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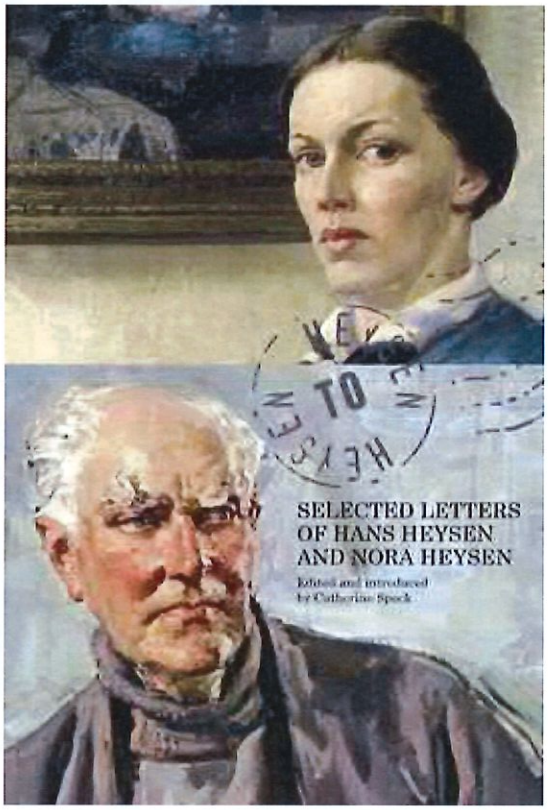
Changing the Palette

Catherine Speck, ed. Heysen to Heysen: Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2011.

Reviewed by Ann-Marie Priest



For some years, I've had a postcard of Nora Heysen's 1987 painting "Apples on a Chair" on my desk. It is such a warm, satisfying image – a tumble of red fruit on a flat, pale-yellow cushion, framed by the yellow-brown slats of an old wooden chair. My eye returns to it constantly. When I was growing up in South Australia, Nora's father, Hans Heysen, was a household name. We had a print of one of his gum tree paintings over the mantelpiece in the lounge, all yellows, browns and oranges, with an ambling cow or two. By then, Nora had been painting for around five decades, but we had no print of hers. In fact, I didn't know of her existence. I became aware of her only in the early 2000s, after the National Library of Australia held a retrospective exhibition of her work. By that time, her father was long dead – he died in 1968 at the age of ninety-one, having been knighted some ten years earlier – and she was herself in her nineties.

Like Hans, Nora was an artist all her life – and like him, she found success early. Yet she never became the legendary figure he was, or enjoyed anything approaching his level of public acclaim – or his sales figures. Much of the appeal of Catherine Speck's edition of the letters between these two great artists is the light it promises to shed on this mystery. Though ostensibly a portrait of them both, it is very much Nora's book. The letters begin when she is twenty-three and Hans is in his mid-fifties, and it is Nora's trajectory they follow as she leaves home for the first time to study in London, and later moves to Sydney to try to support herself by her art.

The picture that emerges in the early letters of a father-daughter relationship entangled with a mentor-acolyte one is intriguing. It is clear that Hans dearly loved his fourth child, and believed in her future as an artist. It is also clear that, when she first went to London, he was anxious to keep her on the straight and narrow, both personally and artistically. Their letters joke about the fearsome prospect of Nora "going modern," and Nora submits her judgements of the artworks she sees to her father for his approval – which he duly bestows. He also commissions his friends and art-world contacts to keep an eye on her. When she had been in London for about a year, she met the modernist painter Orovida, who gave her a critique. "She slatted [sic] me right and left, she said my paintings were muddy and 50 years behind time, and advised me to change my palette," Nora wrote to Hans and her mother, Sallie. "She admitted that I could draw and had talent but that is all she allowed me." Nevertheless, she found the criticism energising. Taking up the older woman's challenge, she began painting with an entirely new set of colours. "You can certainly see a difference in the fruit I'm painting," she reported back to her father. "It has more vibration and is more brilliant [. . .]. It is amazing the depth and richness of colour that can be got."

Perhaps as a response to news he found slightly alarming, Hans encouraged Nora to seek a critique from his friend James Bateman, an English painter and member of the Royal Academy of Arts. Bateman's review was destructively negative. "He doesn't like my work evidently, and hasn't a

good word to say for it," Nora writes. "He thinks it lacks tone, that my technique is mechanical and that I'm trying to get light and vibration in the wrong way." But though Nora finds his critique "disheartening," she counters it by pointing out to her father that Bateman "is biased against women painters and likes work that I don't like at all, so I cannot take it all as gospel truth." Hans's response is to urge her not to dismiss Bateman's critique – a version of which Bateman had sent to Hans, presumably as evidence that he is doing his bit to keep Nora on the artistic straight and narrow. Bateman is "a very sound critic, and absolutely outspoken and sincere," Hans assures Nora. The flaws he identified in Nora's work, Hans goes on, were the result of her "natural," youthful desire "to experiment – a desire which, evidently, should not be allowed to get out of hand. He tells her to "regard and acknowledge Bateman's criticism in all sincerity – it may be biased, but you will probably find on reflection that there is more than a grain of truth in what he says." Nora's somewhat subdued response is that Bateman "is very right in most respects but I think everyone must find their own way."

About six months later, she had a similar experience with Charles Holmes, director of London's National Gallery in the 1930s and another of Hans's friends. At her father's prompting, she went to Holmes for a critique at the end of 1936, only to be told that she had no skills at all, and advised to take a beginner's class at art school. Thus the young woman who began exhibiting with the South Australian Society of Arts when she was seventeen, whose self-portrait was acquired by the National Art Gallery of NSW (as it was then) when she was twenty-one, who won the Melrose Prize for Portraiture at twenty-two, and who made enough from her first solo exhibition in the same year to travel and study overseas, enrolled herself in an English art school to study drawing and painting again from scratch. But though she seemed to bow entirely to Holmes's judgement, she did have some reservations. "There are several items in Holmes's criticism that I still cannot fathom," she tells her father at one point. In another letter, she records a viewing of some of Holmes's own work. "Now I understand why he disliked my work," she writes. "His pictures are low in tone and gloomy." She was beginning to shake off the prejudices of her father's generation and trust her own judgement.

Even so, it was a difficult time for Nora, who found she could not sell her pictures in London, as she had hoped, and who seemed to be pulled in a hundred directions at once as she tried to find her own way as an artist. It was also a joyful time, full of dazzling experiences and new ideas. In the letters, much of the joy is associated with her friend Everton Stokes, a sculptor whom she met at art school in Adelaide, and who joined her in London. The book's editorial matter contains frustratingly little information about Evie, who was clearly an important person in Nora's life. From the letters, we learn that Nora's family did not approve of her friend – but not why. Back in Adelaide, Nora had not been able to "have her at home, or see her when I liked, or [. . .] talk about her or anything," and Nora evidently did not tell her parents that Evie was coming to London. Even so, she announces her friend's arrival with candid pleasure, recording that she met Evie at the boat and took her back to her flat amidst "great excitement and of course much talking and merriment." Evie is to move in with Nora, and Nora assures her parents that "we fit in very comfortably and take it in turns to do everything, and it is very nice to have someone to talk to and help do things."

Then comes the explosion. Hans writes to say that Sallie has fallen ill from anxiety over Evie's "entrance into your studio," and a letter from Sallie – not reproduced – evidently contains references to her daughter's "cupidity," and to having been "hoodwinked." Hans's letter suggests that he and Sallie feared the friendship may have been romantic or even sexual. "There is a very true saying 'that love is blind' and this may not only apply to when that state exists between man and woman but it is equally true and can happen between two persons of the same sex," he writes. "Your letters sound perfectly happy – almost as if you were under such a spell."

Nora responds by sending an airmail letter with the news that Evie is moving out. But she does not disavow the friendship. "All this worry seems so useless, we have been very happy together," she writes. "Is it not better to be happy, and have companionship, than to be lonely and miserable?" The answer to that question in 1935 was a decided "no," if being happy and having companionship meant any hint of sexual impropriety. It is far from clear, of course, that it did. But in any case, despite her seeming capitulation, Nora holds her ground. "We all have to branch out for ourselves at one time or another," she writes. "I have chosen Evie for a friend; whether it is just a spell, as you think it is, I don't know. It has lasted too long and stood too much to be just that."

This is as personal as the letters get. Nora was, as has often been remarked, a reserved woman, and her unwillingness to talk about her private life combined with her desire to spare her parents' feelings give even her most loving letters a decorous and somewhat remote feel. But Evie continues to be a tantalising presence. In September 1935, Nora mentions that Evie is getting married in December – in the same letter in which she announces that her friend is moving back in. "It is wonderful to have her," she adds. "I think it is a very good test if two people can share a flat, and be happy and work together. She helps my work. You will not believe that."

