

**Australian Women's Book Review  
Volume 23.1&2 (2011)**



"Madonna of the Shadows" - Anne Wallace  
Oil on Canvas, 2010  
56cm x 81cm

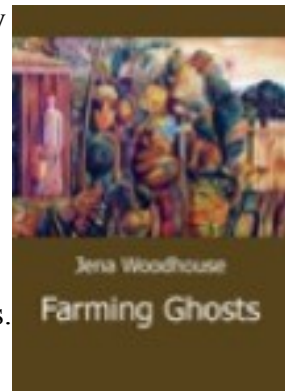
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## Farming Ghosts

Jena Woodhouse. *Farming Ghosts*. Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Gillian Bouras

I have an interest to declare: I have known writer Jena Woodhouse for twenty years, but in Greece, not in Australia. Like the people she writes about, Woodhouse always wanted to experience life in other cultures. I first knew her as a poet, and many of the concerns in her collection *Eros in Landscape* also feature prominently in *Farming Ghosts*; her prose narrative about a family working the land in central Queensland. The title has a poignant ambiguity: Woodhouse writes of people who are eventually forced to leave their farm. The reader is also left with the strong impression that all their struggles were destined to make ghosts rather than happy and fulfilled beings. Regret and “unglamorous valour” haunt the telling of this tale, as the empty house at the end of the novel is haunted by the spirits of the people who have left it. Place is a dominant theme in Woodhouse’s writing in whatever genre, and a poem in the *Eros* collection entitled “Shepherd’s Wife”, set in Greece, finds a strong echo in *Farming Ghosts*: “The old austerities of place/ Devour her days”. In the Australian setting, several lives are devoured by Rosewood, the property the family is trying to farm.



English novelist and biographer Victoria Glendinning believes that writers do not write in order to inform their readers. Rather, “they write in order to find out for themselves about something they don’t know, and to write down, in the best way they can, what they discover”. In her book, Woodhouse shows the child Anna, from whose point of view the novel is written, trying to understand the tensions and dynamics of her family of three generations. Anna is also trying to discover what she wants to make of her own life, and by the end of the narrative she has done so.

Tolstoy famously wrote that happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. It is one of Woodhouse’s many strengths that she writes so discerningly and sensitively about families, the different personalities inhabiting those families, and their own individual desires and dreams. The idea that Anna grasps while observing the warmth expressed in the Stempel household, that each family creates its own energy field, is such an accurate summary, and a partial explanation of the mystery of family.

One of the problems in life is that of fitting in. Some people are compelled to live lives that are too small for them, and so have to trim important chunks away, and give up most of the dreams they might once have had. It is Grandfather Harry Vance, loving Rosewood “with more passion than prudence”, who follows his large dream, one inspired by those singularly free spirits, Robert Louis Stevenson and Paul Gauguin, and refuses to give it up. But it becomes clear that this dream entails imposing a particular and smaller sort of life on other people, a life that very often involves great sacrifice and hardship: the writing about the lost dreams of Harry’s son Jack, and the lives that both Jack and his wife Maggie were forced to receive and endure, reduced this reader to tears on more than one occasion. Woodhouse writes of the “dilemma of living one’s dream without compromising others”, but it seems that Harry was not even conscious of the dilemma.

The novel opens with the child Anna surreptitiously observing her Grandfather burning his letters, photographs, and mementoes. Anna, even at her young age, realises what a loss this is:

The stories and the names that might have fed her imagination have perished in seconds, leaving blank spaces in lieu of lives, and tiny particles of ash instead of hair and lips and eyes.

Yet an imagination like Anna's (and like Woodhouse's) always finds plenty of matter to feed on. And as has been written: you can burn letters and wish death, but the past is still the past. Rosewood remains with Anna, even though it, too, is consumed by fire. The power of place and home is powerfully evoked and captured at the last by Anna's quotation from Scottish Robert Louis Stevenson, whose heart was divided between the South Seas and his native land: "Blows the wind on the moors today and now... /My heart remembers how!"

This is certainly demonstrated in the life of Maggie, one of war and loss and sacrifice. Termites devour most of her sentimental treasures; but the past, and her past love of Jimmy, killed in New Guinea, never leaves her. Jimmy had lost his life, while Maggie's was under the sort-of threat posed by attrition, frustration, and hardship. But she manages to survive via small moments and by never letting Jimmy go. "The only thing you could do to save your spirit from annihilation was to know what mattered to you, and to carry it always in your heart."

**Gillian Bouras was born in Melbourne of Anglo-Celtic stock. A teacher by profession, she developed a career as a writer after settling in the Peloponnese, Greece, somewhat unexpectedly, in 1980. She is the author of eight books; her journalism is also frequently published.**

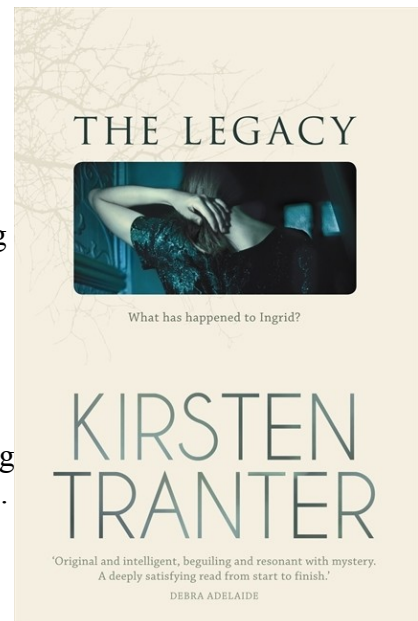
## The Portrait of a Legacy

Kirsten Tranter. *The Legacy*. Pymble: Fourth Estate/HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Reviewed by Sally Olds

*The Legacy*, by first-time novelist Kirsten Tranter, is a story of people using art as a means to transcend their situations in life. A modern-day revision of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, the novel is a postmodernist's dream; with references ranging from De Kooning to Humphrey Bogart, Ovid to Henry Miller, Tranter frankly acknowledges her sources and uses them to craft a gripping mystery populated by artists, intellectuals, hacks and slackers.

Julia, a twenty-something year old Arts student at Sydney University, is in love with her best friend Ralph. Ralph is kind, clever, and charming, but he finds he can only love her as a friend: he is, after all, (mostly) gay. Ingrid is a beautiful and brilliant young woman, Ralph's half-cousin and the new tenant at his family home. Ralph quickly becomes smitten with her. Despite Julia's jealousy (and the incestuous overtones), the three manage to craft an idyllic friendship. Later that year, Ralph's father dies and leaves Ingrid a large legacy. With the money, Ingrid travels to Venice where she meets Gil Grey, a successful and vaguely threatening New York-based art dealer. She agrees to marry him, and moves to America. Disapproving and heartsick, Julia and Ralph drift apart and gradually lose contact with Ingrid. On September 11, 2001, Ingrid has a meeting in downtown New York. She is never seen again. A year later, Ralph is still harbouring doubts about her disappearance and, too sick to travel himself, convinces Julia to do some sleuthing in the US.



