



# Australian Women's Book Review

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(2009)

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Email Address: [c.ferrier@uq.edu.au](mailto:c.ferrier@uq.edu.au)

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## Memory in a Curiously Conservative Queensland

Francesca Rendle-Short. *Bite Your Tongue*.  
Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2011



**Reviewed by Marcus Breen**

CAN full disclosure be fully rendered? The short answer is no. The longer, more engaging answer is that it is impossible to answer that question when the relationship with an author is embedded in one's own experience. In fact, the measure of disclosure is indicated by the way gaps in a narrative are filled in with literary devices that hint at the emotional truth of the people in question. In this case, Francesca Rendle-Short and I share a connection in the fundamentalist Protestant history of Brisbane's 1960s-1970s that cannot be boiled down to a single perspective.

All these years later, we share an objective distance from our family ideologies. The fullness of the relationship remains locked in history, real in time and the curious space of Queensland, with the necessary discounts in the narrative as it appears on the page. Acknowledging those discounts means accepting that it is impossible to ever speak to the truth of full disclosure. What remains is the render – the process of making known (the philosophy of knowledge) with its ragged edges, imprecision and arbitrariness. This indeed, is a large part of the challenge of cultural studies.

There is a personal dilemma for me in reviewing *Bite Your Tongue*. This is the challenge: my life appears alongside Francesca's, as well as people known to me who are subjects in her book, her parents and siblings and characters in the fundamentalist and conservative political movement in Queensland. They are a part of who I am, incorporated into the fuzzy inaccuracies of history. "Memories bite us, scratch and dismay: memories big enough to poke and prod with messing fingers" (187). It is in

the dilemma of how to fully disclose oneself that I become united with the challenge that Francesca Rendle-Short set out to conquer in *Bite Your Tongue*. Her story is partly my story, even while her navigation of disclosure differs from mine. Her story as a girl and as a woman is powerfully necessary in the way it describes structures of experience that I should not and cannot own as a man.

The title of the book is reflected in some of the passages about Angel's predilection for pressed tongue; it was a fine kitchen craft which provided cold cuts for lunches, salads and events at the family dining table. The tongue is of course the object with which the human utterance is made possible, while in the ox and after slaughter, it is little more than offal, hardly used these days for cooking. And yet, the title of the book and the passages about tongue in the Rendle-Short kitchen in Brisbane's suburb of St Lucia, speak to the connection between mother and daughter(s) in conflict over human utterance, over literature and culture.

There is incommensurability in the connection that is typical of many families, especially large ones. The six Rendle-Short children made for a dynamic brood, finding meaning wherever they could as their parents went about their professions, with the heavy tones of Christian purpose resonating through Bible readings at the family dinner table and hymns in church, which the author cites: "Just as I am without one plea, O Lamb of God I come to Thee." Unmaking the puzzle to remove oneself from such a culture is as much about pressed tongue as it is about a child's incomprehension at adult obsessions. This particular struggle is the truth of Francesca Rendle-Short's book – her separation from her parent's fundamentalism, and her explanation of her life and relationship with her activist mother is what she speaks now.

Rendle-Short's full disclosure takes a literary turn through her use of parallel forms, without being formalist. The narrative is occasionally opaque in the way it tells the story of growing up in Brisbane in the 1960s and '70s, with a mother who led a crusade to ban 100 books set for high school and undergraduate English classes: "She was on a mission from God," as Rendle-Short puts it (47). With an academic father who was head of the department of paediatrics at The University of Queensland and a dyed-in-the-wool creationist, along with several siblings, Francesca was raised in what can now be described as a primordial household. Her mother, Angel Rendle-Short, trained

as a doctor at Queen's in Belfast in Northern Ireland, with hints of Anglo-Irish aristocracy and the like. Somewhat perversely, Professor Rendle-Short had prominence in the international medical field, even while he preached anti-science by promoting creationism. (My elder brother Peter, along with my elder sister Andrea, found this book as engrossing as I did, and recalled lunchtime Bible studies and prayer meetings in the Professor's office at the Royal Brisbane Hospital in the 1970s. I recall talks from the same man to The University of Queensland's Evangelical Union, of which I was president as an undergraduate.)

To address the historically dissonant notes in her life as she reflects on the past forty years, Rendle-Short uses shifts in time, character and sensibility to display a parallelism of styles. In doing so, she uses devices that are necessary to face the question of who she is and who she has become, although there is not much about her life now as a writer, lesbian, mother, Melbournian, academic, liberal, and secularist, that is not already publicly known. This book consists of vignettes of experiences in Brisbane that make up the long process of recollection, meaning-making, unmaking, and remaking the self; of snapshots of memory, experience, and the culture of intimate remembered details, as a kind of confessional materiality. Looking back on the fundamentalist family and its history in Queensland, it is not possible to reveal a full understanding. The knowledge of it now, after the fact, can only be offered in an oblique way, through silence (after Samuel Beckett perhaps?) and through the characters who speak for her, indirectly and in shadowy memories in the grainy photographs scattered throughout the book. It is an obliqueness that reveals the ambiguity of the Rendle-Short experience and that can never be fully disclosed, but suggests the emotion of domestic life caught up in structures of suppression cemented in mythological belief: dumb and dumbfounding.

The literary devices Rendle-Short uses in *Bite Your Tongue* partially reveal the dilemma of full disclosure. They serve to summon memory, fill in knowledge gaps, paper over fear, account for uncertainties, and suggest reconciliations within the intimate details of family life and the self. Memory is always like this in writing; it cannot replicate reality, it can only suggest that the factory of the mind is a network of human connectivities. Rendle-Short's mother Angel exists in most of the text as MotherJoy, a figure who can be managed in a way that the daughter was not able to control in real life. It is a trope of historiography, that the author makes herself present in a fantastic

form in order to explain events of the past in the present context. This may not always work, and in *Bite Your Tongue* it is stretched to breaking point, even while the point itself is made – direct storytelling would be impossible, as is any claim to the perfect recollection of history.

To further accomplish the task of making connections that can speak to factual yet imagined possibilities within her relationship with her mother, Francesca deploys Glory, a fictional character who navigates her way as a narrator and the conscience of the story. Most of the time this seems to be Francesca, the daughter of Angel and John, while at other times Glory is the contemporary moral centre offering a perspective on an abnormal family history in which strident public Protestantism became bald ideology.

Glory sees MotherJoy/Angel as an historical figure, a mother and a Christian activist whose idealism is misplaced, yet cannot be denied. In telling one's personal history and in seeking then to engage in full disclosure, some details can only be told through the distanced eyes of the pained observer. Glory is such a figure.

Glory forces herself to read the book, every word, and *forces* is the word, for with each syllable she hears MotherJoy's voice reciting the words that her daughter is reading. MotherJoy is in Glory's head. This book is such a difficult one to love, a difficult one through which to find a *new way* to love. Glory wants to get out, to escape. Instead, she's stuck between the pages. As she reads, even to herself in silence, even late at night in bed when completely on her own, when she reads for herself (even in one of those orange, Penguin-cover T-shirts, the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* version she was given as a joke by an ex-lover), it's impossible not to hear her mother's inflection, her diction, the pitch, the protest in her recitation. Impossible for Glory not to feel dirty herself... (63)

Glory's pain is clear to anyone who was raised in a Christian (or any) fundamentalist home, and left it. Facing the demands of family history is a unique burden for those who have been caught in the net of uncompromising religious belief, which operates as an immovable ideological construction. For Glory, as for so many of us, there was never space for compromise; martyrs were mythologised as the high achievers of belief, compromise was weakness. Burning those 100 books was a good thing and took place under Angel's supervision in the backyard of the Rendle-Short home in St.

Lucia, a few hundred metres from The University of Queensland. Francesca recalls participating in this act with her mother with a combination of curiosity and horror. Glory helps Rendle-Short navigate her way through these memories of fundamentalism, in order to provide some distance between herself as the contemporary author, and the feelings she had and now has for her mother. These emotions are complicated by the fact that her mother is always her mother.

There are things an author/biographer must admit about one's inner self, because this form of disclosure is required to qualify for "authorship," and because it is in the explication of the parent-child relationships that human nature is revealed. Francesca, having rejected Christian fundamentalism and become a liberal-minded secularist, could adopt hatred as the reactive position. However, the strength of this book is that it is a dedicated investigation of her filial attachment, of love, in its remembered messiness. As such, it is not helpful to the civilizing role of literary or critical work to make hatred a singular tool of analysis unless it is accompanied by the realization that the process of analysis also drives us to love.

My love of this book is found in the disclosure of my shared experience with Francesca Rendle-Short, her siblings and mine, whose pain and puzzlement characterised our oppression in fundamentalist families. I knew her as a child, as a young person, and as she grew to be a young woman. I consider her a friend, although we rarely see each other now in our middle age. Her story is an important one because it reflects the challenges many people have faced in religious households, where dysfunction was a way of life. Her literary approach offers a way of navigating through dark waters, offering an understanding of the process of her becoming, suggesting an empathy that can be drawn upon in navigating the history of our lives in more complex cultures. And the end is there as well. When Angel dies Glory starts afresh. There is a palpable sense of emergence from repression: "Something has finished today so something can start, on a beautiful late summer Queensland day too with the smell of frangipani in her hair, with the opening of a new book to follow – Glory hears a flutter of freshly opened pages, smells drying ink" (236).

