

**Australian Women's Book Review**

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Debbie Harman Quadri

**Editor:** Carole Ferrier

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## Contents

4. **Editorial**  
By Carole Ferrier.
6. **Discovering Whiteness**  
By Rosalind Kidd.
10. **Kate Jennings. Interview with Julie McCrossin.**  
Radio National, Life Matters. Thursday 23 May 2002.
18. **The One Who Looked Like Beethoven**  
By Alison Lambert.
22. **Funny for Some, Terrifying for Others: The Ready-Made Worldview**  
Cassandra Pybus, *Raven Road*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Janine Little.
26. **Evoking/Invoking India**  
*The Anger of Aubergines*. By Bulbul Sharma. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000.  
*Goja: an Autobiographical Myth*. By Suniti Namjoshi. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000.  
Reviewed by Alison Bartlett.
28. **Diving into the Heart of Empire**  
Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2001  
Reviewed by Barbara Garlick.
30. **Ambiguity Stripped Bare**  
Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*.  
London and New York: Routledge, 2001.  
Reviewed by Morgan Thomas.
34. **Staying at Home with the Weekly.**  
Susan Sheridan (with Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett and Lyndall Ryan), *Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years*.  
Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Maryanne Dever.
36. **In the Direction of a Signpost**  
Dorothy Hewett, *Nowhere*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic.
43. **Long Waiting in the Wings**  
Susan Pfisterer and Carolyn Pickett, *Playing with Ideas: Australian Women Playwrights from the Suffragettes to the Sixties*.  
Sydney: Currency Press, 1999.  
Reviewed by Kerry Kilner.
46. **Through an (American) Afghani Girl's Eyes**  
Deborah Ellis, *Parvana*. Toronto: Allen and Unwin, 2002.  
Reviewed by Jo Lampert.

50. **The Fragmented Story of a Journey to Wholeness**  
Irimi Savvides, *Willow Tree and Olive*: Sydney: Hodder Headline Australia, 2001.  
Reviewed by Leanne Bensley.
52. **The Hallmark of the Ordinary**  
Anita Diamant, *Good Harbour*. Allen and Unwin, 2001  
Reviewed by Carolyn Hughes.
54. **What Do You Mean by Your Country?**  
Sylvia Lawson, *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia: Stories and Essays*.  
Sydney: University of New South Wales Publishing, 2002.  
Reviewed by Shirley Tucker.
56. **Eating Restraint in the Face of Excess**  
Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. Routledge, 2000.  
Reviewed by Angela Hirst.
58. **The Difficulties of Celebrity**  
Tara Brabazon, *Ladies Who Lunge: Celebrating Difficult Women*.  
Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002.  
Reviewed by Kelly McWilliam.
60. **Unlikely Alliances? Lesbian-Feminism and Queer Theory**  
Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Alexandra Winter.
63. **Lest We Remember**  
Carolyn Polizzotto, *A Trick of the Light*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Tania Oost.
65. **An Eye On the Public Record**  
Dawn Fraser, *Dawn: One Hell of a Life*. Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2001.  
Reviewed by Margaret Henderson.
67. **Colonial or post-colonial religion? Reading Aboriginal Christianity**  
Heather McDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit: Aboriginal Christianity in an East Kimberley Town*. Carlton South, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2002.  
Reviewed by Anne Elvey.
71. **Adjusting One's Head to Advanced Research**  
Diana Leonard, *A Woman's Guide to Doctoral Studies*.  
Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002.  
Reviewed by Myfanwy McDonald.
74. **Cartoons by Debbie Harman Qadri.**

## EDITORIAL

By Carole Ferrier

A question is posed at one point in Sylvia Lawson's essay collection reviewed here: 'What do you mean by your country?' And what, the writers and readers of this review journal might ponder, is meant by 'Australian' women in our title? This land mass began to be called 'Australia' just over a hundred years ago, at Federation. Forty-plus years of indentured labour (mainly in Queensland), a situation close to slavery for the South Sea Islanders who were named Kanakas, ended then, largely for the wrong reasons, with the establishment of the White Australia Policy. This policy still lurks in the national consciousness, insofar as there is such a thing, and has emerged again in terms of how non-white asylum seekers have been treated through the 1990s, and up to now. The few hundred intercepted refugees who have tried to come here on boats have triggered a massive campaign of closed borders around this land mass, and there has been a denial to nearly all of them of any possibility of becoming Australian. More than half are from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, all regimes that the Australian government has publicly denounced as repressive of human rights. But along with thousands more with visa irregularities (but oddly, not many of anglo-origin) who have been rounded up, the refugees have been locked in detention centres run by the discredited ACM (an American private prison operator), mostly far away from the cities where more organised support might be found from those who do not want 'Australia' to present to the world outside an ugly, very white face with a gun behind it.

Angela Davis sees contemporary society and globalised capital as a 'prison industrial complex.' The detention centres contain people from outside this 'Australia' refused refuge; the prisons contain people from within it who are rejected by it (or who sometimes reject it themselves), mainly the most disadvantaged in this culture. The Indigenous inhabitants (although they could not officially call themselves 'Australian' until the 1960s) make up a high percentage of the incarcerated population, for some reasons clarified by Ros Kidd's article in this issue; she tells how her knowledge of the history of white/Aboriginal race relations has meant that 'my sense of myself as a member of a just society is fractured.' Many others have reported the same feeling in relation to the treatment of the *Tampa* and other boats of refugees - that they no longer feel comfortable to be 'Australian' as it is currently being constructed in these times. John Howard was re-elected on the slogan 'For all of us.' This invoking of a shared commonality of interests involves the suppression of difference and diversity, a turning back of 'Australia's' movement towards being a 'multicultural' society, in which varying ethnicities could be a source of interest and joy, not a source of fear.

The shadow of recent international developments hangs over this issue, and many of the reviews express their awareness of it. Not so much September 11, as the subsequent responses - a brutal bombardment of an already war-ravaged country, a massive redirection of national wealth in the developed Western First World towards the buttressing of capitalist interests, and huge budget allocations for the identification and pursuit of a 'Terror' somewhere out there beyond the borders.

What is this Terror that governments in the West seem to be pushing into our hearts and minds? Does it spring in part at least from guilt that is repressed about the misery of the lives of those upon whom capitalism feeds like a vampire to maintain itself, and benefit some? One of the really terrifying things, Helen Caldicott's recent book *The Nuclear Danger: George W. Bush's Military-Industrial Complex* reminds us, is nuclear war. Pine Gap near Alice Springs is an American-controlled base essential for the prosecution of the American-dominated New World (Law and) Order. During the Gulf war, Colin Powell was instructed to prepare a plan for possible nuclear strikes on Iraq. Pine Gap would have been

used for this, as it was for the 'conventional' wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. Australian foreign policy has had these alliances and these bases for decades but they are currently being dramatically upscaled. The last (and only) time nuclear weapons were used it was supposedly to stop fascism. But the current surveillance, secret policing, and government prioritising of burgeoning military might, bear increasing resemblances to the early days of fascism in the 1930s. Is 'Terror' in Australian uniforms not terror at all? Does counter-terrorism (to which this year's Budget in May re-directed massive funds that could have been spent on welfare and education) actually produce anything other than an escalation of what it supposedly sets out to combat? The turn in most of the West over the past few years, and greatly accelerated since last year, to conservative governments, surveillance and militarism, has been compared to the 1950s; more recently however the similarities beginning to be drawn are with the 1930s and the rise of fascism.

Arundhati Roy in a recent article in the *New Statesman* has named the situation in Gujarat in India specifically as 'incipient, creeping fascism' particularly in relation to the persecution of India's Muslims. But she seems to underestimate the degree to which this might also be identified throughout the West. She suggests that George Bush and the Coalition Against Terror created 'a congenial international atmosphere' for its rise, although for 'years it has been brewing in our public and private lives.' But she seems to be blind to the way in which it could also be seen to be being prepared for in the West: one minor concession after another made to economic rationalism, gradually adding up to a whole shift of direction, a whole new worldview. John Howard's role in this in Australia is discussed by Nathan Hollier in the *politicsandculture* journal that you can also find on this website.

This issue of the *Australian Women's Book Review* contains an interview with Kate Jennings who has in some ways followed in the tracks of Christina Stead who left Australia in the late 1920s for Europe and America, marrying an American banker, Bill Blake, writing about the world of high finance in *House of all Nations* (1938), and living in New York for long periods. Her posthumously published novel, *I'm Dying Laughing* was about attacks on the American left, especially cultural workers, during the McCarthyite days. Along with many other Australian women intellectuals, Stead has been important in offering incisive critiques of capitalism and imperialism, and their concomitant ethnocentrism and sexism. Australian women were among the first to get the vote and the socialist-oriented Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s made huge gains in terms of services for women and other progressive social policies, and women's visibility in public life. Particularly offensive to many feminists has been the suggestion that the war in Afghanistan was made in women's name to liberate them from oppression. Violence is also being enacted against minority women here (most visibly in the detention centres that have been described as 'concentration camps') in the name of 'Australian' women.

Virginia Woolf says in *Three Guineas* (1938): 'as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.' Women in Australia could combat the destructive potential of globalising and increasingly militaristic capital by thinking about this view too.

**Review articles are anonymously refereed.**

Contributors are paid \$60 per review, \$90 per review article.

This is the fourth issue of *AWBR* since it became an internet magazine. *AWBR* is published twice yearly in May and November (and appears at the same time as the two issues of *Hecate* per year). It is Australia's only women's review of books (on or off the net). We publish reviews by Australian women of both Australian and, occasionally, other texts, and welcome new reviewers.

## **Discovering Whiteness**

By Rosalind Kidd.

Ten years ago when I first started researching the activities of the Queensland government's Aboriginal Department I had several aims: to acquire for myself a knowledge of government operations during the twentieth century; to do a thorough job in accessing the widest possible range of information; and to come up with new ways of conceptualising practices such as exile to reserves, separation of children from their families, and forced labour. In particular, I wanted some sense of how Aboriginal families experienced these and other aspects of a century of 'care and protection.'

I started off as a middle-class middle-aged woman researching for a PhD thesis and ended up, after reading hundreds of files and thousands of documents, sitting in a room surrounded by paper and thinking: What if this had been me? How would I have coped? What does it mean that I now have this knowledge? The complexity of this suffocating system of controls, the scope and depth of unbelievable deprivation, absolutely beggars belief.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, in Queensland and around Australia, each of the states gave itself total power over Aboriginal lives. As settlement appropriated all the fertile land, Aboriginal families were deported even from dry areas; it was claimed their presence near waterholes or rivers frightened the cattle. Carted off to missions and settlements according to the provisions of carefully crafted 'protection' laws, people died of diseases and starvation because the institutions were invariably located on useless land and the government refused to provide funds sufficient for survival. People who escaped to look for food and work were hunted down and returned in chains. On reserves, work was compulsory and unpaid until the late 1960s, rations and housing condemned as pathologically substandard, and the whole sorry mess handed to Aboriginal community councils in the late 1980s. And now these conditions are largely blamed on poor council administration and misplaced ATSI priorities.

Every employed Aboriginal in Queensland was contracted by the government for 51 weeks out of 52, with or without his or her family. To refuse such separation was to be beaten or banished, usually to Palm Island. Some never saw or heard from families again. On the backs of this workforce of between 4000 and 5000 men, women and children, the Queensland pastoral industry developed and prospered. Surveys showed that Aboriginal workers were often regarded as more skilled than whites, but a gentlemen's agreement struck in 1919 between government and pastoralists set Aboriginal pay at 66% of the white rate for the next 50 years. That was the stated procedure. But in some years workers actually received as little as 31%, and never, during its control of private wages that only ceased in 1970, never did the government ensure that even this money was received by the worker. The government maintained a system blighted by fraud; it extracted levies from pitiful earnings; it misused and mismanaged trust funds; it seized around 80% of private savings to generate revenue for the state on the facile pretext that the money was 'idle' and 'surplus to needs'. Account holders, some with considerable finances of which they were kept totally ignorant, lived and died in grinding poverty. Now we begin to understand the despair and destitution of today.

What most appalled me was the sheer bloody mindedness and perversity as, decade after decade, power compounded power, entrenching a punitive system for the sake of maintaining controls, in the face of mounting evidence of outcomes patently contrary to publicly stated aims. What I found most offensive

was the realisation that during all of these years, when the causal factor was so clearly the pernicious system itself and the men who implemented it with such dogmatic determination, it was the people who were blamed, misrepresented, maligned and discounted as the root cause of their own damnable circumstances. As is still so often the case today.

If you are driven from country which has sustained you for generations, if you are denied access to rental housing or casual accommodation, if those of you in work are denied the cash you are earning, if you are thereby struggling in shanties without the clean water, sanitation, shelter, food, clothing and schooling that is mandated for all other Australians how does it feel to be told it is your failure to provide a good home environment that alerts authorities to the need to 'rescue' your children from your negligence? How does it feel to know, from experience, that you might never see your little ones again? To realise, from the cold hard facts of your position, that you can't afford to follow to be near them? To know, from bitter experience, that the authorities will neither listen to your protests nor respect your heartache? What does it mean for ourselves as Australians to know now, as surely as I know from the evidence, that these children who were taken into government 'care and protection' and the adults they became were trapped, across many generations, in conditions as bad, and often worse, than those from which they were deemed to have been 'rescued'?

Here are some sketches of conditions on government settlements. On Palm Island in the 1930s nearly every baby died who was not breastfed, because the only alternative was arrowroot and condensed milk. Here the doctor asked head office whether it was 'worth while trying to save them' by providing vitamin-enriched formula. At Cherbourg, the government's showpiece institution, the walls of the dormitory were described as 'literally alive with bugs ... beds, bed clothing, pillows and mattresses are all infested ... all pillows were filthy because the previous matron withheld pillowslips to save washing'. In the 1950s malnourished dormitory children succumbed to tuberculosis because, as the expert reported, they slept several to a bed in overcrowded and badly ventilated barracks. The government was warned that the encaging of large numbers of children and unmarried women behind barbed wire and locked doors was artificial, unnatural and pernicious, but dormitories continued to be used, even into the 1970s, as places of detention.

For around 70 years, the Queensland government simply ignored its own law requiring every child to be given a regular education. As early as 1905 the Chief Protector had obtained advice from the crown solicitor that Aboriginal children were not exempted from this basic right. Yet the government had no intention of providing standard teachers, classrooms or learning resources for these wards of state. Until the 1950s, lessons were limited to a half-day so children could work in the afternoons; they had to make do with cast off and outdated materials from the white schools, with unpaid native monitors as teachers. Only in the last few decades has orthodox schooling been provided. Yet the public was told Aboriginal children were intellectually backward. And in the wider community it was the atrocious conditions on the Department's own reserves, where basic amenities were deliberately vetoed on the grounds that they might encourage people to reside there, that were reported, time and time again, as the sole grounds that children were refused access to local schools.

The Department even denied local councils permission to erect necessary amenities, and dismissed white lobbyists as socialist meddlers. From the 1960s, in the name of assimilation, it sanctioned the eviction of families and the destruction of their huts 'on health grounds' conditions for which the Department was itself responsible when it knew that no alternative accommodation was available. In the 1970s, as federally-funded low-rent houses proliferated, families trying to help each other out

risked eviction as Departmental agents warned against overcrowding and 'unsuitable' visitors.

I am horrified and ashamed to read the machinations of this pitiless system. I am ashamed to know that many families with large bank accounts had to go cap in hand to ask permission to make small withdrawals, permission that was frequently refused. Shame turned to disgust now I know that the government knew of, was consistently warned of widespread frauds by both employers and police, but always refused to implement the simplest check namely that people see some record of what was being done to their own savings. Disgust turned to anger now I know that the government itself was taking money from savings for trust accounts it misused and purloined, it engineered 'consent' for deductions to pay for improvements on Departmental reserves, it seized the bank interest and, in the late 1950s, it simply wrote itself a regulation so it could invest hundreds of thousands of pounds of those savings in development projects of regional hospitals when Aboriginal patients were dying of cross infections in the under-resourced and inadequately staffed equivalents.

I am horrified and ashamed to have lived oblivious to such calculated inhumanity. I am also diminished. My sense of myself as a member of a just society is fractured as surely as if I had stepped on a landmine. I am horrified at how late it was in life that I came to learn the terrible realities endured by Aboriginal families at the hands of governments. And this knowledge is very confronting: because I'm one of the millions of Australians who have never gone hungry, I have never been cast adrift from my family, I have always had a roof over my head, a warm bed, my wages in my hand to spend on my needs.

It's not just a case of 'adding in' this untold history. This evidence cannot be characterised as a few awkward last pieces to be fitted in to an almost-completed national jigsaw as our Prime Minister seems to suggest. This is not simply a matter of adjusting the colour and contrast of a two-dimensional representation of our 'development' from the primitive to the modern. What this evidence reveals is a submerged operational dynamic within our national psyche. The diminishment and degradation of Aboriginal agency in Australian history is the diminishment and degradation of us all. Knowing only part of our history, our identity is open to manipulation and distortion. If we could embrace the true content and outcomes of government management of Aboriginal lives, much of the 'whiteness' of our identity would be replaced by the multi-colours of reality. White explorers did not, like conquering heroes, 'open up' the outback and pave the way for 'civilisation'; they were watched, guided and often rescued by those whose country it was, those who knew it infinitely better, those who moved and endured lightly on the landscape. White miners, stockmen and settlers did not 'pioneer' life in the bush; most remote properties and towns were dependent on the labour of thousands of Aboriginal men, women and children, with more than 1000 working full time by 1880 in Queensland alone. Time and time again in the twentieth century pastoralists stated they could not survive without cheap black labour.

These facts are indicative of more than history untold; they also represent debts unpaid. Debts of acknowledgment, debts of regret and, in practical, accountable terms, financial debts. In Queensland alone, calculations show that Aboriginal labour, unpaid and underpaid in the pastoral industry and in developing the communities, is more than a billion dollars in today's value - calculating only from the 1940s. In Queensland today the state admits it has profited from this forced labour; but while this profit amounted to around half a billion dollars annually the state is currently offering about \$55 million, 'in the spirit of reconciliation' as they put it, 'so we can move on.' That's \$4000 for some workers and half that for others. For decades of work.

This is not some unfortunate blight on our past to be 'whited out' with an amount the Departmental budget can comfortably accommodate. My argument is that their wages and savings, denied or missing or misappropriated, are their legal right; they are not within the province of the government to bestow 'in the spirit of reconciliation.' These workers helped build each state. Aboriginal workers, Aboriginal families, are integral to our nationhood, not a late addition. It would seem, in our present political climate, that we have a fight on our hands to reclaim this dynamic our multi-coloured past and present. Well, so be it. History is far too important to leave to the whims of temporary politicians.

This is a good fight, a purifying fight, a fight to claim truth for our nation and our identity. My personal belief is that it is also a unifying fight. We can stand together and work for truth in our history, for the expansion rather than the contraction of our knowledge, for the inclusion rather than the ostracism of our brothers and sisters. We can demand acknowledgment and dignity for those denied it by our forebears and, sadly, by many of our peers; we can be enriched by their stories, their experiences, their culture. And I have found, without question, that I also am empowered through this fight to disseminate knowledge and to win justice. I am still only five foot one; but I am taller, stronger, and richer through my friendships and this shared struggle. I am fighting because to know is to be indelibly implicated: the choice is to walk away or to take action literally, for truth and justice. My reward is to look my children and grandchildren in the eye and say Yes, I learned of it; Yes, I am ashamed and disgusted; and Yes, I am doing all in my power to change it.

**Dr Rosalind Kidd's recent publications include *The Way We Civilise* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997) and *Black Lives, Government Lies* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000). (A version of this article was presented at the Unfinished Business Conference in Melbourne in June 2002.)**

## **Kate Jennings. Interview with Julie McCrossin.**

Radio National, Life Matters. Thursday 23 May 2002.

**JM**

Kate Jennings grew up on a farm in outback Australia in the fifties. It was a toughening childhood, and as it turned out, she has needed all her native resilience to pursue her life's course.

A passionate feminist, she was well known in Australia in the 1960s for a remarkable and confrontational speech which, basically, launched the Australian women's movement. She also edited a book of poems by Australian women, *Mother, I'm Rooted*, which was a best-seller – over 10,000 copies, and she published her own volume of tough-type poetry, *Come To Me My Melancholy Baby*.

Then she moved to New York, and married Bob, an art director, a much older man.

Kate visited Australia for the Sydney Writers Festival to launch her second novel *Moral Hazard*. Written in spare beautiful prose, it is loosely autobiographical, and based on two major events in her life in the 1990s – her husband's diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease and, as a consequence, her taking a job as a speechwriter on Wall Street....

**JM**

In this interview, Kate, we'll try to get a sense of a life journey, so I want a snapshot of the Kate of the late 60s, might have been the early 70s, on the front lawn of the University of Sydney, it's a moratorium against the Vietnam War and you gave a very provocative speech about women, can you take us there with a picture?

**KJ**

I think you'd call that speech 'in your face.' They were wild, rackets outrageous days and we were not getting the attention of the men at that point. We were a very small group that started meeting and that was the speech I gave. I'm not sure that we can actually say it out loud on radio. It was that outrageous.

**JM**

But what was the core content, the cry from the heart?

**KJ**

The cry from the heart was that we were all Vietnam activists and the men were all gung-ho about fighting that cause, and nobody cared about women, and at that stage women could not have legal abortions.

**JM**

And when you look back are you amazed at the courage you had, that was a new voice then, the voice of women saying: 'Look out over here, something's happening, or not happening?'

**KJ**

When I look back at all my life I am amazed, I do keep walking a plank. I thought those days were terrific.

**JM**  
Why?

**KJ**  
We were very inventive. We weren't as earnest as people are making us out to be now. I don't think of course those tactics are necessary now. Goodness, you sending me right back.

**JM**  
At that time, to talk of women in Australia and their issues, wasn't it perceived as a betrayal of the much greater suffering of the Vietnamese people?

**KJ**  
Oh absolutely, and also you have to remember what it was like back then. We have become used to Feminism. Feminism has just infiltrated all our lives and it's taken for granted and it wasn't then.

**JM**  
You went to New York, you went to the United States, why?

**KJ**  
I took off. Just the grand tradition of Australians leaving and going elsewhere, instead of going to England I went to New York, and having a lot of pride and not wanting to come home with my tail between my legs, I stayed.

**JM**  
And you didn't want to be an academic, did you? That was part of it.

**KJ**  
No, absolutely not; with all due respect to academics, they often seem as if they have got both feet nailed to the floor.

**JM**  
Why not that life, why not the feet to the floor?

**KJ**  
I wanted experience, the real world.

**JM**  
And what was real about New York, what was the excitement, the attraction?

**KJ**  
What anybody else would say about New York, it's a very very competitive, unforgiving city, and it suited me, it made me clean up my act, and really concentrate and remake myself, and I needed to do that at that stage.

