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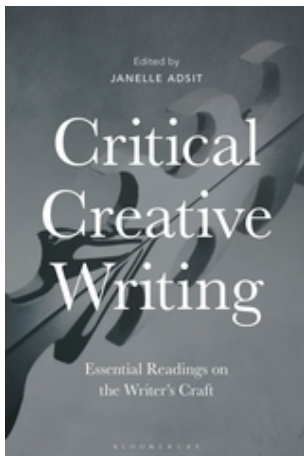
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TEXT review

Seeing our blind spots

review by Rachel Hennessy



Janelle Adsit (ed)

Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft

Bloomsbury, London 2019

ISBN 9781350023321

Pb 272pp AUD35.95

Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft is a collection of essays edited by Janelle Adsit, whose previous works have engaged with issues of inclusivity and diversity in the teaching of creative writing. Adsit's single-authored, *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to guide the Literary Writing Curriculum* (2017), challenges many standard pedagogical practices, both inside and outside the academy, utilising the idea of 'threshold concepts' to question the prejudices inherent in dominant constructions of authorship, representation, identity and craft. Her co-authored work, with Renée Byrd, *Writing Intersectional Identities: Keywords for Creative Writers* (2019),

provides, as the title suggests, a glossary of keywords related to these challenges, with succinct summaries of issues such as ‘appropriation’, ‘essentialism’ and ‘positionality’, as well as providing a guide to further readings. Together, these works engage intensely with the ways in which creative writing has traditionally been taught, provoking instructors to consider not only how their curricula need to transform to be inclusive, but how the workshop itself reinforces a particular model of creativity that is historically contingent and in urgent need of interrogation.

Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer’s Craft sits itself somewhere between a collection of themed essays and a text book. Each chapter contains three to four pieces of varying length, and ends with a Chapter Reflection, providing a number of questions, as well as a Writing Prompt. The introduction addresses first the student and then the instructor. In the address to the instructor, Adsit positions the work as an anthology of multiple perspectives on key issues in creative writing; she wants those in the arena to be provided with a vast array of resources, so that it transforms into something more than a handbook. It is, she writes:

- An invitation to join conversations taking place among contemporary creative writers about the politics of literary art-making.
- An examination of aesthetic considerations that transcend what can be covered in a typical craft handbook, including questions of linguistic diversity and the relationship between art and politics.
- A survey of the craft-criticism genre and its importance to the field of creative writing.
- A chance to engage with irresolvable debates in creative writing. (x)

This ambitious agenda is evident in the subsequent amount of issues the book sets out to address. Seven chapters cover ‘craft’, ‘identity’, ‘privilege’, ‘representation’, ‘language’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘evaluation’. The range of voices and styles counteracts any notion that these issues are in any way “new” and brings together both academic writing and populist articles to demonstrate the width and breadth of the engagement over time and across a number of countries. The decision to include author biographies and/or article contextualisation at the beginning of each piece is a good one, linking the content of the collection with its form. The chapter reflections, consisting mainly of questions, are aimed at students and, thus, could be used by teachers in their classrooms after delivering the material.

In the ‘Craft’ chapter, the stand outs are Matthew Salesses’ “‘Pure Craft’ is a Lie”, which comes from a series of posts on the *Pleides Magazine* blog and is an easy introduction to the questioning of convention, considering how the workshop often pushes ‘the writer to write to the dominant culture’ (10). This questioning of the familiar and the unfamiliar is further explored by Chris Green in ‘Materializing the Sublime Reader: Cultural Studies, Reader Response, and Community Service in the Creative Writing Workshop’. Again, Green focuses on the workshop, and concludes that it ‘needs to address lived situations rather than assuming

and perpetuating the presence of a falsely sublime (generally a white, educated, middle-class) reader' (30).

These considerations are more theoretically explored in the 'Identity' chapter where Dorothy Wang's wonderfully nuanced piece 'Aesthetics Contra "Identity" in Contemporary Poetry Studies' succinctly summarises the core challenge being posed:

...being able to cognitively grasp ("think") these phenomena – in this case, politics, history, race, and their effects on subjectivity and language – does not in any way reify or essentialize or make reductive the not always definite ... often mysterious, but very real relation between and among the social (radical), subjective, and poetic. (83)

Here, there is no sense that identity should be "tacked onto" creative writing studies, for those who come from the non-dominant culture are already 'acutely aware of the contingency and relationality of not only human identity but also language and natural phenomena' (81).

The following section, 'Privilege', is one of the shorter sections of the work, but perhaps the easiest to imagine using. Adsit's contribution, 'Unpacking Privilege in Creative Writing' (already available in her single-authored work), takes its model from Peggy McIntosh's well-known *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1988). Adsit's twenty-seven points are an invaluable resource for teachers wanting to challenge their writing student's assumptions in the early stages of their coursework. The 'Framework for Diverse & Equitable Programs in Creative Writing' which Adsit has also provided on the website accompanying this collection – www.criticalcreativewriting.org – provides further ways for instructors to consider their pedagogical practices in relation to inclusivity. Perhaps the only disappointment is the implied audience of much of this work. Adsit writes:

This framework is inspired by the writing of Claudia Rankine, Viet Thanh Nguyen, David Mura, and many authors who have called creative writing faculty to address racist and exclusionary practices that are pervasive in our academic programs. (Adsit 2018)

Here the 'our' is, quite clearly, American academic programs, a limitation which is not explicitly stated anywhere in the document, nor in the introduction to the book.

The next three sections of the collection – 'Representation', 'Language' and 'Appropriation' – provide strong essays to engage with these ideas, in particular Jess Row's 'White Flights: American Fiction's Racial Landscape' which has deep resonance for non-indigenous Australian writers; Kristen Harmon's 'Writing Deaf: Textualizing Deaf Literature', which broadens out the issues towards disability, often eclipsed or forgotten altogether; and Conchitina Cruz's 'The Filipino Author as Producer', a wonderfully honest calling to account of the author's own discomfort with being a representative of her entire race (though I did wonder why this article was included in the 'Language' section, as it is most concerned with issues of class and representation).

The final chapter – ‘Evaluation’ – spends some time reproducing the debate around literature versus genre but Forrest Wickman’s ‘Against Subtlety’ and Natasha Sajé’s ‘The Politics of Literary Evaluation’ provided me with the most stimulation. Wickman’s critique of close reading and subtext – the “show, don’t tell” mantra and the Hemingway iceberg theory – is a refreshing challenge to the standards of creative writing teaching while Sajé’s article, originally published in 2004, still feels pertinent and should probably be required reading for every first year creative writing student. Sajé’s words provide a fitting end to this collection, summarising the call to account *Critical Creative Writing* asks for:

...we must try to see our own blind spots; we have an ethical obligation to be clear about “where we are coming from” when we evaluate literature. And the literary world will become larger and more interesting when we open ourselves to as many ways and kinds of reading as possible, when we realize that evaluation is contingent on our values, and when we question those values. (251)

Having set itself up as being more than ‘a typical craft handbook’ (x), *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer’s Craft* delivers excellent resources for the teacher of creative writing to ensure students consider their own positionality and its relationship to their writing practice.

It should be noted that the challenges raised by this work are already being explored in the Australasian context, with Threasa Mead’s *Liminal interventions in the regional creative writing classroom* (2019) specifically drawing on Adsit’s threshold concepts and many of the issues around appropriation and identity in teaching practice given critical space in *TEXT* in recent years (including Collins & Crawford 2017; Collins & Crawford 2018; Walker 2018; Bobis 2018; Kon-yu & Gandolfo 2018). We can look forward to more of these direct responses to ensuring diverse and inclusive pedagogical models are utilised in creative writing programs.

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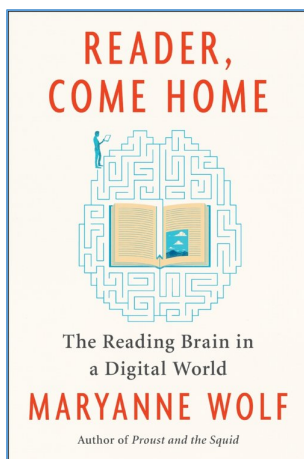
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TEXT review

The literate animal in the face of “that fertile miracle of communication effected in solitude”

review by JF Vernay



Maryanne Wolf

Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World

Harper, New York 2018

ISBN 978006238878-0

Pb 260pp AUD37.99

Digital media trains us to be high-bandwidth consumers rather than meditative thinkers. We download or stream a song, article, book or movie instantly, get through it (if we're not waylaid by the infinite inventory also offered) and advance to the next immaterial thing. (Wayne 2015)

We seem to be drawn to books for a wide range of different reasons: their alluring covers and/ or illustrations (if any), the novelty or topicality of the subject-matter, their compelling storytelling, prior and/or ongoing interest in tackled themes, garnered praise or awards, to name a few. I must admit that my vested interest in *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain*

in a Digital World has been strictly motivated by the fact that I have explored some aspects of the neuroscience of reading in *La séduction de la fiction* (2019), the manuscript of which was completed in 2017, probably at the same time Maryanne Wolf submitted hers to Harper. Therefore, I was eager to read Wolf's take on the digital reading brain, and especially her comparison of reading text on traditional and technological media, given that studies on this topic, which only emerged in the last decade, are still comparatively scarce.

Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist specialised in global literacy development and neurodivergence (dyslexia, in particular), is making some headway in this murky area by discussing the reading brain within a creative epistolary framework. Her nine chapters are as many letters addressed to the reader, letters she sees as 'exchanges about what reading means' (italics mine, 3). To be sure, writing a book is a one-way communication channel, unless the reader happens to write back (like me, with the present book review) and the author gets to read the response and hopefully reacts to it. *Reader, Come Home* was precisely written in the spirit of that final phase as it is Maryanne Wolf's intersubjective response to a spate of fan letters following the publication of her *Proust and the Squid* (2007).

