relationships with other people. Evelyn's conspiratorial role in Olive's sexual encounter with the endearing William Battersby leaves Olive feeling betrayed, and Evelyn's relationship with Marjorie, an upper-class British woman, is a source of contention. Direct and vigorous by nature, Evelyn confronts Olive about their relationship several times throughout the novel, but is always deflected by the more conservative woman. It is only when Evelyn assumes Duncan's identity that Olive's sexual ambiguity resolves itself; the eroticism of Evelyn's flirtation with death intensifies their relationship, and her assumption of male identity allows the women to conduct a visible and socially 'acceptable' relationship.

Evelyn is optimistic about the potential of military service to blur conventional boundaries of gender and class:

Evelyn kept harping on about the 'drab' life of Helen Sewell, the poor girl picking up the dried crusts of sandwiches from the dining room floor, and toting their guests' dirty sheets and wet towels – how much better she'd be out of domestic service, and in a uniform; the nasty business of social class forgotten. (97)

But of course, as Knox shows, the 'nasty' business of social class is never forgotten as Evelyn discovers in her relationship with Marjorie, who eventually rejects Evelyn and becomes engaged to a man of similar social standing. 'The fact is,' Marjorie writes in her final letter to Evelyn, 'that the sort of affair we've had could not go on. Even you must know this' (171). Marjorie makes it clear that she privileges her need to be 'secure and comfortable' (171) over her relationship with Evelyn, distancing herself from her transgressive past desires. Olive also encounters prejudice during her interview for enlistment, when she reveals that her father is a farm manager. 'I see,' the section officer responds, before Olive adds hastily that her father 'owns land now' (105). These encounters capture the hierarchical nature of masculinist military politics, and the way in which women's auxiliaries remained a forum for class prejudice.

Knox delivers a superbly detailed and convincing portrayal of life in the air force during the Second World War, and a study of the intensity of relationships formed in a climate of tension and fear. *The Orphan Gunner* contributes to an understanding of both war and gender as contextually-dependent historical constructions to which different responses and representations may be applied. The novel makes a rich contribution to both historical fiction and the history of women's participation in war, and will appeal to those interested in military and revisionist social histories.

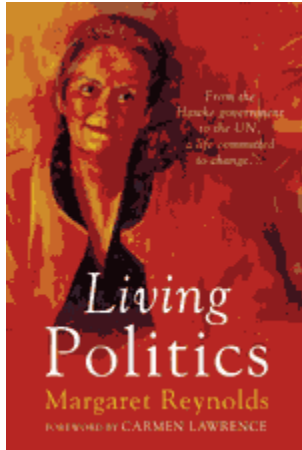
**Liz Bissell is a freelance writer, editor, and reviewer and is working towards a PhD on Australian war fiction in the School of EMSAH at the University of Queensland .**



## Living Politics

Margaret Reynolds, *Living Politics*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007.

By Mary Crawford



In *Living Politics* Margaret Reynolds looks back over her life and careers in education and politics, reflects on the impact her work has had on the lives of others, and on how politics permeates all our lives, very often without our knowing. She recognises that often those whose lives are most influenced by political systems and governments are the powerless, the least informed and the most disengaged, and it was for these very people that Margaret Reynolds devoted much of her activism and work. She concludes that the personal is always political and uses her own life and the experiences that moved her to action to exemplify this.

While *Living Politics* is a personal memoir, it also provides historical context for the way in which people's lives were shaped, and especially, the way gender roles were determined. She recounts the extraordinary path her life has taken from her early schooling, exciting university days and first teaching job in Tasmania, to the very masculine, sexist and racist culture of regional Queensland in Townsville in the 1970s and 1980s and, ultimately, to the powerful world of the Australian Parliament and government and the United Nations. Along the way she marks the salient events that shaped her values and upon which her life and actions were based.