**JM**  
When you say clean up your act, what did you clean up?

**KJ**

One thing, I stopped drinking, 20 years ago now, and I needed to do that and I am glad that I did, I could not have done what I have subsequently done.

**JM**

You choose to get married and in the latest book (*Moral Hazard*) you describe yourself as a 'bedrock feminist,' certainly in your publications of poetry and your editing of poetry and your activism you were a real passionate feminist, so marriage to a much older man might not have been anticipated. Tell us about that, was that a shift within you?

**KJ**

Legally in the States you're better off married and my husband wanted to get married, and I adored him, and he did so much for me that it didn't seem such a large thing.

**JM**

Tell me about Bob, the man you met, that you adored.

**KJ**

He was really generous and optimistic and he taught me to have fun, taught me to be silly, I was a bit of a snarler back then and it was just great good luck, I must say when I met him I thought: 'not for me, he's way too nice.'

**JM**

Why not a nice man for you?

**KJ**

Well, like a lot of women I thought, perhaps men who treat you badly were more suitable. But he certainly grew on me.

**JM**

In your poetry book of the 70s, *Come To Me My Melancholy Baby* (and I searched every book in my house last night, Kate, and I couldn't find my copy) but ...

**KJ**

Just as well.

**JM**

No, but I remember a yearning in there, I remember a poem that began 'Met a man, a fine man ...' and it talked about marriage, was there even in that angry girl of the 70s an echo, a yearning of a desire for love and stability, of real union with a man?

**KJ**

Sure we all would like a companion, and I had the great good luck to find somebody who was exactly that. Because he was older he was also fantastically supportive and that helped a lot, he just encouraged me all the way.

**JM**

When you first think that he might have Alzheimer's?

**KJ**

Several years before he was diagnosed he started forgetting things, and we started going to doctors. It wasn't until ¼ he was working right up to the time of the diagnoses as an art director and he was designing a book and he made a huge mistake, he forgot to get an estimate on the type and we were suddenly in the hole for \$30,000 and it was something that he would have never have done. It wasn't ... when people ask me about the first signs of Alzheimer's it's not forgetting your car keys, it's often huge errors of judgement. And that point we went back to the neurologist and he did lots of cognitive testing, but they also had a new test, a spinal-tap test of amyloid-beta protein and his was through the roof.

**JM**

Didn't the neurologist say some heart stopping words to you at that session?

**KJ**

He did, he said you're going to have to say goodbye to the man you love, and at the time I thought 'you're being melodramatic,' but you don't just say goodbye, you say goodbye every minute of every day for seven years.

**JM**

We've been having a radio diary over the few weeks and we've had a woman over a two years period holding a tape recorder and she kept a diary of what happened when her husband was diagnosed with Dementia. She describes the mood swings as being tough, was that an experience for you?

**KJ**

Oh, absolutely, in the end we really had to medicate him, I describe it in the book, as you said it is loosely based, but he spent a lot of time crying, a lot of time raging and you never knew what exactly he was going to do. But one day I was trying to show him how to do something and he just flew at me and tried to throttle me and at that stage I went back to the doctor and told him and more medication was ordered up, anti-psychotic medication basically.

**JM**

But you say in that incident in the book that the character waits a few days before they go to the doctor because of shame. What's that for?

**KJ**

Yes it was, and even though I knew it was the disease you can't believe that it's happening.

**JM**

Did you feel betrayed by life? You'd got it all together, you'd met the man you loved, you'd 'landscaped your life,' I think is a poem phrase from the 70s, and then this. Did life betray you?

**KJ**

He felt betrayed. He felt that finally he'd got his life together and met the person that he'd wanted to meet, I didn't have the luxury to think about anything much. I had to go to work and earn lots of money to pay for his care, and ... not betrayal, I mean I'd made my decision, I was going to look after him, I

could have just as easily said 'No, I'm too young and it's going to take years,' and tried to make other arrangements, but ... I loved him, I adored him, he was my family.

**JM**

And you accepted at a very deep level, apparently without resentment, that responsibility of care. Not to make it Mary Poppins, I mean it was tough, but you did accept, didn't you, at a very deep level? Tell me about that.

**KJ**

People have asked me about that, and it's strange, but I haven't thought about it, I'm a country girl and I'm really determined and really focused and once I make my mind up to do something I do it.

**JM**

Well, the money. You go to Wall Street which takes us to this novel, *Moral Hazard*, yes there is this amazingly tight unsentimental description of a loved husband and dementia, but there's also absolute equal space to financial matters on Wall Street, had you had any prior experience of the financial world?

**KJ**

Absolutely none. I couldn't tell a stock from a bond. I think that anybody who knew me would really laugh, fall off their chair laughing at the thought of me on Wall Street.

**JM**

Well, you laugh when you know you are writing speeches for executives.

**KJ**

Yes, putting the very words into their mouths.

**JM**

How long did you stay?

**KJ**

Seven years in all. I'm truly not sorry for the experience, I learned so much and as a woman I had always felt side-lined from power, and the big guys, and I couldn't believe that I was actually sitting there with them and watching them in action. I had to pinch myself.

**JM**

You describe the ethic of the big company of the characters as equal parts Marines, CIA, and Las Vegas. What do you mean?

**KJ**

Well they're gamblers, banking is gambling. The Marines – a lot of these guys that work in these companies have come through the army, at that stage quite a few of them had been in Vietnam, so they'd been Marines, ... what was the other one?

**JM**

CIA.

**KJ**

The CIA, oh sure, being a banker is a very good cover for being a spy and there are lots of them in those banks.

**JM**

And tell me about the men you worked with, I mean it was a very male dominated environment, describe the men - and how did you adapt to that culture?

**KJ**

Wall Street is the last bastion of male chauvinism. I can't imagine that it's quite like that anywhere on the face of the earth. To adapt to it, I basically turned myself into an anthropologist. At the time, interestingly enough, the psychiatrist I got to help me with my husband's illness turned out to be an expert on organisations, and he was a huge help because I'd go running to him and say: 'What are they doing? What are they saying?' and he would give me basic survival tactics because, as he would say, they're not going to change and I can't keep throwing myself against them, I would just break into a million bits, and somehow I managed. I can't say I ever fitted in. But somehow I stayed there.

**JM**

Let me read a fragment of your book which goes to a moment when you boss required you to write a speech for the firm's Women's Network:

This was a problem, I had kept my distance from diversity issues. I admired the people who put energy into the task, but they were Penelopes, always weaving, their work unravelling during the night. No matter how many speeches were given, targets announced, and initiatives launched, the numbers of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians at the firm kept falling, with women making only the tiniest of gains. And, to be honest, I found young women bankers off putting. They seemed to have perfected -- indeed made into an art form -- the kind of hand gestures that showed off large diamond rings to maximum effect. And they could be more obnoxious, more condescending, than their male counterparts. While I marvelled at their astonishing self-confidence I couldn't help but think, *For this, my generation of feminists fought the good fight?* (The answer: *Yes.*)

Tell me about these women, and how did you feel that this was part of the product of your efforts in the 60s and 70s?

**KJ**

I have to say, I met some marvellous women on Wall Street, women who were incredibly generous and retained their humanity, I also met women who were scarred by the experience because it's very very tough, and perhaps handicapped by earning stacks of money. That being said, feminism means you can't say women should have equal rights and then say: 'But I don't want you to do that job, I really don't want you to be the Lord High-Executioner.' The rights of women are indivisible, you have to fight for them to do whatever job they want to do. If you want to fight against the hypocrisy in Banking that is a separate issue. It's very hard to be supportive of women who are earning a lot of money, but supportive we must be.

**JM**

Let me turn now in the minutes we have left to the toughest of issues in the book, the issue of death, and the means of death when someone is unravelling slowly and suffering. The character in the book goes to a nursing home, did your husband go to a nursing home?

**KJ**

He did go to a nursing home, and I have to say that the day I put him in a nursing home was the worst day of my life because he had enough of a mind left to know what I was doing. It was truly ... truly, truly awful. And he said he never wanted to go into a nursing home, he never ... I think there's a sentence in the book where he says: 'I never want to get like that.' And he did get 'like that' and he had said that he wanted the Doctor and me to take care of it when the time came, when it was time for him to die and of course, I can't do that. So, all those issues did come up in the end, because after about two years in the nursing home I became aware that they were going to keep him alive regardless, and there is one episode in the book that is actually true, every detail in it is true, and that's when Bailey starts to haemorrhage and he is taken to hospital and Cath wants him to die, and they start transfusing him regardless of what she says. And that happened, and so after that I really had to think about what I was going to do. Will I let this go on? In real life he died of a massive stroke. But I became very interested in that issue and of people who have to make those kinds of decisions.

**JM**

And so, euthanasia is addressed in the book. (I hate it when you ruin a book by saying what happens.) Will that be tough in the United States, given the deep faith of that community?

**KJ**

It will be tough, yes, America is a very churchy country, outside of New York it is very churchy and we have an Attorney General, Mr. Ashcroft, who is actually making it his personal mission to go after doctors who help with dignity in death.

**JM**

You mention the faith of America, but I'm not sure there's faith for you. Let me read a fragment from the book:

I can't abide the sentimental scaffolding that people erect around their lives, but when I am beset, I allow myself to talk to him, imagine what he might have said in response. He could always make me laugh at stupidity and meanness. .... Sometimes, in the spirit of Frank O'Hara, I tell him I do not totally regret life. All the same, he asks too much of me, my darling husband.

Is that a bit of Kate speaking?

**KJ**

Yes, that is me speaking.

**JM**

So, no sentimental scaffolding, no faith at all?

**KJ**

Oh, I've been given a dog and I couldn't be more sentimental about this little dog. I allow myself to be completely silly about the dog, but no, I am not a very sentimental person. I think, overall, I'd say that life is full of hard choices. We do the best we can, and sometimes we don't.

**JM**

And the character closes, Kate, by railing about the ideas of learning lessons and self improvement so deep in the American culture. And also railing against closure, which I enjoyed immensely. But there's these remarks:

Actually I did learn something,...

and this is from the experience in Wall Street but I guess I'm wondering in relation to your experience with your husband,

... the dailyness of life, that's what gets you through at times, putting on your pantyhose, eating breakfast, catching the subway, that's what stops your heart from breaking.

Is that you again?

**KJ**

That's absolutely true too.

**JM**

Tell me more, what is this 'dailyness of life?'

**KJ**

You know after my husband died you would have thought that it would have been a relief not to have the nursing home and the burden and to be watching him and everything that goes with it, but I was absolutely devastated after he died because I didn't have anything to do. I didn't have bits, the practical things I could occupy myself with and I was just left with me and the grief. Yes, and I think that anybody who is a caregiver out there, anybody who is going through a similar sort of thing, it's daily life that saves you. Thank goodness.

**Kate Jennings book is called *Moral Hazard* and is published by Picador Australia.**

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**[Text prepared by Carole Ferrier and Drew Whitehead]**

## **The One Who Looked Like Beethoven**

By Alison Lambert.

I phone her and she's delighted to hear from me, asks me over and though it's been over 20 years we just talk and talk and talk. So much shared history. Both of us born in 1943, the vanguard of the baby-boomers; both ex-nurses, single now; both struggling with clutter of both a domestic and a historical nature. She was the nurse in the labour ward when I had my first baby, at seven in the evening on 27 February 1968. She was kindness itself.

Historical, herstorytell. She's stayed here, in this pretty hinterland area an hour or two from the city; whereas I escaped and have just come back, tail between my legs (keeps your pink bits warm though) because I'd run out of options, it seemed. Well, options that I could stand, anyway. I sometimes look at women who've stayed with their husbands and careers and I wonder, what is the price of their comfort and security?

You get that. I do anyway, nearly every time. I'm living in this shed on my son and daughter-in-law's property, and lucky that my son is building me a little place here, but I don't quite fit in this area of relative affluence.

Even so I tell some of my stories with a laugh, though I do get some shocked looks and changing of subject. Whereas this poor love is still licking her wounds from her one true love, who I remember way back kept leaving her then coming back, leaving again with mouthfuls of accusations against her that some apparently still believe. J became, from what she tells me, a broken-down alcoholic schizophrenic with leukaemia. It was the pot, she said, some people just shouldn't have it. But her ex-father-in-law still won't let her near him ('he's OK as long as he keeps away from you').

Misguided bloody arsehole.

I can see why so many people have got angry on my behalf, when they've heard me tell of this predicament or that. I hear myself in her, that gentle voice with the question in it, the plaintive why?, the small quiet shock that grows as you find yourself on a beach with the tide going out, dumped by the big lively sea. Still more or less sound, as you look at yourself; not too scarred by your relationshipwrecks; plenty to offer, yet there you are, a bleaching old bit of flotsam in the eyes of the beachcombers. I am angry that after all this time, all her efforts, being a single mum to kids who believed his version of it all, hanging in there in the very place of her humiliation, running tuckshops and local markets while the locals lopped at this poppy who could have been tall - oh yes, brains there all right, it takes brains to get depressed doesn't it, just going off to the pokies or whatever doesn't work, oh no you've got this keen mind and it has to stew and chew and because of innate loving kindness you don't blame others so it has to have been your fault. I am angry to hear her still questioning in this way.

But it's hard to know what it is that's making me angry. I am angry with whatever it is that lets her, and me, at this stage of our lives, still be struggling with not enough money, unwashed dishes, an unmade bed, an unquiet mind. We talk, we analyse via various modes: social, gender, astrological, psychological, Buddhist. We speak these languages. The answer lies in all of them and then some, we decide.

Everything we say leads to more things to say. I forget what led to Beethoven. Ah, it was Tracy.

- Have you met up with T at all, since you've been back? she asks. Do you remember her?
- Slight, dark-haired, Scorpio?
- That sounds like her.

Another story starts welling up, then I decide to leave it. I merely comment on the night in the Littleton pub, the Twenties night, when I was there with my husband all dressed up Twenties style and T was there and I was very naughty indeed. Not with my friend; but to some degree it was her willingness to accommodate my eye for men, to bat with me, that started me on the road to ruin. As my Granny might have put it. Actually I was already on the road: it wasn't T's fault at all.

\* \* \*

He did look like Beethoven, in a craggy, pockmarked sort of way. He was there on his own (oh magnet, an unattached man), and had a broody solitary out-of-place look about him. Glasses. Wearing a suit.

As was my husband. He wore a suit I'd found in the op shop, and a wide tie, and a bushy ginger beard, with pipe. Somewhere I have a photo of the two of us taken that night. I am in something black and shiny, sleeveless, a fringe flipping round the bum. Black gloves. Hair scraped back into curls trying to fall to the neck, a band around the forehead. An old black crocheted shawl. It almost worked, the outfit, not that it mattered. But thinking back, fancy dress had got me into trouble before: an outfit I called Ascot 1890, with a long white dress, a fitted black jacket, and a beautiful black hat that you looked out from underneath. A flirting hat. Mother R, as I called her, an Englishwoman and feminine to the core, and a surrogate mother to me for a time, lent me the hat. She told me she'd worn it on a Channel crossing, and how she flirted from under its tilted brim with a young French lieutenant on the boat. The hat was of finest black straw: very little to the crown, with a brim wide enough to balance a pretty face but not overwhelm, and just enough sway in its line to play hide-and-seek with the eyes. I did just that with someone who took my fancy at some party and even though I was there with my husband I ended up in the back of this guy's panel van, or more accurately I ended up creeping home in the wee small hours draggled and sticky with semen and without enough sense to realise I hadn't really enjoyed the sequel to the flirting, even though I'd been complicit.

That's what happened at the Twenties night, too. I was a slow learner. Mind you my mother had never instilled any morality into me, believing as she does to this day that she's 'just not monogamous, and that's all there is to it.'

I think Beethoven was a decent enough fellow. He was probably bowled over to have this woman coming on to him: could you blame him for taking up the chance? I disappeared from the crowded pub with him and we went off somewhere in his ute, and in the passenger seat he put his long skinny dick into me, and I didn't enjoy it but arranged to meet him anyway at a pub in town in a few days' time. When I finally got home that night, about two o'clock in the morning, headachy with grog, cold in those silly clothes, dirty and sticky, my husband was waiting for me. Furious. Understandably. He'd waited for me in the car outside the pub when the do was over, went to sleep, and woke up to find the pub and the street silent and deserted.

I lied:

- I went off to a party. I got a lift home.
- It was a party, in someone's house.
- I was at a *party*.

The next morning he hid the keys to the car. Wouldn't give them to me. I was supposed to go to college in Brisbane, an hour or so's drive. I badly wanted to go to my class, I begged, I pleaded, he finally gave me the keys in disgust.

I think I still hadn't washed, thinking it would have been a giveaway. Went to my class: late, smelly, hungover, defiant as any teenager. I was about 38 at the time.

I went down to Middleton a few days later, as arranged, to meet Beethoven but got the name of the pub wrong and we both waited in different pubs for an hour or so until he turned up and found me by which time I'd cooled right off. In the mundane light of a Middleton pub at lunchtime it was all different. The town is in the heart of sugar-cane country and, even though this was at a time when hippiedom had penetrated even this far, Nambour was one place you didn't feel right walking round in bare feet, for example.

Beethoven was somewhere in between the extremes of longhaired hippie and square conservative. He'd lost his remote and moody look, and chatted to me in a direct and friendly manner. He was an ordinary, nice enough bloke, not exciting at all. I wasn't in fancy dress any more and as he told me about himself, how he was an electrician, had a block of land somewhere down a valley where he wanted to build and would I like to come and look at it, it all became too normal and I didn't see him again.

I think if my husband had been able to talk to me, engage my interest, things might have been different. Maybe if I'd taken more interest in him  $\frac{1}{4}$  but my mother didn't raise me to look after a man: she taught me to see my father, her husband, as the enemy. I was still, at that stage, comfortable in her mould. I married because she encouraged me to, and because he asked me to, and because we got on well in bed. The photo taken of my husband and myself that night at the pub shows a couple not really connected: there is no animated spark between them. People admired them; they made a nice pair, physically, with names similar enough to be charming; they had a nice property; they had other nice couples to dinner, whose children made friends with their two, a boy and a girl; they seemed ideal.

It was later that same year that I left him, left my comfortable and boring life to go and live in the rainforest with a penniless poet, on the dole. They'd said to me, when I started college, that study put a strain on the marriage. Could I cope? Of course, I said airily, and never gave it another thought. What they didn't talk about was the high of using your mind for something other than meals, and the danger of this to housewives. And when I left it was a matter of days before another of those nice couples split up, a couple who had been close friends of ours, and she went to live with my husband, until he kicked her out. He got her back soon after, it turned out, so he had someone to mind the kids who hadn't come with me (I couldn't afford a decent place) and he kicked her out again when it suited him; she went down to six stone with the humiliation of it. She came to see me a few times, when I was living with the poet in the house I'd bought with the settlement, and she kept saying; thanks for being so nice to me.

I guess I did old Beethoven a favour really, dumping him so quickly; the poet and I had a much harder time of it as we struggled to fulfil the ideal of happilyeverafter. We had about three years of putting our very differing expectations onto each other before I eventually kicked him out. That was back when I still had a house, before another man encouraged me, very subtly, to sell my house and go off sailing with him. And I did, and we got shipwrecked, and I lost money, and so it goes.

\* \* \*

This is just one bubble of story I didn't let float out the other day. My story is different from hers; the nature of my hurt is different too. We all have different things to learn, it seems. Some of us are robust, some are fragile. Some are good at survival, some aren't. We all have our means of escape, of rationalising, of explaining, or excusing. And some have to feel it all the way. She's coming over to dinner this week. Bring a story; write it down, I said. Doing the splits I said, call it that. We've come from such a different time and things have changed so much; somehow we need to accommodate it all, the changes, the then and the now.

I know we'll talk and talk and talk, again; and more stories will rise to the surface, wanting air. Wanting out.

\* \* \*

We did talk and talk, the nursing horror stories, how you never got off duty on time, monster sisters, huge responsibilities. I gave her the story to read, and she laughed in places. Once, she said: Oh that's a bit close to the bone. I didn't find out which bit, but she asked if she could keep the story. She rang me the next morning.

I just rang to say thank you, she said, in her sweet and friendly voice with its slight English accent; I did enjoy last night, we must do it again soon. I've been on the phone all morning; J died last night. There was a message when I got home. It's all right really, it'll bring the kids closer to me at least, they want me to go down for the funeral. My neighbour's going to feed the dog.

It shocked me. J was the ex-husband she hadn't been allowed to contact. Do you know, her voice didn't change at all. *I've been on the phone all morning, J died last night.* It's been on my mind ever since.

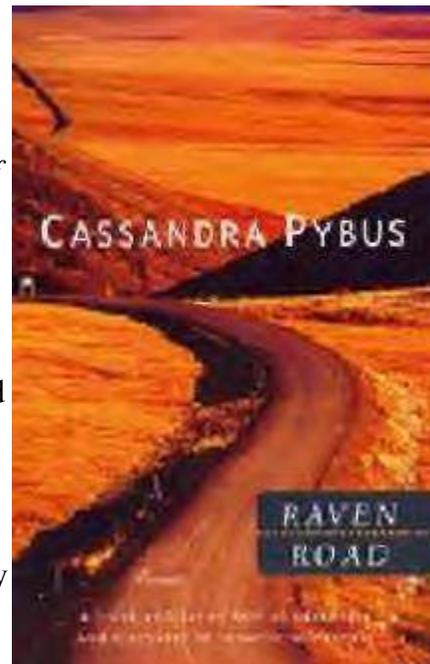
## Funny for Some, Terrifying for Others: The Ready-Made Worldview

Cassandra Pybus, *Raven Road*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Janine Little.

Stories about women embarking on long journeys in pursuit of some kind of realisation are matter familiar to feminist critiques of culture. Those stories, however, travel on paths that can be shown to be formed in worlds as far apart as some contemporary feminist concerns are from any beneficial intervention into lives still lived in wretched conditions. Specifying the path of the woman, and the story (since they are not always the same), flags my intention to make this commentary itself an approach to worldview. Reading historian Cassandra Pybus's *Raven Road: A Frank and Funny Tale of Adventure and Discovery in Subarctic Wilderness* enables that approach also to include some observation of the practice of mistaking confession of a worldview for left historical revision.

