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"That's when i was another tree 2" 2007 - Del Kathryn Barton

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Sketches from a Writer's Notebook

By Cheryl Jorgensen

Friday, 15th May, 2009

Coming back over the Hornibrook Bridge from a solitary meal at Bella Sicilia in Margate, I am almost taken prisoner by the view.

It is sunset and the horizon and just above it is smudged with a dirty pink, like rouge on an old courtesan's cheek, not quite wholesome but with its own unarguable charms. Moreton Bay is so placid the blue has become milky, threatening to set into a level blancmange or tofu, or maybe to spill over the edge of the world after rising like a soufflé. At the horizon, however, is a darker blue line which defines the sea from the soubrette sky, not quite gaudy yet, but suggestive of the kind of fin de siècle sins of a Toulouse-Lautrec poster for the Moulin Rouge. A kind of eyeliner. Even the new, half-constructed bridge standing half a dozen metres further out from this one, does not shatter the repose of this Autumn afternoon with its metal poles at regular intervals back to the shore and slabs of concrete which reflect back some of the sun's pale gold, looking for all the world like a stage set which could be safely packed away after a season or even just a single performance. The big, bold, bellicose concrete construction suddenly looks fragile as a spindly foal trying to stand on its own pins while its mother looks away, pretending indifference, in this self-absorbed time of day. Even the debris of construction at the seminal end loses its sinister starkness. Rolls of rusted, sea-encrusted scaffolding and metal pins and concrete ovals and cubes of portentous weight waiting to be added to the new motorway and bridge are suddenly reduced to a simple geometry lesson, or a puzzle where you seek and name the most basic shapes you learned in Primary school: squares and oblongs, circles and trapezoids. They are suddenly nothing more significant than that, brought down to the easily encompassable by a chit of a sunset only minutes old.

Meanwhile, serious traffic continues relentlessly fore and aft. It is the reason you must not succumb to the pleasures of the view. One second's reverie too long and you could be smeared across this bridge like so much unused colour on an artist's palette, suddenly added to this particular sunset's creation as an afterthought.

The Train from Shorncliffe

The leaves of the umbrella tree fibrillate in the Autumn breeze. It is a glorious morning; the sun is everywhere present but some grey-tipped cumulus clouds lean low in the sky, suggesting the possibility of rain. The besser-block amenities building - painted over with a kind of custard yellow - sits squatly under one of the umbrella trees and a melaleuca, and the train waits in the patient way trains wait at Shorncliffe station, for correct departure time. Here is the beginning and the end of the journey.

The man who gets into the carriage is of neat build and could be handsome, but for the private thoughts that have marked his face with bitterness. He is greying - just a touch of silver at his temples and a streak or two through his thick, dark hair. But he is wearing synthetic rubber thongs with what would in another context be a respectable black and white checked shirt over slate grey slacks... perhaps as a kind of protest. Strange. He looks over at me with a hostile expression and I flick my glance away from him, knowing from experience about the dangers of accepting challenging stares from one such as this, on a train at the beginning or the end of the line. The mollusc of my idle curiosity suddenly withdraws into the sanctity of its shell. Still, I cannot help but make the mental note that this man is a mass - or a

mess - of contradictions. Why the carefully-pressed smart-casual clothes with the defiant thongs? Why the anger clouding the potentially pleasant face? I am intrigued, but sense trouble far beyond my current powers of arbitration. I gaze in the opposite direction from him, out of the window.

The train finally begins its journey. I see plain and sometimes even poky wooden houses on stilts or concrete foundations, set in large, leafy gardens juxtaposed against haphazardly elegant dwellings along the railway track. They seem to hasten past us and pose questions about others' lives with an almost shocking intimacy. Peering down hallways along bare wooden floors or glimpsing cluttered interiors unprepared to meet the censorious gaze of the outsider, I am furtive but completely intrigued, enjoying the vicarious pleasure of staring, yet deploring it. The sub-tropical foliage is very green, lush and damp. After intermittent but heavy rain over the last week, the ground promises a seeping sogginess to your shoes, but gives the heady smell of wetness drying in a nurturing sun. Already the grass along the tracks is too long, too luxuriant. The Council will have to be called to attend to it before it becomes a danger to locomotive or pedestrian realities.

A young woman with streaky blonde hair gets into the carriage with an overweight toddler in a stroller. She is wearing a cotton pastel-coloured sundress which has slid down her back at least five centimetres under her black bra. She takes out a mobile phone and speaks too loudly into it, asking someone if Jamie and Jaiden are coming to the show. I have no idea what show; it is nowhere near Ekka time. As she turns her body in profile I see the dress has dipped even lower, revealing practically all of her bra from this side angle. I wonder if she is aware of this. She is shouting into the mobile phone now and her voice has a jarring quality which seems to stir the toddler into action. He sits up straight and grasps the back of one of the train seats, punching the air. The telephone conversation ended, the woman recaps it loudly to the toddler, or perhaps really to the rest of the train (another half-dozen passengers in the carriage now) as if it is her duty to keep us all informed. The toddler is looking around at anywhere but her.

'Yer bruvver is coming to the show,' she says. 'He deserves it as much as you.' This statement I find unsettling, but before I have time to try to puzzle out what she means, she continues, 'Yer bruver will remember the show more'en you ... you're too young.'

The child grabs one of his own ears and wrenches at it, pulling off a hearing aid.

'Put that back,' says the young woman. Her voice, though very loud, does not have any reprimand in it. 'Bubba's got to hear or Bubba won't learn his words to speak.'

Even though there is now nothing furtive in my eavesdropping, for the woman is speaking far too loudly, I am suddenly ashamed of listening so attentively. The young woman's dress is so wrong, her voice is so wrong, yet there is something unquestionably good-natured and even, to tempt contemporary derision, something quite innocent about her, that I feel I've wronged her in some way, perhaps by being too observant. Suddenly I fall into one of my old bad habits: of worrying about her, wondering if she has someone to help her bring up the child, whether she is going to be able to help him learn to speak, all that sort of thing, even though it has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with me. Perhaps I am becoming one of those irritating middle-aged busy-bodies that I so detested just a matter of a few years ago when I, too, took trains into the city with my own little hatchlings in tow. But I cannot tear my eyes away from her, from them.

The child suddenly submits to her ministrations, settling into the stroller while she prepares to move towards the door. He knows this place, knows the train stop, the ritual. The station is Nundah and they are getting off the train. Mr Thongs also gets off the train, still scowling. I suddenly remember that there is a Centrelink building at Nundah, and perhaps he is about to experience the ignominy of having to front up there. Possibly wait in a queue for an hour, or two. Perhaps he's lost his job and is dreading the humiliation of the obstacle-course that this government agency would no doubt put him through to appease the economic rationalists. I'm also betting the young mother is going there too. She's been explaining herself to the passengers on the train who have not even given her the encouragement of eye-contact, because she is going to have to give another account of herself in there. When, in reality, if they were really there to help her, the bureaucrats, they'd only have to open their eyes a little, and look.

Well, I've looked and I've seen and I've embarrassed myself. I worry pointlessly about the woman and her child, because I feel I can do nothing about other people's lives, uncomfortably remembering D.H. Lawrence's comer to the water trough who, acting on the rationale of unimaginative convention, frightens the magnificent snake away even while admiring its beauty. For I now have the vague, unsettling feeling that I, too, have something to expiate: some sort of pettiness.

Troy and my Water Tank

Troy. Gorgeous. Tall, with the clean-cut uncomplicated beauty of a child's drawing of a significant man. How Superman looks before he gets into his hero drag. He is attaching another pipe to my 5000 litre water tank and telling me about his place in Maclean, a sweet little town in northern NSW on the Clarence River. And about his place in Tassie. Both with waterfrontage. Jo, (his wife) can't survive in Brisbane, he says. She's got to be closer to the sea. There's plenty to do in both places, he says. For the kids.

I wonder how Troy measures out his days... Maybe, while he goes about his labours here and elsewhere, there are snapshots in his mind of days at the beach, a surfing Jo, tanned and slim and equally gorgeous, leaning into the wind that flips the water into curlicues of waves, powering her ride across the surface like Jesus on amphetamines, her eyes the same colour as the sea, her hair the colour of foam, but stuck in wet plaits to her neck and shoulders. And the children serious-eyed but hallooing on the shore, making sandcastles that the ocean which is playing the devil's advocate, plunders and remakes; they trotting up to knees or even thighs into the shallows with insouciant daring that they have absorbed, by osmosis, from their parents... I wonder how I measure out my own days. With stories and new memories of green, green places which make my habitat now, surrounding me, oxygenating me, even inoculating me against the memory of desert - dry and parched and desperate and suburban - which was the setting and the never forensically-taped crime scene of my childhood.

