



Mary Leunig. Drawing. *One Good Turn*, Brow Books 2018.

Australian Women's Book Review

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Australian Women's Book Review

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Editorial

Carole Ferrier

Last year there seemed to be some momentum towards accelerating carbon neutral futures, with Green new deals proposed in the US, the UK and Europe and elsewhere and a forthcoming UN climate change conference to meet in Glasgow in late 2020 to review international progress towards targets.

Then, at the end of 2019 an unknown pneumonia (to be named COVID-19) was identified in China; it spread to be a pandemic that, by March, had the nations bordering on China, most of Europe, and others with new/increasing outbreaks of infection having to divert much of their resources and get into further debt to combat widespread loss of life in their countries. Few health services around the world were prepared for the scale of what might happen, and those that lagged in responding continue to record very high mortality rates.

The remedy adopted for the spreading coronavirus was primarily restricted human contact through their isolation in their homes and this was generally assented to with expedition by the people. Rebecca Solnit writes: “we intentionally produced in the form of business and school shutdowns, and staying home, an unprecedented economic calamity as an alternative to accepting mass death.”

With the continuing collapse of the planetary environment for human habitation as well as the survival of species (plants and creatures), undrinkable water and polluted atmosphere being permanent problems for the world to engage with, COVID-19 and its predicted rises/resurgences now has to be managed as well.

Some European countries, eager to continue the climate change action in which some had played a leading part, signed a statement about the necessity “to build a bridge between fighting COVID-19, biodiversity loss and climate change.” President of the EU Commission, Ursula van der Leyen, along with Macron and Merkel and the Vice-President, Dutch politician Frans Timmermans, advanced “the EU Green Deal” based upon energy policy transition and substantial use of sustainable “green hydrogen” (there is also “blue” and “grey” and “brown” hydrogen—that is not). Timmermans expressed apprehension about

whether politicians would “keep their eyes on the long term crisis or short term electoral considerations.” The Commission proposes a “green recovery” with a Just Transition Fund of €4bn and that more prosperous countries in the EU help with the debts of those with weaker economies (especially those affected by a high incidence of COVID-19 infections). As Ursula van der Leyen puts it: “Sooner or later we will find a vaccine for the coronavirus. But there is no vaccine for climate change.”

Another place in the world notable for having an eye on the planetary is South Korea. Its ruling Democracy Party gained a large majority in the National Assembly elections last April, with the help of a substantial youth vote built by the young lawyer, Souyang Lee, who says she took much inspiration from the school strike movement. South Korea is the seventh largest carbon emitter in the world, and the fifth largest per capita, so turning around to sustainable energy and lower emissions is a massive task, given that the country has \$106bn fossil fuel assets and even lends money to other Asian countries for mining. (During the GFC, President Lee Myung-bak introduced a Green Growth strategy to stimulate the economy but that had not progressed very far.) The Democracy Party now has a wide range of plans for transitioning from fossil fuels to renewables and considers the latter option economically viable. Among a large series of measures is the introduction of sustainable vehicle use, including, from 2021, 80% of vehicles for public organisations having to be eco-friendly; by 2030, South Korea plans to produce 500,000 hydrogen-cell vehicles for the local market and for export. And, down the track, a carbon tax. What will it take to produce in Australia a releasing of the stranglehold of the fossil lobbyists and “disaster capitalism” on the government’s policy making!

The rebuilding of economies after the devastation produced by lockdowns involving every person usually working in the public sphere, apart from those deemed “essential,” can either be to go backwards to restoring the old world dominated by class societies and their inevitable social and economic inequality and injustice—or to go forward towards another. This latter direction involves envisaging the new world that could come from imagining how all the energies and wealth and intellect and empathy and creativity we have could be mobilised to manage the disease—but also, crucially, be directed towards making a much better world, going forward. And for all humanity to have the best chances of being at home on the planet.

Particularly in countries with conservative or Right-conservative political leaders, the orientation to which they are committed is maintaining wealth for comparatively few people by providing money for various ventures—many of which have very adverse effects on the general population. Asbestos, cobalt, coal and other substances produce deadly disease for those who carry out their extraction; coal and oil produce major pollution. Currently many climate change organisations are mobilising against the way the Australian government has been preparing for rebuilding the economy with their escalating, obscenely large investments in coal and also in gas fracking (especially in the Northern Territory), advocated and managed by Liberal Angus Taylor, Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction. Taylor, who makes no secret of his wariness of any but fossil fuels, recently purchased \$94m worth of unrefined oil that is to be stored in the United States Strategic Petroleum Reserve for up to ten years. That amount would only keep vehicles in Australia running for 4–5 days, on current consumption (and this also gives an idea of the massive cost of oil). There are, furthermore, only three functioning refineries in Australia, and as the ALP's leader Anthony Albanese perspicaciously remarked, it is a long way across the Pacific: "The US isn't New Zealand. I mean it's not next door."

More extreme frequent and damaging natural events like floods and fires, typhoons and hurricanes are intensified by carbon emissions. Human health is damaged by the mining or extraction of fossil fuels and the land and the rivers and oceans are contaminated. These energy sources produce global heating and this contributes to drought and bushfires on land and to ocean warming that melts polar ice (this year at the fastest rate since 1957), kills reefs and destroys fisheries.

In 2019, during the crisis of massively spreading bushfires, the Australian LNP government continued to direct many millions of dollars towards investment in more fossil fuel development and production and approved 100m tonnes of new coalmining. Currently, billions of dollars of government spending has been allocated to fund Origin's gas exploration, even though methane emissions from gas production are 84 times more damaging to the climate than carbon pollution.

Insurance companies cannot cover insurance for widespread deaths such as are occurring in some countries from COVID-19. Only a government can act as a type of insurer—Britain currently pays £60,000 to families of health workers who have died from COVID-19, and

after 9/11 the US had a similar system of compensation for deaths. But there is a more sinister aspect to some of the operations of insurance when it is about that of big magnates' enterprises. An industry of litigation has grown up around using the Investment-State-Dispute-Settlement Tribunal to sue for companies' loss of expected profits. This can be used by foreign companies to influence government policy decisions. One example of this was the US-based Philip Morris tobacco company's attempts to block the 2011 compulsory Plain Packaging Act for cigarette packets, that failed. Another was Dow Agrosciences' lawsuit against the Canadian government over their ban on the weedkiller, 2,4-D. How far large enterprises can go, in intervening in governmental policy depends upon the terms of trade treaties. George Monbiot argues in the *Guardian* that any government must make sure that they block overseas companies' ability to "break down all barriers between the government and the power of money"—if they do not, this can "allow private interests to intrude into the very heart of government, and marginalize the civil service." If ISDS is operating, lowering the price of drugs or medical supplies related to COVID-19 could lead to lawsuits; a wealth tax on the rich to compensate for money spent on alleviating a pandemic could be actionable.

So what could build a new direction? Neoliberal capitalism, the dominant system in the West, contains different groups exercising power. These include business leaders, unions, the media, the owners and controllers of the internet, peak bodies, political factions and the people's movements. All these, with different degrees of levels of power, attempt to influence the actual (elected) political leaders (who are for the most part focused upon maintaining their own positions and power) into accommodating their competing demands.

With lockdowns now winding down in some places, there is much discussion about how it would be possible to restart the economic recovery with different frameworks, rather than assuming that, as Liberal Minister for Education Dan Tehan stated on 19 May 2020 in relation to childcare, "the old system was working very effectively." During the lockdown, socially advanced measures of support for workers in various industries who could not go to work were brought in, but these were very limited—and frequently managed by the employers.

Technological "innovation" is crucially important to the recovery, but not much of it is neutral. Naomi Klein in *The Intercept* analyses the proposals of the former CEO of Google,

Eric Schmidt, for integrating technology to increase control in “a future in which our homes are never again exclusively personal spaces, but are also, via high-speed digital connectivity, our schools, our doctors’ offices, our gyms and, if determined by the state, our jails.” Outsourcing to private companies of many of the state’s current responsibilities for core functions such as hospitals, doctors’ offices, the police and the military, produces much less accountability to the people.

In this context, the work Schmidt does for the US government is significant. He is Chair of the Defense Innovation Board that advises the Department of Defense on AI in the military and is also on the National Security Committee on AI that advises the US Congress on “advances in AI, related machine learning developments and associated technologies,” in order to “address the national and economic security needs of the US including economic risk.” Makes one wonder what they do out of Pine Gap these days. Schmidt has something of a conflict of interest, one might think, in that he holds \$5.3bn of shares in Alphabet (Google’s parent company) and large investments in other tech firms. These firms benefited enormously from the recently, or still, home-bound populations doing their jobs and/or organising their daily lives—work and leisure—with physical contact replaced by increasing use of the internet. Twitter has also realised that it can save rent on office space by prescribing this as the permanent workplace, and Facebook plans to have half its employees working remotely from home within ten years.

Schmidt presents his vision to the Trump administration as a way of defending US dominance in the world economy against, in particular, the challenge of Chinese tech companies including Alibaba, Baidu and Huawei that have received large government support connected to the role of technology in surveillance, and maybe Defence. He warns: “China’s overall investments in R&D are expected to surpass those of the US at the same time as their economy is projected to be larger than ours . . . the Chinese are competing to become the world’s largest innovators,” displacing Silicon Valley.

The Canadians were a bit more ambivalent about who or what was driving far-reaching innovation. Sidewalk Labs, an Alphabet affiliate, planned to create a community “built from the internet up” in Toronto, but this was abandoned after two years of controversy about who stood to benefit.

In relation to gender politics and the historical situation of women, one of the key arguments of rising socialist feminism back in the 1960s was that women's liberation depended upon women's economic independence through paid work and their presence and participation in all areas of the *public sphere*. This challenged dominant assumptions about their central role being in the home doing much, or all, of the emotional and physical labour that it generated. It was also, drawing upon Alexandra Kollontai, an argument for more sharing or socialisation of this work that, though necessary to the continuation of the labour that produced profits, was performed free (for "love") with high levels of invisibility and lack of recognition.

During lockdown, so many people being pushed into the home for much longer hours greatly increased the domestic workload, especially since many of the ancillary services that were relied upon had been reduced or removed. When schools were closed during lockdowns, the UN estimates 1.52bn students were studying where they lived rather than going out to educational institutions. Supervising home schooling, even for students with teachers' Zooms and Notes, and their own personal device, is vastly different from giving a hand with homework. Taking a wider view, only half the world's population has a mobile phone or access to the internet. And this is not necessarily only in the "less developed" nations; one-third of New York's population is not connected.

Women are particularly represented in certain industries: apart from making up 70% of the global health workforce, much of which is currently "essential"; large numbers also work in hospitality, retail, travel and tourism—all areas barely functioning during lockdowns, and many slow to resume operations. So, there has been a prolonged dip for these women in their incomes and in their labour force participation. With the Stay Home directive, in Australia 56% of women workers vs. 38% of men moved their work into the home.

With movement towards more "normality" with the relaxing of Stay Home, often women will be left behind because of having dropped out of the workforce or lost their already previously insecure jobs because of redundancies. There will also be a non- or slow return of previous supports that made their working possible—centrally for a lot of women, childcare services—and those in casual or low-paid work earlier may find it hardly worth paying for childcare to go to work. When jobs begin to return on a larger scale, women will often be less available than men (or so considered) to return to them or apply for them.

It is estimated that at least 10% of women previously doing paid work are now unemployed. However, a term that the LNP government rarely uses is underemployment, although this has been a major problem for workers for six years already, in a downturning economy propped up by mining and extraction and some agriculture. Underemployment occurs when someone would like to have more hours than they are working or/and their former hours have been cut for economic reasons. Women make up a large part of the underemployed and casual workforces—and the latter could not apply for the Jobkeeper allowance unless they had been with the same employer for 12 months. Workforce “flexibility” (advocated by the LNP along with a more coercive IR, favouring employers), or the supposedly positive Work/Life balance (beloved of your friendly workplace HR), were already pushing people into more hours in the home, and workers should maybe have been wary of what they wished for—if it was. Women’s paid work is habitually more precarious across what used to be called blue, grey and white collar occupations, so they are disproportionally impacted overall in losing work—although ironically, because of their high representation in nursing, healthcare, aged care and hospital work, most of it “essential,” they are also called upon to get to work (with added risks to their own health, depending upon the standards and equipment of their workplaces).

Domestic violence, that has increased with COVID-19, occurs within the home and family (whether nuclear or variant); an increase in this was only to be expected with the changes to usual everyday lives and routines as well as economic and other stresses and insecurities. (Marxist or socialist feminism explains how this violence occurs because of oppression and repression in class society, as well as persisting patriarchal attitudes and the notion of partners and children as property.) Statistics show that 95% of victims, women or men, experience this violence from male perpetrators. During the lockdowns there has been a reported increase of at least 25% in domestic violence in many parts of the world. Women’s Safety NSW has reported a 40% increase in cases since COVID-19. Actual calls to the agencies for help have fallen—it is suggested that this is because women are spending much more of their time than usual with perpetrators. A technology increasingly used to surveille women is Stalkerware—sometimes called “Spouseware.” It is convenient for domestic abusers to secretly install on their target’s device to follow their movements. Eva Galperin who works for the Russian-based Electronic Frontier Foundation’s Threat Laboratory, was

contacted by hundreds of women when she advertised that they could access/contribute to her research, and she is one source for how effectively it is being used—certainly against women’s self-actualisation, as liberal feminism used to call it, or demonstrating masculinist ideologies of gender relations, as socialist feminism calls it.

When all these kinds of problems are discussed at various times by government leaders, they and their committees often comprise mainly men—more than was still the case before COVID-19. Certainly there are many women national leaders among those who have done the most effective job of controlling the coronavirus; many women journalists who have been attacked and sanctioned for standing up to male leaders and Ministers; many women who have been silenced in meetings but then were equally annoyed by some man interposing, “what . . . is trying to say,” or “what . . . meant to say, is . . .” When Ursula van der Leyen was Minister for Families, she was ridiculed as *crecheUrsel* and, when she became the first female Defence Minister in Germany in 2013, she was called *Flinten*[Shotgun]*Uschi*.

Current government plans in Australia to move people back into their paid work do not envisage changes for the better for casual or low paid workers, but furthermore, they have said little about any workers in Universities or in Arts and Cultural Industries. Hostility towards Universities (especially their Humanities and Social Sciences departments) as well as towards the diverse Arts and Culture organisations (maybe excluding the big opera and ballet companies) goes right back to John Howard—and the construction of the “culture wars” over the innate superiority of Western Civilisation—and was later embraced by politicians on the Right of the LNP, Tony Abbott in particular.

The greatly impoverished ABC has made and is still making huge staff cuts because of continuing funding cuts; it almost appears that the LNP welcomes an opportunity to weaken these areas of work—it is certainly not getting around to prioritising them in the allocation of economic resources in the recovery currently being organised. Catherine Van Wildenberg in “What Is the Point of Art in the Apocalypse, Pandemic, Recession,” discusses the effects on creative practitioners and academic workers of “remote work, automation and telemedicine. Reduced workplaces, more online learning and teaching, more online working and communication systems.” And this all has to be done within frameworks and technology created and provided by people like Eric Schmidt and his agendas.

The path out of the lockdown for these groups of workers removes the temporary suspension of much work called “services” and of some work called, maybe, social critique and commentary, through the production of Arts objects and their performance/ circulation in the creation of culture and the critical construction of its value, aesthetic and social. Wildenberg would like to see the creation of a different context (evidently through a different allocation of resources) of “a creativity not understood as peripheral to the main business of the extractive economy but central to that new regenerative economy . . . a culture based on the development of individual creativity across disciplines aligned to the protection and advancement of our environment, and for our shared wellbeing, for the sake of the only desirable possible future for the planet.”

This means planetary perspectives for people and land, rather than nationalistic, and masculinist ways of seeing the world. But those in power currently in Australia—and in America and Britain, the two closest allies and influences—see their role as a battle for the advancement of capitalism and the profits of its magnates, and the Labor Opposition seems quiescent, with few clear alternative policies gaining traction. The Greens have some very good policies, but they are only small in electoral terms. The power of the Unions is limited, though it is still there, and it could soon be dramatically reduced if new IR measures are brought in, since the main power Unions have is to withdraw their labour, or to extend their support to the struggles against oppression and exploitation in areas where this most overtly occurs. The new structure Morrison proposes to replace COAG will be less representative with a National Federation Council, and a National Cabinet (focusing upon job creation in response to COVID-19).