In Australia, my reading of *Raven Road* coincided roughly with the release of the film version of a book by Aboriginal writer [Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara](#) about the abuse perpetrated on Aboriginal people by white 'protectors', in a time not that long ago. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was a timely reminder of the importance of women's autobiography in history. It tells the extraordinary tale of a 1500km walk by three young Aboriginal girls who escaped from their white captors at Western Australia's Moore River Settlement, determined to go home. The true story worked, as much writing by Aboriginal women does, in representation of survival of an oppressed people and culture but, until Pilkington wrote about it, the trek to freedom remained hidden behind established notions of Aboriginal women's identity – again a repetitive aspect of dominant Australian historical narrative. By working with the reality that life is in the main terrifying for women dispossessed, oppressed, and disenfranchised by class, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* revises a history that has otherwise relied upon assimilation. Connections between then and now made through autobiography can register on these significant political scales, depending on the writer that makes the journey.



Yearning for connection sent Pybus into the subarctic Canadian wilderness to find a story she could shape around a migrant woman who had walked from 1927 New York City, all the way home to Russia. Pybus is determined to set the record straight in *Raven Road* about Lillian Alling's trek of desperation through a dangerous, icy landscape. Unlike Doris Pilkington in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, however, Pybus embarks without personal experience of the 'true story' and, thus, with a sense of marvel at the woman alone adventure, instead of the *need* to enter historical narrative that makes Aboriginal women's writing so politically compelling.

Pybus's tale of 'adventure and discovery' instead turns into a personal quest for self-realisation, a buttressing of the class and culture-privileged figure in front of which other women, cultures and landscapes are propped as mirrors. That is not the result anticipated by the intriguing and inspired character drawing of the opening chapters. From these comes expectation of a sustained engagement with Lillian's experience as a migrant woman who rejected the grim clothing sweatshop existence she

found as the reality of her American opportunity. With this story would have come a multitude of female others, obscured by the fortunate lifestyle makeover narrative that underscores masculinised ideological constructions of migrant experience in America. They are promised by Pybus in her detailing of how women migrants were 'processed' at Ellis Island, and thus established as essentially *other* to the American dream, as they were stripped down and probed for deficiencies in language, body, and mind. Such would have been Lillian's entry point into the country, as it was into Pybus's story. In both settings, Lillian stood as representative of thousands who looked over their shoulders back to home when they no longer recognized themselves in the culture that dominated them. It struck a chord with me, living in Australia, watching *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, recalling writers like Nugi Garimara, Labumore, Glenyse Ward, and Monica Clare, and wondering where Pybus might have taken her trip if she had had a bit more empathy, and a lot less *sympathy*. An impossible demand perhaps, given that the bourgeois woman engaging in confessional narrative to affirm a ready-made worldview travels an altogether separate path.

Even as I yearned for *Raven Road* to go much further with the connective histories of women displaced from their homelands, and make Lillian and Pybus *both* representations of the recuperative power of storytelling, I also acknowledged the vast differences that assured their inevitable estrangement. There was no way, according to sources cited by Pybus, that Lillian could have got across the Yukon on foot, let alone over the Bering Strait to Siberia. Yet the doubt, 'or could she?' that drives Pybus's writing is somewhat subsumed within the more immediate frictions played out by Pybus with her (former) friend and driver, Gerry. Lillian tends to slip out of the historical centre yet again, just as Gerry eventually ends up driving off and leaving Pybus to the more accommodating company of proper strangers. Through the bulk of the text that precedes this parting, however, Pybus points out the contrasts between her worldview and that of Gerry, where the non-academic traveler is constructed as unsophisticated, bulimic, and self-deprecating. Somehow Lillian's presence emerges out of this projection to emphasise the differences between a journey undertaken in desperation and terror, and one made as a romantic quest for self-affirmation where class and home advantage ensure a perpetual safety net.

When it does not profess to be revising history, or recuperating the story of a woman who was clearly from an entirely different world, this confessional mode of storytelling is, as Pybus says, 'frank and funny.' Appropriating into such narrative the stories of women who risk their health, their safety, and their lives because they hope for a better future seems from a left political standpoint, rather sad. Pybus undertook her adventure in subarctic wilderness with the aid of a large research grant, a Nissan Pathfinder chauffeured by Gerry, a selection of gourmet food items, some earnest librarians in Tasmania, New York and Vancouver, and a doting husband hanging by the telephone back home in Tasmania (The irony of the presence of these props emerges clearly but, it *seems*, unprompted by the narration.) Pybus charted a course through Canada to Alaska in pursuit of 'the truth' about Lillian. The resulting *Raven Road* is a series of journal entries turned chapters that are sometimes reflective of the process of working as a historian with a factually flawed archive on a historical figure with comparatively low cultural exchange value. It is more often, however, an account of the baggage (intellectual, personal) that goes with anyone into a research project, and how the subjectivity of the *other* emerges laden with that baggage.

Lillian, for instance, was a Polish Jew branded lunatic by the telegraph line workers, police and reporters who ran across her as she walked across the Yukon and, later, by Pybus who remarks: The more I try, the less success I have in finding a credible explanation as to why Lillian should seek to return to Russia. But as I say, the woman was clearly unhinged. (184)

On the plane home to Tasmania, however, Pybus suspends this earlier concurrence with the official (male) line, after reading a report from a Canadian Mounted Police officer and deciding that 'it points very strongly to Lillian having taken up with a man in Dawson City':

That's it! An explanation to account for the lack of information about her whereabouts over the winter in 1928-29.

In the remote subarctic, a woman on her own was a subject of intense interest and scrutiny, but a woman with a man was not. To all intents and purposes she was rendered invisible. (224)

Oh, is that it? The big *white out* – that erasure incurred in the patriarchally interested colonial setting; what black women writers and critics have long called 'invisibility blues', that experience of being flattened out and slotted into a narrow historical niche where you become a mere accessory in someone else's overarching, ready-made ideologically affirming project.

For Lillian, as it turns out, that experience came out of the project of 'settling' the North American wilderness that put an abrupt end to her record in history. The romantic ending to *Raven Road*, where Pybus hugs her husband at the airport and declares that 'nothing else matters'(226), indicates her need to imagine Lillian in a similar circumstance that compensates, apparently, for the abandonment of the journey home and of the struggle for self-determination. It is a need, or luxury, wholly available to the bourgeois woman who plays out the same resolution earlier, when the parting of company between Pybus and Gerry is recalled. This is where Pybus gets to hear Gerry admitting to the sense of lack and ultimate inferiority as a woman she perceives for herself through the authoritative and fuller figure cut by Pybus:

'Tell me, Geraldine, is that what you are looking for - a man to marry? Is that why you came up here?' She turns to me, her face contorted. 'It's all very well for you.' Tears spill down her cheeks. 'You are so smug, so sure of your life. Loving husband. Brilliant career. You have everything you ever wanted!' I stroke her arm to calm her down but she shakes me off.

'Everywhere we go *you* know what *you* want. Everyone we meet you presume will be interested in *your* project. And they are. They don't give a toss about me. Why should anyone be interested in me? (147-48)

While Pybus calls, at this point, time of death of the friendship, it marks a culmination of the more significant wrestle with identity portrayed in *Raven Road* through recurring reflections on food and eating, ageing womanhood, and the familiar binary of nature and culture. The conflict is foreshadowed early in the book, when it is made clear that Gerry and Pybus hold contrasting views of their trip, as well as of each other:

'We are on a kind of feminist adventure. A cross between *Thelma and Louise* and the *Two Fat Ladies*!...

'I'd say it was closer to *The Odd Couple*,' Gerry murmurs.

She has jokingly mentioned this movie a couple of times since we left Vancouver. She seems to identify me with the Jack Lemmon character.

I do wish my sinuses weren't going berserk. (56)

The occasions in the book where Gerry could be infuriated enough to drive the Nissan Pathfinder off a cliff, or where Pybus describes her various culinary triumphs (and laments Gerry's jibes about her being keen on her tucker) could justify Pybus's initial view of the trip. Escalating anxiety around the relationship, however, meant that I was relieved, from a feminist perspective, to get to the part where Pybus went solo.

That is when the food and eating theme broadened into an account of the quest for 'self realization' through the wilderness experience which, in the predominantly masculine history of such examples, frequently resulted in death through starvation. Alone in the subarctic wilderness, Pybus spends much time writing about starvation and its use as an apparent path to self-realisation. It is within this material that a recollection of the working class writer Jack London's time in the Yukon is included, since he himself almost perished in his retreat cabin. London's experience was not so much a quest for self-realisation as a case of bad timing in the face of an especially fierce blizzard (but Pybus seems to prefer the romantic account). His experience is compared with that of the unlikely cult figure, Chris McCandless, whose book *Into The Wild* tells of his bid to find spiritual awakening by walking off alone into the Denali National Park. The site where McCandless starved to death became, as Pybus observes, a destination for pilgrimages by young backpackers from around the world. Overall, the effect of the inclusion of this self-realisation through starvation content is to widen the divide illustrated in *Raven Road* between those who can afford the luxury of choice in self-reflection, and those who move across the world in search of a better place to live. Starvation and abuse, by choice or by threat, become in the former story a matter of worldview, while remaining in the latter a condition of history.

Specifying and watching how confessional acts of self-realisation are mistaken for left revisions of history may appear to be a small act of agency in a place like Australia, where a film about children escaping from a concentration camp in the desert resonates too loudly in contemporary racist foreign and immigration policy. Placing *Raven Road* into such a context may, similarly, seem too much of an expectation for a book about an Australian woman travelling through the subarctic wilderness. It was only ever supposed to be an adventure, after all.

**Janine Little has a PhD in the area of race, literature and culture; she had returned to her earlier profession of journalist but is now training to be a barrister.**

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An interview with her including some discussion of the 1996 novel, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, can be found in *Hecate* 28.1 (2002). The film, scripted by Christine Olsen and directed by Phil Noyce, expands upon Pilkington's original story of her mother and two aunts, including additional historically accurate scenes and events. See Christopher Hawkes in *Arena Magazine* 59 (June-July 2002) for one useful discussion of the film.

## Evoking/Invoking India

*The Anger of Aubergines*. By Bulbul Sharma. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000.

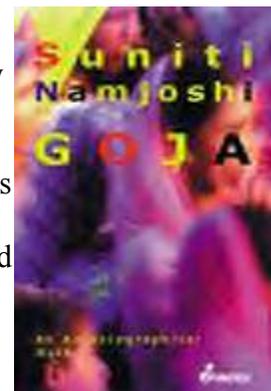
*Goja: an Autobiographical Myth*. By Suniti Namjoshi. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2000.

Reviewed by Alison Bartlett.

These two books from the independent Australian feminist press, Spinifex, are by Indian writers. The first, by Bulbul Sharma, was originally published two years earlier by the Indian feminist press, Kali. The cover image of a gorgeous plump aubergine lying on a piece of gold embroidered red silk is richly sensual and immediately desirable; it evokes a material and gourmet India instantly recognisable to Westerners through the fabric of women's traditional saris and their food. Women and their food are at the centre of this series of short stories, and Indian recipes are included at the end of every story. The book is a fabulous idea, and splendidly marketed to attract English readers. The back cover is suggestive about its concerns: 'Food as passion, a gift, a means of revenge, even source of power. ... Women weigh up the loss of a lover or the loss of weight; they consider whether hunger and the thought of higher things are inextricably linked; they feast and crave and die for their insatiable appetites.' And the stories are suggestive of all these things, and replete with the waft of ginger, the hiss of cardamon seeds thrown into hot oil, and the zing of lemon zest mixed with freshly crushed coriander. Despite all these ingredients, however, the stories seem never-endingly depressing and oppressive. In them, the women compete with each other to cook meals for males; women wait to be married or wait to be told they are separated (and continue to cook for the husband); women are plumped up 'like a pregnant cow' or are made to fast to mourn the loss of a husband. Men are central while women wait around/for/on them, and mothers are the worst women of all and won't let go of their sons. It seems familiar ground for Indian writing, even with the evocatively sizzling spices. Perhaps this is Sharma's paradoxical critique of Indian patriarchy wrapped in the aroma of its exoticised food. While readers are being sensuously seduced, the relationships for women are sickening. Perhaps this is a deliberate undermining of traditionally Western associations of India as the spice culture, as the exotic other, while its politics and social relations remain unstintingly repressive. Ultimately, however, any desire for the delights of this book were overridden by its oppressive preparation and serving for me.



Entering Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja* is like falling down a rabbit hole into completely unfamiliar territory. Subtitled *An Autobiographical Myth*, it reflects on the life of privilege of an Indian noble who goes to the West, becomes a poet, a lesbian, an academic. Goja is the servant who cared for the baby/child subject, and who forms a nexus around which the narrator's guilt/questioning of Indian class relations revolves. Goja becomes a fantastical creature of myth, continually questioning and challenging the author in her own terms: 'You want to de-glamorise power, Sweetie, you'll first have to deconstruct it within yourself.' The other dominant figures are Goldie, the narrator's aristocratic Indian grandmother, and Charity, a confused and hybridised result of Indian Catholic boarding school. Namjoshi writes: 'My mind is a hodgepodge of Greek myth, Hindu experience and Christian words; but I have understood that Charity is neither the daughter of suffering, nor of joy. She has a human face. Blake understood it all along.' Blake understands quite a lot in this book, as the narrator constructs herself as



erudite and learned through this mish-mash of canonical references. It is mainly to the characters of Goja, Goldie and Charity, however, that the narrator talks, as we all do to the voices inside our head, accusing them of sorrow, hurt and unfairness. In one insightful moment the narrator is asked: "Who are you shouting at?" At myself? At the pain? At the whole of India?'

Namjoshi's analysis of sexism, class privilege and homophobia in the East and racism in the West is lucid, but drawn out and at times self-torturing. Post-colonial politics are engaged when the English language is referred to as a coloniser of the mind but also as the key to another life of poetry and writing. One of the most provocative aspects of this book is its experiments in form, which include a chapter on language as a forest, a fable about the black piglet and the queen of spades (mirroring a thread from Namjoshi's *Building Babel*), self-reflexive narration, poetry, fairytale, straight autobiography, and an almost continuous dialogue with various interrogators of conscience. While these variations could arguably be said to reflect the search for an appropriate form in which to write such an autobiographical myth, it is the 'straight' storytelling which is the most readable and engaging. If I were giving a lecture on this, I'd say that this is what I've been trained to read; that the confusion of hybrid textual forms proves just how fixed we've become in anticipating storylines. On another level, however, the tortured textual position of being Indian, aristocratic, and lesbian becomes repetitively self-flagellating (I've never understood Catholic culture) and comparable to that of the seventies Toronto academics in the book who 'complain' that it's not their fault they are white, male, or heterosexual. Perhaps the confusion of the title is telling: this autobiographical myth is not about Goja. Goja is one of many characters whose voice is important, dominant and female in the narrator's imagination. *Goja* is a fantasy of a servant speaking, a personal reconciliation, an elegy.

**Alison Bartlett teaches literature at the University of Southern Queensland. Her most recent book was *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)elations*, edited with Gina Mercer.**

## Diving into the Heart of Empire

Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2001  
Reviewed by Barbara Garlick.

The illustration on the front cover of Angela Woollacott's latest book is of Beatrice Kerr, Australian champion swimmer, who delighted English audiences not only with her swimming and diving displays in the early twentieth century but also with her healthy, athletic body in fetching and brief (for their time) costumes, this one announcing Kerr's antipodean difference by the crest of a kangaroo rampant above the word 'Australia.' Furthermore, visually structuring the layout of the titlepage and each chapter opening, is an illustration of Annette Kellerman in mid-dive in one of the mermaid costumes she wore in her displays as the 'Diving and Dancing Venus.' The image of the physically sturdy, modern Australian woman is at the heart of Woollacott's thesis that female travel 'home' to London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (1870-1940) illuminates important intersections between colonialism, whiteness, modernity and gender in the period. Also, and incidentally, that image underpins the freshness and energy of this study of a little explored aspect of the colonial adventure. There have been a number of studies of the way in which British imperial power structured colonial stereotypes (particularly through popular literature and magazines of the period), but few surveys of the experiences of colonial subjects as they interacted with that imperial power at its centre. The importance of Woollacott's book is that it bases its thesis mainly on personal accounts of such experiences and weaves them into what is, for the most part, a compelling argument.



The chapters of the book themselves chart the logical trajectory of the journey: the actual voyage by steamship; the arrival in London and finding a place to live; making friends and setting up networks; the challenge to male exclusivity in the establishment of feminist organizations; the acts of self-definition and consolidation of not only colonial identity, but also imperial and national identities; and finally the modern sexual and physical freedoms experienced by these women who made the long journey to London.

The introduction begins with an excerpt from the fictionalized travelogue of Louise Mack, who was in many ways typical of these women. Tasmanian born, NSW raised, Mack was a working journalist in Sydney before leaving her husband and going to England in 1901 where she remained until World War One when she returned to the southern hemisphere and for a while travelled extensively in New Zealand and Australia promoting the war and collecting for the Red Cross. She continued to write journalism and fiction until her death in Sydney in 1935. Mack is typical in her adventurousness and her reliance on her own ability to find work but, more importantly, she captures the lure of the old world in her 'surrender to the spell of the City of Mists' in words that recall Dr Johnson's 'If you are tired of London, you are tired of Life.' These women, whose experiences Woollacott chronicles through examples from a wide variety of novels and stories, autobiographies, diaries, letters home, newspaper and magazine articles, helped to shape not only the culture they had left behind and to which many of them returned, but also the culture of the imperial centre itself that was still 'hierarchical, racist, and gendered, even as it was changing.'

In the first chapter Woollacott articulates what is in fact a self-evident point, but which I have not seen so clearly discussed before; that is that the ship itself was a signifier of modernity with developing attendant cultural rituals such as the dockside farewell and the on-board class distinctions; the long voyage entailed stops at exotic places (outposts of empire) where even the lowest class of passengers in steerage became transformed into colonial plutocrats in relation to the indigenous people they encountered at these colourful ports of call (vendors and rickshaw drivers, for example). Woollacott links these often temporary attitudes to a developing knowledge among travellers about an imperial hierarchy of colour and their own whiteness and gender in that hierarchy, a knowledge, however, which on most occasions merely served to reinforce pre-existing beliefs in racial divisions within Australian society and the privileges of whiteness. She problematizes the issue of whiteness by drawing particularly on the work of several American scholars who discuss the structured invisibility of indigenous peoples and the ways in which non-Anglo-Saxons are reduced to an undifferentiated other.

Similarly the second chapter on settling into a new urban space draws on the work of historians and cultural studies scholars on the city and urbanization in the nineteenth century; in a section on 'Colonial Geographies: Mapping London' Woollacott notes that, for Australian women, London was a place of particular geographic and social spaces according to their interests and work. The subsequent two chapters record the establishment of colonial networks and organizations in London and the challenge to a masculinist culture which these represented. The strength and sense of communal solidarity which such organizations engendered - such as the feminist focus in the Lyceum Club and the British Commonwealth League and their commitment to female suffrage - furthered a growing sense of a coexisting national and imperial identity, sometimes at odds (resentment at being labelled 'colonial'), sometimes enabling a robust criticism of the imperial centre and its masters. Being seen as physically (and sexually) active, and embodying political freedom also (having won the federal vote in Australia in 1902), Australian women were seen as bearers of modernity, both in London and when they returned to Australia (particularly artists and musicians who participated in and brought back techniques and ideas of European modernism), in much the same way as Woollacott has argued in previous work for women munitions workers in the First World War as symbols of modernity. Nevertheless her claims for the potency of Australian women as equally symbols of modernity appear at times to be at once self-endorsing (different, adventurous, therefore modern) and historically disproportionate. Rather the strength of this study lies in its use of multiple and wonderfully diverse source materials to support the complex argument about colonialism and modernity and the role played by Australian women travellers in these historical movements.

**Dr Barbara Garlick taught for many years in the English Department at the University of Queensland where she is now a Research Associate.**

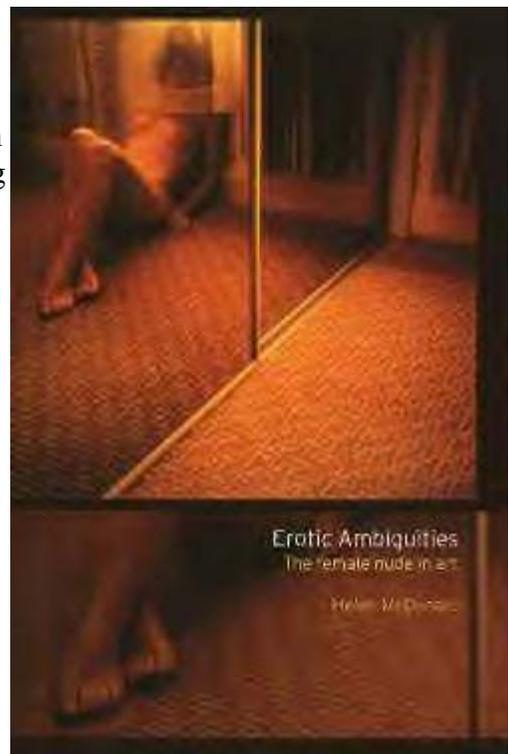
## Ambiguity Stripped Bare

Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*.  
London and New York: Routledge, 2001.  
Reviewed by Morgan Thomas.

How does contemporary feminist thought approach the erotic potential of visual representations of the female body? In what ways would a feminist politics, or a feminist ethics, now make sense of this erotic potential - and of the never-ending fascination with the female body in contemporary art and culture? To what extent have new political concerns and stakes altered feminist perspectives on visual representation in recent years? These are only a few of the important questions at the heart of Helen McDonald's *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*.

McDonald retraces the changing fortunes and stakes of feminist approaches to the female body in critical theory and art practice over the past three decades. Her primary interest here is with the ways in which a diversity of art practices - whether overtly feminist or informed by feminist thinking - have set out to challenge pervasive, yet inherently unattainable ideals of female bodily perfection. In McDonald's account, the disparate art practices arising out of the women's movement have been effective in resisting the powerful hold of such ideals. She argues that by developing a positive, yet 'conceptual' rather than 'representational' ideal based on a principle of inclusiveness and difference, contemporary art has worked to displace these ideals - it has really 'made a difference.'

In making her case, McDonald foregrounds the *necessary* ambiguity (uncertainty, blurring, complexity) of art and visual representation in general. She suggests that it is specifically through their 'negotiation' of this ambiguity that art practices in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s have been productive in generating a 'feminised' ideal of the female body. The recurring tension in McDonald's book issues from the connection she draws between ambiguity and the possibility of a feminised ideal at work in recent art practices. Yet it seemed to me that certain difficulties arise from the pivotal role McDonald assigns to ambiguity in this book. Ambiguity is taken to be at once the constant condition of art, and that which effectively displaces Classical ideals of the female body in certain forms of contemporary art. If, as McDonald contends, art is 'always ambiguous', how does ambiguity distinguish certain art practices from others? McDonald certainly makes interpretative decisions on this point - there is 'negative' ambiguity and there is 'productive' ambiguity - but she tends to elide the key issue of how she arrives at these determinations. This approach also leaves aside the question of whether ambiguity is always the most significant element of the works being analysed. To take one example discussed by McDonald, in an installation by Melbourne artist Kate Beynon we see a pair of tiny, beautiful Chinese slippers next to stuffed calico forms designed to evoke the damaged shape of mutilated feet once they are 'unbound'. This does not strike me as particularly ambiguous. It is rather the starkness and vividness of the juxtaposition that makes this work



at once moving and horrifying.