The novel is divided into three parts, and oscillates in setting between Sydney and New York. The first section takes place in Sydney. Languid in the telling, heavy with a pre-emptive nostalgia, it is both the longest and most successful. From messy parties in Kings Cross, to elegant luncheons at Ralph's family home, trips on the ferry, part-time jobs, and badly cut cocaine, Tranter's descriptions of the city are evocative and never over-done. Against this backdrop, the relationship between Julia and Ralph is sketched out with evident pleasure on Tranter's part.

As a whole, the novel is often reminiscent of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*: in its initial meditation on hazy student days, its subsequent increase in scope, and also in its language. Decisively written, each word and image is carefully considered and well placed. The prose unwraps the story gently—a game of pass-the-parcel, with each page cradling a small prize: a clever turn of phrase, a moment of erotica. At one point, a metafictional flex to reward the reader for bearing with the cloying motif of the birdcage, described as “empty except for ornaments and mirrors”:

Seeing the pigeon fly away from the cage made it all seem somehow more possible and more obvious than it had before. It must be true, I thought. She escaped. The metaphor was so conventional that I felt disappointed in myself.

It would perhaps be to Tranter's advantage if her writing were less guarded; while intriguing enough on the page, some characters, particularly Ingrid, need a touch more flamboyance to render them truly memorable. Then there is Trinh, the post-graduate student who works as a dominatrix to pay for her studies. Though she is a potentially fascinating figure—strong, modern, independent—her character is never properly developed; she is given a whip instead of a personality. In the main,

she is simply a vehicle for the plot. On two separate occasions, just as the search is in danger of stalling, she gives Julia key pieces of evidence.

These lapses are easily forgiven or overlooked amidst Tranter's relationship-oriented intrigues, which often hinge on questions of gender roles and sexuality. Most captivating is the frank exploration of an abusive relationship. The preface, set towards the end of Ingrid's time with Grey, deals with this explicitly: a plastic surgeon nervously jokes about "falling down the stairs" as he stitches up Ingrid's eyebrow. Alarming to read, the gradual revelation of Grey's abusive ways is compounded by Ingrid's refusal to leave him or expose his violence. Her bond to Grey is sharply contrasted with Julia's sexual independence, and the language Julia uses to tell her story often invites this comparison. Visiting Ingrid and Grey's house, post-9/11, she observes:

Tall ceilings and tall windows hung with long, fine curtains, the one point of excess in the room. They fell from their high rail like the pleats in Ingrid's wedding dress and hit the floor in a tumble, lengths of extra fabric crushed in peaks and waves, a bride's train.

Tranter's word choices here are brutal—"fell", "hit", "crushed"—thus associating Ingrid's marriage with pain. In this way, and because the matter is never truly resolved, the basically optimistic ending is tempered by an aftertaste of violence: alarming, ugly—and necessary, given the seriousness of the issue.

The book closes with a survey of the characters: Ralph, reading Proust in Sydney, in search of lost time; Julia, choosing the cultural capital of the world as her home; Ingrid, perhaps writing her thesis in a far off place, perhaps not. Whichever path the characters of *The Legacy* choose, it seems they cannot escape art. Instead, they choose to escape by it. All things considered, this is certainly a book worth escaping into.

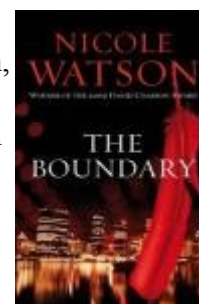
**Sally Olds is a student at The University of Queensland. Her research is mostly focused on Australian literature of the 60s and 70s, and she is currently writing a mystery of her own.**

## Crossing The Boundary: Raising the Issues we Prefer to Ignore

Nicole Watson. *The Boundary*. St Lucia: U of Queensland Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Jacqueline Lamond

A federal court judge is brutally murdered hours after rejecting a native title claim on an inner city park earmarked for development. The lawyer in charge of the claim, Miranda Eversley, is the alcoholic daughter of an Indigenous activist father. Jason Matthews, the investigating detective, is handsome, single, and estranged from both his family and his Aboriginal heritage.



I assumed from the blurb of *The Boundary* that I was about to read a contemporary murder mystery, set in Brisbane purely to provide the crime novel-reading public with a break from the avalanche of seedy underbelly-esque books about Sydney and Melbourne. I could not have been more wrong. Sure, it has a bunch of stereotypical characters—an amoral Senior Counsel, a government bureaucrat addicted to gambling, and a federal court judge cheating on his wife—but it weaves an historical narrative so deep, that the murders (yes, more than one) become almost incidental. This is really a novel about Brisbane—the scars of its history and the challenges of its future. As a story about place, it is wholly convincing. For a start, the author has obvious intimacy with the pointy end of the Brisbane legal landscape. If you haven't seen the law at work from the inside, it would be difficult to appreciate the authenticity with which Watson depicts this world. From towers filled with the Chambers of eminent Counsel to the dim ground level offices of those toiling for the legally underprivileged, everything is precisely rendered. This gives the story a great immediacy and—it seems to me—a sense that the book is a thin veil of fiction thrown over many layers of fact, and dressed up with a touch of fantasy.

Of course, this level of accuracy is not surprising. *The Boundary* is the first novel from Nicole Watson, a Queensland solicitor who has worked for Legal Aid Queensland, the National Native Title Tribunal, and the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency. Watson, a member of the Birri-Gubba People and the Yugambah language group, holds a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Queensland and a Master of Laws from Queensland University of Technology. She is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her legal and academic writings discuss the forced dispossession of Indigenous communities from the land, the protectionist nature of successive governments' dealings with Aboriginal people, and the unfulfilled promise of native title.

*The Boundary* is a novel about these same issues: about what happens to a people who live with the legacy of violent oppression while trying to preserve a culture in the face of overwhelming odds. It is the story of colonialism everywhere, but still a tale so specific that it makes me wonder if Watson hasn't simply changed a few names to weave a fictional story from real-life events. The Corrowa people of the novel have suffered the fate of all Aboriginal people who had the misfortune of belonging to places where the colonials found useful land and opportunity. Confined to the margins of white settlement, used for domestic labour, and forced into missions in the past, the contemporary Corrowa want recognition of their traditional connection to a small park in West End, a piece of their ancestral land on which they still meet as a community. Historically, the park was the boundary of the novel's title; it represents the outer edge of the white city that is patrolled at night by zealots intent on making the local Aboriginal people comply with a government-imposed curfew to restrict their movement. But it is also a different boundary: one where the spiritual world touches this one, where a line in the sand is drawn by those whose legal and political options seem exhausted, so that their only recourse is to kill.

