



TextaQueen. *Family Tree (Self-portrait)* 2012.

## Australian Women's Book Review

Vol. 28.1 (2018)

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*Family Tree (Self-portrait)* 2012

TextaQueen

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# Australian Women's Book Review

Vol. 28.1 (2018)

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# Editorial

**Carole Ferrier**

“Our house is on fire” said Greta Thunberg who in 2018, all by herself, began regularly walking out of school to picket the Swedish parliament about the need for urgent action to hold back the climate crisis. Inspired by the March 2018 student-led March for Our Lives that, after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, demanded gun control and generated huge further actions by students on this issue, Greta was thrilled when students responding to the climate emergency began to walk out of their schools in a growing number of countries around the world, with demonstrations calling for their governments to take urgent action on global heating.

In the mid-twentieth century, ecology and conserving the natural world were beginning to be talked about as political questions by a slowly growing number of voices, some isolated, some in small groups. The concerns overlapped with those of the anti-uranium movement that feared nuclear weapons could again be used, as they were in 1945, and with those of anti-war activists concerned with the chemical warfare that, from 1962 to 1971 devastated and poisoned South Vietnam with the herbicide Agent Orange.

With spreading concern and more research being done, people began to get together to develop ways of thinking about and developing strategies to combat the degradation of the natural world through human activities—whether in the course of husbandry, industry, warfare—or even just “normal,” everyday living activities in the technosphere. The Counter-Culture offered a derisive stance on “conspicuous consumption,” and a lot of students went to Nimbin in 1973. Links between people grew with the gradual awareness that an inter-national approach was needed to tackle the problems that ever-increasing information identified. The environment had to have a more central part in a political analysis of the world and its future than had been usual in the left and the radical movements.

The International Panel on Climate Change brought out its first report in the early 1990s. The poorest half of the world was generating only a single figure percentage of global emissions of four key gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, known to produce climate change. Countries that were centrally powerful in what was called earlier “the military industrial complex” that had the world’s largest Gross Domestic Products and “growth” would, accordingly, have to make considerable changes to their lifestyles to share fairly in combating ecological depletion and climate crisis. Strategies for decarbonising the economies of the wealthy countries were not what many, or most, government representatives wanted to hear about. The speed with which climate change was occurring became clearer, with more scientists and activists generating and circulating the information, and in Europe, Green parties advocating sustainability and environmentalism becoming stronger and more visible. The scale of impact necessary to meet the targets of emissions reduction agreed to be necessary at the Copenhagen (2009) and then the Paris (2015) international Summits, was greeted by some delegates with disbelief or even hostility, but by others with commitment to a huge range of possible measures that could be taken up by government policy and initiatives, and that could inspire smaller institutions, workplaces, groups and individuals into action and activism.

A 2018 UN Study showed that, unless the level of reduction of emissions was tripled, the global temperature would by 2100 have a highly destructive rise of 3-5 degrees Celsius/5.4-9 degrees Fahrenheit, far exceeding the rise of 2 Degrees Celsius/3.6 Fahrenheit originally predicted with the earlier planned emissions controls.

Global heating from carbon in the atmosphere increases the intensity and frequency of destructive cyclones, typhoons and hurricanes and produces flooding from higher sea and river levels and the melting of polar ice, as well as unusually large volumes of rainfall in some areas. In other areas, the lack of rainfall produces very dry conditions that mean the failure of crops and death of stock on agricultural land, and a much greater frequency and intensity of forest/bush fires. Species depletion or even extinction, for plants and creatures in a whole ecological chain of being is intensified by these climactic conditions. Also

contributing to this is that human intervention to control “pests” and “weeds” with the products of big chemical companies is exterminating much of the insect world. Bees are perhaps one of the insects most talked about; but very many insects play a crucial role in pollination—upon which the fruiting and reproduction of plants depends, and upon which humans and creatures rely for food.

Much of the damage to the land that affects human inhabitants and also many other species comes from development that was always at odds with traditional Indigenous land management (the replacement in Australia of bush with European meadows and hooved animals, the replacement in South America of the Amazon forests with palm oil plantations, the destruction by building construction of wetlands inhabited by birds with migratory routes around the world). Development has erected huge numbers of buildings that cannot withstand inundation on flood plains or on the edges of the oceans and rivers.

The quest of big companies for continuing huge profits from the extraction of fossil fuels has in some cases continued undeterred by the international agreements about emissions. ExxonMobil plan to pump 25% more oil and gas than they did in 2017. Since 2016, 33 large, global banks have lent \$1.9tn in finance to the fossil fuel industry. Barclays alone has provided \$85bn since 2015. Overall, it is currently calculated, oil and gas production around the world would have to fall by 20% by 2030 and 55% by 2050, in order to keep global heating below the levels aimed for. But global markets are shifting quite rapidly away from fossil fuels, and as renewable energy is more widely adopted in different nations, it becomes increasingly cheaper to produce, and to use.

So what do those concerned about climate breakdown—that may be approaching sooner than previously predicted—want from their governments? Centrally, some Plans, far more ambitious and far-reaching than most of those currently conceptualised, even in countries where serious advances in emissions reduction are being made. Some countries have implemented plans to move fast to drastically cut carbon emissions and pollution through an Energy Transition Plan, involving the redirection of energy policy and government support and investment away from fossil fuels extraction and their use and towards the expansion of solar, wind, water, or other renewable energy sources.

Then, the use of individual vehicles needs to be reduced more rapidly by better, more frequently available and more convenient public transport. The widespread use of electric vehicles should be promoted and encouraged by more development of, and more information about, charging stations and similar issues. Cars and trucks running on oil and petrol are responsible for a huge amount of current emissions, and government policies need to orient towards vehicles powered by other energy sources. Shale gas produced by fracking is not a good alternative, as it releases methane, produces pollution, can cause earthquakes and, like other mining, consumes water in huge volumes and turns it into contaminated water.

Then, plans to drastically and progressively cut down on waste. Up to a half of the food available to the population in wealthy countries is, we are told, thrown away uneaten. A great deal of energy has been expended upon growing or creating it and on transporting it to shops or homes. If it is not actually consumed, more energy is expended when it is carted off with the rubbish collection or some, even, when it is dropped into a sink grinder. Then, plastic (especially the single-use sort that is used for packaging), is something else that is massively wasted, and its manufacture and use should be more discouraged. Recycling programmes are in crisis in most places, as the sheer volume of unmanageable waste increases; China, and some other Asian countries particularly Malaysia, are no longer accepting plastic waste from countries including Australia—and sending it back. Plastics production and use is estimated to currently warm the planet twice as much as the aviation industry does.

It will be necessary to put such things into practice, with a much bigger reach than is produced by many people's admirable, myriad, individual or small scale initiatives--that you can see, or read about, all over the place--for cutting down on rubbish or improving recycling or not wasting energy, or reducing vehicle use. These are having an increasing impact but bigger plans to make them more effective are needed. One example of a government initiative (with support from Australian scientists) is East Timor's plan to become the first "plastic neutral" country with a recycling plant that will process 20,000 tonnes of plastic waste a year. One use for this plastic is to build roads, playgrounds and outdoor furniture.



Governments such as our own in Australia (which has a long history of mining and minerals extraction) need a plan for a co-ordinated exit from fossil fuels organised with the working communities that depend upon them and involving government investment. Taskforces with all stakeholders could negotiate the transition and ongoing processes for affected communities, and plan early for closures, including workers retraining or being redeployed and new employment opportunities being created in other industries, especially those with a sustainable orientation and which offer a sense of pride and satisfaction in the work performed. The government could support the communities in coal mining regions by assisting economic diversification and setting up environmental remediation. Many former minesites are amenable to the ecotourism that (along with environment-related tourism) is already a large part of the economy of north Queensland. One highly successful example of minesite transformation is the Eden Project in Cornwall in Britain, that has generated various kinds of involvement by the local community, a wide range of employment and a large and diverse number of visitors to the region. It is run by a charity that proposes to encourage the spread of “a sisterhood of sites...focused upon different aspects of how humans interact with the natural world.” Eden, formerly a china clay mine site, is partnering with the Anglesea Project in Victoria to transform a former coal mine site. There are tens of thousands of abandoned, often ugly and contaminating, minesites in Australia, and many would be suitable for such remediation and development, benefitting the surrounding communities.

Individuals and communities are daily coming up with various solutions and trying them out. Some examples are using regenerative agriculture; growing carbon-sequestering, and fast-growing, seaweed (especially kelp), that can restore marine habitats and be harvested for food, fibre, biofuel and fertiliser; creating local, decentralised energy economies that can be produced by solar micro-grids; the building of participatory democracy in communities that can generate positive, collective directions for creative actions. Indigenous peoples’ histories of land stewardship can also be learnt from.

Can these things happen fast enough to turn back a situation of much more widely-experienced extreme weather and environmental conditions? The rich countries that generate most of the emissions have numbers of influential

politicians and others who choose to ignore planetary heating, or even set out to encourage activities that exacerbate it. Donald Trump's advancement of huge new sites for fossil fuel extraction—at sea, on land and in the Arctic and his encouragement of more factories for plastic goods production, in the name of “growth” and profits, is one of the most striking instances. The tossing around in the Federal parliament by LNP politicians of a varnished lump of coal donated by the Minerals Council of Australia is a testimony to the symbolic role of attachment to coal—or perhaps attachment to the profits and “growth” for capitalism that it represented in the past.

The massive proposed Carmichael coal mine in the Galilee Basin in Queensland to be set up by the billionaire Indian businessman, Gautam Adani, has also taken on a huge symbolic significance in promising “jobs and growth—and massive carbon emissions and pollution.” The growth appears to be substantially in the Adani bank accounts in the Cayman Islands. The jobs are far fewer than initially suggested and would in time deplete the Bowen Basin mines' workforce in New South Wales, as well as threatening tourism industry jobs through destruction of large sections of the coastline and the Barrier Reef with pollution, from waste water and ships, and heating of the ocean from emissions that the mining activity would generate. Enormous amounts of groundwater are needed for mining, and the redirecting of this water and rendering it poisonous after use would seriously affect local agriculture and communities. The Indigenous people, the Wangan and Jagalingu have also organised against the mine and the damage to the rivers and their most sacred site, the Doongabulla Springs, that is very close to the mine.

Highly visible figures in the LNP have supported the Adani mine, and emerged as doubtful champions of the miners in order to attack the Greens and those ALP members who are opposed to it. (These latter two Parties could have done more to consult with the mining communities years ago about the inevitable decline of coal as a desirable fuel and what other industries and energy sources might replace it to revitalise the local economy.)

In relation to outdated ideas, it is also hard to forget the gentlemanly trio of Peter Dutton, Scott Morrison and Tony Abbott captured joking on video on 11 September 2015, as they waited with the media for a conference about Syrian

refugees. Abbott had just returned from a Pacific Island Leaders Forum in Papua New Guinea, at which he (along with John Key, the previous New Zealand Prime Minister) had refused the Island nations' request to support a target warming limit of 1.5 rather than 2 degrees at the UN Paris meeting coming up that December. Chatting while they waited, Dutton said the delayed participants must be on "Cape York Time," and Abbott rejoindered that he encountered that at the PNG Forum also. Dutton continued the joke by saying, "time doesn't mean anything when you're about to have water lapping at your door," until Morrison terminated the chat by alerting him that they had begun to be filmed.

In many of the economically powerful countries with which Australia has close economic and other ties, there is a current rise of xenophobic nationalism, racial supremacism, old colonial attitudes and disregard for the poor or disadvantaged—both within their own nation and in others. This is a poor prognosis for the development of a planetary consciousness that would see the world's populations as uniting to push back the dire effects of global heating.

Some Pacific island nations are among the most immediately vulnerable from the rising ocean, but they have received little support from the Australian LNP Ministers. The Islanders are among those likely to be the first climate refugees produced by rising sea levels since serious international action about global heating began to be proposed and organised. But inundations making continuing habitation impossible will not stop there. Predictions are that the first large cities to be flooded, within 50 years, are likely to include New York, London, Rio de Janeiro—and many in New Zealand and Australia as the Antarctic ice melts. By the end of the century, those likely to be added will include Osaka, Hong Kong, Calcutta, Mumbai, Dhaka, Jakarta, Venice, San Francisco and Miami.