These difficulties also surface in relation to the question of eroticism. McDonald argues, again, that art is 'always erotic' - particularly when it has to do with representations of the body. But is this really the case? Does art have to be erotic to be 'good'? Don't artists and audiences engage in a kind of perennial dispute over what is erotic in art and what isn't? Because the logic that operates here is one in which increasingly diverse ways of envisioning the female body - inevitably erotic, inevitably ambiguous - come to be included within a feminised ideal, the risk McDonald's book runs is that of ending up with an innocuous, EEO-style view of erotic ambiguity in art. Reading McDonald's account, we might get the sense that, while there is not much we would want to disagree with in it, things would get more interesting if there were.

This said, the pluralist approach McDonald adopts enables her to put forward a welcome reassessment of the state of play between contemporary art and recent debates in feminism. Her book brings together many valuable insights into the work of artists as different as Patricia Piccinini, Fiona Foley, Zoe Leonard and Pat Brassington, as well as offering thought-provoking reflections on a range of topics - from pornography and the eroticisation of children in advertising, to multiculturalism, queer theory and 'bad girl' postfeminism. Most interestingly, perhaps, her book develops an analytical framework in which recent developments in art practice, inside and outside Australia, can be considered in terms of current feminist concerns.

In broad terms, McDonald outlines a dialectical movement taking place in the last few decades in art. In the 1970s, artists like Carolee Schneemann and Judy Chicago scandalised many observers by contesting traditional representations of the female body with their use of vaginal imagery and highly sexualised performances. As McDonald points out, their art was not meant simply to shock, but also to propose other ways of figuring femininity in art and, more specifically, to reconnect artistic representations of the female body to lived experience. If the strategies adopted by these artists were soon seen as naïve and limiting for their apparent consignment of female experience to the realm of nature, genital corporeality and 'base' matter, the pendulum was to swing very far the other way in the 1980s, as McDonald observes. She argues that, in this decade, alliances between feminism and 'poststructuralism' (postmodernism, deconstruction and, most importantly, theories of the gaze drawing on psychoanalysis) tend to lose the thread tying feminist art practice to the search for alternative ways to represent the female body. At this point, McDonald suggests, a preoccupation with poststructuralist theory leads to artistic strategies that remain 'negative' insofar as they are locked within a critique of dominant modes of representation, subjectivity and spectatorship. In McDonald's view, the art that issues from these alliances remains too rhetorical, too nihilist, and too suspicious of representation and visuality in general, to be very 'positive' in its effects. All it can finally do is say, like Barbara Kruger in a famous work from 1981: 'Your gaze hits the side of my face.'

According to McDonald, however, by the end of the 1980s there is something like a 'return of the real' in art (to use Hal Foster's term) - and with it, a return to a real engagement with the representation of the female body in artistic practice. McDonald argues that a more productive 'revisiting' of the representation of the female body arises from contacts between feminism (or 'postfeminism') and wider social and political concerns, along with the influence of 'post-poststructuralist' theories - it arises, for example, from theories of performativity, postcoloniality, queer theory and recent debates on the effects of new technologies. Thus a more complex, 'embodied' and multifaceted conception of the female body is seen to emerge in the work of artists like Zoe Leonard, Della Grace, Destiny Deacon and Patricia

Piccinini. Many of the strongest and most engaging passages in McDonald's book relate to such recent developments, and these evidently interest her the most.

Interestingly, however, it sometimes appears that the task of 'revising' the female body comes into its own precisely when art withdraws from a direct engagement with concerns which are avowedly or primarily feminist - as if feminist (or postfeminist) art gets 'better' when questions of sexual difference begin to retreat into the background. In the account McDonald offers here, a kind of synthesis takes place in contemporary art between the 'positivity' of the 1970s and the critical and theoretical complexity of the 1980s. This synthesis seems to me to be a little too convenient - at least for a book entitled *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. (Why are Stelarc and Bill Henson discussed here, but not Jenny Saville and Lucian Freud? A consideration of the nude or nakedness in visual representations becomes increasingly tangential to McDonald's discussions of developments in art from the 1980s onward. Although the misleading title of the book is presumably a publisher's decision, the diminishing attention McDonald pays to the problem of representing the naked female body seems to me to be a missed opportunity.)

What problems arise from this synthesis? What questions might we ask about the 'inclusive' yet 'feminised' ideal which, according to McDonald, has been so effective in producing positive representations of the female body in contemporary art? To take one example, we could think here of McDonald's discussion of a series of photographs by the Melbourne-based artist Linda Sproul, entitled *Difficult to Light*. In some of the photographs in this series, Sproul 'parodically re-enacts' famous images of Marilyn Monroe, Christine Keeler and Madonna, undermining the glamour attached to these iconic shots through the glasses she does not remove from her eyes and through her deliberately tense and awkward posture. In other images from the series, Sproul re-enacts photographs, taken in around 1870, of a young Aboriginal woman known only as Ellen. These photographs, in which this woman appears in different postures, partly or entirely naked, with measuring-sticks beside her, evidently belong to a colonialist visual regime of pseudo-scientific or ethnographic 'research'. According to McDonald, Sproul's re-enactments of these photographs function to disturb the authority of her 'whiteness'; she further argues that through the ambiguity of their critical displacements, these photographs work toward an ideal that is at once 'feminist' and 'antiracist'.

Could not more be said here? Of course, there is no way to know what Ellen would have thought of the 'ambiguity' of Sproul's re-enactments or whether she would have appreciated the 'ideal of inclusiveness and positive erotic appeal for the representation of the female body' that Sproul, according to McDonald, continues to invoke in her work. These images reminded me of another performance-based work by an European-Australian artist, in less than dire material circumstances, who spent a day or so hunched over a sewing-machine, acting out the role of an exploited Asian piece-worker. Is there not something going on in these enactments of difference that trivialises the political and social concerns that they 'perform'? The real ambiguity of Sproul's photocompositions lies in the way that they repeat the colonialist capture of difference at the same time that they seek to 'destabilise' it.

To turn to the other side of the feminist/antiracist equation being drawn here, it's significant that McDonald's reading of Sproul's work is framed by a discussion of Judith Butler's writings on gender and performativity - and, in particular, Butler's claims that enactments of gender can be liberating in exposing the constructedness of gender categories, their historicity and contingency. Although McDonald expresses some ambivalence about Butler's position, she nevertheless appears to support it in her reading of Sproul's work and in her general proposal that the positivity of (post-)feminist art

arises through a principle of inclusiveness. McDonald's account of contemporary art tends to suggest an 'all-over' style of feminism (or postfeminism), a feminism which - with its re-enactments, its parodies, and its alliances (appropriative or otherwise) with a range of theoretical, social and political concerns - seems to be less and less interested in questions of sexual difference. One of the issues that McDonald does not pursue here is whether Butler's view of gender as something constructed is adequate. Yet if femininity is just a social and historical construction, why haven't these enactments - which began a long time ago - liberated us from it? Why do so many women hold on to markers of femininity - markers which seem not only to survive but to thrive on these forms of parody?

The questions of why and how lines of division between male and female, masculine and feminine, continue to matter in contemporary culture seem strangely peripheral to McDonald's account of the role of feminism in contemporary art. This is perhaps because these questions resist explanation in terms of appeals to notions of ambiguity and the 'blurring of boundaries', notions which guide McDonald's discussion here. These difficult questions perhaps require a more incisive form of analysis than McDonald's pluralist feminism is able to offer. Yet her book is important, not only because it may prompt us to reconsider the political stakes and limits of this pluralism, but precisely because it leaves more questions than it answers. What kind of erotic ambiguity is promised by the current 'democratisation' of gender and sexuality? What kinds of differences resist this democratisation?

**Morgan Thomas lectures in art history in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.**

## Staying at Home with the *Weekly*.

Susan Sheridan (with Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett and Lyndall Ryan), *Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001. Reviewed by Maryanne Dever.

*Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years* is an important and valuable contribution to Australian social history, not least because it demonstrates so capably the continuing importance of sources such as women's magazines for those interested in charting changing ideals of womanhood and domestic culture in Australia. As Susan Sheridan indicates in her acknowledgments, this study has been some time in the making and one senses that the scope and shape of the project has shifted over time. Yet the end result is satisfying and intensely readable. It combines Sheridan's detailed analysis of the magazine with a series of interludes or 'memoirs' from Barbara Baird, Lyndall Ryan and Kate Borrett, each of whom was at different times involved in the project. An attractively packaged, large-format volume, *Who Was That Woman?* does not endeavour to provide a comprehensive publishing history of Australia's best known women's magazine; this was territory already covered to some extent in Denis O'Brien's celebratory work *The Weekly* (1982). Instead, this study situates itself comfortably between feminist media analysis and Australian social history, tracing the interdependencies of popular culture, femininity and consumption, in the period from 1946 to 1971. Rather than attempt exhaustive coverage, Sheridan and her co-researchers wisely opted for a 'slice approach', working from a detailed index of one year in every five for the period 1946 to 1971. This time span was selected for scrutiny not only because it coincided with the period of the *Weekly's* highest circulation and greatest impact, but also because it represented a time of enormous economic prosperity during which the magazine played a central role in the production of a new consumerist identity for Australian women.



Who was the ideal reader addressed by the *Weekly* in these decades, and how did she change over time? As the title suggests, the focus here is upon the role the *Weekly* played in the years following World War Two in forming Australian women's sense of themselves and in engaging women readers in both the pleasures and the work of consumption. Opening in 1946, the book charts the transition that Australian women were making away from the ingrained thrift of the war years when they were lauded for their capacity to save and to manage wisely, toward new identities based on spending and acquisition. The *Weekly* travelled with them on this journey, offering its female readers colourful scripts for achieving truly 'modern', heterosexual womanhood in the expanding world of the Australian suburbs. The woman reader addressed by the magazine was 'the housewife', and she was courted by the magazine's advertisers as the principal consumer on behalf of her household: she was a kind of 'Everywoman'. However, as Sheridan notes, although the model of femininity produced within the magazine 'presented itself as an ideal universally applicable to all women, it obscured major differences among them' (p.6). Indeed, the ideals of femininity and domesticity circulating in the magazine spoke

principally to comfortable or aspiring white middle class readers; the existence of migrant women, Australian born working class women and Aboriginal women was only intermittently acknowledged in the pages of the magazine and they were seldom addressed as readers.

The core of *Who Was That Woman?* consists of chapters covering key facets of femininity and domesticity: the housewife as consumer; sex, romance and marriage; motherhood; women's paid and unpaid work; house and garden; food and cooking; health; and fashion and beauty. If the *Weekly* was - and remains - a socially conservative publication, it is evident that it did still move with the times (even if it was rarely ahead of them). Sheridan's detailed chapters carefully elaborate the successive discursive regimes that were employed across different decades to accommodate changing understandings of marriage, motherhood, and homemaking. Of particular interest is the *Weekly's* uneasy relationship to the notion of 'careers' for women and to the practice of married women undertaking paid work outside the home, two phenomena not readily reconciled with the magazine's promotion of domesticity and full-time motherhood as rightful and fulfilling feminine destinies. Sheridan traces the contradictions and anxieties surrounding these issues, and they are also taken up by Lyndall Ryan in her lively memoir section, 'Remembering the *Australian Women's Weekly* in the 1950s.' By the 1960s, the appearance of articles such as 'Meals Made in Minutes' showed growing recognition within the magazine that at least some readers were 'working wives' or 'two job mothers', as they termed them. Despite this, the *Weekly's* continuing dedication to particular models of domestic womanhood and family life in the face of the development of the Women's Liberation Movement and accompanying the rise in middle-class women's participation in paid employment, was apparently what contributed to its loss of influence in the 1970s.

There are genuine pleasures here for the contemporary reader seeking insights into the changing material conditions of Australian women's lives across these decades and into changing ideals of Australian womanhood. While labour-saving devices abound in advertisements, domestic life nevertheless remained labour intensive and standards of household management high. Highly-segregated gender roles in the post-war decades offered little possibility for the sharing of domestic chores. While references did appear in the magazine to a condition known simply as 'housewife blues', the dominant images are of ecstatic and glamourised engagements with an endless round of domestic tasks, all presented as pleasant duties rather than dull and repetitive burdens. In this era of fast food and domestic de-skilling, some younger readers might well marvel that anyone would want - let alone have been able - to crochet their own wedding dress (p.40) or produce an afternoon tea-cake in the shape of a vase of sweetpeas ('flower moulding in fondant is not as difficult as it may appear' p.93). More still might marvel that the ideal swimsuit model of the 1950s weighed in at 10 stone. The pleasures of reading this work are increased by the lavish level of illustration that provides readers unfamiliar with the magazine in this period ready access to key elements of the *Weekly's* visual presentation. I have no doubt that *Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years* will become a valuable resource for researchers and students in history, cultural studies, media and women's studies. In its successful synthesis of contemporary feminist approaches to women's magazines it offers an excellent model for reading and writing social history through popular culture.

**Maryanne Dever is Director of the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University. Her many publications include editing *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1910-1945*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994.**

## In the Direction of a Signpost

Dorothy Hewett, *Nowhere*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic.

On the Nullarbor Desert, there is a signpost that points Nowhere, claims Dorothy Hewett. And at the very end of her autobiography *Wild Card*, a passage about the home of her childhood reads: 'Turning away we climbed into the car, saying, 'We'll never come back'. There is no need because in the Dream Girl's Garden, in the Golden Valley, in the districts of Jarrabin and Mukinupin, the first house lies secure in the hollow of the heart. Only the ghosts keep walking in our sleep, ringing us up out of *nowhere*.' And now, after stacking several unpublished plays - notably her *Jarrabin Trilogy* - in the drawer, a new play called *Nowhere* was premiered at the Playbox in Melbourne in October last year and is available in the Currency Press edition Current Theatre Series. As usual, fragments of Hewett's own life and personality re-emerge in different guises, this time mostly unprecedented ones.

Hewett's dramatic heroines were famous in the 1970s for their iconoclastic behaviour and the challenge they threw out to middle-class Australia and to us. In their defiance and critique of the much-cherished values of the time, the beautiful Mrs Porter, Sally Banner, Tatty Hollow, Joan, and the rest of her hybrid characters who combined the feminine and the female in their personality structure, provoked a rage of protest but also the unreported empathy of those women and men who recognised the psychological and sociological force of Hewett's plays. And yet the playwright's fictional figures were the product of pure montage, frequently of separate traits, created in the spirit of expressionism and its strategies of discontinuity and alienation.

Inasmuch as it did exist, personal identification with the heroines was just an epistemological approach to an examination of being in the context of contemporary Australia. Other *dramatis personae* thus frequently reflected the protagonist's emotional response to her human environment; they were merely functions of the central subjective standpoint implicit in the heroine's relationship with her immediate surroundings. This 'anti-objective' bent was of course deliberate, and modelled after the widespread practice among avant-garde dramatists in Europe and America before World War Two. When conventional understandings of the self gave way to the experience of subjectivity as an ongoing and fundamentally ungraspable process, that lent itself to extreme interpretations ranging from the denial of any sort of individuality ('death of the subject') to the redefinition of human nature as a dialectical state of human character, shaped by socio-economic circumstances and the cultural climate of the era.



Although evocative of Hewett's expressionist period and her experimentation with 'Ich-Drama' ('drama of the self'), *Nowhere* forges stronger bonds with post-modern texts, thus paying tribute to the revolutionary role of the avant-garde in the redefinition of the institution of art in Western societies, without losing ground in the present. The play draws on Samuel Beckett's legacy in reinventing the theme and the setting of *Waiting for Godot*, but builds upon the initial inspiration a far richer aesthetic and a very personal discourse with the post-World War Two era in Australia; the 1960s in particular. Recognised in history and theory alike as the key transitional period in the twentieth century, that

decade saw the rise of the new international order marked by American neo-colonialism and the Green Revolution, as well as by computerization and electronic information that replaced traditional forms of communication. At the same time, the global community could not escape grappling with the 'internal contradictions and external resistance', to quote [Fredric Jameson](#), inherent in every social structure. Out of the given agenda, Hewett took big visions that subsequently crumbled into nothingness, and delusions that cost lives. *Nowhere*, however, is much more than a melodrama. It is an Australian story.

The play takes place on a long-forsaken showground at the edge of a country town in Western Australia, Hewett's recurring location. The protagonists are two tramp-like figures from society's margin who, it is clear, can be expected to have far more to offer than 'boring' (Hewett's own word) middle-class suburbia. At an advanced age, she still claims that she 'married two rough boys and joined the Communist Party to join the rough boys and girls'. In *Nowhere*, though, the author 'changes gender' and ascribes some of her life experiences to a male hero. Josh, 'an eighty year old pensioner, once a Communist', is portrayed as a former itinerant worker who 'jumped rattlers all over the country in the depression'. He dwells in a shack that reeks of urine and soiled possessions hoarded over twenty years in which his life was kept at a standstill. With Josh trying hard to pull on his battered boots and the line 'Get on y' bastards, get on' - an unequivocal reference to *Godot* - the historical framework of the play is established with Hewett positioning herself as a writer at the cross-roads of the avant-garde and post-modernism, where three generations of Australians meet. For *Nowhere* opens with another character's dream and a clash of sentiments that bring forth the sense of failure and enduring pain. Snow, 'a homeless forty eight-year-old Vietnam veteran' is haunted by the memory of atrocities he blindfoldedly committed in somebody else's homeland against people who fought for their own vision of a harmonious society. With just one word, 'democracy', on the swearing lips of Snow's commander, the playwright conjures the full controversy and ethical dilemmas behind foreign interference into the internal affairs of a sovereign country. She deconstructs and ridicules the hollow language of war propaganda and exposes the strategies of fear and coercion. The dreaded possibility of Japanese invasion is then juxtaposed with their portrayal as 'our best customers' today. Sarcasm, jokes and irony are all Josh's; Snow feeds the lines to him and completely conforms with the expressionistic treatment of a supporting character who is a function of the protagonist's central subjective standpoint. The female hero, who completes the triad, does not enter the play before the closing lines of the first scene.

In *Nowhere*, the older man plays the role of an eye-opener to his younger and politically naïve mate. This stereotyped concept of character relationships taken over from satirical comedy subverts the whole notion of the dignity of war, without confusing an armed conflict driven by imperialistic interests with an anti-fascist war. Thereby Hewett avoids shutting out dialogue with other currently circulating discourses, and allows for the possibility of alternative ideological positions. The indictment on the sacrifice of human lives, however, is immediate and enduring, since the social position of both characters allows for no ambiguities as to the rewards awaiting the returned soldiers. It is clear that, through constant revolutionary agitation and subversion, a particular form of epistemological and ideological critique emerges, stemming from Hewett's allegiance to the avant-garde. It produces a form of insight into alternative values and, consequently, into what Richard Murphy, in his 1999 text, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, calls 'the discursive status of reality.' The desired result of this technique is an informed opposition to any dogma or 'fixity' that might emerge and take the central position of a new order. As in many avant-garde texts, Snow's nightmares are close to reality. They are dispersed, and bickering sentiments between the two men appeased, only with the arrival of Vonnie, a young woman and Aboriginal at that. Hewett ascribes a conciliatory role to the woman in the men's world, and along with it introduces the theme of reconciliation between white and indigenous communities in

general. The central signifier is a broken down Holden placed centre-stage which, together with the shack, a municipal rubbish bin and a pile of logs symbolically lighting the showground setting throughout the play, makes a fixed '*décor*'. The dying vernacular of the country folk also anchors the play in an Australian cultural context. The closure of the opening scene is brought about by extending the play's political discourse to another frequent theme of Hewett, that of environment or, rather, of nature. Some four decades ago, at the time when Hewett decided to return to the 'country of the imagination', Carl Jung warned in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that to say: '*We have conquered nature* is a mere slogan. In reality we are confronted with anxious questions, the answers to which seem *nowhere* in sight.' The daunting one peculiar to Australians is associated with Snow: almost fifty years on he is still portrayed as being 'frightened of the wide open spaces.'

*Nowhere* begins on an early winter's morning that reflects Josh's age, but also points in the direction of yet another literary reference, that of 'The Winter of Our Discontent.' The playwright's discourse with the Western literary heritage defines both her style of expression and her aesthetic. Hewett's individual *oeuvre* can be viewed as a unity; it goes on exploring the same sites of meaning, with womanhood among her most important concerns. Significantly, when Vonnie, 'a twenty-year-old former hooker running from drugs and Bull, her brutal pimp in the city', enters and is asked where she is going, she answers casually: 'Nowhere.' Therefore it matters not whether she relies on her own resources and goes away, or stays under the protection of men. In Vonnie's character, we recognise the rebellious traits of Hewett's former heroines struggling against an aggregate of social ills inside themselves and the society at large. Aboriginality, femininity and drug dependence are all condensed in the story of Vonnie's childhood and her social and psychological conditioning..

Dreams and humour are the two stylistic elements that pervade *Nowhere*. They appear as nightmares, symbolic visions, and cherished or torturous memories that change shapes. And they give expression to both social concerns and personal yearnings. Josh, for instance, dreams of the river that once was, symbolized by the Dry Torrent that the country town on whose edge he is now living has become. Formerly called The Torrent, it evokes all the harnessed rivers in Australia that are drying out or becoming infested with algae. Water, age-old symbol of a life source, becomes the play's overarching paradigm: it links the controversial regional issue with the global problem and, at the same time, serves as an aesthetic tool that brings upon the reader the sense of nostalgia – subverted all the time, however, by humorous overtones. Thus Vonnie, in one of the longest scenes in the play, acts out precious moments from both Josh's and Snow's sentimental lives in what is a mixture of documentarism, nostalgia and irony. While Vonnie - as an uneducated young woman - would be unaware of the theorising of therapeutic effects that an enactment and the consequent venting of one's emotions can have on individuals, this 'play within a play', or meta-theatre, is an attempt 'to bring it [all] out in the open' and release the two men from grief buried inside them for years. Meta-theatre, ever since *The Man from Mukinupin*, has been one of Hewett's favourite techniques and psychological motivation of her characters' actions is her trademark. She recurs to psychoanalysis whenever she wants to 'put flesh on the bones of her characters' without succumbing to the dominant discourse of 'holistic' naturalistic representations, but alternating instead between realism and abstraction. In using water as the central symbol related to Josh, Hewett goes even further and reaches out towards her characters' archetypal being. Like Jung and Freud, Hewett sees the unconscious as the deposit of the remnants of the past; and she draws on Adler in her interpretations of will for power as much as on Marxism.