It is not hard to believe. Nora drew and painted Evie many times, and these portraits – several are reproduced in the book – are arrestingly lovely. Not only that, but when Evie is with her, Nora's comments about her work are notably happy and enthusiastic. "I have been busy painting a gay little bunch of anemones on the striped cloth," she writes, in the letter in which she announces Evie's return. "I had a happy time painting it. The light streamed all through the flowers making them quite ethereal." Painting Evie in the blue dressing gown that was her mother's gift to Nora herself was "lovely": "It is one of the simplest things I've painted and I have loved doing it." After her friend's wedding, she works on "a quick study of Evie, trying for life and vibration of colour using a high keyed palette . . . . It is almost finished and is more alive than anything I have even [sic] painted." Following a trip to Paris with Evie, she tells her parents that she doesn't "agree with shutting oneself away from one's contemporaries. I think it is stimulating and necessary when one is young and studying to mix with fellow artists, discuss things and one another's work." Her main contemporary and fellow artist was Evie. Indeed, she mentions almost no other artists of her own generation in this section of the letters – though it is possible that she simply chose not to write about them.

Evie's marriage seems to have reassured Hans and Sallie – or perhaps they simply accepted that Nora would choose her own friends. Either way, there are no more missives of disapproval or charged silences. But Evie's new marital status does not seem to have disrupted the two women's friendship. Less than two months after the wedding, they set off on holiday together to Devon, and shortly after that, they went to Paris, staying "in the same little place at Montparnasse" where they had stayed on their first visit, before Evie was married. Then in June 1936, they went to Dorset, where they stayed for some five months. "So the weeks fly past and all my time and thoughts are taken up with that one little word 'art'," Nora writes.

There is no information, either in the letters or in the editorial material, about what Evie's husband was doing at these times. There is, in fact, no information about him at all – apart from that his first name was Henry. About the fate of the friendship, too, the book is frustratingly silent. When Nora returned to Australia in August 1937, she went back to her parents' house in Hahndorf, but she soon decided to strike out on her own and moved to Sydney – which is where the book's second group of letters begins. Evidently, Nora was joined by a pregnant Evie, whose husband had been transferred to Singapore (by whom or why is not clear), and the two shared a series of flats until Evie moved to Canberra with her child (children?) to rejoin her husband. In these letters, Nora barely mentions Evie – but when she says "we" instead of "I", it is almost always Evie she is referring to. What became of the friendship after Evie left Sydney is never stated. Nora, very unsettled by the war and anxious to make a contribution, signed up to be a war artist and went off to Papua New Guinea – and Evie vanishes from the letters. Did they stay in touch? Were they friends for life? Speck provides no answers.

Historically, friendships between women have often been downplayed, underrated or overlooked. In the hierarchy of significance, it is women's relationships with men that count: fathers, lovers, husbands. So the glimpse, however oblique, of a powerful female friendship that Nora's letters provide is particularly welcome, suggesting a fruitful area for further biographical research. It seems likely that Evie's support of Nora when they were in England was crucial in enabling Nora to find her own style as a painter. Did she provide the counter-weight to Hans's anxious, if loving, conservatism? Certainly, by the time Nora returned home, her father's fear had been realised. As Speck writes in her useful introduction, Nora's "work had loosened up, light was infusing it and the cosmopolitan experience had indeed rendered her work modern." Speck adds that Nora's new paintings, "filled with broken colour, were too modern for her father."

For Speck, Orovida's advice was an important part of this change. What Speck does not say is that Orovida influenced Nora in another way. Herself the daughter of a famous artist, Lucien Pissarro (who was himself the son of Camille Pissarro), Orovida decided to drop her last name and sign her works simply Orovida, as an attempt to create an artistic identity of her own. In an interview with Heather Rusden, Nora says that while she was in England, she decided to do the same. She began to sign herself Nora H, "and put the H on sort of the Nora." When she sent these paintings to her father in Adelaide to sell, however, her plans came undone. Hans, thinking "she's got an aberration or something," simply "finished the signature for me."

It is a poignant instance of the impossibility for Nora of escaping her famous father. To Rusden, Nora says that she "saw the funny side of it and didn't do it any more." She didn't want to hurt her father's feelings – and on purely practical grounds, she needed his support. Yet she would be haunted for much of her life by the fear that she was only valued as an artist because of her father. An early instance of this was her Archibald Prize win in 1938. She was the first woman ever to win the prestigious portrait prize, and her fellow artists were outraged. There were dark hints in the newspapers that her father and his powerful friends had played a role in the decision, and it was even suggested that her portrait was not eligible since her subject, Madame Elink Schuurman, was not especially well-known. A group of artists called for an inquiry, and it was rumoured that questions would be asked in parliament. The gendered nature of the media commentary – "Still the Weak Sex," opines the Perth Daily News, reporting on the award of the prize to a "pretty, blue-eyed blonde" – gives a fairly good indication of what the real issue was. One artist, Max Meldrum, who had two portraits in the competition that year, was quoted as saying that an artist's life was "unnatural and impossible for a woman." He and other artists seem to have felt that the substantial prize money should have gone to a man with his way to make, rather than to a woman who should "certainly prefer raising a healthy family to a career in art."

Nora seems somewhat bemused by the storm. "There are still irate and seething letters in the papers against my portrait and the judges' decision," she writes a month or so after the announcement. "The papers rang to know what I think of it. I have nothing to say, so probably they will grow tired of it." In another letter, she mentions a missive she received from "enemy No. 1" telling her that "all the artists in Sydney had been wronged by my gaining the prize." Her one wish, she adds, is "to steer clear of all these petty jealousies and bickering amongst the artists." This she seems to have done by throwing herself into her work. The win had brought her not only the much-needed prize money but also more commissions, and she was absorbed by the problems of the portraitist. Nevertheless, there were surely repercussions. Though she entered the Archibald Prize year after year for the next several decades, she never won again. And she always wondered whether she had really deserved it. Her doubts must have been fuelled by her parents' opinion of the winning work. A June 1939 letter begins simply: "Sorry you didn't like my portrait of Madame Schuurman." She does not defend her work or elaborate in any way. She simply changes the subject.

Despite the controversy, over the next couple of years she was able to make a living out of portrait commissions and sales of her flower paintings, and it is fascinating to see her slowly and devotedly making her way. Her letters from her time as a war artist are full of incident and adventure, and her travels after her marriage to Robert Black, a medical doctor she met in the army, are full of interest. Always, though, she is reticent about her inner life, and as she gets older, there is little evidence of either the joy that bubbles through some of the youthful letters or the depression she once said haunted her life. Her passion for painting – particularly flowers – is her centre, her refuge and her delight. In 1941, she won the Melrose Prize for the second time, but after that, the accolades stopped coming. "I've long since given up hope of winning prizes, my work is far too unexciting and conventional," she tells her parents in 1959. "All the plaudits these days go to something new in the fashionable idiom." She may have been too modern for her father, but she was not modern enough for the contemporary art scene, which was embracing abstraction. When recognition finally came in the late 1980s, in the form of a retrospective exhibition and a monograph, it was welcome but peripheral. In the 1990s, she would receive first an Australia Council Award for Achievement in the Arts and then an Order of Australia.

All of this, however, is outside the scope of the Letters, which end in 1968 with Hans's death. So much of this story is still untold – not just the years not covered by the letters, but also the many silences which surround what is spoken. Even so, there is more than enough here to be going on with – and with any luck, the next major work on Nora Heysen will be a biography.

Work cited: Interview with Nora Heysen, painter [sound recording]. Heather Rusden, Interviewer. Oral History Collection, National Library of Australia, 1994.

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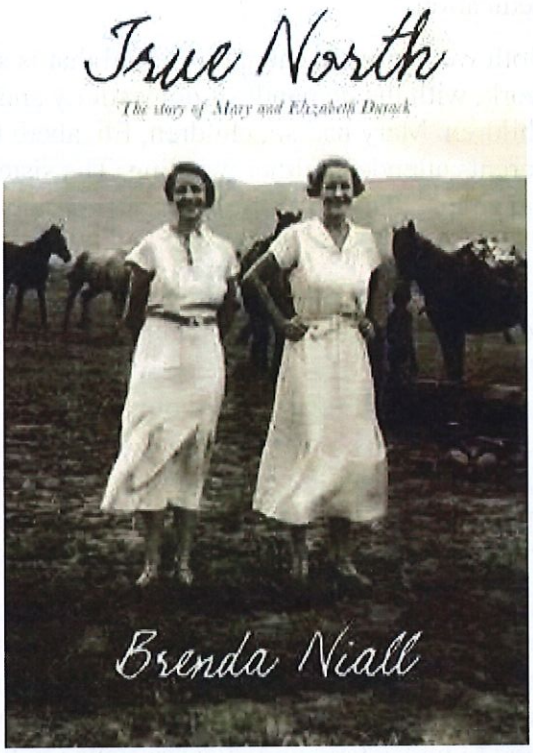
Two Sister Artists

Brenda Niall.True North: The Story of Mary and Elizabeth Durack. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2012.

Reviewed by Gillian Bouras



Sixty years ago, Australian History had just started to emerge as a subject worthy of independent study rather than as a mere appendage to British History. Very few women were writing in the field way back then, but Margaret Kiddle finished Men of Yesterday before her untimely death in 1958, and that same year Kathleen Fitzpatrick published Australian Explorers; 1959 saw the publication of Judith Wright's The Generations of Men and Mary Durack's Kings in Grass Castles. The titles of these works tell their own story about the struggle of creative women in the decades between the end of the Second World War and the flourishing of the feminist movement twenty or more years later.