There is a lot of justification for the murders that occur in the book, and presumably this is why the victims are largely one-dimensional stereotypes. The white victims—the Judge and the Barrister—are murdered seemingly just for being cogs in the wheel of the oppressive machine. Some readers may find this unpalatable, but as an unfaithful husband and a sadistic paedophile, they are rendered as static, thoroughly unlikeable characters who meet a deserving end. And the Indigenous victims are similarly demonised. They are not just traitors to their people, having accepted money from the developers, but so far beyond redemption that one of them can beat up his wife and address a fundraiser for International Women’s Day the following morning.

The main characters are more developed. Miranda and Jason explore the difficulties for Indigenous individuals who work in institutions that oppress their people, and ask questions about what it is to be an Aboriginal person in Brisbane today. Through these characters, the novel explores serious and urgent themes, sometimes with an undercurrent of almost palpable despair. Miranda's internal dissonance reflects what is presented, in some ways, to be the dichotomy of modern Indigenous urban life: reconciling a desire for professional success, material comfort, and rewarding relationships with the need to alleviate the suffering of generations. A grief that is unknowable and at the same time intensely personal. For me, it is the pseudo-crime-mystery feel of the book that allows these issues to be explored intricately without becoming overwhelming or oppressive. Typical of the genre, the novel employs short, direct sentences, realistic dialogue, and gives the reader access to the minds of many of the characters. The pace of the book doesn’t slacken at any point, to ensure the story itself remains paramount. As in any good murder mystery, you want to know ‘whodunnit’.

This is a modern Australian novel that combines elements from many genres and resists obvious classification. For me, *The Boundary* is most successful as a novel about place. Brisbane is so thoroughly and recognisably rendered that and it intensifies the themes the novel explores. While the immediacy of time and place may fade, the issues *The Boundary* raises will continue to be topics of discussion for a long time to come. I look forward to Watson’s next contribution to the conversation.

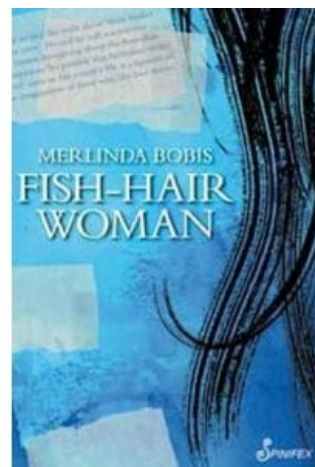
**Jacqueline Lamond holds a Bachelor of Laws from Queensland University of Technology and was a solicitor in private practice for 8 years. She is currently a full-time mother of three and studying for a Diploma of Arts at the University of Queensland.**

## Fishing for Stories

Merlinda Bobis. *Fish-Hair Woman*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Teagan Kum Sing

“Ours is not the story of a war. It is the story of those whom we love and hate” (269). Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* is a novel about the magical, and often mystical, nature of storytelling. It traverses time and voice to explore the events of the 1987 Philippine government's war against insurgency, and the that manuscript this war inspired.



“Hair. How was it linked with the heart? I'll tell you — it had something to do with memory. Every time I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one handspan” (3). Estrella, the fish-hair woman, uses her 12-metre-long hair to trawl corpses from her village Iraya's river, hoping she will not recognise her family amongst them. She falls in love with Australian writer Tony McIntyre, but when he disappears in the conflict she loses the will to fight and flees Iraya. A decade later, Tony's son Luke receives a manuscript written by Estrella that details her love for Tony and the events leading up to his disappearance. After he reads the manuscript, Luke receives a letter signed by his father confessing his terminal health and begging Luke to visit. Confused about his father's whereabouts, he travels to the Philippines in search of answers. When Luke arrives in Manila, he is met by a Doctor Alvarado who tells him his father is “absent” but will arrive in a week's time. Furious that his father's note was forged, Luke demands to return to Australia, but is mesmerised when he meets a mysterious woman with metres of grey hair.

The novel is divided into five sections. Sections one and three are Estrella's manuscript about her life leading up to the war and the beginning of the war itself. Writing in third-person, she explores her love for Tony, her magical hair, and the family that adopts her after her mother dies during childbirth. The rest of the novel is told by an unnamed narrator and examines how the events of the manuscript are dealt with in the present by Estrella, Luke, and a litany of other characters. The novel's complex narrative style and structure reflect the intricacies of storytelling, and explore the ripple effect of the past. Though its plot identifies with the war novel, *Fish-Hair Woman* engages more interestingly with the art of storytelling and the complications of memory.

Bobis's character of Estrella is a fascinating way to literalise the burden of grief. She is born bald, but Estrella's hair begins to grow after a near-death experience, its growth triggered by painful memories. As the war develops her hair has more reason to grow and, hence, like grief, becomes its own entity. Though it becomes unmanageable, Estrella refuses to cut her hair, fearing the cut to be more painful than the burden of memory. Bobis tests the reader's imagination with such a magical character, but crafts Estrella's voice wonderfully to render her believable. The detail of her unique dialect is exquisite; Bobis is clearly at home in the voice of a Filipino woman:

It is a long river spanning three villages, meandering in variant attitudes, sometimes playful and gurgling like a child or humming delicately. Then it thrashes about, spitting over stones in a treacherous current and suddenly in the next bend, it collects its passions into a large basin, barely rippling. In this secluded spot, the river is widest and deepest, and most hushed. Here it is simply called *Salog*, a river called 'River'. But when someone catches the rare, giant eel that feeds several families, it becomes *Padabang Salog*, 'Beloved River'.



Bobis continues her bilingual tradition of including Filipino language in the text. This gives a transcendent, other-world quality to the manuscript and deepens its authenticity. The manuscript is the magic of this magical realist novel, and the transitions between sections in the book often felt like a jolt back to reality.

The present-day sections are less enthralling. Luke's characterisation is believable—he has his own voice and appearance—but I'm hard pressed to describe him outside of his role as Tony's son. Additionally, Luke is an apathetic hero, and after Estrella's passionate manuscript I wasn't moved by his struggles. He seems to lumber through his time in the Philippines while occasionally voicing his desire to return home. The rest of the present characters are fleeting. Many minor characters are introduced, and I found it hard to keep up with the vague back-stories and connections. While these new characters are intriguing—particularly Adora, who communicates with hand gestures—none of them have the time to become memorable. Compare this to the tight-knit, meticulously developed community from the manuscript and it is like a different novel. That said, the sections on Luke and present-day Estrella are not drawn-out or lengthy. Although I preferred the writing style and character development of the manuscript, the events of the present day were lively enough to sustain my interest in the mysteries being developed by the novel as a whole. Perhaps this is Bobis's way of demonstrating how memory can decorate a story? Questioning the boundaries between fact and fiction? While I wouldn't classify *Fish-Hair Woman* as a metafictional novel, Bobis uses Estrella's manuscript to briefly hint at similar concepts.

Bobis uses fine writing and radical characters to craft a memorable exploration of the art of storytelling. For the manuscript alone I would read this novel again, but *Fish-Hair Woman* is more than the story within it. The over-arching plot is lively and suspenseful: Tony's mysterious life is excellent reader motivation, as is Estrella's hair and whether it really exists. Although details of the war can be shocking, this is a romantic and optimistic novel that will not disappoint fans of magical realism or Bobis's earlier work.