The images are importantly feminine and they should remain the domain of the author. Her skill at exploring her emotions is what she is sharing and celebrating in revealing her feelings about her mother's death. Indeed, the significance of women writers can



be seen in *Bite Your Tongue*, in the way writing describes the consciousness of the new self after the pain of difficult, unseemly families for women. I recalled French philosopher Hélène Cixous, commenting in “When I do not write, it is as if I had died,” that “feminine writing” is a political act that aims “to let into writing all that has been forbidden.”<sup>1</sup>

To claim writing doesn’t brand sexual difference is to consider it like a simple manufactured object. As soon as you admit that it passes through the entire body, you are forced to acknowledge that it inscribes an instinctual economy or entirely different modes of expenditure or sensual pleasure. That women are in a particular proximity to everything of the “interior” order and corporeal gesture – of primary structures – is even less surprising than the fact that culturally we find ourselves to have been relegated to the domestic space. (53)

Inevitably, the kind of confessional writing in *Bite Your Tongue* operates to expose the multiple layers of meaning that must be unearthed in a retelling of one’s upbringing as a woman. For those women raised in fundamentalist homes, the layers of experience are often painful signs of the past, even disgrace. The challenge is accounting for each layer, then subtracting the detritus to expose what it now means to experience the joy of emancipation. Full knowledge is impossible; given the hazy starkness of memory and hindsight, the tongue does its best to disclose whatever it can.

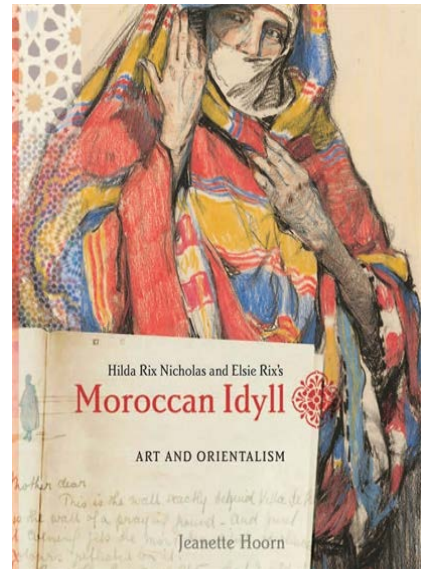
**Marcus Breen was Professor of Communication and Creative Media at Bond University, Gold Coast; he has now moved to the United States.**

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous. “When I do not write, it is as if I had died.” *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*. Edited by Susan Sellers. Acumen Publishing, Stocksfield. 2011:52.

## The Artistic Journey of Two Ingenues in Tangier

Jeanette Hoorn. *Hilda Rix Nicholas and Elsie Rix's Moroccan Idyll: Art and Orientalism*  
Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013



Reviewed by Carol Schwarzman

WRITTEN through a kaleidoscopic lens that mixes aspects of Modernist art history and aesthetics, feminist and postcolonial studies, along with a touch of *Kunsterroman*, Jeanette Hoorn's *Moroccan Idyll* verges on the cinematic; it sweeps the reader into the Rix sisters' youthful sense of excitement and joy as they create their version of an Edwardian Orientalist trail. Hoorn combines scholarly research, original source materials (in the form of the letters home to their mother Elizabeth by Hilda and Elsie, and reproductions of Hilda's drawings and paintings), contemporary photographs and comparisons to multiple artists of the genre and period. By building a rich, hybrid, and ingeniously illustrated biography of Rix Nicholas' life and her years in Tangier (1912 and 1914), Hoorn provides a provocative reconsideration of Hilda's position in Australian art and cultural history. *Moroccan Idyll* is a great read on an historical era that saw western women seeking to travel more freely than ever, engaging through movement and social interaction with the Other, and arriving at boundaries where trust in their own readings of never-before-experienced norms and traditions were necessary to safety and survival.

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I was enticed from the start by *Moroccan Idyll's* physical design. As an object, that is, a book whose cover is a collage of text, image, texture, colour and pattern, the

designers have beautifully conveyed Hoorn's multi-faceted, fresh and of-the-moment approach. Admittedly, I'm a pushover when presented with a good-looking book, yet *Moroccan Idyll* promises at first glance to be a treasure chest of ideas and visual treats, and follows through with a uniquely-formatted graphic biography. The front cover presents us with a detail of Elsie dressed in a plain white tunic and *hijab*, and wrapped in a colourful caftan that is Hilda's pencil and crayon drawing *Camouflage* (1914). Also on the cover is a reproduction of Elsie's handwritten letter to their mother that starts "Mother dear," a quickly-sketched notebook silhouette of a turbaned Tuareg in traditional garb, and intricate, flat stripes of the *zellig* tile patterns so closely associated with Moroccan secular and religious life. These details tell me that this book will be no ho-hum volume of mere historical art rhetoric.

Hoorn tells the story of Rix Nicholas, an ambitious young woman of solid Australian middle-class upbringing, who follows her star and becomes a great painter, studies in the ateliers of Paris and spends four summers in the popular fishing village and artist colony of Étapes. After considerable success in Parisian society painting circles, she joins the ranks of cross-culturally, cosmopolitan painters, both women and men, who travel back and forth between the urban art centres of Europe and America and on to Northern Africa in search of "exotic" subject matter and the popularity of Oriental themes for selling work. While many Australian artists had travelled to Europe, fewer—including Rupert Bunny, Emmanuel Philips Fox, and Ethel Carrick—made it to Tangier. Hoorn's portrayal of Hilda and Elsie as "two ingénues in Tangier" sets the tone for a discussion of the sisters' unique sensibility; their egalitarianism underpins a loyalty to Moroccan people as individuals, and they do not attempt to exoticise their subject matter, either in imagery or in the written word. Hoorn compares them to the painter Henriette Browne, "one of the relatively few nineteenth-century female artists who had made a name for herself painting orientalist themes and who had visited Tangier in the 1860s." Like Browne, Hilda and Elsie "present a distinctly feminised and counter-orientalist view of the culture of Tangier" (175). Throughout the book, aspects of both Australian and Moroccan colonial life interweave, creating a story of globalisation and empire unfailingly impacting upon political, cultural and personal narratives.

As early as the late seventeenth century, Europe was fascinated by Turkish royalty, culture and clothing; a French translation of *Arabian Nights* was published in 1704,

and writers and painters such as Lully, Racine and Molière, Watteau, Fragonard and Boucher worked with Turkish themes and imagery of pashas, sultans and harems. Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1867 painting *Napoleon in Egypt*, is cleverly used by Hoorn to illustrate a discussion of historical European territorial expansion to North Africa and the Middle East and a further birthing of Orientalism. She writes, "intellectual interest followed economic ambition," and cites a surge in the craze for Islam as concomitant with Napoleon's 1798-99 campaign into Egypt. The French *mission civilisatrice* accompanied military aggression, "bringing with [it] as part of [the] invading force a group of 167 scientists and scholars" (50). Napoleon sought to reinvigorate Egypt's past glory and founded the Institut d'Égypte to bring values of the French enlightenment with new technologies (simultaneously pirating quite a few historical artefacts). *Napoleon in Egypt* is a monumental portrait, with an exorbitantly well-hung Emperor standing front and centre, relaxed yet watchful, while in the middle distance a colourful, patiently attending Arab on horseback tends his mount. In the far distance is a diminishing line-up of mosques and minarets offsetting the Emperor's hard-won hegemony. The painting says it all.

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Illustrated with sketches of people and places, and full of stories and enthusiasm for their work, Elsie and Hilda's letters are published here for the first time. Hoorn's reading of the letters forms the backbone of the descriptions of the sisters' social interactions with Moroccan people of various cultural backgrounds—both men and women. Some of the freshest, most exciting material in the book develops Elsie's descriptions of Hilda's painting forays into the *Souk*, where she works on-site to capture the denizens, architecture and energy of the marketplace. Hilda and her painting "follow economic ambition," but only playfully or at the most, benignly transgressing local traditional norms. A discussion of the difficulty of finding willing models to pose, and of Hilda's ability to charm people into posing—or clandestinely sketch until an unwitting model discovers her activity—is the basis of Hoorn's consideration of the Islamic prohibition against the creation of images. Yet Hilda, despite this ancient law, is adept at charming small crowds of onlookers because of her willingness to respect local culture as much as possible, given her agenda. In fact, being a woman enables her to interact with

Moroccan men and women more openly, and she takes full advantage of that freedom.

Elsie writes:

I'm sitting with Hilda in the market place while she is sketching. Alas, there is a big ring of Arabs all around and it takes a great deal of courage to sit still while they watch every stroke... An automobile has just passed, it draws a stream of children behind it. The automobiles are invading Tangier now... The West is influencing the East oh I hope it will be a long time before it dominates it. (122)

\* \* \*

The book is an inspiring read for anyone interested in proto-feminist life choices and lifestyles explored by women at the turn of the nineteenth century. Hoorn clearly conveys the sisters as self-aware and in touch with their transgressions of the *status quo*. I was fascinated by Hoorn's writing on art history, and her comparisons of Hilda's post-impressionist style with that of other Modernist painters—particularly Henri Matisse and his formalist innovations (which, one might add, were exclusively painted as 'conversation' with the concerns of other male painters). Matisse's furthering of Cézanne's pictorial and compositional innovations and his Fauvist colour were a defining influence on Hilda, and Hoorn recounts that Matisse was most definitely painting in Tangier simultaneously with the Rix sisters. But Matisse kept to himself mostly in his room at the *Hôtel Villa de France*, while the Rixs moved out into the everyday life of the local people on a daily basis. Hilda wrote:

Painters, Poets, Musicians and Dancers in the European Countries... have made the world in general incapable of thinking of the East except in connection with impassioned words, writhing bodies and pulsating mystery. I sometimes wonder what the Eastern mind must think of that of the West, for so harping on these things and being almost blind to their everyday life. (111)

Hilda's concern for the people she sketched and painted brings her to find subjects such as *An African Slave Woman* (1914). Hoorn describes Hilda's depiction of the woman as "serious and reflective. She produced a magnificent drawing of her subject...a subtle study of a woman deep in thought and

seemingly worried as she contemplates an unknown future...[Hilda's] interest [is] in revealing the emotional state of her sitter, the unfortunate woman who had been put up for sale in the market of Tangier and who had been rescued by the French embassy" (170).

