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Even Trees Bleed Ashley Morgan-Shae

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Aboriginal Middle-Class Society (Did I hear right?)

By Yvette Holt

It's the middle class that feels the luxury of being able to have causes - Orson Scott Card.

There is a new buzz word spreading like wild fire on the lips of some in certain discrete social pockets of our diverse and varied networks and no it's not called Indigenous Leadership as intriguing as that topic is in itself, let's just say I'm willing to let that one well enough alone for a future piece of writing. I'm actually talking about the notion of an Aboriginal middle-class society, and apparently it is gathering swift momentum amongst a lot of white folks around this wide-brown country of ours and, make no mistake, it appears to be gathering a lot of momentum and tongues-a-wagging from Indigenous Australians as well. But before I venture on I should warn you that for the benefit of this column I will almost entirely refer to Aboriginal middle-class society as the AMCS, I know not another illegitimate acronym (sorry readers). First, I'm sure most of us have heard in our lifetime one or two or perhaps all of the following statements when referring to Blacks who for instance may appear to be or are indeed living above the prescribed breadline, or those who may drive a flash car or reside in an affluent postcode, or heavens forbid there could be one or two amongst us who actually read Tolstoy just for leisure while downing a bowl of oats; well, I'm sure you get the jpeg. There are literally dozens of insensitive ways to best describe a fellow Blackfella who may appear to be or is indeed elevating above the challenging stereotypical notion that all Aboriginal people are equal to the bottom end of the prescribed food chain in a postcolonial Australian society. Well fasten your seatbelts and, in all reluctance, I will dish out a few of the not-so-nice colloquial terms I have heard thrown around inside social circles of both Black and white Australians throughout my adult life including; uptown-blacks, coconuts, flash-blacks, city-blacks, gammon-blacks, gubbah-blacks and, my all time personal favourite, bourgeois-blacks. And just for the record I have been called one or two of those titles over the years and my reply was forthcoming and simplistic in my assassinating wisdom, 'oh dear, but I've been called worse names by better people'. A shrinking violet I am not; but a thorn in one's side, well let's just leave it at that!

So is this AMCS imaginary or real? And if it is the latter what's it really all about then? Over the weeks I have engaged in lively conversations with fellow Indigenous Australians over the notion of an AMCS. Does it exist? Is it exclusive? And why would you bother, if it's just another way of being an accomplice in a white man's world? Most of these discussions held legitimacy and criticism; after all is that not the germinate seed of our democracy to allow our voices to be heard for better or worse? 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it' (Francois Marie Arouet better known as Voltaire). Or do we uniformly subscribe to the insidious tablet that only the marginalised shall remain margined? I think not.

I shall first take you back to last month, when myself and another twenty or so Indigenous academics, general staff and administrators were invited to our 'staff retreat' held in Sydney City over three consecutive days. Our University shall remain nameless to protect the innocent, the ignorant and the incandescent. Over the course of the 'retreat', our staff were by joined by Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, university personnel and an assortment of guest-speakers. Appearing in the mid-afternoon on the very first day as a guest-speaker on Indigenous Leadership, yes, you read that right, we were delighted to welcome no other than the effervescent Father Frank Brennan. I should confess right here and right now (no pun) that I tire effortlessly when I hear fellow citizens (Black or white) sounding all the right bells and whistles on this most questionable line of subject. I was assuredly quite intrigued to hear Frank make mention of a growing phenomenon being that of an AMCS. Immediately after hearing this chain of words exit Frank's mouth my somewhat relaxed posture shot upright like a firecracker on Invasion Day. I snapped out of my mid-afternoon slumber and decided to lend my ears to this discussion post-haste. The mere thought of interpreting the concept of an Aboriginal middle-class society intrigues me beyond all rationale at the best of times, especially when it is being lamented by one as decorated in Aboriginal affairs as Frank is.

Now don't get me wrong I'm not knocking the man, but I'm not in complete agreement with everything he has to say either and, furthermore, this isn't about one man's vision, it's about the collected vision of a People and what their views and opinions are on this tactile subject. After some relentless post 'staff retreat' investigating of his brief presentation, if not for my own sanity I was then assured by a number of folks that this was indeed not his first outing for flying the AMCS bumper-sticker. Phew, and here I was thinking that I had an exclusive scoop.

The notion of an Aboriginal middle-class society is as alluring and developing as it is conceivable and indeed doable. As a matter of fact it is apparently manifesting itself all around us, if you believe in the suggested good-will of some. Naturally one would think that an AMCS inhabits an entire sphere of its own cultural code and conduct, similar--well as similar as one could get to the incubating African American Middle-Classism; again, another article. You needn't be Einstein to work this one out, right? But you need to at least be a realist when dealing with this oh-so-you-beaut-fair-dinkum notion that we have this separate social equator wholesomely distinct from the rest of middle-class Australians. And by the way white middle-class Australia is distinctly unique from middle-class Australia because white does not entail our ethnic cousins including the Chinese, the Greeks, the Italians, the Lebanese, the Russians, etcetera, and so on.

Journalistically speaking it would be detrimental for me to have penned this article without first consulting fellow collegial comrades especially given that they too had attended our 'staff retreat'. Neither of my comrades wished to be named rather they are choosing to go by their identified clan groups and here is what at least two of them had to say when propositioned with this burning question:

What are your thoughts around an Aboriginal middle-class society and are you a part of it?

Birra-Gubba male, aged 42 - I don't believe my family and I are middle-class; both my wife and I have careers not just jobs, our children attend school, are well educated and we promote education in our household as the vehicle of choice. I would be embarrassed to think of ourselves as Aboriginal middle-class. It is not something we aspire to be, we are just us, and we are comfortable being a family who don't want for anything materially. But that does not make us better than or above anybody else. Aboriginality is who I am and who my children are too. I don't believe that in order for us to advance we need to be further categorised by 'others'.

Kooma female, aged 48 - The thought of an Aboriginal middle-class society doesn't appeal to me one bit. I come from a family of workers, where we have always worked and always provided for our kin and have always looked after one another. It is insulting to think that just because there are Blackfellas who work or own a car or own their own home that people can then feel good and sit back and judge and think, oh well, they must be different to the rest of them or they must be middle-class. After all what white people think is their middle-class will never be equal to what they believe our middle-class will be. I know who I am and I know where I belong. A middle-class society is not my idea of success.

Interesting thoughts from collegial comrades. I would have liked to have added the thoughts and interpretation of non-Indigenous comrades, but alas, my space is restricted to a word count. Back to friendly Frank, having listened to him get quite excited and enthused before this group of notable Indigenous educators, I must say the statement regarding an Aboriginal middle-class society both awakened and provoked an inwardly somewhat squeamish reaction from within. This growing, or should that be glowing, reference to Aboriginal Australians having aspired to a hierarchal class-system which sees a percentage, albeit a minute percentage, of us Blackfellas who are demonstrably rising on par toward our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters of middle-classism can feature as almost as tokenistic to us as it is palatable to those not subjected to racial marginalisation.

Furthermore to middle-classism do we then go on to declare a working-class or lower-class Aboriginal society? Truly, how long is this nonsensical ball of string? One question I would dearly like to hear raised at these bountiful 'staff retreats' is: When can Aboriginal people living in this luxuriously ancient, sweeping country of ours simply be known for just being? Does middle class best describe Indigenous Australian folks who would appear to own their own home, send their children to a private school, drive a vehicle that may otherwise attract the persistent glaze of a law-enforcer at a traffic light, holiday abroad, drink Moët & Chandon, Dom Perignon or, dare I say, purchase at David Jones or Myer (because let's face it, one never truly shops at DJ's, it is and will always forever remain a department store that is all about the experience of a purchase--less the overtly persistent shadowing of a plains clothes store detective.)