Because reading is a cultural invention for which our brains were not originally equipped, neuroplasticity, under the influence of external factors, has had an important part to play in enabling us to become literate animals over time:

The unnatural, cultural origin of literacy – the first deceptively simple fact about reading – means that young readers do not have a genetically based program for developing such circuits. Reading-brain circuits are shaped and developed by both natural and environmental factors, including the medium in which reading is acquired and developed. Each reading medium advantages certain cognitive processes over others. (7-8)

In short, the way we read (deep-reading/ slow-reading vs skim-reading/ speed-reading), what we read (i.e. the content as much as the writing system), and the selected medium (print-based vs digital) will be determining in the rewiring and subsequent evolution of our brains. Wolf draws on research by Stanislas Dehaene to remind readers that our basic neural networks have been recycled and repurposed to engineer the reading circuit which enables *TEXT* readers to decipher and understand the words which are building up this book review. But reading is a far more complex process which involves 'two hemispheres, four lobes in each hemisphere (frontal, temporal, parietal and occipital), and all five layers of the brain' (20). Added to the neuroplasticity are the clustering of cells into 'cell assemblies' which hyperspecialize in specific roles as well as 'sonic-speed automaticity' which activates the relevant networks in milliseconds. This energy-consuming mechanics is further detailed in terms of attention, vision, language, cognition and affect in a fascinating extended metaphor discussing the acrobatics of our neuroplastic brain.

So our brains were not initially wired for reading and a few functions had to be repurposed to adjust to a culture of literacy. With the advent of our tech-savvy world in which texts are migrating to digital screens, the literate animal has to adjust to yet another cultural revolution, one which is now imposed by the more fast-paced digital age which is hardly conducive to deep-reading and its analytical processes:

Will the quality of our attention change as we read on mediums that advantage immediacy, dart-quick task switching, and continuous monitoring of distraction, as opposed to the more deliberative focusing of our attention? (39)

Wolf's book is peppered with similar thought-provoking questions, not all of which find straightforward or immediate answers. The capacity of imagery, perspective taking, empathy, theory of mind and mirror neurons are discussed as major elements associated with the 'consciousness-changing dimension of the act of reading' (45). Deep-reading also allows more scope for critical thinking based on observation, interpretation, evaluation, deduction, prediction and conclusion which may lead to insight and, potentially, creative thought. While digital natives are well-placed to develop biliterate brains by embracing both digital and print cultures, digital immigrants are having their brains rewired to absorb scores of gigabytes through the handling of various modern devices. These new light reading habits, like skimming for instance, are said to be caused by cognitive phenomena such as '*novelty bias*' (70), '*continuous partial attention*' (71), and 'environmentally induced attentional "deficits"' (72). However, one should also mention that the indigent and indiscriminate information available on the net often deserves no more than a cursory reading. Logically, the above-mentioned cognitive phenomena impact negatively on readers' memory and sustained attention span which have atrophied over the years. These alarming changes raise important questions about the fate of our literacy-based civilisation:

Will writing change and with it the reader, the writer, the publisher, language itself? Are we each witnessing in our different professions the beginning of a retreat from more intellectually demanding forms of language until – like the ill-fated procrustean bed – it conforms to the imperceptibly narrowing norms of reading on ever smaller screens? (87)

When examining the effect of technology on digital age adolescent readers, the evidence that these young cognitively diverse minds are more impatient, cognitive effort-shy, and therefore less likely to plow through 'syntactically demanding sentence structures in denser texts' (92), cannot be gainsaid. Paradoxically, the creative boredom which has been smothered by the multiple stimuli of digital distractions has been replaced by an unproductive one, the type which

follows too much digital stimulation. This form of boredom may de-animate children in such a fashion as to prevent them from wanting to explore and create real-world experiences for themselves, particularly outside their rooms, houses and schools. (111)

When discussing early access to digital screens, Wolf touches on another important aspect of reading which virtually goes unnoticed by readers, as Siri Hustvedt puts it in her essay entitled 'On Reading':

The act of reading takes place in human time; in the time of the body, and it partakes of the body's rhythms, of heartbeat and breath, of the movement of our eyes, and of our fingers that turn the pages, but we do not pay particular attention to any of this. (Hustvedt 2012: 134)

Let us keep in mind that reading is an embodied somatosensory act and that, in our digital age, there is precious little discussion about the sensuality of the book as object – the allure of the cover, the touch and smell of the pages, the whisper of the words – pleasures that electronic reading devices would obscure if not entirely oust. There is little doubt that the physical book with its full identity (ISBN, aesthetics, size, shape, texture and odour) remains an object crafted to trigger emotion-induced desire, an object conducive to the cognitive emancipation of toddlers:

Putting an iPad in one’s mouth is just not the same. Seeing, hearing, mouthing, and touching books helps children lay down the best of multi-sensory and linguistic connections during the time that Piaget aptly christened the sensorimotor stage of children’s cognitive development. (133)

Therefore, e-books, iPads and other screens, though they increase the possibilities of interacting fruitfully with the text, are to some extent impeding child development in the early stages of life (from 1 to 5). The useful educational insights Wolf provides into the cognitive impact of digital media endow further ground-breaking research in this specific field with a strong sense of purpose. In the next literacy stage (ie the next five years of their lives), children learn reading as part of the three Rs. This important structural phase is illuminated by Maryanne Wolf’s warm theory-driven recommendations for students and teachers alike: the stuff policymaking institutions would promote actively to save the jeopardised centuries-old print publishing industry.

Chapter 8 of *Reader, Come Home* climaxes with Wolf’s plea for ‘the development of a biliterate reading brain’ (170) based on studies examining the verbal and cognitive flexibility of dual-language learners:

The ultimate goal in this plan is the development of a truly biliterate brain with the capacity to allocate time and attention to deep-reading skills regardless of medium. Deep-reading skills not only provide critical antidotes to the negative effects of digital culture, like the diffusion of attention and the attrition of empathy, but also complement positive digital influences. (177-8)

Both reading practices seem to have virtues. One could even go as far as to talk about ‘digital wisdom’ when eager-to-upskill minds would be exposed to “a new type of literacy” such as coding.

Paucity of comparative studies on cognitive impact of print and digital publications, lack of proper training for educators and digital access inequality are non-negligible obstacles which need to be overcome. Despite these challenges, is there room to accommodate Maryanne Wolf’s cautious optimism and techno-utopianism? I would say that the jury is still out on the question.

There is no denying that *Reader, Come Home* is an engrossing read for those who wish to explore ‘that fertile miracle of communication effected in solitude’ (Proust quoted in Wolf 2018: 35). While the author mentions cerebrodiversity, she occasionally seems to take for granted that all readers share generic brain abilities. For instance, ‘our capacity to form images when we read’ is not a universal one, as I have discussed elsewhere (Vernay 2019:

73-4). Similarly, I would argue that empathy is not an automatically-generated process that comes with deep-reading. Some scenes that might touch some readers may not move other readers on the same level or elicit identical emotions: One person's empathy could be another person's dispassion. I also wanted to read more developments on 'the profound impact of books upon the lives and knowledge stores of those who read them' (54), but I was left unsatisfied on this front. What is more, perhaps that *cognitive endurance* would be a more apposite phrase than '*cognitive patience*' (46/92), but these are mere quibbles in the face of the stimulating discussions which Maryanne Wolf draws us in. *Reader, Come Home* promises to be a good conversation starter for anyone interested in what David Grossman sees as two of our primal instincts: 'the story-telling instinct' and 'the instinct to listen to stories' (Grossman 2009: 29).

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Jean-François Vernay is a creative writer and scholar, author of several books, the latest of which are The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation (Palgrave), now translated into Arabic, and its sequel: La Séduction de la fiction (Hermann). He is currently working on two editing projects: Cognitive Readings of Australian Culture and International Perspectives on Australian Fiction. He blogs at <http://jean-francoisvernay.blogspot.com>



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TEXT review

The poetics of breaking: Minds, bodies, codes and paradigms

review by Nataša Kampmark



Ann M McCulloch and RA Goodrich (eds)

Why Do Things Break?

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2019

ISBN: 978-1-5275-3281-6

Pb 225pp GBP61.99

Why Do Things Break? is a book gathering material from three conferences hosted by Cardiff University (2014), the JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide (2016) and The National Opera Center in New York (2017), where the questions concerning precursors, ruptures and breakages were first discussed and performed. It is a collection comprising fourteen discursive and creative pieces which approach the titular question from their particular angles thereby insightfully interpreting and inflecting the verb 'break' into virtually inexhaustible possibilities of its phrasal guises such as 'break down', 'break (away) from', 'break in(to)', 'break out', 'break up', and 'break through'. Similarly, the word

‘things’ is to be understood in the broadest sense, as the authors explore breakages including those of the body, mind, language, tradition, academic disciplines, relationships and so on.

Looking like there is some mystery about to happen, Dr Deborah Walker’s prize-winning painting *The Compass (with ladder)* graces the front cover of this collection which investigates the mystery of why and how cracks appear in peoples’ lives. Divided into four parts, the study looks at the psychological sources behind creative output, and the trail of broken minds and bodies left in the wake of trauma, historical and political developments. In addition, precursors are sought and found as the study navigates the cracks and shifting paradigms, offering a critical appraisal of philosophical, scholarly and artistic ideas and exploring their current relevance.