Consequently, Hewett's most potent signifier is her poetic language. Around and by it she weaves her characteristic texture of exuberant theatricality. Her favourite companion along the avenue of literary

creation is music; specifically, evocative music that helps her awaken emotion and bridge the strings of poetry and prose. In Hewett, theatre, music and poetry merge and bring about a sense of nostalgia and a desire to recreate the past. In talking about what the French call *la mode rétro*, that is retrospective styling or a nostalgic mode in art, Fredric Jameson acknowledges that pastiche and parody are the most significant features or practices of postmodernism. He argues, however, that in what he calls *new postmodernism*, parody is excluded since 'modern art and modernism ... actually anticipated social developments' along the same lines. Since those developments involve social fragmentation and the emergence of numerous 'private languages' or, rather, registers associated with certain professions, the linguistic norm becomes impossible and - by extension - so does ridicule. And indeed, Hewett's sense of humour is never employed in the service of mere parody. For the version of pastiche she now exploits is a syncretic mimicry of her own former dramaturgical styles as much as an author's discourse with her cultural heritage. Thus, in *Nowhere*, 'all the old favourites' are played during the meta-theatrical moments in the plot, bringing back the recollection of *The Golden Oldies*, Hewett's [earlier work](#) commissioned for the launching season of the Playbox, Melbourne. Intertextuality, including that of modern art and social developments, is arguably why Hewett also keeps situating her plots on the edge of a small fictional town in Australia: it allows her to efface the contemporary reference, and encourages the public to receive her plays as Jameson puts it as narratives 'set in some indefinable nostalgic past, an eternal [2000s], say, beyond history.' They uphold mass-culture values and are about specific generational moments of the past. This stylistic option also explains why the language of Hewett's plays nurturing the Shakespearean tradition, from *The Man from Mukinupin* to *Nowhere*, is somewhat archaic and evocative. Like parody, pastiche requires a dramatist to wear 'a stylistic mask' and reproduce 'speech in a dead language'. And yet Hewett's idiom is her own invention: it produces an idiosyncratic and highly personal language of dramaturgy that accommodates poetry and political awareness as an expression of 'the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism' peculiar to Jameson's *new postmodernism*.

The nostalgia mode serves Hewett one more purpose: to invoke the spirit of melodrama at various points in *Nowhere*. These excursions began far back in the 1970s during the author's expressionist stint, and can be detected in most of her plays. They were founded right from the start on an amalgam of German and British notions of the genre since, in German theatre, the term melodrama is commonly associated with a 'musical-dramatic hybrid' ('*musikalische-dramatischen Mischform*') or with a sensational form of popular entertainment. It was Eric Russell Bentley, Peter Brooks, and more recently [Richard Murphy](#), who labelled the heightened emotional states in melodrama as 'hysterical' and introduced the argument that melodrama's 'deeper significance lies in the fact that it resorts to such "screaming" only in order to reach beyond dominant representational systems, codes and conventions, and beyond the epistemological and discursive restrictions associated with them.' The first big melodramatic outburst in *Nowhere* comes about when old Josh starts telling young Vonnie about his past, and the memory of the only woman he has ever loved brings back the image of his days as a Communist as well. Josh's mind is the repository of his identity and it remains, like Hewett's, solid and unshakable. The author thereby initiates a form of *counter-discourse* with her own past and the value system that was the focus of her social and political discontent. By interspersing the play with melodramatic utterances, she 'breaks through everything that constitutes the 'reality principle', all its [censorships, accommodations, tonings-down](#)'. She examines even her own convictions. Lines such as: 'Class is a 'ard thing to overcome ... No, that'd never work out', suggest a 'sobering-up' and the fading of Hewett's former ideals only to be revived several pages onwards in visionary statements like, 'Socialism with a human face. That's what I've always believed in, Edith.' What the playwright sets about to undermine henceforth are assumptions encouraged by realism that 'grasping' reality

'conceptually means possessing and controlling it'. No wonder most of *Nowhere* revolves around Communism and anti-war proclamations, both inspired by strong political convictions. Melodramatic outpourings serve Hewett, above all, as a source of oppositional power that she wields upon the 'conventional and repressive discourses of the post-Enlightenment order' in order to force them to yield up their limitations and to reveal the sites of their repressions. Thus, melodrama returns to the primary impulse behind perhaps all theatricality: it stages fundamental human conflicts and gives vent to unleashed desires in an open transgression of social restraints and psychological repressions. In Murphy's interpretation, it is a spontaneous 'if rather desperate medium both for communicating the anxiety associated with the breakdown of moral and ideological systems in the 20th century, and for expressing the desires (to which this revolution lends support) for the creation of a new order.' But Hewett allows for the melodrama as spectacle and entertainment as well. The pleasure principle to her is the vehicle for social and political persuasion.

In *Nowhere*, as in Hewett's earlier plays, Eros is the dominant instinct, a '*kosmogonos*, a creator and father-mother of all higher consciousness' as Jung called it in *The Undiscovered self*. It is canvassed as an issue that reflects generational attitudes, this time ranging from the widely acknowledged notion of sex as a panacea to the romantic conceptions of love that lead people to suppress their desires by either quelling them altogether or sublimating them into dreams. Desire is again discussed in the form of discourses surrounding both sex and gender. Woman as Virgin versus woman as slut - the two antithetical male perspectives of women - reappear at various points in the play, suggesting that once they get embedded perceptions are difficult to modify.

Something has changed though in modern Australia, Hewett suggests, for Vonnie's behaviour is neither aggressive nor defensive. She freely expresses her sexuality and is at peace with herself. This certainly has to do with her portrayal in the image of a 'half-caste' woman empowered by indigenous wisdom and attitude to nature. The violence to which Vonnie gets subjected by men is still considerable, though. With a single phrase, 'Make love not war', Hewett conjures up the entire era of the 1960s and with it brings to life pictures of women still often sexual objects under the banner of 'sexual liberation.' A fulfilling sexual relationship is seen not to preclude harassment or physical abuse of women by their male partners. From the modern point of view, this parallel examination seems to suggest that men find it more difficult to adapt to the notion of partnership and its quotidian connotations of equality. Violence towards and victimisation of women are the two behavioural patterns that Hewett subverts with a large gesture. One of the most powerful scenes in *Nowhere* is the axe-murder of Bull, a bikie and Vonnie's abusive pimp, conceived in the best manner of expressionism. Hewett has recourse to that aesthetic whenever she needs powerful visual imagery; it also helps her to create the atmosphere of total theatre on stage. But being a pastiche, *Nowhere* exploits other aesthetic options that allow the author to explore. for example, desire in old age. A not-old reader/viewer of a Hewett play can find out what it might be like to be and feel old, and in what ways this feeling weakens or empowers an individual. Institutions like old people's homes, the pension system, and social welfare pop up as discursive points along with social work in general, the 'stolen kids' generation, public and municipal property, or the ambivalent attitude to the arts in Australia. Characters who epitomise public institutions are reduced to character types or symbols and are therefore given only a prefix to a name (Mrs Mac) or are called by the name of their profession (the Sergeant), just as Bull is a man with only a nickname.

This dramaturgical practice commonly found in expressionism enables Hewett to efface the psychological dimension of individuals and lay bare the representational device - both formally and ideologically. The technique has an anti-illusionist function similar to the Russian formalists' alienation

method subsequently adopted by Brecht. The three main characters, on the other hand, are not only given personal names that have a signifying dimension, but also have personal histories and hence, the depth, of human beings rather than being mere instruments of social control. Due to the duality of dramaturgical devices and to memory flashbacks, as well as the meta-theatrical devices and the intrusions of public figures into protagonists' private lives, the sense of discontinuity and representational instability characteristic of the avant-garde lingers on, but the individual scenes are much longer than during Hewett's infatuation with *Kinostil* in the 1970s. The playwright has moved closer to the modernist aesthetic described by Murphy that 'updates realism's technical virtuosity', while still seeking to deconstruct dominant social discourses and, with them, the implicit epistemology, reality-principle and social value system.

The events and emotions that make up *Nowhere's* protagonists are built of a picturesque series of encounters, with Josh as a central figure 'wandering amongst reflections of his own persona on the path towards redemption' and rebirth. The pivotal signifier in the play, its setting, can be largely construed according to spatial considerations and the symbolic meaning of the showground. Its location on the edge of the country town suggests a symbolic reference to Australia and its geographical position on the map of the world. It is the promised country, Alice's Wonderland/Wormland; it is also the 'nowhere' in which initial settlers ended up - the 'place to disappear' to and live a peaceful life at long last, says Hewett the poet. When Snow arrived to the showground on the edge of Dry Torrent, Josh was its only occupant. From that it can be inferred that he ended up nowhere. Vonnie repeats several times in the play that she is going nowhere, and two of her songs or, rather, two parts of the same song delivered at the beginning and towards the end of the play, first as a solo and then in a duet with Snow, bear the title 'Going Nowhere.' Consequently, when the couple decides to leave the showground, they again choose Nowhere as their destination. But when finally Snow turns the signpost pointing towards Nowhere in the opposite direction, all expectations of a definite solution in the play are dispersed. One feeling remains, though. When first sung, 'Nowhere' eerily resonated of death; when continued at the point of the couple's departure it bore the promise of peace, of 'belong[ing] somewhere again'. So, the turning of the signpost could signify that the land of peace stretches all around us. This is also what Josh's determination to stay put seems to suggest. For he both refuses social integration and stands his ground to the very end. 'I'm not disappearin', he says. The 'coming down' of rain that he alone can anticipate, the rain which is 'goin' to be a real bobby-dazzler' is Hewett's last and most important symbol, her discourse with Christian heritage and its Holy Scripture - the Bible. For, unlike Noah, Josh climbs on top of the roof of his shack, closer to heaven and the universe, to await the Flood and watch from above the purification and renewal of the land that will bring physical and moral ablution as well. The prophet in him rejoices at seeing once more the torrent that is going 'to sweeten the waters and green the land again.' The play folds with the soft sound of 'The Rite of Spring' accompanied by church bells tolling faintly, 'as if under water.' Thus, what stays after the book is shut is the promise of an overarching revolution of social habit, with marginal people figuring as the heroes with whom our hope should rest. Or is it, rather, a warning?

Refusal of a closure corresponds with the polysemous nature of Hewett's writings in general and points once again to what Richard Murphy calls, 'a historical sense of the danger which lies in wait for those who do not practice some form of epistemological skepticism with regard to what are, in effect, discursive fictions.' Brecht's argument brings us even closer to Hewett: 'And when the fallacies are all worn out? The last one keeping us company/sitting right across from us/is nothingness.' But it is in Carl Gustav Jung's legacy the most significant link to this chain of intertextuality is found: 'In an era which has concentrated exclusively upon extension of living space and increase of rational knowledge at all

costs, it is a supreme challenge to ask man to become conscious of his uniqueness and his limitation. Uniqueness and limitation are synonymous. Without them, no perception of the unlimited is possible - and, consequently, no coming to consciousness either - merely a delusory identity with it which takes the form of intoxication with large numbers and an avidity for political power' (*The Undiscovered Self*).

The most prominent discourse, and the one interspersed throughout *Nowhere*, is the discourse of war. Flowing from the stage in the Beckett Theatre at Melbourne's Playbox, in the wake of September 11, its historic import faded before the fresh onslaught of a universal and ominous signifier.

**Jasna Novakovic grew up with fiction and the sound of music at heart, and was adamant that she would make a career in opera. Radio unexpectedly opened the possibility for accommodating both but, when the country of her birth started crumbling to pieces, the music stage followed suit leaving theatre as the only resilient medium. Reviewing plays proved to be a source of solace and newly discovered joy, and Jasna was attracted to Dorothy Hewett and to her exuberant world of emotion and social critique. A PhD thesis at Monash University, when completed, will explain more.**

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Fredric Jameson. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

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## Long Waiting in the Wings

Susan Pfisterer and Carolyn Pickett, *Playing with Ideas: Australian Women Playwrights from the Suffragettes to the Sixties*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1999.

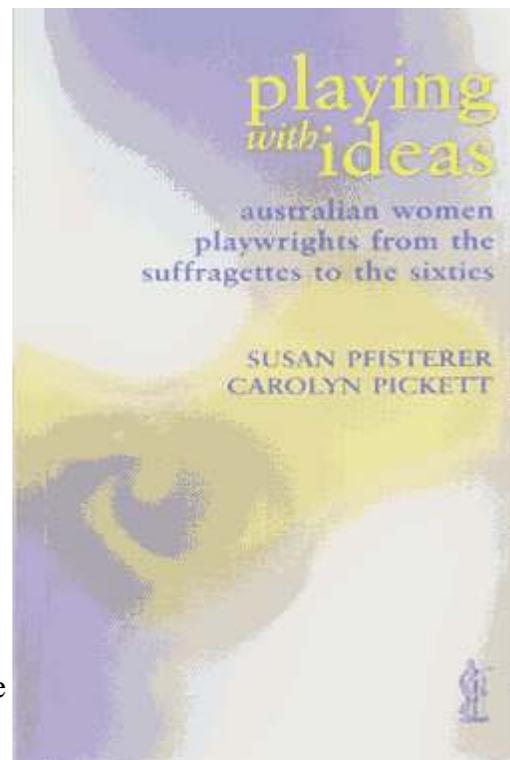
Reviewed by Kerry Kilner.

*Theatre history is actually a record of choices. Playwrights and plays are remembered not necessarily because of individual or textual merit, but on the precarious value systems of the people who selected, recorded and noticed the history of the Australian stage. (p.224)*

*Playing with Ideas* is an important work for its revelation of the activities of Australian women dramatists in the first half of the twentieth century. Pfisterer and Pickett offer a broad ranging discussion and interpretation of the work that a very large number of women undertook in their efforts to develop an Australian theatre culture in adverse times for local dramatic works. The book groups the dozens of plays discussed into chapters that cover such diverse themes as suffrage; the economic realities of women's lives from the late nineteenth century through to the mid twentieth; women's place in the modern world; war and its social, political and emotional impacts; the rise of socialism and the associated propaganda or political plays; and the particularity of historical plays.

Each chapter begins by setting the critical interpretive scene through which the plays and activities of the women are read. Thus each chapter offers valuable analyses of particular areas and eras and can be read independently of the others. That said, however, the work as a whole is a very easy and interesting read and the companion volume of plays, *Tremendous Worlds: Australian Women's Drama 1890-1960* firmly grounds the interpretative exercise in a body of work that can be studied and used in a variety of ways. Both works should be incorporated into twentieth century Australian drama courses and would be useful recommended reading on twentieth century Australian history courses as well. They provide an entry point into the actuality of women in Australian theatre during the period and of women in Australia generally through the subject matter of the plays as well as the activities of the playwrights.

Founded firmly on feminist principles of interrogation, rather than a standard historiographical approach, the authors ensure that their interpretation of the absence of Australian women playwrights and their work in standard theatre histories is put clearly in perspective. Masculinist interpretations of Australian theatre history have simply ignored, or greatly undervalued, the material that in this book is given its full weight and accorded its rightful place in the development of Australian theatre. Because women were involved in the repertory or little theatre movement, often in establishing roles, where community and amateur participation underpinned their success it seems that the contributions they made were almost entirely dismissed by earlier Australian theatre historians. Yet these theatres and organisations provided the humus from which a



healthy theatre industry could grow in the 60s and 70s - the era traditionally seen as the 'birth' of an Australian theatre culture.

Reading into the texts using feminist deconstructive methods, the authors interrogate the plays for their underlying meanings or messages that may be superficially obscured (sometimes purposefully) because of the political and social contexts in which they were written. In *Playing with Ideas* Pfisterer and Pickett do what Miles Franklin hoped critics would do when reading her plays, 'to see the underside or innerness of what I write.' And this is an important point to make about the work of many of these playwrights - that the period was, largely, not a time of overt feminism (at least not after the vote was won). The methods the writers employed to explore issues around the desires for individual and political autonomy and greater economic independence were frequently written in palimpsest upon the page/stage. Women's agency in economic, family, cultural and sexual terms is analysed through the ways these themes are represented in the plays that explore both the potential for women to become fully actualised individuals and the reasons they do not.

The conservative era in which these playwrights worked, and against which they often struggled, is mirrored in the conservative and often unreflective synopses by the theatre historian Campbell Howard (and his assistant, Colin Kenny), whose invaluable work in collecting Australian plays of the 1920s to the 1950s has not been ignored by Pfisterer and Pickett. The Index to the Campbell Howard collection (published in 1993) provides brief synopses written by Howard and Kenny of the plays in the collection. These synopses, however, undermine the potential value of the plays for contemporary readers and researchers by their frequent misreading of the themes and subject matter. The Index, which should give a good first access point to the plays, also contains some very value-laden comments that often miss the point of the playwrights' work. Pfisterer and Pickett sometimes use these interpretations (which were often the first critical accounts, albeit brief and unreliable) to highlight the distorted reading of the plays, and to show the conservatism that the women playwrights faced, both at the time of writing and later.

Of particular interest is the chapter 'Stages of Subversion: Experiments with Dramatic Form.' Its interpretation of the subversive uses to which the playwrights put the convention of realism in plays containing a 'message' (often covertly feminist) through the dramaturgy employed in stage directions is absorbing. The readings of Miles Franklin, Marjorie McLeod and Millicent Armstrong's plays are excellent; I think, however, that the authors have been a little too generous towards Dulcie Deamer's 'morality plays.' It's my opinion that, although she may have been crowned Queen of Bohemia in 1926, Deamer soon 'repented' of her party-girl ways and, by the early 30s, was a staid and rather religious woman. Her morality tales certainly belong to the later period. She does, nevertheless, remain a fascinating individual as do many of the women of these times and these plays.

'Brave Red Witches', Chapter 5, covers the rise of socialist consciousness during the 1930s to the 1950s, and explores the impact that involvement in the various writers' and cultural organisations sponsored by the Communist Party had on their work and lives. The freedom to write drama for assured performance by the New Theatre League offered many playwrights the opportunity of seeing their work on the stage but, due to Australia's conservatism and rightist leanings, it also closed off opportunities for work in the mainstream theatres, often for the remainder of their professional lives. Some of the writers involved in the New Theatre were committed and signed up communists; others were motivated by humanist principles, feminism and pacificism, and didn't ever become CPA members. Quite a few went to Russia and other Eastern Bloc countries as feted guests, and this

phenomenon could have been problematised more here. A discussion of how their works were propagandised for political purposes, and how some of the writers were used by Stalinist regimes is not explored fully enough. This is, admittedly, a very big area and worth a study of its own; a brief discussion would, however, have been able to contextualise rather than simply lionise.

The fact that women writers won so many competitions during the period but still did not manage to get into the written histories of Australian theatre before now must indicate how little historiographers thought of the method of meritorious awards. This absence does not result from a lack of evidence, as there was frequent press coverage about the award winners and their work, along with articles in contemporary literary journals. Nor can it be because they were only writing about women's issues - far from it, in fact - the pre-1960s generation of women wrote relatively little about women, seeing themselves as members of the body politic and often disavowing membership of any overt feminist movements. They used the whole world as their subject matter, taking to the stage with the biggest as well as the most intimate of issues. Far from confining themselves to women's worlds, they wrote about war, nationalism, and international politics as often as, or as a part of, their engagement with family life, women's roles and romance.

There is no doubt that plays of Oriel Gray, Mona Brand and Betty Roland should be as well known as those by Louis Esson, Douglas Stewart and Vance Palmer. Thanks to work such as this book, they will take their rightful place alongside these iconic figures of early twentieth century Australian drama. Indeed the value of plays such as *Here Under Heaven*, *A Touch of Silk* and *The Torrents* in reflecting Australian culture is easily of as high quality, if not higher, than that of their theatre brothers'. But then, during the course of a long-winded Masters Thesis on the same subject that Pfisterer and Pickett cover, I read many of these plays and feel a fondness for the efforts these women put into their literary lives. It was great to be reminded of their worth and of the strange, fabulous and poignant topics they covered.

Pfisterer and Pickett conclude with the statement that, due to the lop-sided historical tellings of Australian theatre, 'Perhaps [there] is justification enough to allow their frustrated promise a second hearing.' Certainly there should be - if not on stage, then definitely in the corridors and classrooms of our educational institutions.

**Kerry Kilner is the Manager of AustLit: Australian Literature Gateway ([www.auslit.edu.au](http://www.auslit.edu.au)) the largest resource discovery service about Australian writers and writing - a collaboration between eight universities and the National Library of Australia. She is the compiler of *From Page to Stage : An Annotated Bibliography of Australian Drama*, published in the AustLit Gateway and has had a lengthy interest in the works of Australian women playwrights of the early twentieth century. She also edited *Playing the Past: Three Plays by Australian Women* (Currency 1995).**

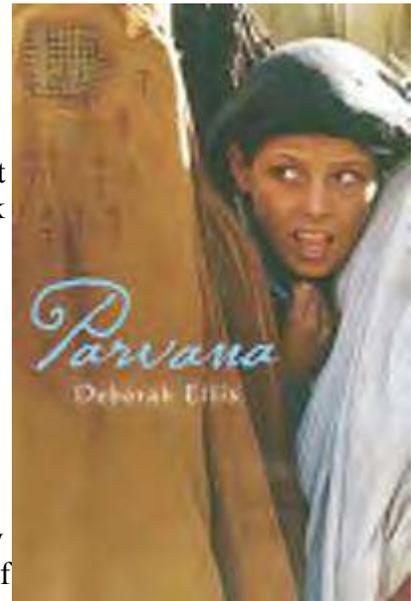
## Through an (American) Afghani Girl's Eyes

Deborah Ellis, *Parvana*. Toronto: Allen and Unwin, 2002.

Reviewed by Jo Lampert.

It's probably too soon, after the events of September 11, to be able to track the ways in which our notions of civics and citizenship, or our Western gaze, have remained the same or changed as a result of the much-hyped War Against Terror. After the frenzied responses in the popular media immediately after the event, we heard remarkably little for a while. Then the new waves of hysteria began. Predictable was an increase in American nationalism, and a decrease in tolerance (and this is also identifiable within Australia). With new publications of fiction since September 11, that concentrate on characters and plots set in the Middle East or Asia, a 'tracking' of attitude through literature begins to be possible.

The recently published Young Adult novel called *Parvana* is one of the first novels in this category to come out since last year. Published under the title *The Breadwinner* in Canada, this is the story of an eleven-year-old Afghani girl, Parvana, who is dressed as a boy to write letters for people and to sell her remaining family possessions at a local market, after her father is imprisoned by the Taliban. The book is dedicated to 'the children of war', positioning the young, almost certainly Western reader as outside the story but charitable and sympathetic.