Unless populations around the world (especially in the wealthy half of it) can find leaders to turn around the climate emergency, the world will become a place of violent conflict and desperation for survival on a level dwarfed by any previous period. (It may cross your mind that capitalism, or indeed state capitalism, are not especially favourable political systems for such extensive agreement and co-operation to occur, since both systems are dedicated to the making of profits and economic "growth." More authoritarian systems overtly suppress democracy and

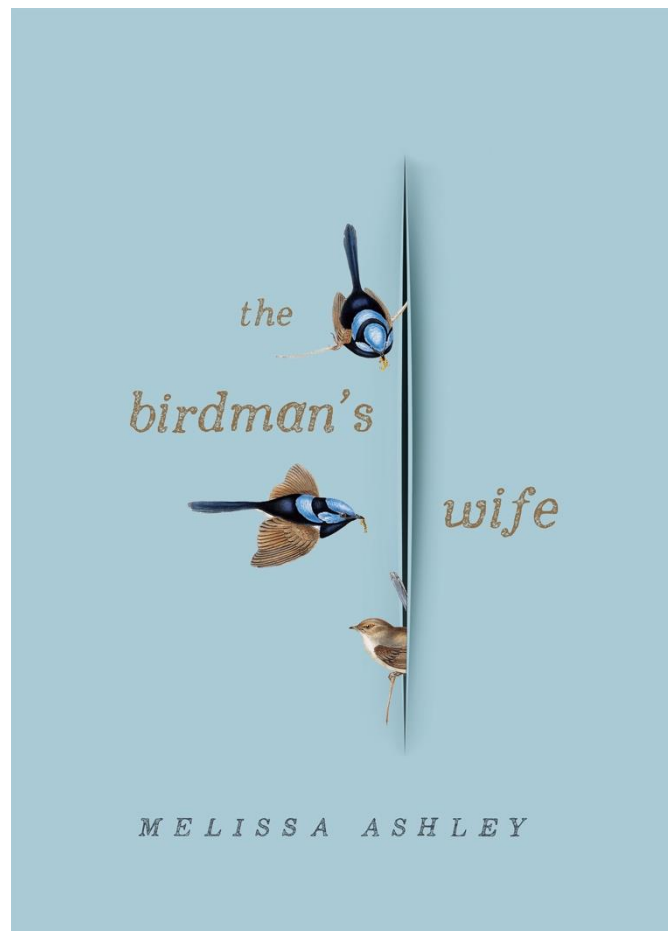
repress their populations, and are oriented towards “growth” and the pursuit of power for their dominant class through much more overt mobilisation of nationalism, militarism and force. An internationalist consciousness in which, as Virginia Woolf put it, “my country is the whole world,” or in which the human right of all people to be able to have food, shelter, constructive and satisfying work and to live in peace with negotiated resolutions of disputes with surrounding communities and cultures can be defended. James Dyke at Exeter University has discussed the technosphere as the complex, globalised, industrial system that grows with the consumption of goods and services. This also raises ways of thinking about production in terms of what is useful and useless production (not just of material things, but also of knowledges and understandings) in a world context becoming one where planetary survival, or survival as human beings, will be question for everybody. Kristalena Georgieva at the World Bank estimates that by 2050, for example just in the three areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America, there will be 140m refugees, “climate migrants” driven to cross their country’s borders in order to survive.

And the climate emergency is growing, as the earth and oceans continue to heat up.

## Romantic Discovery

Melissa Ashley, *The Birdman's Wife*  
Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2016.

**Reviewed by Taylor-Jayne Wilkshire**



POET, fellow bird enthusiast, and academic, Melissa Ashley has a skillset that greatly animates the language, passion, and research of her debut novel, *The Birdman's Wife*. Written from the perspective of the wife of celebrated ornithologist, John Gould, *The Birdman's Wife* reveals a long-forgotten contributor to ornithology, Elizabeth Gould, and depicts her journey through art and science. From the moment Elizabeth meets her husband and begins her artistic career that continued right up until her death, Ashley follows Elizabeth's progression and fills in the gaps that history has missed.

What has entranced many, and initially drew me to the book, is the physical aesthetic of *The Birdman's Wife*. The duck-egg blue of the book-sleeve and the simplicity and placement of Elizabeth Gould's paintings make the book appear like a remastered version of John and Elizabeth Gould's original published collections. The inside of the book is equally mesmerising; feathers rather than asterisks divide the paragraphs and the chapter titles are in a unique font, reminiscent of a lithograph. If I didn't dog-ear my pages or spill drinks and eat toast while I read, it would be something I would hand down to another generation, though I have kept the internal covers in pristine condition (no coffee or peanut butter residue), for Elizabeth Gould's artworks have inspired my own. I personally

admire her use of colour for the emerald-shaded Resplendent Quetzal and the deep-blue coloured Macaw. But the novel itself reflects the physical classicalness and quiet elegance of the book's design and, indeed, the main character.

Melissa Ashley's research into Elizabeth Gould is expansive. From the first chapter, her narrative works to create confidence in readers with what they are being told about Elizabeth. Ashley's research involved travelling to both England and Tasmania and speaking with Elizabeth's last remaining relatives. At an event to launch her debut book, however, Ashley mentioned that only a few documents and diaries specifically relating to Elizabeth's life remain; the majority focus on her husband and his work. Accordingly, Ashley said, she thought of her book more as historical fiction than biography, since much artistic licence has been deployed. Ashley portrays Elizabeth's connection to her children, the ones that lived through childbirth and the ones that did not:

Overwhelmed, I dismissed Daisy for the week so that I might have the house to myself during the day, and took to my bed. I slept long hours, dreaming of the birth, of my baby's cry, of him beside me in the cot, within arm's reach. (45)

But it is easy to see where Ashley has become preoccupied with researching particular details much to the joy of her readers. Ashley's descriptions of Elizabeth's painting processes are remarkable and the details of Elizabeth's artistic methods make it hard to believe that Ashley herself did not live in the nineteenth century as an ornithological artist.

I thickened copper green in the fire, painted it on and then added the finest sprinkling of gold dust. Over the top, I dabbed the softest, sheerest layer of eggwhite, so that when held under the light, a kaleidoscope of colours formed and changed.

In her account of Elizabeth's moment of painting, the reader feels Ashley's own deep connection to Elizabeth's work and an awe about the collections she produced. At times, the language is heavy with adjectives, while words such as plumage, hatchlings, nest, bill, and crown are abundant and used not only when describing birds. But when looking at Elizabeth's works, it is easy to understand that at times there are not enough words in one's vocabulary to accurately describe the quiet beauty and elegance of her ornithological artwork—a life's work that crucially built her husband's reputation.

Often, I read in the genres of speculative fiction and literature where the stories are often haunting and leave me in a brooding, emotional state for days. *The Birdman's Wife* provides a soft relief from today's world. The story is elegant and warming, and the prose beautifully reminiscent of Ashley's poetic background. Although the story does not leave you emotionally haunted or scarred, its presence remains in your mind. You begin to think about the other female contributors to science and art whose struggles and achievements have been forgotten and, as a woman, you wonder how you can be more like those women, more like Elizabeth, who defied many social conventions for the meticulous documentation of natural history and the beauty of art.

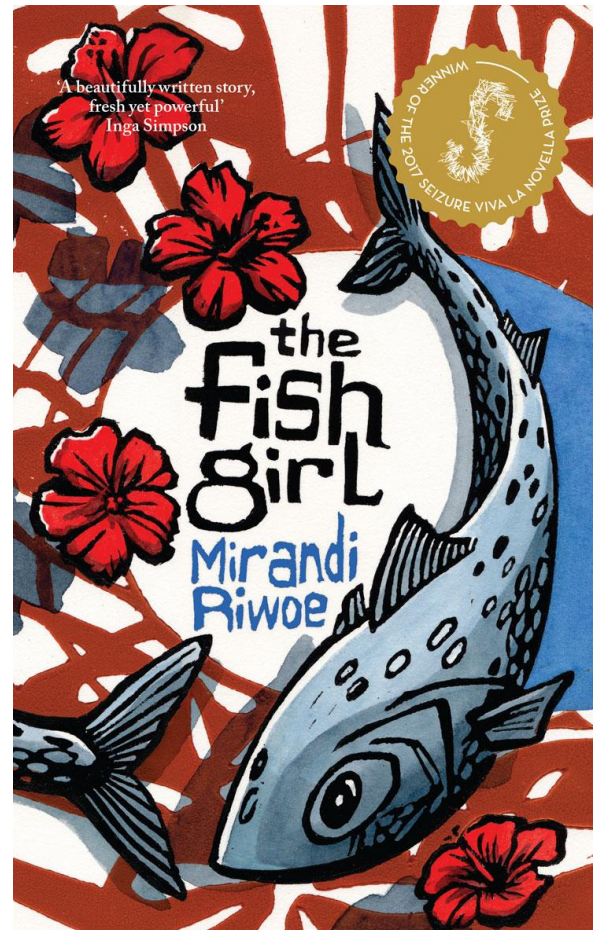
If you are looking for a book that quietly delights and gently pulls the reader into the old world of romantic discovery in which art animates knowledge and science, then *The Birdman's Wife* is for you.

**Taylor-Jayne Wilkshire is a Brisbane-based writer, editor, and artist. She holds a Master of Arts in Writing, Editing, and Publishing from The University of Queensland. Her poetry has been published in *Peril*, *Writer's Edit*, the *Mascara Literary Review*, and *Uneven Floor*, as well as winning the Kingshott Cassidy poetry scholarship and being shortlisted for the NotJack Competition in both 2016 and 2017. She reads and writes about folklore, ghosts, and birds. She has tried writing and reading about other creatures, but they just don't seem to hold her interest.**

## A Tale from the Colony of Colour and Gender

Mirandi Riwoe. *The Fish Girl*  
Sydney: Seizure, 2017.

Reviewed by Jena Woodhouse



SOMERSET Maugham (1874-1965) was a successful British playwright, novelist, short-story writer and travel writer, whose writings were often closely linked with his travel experiences and the stories he heard in the course of his far-ranging journeys.

Mirandi Riwoe, on the other hand, is a Brisbane born and based writer of Indo-Chinese and Irish-English-Australian parentage whose novella, *The Fish Girl* (2017), was shortlisted for the Stella Prize in 2018.

What do these two writers have in common? Riwoe's *The Fish Girl* writes back to Maugham's short story, "The Four Dutchmen" (1928). In Maugham's work, the four Dutchmen are crew on a Dutch tramp steamer on which the narrator voyages from Merauke in New Guinea to Macassar in the Dutch East Indies. The four Dutchmen, who are inseparable friends as well as crew-members—the captain, chief officer, engineer, and the supercargo—are defined by their camaraderie; their corpulence ("Their solidity was amazing. They were the four fattest men I ever saw"); their functions on board ship; their jollity; their prodigious appetites for



food and beer and also, in the captain's case, for "the charms of the native girls"—this last being a cause of some consternation in his companions:

He had picked up a little thing the last time the ship was at Macassar... The captain was always losing his head over one brazen hussy after another...

Maugham's story then cuts to the narrator's next stopover at the Van Dorth Hotel in Singapore, where he reads in the *Straits Times* that the same supercargo and chief engineer were, in the interim, acquitted of murder at a trial in Batavia. Shocked, he proceeds to elicit some sketchy details from the hotel manager.

"It appeared that on one of the trips the captain took with him a Malay girl<sup>1</sup> that he had been carrying on with... He was crazy about her." This divided and alienated his three companions, because, "It was the end of all their larks. The chief officer was more bitter against her than anybody." It then transpired that, "The captain had found them in bed together and had killed the chief" before shooting himself. By the next morning, the girl had disappeared from the ship, with the supercargo and chief engineer disclaiming any knowledge of her whereabouts and the former commenting, "She's probably jumped overboard... Good riddance to bad rubbish." A sailor on watch, however, had observed the two carrying "a bulky package" on deck just before dawn and dropping it overboard. Although they were subsequently acquitted of murder on the grounds of flimsy evidence, "all through the East Indies they knew that the supercargo and the chief engineer had executed justice on the trollop who had caused the death of the two men they loved."

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1 Mirandi Riwoe, in a keynote address at the Asia Pacific Writers and Translators Conference on 6 December, 2018, at Griffith Gold Coast campus, offered a disambiguation of the term "Malay" as being applied loosely or generically, during the period of Dutch Colonial rule, to include what is now Indonesia.

“And thus ended the comic and celebrated friendship of the four fat Dutchmen.”

\* \* \* \*

In her novella *The Fish Girl*, Mirandi Riwoe expands the interstices and parameters of Maugham’s story to create a narrative for the person identified in “The Four Dutchmen” in increasingly pejorative terms as “a little thing” that the captain has picked up: a “brazen hussy” (as a generic term); “a Malay girl”; and finally, “the trollop who had caused the death of the two men they [the supercargo and the chief engineer] had loved.”

Mina is a pubescent girl (precise age unknown) recruited from a remote fishing village in Sunda by a man seeking cheap labour for the Dutch Resident’s kitchen. Riwoe has cleverly repurposed the period, the characters, and the setting from Maugham’s story. Mina’s father, a poor fisherman, is eager to dispose of his daughter in exchange for tobacco, spices and foodstuffs.

The greater part of this narrative relates Mina’s experiences at the house of the Dutch Resident. The story tells of how Mina learns food preparation and is chosen by her employer to wait on his table; how she falls in love with Ajat, a young man from her village (though of a superior social caste), who is also an employee at the Residence; how, disarmed by her adoration for Ajat, she allows him to seduce her, dreaming that this might lead to marriage and a return to her home; how cruelly she is deceived in entertaining such hopes; how she is noticed by the captain, who becomes infatuated with her when the four fat Dutchmen are periodically entertained by the Resident whenever their ship is in port; how she falls out of favour with her employer when he learns of her indiscretion with Ajat.

In a bid to barter herself for some kind of bargaining power in a world where she has no status or voice, Mina accepts the captain’s offer to accompany him on his next voyage, whereupon tragedy swiftly ensues:

“The captain has asked my permission for you to accompany him on his next voyage,” the master says swiftly in Malay. He smiles but his pale eyes are cold. “I have told him that you may.”

The captain asks again if she will go away with him when they leave port. Mina thinks of the master’s house, of how only Pepen (a young servant) will speak to her. And she thinks of how she cannot get home to the fishing village. She presses her prayer hands to her forehead and thanks the captain. She nods yes.