In True North Brenda Niall vividly evokes the tests and trials that the two sisters, Mary and Elizabeth Durack, one a writer, the other a painter, had to endure for the sake of the self-expression that was so vital to them. Mary's Kings in Grass Castles was a brilliant success, not least because the author, not being an academic historian, felt free to use novelistic techniques in the telling of her ancestral story. Elizabeth made her mark as a painter, but never conquered London in the way her male contemporaries did. Both received various honours towards the end of their lives.

In the eyes of the world the sisters were privileged, but the reality was more complex than was often realised. Niall introduces her dual biography at the time of the death of Michael Patrick Durack, known as MPD, ruler of the pastoral company Connor, Doherty and Durack, and father of Mary and Elizabeth and their four brothers. Six months before his sudden death at the age of 85, MPD had sold the company's land holdings in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory. The holdings were as big as the size of Belgium, but MPD had been under financial pressure, and was old and tired. And Niall points out that he had "a touch of the King Lear about him."

Every life entails struggle to accept change, and necessary adjustment to that change. And life is also generally a matter of balancing any number of tensions. Niall makes this matter of balancing very clear. MPD's children could not deny the heroic nature of their ancestors' pioneer efforts, but they also had somehow to come to terms with the high price that the Indigenous peoples and the land itself had had to pay for white settlement. In later life Mary would judge her father quite severely, while Elizabeth's main artistic inspiration was to be found in the land of the north and its native inhabitants, despite years spent in Sydney and Perth.

Mary and Elizabeth were on opposite sides of the continent during the war years, but they wrote to each other regularly during that time. Niall points out how unusual it is to find such a long correspondence with both sides intact, and with both voices coming through, as it were, so clearly; but in the correspondence she also discerns another tension, that between the past and the future. Both women wrote longingly of the past, and indeed yearned for the Kimberley, but they also "showed unease and concern for the future." And they were to have a long future: Mary was born in 1913 and Elizabeth in 1915: both lived into their eighties.

Yet another tension was the one between the sisters themselves, and Niall deftly shows the nuances of the relationship: Mary was "the clever one," and Bet (as Elizabeth was called when growing up) was "the difficult one." Such labelling of siblings is very common but it becomes obvious, during Niall's investigation of the connection, that although there was rivalry between the sisters there was a strong bond as well. On one occasion in the 1930s Elizabeth wrote that she "was sunk" without Mary; later still she wrote that she "wished like hell" Mary were in Perth to "talk and talk and talk to." They often collaborated on projects involving Mary's words and Elizabeth's pictures, and Niall, at the end of the book, accurately describes the sisters as being "contrasts in temperament, alike in dedication."

Both women were caught in a bind that is still familiar: how to reconcile work, especially creative work, with the demands of domesticity and the long-term commitment necessary to the rearing of children. Mary had six children, Elizabeth two, and both made unconventional marriages: their parents attended neither wedding. The sisters also endured great sadness: Mary lost two of her adult daughters, and Elizabeth, the reader assumes, never quite got over the death of Tom Naughton, the love of her life.

It has often been suggested that the Irish have a romantic attachment to the past along with a heightened sense of place, and being Irish was an integral part of the Durack story. Yet the attachment of MPD's children was always firmly to the North, to the Kimberley, and Niall notes that Mary and Elizabeth, although they travelled in their youth, did not find, unlike many of their contemporaries, "a fresh vision" in Europe. But often the attachment to the North was a problem for them: how to get there; how to leave the cities; how to spend time there. Elizabeth acknowledged this late in life, when she remarked on leaving Ivanhoe Station: "If only I could wrench this place from my heart and throw it away, my life would be so much easier."

Almost nothing remains of Ivanhoe Station, and Argyle Station was drowned when Lake Argyle was created. But both Mary and Elizabeth are buried near the recreated Argyle Homestead, now a museum. Niall concludes her fascinating study of two brave, adventurous women by noting that they tried as long as they lived to understand the region of Australia that they loved. The sisters also tried to understand and give assistance to the Indigenous people, but in the end had little power to avert their unfortunate fate. The vision of their grandfather leaving his land to his descendants as "heirs forever" did not last. "His grandchildren would own nothing of the land; it would hold them forever."

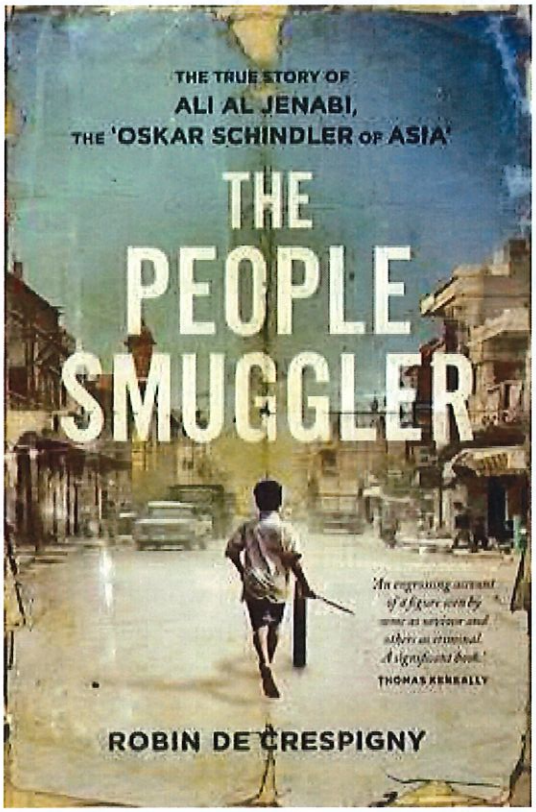
With this book, Brenda Niall adds to her already formidable reputation as a biographer. The research is thorough, but never obvious; her writing style is admirable in its accessibility, and she shows penetrating insight into character, time, and place. This book about two remarkable Australian women could only have been written by another such.

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.

A Risky "Business"

Robin de Crespigny. The People Smuggler: The True Story of Ali Al Jenabi, The "Oskar Schindler of Asia". Camberwell, VIC.: Viking, 2012.

Reviewed by Irina Dunn



Whenever I hear Immigration Minister Chris Bowen or Foreign Minister Bob Carr, or indeed our Prime Minister Julia Gillard, refer to "the business model" of the people smugglers, it is all I can do to hold back a snort of derision at their grossly misleading and deliberately mischievous assertions.

Robin de Crespigny's carefully researched and compassionate account of one of these people smugglers exposes the chaotic, dangerous, demeaning and desperate world of today's asylum seekers and refugees.

Her book slams the notion of the so-called "business model" which politicians choose to paint as a well-organised and highly profitable economic activity rather than the hazardous, costly, precarious and, surprisingly, sometimes humanitarian enterprise that it is.

It also blows the myth of the "queue jumper" right out of the water by demonstrating that places such as Iraq and Afghanistan simply do not have any kinds of queues that people can join in an orderly manner.

Robin chose to write this book in Ali Al Jenabi's first person voice to give his story immediacy and intimacy.

As a film-maker, she had initially wanted to present Ali's story on screen, but a colleague advised her to make a book out of it first as this would be an easier route to getting it made as a film. After three years of intensive research, and conversations with Ali through an interpreter, Robin was finally happy with her representation of Ali's story and gave it to her publisher.

It begins with Ali's childhood in Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1970s as the beloved oldest son of his parents. Although Ali's father is not a devout Muslim, just belonging to the Shiite sect is enough to get him arrested after the school authorities hear young Ali repeat his father's words at school – "Saddam is a bastard!"

At a time when he should be getting an education, Ali must take responsibility as the oldest child. As he starts selling batteries to help his family, he is toughened up on the streets where he learns to fight. To avoid the army he studies accountancy and gets a job with his uncle, a tailor, and teaches himself how to sew.

When he is 20, Ali, his father and a younger brother are arrested and tortured under Saddam Hussein's regime, while his mother is left to care for the remaining five children on her own.

Understandably, Ali feels bitter about the Americans:

> There is no justice to why the three of us are here in Abu Ghraib… When the Americans drove [Saddam out of Iran], offering the Shiites support if we rose up against him, we believed them. But as soon as the uprising started, the US left us to our fate, and the full weight of Saddam's army was turned on us… Not only had the US abandoned us, but they had also lifted the no-fly zone in the south so that Saddam's military could extract their revenge.

After his release from jail Ali makes a break for it and heads to Kurdistan where he joins up with the resistance. He discovers that this is fractured and competitive, with Iranian intelligence, the American CIA, the UK, and Syria all having different agendas and propaganda, and weakening the opposition to Saddam.

What follows is a remarkable story of escapes, false passports, refugee camps, and dangerous border crossings for himself and for his family. He manages through extraordinary struggles to get himself to Indonesia, where he renews his attempts to get his family safely to Australia. He realises the only way he can do this is to earn the money to pay a people smuggler, but after he is betrayed by one he decides it best if he takes on the job himself. This is how he explains his motives and rationale:

> if you empathise with these people's plight, refuse to play games, and really want to help them, the job wouldn't be too hard… I would be honest and upfront with everyone, and with any profit I would fly my family here and then get them to Australia on my own safe boats for free. There is no law in Indonesia against people smuggling. It is just another business, one which provides a path to asylum for refugees who have no other options. So I will do it myself the way it should be done. I will not only save my family, I will save other Iraqis, and everyone I help escape will feel like a personal victory over Saddam.

