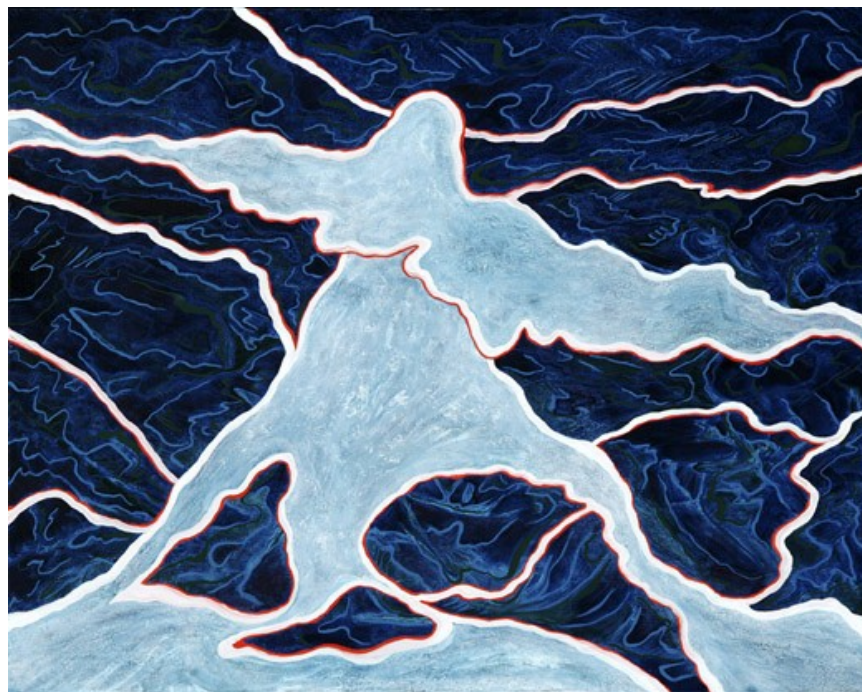


# **Australian Women's Book Review**

## **Volume 20.1 (2008)**



"Assimilation" - Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox

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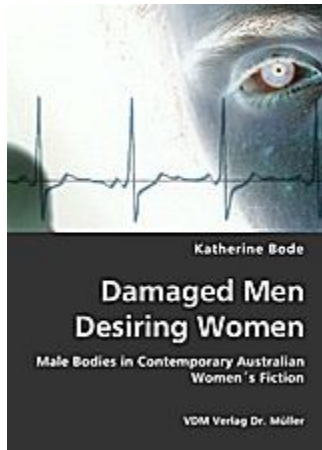
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## Solving a Critical Difficulty

Katherine Bode - *Damaged Men/Desiring Women: Male Bodies in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction*, Verlag: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.

By Alison Bartlett



Katherine Bode's book represents an important departure for feminist criticism and especially for Australian literary criticism. While understanding how images of women work was a revelation for the women's movement and formed the basis of many university 'women in literature' courses, Bode's work addresses the representation of male bodies in literature, thus foregrounding the ways in which men are also embodied. This seems like a critical step in unpicking our epistemological inheritance of equating women with their bodies and men with their intellect. Coming after the establishment of masculinity studies, *Damaged Men/Desiring Women* is firmly interdisciplinary and yet remains uncompromisingly feminist. Masculinity studies have partially hinged on the identification of a cultural 'crisis of masculinity' in the West, which is often attributed to the feminist movement changing

women's expectations of men. Bode has chosen to engage with representations of men's bodies as damaged or suffering, identifying some of the ideological supports that enable the victimisation of (usually) otherwise straight white men. In addition, the texts with which she has chosen to engage are all contemporary ones published in Australia between 1998 and 2002, and written by women. The other feature of this extraordinary collection of texts is that every one includes a woman character who is consumed with looking, vision, visibility or blindness; indeed, these texts indicate a collective fascination with the visual relations between women and men. The texts include *The Blind Eye* by Georgia Blain, *Transplanted* by Sarah Myles, *Last of the Sane Days* by Fiona Capp, *The Architect* by Jillian Watkinson, *Machines for Feelings* by Mireille Juchau, and *Miranda* by Wendy Scarfe. Other texts are evoked, but these six are given unstinting analysis. Bode suggests that they indicate 'an increasing trend in Australian women's fiction, while the lack of academic attention the male characters' bodies in these works have received perhaps implies a critical difficulty with identifying and discussing women representing men' (7). This may well be true.

The chapters are divided not by their primary texts but by thematic preoccupations. The first chapter traverses the last three decades of psychoanalytic visual theory with dexterity, suggesting that the novels take up these theories that are now in general circulation in various forms, and that they contribute to extending the limited but groundbreaking work of Laura Mulvey. The medical gaze, abjection and visualisation of male embodiment are discussed as fictional strategies that disrupt patriarchal viewing relations and which mark the so-called masculinity crisis. Consideration of race and class also imbues the discussion of embodiment and masculinity. The next chapter takes up the idea of the female gaze through a discussion of how women characters objectify and desire male bodies in the absence of any formal viewing relations in patriarchy. This is articulated through a model of gender reversal, but not in any simplistic fashion, and intersecting with medical, sculptural,

aesthetic and aerial/military modes of looking that often reinstall traditional patriarchal relations. Despite their revision and criticism since original publication, Mulvey's theories of the gaze are found to be still important in theorising the modes of looking that are available in these novels.

Chapter 3 marks the beginning of a different strategy by Bode to distinguish potential new models of gender relations that operate outside of (although cognisant with) the visual economy of the chosen texts. Homeopathy and psychic abilities in *The Blind Eye* and *The Architect* are discussed in this chapter as posing alternative modes of embodied, situated knowledge, and yet these are found to be utilised essentially conservatively, reproducing and reinforcing patriarchal relations. Chapter 4 examines the strategy of using idealised heterosexual love as potentially redemptive in *Machines for Feeling*, *Transplanted*, *The Blind Eye*, and *The Last of the Sane Days*. The positive force of this ideal for healing damaged men is written through tropes of reciprocal touch and visual exchange, but is only ever temporary in the novels examined, suggesting its limitation or, by extension, impossibility. Chapter 5 then does a quite extraordinary reading of the novel *Miranda*. Bode suggests that this novel deflects those conventions identified in previous chapters to posit a postmodern feminist construction of male bodies through multiple sensory and artistic modes of looking/textualising, without the complicating relations of heterosexual love. The positioning of Mulvey's spectator theories as modernist proves helpful in this chapter, and brings an alternative perspective to theories of visuality that are prompted by this novel, and to which Bode's argument has been building. The critical constraints of postmodern nihilism are carefully outlined, but the critique of patriarchy and the agency given to feminist subjectivity in the novel is shown to provide a way of countering such apolitical turns.

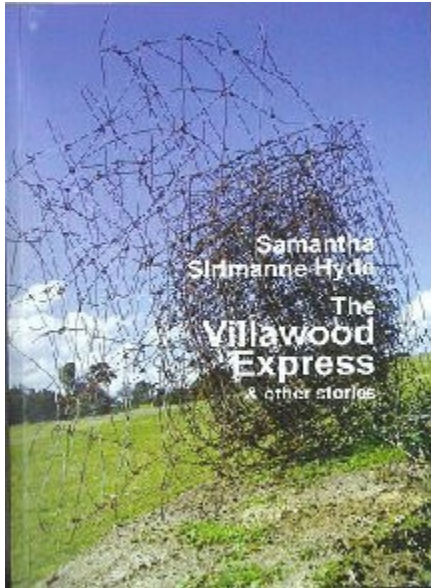
Bode's analysis of the fiction and her theoretical literacy is superbly summarised in the conclusion which, like the entire work, is articulate and thoroughly interesting—and which directly confronts popular social attitudes to masculinity crises. Having just watched the maniac doctor in the television series *House* this work also resonates for me with popular representations of male genius in television and film, as well as the other literary areas mentioned for potential development in the conclusion. This book is beautifully written, theoretically complex and yet not overstated. It is both thoughtful and sophisticated in structure, refusing the simplified one-book = one-chapter format to bring the texts together in dialogic relation to advance and develop Bode's argument around patriarchal viewing relations.

**Alison Bartlett is Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia. Her publications include *Breastwork: Breastfeeding, Bodies in Postmodernity*; *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transformative R/Elations*(with Gina Mercer); *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere*, ed Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee, and *Jamming the Machinery: Contemporary Australian Women's Writing*.**

## Outside the Razor Wire

Samantha Sirimanne Hyde - *The Villawood Express and Other Stories*, ACT: Ginnindera Press, 2007.

By Claudette Taylor



It would be wrong to allow oneself to be misled by the title that *The Villawood Express and other stories* is all about immigrants - detention, dislocation, exploitation, and other similar miseries of the migrant experience. The author, Samantha Sirimanne Hyde, is certainly well qualified to write of such matters, having worked for several years in departments that dealt with migrants at many levels. Yet, it is not that aspect of her work - confronting though it is - that holds one's attention.