Part I: ‘Precarious Reach of Metaphor’ brings together four chapters concerned with memory and time. ‘[A]n exercise in creative misremembering’ (21), Michael Meehan’s self-reflexive piece ‘Blurred Memory: Creative Process and the Art of Misremembering’ uses the metaphor of ‘indistinct music’ (18, 21) to meditate on the source of its inspiration. It breaks away from the fact and enters the realm of fiction as it explores where stories come from and how fiction is written. A bricolage of theory, poetry, autobiography, and criticism, Marion May Campbell’s ‘Waterspout’ is a creative piece of autofiction which queers the narrative of childhood trauma. Centred on the metaphor of a cone, the piece is an intimate unburdening of grief in which ‘[g]enres & their broken names turn [the author] where they will’ (29) as the assemblage of their fragments swirl around, recreating the waterspout that downed the plane and killed her father. Set in the 1970s in the Former Yugoslavia, Jennifer Rutherford’s ‘April in Kumrovec’ pieces together fragments of (mis)remembered past to tell about a broken down romance, revolution, and country. Its central metaphor of a traditional circle dance helps the reader envisage how experiences of the past make us who we are in the present. After three creative pieces, Part I concludes with Antonia Pont’s discursive article ‘Inventive Temporalities’ which focuses on the question of ‘how an attitude or approach to time ... might impact upon creativity’ (38). Taking a view of temporality informed by Gilles Deleuze’s tripartite analysis and his take on Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’, the author expounds on the concept of practice defined as ‘a kind of “strange doing” that involves repeating a bound set of actions intentionally over time’ (53).

Part II: ‘Broken Minds, Broken Bodies’ consists of three chapters which look into physical, psychological and emotional breakages. It opens with John O’Carroll’s ‘Broken Bodies: The Aesthetics of Cancer’ which records a cancer journey in a series of poems not unlike seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry with its unique take on metaphor. In that manner, cancer is personified as a ‘little visitor’ (62) and the patient becomes ‘meat on feet’ (62), a ‘bloodied kitchen onion’ (66), ‘Jesus from Australia’ (65) or a child learning vocabulary of the new world while ‘inspiration’, interpreted as ‘breathing in’, stands for life itself (67). Amelia Walker’s ‘This Order, Not Disorder: Break Down as Break Through’ advocates collaboration between art and science placing poetry at the forefront of the scientific investigation of the mind. By analysing how the linguistic (dis)order of poetry can grant

access to spaces of mental (dis)order denied to conventional means, the author shows how contemporary conceptions of mental health and illness can and should be revised, ultimately suggesting to view ‘disorder’ as ‘this order’ – one among many ways of ‘(re)processing the complexities life presents and which standard language and/as thought cannot necessarily accommodate’ (79). Indeed, the so-called mental illness or ‘breakdown’ is seen as symptomatic of greater ecological or ethical concerns and as such can lead to a ‘breakthrough’. Piri Eddy’s ‘A Body Broken: Creativity and the Grotesque’ draws on the ideas of Connelly, Bakhtin and Remshards in order to posit the grotesque as a vital ‘power to break through possibilities, to unearth that which has been denied and buried, to uncover forgotten realities, and to challenge’ (88). An excerpt from a novel-in-progress featuring a conversation between a grotesque character of Fishboy and the novelist is presented to reinforce the point that creative acts are needed to ‘unsettle the calmness’ and push the boundaries of reality.

In Part III: ‘Breaking Codes’ the authors concentrate on forward thinkers and artists who broke with the past, pioneered ideas and introduced innovative ways thinking. Placing Freud next to Darwin and Marx as a figure who ‘shaped twentieth century deliberations’ (101) in almost all arenas of human intellectual endeavour including ‘natural science, philosophy, economics, politics, jurisprudence, art and education’ (101), Douglas Kirsner’s ‘Freud: A Precursor Breaking into the Contemporary Zeitgeist’ gives an overview of Freud’s major concepts of the unconscious, neurosis and sexuality which revolutionized the way people perceive themselves as individuals and as a collective. The chapter demonstrates how Freud’s approach transformed not only the field of psychology and mental health, but how it continues to influence fields as diverse as the arts, sciences, philosophy and politics. Brian Castro’s ‘The World, the Sex and the Critic’ opens with a critical reflection on the status of poetic prose as a legitimate literary form and creative writing as legitimate academic scholarship, both breaking the conventional boundaries of the genre and discipline, respectively. Asserting the primacy of creative writing over literary scholarship which it gives rise to, Castro, in the second part of the article, exploits the possibilities of poetic prose, bringing together rhythmical patterns of poetry to punctuate an investigation into the genres of biography and memoir, the politics of gender and sexuality, and the intricacies of academia and prejudice. Pavlina Radila’s ‘Valentine de Saint-Point: From Modernist Destructivism to Digital Post-Human’ draws on Rosi Braidotti’s notion of the post-human as ‘the interlinking of human and non-human elements and environments’ (126) arguing that Valentine de Saint-Point’s early twentieth-century modernist performances and artwork, demonstrate that the ideas which preoccupy critics, theorists and artists of the contemporary digital era are not at all new. These include cultural diversity, depersonalisation and dematerialisation of body, fusion of all arts, and dance as an interpretation of poetry through geometry. Indeed, the boundary of what is human was broken much before Michael Jackson’s digitally-enhanced hologram appeared on stage.

Part IV: ‘Making Precursors, Breaking paradigms’ comprises four chapters which thematise the problematics of precursors. Aiming to ‘highlight the problematic epistemological status of

claims ... about artistic precursors' (147), RA Goodrich's 'Situating Precursors' first explores the concept of precursors as envisaged by Jorge Luis Borges in his 1951 essay 'Kafka and His Precursors', and in the critical enterprise of TS Eliot and AC Danto, revealing a potential incoherence of their common stance. By contrast, the field-theoretical framework formulated by Kurt Lewin is then offered as one affording the critic a more coherent engagement with past or anticipated precursors. Identifying speculative realism as a philosophical movement which promises 'a genuinely new perspective' in the first decades of the twenty-first century (160), Matthew Sharpe in his 'Camus' "Midday" Thought: A Precursor to Speculative Realism' nevertheless proceeds to uncover the voice of Albert Camus as the precursor of the new movement. David Harris's 'Assembling Spinoza, Guattari and Cormac McCarthy' adopts the Deleuzian notion of 'assemblage' in his search to meaningfully represent a genealogy from Spinoza to Guattari, then to McCarthy. The collection concludes with Christopher Norris's verse-essay 'A Plain Man Looks at the Angel of History' which satirically warns about the dangers of identifying precursors as well as of 'the arcane chat / of commentators' which has the power to 'twist / his words into some view of things that's grist / to any meaning-mill they're grinding at' (192).

Why Do Things Break? is a collection that itself breaks the boundaries of what is assumed by conventional study. It deploys the metaphor of a compass to assemble pieces in which authors look for directions and guidance after cracks appear in the architecture of life, and artistic and philosophical endeavour. It breaks the boundaries of the genre by arranging together creative pieces, including poetry, drama, and fiction, and academic criticism, sometimes sitting side by side in a single chapter. Most of all, it has an invigorating effect on the reader as the impression left is not that of decay but that of a new life bursting through the cracks.

Nataša Kampmark is a sessional academic in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University. She is the author of Tri lica australijkse proze [Three Faces of Australian Fiction] (2004) and the co-editor and translator of Priče iz bezvremene zemlje [Tales from the Timeless Land] (2012).



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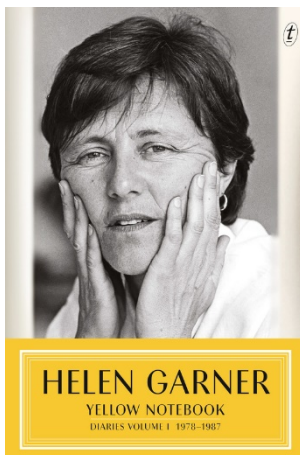
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TEXT review

Diaries: Empirical Evidence and Desire

review by Moya Costello



Helen Garner

Yellow Notebook: Diaries volume 1 1978-1987

Text Publishing, Melbourne 2019

ISBN 9781922268143

Hb 224pp AUD29.99

All of Helen Garner's work is intensely personal. But diaries and letters are genres particularly charged with intimacy. On reading the Garner diaries, what came to my mind yet again was a statement from Janet Malcolm: 'voyeurism' is one of the impulses behind reading life writing (Malcolm 1994: 9).

Previously my fandom for both Garner and her third, former husband, Murray Bail, has been benign. But I noticed a shift occur with my reading of Garner's diaries. I behaved more like

an overzealous, if not actually deranged, fan. I sought out references to Murray Bail in *Yellow Notebook*, Garner's first volume of her diaries. And when reading *Notebooks*, Bail's diaries, in 2005, I did the reverse, even returning to them on reading Garner's diaries, checking any references to Garner.

I decided that what the Garner diaries needed was an index, a chronology of her book publications and marriages, and a glossary: a key to the single-letter-named people in her diaries – I briefly imagined devising a one-off game with a few other Garner fans, where we match a letter to a person and prove our decision with evidence from the diaries and elsewhere.

Garner doesn't always name the books she is working on in this first volume of her diaries 1978-1987, so it's useful to have the following at hand: *Monkey Grip* 1977 (before the diaries), *Honour & Other People's Children* 1980, *The Children's Bach* 1984, *Postcards from Surfers* 1985, and *True Stories* 1998 and *Cosmo Cosmolino* 1992 (both after the diaries). A chronology of her marriages is Bill Garner 1968-1971, Jean-Jacques Portail 1980-1985, and Murray Bail 1992-1998, though Garner first met Bail in 1986.

My very limited but assured glossary would be this: M – Alice Garner, Helen Garner's daughter; and V – Murray Bail. Z is probably David Malouf, and F is possibly, probably Portail.

The real, genuine pleasure of diaries and letters by artists, for the artist, is reading about the processes and practice of the art.