However, Ali begins to realise that this course of action has its pitfalls in that he is developing a reputation as a people smuggler and this once again places him on the wrong side of the law. He now begins to take particular notice of Australian politicians:

> Mr John Howard … appears to be trying to persuade his public that terrorists are disguising themselves as refugees and being brought in on boats by people smugglers … It's hard to imagine why terrorists would embark on such an ordeal by boat, only to end up in a detention centre for years, when they can afford to fly in comfortably with false passports and visas … If Australian people only knew the strength it takes to get on one of these boats, to keep holding onto life after the horrors these people have been through, they would be filled with awe and admiration.

Ali finally manages to get his mother and siblings to Australia, and after he is caught and sent to Australia under the extradition arrangement between Australia and Thailand, they are there waiting for him when he is taken to Villawood Detention Centre.

In Australia he is charged with being a people smuggler, but it is clear the government has difficulty dealing with his case because of his obvious good character and compassionate motivations. As a result the sentence is reduced.

In court, Ali is surprised when the Crown prosecutors contend that the people on Ali's boats were jumping the queue:

> This is the first time I have heard of queue-jumping. I try to imagine this queue. What do they think? That when the secret police are shooting at you, you run down the street yelling, 'Where's the queue? Where's the queue? ... Even if there was a queue to join, there is no UN office in Iraq. The nearest is in Pakistan, two countries away … Anyway the belief that there are orderly queues where asylum seekers line up and wait their turn is extraordinary.

In his judgment of 21 September 2004, Justice Mildren noted Ali's background and acknowledged that he "was concerned to assist his family and that he did what he could on occasions to assist others who were unable to pay fully."

He also compared Ali to Oskar Schindler, "who saved many lives by employing Jews as slave labourers and he made a great deal of money out of their labour." He accepted that Ali was largely motivated by the need to get his family to Australia come what may.

The upshot was that Ali was given a sentence of one year nine months.

On one occasion after his release, Ali was watching television with his mother when he first heard the phrase, "the people smugglers' business model." It had been devised by Immigration Minister Chris Bowen and Prime Minister Julia Gillard in response to the terrible tragedy of the vessel which crashed onto the rocks of Christmas Island and resulted in the deaths of around 50 people.

> They declare they are going to smash this mysterious entity by any means. I laugh out loud when I hear it. Do they think there are men in suits sitting around boardroom tables somewhere devising strategies? Has no one told them people smuggling is an amorphous rag-tag network run by word of mouth and mobile phones? There are no records or bank accounts. No spreadsheets or business plans. They pop up wherever people are trying to escape and disappear when they are no longer needed. If you want to stop people smugglers you have to do something about what causes people to flee their own countries in the first place.

Ali's family members and the approximately 500 Iraqis he helped get to Australia have received Australian citizenship but he is on a "bridging removal pending" visa, which means he can be deported to Iraq at any time when it is judged "safe" to send him there.

He has served his sentence for breaking Australian law, he was acknowledged by the judge for his humanity, and he was cleared by ASIO, so why, after all he has suffered in the past, is the Australian government putting him through the additional mental torture of uncertainty and possible deportation that removes him from his family and sends him back to a country that poses great dangers for his safety?

Robin's extraordinary book reads like a true-life thriller and has won several awards, including the 25th Human Rights Award for Literature; the 2012 Alex Buzo Prize for Shortlisted Authors at the Nib Waverly Library Award for Literature; and the 2012 Queensland Literary Award for Non-Fiction. It was also one of three finalists nominated for the 2012 Walkley Book Award.

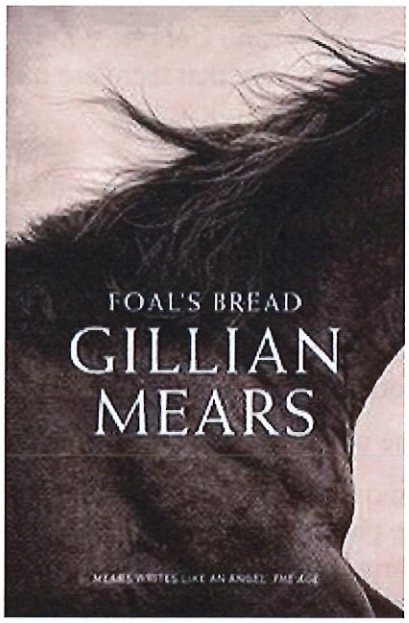
If you want to support Ali's case, go to:
www.thepeoplesmuggler.com/about_ali_al_jenabi/

Irina Dunn is the Director of the ID Editing and Publishing Consultancy and of the Australian Writers Network. She is the author of The Writer's Guide: A Companion to Writing for Pleasure or Publication (2nd ed. 2002).

A Harsh and Brutal World

Gillian Mears. Foal's Bread. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2011.

Reviewed by Dawn Silversides



A brief glance over the cover and fly leaf of this novel by Gillian Mears gave me the immediate impression that it would be a story of paralysis, horses, and perhaps a sweeping period drama of predictable tragedy and triumph. The reader, though, will only be fooled momentarily, for on the second page of the preamble, the following line shakes all expectations loose: "in her fourteen-year-old womb a dead uncle's baby grows" (2). I had to read the preceding paragraph twice to fully digest that this novel would hinge instead on a much more startling and contentious issue; the confrontational details and consequences of an incestuous relationship between a paedophile, Uncle Nipper, and his niece, Noah Childs.

The preamble sets out very clearly the context of such a harsh and brutal world, omnisciently observing in words that could just as easily be Noah's own: "Lick that salt and see what story it tells ... Watch out you don't cry" (3). There is, then, fair warning that this is not going to be an easy read, and in truth it does take some resilience to stick with the more difficult aspects of the plot. In this respect, it is perhaps easy to understand why the book appears to have been marketed predominantly to a readership of more mundane period dramas.

One Tree's dairy farm often thrives, and all stereotypes of drought-ridden and parched existences are periodically washed away by floods and the continual water references throughout the text. The creek where Noah gives birth, and sets her newborn adrift in a butter box, is a watery thread that links many of the major events of her life. It provides a persistent backdrop of deep and murky memory, which lingers and trickles in and out of her consciousness, and conscience.

In many respects, Noah proves to be an unlikeable and antagonistic protagonist from the start, and readers may be alienated by her actions; if not for the seemingly harsh treatment of her first born, for her ultimate destruction of one of her horses and herself, which leaves her other two children orphans. In addition, some may find it difficult to empathise with, or understand, an abused character who does not present as a stereotypical victim. Though somewhat understandable, her reprehensible action with the baby following a concealed pregnancy is movingly depicted, and it is only retrospectively that her motherless state, her hopeless and alcoholic father, and the context of the social history that might have led to such a dire set of circumstances, are gradually revealed. Without this context, which only becomes clear as the story unravels itself; damaged and alone Noah appears calculating and offensive.

Noah is a practical girl who has learnt about life through animal husbandry and droving. Between the sheer shock and agony of giving birth alone, whilst still a child herself, there are desperately harsh and distressing scenes that Mears deftly glances with touching moments: "Allowing her mouth, her eyes, to fill with a feeling hitherto only bestowed on the eyelids of foals, she gave him a soft and squeaky kiss" (14). It would be easy in retrospect to look back and question Noah's responses, and question whether these would have been different if the child she gave birth to, rather than being a small dark-haired boy, had been either a girl, or not so obviously Indigenous. Throughout the text there are many ambiguous references, in particular following George's birth, about the physical appearance of the butter box baby. This tragic "little mister" haunts the text just as much as he haunts Noah, and serves to remind the reader periodically, in the various speculations about his fate, that she has not moved on emotionally, or come to terms with either the abuse or the result of that abuse.

Much has been written regarding Mears's own physical deterioration (from Multiple Sclerosis) and her love of horse riding, both of which find their way into the text, yet I believe that the real triumph of this novel is in its frank, brutal and realist depiction of Noah's abuse. I can think of no other novel where I have encountered a victim who is portrayed as not only having a confusing love for her abuser, but is also afforded her own sexuality in her very physical relationship with her husband Roley. There is also the central scene astride her horse, which graphically serves as an eventual reclamation of this sexuality for herself alone. This is a brave representation of difficult and challenging subject matter, and is uniquely significant for its recognition of a woman's persisting sexuality, even in the aftermath of abuse. The abuse is no less traumatic for this and in some respects is amplified because of its insidious and generational nature, and its drawing out of a frequent characteristic of paedophilia; the attempt to encourage a victim to enjoy the abuse and falsely regard it as an act of love. Noah's journey, by the end of the novel, had softened my initial distaste for her character and actions, and revealed her as a complex and subtle rendering.