Is it our cultural destiny to be cushioned, subjected, and categorised by the observation of a few good men and women who mean well, but really are missing the mark on this Phar Lap of back-handed compliments? Maybe I should sound this out in a national debate, and balance the burgeoning question from closet supporters of this theory, by definition they appear to be all interconnected through social networks? Or maybe I should stop driving my late model silver bullet Fairlane Ghia LPG converter with rear sensors accompanied with all the bells and whistles at the risk of looking middle-class? So what's it really all about then, you may very well ask? When is an insult not an insult? When is knowing that you are doing the very best you can in order to sustain a longer, healthier, fulfilling and comfortably financial life for you and your family enough to knock down the tall poppy syndrome that spreads like fire-ants and quite often then not on a patch of the proverbial green in our own backyards?

Myself personally, I come from a long, long line of high achievers and contributors to Aboriginal education, affairs, women's leadership and social justice as do many Aboriginal people. My parents are each born from the original old school, they are proud, strong, Black and they are gatekeepers of their heritage for their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For what my parents are enjoying today they have worked hard for all their lives and now, in retirement and beyond, they enjoy the most delicious and rewarding fruits of their labour, just as it should be. Why would I choose to paste them with another label such as platinum members of an AMCS?

I'll leave you all with this question - when is a spade left to remain a spade? Answer - when its head is no longer buried in the quickening sand of oppressive tilling. I would certainly welcome comments on this ever so popular after-dinner topic from readers. An Aboriginal middle-class society...did I hear right? And to think I actually thought Tolstoy was an exciting millennium addition to the Lego clan. Duh?

Gothic Imagination or Maban Reality?

Katrin Althans. *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film, Representations and Reflections.* Studies in Anglophone Literature and Culture, Vol. 2. Bonn University Press, Runipress, 2010, pp.214.

Reviewed by Mudrooroo

When I was engaged in writing an Australian Aboriginal surround play to the German playwright Heiner Muller's drama, *Der Atrag* (The Mission), set during the period of the French Revolution in darkest Jamaica and at the time of the French Revolution (when Australia was being invaded by the British and assorted Europeans), I discovered the *Gothic* when I sought to gain some understanding of that period --and also because I found Muller's depiction of sexuality somewhat, well, gothic .

These walls,' said he, 'were once the seat of luxury and vice. They exhibited a singular instance of the retribution of Heaven, and were from that period forsaken, and abandoned to decay.' His words excited my curiosity, and I enquired further concerning their meaning. - Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*



Australia was invaded during the height of the *Gothic* literary movement in Europe, as Kathrin Althans points out in her book under review here, and the invaders sometimes seemed to have used its elements in establishing their narratives of the discovery and settlement of Australia. Sensational, melodramatic narratives with the use of supernatural things that go bump in the night, the *Gothic* novel dominated English literature from 1764 from the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole to its 'supposed' demise in 1820. The genre drew many of its intense images from the graveyard poets, landscapes of vast dark forests with vegetation that bordered on excessive, concealed ruins with horrific rooms, monasteries and a forlorn melancholy character with a fabled spectre or a bleeding nun to add to the terror. Important novelists and books were Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian; or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1797), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). After the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820 the genre went underground though it surfaced with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

The development of the *Gothic* Novel from the melancholy overtures of sentimental literature to the rise of the sublime in the graveyard poets had a profound impact on the budding Romantic movement from Wordsworth to Shelley. The astounding features and use of the sublime and the overt use of the supernatural profoundly influenced the style and material of the emerging romantics. *Gothic* novels led Coleridge to write a *Gothic* drama, Shelley to write two *Gothic* novels and Byron to write *Manfred*-- they later inspired Mudrooroo to write what would become known as his Vampire trilogy.

The *Gothic* stream of images was ideal for motion pictures and from the first the style and content was taken in with the lumbering *Frankenstein* monster, a smash hit. He was followed by the vampire, the most important one being *Dracula* from a novel by Irish author Bram Stoker. It was first published as a hardcover in 1897 by Archibald Constable and has never been out of print, nor has the Count been out of popularity. In the 1980s the American writer, Anne Rice, made the vampire a best seller in a series of novels. Her vampire characters were depicted as struggling with eternity and loneliness. Their ambivalent or tragic sexuality held deep attractions for many readers, making her works popular in the eighties and through the nineties.

The powerful imagery of gothic films began in German expressionist cinema after the First World War and then passed onto the Universal Studio's films of the twenties and thirties. Hammer Film Productions, a film production company based in the United Kingdom produced a series of 'Hammer Horror' films from the mid-1950s until the 1970s. Hammer popularized the vampire *Dracula* as a romantic hero doomed to immortality or a stake in the heart.

In 1986 came the film *Gothic* by Ken Russell which energetically portrayed the genre with all its sexuality, supernaturalism and splendid natural scenery. There even emerged in the eighties a cult, the Goths or *Gothics*, and they are still with us with fashion shops and clubs in the major Australian cities. Although it may be said that the Goth subculture really harks back to the late eighteenth century the *Gothic* stream has taken in the popular imagery of horror films and television. In the 1960s, TV series, *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, used *Gothic* stereotypes for camp comedy. The Byronic hero, in particular, was a key precursor to the male gothic image, with *Dracula*'s iconic portrayal by Bela Lugosi appealing powerfully to early Goth members. They were attracted by Lugosi's aura of camp menace, elegance and mystique. Some people credit the band Bauhaus' first single 'Bela Lugosi's Dead', released August 1979, with the start of the *Gothic* subculture, though many prior art house movements influenced *Gothic* fashion and style, the illustrations and paintings of Swiss artist, H. R. Giger being one of the earliest. Other notable examples include Siouxsie Sioux of the musical group Siouxsie and the Banshees, Robert Smith of *The Cure*, and Dave Vanian of the band *The Damned*.

The *Gothic* stream can thus be seen as flowing through Western popular culture, but it must be asked whether the *Gothic*--an essentially white movement with an emphasis on the palest of pale faces set off by the blackest of black clothes--has been taken up by Aboriginal writers and film makers for use in their productions. Well, according to Kathrin Althans, Aboriginal post-activist writers and film makers including Vivienne Clemen, Beck Cole, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright 'employ a hauntingly European mode of narration in their works, that of *Gothic* fiction.' In her book she argues that these writers and film makers use this European mode basically as a device to write back to white audiences in order to get Aboriginal concerns across.