Mina thinks of how one day when she is a fine and rich lady, with a dark gown buttoned high on her neck, she will return from the grey place [Holland] and buy her parents a proper house. They will leave their thatched hut and endless fish behind.

But not yet... She will have to wait... until she can return with a full basket. ... She will need to be very strong. She will need to be like one of the *dhalang*’s *wayang* puppets, as hard as lacquer, as enduring. (74–78)

In Maugham’s story we learn from hearsay that the captain had found the Malay girl and the chief officer in bed together; in this pivotal scene in *The Fish Girl*, Mina is raped, presumably to bring disgrace to her and humiliate the captain for preferring her company to that of his comrades.

In a fictional sense, Mirandi Riwoe has avenged the death of the nameless girl who appears in Maugham’s story of the four Dutchmen merely as a catalyst for calamity, by giving her a name, an identity, and a life where she is, however briefly, able to negotiate a little personal agency. In doing so, she also exposes the precariousness of Mina’s situation, her powerlessness in a society where she is doubly colonised, not only as “a Malay girl” in a male-dominated culture, but also as a member of a community under Dutch sovereignty. If she now has a voice, it is not audible to those in authority. Her only recourse, as a young woman

without social standing, is to use her allure, her only asset, as a means to better her position and gain whatever personal security she can through her association with an empowered man, whose affection for her is nonetheless seen as a weakness by his colleagues.

Although *The Fish Girl* is Mina's story, and, differently from Maugham's tale, engages the reader's sympathies on behalf of the girl who is treated so contemptuously in the latter, given the social attitudes and realities of the time (as revealed in Maugham's story and incorporated into Riwoe's novella), it is not within the compass of that cultural and social milieu for Mina to become empowered or to act with any degree of personal agency.

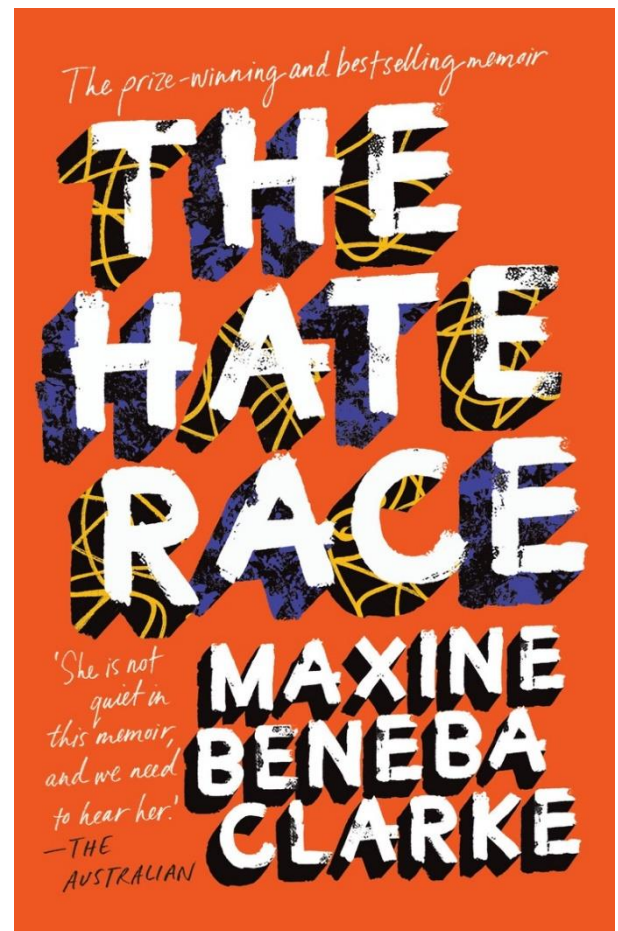
Maugham's story may seem like an outdated one until one hears of the recent execution of a young Indonesian woman employed as a household servant in Saudi Arabia, for attempting to defend herself against, or avenge herself for, rape at the hands of her employer's father. Such instances (this being one of a number of executions of foreign women employed as household staff there) bring home the fact that this kind of social disparity and injustice based on gender is not, in some cultures, a thing of the past.

**Jena Woodhouse is a widely published, Brisbane-based poetry and fiction writer.**

## The Home We Know

Maxine Beneba Clarke. *The Hate Race*  
Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2016.

Reviewed by Katerina Tomasella



AUSTRALIAN national identity has been constructed on being built upon survival. The words “hate” and “race” contain divisive meanings—yet place them side-by-side, as Maxine Beneba Clarke does, and they transform into a metonymy for the dominance of White culture in Australia.

*The Hate Race* is Clarke’s debut memoir and it is a recovery narrative that deals with the established racism that permeates Australia, both historically and now. Clarke is selective in her delivery of the systemic racism and uses her personal story to inexorably jar the lens of a Eurocentric Australia. Reading these first-hand accounts of inescapable racism has a sinking effect, drowning the reader far beneath the overtly multicultural nation on which Australia showcases itself—and then Clarke shares her strength, her survivor history, which forces us to claw out of the surface with her, distilling the *you people* archetype that intolerance birthed.

Impassivity is a central condition of the “keloid scarring” undergone in the past centuries since British colonisation of Australia and other lands. *The Hate Race* delves beyond the personal experiences of a young Australian girl of Afro-

Caribbean descent and incisively demonstrates how discrimination has become a strong undercurrent personality in contemporary Australia. The specific incidents that Clarke shares haunt the story's arc and disclose the extent of the intolerance she faced in her youth and its impact on her life currently. Clarke has pulled back the curtains on racism and its tight hold on Australian suburban life. She vocalises the incidents that have shaped her youth, communicating how even though "the word [*racist*] felt strange in my mouth," it was also "powerful, as if now that I could name the thing that was happening to me, it had become real, not something I was imagining or being *oversensitive* about" (104).

Clarke opens her memoir on North Road in Melbourne. She is a mother, pushing her baby daughter in a pram on the walk to pick up her young son from school. Then, in the afternoon traffic crawl, she is attacked by racist invective from the unknown, male driver of a ute: "he's talking to me ... It's been about ten months since I was openly abused on the street by a total stranger" (vi). The nakedness and vulnerability that Clarke depicts in this scene became apparent to her in childhood — in preschool, primary school, and high school. The prejudice she experiences has a changing-face; it comes in the form of Cabbage Patch Kid, a school teacher, a shop clerk, parents of her peers — and it appears without forewarning, "anywhere, at anytime" (255).

As a memoir, *The Hate Race* precipitates a conversation pertaining to casual, overt and institutionalised racism and its deeply-embedded cultural influence within Australia. Clarke's storytelling captures the ordinariness of growing up in Sydney's suburbs during the eighties and nineties, juxtaposing this normalcy with personal experiences of targeted and inescapable racism. Here, childhood innocence is tainted by vindictive slander, and Clarke's feelings of ostracism and conflicted self-worth slowly impact all facets of her life, including her roles as a daughter, friend, student, and girlfriend, because "at five and a half, racism had already changed me" (33).

The language of the memoir replicates the folklore style of weaving a tale, embodying the author's own Afro-Caribbean heritage. This interweaving of Afro-Caribbean storytelling becomes a structural device that paces her memoir, taking

the reader in and out from sections filled with racially-charged abuse to moments of joviality. This apposition builds momentum in the text, enabling the reader to relate to Clarke's experience. The cadenced and rhythmic tone of her storytelling synergises with dialogue and produces a linking effect with her ancestors' oral literature, signifying that the past still holds power to reshape the present.

Clarke instils a recurring rhythm in her narrative, that she produces by repeating certain phrases, such as "This is how I tell it, or else what's a story for" (2), and "That was how it happened, or else what's a story for" (183). This deliberate writing style pays homage to the Afro-Caribbean storytelling way and enables Clarke to "boldly inhabit" her own writing, interlacing Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous Australian histories and experiences to enlarge the conversation around stories of racism specific to Australia. One of the most poignant lines of the memoir reads, "my father used to joke that black people were like oil, or Teflon: naturally resistant to water" (55). This statement references Clarke's family's ancestors, who were abducted and enslaved from the shores of their home country, where "for centuries, our [ancestors'] blood crisscrossed the cobalt blue: backwards and forwards, north to south, circling in search of a safe landing space" (55). For the Afro-Caribbean people, the water is a symbol of bloodshed, for it carried the ships in which their stolen bodies were chained — it encapsulates the brutality exercised towards them after colonisation in West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade that journeyed to the Americas. For Clarke's family, the core of their ancestors' history is survival. And now, she pinpoints how that survivalist nature has become instinctually imprinted upon each generation born since the days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade — flowing through the veins of "the descendants of those unbroken" (256). Clarke's inclusion of her father's joke in *The Hate Race* acts as a connecting agent for her own writing, in which she evocatively and disconcertingly echoes the way colonisation operates as an enduring enterprise. Concurrently, the casual and succinct delivery of Clarke's father's statement can be interpreted as an emblematic replication of the collective desensitisation that mainstream Australia has performed towards its own history of violence.

Clarke identifies hegemonic Eurocentric belonging as a circulating distillation that complicates the processes of Australian colonisation. In her accounts of school Multicultural Days, Clarke exposes the treatment of non-European-descent children. Here, the “traditionally”-dressed students would be mercilessly bullied in the playground while other students would wear “ordinary weekend clothes with some token ‘multicultural’ item: chopsticks through a hairbun...or a stick-on bindi in the centre of their forehead.” (226) Similarly, Clarke reminisces on the 1988 Australian Bicentenary celebrations at her primary school, where the classroom was decorated with “drawings of Governor Phillip...and models of the First Fleet” (86). Clarke explains that in their classroom conversations “we talked about the difficult lives of the settlers, how they were *true pioneers* ... we learned that the Aborigines were the brown people who were already in Australia when Cook discovered the country” (86). However, the only historical account of the Indigenous Australians taught by the schoolteacher included that they “hunted animals with boomerangs, did corroboree dances and ate grubs” (86). Likewise, Clarke recalls a drawing her sister brought home one afternoon that she had traced from a school textbook. The sketch had Captain Arthur Phillip in his captain’s uniform with “two loin-clothed Aboriginal men, their face contorted in scowls” (87). Underneath the picture, in her sister’s handwriting was the caption she had copied, that read: “*Captain Phillip tried hard to be friendly, but the Aborigines were violent and hostile*” (87). Clarke personally encountered the solidification of systemic and institutionalised “Eurocentric” branding of Australian history. And now, through her memoir, she openly conveys the ways in which Australian society perpetuates aspects of its own history of colonial brutality.

Inhabiting different perspectives in her memoir allows Clarke to encapsulate the perspectives of a mother, a daughter, a “brown girl”, an “Australian”, and a descendent of Afro-Caribbean ancestry. In a book that centres itself upon the exclusivity of Eurocentric Australian culture, Clarke is invitingly inclusive with her readers; she imparts herself and her childhood story, recognising the value of sharing who she is and what she has endured, “or else what’s a story for” (124). The humming melody of Clarke’s writing traverses the pages of her memoir, retelling for the reader that “this is how it alters us. This is how we change” (75).



*The Hate Race* is a memoir of national significance, earthed in traditional Afro-Caribbean storytelling. It recognises the importance of the individual and their experience, with a narration that bears witness to the burdened hearts of those who have endured racism in pockets of silent isolation. Clarke validates how racism is an agent that flays identity, intruding upon mind, body and spirit. She writes: “like poison: it eats away at the very essence of your being. Left unchecked, it can drive you to the unthinkable” (vi). Clarke reiterates that stories like hers must be told because they break the silence that often surround topics and issues of racism and how they can come to “erode us all” (75).

*The Hate Race* is a book that is both influential and accessible to many kinds of readership; its pages are a witness to an individual child’s experience of racism in Australia, serving as an open dialogue between Clarke and her reader. It asks us to remember and to reflect upon our own childhoods. It has gained respect and recognition in the Australian literary sphere, in 2017 winning the NSW Premier’s Literary Award and also being shortlisted for The Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction, The ABIA Biography Book of the Year, the Indie Award for Non-Fiction and the Stella Prize.

*The Hate Race* forces its readers to reflect on their perceptions of cross-cultural acceptance in Australian society. This memoir works beyond a monolingual paradigm to re-interpret and scrutinise notions of Eurocentric belonging. As a piece of Australian literature, *The Hate Race* must be read contemporaneously, regarding both colonising history and the all-embracing, spoken present. Clarke’s memoir is the cataclysmic result of a lifetime of intolerance that ascends from “the watery tracks of my family’s belonging scar” (55).

Maxine Beneba Clarke dedicates her memoir to the children of Australia, including her own, in the hope that an accepting and more sensitively aware Australia could be the home we all come to know.