By comparison, Noah's husband, Roley Nancarrow, was not a particularly engaging character and I felt at times that he was merely a necessary prop to challenge Noah's increasing mastery of men and horse jumping. I have to admit that I also found some of the build up to his almost fatal lightening strike a little heavy-handed and tedious; as if the author were making too many overt signpostings of one of several moments of the emasculation of a central male character. Roley's eventual paralysis, and the graphic castration of a child abuser, serve to empower Noah in her adult life – in stark contrast to her former life as the motherless and vulnerable female child in a male dominated world whom we first meet.

The novel ends with a Coda, which – unlike the preamble – I found unnecessary and over-sentimental. Whether this was a publishing direction or an authorial decision, it diminishes the power of Noah's final record-breaking horse jump and resulting suicide. This is where the novel, for me, should have ended.

Readers who feel more satisfied with all loose ends tied up and a happier and more optimistic final note would probably disagree, but I have the overwhelming feeling that the Coda is an editorial mistake and, in part, is the result of too many competing themes in the novel fighting for equal attention. This abundance of issues is where some of the difficulties in appraising such a book lie; there are simply too many competing themes that the author appears to want to cover in detail. Noah's Indigenous heritage and abuse; George's disability; Lainey's difficult relationship with her mother; the historical show jumping circuit; the dairy farming; the droving life, and Roley's paralysis are only the most prominent themes that jockey for position and depth in the pages of Foal's Bread, and unfortunately many of them are short-changed.

Mears is far more accomplished in her moving and often lyrical prose which racks up the simmering undercurrent of Noah's unexpressed grief, and the repression of her traumatic past. This powder keg of raw emotion explodes into the present when she is confronted by a scene where history is about to repeat itself, with her own teenaged daughter Lainey. Crucially, it is one of Uncle Nip's phrases which provides the prosaic narrative: "Life is like a river. Never runs the same way twice" (312), which says more in these few words about redemption and salvation than the Coda tries to do in nine pages. It would seem at this stage of the novel that the luck of the foal's bread has already been bestowed on Lainey and future generations instead. This foal's bread, which also provides the novel with its title, is described at length and added to the queasy undertones of this narrative for me. While I would not say that I am particularly sensitive to such details, this novel has a propensity for unnervingly realistic and graphic prose that is cumulatively unsettling. This lucky talisman, which is sometimes found in the afterbirth of a newborn foal, could also represent a pseudo-religious faith that endures throughout the trials and hardships of the plot, and perhaps provides another subtext in the novel.

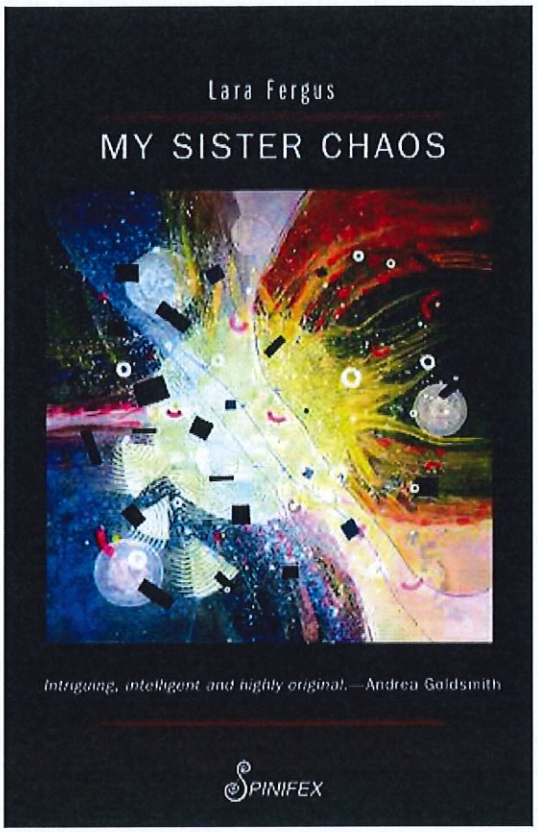
Foal's Bread, then, is not an easy or wholly rewarding read, yet it stays with you, and hauntingly so, for a long time after you finish the novel. In particular I found it very difficult to let go of the poignant fate of the Butter Box Baby, who is allowed simply to wash away and be forgotten, like so much difficult and traumatic history.

Dawn Silversides has studied for a BA at the University of Queensland. Originally from East Yorkshire, UK, she now lives in Redland Bay, Queensland.

Organised Chaos

Lara Fergus. My Sister Chaos.
Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Teagan Kum Sing



> There is a pain somewhere in the house like a nerve exposed to the air. I feel it in my teeth and my scalp. It rings in the darkness at a pitch almost too high to hear. The source is somewhere small, in a tiny part of something, concealed, or else hidden among the layers of something ordinary.

Spinifex Press publishes "innovative and controversial feminist books with an optimistic edge." My Sister Chaos is innovative and possibly controversial, but it is not optimistic. Its edges are bleak and troubled. The novel progresses like a boulder rolling down a hill – gathering speed and becoming uncontrollable. Coming out the other side of this novel, you do not feel hopeful. But, perhaps optimism can be found in Lara Fergus herself: this is her debut novel, and it is truly an exciting beginning.

My Sister Chaos follows twin sisters who are refugees from war. One is the first-person protagonist, referred to as "the twin," and the other we only see through an omniscient narrator's eyes, referred to as "the sister." The twin is a cartographer with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. She maps her house repeatedly, frustrated by her inability to capture its "every dimension and trace every line." Her plot line follows her processes and difficulties about mapping. The sister is described as a "painter turned code-breaker trying to find the lover she lost in the war." She comes to stay with her twin unannounced and becomes an uncontrollable stain on the ordered life of the twin. Each sister's journey towards what they think will heal them only brings further pain, and the novel progresses towards this point.

Hearing the summary, you'd be forgiven for thinking that very little happens and that the characters are romantic, if not borderline nonsense. But this is not the case. Though it is not a plot-oriented novel, the narrative is a trajectory of action; it gathers speed and intensity while remaining elegantly restrained. One of the most delightful elements is the feeling of having no idea where the narrative is going. The plot line is unsettling; unpredictable; and occasionally difficult to comprehend. From one chapter to the next you are led along by Fergus's creativity, blindly feeling your way through the events and enjoying the mystery. Not so much wonderland, but falling down towards it.

The sisters make surprisingly realistic characters; their quirky professions suit them and their secondary hobbies end up making perfect sense. Yes, it takes a while to see past the mapping jargon of the twin and the drawn-out mystery of the sister, but once you break through it they carry the novel with great sincerity. There is a gnarled bond between them that's fascinating to see play out, and Fergus highlights with painful clarity the comfort–pain relationship of a family fractured by trauma.

For me, the central, most interesting conflict is their being caught between abandoning or leaning on one another, unable to figure out which would be easier: the burden of shared history, or exile. It's an involving dilemma and a fresh perspective on the aftermath novel – it refuses to feel sorry for itself or to glorify support and survival the way so many do. This unique approach may be shaped

by Fergus's own experience in working overseas with "various advocacy organisations, including for newly arrived immigrant and refugee women." I was often startled by the way the sisters acted towards each other: the twin makes it obvious that the sister is ruining her delicate peace of mind, and the sister showed no empathy for her twin's mental illness, going so far as to steal her map and use it to manipulate her. There is no tenderness between them. Family is not a refuge from, but a reminder of the past: "She has to go. She pulls me down from my legitimate processes, my bird's-eye perspectives. I land with a thump in the middle of her stupid landscapes." Like the twin's mapping, trauma strips a relationship to its foundations and the sisters see that their bond is nothing more than coincidence – and an inconvenient one at that.

I think this is why the novel lacks optimism. There is something so uninviting and hopeless about the sisters: they radiate trauma and alienate themselves because of it. In each other they are reminded of their past pains. The way trauma wedges between them seems to intensify the arbitrariness of family, and by extension, social values. The twin constantly remembers the war through "people sobbing at bus stops, still trying to live their lives within an infrastructure that has become a mockery of itself, all structure gone." And by setting the novel over two time frames and countries, one of war and one of peace, Fergus extends the critique past war and begins to pick at the fabric of societies – questioning why we rely on people to uphold values that can lose meaning the moment they are violated.

The characters, locations, or time frames are never given names; nothing is identified other than brief mentions of midnight or morning. The result is a startlingly liminal fracture that Fergus often exploits very effectively. Towards the end of the book, when chapters start splitting into fragments, perspectives and locations occasionally blur. This creates a disarming feeling of being pulled from one time frame to another, or not knowing which sister is doing what, that no amount of re-reading can figure out. In these moments the reader tastes the confusion and alienation of the refugee, and the fleeting disruption intensifies sympathy for the sisters.

Which is just as well, because despite being fascinating, the twin is confusing and generally "difficult." Her OCD may be part of this, since her actions are unfathomable and often seem spiteful. But I also think this stems from Fergus's writing: she is a strong tell-er, but not a strong show-er. While most writers are instructed to "show not tell," I think that Fergus gets away with telling, because it works for the first-person narrative and she is very consistent with voice. However, mimetic modes like dialogue and movement are weak points in the novel, often feeling clichéd or unrealistic. It gives the strange effect of childishness; for example, when the sister steals the twin's map, the twin throws a bin at the ground and yells "bring it back." And this child-like effect is poorly paired with her mental disorder, as a sensitive reader may worry that Fergus is infantilising the twin. I don't think this was her intention, as the character is complex and mature in other ways.