**Teagan Kum Sing is currently studying Writing and Literature at the University of Queensland. She focuses her studies on a career in the publishing and editing field.**

## Waiting for Robert Capa

Susana Fortes, trans Adriana V. Lopez. *Waiting for Robert Capa*. London: HarperCollins Publishing, 2011.

Reviewed by Cheryl Jorgensen

“Robert Capa” is the name and persona invented by Gerda Taro to successfully market photographs taken by herself and Endre Friedmann in Paris in 1935. Gerda was born Gerta Pohorylle in Stuttgart, a Jewish citizen who fled from the Nazis to Paris where she met the Hungarian Endre Friedmann, also Jewish. He was taking photographs and developing them in the bathroom of his tiny flat with red cellophane wrapped around the light, as he had been shown how to do by another emerging artist, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

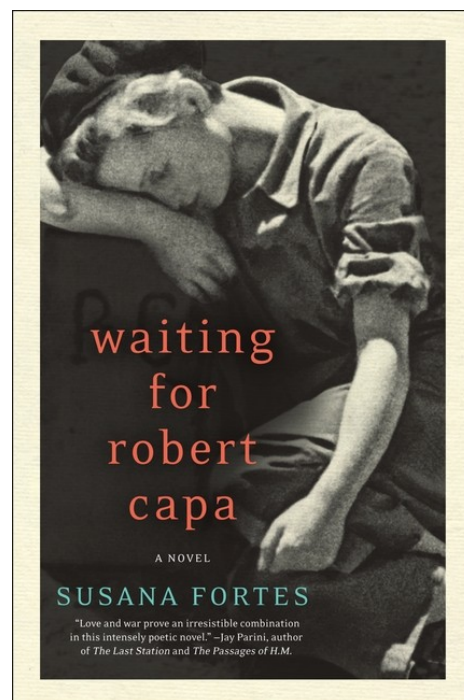
Gerta changed her name to “Gerda” because it sounded less Jewish, Endre became Robert Capa— Gerda’s creation of the successful American photographer who was rich, talented, and a womaniser. Gerda established herself as Capa’s agent, managing to get commissions for newspaper stories and advertisements.

Robert Capa was sent to Spain to cover the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. While he was away, Gerda developed her own distinct style of photography, but sold her pictures as Capa’s work without being acknowledgement for them.

Prior to conjuring Robert Capa from thin air, Gerta had been sharing an attic in the Latin Quarter with her friend, Ruth Cerf. Multilingual Gerta had easily been able to pick up poorly-paid work typing up scientific journals, but felt the need to do something more satisfying. Returning to her flat one evening, she found that the door had been forced and, stepping inside, that their living space and possessions had been trashed. Captain Flint, their pet parrot, was floating in a pot of boiling water, his neck broken. Racist slogans had been painted on the walls. Shocked and frightened, Gerta briefly gave way to tears, but then, realising that she was reacting as her tormentors wanted her to respond, she took the Leica camera that she had slung over her shoulder on her way home from work, and started photographing. She had found her profession: she would become an important witness to the cowardice and brutality of such violence.

*Waiting for Robert Capa* is an imaginative reconstruction of the lives and work of Gerda Taro and Robert Capa, written by Spanish author Susana Fortes, who has won several literary awards for her work—including the Premio Fernando Lara prize in 2009 for this novel. Fortes dedicates much of the narrative to the love that grows between the two protagonists—at the expense of the daily events of those turbulent times that are possibly far more interesting. Sometimes the narration becomes mawkish, though it may be that clumsy translation is to blame:

It showed in the way they made love, holding on to each other tightly, because one day in the near future one of them or both of them could die, and then there would be nothing, not a damn straw to clutch at. The amazing foreshortening of her lying across the bed with his pyjamas on, tender and half-asleep.



Sometimes it is difficult to locate the events occurring in this novel in time, since internal journeys in the characters' minds take precedence over their physical movements. This, with the too-frequent absence of verbs in sentences, becomes rather irritating. Even more irritating is the intrusive sentimental commentary from the author. An example is a description of Ruth Cerf:

Attentive eyes, an understanding forehead, with that protective instinct that women used to have when they buttoned up a coat properly and wrapped their children's scarves around them on chilly mornings.

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Or Robert's effect on Gerda, who is described as "A tad naive, gullible like all women. . ." (110), a statement that does not bear examination when seen in the context of Taro's short but heroic life.

Also somewhat unsettling are the leaps forward in time out of the narrative to inform the reader of the deaths of the main characters. We learn quite early in the story of both Robert's and Gerda's premature deaths, and we also hear of the demise of their friend Chim:

There are images that simply float through our memories, waiting for time to put them in their proper place. And although nobody can know beforehand, there's always a vague premonition, an omen, something we're not certain of, but that's there. Many years later, that would be the last image that David Seymour, Chim to his friends, would remember before he was struck down by an Egyptian sniper. It was November 10, 1956, at a border crossing, where he'd arrived with another photographer from France on an assignment to cover a prisoner exchange in the Suez Canal while peace negotiations were already underway.

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This is a leap of some twenty years from Gerda's and Capa's story, when in Spain pursuing their careers in photo-journalism, they join the Twelfth International Brigade, made up of German and Polish Communists, and meet Chim in the ranks. The excerpt above goes on to describe their Polish friend's violent death. It then claims that as he is breathing his last he remembers this meeting he had with them, "Capa, Gerda, and he, three young people walking along a trail. Smiling".

Though this story is a fictional account of Gerda's and Capa's time in Spain, it is rather difficult to suspend disbelief to the extent that we can accept what this dying man sees in his mind as he is shuffling off his mortal coil. This is because the character is not fleshed-out sufficiently in the narrative. He remains a stranger to us, so we are suspicious of the claims about his last thoughts that appear as merely an author's contrivance. It is again sentimental, devaluing the fact of Chim's actual death. However, the description of the demise of Chim does highlight the risks involved in wartime photo-journalism, a point that Fortes, in her Author's Note, claims she wanted to make.

George Orwell arrived in Spain a year after Gerda and Capa, to chronicle the events he witnessed. His *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), offers a far more lucid account of the Spanish War, combined with a potent sense of the tragedy of the betrayal of those altruistic men and women who were in Spain to fight the Fascists, than *Waiting for Robert Capa* achieves. In the hands of Fortes, Robert Capa's war was certainly more glamorous than Orwell's, for she reminds her readers of the many luminaries gathered at the Anti-Fascists Intellectual Congress—more than two hundred writers and artists from twenty-eight countries. While she mentions André Malraux, Tristan Tzara, Stephen Spender, Walter Reuter, Paul Robeson, and Ernest Hemingway—among others—they are merely mentioned. This, too, is a minor frustration. With such fascinating people gathered in one country, the reader may have expectations of *some* tantalising interaction between them and the two main characters, but this never happens.