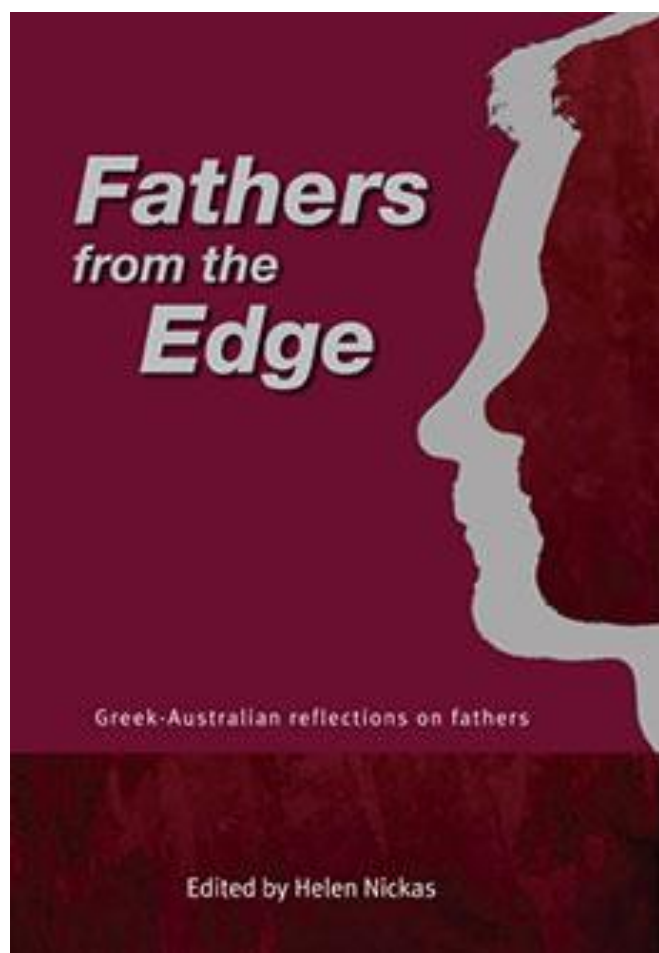
**Katerina Tomasella is an aspiring novelist and is commencing a Masters program in Writing, Editing and Publishing at The University of Queensland.**

## Negotiating With the Dads

Edited by Helen Nickas, *Fathers from the Edge: Greek-Australian Reflections on Fathers*

Melbourne: Owl Publishing, 2015.

**Reviewed by Gillian Bouras**



IN 2006, Helen Nickas, a Greek-Australian, published an anthology titled *Mothers from the Edge*, a collection of tributes by twenty-eight Greek-Australian women to their mothers. Nine years later, *Fathers from the Edge* appeared: in this anthology both men and women, twenty-four in number, write about their fathers, who are or were invariably immigrants to Australia. Some of these men were twice displaced, and many were witnesses to unspeakable horrors, being of the generation whose childhood and youth were deeply affected by the German occupation and the Greek Civil War. Both anthologies feature writing that is simply and directly expressed, while being often deeply introspective. In recollecting their relationships with their parents, the writers wrestle with problems both past and present.

The writers bear witness to the complicated love that arises when the younger generation is forced to live a double life during its formative years: many of these writers were Greek at home, while trying to fit into the dominant Australian culture at school. Girls had a particularly difficult time, as they attempted to cope with the demands of a double standard as well. "Because he's a boy," was an oft-repeated

reply from fathers when their daughters complained about the freedom given to their brothers or male relatives. There is also the unbridgeable gap of differences in experience; the children of these men, despite a general, loving willingness, are unable to comprehend what their fathers went through, and what they chose or were forced to leave behind. Nor can they comprehend the sacrifices made by their fathers: they observe the better material lot that migration has usually ensured for the older generation, but often fall short of understanding the spiritual and emotional fracture and loss that has been endured.

The male contributors, however, invoke the inevitable effect of genes. N.N. Trakakis states simply: "I carry within me my father." Some stories involve estrangement followed by occasionally uneasy reconciliation. Other stories pay loving tribute to their fathers. Hariklia Herastinidas, for example, writes of her "best-in-the-world Dad," while Emilios Kyrou, who became the first Greek to be appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria, sees his father as "a strong and courageous spirit that continues to inspire me." Martha Mylona remembers her father pointing out her good luck in having seen both the Great Bear and the Southern Cross.

I am a migrant in reverse, having left Australia for Greece many decades ago. But I have had it easy; this collection shows the raw pain felt by migrants. Many fathers are recorded as never getting over their nostalgia and the experience of loss. As well, they found it difficult, or well-nigh impossible, to alter the patterns of the past. One of these patterns was the template for "a real man." George Alexander ponders this matter and tries "to figure out how one dreams oneself together as a man." In general, however, the pattern of masculinity for a traditional Greek meant that a man did not reveal his feelings, or show vulnerability, especially not to his wife or children. Pride was paramount, so that any sign of what society, or other men, deemed weakness was to be avoided. Weakness was very much bound up with lack of control, so that wives and offspring had to conform, or else be kept in order. There are instances recorded in this book of sons protecting their mothers. Yet when the "real man" was widowed, he most often felt bereft and helpless.

In both these volumes the inclusion in the title of the phrase *from the edge* is particularly apt. When one becomes a migrant one is immediately *on edge*, and *on the edge*. Nerves are taut because of the struggles of fitting into the new host society, and migrants are almost always fearful of the unknown. They observe and either try to learn or decide to reject the notion of ever assimilating. Helen Nickas, whose contribution is the last in this book, points out that migration affects everybody in a family, and Olympia Panagiotopoulos's testimony bears this out. She writes that the children of immigrants were a different breed and had to be successful. "We were the seeds of a dream and within us lived the spirit of hope and possibility. We were the answer" (146).

Nickas's chapter is a belated letter to her father, a letter written long after his death, and written in Australia, a land her father visited only once. She recalls the loss of his only son, killed by a mine during the Civil War; she recalls her leave-taking when she was beginning her long journey to Australia at the age of eighteen. It has been said that goodbyes are rehearsals for death, and so it is often proved: Nickas was not in Greece when her parents died, and she states that she dealt badly with this fact, and mentions "long-distance grief." Being away from the homeland, she says, "robs you of the big moments in life—whether it's joy or grief—because so much of what happens to your family is happening so far away from you." On the edge, indeed.

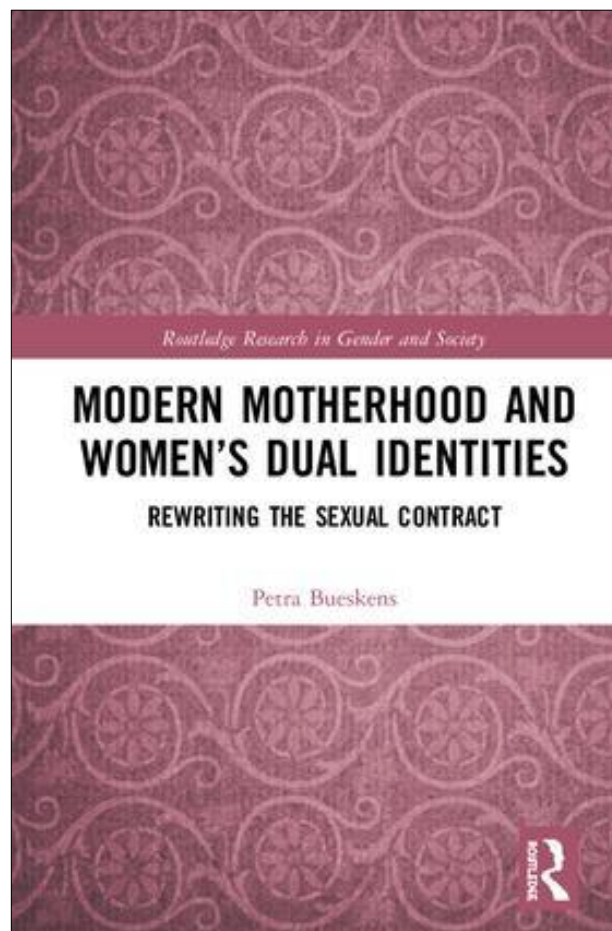
Through Owl Publishing, Helen Nickas has devoted much of her life to encouraging and preserving literature from the Greek diaspora, and has helped many writers to express their ideas, doubts and fears about their Greek heritage and their Australian experience. Her many readers have good reason to be very grateful to her.

**Gillian Bouras is a Melbourne-born teacher and writer who has a Masters of Education from the University of Melbourne. In 1980, Bouras moved to Greece with her family and currently lives in the Peloponnese, frequently visiting Australia when she can. She has written nine books and has had her journalism published in six countries.**

## Revolving Maternal Identities

Petra Bueskens. *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*  
Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018.

Reviewed by Sophia Brock



WHILE feminist movements have traditionally transformed the experiences and lives of women, mainstream feminist movements have failed to recognise the specific needs and experiences of mothers. The issues to which feminist movements attend to inevitably have implications for motherhood as a category and a lived experience, and political and social shifts that feminism has facilitated have impacts on all women— whether they are mothers or not. Despite what has been achieved in raising awareness of motherhood as an experience and ideology, motherhood still remains the unfinished business of feminism.

The challenges and barriers that women who are mothers experience centrally relate to their subject position as mothers. There is a plethora of growing material exploring these challenges, barriers, and experiences. The development and rise of matricentric feminism – a term coined by Andrea O'Reilly<sup>2</sup> – is testimony to this.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, "Ain't I a feminist?: Matricentric feminism, feminist mamas, and why mothers need a feminist movement/theory of their own" (paper presented at Motherhood & Culture: International and Interdisciplinary Conference, Maynooth University, Kildare, 2015).

Within O'Reilly's body of work, there is widespread research evidence of the dual challenges that women who are mothers face when it comes to their identity and sense of self: embodying the role of the (intensive) mother and exercising their freedom as (autonomous) individuals. The challenges, ambivalence, and difficulties inherent in being a mother in contemporary society can be traced to the deep-seated tension between the maternal self and the autonomous self. As Alison Stone contends: "[in] Western civilization there has been a widespread tendency to understand the maternal body and the self in opposition to one another".<sup>3</sup> Research exploring this opposition generally either emphasises mothers' constraint and oppression in occupying their maternal selves, or alternatively, emphasises their subject position as autonomous individuals while free of their maternal constraints. There has been no theoretical framework to allow this duality to be explored in its complexity. This is the gap that Bueskens' ground-breaking book fills.

*Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities* has subjectivity at its centre, tracing a contextual history of the rise of the "individual" and corresponding feminist movements and discourses. In the first section of the book, "setting the scene" Bueskens details her methodological framework drawing on positivist, hermeneutic, and conflictual paradigms, as well as feminist standpoint theory. A major strength of this section is the way in which she locates her own context and subjectivity as a researcher and writer. Bueskens experienced an "unplanned" pregnancy at twenty-one and chose to continue the pregnancy, traversing the path of single motherhood at a young age while she witnessed her peers bask in "phenomenal freedom" (50). She has used her life experiences as resources for intellectually probing and theorising the social structures and constraints that produced her struggles as a young, burgeoning academic and single mother: "the research and writing has taken place in the context of mothering work and paid work and the incompatibilities of these, which were made especially sharp for the

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Stone, "Psychoanalysis and maternal subjectivity," in *Mothering and Psychoanalysis: Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Petra Bueskens (Toronto: Demeter, 2012): 325-42.

decade when I was single mothering” (52). This discussion not only serves the purpose of building rapport with her readers early on, but also prepares us for the theoretical argument she mounts. Bueskens’ feminist perspective is “cognisant of the ‘benefits’ of western modernity” (49), but theorises that such ‘benefits’ are:

dialectically linked with, and therefore *produced* by, the same system that creates ‘our’ (specifically, western women’s) constraints. In this sense, my epistemological standpoint encompasses the theory of duality developed throughout this book. (49)

The theory of women’s duality was developed through bringing together existing research, creating the foundation for her empirical study. Therefore, as Bueskens explains, the research has been both inductive and deductive.

The way *Modern Motherhood* is written and structured is key to Bueskens’ development of the theory of duality. The book comprises four parts. The first prepares the reader for theoretical development and exploration and sets the scene for the empirical study. The second part traces historical, political, philosophical, and social contexts, reading as a crescendo of information and revelation, arming us with the understanding that we need to engage with and absorb the remaining chapters. This second part culminates in a chapter tracing the emergence of the new sexual contract. The third part of the book rewards us through delving into the empirical data to demonstrate and further explain duality, opening up another way of experiencing/challenging the contextual scene that was set in part two. The last chapter in this part concentrates on “rewriting the sexual contract.” The fourth and final part serves to synthesise and consolidate our understanding and the research findings. The book concludes by inviting us to consider how a revolutionary change in the social order can be achieved.

Bueskens takes the contradiction between the maternal and individualised self that *appears* inherent and shows us how it has been *constructed* through historical, philosophical, and political processes. She argues that the

contradictory duality that exists for mothers has been ushered in, constructed, enabled, and perpetuated by processes of Western modernisation. Bueskens meticulously traces these processes through from the Enlightenment to industrialisation; liberalism and the rise of the “individual” theories of individualisation, capitalism, feminism; and what she terms “deregulated patriarchy.” According to Bueskens, there is a structural interdependence between the “public” and “private” realms, creating a contradiction whereby processes of modernisation have *both* sequestered and released women in and from the home. Bueskens’ pioneering theoretical contribution is that mothers experience their modes of self and roles not only as contradictory, but also as *dialectical*:

My theory of duality argues that women’s individualisation is produced by the same social structure that isolates and intensifies mothering work, and that this is the deeper contradiction at the heart of the dual-role problematic. (4)

Bueskens’ theory of duality rests fundamentally on a deconstruction and then reconstruction of Carole Pateman’s work *The Sexual Contract* (1988). Bueskens notes that “once the category of ‘the individual’ was conceived, a corresponding category of the wife and mother emerged as his dialectical counterpart.” (7) The abstraction of liberalism meant that individuals who moved beyond the home to participate in the public sphere were able to claim a universal standpoint as equals to each other – and in the original conception, the “individual” was only ever a man. The “social contract” meant that women were relegated to the home and the only way they were able to gain status as individuals was through the marriage contract, “which simultaneously – and paradoxically – negated their freedom. As Pateman points out, women were signatories to a contract that both assumed *and* negated their sovereignty” (8). Pateman describes how liberalism shifted patriarchy from being paternal to a “fraternal patriarchy”: paternal rights turned into male rights. This process meant that the “sexual contract” became part of the “social contract.” Men were allowed the freedom to participate in society as



autonomous individuals while women were expected to remain sequestered in the home, fulfilling caregiving and relational needs (1988, 165-188).