Moments in the Garner diaries are later transformed into her fictional narratives. She has the writer's observing/recording eye/ear: 'meaning is in the smallest event. It doesn't have to be put there: only revealed' (22). One of Garner's visual artist friends, P,

...lay on her bed and wept. She was grieving over her isolation as an artist. "I'd like to talk about things with other painters, the men, but they know so much and I feel sure they'd realise how ignorant I am ... and they won't think I'm worth talking to." (112)

Surely this is a component of 'The Life of Art'. Then there is H who has "'jointed the born-again Christians'" / "'gone back to Jesus'" (17) and is surely the basis for Ray in *Cosmo Cosmolino*.

Garner demands of herself that she '[t]ake risks' (5). Or, '[s]ometimes', she notes 'ideas for stories surface as if from a muddy pond' (32). Or there is doubt: 'I'm scared to go to my office in case I can't make things up' (83). Or there is a breakthrough:

I can see "dimly-lit pathways" into the forest of a book. I've got Alexander, Athena, Philip. They are established and already their names belong to them. Now I must take

charge of them, lead them away from the literal past, start to snip and pin and stitch my SEAMLESS GARMENT. (56)

She records her reception of rejection. There is the setting up of a writing office, and establishing writing discipline: 'I hereby resolve to refuse all social engagements on weekdays' (61).

Further content of the diaries concerns personal and domestic life and the publishing industry.

Garner is self-judgemental – 'I can hardly stand myself' (196) – but also self-accepting as she grows more knowledgeable and stronger. She is grateful for her daughter, Alice. And the growth of her spiritual life is noted. She is in psychoanalysis. She is learning the piano. As with Jane Austen in her fiction, Garner repeats the trope of walking alone or with another in parks, streets, cemeteries, or has her Garner-esque take on bicycling. She records dreams, and attendance at criminal trials, concerts and opera. She's concerned with her appearance.

An example of the publishing industry is the infamous 1981 anthology *The First UQP Storybook* which she reviewed while trying 'to hold the bitterness' out of the review: 'the only woman in it is the naked one on the cover' (20). She meets other artists such as actor Noah Taylor and writers, among them Frank Moorhouse and Raymond Carver. She gives brief accounts of judging competitions and Australia Council grant submissions.

In 1986 and 1987, there is a significant amount about V (Murray Bail).

I wonder if I will become one of those women in their forties who have affairs with married men. No! I will not. Full of curiosity about this one though – V. (230)

She is curious but not unwarily, because of his views, his intellect, his nature and his long first marriage.

I read fiction, including Garner's fiction, for knowledge of how to live, for instantiating a moral compass in my life. Others read life writing, a form of creative nonfiction, for the very same purpose. While there are practical implications for me, as a writer, for reading letters and diaries of writers, I read them, too, as I mentioned above, as a fan, a topic I partially dealt with in a conference paper 'Fanning Hallucinations in Murray Bail's Hall of Mirrors' (Costello 2015).

Bail was a subject of my PhD, and in the National Library of Australia I've read letters to him and some he has sent to others. But what I assume are Garner's letters to him require 'permission for research until 20 years after Murray Bail's death'. I didn't attempt to read Garner's letters because of the permission required for all. Bernadette Brennan enviably gained access to Garner's correspondence for her book *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work* (Brennan 2017). That book is a tool for deciphering some of the diary entries.

In a review of Brennan's book, I wrote that 'there can be a slither of surprise, concern for the lack of caution, a sense of alarm, of aghast-ness at [Garner's] openness, her exposure of herself and others' in her work (Costello 2017). With the diaries, I am aghast at my own undisciplined, intemperate reading of them, behaving as if I was following a soap opera. If I offered an excuse, it would be that art produces what Elizabeth Grosz calls, via French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, 'sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems' (Grosz 2012: 1), in other words high passion inflaming your imagination, fuelling flagrant desire. 'In fandom, you enter a Bureau de Change, lending your body to a text, the space of fandom being a crossing-over, a border space, for texts and selves' (Costello 2015).

The diaries are for Garner a source of more fiction ('Maybe it'd be a good idea to start another diary, just to cream it off' [1]), and working out personal issues ('I see what I am doing, in this diary, is conducting an argument with myself, about these two men, and myself, and men in general' [240]). A reader probably goes to the diary-as-archive for empirical data. But such archival material bleeds the borders of genre; it is alive with becoming fiction. It shimmers, driven by a reader's mounting affect and ballooning desire.

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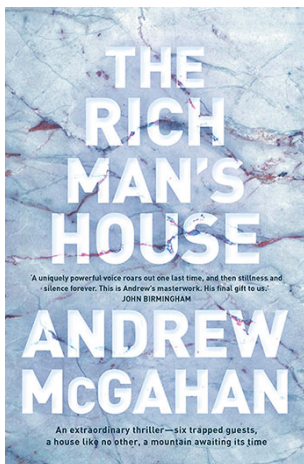
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TEXT review

The rich man and the mountain: Andrew McGahan's eco-epic

review by Nataša Kampmark



Andrew McGahan

The Rich Man's House

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2019

ISBN 978 1 76052 982 6

Pb 596pp AUD32.99

'Death is the great invigorator' (21) writes the late Andrew McGahan in the first chapter of his last book, *The Rich Man's House*. Racing against death in the final stages of pancreatic cancer, McGahan was composing a deathless tract which is not only 'twice as long as most of [his] books' (Steger 2019) but amplifies to epic proportions major motifs and interests from his earlier works, notably the opposition between man-made constructions and the forces of nature. Thus, the titular house he depicts is 'the most expensive private residence in recent world history' (77), built within a solid rock of Theodolite Isle and facing the Wheel, the

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highest mountain on Earth which rises 25 kilometres into the sky, ‘defying comprehension’ (87), piercing the stratosphere and generating its own extreme weather. Only one man has ever stood on top of the Wheel – Walter Richman, the owner of the extravagant house.

The world of *The Rich Man's House* is recognisably our own, but not quite. It features well-known mountaineers from history such as Edmund Hillary, the first to conquer Everest, only to have him die in an attempt to reach a mark half-way up the Wheel whereas the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay is there only to refuse to climb the mountain which ‘is not a mountain as we know other mountains. It is something else’ (148). Pioneering lunar explorers Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin make appearances which serve as points of comparison to emphasise that mankind stepped on the Moon before any human being set foot on the Hand of God, which is how the pinnacle of the Wheel is known. Just like in the world we know, ‘billionaires make their own rules’ (72) and ‘the intrusion of humanity’ destroys the natural landscape which ‘bow[s] to the inevitable, and die[s]’ (389). The difference is that in McGahan’s novel that world is augmented and infused with the supernatural in order to house a conflict of universal significance, albeit framed as a tale of crime and punishment of one man.

Although the novel is categorised by the publisher as ‘crime and mystery’ (‘The Rich Man’s House’ nd) thereby placing it neatly into genre fiction, identifying the victim, the criminal and even the crime is not straightforward. The death of Richard Gause, a world-renowned architect who designed Richman’s lavish home, acts as an incentive moment, sending his estranged daughter Rita as an exclusive guest in her father’s stead to celebrate the completion of the Observatory, as Richman’s house is called. It takes an elevator ride up a 2.5 kilometre shaft to reach the lofty destination, but once Rita, a Melbourne vet with a past of substance abuse she would rather forget together with the book she wrote at the time, emerges from the super-sized rabbit hole, she steps into ‘a fantasy palace’ (152) where only imagination is the limit. There she is joined by four of Richman’s closest associates and the host himself. It is not long before, one by one, they start meeting their horrible and mysterious deaths. ‘A body frozen in a pool ... a body flayed to death by the wind ... one fallen and lost in an underground labyrinth ... one blasted apart by lightning’ (505), Rita remembers as she plots her own escape from the house which is haunted by a mysterious force. The four elements seem to have combined to destroy the people who have gathered to marvel at the triumph of man over the mountain. For Observatory is a place of ‘secular worship’ (86) and the monument commemorating Richman’s ‘defeat’ (483, 350) of the Wheel. As an earthquake strikes, and an avalanche ‘strip[s] [the mountain] for battle’ (302), causing a tsunami, Rita uncovers the real reason behind the invitation to Richman’s house – her unique ability to detect and communicate with non-human forms of consciousness found in ‘stone and earth and water’ or ‘presences’ (391) as she calls them in her book. It is through Rita that the majestic mountain is given a voice to tell its side of the story:

The Wheel sought no understanding or atonement or placation from humanity; it sought only destruction. And who better to inflict that destruction upon than the man

who had defiled the mountain's undefiled peak, the man who stood as symbol of all humankind's contempt for any awareness other than its own. (474)

For his last book McGahan chose an epic theme and gave it a contemporary twist. In traditional Western literature, it takes a hero of superior social and moral standing to stand up to gods or superhuman forces and most likely perish in the battle, thereby saving his people and earning an undying fame (Cuddon 2013: 239-241). McGahan's novel seems to suggest that in the 21st century, 'Westerners seem so determined to destroy [their gods]' (395) and the hero turns out to be an unscrupulous ruthless individual with a 'towering ego' (483) and little respect for the life of other people. The style of the novel also follows the epic formula, including episodes, digressions and repetitions. Inserted episodes – newspaper clippings, excerpts from journals and magazines, chapters from history books, transcripts of lectures – serve to provide the characters' background or offer interpretative frameworks. Digressions provide detailed descriptions of all objects of interest, such as mountaineering equipment – reminiscent of armour descriptions in an epic poem – or main rooms in the house which are described in every glowing detail like the precious spoils of war. Repetitions punctuate the narrative, reminding the reader of the major conflict between man and the mountain, referring to Richman's extravagance and wastefulness symbolised in his house which is 'the monstrous work of beauty and arrogance' (515), 'a crime against nature' (112) and the Wheel's wondrous uniqueness that 'stood eternally apart from humanity' (50).