Rather, it is her ability to present a range of credible characters usually enmeshed in emotionally or physically perilous situations from which there is no escape. That she does this with a remarkable degree of empathy with her variously tormented people, while retaining the detachment that marks a disciplined writer, is perhaps her most impressive achievement. It is so easy to fall into the trap of advocacy or polemic when dealing with

such emotionally charged subjects, both of which may have their rightful place, but Sirimanne Hyde avoids both.

Her characters - the exploited Thai woman Sucharitha; the tragic 'illegal over-stayer' Tommy Murugesu; sad, Prufrock-like Harold; even Dot and George, a typical middle-aged, loving, Aussie couple, to pick just a few - are individuals, yet they simultaneously represent thousands of others, trapped in situations and lives over which they have little or no control. However, they must all learn to live with whatever life dishes up to them, while around them a mostly indifferent and occasionally malign world goes about its business.

Reading their stories, one is outraged, appalled, disgusted or saddened, but not because the author has gone overboard - she never does. While the fate of her characters may rouse our indignation, the author's style is restrained, understated and ironic, as she observes how some of our fellow human beings live out their sad, unfulfilled lives. Frustrated ambitions, fractured relationships, cruel deceptions, all feature in these stimulating, if sometimes harrowing tales. Yet, they mostly relate ordinary human experiences, not contrived, synthetic scenarios with improbable or melodramatic conclusions.

Many are recognisable characters we might see in the street, without ever knowing what their lives are like. With clear-sighted honesty and compassion, the author tells their stories - reminding us of that 'infinitely small, infinitely suffering thing' - that is our common humanity.

In a literary environment in which there is a lot of self indulgence and pseudo-psychoanalysis, *The*

*Villawood Express* is a refreshing contribution - about some of our fellow human beings - from a writer with an interest in people other than herself.

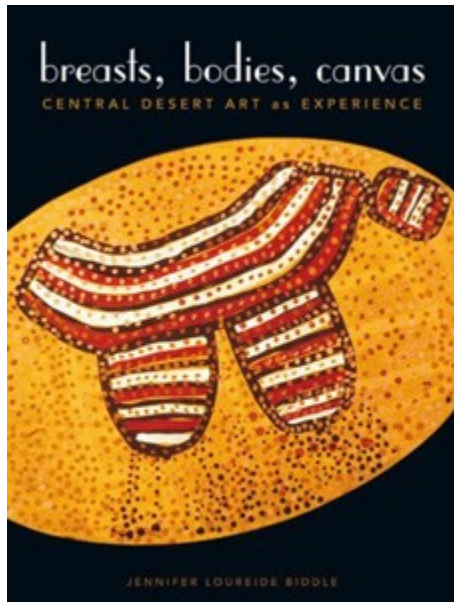
**Claudette Taylor has been a teacher of English Literature, a writer, reviewer, and librarian in both Sri Lanka and Australia. In addition, she continues to maintain a keen interest in the work of Sri Lankan and other writers, especially those who can move outside the literary ghetto of 'the migrant experience' and establish relationships and share experiences with other individuals in the community. She enjoys classical music and gardening, and lives in Canberra.**



## Canvas to Skin to Country

Jennifer Loureide Biddle - *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas, Central Desert Art as Experience*, UNSW Press, Sydney 2007.

By Janine Burke



In this compelling study, Jennifer Biddle presents a new paradigm for examining the art of Central Desert women artists. Rather than describe works in symbolic/historic/aesthetic terms, Biddle argues that in order to ‘encounter Aboriginal culture as a lived reality’, it is crucial to engage emotionally and sensuously with the work. It is ‘this experience of feeling that matters’. Rather than place the work ‘in the landscape’, Biddle locates it on the body. To explore her thesis, Biddle focuses on artists including Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre, Gloria Petyarre, and Dorothy Napangardi, and posits a determinedly ‘feminine take on the Dreaming’.

Biddle, an anthropologist at Macquarie University, has conducted field research with Warlpiri communities for over two decades and has published several essays in the area. This is her first book. Though the usual suspects are acknowledged

in Biddle’s line-up of authorities - Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva - *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas* makes a good fist of combining scholarly rigour with an intimate, emotive writing style.

Over the last thirty years, Central and Western Desert painting has been the central force that has established a global audience and market for Aboriginal art. In 1971 Geoffrey Bardon, an idealistic schoolteacher, arrived at Papunya, 230 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. Papunya was the last of the Aboriginal reserves established by the federal government where tribal peoples, predominantly of the Luritja/Pintupi language groups, were forced to live after removal from their traditional lands.

Bardon supplied the community’s senior men with acrylic paints and canvas boards, specifically asking them to paint their tribal stories for him. Because Aboriginal tribes had been nomadic, most of their visual representation was transitory. Sand paintings and body paintings, with their shared abstract patterns of dots, semicircles and lines, were made for particular ceremonies, and then obliterated. For the first time, Aboriginal people were creating permanent artefacts from traditional designs with Western materials. The power, originality and beauty of these works not only made the spiritual heritage of the Papunya artists accessible to a non-indigenous audience but signalled a revitalisation of Aboriginal culture.

But, as Biddle notes, ‘it is a fact little reflected on that the beginnings of the Central and Western Desert ... movement’ comprised ‘exclusively male painters’. Even Bardon’s recently published *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story* (2005) makes this point in ‘tellingly dismissive



terms'. In addition, there is little documentation of works from this era by women compared to the well-documented history of men's paintings. Redressing the balance has been a worthy and important aspect of feminist research since the 1960s, and it has meant that issues of absence and denial have framed feminist/cultural debates. By drawing attention to aspects of women's work that have been ignored or undervalued, Biddle is not doing anything new. But by suggesting a fresh method of encountering that work, Biddle relocates it in the 'geography of the body' - a context that is both fascinating and sensual.

Men's designs supposedly derive from sand paintings, while women's come directly from the body. In the female-only Dreaming ceremony called *Yawulyu* in Warlpiri and *Awelye* in Anmatyerr/Alyawarr, women's breasts, chest and arms are festooned with intricate patterns. Singing is part of the ritual while, during the act of painting one another, Dreaming songs of the Ancestral figures are intoned by the women before they dance - a quite brief performance compared to the painting and singing. These designs are repeated when the women apply them to canvas. 'The techniques of painting', comments Biddle, 'turn canvas to skin to country.'

Emily Kame Kngwarreye has been appraised as one of the twentieth century's greatest artists. By the time of her death in 1996 she had achieved fame, as Susan McCulloch has observed, of 'almost mythic proportions'. The confidence, volume, and sheer beauty of Kngwarreye's art goes toward justifying such a claim. Born at Soakage Bore near Utopia around 1910, Kngwarreye did not start painting until she was 72 and, after producing batik works with the Utopia Women's Batik group, she began to paint, rapidly completing an oeuvre of over 3000 works.

In 2006, when I visited several communities where Kngwarreye had lived and worked, it gave me the opportunity to appreciate her *modus operandi* and her consistency in an environment that would challenge the most dedicated artist: implacable heat in summer, rain and freezing nights in winter, as well as the raw conditions of camp life. The Central Desert is a stark and beautiful landscape but it is also harsh and unpredictable, a place of challenge and survival. As a visitor, I registered how Kngwarreye and her work inhabited two worlds: that of her community/country, and that of an admiring, hungry, art world.

Biddle writes that in the process of painting, the Ancestral force, the *kuruwarri*, enters the body and 'feeds' the women. 'The rhythmic, repetitious marking and remarking literally press the *kuruwarri* mark in.' Biddle aligns this process to 'the pressing, penetrative, putting on of the repetitious 'dots' in acrylic painting'. Skin is a conduit for Ancestral potency. In the women-only Dreaming ceremony—*Yawulyu* in Warlpiri and *Awelye* in Anmatyerr/Alyawarr—age is valued, seen as potent. 'To be a proper *Yawulyu* performer is to be beyond child-bearing age', and Warlpiri women equate ceremonial leadership with big breasts.

Biddle positions her discourse in semiotics. My reservation is that, in a book titled *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas* and whose photographs document the ceremonial painting of women's breasts, arms and bellies, Biddle does not comment on the sensuality that seems implicit in such ceremonies. In the act of being painted, women are stroked by other women. Surely that produces pleasure? How is that pleasure represented? Is it an erotics of comfort, of bonding, of ritual? Interestingly, the Warlpiri have no term for 'naked' or 'bare breast'. But what are the words for 'pleasure' and 'touch'? Biddle often references Freud but ignores his fundamental proposition: that we are sexually determined beings,

enacting powerful, instinctual drives.

In the media, Aboriginal sexuality is habitually represented, if at all, in negative ways. In 2007, the intervention by the Howard government in some remote communities was based on the former prime minister's reaction to the report *Little Children Are Sacred*, which catalogued child sexual abuse. What are the stories of pleasure and intimacy? Of the sensual landscapes of Aboriginal women? Can we find also these stories inscribed on their bodies and in their paintings?