She devotes chapter four to these artists. Under the heading 'Con-Juring the Phantom: Spectral Memories', she examines Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997); Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* (2002) and Becky Cole's film *Plains Empty* (2005) as to their *Gothic* elements--and finds them, though it must be queried if we are consciously in the realm of the *Gothic*. Alienation and dispossession as well as cultural deprivation are perhaps too often exposed in raw nerves of suffering in Aboriginal artistic productions. The historical reality of trauma and cruelty is still with many Aborigines and needs healing. Kevin Gilbert in his *Because a Whiteman'll Never Do It* exposed many of the wounds that Aboriginal people suffered, and he even called for the creation of Aboriginal Israels where Aborigines might go to effect a spiritual healing. In *Plains of Promise* the character Elliot, by becoming a pilgrim and following the traditional songlines of his people, achieves this type of healing. Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* doesn't seem to be *Gothic* at all, but might rather be inspired by post-modern Western films where the peaceful pioneering towns of yore have their mask stripped away to reveal the festering discord, cruelty and division beneath their supposedly placid surface. Cleven creates the town of Mundra with its black and white townsfolk; but the terrors her characters endure are not from those things that go bump in the night, vampires and zombies, but men and women's cruelty and indifference to each other. Still, like *Plains of Promise*, *Her Sister's Eye* seeks to effect a healing by revisiting past horrors and searching for catharsis. The third work that Althans calls our *Gothic* attention to is Becky Cole's *Plains Empty*, again featuring a scary town this time with things that go bump in the night and also the day. It is a genre with which we are familiar from American films where contemporary country towns are treated as reservoirs of the vicious and the outré which are visited by city dwellers at their peril. We are expected in these films to wait for the unusual and in Becky Cole's film this is a phantom girl who is eventually laid to rest thus recreating the same sort of catharsis in hope for the future that the two novels do. Films are hybrid constructions which take and use various elements from other art forms such as the novel and again with their use of *Gothic* elements from the very beginning it is relatively easy to read Aboriginal elements as partaking of, well, the *Gothic*.

The author also includes activist writers and film makers including Sam Watson, Mudrooroo and Tracey Moffatt in her list of black *Gothic* artists. Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) I consider a perfect example of a Maban Reality text and of what is called a Kadaitcha man is, but the Maban shaman of my critical term and the reality we would expect to find, and do find, is precisely an Aboriginal reality that does not correspond with European reality though it does approximate the *Gothic* to some extent with the subterranean caverns of Uluru approximating the haunted castle of Otranto with its twisted corridors of gothic imagination. *The Kadaitcha Sung* is an amazing story and I don't think any other Aboriginal novel has approached the Aboriginality of Sam Watson's text; but I ask, is it *Gothic*?

We also may ask the same question in about Tracey Moffatt and her films. Is the inspiration behind the three ghost stories of her film *beDevil* (1993) from Maban Reality or from white gothic sources? There certainly is an eeriness about how she handles her work that does seem to stem from her Aboriginal consciousness; thus, on reflection, it may be argued that we are being confronted with a hybrid text especially as her films are quite complex and seek to work against filmic conventions we are used to from horror films to establish--what else but a Maban Reality of the screen. This is seen in *Mr. Chuck*, about the ghost of an American GI from World War Two who drove his tank into a swamp and henceforth haunted at first in the imaginations of the local people and the film as a ghostly superimposed image of a black man. He thus haunts the film or this story, until at the end his face emerges from the mud and he is there with us and remains so in our memory.

The question of hybridity also arises in Kim Scott's novel, *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) which introduces the mad scientist into Aboriginal literature; this mad scientist creates or clones the young Aboriginal narrator, Hartley, who sets out on a journey with which we are familiar from Aboriginal novels as Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*. It is very different in its use of historical materials to question history as written by the conquerors. This novel is a Noongar story of Maban Reality in which the main character has the ability to hover in the air (unlike Frankenstein's monster), as Maban ability.

I invoke hybridism to explain *Gothic* elements (as distinct from Maban Reality) in Aboriginal texts, as I keep in mind that the *Gothic* in all its appearances is always a powerful European phantom. Indeed, if my works are included and considered then it must be accepted that my last three novels, *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999) and *The Promised Land* (2000), which Althans subjects to a deep examination, did use such elements because of my working on and with Heiner Muller's play text and discovering that the horrors and supernaturalism of *Gothic* literature might be used as an instrument to try to understand that period of white invasion along the southern coastline when small groups of British army personnel and citizens often found themselves isolated for many months at a time in a strange land surrounded by vast forests peopled by savages, and where the supernatural as the *bunyip* and the *yowee* lurked. Indeed, they might imagine themselves in a *Gothic* novel and even, at times, did indulge in an extreme brutality against the original inhabitants or eventually went mad, as characters often did in the fiction. Yes, there is indeed a case to be made that the *Gothic* novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries might be used to understand the British mind of the period that gave birth to a literature of such popularity that it has endured into the twenty-first century and has even entered into computer games. Still, it must be asked if this influence has passed over and into Aboriginal literature dealing with the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries--even though I find it almost impossible to visualize an Aboriginal Goth. I myself found *Gothic* novels inspirational and read a lot of them whilst I did my work though the result as I have said emerged later, not in my drama, *The Aboriginal Protestors*, but in my last three novels set in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Before I wrote these, I had formulated what I might term an anti-*Gothic* narrative which might be mistaken for the *Gothic* since in Aboriginal culture there is a strong line of supernaturalism which has been written about, for example, by A.P. Elkin in *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (1945). When I wrote about, well, Aboriginal *Gothic* in my *Milli Milli Wangka* (1997) I used the term 'Maban Reality' to highlight the fact that it did present a different reality; but now I might rename it 'Maban Consciousness' to contrast it with the *Gothic* consciousness of Europe. Similarity does not imply identity and, hence, Aboriginal writers and their *Maban consciousness* should not be confused with European *Gothic* as Althans has done. She does mention my use of the term 'maban reality' in passing, but prefers the use of '*Gothic* Aboriginal'. I argue against this, as I believe that such Aboriginal writers and film makers should be

seen as gaining their creative impulse from their Aboriginal culture and consciousness rather than from the *Gothic* tradition of Europe.

Althans, indeed, is more interested in establishing an Australian *Gothic* and pushes Maban reality to one side--although I hate to write this, as Aborigines have often been pushed to one side in European discussions of Aboriginality. This is a shame in that, overall, *Darkness Subverted* does serve as a reasonable introduction to post-activist Aboriginal writers and film makers and thus should not be dismissed out of hand. No, it draws attention to certain facets and tropes of Aboriginal creative expression different from early Aboriginal written literature and film that were basically realist texts appealing to the emotions by telling it as it was or had been. Often these eschewed literary device and powerful images in an effort to mirror the truth. The documentary film *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1983) by Gerry Bostock is an example, as well as the numerous life stories that banished fiction or sought to do so. Now, form is being used to shape substance and these novels can be read and these films viewed to be enjoyed as art pieces and not merely as harsh propaganda. As the political ground has shifted so have the means and the shape of expression of Aboriginal artistic production in the post-Mabo period; but I don't believe that we should be speaking about an Aboriginal *Gothic* text rather we should be using Maban Realism to highlight the Aboriginality of these artistic products.

In the Darkness, Painting

Kristel Thornell. *Night Street*. Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2010.