Yet, it was through this seemingly-silencing and relegating sexual contract, that pathways opened up for women's resistance and even escape: "greater social complexity generated possibilities for movement between spatially and socially insulated spheres" (8). Bueskens pushes this revelation further by proposing that: "modern women's freedom – including political rights, autonomy and self-determination – *is produced by and therefore depends on* their sequestration..." (9). The values of liberalism marginalised caregiving work in order to allow for the rise of individualisation, accordingly, the very social structure that constrains women also creates possibilities for them to enter public life and exercise autonomy.

Bueskens rethinks Pateman's work and conclusions through suggesting that the "[fraternal patriarchy] ... has become fluid like other contemporary social structures... [and] has become what I call 'deregulated patriarchy'" (167). Modernity freed women as individuals, but constrained women as wives and mothers. Motherhood and the related responsibilities of caregiving and domesticity became women's individualised problems and, therefore, "*motherhood has become an individualised risk*" (167). Women are enabled as individuals but constrained as mothers, "with the twist that the structural enablers double as the agency constrainers" (153). This analysis, born from tracing philosophical and historical developments, is what leads Bueskens to consider duality theory and how women experience two modes of self: "an individualised self, oriented to competition and achievement in the public sphere and a maternal or nurturing self-oriented to care for family members in the private sphere" (173). Through exploring the history of modernity and dissecting inherent paradoxes within liberal individualism, Bueskens explains how mothers have a desire to not only fulfil intensive mothering demands for their children, but also to exercise their capacity for autonomy and assert their status as self-actualised individuals. This contradiction of duality exists both structurally and psychologically when dissecting different parts of the "self" Both of these dual yet contradictory

dimensions need to be acknowledged and examined simultaneously, and this is precisely what *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities* does.

The contribution of this book is accordingly not only theoretical, but also empirical. Bueskens takes us on this journey of theoretical uncovering to reveal that it is within this dual-role problematic, that women who are mothers are actually able to exercise their capacity to “leave.” In actuality, it is *only* through this differentiation that women have been able to exercise their freedom. As Bueskens notes, there is an abundance of research examining how mothers experience living within the tensions of trying to both perform intensive mothering *and* exercise their individualised capacity for freedom and autonomy. Mothers’ struggles wedged within this contradiction are well-documented. Less documented, however, is how some women try (and are able, to a certain extent) to address (explicitly) and then restructure (intentionally) these very contradictions. This is what Bueskens’ empirical research achieves. She interviews 10 mothers who are termed “revolving mothers.” These mothers leave their homes – and therefore their active roles as caregivers – for periods of twenty-four hours or greater, on a fairly regular basis.

So, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities* fulfils dual roles itself: first, to articulate a feminist theory of women’s duality that explains and expands how mothers experience contradiction relating to their subjectivity; and second, to explore how “revolving mothers”—temporarily leaving behind the consuming nature of mothering and domestic work—subvert the contradictions of duality.

All participants in this research are mothers who have careers or creative pursuits that mean they are away from their partners and children for intermittent periods of time, longer than the standard work-day. These participants are not from diverse backgrounds, and are mostly extremely privileged, with many holding a Doctorate. Bueskens outlines their journeys to motherhood and highlights the individualised processes that led participants to become mothers. “[M]arriage and motherhood are coterminous with the ‘project of the self’” (201) for most participants, and motherhood is understood (or anticipated to be) an expansion and extension of the individualised woman enjoying a self-determined life.

The transition to parenthood was then examined, revealing the realities of the “traditionalisation” process: “For Sally, who had longed to be a mother and saw this as a means to actualisation and fulfilment, the reality of home-based motherhood came as a shock” (209). While the small sample of ten privileged mothers is, as Bueskens acknowledges, by no means representative there is still an interesting diversity of experience among participants. One example of this is Nina, who separated from her partner in the eighth month of pregnancy, with virtually no familial or social support in her journey into motherhood. She had an earlier career paying a high salary, resulting in high outgoing expenses and a mortgage; this meant that to be left in a position late in pregnancy where she needed to be self-supporting for the remainder of her pregnancy and through the early post-partum period would be extremely difficult. Nina was forced to return to work earlier than she would have liked (after only a few months) and had to be creative and measured in organising childcare arrangements. Trying to meet the high needs of an infant and financial needs—all on her own—resulted in exhaustion and stress, but this also emphasises how the traditionalisation process operates even in the absence of a partner. The rest of the participants had partnerships based on the model of the “pure relationship” (Giddens), yet a traditionalisation process occurred in most after the birth of their child. Interestingly, this was even the case for the same-sex couple interviewed, where the biological mother was the one to occupy the “default” position of primary carer. All (biological) mothers assumed the majority of caring and domestic work after the birth of the child, with partners taking on the majority of paid work. The exception to this was Anne, who went back to paid work full-time while her male partner adopted the primary caregiving role. The traditionalisation process was not necessarily seen as marginalising for some participants, it allowed them to be supported financially, and in some cases, to pursue further education. Many experienced the realities of traditionalisation as a consequence of the sexual contract, but as Bueskens contends, “the critical problem with the new sexual contract lies not in the ‘choices’ women make to work less or ‘opt out,’ but rather in the long-term consequences of these choices” (171).

Participants came to actively resist the traditionalisation processes they experienced during the post-partum period. They actualised this resistance through periodic absence from the home (and therefore their partners and children). The way this operated was through a reversal of what Bueskens calls the “default position” which refers to the assumed position of the mother as the primary carer. Mothers actively and periodically leaving the home thrust their partners into this “default position” as having primary responsibility for the children’s care. The participants took time away from the home through avenues such as attending conferences, intensive workshops, or meditation/ writing weekends away. For many, this time out was a necessity, creatively and professionally. Bueskens frames participants’ occasional “leaving” as precipitating two modes of transformation. The first is maternal transformations, where “leaving home ... opens up the space to be another kind of self” (231). Stepping away from their maternal role – both figuratively and literally – meant they were able to exercise their autonomous self in a way not possible when actively parenting. Noteworthy, is that a subsidiary benefit of this involved the perceived benefit in the quality of their mothering once they returned home. The second transformation that came about as a result of mothers periodically leaving was paternal transformations. The releasing of maternal gatekeeping opened up space for more active paternal presence. As Bueskens importantly qualifies, “One has to be careful indeed with apportioning blame to women for not creating equality in their heterosexual relationships” (250). These maternal and paternal transformations have potential in prompting further structural, transformational shifts: “revolving mothers” actions, while personal are also political. Insisting that men, partners and other carers share family work means that women obtain more time and space to earn an income and to pursue their careers, creativity and leisure” (261).

While a change in the family system was experienced because of revolving maternal absence, this change endured only for a period of time, and slowly the traditionalisation process would take hold again. It was up to the women to monitor and be cognisant of this, and then actively resist this traditionalisation process. Despite the need to reignite this resistance, the results from this research suggest that periodic maternal absence from the home is a way to shift family

dynamics towards patterns of equality. Bueskens' analysis frames this as a "rewriting" of the "sexual contract" and she suggests, "it is modern social complexity that has opened these opportunities for women as much as it has foreclosed them" (284).

Part of the appealing beauty of Bueskens' book is that she challenges us to work with and accept theoretical complexity rather than simplify it for ease of understanding. In this way, she models a way for us to accept the existence of duality, and theorise contradictions, rather than try to solve them. Consequently, Bueskens' theory of duality can be adopted by other scholars and used in further research on mothers' identities and experiences. Bueskens' empirical research and analysis reveals that "most of the mothers remained committed to intensively mothering" (299) and being in paid work with the flexibility to determine their own hours was crucial, meaning "being able to *schedule work around children* (and home) rather than the other way around" (299). Mothers are occupying the roles of the "intensive mother" *and* "the individual," *simultaneously*. Bueskens argues that this duality is "as much a product of modern social structure and ideology as the 'liberated woman'" (301), and that "only radical change in the gender order or what I refer to as a 'rewriting of the sexual contract'" (302) will interrupt the process of subordination of mothers' experience. Mothers have had to attempt to adapt to a system that produces contradiction between the roles they inhabit, and it is only through transformation of the system that this can truly change. Bueskens' book concludes with a number of inspiring, compelling, and thought-provoking suggestions for ways in which the current system can be transformed, leaving us to ponder how we can contribute to what she calls one of this century's most formidable challenges: rewriting the sexual contract.

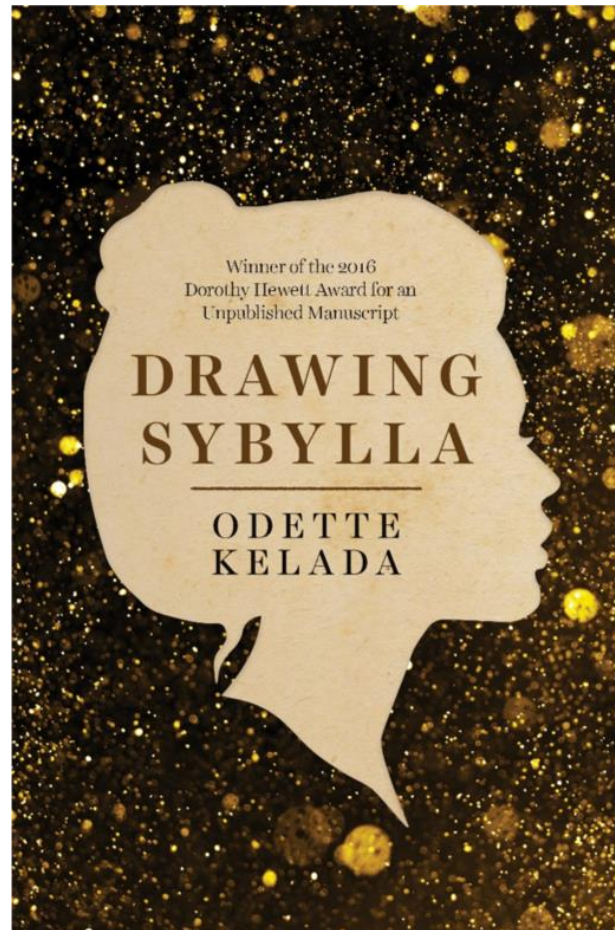
**Sophia Brock works in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at The University of Sydney and is the President of The Australia Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (AMIRCI). Sophia has a particular interest in examining the lives of mothers of children with disabilities. She is also interested in motherhood as hegemony and how mothers construct their identities and relationships. She is a mother to her one year-old daughter.**

## Doodling in the Margins

Odette Kelada. *Drawing Sybylla*

Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Chloe Giacca



*DRAWING Sybylla* is a magical spell, casting us back to view the struggles of Australian women writers and their demands to be heard. The novel comprises two components, the women's stories and the interspersed "Between the Chapters..." which follow the narrator, an author herself, and her journey in learning these women's stories. In the beginning of the novel our narrator, at a conference, is listening to Sybil Jones talk about Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and begins to sketch the speaker before her. As if magic is at play, our narrator travels through her drawing of Sybil into an alternative universe and is invited to learn of the struggles that women have faced when writing in Australia's past. The woman guiding the narrator in this magical realm, the *flâneuse* as Kelada terms it, our narrator calls *Sybylla*.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is read aloud by Sybil Jones at points throughout the novel and acts as an analogy for the struggles that the women in the book face in their writing pursuits. When the narrator in Gilman's short story descends into madness, a figure begins to appear in the yellow wallpaper of her bedroom, begging to be let free. Anyone who rubs against the yellow wallpaper or even slightly touches it is left with its yellow marks. To free

the woman in the wallpaper, the narrator begins to rip at it, and slowly lets herself free in the meantime. Sybylla tells the narrator about this wallpaper and how they both must help to free these women from the restraints of men in their lives, allowing them to write. At the end of Gilman's story there is triumph; the woman is freed from the wallpaper that has kept her stuck to the margins. The practice of writing itself can also be seen as the wallpaper. Through writing, women can find their escape, a hole to creep through.

*Drawing Sybylla* is rich in intertextuality and references some of Australia's most prominent twentieth-century female figures. First, we are introduced to the name Sybil/Sybylla or in Greek, Sibylla, prophetess. Are the women we are presented with prophetesses? Evidently, these women come into contact with divine beings, as prophesied. Parallel to this, Sybylla is also the main character in Miles Franklin's duology, *My Brilliant Career* and, *My Career Goes Bung*. However it may be spelt, this name is a representation of power that women possess and always have. Kelada, in an interview with the *Australian Women Writers* blog, does affirm that each of the women is also centred on famous women in Australia's past. While she does not reveal who each character resembles, we are given hints and left to decide for ourselves. Rather, she calls these women "composites." Make of them what you will, she suggests.