To say that My Sister Chaos is not optimistic is not to criticise it. Yes, it's an involving read and you can't leave it without some disruption to your peace of mind. But it's also an insightful and intelligent read; it's unique and punctuated regularly by achingly beautiful sentences. Fergus has done her subject matter respect by letting it lean on the reader; she chooses realism over optimism, and it really works.

My Sister Chaos has been nationally and internationally recognised. It won the Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction and was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Debut Fiction, both in America; and in New South Wales it was short-listed for the Dobbie Literary Award. It's no surprise Fergus has made a name for herself so quickly; with an beginning like My Sister Chaos, I cannot wait to read what she writes next.

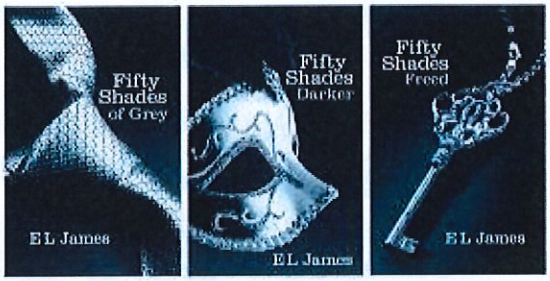
Teagan Kum Sing is a Literature and Writing graduate from the University of Queensland.

Endless Shades of Disappointment

E. L. James.
Fifty Shades of Grey. London: Arrow Books, 2012.
Fifty Shades Darker. London: Arrow Books, 2012.
Fifty Shades Freed. London: Century, 2012.

Reviewed by Agnieszka Niemira

> "I am a marionette and he is the master puppeteer" (Grey 429)



The Fifty Shades trilogy is a poorly written pornographic romance novel that seems to be aiming at gender stereotypes reinforcement: man as dominant and sadistic, woman as submissive and masochistic; he as a leader, she as a follower; man as a sexpert in female sexuality, woman as a virgin (in this case, twenty-one years old) in need of sex tuition from him; man as controlling, woman as obedient; man as active, woman as passive; man as subject, woman as (sex) object; man as owner, woman as his property (preferably "unspoilt", hence virgin).

Anastasia (Ana) Steele, a twenty one years old student of literature, meets Christian Grey, an obscenely wealthy, twenty-seven years old CEO. The two are the embodiments of the above stereotypes. Christian the sadist, the dominant, the sexpert owns his women as he owns his assets. They can be bought and controlled. He expects them to obey, be still, be quiet, be docile. He does not appreciate having his judgments questioned. He punishes disobedience. And, as the cliché goes, he is dark and mysterious. So the fairytale prince, the knight in shining armour becomes the dark knight in need of rescuing.

Anastasia is both drawn to and appalled by the sadomasochistic practices, but as the story unfolds she is determined to help Christian, even if it means letting him inflict pain on her, because he "needs" it. Eventually, she is allowed to touch his scars. His family comments on how happy she makes him. His mother hears him sing for the first time. Even so, Christian is still controlling, overbearing and sadistic. Ana lives in permanent fear of his mood swings; she high-heeled walks on the proverbial eggshells. Anything she says or does can be punished. "I want your world to begin and end with me," (Fifty Shades Freed 146) he demands. This is clearly an abusive relationship. By the end of the series, Ana is a masochist/submissive, a wife and a mother.

> "I'm helpless. I am his, just his, to do with as he wills." (Freed 39)

The idea of woman as a damaged man's rescuer is characteristic of much romance fiction, and it's a dead-end notion. Women stay in abusive relationships, believing that, if they are patient, "their" men will change, improve. The Fifty Shades trilogy tends to reinforce this attitude.

Neither Christian nor Anastasia are the kind of characters that appeal to me. Ana's inner life consists of her inner goddess and a distorted understanding/representation of the subconscious. The inner goddess is basically an instantaneous, no-questions-asked sexual responder, and the subconscious is the construct of James's imagination that has nothing to do with the subconscious. Anastasia converses directly with her personified subconscious, who usually disapproves of Ana's actions. By definition, if one had a free and direct access to her subconscious, it would not be the subconscious, but the conscious. Is there any authorial irony that undermines this? Is the subconscious "disapproval" wry and ironic (as in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook) or is it morally condemning?

The Fifty Shades trilogy has no literary merit. The storyline seems to be there simply as a backdrop – elaborate sex scenes dominate the novel. They are repetitive, always heterosexual, and frequently violent and disturbing. At the end of Fifty Shades of Grey, Christian belts Ana. After that, she finally leaves him. However, the reader's relief at seeing her free does not last long, as she comes back to her abuser at the beginning of Fifty Shades Darker.

Reading the Fifty Shades trilogy, being within its world, surrounded by its characters felt claustrophobic and exhausting to me. Somewhat ironically, I did indeed feel Fifty Shades freed when I finished reading Fifty Shades Freed. But the book is not what I would have liked a bestseller to be. My ideal bestsellers would open spaces for women rather than reinforce women's imprisonment in patriarchal constructs that are simply repackaged as "liberating." The book is not the sexual revolution that some (especially its publishers) proclaim it to be. It is not subversive. It is well and truly within the system's paradigm, playing right into the hands of its patriarchs.

Agnieszka Niemira is a writer, teacher and BA student at the University of Queensland. Her most recent publications are books of poetry waves whisper the shoreline to life (Post Pressed, 2010) and making the invisible transparent (Post Pressed, 2008).

Fables Crossing Cultures

Suniti Namjoshi. The Fabulous Feminist. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Johanna Qualmann

It is not often that a book falls into my hands that calls itself – consciously and unashamedly – a feminist book. Even from its title, The Fabulous Feminist is clear in its philosophy, and takes the reader on a journey through Namjoshi's own experiences with feminism, as told through fables, poetry and several longer works of fiction.

As a reader that selects material from Namjoshi's body of work, The Fabulous Feminist throws together a range of different books and collections. There is certainly a sense of thematic unity to the collection, produced substantially through the author's exploration of morality and immorality, and her almost ubiquitous use of allegory and of animals as characters. While the form of the book lends itself well to collecting Namjoshi's fables and poetry, it does less justice to her longer works, the extracts from which are intellectually interesting, but emotionally unfulfilling.

A significant part of The Fabulous Feminist is made up of fables, a form to which Namjoshi is particularly drawn. The first set, simply entitled "Feminist Fables," represents the author's own strategies for negotiating a confusing patriarchal world as a new feminist. "If something didn't make sense, I wrote a fable about it" (1), she writes in the Introduction to this section, and indeed, many of feminism's primary concerns can be spotted in each text. The fables are short and simple, often only a few paragraphs long, and have a strong ethical sensibility. Namjoshi consciously plays with this didacticism, sometimes concluding by challenging the idea that there is a moral to be found at all. At the end of "Summer Days," for instance, she speaks to the reader directly: "and the moral of the story? There isn't one. It is an immoral tale" (245). At other times, however, there is a very clear message to the short fables, especially in the earlier collections, where the development of Namjoshi's own thoughts and feelings about feminism can be traced over time.

In most pieces, it is easy to see the story of gender essentialism, discrimination and sexual violence that lies behind the rather straightforward wording. In one fable, a duck is awarded honorary swan status after working very hard to study the ways of swans, but is soon scorned for aspiring to be what it isn't; for bowing to the demands of the swans who lord it over the other ducks. In another, a mongoose spares the life of a snake who professes its love for her, but kills it when it decides it will force its love on her. That fable concludes with a warning that not all snakes end up as victims. While some fables made me laugh out loud with their simple, but clever conclusions, I found myself wondering at several points in the book whether the messages were as basic as they seemed.

I found a similar problem while reading the extracts from Namjoshi's longer works, such as "The Mothers of Maya Diip" and "The Conversations of Cow." The chapters included in this reader effectively present the intellectual crux of each novel, and are soundly contextualised in the author's introduction to each text. I found "The Mothers of Maya Diip" particularly interesting, as it plays with the theme of semi-fantastical, all-female universes, and asks some similar questions to other feminist novels such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland and parts of Joanna Russ's The Female Man. The three chapters are intellectually fascinating, but little attention is paid to characterisation, and as a result even the primary characters read like archetypes with little individuality; as genders and roles, rather than people.

There are, of course, exceptions. The Suniti character in "The Conversations of Cow," who largely embodies Namjoshi herself, is one of the most fleshed-out characters, and faces many of the same problems and questions that I face myself as a young woman negotiating feminism on a daily basis. Another is Namjoshi's portrait of a family servant in India, vividly brought to life by intensely personal memories and imaginings in "Goja: An Autoiographical Myth." Likewise, many of poems included in this reader evoke personalities from literature or mythology and give them voices and feelings of their own, far beyond the personalities granted to them by existing cultural traditions.