Like that of an epic, the story of *The Rich Man's House* unfolds slowly, allowing the reader to appreciate its style and narrative technique, explore allusions and references, trace influences and contemplate the workings of history. On the other hand, it could also be described as a page turner, but not because the reader only wants to know what happens. It is how it unfolds that equally captures and sustains the reader's interest. In other words, alongside an extraordinary tale, it is McGahan's formidable imagination and the language he uses to dress it that offer a rich reading experience.

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TEXT review

Men claiming women and women claiming their strength

review by Bronwyn Lovell



Eugen Bacon
Claiming T-Mo
Meercat Press, Altana GA 2019
ISBN: 9781946154132
Pb 266pp AUD27.99

Content warning: violence against women

‘What might that be, to be strong and woman, I wondered.’ (88)

Claiming T-Mo is the debut novel from prolific speculative short-story writer Eugen Bacon. It details a mother’s determination to fight for the innate goodness within her son and her quest to release him from the debilitating and destructive grip of toxic masculinity. It is a narrative that spans planets and generations, is richly inventive in its use of language, and demonstrates the breadth and depth of Bacon’s extraordinary imagination.

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T-Mo is one half of the boy Silhouette gives birth to. The other half is Odysseus. T-Mo is the name the mother chooses for the child. Odysseus is the name his father gives him. Being named twice splits the boy's personality in two. T-Mo is good, Odysseus is not. *Claiming T-Mo* tells the stories of the women in T-Mo's life – his mother, wife, daughter, and granddaughters – and the intergenerational trauma of their encounters with Odysseus, the Hyde to T-Mo's Jekyll. However, there is more than one toxic male character in this story.

Silhouette comes from a family home where ten brothers laud over her in their male entitlement: 'Bring me, give me, fetch me, said the kings. Sod off, said the kings' (20). As the only girl, she is betrothed at birth and married by eleven. Silhouette develops coping strategies to deal with the trauma of sexual encounters with her husband:

My examining the bed, the chamber, outlasted his terrible desire. I lay still long after Novic was gone, my fingers still racing along the artisan bedhead that had mutely witnessed my sacrifice to whatever Novic's desire prescribed. (22)

T-Mo/Odysseus is thus the consequence of statutory rape. In such a patriarchy, a woman who gives birth to a male child is prey giving birth to predator.

Novic also exhibits a dangerous unpredictable nature in this narrative. In a jealous rage, sparked merely because another man covets his wife, Novic puts 'a sizzling rod' in Silhouette's eye (66). Silhouette explains that Novic is 'a priest and a demon, one entity' (66). In this way, Odysseus is simply the name given to T-Mo's own demon – a fault in temperament inherited and learnt from his paternal lineage. Silhouette notices the narcissistic effect time with Novic provokes in the boy, who transforms into the obnoxious and cruel Odysseus in his father's company.

The poetics of speculative fiction is such that it deals in literal metaphors (Chu 2010). The bad man Odysseus inside the good man T-Mo acts as an analogy for internal conflict and the darker aspects of the volatile male psyche rising to the surface and manifesting in uncharacteristic behaviour. Salem, T-Mo's wife, first encounters the malicious impulses of Odysseus when her husband tries to rape her in front of their daughter, Myra.

The man Salem knew, thought she knew, was at speed beside her bedside same time as the bottle crashed. She paused, mid-sentence in her reading, as he jerked her arm and the book fell. Her hand was tender on his chest, her look gentle. And she said, "Please, no." Perhaps a cloud of sadness entered the gentle look when he groped her, when he ripped her garment to bare her tit. (79)

The assault stops when Myra screams and her grandfather, Novic, enters the room and takes the crying child away. Soon after this incident, T-Mo abandons his family, leaving Salem lost and distraught. She enters into a relationship with 'the first prick she [sees] ... in the first car that [throws] mud in her face' (113). Like Silhouette before her, Salem endures enormous grief.

Speculative worldbuilding means authors can imagine realities different to our own, modelling non-patriarchal power structures and alternative roles for women. Speculative fiction writer Sarah Gailey has criticized the high instance of sexual violence in genre fiction (Gailey 2016). *Claiming T-Mo* is no exception to this pattern – the story features undeniably distressing subject matter: child marriage, statutory rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and animal cruelty. However, Bacon’s dynamic wordplay ensures the book maintains linguistic levity despite the heaviness of its themes.

When T-Mo reappears in his daughter Myra’s life when she herself is a mother, it is in the form of Odysseus. Myra is disturbed to observe that her father allows a flirtatious relationship to develop between himself and her young daughters. Still, Myra observes ‘her fondness for someone about whom everything [is] not right’ (233). This is the crux of the novel – women have an incredible capacity to love seriously troubled and troubling men.

Claiming T-Mo acts as a critique of patriarchy and an extended meditation on masculinities. It explores the ways women are hurt and haunted by the men they love – as partners, fathers, and sons. It is also testament to the resilience and potentially transformative power of women’s love in the face of patriarchal terror.

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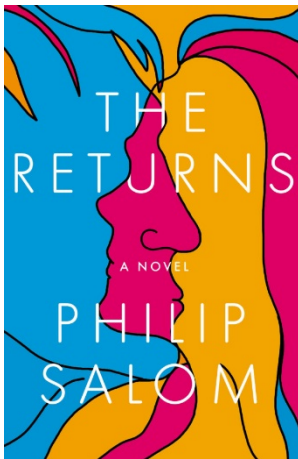
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TEXT review

Unseen shapes of ourselves

review by HC Gildfind



Philip Salom

The Returns

Transit Lounge, Yarraville VIC 2020

ISBN: 9781925760262

Pb 336pp AUD29.99

The Returns is something of a sequel to Salom's *Waiting* (2017): both novels are set in a vividly evoked North Melbourne and both chart the evolving relationship of eccentric – if very differently classed – characters. *The Returns* cheekily acknowledges this connection when book-seller, Trevor, stares out of his shop and sees *Waiting*'s unforgettable Big and Little gazing straight back at him: Salom's readers know who Big and Little are, and Trevor would too if he'd bother to read the copy of *Waiting* that resides on his shop's shelves. Trevor is, of course, oblivious to the authorial joke he is sitting in. Overweight, about-to-be-divorced, limpy, and prone to gloom, this 'mordant humourist' (39) is too busy worrying about his post-marriage future. Then, Elizabeth appears. She is skinny, orthorexic, divorced,

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and a sufferer of prosopagnosia: she cannot recognise faces. She works-from-home as an editor and is looking for a lodger. Trevor soon moves in, befriends her equally limpy dog, takes over the cooking, and turns her shed into a studio: he wants to ‘fetch back’ his abandoned youth as a ‘wayward’ bachelor artist (59).

With her new housemate, Elizabeth feels ‘half coerced ... half trapped’ and concludes she is at ‘*a point halfway*’ (144) in her life. Trevor feels the same. When living with his ex-wife he was in a transitory place of ‘hoping and knowing it’s hopeless’ (53), of ‘half loving’ and ‘half leaving’ (91). It was a ‘friendly, dead place where nothing matters. Until something hurts’ (39). While trying to cope with his anger – ‘The two clenched fists of his brain’ (37) – he enters the equally transitory space of Elizabeth’s home, knowing that he is doing something more than moving houses: ‘he is moving the unseen shapes of himself’ (93).

The sudden togetherness of these half-way, half-stuck people creates a new perspective from which they can contemplate the aloneness – and increasing loneliness – of the ‘the big space’ that gapes between ‘Love and Death’ (234). They tentatively become friends and their lives begin to change. Elizabeth relaxes her orthorexic eating rules, ceases to be a dog who aspires to invisibility, learns to deal with her hoarding, narcissistic, ex-sex-cult-member mother and finally contemplates the eye operation she’s been avoiding. Trevor loses weight, builds his strength, confronts Elizabeth’s creepy neighbour – and a number of other aggressive, contemptuous men – resumes his painting, and faces up to the recent fact of his dead marriage and the perennial fact of his missing father.

Elizabeth’s and Trevor’s professions give Salom an opportunity to poke fun at the culture industry and the ageist market(ing)-driven capitalist system it increasingly submits to. Trevor sees how, in a literary world of climbers, egotists and narcissists, Elizabeth does a key yet entirely undervalued job: ‘*She’s a professional unseen. Editing, the job that disappears itself*’ (164). At least Elizabeth knows her worth: ‘The raw text is unwell and she is its doctor’ (204). Elizabeth decries the ‘lack of challenge’ in modern fiction and ‘aches for some radical disturbance.’ (8). One of her nutty writers agrees, ranting: ‘The book publishing scene looks like property management sometimes. Safe books in safe suburbs’ (204). At a literary award, Elizabeth notes how new authors are generally, ‘*Very topical, very young, very likely*’ (166). In this world, writers are ‘ghosted’ (166) the second there’s a new ‘starofthemoment’ (204): ‘in the real world of fiction the author must *win*’ (166). This comment surely critiques the unnecessary and destructive ‘winner takes all’ nature of major prizes in Australia. (*Waiting* was short listed for numerous major awards.) Meanwhile, Trevor pines for authors like ‘curmudgeonly’ Patrick White who dared to be ‘old-fashioned enough to want truth’ (59) and whose writing, Trevor believes, could actually change lives. Trevor laments the disappearance of readers and writers who understand that ‘good books are drugs ... controlled hallucinations’ (222).