Vertigo ... a Trip to Wollongong

Peering down the throat of a mountain ravine

Across a coastline altered by time and memory,

I am haunted by familiar things.

Yet there are pricklings of uncertainty ... was it here I did those things?

Was it here I committed so many sins of commission and omission?

Was there a co-op here, where this upmarket restaurant now smirks so egregiously?

Was it here I brokered a deal become a marriage, become too soon a desolation?

What makes me now so safe in my current assumptions?

Birthing As Battlefield

Mary-Rose MacColl. *The Birth Wars: The Conflict Putting Australian Women and Babies at Risk*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

Reviewed by JaneMaree Maher

The title of Mary-Rose MacColl's new contribution to maternity and birthing literature in Australia is sensational and well-framed to tap into contemporary discourses of risk, fear and dissatisfaction around birthing. The volume explores what MacColl argues is an entrenched ideological and practical division in the provision of maternity services in Australia, where two different philosophies of birthing, the 'organic' and the 'mechanic' conflict to produce poor outcomes for birthing women. MacColl's *Birth Wars* is offered as a vehicle for exposing and challenging this division, in order that each woman has a better likelihood of being offered the best possible birthing options for her and her baby.

MacColl charts changes and challenges in obstetric care, primarily focusing on Australia: the use of chloroform, the move of births from homes to hospitals, Australia's high and rising level of caesarian birth, the conflicted landscape of home birthing and the consequent impassioned debates about safety and choice in childbirth. She examines the challenges facing women birthing in rural and remote parts of Australia and offers some insight into the structural issues that currently face Australian maternity services and maternity care health professionals as they negotiate a straightened resource base and shortages of service providers, especially in remote areas. She alerts us to the growing sense of trauma and dissatisfaction in our society surrounding birth, rising rates of post-traumatic stress disorder related to birthing and high rates of postnatal depression that may be linked to women's childbirth experiences. The impetus for the book arose from MacColl's involvement in a government review of maternity services in Queensland, where her passions were engaged by debates about how safe birth really is in Australia and how well Australian women are being served.

The Birth Wars opens with a harrowing account of a baby's death; of miscommunications, of mistimed responses and a series of problematic decisions that accumulate and create the most awful outcome, the death of a baby. And as MacColl describes the story of baby Lilliene's death and the grief and bravery of her parents, her commitment and care are evident. The purpose of the book is to illuminate important questions in maternity care: questions raised by women's experiences of birth and practitioners' approaches to the delivery of maternity care. Women's agency, their safety and their hopes and happiness are inextricably bound to the social, economic and political conditions in which they become pregnant, labour, deliver and mother, and MacColl's approach is apposite as she draws together the policy, public, cultural and clinical arenas. If MacColl's central point is that there is dissatisfaction, uncertainty and potential conflict in maternity service delivery around Australia, this is persuasively argued and clearly an important issue that needs on-going attention. As other recent Australian volumes like *Our Bodies, Our Babies* (Reiger, Melbourne University Press, 2001) and *Delivery by appointment:*



Caesarean birth today (Hamer, New Holland Publishers, 2007) have suggested, we are facing continued and perhaps intensifying challenges in our negotiation of birthing, resources and risks in Australia. But the resolute adherence to the conflict and risk framework that MacColl employs, in my view, lessens the potential contribution this volume could make to discussions about birthing in contemporary Australia. And while it is suggested that this is 'essential reading' for women who have or might give birth, the battleground metaphor that frames the volume and produces the implication that women need to be armed to manage the conflicts of their care providers might not help in the complexities of birth and delivery.

MacColl characterises the diverging philosophies underpinning birth assistance as 'organic' and 'mechanic'. Mechanics, she suggests, are 'mostly men, who stress the need for access to technology' (6); 'organics...most of whom are women, see pregnancy and birth as a normal life events that doesn't sit well in a medical setting' (6). A central claim of this volume is that conflict between these two groups of practitioners, between these two philosophies, traps women in potentially unsafe situations where communication, practices and clinical judgments are held 'hostage' by these 'two distinct ideologies' (6). The distinction MacColl argues for between mechanics and organics underpins her schematic account of birthing and diminishes the evident complexity of the stories and exchanges actually reported in *The Birth Wars*. While she does outline mistrust and differences in opinion, much of what actually emerges in her exploration is much more complicated than her battleground metaphor allows.

From the beginning, MacColl recognizes that 'there are organic obstetricians and mechanic midwives, and some from both professions who fall somewhere in between' (7), suggesting that the hard borders she seeks to create between 'organic' and 'mechanic' practitioners are always under pressure. They are under pressure in labour wards as her stories from hospitals suggest and they are under pressure, I would argue, because they reflect some limited conceptions about the interactions of bodies, cultures and societies. At the heart of this distinction are assumptions about the 'natural' and 'technological' as two completely discrete fields, assumptions that have been challenged by feminist insights that culture changes and shapes bodies and experiences and that 'natural' is a category to be used with great caution. 'Natural' assumptions about women's child-birthing were used for centuries to exclude women from education and public life, to diminish the value of child-bearing and caring activities undertaken by women, to maintain professional distinctions between midwives as women's birth attendants and barber surgeons as managers. I am hesitant about the value of re-invigorating such debates by using terms like 'organic' and 'mechanic' in the complex landscape in which women birth.

But the major issue with the schematic frame and the invocation of the battlefield metaphor is that it most often writes down the meaning and the complexity of what is described. Talking of pain for example, MacColl says 'in the birth wars now, labour pain is something you fix or you don't, you manage or you welcome, depending on which side of the wars you're on' (92). This description of pain immediately writes out the importance of individual women and their responses and desires, which, as MacColl rightly notes throughout the volume, are not well heard in childbirth. Her description untethers pain from women's bodies where it is experienced. The 'either/or' account of how pain is felt or managed by different practitioners creates distinctions that seem artificial. Organic practitioners, for example, offering showers are attempting to fix and manage the pain certainly using different mechanisms than the nitrous and pethidine that might be favoured by mechanic practitioners, but both groups are trying to work with and alleviate women's pain to assist them to move through the process of birthing.

MacColl defaults to simple accounts of risk, information and safety that don't address broader questions about neo-liberal policy frameworks of individual responsibility for health that have swept Western

developed societies. Discourses of risk and safety are routinely mobilized in contemporary health debates; heated contests over who has, and who should have, information and control emerge most often as the central contention. MacColl's stated objective of improving information and choice for women is plainly an important one, but it invokes, without examining, assumptions that better informed individual responsibility is the best way forward. It reinforces the adversarial elements of contemporary health discourses where the patient's responsibility is to be armed with enough information to choose correctly. Yet, she describes her own experience of amniocentesis (51-2) as one where information, from her clinicians, from the internet, from relevant research studies, didn't address her deep-seated and crucially important questions about her baby's safety. She went ahead uncertainly and hopefully. In her own example then, the framing of the problem in terms of a battle reduces rather than illuminates the issues in which MacColl is interested.

In reading *The Birth Wars*, I found the persistent use of the adversarial metaphor of war limited and skewed the text. While there were practitioners who did frame birthing as a battle, such as the yoga instructor who urged birthing women to look for 'traitors' (99) in their own support team, the majority of voices here recognize and work within the complex reality of shared care, resource constraints, differing but interconnected professional objectives and women's diverse aspirations. As MacColl notes,

the true shame of contemporary maternity care is, that while the professional bodies argue about who should be in charge, this fact remains: the vast majority of women who have babies today will not know both *the midwife and the doctor who will share their care in labour and birth.*(90) *My emphasis.*

The confusion in this comment acts as a useful synecdoche for the confusion in the volume as a whole. What is the meaning and utility of the metaphor 'war' when most Australian women do have both midwives and doctors in the room, midwives and doctors who may be more or less organic or mechanical but who are literally sharing the care of these laboring and birthing women? MacColl acknowledges that

Paradoxically, both midwives and doctors are driven by idealism and the need to keep women and babies safe. It's just that their ideals and their notions of safety are completely different. (84).

Again, what is the utility of a war metaphor when there are shared objectives? When 'both sides of the birth wars use the phrase 'woman-centred care' (81) and insist women are best served by continuity of care? MacColl's stated hope for this book is that both sides in her putative combat zone can work together to help women have optimal choices for their birthing experience but why, if this is the ambition, is the framing device for this volume so confrontational?