In fact, a real strength of The Fabulous Feminist as a whole is its constant engagement with mythology, folklore and other works of literature, be they Hindu or Christian, Indian or European. Within the pages of this reader I found re-imaginings of figures and responses to authors from many eras and cultures, from Aesop, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde and Jonathan Swift to Shakespeare's Prospero and (a female!) Caliban, from Snow White to Medusa and Circe. As an aspiring classicist with a particular interest in femininity in the ancient world, I found the poems subverting traditional myths especially clever and satisfying. Namjoshi's Medusa, for instance, is not the victim of glory-seeking Perseus as the myth suggests:

> The waves roared as waves will,
> till at last the hidden hero burned
> to be seen by her whom he had come to kill.
> "Look! Medusa! I am Perseus!" he cried,
> thus gaining recognition before he died. (110)

There are certainly many other influences on Namjoshi's writing that lend it a distinct style, such as the open emphasis on lesbian identities and relationships; the mingling of Indian and Western cultural traditions; and the feeling of existing only on the periphery. Many of the stories and poems embody the struggles that Namjoshi describes as arising from her conflicting Hindu background and Christian education. I found this aspect of The Fabulous Feminist particularly rich and engaging, especially because the didactic forms and semi-fantastical, ethical themes complemented each other so effectively.

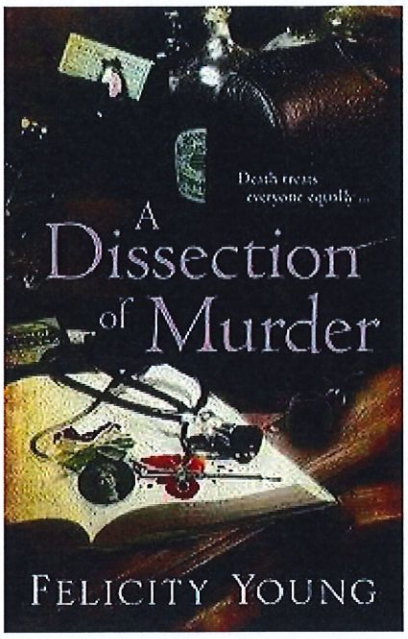
Read as a collection, the similarity of stories and characters and the relatively simple, unembellished prose can become a little grating, and I felt that my engagement waned the more I read at one sitting. The Fabulous Feminist is a book best read bit by bit, by opening at a random page, perusing a few fables or poems at a time and pondering their meaning throughout the day. Nonetheless, it is always joyfully refreshing to find a book that stands to its own feminism, without judgement, and without having to qualify itself.

Johanna Qualmann is an undergraduate Arts student at the University of Queensland and an aspiring feminist historian and archaeologist. In her spare time she is involved with the Women's Collective and maintains a blog where she writes about her own experiences with feminism.

Who Killed the Suffragette?

Felicity Young. A Dissection of Murder.
Sydney: HarperCollins, 2012.

Reviewed by Cheryl Jorgensen



The West Australian crime writer, Felicity Young, has written a gorgeous historical crime fiction in A Dissection of Murder, foregrounding the actual British Suffragette march for the Women's Vote in November 1910, where the London police behaved so brutally towards the marchers that three women were killed and many more seriously injured. It has been suggested, though not proven, that Winston Churchill gave the order to the police to behave in the appalling way they did. They not only killed and maimed, but also sexually assaulted many of the women.

That Churchill hated the Suffragettes is a strong possibility. History records that just the year before, on 13 November 1909, the Suffragette Therese Gurnett, smote Churchill around the head (which was mostly protected by his hat) with a dog whip, as he alighted from a train in Bristol. The New York Times reported: "The astounded statesman seized his petticoated" (earlier described as "modishly dressed") "assailant, who fought like a tiger cat … When the police got hold of the woman, she pointed scornfully at the Minister's dented head piece and while her face flushed with excitement cried: 'That's what you've got and you'll get more of the same from British women!'" (14 November 1909). Gurnett was arrested and gaoled. Her whip was apparently given to Mrs Churchill as a souvenir.

Young mentions the possibility of Churchill's having behaved belligerently, but does not pursue it. She does touch on the women's hunger strikes in the prisons where they were incarcerated, however; and she gives a few details of the squalid, distinctly unhygienic conditions which prevailed, and killed some of those made to endure the horrifying forced feeding procedures introduced by the prison authorities.

Young's chief protagonist is Dody McCleland, England's first female autopsy surgeon who is an assistant to Dr Bernard Spilsbury, the real-life forensics expert whose scientific evidence convicted Dr Hawley Crippen of the murder of his wife.

Dody is shocked to realise that the dead body of the Suffragette she has been asked to examine as one of her work duties, is actually that of a friend of her sister Florence (who associated with the militant Women's Social and Political Union). In the name of dispassionate analysis, she feels constrained to pass this duty on to another medical examiner, but keeps a sharp eye on the events that are unravelling when she observes that her replacement is merely whitewashing the crime in an attempt to protect the reputation of the London constabulary.

Young says in her "Author's Note" that the character of Dody McCleland is based upon her grandmother, who was one of only a handful of female graduates from Trinity College, Dublin. Bernard Spilsbury actually did have a female assistant, one Hilda Bainbridge, but not until ten years after this story takes place.

This is a very satisfying crime fiction because it not only fulfils the expectations of the genre, but also reminds the reader of the life-and-death struggles for the women's rights we now take for granted; struggles that, a mere century ago, were engaged in by increasing numbers of valiant women who had much to lose in resisting the entrenched patriarchy of the day. It would make a wonderful film.

Cheryl Jorgensen is an award-winning Brisbane writer, and author of the non-fiction works The 'brook and The Taint, and the novel A Quality of Life.

Fleshpunk

By Ashlley Morgan-Shae

Where does art go – in a time of war – when beauty is a dirty word – when painting has been declared dead decades before – when austerity-measures rule, and hoodies cloak anonymity and suspicion, when the body is commodified, homogenised, exteriorly-grown, utilised, mutilated, genetically-matched and restored, when class-divisions have widened and protests and debt-management are daily news, when using paper has to be justified, and the health of our world is transparently linked to our own survival?

In 1976, in an overheated British summer, punk clashed out as an underclass, rebelling against stifling systems. Over the next decades 'punk' has been appended to subcultures – movements rising from crush, the unheard, the visionary.

Around 1980, Steampunk rose against the mass-produced and the commodified. In 1987, the name Steampunk was coined. Steampunk is a way of seeing, and making, outside the system – dilettante in the sense of trying and testing and re-trying – as a lover of art; libertine in the freedom of thought and individualism. Reviving the Victorian sense that anyone could be a scientist, artist, inventor – even self-taught, simply by doing and making and learning – the art-is-try of continual action.

Evolving from Gothic brings Steampunk a sense of love and beauty lasting beyond the grave, of things that endure, in themes, and use of materials such as wood, leather, brass and taxidermy. Steampunk rebels against the mass-produced; practitioners make, re-use, re-cycle and create handmade, individual objects – striving for beauty, and often including working-models. The auteur, the bricoleur, the self-taught, and multi-arts work on slowly-made, inventive works. Steampunk unites eras of past, present and future, using as root-source – soul, survival, slow-technology, and the co-dependency of species.

Mirroring the Arts and Crafts movement of 1880–1910, when William Morris championed artists, architects and crafters working together; Steampunk recognises the artists' guild, the bricoleur – in hand-making and crafts. Slowly-made art that strikes some sort of harmony, of out-cast and future-cast, a melding of ugliness and beauty – a terrible beauty under threat of extinction, bridging both the Victorian era and cyber-age, and traversing life-spans. Even William Morris fabrics and patterning, and slow-ways of printing are revived in some practices.

Early Steampunk individualised PCs in leather and brass (playfully invalidating their warranties), using "upcycling" – "more than recycling: re-using things from the past and making them better … more beautiful than before," and "modding" objects from mobile-phones to cars. Steampunk's autonomy, make-it-yourself approach hand-makes and crafts in taxidermy, wood-carving, knitting, crochet, hand-sewing, metal-working and casting. Steampunk has a machinery aspect, with brass and cogs and working-models.

After thirty years, some Steampunk art appears to have branched out into an art of the body, the self to humanity, and animating animality, incorporating faith and beauty and truth in a contemporary, yet still ageless, time. The use of wax-casting, twigs, bones, fabric, and the linking of different life-forms, recognition of animals in equality to humans, and tackling contemporary issues including survival, political power, climate-change, gender and species equality, war, imprisoning, torture and escape, crossing eras and times, make this art both contemporary and fleshy. This can be called Fleshpunk.

Artists who work on the body with its vulnerability, beauty, in a time-committed, unifying death-and-life revivification way, include Berlinde De Bruyckere, Pedro Almodovar, Ricky Swallow, Ron Mueck, and, living in Australia, Adam Laerkesen, Jazmina Cininas, Lisa Black, Aly Aitken and Kate Just. That some artists who trained as drawers and painters have turned to sculpture can indicate a striving towards full-bodied impact, walk-around, multi-layered readings, and a realism

that might be discounted in flat wall-art.

The word "punk" began life as "mean and petty villainy," "rotten" and "worthless". Yet it has gained the strength of the outsider, going against establishment, of autonomy and individuality against crushing systems – a precursor to change.

The NGV's exhibition Napoleon promotes him as a great innovator, yet his rise was due to his participation in "The Terror" and three million dead. Concurrent in July 2012 was ACCA's exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere's We Are All Flesh. Perhaps comparative as an establishment crown-power show and a Fleshpunk counter-balance.