While the excesses and vanities of Trevor and Elizabeth may well grate on some readers, *The Returns* neither reifies nor condemns their middle-classedness. Instead, the nature of their

lives is simply observed and often revealed via the contrasts and tensions created between them and the people they interact with. Perhaps the most striking contrast lies between Trevor – with his relentless, pretentious food fetishism – and the homeless woman who begs outside the supermarket where he buys his ingredients:

Her face is mottled with dust or sun or something he cannot explain. Perhaps she thinks people don't see her when they walk past without stopping, or they see her too well and she haunts them. She is, perhaps they are, ghosts of the divide, where having/not having makes everyone defensive. He's no different. Except she is no one's neighbour... He shuffles his bags as he speaks to her, though what to say? She knows more about the weather than anyone... (111-112)

This empathetic, compassionate, observational perspective is typical of Salom's writing: he is not one to bully readers into agreeing with him about how the world 'should' be. Trevor explicitly values this sort of perspective too, saying of his own art:

If he wrote a novel he'd want to keep posing the same doubts in different masks, turn over and over recurring terms and phrases, alternate appearances with disappearances then ending on questions never answered. The notes. His paintings are notes. They answer nothing... (310)

Salom approaches characters as the unique and mysterious particularities that all humans are – irrespective of situation or identity. If people have anything in common it is, as Trevor says, that we are all the product of an interaction between the accidental, the deliberate and the coincidental (59), that we all experience our lives as endless 'inconsequential *ands*' (187), and that we are all, in the end, nothing other than those very strange things called minds: 'fragmented, changing, returning, repeating' (209).

Salom is a poet. His prose is rich, playful, funny, clever, and humming with energy. His linguistic virtuoso gives verisimilitude to the voices that constitute his characters' mindscapes as they struggle to survive, connect and thrive in the very real landscape of North Melbourne.

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H.C. Gildfind (hcgildfind.com/@ltercation) is the author of The Worry Front (Margaret River Press) and is the 2020 winner of the Miami University Press novella competition.



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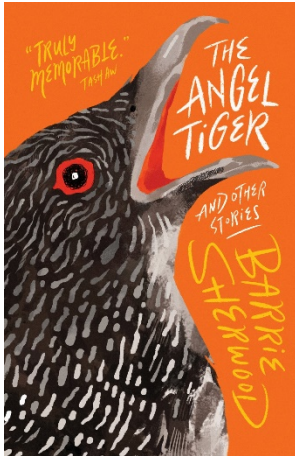
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TEXT review

Snapshots of Life and Death

review by Ashley Brown



Barrie Sherwood

The Angel Tiger and Other Stories

Epigram Press, Singapore 2019

ISBN 9789814785662

Pb 240pp AUD18.90

Barrie Sherwood has written two novels thus far: *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* (2000), and *Escape from Amsterdam* (2007). *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* is, as the title suggests, a collection of short stories.

The stories are set, seemingly, in contemporary times (according to the occasional cultural reference such as Pokémon cards and *Top Gear*), in an assortment of Asian countries, such as Singapore, Japan and Sri Lanka. They involve a vast assortment of characters in a wide variety of environments, circumstances, emotional states and cultural conditions. Whereas this sounds like a great premise for an entertaining read, for this reviewer, the recurring

themes of death and loss – seven out of the thirteen stories involve death either by allusion or direct plot device – made this book, all in all, a difficult read.

Some of the best parts of the book are the snapshots of life, such as the story ‘Concert Hall’, in which Indian youth work in other countries to make enough cash to secure their futures back home:

At night these men sat out on the sidewalk, or in the harsh light of the Indian grocer next door, and talked to relatives on their mobile phones. On Saturday nights they drank big cans of Knock Out and half-pint bottles of Director’s Special. On Sundays they played cricket in the park. Once a month, they queued up on their day off to send money home by Western Union. (40)

Passages like these show the true, street-level life in other countries. Other excellent passages are from when Sherwood’s characters offer observations on things we take for granted, such as this description of a department store in the same story: ‘Abhas loved these megastores: labyrinths of plastic in an unearthly white light, not a shadow on anything’ (43). Sherwood’s main character in ‘Beneath the Palm’ gives excellent, detached observations, for example when she reflects on environments of joy in her past, such as making fortresses from cushions, and laments losing a sense of value in aesthetics:

A real house was serious business ... things that broke had to be fixed by professionals. Everything had to enhance the value, though nothing you did yourself really would ... the last place that had been any fun at all was her residence hall room at university, where the film noir posters and lava lamp and African masks all seemed to make a very important statement of aesthetics. No home décor would ever seem as important again – just the word “décor” was all wrong. (50-51)

Stories such as this one, and ‘Concert Hall’, both made this reviewer look up and digest the last lines – both stories end abruptly; not poetically, yet this is stylistically apt – everyday endings to stories about the everyday.

However, there are some aspects of the book that are less effective. For instance, there are occasional confusing analogies, such as in ‘Chairs’, where a character comments on a customised car: ‘An aesthetic devoid of the very function that first defined it. Like women with silicone breasts, eh?’ (72). Maybe that analogy is clear – maybe it’s just over this reviewer’s head.

One very curious part is the beginning of ‘The Cone Snail’, where the writer’s voice instantly changes into that of the characters:

...a Singaporean Sikh who lived with his aunt and owned a fleet of taxis that did a good business between the airport and the resort on the coast. A researcher had come to –

‘A what?’

‘A scientist,’ Lakhi Uncle explained... (86)

Being the eighth story in the book, a book which had so far made itself clear to be firmly in the realism genre, this was a jarring shift of literary voice.

Ultimately, however, the collection’s major weakness is that the stories are so short: so many of them deal with hefty subjects and themes (namely death and loss), for which readers need to have emotional investment in the characters, but because of the stories’ lengths, this is impossible. This, along with generally forgettable dialogue, has a few major consequences. For instance, I understand the messages of ‘Merissa Beach’ and ‘A Trip to the Beach’, but because they’re so short, they have no impact. There’s no room for an emotional build up; the characters have no room to breathe, develop or convince. This is pivotal for when characters do unexpected things. For instance, why did Ed spontaneously eat a turtle egg in ‘Merissa Beach’? There’s no explanation of the motivation to do so, and, in turn, the reader has no background information or emotions to base their reaction to either that, or indeed any character doing or saying anything unexpected (this happens quite a lot).

The book occasionally reminded me of Harry Harrison’s *West of Eden*, when two characters are talking, and in your mind’s eye, you envisage the characters delivering the dialogue with a particular manner of enunciation and emotion, but then, with a single word from the writer, the characters spontaneously change emotion. This happened conspicuously in ‘Bullet’ – the wife changes from dumbfounded but alert to suddenly crying, then, a short conversation later, from crying to strong, defiant and making controlled decisions. (‘Bullet’ is an intriguing story, but with a whopper of an anticlimax).

Finally, ‘Cougar’, and the book’s last tale, ‘Blushers and Panthers’, seem to be, well, pointless, as if they were merely extended thoughts.

All in all, *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* is an acquired taste; a collection of emotional situations that you can only vicariously feel; a soup of characters doing and saying things for reasons that are often perplexing and never adequately explained. This reviewer feels that as Mr Sherwood’s literary career blooms into heading bestseller lists, *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* will be regarded in the future as ‘for fans only’.

Ashley Brown is an Australian writer, editor, artist and teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL), holding a Masters in TESOL. He taught academic and spoken English in universities in China from 2006 to 2015, in Wuhan and Nanjing. He has had articles, stories, and poetry published in, among many others, cordite.org, Newcastle Short Story Anthology, Catalyst, Farrago, Easey, Beat, Beijing Review and Nanjingexpat.com



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TEXT Review

Opalised storytelling

review by Alex Henderson



Kathleen Mary Fallon

A fixed place: the long and short of story

University of Western Australia Press, Crawley WA 2019

ISBN 9781760800284

Pb 250pp AUD24.95

Kathleen Mary Fallon is a multi-talented writer who has been playing with language and storytelling in poetry, stage plays, feature films, and prose since the 1980s. *A fixed place: the long and short of story* is a collection of short stories from across her career (and some never before published works), taking the reader on a journey through the deeply personal and messy lives of a variety of characters from contemporary Australia. The book nearly defies genre definition; it feels reductive to call it 'a short story collection', given that the tales swing and swoop so readily between prose, poetry, prose-poetry, scripts, song lyrics, and the occasional dreamlike dive into stream of consciousness, demonstrating Fallon's ability to

leap between genres and forms. The overall effect is a dreamlike adventure through the Australian landscape and through the many playful possibilities of language.

The stories are filled with evocative imagery: headstones made of cracked china saucers in a back-garden graveyard for chickens; the thudding heartbeat of a tree frog in the hands of the child who has just rescued it from a dance floor; sheets of rain-damaged taffeta hung up to dry, their colours running so they become ‘aquarelle taffeta opalised taffeta rainbow-stained-across-the-sky taffeta’ (23); ‘starscraps’ (92) falling to earth like cosmic metal shavings as the night sky rearranges itself over the heads of characters while they have an existential moment.

The backdrop of the stories is uniquely Australian and full of sensory details, some grubby and grimy and some glowing and lovely, never shying away from awkward truths. Some stories are deliciously funny: ‘That’s the way the game’s played’ introduces us to a snobbish housewife who ‘often imagined herself having high tea with men in cream linen suits wearing white topees and ladies, elegant in wispy floral frocks, under the whirr of the fans on the verandah of Singapore Raffles, circa 1930’ (34). Her attempts to perform a very colonial, old-world vision of good housekeeping – something that shall surely elevate her above the rabble, establish her as part of the new elite culture of Australia – are impeccable, and she lives in hope that her neighbours are peeping enviously over the fence. However, irony strikes when her husband fertilises the lawn (that symbol of tamed nature and suburban bliss!) with chicken manure, and the garden becomes a noxious stink-site for passers-by to avoid rather than a domestic sanctuary to marvel at. Her efforts at performing the perfect housewife and garnering envy are brought down by the simple facts of nature (and, it should be noted, a very wry and very Aussie sense of humour from her aforementioned husband).