The book is chronological and from the outset Margaret seeks to explain what it is that has driven her to fight for social justice and reform in our society. The early chapters give details of Margaret's young life and schooldays, meeting her life partner Henry Reynolds and becoming a mother. She also is able to acknowledge moments by which her resolve to work for a more equal society was formed. Despite the fact she never knew her father, Margaret conveys a sense of enthusiasm and joy about these years and acknowledges the encouragement of her mother, her grandmother, and the women teachers who were a feature of Australian high schools after the Second World War. However, she is quick to remind us that not all women were treated equally; she learns at first hand. Domestic staff, for example, are poorly treated by the sleazy landlord of the Launceston Hotel; sexual intimidation occurs to the young female house staff by some naked male guests when breakfast trays are delivered.

Schooling and support for children with disabilities is still at the forefront of the political debate so it is humbling to be reminded how children with disabilities were 'dumped' (17) during the 1960s because of lack of support or guidance for either themselves or their parents. Margaret's struggle to get parents and education authorities to offer such children opportunities for study and general life experience, such as visits to the local library, is well documented. What is more important is that Margaret identifies the need to learn to walk 'the fine line between independence and compliance' (17) which she says enabled her to work for change in the area of discrimination. She had started on her life's work of fighting for the human rights of some of society's most vulnerable.

While the book regales us with stories of travelling from Australia to Europe by ship in the 1960s after Margaret and Henry's marriage, it also identifies just how different Australia was from Britain in the 1960s particularly in relation to the treatment of married women and the workforce. While the birth of a first child can be life-changing for many, it was the role of day care and the acceptance of married women in the Education system in Britain that not only allowed Margaret to return to work but also to develop a pattern for work and family that would enable the Reynolds' to continue working and activism throughout their lives. Margaret ponders what would have happened if she had not had that experience and might have had to accept the fate of many Australian women of her time and be confined to family duties — 'had we produced our first born in Tasmania the pattern of our child rearing may have been very different' (43).

Some readers may share many of the memories of the late 1960s and the struggle against conscription and the Vietnam War that Margaret portrays with her establishment of the 'Save Our Sons' local branch during her early years in Townsville — the woman who could no longer be a friend as Margaret had been identified as a communist by the local parish priest (55); the rejection of any 'Letters to the Editor' by the local newspaper and some even ripped up in her face (56); applications for police permits that were never granted (57), and Henry blamed for not 'managing' his wife better (55). She identifies the environment of Townsville as steeling her determination to act and speak out against injustice. This was truly tested as she confronted overt racism in Townsville and established the first OPAL kindergarten in 1967. It was here that they met Eddie and Bonito Mabo and who were to lead the land rights struggle in which the Reynolds' would become inextricably involved.

This book is timely as it comes just as a Labor government has been returned in Canberra with a record four women in Cabinet, and young women elected to the Australian Parliament in unprecedented numbers. Margaret reminds us that women's entry into parliament was not always quite so easy and, indeed, some of her concerns about preselection, the nature of parliament and the struggle for work/life balance are still a constant. The preselection processes of the political parties have long been identified as a major barrier for women's entry into parliament and the way in which Margaret was treated by the ALP in the 1970s and her eventual election to the Townsville City Council after two years of raffle ticket selling (106) rings true. Her election to the Senate in 1983, as the first Labor woman Senator from Queensland, coincided with the election of the Hawke Labor government. The establishment of a Caucus Status of Women committee offered the women members an opportunity to lobby in-house as well as providing support for each other. While men see their loyalty as being to their factions, this group crossed those lines. This was certainly the case when I entered Federal Parliament in 1987 and was grateful for the support of Margaret and the other women.

As a Senator, Margaret grabbed the opportunities offered to advance the cause of human rights especially women's rights to abortion, privacy about their medical records, women's employment and the introduction of the Women's Budget process. During this time Margaret became well known, and in 1987 was made Minister for Local Government and Regional Development. She offers insights into the way a male dominated Cabinet operates and she was also a trail blazer in the Local Government portfolio. Again she sought to have a ministerial office in her home town of Townsville to enable her to better cope with her family responsibilities. This period was also marked by wide ranging social

initiatives in aged and child care, housing, employment, education and cultural and recreational programmes. Nonetheless, she brings a wry smile to your face when, as Acting Prime Minister, she still has to exert her authority over a diplomat for the use of a government car (158), for women were still assumed to be mere appendages to the more powerful males.