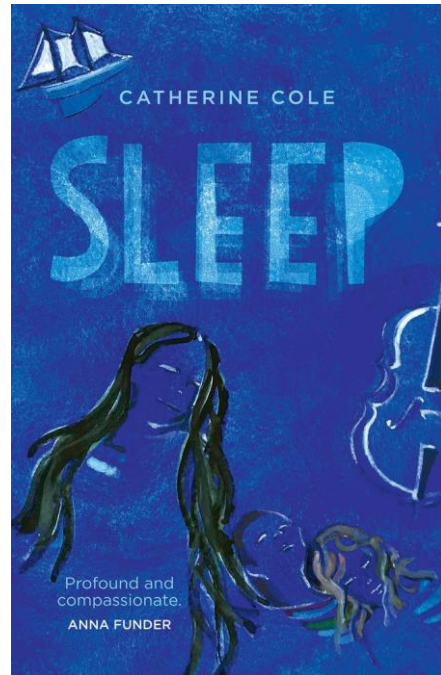
Many progressive people in Australia envisage, post COVID-19, introducing or reviving radical alternatives in their own work and professions, and intensifying the positive social effects of what they do towards fairness and justice—an internationalist not a nationalistic orientation. Events such as this pandemic do not break societies, but they shine light upon what may be already rotten, cracking or broken. Some existing paradigms could be transformed almost instantly with different government policy—in particular, a scaling right down of the massive fossil fuel extraction component of the energy industry to restore and rapidly increase funding for renewable and green energy R&D (supported, according to a recent poll by 88% of Australians); new manufacturing beyond the huge dominance of

military hardware and armaments; the cancellation of projects such as the ridiculous submarines contract; an end to the appalling refugee policies; genuine Justice for Indigenous people and the disadvantaged. But the LNP had themselves prepared to maintain the old directions, and the government is now implementing and entrenching these on a daily basis, back to their future.

‘Be careful what you remember’

Catherine Cole. *Sleep*.

Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2019.



Reviewed by Anne Brewster

Catherine Cole's new novel *Sleep* revolves around an extended family of women and the ways in which they manage intergenerational trauma. The protagonist, Ruth, struggles with issues of abandonment. She has to deal with the trauma of her mother, Monica, which had been passed down to Monica through her father, a survivor of the Second World War. He returned from the war a troubled and restless man, estranged from his family and the Yorkshire landscape of his childhood. He relocated the family from Yorkshire, where Monica had grown up, to London where they continued to move from house to house, with Monica and her sister always homesick for Yorkshire. Although they had never lived there, Monica's daughter, Ruth, and her sister, Antoinette, remained deeply attached to the Yorkshire landscape of their mother's childhood, and to the people who inhabited it, especially their Aunt Elsie.

Sleep presents us with a loving portrait of the Yorkshire Dales – the pale twilights, the wind slinking through the grasses, the bracken, the hills and crags, the dry stone walls and rambling tracks, and the domestic interior of Aunt Elsie's homely Langthwaite cottage, infused as it is with the warmth of its fire in the hearth, the hissing of Elsie's ironing and the aroma of her wonderful cooking. Whether she is making tea, cooking, knitting, shopping or

preparing the fire, Elsie is constantly engaged in the “interminable little chores” (11) that sustain a household and occupy so many women’s lives. This novel is in many ways an essay on, and a homily of the rituals of women’s domestic practices – the comforts and connections they sustain – as different generations visit and care for each other. These connections are loosely maintained when a couple of the women – Monica’s mother and sister – migrate to Australia. The novel doesn’t show us anything of their lives there except for the occasional postcard, but their histories continue to bind them together. This novel is organically cosmopolitan, exploring the effects of both inter-national and intra-national migration. Although it problematises notions of belonging – Monica tells her daughter Ruth, “you can never go home” (28) – the novel demonstrates the durability of familial and historical memory.

This is a novel primarily about memory. As Ruth says, “memory allows you to keep things close” (10). But some of the memories in this family are horrifying; this is the reason Ruth’s female relatives migrated to Australia. While the novel shows us how loving memories continue to sustain a family separated by migration – within and beyond the UK – it also shows the challenge a range of characters face in living with painful memory. Ruth has been deeply scarred by the intergenerational trauma that her mother Monica had inherited in living with her father’s “remembered horror” (79) as a war veteran. Monica struggles with despair and depression and her brutalisation at the hands of the medical profession and its latest “cures” impact deeply on Ruth especially as she enters adolescence.

Ruth is drawn into an odd kind of friendship with an elderly French-Hungarian artist, Harry, who is exiled from his beloved Paris. The story of Ruth and Harry’s conversations about love, grief, memory, philosophy and art, comprises a central narrative thread which is interwoven – in alternate chapters – with the story of Ruth’s family. Harry has migrated to London from Paris after the Second World War. As I have suggested, *Sleep* produces a loving portrait of the Yorkshire Dales, but it also centres on a beautifully crafted historical portrait of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically the 10th Arrondissement with its famous Canal Saint Martin which Harry adored as a boy. Paris with all its visceral street life, its homely interiors and, perhaps most importantly, its lavish cuisine, is rendered in all its enchantment and richness through the perspective of a precocious young boy on the edge of puberty. This evocative portrait of the famous city that encompasses Paris’s occupation by the Nazis and

the flight of its Jewish population, is evidently founded on substantial research, the result of Cole's residency at the Keesing Studio in Paris. This research is knitted seamlessly into the texture of the lives of the many characters that populate *Sleep's* Paris. The effervescence of the young Harry and his talented extended family are shot through with whimsical and comic moments, such as the memorable section depicting the draining and cleaning of the Canal Saint Martin, and the wartime tragedy and heroism that have characterised the history of this iconic city.

Carrying all these memories which jostle up against each other, Harry, we gradually come to understand, is beset with his own inner demons. In his long conversations with Ruth, he relives his idyllic childhood in Paris with his gifted and affectionate extended family. The war has impacted upon both their families in calamitous ways and as an exile in Paris it is clear that Harry nurses secrets that have transformed him into a strange and somewhat creepy person.

Both Harry and Ruth are tormented individuals who struggle to keep the "evil" (32) that beset their childhoods at bay. They both wrestle with a grief that is at times almost insurmountable. Harry's solution to the wreckage wrought by memory is art. He tells Ruth:

"I prefer not to remember the dark things ... let historians and curators deal with them. I want to move through what's left of my life slowly, watching how leaves change colour or how a spider spins its web." (232)

Harry has found a measure of peace in his life as a portrait artist although he is an ambiguous, voyeuristic figure. Ruth, as a young woman, has not found the peace that Harry cultivates; her troubled childhood has left her with an ingrained drive for revenge. Both her grief and her anger bubble up at times, threatening to overwhelm her, but she gradually learns from the wisdom that her aunt and Harry impart. Ruth's aunt Elsie tells her, "Be careful what you remember ... some things are best forgotten" (33), and Ruth's journey in the novel is that of learning to manage her memories. The novel suggests that, where it is not possible to forget, we must find a way of co-habiting with memories in a manner that does not destroy us. Harry counsels Ruth: "you can't kill memories. You have to find a way of living with them" (209). Of the painful events that haunt her and for which she seeks reparation, he advises: "It is too late. It is done ... you have a life to live ... what was done

cannot be undone" (226). This radical form of acceptance resonates with some of the spiritual practices of Buddhism or Christianity. But Harry has discovered that it is his art that enables him to live with pain and trauma, and Ruth herself starts to write about her mother as a means of living with the painful memories of her childhood.

However, as I have suggested, our relationship with Harry and his art is ambivalent. While initially it may appear admirable, his dictum that "art allows us to make something lovely of self-delusion and pathos and longing and fear" (105) is rendered ambiguous in the course of the novel. We come to see that Harry's art has unexpected consequences that threaten to destroy the friendships he holds most dear. The novel appears to question art and its voyeuristic relationship with suffering and despair. Harry seems at times a predatory creature who "collects" people in order to paint them (105). The novel suggests that his relationship with some of the people he paints is possessive and appropriative; we are told that, in one instance, he "watched [the woman he wanted to paint] as a fox watches its prey" (172). Harry and Ruth are both stalkers who disturb and unsettle their quarry.

If memory is a central theme of the novel, the title announces the book's focus on sleep – and on nightmares and dreams. The theme is introduced through the figure of Ruth's grandfather, a disturbed man who is haunted by images of war and afflicted with a "smouldering rage" (131). We are told that he had "given his sleeping life over to nightmares of begging wraiths, of bodies on which the most awful scientific experiments had been carried out" (97). Monica's experience with "sleep torture" (76) as a young woman impacts on the rest of her life. The terrible, gendered medical treatment that Monica received is overtly juxtaposed with the war experience of men when Ruth visits the Imperial War Museum in London and sees evidence of scientific experiments with mustard gas (97). If sleep is a precious and essential item in our repertoire of life skills, its calibration is all-important; too little or too much can have terrible consequences. The novel reminds us of the proximity of sleep and death.

The experience of trauma and exile raises many issues in the novel, some of which, as I have suggested, derive from macro global issues. Both families in this novel – Harry's and Ruth's – are inflicted with a kind of philosophical malaise. They nurse within them, as a result of war, "big, imponderable questions, for which there never was an answer" (115). These questions revolve around people's inhumanity to other people, around cruelty and brutality. They

encompass sciences in particular, medical practices discredited in the passage of time as horrifically wrong and barbaric. How do we live in the shadow of these truths and their traumatic histories? The novel poses this question and also an answer: we learn how to survive through simple, mundane acts of care and self-care, through attentiveness to the small acts of regeneration in our daily worlds, which is also the stuff of art. As a child Harry had read Schopenhauer: “Each day is a little life: every waking and rising a little birth, every fresh morning a little youth, every going to rest and sleep a little death” (38). More than once Schopenhauer and other philosophers are called upon to contribute to the novel’s rich philosophical life. This is indeed a deeply philosophical novel that investigates the manner in which we might fashion ethical lives that sustain both ourselves and others. In one of Harry’s meditations on the compulsions and addictions of his extended family, he tells Ruth “once I’d grown older I understood how blinded we become by our own inadequacies, yearning for what we can never be while overlooking our best qualities” (100).

The novel incorporates snippets of philosophy such as this effortlessly into the narrative in its interest in the daily-ness of everyday life, and in particular the everyday life of families. Because of the searching nature of the journeys into and out of their families on which the two main characters, Ruth and Harry embark, these quoted excerpts of philosophical discourse slot apparently effortlessly into the fictional narrative, enriching and enhancing it. I say “apparently effortlessly” as this seemingly effortless textual hybridity belies the writer’s skilful craft and, in this case, the considerable research which has gone into the re-creation of the various historical periods in Paris and the UK history in which the novel is set. Both Paris and London are cities haunted by the memories of war in complex and subtle ways. Inevitably, on one level, life continues in spite of war. When, after the war, Paris’s beauty was unchanged this was a “terrible psychic shock for Harry” (230). He couldn’t understand how the place could have stayed itself (230) after the barbarity of the war. However, in the final view we have of Paris – on the last page of the novel – there is an image of “a veritable city of tents ... lined up along the other side of the canal: refugees, homeless people, the dispossessed. *Nous sommes sans-papiers*, says a sign” (243). In this single image at the novel’s conclusion Cole hints at history repeating itself. She gestures to war, migration, trauma and dispossession as ongoing conditions of the contemporary world.

The two narrative threads of the novel – Harry’s story and Ruth’s – become increasingly tightly bound and their narratives intertwine with and inform each other. Although the novel opens at a leisurely pace it imperceptibly gathers momentum through a number of powerful revelations and confrontations and by the last quarter of it I couldn’t turn the pages fast enough. The ending is a *tour de force* with enormous affective power and indeed confirms Anna Funder’s assessment of it on the front cover as “profound and compassionate.”

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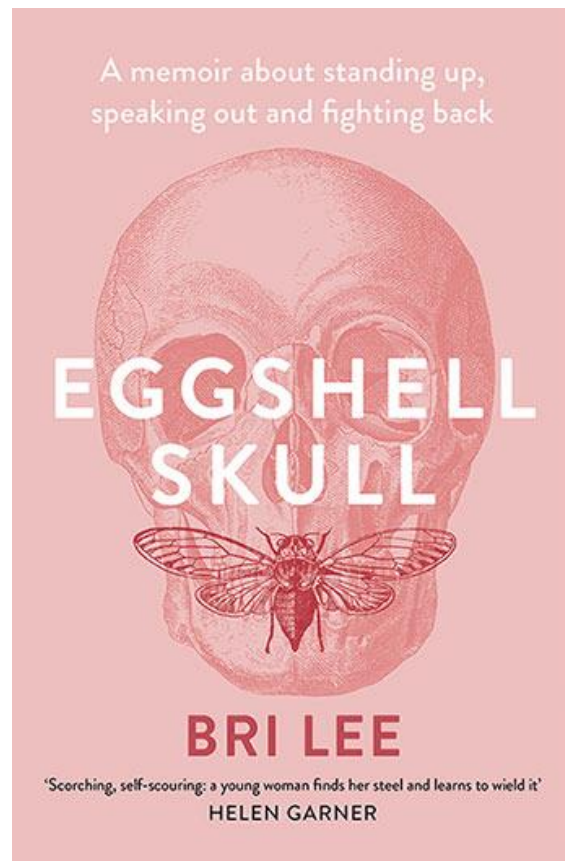
Eyes Are Singing Out:

Australia's Justice System and the Importance of Speaking Up

Bri Lee. *Eggshell Skull*.

Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2018.

Reviewed by Riley Byrne



It took me the first thirty pages of Bri Lee's *Eggshell Skull* to connect the jittery judge's associate described in its opening chapter with the self-possessed author I had seen moderating an event at Avid Reader in Brisbane's West End last year. I hadn't even realised that the author of the book was Australian. But while Google quickly confirmed this, it would have been difficult to get much further into Lee's memoir without being struck by the *locality* of it and its author.

Eggshell Skull opens in 2015 as Lee approaches the Courts building in Brisbane's CBD, fresh out of the University of Queensland Law School. She describes a mural by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, opposite the building: rows of open, painted eyes set in concrete. I can picture the eyes clearly – they've been on my bus route for the last five years, on my own transit to UQ – but I had never thought before about the symbolism of the artwork. This becomes clear when Lee describes it, "on a diagonal so that people walking past can see it, but so that the eyes clearly look upward toward the courts" (1). Somehow in the last five years I have failed to notice the significance of the position but, gazing up at the Courts building, Kusama's eyes apparently symbolise legal transparency and accountability. On a plaque near the artwork, the curator's statement explains: "In a time when public

accountability is of the utmost importance, Kusama's eyes not only look back at you, they surround the courts with looking."

At first, this sounds reassuring. The plaque continues: "It is suggestive not only of a watchful public but also omnipotence, enlightenment and inspiration." I don't mind the idea of a 90-metre-long field of eyes keeping an enlightened tab on the justice system on behalf of the wider public. But throughout *Eggshell Skull*, a far more disturbing question emerges: why does our justice system require such rigorous watchfulness in the first place?

Lee grew up in Brisbane, and, like me, she would have been familiar with Kusama's mural long before her first day as a judge's associate in the circuit court, a year-long position she received after graduating from law school. She only briefly notices the eyes before entering the building. Instead, the first half of *Eggshell Skull* follows her experiences working on trials around Queensland. This is an absorbing insight into the legal system, and in a literary climate drenched in true crime, the appeal to many readers is clear. But, because Lee's experiences are overwhelmed by disproportionately-common sexual assault trials, I was exhausted as much as gripped while reading it. Rarely does Lee describe feeling satisfied with a verdict. Trial after trial is sketched in slightly different detail, and then ushered out with an increasingly familiar sense of injustice as juries continue, often bewilderingly, to conclude that men (mainly) are "Not guilty."

In the narratorial retrospect, Lee is open about the toll that this experience has taken on her mental health. An outwardly dispassionate member of the court, her frustration is restricted, often to notes scrawled in silence: "I AM ANGRY. I AM ANGRY. I AM ANGRY," she writes during one particularly galling testimony (100). Meanwhile, her fury finds outlets in solitary hotel rooms through self-harm, bulimia, and alcohol abuse as she grapples with the limits of a legal system determined to uphold notions of objectivity in crimes as fraught and complex as sex offences.

Lee is far more measured in her writing today than in the furious courtroom it notes that at intervals she quotes, but after a year of suppressed anger, this first half of *Eggshell Skull* reads as intensely cathartic. Lee is particularly unflinching as she describes her own struggle with mental health during this time. Gradually, it becomes clear that her difficulty with

these cases stems in part from her own experience of sexual assault as a child. As her year on the circuit court draws to a close, Lee decides to report this assault for the first time.

The second half of *Eggshell Skull* then documents the gruelling process that follows. From under-resourced police to uninterested victims' advocates, Lee discovers, from the other side of the courtroom, the variously malicious and petty ways in which victims of sexual assault are discouraged from pursuing legal action. However, she is in a better position than many. She is highly educated; understands the law; and has a strong support network and the financial resources to persist through bureaucratic apathy and disorganisation.