An interesting consequence of the alliances and empathy available to us in current times, is the manageability of both loathing the enemy (the Taliban), and saving a subgroup, Afghani women, who we can construct as abused, oppressed, and in need of 'our' advocacy. The American salvation narrative is strengthened rather than weakened by the events of September. We can name the enemy (who has the face of Osama Bin-Laden) but appease our liberalism by easily identifying the 'good' face of the 'tribe' as well: the women, who would be much better off if they were more like 'us'.

In *Parvana* (which is written by a white Canadian woman), it is possible to argue that the family we are involved with are really stand-in Westerners. Although they are Afghani, the father has commendably been educated in Britain, and both parents speak English (Parvana's father is very excited at one stage in the book to find another woman who speaks English, thus they can easily identify her as both good and educated). We sympathize with them further, because they were middle class (like us!) and their lives are in ruins thanks to the Taliban's cruelty. We can feel suitably outraged that the family has lost 'everything' (including the father's leg when the school he taught in was attacked). Their home (first a house, then an apartment, finally just a bombed out shelter) gets smaller and smaller as the evil Taliban victimise them. The reader can imagine losing her own home.

In fact, when he is snatched from his family, the father has just finished telling the story of how Afghanistan defeated Britain in 1880. The seeming pride he displays at Afghani independence is very quickly dispelled, however, when the Taliban almost immediately burst in, during this story, to arrest

him - for having been educated in Britain. Oddly, the independence so proudly expressed in one paragraph is almost immediately dissipated as the British are now portrayed as the heroes - the nation that 'educated' the father and that the Taliban resents and punishes. Do the Afghans benefit from Independence then, or not? This book would suggest that they are much worse off without the 'help' they receive.

Parvana's father (and then Parvana herself) reads letters for people in the market. So his symbolic link with the outside (Western) world is well established, and again proves his value. We can once more be safely outraged at his treatment, since he is more like us than not. He fits into a long tradition of poor but noble peasants. He is worthy as a role model Afghan, because he is educated and has been, it may be implied, (almost) as badly treated as Americans on the date.

Parvana and her siblings are also substitute Westerners. She is often confused by what she sees around her (women in burqas), totally befuddled by the politics of the war, naïve about the circumstances in her own country. The only reason she knows about land mines is because someone from the United Nations once came into her class to talk about them (167). Even her father seems totally bemused by Afghani politics 'I don't know why they arrested me. How would I know why they let me go?' (162).

And commerce is the perceived desire. Parvana and the other girl, whom she discovers is also dressing up as a boy to provide for her family, are singularly interested in finding ways to make more money. Oddly, they speak remarkably like Americans, and the dialogue has them saying things like; 'Hey, maybe if we can work together, we can come up with a better way to make money!' (100).

In addition, there is not one Afghan in this book who doesn't wish to move away, to a Western country. The glimmer of hope for the girls is that one day they'll meet at the Eiffel Tower (167). (let's hope none of them aspire to Australia, given the tiny percentage of those currently on Nauru assessed as 'genuine' refugees!). No suggestion is made that life as immigrants might be just as, if not more, difficult than the life they are leading. It's the American dream, imposed seamlessly. It's hard not to wonder, too, in what ways this feeds into currently hyperbolised fears of immigration and the so-called 'refugee crisis'. What if everyone in the world really does want to come to the West? Then what?

There is also an interesting politics of envy exemplified in the book ... above all, Parvana says, she just wants 'a normal, boring life'(139). It's not hard to interpret this as meaning she wants the normal, boring White Western life that the readers (they should remember) are lucky enough to be leading. We can walk away from this book with a great sense of superiority.

Strangely, a judgmental, almost sneering tone creeps in at various stages in the book. The authorial ideology seems implacably one of Afghans as essentially barbaric, certainly illogical. The father explains history in the region in this way: 'After the Soviets left, the people who had been shooting at the Soviets decided they wanted to keep shooting at something, so they shot at each other' (16). Similarly, and amazingly, later in the novel someone suggests, about Kabul, 'maybe someone should drop a big bomb on the country and start again' (140).

The author also cannot stop herself from imposing her own position on her Afghani characters. Her outsider point of view, her judgment of Islamic women, is evident. When Parvana asks her father how women in burqas manage to see where they're going, her father tells her 'they fall down a lot'. Similarly, at another point in the novel, Parvana wonders how women in burqas recognize each other at all. These

are hardly credible as issues, except perhaps for outsiders.

The book is also written through a kind of Christian filter. This 'dumbing down' or simplifying of Islam again contributes to the generation of reader outrage. It means we don't have to try to work too hard to understand any perspective other than our own. It is explained to Parvana that 'the word Taliban meant religious scholars, but Parvana's father told her that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder. The Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live' (16).

Overall, the Taliban in this book are, to a man, thugs. The one 'good' (albeit illiterate) Talib in this book is good because he is also oppressed - his wife is dead, presumably at the hands of the Taliban. We are told the Taliban hate all music. The most memorable scene in the books is one where the girls try to sell their wares in a stadium, only to find the Taliban cutting off the hands of thieves en masse. We are told that 'dogs had started eating some of the bodies, so there were pieces of people on the sidewalks and in the streets. I even saw a dog carrying a person's arm in his mouth' (154). This image of inhumane monstrosity has the tone of propaganda. The Taliban, in this book, is an irrational, barbaric Thing.

This portrayal of Arabic savagery is not new, of course. An Australian young adult novel called *Jihad: A Girl's Quest to Settle the Past* voices a similar cultural stereotype. The Mujahadeen are described as 'such hotheads that fervour spread through a group of them like a [summer bushfire](#)'. This image, interestingly, echoes again recently in *the Weekend Australian Magazine*, with reference to David Hicks, the Australian currently detained at Guantanamo Bay for fighting with The Taliban. 'He's a hothead,' says [Lieutenant-Colonel Bernie Liswell](#). Guilty by association.

The book makes use of some very Western narratives and genres in its form. This is, in essence, a Cinderella story – Parvana, the member of the family with the least power (her sister is particularly unkind to her) becomes the recognized heroine. There is also a tradition of the regulation of the body, in literature, and more specifically, girls dressing as boys (Yentl springs to mind). Parvana dresses as a boy to become more acceptable, more powerful, more 'useful' - but the entire family 'dresses up' as Westerners, and this has the same effect on the reader. Parvana needs to do it to 'fit in'. The family needs to do it to be accepted by the reader. Parvana is transformed into a more acceptable version of herself.

In the aftermath of September 11, Kabul is described as not having a 'single intact building in the whole area, just piles of brick, dust and rubble' (107). It is simple to see this book as a film, and in fact the cover is already perfectly filmic, constituting terror: a photograph of a young girl's dark eyes, surrounded by faceless women in burqas.

*Parvana* ends on a note of ambiguity. The girl and her father leave Kabul to go searching for her mother and sister, who have by then disappeared, possibly to a refugee camp.

It will be interesting to have a closer look at the endings of children's literature in the years to come. Henry Giroux, in his new book *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism*, written prior to September 11, suggested that Westerners no longer have much hope for the future, that Americans have an increasing inability to believe in a happy ending. In the midst of the current 'crisis' we may see more of this loose-ended resolution, as uncertainty increases with little hope of conclusion. But we the implied readers, thankfully remain safely (for the moment) at home.

**Jo Lampert is a published writer of fiction, and is currently working as a Lecturer with the Faculty of Education and The Oodgeroo Unit at the Queensland University of Technology.**

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Roseanne Hawk, *Jihad: A Girl's Quest to Settle the Past - And Say Goodbye*, NSW: Albatross Books Pty Ltd, 1996: p.75.

Cameron Stewart, 'Nowhere Man' in the *Weekend Australian Magazine*, April 6-7 2002: p.17.

## **The Fragmented Story of a Journey to Wholeness**

Irini Savvides, *Willow Tree and Olive*: Sydney: Hodder Headline Australia, 2001.

Reviewed by Leanne Bensley.

The Ancient Greek art of mosaic is often described as one of the highest expressions of art. Originating in Crete in the third century BC, mosaics have long been treasured for their striking and vibrant presentation techniques which create ordered pictures by using small fragmented pieces of matter. Irini Savvides has created just such a work in her novel *Willow Tree and Olive*.

The word mosaic, originating in the Greek, means 'patient work of art, worthy of the muses.' As in all works of mosaic art, Savvides strategically uses fragments of shape, texture and colour, forming broken images that, in completion, create a vivid picture with a surreal depth of field.

Indeed, the notion of 'fragments' is central to *Willow Tree and Olive* in both form and essence. Savvides uses a variety of literary languages to craft an image of a beautiful and lively soul. She shifts between first person, third person, prose, diarised narration, dialogue and letters to craft her vivid portrayal of Olive Alexandropoulos and her powerful journey of personal recovery.

Olive is an singularly courageous and perceptive character with an 'old soul' that seems determined to drive her through the trauma of resurfacing memories of childhood sexual abuse and onwards to a reborn spirit.

Olive's deep and dynamic friendship with fellow student Kerry McLean affords Savvides an ideal tool with which to craft the early stages of her story and bring her protagonist to life. Kerry McLean's introverted realism provides the ideal counterpoint to Olive's extraverted dreaming. It is a friendship that seems the richer for its spanning of Greek and Irish cultures, and is an entertaining and engaging entry point for Olive's migration towards acknowledgment and ownership of her Greek heritage; a migration that ultimately delivers the character into personal renewal. Olive's journey from Melbourne to Greece is a migration not only of cultural awakening, but a journey in which Savvides offers her readers a deeper understanding of the place of culture and heritage in the journey into adulthood.

Savvides' portrayal of Olive's shrewd and insightful mind continues to surprise, and models a compelling character for young readers struggling with their own experiences of culture, faith, fear, pain, or simply the uncertainty of an unknown future. Olive's instincts are good and her spirit unfettered; two qualities aptly demonstrated by an observation of fellow passengers on a bus ride. 'As Olive looked at them, it was hard to decide who was more tired: the farmers, or those who stayed cooped up in a box all day. The difference in their eyes was that the former seemed to look out at the horizon whereas the latter seemed to be staring outwards - but they didn't seem to see very far' (p 195).

Savvides' imagistic fragments poke out from the text and subtext throughout her story, appearing at the outset in shards of shattered Wedgewood plates at a traditional Greek wedding, and reappearing through to the last page. 'What if she herself had stood there in ages past and had come back to piece the fragments together?' (p233), Kerry wonders of her friend.

Kerry's gift to Olive of the tiny book of poetry, *Fragments by Sappho*, seems to continue the suggestion that one's journey to completeness is an intricate series of disparate moments and perceptions. 'I feel

disappointed and confused. *Fragments by Sappho* falls out of my pocket. I read the lines. They are so lyrical, so beautiful, but incomplete. All that's left is fragments and I do not have the glue to piece them together' (p247).

Like the olive trees that symbolise hope to Savvides' protagonist, this story seems firmly rooted in the fertile soil of her own experiences of culture and relationship. Through Olive's youthful and descriptive eye, Savvides gently sits into place a rich imagery of trees, friendship, and Greek culture and landscape, to piece together fragments of a broken past and create a tale of beauty and wholeness.

Irini Savvides lives in the Blue Mountains outside Sydney. *Willow Tree and Olive* is her first novel.

**Leanne Bensley is a professional freelance writer and editor. She undertakes feature writing, reviewing, editing and content development through her company Telescopes.**

## **The Hallmark of the Ordinary**

Anita Diamant, *Good Harbour*. Allen and Unwin, 2001

Reviewed by Carolyn Hughes.

Reading this book was a depressing experience. Not because of the subject matter of mid-life marital trouble and breast cancer, but because these themes are handled without any depth or even sharp observation. The novel is riddled with clichés at every turn - the plot, the characters, the dialogue, the setting, the ending.

The main characters, Kathleen and Joyce, meet in a seaside town at a difficult time in their lives. They form a friendship that exceeds the limits of the closeness they have with their husbands. On their regular walks together along the beach at Good Harbour they share secrets and talk about parts of their lives they feel they can't discuss within their respective marriages. The title of the novel and the name of the beach, Good Harbour, are not very subtle hints at the role of the friendship as a good harbour during life's troubles.

Kathleen doesn't relate to her husband Buddy as easily as she does to other women, and strongly feels the absence of her sister, who died years previously from breast cancer. Kathleen is a children's librarian and, like her sister, is diagnosed with breast cancer; hers, however, is a lesser form that is successfully treated with surgery and radium therapy.

Joyce is writing a romance novel at a cottage near Good Harbour and the novel is faltering, along with her domestic arrangements. As a reaction to her increasingly distant marriage she has an affair with an inexplicable character who won't take his pants off, for reasons that remain unknown. She is depressed because, in her own words she is 'such a cliché'. If a character in the text can articulate these words, why then doesn't Diamant go deeper than the cliché? Why not explore the nuances of Joyce's ordinariness? Or examine why the character considers herself to be a cliché? The novel is like a long Hallmark card and, funnily enough, Joyce says to Kathleen: 'I love it up here. But when I try to explain what made me pick Gloucester, I end up sounding like a Hallmark card.' This is an unfortunate choice of words for Joyce because it can ironically be applied both to the character's life and the novel in general.

Each character speaks of problems with motherhood - and this is where the novel has its few interesting if undeveloped moments. Kathleen's grown sons could have provided more complexity, particularly in regard to Jewishness and the relationship between mother and son. Joyce's twelve year old daughter is shuffled off to camp and out of the novel making her presence brief, although she does provide some interesting tension.

Because of the flatness and clichés, there is no sparkle. *Good Harbour* offers nothing significant in terms of a literary contribution to representations of female friendship. The friendship is ultimately unconvincing because it is dialogue-driven with little inner narrative. The dialogue between the two women tries really hard to be fresh and witty, but comes across as a bit flirty and strained (*Gilmore Girls*-esque), and doesn't convey any ease or familiarity between the two women.

I imagine the audience Diamant attracted with *The Red Tent* would have had, like myself, higher expectations of her second novel. Without the setting and characters already sketched for her (*The Red*

*Tent* is about Dinah, Jacob's daughter from the book of *Genesis*, Diamant struggles to capture a sense of people and place. Most of all, it's the narration that lets *Good Harbour* down. The narrative voice is tepid and unengaging, in direct contrast to the believable voice of Dinah that so easily brought us into the world of *The Red Tent*.

While Kathleen and Joyce walk along the beach, their conversation paddles in the shallows. Secrets are shared, and the secrets form a major part of their lives, but the level of engagement only laps at the surface. This is a far cry from the all enveloping and warm narrative of *The Red Tent*.

The central concern of the novel is meant to be the friendship between Kathleen and Joyce, but how the two women feel about each other and their friendship is wholly unexamined. There is no reflection within the novel of the impact of the friendship on either woman's life, nor is there any engagement with how the husbands feel about the friendship. What is especially lacking in this story about friendship is intimacy. The reader can't get close to the characters because we are shut out of their deeper inner thoughts. And there is a lack of intimacy in the representation of the friendship as well - there is a wall around each of the characters that prevents any meaningful exchange. The reader is left hoping there is more to friendship and intimacy than the depressing clichés contained within the pages of *Good Harbour*.

**Carolyn Hughes is completing an M Phil thesis in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.**

## What Do You Mean by Your Country?

Sylvia Lawson, *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia: Stories and Essays*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Publishing, 2002.

Reviewed by Shirley Tucker.

Reading a collection of stories and essays by one author can be a bit like listening to an album by one artist. There are tracks you routinely skip - not because they are necessarily inferior to the ones you don't, but because they are simply not to your taste. Sylvia Lawson's provocatively titled collection, *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia* reminds me of such albums; albums that cover a vast array of genres, styles and themes in an attempt to showcase the versatility of the artist and demonstrate their mastery of everything possible in music.

It's not that Lawson isn't a great cultural critic and writer. Taken individually, each story/essay is intelligent and engaging (except perhaps for 'Putting the books away with Jack' the one where she sorts her books with her son according to various ambiguous disciplinary categories), and each story investigates important questions of nation, identity, politics and culture. It's just that despite these pressing Australian preoccupations, the overall sequence or continuity is somewhat incoherent because, I think, the integration of these themes into each story/essay is so elusive. It's hard work making the connections but you can't help responding to the not quite concealed demand that you bloody well make the connections.

Perhaps the book's suggestive cover, with a title that promises the fantasy of Simone, albeit dead in Australia, positioned above an Aboriginal art graphic, perfectly contextualises the vast array of genres, styles and topics within. The overall organising principle for this collection is announced in the epigraph to the Introduction where an interviewer asks Noam Chomsky whether the time might come when we are no longer ashamed of our country and Chomsky replies 'it depends what you mean by your country'. The ensuing investigation of 'our country' provides an interesting, if not unusual, journey into the thoughts and observations of Lawson.

Using a mix of fact, fiction and autobiography, Lawson investigates the extent to which increasingly repressive ideological conformity has eroded any sense of social democracy. While the tone is optimistic rather than gloomy, she is clearly concerned about the disappearance of the dissenting voice as she moves us through a wide range of settings; Alice Springs, East Timor, Indonesia, West Papua, Britain and France, to emphasise this point. Despite the many problems she observes as a consequence of this loss of critical voice, she manages to maintain positive about the future through her own good faith in people generally. For example, though she explains that our nation-building efforts (characterised by corroboree, Snowy River horse riders in Akubras and Drizabones, and the lawnmower ballet at the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games) are largely symbolic, she argues that we read symbols accurately and we 'know full well what we're doing when symbolic action is called for' (5). Thus the meaning of Cathy Freeman's



gold medal win, watched by the whole of Australia, was about the future, about 'what's not attained but might be, with a long way to go' (4).

And though the shifting locales might be difficult at first to integrate into a coherent narrative of 'our country', they all contribute to an analysis of the connections between the personal and the political, and the impossibility of imagining culture or identity from an exclusively local perspective. Our country, then, is variously created and critiqued by many famous dissenting voices that share cameo roles with more intimate dissenters that Lawson has both invented and remembered. The title essay/story for example, is as much about a reading group of ordinary women as it is about Beauvoir. And I guess this is why I found this essay quite disappointing given its apparent subject. While it is always difficult to do justice to an icon, particularly a feminist one, I found myself unable to take an interest in anything her various reading group characters had to say, either about Simone or themselves.

Nevertheless, her writing versatility, her astute observation and cultural critique is evident every time Lawson's analysis of the ways in which de Beauvoir hasn't 'died' in Australia intercepts the agonies of the reading group characters. Similarly, the deeply reflective essay, 'How Raymond Williams Died in Australia', is a brilliant discussion on cultural institutions and loss. In this collection there are many moments when Lawson is at her best and, even when her dissenting voice seems muted in the words of fictional others, you can't help admiring her constant self-questioning and searching for a way forward.

**Shirley Tucker is a Lecturer in the Contemporary Studies Program at the Ipswich campus of the University of Queensland.**

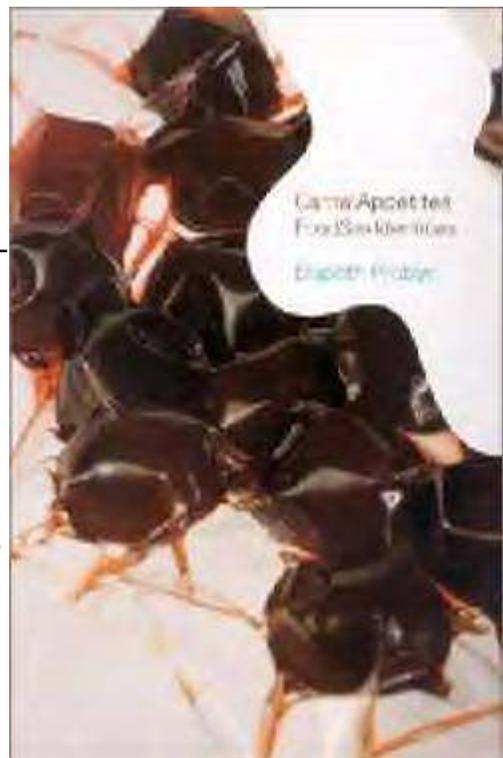
## Eating Restraint in the Face of Excess

Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. Routledge, 2000.  
Reviewed by Angela Hirst.

*Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* is an alimentary journey that veers away from the well-trodden ground of 'pleasant' food writing. It's hard to imagine Jeffrey Steingarten, Elizabeth David or M.F.K. Fisher ever having thought to take food so far afield from gastronomy as to provoke the question *is oral sex eating?* By trampling on well-established food arenas into previously unrelated territory, Elspeth Probyn ingeniously confuses thinking and eating, living and feeding. The result is a deftly described game (an edible 'twister' perhaps) with food as the board and our identities as the players. In the game, we consume life's unpalatable elements as readily as its delicacies, and are teased, disgusted and tantalised by their dialectical imagery. Using Probyn's words, food and eating become the 'optic' through which to see how we live, what sustains us, or 'how we eat into cultures, eat into identities, indeed eat into ourselves.'

Probyn borrows Deleuze's rhizomatic logic to describe food's ever surprising infiltrations into and around us. We eat rhizomes. They are protruding bulbous underground gingers and potatoes, which are both root and stem. They branch off laterally and horizontally, growing opportunistically, making soil and water into body. Similarly, Probyn understands human ingestion as a process that problematises the boundaries of body, food and inedibles. When we consume the tuber, divisions between I and other are blurred. Identity is destabilised. The body becomes assemblage connected to other assemblages, 'bits of past and present practice, openings, attachments to parts of the social, closings and aversion to other parts. The tongue, as it ventures out to taste something new, may bring back fond memories, or it may cause us to recoil in disgust.' Rhizomatic logic pokes fun at the hierarchical tap root logic of trees. The seemingly unconnected connect. Near and far are juxtaposed and new food sources - sex, black and white skins, human bodies, ideologies, shame - are uncovered.

Let me throw you a few examples to whet the appetite. Probyn often begins her food explorations with herself, lending an idiosyncratic and sometimes quirky edge to each theme she explores. Going from possible pregnancy convincing her to change breakfast from cigarettes and coffee to phyto-oestrogen-rich folate-fortified cereal, to recounting the battle between pride and shame in her severely anorexic adolescence, Probyn maps her eating body so that we can discover ours. In 'Bodies that eat', and contrary to the tacit claim that eating confirms identity, Probyn describes eating as a way of losing oneself. In 'Feeding McWorld, eating ideologies', she pays a dubious respect to the perversity of McDonald's ingenious blend of 'familial citizenship' and 'globalised eating.' 'Eating sex' departs from popular food and sex couplings in the guise of celebrity chefs and gastroporn for the more restrained sensuality and timing involved in turning a mango inside out. This way of 'thinking through eating to sex', she tempts, may make us 'infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.'