This theme also emerges when Margaret discusses her work on the National Agenda for Women that again recognised the position of many Australian women in the workplace, the society, and the home. She recalls the negative media coverage and the abuse from many men. She also identifies Prime Minister Bob Hawke as being supportive of both the National Agenda for Women and the National Domestic Violence Campaigns. This leadership from the top enabled the success of these campaigns and she goes on to outline their impact on the lives of many Australian women.

However, Margaret also delights us with tales of her travels on behalf of the Australian government, and we see her values and energy on display despite some countries sharing few of Australia's views on the equality of women or human rights values (174). A highlight of this period was the 1995 UN World Women's conference in Beijing. The joy and pleasure that Margaret, her family and the 500 Australian women there experienced is palpable (195), as is the thrill of meeting Nelson Mandela in South Africa (197).

Readers will be astounded by the energy that Margaret Reynolds displays when having left the Senate in 1999, she continued on until 2005 as National President of the United Nations Association of Australia. Despite the war in Iraq and Australia's treatment of asylum seekers she continued to pursue her goals and remain true to her values. Nevertheless, she does admit to the loss of resources that leaving Parliament brings, and a sadness about Australia's refugee policy. However, this is lightened by some very joyous memories of times in Parliament and the singing of the 'Red Flag' and other events (220).

Readers of this book come to know a woman whose experiences in life led her to activism and a desire to change what she saw as unjust. We learn of her triumphs and her difficulties as well as the ever present attempts to balance the commitments of family with the exhilaration of working to bring about a more just world. However, the message is clear. Individualism in Australia over the last decade has led to a very limited debate about social and public policy and has seen those who seek to espouse different views derided.

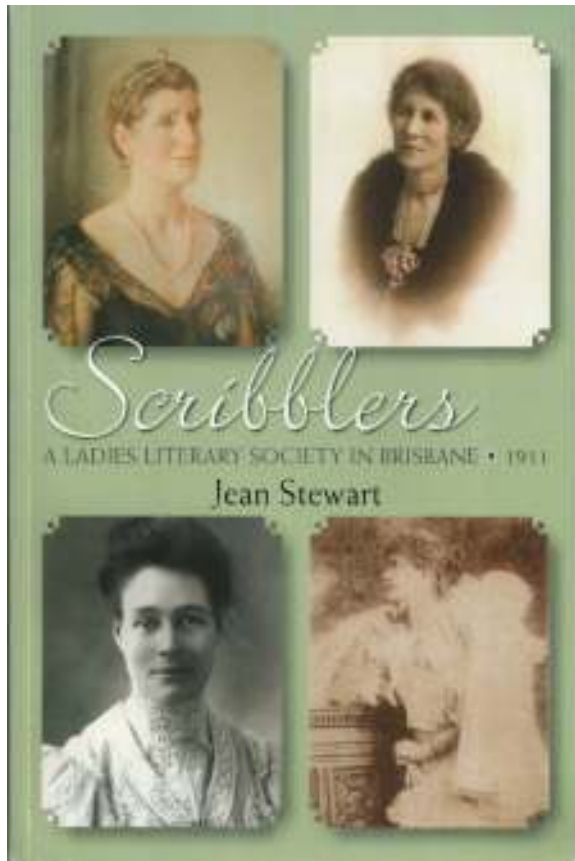
Margaret Reynolds stands up to be counted, and *Living Politics* is a reminder that we must all act to ensure that injustice and wrongdoing is spoken out against in the public arena if we are to have an Australian society which values equality and human rights.