Lee explains these advantages in the context of the legal doctrine "eggshell skull", according to which a defendant is not less guilty if they strike and kill a person who happens to have a skull as thin as an eggshell. In other words, the law mandates that they must "take their victim as they find them." If offenders have to answer for their victims' vulnerability, Lee argues, why shouldn't they answer for their strength? Aware of her advantages in the legal system, she is determined to make use of them to secure a guilty verdict.

Much like Kusama's mural, at first glance, this sounds uplifting. Reviews of *Eggshell Skull* have lauded Lee for reclaiming autonomy in a hostile legal process and converting her vulnerability into strength. Ultimately, she does get her guilty verdict, in another moment of intense emotional catharsis, over two years after she first pursued a criminal trial. But why should justice depend upon a victim's strength or weakness? Why should it depend upon the victim at all? Lee paints a depressing picture of a state of affairs in which justice is only granted to complainants with figuratively thick skulls: money, education, white skin. And regardless of the outcome, the onus falls on the victim rather than the institutions that ostensibly function to protect them. The comparison is maybe too easy to draw between Lady Justice, wilfully blind, and Kusama's rows of eyes watching laboriously in her stead – but it does come to mind.

In the first half of *Eggshell Skull*, countless complainants are dismissed because they lack the resources to which Lee gratefully acknowledges her access. In fact, the legal process that she describes seems to weaponise victims' vulnerabilities against them – often after those vulnerabilities facilitated their victimisation in the first place. One woman is deemed too emotionally unstable to testify, despite a recorded confession from her rapist; historic

accusations are dismissed on the grounds of easily manipulated child testimonies, despite multiple corroborating witnesses; class imbalances are crystallised in high-priced lawyers and communities rallied around well-connected defendants.

Lee acknowledges this contrast, asking the reader: “What do you do in the months and years that follow? When winning the battle has only opened your eyes to the breadth of the war” (356). Lee’s willingness to engage with nuance throughout *Eggshell Skull* is a credit to her thoughtfulness and honesty as a writer and, as she suggests here, her legal victory only highlights a persisting problem. Her answer is revealing, if slightly cheesy: “You cry and you cry, and when you’re done crying, you wipe your eyes, and slap your cheeks, and you get angry, and you get to work” (356).

The strength and power of *Eggshell Skull*, therefore, is not as an uplifting tale of defeated odds, but as an indictment of the continued failures of Australia’s legal system. The fact that legal recognition could only be secured for a complainant with the resources to outweigh her attacker is not inspiring. *Eggshell Skull* is not a celebratory title – or at least it shouldn’t be – but a denunciation. Lee’s memoir is at its most searing when it acknowledges that this is the case, and when it contributes to a long-overdue conversation about the disservice done to sexual assault victims in Australia’s courts. Lee doesn’t provide a solution, and nor does she need to. That’s she is willing to contribute with such honesty is enough to deserve praise.

Yayoi Kusama’s mural in Brisbane’s CBD is titled *Eyes Are Singing Out*. In as much as this symbolic citizenry observes the Courts system, Kusama’s title suggests that it also has something to say. On the same plaque nearby, she is quoted: “These eyes will keep on singing out louder and louder that love is forever and infinite, to the ends of the universe.” This time I think the optimism is warranted. *Eggshell Skull* is an important example of the need not just to see injustice, but to speak out about it. What good is a silently watchful community if the legal structures in place to protect it repeatedly fail to do so?

Ultimately, *Eggshell Skull* is an engaging and disheartening insight into the inner working, stony-faced objectivity from its participants but is marred itself by subjectivities and grey areas, and its meteing out of justice unevenly, depending upon victims’ social and economic status. While the book ends with a triumphant conclusion for Lee, it is littered with dozens

more examples to the contrary. Lee's inclusion of these stories and the frustration that accompanies them, after a year of venting mentally at her desk in the front of the courtroom, highlights the importance of speaking out to expose deeply entrenched failures in the justice system. Unfortunately, because these failures are so engrained, Lee's project often manifests in direct opposition to the continuing attitudes of Australia's legal and political institutions.

I looked up *Eyes Are Singing Out* in idle curiosity after finishing reading *Eggshell Skull*. A *Courier-Mail* article written at the time of its installation in 2012 details then-Justice Minister Jarrod Bleijie's distaste for the mural, which was commissioned before his election. "We couldn't stop it," he complains. "We just have to wear it because the works had been completed."



Kusama, Yayoi. *Eyes Are Singing Out*. 2012, Brisbane, Australia. Captured by John Gollings.

Source: <https://www.roslynolexy9.com.au/exhibition/eyes-are-singing-out/mznrv>

Riley Byrne recently graduated from The University of Queensland with a Bachelor of Arts and Communications. She is particularly interested in gender and literature, and was able

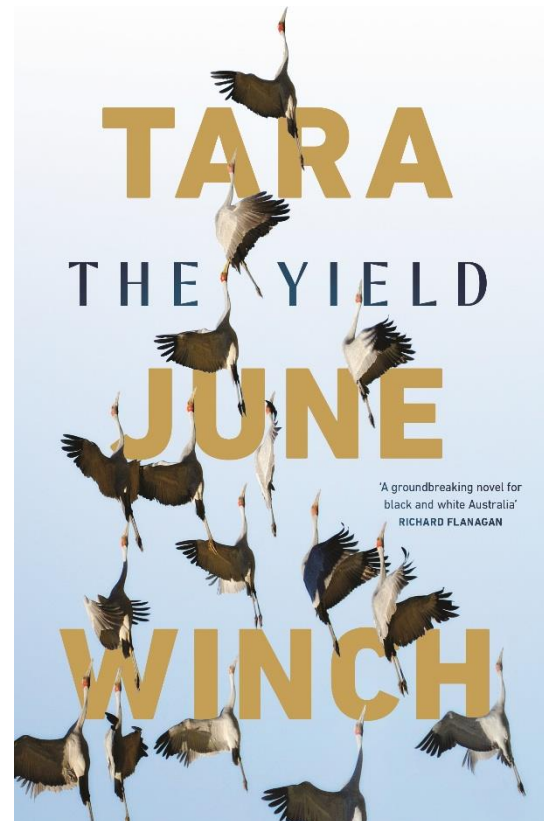
to visit the haunts of some of her favourite writers (Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti and Agatha Christie) in a trip to the UK over Christmas. Riley is currently completing honours in English literature and enjoying the excuse to read full time.

Reaching Deep

Tara June Winch. *The Yield*.

Hamish Hamilton, 2019.

Reviewed by Jena Woodhouse



Tara June Winch's hugely accomplished and intensely engaging narrative, *The Yield*, reaches deep into Australian culture and society in its ancient, colonial and modern aspects. The means deployed to assemble this fluid, three-dimensional model of a place and its people are ingenious and effective.

The story is shared by three alternating narrators: "Poppy" Albert Gondiwindi, whose voice travels omnidirectionally through time, as it did in his lifetime; his childhood mentor, the Reverend Ferdinand Greenleaf, whose memoir, epistolary in form and ultimately confessional in tone, appears in instalments throughout *The Yield*; and Poppy's granddaughter, August Gondiwindi, who has returned from England to her grandparents' home at Prosperous, outside the township of Massacre Plains on the Murrumbidgee River, to attend Poppy's funeral.

As Poppy explains, with reference to his time travel, and contextualising the Wiradjuri phrase, *dhaganhu ngurambang*, meaning "Where is your country?" (one of the entries in his dictionary):

The question is not really about a place on the map. When our people say *Where is your country* they are asking about something deeper. *Who is your family? Who are you related to? Are we related?...* The map isn't the thing, this country is made of impossible distances, places you can only reach by time travel. By speaking our language, by singing the mountains into existence. (33-4)

Poppy had spent his childhood on the old (Lutheran) Mission at Prosperous, established by the well-meaning Reverend Greenleaf, whose compassion for his flock, as expressed in his correspondence, falls short of true comprehension of the people and their culture. The Reverend Greenleaf's understanding of time, in contrast to Poppy's, conforms to church time, clock time, linear time.

August Gondiwindi's story of how she re-encounters the family and society in which she was raised is told in the third person, whereas Poppy tells his stories in the first and second person, while the Reverend Greenleaf writes his account of his life and the Mission – which was his mission in life – in the first person. Cumulatively, this narrative structure creates breadth and depth, implicit in which are the questions of where we come from, where we are going and who and what we are.

The fundamental question of belonging lies at the heart of this story and is the source of August's restlessness. Will she remain at Prosperous – an ironic name for a place that has been experienced in colonial and recent times as a traumascapescape – with her Nana Elsie and her two aunties, or will she return to the other side of the world after Poppy's funeral? What drove her away, and what could have the power to make her cancel her return ticket and bring her back for good, to the place where her grandparents raised her when her parents became unable to bear that responsibility?

A wrenching subplot of the sweeping narrative arc, which encompasses tens of thousands of years of cultural history and concentrates it into five hundred acres at Prosperous – the site of the former Mission – is the disappearance of August's sister, Jedda, aged only ten, when August was nine years old. Jedda was never found, nor was her fate ever known – although there are ominous hints as to what may have befallen her – until, in the final stages of the story, August's quest to locate her Poppy's Wiradjuri dictionary is finally successful, and, in the contextualisation of one of the entries, her worst fears are confirmed.

Not only do the three narratives in one complement each other by providing three differing perspectives in terms of time, culture, and attitudes to the place and its people – which may be read as a microcosm for the country as a whole – but they also provide information that bridges gaps in the awareness and knowledge of the three principal characters and that of the reader.

In addition to this function, the three alternating narrative voices set up different rhythms and modes of perception that run through the text: currents and undercurrents discernible at the surface level and sensed subliminally, reminiscent of the Murrumbidgee River that was once the lifeblood of its people's communities.

Poppy's story is told episodically, both directly and obliquely, through the medium of the dictionary he was compiling until his passing, that has mysteriously vanished until August manages to recover it. The dictionary came into being when Poppy, having worked his way through the *Oxford English Dictionary*, discovered that many words and phrases and concepts in his first language, Wiradjuri, had no equivalent in English, prompting him to redress the deficit:

I thought I'd make my own list of words... I thought I'd start backwards, a nod to the backwards whitefella world I grew up in, start at Y – *yarrany*. So that is the once upon a time for you. Say it – *yarrany*, it is our word for spearwood tree: and from it I once made a spear in order to kill a man. (12)

The reader does not discover the implications of this last remark until more than two hundred pages later. The final entry in Poppy Albert's Wiradjuri dictionary begins with A:

Australia – *Nyurambang*. That's my country, anyway. It [Wiradjuri country] spreads to almost the size of England, from the mountains in the north, to the boundary of Nyurambang in the south. The water once flowed through the Murrumbidgee from the southern rivers, filling the creeks, the lagoons, the lakes, and feeding everything in its wake.

Nyurambang is my country; in my mind it will always be on the waterfront. Five hundred acres where the Gondiwindi lived, live. Australia – *Nyurambang*! Can you hear it now? Say it – *Nyurambang*! (312)

Tara June Winch is acutely conscious of language and its manifold power. In an interview posted on *The Garret*, she observes that when we visit another country where another language is spoken, many of us at least learn a few words of that language as a courtesy, yet “we are visitors to people’s country here in Australia wherever we go or in someone else’s country. It is just such a basic and respectful and connecting thing to do, to learn a few words of the country you’re on today.” (*The Garret*: 12 September 2019 <https://thegarretpodcast.com/tara-june-winch/>)

Further to her passionate concern and respect for language, and inherent in the cultural values at the heart of *The Yield*, the author expresses her views on, and her commitment to, language as follows:

Language is so closely tied up with pride in our history, pride in ourselves. If you look at the alarming rates of Indigenous youth suicide in the country – having that connection to culture, that inherent pride, and using that platform for kids to learn and become language practitioners themselves, become teachers, is invaluable.

If you introduced it at an early age, for non-Indigenous kids too, it would completely change that generation, the future of Australia, and the way all Australians see themselves. Fear and anger come from ignorance, and I feel like having Indigenous Australian languages all through schools would be just amazing. It’d cut through so much discrimination. (“Up Close” [no author attribution] published in *Good Reading*, July 2019: 22-3: goodreadingmagazine.com.au)

Winch’s flexible, fluent, inventive use of language, and her apparent ease in a number of different vernaculars, is strongly evocative of her characters, and one of the book’s many strengths in *The Yield*. Poppy Albert Gondiwindi springs to life as a memorable and sagacious personality through his contextualisation of the words and phrases in his Wiradjuri dictionary, which frequently involves personal reminiscences and observations, told in the language of an oral tradition. Although his anecdotes have been recorded in writing for lexicographic reasons, it is as though the reader is listening to him speak. While a helpful dictionary of Wiradjuri words forms an appendix to *The Yield*, it is Poppy’s contextualisation of some of those words throughout the text that captivates the reader.

The Reverend Greenleaf's more formal, early twentieth-century style gives us access to him as a distinctive character, while the language used to tell August's story is contemporary, the vernacular of youth culture, and conveys a natural, true-to-life impression of that character and her generation, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Likewise, the speech of Nana Elsie and of August's two aunts, Missy and Nicki, and her cousin Joey, rings true in its use of colloquial discourse markers to evoke those particular characters as individuals, while also indicating their generations, genders and social backgrounds. The author's ear for dialogue convincingly renders idiomatic conversation.

As mentioned earlier, the quest that is intrinsic to August's story is a quest for a sense of belonging – the recovery of a sense of identity, of self, of selfhood. The inconsolable loss of August's missing sister, Jedda; the need to at least know her fate; the reconnection with family, country and culture, are vital aspects of that quest, as is resistance to the invasion of Prosperous by Rinepalm mining company – a further instance of colonisation. On a personal level, August has a need to resolve an old, unspoken attraction between her and Eddie, the pastoralist's son and neighbour who half-unwittingly gives August and her people the evidence they need in order to reclaim their birthright and oppose the mine.

August's determination to locate Poppy's dictionary, which has seemingly been spirited away, leads to her discovering the fate of Jedda, her sister, which is revealed indirectly in one of Poppy's anecdotes illustrating the meaning and context of a word; and, by helping to rehabilitate and reorient her within her culture, language and family, contributes inestimably to her own understanding and acceptance of who she is and where she belongs. Unbeknown to August, Poppy, too, had been seeking the truth concerning Jedda's disappearance, ever since she had gone missing.

It took Winch more than ten years to write *The Yield*. Her time and energy and passionate concern to get her story right have produced a momentous addition to contemporary Australian literature, one which furthers awareness of the brutal impact of colonisation on this country's ancient, highly-evolved, pre-existing cultures, from the perspective of a talented descendant of one of the peoples who bore the brunt of that impact, the insidious legacy of which pervades our contemporary society. Winch is one of a second and third generation of Indigenous writers whose work has the capacity to close the awareness gap of contemporary non-Indigenous Australians in relation to our ancient and traditional cultures.

The growing cohort of Indigenous women's voices includes Alexis Wright, Marie Munkara, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Melissa Lucashenko, Jeanine Leane, Yvette Holt, the younger writers Evelyn Araluen, Alison Whittaker, Ellen van Neerven, and numerous other earlier and emerging talents, whose writing is a wake-up call from a culture embodied and embedded in this land that was annexed so summarily and with so little respect for its Indigenous cultures.

While the range of Winch's writing in *The Yield* encompasses humour and irony; joyousness as well as tragedy; the freshness and energy of youth as well as trauma and despair, the significance and timeliness of this story cannot be overestimated. It is a work that commands respect and warmth for the author and her people, whose sense of community, love for and nurture of each other is manifest in her family of grandparents and aunts, and sustains them in surviving the effects of trauma, both immediate and intergenerational.

Near the end of Poppy's dictionary, under words beginning with "a", in English, appears the entry "always be, exist – *ngiyawaygunhanha*. A person exists beyond the living and the dead, in the planes of time where gods roam, when they know the seen and unseen at once. That is to be *ngiyawaygunhanha*" (285).

The most pervasive theme of all in *The Yield* is that of healing, an essential element of this work in both literary and practical terms. As the author explains in an interview:

"I think everyone's strand [in *The Yield*] is their own process of healing, coming to terms with the past, because Albert's not just telling the story of his own story, he's telling the story of all time, his people throughout all time on those 500 acres of land. And then ultimately, it's about healing the land as well. They're all telling their regrets on that land. Does [that] make sense?" (*The Garret*: 12 September 2019 <https://thegarretpodcast.com/tara-june-winch/> n.p.)