It is always a pleasure to see the name Hecate appear, a reminder of the magic women bring to the world. From the beginning, Sybil is projected to be an ethereal, goddess-like creature. She is, after all, one of these women attempting to write feminine subjectivity. Our narrator explains on the first page, "But her [Sybil's] biographic notes say she was born in Albury-Wodonga, far from the cave at Cumae, a world away from Hecate's lake" (1). How on earth can this woman, who presents so much like Hecate, be from Albury-Wodonga? It proves that the Hecate woman can be the unlikeliest of characters; she is the everyday woman.

This book is an example of the plethora of historiographic metafiction that is blessing bookshelves at the moment; the blending of history and writing about writing lends itself to giving a voice to those who are voiceless. Kelada's novel is centred on women's writing in twentieth-century Australia, taking us through

several decades of the struggle, while showing that through all this time, nothing has really changed. We meet five ordinary women throughout the book: Lucy, Vera, Stella, Eve, and Susanne. All these women experience disdain toward their writing careers, disapproval from their families, and pressure to remain in the private sphere that they have been instructed to inhabit. Similarly, all of these women condemn a traditional ideal pressed upon them. These are modern women who, each in their own time period, try to break the mould and venture into unknown territory; women doing things they are not supposed to be doing.

The journey through the wallpaper begins with young Lucy in 1901, with similarities to Miles Franklin. Lucy is brighter than her brothers, she is not, however, given the same opportunity as them to study with their tutor. Instead, she shuts herself in her room and writes, much to the suspicion of her mother. After their encounter with Lucy, Sybylla asks the narrator, "Did you like Lucy? In walking through the gaps between the words of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, we have crept behind the patterns. Lucy is only the first of the women we must meet who have been lost inside it" (33). Sybylla also tells the narrator that indeed, Lucy, did succeed with her writing. So perhaps she is a young Miles Franklin, destined to have her voice heard.

Some suggest that Vera, whom we meet in 1929, is the daughter of poet and famous bohemian, Christopher John Brennan. Vera knows that the only way to be accepted into the circle of writing men is to use her best asset; her body. She is aware of her weaknesses and even acknowledges them, "You could say I had a father complex. I would say I had a 'man' complex. I insisted, you see, on getting a word in at whatever cost" (38). She writes poetry but is rejected in attempting to get her work published.

When we meet Stella in 1932, we are reminded of Miles Franklin, who returned to Sydney that same year and entered the literary scene with her real name. Stella is a history teacher who is intrigued by the school's charwoman, an Indigenous Australian woman named Ruby. Ruby, however, does not seem too intrigued by Stella. Stella's writing, much like that of the other women we have met and will



later meet, also seems condemned by the men in her life, especially when she reveals her new idea for a story; an interracial love affair.

Eve, whom we meet in 1954, is a housewife who mimics a typical middle-class Australian woman; she is the doctor's esteemed wife, she cooks, cleans, bears children. Eve finds sanctuary in writing and often rises early each morning, despite the biting cold, to write. Through her writing, Stella fashions herself a muse, or rather, an evil influence who tricks her into thinking and doing unspeakable things. Pregnant at the time, Eve's thoughts are consumed by abortion and a life without children and the constraints of her husband.

Finally, we meet Susanne in 1979, soon after second wave feminism struck the world in the 1960s and early 70s and we see her participate in the western women's liberation movement. While she may initially present as a 'good' Catholic girl, she later seeks to discover her sexuality and work to help write female subjectivity. Even if Susanne does not receive the acceptance that she may have sought, she is finally able to find solace in other like-minded women.

All of these women (the women we meet in the stories, both Sybil and Sybylla, our narrator, and even Odette Kelada) write in white ink. For French-Algerian writer, Hélène Cixous, women are to be encouraged to write their own lives and reject suppressing traditions created by men; they are encouraged to write in white ink. This is exactly what each of these women does in *Drawing Sybylla*. Lucy does not want to write the traditional Australian story of the landscape and the struggles of the bush; Vera is a sex worker who writes poetry; Stella is a school teacher who tries to engage with an Aboriginal woman, Ruby, and proposes a novel of interracial love; Eve is a housewife begging to be let free; and finally, Susanne is a radical feminist who writes to challenge the suppression of women. All of these women use their white ink to project their ideas.

One topic that this novel touches upon is motherhood and, more specifically, how women parent while attempting to make a career out of their writing. Motherhood is one of the most prominent things that was solely dedicated to women and is possibly one of the keys in moving towards feminine subjectivity. While the

rejection of traditional expectations of women is strong today, *Drawing Sybylla* opts to suggest that motherhood can also be liberating. This form of écriture féminine allows women to take hold of their subjectivity and their agency. Women have the right to write.

However, what inhibits this right to write is the guilt associated with it and with the self-actualisation sought by women. We see this guilt in Eve who finds solace in writing, battles with her inner self as to whether this is too selfish a thing. She rises early, much earlier than her doctor husband, to write and immediately stops when anything else demands her attention. She is also tied to the home by her “duty” as a doctor’s wife to be ever-present in case a patient tries to ring, as instructed by her husband. He tells Eve that neglecting to answer the phone could be murderous.

While Susanne is wary about motherhood, our narrator evidently embraces it, as is shown towards the end of the novel. While rejecting traditional motherhood can be liberating and evidence of women having autonomy over their bodies, accepting it can also have the same liberating result. After ripping away the yellow wallpaper and learning the stories of other women who have done the same, our narrator races home to see her child. She says, “That evening when I come home, I race to see Byron. I feel like I have been away from her for a century, And I have. I hold her close. The babysitter is telling me to let her breathe” (162). The narrator has stripped away the yellow wallpaper for her daughter.

At the end of Kelada’s story there is also triumph. The narrator has successfully freed these women from the yellow wallpaper, evidently also freeing herself and her daughter, Byron. Her own yellow wallpaper, however, is her drawing of Sybylla. What an uncanny resemblance. The narrator enters this sketch, this yellow wallpaper, and manages to come out of it a different woman.

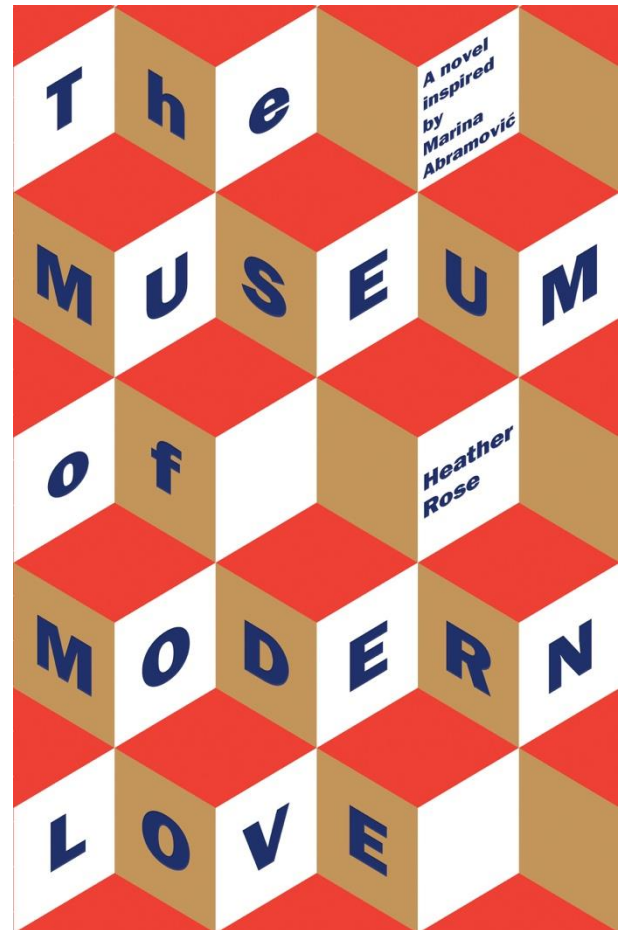
**Chloe Giacca is an Arts student at The University of Queensland, majoring in English Literature and Writing. Her long-time love affair with reading is celebrated through her studies and she has had the pleasure of travelling**

to both Italy and Japan to better her skills. She hopes to enter the Editing and Publishing world once finished with her studies.

## Art as Consolation

Heather Rose. *The Museum of Modern Love*  
Sydney. Allen & Unwin, 2016.

Reviewed by Jazmyn Tynan



IN March 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Serbian artist, Marina Abramović, takes a seat in a simple wooden chair under bright theatre lights. Across from her, over a wooden table, is a space for prospective participants to join her extraordinary performance art piece *The Artist is Present*. She waits silently for an observer to become a partaker; she will connect with them through nothing but a gaze.

It is no surprise that such an emotive and intriguing medium of art serves as inspiration for more art. Australian author Heather Rose's most recent novel *The Museum of Modern Love* was published in 2016 by Allen and Unwin and was the deserving winner of the Stella Prize 2017. In order to write the novel, Heather Rose attended the installation. The piece is not only an ode to Marina Abramović's talent, but also a testament to Rose's unique ability to tell a story. This novel is, "a strange hybrid of fact and fiction" (283) as Rose describes it, or as Dominic Smith puts it, "an ensemble novel of convergence."<sup>1</sup> It encompasses the lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Dominic Smith, "Artist Marina Abramović at the heart of Heather Rose's novel," *Australian*, October 12, 2016, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/artist-marina-abramovic-at-the-heart-of-heather-roses-novel/news-story/f35b0e5071019c8778a63069f0e07688>

both actual and fictionalised people/characters, all of whom are on personal journeys of self-discovery, love, and healing.

The central character, Arky Levin, is a film composer who has been struggling to create a score ever since his wife, Lydia Fiorentino, began slowly dying due to a genetic condition. Levin adheres to his wife's wishes not to see her in her last days, and as a result of this his relationships become strained, particularly with his daughter Alice. He decides to visit Abramović's exhibit and it is there that he meets another pivotal character, Jane Miller, a recently widowed art teacher trying to navigate mourning. Their stories are interwoven against the backdrop of Abramović's performance, as they ponder the people surrounding them in the atrium, their own lives, Marina Abramović's life, and her participants.

Though Levin and Jane contemplate the art together, Rose delicately underlines the difference between their own journeys and therefore, their own perspectives. Jane notes that people are coming from all over the world to see this performance art because she captures, "how art can be... transformative. A kind of access to a universal wisdom." (86) Jane is described as the most interactive character in the novel. She talks to members of the audience, watches them, eavesdrops on people and ponders their thoughts; all to discover the meaning of art. Levin, however, primarily contemplates the thoughts of those who sit across from Abramović, rather than other passing observers such as himself. He acknowledges the power of art, much like Jane does. He notes the power of a single gaze, particularly for a depressed young woman in which "Abramović was definitely encouraging the young woman... Her shoulders straightened. Her head lifted. Her complexion seemed to grow." (34) Rose seamlessly ties these observations to her character's personal distresses in such a way that makes the reader feel as if these problems were their own. As if the reader is watching Abramović gaze into the young woman's eyes themselves, feeling reassurance and inspiration.

The presence of an omniscient narrator ties the story together. This narrative voice treats the characters as its own, often referring to Levin as "my artist." This skilfully employed technique serves to personalise the story even more, as the

reader trusts its guidance. Smith comments; “One of the delightful surprises of *The Museum of Modern Love* is discovering that the all-knowing storyteller is not your distant, narrative god descended from Dickens and Austen, but an intimate voice, someone we all recognise from our own struggles and lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Rose explores more than art itself in this novel. She explores its origin, its impact, the response it is given, and the power it holds. We can see through compelling characterisation that each individual—fellow artists, art teachers, doctoral students, and art critics—has a distinctive appreciation for Abramović’s installation. Each character serves as a device to explore a different side to art. Where Jane seeks to find meaning within performance art, Levin seeks to find courage. Where a Dutch doctoral student seeks to find motivation, an art critic named Healayas seeks to be reminded why one invests oneself in art.

The one all-encompassing value that is shared among these characters is that they are all searching for answers. They believe Abramović reminds them, “why we love art, why we study art, why we invest ourselves in art.” (98) To create a web of fictionalised characters and incorporate them into an influential performance artist’s work demonstrates Rose’s capacity for creativity in this hybrid genre.

**Jazmyn Tynan recently graduated from The University of Queensland with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in French and Writing. Her passions lie in Francophone cultures and the history of fashion. She one day hopes to pursue a career in either of those fields, using her writing skills to give voice to these areas.**

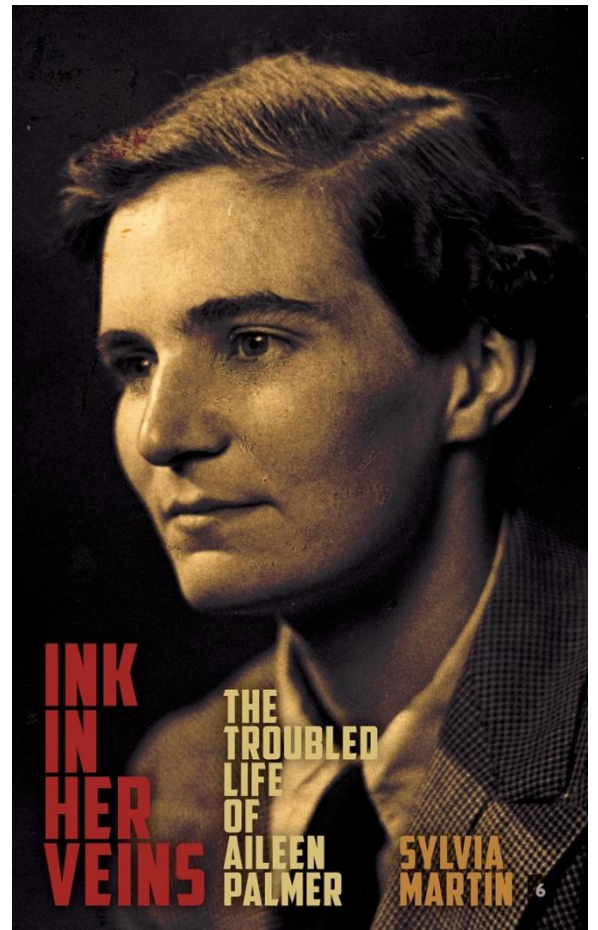
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<sup>2</sup> Smith, “Artist Marina Abramovic,”

## Writing Aileen Palmer Back Into Memory

Sylvia Martin. *Ink in her Veins: The Troubled Life of Aileen Palmer*  
Perth: University of Western Australian Press,  
2016.