**Mary Crawford is a lecturer in government/business relations in the School of Management, QUT and is currently working on her PhD on 'Gender and the Australian Parliament'. She was the Labor Member for Forde from 1987-1996 during the Hawke/Keating years.**

## The Invisible Ladies Step Out

*Jean Stewart. Scribblers: A Ladies Literary Society in Brisbane, 1911. Privately published: J & D Stewart, 8 Acworth Street, Kenmore, Brisbane 4069, 2007.*

*By John McCulloch*



A great deal has been published about Australian women, including a number of biographies, but very little on Queensland women and women's organizations, particularly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A notable exception is Pam Young's 1991 biography of Emma Miller.

Jean Stewart's account of the lives and times of 32 women is meticulous and interesting, and it utilises a variety of sources: primary, secondary and archival, as well as personal interviews with some of their descendants. It should generate some further new research. There is little doubt that a PhD is just waiting to be done on Zina Cumbrae-Stewart, for example.

The focus of the book is one of Brisbane's earliest women's clubs, and 32 of its prominent members, giving an insight into the early rules and office bearers of 'Scribblers', as well as a wealth of information about other women's organisations at that time. These include the Brisbane Women's Club, Lyceum Club, Moreton Club, Mothers' Union, National Council of

Women, Needlework Guild, Pioneer Club, Queensland Women's Electoral League, Queensland Women's Historical Association, Weavers Club, Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Young Women's Christian Association.

The book provides a wealth of interesting and valuable socio-biographical information not only with respect to the women of the time but also regarding their husbands and families. It concentrates on society and tends to avoid politics, religion, business, and lower-class women.

The detail regarding the connection between Mary Elkington and the Lindsay Family, Christina Corrie's dedication to the suffrage cause, and the association of some of the women with The University of Queensland are important and not readily available elsewhere. The information regarding the foundation of Women's College at The University of Queensland and the contribution of Scribblers to the First World War effort are of particular interest.

The author, of course, encountered that age-old problem of all those brave enough to attempt to shed light on the lives of women from this era. Women in general were invisible, and wives in particular tended to merge seamlessly into their husband's identity, losing their own individuality as well as all of their property (until the Married Women's Property Act of 1890). Not only did they acquire the surname of their husband but also took his initials—Mrs F.T. Brentnall (Elizabeth), Mrs James Williams (Agnes), Mrs E.B. Harris (Flora), and so forth. This makes it extremely difficult for the historian to discover the first names of married women particularly given the fact that many of these women were born overseas. For example, it took Jean Stewart eighteen months just to elicit the first names of the thirty-two women she writes about, and she should be applauded for such painstaking detective work.

*Scribblers* is indispensable to anyone researching the women who moved in middle and upper-middle class society in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Queensland, because it contains comprehensive endnotes (518 in total), abundant illustrations (144 including some cartoons), plus an excellent bibliography and index.

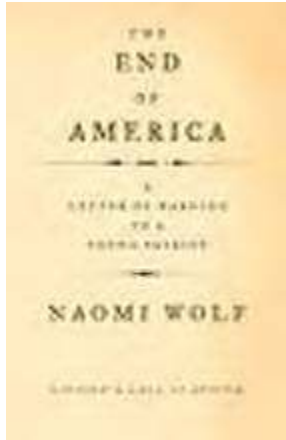
**John McCulloch OAM is former librarian and research officer at the Queensland Parliamentary Library. His PhD thesis at the University of Queensland is a biography of suffragist Elizabeth Brentnall.**



## Not Quite the 'End of America'?

Naomi Wolf, *The End of America*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007.

By Laura Brunner



Naomi Wolf's newest book *The End of America* is a call to arms for American citizens to oppose the abridgement of civil and political rights that has taken place in the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001. It is a warning to citizens against complacency as the U.S. undergoes a shift toward fascism (xiv). The book is packed with patriotic rhetoric and national mythology that appeals emotionally to even the most cynical American (my sister says that every American has a love/hate relationship with her/his country). As a reader, I definitely wanted to be convinced by the book. Wolf oversimplifies some very complex social and political changes, however, and the depth of her research falls considerably short of the book's grandiose aims.