**Janine Burke is Monash Fellow, School of Social and Political Inquiry, Monash University. Her most recent book is *The Gods of Freud: Sigmund Freud's Art Collection*.**

## Daughter of the song

Yvette Holt - *Anonymous Premonition*, St Lucia: The University of Queensland Press, 2008.

By Jena Woodhouse

*Anonymous premonition*, Yvette Holt's debut poetry collection, is based on the manuscript that garnered her the David Unaipon Award for 2005. The poems reflect and articulate this poet's many concerns, some of which are listed in 'Under Sixty Seconds', the author note in poetic form which appears on the book's first page:

*Human Rights / Child Protection / Domestic Violence / Immigration Laws / Social Justice.*

In the same context, the poet characterises herself as:

*Poet / Writer / Performer / Lover / Semi-butch / Semi-femme / Caffeine-free / Peppermint / & Chamomile / Sipping feminist, and also: Generous / Giving / Thrifty / Frugal / Bargain hunting / Lay-by wearing / Credit card declining / Broke arse undergraduate.* (It must be noted that she is now a graduate, and it would take much longer than sixty seconds to document her numerous achievements.)

The voices of Yvette Holt's poems resonate with cries and whispers, lamentation and laughter, celebration and story, as they speak of the life experiences of many, mostly anonymous women (though not only women), whose journeys and pathways have intersected with the poet's, thereby becoming part of her extended personal narrative. Yvette Holt has said that she had a premonition of being entrusted with such a role and such a mandate, hence the present title.

The poems take their reader on an empowering transit of the collective and individual experience/s which inspired them and, in the process, acknowledge what living, loving, learning and survival may entail:

*I am shaped by the women in my life  
Closing all the windows and cupboards  
Crossing the corners of my speechless bedroom  
They follow me as if I have the answers  
I don't have any answers  
Only too many questions  
I mourn for the children  
Who were taken away  
I weep for the grandmothers who will never know*

*(Woman)*

Other painful but essential issues are broached, such as untimely death in the Indigenous community ('Close the Gap'); the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy in Australia

(‘Against the Odds’); violence against women and children who, while not named, are not necessarily Indigenous nor socially disadvantaged (‘The Afterbirth of Rape’; ‘The Old School Days’). Yet, when the matter at issue pertains directly to herself, the poet sometimes counters the challenge with humour or irony.

*When I was 21 years of age  
I broke seven mirrors  
In seven days  
They tell me  
It’s not looking good*

*21 plus 49  
Equals 70  
Will I live to see that age?  
Statistically speaking  
I will cheat superstition  
By death  
What a way to beat the odds*

*(Against the Odds)*

The tone becomes terser in poems such as ‘Primary Education’:

...  
*On my very first day at work I was asked ‘what nationality are you’, when I told them I was Aboriginal they replied, ‘But you look so clean’.*

*Last year, hailing a taxi in George Street, Sydney, the driver asks, ‘Where are you from?’ I ask the driver to take a wild guess, after surveying the paying customer sitting in the back seat, he triggers the meter then casually replies, ‘You sure don’t sound koori because you speak English very well’.*

*There are some days when ‘others’ may need to persevere with my silence... because there are some days when I may no longer have the inclination nor the fucking head space to educate your reply.*

*(Primary Education)*

In the seven sections of this collection, the threads of humour; social, cultural and interpersonal politics; Indigenous women’s tradition; intimacy and family relationships, are interwoven with confidence and jouissance in the deployment of language, and a warmth and integrity that emanates from the creator, whose indomitable spirit pervades the work. While the groupings of poems are an indication of a common focus, there is also a flow of discourse going on across these minimal borders.

The first section, titled *4077*, introduces Inala, the poet's home suburb, by its postcode, and deals with a selection of family and childhood themes. Part II, *Inamorata*, focuses on women's business in various senses and contexts, while III, *Seasonal Change*, ranges through private and public terrain, touching the raw nerves of unresolved injustices ('Close the Gap') as well as taking a light-hearted look at more domestic scenes ('Serving It Up'), and registering some wittily incisive observations about cultural politics at a Sydney Writers' Festival:

*Rock climbing over mountains of literature*  
*Sidestepping landmines of woollen shawls*  
*and middle-class teacups*  
*Chapters of history reclaiming the wind*  
*Political incorrectness curving the corners of acceptability*  
*Lipstick prints pouting over recycled styrofoam cups*  
*Leaving behind a DNA of understanding and sympathetic*  
*gestures*  
*I question their intimacy of blackfellas' knowledge.*

*(A Writer's Chopping Block)*

The poems of part IV, *Resilience*, speak of vulnerability and the abused, but do so with restraint and compassion. Here, many of the anonymous premonitions are given form and voice. In telling of the unspeakable experiences other women have confided, the poet is able to empathise with her subjects to such a degree that these poems have been misread as autobiographical in a literal sense.

Part VI, *Bon Voyage*, captures the energy, excitement, and appetite for adventure and romance that the prospect of travel evokes, while part VI, *Kevin*, contains just two poems for and about Yvette's brother, to whom *anonymous premonition* is dedicated. Part VII, *My River City*, embraces place in a spirit of homecoming, but notes also that some are without a place to call home, such as the homeless hounded from under the bridge in Hope Street, their precarious shelter.

Each of the seven sections of *anonymous premonition* has the potential to become a collection in its own right, and this is one of the many qualities that pleases me about these poems – for all their abundance, their freshness is such that the reader's appetite is whetted but not sated.

Underlying the poems is a sense of groundedness, of strength and stability, which the poet has attributed in large part to having been nurtured by a caring family and community. The opening poem in the first section pays tribute to the power of family commitment:

*It was the late 1960s*  
*Outside Hicksville county*  
*In western Queensland*  
*A clash of two cultures*  
*The original sin*  
...  
*Workmates would remind him*  
*And town folks would ignore her*  
*They were always going to make it*  
*But at the time*

*They just didn't know how*

...

*They moved like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers*

*So eloquent on their feet*

*From a small country town to the bright city lights*

*Together they shifted a universe*

*(Ballroom Romancing)*

It seems to me that the eloquence, the passion and the obduracy glimpsed in 'Ballroom Romancing' surface in the poems of this romantic but embattled couple's daughter, who offers an image of herself on the 423 bus to Marrickville as 'the lady standing up in the back scratching her mind in public', and reminds us:

*Some words are like a precious ache*

*They kneel for no one*

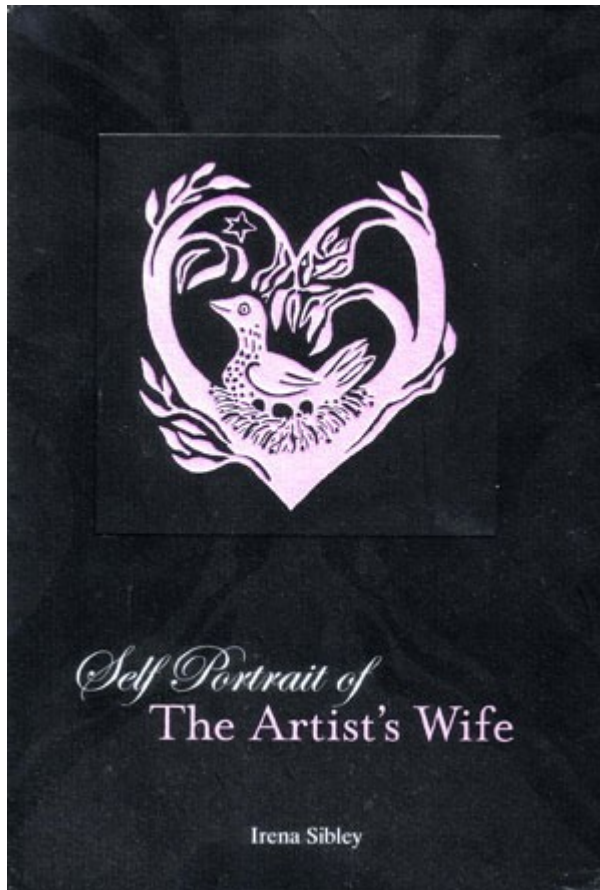
*(Words...)*

**Jena Woodhouse's publications include poetry collections – *Eros in Landscape* and *Passenger on a Ferry* – and the children's novella, *Metis, the Octopus and the Olive Tree*. Her work, which has appeared in publications and anthologies in Australia and abroad, has received several awards. She is working on a PhD in Creative Writing.**

## Finding 'Me'

Irena Sibley - *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, Staffordshire, England : Central Park, Vic, Lytlewode Press, c2007.

By Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox



Irena Sibley's autobiography *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife* published in 2007 recounts her first thirty-six years of life, from her birth in Lithuania in 1944 until 1980. An 'Epilogue 2004' written by Irena reassures the reader that the intervening years have been full and that she has become all the things she said she would. The well-known Australian artist, Andrew Sibley, and Irena have been a couple since 1964, marrying in 1968. Irena's autobiography invites the reader to enter the 'seminal' part of her life. Upon finishing the book the reader is sure that an autobiography recounting the years from 1980 onwards could not and would not be titled *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, because whilst she is still Andrew Sibley's wife, she is also known as a multi-talented artist in her own right.