Reviewed by Imbi Johnston

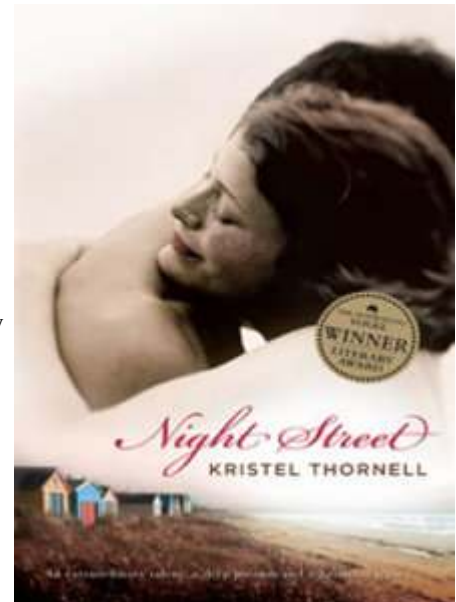
Joint winner of the 2009 Australian/Vogel Literary Award, *Night Street* is a fictionalised portrayal of the life of Australian painter, Clarice Marjoribanks Beckett (1887-1935). The author, Kristel Thornell, began the award winning novel after encountering some of Beckett's artwork at the Art Gallery of South Australia. Immediately fascinated, Thornell began her research with the scholarly work of curator Rosalind Hollinrake. The bulk of Beckett's work, never having been acquired for a public collection, was famously rediscovered by Hollinrake in the 1960s. Horrified, she discovered some 1200 paintings rotting in an open-sided barn in the Victorian countryside. Having been exposed to the elements for almost four decades, the majority of the work was considered irreparably damaged. As a woman painter, Beckett was marginalised and her work was mostly either dismissed entirely, or was met with disparaging reviews from critics who saw her chosen technique, Tonalism, as controversial. Neither she nor her work as an artist were ever really understood or accepted in her lifetime by either the art community or in wider society. As Thornell researched she found her interest in Beckett as a historical figure churning into an obsession with another emerging life form - a fictional artist by the same name. This haunting abstraction was to evolve into the protagonist of the award winning *Night Street*, Thornell's first novel. Thornell says, of the novel, that she 'attempted to look' at Beckett as she (the artist) may have looked at a landscape, squinting to soften edges and reach beyond detail in the search for patterns of light and shade' (241).

Night Street is set in bayside Melbourne; the Becketts live in Beaumaris. Middle aged and unwed, Clarice lives with and cares for her aging parents as they become increasingly frail and dependant. While actively looking after them, she is also an extremely prolific artist. Resolute, she rises in the dark and begins her work before she can see her own brushstrokes on the canvas. Feeling her way, this is her life. She is married to her art. Late in the evenings she sets out again, painting Melbourne's landscapes and cityscapes into the night. Clarice values subjects, both humanmade and natural, in her art. Commonplace things such as telegraph poles, bridges - things disregarded by other artists as eyesores, are often depicted diaphanously in her landscapes and revealed as harmonious in her vision. As a woman artist, the possibility of a studio of her own is out of the question. Out of necessity she builds herself a mobile easel - and so the legend is furnished. Clarice, the local eccentric, can often be seen dragging her mobile easel 'the size of a largish dog' (1) in search of the elusive muse. This arrangement serves Clarice's predilection for painting *en plein air*, a French expression for 'in the open air', which is to become her trademark and her strength as an artist. This quirk also adds to the notion, or admonishment, that she doesn't paint 'as a lady painter should' (75).

The idea of spinsterhood as a choice rather than an unfortunate shortcoming was unfathomable during this era. Thornell portrays a society where women who don't take the conventional path down the avenues of marriage and motherhood and into respectability are looked upon with both suspicion and sympathy for their obvious misfortune and deficiency as women. Clarice overhears her own mother expressing pity for her childhood art teacher, middle aged and unwed. This alerts young Clarice to some contemporary ideologies that, unlike her mother, she will one day dismiss without concern. Despite being commonly described as beautiful and having had more than one opportunity to marry, Clarice's family find her unenthusiastic when confronted with their efforts to find her a suitor. Clarice ultimately chooses to 'turn her eyes away from the common shape of a woman's life' in favour of dedicating herself to her art.

Despite spurning society's imposed views and living what might appear to be a mundane and insular existence, Clarice remains free spirited and lives a rich, sensual life. Thornell insightfully portrays her involvement in two passionate affairs, both with married men, and her urges to preserve her artistic integrity by retreating into solitude. The correlation between isolation and creativity is an idea that arises early and flows throughout the narrative. This is highlighted when Clarice dwells on a comment, made by her respected art teacher, that women cannot be great artists as they lack the capacity to be alone (13). This statement appears to be a driving force behind Clarice's dedication to both her artistic vision and her authenticity as an artist. Her growing need for solitude and willingness to make sacrifices, run parallel with her improving technique, and the increasing respect garnered from the locals, if not the critics. The novel ends with the consummation of Clarice's dedication to her art. As a rainstorm gathers strength she ventures out, unperturbed, into the blustery winds to paint. Catching pneumonia she later dies in hospital. She is only 48 years old.

Thornell's deeply moving and poetic portrait of the artist this fictional character represents emerges as that of a brave, intelligent and extraordinarily talented woman who lived a life of self sufficiency and great passion.



Partial Resolutions

Pat Rosier. *take it easy*. PJ Press: Paekakariki, New Zealand, 2008.

Reviewed by Alison Kagen.

Pat Rosier's third novel is the story of a reasonably ordinary, although none-the-less interesting, woman. It is also a story of family and community.

Isobel is the central character. One of the first things we learn about her is that there was something significant in her past, because it has unexpectedly resurfaced and appears not to be as satisfactorily dealt with as Isobel had thought. We don't immediately learn what that something was or is. The main narrative thread involves Isobel's efforts to re-visit and review events in her past and the reader maintains a parallel journey, discovering and understanding more about Isobel as she does this herself. We all, Isobel and readers, are prompted to think about whether in fact this particular event - or any major event in our past - should really be considered as being in the past, as 'was', or more realistically in the present, as 'is'.

Rosier employs a technique in Part One that is both useful and effective: Isobel briefly sees a therapist, and then starts writing her own history independently, just for herself. Both actions mean that elements of her past are revealed, without the need for any kind of staged series of interactions with other characters, or a bald recitation of facts and actions. And of course we learn more about Isobel's nature, and those of the people involved with her, as she does so.

Dramatic tension is maintained, and not everything is related in chronological order. Although Isobel's story gradually becomes evident, more than one viewpoint is able to be utilised. We have Isobel's current perspectives in her interactions with partner, friends and colleagues, and her written notes about her childhood and early adulthood.

Additional narrative strands involve engagement with others: family, extended family, friends. Isobel is the youngest sibling, with an elder brother and an eldest sister. Her picture of herself as a child, separate somehow from them and her parents, not understanding how life works, is elaborated but also challenged by their different memories. Her relationships with both as adults, not unfriendly but not closely connected as we meet them, undergo considerable changes through the course of the events detailed in the novel.

A family emergency takes Isobel and her partner Iris, together and separately, to Australia. These episodes highlight differences between them as they deal with Isobel's past and its impact on their present. They also illustrate and emphasise the nature of their relationships with friends, as a couple and as individuals, as support is provided through times of difficulty.

In Part Two, the perspective shifts. It is still Isobel's story, but the focus is an intensive few years in the mid-sixties. Rosier evokes some of the dominant social discourse with disturbing effectiveness, tackling, for example, the idea of 'working mothers' from a number of viewpoints.

Part Three returns to the present, offering a partial resolution of a number of strands. This is a novel exploring the nature of life experience, life being notoriously unable to resolve itself neatly.