She argues that she is looking at something unprecedented in U.S. history, and so has to look outside to the histories of other countries, where the restriction of individual rights has led to fascism. According to Wolf, shifts towards fascism have all begun with the consolidation of power through legal means, and have eventually resulted in an unchecked executive operating autonomously above the rule of law. She examines the rise to power of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, looking for elements that resemble the contemporary American situation. She calls her findings 'historical echoes' and emphasizes that they are not proof of growing fascism in America (6). The reader is left with evidence that is circumstantial at best. There are many questions: What is the actual link between these historical echoes and what's actually happening now? Has someone studied Hitler's methods? Who are the architects of this fascist shift? Presumably it is people in the Bush administration, but what motivates these people? What is the actual point the book is trying to make?

Wolf traces ten steps which have historically taken place during the closing down of open societies during the transition to fascism, and identifies their emergence in contemporary American society. The steps are: (1) 'invoke an internal and external threat,' (2) 'establish secret prisons,' (3) 'develop a paramilitary force,' (4) 'surveille ordinary citizens,' (5) 'infiltrate citizens' groups,' (6) 'arbitrarily detain and release citizens,' (7) 'target key individuals,' (8) 'restrict the press,' (9) 'cast criticism as "espionage" and dissent as "treason",' (10) 'subvert the rule of law.' This ten-step structure lends the book an instructive tone, and the feel of a political pamphlet *à la* Thomas Paine. However, the list format also chops up the argument and makes the work feel less cohesive. It weakens the book's ability to deal with cause and effect, to show the inter-relation between these points, and separate the major from the minor themes.

The idea of invoking an internal and external threat deserved more careful analysis than the book offers. The threat of terrorism is the justification for restricting individual freedoms, as well as the reason that citizens feel compelled to accept it – they are trading freedom for security. Rhetorical appeals to this threat are used to justify most of the other steps she identifies. In other words, it is the

causal factor. Not covered in this section of the book, or anywhere else, is the role xenophobia plays. The Nazis began by using Jews as a scapegoat for economic and social issues, played on the anti-Semitism in German society, and ended up with death camps. A deeper analysis of this point would have provided more support for one of Wolf's minor points: minority segments of society tend to bear the brunt of the effects of fascism and this makes it more readily acceptable to the majority. This really should have been one of the foundational points, not a satellite, of the book; it certainly would have made the supporting research more meaningful.

Many of her other points are still quite compelling. I was deeply disturbed by the research she presented on Blackwater troops, unaccountable to the U.S. Military court system and also available for hire, without the need for Congressional approval, in covert operations. These forces operate outside the rule of law and have been responsible for the murder of civilians both in Iraq and in the U.S. during the Hurricane Katrina rescue efforts. I was also shocked to learn that the U.S. military had deliberately targeted and fired upon journalists in Iraq, killing several reporters. At the same time, the U.S. government has authorized the killings of plenty of innocent people in the past, for example, in Vietnam, or the Kent State shootings in 1970; as a reader, I was not convinced that these points constituted conclusive evidence of a fascist shift.

The validity of Wolf's argument depends on her ability to prove that this point in history is different from all the other points in American history when there have been prior restrictions on individual rights. She mentions the examples of curbing free speech during World War I, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and the communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. Wolf makes the claim that the present is different: first, because the war on terror is a war with no endpoint (as if any war, whether it is the cold war or World War II, has a foreseeable endpoint); second, because of the use of torture (yet one thinks of Alice Paul being force fed in prison, or the CIA's covert use of torture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century). This is where the argument falls apart: Wolf asserts that this point is different in history because freedom has always been restored in the past after a certain period. Blatantly missing is an in-depth historical analysis of the processes through which U.S. society has normalized after these periods. This would have allowed for a sophisticated comparison between those processes and what citizens, politicians, and activists are, or are not, doing now to ensure that freedom and individual rights are restored. She mentions, but does not provide evidence for her view that the checks and balances which have protected freedoms in the past are being eroded. One could argue that freedom and normality have never truly been restored after these periods and that the U.S. is undergoing a much longer decline in its democracy.