However, Irena has deliberately called herself 'the artist's wife' indicating an early acceptance of her husband's projected persona. Women of her generation were often determined by their husband's occupation: the doctor's wife, the lawyer's wife, the butcher's wife. However, at some point many of these women become known

as more than a projected persona. Indeed, Googling Irena Sibley's name in 2008 provides various descriptors of this very talented woman, including artist, writer, children's book writer, teacher, book illustrator, printmaker. Yes, she is also mentioned as being married to Andrew Sibley.

Irena writes about her past in the constant present. The reader is taken back in time and loses sense of it. Her economic use of adjectives plus her matter-of-fact short sentences add to the sense of 'now'. There is no sentimentality. Irena and her family are far too capable for this kind of indulgence. Irena's stories weave a fascinating tale of her family's forced departure from their farming lands in Lithuania during the end stages of World War Two. They wandered Europe for five years before leaving their last 'home', a transit camp in Naples, for the unknown land of Australia. Their arrival in this brown land is an excruciating experience for the reader, who feels the pain of these proud, intelligent, and educated people trying to make a new life in parochial 1950s Australia.



Despite the hardships, Irena's family members do not lose their love for creating beauty and fun. Food is a consistent theme with vivid descriptions of exotic Lithuanian delights and delicacies created by her grandmother, mother, and then later by Irena. Parties and celebrations regularly punctuate Irena's childhood and adulthood. The reader feels like an invited guest enjoying the company, food, and wine. Indeed, we meet many of Irena's family and friends face-to-face in the photographs interspersed throughout the book.

Irena has a feminine heritage of strong-willed and talented women. Her mother and grandmother both fulfilled traditional roles at home. They also worked during the day and/or night to help financially support the family. A strong sense of propriety and a desire for a better life for themselves and Irena and her brother propel these women. Yet, the reader cannot ignore the fact that if the world had not been engulfed by war the family would never have left Lithuania, where they were landowners and professionals. Characteristically, Irena does not engage in lamenting but she certainly lets the reader know that her parents were educated and talented. Indeed, in contrast to most Australians, her accountant-trained father spoke six or seven languages, yet was given labouring jobs when he arrived here. How often do Australians and various government authorities make the mistake of assuming that English is merely a second language for new arrivals to our shores?

Throughout *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife* a pantheon of Australia's most significant artists including Clifton Pugh, John Coburn, John Firth-Smith, Ian Fairweather, Colin Lancel, and others are mentioned as friends, fellow students, teachers, and acquaintances. All male artists and all successful. Male artists obviously had their 'tribe' in which they could be nurtured, challenged, and stroked. Mirka Mora is the only well-known female artist mentioned. Irena's female friends at art school are not and do not become familiar names - their talents lost to the projection of husbands' occupations maybe? Where would a female artist of this era find her 'tribe'? How many female would-be artists worked for wages in full- or part-time employment and/or at home with children, leaving little time for creative space? Not long after graduation, Irena starting teaching art in secondary schools and in 1968 was pregnant with the Sibleys' first son. She succinctly puts her heart on her sleeve in the telling chapter 'Every Artist Needs a Wife, 1968' when she says, 'There is no empty space either around me or in me. Besides, it is too hard painting pictures. It is easier to bake cakes. So I do.'

An event nearly ten years later forces Irena to find an 'empty space' for herself. As with many of the changes in a person's life, the catalyst for Irena's recalibration was not pleasant. But in hindsight it can be seen as an opportunity. She writes about her husband's affair sparely and in doing so maintains honour for both of them. The reader senses that whilst Irena may prefer not to write about this event, she knows it marks a turning point in the expression of who she is and who she wants to be. The effect of an affair on a marriage is upsetting. But there are choices. One is to separate, another is to forgive and self-reflect. Irena chose the latter and went to New York to think on her own for seven weeks, leaving her husband with their two young sons. It also gave him time to reflect.

On her return from New York Irena declared to her husband, 'I have changed, reinvented myself. The new me is a writer, an author, an illustrator, a creator of childrens' books.' Her husband's reply was, 'Ah, about time!' However, the word 'reinvent' does not quite ring true. By the time the reader has traveled with Irena from childhood to this point, it is clear she has always been all of these things. Rather than being destroyed and needing reinvention, they have been veiled by the wife, mother, and

provider roles so easily donned by women. Irena at the age of 35 actually un-veils to re-discover herself. Sometimes it takes a shock to be diverted onto the road of re-discovery. How many women resonate with this? Good on you Irena!

Her husband's response 'Ah, about time!' suggests he also knew she was always everything she declared she was now going to be. After all, when they met in 1963 Irena was in her fourth and final year at art school. There are signs that Andrew expected Irena to be a practising artist, but expectation on its own does not sustain growth. Andrew, nearly eleven years older than Irena, was already a respected artist experiencing the challenges that critical and uneven financial success brings. The reader picks up that his success, coupled with his understandable need for support, intimidated the younger Irena enough for her to avoid her own painting career. Certainly her secondary school art students benefited from Irena's re-directed energies. She was also fulfilling a practical necessity because her teaching and, occasionally, her culinary talents provided a regular income for many years.

Beautiful black and white vignettes reproduced from scraper board sketches by Irena are dotted throughout the *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife*. A glorious image of a woman, whose hair cascades with an array of rich foliage, flowers, fruit and mythic-like creatures, is reproduced on the inside of the front and back covers. Like her writing, Irena's art is strong and succinct. There are no unnecessary markings, yet Irena has an ability to provide the kind of detail which gives emotional depth, satisfying the viewer and reader alike. She also has a talent for humour, both in her art and writing. Many of the delightful vignettes reflect the retelling of funny or quirky stories, the type of stories which foretell her later success as a writer.

In the front pages of *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife* Irena has placed a reproduction of a self portrait which she drew at the age of nine-and-a-half. After reading her autobiography the reader can look at this exquisite pencil drawing knowingly. Irena, the child, gazes directly and confidently at the viewer. There is no guile. Dressed in a perfect school uniform, she displays her individuality with an elaborate hairdo of plaits and ribbons. The drawing's background is treated similarly to the way the adult Irena approaches image making. Energy is apparent.

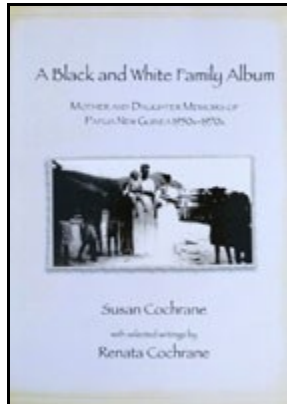
Irena has drawn a narrow frame around her childhood self-portrait. This frame is decorated with hearts, crosses and wavy lines. It is also 'decorated' with the word 'Me' written five times as if to make sure there will be no mistaken identity. Indeed, nine-year-old Irena looks as if she knows exactly who she is. She is 'Me', full of potential. The first thirty-six years of Irena's journey into this potential is *Self Portrait of the Artist's Wife*. Maybe Irena will write about her life since 1980. If so, what would the title be?

**Visual artist Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox has an extensive exhibition history in South East Queensland and more recently has exhibited overseas in London, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Seoul, and New York. She completed a BA with a double major in Art History from The University of Queensland in 1980 and after graduation worked at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. However, marriage took her to Goondiwindi where she spent eighteen years before moving to Brisbane in 2000. Whilst living in Goondiwindi, Kathryn exhibited in Brisbane and generally in South East Queensland. She also worked as a freelance curator in various regional art galleries. Kathryn has three daughters.**

## Several Life Histories

Susan Cochrane (with selected writings by Renata Cochrane) - *A Black and White Family Album: Mother and Daughter Memoirs of Papua New Guinea 1950s-1970s*, Eumundi, Qld: Pacificlink, 2007.

By Kerry Heckenberg



This book is a tribute by a loving daughter to her mother. It is a life history, or rather, several life histories: those of the author, Susan Cochrane, and of her parents, interwoven with the story of the Territory of Papua New Guinea as it moved towards becoming an independent country. Indeed, the influence of events in the wider world on personal trajectories is a constant theme, along with the role of chance. The parents, Percy and Renata, meet by chance in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe, and their eighteen year residence in Papua New Guinea was facilitated by a chance encounter with a newspaper advertisement. But although the reader learns about Percy and his achievements and, as the sub-title suggests, the life of the author is another significant strand in the narrative, it is the mother who is the principal subject of the book. While many of the events are recounted

from the author's point of view, the inclusion of extracts of some of the mother's writing, mainly reflections on her life and experiences in Papua New Guinea (some previously published, principally as newspaper articles, other pieces previously unpublished), maintains this focus, giving more insight into Renata's personality and ideas and adding to the depth of the narrative.