Indeed, many of the stories seem populated by older ladies making their best attempts to ascend to the rank of classy, domestic goddess, even if it means turning up their nose at their own (and their country’s own) rougher beginnings. Fallon presents these characters with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour, and her knack for slipping into a gossipy stream of consciousness (stream of gossip?) in the narration itself is delightful, creating the impression that you, the reader, have been trapped at the tea table by a Very Cultured Lady who will not stop telling you about the expensive furniture she got when she was in London, and how it’s such a shame that so many posh hotels are ‘owned by Arabs now’, even in ‘glorious England’ (32). You long for escape, and yet the prose makes these caricatures so strangely compelling. Perhaps it’s the authenticity in the voice, delivered with that knack for dark comedy, and the dreadful knowledge that this is only a slightly exaggerated creative rendition of a thousand real conversations.

While there is plenty of satire in the tales, there is also plenty of down-to-earth melancholy. ‘Michael – a potter, not a ceramicist’ expertly blends black comedy with crushing dread, telling the story of a complicated friendship brought to its end by the AIDS epidemic. The image of two friends who never properly said goodbye to each other, as it would have been

too sappy for the biting and banter-filled dynamic they had developed, is haunting and feels painfully resonant. ‘not unlike the peeling of many bells’ also tells, through looping and languid prose poetry, the story of a disastrous relationship and the complexities of sexual identity.

The detail in all these stories, and in all these characters’ lives and loves, is rich, and Fallon paints a multi-layered picture of these flawed, messy, toeing-the-line-between-sympathetic-and-unsympathetic characters in a short amount of time. While some stories, such as ‘Michael’, are clearly autobiographical, there is a ringing of truth to all the writing in the collection. Even if they may feel ethereal, there is always a strange certainty that the events and emotions described really happened – yes, even shavings of the stars falling down as the constellations remake themselves.

Sometimes these stories are melancholic, sometimes chaotic, sometimes both at once. Like the taffeta with the ‘opalised’ dye, the writing is colourful and effervescent and shimmers a little differently depending on the angle from which you look at it. Those familiar with Fallon’s work will no doubt delight in having so many of these tales and poems gathered together in one book, and for new readers *A fixed place* provides an intriguing tasting platter of Fallon’s range as a writer.

Alex Henderson is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. Her creative thesis explores the ways writers can play with familiar tropes and archetypes for the purpose of social commentary and diverse narratives, with particular focus on depictions of gender roles and the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters.



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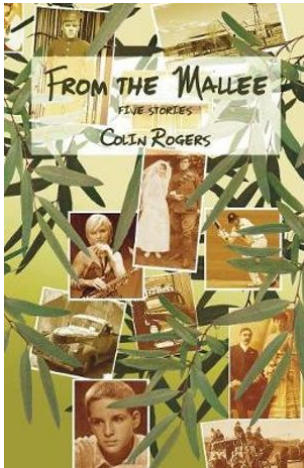
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TEXT review

Memories next door

review by Christopher Gist



Colin Rogers

From the Mallee: Five Stories

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2019

ISBN 978 1 76041 707 9

Pb 169pp AUD27.50

This is an old picture come to life. Colin Rogers' *From the Mallee* is a snapshot of 1900s Australia bush life in five short stories, a loving evocation of a style of community life lost to contemporary culture flows, mass transport, and digital democratisation.

One of the great joys of Rogers' stories is the revivifying of that world, and he gifts readers with a vivid 'remember when' for those familiar with touchstones such as the Bedford van, the pressed-tin money box, and the Coles Emporium.

Rogers signals early the reason we're here: 'There was a good yarn going around...' one of the characters recalls (8), and these five stories are certainly yarns. The use of argot, simple

speech, folksy humour, and a knowing author/narrator are all there. True to the tradition, these are men and women, heterosexual, married or not. We never visit ‘base-camp’, as Larkin would have it; it is a world largely absent of identity politics beyond the historical racisms of the era.

Yet these remain yarns with a difference. There is very often a twist in the tale that recalls Roald Dahl’s *Tales of the Unexpected*, and Rogers clearly side-steps a number of the conventions of the bush ethos. The threat comes not from an inescapably isolating landscape of a barely habitable or wholly hostile nature. Yes, there are thunderstorms and dangers to the crops from the weather but Rogers’ characters are, by and large, people living with nature, eating with the seasons, little interested in imposing their will on wilderness. There are no folkloric lost children, few wombat holes to fracture horses’ legs, and scant writerly interest in the transactional migrant of the 19th century bush balladeers – those *émigrés* who would make their fortune in the colonies and return to their real home of England in elevated status.

Rogers’ characters are, instead, people rooted in Australia – publicans, cops, real estate agents – characters more recognizable to the contemporary eye than the drover, the squatter or the overlander. They are people for whom threat comes from revelation and social exposure, jealousies and prejudices, damaged status, or domestic abuse. The village is the strength and the danger.

Of course, readers of pre-Federation and Federation Australian writing will note Rogers’ antecedents. Banjo Paterson is name-checked, and the first of the stories, ‘The Ute’, suggests the abandoned wife of Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’. ‘She’ is a woman who remains nameless in both stories, positioned instead as wife and mother. Rogers opens with the wife alone with her children at night when something in or around the house wakes her.

Now she lies stock-still, her pulse amplified inside her head by a damp pillow, her breathing far too loud. She concentrates her senses within the room.

Nothing ... no presence. None of that sense of a space filled by something unknown.
(7)

Focused and thoughtful writing of this sort defines the set-up to this tale and Rogers, here, navigates the psychic distance between omniscience and character with aplomb.

Unlike Lawson, however, the peril in this story comes from the husband, a man who is revealed in marriage as the opposite of the open-faced, wide-smiling man who courted her, a man who was ‘good with cars and most things mechanical’ but now is a ‘bullshit artist and a liar’ for whom there is ‘no place at the RSL bar of a Friday night’ after the truth of his war service is revealed (13).

The reasons for the husband’s change or, perhaps, the wife’s misreading of him, remain unexamined. The husband is there for the trouble he causes, pushing the wife to the brink of

pariahdom and forcing her, heart-sick, to cling to her reputation through cheery industriousness and familiarity with the respectable citizenry. The wife's occasional romantic thoughts about the policeman or the teacher serve only to underline her entrapment. As in 'The Drover's Wife' it comes to a head one night and the wife ultimately acts to protect her family but, in so doing, she becomes the mistress of her own guilty sleeplessness.

'Pictures in the Window' is the longest of the stories and introduces us to the small town of Stillwell that is grateful to sell one of its empty shops, even if to an anonymous buyer. Completely unaware of the forthcoming catastrophe, the townsfolk make sport of the anonymity of the new owner, spinning yarns at the pub about all the things that could evolve from the sale of the tobacconist's.

The story cycles around the quotidian (veranda sweeping, the pub's darts comp, work rituals) as it moves deeper into morality play. We quickly do the mental maths on who of the many characters deserves censure as the new shop owner reveals the darkest truths of Stillwell while somehow remaining utterly anonymous.

Where the community is torn apart in 'Pictures in the Window', in 'The Popular Copper' the community comes together to save itself. Structurally, this story departs further from the conventional bush yarn, more complex in its intercuts between time and place and its nested counterpointing of personal histories to reveal deeper truths or to disorder expectations. We are privy to a range of points of view as the local police potentate is brought low by the victims of his bullying. And it is 'The Popular Copper' that offers one of the most sympathetic renderings of character in Reverend Douglas Trembarth's wartime courage during the blitz. Here, in Trembarth, as in Paterson, action is virtue, and he is a simple heroic character, loved for his decency.

The tone is very different in 'Ronnie Smalls', the name a play on Great Train robber Ronnie Biggs,¹ and one of the shortest and lightest stories in the collection. Again, there is a twist: the young boy who decides to follow his father's footsteps into petty crime by ineptly casing the local corner store later becomes a different kind of 'thief' in adulthood as a fashion designer. The humour here builds into farce as the shame-faced child slinks home and past his mother who informed on him to the police. She does all she can to avoid his eye, 'sewing fifty yards of random zigzag' on the Singer until 'he'd got to his bedroom' (144) and, later when baking, turning the beater to maximum and adding a dozen eggs until 'the beater had circulated a horizontal line of batter across her midriff and around the kitchen' (145).

The last of the stories, 'The Turk', turns on the irrevocable damage done to a small-town volunteer in the Great War, wherein the twist amplifies the tragedy.

Points of view shift fast in Rogers' stories. A change in voice between the unidentified narrator and the character happens from sentence to sentence (rather than via paragraph break, new chapter separation, or gentler slide into character shift through double voicing

often used when ‘head hopping’) and can risk leaving the reader uncertain of whose voice or point of view we are in. The authorial voice can shift from the uninflected to one indiscernible from character voice, sometimes challenging us with the permissions we have into the fictional world. In ‘Ronnie Smalls’ the policeman scares the boy straight, and, in the falling action, we risk tripping over the steps in psychic distance. We are told that ‘No one will ever know what the policeman said to the would-be thief’ (143), yet there ‘Might be a future for the boy as a contortionist,’ the policeman thought as he ‘strolled off with another victory for country justice under his belt’ (144). When we are sitting side by side with an idiomatic author/narrator it is a jolt to be excluded in this way.

These considerations aside, it is likely that the reader who seeks out this collection will very much enjoy being in the company of these yarns. Rogers’ appreciation of this period is laudable. He has reminded us uncynically of the ‘new world’ of post-wars Australia, long-lived enough to distinguish itself from the old but, we see now, fleeting.