Overall the book suffered from lack of cohesion. There was some interesting research, and a few compelling points, but they did not work together as well as they could. Wolf has one valid point: our rights are being curtailed, and we cannot trust that our society will normalize automatically without our involvement. While I agree that the current abridgement of political and civil rights in the U.S. is disturbing, there is nothing in the book that convinces me that this is actually the 'end of America' or that, in ten years' time, Americans will not just forget about this period of their history and move on.

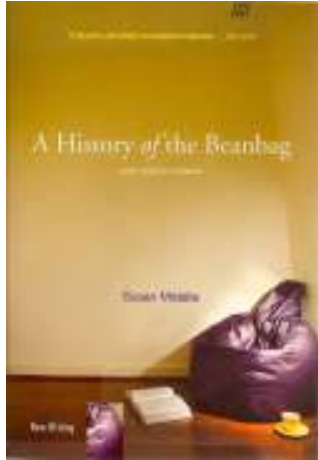
**Laura Brunner has just completed her Master's Qualifying degree at Monash University in Australia with a thesis on sexual harassment. Her upcoming publications include an article in *Feminist Media Studies* entitled 'How Big is Big enough? Steve, Big and phallic masculinity in**

*Sex and the City* '. She is currently applying to several PhD programs in the United States.

### The Domestic Sublime in New Australian Writing

Susan Midalia. *A History of the Beanbag (and other stories)* . UWA Press, 2007; Nicolette Stasko. *The Invention of Everyday Life* . Black Pepper, 2007.

By Frances Cruickshank

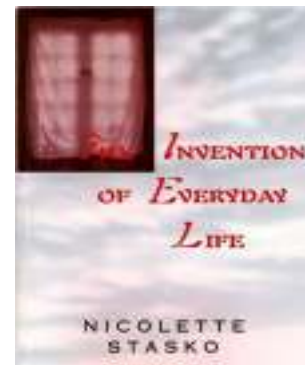


The tragicomedy of the ordinary is celebrated and ironised in these works by two established voices in Australian women's writing. Both are textured and attentive explorations of domestic space and both dispense with narrative in confident gestures. Both test the boundaries of the literary gaze, but only one emerges with a sure and enduring vision.

Susan Midalia's uneven collection of short pieces includes humdrum reflection alongside startling moments of pathos, and bears the marks of a critical periergia uncomfortable with poetry. Some stories, like the eponymous 'History of the Beanbag' or the pseudo-psycho-romance 'Halfway Through the Nightmare' fall decidedly flat, as though the mental camera slipped while trying to catch an image of intimacy or beauty, and caught only the awkward squint or the blurred half-turn. The ironies of 'A Comedy of Manners' or 'Put on Your Dancing Shoes' are overt and mawkish, and often the celebratory sails too close to the sentimental, making her photography of the domestic merely tabloid.

Others, however, deliver powerful and subtle expositions of fragility and breakage. 'Freeze Frame', brilliant and tragic, is a snapshot of lost innocence indifferently glossed. 'Legless' explores the inner world of an intellectually impaired child, and through him exacts a bloody revenge for the transgressive moving of boundary stones. Honest and brave, 'Meteor Man' gives us the exquisite indignity of fatherhood, and 'The Monstrous Arc' spans the perilous divide between love and hatred that silently fissures motherhood. The stories come from and affirm experience: the pleasures, pressures and sharp edges of home and family. Where they succeed, they illuminate the fearful asymmetry of ordinary life, and pause significantly over the defining crossings of human passage.