Winch is a Wiradjuri writer based for more than a decade in France. The manuscript of her first novel, *Swallow the Air*, received the David Unaipon Award (2004) and was published by UQP (2006, 2016), garnering many awards. Her short story collection, *After the Carnage* (UQP 2016), was short- and long-listed for several national awards. In 2008-09 she was mentored by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka as a beneficiary of the Rolex Mentor and Protégé

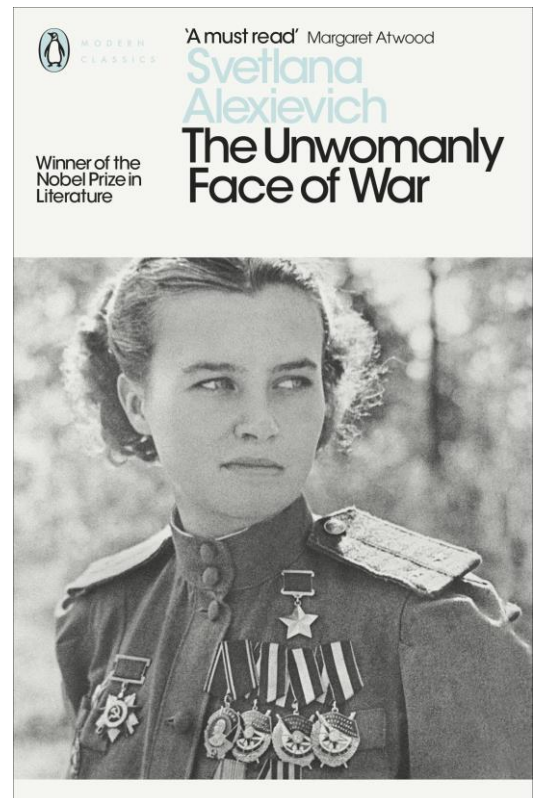
Arts Initiative. Her documentary, *Carriberrie*, was screened at the 71st Cannes Film Festival in May 2018.

Jena Woodhouse is a poet and fiction writer, and the author/ translator/ compiler of nine book and chapbook publications, the most recent being *The Book of Lost Addresses: A retrospective* (Picaro Poets 2020).

“A Human Being Is Greater Than War...”

Svetlana Alexievich. *The Unwomanly Face of War*
Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.
New York: Random House, 2017.

Reviewed by Susri Bhattacharya



Belarusian investigative journalist Svetlana Alexievich is not an uncommon name in literary forums after 2015. She has blurred the horizon between fact and fiction in her writing. In the original Russian edition of her novel *У войны не женское лицо* (U voyny ne zhenskoe litso), trans. *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich notes that her literary endeavours are a collage of memories in bits and pieces, curating a *whole* of vibrant impressions – impressions to reflect experiences after seething stretches of silence.

Amid the wave of cultural studies, alternative historical studies, and the lucrative diaspora genre, why does this book seem different? It makes readers look back in a new light. It frees *History* from Edward Acton’s definition of a “unique opportunity of recording” and acknowledges the silence. Agelong, unnoticed, discarded as unimportant, *Silence*. The book describes wartime and its women, and, most importantly, their voices, waiting underneath the heap of ashes begotten of war – ashes and tears; mud and burials; love and losses; killing and honour; victory and families; curbed duties/demands/mother-instinct and shots...

About one million women fought in the Soviet army. They mastered military specialities, including the most “masculine” ones. A linguistic problem emerged: no feminine gender had

existed until then for the words “tank driver,” “infantryman” or “machine gunner,” because women had never done that work before. The feminine forms were born there, in the war.

Alexievich knew that if she was going to deal with war, she would be asked questions about the Russian legacy. She discards all arguments by saying that her writing would discover suffering compressed in and comprised of history. Her primary obstacle was her choice of two polarised territories: *women* and *war*. Many argued that to consider a woman’s account would lead Alexievich to a puddle of fantasy stories with no gritty facts. Alexievich answers in this book that she never wanted hard chronologies but wished to bring out before the world the *humane* part of the war.

There is a concept in optics called “light-gathering power”: the greater or lesser ability of a lens to fix the caught image. Women’s memory of war is the most “light-gathering” in terms of strength and feelings – in terms of pain. The masculine hides behind the history, behind facts; war fascinates as action and a conflict of ideas. The feminine is caught up with feelings (xxi).

Alexievich’s method is to weave multiple incidents in multiple voices, synching individual narratives into harmony. With her Nobel Prize win, Alexievich was praised for her “polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our own time.” On her website she confesses that she was never interested in *dry* history: “My documents are living beings; they change and fluctuate together with us.” In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, she describes the triple-thread participation of the interview sessions: “At least three persons participate in the conversation: the one who is talking now, the one she was then, at the moment of the event, and myself.” Thus, it becomes a peeling verbatim of *version*, unstable, and not thoroughly *truth*. The stories are coloured with emotion and framed by the gaze. The book becomes a mashed-up harmony that never repeats a rhythm; the breathing gap, or caesura, invokes war-torn palimpsests.

Turning pages brings out stark corners, the *blind spots*, in war participants’ lives. Conventional image and heroism shatter in front of reality. During the war, people met, fell in love, and got married in the trenches. But after the war, gender views were polarised. A conflict between *glory* and *gory* dissected the inner beings of survivors, especially women.

They were now housebound, harmless creatures, not risking offending against their husbands' wishes to dismantle the heroism in war.

There are interviews from every walk of life in Alexievich's novel. Like Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, people who acted and performed in the bloody masquerade come up with their stories and confess.

"Human bones among the cinders, with scorched little stars on them..."

The story of First Sergeant sniper Klavadia Grigoryevna Krokhina is of her *first time*, which is jaded, nerve-wracking, and then either a habit or an instinct just waiting for the order. Her first kill was a Ukrainian stranger who popped up his head while she aimed nervously. She would sift through the burning remains to find glittery stars – facades of bravery lying in trenches as fading souvenirs of war – masculine decorations doubling as killing props.

"For so many years we said nothing..."

Natalya Ivanovna Sergeeva was a private nurse-in-aid at the war front. Because of their age, the girls in her family couldn't join the war camps, so their father made them join the nursing corps. Crude propaganda and war frenzy took over the mob, as though someone had injected cocaine into Europe's spinal cord. Nobody noticed the wound that gave Natalya a permanent scar. She had never wanted to join the war, and this was the case with many.

"How's it I am dead? Can it be I'm dead?"

Nobody wanted to die, even if it meant to be *heroic*. The snapshots arranged in the section "Of Death and Astonishment" record the bloody battle to avoid exhaling one's final breath. From old to young, everyone wanted to live. In the meantime, one tries to soothe or console – one or two shadows follow the body – and life ends. Even the dead cannot believe that they died so casually.

"I went up and kissed him. I'd never kissed a man before..."

Here, journalism and fiction tie the knot, as a burial pretends vainly to be a wedding. Liubov Mikhailovna Grozd was in love – "head over heels" – with Nikolai Belokhvostik, a second lieutenant in charge. She recalls the moment he gave her a German chocolate bar: a sweet from the opposition. She thought that nobody knew about her love for him. When she saw

the preparation to bury him someone asked her to be ready; she only blushed, assuming that they all knew about her love. She doubted that he had also known – nobody could answer that, but she certainly hoped. The hope made her move and greet his body with a kiss.

“...everyone just repeated the word, “Victory,” and the rest seemed unimportant”

Anastasia Vasilyevna Voropaeva’s account takes us to the final scene of war. All the “sound and fury” ends in “signifying nothing.” The war is torn between *peace and war*, and it ends at *war and victory*. The magnanimity of victory looms larger than the survivor’s jolt of joy, fear, or relief. The system pushes all towards quick amnesia and fast adaptation. Bodies and minds bear it all – brutality, angst, and horror. All the pomp cannot shape the war as a glory to the girl raped repeatedly by her Fritz boss and, now pregnant, helplessly aspiring to kill the child. But the war and its unwomanly face have gone – only to bolster once again regressive feminine codes of conduct. Vasilyevna reports a German woman who knelt in the middle of the road to thank Russian troops for not harming her babies and husband, who was fighting from their side on the Eastern Front.

Alexievich never tries to reveal the negative side of the war or the glorious one. She presents what went in between. Women who were, by contemporary cultural standards, “unwomanly” broke the dual concept provided by Judith Butler in *The Frames of War* – “precariousness” and “grievability” – and were actually the subjects of war.

In the near future, other wars are apprehended; at any moment, out of any impatient tussle over any unsettlement, the announcement may fall. Modern provocations like the Taliban; North Korea; the Indo-Pakistan conflict; generational dismay in Columbia; recurrent feuds in African territories; more recently the Rohingya issue; a constant mess of Kashmir, and so on, brew unknown fears. I recently went to Nalanda, the UNESCO-recognised site, that has also suffered the brutalities of war. During the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji, it was burned in rage, the largest University shattered into ashes. Architectural ruin stands now bearing its legacy. People cherish it as a spot to visit, I doubt that anybody could trace sheer horror out of those burnt pillars and roofless storeys.

Thankfully, people are uniting against war proximities. A recent post from social media bolsters my confidence: a war survivor has collected bomb shells in which to plant and

nurture trees. How beautiful! I find in her striving the approach of Alexievich: *rubbish* turned into “simply life.”

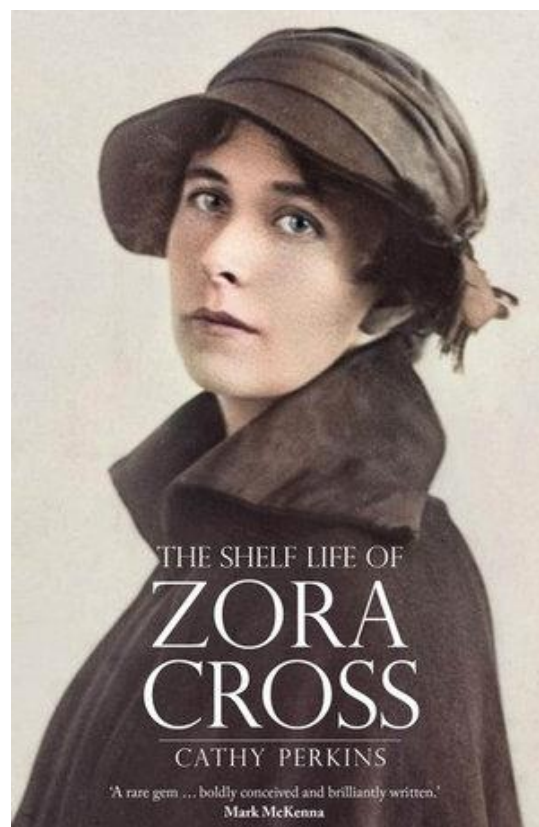
Susri Bhattacharya is a sports enthusiast, an animal lover and an amateur photographer. She pursued her M.A. in English Language and Literature from Calcutta University, India, and is a faculty member at the College of Engineering and Management, Kolaghat and a Guest Lecturer at Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College.

‘History Will Find Me’: The Life Journey of Zora Cross

Cathy Perkins, *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*.

Clayton, Vic: Monash University Publishing, 2020.

Reviewed by Christina Ealing-Godbold



As the gruesome reality of World War One dawned on Australians in 1917, a woman from Queensland published a book of love poetry which became one of the nation's bestsellers. It was considered distasteful in society for a woman to display passion or allude to sex. Yet Zora Cross, born in Brisbane in 1890 and a granddaughter of Queensland pioneer and landowner, Zachariah Skyring, was to create something of a sensation with the publication of *Songs of Love and Life*. With a cover illustration by Norman Lindsay, the publication was bordering on scandalous.

Cathy Perkins has written an absorbing biography of this largely-forgotten Queensland author. The author's approach in the telling of this fascinating story is unusual yet very effective. In writing the life of a complex artist, Perkins has chosen to document her journey through her relationships. From her childhood letter writing to Ethel Turner, her professional relationships with Bertram Stevens and Mary Gilmore and her relationship with her husband David McKee Wright, the biography documents a journey filled with hope, pain, loss and financial survival through two world wars and a Depression.

A biography is often a chronological exploration of the life journey of the subject. However, it is also important to capture the essence of the subject in the work. Perkins had intended a more conventional approach to her biography but found each of Zora's key relationships illustrated a different side of her personality and a different view of her life struggles and

triumphs. Each chapter brings out one of these key relationships. A young Zora Cross wrote wonderful letters to Ethel Turner about life in rural Queensland. Ethel, an editor of the children's page of the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, invited letters from children all around the country and published them in the journal. These letters gave huge insight into the lives of young people living in many different regions of Australia. Ethel Turner met Zora as an adult but the relationship via letters in those formative years had a considerable effect on young Zora. David McKee Wright, a former Congregational Minister with a wife, a de facto and a number of children, entered into another de facto relationship with Zora Cross who was herself already married. Wright, a poet, writer and editor of the *Bulletin* became her partner in life, fathering two more children with Zora and sharing a house in the Blue Mountains from 1919 until Wright's death in 1928.

Regardless of the author's attention to relationships, Cathy Perkins still provides a detailed and interesting chronology of the life journey of Zora Cross. After completing her high school matriculation in Queensland, Zora won a scholarship to Sydney Teachers College and, whilst living with her Aunt Lottie, worked at Croydon Park Public School and attended lectures at Blackfriars Public School in Chippendale, a temporary location for the new Sydney Training College. Zora graduated and worked at Leichardt Public School in Sydney's inner West in 1911, living in the suburb of Petersham. Marrying actor Stuart Smith in the same year, Zora gave birth in Brisbane to a baby girl who died just a few hours later. The marriage was short-lived and Stuart Smith left for California in the United States (where he married and lived for the rest of his life). Perkins has traced the genealogical details of a marriage that was very unclear in Zora's writings and memoirs. Her parents moved to Mosman in Sydney in 1912, after her father had several business disasters and was arrested for fraud. Zora joined them and, once again, the family was able to live together.

During this period, Zora continued to write, contributing to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Turner's advice. Zora also had a love of the theatre and took lessons in Sydney before resigning from teaching at the end of her three-year agreement with the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction. She then travelled to Queensland and up to Cairns as a member of a travelling Comedy Costume Company. Another baby was born in Cairns and it is not known who the father was in this case. Baby Normand Garvin was left with her parents while Zora lived in Brisbane during the first world war, making a living from writing

and acting. An organiser of entertainments for the troops' camps, Zora went north to Townsville in 1916, performing patriotic concerts where she was billed as a "Sydney elocutionist and comedienne." Still writing for newspapers in Brisbane whilst working as an actor, Zora kept up her correspondence with Bertram Stevens of the *Bulletin* throughout the period, published some poetry in the *Bulletin* and eventually returned to Sydney to be appointed by Stevens as a theatre critic for the *Lone Hand* in 1917.

The biography explains in detail how a young female teacher from Queensland was able to convince the leading publishers of the day to publish her poetry. The Literary Editor of the *Bulletin*, David McKee Wright (later to become her partner) encouraged Zora to write sonnets for publication in the *Bulletin* as well as the *Triad*, another publication of the day. The sonnets became the book that caused such a sensation. A sample copy of the compiled sonnets was shown to George Robertson, of the publishing company Angus and Robertson, and he found them to be extraordinary. Bertram Stevens thought them remarkable, commenting on the fact that these sonnets "came from a woman who has lived and loved, and is setting forth her ideal of love without reserve and regardless of the convention which forbids sincere speech on the subject." Robertson approached Norman Lindsay with a "lucrative commission" to provide artwork for the publication, as he felt this was a way of ensuring extensive sales of the work. Although Lindsay was reluctant, he did agree to provide a cover illustration and Sydney Ure-Smith provided a drawing for the endpapers.

Perkins points out that, despite some surprise that Norman Lindsay would provide artwork for the publication, there were common themes in the work of both Lindsay and Cross. Both the artist and the poet use classical traditions to venture beyond conventional morality. Lindsay drew on paintings by Rubens and Titian and Zora built on centuries of love sonnets and particularly the work of Shakespeare. The *Bulletin* reported upon the publication of *Songs of Love and Life* in 1917 that "Zora Cross does not write a sonnet to her husband lover's eyebrows: she writes sixty sonnets to – well, all of him." The first edition sold out in three days.

At a time in Australia's history where young soldiers were returning from the front with venereal diseases, the importance of sexual hygiene became a topical issue. In 1916, a conference at the University of Sydney with speakers from many different backgrounds explored the importance of raising the issue of sex and passion with young women.

Previously a topic that remained unspoken, there was now a realisation that it was important to bring the private sphere of home and notional wifely duties into a public space. At a time when poetry was often published in Australia and was eagerly read in newspapers and journals, the passionate love poetry of a young woman writer was considered almost scandalous and ground-breaking. Zora also wrote novels and many items for journals and magazines, but it was the *Songs of Love and Life* that was to bring her to fame in early twentieth-century Australia.