The final story in *The Birth Wars* is the story of Jemima, delivered eighteen years ago by two of her interviewees. The link is coincidental; MacColl sees the same baby photo in the rooms of two people she is interviewing in the course of her research and elicits a great story of cooperation in the face of a rare and dangerous condition; where toxins creating unbearable prenatal itching could cause the death of the baby in the womb. The desired homebirth is off the table but obstetrician and midwife work together to produce a safe and peaceful enough birth for the woman and her baby. MacColl sees, in the evidence of the photo, that the obstetrician and the midwife involved, now at the peak of their respective professional bodies, hold this birth experience as one of the best and most satisfying in their careers. Her stated aspirations for partnership, consideration, attentiveness and high level successful

care are all achieved here and the reader's heart is lightened and engaged by the story and the possibilities it suggests.

But the question I am left with after the story and about this volume is what motivated the decision to insist on the language of 'crossfire' (16) throughout. In all of the examples I have given here and in many more in *the Birth Wars*, both clinically and ideologically, there is ample evidence of engagement and collaboration, much more than there is evidence of obstruction and interference. There's plenty of disagreement and a great diversity of views, but there is much common ground. Given the grace, generosity and courage of the birthing women who spoke to MacColl, given the commitment and thoughtfulness of the practitioners who shared their views and ideas about birth with her, given the importance of the endeavour, to examine how competing and conflicting discourses of risk and safety shape intimate experiences, the war metaphor reduced and obscured what was described. At the beginning of *the Birth Wars*, MacColl says 'while women may be told they have choices about their care during pregnancy, in reality, the only choice women in Australia have is which side of the birth wars they will be on, the mechanics or the organics' (14). I would argue this isn't a real or meaningful choice and certainly isn't where women birthing or their carers should focus their attention. *The Birth Wars* demonstrates that there are clearly structural issues in Australian maternity services, that women and their care providers need to negotiate these in partnership and with respect for women's desires, their safety and their babies, that we need to improve in communication, care and cooperation. Starting with the assumption that we're in a war, in my view, doesn't contribute to any of these goals.

Dr JaneMaree Maher has degrees in Law and Arts (Hons) (University of Melbourne 1991) and gained her PhD in 1999 (La Trobe University). She is Director of the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University, where she has worked for ten years. Her current research is focused on women's employment, family life and work and new models of motherhood. She has recently published in these areas in *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Work, Employment and Society* and *Journal of Sociology*.

A Fine Compilation on Fashion in Recent Times

Llewellyn Negrin. *Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
Reviewed by Mary Pridmore

This is a serious, scholarly, challenging, flash-light of a book. But, don't be daunted by those first two adjectives, this is a clearly written and relatively easily read book. For those of us who have attempted to read the many post-modernist texts dealing with feminism this is almost a primer.

Negrin has been on the academic staff of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Tasmania for two decades. Her PhD is in philosophy but she is a well established scholar in the fields of philosophy, fine art and feminism. The book examines the nexus of feminism and visual culture over the past twenty-five years. The student of feminism, fashion, gender and visual artists dealing with these areas will be delighted. Negrin has applied her keen mind to a close examination of the important documents over this period first analysing and then amalgamating the important ideas.



Negrin refers to the current concept of the self as construct, 'the self as masquerade has become a central feature of much contemporary discourse about the body and identity' (2). She continues, however, that it goes too far, 'this new notion of the self as masquerade conceives of the subject as constituted wholly through the various guises that one adopts. There is no self apart from that which is constructed through the fashioning of one's appearance.' She argues that while for many 'masquerade is essentially liberating' this idea must be challenged, as it is complicit with the 'imperatives of late capitalism'. Negrin rightly makes the point that we must recognize 'the importance of other sources of identity formation in the construction of self'.

Other points of interest to this reviewer are the immediate challenges which the book offers to contemporary feminist artists and theorists concerned with re-evaluating decoration and fashion.

In the post-modern period ornamentation and the *feminine* have been repositioned within mainstream culture. Negrin points out that we have succeeded in giving positive value to ornamentation but its new position is diminished because we haven't challenged its definition. 'A more thoroughgoing challenge would question the way in which ornament was defined in the period of modernism, and, in particular, the oppositions on which it was predicated - namely, those between the superfluous and the essential; surface and depth; purposelessness and functionality; the sensuous and the rational'(118). It is not sufficient to defend ornament in a narrowly defined role as something superficial, inessential and purposeless. Chapter 6 elaborates on the serious role ornament played before its denigration in the period of high modernism, arguing that in earlier times there was an intimate connection between ornamental and functional aspects of an object (118).

On feminism and fashion, Negrin notes that feminists have been able to return to some enjoyment of fashion, a pleasure which had been sacrificed by the early second wave feminists who placed importance exclusively on 'functionalism' in dress. She states that in contemporary culture, appearance has been elevated and become the sole means by which women create identity. Pleasure in beauty and dress, Negrin argues, can 'only be genuinely realised in a context where individuals are no longer judged primarily by their appearance, and where there are [no] marked inequalities in gender, race and

class' (51-2).

This book is much broader than female fashion and fine art. It is a serious feminist treatise, giving due consideration to cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, cross-dressing and men's fashion. This is the new 'must have' for thinkers and workers in the fields of fine arts, culture in general, social anthropology, gender studies and, of course, feminism.

Unfortunately it is expensive, reflecting the specialist readership. However, it is a scholastic triumph, a new canonical text which should be in all libraries and available to all of us.

Mary Pridmore recently completed her PhD at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. A finalist in the Portia Geach Memorial Award (2003), she undertook a University of Tasmania residency at the Rosamond McCulloch Studio, Paris (2005). Mary has received grants from Contemporary Art Services Tasmania, the National Association of Visual Artists and funding for exhibitions from the Burnie Regional Art Gallery and Carnegie Gallery in Hobart. Her work has also been seen at Linden Gallery, S H Ervin Gallery, Contemporary Art Services Tasmania, The Plimsoll Gallery and Colville St Art Gallery.

Always a Wolf?

Danielle Wood. *Rosie Little's Cautionary Tales for Girls*.
Allen and Unwin, Australia, 2006

Reviewed by Amanda de Clifford

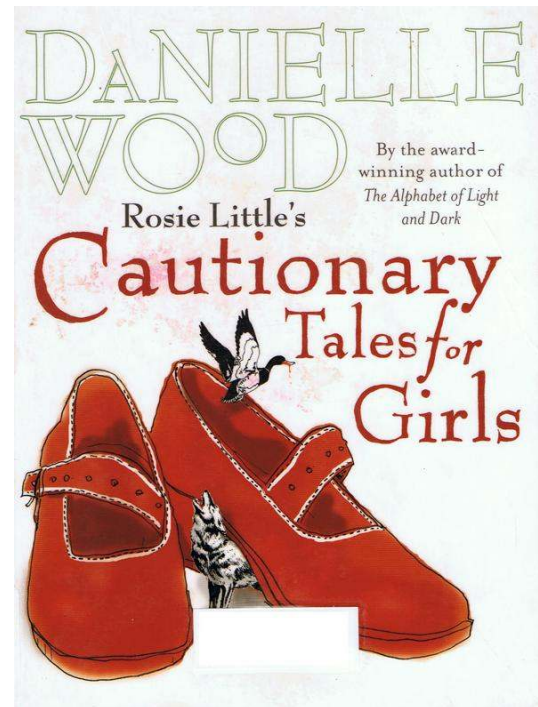
When I went to borrow *Rosie Little's Cautionary Tales for Girls* for the second time, a librarian helped me find it and, plucking it from the shelves of Australian literature, she became animated and gushingly said, 'Oh, this one, the cover is so seductive!' And it is. A giant pair of red Mary-Jane shoes are our focus; a wolf howling below them and a duck with a bleeding beak flying above. This cover entices the Little Red Riding Hood in all us, asking us to open its pages and read about desire - all sorts of desires. Here, sexual desire is intertwined with a hunger for adventure, experience, meaningful work, friendship, love and babies. Like a guidebook, the package of this text is small and neat. Rosie Little, our narrator and intrepid guide, divides the world into twelve discreet sections: Virginity, Truth, Travel, Beauty, Art, Love, Commitment, Marriage, Work, Longing, Loss, and Destiny.