Overall, *Waiting for Robert Capa* is disappointing. The real events that are the background to the love affair seem sketchily drawn when compared with works about the Spanish War by other authors. A stronger portrayal of this time would have made the love affair seem more poignant.

**Cheryl Jorgensen is the author of non-fiction works *The 'brook* and *The Taint* and the novel *A Quality of Life*, as well as a review in print and on radio. She is writing a PhD thesis on Janette Turner Hospital in the School of EMSAH at The University of Queensland.**

## Shifting the Boundaries

McDonald, Willa. *Warrior for Peace: Dorothy Auchterlonie Green*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009.

Reviewed by Deborah Jordan

Don't be put off by the puritanical photograph on the cover of this well-produced monograph. Dorothy Green was an important literary scholar, critic, essayist, journalist, and poet. In many ways she was the most influential literary critic working in Australia for feminists of the 1970s.

Green's book *Ulysses Bound: Henry Handel Richardson and her Fiction*, a rich analysis of Richardson's writing and the sources of her creativity and desire, had an impact far beyond the subject matter.

Published in 1973—the heyday of women's liberation in

Australia—*Ulysses Bound* was taken up by younger women searching

for some recognition of the place of women in Australia's cultural history; some understanding of a different approach to the study of

women in literature; and any reasons for the absence of women, or

considerations of gender, in most academic subjects. *Ulysses Bound* appeared a year before Juliet Mitchell's formative text *Psychoanalysis*

*and Feminism*, two years before Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police*, and well

before major translations of such French feminists as Julia Kristeva or Helene Cixous. Through its capacity to probe deeply, its depth of vision, and contextualisation in the history of ideas, the book

grounded many emerging feminist issues in a discussion of Henry Handel Richardson and Australia.

Even more widely, as Drusilla Modjeska argued in *The Music of Love*, the generation of the protest movements against the Vietnam War found their concerns expressed in Green's writing, poetry and reviews, especially in her understandings of the connections between literature and politics.



Inside *Warrior for Peace* there is a range of photographs much better suited to imaging Dorothy Green with—the gleam of deep intelligence and compassion in her eyes and her birdlike smile—than that used for the front cover. “It is an indication of her influence”, wrote Modjeska in a preface to a selection of Green's essays “on the critics and cultural historians of the seventies” that she was elected a life member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. When it came to the subject of women intellectuals, Green tackled many of the hard questions about career, children, sacrifice and love, all still of ongoing relevance. She also commented on the divide between politics and writing, political activism and academic research in many women's lives. Whenever I come across a second-hand book of essays with a piece by Green, or perhaps only a preface, I still buy or copy it, such is the power and clarity of her thinking, her understanding of agency and thought, feeling and action, universal principle and politics. And McDonald's book is of this ilk, steeped as it is in Green's powerful and acerbic intellect: it needs to be on many shelves, in many libraries, and read.

McDonald's study of Green is not about Dorothy Green as a female intellectual in Australia. Rather, it is a much more exciting and complex attempt to represent, engage with, and interrogate the mature Green, the political agent, in the period of her most extensive direct political engagement in disarmament, environmental issues and population control, of her role in the founding of the Australian Association for Armed Neutrality, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and Writers Against Nuclear Arms. Green's politics were based on first principles, as McDonald summarises:

[Her] life and work were an expression of a deeply felt humanity; a humanity based on a conviction of the sacredness of life and of language as the mediator between experience, thought, feelings and action (198)... A practising Christian, she was deeply engaged in life and believed in putting redemptive love into action and acting on principle .

While McDonald tells us that she never met Dorothy Green, she began her research soon after Green died and carried out extensive interviews building on living memories. Much of this material is very valuable in creating a rich portrait; that is, despite some of Green's friends and colleagues having very different agendas. Did McDonald hope to write a biography? It appears she could not get full access to Green's papers, and without this, as she acknowledges, an intimate biography is difficult. Sensibly, the first few chapters on Green's early life are very bare; we are given the basic details—enough information to position her historically and socially: Green as part of the generation old enough to experience the full extent of the Great Depression; as a migrant experiencing an initial rejection of Australia's 'harsh' landscape'; and as a student of the University of Sydney, in the heady days of the radical philosopher John Anderson. Through McDonald's narrative there are some gems, some future biographical quagmires waiting to be teased out, such as Green's own admission that her first love was not literature or politics but music, and how her life was based on substitutes for her love of the muses of music. Later biographers will address her love affairs, marriage, and intimate literary partnership, which is only roughly sketched by McDonald. The narrative in this section only starts to get interesting when McDonald explores Green's poetry. A fuller study of Green's extraordinary literary partnership with a man 31 years her senior, her other love affairs and her passions, her descent into madness, the dark night of her soul, will be a very different book.

Commentators have compared the Greens's literary partnership, their marriage of minds, to that of Vance and Nettie Palmer, but the situations were very different in most respects. Vance and Nettie were born in the same year and both were influenced by the first wave of the women's movement in seeking equality between the sexes, and neither was ever institutionally aligned. When I interviewed Dorothy Green in the 1970s about the Palmers I did not know the minefield I was entering. The Palmers had been closely involved with H.M. Green and his first wife. "Was it worth it", she asked, about Nettie Palmer's devotion and supposed sacrifice to her husband and the cause of Australian letters. "Would Nettie Palmer have been happier with five children?" Green's challenge to feminist historians was embodied in her review of Germaine Greer's book *The Obstacle Race*, on women painters. "Have intelligent women nothing better to do than spend eight or ten years amassing evidence to accuse men of preventing them from becoming great painters?" Green asked. Her questions about my biography of Nettie Palmer took a different form, and she wanted multi-layers of analysis and nothing less than the story of a struggling soul to be born. McDonald's book is not a study of the psyche in any but its most material manifestation. Some of her speculations in this context are merely superficial and will irritate readers, such as the bland statement, whether paraphrasing Green or not, that there was "no bias against her because of her gender" at the elite North Sydney Girls High. McDonald's account of Green's unrequited love and descent into madness when she was in her forties only obfuscates those critical times. Susan Sheridan's beautifully written biographical essay in *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark* builds on McDonald's work and starts to address more sensitively some of Green's successes and frustrations in her career. We can ask many more questions about Green's lack of academic recognition and its implications—imagine if, instead of the arch conservative Leonie Kramer, she had been appointed the first Professor of Australian Literature. Imagine if Green had spawned a school of thought and nurtured a generation of honours and postgraduate students, as opposed to merely inspired students, readers, the general public? Sheridan's judgements about Green's resignation from a tenured academic position at the ANU in 1972 stem from those of a different path taken. We need to ask what was it about the often derivative and careerist culture of the Australian academy that Green, the avid truth-seeker and scholar of high integrity, found so untenable that she sacrificed economic security?