Perkins's book, as much as it is a biography is also about the records and library collections that allowed the biography to be written. Perkins is an editor in a State Library setting (it is wonderful for Library staff's research to be recognised and published), and her book refers to the papers of Zora and David Wright in various collections. In twentieth-century Australian literary circles, the donation of literary papers to the Mitchell Library in Sydney or to a University library was an important "rite of passage" for well-known authors. Perkins begins her prologue with, "I was sitting on the concrete floor of the Mitchell Library basement in 2008 when I first saw the name Zora Cross." Elsewhere in the biography, librarians such as John Le Gay Brereton are an important part of the fabric of the life of Cross. In Perkins's chapter on Angus and Robertson (George Robertson) and in that on Dame Mary Gilmore, considerable space is devoted to the time spent by authors "putting their papers in order" before they passed on. George Robertson spent hours each day organising his letters and files and Dame Mary Gilmore would not relax until every written item was delivered to the Mitchell Library. Reportedly, Dame Gilmore lay back and said: "Thank god! Now I can die in peace." Zora Cross wrote many letters that made their way into the Mitchell Library and papers that were lodged in the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at the University of Sydney. The biography has excellent notes and a bibliography of Cross's work and is also well indexed.

"History will find me" said Cross to April, her daughter, and many years after her death in 1964, it indeed has. Although Zora Cross – teacher, actor, writer, mother, and grandmother – was a fairly unfamiliar name in Australian literary history,¹ by the twenty-first century

¹ An exception to this being readers of Michael Sharkey's long discussion, "Zora Cross's Entry into Australian Literature," *Hecate* 16. 1 & 2 (1990): 65-89. Perkins's book acknowledges Sharkey's help.

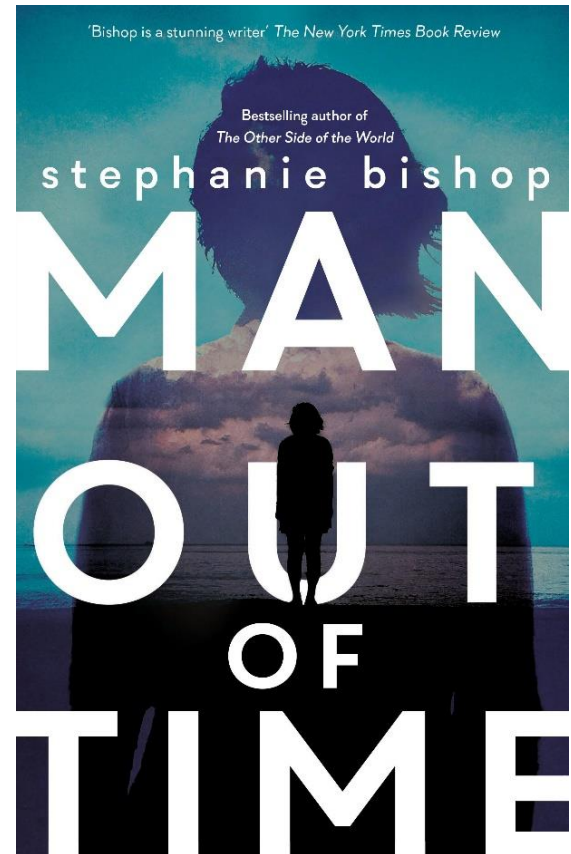
history has indeed found her, and her life journey is well documented in this book through the lens of her relationships with others.

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Families and Black Holes

Stephanie Bishop, *Man Out of Time*.
Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2018.

Reviewed by Gillian Bouras



It is a brave writer who tackles the subject of mental illness, sufferers of which still labour under the stigma of being “different”: most “ordinary” people fear and dread mental illness and find it hard to comprehend. But Stephanie Bishop, author of *Man Out of Time*, a novel in which the protagonist is clearly disturbed, is on record as stating that her father was plagued by depression for much of his life. Thus, she also runs the risk of readers taking her novel as a factual account, but it is definitely a work of the imagination, despite the parallels with Bishop’s life. In her second novel, the much-lauded *The Other Side of the World*, she also draws on her family background while constructing a gripping novel.

Mental illness features in many narratives and, since examples such as Ken Kesey’s breakthrough *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the reader comes to an understanding that mental illnesses are often a reasonable reaction to a terrible world and the dysfunctional societies and systems to which so many humans are exposed. Some people, like Leon’s brother, escape this world via the punitive act of suicide. One of the pernicious effects of this can be to give a kind of permission to other vulnerable people: there are many so-called “copy-cat” suicides. Another effect is that of change: obviously nothing can ever be the same after such a wrenching event. Stella, although only a child, realises that as a result of her uncle’s suicide “something had changed” within the family (30).

Novelists are fascinated by time, its passing, the influence of it, and human impotence in the face of it. This novel's title indicates the way in which the main character's illness fractures him and his life: the careful structuring of the narrative moves the reader back and forth between past and present, while making said reader (and the main people in Leon's life) fear the future. The families of people like Leon are haunted by possibilities, "in her mind the terrible thing was always going to occur" (21). The novel opens and closes in recent times, but in the interim zigs and zags between them and the past with its various troubling episodes. These include the suicide of Leon's brother and Leon's own periods in mental hospitals.

There are innumerable references to time, the inevitability of its passing, and the way in which the passage of time defies real understanding. For example, Leon, when in hospital, is always conscious of the green river at the bottom of the gardens where he is able to sit, "for this is how you measure time, how you continue to understand that something around you is passing, changing" (115). He is also able to count the boats. Associated with this sort of illness is often the loss of any sense of time, and often the loss of memory.

The family constellation consists of Leon, his wife Frances, and their daughter Stella. Leon's love for Stella is made clear (the combination lock in his bag opens to her birth date), but his influence on her is not always good, or conducive to the stability that a growing child needs. As she grows into adolescence his attachment becomes rather too intense: one incident borders on sexual abuse (210-12). Leon is unpredictable in his behaviour and very unreliable: one of the first episodes in the novel concerns his forgetfulness over Stella's ninth birthday. We realise very soon that there is something gravely wrong with Leon, who earns our sympathy for much of the time. But we also have a great deal of sympathy for his wife and daughter, for mental illness often seems similar to a black hole into which whole families can be remorselessly sucked. Frances has to cope with Leon's unpredictability, the feeling that her own life is a fiction (162), and the fact that "solutions" such as the family holiday do not necessarily work (141).

Parallel with plot developments about Leon, the reader follows the passage of Stella's life: she is often depicted as a solitary child who has to entertain herself (103), although sometimes she and Frances re-enact Stella's birth (110). The difficulty of this birth meant there would be no more children for this family, so that Stella has no companion with which

to share the trials of growing up in this particular and testing situation. She often hides away and constructs a parallel fantasy world for herself. She wants the business of growing up to accelerate, and longs to be a teenager (108). When she becomes one, she engages in fairly typical acts of rebellion (184–85). She also clashes with Frances and tends to blame her for Leon's plight (186). When Leon is in hospital, Stella cannot bring herself to look at him: the reader becomes aware once more of Leon's essential isolation (149). One of the implicit questions in the novel, made more complex by the family's circumstances, is *How does a girl become a woman?*

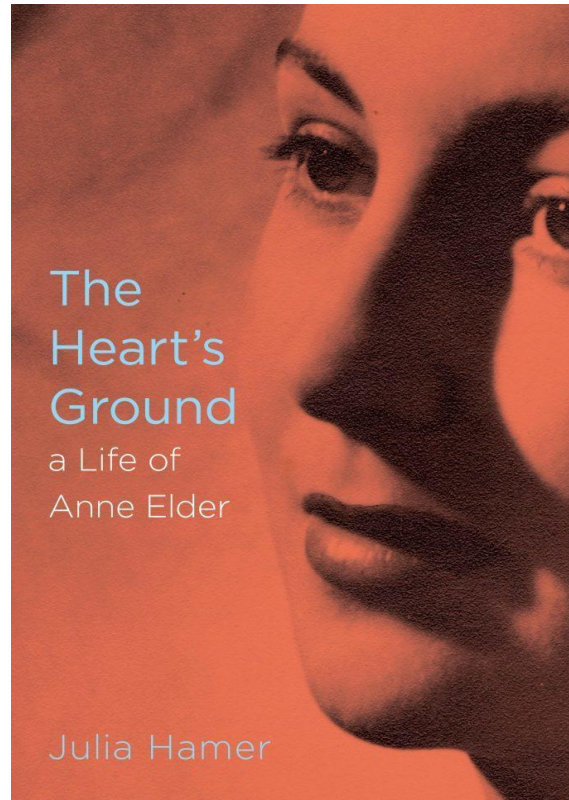
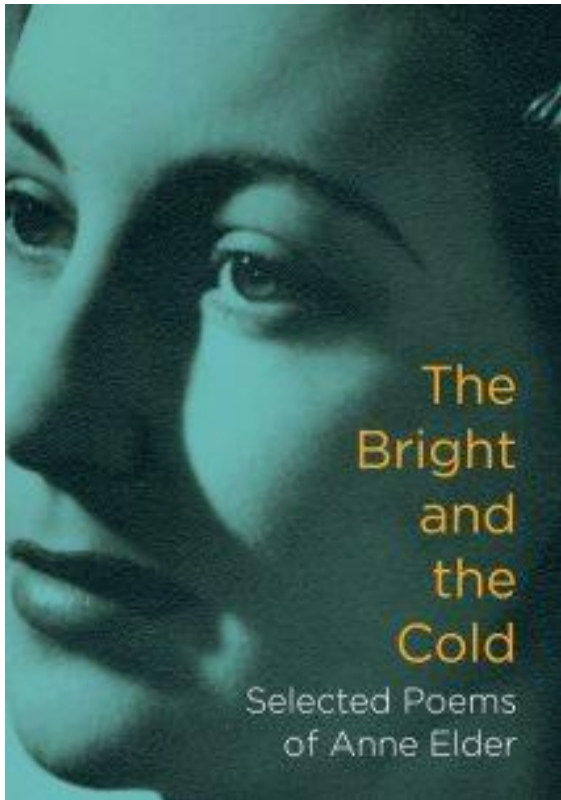
In the opening phases of the narrative, Leon has left his home and is wandering about with his camera: the novel includes several haunting and distinctly odd photographs of abandoned rooms and isolated places. (Bishop herself found a collection of photographic negatives after her father's death.) Photography freezes the moment, but its rendering of so-called reality is a debatable matter. At one point early in the narrative, Leon raises his camera to capture a series of grids. The text is then punctuated by an image of the railing along the cliff edge where Leon is standing (9). "During those last hours he struggled to find things that felt real..." (10). Feeling out of touch with reality is apparently a common symptom of disturbance, and disturbed people often go missing in an effort to escape the threats of so-called reality and in an effort to construct another, one more meaningful to the questing individual.

Readers who have any experience of mental suffering or connection with it will find this novel demanding and at times painful. But Bishop intuits the inner world of the mentally ill with great sensitivity and understanding. She comprehends and describes it all so well: the lack of affect, the isolation, the delusional nature of it, the risk-taking, the lack of understanding of so-called social norms, the insomnia, the obsessions, the breakdowns in communication symbolised by the crossed telephone lines that leave Stella unable to understand exactly where Leon is (121). There are also the symptoms of psychosis: the hallucinations, the emotional lability, the heavy unnatural sleep, the out-of-the-body experiences, the body "symbolised by a black dot, progressing slowly through a grid" (156).

Readers will also find Bishop's sensuous and evocative prose uplifting, especially when the natural world and childhood are being described. At times the poetic nature of her writing is inspirational. This is particularly true of the last section of the novel, in which the ideas of

Albert Camus are examined. Camus considered that suicide is the one philosophical problem, because it necessitates judging whether or not life is worth living: all other questions arise from this one. The actual act, he stated, is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. In her progress through the novel, Bishop attempts to penetrate this silence, and in so doing indicates the veracity of the notion of time's inexorability and the comfort of the thought that love is as strong as death.

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



Rediscovering Anne Elder, Poet and Dancer

Compiled by Catherine Elder, *The Bright and the Cold: Selected Poems of Anne Elder*.

Gardenvale: Lauranton Books, 2018.

Julia Hamer, *The Heart's Ground: A Life of Anne Elder*.

Gardenvale: Lauranton Books, 2018.

Reviewed by Michelle Concetta Borzi

The Bright and the Cold: Selected Poems of Anne Elder compiled by Catherine Elder and *The Heart's Ground: A Life of Anne Elder* by Julia Hamer are companion books in their representation of the oeuvre and life of a poet whose literary career began in the mid-1950s

and subsequently produced two collections: *For the Record* in 1972 and *Crazy Woman and Other Poems*, posthumously in 1976. Anne Elder's name is well known, synonymous as it is with the prestigious annual award for the first book of poetry published in Australia, an award inaugurated by her husband John Elder following her death. While each of Elder's individual books received a few critical reviews, her full oeuvre has had minimal critical attention. Her books have long been out of print and this in itself will have limited her readership. Catherine Elder writes in her "Preface" that the concurrent publication in 2018 of a biography and the *Selected*, marks two milestones: the 100th anniversary of her mother's birth and the 40th year of the Anne Elder Poetry Award.

Catherine Elder refers to "the various registers of Anne Elder's strong, distinctive voice, and her emotional range" (xii) as her guide in choosing poems for the *Selected*. Reviewers of Elder's two books have also commented on her "distinctive voice." Graham Rowlands wrote in his 1977 article "Anne Elder: Poet", published in *Overland*, that Elder was an "excellent" performer of her own work: "No one who heard her read at her best ... can forget the experience: her almost hypnotic presence, her voice-enactment of each poem" (21). Rowlands draws attention to her speaking voice, but two other reviewers have referred further to a perceptible tone in the poetry itself. David Martin wrote in his 1972 review of *For the Record* that "her range is too wide and her voice too individual for simplified judgments" (23). Philip Martin made a similar general statement in his 1977 review of *Crazy Woman and Other Poems*: "whether a poem is amusing or sombre or both, she speaks with a particular accent, unmistakable" (23). Those reviewers have recognised something about Elder's style that draws readers in, but they don't say what it is. Reading Elder now, there is certainly a distinctive note through all of the personas crafted on the page and this is worth exploring.

Here, for instance, is the middle stanza of "Triad":

A tune
of rain fell where in the hour of dawn
past rain had strung a frozen scale of breves
across bare staves of branches. A bird
like a last torn leaf against the sky
from the slung cordons of the climbing rose

flew down and scratched for seed.

One wintry cry
piped from its throat; staccato feet
stabbed a gavotte. Then, spinet-thin,
came chords
from somewhere down the muffled street
and someone lonely touched the chords again
in an empty room, pianissimo. (4)

Elder's poetry is able to sustain long breaths of thought and imagery over a number of lines, often driven by layer upon layer of ornate facets of observation. One of the techniques used to power the expansive movement through this typical stanza is the stressed beat on the last word of each line, superbly done. The perceiving self in those lines is devoted to observing the natural world, not only to record it clearly, but to imaginatively transform it in ways that enable us to think about the part that rhythm plays in the imagination. Also distinctive of Elder's rhythm is her frequent placement of two or more lengthened stresses together: "rain fell where", "bare staves", "last torn leaf." It is hard to read this poem quickly. This is an effect not only of rhythm itself but of the attention to which precisions of rhythm refer us. Rhythm in Elder's poetry is as much psychological as it is bodily. She understood how exacting the art of free verse is, just as she understood the specific discipline of ballet, as a professional dancer with the classical Borovansky Ballet up to the mid-1940s.

Julia Hamer locates the late 1940s or early 1950s as the time when Elder turned to writing poetry, about the same time that she gave up dancing to start a family. Her first publications began appearing in literary journals from the mid-1950s. Hamer also recorded that Elder joined a writing class in the early 1960s (Judith Wright and Bruce Dawe were her tutors) where she was encouraged to write verse in metre. Elder might already have learned metrical craft around the same time as a number of her female contemporaries who were writing and publishing books from the late 1940s: Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood and Rosemary Dobson; and including significant women writers who are now a little less known: Nan McDonald, Nancy Keesing and Dorothy Auchterlonie. Judith Wright included some free

verse poems in her first book, *The Moving Image* (1946). Elder turned to writing predominantly in free verse in the poems published in *Crazy Woman and Other Poems*.

“Journey to the North” from *For the Record* shows Elder’s dexterity with metrical lines: a Pindaric mix of strict pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter and dimeter lines, irregularly placed and rhymed, the varying lengths playfully energetic. Here are the first three stanzas:

Vagrant sea ranging up from Antarctica
scoops at our southern capes with bold
blue polar paws: and as the cold
sea hungers sharply for Australia
southerners hanker for the restive breath
of air that badgers them from birth to death.