Percy Cochrane (1907-80) worked in radio as an educator and administrator, first in South Australia and then, after service in the Royal Australian Air Force between 1941 and 1946, in the Territory of Papua New Guinea when it was administered by Australia. First appointed as Senior Broadcasts Officer there in 1949, Percy became the Chief of the Broadcasts Division and, in that capacity, established regional broadcast units and collected a significant archive of local music recordings. Renata Campbell-Rogers (1919-83) was the daughter of a British army officer and a French-Italian aristocrat, who trained as a teacher before her war service in the WAAF (1939-46). The meeting with Percy took place in France, on a trip to the Côte d'Azur as both took a break from post-war duties. The events of this journey are recounted as a 'favourite bedtime story' (1) for their daughter in a delightful first chapter. The couple eventually married in Australia in 1947 after Percy's failed first marriage ended in annulment (Renata had insisted on a Catholic ceremony since she was devoutly religious, unlike the agnostic Percy).

Susan Cochrane commenced her sojourn in New Guinea as a young baby, arriving in Port Moresby with her mother and older sister, Penny, towards the end of 1949. Renata's experiences in establishing a home for her young family and learning about local customs, both Indigenous and among other expatriate families, are an effective way of introducing the reader to the local environment, combining the personal, the physical, the socio-cultural and the political. While the mother sought an outlet for her energies and intelligence in writing educational booklets and articles for the local newspaper, Susan benefited from her upbringing by gaining knowledge and insight into New Guinea culture, an invaluable asset in her present occupation as a noted Pacific art historian.

Renata soon realised that she needed to travel around the region in order to get to know it firsthand and gain material for her writing, and did so accompanied by her young children - initially the two girls and then a baby brother, Pierre, who was born in New Guinea. Missions often provided a welcoming abode for the family on their travels.

While the early chapters are organised around the linear narrative of the meeting and marriage of Renata and Percy followed by the events of their move to the Territory of Papua and New Guinea and early life there, the middle of the book is marked by a change of pace. First, the story of Ian, the son of Percy's first marriage, is recounted. His adventures as a plantation manager in New Guinea, including a liaison with a local woman that resulted in the birth of a son, provide additional insight into the local culture. Issues of race and religion conspired to separate the couple, but the son, Nick, became close to the Cochrane family when he attended boarding school near Port Moresby. Experiences on recording journeys with both parents form the focus of another of the central chapters, including descriptions of ceremonies and indigenous customs, followed by a discussion of the role of missions. The following chapters deal with the more settled pattern of life in Port Moresby that developed after the attainment of a 'permanent home base' (107) and the maturing of the children. Renata formed an ambivalent attitude to Papua; in her own words, 'Papua could fascinate or repel - or both. That was the impact Papua had on me, and on many of the people who tried to see her as she really was' (106).

In 1959, Renata began writing a newspaper column entitled 'What do you think?', utilising it as a vehicle for a wide variety of issues and topics, canvassed in one of the later chapters in the book. The following chapter looks at Percy, his personality and his radio work. Collecting recordings of local music that could be used to meaningfully fill local air-time was an important facet of his achievement in developing 'radio broadcasting as an essential means of communication' (138) in Papua New Guinea. The role of the Cochranes in encouraging and nurturing local and visiting writers is also explored alongside Renata's increasingly diverse output.

The final stages of the narrative deal with the gradual development of independent government in Papua New Guinea, and the lives of the Cochranes in Sydney after Percy's retirement in 1968. In the 1970s Renata wrote several film scripts for documentary films dealing with Papua New Guinea, but the early 1980s saw the death of both parents. In the final chapter of the book, 'Inheritance', the author discusses the physical legacy of her parents, a collection of 'manuscripts, documents and photographs ... accumulated over nearly twenty years in Papua New Guinea, from 1949 to 1968' (179). Renata and Susan sorted the material, now mostly housed in the Wollongong University Archives. The present book is a digest of this material; as the author writes, 'my mother's memoirs, in memory of her' (183).

In part, the book also seeks to atone for Renata's disappointment that 'none of her book manuscripts were published' (180). Developed from research done for a thesis submitted for a Masters degree, the present book is self-published, something made more possible today with current technological developments in word processing and printing. Although generally well written and researched, the book would have benefited from some editing: there are occasional typos and lapses in continuity. Illustrations, either taken from family photographs or from images included in the Wollongong University Cochrane Papua New Guinea Collection, add to the narrative, although listing of captions at the front of the book sometimes means that the reader has to juggle pages in order to identify a

picture. But these are minor reservations. Overall, the author has fulfilled very well her ambition to memorialise her mother and her life's work. Furthermore, because these personal reminiscences and experiences are firmly set in their social, cultural and historical context, the reader can gain an enhanced appreciation of an important phase in the development of Papua New Guinea.

**Kerry Heckenberg is an Honorary Research Advisor in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at The University of Queensland. Her doctoral dissertation is entitled 'The Art and Science of Exploration: a study of genre, vision and visual representation in nineteenth century journals and reports of Australian inland exploration' (2002). Her post-doctoral work extends this research, examining the use of illustrations in travel and natural history publications concerned with Australia throughout the colonial period.**

## **Doing It Our Way: Before, During and After Death, Lesbian Feminist Style**

Anah Holland-Moore et al - *Willing Up and Keeling Over: A Lesbian Handbook on Death Rights and Rituals*, The Long Breast Press Collective, Brunswick, Victoria: Long Breast Press Inc, 2007.

By Prue Hyman

The photograph of the eight smiling white lesbians-of-a-certain-age on the cover of this book was appropriately taken at Fryestown Cemetery. Constituting the Long Breast Press Collective, this group shows that collective writing and action, together with lesbian culture and wit, are well and truly alive in this age of queer soup, where critiques of the supposedly humourless, conformist lesbian feminist organising of earlier decades abound. From the light touch of some of the poignant poetry, written in the face of grief and loss, to the title, humour is an integral and essential ingredient of a book which deals with some of the toughest times we must all face, the deaths of our dear ones and ourselves -without it, the book might have been almost unreadable and the tears shed on its pages even greater. Those familiar with Chris Williamson's music would recognise the allusion in the book title - she is appropriately thanked for the inspiration from her wonderful song, *Waterfall*. Many of us have joined in the chorus starting 'Filling up, Spilling Over' at lesbian concerts, and this play on words, reminding us all to ensure that our wills are written and up to date, is a great touch.

This book covers a huge range of topics around the processes of last illnesses, dying, and the aftermath. Individual sections and poems have named authors, but the collective writing and publishing process is obvious and admirable. There are some overlapping elements to the stories, which were not a negative to this reviewer, but the 'times of laughter', 'emotional upheaval', 'deep work' and 'bravery' (214) needed to produce the book are clear. Nor is it afraid to tackle difficult issues such as suicide. It contains much excellent advice and presents alternatives for women facing death and those closest to them, partners and lesbian community friends most affected before and after the event. It successfully walks a tightrope of combining a great deal of important factual information on the practicalities involved, with political analysis and awareness of the extra problems and precautions needed in a lesbophobic world, and personal experience of the deaths of close 'family', with emotional stories and poetry from each of the collective members. It is the book that Collective members wished they had had when they lost their own lesbian loved ones and first started thinking about their own funerals.

Death and dying is a topic that many of us avoid thinking about when young or it may simply pass us by until we are forced to confront it. However, the group persuasively argue that it is never too early to think about it, with one of the aims of the book 'to try and demystify death and to make it more of a familiar everyday part of our lives' (4). This will help prepare us to support the dying and those closest to them and to plan our own last days appropriately, with planning helping to reduce the stress of what can otherwise be too overwhelming. With the first generation of out and activist lesbian communities having reached the age where death is confronted frequently, the book is timely.

Successive chapters deal more or less chronologically with the sequence of events related to death, starting from decisions concerning wills, power of attorney, and medical treatment. For many of us with terminal diseases, choices may be possible between hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, and

staying at home, with health services and caring from friends - and even, of course, 'the Old Dykes Home that many of us have been talking about for years' (85). Throughout, the book brings out the extra issues for lesbians, still confronted by negative societal attitudes and a lack of full legal protection. Hence, for example, there are helpful suggestions on how to ensure next of kin and visiting rights, as well as ongoing parenting for the non-biological co-mother of a child whose lesbian birthmother has died. Without careful preparation, blood relatives may attempt to step in and abrogate the rights of partners and lesbian families at these and other stages. Hence, emphasis is placed on many aspects of the legal system, albeit with the necessary disclaimers with respect to legal advice - make sure you get your own. And necessarily, the numerous useful references to the legal framework, helpful resources, and websites are for Victoria, where the collective is based, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in Australia; on some issues, both federal and state level governments are involved. In many areas, as the authors state, the legal situation is changing, hopefully for the better for lesbians on issues such as guardianship and adoption - particularly if the 2007 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Report on Same Sex: Same Entitlements is implemented. The changing scene and the Victoria specificity somewhat reduces the usefulness of the advice on details, but its treatment of the whole topic has general applicability. And indeed it could encourage lesbians elsewhere, such as New Zealand, where I am based, to think of writing a similar book suitable for the local framework. Also, while it is rightly aimed at lesbians, much of the material would be eye-opening and of benefit to everyone.