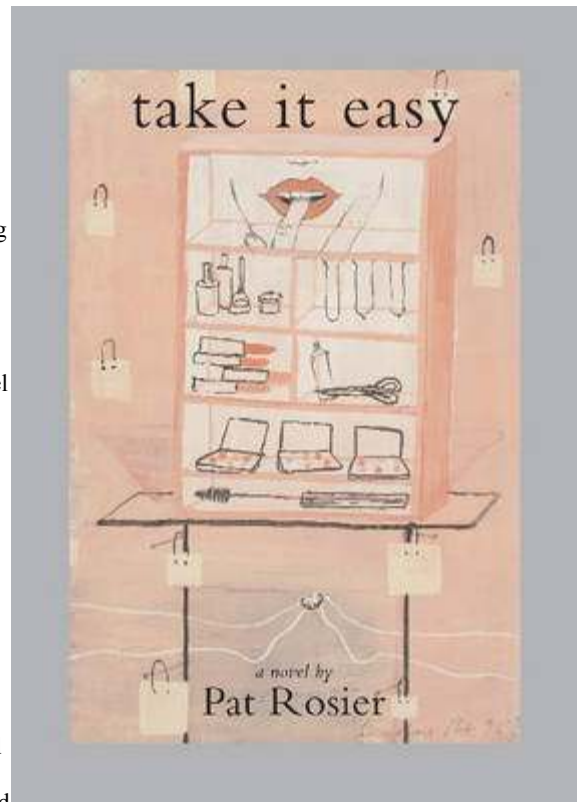
Rosier's skill with language is evident in the judicious use she makes of dialogue. She also makes sparing but effective use of quotations to introduce each of the three parts, and in the title. That there is a link and a reason for each is apparent on first reading, but there is added depth and insight revealed on re-reading.

take it easy is full of contemporary New Zealand references. Streets and suburbs, shops, music, politics, even a summer barbecue for new year - the ephemera of daily life are scattered through dialogue and descriptions, giving added solidity to the story.

As has been obvious, Isobel is lesbian. She is in her fifties, has been out for some time, in this relationship for ten years. She has been, up until the time at which the book starts, comfortable with her work, and her social and personal lives. There is a fine balance for the author to achieve: on the one hand, we don't want a big fuss - being lesbian is just part of what makes Isobel the woman she is. On the other hand, being lesbian is an important part of what makes her who she is, so, perversely, we don't want her identity, her behaviour, her understanding of the world to be played down so much that it is practically non-existent. Rosier manages this balance with an even tempo.

Readers who are familiar with Rosier's earlier novels (*Poppy's Progress* and *Poppy's Return*, Spinifex Press) will note a more assured sense of tone and plot. New readers will enjoy the leisurely unfolding of a life; a mix of the familiar and the less familiar. All will find aspects that interest and that can challenge their thinking about themselves and other women, friends, lovers, family.

Alison Kagen is an omnivorous reader, particularly of works written by women. She completed her Bachelor of Arts with majors in Feminist Studies and History.



Headfirst in the Earth

Pam Schindler, *A Sky You Could Fall Into*. Brisbane: Post Pressed, 2010.

Reviewed by Zenobia Frost

This début collection has been long-awaited. Many of its poems first found homes in well-thumbed journals—*Meanjin*, *Island*, *Blue Dog*, *Hecate*, and *Stylus*, to name a few—but with their unanimous song of bird and frog, they are best read together.

Schindler's poetic voice is tender without sentimentality. In her work, the natural world merges effortlessly with the human, as if each poem were born straight out of the earth she so lovingly paints. Or as if each piece were a little house—its north aspect firmly planted in the bush and its south looking out to the far-off lights of the city. This is the collection's most striking feature: the world collapses in on itself; lines blur between what is human and what is animal; what is domestic and what is wild; what is ocean and what is sky.

In *A Sky You Could Fall Into*, themes and figures recur throughout, weaving the collection into a cohesive whole that binds the reader into a sense of familiarity with the poems. Frog-song is the collection's constant soundtrack: they sing the book into being, welcome the morning by 'percolating against the windows,' and transcribe 'their morse-coded words, / tapping the glad rambling / letters of the rain.' Birds and possums, too, appear and reappear.

The book could be said to have four movements, though there is no strict division between them. There are poems about the character of the Brisbane bush and its inhabitants, about birth and motherhood, about death, and finally about the ocean. Again, the book echoes with how inseparable these things are. Schindler's poems commune with the reader, sharing her intimate relationship with nature. She tenderly speaks of and to the world: 'The moon is a curved hand cupped / around a mystery' ('New Moon'); 'The soft northern air / leans close like a lover' ('Brisbane Nightfall'); and, recalling a forest tryst in 'Night in the Border Ranges':

I curl that night in my hand
its thread of bell-music
to carry with me
under the dark trees

Desire is explored in a delicious triptych of poems about the constellation Orion. The stand-out of these is 'Orion and the Bunya Tree', a poetic creation myth in which the bunya tree is personified as a mother-deity, 'headfirst in the earth' and with feet 'wandering a little in the breeze.'

her vast thighs touch
but her knees are parted
and the wind smooths
all round her towering legs-

In this sensual description we have an example of the easy rhythm in Schindler's work. One line glides into the next, with momentum maintained by assonance such as in 'vast thighs' and 'round...towering'. The effect is such that the poet's craftsmanship is invisible; Schindler's poems flow as naturally as 'new glittering leaves' from Bunya Tree's feet.

Throughout *A Sky You Could Fall Into*, Schindler most often celebrates what in nature might be renamed goddesses in a different context; there is a strong sense of the feminine in the creativity, sexuality, and nurturing that occur in her poems. Orion, on the other hand, is at once a figure inciting desire and distant from it:

spread out in the sky
too wide for any girl's arms

The women Schindler writes of are not distant and sky-hung; they are very much of the earth. 'In Paperbark Country' juxtaposes the brief life of a blue dragonfly, 'teaching the eye suddenness', with the life of the speaker's mother. The young mother is compared to the paperbark; then, as she ages, to a lake:

cupping today's sunlight
she will hold it and let it go



Perhaps the strongest poem in the collection is 'The Little House', written in memory of Queensland poet Gloria Yates. 'The Little House' is heartbreaking in its simplicity: there is no hedging here; the poet speaks plainly of impending death and of the great strength of the woman who stood against it. The poem opens as a nursery rhyme could open-'The doctor came to visit', but the doctor's dialogue is as distant as Orion, composed of only two words from a medical discourse foreign to the poem's simple language. Every little word in this poem is 'stitched like steel', and when the final stanza comes, the reader cannot help but feel it in her bones:

How the doctors backed away.
How her heart wrapped fiercely around
the little house,
and the little dog.

A Sky You Could Fall Into is a significant first collection from a Brisbane poet worthy of considerably more recognition than she has so far received. It is a book that draws us in. Like 'the possum on the windowsill', we are tempted to curl into Schindler's poems as 'into our own dark.'

Zenobia Frost is a Brisbane-based poet and journalist. Her work has recently appeared in *Overland*, *Small Packages*, *Voiceworks*, *Writing Queensland*, and *Famous Reporter*. In 2009 she took her debut chapbook, *The Voyage* (SweetWater Press), around Australia on the Arts Queensland Touring Poets Program. She is the arts editor of *Rave Magazine*. <http://zenobiefrost.wordpress.com>

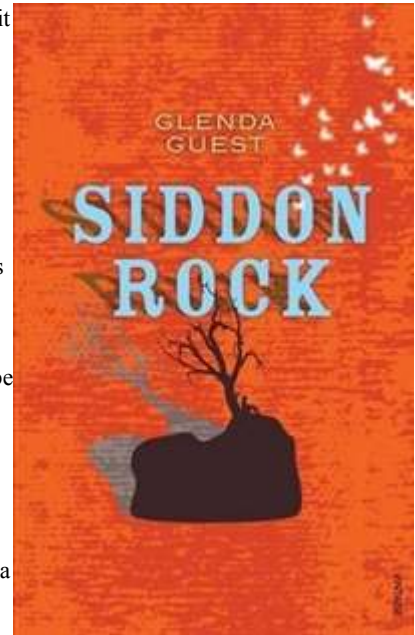
Holes in the Fabric

Glenda Guest, *Siddon Rock*, Vintage Books, 2009.