But now we have come to the North to warm
our wintry humours. Confounded by the calm
smiling mouths of the noble rivers
that deign to feed the ocean on this coast
we move in blazing dream as though we lost
our senses on the border. Distance severs
the heart from its cool soil, and colour
jigging on light builds up in belly and eye
the indefinable yawning dolour
of travellers. We do not believe in winter Dry
or in the latticed unsubstantial homes
of men who work this land offhandedly
and squat in the shade of palms to boil their tea.

Unhinged by idleness we chant the names
and cross the creeks:

Halfway and Sandy,
Ironbark, Black Adder, Kangy,

Cold Tea, Ghinni-ghinni, Swan . . .
meaningless magic spelled and gone:
or briefly loved for euphony
when Windy Dropdown Creek went dropping down
to river or sea who cares, a dribble of tone
channelled by ear to the pool of memory. (2)

Elder's language is bardic and colloquial. The poem evolves as a travelogue through an Australian landscape: a collage of external images and road-trip exchanges are encountered, mediated and articulated. One might say this poem is a reminder of language as ceremony, delivered with a jaunty toughness.

The poems in *For the Record* were written on the cusp of a period that roughly coincides with the emergence of dailiness as a fitting subject for poetry in English. The shift was international and for many poets, though not all, it had a link to the renewed interest in free verse around the same time. Poets as different from one another as Philip Larkin, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Richard Wilbur, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton – and Robert Lowell from *Life Studies* onward – were placing more of their poems within an observation of immediate, often ordinary, particulars. The concerted turn to an unselfconscious vernacular around the late 1950s (a decade or so later in Australia) culminated in a greater improvisation with form and an opening up of subject matter to experiences and details from everyday life. Donald Hall's 1962 anthology *Contemporary American Poetry* catches the zeitgeist of this shift amongst a post-war generation of American poets. In his "Introduction," Hall puts it thus:

It is the poetry of a man in the world, responding to what he sees: with disgust, with pleasure, in rant and in meditation. Naturally, this colloquial direction makes much of accuracy, of honest speech. 'Getting the tone right' is the poet's endeavour, not 'turning that metaphor neatly', or 'inventing a new stanza.' Conversely, when it fails most commonly, it fails because the emotion does not sound true. (30)

Donald Allen and Robert Creeley edited another influential anthology, *The New Writing in the USA* (1967), with Creeley writing in his "Introduction" that poets had turned to "the particulars of their own experience, the literal *things* of an immediate environment" (18).

Elder's "Farmer Goes Berserk" is a remarkable example. It is urgent and immediate in its daily setting – a chilling narrative of migration, hardship, and domestic violence. The narrative is difficult to excerpt. Here is the full poem:

Perhaps she said, lively at first but once
too often in that softly stubborn voice:
'What kind of a country d'ye call this!' – or
'Pity I can't send for a wee drop of rain
from Home' – and that would be Ballachulish
on Loch Lynne (for the nine hundredth time).
Here, water is khaki and each day a battle
with mouths. Seven, born quick as roses but grown
slowly insupportable with their throats
and itches and grizzles. Two farmed out
(a shame, that) and one in a home,
returned maybe for Christmas and Easter
a frightfully quiet stranger. They kept,
just, the four little girls.

Would that be enough?

Rain at last, too much; the spuds
to be got in, tractor on the blink, more
work than feasible for one man with fear
waiting in unopened bills and no rest.
No rest ever from her soft worrying tongue
and that ultimate gnawed bone, no rest within
except in the grog (money ill spent) but oh
the beautiful glad spurt of the grog
so that he said
'Shut your trap, woman!' Astoundingly.
With the rabbiting gun. And she slumped
open-mouthed all over the bed and then

the four of them, easy! Sleeping easy
in their bright blood and the bloody dog
and the excitement
of no fear for the crowning achievement
Him Self . . .

By Cripes, we can share it
for one day's wonder in the Stop-Press, local.
Was he brute or victim, this assassin?
Or were they simply muddlers, no-hopers
who bred and scrapped together? – who eked out
a widowhood from life behind a veil of gums
in a crazy dump with a cracked iron roof
too remote to be even called infamous.
Now in the darkening puddles of their blood,
briefly limelit, they become neighbours.
Did you ever! He went berserk!

Unto Everyman,

according to his worth, acclaim for his labours. (73

This is one of Elder's finest poems. It is original and barely paralleled in its carriage of domestic violence, which has always been relevant across our contemporary social and political compass. A headstrong poetic poise is held throughout, making it difficult to detect a stable or characteristic Elder "voice." In fact, variable personas move in and out of the poem, creating an eerie illusion of levity, both understated and volatile. The narrative's verbal force comes from a mix of satirical techniques: parody, dark irony, hyperbole. Like all true satire, the final lines of the poem declare an ambivalence, invoking a shared and individual soul-searching.

Peter Steele in his 1972 review of *For the Record* observes that Elder's poetic demeanour is "about being here at all, about being oneself, about being oneself here writing" (56). This is not to say her poetry is autobiographical. Critical commentary has tended to emphasise the

topics of family and domestic life in her poetry, and reading the *Selected* and biography together, it is evident she took some inspiration from her personal life. Poems such as “On Leaving a House”, “To a Girl Sleeping”, “Pippit: The Death of a Fledgling”, “For Bracken, An Irish Setter”, “Forgive Me, David” and “At Ballindean” show a variety of life moods and experiences. However, as a poet, Elder strives for an impersonal voice that is beyond personal. She might possibly have read A.D. Hope’s essay “The Sincerity of Poetry”, published in *The Cave and the Spring: Essay on Poetry* (1965), an important book in its time. Here is Hope on impersonality:

What seems peculiar to poetry among other arts is the constant tendency to take poems as confessions, to regard them as parts of the poet’s autobiography. ... It is hard for most readers to distinguish the poem from the poet, no matter what his subject may be. What the poem says is apt to be taken by general readers and professional critics alike for what the poet thinks or feels. (69–70)

In Elder’s case, I would argue that her poetic involves transmuting personal memories and observations, foregrounding language in rhythm, invention and her own distinctive style. Take the opening stanza of “One Foot in the Door”, for instance:

During the Depression my grandmother
was plagued in her daft heart
by processions of hawkers. Supporting
a wry neck on two fingers she nodded
compulsively to tales of a little woman
and kids unlimited; bought from them
bootlaces, talc and Pears Soap galore
out of the soft purse of her own reduced circumstances.

Her stocks increased, unused. I store
the days and years like that, supporting
myself during the depressions
with two fingers on an Olivetti and pitiless poems. (82)

There may be a convergence here between biography and art, but that link is inherently unreliable. Those lines come near, and then veer away from a precipice of personal

revelation through the re-imagining of a story that might or might not be part of family folklore. That stanza is compelling for its portrayal of a writer who wants to be seen as taking risks: “pitiless poems” comes with a powerful double entendre. Elder’s interest is not in flaunting personal “niceness” in her poetry. Rather, her poems are often dark and, her voice occasionally intractable. Rowlands refers in his *Overland* article to a “strong strain of emotional violence in Elder’s poetry” (24).

“School Cadets,” for instance, has a rebellious tone, its first two stanzas blisteringly so in their caricature of school staff and officials at a school fete. And then in the final two stanzas, the school band:

‘Excuse me – excuse me’ – the mothers are shoving
like hooligans. There he is! The short one, third
from the right, sloped in the tango embrace
of the great spiralled horn. Impossible to separate
that agonising familiar forlorn
lowing, practised in bathrooms on holiday.

He is pitiful
as a babe in python coils, they are pitiful
all of them, they are terrible
as Kings in Babylon. The hateful nations
inhabit their slight frames, the future leers
desirous on their wavering formations.
Earnestly they are inflated, diminished . . . and *away* . . . (59)

Elder’s satire can quickly turn to mockery. When thinking about how elegant her poetry is, it is stanzas like this where we need to ask whether the voice is as unkind as it seems to be. There is certainly no timidity of feelings or opinions. The thing about Elder’s poetry is that the detail is always so good, but when you read the whole poem, it turns out not to be about the detail at all. Take “Save the Last Dance”, for example. It begins with a thoughtful reverie, prompted by music, but threaded through the poem is a terrible knowledge of nothingness. The penultimate stanza has a blend of wry satire and anguish:

Shall we ever
be split from the tunes? At the party
to end all parties, the Big Surprise Conflagration
that everyone pretended not to know was planned
won't there be just two atoms with the courage
to pair up by accident you know, first sight you could say
give a hitch, and, tentative at first, glide, gathering hazy
momentum, gyrating, out on that awful blank space
for a waltz? (6)

This is characteristic of Elder's roguish style, and yet the poet's voice also takes on a suggestive musical quality in its imploring tone. Amidst the elegance and craft, those last two lines express despair.

"Frustration" from *Crazy Woman and Other Poems* is not in the *Selected*, but in view of what we are told in Hamer's biography about the prominence that Elder placed on her need to write, it is an important poem. It has lightness in its spirited rendering of the desire to write while navigating domestic expectations. This poem also is hard to excerpt. To give a sense of its vigour and changes in tempo and cadence, here are all five stanzas:

Last night I read of ceremonies in Bengal
offered at change of season, festival,
marriage, child-naming, welcome to a guest:
of how a thin paste of rice is pressed
with the tip of a little finger, the twist of a hand,
in courtyards, at entrances; as we might lightly stand
a vase. It is a patterning drawn from the mind
freely, of creepers, ducks on a pond, the wind
blowing petals. *Alpona*, a feminine art
handed from woman to woman,
spoke soft to my housebound heart:
There if you like is a poem.

I am afflicted by such promptings, they come
in the mail and spread in me. I ate a poem
for breakfast; a delectable invitation
that rightly presumes I am biddable to an Auction
of Antique Jewels. Importantly,
Superbly and With Exceptional Clarity
I shimmer as catalogued. I am going, going,
gone, far gone in imagination,
gorging on jargon. And what
is a Riviere of Emerald Cut Crystals?
Forgive me a moment while I float
and glide midstream on syllables,
bleed at the point of an Amethyst Stickpin,
write, glib as the snake in a Red-Gold Muff Chain,
Four rows of Rubies in a Rare Siamese
Bangle – four rows of words would not appease
this mess of jewels. And whom have they adorned?
Who paid the price? And was their beauty earned?

Come, come, there is a house to be kept,
leaves swept, deaths wept, peas shelled,
fears quelled, a policeman at the door!
I am summonsed by diversity. What's more
and worse, nagged by the half-lost voice
of worlds that spilt from me when I was young.
I am old, I am undone, stung
by all that waste of word, my thought unheard!

Well, I shall badger it, the hour of time,
to sit down (tomorrow will do) and hammer,
humour and burnish the old rhyme.

Resolution briefly flares
and flags. How flat
are the dead loves resurrected?
But the bright ones, unborn only wink at me
from the grey firmament of duty and sobriety
like cock-eyed stars.
I walk under them, crying at their innocence
and homelessness. They are children not my own
inaccessibly imploring me.
In the morning they are gone.

To be calm of wrist as the women of Bengal
and draw my life simply on the house wall:
to swallow a pearl at breakfast and regurgitate
wisdom at midnight ... it is late, late,
later than I think. I must go to bed
and sleep my sounding head. (*Crazy Woman and Other Poems* 26–27)

“Frustration” is about inspiration and the ability, and inability, to grasp it when it emerges. The first stanza finds inspiration as a charm, the speaker discovering her muse in the creativity of Bengali women, linking their “feminine art” with her own. But a charming poem is an easy contraption and called out as such: “There if you like is a poem. // I am afflicted by such promptings, they come / in the mail and spread in me. I ate a poem / for breakfast.” The poet then parodies the creative process, hamming up an enactment of inspiration that over-reaches – “I am going, going, / gone, far gone in imagination, / gorging on jargon” – the process itself exhilarating and gruelling: “I float / and glide ... bleed.” But that parody is also directed at personal constraints – inspiration thwarted by domestic duty. A resolute voice reemerges – “I shall badger it, the hour of time” – only for that resolve to fade quickly, giving way to “the grey firmament of duty and sobriety” and quiet frustration at losing touch with the muses: “the bright ones, unborn only wink at me.” That line has a perfect, inspired compression. In Elder’s 1956 letter to Jonet Wilkie, her close friend and fellow dancer, she writes: “I get bouts of scribbling which have to give way to other things more often than

not" (189). Paradoxically, in "Frustration", the poet has turned the enactment of inspiration and un-inspiration into a very lively poem.

Hamer's biography explores Elder's openness "to the tag of 'housewife poet'" (289). It was an identification she fully accepted and owned. Intriguingly, she expressed strong disapproval of the feminist movement and of Lesbianism. After submitting three poems – "Spinsters", "The Baptism" (poems not in the *Selected*) and "At Ballindean" – to Kate Jennings's legendary *Mother I'm Rooted: An Anthology of Australian Women Poets* (1975), she later expressed her discontent with the anthology, describing the young women poets as "unskilled and boring" and the older ones as "bleating away with the utmost banality about 'my children are gone, my life is done'" (274). In the context of what Jennings wanted to achieve, *Mother I'm Rooted* celebrated the unheralded voices and experience of women, allowing them to stand out, the motivation was "feminist in its broad sense." Jennings writes in her "Introduction":

I think the women in this book, most of them writing in isolation, and uncontaminated by trends, fashions and the politics of the poetry world, write because they need and want to express themselves, and they have something to say, in their own voices. No oughts. (No page number)

That description would certainly apply to Elder. While there are some notable omissions from Jennings's anthology – the more established poets, Wright, Harwood, Dobson, Hewett – *Mother I'm Rooted* is anti-traditional, with a pro-female brushing aside of ceremony. Poems were chosen "mainly on the grounds of women writing directly, and honestly." Some of the poetry made a point of being scrappy, but reading that anthology forty years after publication, the *raison d'être* of honesty and rawness is pervasive and lasting. By its iconic nature, *Mother I'm Rooted* retains the freshness it was looking for, and Anne Elder went to it as a woman writer who was fighting for a professional place as an artist.

Elder's objection to being classified as a feminist poet is interesting when her contemporary female poets – Wright in Sydney, Harwood in Brisbane and subsequently Hobart, and Hewett in Perth, apart from a decade or so in Sydney – were consciously making claims as women poets. The question is, what is a feminist work of art in a particular place and time? Hamer writes of Elder's circumstances:

Anne was a child of the 1930s and 1940s in Australia, and a young woman in the 1950s, when women were still constrained in what they could say, do and write. Her circle, until she started to meet other poets, was not intellectual, consisting largely of neighbours and people met at church... She read books, including poetry, with intensity and great pleasure, but slowly and narrowly, chewing things over and remembering well what she read... The expansion came through the poetry. (244)

Wright, Harwood and Hewett were also young women growing up over the same years. But in contrast to Elder, they had an opportunity for university educations. It seems that she did not allow herself to engage with the intellectual feminist debates of her day and in this, she was of her time but not ahead of it. Hamer also offers some perspective on the complexities of Elder as a person: “[Anne] lacked a broad perspective that could have helped her reconcile her powerful and sometimes seemingly contradictory responses to things... In short, she was a mass of passion, rigidity, rebellion, conservatism, guilt, love, and anger” (243–44). Elder has written a number of fine poems – “At Amalfi” (not in the *Selected*), “Nude”, “Two Wives”, “Daphne”, “The Parley” and “The Bright and the Cold” – that implicitly explore the world through a female sensibility. Take “Daphne”:

After Bernini's Apollo and Daphne in Rome

She was always plagued by her own breasts
small as snowberries, each with its crisp
disproportionate stalk that rasped against
her tunics in a dialogue that left her
bereft of small talk. She was thought haughty
by shepherds, and so she was, believing herself
specially designed to give pleasure to the great.
She was qualified to know, listening, smiling
in secret to that debate so close to her heart.

I see that Bernini has caught her out

at the moment when the smile turned to terror.
Poor silly, how could she guess that the godlike
lover would be death when all she felt
was the hands of the Sun stroking? To be struck
so, to be rooted into the very ground! A chisel
shapes her cold cry in the Villa Borghese.