In these chapters, Rosie shows us how girls might navigate the many facets of life. And yet this is not a girl's own annual, as a soulful novella that encapsulates the sense of gothic underlying so many fairytales, for on Rosie Little's journey she encounters a very adult world: a woman who keeps her dead premature baby in a bottle of formalin; her obsessive cousin who painfully resents being given elephant memorabilia, 'her entire existence...stretched out of shape, swollen up and distorted with elephants' (22); an incident involving vomit and oral sex, and then a story about being beaten by a lover - so badly that Rosie's face became

an ugly gash of puckered skin and knotted twine marking the midpoint of eye sockets stained magenta and purple. My forehead was swollen and misshapen. The fine crack revealed by the X-ray was concealed beneath my swollen forehead, but in the mirror I could see the unmissable sign of ownership. A brand. (125)

In these stories, Rosie Little is not always the main protagonist; rather, she is a constant narrating presence, often making a cameo appearance or just adding an extra word of advice. In her prologue, Rosie Little sets the scene for her readers, declaring:

These are not, I should say from the outset, tales written for the benefit of good and well-behaved girls who always stick to the path when they go to Grandma's. Skipping along in their gingham frills - baskets of scones, jam and clotted cream upon their arms - what need can these girls have for caution? Rather, these are tales for girls who have boots as stout as their hearts, and who are prepared to firmly lace them up (boots and hearts both) and step out into the wilds in search of what they desire. And since it cannot be expected that stout-booted, stout-hearted girls will grow up without misfortune or miscalculation of some kind,



they require a reminder, from time to time, about the dangers that lurk both in dark forests and in the crevices of one's own imaginings. (Prologue)

Rosie Little is a well-read narrator, self consciously scattering her text with a path of literary sources. Whilst visiting 'the Mother Country' she tells us, 'In the Underground I was Alice, tumbling through the blackened rabbit-holes of the city. I was a child in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, hurtling along bright-coloured tubes' (47). We are given references to *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Rumplestiltskin*, *Bluebeard* and *Snow White*, whilst Rosie Little speaks of reading books with 'serious literary intent' (195), of 'hunting on the internet for the rest of an Emily Dickinson poem' (243) and she considers what it means to have 'nothing more than a Mini with a busted door, twenty-seven pairs of red shoes and an arts degree to your name'(235). Like the traditional fairy tale, this text operates on many levels, serving as a rites of passage story while also pointing to a series of moral or, in this case, theoretical questions. When Rosie Little speaks of girls firmly lacing their hearts and the dangers that lurk 'in the crevices of one's own imaginings' (Prologue), she gestures to a field interested in questions about subjectivity and, in particular, female subjectivity. This text asks, in a myriad of ways, 'How does woman move through the world and how might she navigate the self/other relation?' Underlying these tales, then, are a series of cultural comments about the relation between gender, power, subjectivity and desire. On my second reading, gobbling down the words as I was, I realised that something about the dynamic between gender and power in this story itches me a little. I shall open some questions about this relation, further in this review, whilst also touching on an issue of style.

Beauty - The Wardrobe

Because of my interest in theories of desire, fetishism, and masquerade, I was particularly drawn to the section 'Beauty' which contains a story called 'The Wardrobe'. In this story, a young woman, Justine, is turned into a mannequin. Whilst Rosie Little suggests that Justine literally becomes lifeless, turned to stone by her lover Henri, we might also read this tale as one that illuminates the sorts of expectations at play in the building of the body beautiful. In 'The Wardrobe' Henri takes Justine shopping and trims her down, both literally and symbolically. Magically, waisted dresses that appear too small fit perfectly and whilst worrying that a bodice will not be filled, Justine 'felt her breasts bloom into the softly gathered cups' (82). Justine's friends comment on her weight loss, her new hair style, polished nails, and Manolo Blahnik heels and before long she finds herself at a party mimicking the pose of a nearby mannequin, 'her coiffure too unsteady to move her head too far to either side' (83). Captured in Henri's gaze, her body begins to stiffen and 'even now, two years later, Justine holds the same pose, both arms bent ninety degrees, the fingers of each hand locked together in neat salutes' (86). As Justine describes Henri's obsession with dressing her, this text not only offers a cultural comment about the construction of femininity, the making and consuming of 'woman', but perhaps also gestures towards Sigmund Freud's theory of 'Fetishism', as Justine declares: 'He's a shoe maker. It's his business to be a foot fetishist' (78). The notion that 'woman' is made is a recurring theme in Rosie Little, and is highlighted in the story 'Vision in White', where a bride describes a desire to turn herself into 'a magnificent white butterfly' (154).

Always a Wolf?

On the way to meet grandma, Rosie Little encounters many wolves. Whilst 'woman' is often presented as a guide in this text, signified by various female subjects adorned with polka-dots and 'there at every crucial junction' (253), 'man' with his sneaky sexual appetite is written as a subject to be wary of. There is, I think, a reoccurring anxiety about the wolf man here; the sleazy godfather in 'Travel', the pimply faced adolescent in 'Virginity' who tells Rosie, 'Christ, your fucking snatch is tight', Henri in 'Beauty'

who turns Justine to stone, the domestic violence perpetrator in 'Love', and the salesmen in 'Art' - 'the blackness was his smile, its colossal white teeth and, between them, flicking quick as whiplash, a forked tongue' (106). Rosie Little spends much of her journey wondering if 'the wolf has a heart' (127) and, aside from a brief and erotic encounter that 'inject(s) my bloodstream with some sort of magic cordial' (56), it appears he does not.

The final section, 'Destiny', gives us hope and for a moment we believe that Rosie has finally met an intelligent match and found love with the Irish poet, Russell, who delivers 'a suite of tender poems about bird flight and heartbreak' (241). Rosie looks out of the porthole, in Russell's cabin, seeing it as:

a kind of spirit level that measured my own equilibrium as I ebbed and flowed in Russell's bed. Within the white wash of daily-laundered sheets, there were moments of silence in which I could pick up the scent of vulnerability on his naked skin. Or I thought that I could. (246)

For Russell is married and, like almost every other male subject in the book, a conniving wolf as well. Perhaps it is the Pollyanna reader within me, wishing for a complete and happy ending, but at this point in the narrative I hungered for an alternative characterisation of the masculine subject, rather than this stark portrait of 'otherness'. If this text can so successfully bring the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* into the adult world, asking the female narrator to consider the onomatopoeic qualities, or lack of, in the expression *fellatio* (3), couldn't the masculine subject also be a little more subversive? Need he always be a wolf?

Moreover, whilst I am being picky, and in relation to a work I am so fond of, I will draw attention to the layout of this text. This novella is divided into two parts, whereby each chapter offers a small-boxed section with relevant words of advice from Rosie Little. Whilst I enjoy the old world aesthetic of these captions, a style which speaks directly back to the poetics of the text, I found the presence of this other narrative a little distracting and was unable to 'read' these parts together. A greedy reader, I am, wanting to flit past these other words of advice and just consume what seems to be the 'real' story. And yet, having said that, I urge readers not to miss 'A word from Rosie Little on: Brides', where she wryly suggests that:

I do not think that it is any accident that the croquembouche is a cake traditionally found at nuptial celebrations. I think it is the most perfect of metaphors: all those profiteroles piled high on a plate like so many flaky little brides' heads, and within each of them (in place of brains) a quantity of custard: thick and sweet. (157)

Cup of Tea

In the final pages of her story, Rosie Little 'joins the dots' and looks back to the prologue as she describes her polka-dotted guide holding 'a cup that was black with white polka-dots' (254) whilst softly telling her that both her shoe laces and inner ties are undone:

I looked inward at my heart. And indeed, there too, the criss-cross corsetry was slackened and gapping. I was all undone. And so I began to tug at my own heartstrings, pulling them up tight until there was the right of amount of tension. Then I bent down to my boots and laced them firmly too. (254)

In keeping with this rhetoric of self empowerment, Rosie Little tells her readers that whilst wearing her 'cherry-red leather' boots she will step back into the woods, just as soon as she has finished her cup of tea. Always reflective, Rosie Little points to the fragility of the subject, the flimsiness of what we call 'woman', while reminding girls that only they can lace their own shoes. While poetic and seemingly aware of an array of available theoretical discourses, our narrator has a familiar tone. Indeed, towards the end of the book she speaks to us as her friend, encouraging us to:

Oh please, admire me in my cruise company uniform: the snug-fitting bottle green skirt, the matching fitted jacket, the nylon nanna-print blouse, the beige pantyhose. And please, do, reach into the breast pocket of my jacket and bring out, for your amusement and mine, the laminated card which I could (and did) get a written reprimand for failing to carry. (237)

Rosie Little takes us by the hand and leads us through the forest. These cautionary tales prod us to ask questions and join in Rosie Little's palpable desire as she points out the ills, as well as the riches of the world; a seamless flit from ethereal 'walls ripely hung with painted apples' to the visceral grittiness of 'toddler shit' (p.236), fat and bodily fluids. In many ways, this is a book I would have liked to write.