Moving on to the practicalities of how you might want your body to be treated after death, sections deal with coffin design, burial or cremation, including the option of a shroud burial, whether to be embalmed, and whether to use a funeral home or have your friends do as much as possible themselves. One splendid suggestion is the development of a Lesoleum, 'a memorial space/place with friends so we can hang about together at the end', taking over areas of country cemeteries or finding ways of developing our own. In line with one major emphasis of the book is that we lesbians (the book capitalises this throughout - I have chosen not to do so in this review) constitute a culture, 'as distinct from a minority group, a lifestyle or oppressed group' (194). Accordingly, there is throughout the book encouragement for further developing our own ways to do things, and those who wish to do so taking control of all stages of death and dying while adhering to legal requirements. While the collective has no Aboriginal members, appropriate acknowledgement is given to the fact that bodies and ashes of lesbians lie on their lands, while a short section (pp 8-10) was written in communication with a Yorta Yorta Dja Dja Wurrung woman and covers issues for indigenous lesbians and of respect for their wishes.

It is becoming common in New Zealand, stemming largely from Maori culture, to have the body of one's loved one at home in an open coffin for one or more days before the funeral. Many lesbians have embraced this practice, which is well covered here, along with the possibility of laying out the body ourselves—washing and dressing her in her chosen clothes, a last caring task which can be highly meaningful. This can be done whether or not a funeral home is being used, as has long been Jewish practise—among the resources listed is Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish group responsible. I have recently helped do this for my dear friend and ex partner Bronwen Dean for whom I was also executor: her own planning with my assistance, together with her blood and lesbian families, made this book very close to home. The issues around planning one's own funeral with partner and friends and incorporating meaningful ritual, music, and mourning for those left behind will probably be more familiar to many readers than the more technical sections, but are still highly worthwhile. The



support needed for the main carers is rightly emphasised, together with the fact that mourning is not a rapid process. References here include international literature, including Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief and other U.S. general and lesbian-specific material on cancer, death and dying, mediation, ritual and spirituality, and coping with grief.

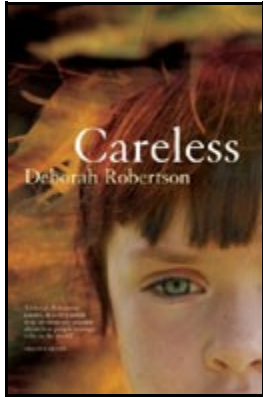
Anah Holland-Moore, Ardy Tibby, Barbary Clarke, Cathy Wheel, Claudia Huber, Jean Taylor, Lorraine le Plastrier, and Rosalinda Rayne are to be congratulated on producing, with no financial support from outside the lesbian community, a valuable resource book on such an important area. They clearly drew on a great range of skills and experience, with each of them writing poetry and making other contributions. There are a number of illustrations/photographs, ranging from casket construction and coffin decoration to Anah's beautiful cloak, which will become her shroud when she dies of cancer, and which is decorated with colourful patches made by her friends. The cover photograph is of Lorraine's sculpture 'She Who Sails Into the Wind'. It is well worth sailing into charted and uncharted waters with this collective, who are part of ensuring that lesbian culture long continues.

**Prue Hyman is Adjunct Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Professionally a feminist economist as well as a long time lesbian feminist activist, she currently coordinates a weekly lesbian community radio show, which can be downloaded from [here](#).**

## The (Un)recovered

Deborah Robertson - *Careless*, Picador 2006.

By Rachel Slater



Initially *Careless* strikes the reader as a collection of short stories: there are four protagonists - Pearl, an eight-year-old responsible for the happiness of her mother and the care of her beloved younger brother; Anna, who has lost an adult daughter to murder and was never able to recover her body; Sonia, a Danish immigrant mourning the loss of her furniture-making husband; and Adam, a controversial, egotistical artist on the cusp of fame. Their stories share a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness but appear to have little relation to each other; familiar territory for Deborah Robertson whose first book, *Proudflesh*, won the Steele Rudd Award for the best Australian short story collection in 1998. Yet as their stories unfold and their lives become entwined, brought together and then driven forward by a tragic event which causes them all to examine what is lost and what can be recovered, it becomes clear that Robertson is just as adroit in the unfamiliar landscape of the novel.

Lost children people *Careless*: in lived experience; in the news; in fairy tales and myths; reminding the reader and the characters of the many lost children throughout history and the immeasurable emptiness they leave behind. Sonia often ponders the Irish fable of *The Children of Lir* which tells of three abandoned children who are turned into swans for nine hundred years, left to wander in sorrow until they have outlived all who knew them, finding human form for one last brief moment before dying (39-42). Sonia realises: 'Stories about children did not always have a happy end. And the years might pass and the world might move on, but the loss would never be recovered' (42).

Death and grief are central to this novel, and in particular the concept of public versus private grief and the questions around how art can deal with a subject of such magnitude. A great deal of attention is given to the idea of public memorials and the commemoration of an individual or individuals. With so much of life lived in the full glare of the public eye - reality shows abound and personal privacy has become a rare and precious thing in a post-September 11 world - it is perhaps unsurprising that death and the ways in which grief appears should become less of a personal and more of a community experience, as evidenced by the vast public demonstration of feeling at the death, funeral and subsequent memorial of Diana, Princess of Wales. Indeed it is a city council meeting to discuss plans for a memorial for lost children that first brings the main protagonists together, and the novel is punctuated by the symbols of personal loss and public grief: there is a posthumous exhibition in honour of a furniture designer; flowers are left at the scenes of road traffic accidents; a waterwheel cast in bronze turns continually to represent the never-ending nature of love; and a drug addict's death by overdose in a run-down apartment is turned into art so that we all might feel the beauty in loss. Yet despite this coming together in grief, the characters live in a world depicted as lacking in empathy and filled with broken ties, eschewed responsibilities and careless love. It seems only fitting that Robertson writes with restraint; the novel has a sense of requiring in the reader, as the artist Adam develops in himself, the 'cultivat[ion] [of] a small, cold place in his heart in order to

experience something that interested him’.

But there is a suggestion of hope too. Pearl’s passion for Frank Lloyd Wright’s iconic house ‘Fallingwater’ leads her to the discovery that the architect also suffered great loss when a male servant set fire to the living quarters of Wright’s home ‘Taliesin’ and murdered seven people with an axe (including Wright’s partner Mamah and her two children) while the fire burned. Pearl is astounded that the beautiful ‘Fallingwater’ was created sometime *after* this atrocity and she comes to realise that great beauty and happiness is possible after great loss: it is at this point in the story that the reader senses that recovery may be possible for Pearl. Yet Robertson avoids any suggestion of complete reclamation - of the self, or of things and loved ones lost - closing the novel with an epilogue called ‘The Children’s Memorial’ where three new characters, a mother and daughter, accompanied by a distressed female friend, pass by the site of the soon-to-be constructed memorial.

“It just looks like a huge, big seesaw,” says Ava.

They read that the mechanism will slowly oscillate the bronze plank upon its copper pivot through the minutes of every hour, through every hour of every day ...

“It looks like one of those memorials you can take your own grief to,” says Serena.

The women fall silent. Ava looks at them.

“But what if you don’t have any grief?” she says ...

There are questions her daughter asks for which there are really no answers. (293)

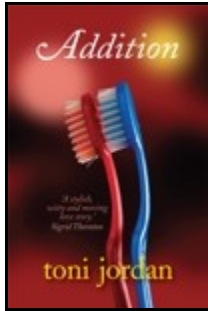
They have not personally experienced the griefs which inhabit the novel but they respond to the memorial with an ambiguity which might be a general response in the shadow of such monuments. *Careless* offers an intimate yet shared portrayal of grief in all its complexities and reminds us that our promises of care can never really be kept.

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

## Fairytale Fix

Toni Jordan - *Addition*, Victoria: The Text Publishing Company, 2008.

By Poppy Gee



Madness in women has long been popular with writers interested in exploring or explaining female suppression, trauma or distress. In Toni Jordan's debut novel *Addition*, an unnamed clinically diagnosed obsession with counting drives the narrative. This counting addiction prevents the protagonist from satisfying cultural expectations of feminine behavior, and enables the writer to offer a critique of an over-medicalised society and pressures to be like everyone else.

Grace Vandenburg is a former schoolteacher living alone on sickness benefits in a drab brick six-pack flat in Melbourne. She is extremely clever, but something is not right. As one colleague describes her, 'she might look hot but she's a fucking nutcase' (19). Since childhood she has not been able to stop counting – her steps as she walks, the hairs in her doctor's eyebrows, the bristles in her toothbrush, even the letters in people's names (she's a 19). She records the numbers in her notebook. Knowing the number of things helps her make decisions. For instance, the number of poppy seeds on her orange cake determines the number of bites with which she eats it. 'Anywhere between 20 and 30 is no hardship... Fewer than 20 needs some skill... More than 30 is a large number of bites, and once there was an incredible 92 poppy seeds and I virtually had to eat the cake crumb by crumb' (24). Her favourite number is ten, and derivatives of ten.