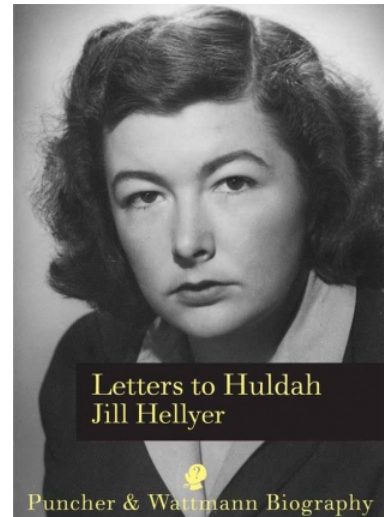
*Moroccan Idyll* serves as a wonderful foil to the usual recounting of the Modernists' North African sojourns. And while Hilda Rix Nicholas has not entered the pantheon of Great Painters, as a woman she lived her life as a committed, successful artist, close to her personal values of compassion and curiosity toward the Other—something at times still lacking in the mainstream of art history-telling.

**Carol Schwarzman is an independent arts writer and visual artist based in Brisbane and Brooklyn.**

## Life Writing as Conundrum

Jill Hellyer. *Letters to Huldah*.

Sydney: Puncher & Wattman, 2013



**Reviewed by Suzanne Dixon**

JILL Hellyer's autobiography (1924-2012) provides plenty of “talking points” for a reviewer. *Inter alia*, it covers her crucial role in the fledgling Australian Society of Authors (ASA), her own writing, her dreadful marriage to an overbearing older man, her horrific struggles with one son's mental illness and another's physical handicap, the belated revelation of her daughter's sexual abuse, her years as a mental health activist, and her friendships. But only the most determined reader is likely to appreciate them. The book presents itself as a puzzle, as an obstacle course that perhaps mirrors Jill Hellyer's own life experiences. Consider the front cover, a posed photograph of the young Jill Hellyer, with the title *Letters to Huldah* over a subsidiary heading categorising the book as biography. Hmm, letters and biography, thinks the reader, who then finds it is not a biography of “Huldah.” On the back of the dustjacket along with any other editorial help, and without spelling it out, the vague blurb hints that the book is *autobiography*. The 120-word, prefatory “Author's note” (a reductive summary of the life of Huldah Sneddon, 1906-2006) yields the bare fact that Huldah was once Jill Hellyer's English teacher.

*Letters to Huldah* is not a set of real letters. The collection is divided into uneven sections, by year 1988-1994. But that is no guide to content as the events in each section are as likely to be from the 1930s, 1950s or even after 1994. Thus in the opening segment, 1988, the reader is presented with a series of “letters” recounting first the death of Jill Hellyer's mother in 1937, followed by a mixture of childhood

reminiscence and contemporary concerns of the author, who was sixty-four in 1988 and in her eighties when compiling this work.

"Then what *am* I reading?" you ask yourself. "Life-writing? Novelised memoir? Random jottings from a writer's notebook over six decades supplemented with letters and minutes?" All of the above, perhaps. While the book bears no resemblance to any of the collections of letters I have read, it is emphatically not an epistolary novel. Oddly, it is sometimes reminiscent of the mannered essays in letter format of earlier periods – the classical Pliny the Elder's neat description of his nurse's small farm or the philosophical reasoning of the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco. Yet Hellyer's work has the disadvantages of reading real letters – unexplained social context, no dates or points of reference, poorly identified characters drifting in and out of anecdotes, domestic detail. All of these things are interspersed with lyrical and physical descriptions of place. Not "real letters to Huldah," then; more like wide-ranging musings with Huldah perhaps in mind.

I did not have the sense that this format was conscious writerly play. Forget Modjeska's *Poppy*, Sontag's *Volcano Lover* or Brian Matthews' genre-crossing fiction *Louisa*; *Letters to Huldah* seems more an unintended jumble than an experiment. But I persisted and I suggest other readers do the same. Who knows? Other readers might enjoy the mysteries. Like an early modernist novel (*To the Lighthouse* perhaps) or an old fashioned whodunit, this piecemeal anti-narrative eventually sketches in the intended revelation – in this case, the author's life and thinking, if not her personality. For all my frustrations, I was gradually drawn into the life of Jill Hellyer herself and finally stopped bitching about the inevitable Huldah-Hellyer confusion. (It is not until more than half-way through the book, we learn that JH chanced in 1962 to make contact again with Huldah, who had been her English teacher at high school in the 1930s.) In dribs and drabs we learn of Jill's struggles to establish herself as a writer, especially a poet, with the familiar handicap of her gender and nationality accentuated by subsequent choices, particularly the disastrous choice of husband, who isolated her, was jealous of her talent, and fathered her three children (while already having four from his previous marriage).



The writer's struggle to write, to be read, and if possible to be recognised or even remembered, is a familiar and perennially fascinating tale. Jill Hellyer gained that recognition among her peers, primarily as a poet. And she brings a poet's sensibility to her writing here, along with the developed rhetorical and – literally – prosaic skills imposed by her necessary roles as lobbyist, as mother fiercely doing battle for her brood, and sometimes as unwelcome prefect of her fellow writers. As a young woman she succumbed to the attractions of a destructive mate – whatever his appeal, she lacked the life skills and self-confidence to resist. How many gifted female artists have gone down that road?

In the end – whatever or whenever that may be – posterity is fickle. Few modern libraries now stock the books of once-popular novelists like Charlotte Yonge, and critical literary successes like Ivy Compton Burnett. Australians who certainly read their poetry at school look blank at the names of Judith Wright, Oodgeroo/Kath Walker or Douglas Stewart. The achievement stands nonetheless. This book may stimulate a new readership to explore the writings of Jill Hellyer and her peers or mentors.

Living in remote rural locations in post-war Australia with minimal income and emotional support, while bringing up small children was an even tougher task than it would be now. Yet Jill Hellyer – who characterises herself as shy and self-doubting – persevered with her own writing and maintained her links with Sydney writers, who recognised her gifts and encouraged her to cultivate them. Many Australian readers will enjoy, as I did, her anecdotes about authors already prominent or promising in the 1940s and 1950s – Dal Stevens, Douglas Stewart, Alec Hope, Frank Hardy – and the emergence of the ASA as a more 'business-focused' writers' association than the Federation of Australian Writers. Jill Hellyer is refreshingly indiscreet in her accounts of internecine strife, freely naming names. Typically, though, she is sparing with crucial background details, alluding in passing to the ideological struggles which went on in the 1950s as part of the Communist/fellow-traveller discourse and image of arts groups, above all those of Australian writers.

Sloughing off her appalling husband at last, she moved to Sydney where she could make a meagre living with her secretarial skills. But children are a life sentence. Handicapped or troubled children more so. It became clear to her quite early – but it

sometimes took a disgracefully long time for educational, health and government authorities to acknowledge – that both of her sons battled serious conditions. As she repeatedly said, "the average is two or three years to get a doctor to believe there's something wrong with your child." She had to become a warrior, prepared to take on MPs and government departments to fight for both her boys; this was a role she could never relinquish. To Jill, the dissolution of the residential psychiatric hospitals was a catastrophe for her schizophrenic son, Allan Stephan. In spite of her heroic attempts to get him the medical treatment he needed and to keep him from the situations which triggered his worst episodes, she had to repeatedly battle for him in magistrates' courts. Some readers might have seen Jill and Allan on Andrew Denton's TV show *Enough Rope*, in 2003 and – because there had been such a strong viewer response to them – again in 2007, when Jill was 81 and Allan 55, still her "lovely boy" (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s906725.htm>).

Her other two children also had a lot to deal with, her younger son Laurie was deaf and eventually went blind. He, too, developed behavioural problems. It takes so little time or effort for me to write that; to gloss over the constant, wearying, life-grinding effort involved. For the son, for his mother, for the whole family. And all the time she was getting older. Her letters deftly convey something of the unremitting struggle. She wryly jokes about the volume of her correspondence over the years with the NSW Department of Health. And that was only a small part of it.

Her firstborn, Linda, was a great comfort and support to her, but Linda's life was neither simple nor happy. Eventually, Jill learned that her beloved daughter had suffered repeated, incestuous rape as a child and adolescent. Yet again, Jill was in court to support one of her children. This criminal case had the desired outcome, the conviction and imprisonment of the abuser, but anyone who has ever been involved in any form of child abuse or sexual assault knows that the legal ordeal is only part of the experience of the survivor. It is extraordinary that Jill and her family had the generosity to expose this suffering to the public gaze.

The story is not all misery. There is a lot of fascinating information, engagingly told, about the Hellyers' family history, about the good and bad of Jill's own childhood and youth, about some of the great events of the past, and about her friendships. About

her achievements as a writer – of letters, as well as of the poetry for which she is best known, and of her short stories. We get some sense of how important Huldah Sneddon-Turner was to the adolescent Jill, but, as with many other things in the book that interested me, I had to do my own research to form a picture of Huldah. I am told the format was Jill Hellyer's own choice, so presumably the lack of index and footnoting (or even a basic family tree) was hers as well. But enough of that, for I came to love this book. In fact, I find myself groping for the language to express how much it moved me. So many terms have been appropriated by facile 'inspirational' quick fixes in advertising and social media, that I risk gushing ("heart-warming") or resorting to stodgy academese ("it rewards the initial effort"). Suffice it to say that hers was a truly worthwhile life, richly lived, and that she is the writer to bring it to the reader in all its vividness, pain and complexity.

**Suzanne Dixon is a writer, activist, teacher and former academic. Her scholarly publications include biography, history of the family and childhood, and women's work and sexualities. She has written many reviews and some feature journalism, short stories and plays. She lives on Stradbroke Island.**

## Thrilled Even Without An Audience: Thoughts About Poetic Engagement

Rachael Munro. *Indigo Morning – Selected poems*.