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Too Soon and Too Late: Marilyn French's Last Novel

Marilyn French. *The Love Children*.

New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009.

Reviewed by Margaret Henderson

When your first published novel sells more than twenty million copies, is translated into nineteen or twenty languages, and has 'This book changes lives' splashed across the cover, as was the case with Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, then anything you publish after is going to pale by comparison. French, who died this year in May at the age of seventy-nine was, however, fearless in her pursuit of a large scale, radical feminist cultural project. She wrote, for example, a four volume feminist history of the world (*From Eve to Dawn: A History of Women*); a study of Shakespeare; works of political philosophy; and a number of novels that could be termed feminist popular fiction. *The Love Children*, French's last and posthumously-published novel, continues her quest to make women and feminist politics central to the historical narrative, and to explore contemporary social change in the genre of popular historical fiction. Given French's achievements, her tactical use of popular fiction (perhaps even soap opera), and her uncompromising political views right to the end of her life, I wanted to like this novel. *The Love Children* was, unfortunately, a disappointment, and I think that the reviewer who commented that the book read like a draft was spot on. French has subject matter of great potential, yet the book is underdeveloped, and is a sad way to end a politico-literary career.



The Love Children is French's intervention into the American culture wars surrounding the legacy of the 1960s. She uses a first person narrator, Jessamin (Jess) Leighton, and a focus on Jess and her small group of teenage friends to explore the types of lives made possible (and impossible) in American from the late 1960s onwards by virtue of the new social movements, the counterculture and, particularly, the anti-Vietnam War movement. These characters are 'the love children', as Jess explains: 'We thought that we were a miracle generation born to create a new way of seeing and feeling, a different morality. . . . We were against the Vietnam War, yes, but also all war, all violence, and racism' (49). Jess narrates her life from childhood to late middle age, largely without nostalgia or sentimentality, in that intimate and direct mode of address typical of French's work. Yet it is the narrator's voice that is one of the first and major weaknesses in the novel. There is a flatness to Jess's voice, and hence her character, attributable I suspect to an overemphasis on highly detailed narration but not much psychological interiority, and an emotionless tone atypical for French. So much of the story is arranged along the lines of 'this happened, then that happened' and so on, and suggests the book being only at draft stage. This flatness associated with the narrator also affects the narrative: it lacks tension and suspense, and thus has a meandering feel, reading more like an underworked and rather emotionless memoir rather than a fictional account. Considering the potentially sensationalistic subject matter of drugs, sex, and political upheaval, this is a

surprising outcome.

Jess is the only child of an alcoholic artist father and a frustrated academic mother; not surprisingly, their marriage breaks up while Jess is a child, sometime in the mid-1960s. She stays with her mother who goes on to live as an independent woman - she is the 'true' feminist heroine in the novel. The father is a minor presence in it; he finds fame as an artist but leads an increasingly reclusive and drunken life (though he has the resources to bankroll Jess at various times in the narrative - these love children are all thoroughly middle class). Interestingly, given that French has been accused of being a man-hater, the father is treated sympathetically (as are most of the male characters, a point to which I will return) - more a flawed fool than an overpowering patriarch.

The historical narrative takes shape through the fortunes of Jess's high school friends who are all against the Vietnam War: Sandy, Dolores, Steve, and Bishop. Steve is African American, and Jess's first boyfriend until the interracial tensions prove insurmountable. Sandy is a lesbian, Bishop is a non-patriarchal male, and Dolores is highly intelligent. While Jess's narration is retrospective, we are given a teenager's account of what it was like to protest against the War, the ensuing climate of tension, violence and divisiveness, a sense of rejecting mainstream values (typified by experimenting with drugs), and pondering how one should live a just and good life. Jess proclaims, for instance, that: 'no matter what, I wouldn't live like them [her parents] - I would live *right*' (63). Her characters go on to college, so we get a typical rendition of this American middle-class rite of passage: the agonised choice of college, the choice of subjects, the allocation of room mates, writing poetry, sexual experimentation and heartbreak, and political activism. In these early sections of the novel French clearly wants to bring to life these new types of subjectivities and the historical events shaping and being shaped by them, however, the novel's historical representation and mode of characterisation are other major weaknesses. The descriptions of demonstrations and other historical and political events are pedestrian, schematic, even a little clichéd:

I don't know when I realized there was another war going on, right here in our own country. I should have know the year John Kennedy was killed, because Medgar Evans was murdered that same year, and white people bombed a church in Birmingham, killing four little girls at Sunday school. I should have remembered how upset Mom got when Malcolm X was killed in 1965. But I didn't read newspapers, not even after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in 1968. It wasn't until Steve explained it all to me that I saw it - all of a sudden, in one glimpse. (46)

We have a historical novel that cannot always represent and thereby integrate history effectively. Moreover, the characters lack psychological depth or complexity. Jess tells us about them, rather than showing us. Much of the novel is long passages of reportage and Jess's interpretation of the characters' behaviour, punctuated only by brief sections of dialogue. As a result, characters remain sketched figures and the reader feels little empathy for their lives.

One of the stronger parts of the narrative is when Jess drops out of college and joins a commune. The meandering and detailed style of the narrative suits this section and shows how the commune functioned in practical and ideological terms. French doesn't romanticise commune life, rather she emphasises the drudgery and the inevitable power struggles, and it is here that she is most critical of her male characters. Until this point I wondered why the novel emphasised food and cooking so much - usually Jess's mother's (indeed, at times I felt I was reading a cookbook, and it made me think there is something deep in the American psyche concerning food). At the commune, Jess's passion for cooking emerges and flourishes, and this talent will later change the course of her life when she decides to leave

the commune and work as a cook. Jess's cooking seems to signify the mother-daughter bond, and gives her independence as well as connectedness.

When the commune reverts to a patriarchal structure Jess leaves for a new phase as single mother, cook, then eventually wife. By now the political narrative is muted, and most of the love children have become middle-aged, well-adjusted Americans who have managed to live life by a different moral code to that of the dominant culture. They have achieved contented lives without selling out. As one of the characters, Philo, comments towards the novel's end: 'All those things we shouted back then, Make love not war, peace and brotherhood-or sisterhood-whatever. We meant them' (326). French's version of the legacy of the 1960s is a gently positive one. Accordingly, French gives us an almost fairytale ending for Jess: happily married, a successful cook and restaurateur, with loving children, and reconciled with parents, yet with America involved in another war post-September 11 2001. This destination for the heroine makes me wonder: 'just how feminist is *The Love Children*?' We do get a sense that the novel wants to focus on a young woman's existential dilemmas in a time of major social and political change and, while Jess is more a peace activist rather than feminist, and the women's movement is only a muted presence in the novel, she does have a feminist consciousness. The firebrand feminist politics and melodrama of French's earlier works, however, are missing: in their place we find a rapprochement with motherhood, domesticity, heterosexuality, and men. Jess might claim that 'We really were the beginning of the brave new world' (50); *The Love Children*, however, suggests a more limited shake up of the social order, and is a bildungsroman featuring *Sturm und Drang*-lite.

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De-gendering Marriage

M. V. Lee Badgett. *When Gay People Get Married: What Happens When Societies Legalize Same-Sex Marriage*. New York & London: New York University Press, 2009.

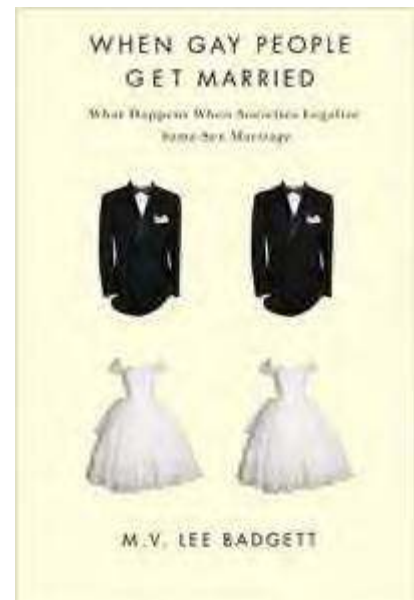
Reviewed by Mary Tomsic

Same-sex marriage is a hotly contested issue. Some of the most publicised conflicts have been seen in the United States of America, most recently after the success of California's Proposition 8 in November 2008. This limited marriage to being only between a man and a woman (just as Australia's Federal Marriage Act does). The change attracted much attention, as same-sex marriages had been first allowed in California earlier that year. Large protests and public debates occurred, including impassioned statements at the 2009 Academy Awards ceremony. After winning an Oscar for his performance as openly gay politician Harvey Milk, Sean Penn said that 'it [was] a good time for those who voted for the ban against gay marriage to sit and reflect and anticipate their great shame and the shame in their grandchildren's eyes if they continue that way of support'.