Reviewed by Carin and Sharin Mattar

In *Siddon Rock*, Glenda Guest paints a unique portrait of an Australian outback town, bringing it vividly to life and infusing it with magic. It is a novel obsessed with stories, revealing that they inhabit people and places like ghosts. One of the characters, Marge Redall, comments that a moth's wings 'look so fragile... And there's such a pattern on them. Like a piece of tapestry. There's blue and green and brown - so many different shades. You'd never think it, looking at it normally' (270). This description is reflective of the novel itself, for it similarly weaves a tapestry of stories which interconnect in surprising and complex ways. Guest's powerful narrative spans generations from the town's founding by Henry Aberline to his great-great-granddaughter Macha Connor's homecoming from World War Two, telling a myriad of stories about a town's inhabitants. However, the book's tragic climax insists that 'there are always holes in the fabric' (215) - missing pieces of the story that cannot be known - just as the townspeople cannot form their fragmented recollections of Kelpie Crush and Jossis Morningstar's disappearances into a complete narrative. Further, through characters who are haunted by the ghosts of World War Two, *Siddon Rock* powerfully illustrates that there are stories that cannot be told as they are too traumatic.

The novel exposes the existence of the holes in the fabric of the town's narrative that represent the stories that have been silenced: 'On played the women, and slowly and irrevocably they wove the town's stories into a fabric as delicate and strong as parachute silk... Nell...alone saw the ripped hole where her own story should have been' (240). Nell, an Aboriginal woman, represents the invisible story of Aboriginal people that has been silenced by white Australia. In a telling moment, the white man, Harry Best cannot read the story that Nell tells of Kelpie and Jos's disappearance that she had witnessed.



Not only does it reveal that there are holes in the fabric but the novel also delves into those gaps, giving voice to the narratives of those who have been silenced from the story of white, patriarchal Australia. Significantly, it is the women who weave together the town's stories. What is most compelling is the prominence Guest gives to the narratives of women in the bush, exploring their stories which have been excluded from the mythologies of the Australian frontier and the masculine tradition of mateship. For example, there is the story of Brigid Connor who carves her own place on the land, running her farm against the wishes of the Aberline family. The novel also intriguingly subverts the bush myth by imaging the Yackoo bush as a space of safety for women; primarily for Macha who finds it a place of refuge. In contrast, the men tell stories 'about how blokes would try to walk through the Yackoo and not come back' (127). Interestingly, Guest shines a spotlight on the bonds between women in the bush, creating with sensitivity a connection between the marginalised women in the novel: Macha who attempts to extend the boundaries of femininity during the war and is traumatised by what she witnesses; Sybil who has been abused by her patriarchal father; Nell, the Aboriginal woman who must play a marginal role in white society and Catalin, the Hungarian refugee whose migrant presence disrupts dominant Australian identity in the 1950s. Together, these women forge an understanding and a solacing companionship born from their shared pain and trauma.

The novel ends on a conversation about the other name of the town 'Yad Yaddin' which means 'stay here' (284), and it is this phrase which lies at its heart for ultimately it is a story about the things that stay with people. Refugee Catalin's life is forever marked by the disappearance of her child Jos. She says 'I told Jossis I would always come to get him, so I must always be here. Just in case' (281). Quite literally then, she will 'stay here' at *Siddon Rock*-but in another sense, the incident will always stay with her. Other characters, too, carry things with them that refuse to leave. Macha's traumatic experience in the war renders her unable to speak and Sybil cannot get the smell of her abusive father off her hands 'no matter how long she scrubbed them or what soap or abrasive she used' (186). *Siddon Rock*, then, asks the question-how do you go on, how do you stay alive 'here' with the weight of tragedy bearing on you and ghosts that haunt you for the rest of your life?Â

Despite dealing with dark subject matter- racism, child sexual abuse, a lost child, trauma and the horror of war - the novel refuses to be overwhelmingly gloomy and slivers of light shine through. Marge tellingly observes, 'Guess there's always a dark side of everything, eh. Like light and dark of the same thing' (270). This duality of things, the intertwining of light and dark, is a thread running throughout the narrative. The phrase 'stay here', as already mentioned, speaks to the scars that characters bear which 'stay' with them. However it also has a positive, lighter side to it. It points to the fortitude and resilience of the women who endure, who 'stay', through the tragedies that befall them. Â

What is unique about the novel is that it emphasizes the strength of women in contrast to men. The town's name '*Siddon Rock*' originated from the words 'Sitdown Rock' in honour of its founder Henry Aberline sitting down at the rock, having given up on his dream of catching an elusive butterfly. After that, his 'male descendants for at least five generations would carry the sadness of the Aberlines, and often like Henry did, find life too much to bear' (37). Unlike them, the female characters do not give up. For example, traumatized Macha becomes the town's protector, guarding it. Sybil refuses to let her history of child sexual abuse victimize her or render her completely powerless. She takes over her father's business, Barber's Butchery & Bakery-a job which amazes the townspeople who exclaim, 'She's just a

girl...how can a woman kill beasts?'(101). Despite her father's ghost tormenting her as she cleans the shop, she perseveres in doing it. 'Each Sunday, too, the shade of Alf Barber stood over her as she worked, commenting and remembering: *Your mother's at church, Sib, just you 'n' me at home. Good for a dad to have some time with his daughter, eh?* À he'd start. Sybil concentrated on her scrubbing, ignoring the rough voice behind her' (184). Catalin transforms her horrific experience of the war into a moral lesson for schoolchildren. It is a tale so powerful that it causes one of them to say 'no at a crucial moment ... many years later when he was in a position of immense power in the government of the nation'(174). In a shining example of the novel's luminous, almost poetic prose, Alistair says at one point 'for me feminine is the essence...it's the strength and desire under whatever surface the world sees, hidden away right at the heart of being' (226). Indeed the novel leads us into these secret places of women's hearts, revealing their strength - the light that shines in the darkness of their tragedies.

In addition to featuring women of steel and strength, *Siddon Rock* signals its interest in destabilising gender roles from its beginning. The novel raises the question of the roles available to women by opening with the arresting image of Macha back from the war, 'when Macha came home she walked into town as naked as the day she was born, except for well-worn and shining boots, a dusty slouch hat, and the .303 rifle she held across her waist' (7). Alistair Meakin, a cross-dresser, subverts traditional Australian masculinity and the stereotype of the rugged and hardy bushman. Both struggle with their gender roles and transgress them: Macha assumes the male identity of a soldier in the war and Alistair hides his feminine self, 'Allison' but becomes her in the quiet hours of the night. Catalin suggests that gender is fluidâ€”sometimes masculine is hidden by the feminine, and sometimes the other way round. Sometimes nothing is really as it seems, is it' (226)-a remark that reflects the novel's unsettling of the boundary between masculine and feminine.