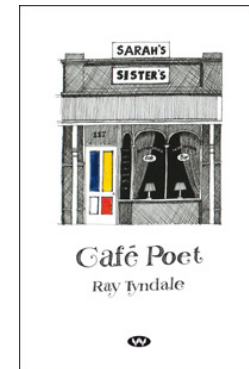
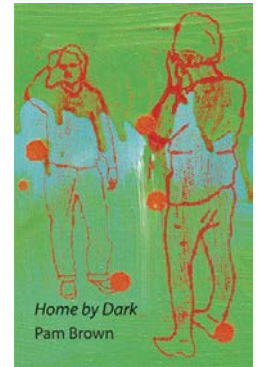
Grand Parade Poets, 2013;

Pam Brown. *Home by Dark*.

Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2013;

Ray Tyndale. *Café Poet*.

Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2013.



**Reviewed by Ynes Sanz**

ON a brief first acquaintance with these three poets, I found myself wondering what clues their collections might hold about the paradox of the poet. If to publish at all is to challenge the stereotype of (female) poet as a pale Dickinsonian waif at the window, how can we understand the poet's intention? Is the love of solitude a blessing or a curse? Or perhaps all this solitude stuff is a label slapped on poets because Emily is less scary than Lilith, of whom Munro comments:

Some say she flew  
and fell into wicked ways  
but independence can give a woman bad press ("Out of Eden")

Are poets solitary scribblers who, being published, want to be heard or perhaps even known, albeit in a self-defined way? If they want us to listen, how do they seduce us into paying attention? And what can be said about the public poet?

### **1: Solitary Splendour**

Munro gives us a hint about how a child left to find its own forms of amusement might well grow to become an introspective poet when she writes:

The front veranda of our old house

was my nursery of benevolent neglect.

Here she confides:

I tied my shoelaces in a bow  
for the first time –  
thrilled even without an audience. (“The Front Veranda”)

In this collection, Munro invites us close to her skin to share moments of intimacy around themes such as her lifetime of enjoyment of the bush, sometimes in the company of ageing family members or beloved horses. Her beautifully cadenced writing asks to be read contemplatively, in a quiet room.

“A Loving Gift” blindsides the reader. Her restrained language lets the story tell itself.

I found a gift beyond price in my bed  
beneath the crumpled sheet.

Her writing seems to be shared with the reader judiciously. Although emotionally generous, it is a peaceful country miles away from that kind of confessional verse that can sometimes seep into print from a less accomplished poet’s filing cabinet. Munro writes movingly about her cats, including one that curls “*locked around his purr.*” In “There is no grass,” she tells us about her “*pewter kitten, nearly a cat*”:

Yet even on his brief occasional escape  
even at the available slack of his small harness  
he has never ventured more than five feet  
from the door  
or me.

In “From a Suburban Window,” Munro hints at loss of solitude “*I sit in my niche by the open window/ and listen to the aura of silence.*” This is a window where, she tells us, she “*will angle the vertical blinds/to optimise exposure vs privacy*” and “*Interruptions are few, and relatively short-lived.*”

The reader is tempted to see parallels in the benign restraints accepted by both cat and poet.

## 2: I'll Show You Mine: Writing about Writing

Pam Brown has a long publishing pedigree, and in this collection, much of the work is introspective and makes her artistic process explicit.

For instance, "Spirulina to go":

You're embarrassed  
by my slurp  
when I'm  
guzzling spirulina  
but  
I've been to my personal best  
and back –  
I'm not worried

and later in this same poem,

...  
I want to reach the inhumans  
find the kind of poetry  
that appeals to them  
...

At times Brown turns to address her reader directly, as in "Wordless," a diary-like stream of consciousness in which the minutiae of life, bus journeys, the people observed, and new undies, become a compelling read:

...going home  
to make a poem  
(this one)  
to give my problems  
to you, reader

(contagion)

Her approach to language, subject and form has an authoritative anarchy. "In Queensland" looks at first glance like a simple descriptive poem, but isn't, despite its

“*stonkered cattle lying in the road/ to carnarvon gorge.*” This is a poet who can stud her work with glacé cherries like “*polysemy*,” “*gewgaws*,” “*cladistic*” and “*hyperaubade*” and make them stick. She had me at “*stonkered.*”

In “More than a Feuilleton,” a longer poem that she originally published as a chapbook, Brown reveals more about her poetic practice, hardwired as it is into her life. And in doing so, as in much of this collection, ruminates on those things that can also perplex and destabilise many of us.

my week

is my weekend

my task –

reinvigorate ossified poetries

by adulteration

and, later:

who says 'penned'

instead of

'wrote' or 'written'?

always say

I data entered

that poem!

As Munro lets us know in “Proof of a Day,” her poems don't slip out without permission either. A catalogue of the scatter of objects on her desk becomes a piece about *not* writing poetry:

...poems by Jim Morrison

and an ashtray full of apricot pits and butts –

coffee table proof that January 26 really existed;

that, and 5 bad poems dated 26/1.

Perversely, or perhaps as she intended, Munro leaves the reader wanting to know what her “bad poems” sound like ... which brings us to the question of engaging the reader.

### 3: The Rules of Engagement

In Brown’s “1995”:

The day after  
the very long reading,  
at the very cool venue,  
we, the audience, *were*  
those sluts, those girls –  
...  
she meant *us*,  
that’s the way she read  
to us the way  
she treated us ...

A confident poet who knows how to present her work at a reading is at an advantage in sending her words straight home. If we encounter her on the page, what hooks can she employ? If these poets want a dialogue or a dance with the reader, what do they do to win us over? On the page, a poet can work the neglected power of the title. For instance, Brown’s “Wet Flannelette” begins:

who are those people  
running on my grass?

Other poems with well-baited titles: “Rehab for Everyone,” “Haywire Here” (*“who prepared this future?”*) and “Spirulina to go” do not disappoint. A preliminary glance at Munro’s “Contents” yields some contenders: “The Sheep of the Monaro do not Dream of Angels,” “The Faint Fragrance of a Clean Damp Cat,” and “The Cigarette Lighter and Chaos Theory.” Is it greedy to want her to follow up with killer first lines?

This is not to say that a title like “Snow and Eucalypts” does not invite us in. If we take the time to savour this poem we have our reward in her sensitive observation and the nuanced visual richness of her descriptions.



We drove the snow-bound way across the mountains, through  
sun-shot and blue-shadowed stillness

But the listener's ahh might not come until the final line: "*A deciduous winter seems a mean-spirited thing.*" Like a scene from a good movie, a winning last line can linger satisfyingly with the reader.

The contents page of Ray Tyndale's book also has plenty to make a casual browser look further: "Tar and Cement" gives us a solid-gold moment in a poet's day, "Implants" turns out to be about teeth, while "Fiona's take on Anaïs Nin" is a nice reflection upon reflection itself.

#### **4: Going the Whole Hog: Poetry Writing as Public Activity**

The poet-in-residence, especially one who practices "live writing" in the presence of members of the public including her subjects, has to put her writing "out there," sometimes while the ink is still wet. Ironically, she has first to demonstrate that she is a good listener. Ray Tyndale clearly is.

Tyndale had Australian Poetry's support to be café poet in Semaphore, South Australia. Her first poem sets the initial scene:

'I just come in here for a coffee  
and a bit of peace and quiet.'  
Those warning signals  
are easily read.

One diner says to me 'Oh no  
I'm not at all interested in poetry.'  
I am fairly green as a café poet:  
back off immediately

somewhat chastened ("On Being a Café Poet")

In the next poem, a transformative moment takes place between the poet and the same café visitor:

the writing of a tiny little poem  
opens her heart.  
She weeps a little, folds it in four  
and stores it away in her wallet. ("Tar and Cement")

Customers in her café start out as potential subjects but ultimately become her collaborators. It could be argued that a poet's choice of subjects is just another kind of poetic narcissism, but Tyndale does not interpose herself. Her style is direct, the language straightforward and her focus, the meticulous retelling of the stories.

In the series of eight poems about a woman given the pseudonym of Mimi, this dynamic is most deeply examined:

Cut the accent with a knife  
not broad Geordie  
but a lovely soft middle-class  
Tyneside lilt unmistakable

so familiar to me

and,

nudge the flowing stream  
in the right direction  
bit by bit I'm getting  
the whole life story

just exactly what I want! ("Call Me Mimi")

later,

This time our meeting  
is coloured by pamphlets dug out  
of the large white handbag and handed  
to me nonchalantly, as though

unimportant ... ("Fourth Meeting")

and finally,

I realise now as I sit talking to Mimi  
that in a sense I've milked  
her dry and now all that remains  
are memories. She's tired

of being asked about her youth ... ("Subsequent Meetings")

Here, through a series of conversations controlled by both poet and subject, in touching contrast with Tyndale's first tentative overtures, the poet and her public finally reach a kind of consummation. So perhaps a poet's personal inclination – hermit or hoyden – is not so important after all. But on the page she must be eloquently and idiosyncratically *herself* for a reader to care about her writing.

**Ynes Sanz was Poet-in-Residence for a year at The Royal Mail Hotel, Goodna.**

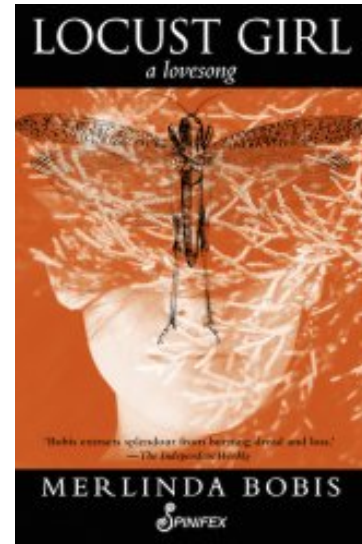
... when the social lubricant kicks in,  
it won't be me spilling my guts.  
Then you'll want to watch out:  
trust me, I know words  
I haven't even used yet. ("Live writing at The Mail," Ynes Sanz 2014)

## The Plague of Love

Merlinda Bobis. *Locust Girl: A Lovesong*.

Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2015

Reviewed by Emily Yu Zong



“But must love be reciprocal, for it to be love?” (*Locust Girl* 159).

SO questions the *Locust Girl*, Amedea, after her friend Beenabe’s rejoicing exclamation that she has learned to take love by providing sexual comfort to the Kingdom builders. Representing the converted likes of herself, Beenabe has to make compromises between her refuge in the Kingdoms and the cost that shelter demands, and between her cultivated loyalty to this new home and the numbing of her past memories. But love, as Amedea discovers through her friend’s sacrifice, can be taken without making it, and can be given without receiving it. Love is, indeed, a plague.

Suffused with gritty winds and whirring songs, Merlinda Bobis’s reimagining of a post-apocalyptic fantasy world is one where water and colours become rare treasures; it is a world that is polarised between the despaired strays and their dehydrated wasteland and the last remaining green haven, the Five Kingdoms and their tyrannical caretakers. *Locust Girl* is the Filipino-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis’s fourth novel and it tells the story of nine-year-old Amedea the *Locust Girl*, who undertakes a journey from the desert to the green borders of the Kingdoms. Amedea lives with her father in numbered tents where water, seeds, and vial lights are meagrely rationed, and when rations are not resupplied, locusts become the main source of food. Each household is allocated a broadcasting box from the Kingdoms, and its sole refrain regiments people to their own patches of sky: “*No one should look / No one should walk beyond the horizon*” (10). No one should walk across the border. A punishment fire is spewed

to bomb, to burn those daring to breach this law. Ten years after losing her father and her village to this nightmarish fire, an amnesiac Amedea is dug out from skulls and bones by a curious Beenabe, only to find a whirring locust embedded in her brow.

Amedea's locust, "a sensing compass" that predicts, copies, and creates songs to direct her journey across the desert, sustains the suspense that drives the story forward. This magical realistic design reinstates Bobis's use of the uncanny that was also ingeniously written into her previous works. In the first section, with the navigation of the locust, Amedea and Beenabe brave a survival marathon across the desert and nurture a love-and-hate sisterhood. The strays they encounter—a cave woman Cho-Choli who has wept her eyes out, and a nostalgic couple playing a love song—recollect traumatic memories about the Kingdoms' plunder of water and trees and a subsequent collapse of love and human bonds. The function of singing is revealed in the novel when an enlightened guru delivers his prophetic whisper to Amedea: "Lives are not rumours. They must be told openly. Lives are stories. They must be sung openly. . . Plague them with songs, Child" (54).

This distinction between rumours and singing brings us to the novel's second section, "Singing." Beenabe and Amedea are separated three years after the burning of Beenabe's village, and as bits of Amedea's own painful memory are restored, she finds herself in the night ration lines with the wretched who conduct furtive trades and exchanges: a necklace for a jug of water, the last crockery for a fistful of seeds – even, "dreams" of colours. In the ration lines, the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Kingdom's reign are further filtered through its obfuscating claims of equality and justice: claims that are targeted at brainwashing the strays and managing them in order to secure authoritarian rule. These claims are upheld through the enforcement of "purity," the exclusion of children, the sacrifice for the Kingdom's cannibal feast, and, more importantly, through the disavowal of singing. Not dissimilar to the Orwellian "thoughtcrime" is the novel's invention of "singingcrime."

Singing: how is it different from rumouring? As Amedea joins another group of strays, her locust songs discredit the trade of Shining Lumi, the owner of a skull with which she makes promises although she never lets it sing. The hopeful supplicants keep queuing up outside Shining Lumi's tent, paying her with rations and pleading for the skull to sing the stories of their *maybe dead* loved ones who have disappeared in the

wars, in their walks to the borders, or in the ration lines, and who will *maybe* come home one day. Fearing the Kingdom's punishment of any singingcrime, Shining Lumi shamelessly practises the "crime of hope" with her rumours and empty promises (93). The collective singing, however, is evoked by Amedea's locust that sings in the voices of the supplicants' lost ones. Soon, one by one the desperate supplicants sing out their own histories which fuse into the "longest song after a very long time of silence" (103). This communal testimony replaces vaporous rumours with lived stories uttered from within. Singing thus becomes an act of acknowledgment and remembering, an open engagement with pain, desire, loss, and love, and a healing cure after eating the Kingdom's "forgetting seeds."

But what if memories of hate and terror are unforgiving? What is the cure? In the novel's third section, Bobis depicts the other side of the border where memories resist closure. In the Five Kingdoms – where water, seeds, oils, colours, and fires never fall short – Amedea re-meets Beenabe, and discovers the undercurrents of surveillance and terror in this blessed oasis. In a series of thrilling runs for hideouts, Amedea is caught as the plague and put to trial in front of the Kingdoms' ministers and the multitude of its loyal citizens. Amedea is charged with undermining the Kingdoms' convictions of *peace*, *purity*, *piety*, and *preservation* by transgressing borders and singing unauthorised songs. However, the falsehood of such convictions is betrayed by the sneaking tiredness, fear, and anger of rehabilitated citizens who are forced to live with playbacks of fires and wars, and thus forbidden to forget. A flagrant challenge is launched by the border-crosser, Verompe. A bastard son of the Minister of Mouths and the chief of the ration lines, Verompe is witness, victim, and culprit, as he struggles between an illusory loyalty to his father and his conscience, plagued by the suffering of the strays in the desert. Verompe's awakening is initiated when he contradicts his father: "Does the other side have no right to their own peace? No. Because their peace threatens our own and more legitimate peace?" (170).

The novel reaches its climactic revelation when Beenabe, in defence of Amedea, is trampled by outraged citizens and Amedea begins to sing a multitude of voices from both sides of the border. This accommodation of a legion of voices makes her implode and catch fire; she is reborn truly as a Locust Girl: part locust, part human. Her self-immolation, the ultimate sacrifice, releases the trapped locust and brings the story to its fabled ending, as the locust sings the heart of this story:

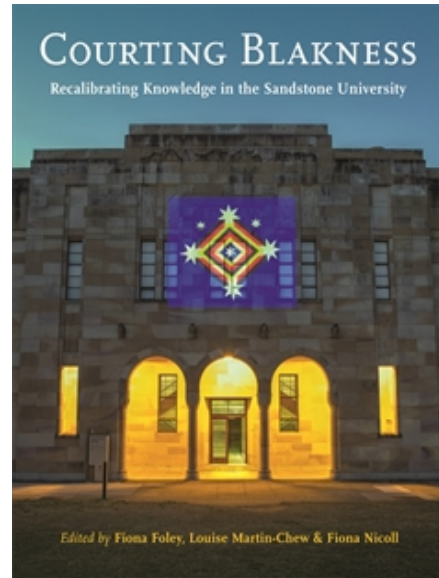
What greater plague is there  
Than what we do to each other  
What greater love is there  
Than what we do for each other (175)

The message allegorised here is simple and enduring. It is the way Bobis weaves wild imaginings and breath-holding suspense that wrings the heart as we embrace the aching strangeness of this novel. Combining elements of the uncanny, the fable, the post-apocalyptic, and popular fiction, this novel's genre is hybrid. As Bobis blurs the boundaries between a utopian and a dystopian society, she touches on the social malaise, cultural discomfort, and ecological concerns of our globalised times. The desert grows into green fields from Beenabe's barley seed—this seed that Beenabe and Amedea have planted is, in fact, the plague of love. Even after I put down the book, the lovesong Bobis composes keeps whirring; in our lifelong desires for and defences of the border, have we never realised that the border is already within us, and that only by setting free both hate and love can we nurture the safest haven, our hearts.

**Emily Yu Zong is a PhD Candidate in the School of Communication and Arts at the University of Queensland. She is working on her thesis on Asian-Australian women's literature.**

# **Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University**

Fiona Foley, Louise Martin-Chew and Fiona Nicoll.  
*Courting Blakness*.  
University of Queensland Press, 2015



## **Reviewed by Yamini Krishna**

THE book *Courting Blakness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University* comes as a part of the art project 'Courting Blakness,' curated by the artist Fiona Foley, a Badtjala artist and Adjunct Professor at The University of Queensland, and brings together works by Ryan Presley, Archie Moore, Rea, Natalie Harkin, Karla Dickens, Christian Thompson, Megan Cope and Michael Cook. The art works, the live discussions, the website documenting the project, and finally the book – which reflects upon the art works, artists, the historical context of the work and the university space, are all integral parts of the project. The project invited these artists to reflect on identity, Aboriginality, the Australian nation, Western education, and architecture in the space of The University of Queensland. The book is a collection of essays, reflections and conversations fostered by the Courting Blakness project.

The importance of the project at this historical juncture can be outlined by an anecdote from my personal experience. In a discussion about Aboriginal history, an Indian student at an Australian university remarked, "But that is past. It is taken care of!" This remark coming from an Indian emigrant has a lot to say. The Sandstone University is a white space and this whiteness transcends the boundaries of nationality. The uniqueness of the project lies in challenging exactly the assumptions and a hegemony that gets propagated as common sense. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the project shakes the ground on which one stands.



In her foreword, Larissa Behrendt points out that the power of the project is in allowing space for conversation, meditation and reflection. Fiona Foley, the curator, quotes Socrates: "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think"; this statement sums up the aim of the project very well. The book begins with an introduction that contextualises the space in which the project operates, and its politics, and progresses to meditating on different conversations started by the project. It is divided into six parts: Architecture, Space and Possession; History, Identity and Power; Haunting Institutions of Settler Colonialism; Nations: Flagging Sovereignty; Debt; and The Blaktism, and concludes with closing remarks: "Through my eyes."