It was the earlier incarnations of these public debates that M.V. Lee Badgett said inspired her to research and write *When Gay People Get Married*. Along with her academic interest in the 'economics of marriage as it relates to gay and lesbian people' (5), it was the different possibilities for formal recognition of same-sex relationships in the Netherlands (where she was a visiting scholar in 2003) and the new reality of marriage as a choice for Badgett and her partner in their home state of Massachusetts, that have provided a rich background for Badgett's analysis of marriage.

While the Netherlands is used as a 'case study' country that has legalized same-sex marriage (alongside other ways of formally acknowledging and registering same and different sex relationships), the United States of America is the reference point for the discussion. There are four 'big questions' that sit behind the analysis. These are identified by Badgett as not having been adequately addressed in current debates. They are: Will gay people change marriage? Will marriage change gay people? What path should change take in the United States: immediate or gradual? And are alternatives to marriage needed? (5-6) The book is organised around these questions and Badgett clearly presents her responses to them. She doesn't see marriage being significantly changed by same-sex couples; her research demonstrates that the Dutch same-sex couples she interviewed were drawn to marriage for a similar range of reasons that different-sex couples were. Badgett believes same-sex marriage will provide positive changes the people involved, largely by facilitating social inclusion. Following this, marriage, rather than other options (like civil partnerships) should be the goal. Finally, Badgett says the USA should not fear change and hide behind a belief in 'American exceptionalism' but, instead, should pay attention to changes in other parts of the world 'to help us understand what will happen if we give gay couples the right to marry' (212).

By stating these broad responses I don't want to suggest that Badgett presents a simplistic argument in this book. She very carefully examines many of the competing interests and contradictory ways in



which parties have entered into same-sex marriage debates and marriages. For instance she describes how some of her subjects, as lesbian feminists, have negotiated their changing political and personal beliefs about the institution of marriage generally, and same-sex marriage specifically, alongside the practice of de-gendering marriage (examples are given on 93-94, 205). The question of monogamy is also briefly examined in relation to gay male subjects interviewed. Most reported that they were not monogamous, but nonetheless 'clearly [recognized] the existence of the monogamy norm and have felt its power' (95). She concludes that same-sex couples in the Netherlands she interviewed used marriage is a site of activism for gender equality but not to publicly undermine monogamy (96).

Badgett writes in a direct and compelling tone and, although she is an economist, the approach taken is a broad one; her research base includes international demographic data, surveys, policies and detailed interviews with Dutch same-sex couples. The testimony of Dutch same-sex couples, along with her own marriage story, enable Badgett to effectively interrogate the complex relationships between individuals, institutions and societies. This is particularly effective, as evidence from the interviews is used to create a dialogue and speculate on how meaning is made for individuals. One example of this is seen when examining the work of gay activists who campaign against same-sex marriage. These activists argue, among other things, that gay culture could be lost when pursuing heteronormative recognition in the form of marriage. In contrast, the somewhat contradictory stories of Dutch married same-sex couples question this. Couples talked about marriage affording them a sense of normalcy, which they enjoyed (121-123), but it also simultaneously made 'them more visibly gay to the rest of the world' (133) when for example, they travelled internationally or even locally used the term 'wife' or 'husband' to refer to their same-sex partner. It is in interweaving the personal pictures with complex political arguments and social realities that Badgett's analysis is most compelling.

Another highlight of the book for me is the chapter in which she expertly analyses demographic data from various countries to demonstrate the fallacy of claims that legal recognition of same-sex relationships has caused a decreased marriage rate; a decoupling of parenthood from marriage and a decline in the relevance of marriage. It is research like Badgett's that demonstrates the invaluable nature of academic scholarship in intelligently and systematically responding to such claims. Whether those who oppose the legalisation of same-sex marriage will respond to this work is, of course, another matter.

After reading *When Gay People Get Married*, I was left with a sense of Badgett's belief and faith in the institution of marriage and its practice. Despite being convinced by many of her arguments, and the value of marriage being an option for same-sex couples, I do not entirely share her positive outlook for marriage. There are ideas that I think are important to interrogate further, such as the links between marriage and weddings, as well as the religious aspects of marriage, and why marriage is seen as a desirable social arrangement in which to raise children.

The blurb on the insider cover of *When Gay People Marry* describes it as a primer, and it is a superb primer. It is an invaluable introductory text, which outlines key elements of the debate surrounding same-sex marriage for all interested readers. While it focuses on the USA as its reference point, it is nonetheless highly relevant to an Australian audience as it interrogates marriage in a conceptual manner. Badgett's book has broadly canvassed the debate for me in a way that has kept me thinking about it, and prompted me to ask many more questions.

Mary Tomsic has most recently been teaching in the areas of Western sexuality history as well as gender theory in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne.

Reticent Writing

Marele Day. *The Sea Bed*.

Sydney: New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2009.

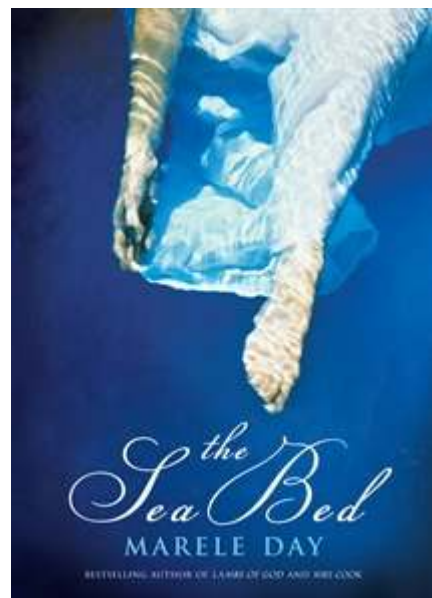
Reviewed by Christine Edwards

The Sea Bed is a novel that relishes secrecy. Given that it comes from accomplished murder mystery writer Marele Day, this is not entirely surprising. Indeed, the secrets cover a lot of whodunit material: there are hidden agendas as well as silenced pasts, unfamiliar settings and suppressed emotions. Of course there should also be a detective, but even that role is approximated by the foreign Yugen, who himself is immersed in secrets. The only serious deviation seems to be the absence of a dead body on the first page. Without one, the suspense seems to falter.

The book certainly opens slowly. With unnamed characters both in the prologue and then the opening chapters, the focus appears unclear. However, Day rewards a persistent reader. The tale unfolds into a web of emotionally complex characters that are all subtly connected in surprising ways (surprising not least because of the aforementioned reticence). Yugen, a repressed monk, gradually reveals his mission to put to rest the remains of his teacher Soshi, but just as gradually he finds his curiosity and desire resurfacing. Meanwhile Chicken, a local from the island, struggles in the face of her fading heritage as a 'sea woman' as well as coping with the absence of her adoptive sister, Lilli. She now lives in the city, and is revealed to be slowly suffocating in her new life. Yet she clings to her independence where she can find it, until the prospect of turning back to her home is more than she can handle. This challenging tale raises the issues of dying traditions, disenchanted youth, and crippling repression.

Secrets are to some extent necessary to any story, but here they pervade most levels of the novel. The first and most obvious is that of setting. The story is set in Japan but Day does not flag this anywhere in the novel itself. The only direct reference can be found in the acknowledgements, which simply describe a 'two-month residency in Japan, 2005' (287). Further she resists specific scene-setting: the prologue is set in a sea, the first chapter in a forest, and the second in a city. Yet setting is important: sea women are only found in that area, and for them the sea takes on an unusually central role. There seems to be a self-conscious (almost at times contrived) reticence in her prose, but the largest demonstration of this is through her characters.

The earliest and perhaps most difficult character to come to grips with is the monk Yugen. At first he is almost entirely opaque: he appears nameless for the opening chapters, and his background and apparent task are carefully obscured. This namelessness early in the novel is jarring, but Day later reveals that his name is somehow meaningless to him. In the temple, it was mostly unused. What this does highlight though, is a lack of separate identity, and casual observers view him in this generic way. For Yugen, secrets mean an almost tangible difference between outward appearance and inner feelings. Behind such a label as 'the monk' these inner feelings are overlooked, so to be nameless makes this point. Yet there is also a personal dimension since the novel suggests that, having repressed many of his



true feelings, he is rediscovering the secrets of himself at the same time as we do. Clearly Day is building towards this discovery, but it takes perseverance to get past what appears to be a blank and unfeeling character.