Slight marble girl, you stand
arrested on one toe, your fingers
changing to leaves at the moment I saw you
first and for all my life in the Villa Borghese. (60)

With its tactile imagery and its quiet, sensual fury, “Daphne” is undeniably feminist. The poet’s gaze throughout is on the vulnerability of the teenage girl from Greek mythology. Bernini’s marble sculpture of Apollo in pursuit of Daphne captures the moment of her transformation into a laurel tree by her father, a river god, to save her from rape. The poem’s quick turns of imagination involve several stages of metamorphoses and eons of time: from the young sensual woman of Greek myth in the first stanza to beginning to immobilise her in the second, to Bernini the Renaissance artist at work in the third capturing the very moment in marble, to the poet centuries later in the fourth, standing in the Villa Borghese imagining the artist chiselling the stone sculptured figure and, decades later, to readers hearing Elder’s voice in the poem observing Daphne in the same moment “arrested on one toe... changing to leaves.” The third stanza takes up a striking interplay between the poet’s voice on the page, the female body of Daphne and the hand of the sculptor, bearing a challenge to any notion of Daphne as object. She is imagined instead as a breathing subject: “the secret / smile that borders on madness, the self to the self.” In that phrase, the poet and Daphne seem indistinguishable.

We are told in Hamer’s biography that Elder experienced periods of self-doubt as a writer. In her 1956 letter to Wilkie, early in her career, she writes:

writing verses is something which can still provide satisfaction almost to one’s dying breath. It is something I have been puddling away at all my life, but only lately have

grown confident enough to post them off. I still get lots of knock-backs & don't suppose I will ever get very far as I'm too simple minded & about 20 years behind the times as to style. (189)

This motif reappears in another letter to Wilkie, written in the late 1960s: "I still have doubts where I don't think any of it is any good" (247). It is interesting that Elder considered her poetry to be "behind the times as to style." She kept herself at a distance from poetic movements of her day (290) and we can only speculate about which of her contemporaries she read and who her wider literary influences were. I made some points earlier about the style and bearing of a number of poets who were her contemporaries, here and abroad, whose work went through changes similar to hers. That may be as much a matter of zeitgeist as of individual influences. Hamer's biography gives a few details: an affinity with Emily Bronte, as "At Haworth" suggests; and through correspondence and family recollections, we learn that Elder read Bruce Dawe, Ted Hughes, Katherine Mansfield and a few American authors. A few clues emerge from my own reading of her poetry: "To Stevie Smith: A Letter Across the Sea" suggests at a reverence for that marvellous, mischievous poet; "Missing" mentions "Dante and many poets" (78); and a quotation from Rilke is included as an epigraph in *For the Record*. Returning to style, Hamer also speculates about whether Elder's poetry has "suffered undeserved neglect" or whether it "has become dated in some way" (291), but she does not explore that question. *The Heart's Ground: A Life of Anne Elder* is not intended to be a critical biography. That book on Elder's oeuvre is still to be written. The issue of style has to depend on the response from readers. What does "dated" mean? Is Judith Wright dated? Is Frank O'Hara? Or Sylvia Plath? Those poets are of their time, but their poetry is not dated. Elder's poetry doesn't always catch on in the first reading. It requires readers to stay with it and to read it again and even again, as most seriously-written poetry does. The more I read her poetry, the more I feel attuned to the robustness of her personal voice, which seems to continually assert an identification with a succession of poetic personas.

Hamer provides an insight into how highly sensitive Elder was, in relation to the criticism of her writing: the words of "some critics" produced feelings of hurt and rage, and later, rejection from publishers would "send her into a frenzy." "She was prone to panic in crises" (166). Elder's sensitivities about her poetry extended to her family, as Catherine Elder

explains: “It was threatening being asked to comment on her poetry, because it was so important to her and also we didn’t know what the right answer was” (181). Private family anecdotes feature strongly in the biography. It is as much a familial history, beginning with the poet’s grandparents, as it is an illumination of the intensities of the poet herself in relation to her creative life. We are also given details of Elder’s private struggles with her physical and psychological health:

Anne suffered various forms of physical discomfort for most of her life; in addition the range of her emotions was enormous, from ecstasy and deep domestic happiness to huge rages and desperate unhappiness and guilt, which could morph at times into mental instability. (188–89)

Elder experienced coronary heart attacks, the first in 1969, and was diagnosed later in her life with scleroderma, an auto-immune disease. Hamer also refers to occasional “attacks of paranoia” (291). Elder’s American contemporaries, Berryman, Lowell, Plath and Sexton struggled with mental health but what we get from their writing is not the imitation of mania but the crafted poems that come from it. So too, I would suggest, with Elder’s poetry.

Australian anthologies from the 1980s to the present have featured almost entirely different poems from across her two books. I’ve noted a few here, from an historical perspective. Rodney Hall chose four of Elder’s poems for the *Collins Book of Australian Poetry* (1981). Susan Lever picked three for her landmark, innovative anthology, *The Oxford Book of Australian Women’s Verse* (1995). John Leonard has edited three influential Australian anthologies, with two Elder poems in each book (with one repetition, “The White Spider”): *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1990), *Australian Verse: An Oxford Anthology* (1998), and *The Puncher & Wattman Anthology of Australian Poetry* (2009). Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray featured three poems in their wide-ranging, lengthy anthology, *Australian Poetry since 1788* (2011). Some other anthologies have not included her poetry at all, among them John Kinsella’s *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (2009).

Of the fifteen Elder poems included in those anthologies, six are not in *The Bright and the Cold: Selected Poems of Anne Elder* – “Horse and Mare”, “At Amalfi”, “Carried Away”, “Singers of Renown”, “Spinsters” and “The Baptism.” Each of those poems is as good as those in the *Selected* and it would have been rewarding for readers to be introduced to

them. The *Selected* is divided into three parts, with Parts I and II featuring twenty-six poems from *For the Record* and twenty-seven from *Crazy Woman and Other Poems* respectively. Part III is a collection of eighteen poems that were either unpublished during Elder's lifetime or the publication details are unknown, along with poems published in journals and newspapers and from a chapbook, *Small Clay Birds* (1988), compiled by Lynette Wilson. *The Bright and the Cold* is a start, but a full scholarly edited collection of her two books and a generous selection from her further poetry would allow for a broader meditation on her poetry. The matter of Elder's stature is not settled. But we know that. I think the last word should be hers. Here is the delightful "Singers of Renown":

I listen each week to the discs
on radio, superlative voices
busting their boilers to bring us
nostalgia. Being a woman, it is the tenors
and baritones who afford me
most mellifluous pain
at the heart. Standing tonight at the door
I look over evening fields and listen
to someone's immortal heartache.

What more
can I do but watch an eagle wheeling
into night and write
this dry little verse, collapsing
the whole sexuality of men and women
via the voice into one ragged stanza.

Still, it is done, and I can go to the kitchen
having loved my little bit with a pen
and unaccompanied. Catharsis
makes bearable the frying of brains.
I thank you,

plump amorous tenor, I thank you
with tender stewed plums.

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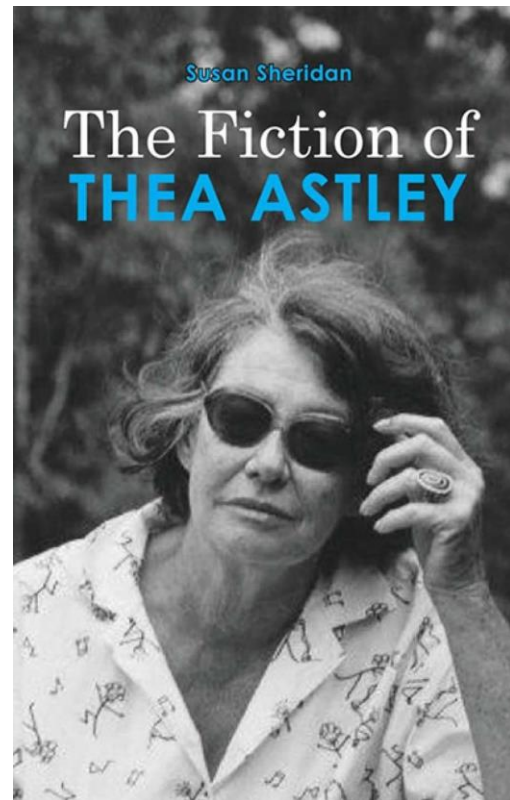
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A Measured Monograph on an Artful Modernist

Sheridan, Susan. *The Fiction of Thea Astley*.
New York: Cambria Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Lesley Synge



Q. Thea Astley was suddenly in the news when Melissa Lucashenko won the 2019 Miles Franklin Literary Award for *Too Much Lip* because the media shone a spotlight on past winners from Queensland. It was common to read that the Brisbane-born writer (1925–2004) won the Miles Franklin *four* times. Isn't such attention proof that due recognition is given to Thea Astley?

A. Feminist scholar Susan Sheridan is unlikely to agree. She wrote this work of literary criticism to give Astley's novels greater attention and to argue for more. The emeritus professor has a very long-standing interest in Australian women writers and women's writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She co-edited *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds* (2006) with Paul Genoni and wrote about Astley in *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making Their Mark* (2011). On retirement from teaching women's studies at Flinders University in Adelaide, she dedicated time to interrogating the manuscript collections held in the National Library of Australia and the Fryer Library to compile this evaluation of each of Astley's works and the legacy as a whole. Since then Sheridan also co-edited, with Jessica Gildersleeve, a special issue of *Queensland Review* on Thea Astley (vol. 26, no. 2, December 2019).

Q. *The Fiction of Thea Astley* was published in 2016. It's now 2020. How relevant is this work of literary criticism?

A. It's always a good time to revisit Thea Astley.

Q. Who is the reviewer?

A. I'm a writer born in Gladstone, Queensland, whose former work as a schoolteacher took me to many locations in regional Queensland and Brisbane (where I now live). My major engagement with Astley's works took place in my late-twenties and early-thirties with *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979) and *It's Raining in Mango* (1987), works written by Astley when in her mid-fifties and early-sixties. Astley belonged to my mother's generation and I remember the shock and wonderment of reading characters and settings that authentically reflected my own lived experience.

Astley may have lived most of her adult life in Sydney, but Queensland was home to her imaginative identity. When I visited Kuranda in Far North Queensland (FNQ) in the early 1990s, I immediately knew myself to be "on the set" of *It's Raining in Mango*. The heat! The fecundity! Astley had left Brisbane and had lived in suburban Sydney for decades before falling in love with the North. In the 1980s she bought a second house in Kuranda and began to alternate between living in it and the home in Epping. (It only now occurs to me that, when I delighted in Kuranda's colour – the "human confetti" that Astley recognises in the Far North and celebrates (Sheridan, 100) – that I could well have run into the writer herself.) Sheridan's book impelled me to read a biography of Astley immediately and then to source the late works, which had tellingly disappeared off my radar.

Q. Can you give an example of Astley's evocation of place?

A. Sheridan gives generous and thoughtful space to Astley's prose in general. A narrator in the short story collection, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, gives this tribute to North Queensland which Sheridan quotes to illustrate Astley's unique (Faulkneresque?) understanding of how landscape shapes human life:

Let me draw you a little map.

Take a patch of coastline and its hinterland, put it just north of twenty and one hundred and forty-six east, make it hot and wet and sprinkle it with people who feel they've been forgotten by the rest of the country – and don't really care

Everything's very green here. Very blue and very green, and the depth of its colouration whacks out this response, not only from me but from the rest of us who, having chosen, ripen and wither and repeat ourselves in stories. Which are re-lived by others. Over. Over. Maybe it's only a second-rate Eden with its rain-forest and waterfalls, its mountain-climbing burrower of a railways and sea-bitten rind of coast – a kind of limbo for those who've lost direction and have pitched a last-stand tent.

Q. Is there an overview of Thea Astley's works?

A. This is precisely what Sheridan achieves impeccably. First, she situates Astley as a writer of place and character with much in common with American fiction writers. She will later observe that Astley is "one of the first Australian novelists [along with Tom Keneally] to take a critical, demystifying look at the violent colonial past", one who consciously challenged the "popular fiction and history [tradition] that celebrates white Australia's pioneer past" (73). Sheridan then describes each of Astley's works with a deft, knowledgeable and perceptive intimacy. She traces the novelist's early vocation as a chronicler of northern Australia's small towns, and the insiders and outsiders who populate them, and admires her elucidation of the emotional lives of so-called "ordinary people." Sheridan shows how Astley becomes increasingly interested in gender, how she turns up the heat on masculinity, male privilege and abuse of power before turning a politically informed and absolutely scorching gaze at colonialism, its impact within Australia and the Pacific. To illustrate Astley's artistic development, Sheridan begins with *Girl with a Monkey* (1958) and ends with *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (1990) and *Drylands* (1999). "As Astley aged, her fiction gained in strength," Sheridan summarises (13).

Q. Astley uniquely entered a male-dominant world as a young writer in the late 1950s. How did she negotiate this space?

A. "I learned early on that a woman was not supposed to think," said Astley when describing her early life in Brisbane just before the second world war (6). She clearly recognised oppression and refused to accept it – there's a certain inner *rage* in the words. Sheridan is

sympathetic to Astley's experience of female identity, decades before the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 80s brought a counter-culture of rebellion. Sheridan ensures the reader is informed on how skilfully Astley negotiated issues of gender in her fiction and – to some extent – in her life as a writer. This is but one of the rich dimensions of the critical work. I found it fascinating but understandable that Astley would not call herself a feminist but described the act of gazing at the violence in colonial and patriarchal contexts as seeing the "horrible boil-up of masculinity" (13).

Q. What exactly does Sheridan admire most?

Sheridan sees Astley as a writer with an extraordinary ability to apply compassion towards human weakness with a darkly comic sensibility. She admires her for unsettling "the certainties and satisfactions of settler-colonial Australia" (151). Sheridan particularly respects Astley's probing of, and exposure of, the emotional life of Australians. Even the index highlights Astley's themes, for example:

- despair
- disappointment
- disaster
- disgust
- disillusionment.

She also loves Astley's perceptiveness towards nature, landscape, and the non-human world. And much else.

Q. Are there any drawbacks to the methodology?

A. *The Fiction* is literary criticism, straightforward and unadorned. The interplay between the life of the writer and her work is not a focus. Accordingly, I promptly read the biography *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather* (UQP 2015) by Karen Lamb. Sheridan's slim volume of literary criticism and Lamb's plump biography are deliciously complementary. On its own, I venture to say with all respect, *The Fiction* can be a little dry.

Take Sheridan's treatment of Astley's sexuality. The critic contends that the novelist, as "a woman and a Catholic" (77), is aware of the interplay of her oppression and faith and harnesses these forces to drive her works. Sheridan emphasises the Catholicism rather than

the personal life experiences. Understandable, perhaps, with trenchant passages such as this from the narrator in *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (1996) when confronting an all-male, church-led committee intent on setting up “a home for fallen girls”:

“Why fallen?” I demand abruptly. “Why must men regard pregnancy as a fall, for God’s sake! ... Aren’t men fallen too, for Chrissake, or is there a special dispensation for male sins of the flesh? How about,” I add, “a home for risen men? That’d be the hub of the matter, isn’t it?”

Sheridan’s focus, legitimately, lies in the works, not the life, but aren’t they more entangled than she allows? Doesn’t the life play into the fiction?

Thea married “Jack” Gregson in 1948 at the age of twenty-three (in Gympie, Queensland, as Lamb’s biography outlines more fully). Jack was ten years older than Thea. He’d been married before and was already the father of a daughter – this earlier family quite absent from their lives, especially when Jack and Thea’s son “Ed” was born in 1955. When Astley hit her forties she took a lover and the relationship with Don Whittington, a journalist like Thea’s father, lasted around five years. Some of Astley’s characters know the scorch of desire and have affairs but for Sheridan, this significant relationship lies out of focus.

According to Karen Lamb’s *Thea Astley*, Whittington “was a man who appreciated and listened to women, was not afraid if they had ideas” (Lamb, 178). Jack clearly tolerated the relationship – it was conducted exceptionally openly while the marriage stayed intact – and apparently it was the escalation of an unbearable “Catholic” guilt that made Astley end it. Sheridan doesn’t mention the relationship at all.

Someone inquiring into Astley’s artistry might ask, was the relationship a necessary assertion that Astley *would* think for herself and that, at least for a particular period of her life, she *needed* the stimulation of this particular individual to feed her artistic life, to help her “think”? Sheridan, however, sticks only to “the works” like glue.

Q. Is it true that Astley’s work has not “received the sustained critical appreciation that it deserves” (112)?

A. Sheridan believes so. It’s a sentiment that Astley herself voiced. Sheridan likens Astley’s experience to that of Christina Stead, “the other great Australian woman novelist of the

twentieth century” whose literary reputation has fluctuated (3). Part of the problem, Sheridan hints, is that postcolonial critics regularly fail to recognise Astley’s own postcolonial viewpoint, in the later novels at least. They mis-read the novels and contribute to creating a culture of neglect. Sheridan gives an example of a critic who is unhappy with Astley’s rendering of Aboriginality. In this, and similar responses, Sheridan faces the criticisms, evaluates the critical perspectives, and successfully counters them with evidence from the novels. Equally evenly, she acknowledges the critical insights of fellow critics such as Robert Zeller who observes that Astley gives Nature all “the violent verbs” (97), Cheryl Taylor and many others. (The bibliography alone is valuable and impressive.)