Although Probyn openly admits to passing over specific environmental concerns in favour of more diffuse questions of understanding, her approach does, nonetheless, underscore a vital focus for environmental discourse that has thus far been neglected. In dealing with those smaller, insidious actions hidden within the mundanity of eating, Probyn's rhizomatic exploration becomes a tool to cloud the logic of the worldview pictures of ethical existence. By informing a more subtle ecological sensitivity often neglected by environmental writing, Probyn's work inadvertently contributes to a developing paradigm of environmental consciousness: '[W]ays of living informed by both the rawness of a visceral engagement with the world, and a sense of restraint in the face of excess.'

Although I applaud Probyn's endeavours at what she describes as 'smaller' scenarios rather than 'generalised green politics', I also hope that her sojourn is but the first nibble at this particular rhizome. It's not that Probyn has inadequately critiqued the realms of traditional identity formation - sex, bodies, corporate culture ... but that within the category of 'food' many neglected areas still exist. Eating is privileged within research, unfettered by links to all those less glamorous activities which make it possible. The emphasis on eating in Probyn's writing alludes to a more universal cultural emphasis on this consumptive practice, which results in little being written, for instance, about the growing of food. The colours and characters of food production are so easily washed out under the glare of celebrity chefs and shock/horror eating practices. In such a light, consigning food production to the shadows of cultural research, remote edges of 'over-developed' cities, corners of backyards and the insides of industrial sheds may be an understandable strategy. However, with 40% of the world's population facing a future with not enough water to grow their own food and famine currently spreading through parts of Africa, I contend that extending Probyn's question 'What does power taste like?' to these nether regions of food practice is a critical next step.

**Angela Hirst is doing PhD research in the Department of Architecture, Geography and Planning at the University of Queensland.**

## The Difficulties of Celebrity

Tara Brabazon, *Ladies Who Lunge: Celebrating Difficult Women*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002.  
Reviewed by Kelly McWilliam.

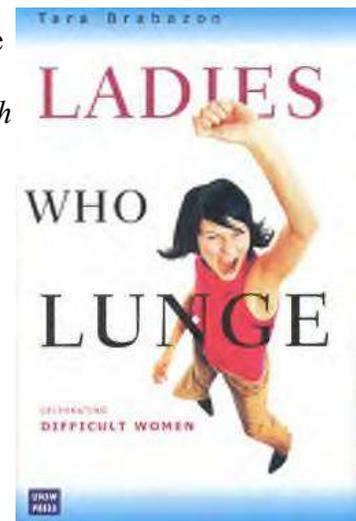
Tara Brabazon needs to speak to her publisher. In her recent book, *Ladies Who Lunge: Celebrating Difficult Women*, Brabazon makes a series of energetic, flippant and sometimes frustrating statements in her introductory paragraph, that includes: 'And whoever invented hipster trousers has never seen a woman's body. I'm sorry, but I curve there' (vii). This might seem an odd sentence to quote (though valid enough in context), until you remember the young woman on the cover of *Ladies Who Lunge* in what look suspiciously like ... hipster pants. Perhaps not the initial statement Brabazon might have hoped for.

*Ladies Who Lunge* is an interesting, sometimes uneasy combination of social commentary, cultural critique and glib, gimmicky witticisms. Brabazon produces a pop feminist examination of a series of 'difficult women' - slightly random but all with a certain kind of 'celebrity'- ranging from Anita Roddick (of The Body Shop), Miss Moneypenny (of the *James Bond* films), Bette Davis, Julie Burchill, Captain Janeway of the Starship Voyager and WWF wrestler Joanie 'Chyna' Laurer. In doing this, Brabazon delves into different, sometimes disparate areas including fashion, capitalism and colonialism, science-fiction television, politics, pedagogy, wrestling and cinema. Throughout the book, Brabazon retains a writing style that has more in common with Helen Razer than the academy.

While pop feminism is, of course, as valid and important an arena of feminist writing as any other, Brabazon's choice and execution of language has a number of unfortunate implications. Brabazon is, for example, frequently dismissive of other women - who are either not 'difficult' *enough* in her assessment, or perhaps simply too difficult for her. Consider, for example, Brabazon's description of a hostile audience member who asks a question in response to a paper Brabazon has just presented with three graduate students:

One questioner had her arms crossed, voice raised and defences up. She accused me of creating 'clones' of myself and over-emphasising the continual patriarchal ideologies within the supervisory structure. After all, she had a male supervisor 'and he was a darling'. Thanks for sharing. Unfortunately, the vixen was only winding up, rather than down. Experience can be a brutal weapon when viciously wielded by the wounded. (79)

Brabazon's personal attack on the unnamed female questioner is equivalent to wider sexism in the workplace, where women are devalued through a system that disregards their opinion, sexualises them, and characterises any criticisms they may have as a product of their 'unstable emotions.' Brabazon's very similar approach - with her dismissive 'thanks for sharing', 'vixen' tag and assumption that the woman is responding as someone who is 'vicious' consequent upon being 'wounded' - seems quite antithetical to her initial call to celebrate 'difficult women'; that we 'all have a responsibility to value and validate women's choices' (x). Instead, Brabazon is not only uninterested in the woman's opinion, she is disrespectful and actively trivialises both the woman and her comments.



Brabazon is often also reductive about the experience of other women under the guise of humour. *Ladies Who Lunge*, for example, begins with Brabazon stating: 'Frequently, I hate myself for being a heterosexual woman. It is like cherishing a scratched vinyl record in the era of compact discs' (vii). I'm sure queer women around Australia - whose lives are typically fraught with very real and sometimes physically dangerous bias - would be buoyed to note that Brabazon considers them a product of a harmless, quirky fashion-trend, equivalent to opting for café latté over Nescafe Instant.

What is perhaps most frustrating about *Ladies Who Lunge* however, are its strengths: Brabazon is a charismatic, perceptive critic who makes a number of valid, often convincing arguments about the collection of 'difficult women' she has assembled. Her discussions are, overall, both astute and cogent, and any book that calls for its readers to listen to and support women, regardless of fractious potential, is always a valuable contribution to contemporary thought. It is the fact that Brabazon doesn't always take her own advice - her sheer determination to be offhand about the experiences and opinions of others (and others who are not necessarily in the same position as Brabazon, a heterosexual moderately senior academic) - that undermines the ethic of *Ladies Who Lunge*.

**Kelly McWilliam is a doctoral candidate in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland. Her research investigates 'female queer' independent cinema, and the industry practices that enable and disable these films. She is the General Editor of *M/C Reviews*.**

## Unlikely Alliances? Lesbian-Feminism and Queer Theory

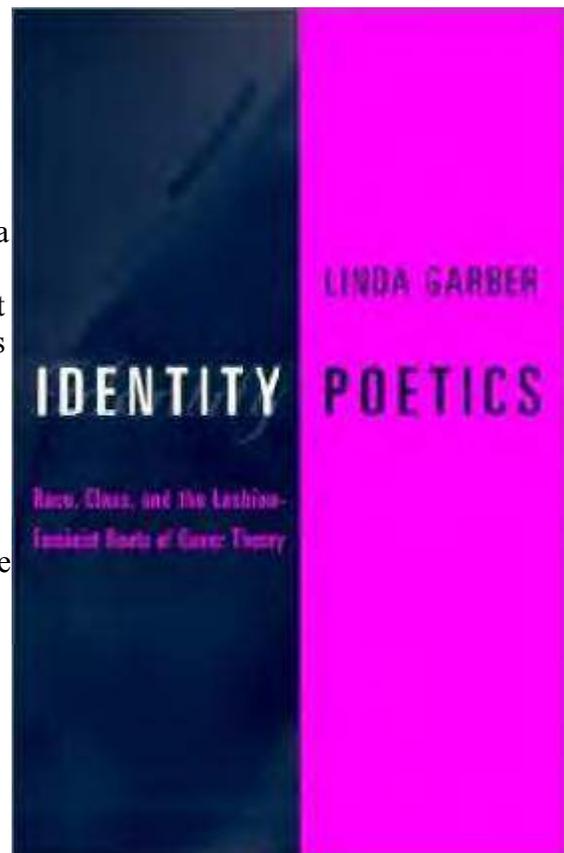
Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Alexandra Winter.

The ten years or so since the academic emergence of queer theory have been characterised by debates not only between queer and gay and lesbian studies, but also by tensions between queer theory and feminism. Feminist academic Bidy Martin, for example, while recognising the benefits of a queer critique of feminist understandings of sex and gender, has expressed concern that queer theory views feminism as an outmoded dinosaur. This risks, she suggests, positing gender and race as fixed entities against which the 'play' of sexuality is contrasted. Indeed, this articulation of fixity is precisely what enables the apparent play of queer theory, so that feminism is represented in terms of a staid and even conservative older generation in its insistence on a material embodiment. By contrast, the reach of queer for some theorists enables an emphasis on sexuality rather than what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, the 'coarser stigmata of gender difference.' This tension between feminism and queer has not only been played out in academic or theoretical circles, but has also been hotly debated among feminist activist circles and (in my own experience) in university campus women's rooms. Linda Garber's *Identity Poetics* productively engages with the debate between lesbian feminism and queer theory at the points at which the disagreement is characterised as one of generational difference, one of gender versus sexuality, and one of essentialism versus postmodern play. Garber's project is not to construct a defence of either, but she argues that the relationship between queer and lesbian feminism is perhaps not as discordant as it is frequently represented, and that queer theory owes much to the activism, and also poetry, of lesbian feminists, particularly working class lesbians and lesbians of colour.

*Identity Poetics* both negotiates a historical trajectory between lesbian feminism and queer theory, and engages in close textual analysis of poetry and prose by Judy Grahn, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Gloria Anzaldúa. This enables Garber to trace the lesbian feminist roots of queer theory, and performatively to enact the text's position that the poetry of working class lesbians and lesbians of colour is in itself an important theory-making strategy. Thus, the first chapter examines the social construction of lesbian feminism, specifically examining poetry as an important site for the dissemination of ideas and an emergent lesbian identity (especially in relation to the rise of poetry readings and the advent of women's and lesbian publishing houses in the 1970s). More specifically, Garber locates poetry as a self-consciously constructivist project, creatively building a lesbian 'lineage, history, and identity' (11).

Garber introduces and develops the term 'identity poetics' to refer to the discursive and social negotiations between lesbian feminism and queer theory, and to provide a



simultaneous affirmation and deconstruction of identity (politics) in the poetry/theory of working class lesbians and lesbians of colour. Thus, much of her textual analysis focuses on issues of identity. This is partly in response to the familiar (and, as Moira Gatens puts it, tired and tiring) charge of essentialism that is often directed towards lesbian feminism. The insistence on identity may also be read as symptomatically reflecting the poststructuralist impact upon theorisations of identity more generally. Thus in the chapter on white American poet Judy Grahn, Garber points to Grahn's reclamation of words such as 'queer' and 'dyke' in her poetry about working-class women, the emphasis on the free play of language, and a nascent critique of what queer theory knows as 'heteronormativity.' Similarly, Garber reads Black American poet and activist Pat Parker's poetry as pre-empting postmodern or queer notions of identity by refusing a singular and unified subjectivity - reflecting on the differences within. For Garber, Parker's work also begins to articulate a critique of the nature of differences between women, analysing the silences and exclusions around class and race within the women's movement and lesbian feminism. A similar critique of identity is also located in the work of Audre Lorde, the Black American writer, activist and lesbian feminist, who Garber reads as drawing on various myths, histories and identities in order to articulate not an essential or archetypal identity, but a 'postmodern lesbian-feminist identity poetics' (112). Other elements of Lorde's work that Garber reads as 'queering' stereotypes of lesbian feminism are an emphasis on sexuality (instead of the prudish and humourless caricature of lesbian feminism), and a deployment of a 'strategic essentialism' that has more recently been associated with theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Diana Fuss and Elizabeth Grosz.

Placing Adrienne Rich next to Lorde as one of the most prominent voices of lesbian feminism, Garber discusses the way in which these authors have frequently been read out of context, understanding this as part of the reason why elements of Rich's work have been repeatedly invoked as representative of the sins of lesbian feminism. Promoting a more detailed re-reading of Rich, Garber draws out links between Rich's well known concept of compulsory heterosexuality and queer theory's (and in particular, Judith Butler's) critique of the heterosexual matrix. Similarly, Rich's formulation of the lesbian continuum (reading a range of relationships between women as 'lesbian') is not represented in terms of a gender/sexuality (or a queer versus lesbian feminism) oppositionality. Instead, Garber analyses the motivations underlying the lesbian continuum and queer as similar; both 'draw attention to sexual identities that are suppressed by heterosexism, and . . . construct disruptive, insurgent categories of identity that fly in the face of the terms' typical usages' (137).

Finally, Garber reads the work of Chicana cultural theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa as a bridge between the poetry of Grahn, Parker, Lorde, and Rich, and the emergence of queer in the early 1990s. As with these writers, Anzaldúa's work is understood to be decidedly queer in terms of the problematising of identity, and of the categories theory/poetry. Although Anzaldúa consciously invokes the term queer, as well as an identity, or identities, that are self-consciously liminal and borderline (see Anzaldúa's oft-cited *Borderlands/La Frontera*), Garber is careful to link her work with that of the emergence of a specific Chicana feminism in the 1980s and the deployment of a strategic essentialism, rather than appropriating her work to a completely queer or postmodern deconstruction of identity.

There are two potential risks in Garber's project - either too thorough appropriation of lesbian feminism by queer theory, or an uncritical celebration of lesbian feminism. Garber is on the whole careful not to realign the work of Grahn, Parker, Lorde, Rich, and Anzaldúa with a queer agenda, for to do would misrepresent these women and their work, as well as the social and historical importance of the expression and theorisation of a specifically lesbian feminist identity and politics: 'Although I argue that lesbian feminism is neither as white, middle class, nor antiqueer as it has been portrayed, neither

do I assert that lesbian feminism is *not* white, middle class, nor, well, lesbian feminist' (127). Thus Garber emphasises the influence of these authors as both poets and theorists in specific contexts and locations. In particular, *Identity Poetics* is important in its recognition of the ongoing marginalisation of working class/lesbians of colour within contemporary queer theory, and for its reconceptualisation of queer theory as having a particular history in the work of working class/lesbians of colour.

Garber however, does not uncritically affirm lesbian feminist politics, but reveals its complexity and its importance to the contemporary moment of queer theory. *Identity Poetics* allows for a complex dialogue between queer and lesbian feminism, a dialogue that is productive both in terms of positioning queer as having a discursive and literary history, and in terms of a reassertion of the specificities of gender, race, and class in this history. Indeed, Garber's text suggests that it is precisely the recognition of, and, the poetic/theoretical engagement with these specificities that have shaped the emergence of queer concerns and interests. Ultimately *Identity Poetics* advocates a re-reading of the work of lesbian feminists, working class lesbians and lesbians of colour in order to place this work as central so as to 'build lesbian theories that are coalitional, dynamic, and broadly influential in both academic and activist spheres' (207). To return to Martin's concerns, rather than positing lesbian feminism as the material ground against which the play of queer occurs, Garber exposes this ground as itself shifting and unstable. The concept of identity poetics is presented not just as a possibility for dialogue between (and a simultaneity of) queer and lesbian feminist identities, but also in terms of poetry/theory and theory/activism.

**Alexandra Winter is writing a PhD thesis on the topic of 'Skin' in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.**

## Lest We Remember

Carolyn Polizzotto, *A Trick of the Light*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001.  
Reviewed by Tania Oost.

*A Trick of the Light* is the memoir of Australian-born Carolyn Polizzotto that pieces together a hard-won recollection of her postwar childhood in the 1950s. It is interesting as a memoir because its point is what *cannot* be recalled about one's life, and why. She candidly reveals that there is much in her childhood which she is unable to remember (and in fact much of what she writes is second-hand information from her parents). Near the beginning of the book she asks: 'Why is there a gap where my childhood should be?' (27) Her memoir is an exploration of this question and an attempt to redeem her childhood memories. Her thinking about her lack of memory takes an existential turn and it is a pleasure to read her unique take on how her consciousness and memory were shaped in relation to language and silence.



Polizzotto's childhood was dominated by a war that was never spoken about but that pervaded family life. She recalls that 'war was all around me and the fact that it was not spoken of made it more real, not less' (21). Her father had served in the Australian navy in World War Two and returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder. His disorder was not acknowledged, however, and he dealt with his trauma through silence and withdrawal. Interestingly, while specific references to her father are infrequent and peripheral in Polizzotto's memoir, his influence within her story, as with his influence over his family in the 1950s, is heavy and sombre. While he is mostly absent throughout these pages, the sense that the reader gets of his pervasive effect over the family is all the more powerful, and is skilfully invoked by the author.

Polizzotto's father remained silent and withdrawn, and her mother dealt with him in a similarly evasive way. Polizzotto recalls her as always whispering to the children, shooing them out of the way and tiptoeing around her volatile husband. In this way her mother seemed to fade away, to lose herself to her husband's problems. Polizzotto, too, was deeply affected by her father's moods and by the oppressive atmosphere in the household. She recalls that she was always nervously attuned to her father's state of mind. Fear and tension were an everyday undercurrent that she took to be normal. Ritual and superficial pleasantries were necessary to disguise underlying problems and to suppress a truth which threatened to surface at any moment - that perhaps the war was not justified, that there were no real victors, or that, in the minds of these generations, it was not over.

Polizzotto explains that this silence was used to raise a new generation of children with a clean slate - that is, the children *were* the clean slate. She believes that her generation functioned as a language, giving meaning and justification to the war:

we and all our generation were the currency of the 1950s. We were our parent's lost innocence. Their teens and twenties, gone to war, were set to be our future. With us the speculators bought and sold land, orchards, cars and fridges. We were the reward of war and our happiness was the price of peace. The fifties? *We were its language.* (56)

As a result of growing up in a climate of isolation, secrecy and silence, Polizzotto feels that her generation was denied a language of its own, and that she had few reference points from which to anchor her own sense of self. Refused words, a language of her own with which to comprehend her experiences, she expresses her ontological insecurity as 'a hovering miasma of disquiet shot through with lightening bolts of terror' (135).

It was when reading primary school children's books about the lives of others her age that she finally began to discover a language of her own, as well as a new way of being, different from 'the years before then ... when language was lacking,' when her dominant sense was of 'peering back through a fog' (91). Only when she discovers words for places, things and colours, when she can follow a timeline, plot out a vague map, and then locate herself within it, can she redeem some of her memories. Her world then begins to take on a form that can be remembered.

Polizzotto's remains, nevertheless, a world with many gaps. As a woman now in her fifties, she still struggles with the consequences of her lost past. While the reader comes away with a sense of Polizzotto's sadness and emptiness in this aspect of her life, with adult insight the retelling of her childhood does succeed in acknowledging its existence and in uncovering what she felt was the hidden truth and the experience of her generation.

This is a beautifully written and insightful memoir and it is well worth accompanying the author through her very personal journey.

**Tania Oost is part-way through an honours degree in Women's Studies at the University of Queensland.**

## An Eye On the Public Record

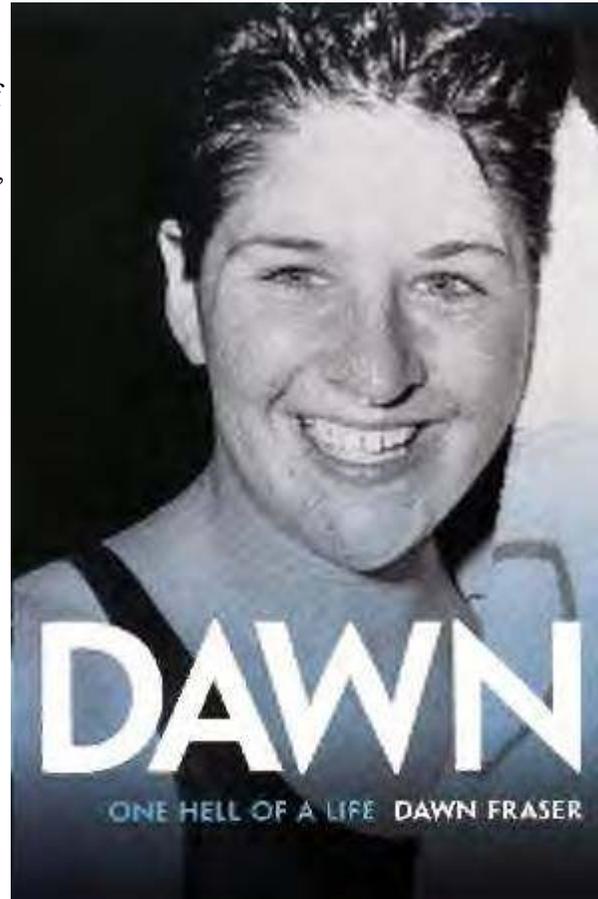
Dawn Fraser, *Dawn: One Hell of a Life*. Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2001.  
Reviewed by Margaret Henderson.

Since I'm reviewing an autobiography publicised as somewhat confessional, I'll begin by making two relevant confessions. First, I am not a fan of the sport of swimming, and the particularly Australian love affair with it that is reignited around the time of the Olympics, the Commonwealth Games, and World titles, where our national pride swells and erupts at our supposed world supremacy (in a sport taken seriously in only a handful of countries). Second, and related to this, Dawn Fraser has never been one of my sporting heroines and I have never entirely understood the national fascination with her. I guess I'm more of the Cuthbert/ Jackson/ Strickland/ Boyle/ Goolagong school. I have, however, been an elite athlete; thus, I have experienced the strange joys and painful contradictions that come with being a female athlete in a still resolutely masculinist domain. So I am really interested in why 'our Dawn' became just that, and in how a superb athlete might write her life.

*Dawn: One Hell of a Life* provides answers to both those questions, but not without some disappointments. The book's title and the genre of sports autobiographies are clues to how Dawn's life is narrated. We are faced with the limitations of the conventional sports

autobiography: ghost written, reading like a fairly direct transcription of interview tapes, heavy on detailed narration but light on introspection, and in need of more editing. The emphasis is on chronicling that hell of a life and, from the evidence Dawn presents, it has indeed been a tumultuous saga of public triumph and trouble, and private pain. We get, in a largely controlled fashion, the downsides of her life when she slipped from public view in the late 1960s-1970s; the continual struggle to make ends meet whilst competing as an elite athlete; personal heartbreak about rape and abortion; tragic deaths in the family; and the failed relationships (straight and lesbian). These join the more often recounted public stories about sporting success, larrikin escapades, constant battles with the sporting establishment, and her new careers as a publican and a member of the New South Wales parliament.