Fiona Nicoll in her introduction draws our attention to the importance of the space and the time of the project. It is said that the Aboriginal question will always be a difficult one for the Australian nation. Although Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's national apology to stolen generations of Aboriginal children in 2008 brought some level of openness to it at the state level, the paternalistic approach of subsequent governments persists, and the study of the nation's history in classrooms is a difficult experience for Aboriginal students. The project reverses this gaze onto European knowledge, and it comes at a critical juncture of structural changes in higher education in Australia. Posing tough questions and fostering discussions, the project was both in and out of place in the university and the nation.

In the essay "History Receding," Kelly Greenop describes the intersection of the art works and the colonial architecture of the University as unsettling, and talks about the complacency of architectural history in dealing with Aboriginal architecture. She points out that the project results in questioning received history and tries to reach out to the hidden Aboriginal roots of the great court (32). Louise Choido's calls Australian universities a place of whiteness and defines whiteness as the political and cultural practices through which individuals make sense of the world. For her, art spoke of the unacknowledged reality that "no matter where we are, we would be standing on Indigenous country," and reflects upon the invisibilities which we take for granted (41). Brownyn Fredricks problematises the university space, "for a long time it seemed that when we entered through the gates of universities, we were expected to be simply staff, researchers and students. In the past Indigenous academics referred to the concept of leaving 'Indigeneity at the gate.'" Standing on the Aboriginal land,

universities through multiple inherited rules and procedures often set up an “us” versus “them” dynamic, most often making Aboriginal people strangers on their own land (81).

Country, for Kevin O’ Brien carries two distinct categories, one spiritual and the other practical. He explains that “it binds Aboriginal people together, it is a place of belonging as opposed to owning” (27). Archie Moore takes the idea of Aboriginal ownership and belonging and makes flags for the 14 Aboriginal Nations which existed prior to colonisation, questioning the unified Australian nation and also the unified Aboriginal identity. These flags represent the confusion of these identities, which are always thought of as coherent. Katrina Schlunke uses ‘Blak’ in this book to refer to the work done by Indigenous artists to “resituate” Australia where black art speaks back to colonialism and white terror (51). Djon Mundine writes of the official histories which form milestones for the nation but are silent on the realities of Aboriginals, almost rendering them invisible (61).

Karla Dickens’ installation, *The honey and the bunny*, is a love story between an unlikely couple, a drag queen and a bunny, as they walk through the streets of Southern Sydney in a starlit night. It lends visibility to the invisible, in the Great Court of the university. The installation allows a sense of hope in a concrete jungle through the dreams of the underdog, making a point that there has always been a greater chance of belongingness and togetherness on the streets and sports fields of South Sydney, than within the conservative walls of the university (72). Jessica Brodie points out that this project invites viewers to be a part of it. For her, it presents a space to contemplate the possible histories, struggles and marginalisation (69).

Memory is an important aspect that several of the artists play with, as well as questions about whose memory is acknowledged and how memories come to be constituted and reconstituted in history. Natalie Harkin liberates her memories through a basket woven from her great-grandmother’s letters. She writes, “we can create objects of beauty from the darkest, most oppressive of places... In our baskets, we can carry new stories forward, gently, more lightly, and with rupturing purpose” (90). While one aspect is the questioning of Australian identity, the other is the creation of Aboriginal identity. The native is born out of the fantasies of the coloniser and Elizabeth Strakosch points out that the colonial apparatus was built on these fantasies. She draws a comparison with the state of Israel, which she calls a valorisation of political fantasy. She says the

national story of Australia works on the fantastical story of the Aborigine, where universities become safe spaces designed to hold the story and reality together; this ruptures every time the settler people encounter the Aboriginal struggle, culture or political systems (105). For her, *Courting Blakness* infiltrated these insulating white spaces.

In the book, Heather Douglas and Jo Beasley present the Aboriginal art galleries and museums as White spaces, which become property of the nation-state rather than a site of Indigenous expression (129). They explain that the very act of naming something Aboriginal is a political act, and makes us aware of the connotations it has with the colonial creation of the Aborigine. Morgan Brigg and Romaine Moreton take up the idea of White fantasy and talk about the creation of an “authentic” Aboriginal. Megan Cope, on the section of the book *The Blakism*, presents a ritual of creation of the native, presenting a critique of the unified identity. It poses an ultimate question: “who is the certificate of Aboriginality for?” A virtuous, civilised, law-abiding, secure and superior white Australian is created opposing the body of the savage Aborigine. It provides a space to state what “allowing whiteness is, by stating what it is not” (179), argues Romaine Morton.

Ryan Presley’s *Debt* engages with colonial roots through exchange and transaction. In his essay, he talks about the word “debt” being synonymous with guilt in several languages by drawing attention to money, markets and colonization. Debt can also be referred to as the debt that the Australian nation owes to the Aboriginal people. The project displays a large text piece XCHANGE plastered with images of money, and presents Australian currency commemorating Fanny Balbuk, Jandamarra, and others, thus attempting to acknowledge this debt to the Aboriginal people. Maurice O’ Riordan points out that the work also foregrounds the user-pays system, which reduces education to a transaction (147). Alice Te Punga Somerville reflects about her own self through debt, who the owner of the land is, and who pays the debt.

Michael Cook plays with photographic form and techniques to provoke important questions from the students, some of which are: “Are all of Australia’s Prime Ministers Aboriginal?” and “Have there been any Aboriginal Prime Ministers?” (190). It was Rhyl Hinwood’s artistic vision that was responsible for the Indigenous Aboriginal people appearing as artistic and intellectual subjects in the Great Court.

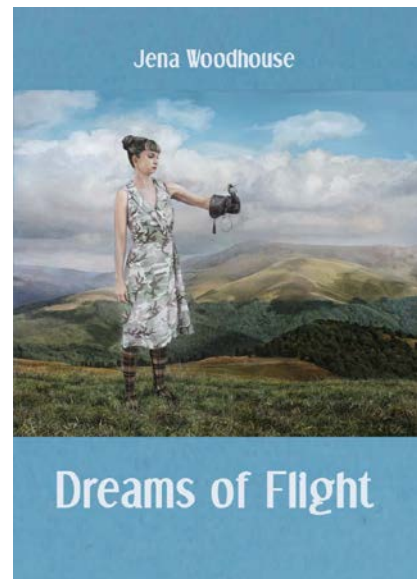
Fiona Nicoll remembers the legacy of former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who introduced free education, recognized Aboriginal land rights and promoted arts as the touchstone of cultural sophistication through public funding. She calls Courting Blakness a “Whitlamite” project: optimistic, courageous and beautiful.

In her closing remarks, she says “there are no guarantees that the portals it opened to new ways of thinking about history, identity, sovereignty and value will not disappear in the course of business-as-usual in the sandstone university...Yet, in spite of appearances, this space has been indelibly marked by Courting Blakness” (193). The value that the project brought to the community was not just limited to the discussions and deliberations, but to the relooking and rethinking of one’s position as an individual and as a community. In the words of Alice Te Punga Somerville, “What contribution can we make to ensure that our presence does not become part of the problem rather than part of the solution?”(162). This encouragement of self-examination is the greatest success of the project. It provided those breathing spaces in the arcades of the sandstone university, clearing some of the fog of the past, and holding up a mirror to peek into oneself.

**C.Yamini Krishna is a Ph.D student in the Film Studies Department, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, at present working on City and Cinema. Her research interests include Popular Culture, Art and Society, Indian Cinema and Digital Media.**

## Coming up for Air

Jena Woodhouse. *Dreams Of Flight*.  
Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2014



**Reviewed by Alison Cotes**

DREAMS of flight. A flight towards or a flight from? Dreams of hope or of despair? This rich but immediately accessible collection of short stories leaves it up to the reader to decide the answers. But the metaphor of flight is more intricate than the simple idea of birds allows, although there are many of them in these stories with different fates. Another underlying image is that of water in all its aspects. From sea, to lake, to stream, water can trap us or give us freedom, especially when it's combined with air, such as the experiences of the young photographer in the story "Stalking the Light," "She is here, now, in the impressions of the moment, with the solitary canoeist whose craft draws a long chevron on the rose-tinted surface of the water below; with the cohort of ibis silhouetted against the forget-me-not blue unveiled by dispersing cloud above; with the kingfishers and herons and magpies who frequent the early-morning river bank: here, now in the strengthening light."

Water, light and air. The most ethereal elements, fragile but essential, without which our lives would become engulfed by dirt, mud and fire that will drag us down with no escape possible. The idea of country is one that we are most familiar with in Australia, from the very beginning of human occupation going back more than 60,000 years, but we need the lightening elements as well, and this is what Jena Woodhouse gives us. Short stories are the logical next step for a lyric poet such as Woodhouse. The compact nature of the form demands not the broad sweep that the sometimes self-indulgent novel allows, but the intricate closeness of thought and word, the need for

metaphor rather than spelling-out, the lightness of touch that arrests the reader with a phrase, a brief idea, that at the same time is rich with meaning and suggestion.

Woodhouse is such a writer, and these stories work on a double level. A reader can be taken in by the exquisite control of the prose so that there is nothing to do but stop and luxuriate in a single sentence or image – the small fish caught on a mundane fishing trip are to the out-of-place narrator “as exquisite as slivers of moon”; a Swedish house of timber and glass “more reminiscent of a floating craft than a sedentary dwelling”; “the sea gnawed uneasily at the intertidal rocks.” The sheer beauty of such imaginings acts as a subtle lure away from the world of meaning into a breathless admiration of the power of words, which those of us old enough to care about such things equate with the craftsmanship on a piece of chased eighteenth-century silver jug (see what watching *The Antiques Roadshow* can do to a person!), or the intricate beauty of a Bach fugue. These are the words of a dedicated artist at work, on a par with the work of the almost-forgotten writer Anita Brookner, whose sentences are so perfect that they can stop readers in their tracks, luxuriating in the perfect cadences of a mistress of word.