If Grace stops counting, she suffers panic attacks and fears she might die a horrible death. She explains her counting as a way of making every moment of her life count. 'Without the ability to count our days, our hours, our loved ones... there's no meaning. Without counting, our lives are unexamined. Not valued. Not precious. This consciousness, this ability to rejoice when we gain something and grieve when we lose something – this is what separates us from other animals. Counting, adding, measuring, timing. It's what makes us human' (111). Her hero, nineteenth century inventor Nikola Tesla whose photo is in a polished silver frame beside her single bed, was also a counter and the novel is punctuated with interesting pieces of information about his life, which mirrors parts of Grace's own.

One day at the supermarket Grace is piling her shopping onto the checkout counter. She has 10 chicken thighs, 10 carrots, 10 eggs (she removed the offending extra two), 10 potatoes, 100 painstakingly counted beans, and, to her horror, only 9 bananas. Reeling, she turns towards the fruit section to grab an extra banana when she notices a man lined up behind her with one banana in his basket. While he flips through a magazine, Grace steals the banana. He catches her.

Seamus Joseph O'Reilly works at the cinema, has the 'sexiest hands' (88), and is also a 19. He is intrigued by this woman whose apartment is filled with clocks and who keeps a ruler next to her dental floss. When Grace is with him the obsession which has cost her a job and a normal life abates and she forgets to count for brief periods of time. 'I didn't notice how many strokes he took or how many times he said my name. The numbers scattered from my fingertips and ran across the floor. I

was pinned under him and could not chase them' (69). When Seamus stays the night Nikola's photo is turned upside down, but unfortunately so is a very likeable element of this otherwise excellent story. That Seamus wants to save Grace from herself is not a problem; it is obvious her life will improve if she doesn't invest so much time arranging her wardrobe in numerical system and doing an inventory each time she opens a cupboard. However, the fairytale rescue scenario sits uneasily within the narrative. From the start Grace despises Mr and Mrs Average, scathingly observing people fumbling through life, crawling over each other in blind industriousness. 'They are ants racing across my balcony as the sun is rising only to race back as it sets' (20). Grace sees nothing positive about the hordes who will breed, borrow money, retire, be miserable and sick, before they finally 'die painlessly due to the advances of modern drug therapy, as numb and vapid as they lived' (20).

Grace's sister Jill epitomises all that Grace detests. Jill lives in an elegant beachside home that she 'fills with fresh flowers and fragrant candles and the smell of roast dinners, as if her life is clipped from a decorating magazine' (40). According to Grace, Jill's high powered husband has what looks like pubic hair growing on his head, flabby pink manicured hands and is boring. They have three children and appear to be happy, but Grace cannot see how. The first person narration means there isn't much insight into other characters except as viewed through Grace's grumpy and humorous lens so consequently Jill comes across as stereotypical and one dimensional. This narrative strategy means that the novel's successful relationships appear unsatisfying. Grace's father 'died as he lived, disappointed' (40) and her mother is 'a hollow, shaken woman' (38). It is disappointing when Grace becomes a willing participant in the shift towards the kind of predictable ending she professes to loathe; but perhaps that is the prerogative of romantic fiction, the opportunity to be in love revises everything.

While *Addition's* trajectory essentially relies on the chick-lit formula of meeting the right person, then overcoming obstacles before settling down to live happily ever after, the intensive documentation of Grace's dysfunction adds a depth to her character development that is not often associated with the chick-lit genre. Therapy and prescription drugs rob Grace of her sense of self and she turns into one of the people she hates. Not long after Seamus helps Grace seek professional help, television replaces conversation between the couple, she starts having long, happy chats on the phone to her mother about the rewards of housework, her cutting personality morphs into one of blind contentedness and, worst of all, her libido wanes. It isn't giving away the ending to say that the fairytale structure gets turned on its head when Grace decides that for better or worse, she wants to be herself, and she ditches the prescription drugs, therapy and Seamus.

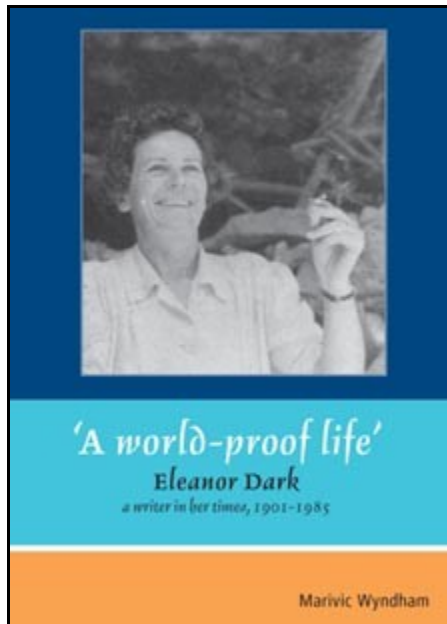
Jordan delivers a very clear message about the value of accepting oneself and resisting societal pressures to behave in certain ways. Apart from the fallout from her counting obsession, Grace is a woman in charge of her life. She is financially independent, completely in control of her sexuality with a healthy sense of self-entitlement to gaining enjoyment from her sexual encounters, is not concerned with what others think of her and despite her obsessive-compulsive disorder she is determined to live exactly how she wants to.

**Poppy Gee has worked as a journalist, newspaper editor, book reviewer and travel writer and is currently studying towards a Masters in Creative Writing in the School of EMSAH at The University of Queensland.**

## Eleanor Dark and 'the Artist'

Marivic Wyndham - *'A World-Proof Life': Eleanor Dark, A Writer in Her Times*, Sydney: UTSePress, 2007.

By Liz Bissell



The critical interest in Australian novelist Eleanor Dark and her work in the last thirty years exemplifies the trend by Left cultural historians in Australian literary studies towards writers of the interwar period. Marivic Wyndham's new biography, *'A World-Proof Life' Eleanor Dark: A Writer in her Times, 1901-1985*, attempts to address some of the assumptions of feminist historical research and Left views of 'radical' writers which have been applied to Dark since the late 1970s. Wyndham argues that there is a long 'victim tradition' in Australian literature, 'fomented on the Left,' which sets the writer in opposition to an unenlightened local literary scene, community neglect, repressive government measures, paranoid censors, and British and American cultural empires (14). She argues that Dark does not fit the generalised categories into which historians have placed her and attempts to reinterpret Dark's writing life in relation to the origins of her work in a relatively privileged experience of inter-war Australia. The title, a phrase

borrowed from Dark's *The Little Company*, gestures to what Wyndham calls a 'symmetry of privilege' (86) in Dark's personal and professional writing life which allowed her to create a 'world-proof life' that both insulated and confined her.

Wyndham links elements of biography, cultural history, literary criticism and historiography to chronologically map Dark's life and writing career through the Depression, World War Two and the early Cold War period. She suggests that Dark's literature provides an index of popular waves in fiction-writing—tracing her early experiments with psychological modernism in *Prelude to Christopher* and *Return to Coolami*, to her attempts at social realism in the late 1930s, through to her historical trilogy of the 1940s and early 1950s. The theme of the artist is a central element throughout the text. Wyndham elaborates Dark's emphasis on the role of the creative writer in relation to the sense of crisis that permeated Australian society during the 1930s and 1940s and examines the tensions between art and politics that developed throughout her writing career. As Wyndham points out, 'artist' is the only label Dark wore willingly, it defined her sense of self and her function in society, and the theme was a major preoccupation of her papers and fiction (16). Wyndham also explores the relation between art and life and, more particularly, the relation between the artist's life and her work and the effect of this on both personal relationships and her relationship to the wider community.

Wyndham neatly frames Dark's writing career with *Prelude to Christopher* and *Lantana Lane*, her first and final published novels, claiming both as successful pieces of social critique in which Dark 'seems – and is – basically at home with her material . . . writing from within her story and in sympathy with her subject' (319). Wyndham is less sympathetic to what she sees as Dark's failed

attempts at social realism during the late 1930s. She argues that *Sun Across the Sky* and *Waterway* demonstrate the effects of 'a grafted consciousness' (154) as Dark attempted to broaden her focus beyond the educated professional middle classes to include the working classes and incorporate 'class' tools and features such as colloquialisms, workers' strikes, and political demonstrations into her narrative. According to Wyndham, 'all of Dark's working-class characters remain victims of their own inadequacies and the capitalist system that fosters and reinforces them' (158). Wyndham attributes this to the fact that Dark was geographically and financially insulated from the worst effects of the Depression and World War Two, and was supported in financial, practical, and emotional matters by her husband throughout her career, concluding that 'social realism defeated her . . . [s]he lacked the necessary perspective, experience, and commitment for the task' (158). Wyndham also declares *The Little Company* a failure 'as entertainment, chronicle, thought, and art.' She argues that it 'lacks action and vitality. Its narrative is weak; its characterisation poor; its characters unappealing. It is a story' she declares, 'without a heart.' Its principal flaw, according to Wyndham, is 'the tensions and contradictions that exist between the moral qualities attributed to, and those reflected by, Gilbert and Marty' (225). She is more positive about Dark's historical trilogy, perhaps because the material in these works allows her to draw much more comfortable parallels with Dark's life. It also emphasises her argument that Dark's sense of nationalism was 'essentially a metaphysical evocation of 'a timeless land' rather than identification with particular class or cultural interests' (5-6). She elaborates Dark's affinity with the Australian bush as another method of reinforcing her 'world-proof life' and her vision of the artist as isolated from, even elevated above society.