Steampunk artists rifle through opportunity-shops, markets, side-of-the-road cast-offs, then start re-pairing, re-making, and re-inventing things into a working, kind of savage harmony. Wonder-makers, self-taught tinkerers, generous with tips of making, and modding, and crafting across the internet, creating new beauties by doing and learning. Akin to the Arts and Crafts movement, the value is not in precious materials used, but rather in the making, the hands-on quality, and the harking to the heart of things.

From Gothic romance of the soul enduring, beyond vampiric, sacrificial love where death is a transformation, Steampunk passes on this uneasy faith to the flesh artists. If the body is a machine, and workers cogs in a Metropolis world, then where does the heart, the wasted flesh come in?

Looking at imprisoning systems, and ruthless or repressive governments, I recall in Port Arthur tourist-trailing a roofless, abandoned church. During its making, two convicts with life-sentences made a suicide-pact. One would axe the other fatally, and the killer would hang, thus their bodies be no longer imprisoned. The church remained unfinished, as it could never be consecrated. In restrictive times, pressed to the nth degree, we start thinking about a life beyond the physical – both as escape and re-balancing.

Art, especially in financially-strapped times, demands faith. De Bruyckere speaks about the ACCA space as being like a church and her horse sculptures as an altar-piece "like heroes" "made out of corpses." She says she is "always looking for some beauty." There is fragility, temporality and a ruthless reality in the veins showing through skin. De Bruyckere's blue-and-red coursing through the wax commands witness; Aly Aitken's sewn-seams remind me of scar tissue, and the collusion of our actions or walk-aways. Jazmina Cininas uses the she-wolf were-wolf as both hunter and the hunted, and the dismembered paw/arm as sympathetic wound. For De Bruyckere "rent-open flesh first makes us aware that there is an inner being to the body, … the wound is a symbol of change."

The quest to make beautiful, a dark romance, is a recurrent theme. De Bruyckere speaks about her series of entwined antlers My Deer as also being "my lover." In Inside Me III the "dead branches that I found along the street" "become bones." Laerkesen states "a desire to reveal forces of nature, making the invisible visible." Ancestral memory reels in his deer-heads with twig antlers and wrapped rags seeming to leak blood and body-fluids, his chrome-eared wolves, and creatures on the fringe of survival and other-world. Mutated beauty and screaming humanity recur in the work of these artists working in the flesh.

When viewed by the general public, contemporary art can seem a label-less mass. Although themes affecting the world: mass debt, terrorism, survival of both planet and species, genetic engineering, are earthing into art that has some similarities across the globe.

We have had a series of political-draws, or close-calls of ballot-counts in Australia, England and Europe, where right and left are no longer clear divisions, and negotiation with independents has to be made to stay in a seat. A mining-tax under-mined a political leader's tenure. A power-player has bought out a major part of the Australian press. Watching street riots on television brings out the tension of both external and internal battles being fought. Our under-skin, underground, undergarments, and under-state are now shown.

Steampunk incorporates discards – initially the spent-bodies of computers, of junked nature-strip finds, brass, and cast-offs. When the machinery is gone – the steam in steampunk, the Victoriana-retrospect, we are left with the body, a flesh shell, and questions of just what are we, what do we need, where do we go?

Steampunk brought slow-tech over low-tech, quality over quantity, memory over media-sell, and an anti-mass-market art. When I go to the internal sources of memory, heart, soul, the darkness after violence and scars, I come to a Fleshpunk way of looking – a renewal of the shared experience of flesh and bone and the bit-by-bit piecemeal making of healing.

In the Separate Prison in Port Arthur, where masks were worn and there was no conversation, many were driven mad; the Chapel was the only place where prisoners could use their voices, and they sang rousingly loud – fit to lift the roof.

In an era of war, fear of terrorism further limiting individual rights and movement, torture and imprisonment, governments being increasingly secretive and unanswerable, and formal education expenses rising – individual freedoms have to be re-fought.

De Bruyckere's earlier work was of cages, "I was interested in the notion of being inside as opposed to being outside the cage, of freedom versus its absence, of being mentally imprisoned." "In the 90s, I began to include woollen blankets in my sculptures. I envisioned these as an answer to the metal of the cages." "Blankets bear the smells of the people who have used them. They show signs of use … A blanket can … serve as a second-skin. It offers warmth and protection, however a great mass of blankets can evoke suffocation." Not unlike the stifling atmosphere of the political nanny-state.

Almodovar says of his film The Skin I Live In, "It's about the abuse of power. I think a lot about governments that abuse positions of power." The Skin I Live In traverses gender-realignment, imprisoning and escape, death and life, and the enduring power of love and belief. In Anthony Lucas's The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello, Jasper makes the ultimate sacrifice to try to save his city from further calamity, from another greedy doctor's ambition.

Aloneness, wit, raw determination, fabricious story and scars of memory are strong in Adam Laerkesen's and Aly Aitken's creatures. Anthropomorphism, of imbuing animal and tree-limbs and antlers with human qualities, unites species in the urge to thrive.

We make sense in recognition. Until I had to fight for a place, and began collecting broken branches that reflected the breaking of my limbs, and memories of multiple bruises, I did not realise my own artwork was a continual search for place, and a home. As a child I tried to imagine my bruises as yellow and purple flowers, but the illusion left whenever I pressed and felt pure pain. My 2012 Limbs drawings are disembodied, hugging, playing, or being supported by and supporting the parent-arms of trees. They come from memory of being locked outside as a four-year-old, having to conquer my fear and trying to make a story – a kinship with something with life in it – with the tree-limbs tall and scary, looming in the darkness.

I moved from painting shell-bodies as space-ships in a Steampunk kind of imagery, to limbs striving to make contact and recognising the interdependence of inner and outer worlds. A fleshtopia of pieces is not the cyberpunk world I wish to make – but rather a search for re-connection and re-integration. In branches and limbs I draw out their humanness, and otherness, and link them together as a life-support. I strive for balance and flow, and beauty is integral to my melding together of disparate parts – to strike harmony.

In De Bruyckere's Inside Me III, transformation of branch to intestine or bone, reminds it is less what I know, more how we grow – a Voltairean freedom of mind, to think for oneself when faced with what remains – remnants, rejections. Recycling found-twigs into flesh-like wax brings the tenuousness of love, life, and lost-time closer. The sacrifice of life to beget life is inherent in its cradle balance. Both the end and beginning of life is apparent – cradle-and-bough of re-generative lullaby. The edge of repellence and attraction is as borderline as the shaky balance on string and

wooden sawhorse. Everything breaks – it is how we rebuild – our inner outlook and action that transforms our future.

Laerkesen's The Stain of Memory bandaged deer-head holds individual stillness of wounding, of both hollow and wholeness. The hunter's coat and lantern nearby, can also be the resting-place of the healers/salvager's hut. Shadow-play of branch-antler invokes a soul-shade moving on – geographical shift. Animal and human presence are linked by both the need to survive and the need to care. The past is invoked with kerosene lantern, a hand-held light needing someone to carry it, and the much-weathered coat. Time takes on a Narnian change – personal action is needed to restore life. Winding-bandage earth-tones of mulled-wine/dried-blood, green, brown, remind of Silent Spring, the co-dependency of survival, as well hope healing the fertility of imagination, multiple-process, grafted branches held high as a torchlight for future in-sight.

De Bruyckere does not put heads or faces in her works. She said, "War involves masses of people: … difficult to seize through the … single individual." Yet a mutated, headless, doubled-horse invokes all war-horses in We Are All Flesh. Laerkesen does have faces. These artists reverence humanity in its most vulnerable, raw, sometimes hollowed-out form. Laerkesen's animals – fleeing, curious, prowling or fearful are recognisably human and earth-core dependent. Severed branches regrow as antlers.

Tree-roots are often used in art to reference the land – like a seed, an arm, an embedded entwining. The publicity poster for Bangarra's dance Terrain uses tree-root hair and earth-marked limbs. Fleshpunk themes are uniting animality and humanity as one – not as distinct lesser or greater – but in equality. The cost of survival of the fittest is seen as the destruction of the most vulnerable. Blue-veins are not the ownership of blue-bloods, but of all – dis-ease, old-age, yearning, and love and work are a shared experience.

In a contemporary world, where greed is forced to share, the debt-ridden are pressed beyond endurance, marriage equality is sought, genetic solutions and matter can be bought, corporations have no surety, when the health of the land has to be recognised and reconstituted, where there are no clear winners and losers, where food sources and energy sources must be sustainable, where dark sides are being revealed, where there is no security, and institutes of church and home are threatened – we are left with just our bodies – the flesh/our land, the heart/our drive, the brain/our connection. Written on the body is all our time spent, how we move, the circulatory of memory, the experience of tales – uniqueness beautifully-structured and re-generated. This particular strand of flesh art is where my heart lies.

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Kate Just, The Armour of Hope, 2012
Digital Type-C print
61 x 45 cm

Kate Just, Unearthed, 2011
Modelling resin, wire, cloth, wood. 75 x 600 x 61 cm
Photo: Lily Feng