If these created words were no more than that, they would have the passing charm of a butterfly, but the stories in which they appear are often as grittily rooted in an ordinary world of sometimes ugly realism. Hers are no fairy-tale worlds of grown-up fantasy, for Woodhouse draws on a wide range of settings and habitats, as befits someone who has spent much of her life living or travelling in other countries. She takes us to Greece, of course, where she lived for many years, and to Hungary, and to Russia, with fleeting glimpses of other cities, other cultures. And finally it's home to Australia, mostly to old bush towns or nondescript suburbs in the city where her insights and stories make it clear that every place in the world is the same but different, that we are nowhere but everywhere at home.

This truth doesn't have to be spelt out, of course; Woodhouse's simple stories provide immediate evidence as they unfold the situations of so many different people. Sometimes just a moment in time, sometimes a deeply introspective narrative, every character and event makes it perfectly clear, and although each story is very different from the others, this is the truth behind them all. As you read the stories in sequence, it may seem that they have very little in common, but by the final one, “Hovering Over

My Life,” we are given a futuristic vision of a world not too far away in time (2031) in fact, one we are almost living already. The person whose life has been lived under the terms of social contracts, the man who is undergoing a heart transplant taken from a pig, is ironically transformed by a recognition that in the mechanistic twenty-first century, we have discarded the old fashioned values of forgiveness, charity, compassion and empathy, and especially that almost-forgotten concept of kindness. It reminds me of a quatrain by that otherwise forgettable poet, Ella Wheeler Wilcox – “So many gods, so many creeds; so many paths that wind and wind, while just the art of being kind, is all this sad world needs.” An old-fashioned sentiment, perhaps, but one that underlies most of the stories in this exquisite little book, the book of a poet whose prose is winged indeed.

**Alison Cotes, based in Brisbane, has been an arts and theatre critic for twenty-five years. She founded The Matilda Awards in 1988 and serves on the judging panel, and is Queensland arts writer for crikey.com’s Daily Review.**

## You Don't Need to Be a Weatherwoman To Know Which Way the Wind Blows

Karen Lamb. *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather*.

University of Queensland Press, 2015



**Reviewed by Christina Ealing-Godbold**

KAREN Lamb has produced an excellent piece of “life writing” in her biography of the Queensland author, Thea Astley. Astley, a successful Australian author by any standards, has contributed 16 published works and many articles to Australian literature, winning the Miles Franklin Award four times. Thea Astley was an All Hallows School girl from Brisbane, a graduate of The University of Queensland, and a Queensland school teacher for the first few years of her career, combining the roles of wife and mother, teacher, academic and prolific author, in what appeared to be a seamless fashion. Karen Lamb, in her carefully researched work, opens the door to the private life of Astley and allows the reader to follow her career and life journey, including the juggling of roles and commitments.

Lamb’s work is a holistic biography; examining every aspect of Astley’s childhood home, her struggle with Catholicism and marriage to Jack Gregson. The novel also explores her personal struggles, as well as the mechanics of timetabling her writing life to fit into her busy world. The subtitle *Inventing Her Own Weather*, refers to Astley’s moods and sometimes inexplicable changes in attitude which she herself described as “personal weather.” Often outspoken and less than politically correct, Astley contributed to her reputation as an argumentative and difficult person. Yet Lamb has been able to illustrate the softer side and generous nature of Thea Astley—the nature lover, dedicated mother and lover of music. Lamb’s biography well illustrates the many dimensions of Astley’s complex and multi-layered life.



Feminist in principle and opposed to the restrictions on women, particularly in marriage, Astley was committed to her marriage to Jack Gregson and Lamb explores this theme thoroughly in the biography. Astley pointed out the economic necessity of marriage for most women and explored the topic of marriage closely in her novels, *The Well Dressed Explorer* and *The Slow Natives*, as well as other writings. Jack and Thea were often seen to have a prickly relationship; at times living in the same house, but with little interaction. Analysing the fiction, Lamb describes this kind of long term marriage with much unsaid, as “armed neutrality.”

Astley was not part of the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and thought that, apart from the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961, not much had changed for most women. She was convinced that new social freedoms lacked credibility and came with their own form of shackles for young women. In her North Epping neighbourhood, Thea gathered women together to share friendship and was often provocative, according to Lamb, in pushing her group to discuss marriage and “the rueful whimsy about its monotony, in contrast to the idealistic women’s magazine portrayal of the married state.” Lamb demonstrates the contradictory aspects of Astley’s feminist views throughout the work.

Catholicism played a strong role in Astley’s childhood in Ashgrove in Brisbane; her parents were devout believers, and her only sibling became a Catholic priest. Throughout the biography, Lamb places Astley’s life within the context of this Catholic world of guilt, anxiety and self-deprecation. As a member, in her teens, of the Brisbane Catholic Writers’ Movement in the 1940s, Astley enjoyed the comradeship and support of fellow writers as she made her way through a Bachelor of Arts degree and a teaching diploma. Lamb describes Astley’s experience with Catholicism as troubled yet influential in much of her written work. However, despite her Catholic roots, Astley married a protestant in a civil registry office in country Queensland. This marriage proved to be too much for her parents, who succeeded in convincing her to go through the process of a legal marriage “in the sight of God” in the Catholic church, albeit many years later in suburban Epping.

Drawing upon a range of sources including interviews and oral history, as well as private letters and papers, Lamb has produced a well-balanced picture of a revered Australian writer. The biography illustrates the often contradicting views of Astley’s

public persona and success versus her own self-deprecating view of her efforts and the value put upon them in the world of publishing and literature. The details of Astley's numerous publishing contracts and approaches to securing them, will be of interest to any author, researcher or librarian with knowledge of the business. Lamb has shown Astley as a woman who had a considerable amount of business and financial acumen to add to her already impressive array of talents, and that she was not afraid to use this, as well as her husband's financial knowledge, to take a stand against what she considered to be publishing practices that did not favour authors.

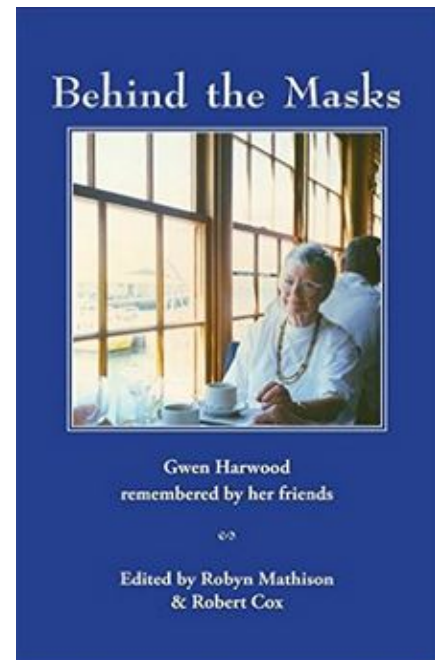
By the end of the biography, the reader appreciates Astley's hard work and dedication to her craft, and the twists and turns in her journey that led to her success. Lamb's careful manipulation of Astley's lifestyle to allow her writing to proceed in a most orderly and structured fashion is also impressive and well-illustrated throughout the work. Astley coined for herself the phrase "The Gorgon of Epping North" to acknowledge her reputation for speaking her mind to those in genteel suburban society. Yet meanwhile, as Mrs Gregson, she maintained the "economic necessity" of being a wife, professional and home owner in what she described as the "horror domestica" of 1950's suburban life. Lamb's magnificent job of this biography, displays both breadth and depth in chronicling the life journey of a female writer in post war Australia.

**Christina Ealing-Godbold is a Senior Librarian in Reference and Research at the State Library of Queensland, where she has worked for more than twenty years in the John Oxley Library, General Reference and Family History. She has a Masters in Australian History from Sydney and an undergraduate degree in Journalism and Media Studies from Griffith. Her Masters thesis was on Conditions for the Working Class in Brisbane 1900–1910. Christina's academic interests are working class history, especially with regard to women, Australian women's literature and Australian music history.**

## Gwen Harwood's Competing Identities

Robyn Mathison and Robert Cox. *Behind the Masks: Gwen Harwood Remembered by her Friends*.

Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2015



### Reviewed by Ann-Marie Priest

IT is twenty years this December since the renowned Australian poet Gwen Harwood died at the age of seventy-five. She was at the height of her fame and had confidently expected to live to an advanced age—or so she told various correspondents. To be diagnosed with terminal cancer at the beginning of 1995 was a blow. “I can’t remember the medical terminology but it was basically Good Night Sweetheart,” she wrote to a friend. “Oh well, shit eh? as they say in the Blessed City.”

The Blessed City is Brisbane, the home of her youth, which she left at the age of twenty-five to move to Hobart with her husband Bill Harwood, and never ceased to regret. Suffering, as she freely admitted, from what she dubbed “chronic morbid nostalgia,” she looked back on the Queensland of her childhood as a golden paradise, and for the rest of her life saw herself as an exile. Yet it was in Tasmania that she built a career as a poet in the 1950s and 1960s, a time notoriously hostile to women seeking any career outside of what Gwen herself sarcastically called “Holy Motherhood.” It was from Hobart that she staged what Susan Sheridan calls her “guerrilla war” on the mainland literary establishment, doing an Ern Malley, as she phrased it, by sending a series of hoax poems under various pseudonyms to the editors of *Meanjin*, *Quadrant* and *The Bulletin*. These furious and brilliant assaults culminated in 1961 in the

publication by an unwitting *Bulletin* of a pair of acrostic sonnets, one of which famously read: “Fuck all editors.”