I think it is important at this point to consider the representation of monks. Surprisingly few details of monastery-life are given, and this secret is never really unsilenced. Presumably audiences would mostly comprise people with little knowledge of Japanese Buddhist monks. In consequence some descriptions feel discordant, as his apparent rigid behaviour is contrasted with his admission of drunkenness at a festival. To represent Yugen as a monk who is both heavily repressed and close to leaving the Temple without giving more of an explanation of his life in the monastery leaves the reader in the dark. What is it to be a Japanese monk? Does it only shape repressed individuals, or is Yugen a special case? The overall representation appears negative, particularly as the only other monk described in detail is eventually revealed to have entered to heal his broken heart. The only real conclusions that can be drawn are either that to be a monk is harmful for certain people, or that it inevitably leads to repression. I would have been more satisfied if this had been set in context.

This should not overshadow the power of this story, and I feel it is at its best when connecting her web of characters. Lilli, who lives in the city, is a fascinating counter-point to Yugen. Indeed, following her own self-exile, the return to her home is in many ways as tentative and blundering as the monk's own adventure. While Yugen is repressed, Lilli is emotionally scarred, and even her own experience leaves her as stunted as Yugen is in unfamiliar surroundings. She is not uncreative, but few of her plans are ever worked through, and her lack of agency builds as the story unfolds. In particular, she seems to find herself objectified by men. She dresses fashionably, and men are undeniably attracted to her, but in each case she seems somehow unsatisfied or threatened by their attentions. One of her most interesting daydreams is that of a woman's 'pleasure parlour', where she imagines herself running her own business ('Geisha Guys') that caters for women. But rather than showing ambitious or revolutionary intentions, I think it reveals her underlying dissatisfaction: men's needs are catered for but never her own. What this means for her character is unclear. What needs is she referring to? Are they purely sexual as she implies? Is she simply reacting against men she despises by trying to outdo them? Or is it just an attempt to articulate an imbalance? If so, is sex even what she is really after? Day, I think, suggests not. The natural companion to secrecy is discovery, and I think for these characters this means knowledge and healing. For Lilli, healing requires love, both familial and sexual.

There is a relentless quality to the novel. It ordains that Lilli will return perhaps more than is strictly probable, and also that healing will eventually ensue. This relentlessness is personified through the sea, which is almost figured as a character in its own right: 'The sea swarms all over him. It is alive...It leaves no part of him unexamined. Then, release' (1). I think this is the effect of the story as a whole: it swarms over the most desperate boundaries of ignorance, pride, and secrets in all their manifestations. It is determined to redeem and renew. This is an interesting metaphor in regards to the story's preoccupation with secrets since, much as in the usual murder mystery, order is restored. But this order is figured to be just out in the future, perceivable but in some sense still unapproachable. And secrets, much as in real life, still rule.

Christine Edwards is studying at the University of Queensland and is in her final year of a Bachelor of Arts. She has an ongoing interest in feminist studies in a number of disciplines including literature, history, and philosophy. Her particular study fields include Early Modern and Victorian literature.

A Very Masculine Sphere?

Susannah Fullerton. *Brief Encounters: Literary travellers in Australia 1836-1939*. Sydney: Picador, Pan Macmillan, 2009.

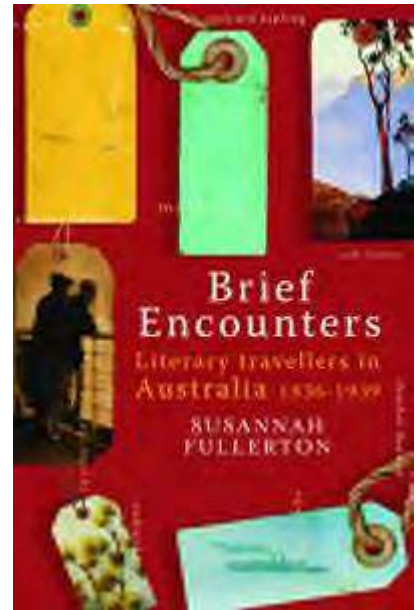
Reviewed by Jena Woodhouse

Susannah Fullerton's criteria in selecting writers for inclusion in *Brief Encounters* were predicated upon what she saw as the enduring literary quality and popularity of the writers' works. The fact that they wrote in English, visited Australia during the period 1836-1939 and spent long enough here, or were sufficiently impressed by what they encountered, to record their impressions in detail or at length or, in some cases, to have been creatively inspired by the experience were other determining factors. The result reads something like a collective travel memoir embedded in a third-person commentary, and is a *mélange* of the familiar as variously observed through the eyes of strangers (who are themselves familiar to readers in varying degrees) and previously unknown or unnoticed details that render the familiar fresh and interesting, so that recognition sometimes coincides with revelation.

Fullerton selected eleven writers who visited Australia in the period under review, from a long list summarised in the Introduction. In chronological order, those whose travels to the Great South Land are recounted here, partly in their own words, complemented by Fullerton's thorough and engaging contextualisation, are: Charles Darwin, Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Jack London, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, DH Lawrence and HG Wells.

They include those who were primarily interested in Australia or certain aspects of it, such as Charles Darwin, who was fascinated by the behaviour of an antlion on a riverbank near Bathurst, but disappointed by the 'scrubby' and 'exceedingly monotonous' eucalypts. It is distressing to learn that his desire to see Australian fauna was matched only by his desire to shoot it. Having failed to see or to souvenir a kangaroo, he also predicted that kangaroos would soon become extinct. Darwin suffered many weeks of seasickness in the course of his voyage on the *Beagle*, but this did not predispose him to appreciate Sydney society, and he concluded: 'On the whole I do not like New South Wales.' (p. 20)

Other visitors seem to have been chiefly interested in themselves in Australia, rather than the country itself. These include Mark Twain, who in 1895 embarked on a strenuous lecture tour intended to bring him back from the brink of bankruptcy after an unwise investment in the Paige Compositor, a machine with eighteen thousand movable parts which could never be made to synchronise perfectly. Rudyard Kipling's need for respite from personal problems prompted him in 1891 to put as much distance as possible between himself and the source of confusion in an attempt to clarify his feelings, or, as he put it, to 'get clean away and re-sort myself'. (p. 137) Conan Doyle's motive in visiting Australia in 1920 was to convert as many Australians as possible to Spiritualism.



Whereas Darwin in 1836 had formed the opinion that everyone in Sydney was obsessed with making money, and found a field trip to study dung beetles a welcome escape from the rancour and jealousy of Sydney society as he saw it (p. 19), Kipling in 1890 disapproved of what he perceived as that city's hedonistic pursuits: 'I went also to Sydney, which was populated by leisured multitudes all in their shirt sleeves and all picnicking all the day' (p. 143). Most of Fullerton's visitors evinced an interest in the convict legacy and the plight of Indigenous Australians, and many were critical of what they termed the Australian tendency to 'blow': to aggrandise what had been achieved since European settlement, perhaps as compensation for feelings of inferiority, or out of a desire for validation.

Part of the appeal of this account of early literary travellers' exploits in Australia lies in Fullerton's ability to capture the personality and stylistic inflections of each writer, conveying their attitudes and responses with an eye and ear for telling detail. Presenting the book in Brisbane, Fullerton confessed that in the course of her research she had, as it were, fallen in love with all but one of her male subjects, and she also made it clear that her passion for literary classics in English and a desire to inspire others to read them lends ardour to her enterprise.

The author's perceptions of her protagonists and the freshness and humour of her writing are engaging, and are informed but not burdened by meticulous research. A sense of dramatic timing is used to good effect, as in recounting Robert Louis Stevenson's arrival at Sydney's grand Victoria Hotel in 1890:

Stevenson looked as if he had only days to live. He was dressed in ill-fitting, creased and travel-stained clothes, with a wide-brimmed straw hat and ungroomed over-long hair. His wife looked even stranger wearing a 'holoku', a loose Pacific Island dress... The couple's luggage was packed into three cedarwood chests held together with rope, some 'Tokelau' buckets made from tree trunks, palm-leaf baskets, native mats, rolls of 'tapa' cloth, calabashes, and a motley collection of coconut shells tied up with fish-netting. (101-2)

Many of the visitors, including Agatha Christie and, perhaps most famously, D. H. Lawrence, recorded their impressions of the landscape. Christie in 1920 wrote of 'a faintly austere' and 'virginal' quality (p. 278), while Lawrence in 1922 wrote of looking 'into' the landscape rather than at it:

It is extraordinarily subtle, *unknown* country. The gum trees are greyish, with pale trunks and so often the pale, pure silver dead trees with vivid limbs: then the extraordinary *delicacy* of the air and the blue sky, the weird bits of creek and marsh, dead trees, sand, and very blue hills... so apparently monotonous, yet when you look into it, such subtly different distances, in layers, and such exquisite forms. (308)

What *Brief Encounters* may lack for some contemporary readers is the kind of overall balance that women's perspectives and perceptions might have contributed. One can only lament the fact that seemingly there are fewer accounts of travels in Australia in the period 1836-1939 by women of comparable literary prominence to the male writers represented here. It would seem that established women writers were perhaps not in as favourable a position as men to undertake the arduous journey as independent travellers from the northern hemisphere in order to record their experiences, so the gender bias and lionising of the writer as male, and male as writer, is explicit, and is presumably a reflection of the status quo in the period covered in *Brief Encounters*.