Although Dark's public accounts of her childhood emphasise a literary, philosophical, and creative relationship to her father, the writer Dowell O'Reilly, Wyndham suggests that Dark developed her conception of 'the artist' as 'arrogant, elitist, inclined towards the notion of art for art's sake' (30) from the poet Christopher Brennan, whom she met rarely and briefly as a child. Wyndham does not adequately support her statement that 'the spirit of Brennan permeates her literature and conception of the artist' (40), basing evidence of this 'infatuation' on the description of Nicholas Kavanagh in *Sun Across Sky* which she claims Dark based on Brennan. She also suggests that, in *Prelude to Christopher*, 'Brennan's spirit resides not in the character of d'Aubert, the quintessential artist, but in the essence of art itself which d'Aubert represents' (41). Wyndham argues that the 'romantic, vague and anachronistic' conception of the artist that emerges throughout Dark's work encapsulates her privileged life and the distance she cultivated from society (8). She also links the theme of the artist to 'the little company' Dark worked within, composed of prominent interwar writers such as Vance and Nettie Palmer, Miles Franklin, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard, and Frank Dalby Davison. She argues that the significance of the group, for Dark, was their mutual conception of 'the artist' and conviction of themselves as artists, rather than any definitive ideological perspective, that allowed a sense of collegial support and professional validation (11).

*A World-Proof Life* doesn't ultimately offer any substantial new materials or perspectives on Dark or her life, but provides an efficient and engaging overview of Dark's contribution to, and significance in Australian literary history.

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## Dark Lives

Belinda Burns - *The Dark Part of Me*, Fourth Estate, 2006.

By Chris Broadribb



*The Dark Part of Me* by Belinda Burns is a raw, gritty, realistic portrayal of the sort of lifestyle that many teenagers and younger adults lead these days. The characters drink excessively, take illegal drugs, speed around in cars, have unprotected sex, and go to all-night raves - or do several of those things at once. They're bored, disillusioned and irresponsible, only interested in having a good time while ignoring the risks and consequences of their actions.

The novel is set in Brisbane, or BrisVegas, as some locals call it, and centres on a 19-year-old woman named Rosie. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother, Janice, who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Rosie is a university drop-out who works in a café. She hates her job and her life, and continually pines after her ex-boyfriend Scott, who broke up with her a year earlier. She lives for drugs and raves, and derides the mundane lives of the 'burbanites' around her, while failing to recognise the pointlessness and self-destructiveness of her own lifestyle.

There are many dark aspects to Rosie's life, and that of her friends and family. She frequently smokes marijuana or takes speed or ecstasy, as does her best friend Trish, Scott and his friends. They obtain drugs very easily, and never have to face any legal consequences as they never get caught. It illustrates how widespread drug use is in society and how casual people's attitudes are towards it.

Of course, there are even worse potential consequences of drug use. At one point in the novel, Rosie overdoses at a rave and nearly dies, only surviving because Scott performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and Trish calls an ambulance. Unfortunately, Rosie doesn't learn anything from the experience and continues to take drugs later on. It reflects the way that many people behave in real life.

Rosie's father, Trevor, is also a drug addict, but in his case, it's a legal drug, alcohol. He had a drinking problem even before he married Janice, and started physically abusing her on their honeymoon. After Rosie was born, he drank even more heavily and became increasingly violent, smashing furniture and punching holes in the walls of their home (literally and metaphorically). Even though he almost killed Rosie in a drunken car accident and Janice divorced him, he was unwilling or unable to give up alcohol. When Rosie meets him at a coffee shop for their annual Christmas get-

together, he drinks beer continually, while asking, as he does every year, whether Janice would take him back if he gave up drinking. Like every other character in the novel, he fails to learn anything from his mistakes and even though he dimly recognises that he has a problem, makes no real attempts to solve it.

Although Rosie's life isn't as sad or desperate as her father's, she takes many risks without considering the consequences. A flashback scene shows her having a car race against Scott through the streets when she's 17. She has a serious accident and breaks her arm. It's written in a less believable way than the rest of the novel; she doesn't suffer much and is even sexually intimate with Scott straight afterwards. In real life, a broken arm is overwhelmingly painful and the victim can't think of anything else.

Another flashback scene explains how Rosie met Scott - and shows more of the risks that she and other young people take. She sneaks out of her bedroom window at night and catches a bus into the city to go to a nightclub when she's only 16 years old. She mentions that all of the 'cool girls' at school go out clubbing, often with fake IDs. She's sexually harassed by an older university student on the bus but doesn't regard it as a warning, and as a result is nearly sexually assaulted by him and his friends later on inside the club. She still doesn't appreciate the danger she's in and stays at the club for a while, even accepting a lift home from Scott, who's a stranger at the time. Fortunately, he doesn't try to abuse her.

Rosie and Scott's relationship is very different from her parents', reflecting the generation gap and changing social roles and customs. Janice appears to have rushed into marriage, marrying Trevor after only 'four or five' dates, perhaps because of social pressure. She put up with Trevor beating her, covering the bruises with make-up while quietly saving up money in the hope of leaving him some day. Rosie, on the other hand, is far more confident and assertive and her relationship with Scott is more equal, although also more casual. She and Scott drink and take drugs together and wrestle with each other. She starts having a sexual relationship with him after going out with him for three months, without considering how long the relationship will last or even thinking about a future marriage.

Like many young people, Scott is casual about relationships and unwilling to fully commit himself. After he's been seeing Rosie for a while, he abruptly leaves her to travel around Europe with his best friend, despite previously having planned to travel with Rosie. He waits another year before breaking up with her over the phone. He returns to Brisbane but waits two weeks before contacting Rosie. He calls her 'babe', as if she's his girlfriend, and continues to go out with her occasionally, but sees someone else behind her back.

Rosie is no wiser than her mother about relationships, being unable to see when one isn't working or deal with it appropriately. When Scott breaks up with her over the phone, she's upset, but resorts to smoking marijuana, drinking scotch, dancing to trance, and chatting up rugby players. She's unable to completely accept that the relationship's over, and saves postcards that Scott sends, reading non-existent declarations of love into his brief messages. She also quits university and starts working at the coffee shop in the hope of saving up enough money to join him in England and rekindle their relationship.

The fact that Rosie has a job and is able to set a goal and work towards it shows that she isn't completely irresponsible, and that there's hope for her in the future. She saves up \$10,000 -- a significant sum of money for someone of her age -- though a small amount of it is from till-skimming. When Scott returns to Australia she continues working even though she no longer needs the money, which shows some maturity. The fact that she was studying law at university also shows that she's intelligent, even though she lacks wisdom.

Some of the other characters in the novel lead darker and more disturbing lives than Rosie. She has a friend named Hollie, whose actress mother, Mrs Bailey, shot herself in her bedroom when Hollie was very young. Hollie keeps the bedroom as is, holds elaborate Christmas parties in her mother's memory, and dresses up in her mother's old costumes to enact love scenes from Shakespeare with Rosie. Hollie's brother, Danny, is even more disturbed and has been in jail for murdering one of his school friends. The relationship between Rosie, Hollie, and Danny is strange and unhealthy, however, none of them recognises it.

An interesting aspect of the novel is its portrayal of Aboriginal culture. Rosie, Hollie, and Danny, despite being non-Indigenous, are fascinated by the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. When they're children, they go to their favourite hideaway in the bush and play a game where they pretend to be Aboriginal, darkening their skin with mud, marking themselves with ochre and dancing naked around a campfire.

The novel also hints at some of the problems that Aboriginal people face in contemporary society. Once when Rosie goes to a rave, she sees a group of local Aboriginal people leaning against the wall across the street, wearing scruffy clothes and drinking. Their feelings of alienation and hopelessness are reflected for her in their sad, dead eyes. Rosie also mentions her father's attitude towards them: he labels them dole-bludgers who 'couldn't handle their booze', conveniently ignoring the fact that he's a chronic alcoholic himself. It illustrates the racist, hypocritical attitudes that many non-Indigenous people have.

The whole novel is written in first person from Rosie's point of view. It's in a very colloquial style, and some of the key scenes from Rosie's life are in first person, making them more dramatic and immediate. The novel draws the readers into Rosie's dark world and keeps them turning the pages to find out what happens next.

The author, Belinda Burns, grew up in Brisbane but wrote the book while living in London and studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University College. She won a prize from a literary agency for the best novel from the course. *The Dark Part of Me* is her first published novel.

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