In the resulting media headlines, Harwood was described as a “Tas housewife”—the two epithets perhaps equally shocking. How could a housewife, let alone one from genteel, conservative Tasmania, have done such a scandalous thing? Throughout Harwood’s life, critical and media views of her would focus on the seeming contradiction between her apparently simple, conventional life, and her complex and subversive poetry. As her friend and fellow writer Janet Upcher puts it, “When I contemplate Gwen Harwood’s international reputation as a brilliant poet, one of Australia’s foremost female writers, it’s often hard to reconcile that public image with the other Gwen, the motherly, kind-hearted, down-to-earth practical woman who always put others’ needs before her own and who loved a wicked laugh.” The poet who set out to expose, through her hoaxes, those editors who “wouldn’t know a poem from a bunyip’s backside,” and whose brilliant wit made contemporaries of the stature of A.D. Hope permanently wary, was also the devoted mother of four children, a medical secretary for some ten years, and an energetic participant in her local community. The writer who mouthed a bitter “Amen” to the declaration that “God is dead” in the poem *Dust to Dust*, was also the organist at the All Saints Anglican church in Hobart, secretary of the Parish Council, and a member of the Mothers Union. The discriminating critic who made merciless fun of her fellow poets’ shortcomings in her private correspondence, was the president of her local Fellowship of Australian Writers (and, for a term, of the federal organisation), and a staggeringly generous supporter of emerging writers.

As her poems and letters make clear, Harwood was many contradictory things all at once, and this is where *Behind the Masks: Gwen Harwood Remembered by her Friends*, edited by Robyn Mathison and Robert Cox, comes into its own. This brief collection of memoir does not attempt to reconcile Harwood’s competing identities, but simply presents them side by side through a medley of voices speaking in their own distinctive ways. The contributions vary in length, intimacy and literary sophistication, but together they create a vivid sense of the poet’s world—in particular, the daily textures of the life from which she made her poems. This is not a work of literary criticism or analysis, and it is not intended to be. Its purpose, as Cox explains in his capable introduction, is to begin filling the gap created by the absence of “a memoir or

biography of the loved and estimable poet” by giving “glimpses of the many facets of her character.” In both its range of voices and quirky charm, this work is reminiscent of a similar volume published by Henry Handel Richardson’s friends a decade after her death. (Edna Purdie and Olga N. Roncoroni, *Henry Handle Richardson: Some Personal Impressions*). This work is reminiscent of a similar volumeBoth books shed light from oblique angles, and give space to voices that might otherwise not be heard.

Unlike the Richardson book, *Behind the Masks* contains no contributions from the subject’s own family, nor from her close contemporaries, most of whom have died. As a result, the reminiscences are skewed towards the latter years of Harwood’s life. However, there are marvellous pieces by friends from a younger generation, including literary scholar Alison Hoddinott, who was a close friend of both Gwen and Bill for more than forty years, and acclaimed poet Stephen Edgar, the partner of Ann Jennings, one of Gwen’s oldest and dearest friends. Hoddinott, author of perhaps the definitive literary analysis of Harwood’s work, *Gwen Harwood: The Real and the Imagined World*, contributes a delightful essay on her friend’s lifelong passion for food and its role in her social and literary life, in which she includes Harwood’s recipe for patty cakes, sent off post-haste in response to Hoddinott’s confession that she had no idea how to concoct the “delectable items” required by her daughter’s school for patty cake day. The letter containing the recipe, Hoddinott notes, “lay in my kitchen folder for many years.” Edgar’s piece, a re-working of two previously published essays on Harwood, connects the woman with the poet in fascinating ways, identifying the transformative power of memory and imagination not just in her poetry but in her life. He writes, “A day, an afternoon, an hour spent in Gwen’s company, however enjoyable, might well be recalled to you by her at a subsequent meeting, bathed in so radiant an aura of fond recollection that you stood astonished at the transfiguration of the scene.” The radiance that suffuses so many of her poems of the past was part of the way she experienced her own life.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece in the book—certainly the longest—is by poet and academic Graeme Hetherington, whose friendship with Harwood began in 1970 when he joined the Classics Department at the University of Tasmania. In his deeply personal rumination, Hetherington characterises himself as a lumbering bear and Gwen as a light-footed imp, “tempted out of impatience with me to tweak my ears in passing for being so deaf to the light-hearted, mockingly ironic strain in her

personality.” He reveals that for several years in the early seventies, he and Gwen met at her house over Friday lunch to work on their poems, and creates a vivid picture of these sessions, in which an “intense, supercharged and brilliantly organised” Gwen prepared and served a light meal before poring with him over “what we’d cooked up during the week.”

Hetherington is open about the extent to which he, at the beginning of his poetic career, felt intimidated by Harwood—her wit and intellect as much as her established stature as a poet. Yet as well as serving him lunch, Gwen—generous to a fault—typed up his poems for him, and helped him put together his first manuscript, which she insisted he send out. Despite the evidence—which he painstakingly recounts—over many years of Gwen’s goodwill towards him, he seems always to have mistrusted her somewhat, fearing that her friendship was too good to be true and that he had been, or would become, the victim of one of her hoaxes. Though he confesses that he felt himself always to be the “poor relation” of the Harwoods, “culturally and intellectually,” he also felt superior to them in some ways. He chides Gwen for her supposedly “Mrs Oz” attitude to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and for failing to extend to a “fellow artist” of his acquaintance the unstinting friendship she extended to him. He also seems to have been oblivious to Gwen’s struggle to forge an identity as a poet, characterising his own struggle in both class and gender terms but seeing no obstacle in Gwen’s gender, despite her own acute awareness of the risk of being dismissed as a “lady poet.”

Among other notable contributions are the reflections of Don Kay, a Tasmanian composer for whom Harwood wrote several libretti. Harwood’s collaboration with composer Larry Sitsky is relatively well documented, but Kay’s account of their working relationship sheds new light on her process as a librettist. He comments on the “speed and seeming ease and spontaneity” with which she produced texts for his use. “She claimed she could hear my music, in advance, dictating the words for her,” he writes. Sitsky once said in an interview that Harwood quickly came to know which images and phrases would stimulate his creativity, and would make good use of them: “She had me on a string.” Kay suggests something similar in his discussion of the composition of the choral suite “Northward the Strait,” writing that Harwood’s opening lines were “enough to get me going,” seeming “to immediately conjure up the spirit of the place in my imagination.” Kay also movingly evokes Harwood’s passion for music, describing

how she would sit in the audience at performances of their joint works with tears streaming down her face.

Something of Harwood's humour is evident in Robyn Mathison's lively account of her friendship with Gwen, which was fostered by the Fellowship of Australian Writers. As president in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Harwood co-opted Mathison to act as her secretary, working closely together for several years. As they lived within walking distance of one another, Gwen would often drop in at Robyn's house, letting herself in and calling out to make her presence known. Mathison describes how, on one such occasion, she heard Gwen in her kitchen introducing her cats to someone by name, one by one. She went in to find Gwen showing off her pets to Vikram Seth: "Without missing a beat she said, 'Ah, and here's my friend the FAW secretary, who lives with them.'"

Seth is mentioned in several accounts; his visit to Hobart to see Harwood at the end of 1991 seems to have made a big impression. In a letter, Harwood reports that she and Seth "walked round together singing bits of Schubert & making up impossible rhymes & visiting friends." The separate accounts of Robyn Mathison, Sarah Day and Giles Hugo bring this visit to life. Among many other vignettes are glimpses of Harwood winning the Launceston Poetry Cup, enchanting a group of primary school children, fixing the boiler at a FAW camp, and attending daily mass at All Saints. The result is a gallery of sketches in mixed media, a sometimes baffling, certainly incomplete, but always beguiling set of studies for a multi-faceted portrait of a complex and brilliant woman.

**Ann-Marie Priest is a senior lecturer at Central Queensland University. She is working on a biography of Gwen Harwood.**

## Cover Image

Jenny Watson (1951–)  
*Will somebody please help me take this knot out of my mouth*  
(2009)  
gouache and human hair on Chinese wrapping paper  
image 64.0 x 64.0 cm  
frame 82.0 x 81.0 x 3.5 cm  
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009.



Jenny Watson is a prolific artist with an international profile. She has held over 60 solo shows in 11 countries since her first in 1973. Born in Melbourne in 1951, she started her career making figurative paintings at a time when hard-edge abstraction was the prevailing trend. In the years that followed, Watson's approach changed from the Photorealism that characterised her early practice to a *faux-naïf* style, of which this collage is an example. Many of these later works are autobiographical and painted on fabrics that the artist has collected on her travels.

Watson paints on printed paper because it is pre-loaded with meaning, a quality she refers to as the material's "cultural quotient."<sup>1</sup>

She employs this attribute to emotive effect in *Will somebody please help me take this knot out of my mouth* (2009), which reverberates with psychological energy. A sheet of Chinese wrapping paper covered with a nested pattern of maple leaves resembles camouflage, forming a background against which Watson's figure struggles to be seen. A literal knot of hair stands in for her mouth and provides a tactile metaphor for the feeling of choking on one's own words. The hair, which has sexual connotations, may also be seen as masking or muffling the figure, a comment on the prevailing difficulties that many women experience when trying to get their point across. Watson's nod to collage, and the child-like simplicity with which she has rendered her wide-eyed figure, invests the work with candour and makes a powerful statement about being overwhelmed by forces outside one's control.

**Emily Poore with Vivien Thompson, Curatorial Assistants, UQ Art Museum.**

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<sup>1</sup> Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, "Jenny Watson – The Daisy Show, 2010," <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2010/08/12/188/>.