Similarly, *Siddon Rock* troubles the line between reality and fantasy through its use of magic realism, opening up different ways of looking at the stories that are contained within the fabric of post-war Australia. Nell says, '*Those people, they think that putting the stories on a piece of paper makes 'em theirs, as if they won't ever change*' (181). The novel destabilizes the notion of a single, authoritative narrative, instead asking who owns stories? who has the authority to tell them? and to be listened to? which stories are silenced? how do stories change? The novel's ending, where Nell tells the lost Aboriginal name of the town before it was named 'Siddon Rock' (284), conveys that not only do stories of a place change over time and are forgotten, but marginalised history can crucially also be recovered through an act of storytelling. Through its intense, emotionally haunting narrative, *Siddon Rock* is a testament to the power of storytelling.

Carin and Sharin Mattar are both completing Honours in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at The University of Queensland.

Executing Justice

Anna Haebich, *Murdering Stepmothers: The Execution of Martha Rendell*.
Perth: WA: UWA Publishing, 2010.

Reviewed by Belinda Morrissey

Anna Haebich shows in her new work, *Murdering Stepmothers*, that she likes to play - with everything from simple double entendre, to stylistic form, to the most important questions of any culture, time or place, those of guilt or innocence. However, this playfulness should not blind us to the seriousness of this biography of the condemned child killer, Martha Rendell. Rather, even the most obvious of the double entendres demands that we re-evaluate Rendell's case using the new perspectives granted us by this new look at the now elderly case notes and recollections of her trial and conviction.

Martha Rendell was executed in Perth in 1909 for the murder of three of her stepchildren. She was considered to have killed them extremely cruelly by painting their throats with a corrosive hydrochloric acid known then as 'spirit of salts', and commonly used for soldering and welding. Although no evidence was ever produced to support this theory, or any other, for her murder of the children, she was nevertheless duly convicted and hanged. The children's father, with whom she was living and who was charged as her co-conspirator, was acquitted.

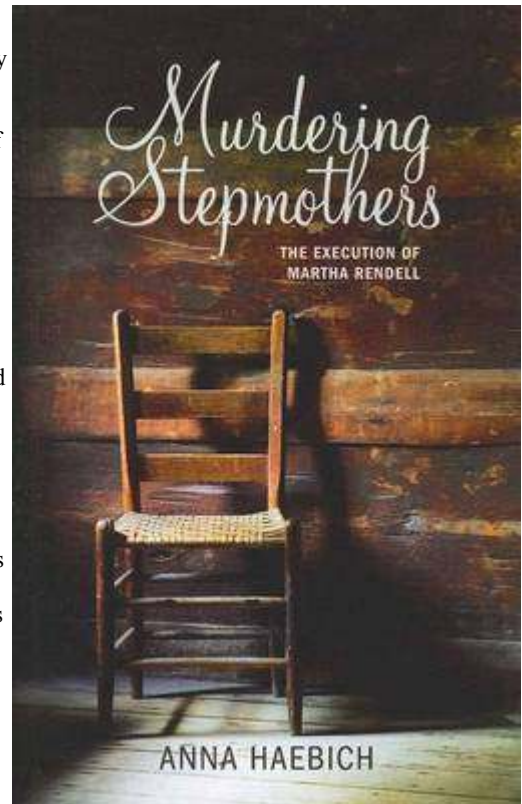
Haebich has chosen an imaginative method to convey Rendell's story. *Murdering Stepmothers* is written in first person narrative, with one chapter apiece from the perspective of various persons involved in the case at the time. Using some fictitious licence, these characters include a photographer who took the final photograph of Martha Rendell; the main detective involved in her case; a retired doctor who judges the case somewhat from afar; the reverend who sat with Rendell until her execution; and finally, a commentary from the author herself, who explains her own reaction to the case, to her research and to Martha Rendell as a fellow stepmother.

Throughout each chapter, historical social commentary and observation are woven very effectively through each fictive character's contribution to the investigation of the case. The research is extremely thorough and well-integrated, and is cleverly threaded into each character's deliberations. For instance, many cases on previous female killers are integrated into the detective's story, while the photographer considers theories of feminine evil. The doctor, on the other hand, is used to provide a very telling critique of the defence case in the trial, especially the scant medical evidence; while the reverend considers the public and political campaigns in support of Rendell, and provides some understanding of her character. Finally, the chapter on the author's research provides several meditations on the various theories as to Rendell's possible guilt or innocence, and possible causes for her behaviour in certain circumstances.

Overall, then, *Murdering Stepmothers*, provides a great deal of information on the trial and execution of Martha Rendell - and from several points of view, some sympathetic, some decidedly not. Yet, what the book does not do, despite Haebich's claim that she was influenced greatly by Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, is to make Martha Rendell come alive. This is, perhaps, in large part because, unlike in Atwood's work, Martha does not speak for herself in this novel. Others always tell her story for her: she is spoken for once again in death as indeed she was in life. However, having Rendell speak would have been most problematic in a book refusing to argue her guilt or innocence, so this is a predictable, if unfortunate, omission.

The decision to use first person narratives to tell Rendell's tale is both interesting and risky; it has the potential to engross the reader, or to backfire depending upon the writer's facility with characterization. Sadly, in this book which is so well researched, and which has such a fascinating story to tell, it tends to do the latter. In the absence of Rendell herself, Haebich's other characters need to bring the case, and the woman, to life-but, for the most part, they do not. Haebich tends to tell the characters' back-stories rather than show them to the reader through the eyes of the character, which means that the characters declaim testimonies, and proselytize rather than speak and act as actual people might. Further, each character is not so differentiated from the others as to make them particularly interesting in themselves. They all speak in the same voice: that of the writer. Indeed, the only 'character' who is truly differentiated is that of the researcher herself. Had the writer shown more skill with developing characterization, this technique would have worked extremely effectively to tell the story of Martha Rendell. The ideas for the different characters were clever, and the last chapter detailing the experiences of the researcher was both poignant and absorbing. However, although each chapter cleverly introduced new research to the study, and hence provided a new aspect to the case, it did not show us all the different sides of Martha Rendell's personality, or even the different personalities of the characters themselves, very effectively at all.

To conclude, I found *Murdering Stepmothers* a haunting book in that it showed how very easily a life can be undone. The play on words in the title is not merely ironic, but chilling; as indeed, it seems, were Rendell's attempts to mother another woman's children. The book contains an enormous amount of information on Rendell's case, and the copious research on the various theories of the time regarding criminal women and motherhood make the work a valuable contribution to literature on true crime.



Belinda Morrissey is an honorary research advisor at the University of Queensland and research consultant at QUT. She is the author of *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (Routledge 2003), and has published in journals including *Social Semiotics*, *Cultural Studies Review*, and *Continuum*.

Women's Crime Fiction: 2010 Davitt Award Winners

By Tanya King-Carmichael

This year there were 40 books vying for the three categories in the Sisters in Crime Davitt Awards for the best crime writing by Australian women published in Australia in the previous year: the best adult novel; the best young fiction book; the best true crime book, while a fourth category was judged by readers.

The winner for Best Australian Women's Crime Novel was *Sharpshooter* by Marianne Delacourt.

Tara Sharp has a rather unusual gift, one which she considers a curse. She can read people, in particular their auras. She can read their emotions and, given she sometimes has trouble keeping her mouth shut, at times this almost renders her unemployable. Her parents despair of her holding down a job, and send her to a family friend for counselling. Tara is surprised and nonplussed when the counsellor sends her on her way, advising her to visit a body language and psychic business. At a loss, Tara follows her advice, and meets Mr Hara, who takes her on as a student in exchange for her doing some work for him. He explains about proxemics and kinesics, and has a laminated chart that explains what aura colours mean.