Not that women were absent from the events described, since Fanny Osbourne accompanied her husband, RL Stevenson; Charmian London accompanied Jack London and pulled her weight as crew throughout the voyage of the *Snark* across the Pacific from California (predictably as First Mate to his

Captain); Mark Twain's wife Olivia staunchly attended virtually all his public lectures; Frieda was never far from DH Lawrence's side, and Conan Doyle's wife also dutifully accompanied her 'great man'. However, these women seem to have been too preoccupied with their supporting roles and the social whirl that ensued from their husbands' celebrity status to have recorded their impressions for publication, and indeed it is debatable how much latitude they would have permitted themselves for independent or original reflection. Fanny Osbourne, less reticent than some of her counterparts, expressed the view that the faces of Sydneysiders had a criminal cast to them, an opinion not shared by Stevenson, and Charmian London did go on to publish a two-volume biography, *The Book of Jack London* (New York, The Century Co., 1921), but the mode and quality of her thinking seem to have been eclipsed by that of her subject, as the following excerpts suggest:

Some feminine journalist, after reading my 'Log', described the cruise as 'a disappointment'... But I, with a firm philosophy that it is the Big Things which count, and with the memory of my Strong Traveler beside me, ask that no one shall entertain the opinion that it was not the most wonderful, victorious thing which ever happened to the right man and woman.' (*The Book of Jack London*, 163-4).

In similar vein she depicts Jack at work during the cruise of the *Snark*:

realising that a half-hour had been lost from his busy time, he would pick up his charmed ink-pencil:

There - don't talk to me any more, woman! How am I going to get my thousand words done, to pay for those pearls we're going to buy in the Paumotus and Torres Straits, and all that turtle shell from Melanesia, if you keep me from work now!' (*BJL* 164- 5)

While the women writers who travelled to Australia as visitors in the period 1836-1939 and recorded their observations were greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts, according to Fullerton's Introduction there were in fact several women writers of some renown who came during that time-frame and whose writings reflected that experience: namely, 'American temperance reformer and journalist, Jessie Ackerman, who 'visited several times around the turn of the century and wrote *Australia from a Woman's Point of View* in 1913'. Rudyard Kipling's cousin Angela Thirkell found material for a work of fiction as a result of a visit to Australia, and Beatrice Webb visited briefly with her husband, Sidney. Her intensely negative reaction to all she encountered is recorded in her *Australian Diary*. (Introduction xiii-xiv)

Interestingly, the lone female writer represented in *Brief Encounters* - Agatha Christie did not travel to Australia independently, but to accompany her husband, who was a member of a Mission to promote a forthcoming Empire Exhibition to be held in London in 1924 as a showcase for the products of the British Empire. The most enjoyable part of her Australian visit appears to have been a holiday without her husband on a property at Boonah, south-east Queensland, where she was greatly impressed by the practical and social capabilities of the women of the family, which happened to be one of the most affluent and elite grazing dynasties in the country.

While Fullerton understandably refrains from passing comment on matters outside her province (which is to present a composite portrait, or perhaps album, of Australia as observed through certain practised eyes at a given time), one cannot help noticing that most of the visitors seem to have invested less of themselves than they gained from their visits to Australia, and in most cases were not here long enough to develop any deeper awareness of the social complexities and inequities that still clamour for

attention and redress.

Despite the regrettable absence of a range of female visitors' viewpoints on an entire century of life and society in colonial and postcolonial Australia, seemingly a reflection of the relative scarcity of eligible contenders, *Brief Encounters* is enlivened by the wit and (generally) intelligent observations, the reflections, idiosyncracies and controversies generated by the peccadilloes and prejudices of the eleven writers whose diverse gifts are brought to bear on a subject most of us who live here find perennially fascinating: what it is that makes Australia different, and special. While the writers Fullerton has assembled between these covers make no claim to definitive answers, they were in their time as interested in the question as many readers and writers are today.

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A Told Story

Amanda Lohrey, *Vertigo: A Pastoral*. Melbourne: Black Ink, 2008.

By Helen Gilfind

In July of 2009, Amanda Lohrey gave the Barry Andrews Annual Address in Canberra. She spoke about the 'post-pastoral,' demographic phenomenon of Sea and Tree-Changers. She read from her short novel, *Vertigo*, presenting its central characters, Luke and Anna, as exemplars of the demographic type who turn to Nature in order to flee 'the anxieties of economic rationalism' and the 'future time' that 'characterizes postmodern capitalism.'



I was surprised and disappointed by the analysis *Vertigo* offers of why privileged people, in privileged countries like Australia, increasingly feel the need to escape to Nature. Perhaps I have judged Lohrey's book unfairly against my own (mis)interpretation of her intentions. However, whatever Lohrey's intent, Luke and Anna's story does not convince and there are thematic and structural reasons for this.

The text signals Luke and Anna as belonging to the so-called X-Generation: they are thirty-something, IT-based workers with a Bohemian sensibility that somehow co-exists with their acute dependency on mobile phones, broadband, cable, Google and good coffee. I prickled as I met them, feeling myself once again witness to the stereotyping of one generation by another. More importantly, Lohrey's focus on 'X-Genners' actually disallows her from truly exploring the Sea and Tree-Change phenomenon, as it is fifty and sixty-somethings who have the means to live without employment in isolated areas. Lohrey conveniently makes Luke and Anna self-employed and 'online,' but this results in them seeming exceptional to, rather than reflective of the demographic they are meant to typify.

As Luke and Anna search for Eden, the reader realizes that they are really fleeing their unspoken grief for their lost child. Ghost-like, The Boy appears and disappears throughout the narrative. When I was introduced to The Boy, I prickled again: Luke and Anna, in so many ways flat stereotypes, again become conveniently exceptional in order to suit the text's need for poignancy and motive. How many X-Genners (who 'typically' delay or never have children) outlive their first born? Here, I may seem contradictory: on the one hand, I am criticizing Lohrey for relying on stereotypes and on the other I am criticizing her for not being true to those stereotypes. However, what I am reacting to, I think, is that *Vertigo* seems unsure of its own subject. Is it a wholly imagined story about two grieving parents or is it an analysis, through fiction, of X-Genners and/or of privileged urban people seeking solace in Nature?

Sometimes, 'literariness' gets in the way of good literature. Throughout the novel, and despite their private and incommunicable grief, Luke and Anna relate to The Boy in exactly the same way. This unnuanced use of The Boy makes him read as little more than a self-conscious 'literary device' and suggests that it is the narrative voice that ultimately cripples this novel. *Vertigo* is a told story: nothing in this novel is shown to us. Through The Boy the narrator generalizes about Anna and Luke's grief and does not allow readers to draw their own conclusions about them as two individual characters.

Likewise, we are told that Anna feels a sense of vertigo in her new life, but that feeling is never evoked through the writing. Luke's reading of *The Land That is Desolate* (written, 'coincidentally,' by a grieving parent), is another unsubtle means through which Lohrey tries to coerce readers towards specific textual interpretations. One could argue that the novel's distant, 'telling' voice, and Lohrey's use of such 'archetypal' elements as The Snake and The Bushfire, give the novel an allegorical feel. However, just as it is never clear just what Vertigo's focus is, it is equally unclear what the novel might be an allegory of. Vertigo's 'archetypal' elements thus read as little more than predictable symbolical and plot devices.

Cast in the passive role of a consumer of an over-worked meaningfulness, I felt suffocated by the weight of Vertigo's literary design. 'Literariness' as 'generic formula' has got in the way of this novel succeeding as a truly successful and human piece of literature.

Reference: The comment in the first paragraph is taken from Lohrey's abstract in the Conference Program for ASAL 2009: Common Readers and Cultural Critics, held 8-11 July 2009, p.12.

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