If one were to ask, is Sheridan too full of praise? the answer might lie in this fact: between 1986 and 1999, Astley produced six major works in which she looks at patriarchal power relations and post-colonial perspectives on race relations.

One of these was *Beachmasters* (1986), the result of a couple of research trips to Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides under the French) and, Sheridan says, was written at the height of her powers. In it, Astley developed her “capacity to take on overtly political themes” to give a political perspective on colonialism. It was her tenth book, Sheridan says, and “one of her most significant achievements” but one that “never won the recognition it deserved” (68).

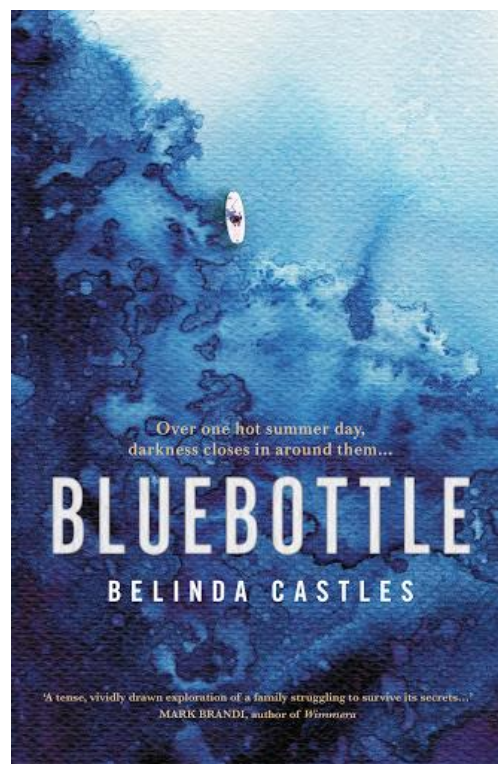
The Fiction of Thea Astley is a condensed and measured work of literary criticism. In the desire to highlight Thea Astley’s contribution to Australian literature, Sheridan succeeds admirably. A definitive work.

Lesley Synge holds a BA, a Dip Ed, and a Master of Creative Writing from The University of Queensland. She is published in many genres and is currently contributing a column “Chasing the Wild Pineapple” (2019–2020) to *Writing Queensland* to pay “tribute to Thea Astley... founding member of the Queensland Writers Centre.” www.lesleysynge.com

Backwash

Belinda Castles, *Bluebottle*.

New South Wales: Griffin Press, 2018.



Reviewed by Emma Hamwood

Australian author, Belinda Castles has written four books. Her first novel was *Falling Woman* (2000); the second, *The River Baptists* (2007) was the winner of the Australian Vogel Literary Award (2006) while her third novel is *Hannah & Emil* (2012). In 2018, she released her fourth book, *Bluebottle*. The title can be interpreted as denoting the setting at Bilgola Beach, relationships of character, and the sting of the plot.

Castles' fiction novel, *Bluebottle*, is about the Bright family – Charlie, Tricia, Louisa, Phoebe, and Jack – and their sudden move to a beach house when doubt forms within the family after the disappearance of their neighbour's daughter, Monica Kazmi. The novel focuses on the relationship of the characters within the family and how they cope with the tidal wave of changing emotions and the unanswered questions of moments that don't quite make sense at the time. Years later, the Bright family come together to revisit the house and express thoughts and memories that were not originally crystal clear.

The notion of time is problematised by the creation of two shifting time frames of the story: one in 1994 and the other twenty years later. This is noticeable as one chapter is written in present perspective – talking about the incidents as they occur – then the next chapter

alternates to a future perspective – reflecting on past events – bringing out the separation of the years. This allows the reader to contrast between the present and the future and allows a form of deception to develop.

There is a balance between nostalgia and pain as each family member has to cope with a burden because of the erratic behaviour of Charlie, the father. Due to his expressions and comments, his different individual treatment of each child leaves various impressions. Louisa seemed to find her father's reactions about Monica suspicious and took it upon herself to nose around through his possessions. Louisa was a rebellious child who tried to push the limits and cause trouble. In the future, she goes into depth as she reveals her thoughts: "She wanted that feeling again; it was what life was for. Those days when you could not be stopped, when all the air above the ocean rushed into you and you were light, fast, out ahead" (173). She expresses her desire for the rush and thrill of the past, but this can be interpreted as her regretting that she no longer has it any more. Her reflection, "The only reason to ever go back and do something again was to give yourself the second chance to get it right" (172). The effort of attempting to fix the problem that can sometimes mend the previous mistakes and misconceptions since the information gained can change perceptions. When Louisa and her family return to the house, this signifies that they are trying to understand the past better.

The memories of the other daughter, Phoebe, appear to be dispersed since she does not remember events or conversations that revolved around Charlie. Her thoughts are summarised as: "These memories, like a piece of glass on a thread around her neck that she forgot about until it shifted and cut the skin" (180). She mentions that she completely forgot about a particular discussion but the more she thinks about it, the more she starts to recognise that she recalls it in another way. There are missing gaps in everyone's memory and people remember things differently because memories can be deceptive and unreliable. Has Phoebe blocked out everything that reminds her of Charlie as a way of protecting herself from the pain?

Jack, the son, suffers from anxiety and panic attacks that seem to be triggered by Charlie's impulsive actions. Even though Jack's friend Monica was missing, the responsibility of Charlie fell onto him. Charlie tried to dedicate a day to Monica but ignored how his actions could have impacted other people. It was on a day that eventually caused Jack to endure a

twenty-year unspoken burden. It allowed Jack's siblings to move on from the incidents but left him with regrets. His sister, Louisa, acknowledges his sacrifice: "That's what he had absorbed for her, enough time dragging this awful weight behind him for her to be able to love him still" (243). She learns that Jack was selfless as he withheld and tolerated the guilt to save everyone. His emotional damage doesn't disappear, it still follows him in his memories. This illustrates that he values protecting his family over himself and this expresses that sometimes the actions of our past can remain with us. In some cases, some things are better left unsaid as nothing could have changed it.

The author creates a sense of place through the visual description of the setting which captures the beach essence. Each family member associates the setting, the house on the beach, with experiences and memories of moments of a particular character. *Bluebottle* symbolises that the characters resemble an ocean that contains many qualities: occasionally it is calm and peaceful, other times it is vicious and destructive. Some misunderstandings of characteristics give the wrong impression and can be interpreted as deceit when unclarified. The novel highlights the idea that everyone has various ways to solve potential problems and to express emotions and feelings. Our reactions can change based upon the events and how much time has passed. The past embodies a reflection of who you are, but the future reflects how you have developed or changed. Struggles are not always with other people they can be within ourselves and how we come to terms with things.

The story dynamic draws attention to the backwash effect childhood can have on adulthood. Castles shows the importance of trust in family but recognises that unexpected and painful events have repercussions, like the sting of a bluebottle in the ocean. *Bluebottle* would hold value to people that can resonate with a family tension that escalates as a mystery slowly unfolds.

Emma Hamwood is an aspiring novelist and screenplay writer from The University of Queensland. She hopes to travel and learn more languages while progressing with her writing.

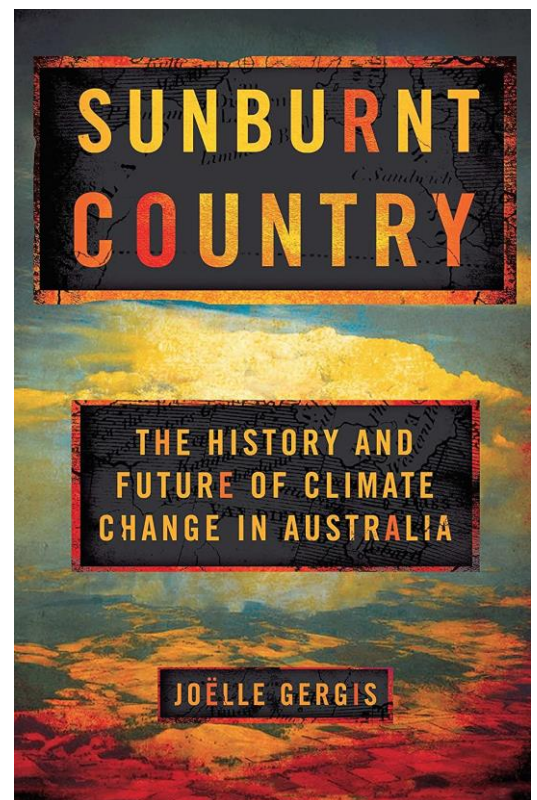
Always the Land of Legendary Droughts and Floods?

Joëlle Gergis, *Sunburnt Country*:

The History and Future of Climate Change in Australia.

Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Emily Duncanson



Climate scientist and researcher in the University of Melbourne's School of Earth Sciences, Joëlle Gergis skilfully combines the history of colonialism and science as she navigates her way through the climate timeline of Australia to tell the story of *Sunburnt Country*.

As a step back in time and a view of our future regarding climate, Gergis focuses her story on variances and links with Australia's unforgiving climatic and weather events. In a sunburnt country of red and brown lands, she focuses upon communicating her knowledge of, and rapport with such a place, and conveys a strong sense of advocacy as she discusses topics from El Niño and La Niña to the diary entries of settlers in Australia and their experiences with the extremes and the problems they faced.

Cycles such as El Niño and La Niña are responsible for influencing floods, droughts, and extreme heatwaves in this country, with what Gergis refers to as a tug of war between cool and wet temperatures from the South and warm and tropical ones from the North (23). The saying "ignorance is bliss" was often taken all too seriously as the white settlers in Australia chose to do just that – ignore it. Gergis outlines the history of the settlers and their actions during the time of their discovering Australia's ruthless conditions. Flooding was common, and the settlers took little to no action to acknowledge its regularity or understand its patterns; ultimately, loss of human lives, crops, and swine occurred time and time again.

It was not until Hawkesbury settlers acknowledged the similarity of flood events in 1809 and 1816 that they began to read the tell-tale signs of future flooding occurrences and accept that major damage to farms around the Hawkesbury River was probable. But though the settlers were now aware of the danger, their hopes for fruitful agricultural land were too high for them to be convinced to relocate. Discussion of the dedication (or obtuseness) of the settlers back then trying to make something of the land, demonstrates change. Do we still have dedicated farmers? Yes. But do we still grow crops on riverbanks knowing full well that any flood event, particularly an unforeseen one, could be detrimental to those crops? No. We live and we learn, and the picture that the first few chapters paint of the white settlers encourages us to believe we have indeed evolved as a species. Having this shown in the book reminds us how far science has also come and what it is capable of, but it also shows us how our climate has changed over time.

The book moves on to discuss a harsh drought of the 1800s and emphasises the evolution of thinking in that, when the government realised the drought was coming, they took measures to try to ensure there would be no food shortages. The agricultural land, however, inevitably suffered. The timeline indicating a jump from one major event to another demonstrates Australia's taxing climate and can be read in comparing today's climatic occurrences to those during the 1700s and 1800s and how humans responded to them and/or were affected by them.

The story's events are told in order of category rather than by moment in time. It is broken up into Parts 1–5 with each containing chapters of their categories. This is an effective way to set it out and could be especially helpful for researchers looking for information only on one topic (flood or climate recording techniques, for example) who do not require the information about the other events mentioned through the book. The chapter headings indicate what each includes, but then the author extends the account in describing the events through each chapter in line with her cross-disciplinary approach, forming a more comprehensive understanding of the timeline of the events.

Gergis knew how difficult it would be to know what happened before the year 1900 (the start of the Bureau of Meteorology's official climate records) and therefore hunted down Australia's early weather records to better understand the climate before the twentieth century (58). Her research into many different sources, including handwritten weather

observations by colonial settlers, demonstrates the spread of resources she used to piece together this climate timeline. Her discussion of differences between how meteorologists generate their forecasts compared with how the Indigenous people of the land did this demonstrates her interest in cross-cultural perspectives and different practices for generating knowledge.

The *Sydney Gazette* is referenced and quoted throughout the book as one of the main sources. While Gergis's research has gone to many lengths and she has referenced many scientists, she also acknowledged and appreciated the information that a publication such as the *Sydney Gazette* could provide. She uses diverse references to back up her statements and facts and invokes Dorothea Mackellar's poem *My Country* at different moments through the book to make readers thoughtful about what they think and read: "And have we always been the land of legendary droughts and floods?" (59).

On seeing the title, what do you expect the book to be about? When I read it, I immediately pictured the reddened soil and the overbearing sun – a hot, golden country. But is the book about what I thought when reading the title? The answer is yes, but in a different frame. Australia is the focus in *Sunburnt Country* and using the nickname for the country as the title is appropriate considering that the book discusses in great detail the harsh weather conditions including that of the sun and heat and their effects on the land.

In terms of my own experiences relative to the subject, they are of course minor in comparison to Joëlle Gergis's. I am a science student highly invested in learning about earth and environmental sciences including geography, geology, and surveying. Because of my background in science, I have formed a great passion for what is discussed throughout *Sunburnt Country*; this influenced my opinions when reading it.

My favourite thing about this book was the courageous mixture of techniques and sources used to form the overview of our climate. I loved the science side of the book but had little previous interest in the history that is a major part of making the book what it is and getting its message across. If I could change anything in this book, it would be the flow. I would rearrange it so that the topics link and merge into each other smoothly. The cross-disciplinary technique produces richer approaches but has the potential to be challenging for some readers, perhaps.

Are societies learning from past mistakes? Is humanity moving forward, backward or remaining stagnant? Gergis understands the urgency and importance of the information she has delivered through her book and encourages people to learn more. An example of this is when she writes: “As the old saying goes, those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it” (215). I feel that she definitely achieved her goal with this book, in helping people learn from the past to help them in the future. This book contains extensive content on climate and the history of it in our country and it would be reckless not to acknowledge what she has taken the time to teach us.

Haunting and impossible to put down, *Sunburnt Country* highlights the importance of taking care of our country and the necessity to understand it. This book paints a captivating picture of Australia and its climate of the past, present and future through Gergis’s interrogation of colonisation, earth and environmental sciences, and ultimately, how humans are contributing to or affecting the planet. The complexity captured in this book pushes readers to be in awe of our country’s climatic traits. Joëlle Gergis has, throughout *Sunburnt Country*, successfully met her goal of engaging and educating readers on Australia’s climate timeline.

Emily Duncanson is an aspiring writer and geographical scientist, who is currently studying a dual Bachelor of Science and Arts at The University of Queensland.

Cover Artist: Mary Leunig

Mary Leunig, born in Melbourne in 1950, attended Footscray North State School and Marlbyrnong High. She studied art at Prahran Institute of Technology 1968-1969, had two children, Joseph and Kitty, and then went back to complete her art studies at Preston Institute of Technology from 1974-1975, majoring in printmaking and drawing.

Leunig has had the following books of drawings published:

- *There's No Place Like Home*. 1982. Aust, NZ, UK, USA, Canada; Penguin Books
- *A Piece of Cake*. 1985. Aust, NZ, UK, Canada; Penguin Books
- *Trautes Heim*. 1988. Germany; Scarabaus bei Eichhorn (German edition of *A Piece of Cake*)
- *One Big Happy Family*. 1992. Aust, NZ, UK, Canada; Penguin Books
- *Black White and Grey*. 1995. Aust, NZ, UK; Penguin Books
- *One Good Turn*. 2018. Brow Books

Artwork has been published in various newspapers and magazines including *The Lifted Brow*, the *Age*, *Nation Review*, *Meanjin*, *Heat Magazine*, the *Meatworkers Journal*, *Time*, *Penthouse*, *Der Rabe* and the *AWU Magazine*.

She has produced images for various government departments, community groups and organisations including:

- Australian Teachers Union, Stop Domestic Violence.
- Binburra Film Company, *Fences*.
- Fitzroy Legal Service, Users' Guide to Family Law.
- United Nations, Shelter for the Homeless.
- MAV, Support Women in Local Government.

- ABC, *After the Beep* television series.
- Victorian AIDS Council, Gay Men's Health Centre.
- Organisation for the Ordination of Women.
- Melbourne Fringe Festival.

Other works include:

- A theatre production titled *Daze of our Lives*, based on work by Mary Leunig which was performed by Handspan Theatre at the Victorian Arts Centre in 1995 and toured nationally and internationally.
- An artworker at Victorian Trades Hall Council from 1987–1989 producing drawings, posters, pamphlets and a union banner for Wally Curran and the Meat Workers' Union.
- A member of WAC, Workers Art Collective.