Reviewed by Donna Lee Brien



AILEEN Palmer was a poet and author in a wide range of other genres. She was also a linguist with an advanced grasp of a number of languages—putting this to good use in sensitive translations. A political activist, she lived and worked in Australia and overseas and both her work and her name deserve to be better known. Sylvia Martin’s beautifully written and carefully researched biography of Aileen certainly makes a major contribution to that task. The title of Martin’s biography suggests that, as the eldest daughter of two important Australian writers, Nettie Palmer and Vance Palmer, its subject was born into a writing life. This other main theme of this biography is suggested in its subtitle as not only did Aileen Palmer have “ink in her veins”, she also had a “troubled life.” These dual concerns—with her various writings and the turmoil and distresses she experienced—make for a finely balanced and nuanced life study.

Although its focus is clearly on its subject, Aileen Palmer, the volume begins with an engaging description of the work of the biographer. Narrating the introduction, the biographer directly addresses the reader, in the present tense, as she is looking at a photograph of a painting. This is a beguiling portrait, and the

biographer relates not only what she sees, but her thoughts as she considers this image. The narrator then continues, in the past tense, to describe how she discovered this photograph in the archives, but that the portrait it images is now lost. This serves to set the scene for a biographical narrative in which source materials are, seemingly at every turn, missing, fragmentary, or illegible. It vividly captures the joys and stimulations of such research, with its plethora of “new discoveries and more puzzles” (2), as well as the irritating frustrations that are regularly encountered. It is not just that the archives are always incomplete. There is also, in this case, copious evidence of the human tendency to dissemble. Aileen’s writing is itself “oblique,” her letters “abstract” (3). Her diaries refer to individuals not just using a long series of initials, but initials that have themselves been coded using an indecipherable encryption system.

In these first few pages, Martin-as-biographer also reveals a great deal about her subject—noting Aileen’s various literary achievements and her lifelong interest in working for a fairer world. Martin briefly mentions that she suffered breakdowns and spent a considerable portion of her later years in mental health institutions. She also lucidly outlines her own motivation as a biographer and the central questions that drove her investigations: “Why, I asked myself, would a young woman of twenty-one volunteer to risk her life in a foreign war? Why did her world then unravel when she returned to Australia in the 1940s?” (3). This revelation of the biographer’s thinking is deftly handled and, as the biography unfolds, Martin’s presence is never intrusive. Instead, her commentary on the biographical task contributes significantly to the narrative, gracefully signalling gaps or inconsistencies in the available documentation, and teasing out possible readings of the often-patchy evidence.

Aileen did follow her parents into writing, publishing poetry, and translating the work of Ho Chi Minh, as well as recording what she referred to as “semi fictional bits of egocentric writing”—what could be characterised today as fictionalised memoir. *Ink in Her Veins* mixes biographical insights gained from close research—logging a wealth of source material, including Nettie and Vance Palmer’s writings, diaries and letters—with those evidenced by passages from Aileen’s semi-autobiographical writing, plus (when signalled) speculation on what



can be read from these sources. In this, Martin offers warmly detailed, but never forensic, analysis of the various texts and other evidence she located, delving deep into Aileen's own narratives, but always noting that all her writing intentionally blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Alongside Aileen Palmer's story, Martin provides a wealth of anecdote and description about life from 1920s to the 1970s. Readers learn about Melbourne in the 1920s and 1930s while Aileen was growing up, as well as about her parents and the literary world at this time. What comes through clearly is what Martin describes as "the extraordinary value" (71) placed on the written word in the Palmer household, whether in terms of producing letters, articles and books, or reading and discussing such writings. The young Aileen, moreover, grew up in a household environment in which literature was understood to not only affect the world, but to also possess the power to transform it. The Palmer home was one in which fostering and using creativity was valued far above the funds this could generate or the material possessions those funds could buy. Political activism was also esteemed, and these beliefs are shown to have shaped Aileen's attitudes and actions as she grew to adulthood, and then throughout her life.

The biography lingers over some telling details of Aileen's school days, which she completed at the prestigious Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) in Melbourne. There, she did well in languages and literature. Encouraged by her teachers and her parents, she read widely and wrote poetry, reviews and a play, as well as beginning a novel based upon her school days. Martin develops Aileen's character through these descriptions and her analyses of them, subtly contrasting her actions with those of others in the story and, at times, especially those of her sensible sister. The narrative then moves to Aileen's time at Melbourne University. Enrolling in 1932, she majored in French and German language and literature. At university, aside from her studies, she kept a diary, made progress on her novel, and also joined the university Labour Club and then the Communist Party. The contrast with contemporary academia is stark, and often unflattering to today.

By 1935, aged twenty, Aileen had successfully achieved her Bachelor of Arts degree and travelled to Europe with her family, first to Paris where she could revel in her knowledge of French language and culture, spending days in the Louvre. Then to London, where she was involved in anti-Fascist protests and other political activities, and spent whole days reading about socialism in the Marx House library. Leaving her family in London, Aileen travelled to Vienna, working as a translator and English teacher. She then re-joined her parents in London, before decamping with them to Spain in the winter of early 1936.

Spain plays an important role in both Aileen's life and Martin's biography of it. Aileen became a translator for the Popular Olympics (a left-wing counter to the Berlin Olympic Games) and was in Barcelona during the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Compelled by her parents to return to London with them, Aileen spent only a brief time there before returning to Spain, and the war, as secretary and interpreter with a British medical unit. There she worked close to the front lines until 1938. Back in London, she wrote the novel "Last Mile to Huesca" based on her experiences. Sadly, for both literature and her biography, this text is lost, with only the notes she made for this novel extant. She then became an ambulance driver in London during the bombings of the Second World War.

Life was not all war and activism for Aileen Palmer at this time. In London, she fell in love. This is another topic of which only enigmatic and intriguing hints and traces survive, and Martin skilfully weaves together in her text these splinters of evidence and her interpretations. In 1943, Aileen began work in a research position at Australia House. At this stage, it is telling that her life experiences were seen as so interesting, and even extraordinary, that she was invited to present radio broadcasts about this topic.

All this time, her parents feared for her safety and urged her to return to Australia, but Aileen only did so in 1945 after her mother suffered a stroke. On her return to Australia, it soon became clear that things were not well. This is ultimately a sad and moving story, for despite all the promise of her early years and her indisputable courage during the wars in which she served, Aileen definitely lived the troubled life of Martin's well-chosen subtitle. Not long after the end of the war,

her mental health deteriorated, and she was to spend long periods of the rest of her life in psychiatric institutions. Taking on a difficult topic to write in detail about (without becoming gruesome or voyeuristic) Martin compassionately, and with considerable insight, describes Aileen's fragile mental health, her numerous hospitalisations, and the effect of this instability on both herself and others. Aileen's disorientation and distress are memorably depicted, providing a powerful portrait of post-traumatic stress and the periods of manic behaviour, anxiety and depression she suffered.

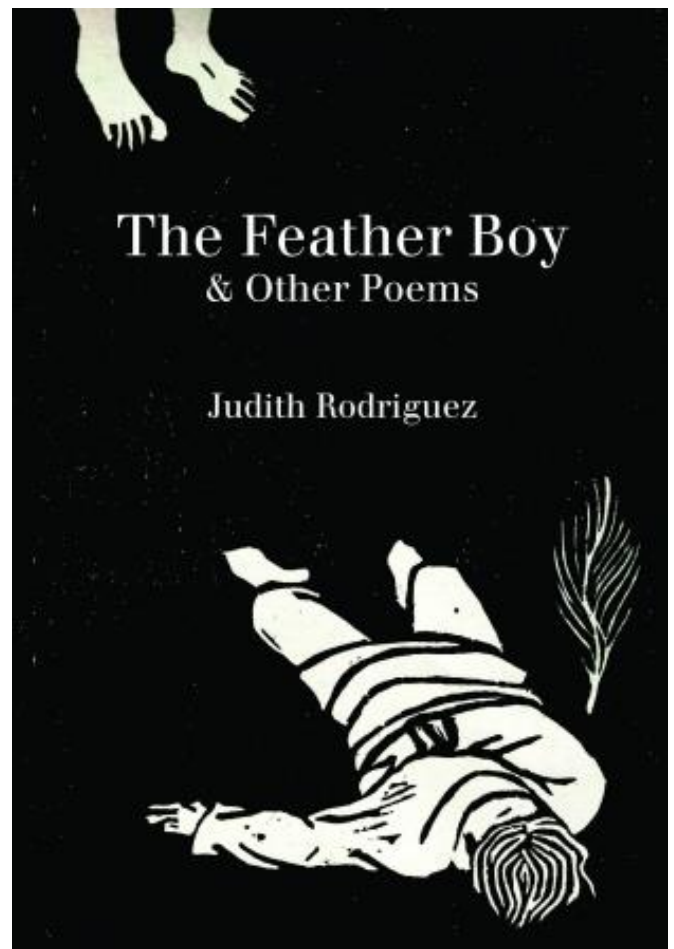
Structurally, *Ink in Her Veins* is elegantly organised into three sections. Part One, titled "A Promising Life" covers the first twenty years of Aileen's life, from her birth to 1935. Part Two, "A Decade of War," then probes deeply into the decade Aileen spent in Europe in Spain and London. Part Three, "A Life in Fragments," then completes this life study, with its first half dealing with the post-war period to 1950, and the final chapters focusing from 1950 up until Palmer's death in the 1970s. The book is beautifully produced and edited by UWA Publishing. It features eight pages of well-chosen colour illustrations, plus detailed chapter notes citing sources as well as a bibliography and excellent index. This makes *Ink in Her Veins* a scholarly resource inviting further investigations, as well as a model of contemporary biography.

**Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, Australia. Her research focuses on specialist genres of non-fiction writing, especially biography and memoir. Her latest books are *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice*, edited with Quinn Eades (2018) and *Publishing and Culture*, edited with Dallas J. Baker and Jen Webb (2019). Donna is the co-editor of the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*.**

## Travelling Light

Judith Rodriguez. *The Feather Boy & Other Poems*  
Glebe: Puncher & Wattmann, 2018.

Reviewed by Ashley Morgan-Shae



JUDITH knew she did not have long when she assembled this book, poems made over thirty years, she had not told her friends that she had cancer, she had sold her house and was planning more overseas travel with her daughters. This book travels far, just as its author travelled to countries, places, homes - just as a thought on paper expands to become a poem, to become a tour, to become a book. Recurrences I see in this book, not in any order of importance, are names, sea-water/river/creek, place/land, trees, sky/wind/clouds, politics/politicos, dark/light, dead and live, family and friends, ageing, memory and care.

A poet's last book, final gift, is one I find hard to broach; with its voice that leaps off the page, as clear as if they are alive in front of me. Knowing the person, having first met the poet as a university lecturer who accepted me, when others did not, who said I needed to learn to 'write in sentences.' Someone who taught linguistics that I never mastered, rolling 'r's and sounds off her tongue that entranced and intrigued me, and who could speak of bull-fights in Spain with bull-testicles on a plate, abused women, imprisoned writers, with the knowledge of an eye-witness. Someone who understood rhyme like the 'chime of a bell'; while I measured beats,

she measured metre. Whenever her students, first-year or graduate, had a writing event, Judith came after-hours, sometimes to two events on the same night, to hear, support, tell us what worked - where we won or lost our audience. In our tutorials she handed us wine and Pringles chips and listened, guiding, not bossing, so we felt a friend and part of a unity of artists, our imp-unity.

The cover is an author-made linocut, a fallen person, a rising feather, ascending feet - the feather of flight, of a wind-borne object, lightness and earth-bound heaviness in continual cycle. In stark white on black, graphic as a visual poem, as words across a white page, *'for us crushed in hiding, for all of us scattered, parents, cousins, our fates / feathers in war's updraft.'* *The Feather Boy*. A Judith Rodriguez linocut, long-running on three *Hecate* journal covers and continuing on title-page, has a full-breasted female, cross-legged, feet bare, face in profile, palms raised, above her head snaking 'hair', moon 'rays' equally balanced, mirrored-imaging dark and light. Judith's prints are a body of artworks that can equally repel and beguile, caught between supposed ugliness and beauty, the change, the moving moment, so it moves us.

The book is divided into four parts: *The World We Live In; Weather, Times, Places; Celebrations; and Near and Dear*.