The central concerns of this book are the causes Green became involved in later in life, as a critic, commentator, publicist, spokesperson, and initiator. This focus on her politics is a very interesting development, given that Green's literary scholarship is known and well respected in literary circles, but the extent of her political achievements is not. There are chapters on Green's work campaigning against conscription and against Australian involvement in the Vietnam war, Uranium mining, nuclear proliferation, and the peace movement of the 1980s. Chapters where Green was centrally involved are very interesting. That is, on lobbying the church against uranium mining through her involvement with the Churches' Commission on International Affairs, and her central role in the formation of the Nuclear Disarmament Party as its vice-chair in 1984. McDonald defines her most important peace-making activity as when she co-founded Writers Against Nuclear Arms in 1986, which continued into the early nineties, and there is an excellent account of the activities of this organisation. Other chapters track her involvement with the founding of the Association for Armed Neutrality with David Martin, her contribution to Gorbachev's forums on the non-nuclear world, and her work with Writers for an Ecologically Sustainable Population.

McDonald's method to combine an outline of the issues involved, Green's position and thoughts on the subject, and a history of the organisation itself all within the same chronological narrative is a difficult but exciting art. Occasionally, she will interrogate Green's position, or find a contemporary thinker to elucidate it. Whether Green had ever read the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh or not, his understanding of the distinctions between violence and non-violence is used to explain her decision to work for the Australian Defence Force Academy. At other times, she extends Green's insights on issues by drawing on other thinkers to pursue understandings. Jill Redner's beliefs on the role of the writer and artist—not to fix prophetically on terrible certainties (of nuclear devastation) but rather to leap into the void of the unknown—are used to develop Green's stance of the non-nuclear future. Green was not a grassroots activist but rather sought to draw on her capacity as public intellectual; there will be refinements needed here, and critiques needed of her leadership of the Nuclear Disarmament Party for instance, but McDonald has mapped the terrain well. McDonald has a strong sense of Green's political and intellectual trajectory and some of this works excellently, indeed turns this book into a lively and vivid narrative.

In many ways McDonald's book is an exciting development in literary and feminist biography. It moves the focus away from the conventional traditional achievements, the straitjacket of the literary scholar, to centre on the individual's politics and their integrity as human agents. How do we begin to assess the contribution an individual makes to such an ephemeral thing as the social protest movement? Henry Handel Richardson admonished Nettie Palmer for taking up causes (in her case, the anti-fascist struggle) given her critical ability. Similarly, Green admonished Judith Wright (in her case, the protection of the Great Barrier Reef) in a public review for letting her politics inspire her rather than her poetry—surely Sheridan, grappling with Green's "talent and huge potential", is well wide of the mark in suggesting Green fits a profile of "a peculiarly feminine form of perfectionism" and "victimism"? Through McDonald's focus on the causes that Green took up and espoused, we find important affirmation and validation of her achievements outside the academic institutional arena (even as she should be recognised within it) created by the discipline of spirit and intellect she imposed upon herself. A new digital selection of Dorothy Green's political and spiritual writings would be welcomed.

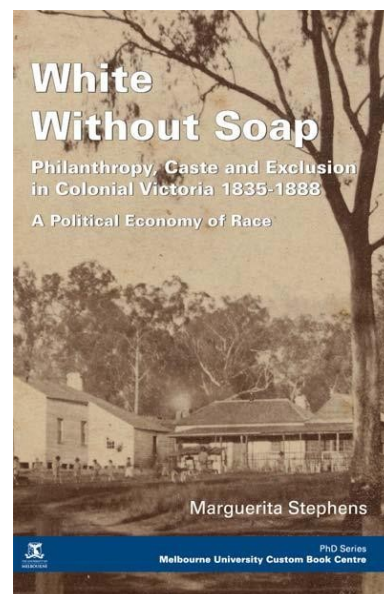
## White Without Soap

Marguerita Stephens. *White Without Soap: Philanthropy, Caste and Exclusion in Colonial Victoria 1835–1888, A Political Economy of Race*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Custom Book Centre, 2010.

Reviewed by Jean Taylor

As it says on the frontispiece, *White Without Soap* was a PhD thesis in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne in November 2003. Usually, if a PhD thesis is to be published, the writer works on the thesis to make it more accessible for the general public to read. Jennifer Kelly's *Zest For Life*, which gives a positive view of lesbians' experiences of menopause, springs to mind as an example of a rewritten PhD thesis that was published by Spinifex Press in Melbourne in 2005.

However, I read Marg's thesis not long after she had received her PhD and was mightily impressed. Not only with the academic language and the rigorous intellectual enquiry she brought to bear on this important subject and the research she did into this brutal aspect of Victoria's past, but also as a reminder of the despicable treatment of Aboriginal people, and the ways in which we non-Aboriginal people still have a lot to learn in terms of our interaction with and our understanding of the Indigenous people of this country.



As Marg puts it in the Abstract:

The thesis explores the connections between nineteenth century imperial anthropology, racial 'science', and the imposition of colonising governance on the Aborigines of Port Phillip/Victoria between 1835 and 1888.

These supposedly scientific facts included the observation by a Polish traveller, Count Paul Strzelecki, that after an Aboriginal woman had a child by a European, she was then unable to bear children by an Aboriginal man. This is a plainly ludicrous suggestion, but one that Marg uses to point out just how assiduously and insidiously science was used to discredit Aborigines as a race—women in particular—and to justify the annihilation of the Aboriginal people and the confiscation of their land by the so-called superior European invaders.

Marg uses extensive quotations from the documents of the era to clearly illustrate not only the overtly racist, cruel, and torturous methods used by the invaders to subjugate the Kulin Aborigines—not least the removal of the children who were then put to work as unpaid domestics—but also, needless to say, just how industriously successful Aboriginal people were and still are on their own behalf, if left to their own devices.

The Kulin Nation people—comprised of five language groups, Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung, Daungwurrung, Wathawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung—had survived in Central Victoria for tens of thousands of years before the European invasion in 1835. It went without saying that they were more than capable of conducting their own affairs. By 1859 Aboriginal people were in despair about their land being stolen, so that they had nowhere to hunt and gather food, and, therefore, no way to feed themselves as they had been doing since time immemorial. They petitioned the government of the time for some land they could call their own, where they could grow crops to support themselves, raise their children, and be relatively safe from murderous settlers.



Marg tells us that the government of the time had another agenda:

By the 1860s children of mixed descent, and girls in particular, had become the principal objects through which the colonial government justified the round up of the Victorian clans, and their concentration on “mission stations”.

As a result of these quite different objectives, land was set aside on Acheron Creek. Almost as soon as they arrived on what they regarded as their land, the Aboriginal people set to making the place habitable by building huts and clearing the land. Unfortunately, due to the resentment of the local Europeans, the venture was short-lived, and the Aborigines were forced to leave within fourteen months.

William Thomas, who was officially responsible for the protection and welfare of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people in the Port Phillip and Western Port areas, kept extensive diaries of his years as one of the four Assistant Protectors of the Aborigines in Victoria. He established friendly relationships with several members of the Yarra tribes—the term he used.