It will be difficult for *Sharpshooter* to avoid being compared with the Janet Evanovich series - it even says this on the cover - but *Sharpshooter* undeniably Australian, and Tara Sharp smart and funny. While she rushes at life wholeheartedly, she does not seem to feel the need to bowl it over like a Labrador puppy, getting into ludicrous situations as she does so - the rather wearying trend of many similar heroines. She is keen to make money, but doesn't rush into situations blindly. Delacourt has surrounded her with a variety of original characters - an upmarket mother-of-three female best friend and a gay male best friend; a narcoleptic side kick she doesn't really want but who attaches himself to her; and realistic parents, who worry about her and annoy her, but who she loves and they love her. Oh, and a pair of excitable galahs who play a critical part in the novel.

Sharpshooter is the first in a series, a welcome addition to the comedy caper crime heroines, especially when pulled off with such aplomb. Delacourt is a refreshing new voice in crime fiction, whose aura-reading PI makes her presence felt. It was also an invigorating change to have a PI novel set in Perth, which was brought to life so strongly in *Sharpshooter*: is able to bring a real sense of her town and its inhabitants into strong focus in the novel. She clearly has a strong affection for the town where she grew up.

The winner for Best Young Adult Crime Fiction was *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier.

It is easy for many readers to dismiss young adult novels as being for children and therefore simplistic and unlikely to contain anything of interest to an adult. In the recent crop of young adult and children's novels up for contention for the 2010 Davitt awards, plots were complex, story lines were original and often witty, and characters realistic. None more so than Justine Larbalestier's *Liar*. This is a novel squarely at the older end of the Young Adult market, and as such it could easily be picked up and devoured by the discriminating adult reader as well. It is set in a New York high school and tells the intriguing story of teenager, Micah Williams, who is not as she seems, nor does she want to be. She is proudly and defiantly a liar, one who can't help but spin a line to everyone she meets. Her peers have been badly burnt by believing her often plausible lies, and she is an unpopular outcast.

Larbalestier's novel is divided into three parts, each one revealing more about Micah, but at the same time taking away something that the reader has previously believed about her. The story is from Micah's point of view. She unabashedly confesses her lies to the reader, and promises to tell the truth but, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that not all her confessions are true after all. As readers, we are used to believing what our protagonists tell us: accordingly, even when we are told not to believe Micah, it is hard to shake the habit.

Micah has built a web of lies around her, and hints are dropped from the beginning about reasons for this, reasons which her parents not only seem to condone but encourage. Or is that the truth? When Micah's secret boyfriend, Zach, first disappears and is then found viciously and sickeningly murdered, will her lies protect her or bury her? Or will the truth save her?

There is a strong supernatural theme running through this clever and complex novel, and because of this, it may not be to the tastes of all readers. *Liar* grabs you by the jugular from the first page and drags you headfirst into it. It is elegantly and skilfully structured, told from the point of view of an unreliable main character whose lies and truths have the reader questioning and re-questioning what they believe and what they think they believe.

The winner in the True Crime was *Lady Killer: How Conman Bruce Burrell Kidnapped and Killed*, Candace Sutton and Ellen Connolly.

Lady Killer is the impeccably researched account of the decade between the crime and conviction of conman, Bruce Burrell. Sutton and Connolly are two Sydney journalists and writers. They have clearly had access to a range of sources, and provide a balanced picture of this terrible true story. In May 1997, Kerry Whelan, mother of three and beloved wife, vanishes, seemingly without a trace. This leads to Australia's greatest manhunt in what was initially believed to be a kidnapping and ransom demand. Kerry's body was never found. Two years earlier, wealthy widow Dorothy Davis had also disappeared. There seems to be no link between the two women, but a small team of tenacious police officers find it in Bruce Burrell. Burrell had done some work for Kerry's husband and even holidayed with the family. He had borrowed a large sum of money from Dorothy around the time she disappeared. Burrell was a seemingly respectable and wealthy advertising executive, but delving into his life reveals this as facade, his much flaunted expensive cars stolen and his advertising experience largely manufactured by Burrell himself, an expert at convincingly talking himself up.

True crime as a sub-genre is wide-ranging, and its popularity never diminishing. There can be a tendency for some true crime to be sensational, and run the risk of potentially entering the realms of voyeurism and exploitation or, at the other end, to become newspaper copy. *Lady Killer* never runs the risk of falling into either of these extremes. It is well written, with few over-written or flowery passages, and Sutton and Connelly are enormously respectful of the victims' families. They paint a convincing and poignant picture of their suffering after their loved ones disappear.

Most fascinating is the background and childhood provided for Bruce Burrell, and the book unsympathetically paints him as an over-confident sleazy conman who kidnaps and murders at least two women for their money. The narrative provides excellent information about each of the central roles, with interesting and relevant observations. While it is difficult to call this challenging genre 'enjoyable', *Lady Killer* is very readable and hard to put down.

The Reader's Choice Award went to *Forbidden Fruit* by Kerry Greenwood.

Forbidden Fruit is the fifth in the Corinna Chapman series by Kerry Greenwood. Greenwood is a prodigious writer, best known for her Phryne Fisher novels. *Forbidden Fruit* Corinna is an ex-accountant who left her life of regular hours and tailored suits behind to run a small, successful bakery off Flinders Lane in Melbourne, called Earthly Delights.

Those who know and love Greenwood's novels, will relish the chance to return to Corinna's cosy world of 4am starts, loyal apprentices and bakery staff, beautiful Israeli lovers and, of course, a multitude of pampered cats. *Forbidden Fruit* is set just prior to Christmas, a time of the year Corinna abhors, and Greenwood deftly mixes pagan and Christian symbols, such as a pregnant teen runaway, star-crossed lovers, a rose muffin-loving donkey, a religious cult, militant vegans and anarchistic freegans. Corinna's lover, Daniel, is on the search for the two runaways, Manny and Brigid with the latter heavily pregnant. Greenwood revisits areas she has delved into before; specifically, what some people will do when taking their beliefs to the fundamentalist and rigid extremes. In *Forbidden Fruit*, she explores this through the mental and physical suffering inflicted on Brigid and her younger sister by their family in the name of an extreme religious cult, and via the extreme and disturbing actions of an equally inflexible group of animal rights vegans.

Forbidden Fruit is an inviting, hot chocolate of a book with Greenwood's well-loved eccentric band of characters. It is best savoured slowly, preferably with a glass of your favourite tippie and a preferred nibble or three.

Tanya King-Carmichael is an avid reader of crime, has been a member of Sisters in Crime for ten years and is privileged to have been one of the National Convenors for close to seven years. Her involvement with Sisters in Crime has provided her with the opportunity to interview authors such as Tara Moss, Kerry Greenwood and Gabrielle Lord; write reviews of up and coming crime novels; host a Scarlet Stiletto awards night and be a judge of the Davitt Awards. Tanya is a child psychologist who has been practising for 13 years.

Cover Artist



Ashley Morgan-Shae
Even Trees Bleed

Ashley Morgan-Shae is a Melbourne performance poet, and a poet and short story writer widely published in magazines including *HECATE*, and a visual artist in several mediums. She co-created, organised and MCd *INK* readings at Prahran Town Hall. Her writing is included in two textbooks, *LATITUDE* and *CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY* in Chinese, and she has three poetry collections: *DANCING AT DUSK* and *NEW CITIES* (Grendon Press) and *LOVE TRASH* (Five Islands Press).



Ashley Morgan-Shae
Dont's for Wives