**The World We Live In** addresses terror, knives, asylum, deaths, politicians, boats. Judith served on PEN International, fighting for the freedom of imprisoned writers, represented at events by an empty chair with a photograph of a missing writer. *To Sleep 1986: 'South Africa is burning awake /screaming in the obscene necklace and the grave political sentences'*.

*Bin: 'there is no bin we are not in... little cloudy sky-bin'*. To be in this world we witness and are part of each other, even when *'There are no words for this'*, deep empathy and feeling is in the detail, and recognition, *'My own grandfather came on a boat, with one change of clothes,' Boat Voices, S.S.Tobruk: A Senior Naval Officer*. As a First Australian told me, 'We are all boat people.'

*In Brisbane, John Howard's 'very careful legal advice' 'can pauperise hundreds', '... can lock a man away for decades / make children into mental cases' and 'publicspeak is a code not everyone may wish to understand.'*

*Back in Brisbane, April 1985, the poet's growing-up school-town, 'that murmurs to me on a cool night', 'my mother the university stands to welcome her children, in the wide-cast bend of the unpolitical river'. This is a poet intent on capturing both vastness and tininess, always trying, never comparing and despairing, 'roaring ballads', displaying stark differences and connections, deepening understanding; a lecturer of humanities who was a humanitarian, travelling widely, living her poems.*

**Weather, Times, Places** opens in Melbourne, with clouds metaphor: *'Piled- up grey walls off endearing blue'* - a portrait poem more human face than rock face. *'Transparent policy / throws them desperately south: tatters and smudges flee.'*

Columbian poets are translated: *'a sailor of the earth / tells me that here I shall keep some day my tryst with water'* - *The Moveless Sea of the Llanos*; and *The Man Murdered In The Dark*. The usefulness of a killed cat in *Recycling*, where grieving family members take bodyparts, and the grandson asks *'for the bones / I'm grinding them up one by one in front of my sister's mirror because grannie says anyone who touches bonedust turns invisible'*.

Names are important throughout the book, as names are what politicians often do not tell, names personalize plights, defy bundling - nameless mass, the absence of individual names can lead to further folly policies, lack of responsibility, lack of care, no one to call, or to remember, if there is no name.

There are also duo poems, an *Exquisite Corpse* where each poet writes an alternate line not seeing the one before: *Travelling to the Dead Centre, Tourists in the Pacific, Tricycles for Geriatrics: 'careering in tight circles to the fear of joggers, strolling families and sea-gulls'*.

*Jones the Hangman* is a performance poem, its chorus-voice reading as

theatre piece, taking the abhorred man into a person invoking empathy and regret for his loneliness and premature death.

*Elizabeth and Red Socks in Perth*, seeing her friend wearing knee-length red socks revels: *'truth in small things is a point with me'*. I recall Judith's *Ha!* exclamation of delight. Receiving Elizabeth Jolley's present brings *'Home and half-hosed, blushing to the shameless ankles'*. *The Champagne Launch of the Victorian Women's Writers' Train*, 1991: *'that woman who sits hours listening, shaping what it is she hears, until among starry word-traffic, ideas waving out of every window, ...world of words on wheels – and it moves.'*

*Arriving at Moongalba, Remembering Oodgeroo Noonuccal*: *'the girl named for paperbark crosses the bay... Claims her name.'* *'Place holds the people. They wander – place is inside them'. ...'To care for creatures of foot fin and wing'*.

## **Celebrations**

On Judith's eightieth birthday she had a big shindig, a party at her home, its entrance hallway lined floor to ceiling with books. Daughters bringing out plates and little tables and chairs planted all the way out the door, down front steps and across the garden. Poets were told to bring poems and we spilled from inner rooms to verandah to garden reciting, listening, laughing, celebrating. Dogs barked, trains roared, but the poets, and words, were louder and partied all day.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* was on Judith's first-years' reading lists, and here is a poem in Dominica of her first discovery of the writer and later book. *Two for Joyce Lee at Ninety*: *'teasers of wind' 'where poets of ninety, still writing / mulch their much living'*. *Peter's Dream*: *'a rousing at your name, your spirits, your book rescued from the dark – how everything loved can be recovered.'* *The Year*: *'for me, all along you'd been there, ...Not dead, but planning to visit –'* *Answering Doris*: *'a memory dear and extraordinaire.'* *It's Not Right*: Lisa Belleair is *'sweet urban bird / day never drowned out your voice'*.

## ***Near and Dear***

In *The Score*, a woman's thoughts are measured against a man's estimation '*can't cook for nuts / can't dress can't save / can't give the love / his mother gave*' and the reader knows this bright spirit will move. Judith told us as students her first husband stayed in the house after divorce, with her friend's observation of 'Sticky feet.' For words to move, we have to keep moving, travelling in thoughts, ideas and places.

*Daughters: 'A coven of witches' ...'brutes – 'I hazard, they hazard – unfurling between us the note of our incantation.'* *Sayings of My Mother: '1930 ...rattle of slats, dot-dash sun-spots on the boards.'* Her mother '*never...brave enough*' whereas '*I scan the tides, the rock-passage navigated, the chasm, the narrows, the odds I slipped through, me.*' Dad: '*When Dad learned cabinet-making-... The smell of good wood, maple, with me / till I inherited the desk – its drawers still running like silk,*' a play on silk drawers, underwear of family inheritance, wood like skin, the hands-on practical doing, whose grandmother '*kept the dicky door-handle ...half-repaired, waiting*' for visits. '*Their life, my hands, your gift.*'

Judith had great knowledge of poetry forms. She taught us the ballad, rondeau, terza rima, triolet, sestina and as a literary judge awarded a pantoum writer telling me of the difficulty of the form. In this book her poems are looser, far-ranging, accessible and as warm and brutal as everyday living. Their inventiveness is in the unique phrasing in lines, and empathy is their strength. Celebration is a keynote, recognition of others and their own talents and individuality everpresent. Not strictly narrative, but always real, capturing time and events, expressing and releasing for thought, discussion, motivation. Warmth and detail abound, the twist and turn of line delights.

Judith once gave me a copy of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, fairytales that enthralled me, the wealth of the gift I did not feel I deserved to keep. Fairytales are crooked and brave and make the everyday bearable with magical



thinking – extra-ordinary real-isations. Judith was a writer's godmother, who stood up for my individuality of expression to a book publisher, being my editor with a singing touch.

Judith immediately bought two copies of a story, telling me, 'This is important, and you name names.' *Marks & Monstrous-an RMIT tale*. Judith was my support person at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission attempted mediation in 2014. Escaping untruths we scooted for lunch at Jimmy Watson's. In November 2018 takedown demands were sent to the American academic website hosting the story. I emailed Judith, her daughter immediately replied that her mum had just died. 'She would never want any of us to be sad.'

Over weeks of correspondence with the Americans, I explained that the Statute of Limitations for alleged defamation had passed years before and that I had never signed confidentiality. Then I also prayed, and thanked Judith. A day later I received an amazing email from America. Convening a meeting the website changed their stance, advising that I was not in breach of their terms of service. I could re-upload my story – something a lawyer had told me was a slim, almost never, outcome.

Fairytales walk against the dark, take back our power, just as in women's marches for the freedom to walk in the dark, not being convenient and not being stood down, stood over, or sometimes understood, thinking sideways, a magic realism where everything is possible and if not try anyway.

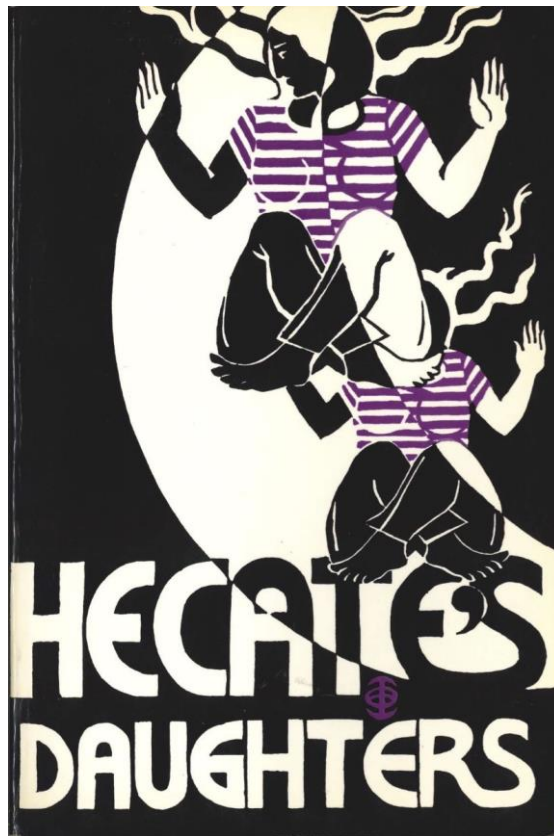
*Four Tales interchange She And He Would Rather Be: 'You will not, he said, tell my child fairy stories. She laughed back. My mother told us fairy stories every night of our lives! ...At least frogs know fairy tales are good for you! They might change you into something else, something you'd rather be.'*

Thank you, Judith

## Notes

On Judith's Hecate images: 'thinking Hecate's daughters entitled to their own upspringing style, I gave them hair/rays...' quoted from Judith Rodriguez' letter to Carole Ferrier on making the cover for *Hecate's Daughters* 1978 anthology - a variant image with repeating figures and moon. The face in profile Judith states is 'recognizably a reminiscence' of William Blake's c1795 Hecate, now called *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*. Judith's striped t-shirt and trousers make her own Hecate more radical. Hecate/Lucina, could prevent a birth when she crossed her legs, only when she opened them in blessing would bring on the birthing. Hecate's births happening when she decided, as in 1970s freer days of choice with the contraception pill. Carole Ferrier began *Hecate* magazine in 1975. *Hecate* covers bore the central Blake figures from 1975 to 1982 <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/11966689>. Judith Rodriguez' Hecate linocut graced the covers of five issues in volumes from 1985 to 1993. In 1998 Carole and I chatted about Judith's artwork. In *Hecate's* next issue Carole resurrected Judith's linocut to *Hecate's* title page, where it remains to the present.

In *Hecate's Daughters* anthology, 1979 expanded edition, Judith Rodriguez has twenty artworks, the cover linocut and nineteen internal prints.



Judith's children are currently working on an art book of Judith Rodriguez' artwork, which will be published both online and in print.

## Postscript

After I wrote this I listened to Judith's last interview and reading on 3CR Community Radio, and was struck by the similar choice of poems she reads.

<https://www.3cr.org.au/spoken-word/episode-201811010900/judith-rodriguezs-new-book-feather-boy>

**A forced outsider, Ashlley Morgan-Shae lives in Melbourne with her cat. *Shellships* - art and poems, is her fourth book. For too long her fifth poetry book has sat collected, almost complete.**

## Notes on Cover Artist, TextaQueen



**TextaQueen 1975**

*Family Tree (Self-portrait) 2012*

from the series 'Unknown artist'

fibre-tip pen, coloured pencil and acrylic paint pen on Stonehenge cotton paper

97.0 x 127.0 cm

Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2013.

Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney.

Photo: Carl Warner

TextaQueen's name comes from their choice of medium, which is felt-tipped pen or Texta. This large-scale Texta drawing on paper, *Family tree (Self portrait) 2012*, is exemplary of the artist's use of symbolism and decorative detail to tackle political issues such as sexuality, gender and race. More broadly, the artist's colourful practice is characterised by an interest in redefining the classical salon nude. The artist's work also has a performative flare, evidenced by their adoption of the superhero persona, TextaQueen, which can be seen in their animated portraits.

In *Family Tree (Self-portrait)*, the artist reflects on ways to connect with their Indian cultural heritage. TextaQueen reclaims the representation of the self on

their own terms, responding to colonial portrayals of Indian culture as seen in cultural tourism and Western art historical narratives. The artist resists these reference points; instead, drawing on their family history, they consider the future of their bloodline.<sup>1</sup> The elephant is a symbol of the power of memory, recalling the expression 'an elephant never forgets'.<sup>2</sup> This is linked to the continuation of knowledge passed down by their ancestors, which are depicted flowing down a stream of coconut water in the form of 'Chicos', brown lollies shaped like babies. A sardonic sleight of hand, the Chicos represent the problematic portrayal of people of colour in Australia.<sup>3</sup> TextaQueen combines these images to form a family tree, where past, present and future entwine.

Born in 1975 in Perth, Western Australia, the artist studied a Bachelor of Fine Art at The University of Western Australia, Perth (1995) before moving to Sydney to complete a Certificate II in Arts (Interactive Multimedia) at Metro Screen, Sydney (1998). In 2017, TextaQueen held a retrospective exhibition *Between you and me* at Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria. Recent solo exhibitions include *The empire's new clothes*, 198 Gallery, London; *Eve of reconstruction*, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne (2017); *Gods save the queen*, Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney (2017); and *We don't need another hero*, Gallerysmith, Melbourne (2017). Recent group exhibitions include *National works on paper*, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria (2018); *Decolonise*, 198 Gallery, London (2018); *Always there and all a part*, Blindside, Melbourne (2017); *Planet 9*, Kunsthalle Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany (2017); and *Hazelhurst Works on Paper*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery (2017).

Isabella Baker, adapted from text by Vivien Thompson, Curatorial Assistant, UQ Art Museum.

1. "Family tree (Self-portrait)," TextaQueen, <http://textaqueen.com/unknown-artist/family-tree-self-portrait-2012>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.