Their failures of meaning or of style might be conveniently put down to a deliberate pedestrianism, in keeping with the motif of the mundane, if it were not for the sublimely achieved inachievement of Nicolette Stasko's meditation on *The Invention of Everyday Life* . With a similarly photographic, but more profound interest in the ordinary, Stasko's superior artistry proves that a still life can be a masterpiece.



This unusual novel, more like an extended prose poem than a work of fiction, rests a speculative but uncritical light on the good citizens and shining suburbs of Dockside and Half Moon Bay and, like a

beachcomber, presents its findings as a collage of fragments, truthful in their incoherence. Without explicit references, the writing has an allusive quality, and daily rituals are transfigured into momentary ecstasies. The portraiture of vegetables is sacred and lavish as Dutch painting; refuse and flaking weatherboard are realist flourishes. Traditions, like perennials, are both fragile and persistent, surviving dispersion and thriving in unlikely soil. Shorelines and crossroads are unobtrusive symbols, and birds surround the bright bay as metaphors of migration.

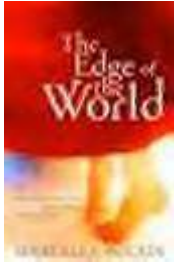
Stasko's lyricism frames domesticity with unself-conscious ease. If the hearth is the newest frontier for edgy writing, her instinct for simple beauty shows us, more clearly than Midalia's ambitious homeliness, why the domestic sublime is as precipitous as any other romance between the writer and the world.

**Frances Cruickshank has a PhD in early modern English poetry and teaches English Literature at the University of Queensland.**

## The Poison of History

Marcella Polain . *The Edge of the World* . Fremantle Press, 2007

By Jasna Novakovic



Some books evolve from an idea, others have to be written because no other way of curing the poisoned psyche seems possible. The difference between them is as great as the distinction between the creative impulse and the instinct for survival. Marcella Polain's *The Edge of the World* belongs to the latter group judging by the intensity of experience detailed in it. Writers have used the human mind as a prism capable of revealing particular states of being that, by extension, illuminate the hidden facets of social reality. Polain goes still further. She draws on experience, memory and the imagination — sometimes all three together, sometimes in sequence — to introduce the reader to the history of genocide that modern Turkey seeks to obliterate by the narrative of progress. The victims are, as usual, those who bear the mark of difference, those perceived as the Other, as 'traitors'.

In *The Edge of the World*, Polain does not ask the question 'why'. Instead, she accuses by the extent of suffering inflicted on the innocent and the torturers' insensitivity to it. The question is not asked because there seems no answer to it. The figure of 1.5 million Armenians driven to death in ways conceived in the perpetrators' imaginations and justified by reason, is vaguely familiar to all those who have studied European history. In Australia it would not be that many. Even without knowledge of history we now know that hostility spawned by cultural, religious or racial difference is an uncivilized feeling. We are taught to respect the humanity of man, woman and child, and yet scapegoats are somehow never scarce. They just change their form and multiply. The label stuck to the victim is hard, often impossible, to shake off, so much so that it becomes a state of being. *The Edge of the World* opens the reader's eyes to the ways in which this state is enforced upon people and then transported through space and time without becoming history. An excruciating memory can be passed on from one generation to another for centuries, the dreaded act can be repeated time and again before someone finally takes it upon herself to write it down. In so doing, Polain publicly admits that many people are not only capable of ghastly cruelty but that they derive pleasure from the act and she wonders whether the ghosts thus engendered can be laid to rest. The profundity of the problem is evoked by tropes: stones, white tigers, birds — things to which people ascribe mythical properties.