Marg says that Thomas was writing to the Commissioner of Lands and Surveys on 20 July 1859 about the threatened closure of the precious Aboriginal settlement on Acheron Creek, which he had supported the Kulin in getting for themselves: Thomas regretted “the disappointment of a body of intelligent and industrious Aborigines, who have congregated there, inured to civilised labour” and castigated the Board for uprooting them from a “spot they cherished and which I assured them Government would most sacredly retain for them”: from a place he had “promised them ever should be theirs”.

The Kulin people still needed a place to call their own, and eventually Coranderrk Station was set up in January 1863 on “a traditional gathering site for the Woi wurrung”, as Marg explains, by members of the Kulin Nation including two senior men, Simon Wonga and William Barak, and an Inspector of Aborigines, John Green, who had taken on the job of saving Aboriginal children from being being abused by European men.

Originally designed to accommodate children and the elderly in need of care, many Aborigines were suffering from European diseases and malnutrition; within a year the 67 residents of Coranderrk had established vegetable gardens, built nine cottages, “cleared, grubbed and fenced fifteen acres of land, planted potatoes and oats, tended the station’s small herd of cattle and had produced and sold a great number of possum-skin rugs”. Such industry couldn’t last, especially when the Aboriginal residents began growing hops as a commercial enterprise that put them into direct commercial competition with the European farmers. As Marg added in the section entitled “Paradise Lost”: “For the first few years relations between the Kulin and Green were fraternal but in the middle years of the late 1960s they soured due largely to the incompetence of the Board”.

In fact, it is hard to credit the stupidity, ignorance, and downright cruelty of the Board members who seemed hell-bent on making the lives of the Aborigines as miserable as they possibly could. As Marg states:

In 1869, the Board was finally granted the absolute power it had long sought to relocate all Aborigines to its stations, by force if necessary... Under the regulations that became law in February 1871, the Board could now ‘order the removal of any Aboriginal child neglected by its parents, or left unprotected’ into the station dormitories, or remove them still further ‘to an industrial or reformatory school’.

Due to the subject matter, *White Without Soap* is not necessarily an easy read. But as a means of informing ourselves about how the racism of the European invaders impacted on the Kulin Nation, as well as coming to some better recognition of the extreme brutality of our non-Aboriginal

forebears, I can heartily recommend Marg's politically and socially relevant book. It is available online at [www.bookshop.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.bookshop.unimelb.edu.au)

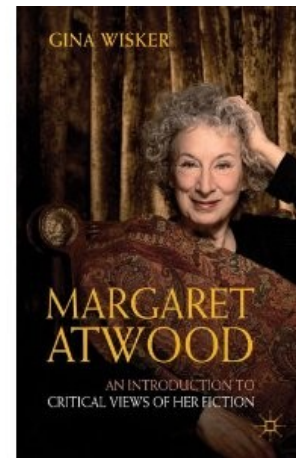
**Jean Taylor is a radical lesbian feminist activist and writer based in Melbourne. Her latest book, *Stroppy Dykes: Radical Lesbian Feminist Activism in Victoria During the 1980s* is being published by Dyke Books Inc in Melbourne in 2012.**

## Does a Novel's Ethical Worthiness Make it Dull?

Gina Wisker. *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Reviewed by Kezia Whiting

Gina Wisker's new book synthesises critical responses to all of Margaret Atwood's fiction (though not her poetry) up to 2010. *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* follows a generally chronological structure that is at times broken up by chapters with works paired thematically. The development and recurring interests of Atwood's writing become clear through this structure. Wisker covers many of Atwood's themes and usual preoccupations, such as feminism and environmentalism, indicating ways in which they recur differently throughout her oeuvre. The book is aimed at an introductory level, with occasional parenthetical explanations of literary terms to aid undergraduate or even high-school level students.



The weaving together of so many articles and reviews creates a general sense of the issues covered in Atwood criticism, but rarely gives much analysis of individual arguments and the way they are interrelated or in disagreement. Often, Wisker summarises an article and moves on to quote from another critic without clearly indicating this movement. Wisker skillfully covers much of the significant scholarly work on Atwood, highlighting the important studies as well as the early reviews of her works. But at times, the focus on reviewers' opinions of the texts results in less of an emphasis on extensive critical engagements with, and debates about Atwood's fiction.

As well as Atwood's environmentalism and, at times problematic, feminism, Wisker focuses on major themes, including storytelling, autobiography, myth and fairytale, memory and identity. Each chapter focuses on one or two of Atwood's texts (except the chapter covering all of Atwood's early short fiction), and is divided into sections with subheadings, beginning with a section on early reviews of the novels. Subsequent sections are thematic, focusing on critics' responses in relation to topics such as "The postcolonial and Canada", "Remembering the past", and "Language and storytelling".

Another interesting focus of Wisker's overview is the tension often created in Atwood's texts by using tropes of genre fiction (such as science fiction, the gothic, and romance) in much of her realist work. In Atwood's early works, Wisker highlights an interest in representing the Canadian wilderness and environment, and the city of Toronto. Atwood's "Canadian scathing view of the US" is often commented upon; this is apparent, according to Wisker, through her early works to her later dystopic fiction: both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Wisker notes, are set on the US east coast (Wisker 147).

Wisker's general focus on the texts' themes can, however, overlook their literary techniques, and there is not enough close reading of either Atwood or her critics. Wisker often has suggestive, insightful comments, which one hopes will be further explored by students or critics of Atwood. I found particularly thought-provoking her claim that "The story ["The War in the Bathroom"] concludes on the same terms as almost all of Atwood's poetry and fiction: the view of life as a series of small, uncertain battles on the fringes of madness" (56).

The section on language and storytelling in *The Handmaid's Tale* is Wisker's most sustained, interesting analysis, and makes one wish Wisker more consistently pitted her own analysis against

that of other critics. Wisker focuses on the use of language to disempower women in the novel, arguing that “Language also *excludes* by naming so that the sexually dissident, the feminist, is called ‘Unwoman’ and the many babies born with birth defects are rejected as ‘Unbabies’” (95). Wisker notes that the power of language to shape perception is exploited by the novel’s protagonist: “Her habit of talking about storytelling highlights the processes of constructing and representing histories and legitimated or repressed versions of events” (95).

Responding to the critics and reviewers who found Atwood’s most recent novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), dull, Wisker provocatively suggests that, “[p]erhaps it is the worthiness of the text which people find dull” (181). Wisker here touches upon the problem of applying moral dictums in literature, and it is a problem that I would have liked her to address in more detail. Does a novel’s ethical worthiness make it dull? How does an author maintain their literary style and also have a clear political stance? How does a critic look at both political and moral themes in a novel, and also attest to the novel’s multiplicity? This is an important question for Atwood’s work, which Wisker clearly shows is both political and ethical in orientation.

**Kezia Whiting is a PhD student in the School of EMSAH at The University of Queensland**

## A Celebration of the Typical Australian Woman

Kate Grenville. *Sarah Thornhill*. Melbourne: Text, 2011.