Even with all these ingredients, however, the story still drags at times and something is missing. When you read sports autobiographies, you want to get beneath the statistics and the legendary feats in order to find a different version of the human who happens to be physically gifted, and to experience vicariously just what it might be like to be that kind of body and mind. In *Dawn*, we get one race after another, one party after another, and name after name of famous people she meets in her travels. Yet, disappointingly, any introspective moments about what it is to be a great athlete are rare, as are descriptions of how the body felt/feels, and how the mind handled the pressure. Fraser tells us that the training was hard, the water often cold, the body tired, but the description never goes beyond this



superficial level. When she does drop the public voice of narrative and exposition, the moments are insightful and revealing: 'I have never felt beautiful on land the way I do when I'm in the water. When you're at that stage of fitness and going into competition it's like a love affair. . . . It is an extremely sensuous experience to swim at that level of oneness with the water, feeling a tingling sensation on the fingertips and the skin' (p.109).

Interestingly, the most personal and engaging parts of the book are the early sections where she recalls her childhood growing up working class in Balmain. Fraser evokes a suburb and a hard way of life now largely vanished, and she tells some wonderful anecdotes. She worked for the SP bookie, Lenny McPherson at the age of eleven, and she describes how she got her friends to dive bomb the middle-class swim squad from Drummoyne when they tried to train in her pool. Fraser really did achieve against the odds, with no AIS, no sponsors, no heated pools, no media jobs to help her, just full-time work and full-time training. In this way, her early working-class life is central to understanding her drive, rebelliousness, and search for recognition (often from famous people). If we don't necessarily discover a different Dawn, we at least gain an account of a different era of sport.

And we also see how national legends get (re)constructed. By this, I don't just mean the tendency in the book for Dawn to replace self-analysis with the easier option of reverting to the national stereotypes of larrikinism, working-class battlers, or the working class made good. I mean, as well, the basic narrative of Dawn's rise and fall from grace, and her eventual reinstatement to her rightful place in the national pantheon as 'Our Dawn' (indeed, she has been described as a national living treasure). Her slow climb back to public prominence in the 1980s and 1990s is a case study of the intersection of an ex-athlete with the codes of national identity, and the expanding sports industry and bureaucracy. Thus *Dawn: One Hell of a Life* provides dual insights: first, into a collective psyche constructed through those stereotypes, desirous of heroes, and in love with sport; and second, into a working-class female champion who relies on those largely male mythologies for a sense of self (and an income).

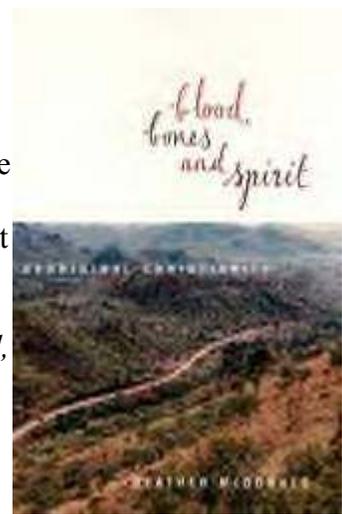
**Margaret Henderson is a lecturer in the Contemporary Studies Program at the University of Queensland, Ipswich Campus. She is writing a cultural and political history of twentieth century Australian feminism.**

## Colonial or post-colonial religion? Reading Aboriginal Christianity

Heather McDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit: Aboriginal Christianity in an East Kimberley Town*. Carlton South, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Anne Elvey.

At the beginning of *Blood, Bones and Spirit*, two maps, which could be overlaid one directly upon the other, show the contemporary East Kimberley region in north-western Australia. On the left hand page the region is marked with the names of European towns and stations, on the right hand page with the names of the Aboriginal communities whose place it is. The two maps in a sense act as a metaphor for a mapping that occurs throughout the text: two quite different ways of interpreting the world meet with varying degrees of conflict and appropriation when Aboriginal cultures in the East Kimberley encounter Western Christianity. Although this study is specific to a particular place in north-western Australia, *Blood, Bones and Spirit* addresses a key contemporary concern, not only understanding and redressing the past and the on-going violence of colonisation, but to be attentive to the particular ways in which indigenous peoples and others throughout the world are negotiating with, re-interpreting and resisting colonial practices for their own survival.



Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes has a poem entitled '[Rachel](#)' commemorating the death of an eight-month-old child on Palm Island Reserve (off the north-east coast of mainland Australia) in 1974 after a doctor's refusal to treat the child. The poem begins by recalling the arrival of the Bible in Australia as accompaniment to and agent of colonisation. Moving through a description both of the dead child, whose name Rachel comes from the Bible, and of the doctor's neglect, the poem suggests that those who brought the Bible to this land 'need to take a closer look.' Focusing on the tragedy of the child's death and the racist underpinnings of the doctor's neglect, the poem also highlights the ambiguity that surrounds Aboriginal experience of Christianity in Australia, where Christianity has come to be experienced in both colonial and counter-colonial ways by its Aboriginal adherents.

In recent years, publications such as *A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the Struggle for Justice* (Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Apostolate, 1993) and the Rainbow Spirit Elders' *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn: HarperCollinsReligious, 1997) attest to some of the ways in which Aboriginal Christians in Australia have been articulating their experiences of and reinterpreting their practice of Christianity 'Aboriginal way.' McDonald's approach is different. *Blood, Bones and Spirit* is an anthropological study undertaken as doctoral work at the Australian National University. It looks not at those Aboriginal Christian traditions, for example in the Uniting, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches, where Indigenous participants are actively reworking the Western traditions brought by the missionaries. Rather, *Blood Bones and Spirit* considers the emergence of Aboriginal Christianity within two evangelical Protestant churches, the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) and the Assemblies of God (AOG) congregations in Halls Creek, a small town in the East Kimberley area. The UAM and AOG adherents there are Gija and Jaru people. Occasionally, McDonald also makes analytical comparisons with the practice of Aboriginal Christianity within the Roman Catholic community of the region. While McDonald identifies as post-Christian, she comes 'from a long family line of Christian

missionaries and evangelists' (p.xi). As well as her work as a health professional in Aboriginal communities, this evangelical heritage shapes her interest in Aboriginal Christianity and informs her measured critique of the colonising discourses of contemporary Christian evangelists in the Kimberley. Although there have been anthropological studies of Aborigines and Christianity in the past, 'Aboriginal Christianity' as such has not been a subject for anthropological investigation. The readiness to acknowledge Aboriginal Christianity as a possibility within Christianity parallels the emergence of Asian, Black American, liberationist, and feminist (theological) movements that challenge and reveal as partial the universalising claims of Western Christianity (pp. 8-9).

McDonald for her part is concerned less with why many Aboriginal people become Christians than with what meanings they make within Christianity. She asks: 'How did a land-based people who celebrate in ritual their embodied relationship to a fecund universe, embrace a Hellenistic Mediterranean religion of displaced peoples?' (p. 2). *Blood, Bones and Spirit* considers the ways in which a universalist religion of placelessness, as she understands Western Christianity to be, affects and is in turn affected by the encounter with Aboriginal spiritualities of place.

While this book is written in a clear and engaging style, it is not always an easy book to read. For this reader, McDonald's descriptions of the overtly colonising discourse of the AOG missionaries were particularly disturbing. She makes note, too, that what might seem more benign traditions such as Roman Catholic, Uniting Church and Anglican, may continue the colonising process in more subtle ways. On the surface the UAM appears less conservative than the AOG and its attitudes to traditional Aboriginal cultural practices appear somewhat less negative. Nevertheless, the accommodation of Aboriginal cultural practice to white Christian expectations does not correlate directly with the level of conservatism and overt racism underlying and expressed in those expectations. Differences between the experience of the adherents in terms of their town or station background and their earlier experience of colonisation are also key factors affecting the way in which Aboriginal culture is valued and maintained in the context of the competing expectations and claims of Western Christianity.

For McDonald, however, many of her informants expressed attitudes to their own race which suggested to her that they had internalised the racist attitudes of the contemporary colonising missionaries. In particular, both missionaries and Aboriginal adherents used the language of 'black' and 'white' to describe respectively the pre-Christian sinful person (black inside and out) and the Christian person (white inside). In addition, McDonald describes an ongoing demonisation by the AOG missionaries of Aboriginal cultural practices. It can be difficult to judge the internal attitudes of another - this involves in a sense speaking for the other. Nonetheless, the evidence that McDonald presents, replaying in part the ongoing tragedy and injustice of colonisation and in particular the shame engendered in Aboriginal people through exposure to racist ideologies, is deeply disturbing.

But *Blood, Bones and Spirit* also challenges an easy understanding of Aboriginal experience of Christianity. Through taking up and interrupting her narrative of Aboriginal Christianity, McDonald offers a simple but complex picture of difference, conflict and meaning-making where the experience of belonging to a local Christian congregation is part of a multifaceted set of negotiations between kinship responsibilities, the threat of the state through police, courts and other government agencies, and the demanding but sometimes mediating influence of local churches or assemblies. In chapter four, 'Maddy Jarra's World History', McDonald suggests that '[t]raditional Dreaming narratives are unable to account for European colonisation' (p. 78). This inability sets the scene for the complex interplay between colonising Christian narratives and the narratives of Aboriginal adherents whose contemporary

stories cannot be easily categorised as colonial products.

Importantly, McDonald contrasts what is significant for Aboriginal adherents with what is meaningful for their pastors. For example, where Aboriginal adherents might focus on health, their pastors applaud heavenly salvation as a higher good. In the latter view, for example, healing of the body is sought not so much for the health of the adherent as to display divine power and glory. Throughout the course of her book, McDonald develops a series of comparisons which distinguish Aboriginal Christianity from the experience, worldviews, and expectations of the pastors and the universalist Christianity they represent. Centrally there is the contrast, and indeed this catalyses McDonald's study, between spiritualities of place and a universalised religion of placelessness that gave meaning to displaced peoples of the first-century CE Mediterranean. McDonald also identifies other key differences between Aboriginal and traditional Christian understandings. For example, the way knowledge, spirituality and personal power is situated in the body differs: for Aboriginal adherents the 'binji', (*munda*), the diaphragm and stomach area is a corporeal focus which both parallels and contrasts with the Western emphasis on heart and mind (pp. 116-7). Western Christian notions of individual salvation are at odds with the values of responsibility toward one's local kinship group and country. Inter-relationships with local, protective ancestral powers, which accompany Aboriginal spiritualities of place, are at variance with a belief in a universalised and salvatory Holy Spirit power which accompanies a religion of placelessness (p.103). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians model differently the relationships between the divine and the human which parallel relationships between pastors and ordinary adherents. McDonald argues that for the Aboriginal Christians she encountered the boss/worker model (drawn from the experience of station life and in which mutual obligation plays a part) prevails over the military model presented by conservative Christianity in which obedience follows command (pp. 135-8).

Further, McDonald notes:

The churches have been successful in suppressing traditional religious practices such as initiation ceremonies and death rituals which are expressed through performance and spectacle. They have been markedly less successful in suppressing (or appropriating) the beliefs and values which underlie these practices. Beliefs and values cannot be seen, and values in particular are rarely articulated. Both Aboriginal people and missionaries tend to interpret the other's behaviour by situating it within their own cultural context and judging it according to their own standards of appropriate behaviour. As a result, there is a great deal of unrecognised misinterpretation and miscommunication between Aboriginal people and missionaries. This protects Aboriginal beliefs and values from close scrutiny and evaluation by missionaries and other agents of change. (pp.148-9)

The layers of difference, which the contrasting expectations and experience of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians represent, form the basis not only for conflict between missionaries and Aboriginal people, but also for the development of an alternative Aboriginal Christianity in which kinship responsibilities, relationship to country and the pursuit of land rights retain their salience in Aboriginal life. McDonald concludes her study: 'Rather than accepting a religion of exile (that is, a salvation religion) as compensation for dispossession and displacement, Aboriginal people in northern Australia are choosing to repossess their land instead' (p. 201).

Another significant aspect of this book is the way in which it moves between McDonald's reading of Aboriginal culture and experience and her consequent re-reading of the early Mediterranean and Hellenistic origins of Christianity. Methodologically this approach enriches the study by allowing the anthropological eye to turn its gaze upon the cultural foundations of Western Christianity. The final

chapter offers an excellent summary of the ways in which Western religious traditions, specifically Christianity but also more recent feminist, ecological and new age spiritualities, perpetuate a desire for another world which is at odds with Aboriginal spiritualities as McDonald presents them. Her reading of Aboriginal Christianity informs her appraisal of these traditions very well.

While I found *Blood, Bones and Spirit* engaging, it raised a few questions for me. First, I wondered to what extent McDonald's articulation of the contrast between Aboriginal and Western Christian worldviews reinstated the kind of dualistic framework that has undergirded Western philosophy and theology. As McDonald herself indicates, this dualistic mode of thought can be found in contemporary Aboriginal distinctions between 'blackfella' and 'whitefella' and between 'Aboriginal way' and '*gardiya* way' (p. 182), and it is perhaps from here that she takes them for her study. Second, I felt that the voices of her Aboriginal informants were somewhat muted by the weight of interpretation traditional in a scholarly study of this kind. The book carries twelve pages of coloured photographs, one of the hilly country around Halls Creek, the remainder of local Aboriginal people mostly engaged in everyday food-gathering and other subsistence activities such as cleaning out a water hole. While the photographs are beautiful in themselves, and in a sense offer portraits of the people among whom McDonald conducted her study, I was unclear about precisely how these images were meant to complement the text, except perhaps to affirm that despite the ravages of colonisation the Aboriginal people remain embedded in country. But I was left wondering in what ways McDonald's Gija and Jaru informants benefited from her study. There seemed to me to be less transparency on this point than, for example, in Deborah Bird Rose's *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (1992).

Nevertheless, this is a timely study. In Australia the percentage of Aboriginal people who claim adherence to Christianity is significantly higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population. If we are to respect this aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life, we need to avoid assuming that Aboriginal Christianity is a carbon copy of Western Christianity. *Blood, Bones and Spirit* offers a nuanced approach to the question of the way in which Gija and Jaru people make sense of a religious tradition, namely Christianity, which emerged in a situation quite different from both their pre-colonial and colonial experiences. McDonald claims that within the AOG and UAM Aboriginal adherents remain colonised. At another point she presents a narrative of post-colonial resistance within the local Catholic community (p. 88). But none of this is over-simplified. The continuing efficacy of Aboriginal spiritual practices, the uses of Christianity by Aboriginal adherents to counter the extra-Christian colonising practices of the State and to alleviate some of the violent legacies of colonisation, as well as the prevailing importance of the land suggest that the ongoing processes of colonisation are not absolute, but neither are they to be ignored.

**Anne Elvey is an Honorary Research Associate in the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University. Her research interests include ecological, feminist and post-colonial approaches to biblical interpretation. She has also studied at the United Faculty of Theology and the Melbourne College of Divinity.**

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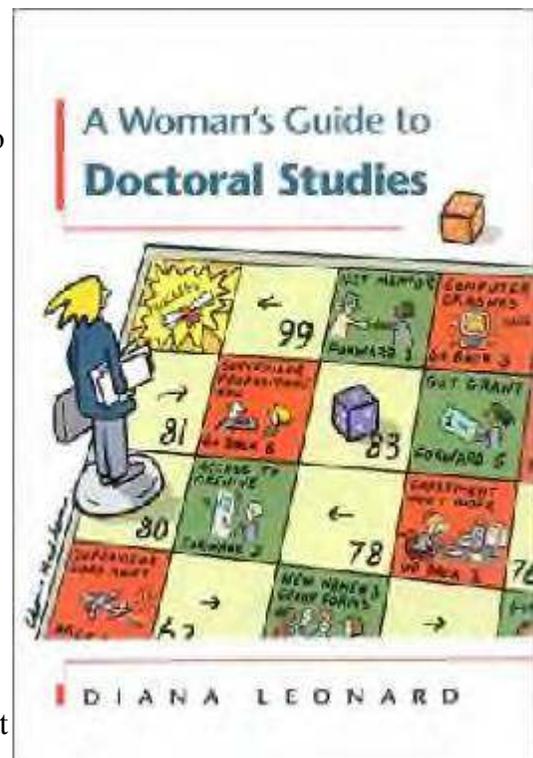
Bobbi Sykes, *Love Poems and Other Revolutionary Actions* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988) 17.

## Adjusting One's Head to Advanced Research

Diana Leonard, *A Woman's Guide to Doctoral Studies*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002.  
Reviewed by Myfanwy McDonald.

I must admit that I didn't read this book 'cover-to-cover in one sitting' as did one person whose enthusiastic comments are included as a back-cover blurb for Diane Leonard's *A Woman's Guide to Doctoral Studies*. This kind of enthusiasm may be indicative of someone who likes a guide type of book (and I wouldn't include myself in that category), it may also be indicative of someone who doesn't have 50 other books to read on the topic of their thesis along with having a book like Leonard's to read about doing the thesis itself. The notion of 'A Woman's Guide ...' is also a potential put-off for those of us who are accustomed to not having our specific experiences covered (lesbian, non-Anglo and so on) when it comes to a description of women's lives. Juggling a family and a career, for example, seems to be the dominant theme in most discussions regarding women's development in Australia. But too often the family being juggled is heterosexual and characterised by a present/absent father and kids, thereby discounting those of us who are caring for older parents, are single, or who have a female partner. Furthermore in these discussions, a career doesn't usually refer to a Doctorate, which isn't classified as a career *per se*, but Doctoral students are still encouraged to view it as a full time job (with a just-livable wage and without any kind of security beyond the 'reasonable completion period' of 3.5 years).

It is comforting to note that Leonard's book does not ignore lesbian, non-Anglo, International and differently-abled perspectives. I found the book helpful, especially because it is feminist in a practical sense rather than simply adhering to a superficial feminist perspective. For example, Leonard emphasises the importance of women Doctoral students establishing genuine, strong, social networks within academia because of the potential sexism they may face in an academic environment. This may seem to be rather obvious advice but I think it is not unusual to assume, for younger women especially, that once you've passed through a certain number of 'hoops', thereby proving your capability and commitment, you are relatively immune from discrimination of the sexist type. This is a nice thought but not very realistic. Academic environments exude their own brand of sexism, and women still have to be aware, regardless of how qualified they may be. It's also easy to forget that there is a world beyond one's thesis - in the immediate vicinity, this is other Doctoral students, and support networks aren't just about looking out for oneself but looking after the community of women within academia.



The book opens with a broad-based view of Doctoral studies, namely how Doctoral students fit into the new 'skills'-based rather than 'expansion of the mind'-based academic environment. Leonard summarises the impact of these changes upon Doctoral students in Britain and, on the whole, this seems relevant to the Australian experience. Perhaps the most tangible change is the pressure upon Doctoral students to complete their thesis within a specific time period, rather than adopting the more

laid-back attitude of our predecessors who saw their thesis as more or less a life project. The less relevant discussion in this opening chapter is, perhaps, the detailed explanation of how British Universities are monitored by the British government in relation to issues like Teaching Quality. Leonard does cover the affects of these changes upon Australian Universities but she tends to focus upon purely economic issues, such as the 'internationalisation' of Australian educational facilities.

Despite the occasional in-depth discussion on the specifics of the British higher education system the book is still wholly relevant for an Australian audience. The book is not, thankfully, a generic guide (as in: *The Idiot's Guide To ...*). It has obviously been written by someone who has both completed a thesis and supervised a number of postgraduate students. Hence Leonard offers a number of absolute gems that really ring true but which are often not acknowledged in the fast paced, academically focused world of postgraduate studies:

Stress in doctoral studies is better handled by getting an understanding of disciplinary socialisation rather than by time management; by recognising that one has been put (back) into an apprentice position, and coping with this through negotiating a more equal relationship with one's supervisor; and by establishing solidarities with others in the same situation, rather than by retreating into one's room and adjusting one's 'head.'

(I originally read the last line of this passage as: 'rather than by retreating into one's room and adjusting one's *hair*', which is probably also timely advice.)

Leonard also addresses issues relating to the most fundamental aspect of the Doctoral experience - the relationship between the student and his/her supervisor. Apparently knowledge and authority are a 'sexy' combination which is why students seem to fall quite easily for people (that is, academics) they wouldn't look twice at on the street. The section on 'Relating to Your Supervisor' (separate from the discussion on intimate relations) is less sensational but more broadly relevant as all Doctoral students will have to build and maintain an effective relationship with their supervisor. For most students the main issue in the supervisory relationship will probably not be physical intimacy but personal intimacy - or how to combine or differentiate between, depending on the circumstances, one's Self (one's personal experiences and personal life) and one's thesis. This then becomes an issue of what the supervisory relationship actually means - personal, professional, both? What does one bring to the meeting and what does one leave at the door? These grey areas are perhaps more a reflection of the limitations of the academic environment than the shortcomings of either the student or the supervisor; as Leonard points out: 'It is probable that women fit the system less well, given it's set up from men's strength and possibilities.'

The chapters that address issues for students who are considering Doctoral studies are perhaps more relevant for people who have spent a considerable amount of time away from the academic environment; most Honours students, above all, would have been able to discuss the issues of choosing a supervisor, choosing the right University, sources of income and so on, with their Honours supervisors and other helpful academics. However, the chapters on a good start, research into gender, and sticking with the course are useful to all Doctoral students. Overall, I think the book provides a distinct advantage to PhD students in their first year when issues like departmental socialisation weigh heavily on students' minds. Perhaps, more importantly, first year students can spare more time to read the book than students in their second and third years who are usually more pressed for time and who have already worked out most of those issues for themselves.

If you're the kind of student who doesn't need study guides any more - how to write an essay, how to manage your time, how to succeed in a University environment and so on - this book is still very relevant. It provides information that your supervisor may not have the time to cover, such as finding mentors and joining professional associations both within your home country and outside it. The book's most valuable contribution is its constant reference to the interpersonal issues inherent to the Doctoral project, especially in the supervisory relationship but also, for any woman aiming for an academic career, less acknowledged issues like dealing with departmental cultures and developing positive connections. For these reasons, especially, the book is valuable, although probably not essential, for any Australian woman undertaking, or considering undertaking, Doctoral studies.

**Myfanwy McDonald is a PhD student at the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. Her research interests span gender and space, the medicalisation of gender identities and transgender politics. She has an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Creative Writing from the University of Wollongong.**

# Cartoons

by Debbie Harman Qadri



Time's up Mary.



Writer's Block.



# M O T H E R ' S M E T H O D ' S

FOR WRITING POETRY



## RESULTS:

1. tis is naba 2 naba  
2 les do it babe  
naba 5 naba 6 isuke  
Bt naba my 5 is Bta  
Naba naba 5 Books Naba  
5 the End.

2. kale, raconteur  
pleasant, solvable  
suzerain  
tooth.  
(very profound!)

3. (not enough)  
room  
left.

\* Make sure you send them to Angry Penguins.

Mother's Methods for Writing Poetry.



Rapunzel.



The Baby-Sitter's Here