Ghosts and stones have a common link in the narrative right from the start. Stones mark the track that leads from the present to the past and back, for the living and the dead to tread willy-nilly together. One of the most memorable places in the book, a mythic city ruled by an ageless wise man, is built entirely of stone. A man who finds temporary refuge in it only to discover dungeons inhabited by mutilated victims is an architect; he once used to design stone houses. His grandson, born in modern-day Australia, believes: 'there is life in stones' (286). Broken headstones serve as a reminder that things never stop. 'One thing just becomes another. Mother, child. Child, earth. Earth, stone' (296). A boy of Serbian descent, bullied by the school children because he has a strange name and cannot speak good English, also has a metaphoric link with stone. Persecuted until he could take no more, he 'clambered up the quarry face and threw himself off, flapping his arms, so the other kids said, because dragons can fly' (284). The comparison with the legendary creature came from his name, Dragan; a smile, his only



defence, first earned him the taunt 'Daggy Smilo', which after many variations became 'Smelly Dragon'. White tigers, on the other hand, inhabit the region of memory that lurks between legend and actuality. Only in the end do they too become mythic creatures. The process of shifting frames is perhaps most obvious in the treatment of birds. Dragons, legend has it, can also fly. But, in Polain's narrative, birds are more often real than not; they are vultures, predators. And yet, when the writer eventually escapes from the full house taking refuge at the roof, and starts observing the world in a bird's eye perspective, this seeming consistency is destabilized too in acknowledgment that both objects and beings can be many things to all people.

The boundaries between fantasy, legend and myth are by no means clear in this book. All three are enmeshed with facts, compelling the reader to share the history of Polain's forbears and witness the perpetual cycle of violence, torture and death they were forced to endure under Turkish rule. The Armenian story bears many similarities with the Jewish one: it confirms that being a good citizen is never enough. In fact, the mark of excellence provokes competition, envy and can, ultimately, lead to sadism. If possessed by the other, excellence only exacerbates the difference that, in volatile times, the frustrated majority perceives as reason enough to resort to extreme forms of violence. The issue of excellence is, however, just one little narrative Polain constructs while exploring the larger question of ethnic minority as historical target. Her angle is unambiguously personal: the first victim is a father figure; the next the family; then the whole village perishes. The poetic tone of this book, its simple and yet beautiful language, both enhances the endless images of cruelty and resists their ugliness. This is Polain's main oppositional strategy, mustered to convince the reader that, without greater resolution, unity and persistence, humanity will never put a stop to such atrocities. For those cursed to remember them, the burden is no smaller than Sisyphus'. One after another the narratives of psychological traumas, and their crippling effects on the emotions, add to the burden; legitimizing the author's claim that, even after she had almost finished the book, the ghost refused to let go. Chapter One, written last in the form of a prologue, shows that nothing can stop them from haunting the psyche. How long their visitations will continue often depends on the sense of justice obtained or the sense of closure.

Jews who have compiled records of those killed by the Nazis or have built them monuments are still asked, every now and then, to prove that their version of history is accurate. They still have no closure. Armenians have hardly started yet. Robert Manne talked about Turkish nationalism and the Armenian genocide in the History Council of Victoria's third lecture this year. Those concerned could not hear him, though. Only the other day a story of an Orthodox priest killed in Turkey hit the news again. This is happening at a time when the country is doing all it can to negotiate membership in the European Union, and what will happen if the people finally get the feeling that they are rejected or, worse, that they are inadequate because they are Muslims and therefore different, and start seeing themselves as victims? (Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* also offers an interesting fictional account of this dynamic). The likelihood of venting indignation on the different in their midst becomes a possibility. The latent force of violence, which threatens to spring out of control whenever the discourse of national security becomes dominant, is what breeds the ghosts. Neither Christians nor Muslims have so far invented an effective method for clearing the historical victims of a guilt fabricated in the collective imagination of the victimizers. In calling attention to the largely-neglected plight of Armenians, Polain's book challenges every notion of human decency. It warns that large stones still block the way on the road towards tolerance, the legitimation of difference and true equality. At present it seems that telling stories, personalized stories about helpless people left to the mercy of abusers of authority, is the only

mechanism that can shift those stones a little. To lift them up, the stories need to be told often, whenever and wherever we can, in books, in the media, in conversation. *The Edge of the World* has the power to convince generations of readers how important it is to care. The Armenian story is the story of prejudice. It is every victim's story.

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