Reviewed by Fiona Duthie

*Sarah Thornhill*, the much anticipated sequel to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, is not substantially different in terms of theme or subject matter from its predecessor. Instead of breaking new ground, the perspective has shifted to allow a woman's voice to become dominant. There is nothing particularly radical in Grenville's portrayal of the eponymous protagonist; on the contrary, she is in many ways the quintessential Australian woman of the bush. According to noted cultural historian Richard White, an Australian girl was generally praised for "freshness, beauty, good sense and a lack of affectation . . . what delighted most observers was her independence". Sarah embodies all of these attributes and is portrayed favourably because of them. Through Sarah, the traditional Australian image is endorsed, extended, and given a potency that is deeply relevant to contemporary society. This is particularly evident as Sarah strives towards an effective reconciliation with certain aspects of her family's history.



As a child, Sarah refuses to conform to her stepmother's requirements of a "lady", as she rejects skirts, dresses, and sidesaddles. Similarly, as an adult she makes little pretence of conformity to the notions of etiquette and graciousness transplanted by the British to the colonies. This is amply demonstrated in her first meeting with her neighbour Mrs Coulter: "Those Lady Bountiful ways got my hackles up". From the outset, she also displays a certain independence of thought in her political leanings: "They called us the Colony of New South Wales. I never liked that. We wasn't new anything. We was ourselves." Sarah is illiterate and uneducated. However, there is never any suggestion, either from the author or from the other characters, that she is inadequate or in need of improvement as a result of these deficiencies. Her narrative voice, although punctuated by non-standard grammar, indicates a quick intelligence and a vivacious, strong character. It is, nonetheless, clearly indicated that Sarah, in some ways very sheltered throughout her childhood, has a naïveté that needs to be addressed. She has never thought to question the means behind her father's amassing of land and wealth, nor the circumstances that led to the surrounding Aboriginal peoples being forced to live principally on the awkward charity of people like her father. Her awakening, when at last it arrives, tests her resilience as it has never before been tested.

Sarah falls in love with her brother Will's close friend, Jack Langland. Jack has been raised by his white father and stepmother following the death of his Aboriginal mother. For a considerable period, Sarah remains blissfully innocent in her view that the relationship is both natural and destined. Her dream is shattered when her stepmother tortures Jack with the revelation that William Thornhill participated in a massacre that drove the Aborigines from the land sequestered by the settlers. Jack rejects Sarah in an instant and flees to New Zealand. Sarah, however, proves to be stronger than both Jack and her father. It is some time before she fully understands the circumstances that ended Jack's love for her, but although she still has much to learn, this learning will be undertaken on her own terms. When at last she learns of the massacre and understands that her family has long lived on the proceeds of it, she is appalled. However, her character and the course of her life have never been prone to radical disfigurement by the actions and judgements of others--the fate to which Jack succumbed so rapidly. Sarah silently refuses to be condemned by association or trapped in a cycle of unending remorse as she comes to comprehend the half life endured by her father. Even in her adolescence, as she mourns for Jack and the lost relationship that might have garnered some form of reconciliation with the past, she summons the strength to continue. Sarah marries another man from motives essentially pragmatic and establishes a new life

in a different district, independent of her family.

In her marriage, Sarah retains her own unique identity. Her affection for John Daunt is genuine but for the most part measured and her manner remains somewhat reserved. She has a private life quite distinct from the life she shares with her husband. Within it, the memory of her time with Jack is preserved, as are many of her views concerning her current situation. Sarah works relentlessly and without complaint at the household tasks, onerous as they are in a rough and ready homestead in the Australian outback. Despite all, she has a generous and nurturing nature, and it is suggested that she has an apparent maternal instinct both fierce and tender. The scene in which Sarah gives birth to her daughter is intensely visceral; through the haze of pain “that only a woman can feel” and the ensuing exhaustion, she feels her power as a woman as a new life is brought forth. Though hardly unaccustomed to physical labour, she feels that she “never worked so hard in all my life as getting that baby out”.

Despite her growing influence as an independently-minded nurturing female presence in the bush, Sarah also experiences some cataclysmic failures. For years, Sarah longs to achieve some form of kinship with her niece, a Maori girl removed from her homeland, robbed of her true name, and forbidden to speak in her own language. The girl exists henceforth almost as a wraith, never speaking, pining for her home, and erecting barriers that Sarah is unable to penetrate. Eventually, “Rachel” finds some solace in the arms of an Aboriginal boy in the employ of the Thornhills who presumably shares a sense of alienation from the community. However, as with the sad end of Sarah’s affair with Jack, this relationship is abruptly curtailed by external forces. Shortly afterwards, the girl dies on an abortionist’s operating table. There is no creative cross-pollination of cultures allowed in this novel. However, Sarah’s subsequent journey to New Zealand, though implausible, carries a symbolic weight. Though she failed the girl in life, there is some atonement that only she, as a woman, can offer after her niece’s death. Sarah travels to tell of the tragic passing to the girl’s dying grandmother, who cannot peacefully meet her own end if the girl’s life is not sung. Upon her arrival, Jack, who has played the part of escort, hangs back as the women greet Sarah; it is not for him to take part in this “women’s business”. During the ceremony, a womanly kinship is temporarily vouchsafed with the old Maori woman and the others in the group. The difference in language proves no barrier: the old woman looks “past the words, into the woman speaking them”. In this way, though Sarah is greatly pained by the experience, she draws strength and understanding from the group as she atones for the only major wrongdoing in the novel that is, at least partially, her fault. She carries this strength back to her daughter, and it will continue down through the generations to ensure that these stories, as well as those of her father and Jack, will never be truly lost.

*Sarah Thornhill*, while somewhat contrived and not entirely realistic, is a cleverly executed interpretation of the past that, while having some elements of feminism, does not actively disrupt the traditional image of the woman in the Australian bush. Grenville has created a credible portrait of an uneducated nineteenth-century woman who is nonetheless stronger than all of the men in the novel. Though unrefined and unlettered, Sarah has a strong sense of self and rightness. She is a shrewd judge of character and she grows to be a source of simple but profound wisdom. The narrative suggests that Sarah makes as effective a reconciliation with the past as could conceivably be made then by an individual. In this way, the novel offers a version of feminine delicacy to the tortuous process of coming to terms with Australia’s largely unpalatable nineteenth-century history.

**Fiona Duthie has a PhD and an MPhil from the University of Queensland, both in Australian historical literature. She went on to complete a Master of Library and Information Management at Charles Sturt University, and is currently working at the State Library of Queensland.**

**The University of Queensland Image Attribution.**

Anne Wallace is an Australian artist who lives and works in Brisbane. She is primarily a painter, although has also produced works on paper and short films.

She studied at the Queensland University of Technology from 1988 to 1990, and completed an MA at the Slade School in London in 1996. She has been represented by the Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, since 1992.



"Madonna of the Shadows" - Anne Wallace  
Oil on Canvas, 2010  
56cm x 81cm