Notes

¹ For information about Ronnie Biggs and the London-Glasgow Great Train Heist of 1963, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ronnie-Biggs>

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TEXT review

‘Where it ends is where it starts’: Tracing the beginning through the end in the language of Mann and Mossammaparast

review by Madhupriya Roy Chowdhury



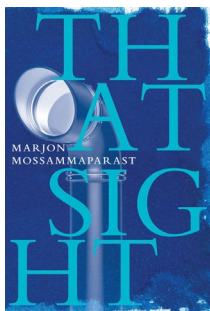
Rachel Mann

A Kingdom of Love

Carcanet, Manchester 2019

ISBN: 978 1 784108 57 1

Pb 72pp GBP8.99



Marjon Mossammaparast

That Sight

Cordite Publishing, Carlton South VIC 2018

ISBN: 9780648056881

Pb 79pp AUD20.00

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction
—Pablo Picasso (in Rosseau 2014: 17)

For both Mann and Mossammaparast, a post-structuralist approach of thought embodiment is evident as they try and break away from the patriarchal construct of language. Mann's ontological reflections in her poems seem to be an attempt to strip spiritual and religious practices of their associations with 'maleness'; God is seen as an intimate spiritual experience of the woman:

Why should I not have lovers too?
Which is to say, when no one else
Comes near, God will have to do. (Mann 10)

Propositions of Cixous and Kristeva for *écriture féminine* are recalled through the suggestive imagery in the following lines:

We learn the world, the first world
Of love and drool and sweet milk
Through lips. (Mann 6)

The search for a unique form of writing is tacitly expressed through Mann's ontological statements, repetition of words, and different voices:

I am wracked by assertions:
God is *not* a name,
God is Love, God is, God *is*. (Mann 11)

An attendant pours tea, hands me bacon
In a roll. South, south, deeper into territory,
'*This is England*', who can spot my fakery? (Mann 28)

Mossammaparast's quest is overt, stated through the use of caesura bars, gaps between clusters of text, overlapping words, cancelled words and unfinished words which explore the nature of being: 'Nature is full of ~~Beauty~~, Truth, Awfulness, ~~Calm~~.' (Mossammaparast 53), are symbolic of representation: tossing the reader into the ebb and flow of the sea to rest on the enchantment of words in *That Sight* – 'inbred | intuit | in | involuntary' (Mossammaparast 71) and creating skate marks on slippery ground signifying a non - linear narrative movement in 'Act I – At the dove and Olive' of 'Wordsworth Wonders' which is written in the layout of a play:

In their dreams

I will be \ skating // skating \ skating // \\\ my silent figure 8s
On Rydal Water, splishing splashing, wearing a hat.

// \ \ // \ \ // \ \ //

\ \ // \

Charlotte is on the moss slipping and slipping. (Mossammaparast 52)

Language is rendered a patriarchal medium:

women are hanged with hyphens,
strapped with adjectives, quietly like the countdown of a bomb. (Mossammaparast 35)

The use of foreign language serves to suspend the reader into foreign domains of representation, projecting the reader into the lacuna of obstructed comprehension by breaking away from the conventional monolingual and predictable character of a text:

Yet to find one's final form,
Surely that's the meaning

Of *spes contra spem*? (Mann 17)

٤ بابا آب نداد.

(Mossammaparast 9)

Along with the scriptural essence of their poetry built through the allusions to theological texts and Greek myths, the notions of creation of language, dictates of inscription, the act of writing and deconstruction are worked into mythical motifs giving the texts a dynamic character, as they move from the genesis of thought to the death of the author becoming a metaphor of that process, and operate interchangeably between the concepts of the traditional God and Barthes' theory of the 'Author – God' (Barthes nd). A sequence of the creative process can be traced as follows:

The birth of thought:

He dreams of milk and drool,
Of bitter birth, brush of prayer on lips – (Mann 9)

The effort to formulate language, the understanding of phonology, morphology and syntax:

Before holy or righteous, before the Law,
Before sound was distilled (so many crossings-out)
Into *bet, aleph, niqqud*, before all that: Song.

Oh, to taste fricatives – damp from lip and palate –
Dental trills, the Spirit chewed by teeth,
Ejected from lungs, an offering. (Mann 8)

The realization of the shifting nature of reality, of signs, signifier and signified:

I'm an infant, I don't know what things are called. (Mossammaparast 12)

Knowledge of association, the cognitive process of assimilation, the idea of art imitating nature:

Trick is to associate the names with something you see in reality,
not woman. (Mossammaparast 49)

The effort to give shape to thought, selection of appropriate words:

I try to form prayer's capital word
On my tongue. O sweet imagination
Give it shape enough! *Love!* (Mann 4)

The act of writing and representation:

Oh, that my words were now written!
Oh, that they were printed in a book!
That they were graven with an iron pen
And lead, for ever in the rock! (Mann 31)

The conceived work of art given shape and form, the published book:

Children's stories in Farsi commence with the refrain
There was one, there wasn't one
Apart from God, there was no-one
akin to that first line of fairytales, *Once upon a time*. (Mossammaparast 10)

Questioning the author's intended meaning, understanding and conceptualizing the narrative in terms of personal experience:

But what is God
if not the question of transposition? (Mossammaparast 57)

The act of deconstruction:

I take God apart like an artform. (Mossammaparast 3)

The death of the author, the loss of original meaning, reader response, the birth of new and shifting interpretations of the book or written words:

but the book is nowhere on Google nor in my hands.
It has fallen through a gap between the internet and God (Mossammaparast 10)

An example of intertextuality is seen in the influence of Wittgenstein's philosophy of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 2001): words borrowed by both writers to formulate the ethereal nature of existence mirrored through the structure of their compositions:

If the world is all that is the case,
If it is the totality of facts, not of things,
What then of prayer? (Mann 12)

*The right hand and the left hand are in fact congruent.
It is irrelevant that they cannot be made to coincide.* (Mossammaparast 30)

The Biblical allusions, the concepts of God and spirituality are evoked through and interwoven with organic imagery and the representation of the body – a feature instrumental in making their poetry loyal to the tropes of ecofeminism; the female body merges with nature and earth: 'The tree is the woman lifting her song, blossoms the heart of a woman' (Mossammaparast 35), the woman and the country acquire aspects of a caring and nurturing mother – 'Australia is a big mother.' (Mossammaparast 14), 'Mamucium: breast place, mother, Eve' (Mann 29), woman and land is exploited by men:

It was good enough for explorers,
Thrusting flags into virgin land.
For Adam too. (Mann 55)

Rachel Carson's love for the environment and knowledge of the origins of life forms is shared by both Mann and Mossammaparast and demonstrated in their poems through descriptions of different ecosystems: 'Coral can't be solitary' (Mossammaparast 47) and a variety of animals: 'the otter the doe the spotted giraffe' (Mossammaparast 72); which when framed with in their experiences act as a distancing technique for the reader and subtly triggers an urgency to actively preserve the environment:

All life was water once.
Perhaps I'll travel home,
relearn the trick of gills, fin and scale. (Mann 56)

Climates change longitudinally. The Kalahari expands.
Cows belch in simulation as earth digests into seas,
off the coast of California. (Mossammaparast 6)

Time progresses from beginning through end in a circular motion, being born from expiry; it is a connatural phenomenon of the universe, sometimes standing still: 'there is no sunrise or sunset, there is only our rotation.' (Mossammaparast 40) and sometimes sweeping the pasts, presents and futures of the earth along with it:

We've come to measure

The distance between here and there, past and now
From wood to village, time as geography –
Days measured in inches, months in yards gained,

a decade in how long it took to plot the remains,
the ploughman surveys the field's chalk and bone
harvest. (Mann 35)

In this city the end is in the beginning, the sun in the split atom. (Mossammaparast 35)

The mention of various places and the imaginative re-creation of landscapes appeal to the senses of the readers and fix their minds in familiar and unfamiliar settings. The places are connected with the sensations of their historical pasts; the present and the past exist together in the memories of the land with a desire for justice and resurrection:

Vast digital boards blaze,
Sheffield, Stockport, Staines,
So many destinations,

Is this Europe? Wartime?
Bags dragged, whole lives. (Mann 48)

Here is London's working man under the shadow of Nelson,
who crowds in from all over the world, like you,
in this (really quite perverse) scramble for our fountain
perennially flowing, which is the Empire
alive (underneath) with all her billions, jewels
(and whatever does not glow immediately to the eye),
The perfect loot of lost worlds lost again! –
still carrying the sense from perfume to piss. (Mossammaparast 33)

However, the reading of their poetry is not complete without the consideration of the perspectives of autobiography and memory. The sense of culpability in 'Accept my body as transgression' (Mann 13), the reference to Biblical characters with a history of disobedience such as David and Jonah, the recollection of Persephone and Ezekiel symbolic of suffering innocents and mentions of hospitals and disease must be read in the light of Mann's record of her personal experiences in *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God* (Mann 2012). Similarly, for Mossammaparast, the experience of being a refugee forms the understanding of the earth and mother as synonymous: 'Her mother was pressed between the

Persian carpet and the roof' (Mossammaparast 28). It is also important to note her travel experiences and the portraits of the American professor, the mother, the grandmother, Nasrin, Rosaria and Frank which seem to be products of memory and imagination and look at them from the standpoint of Mossammaparast's life.

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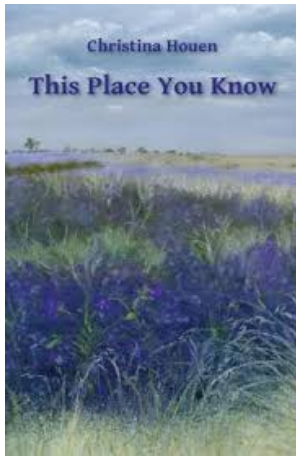
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TEXT Review

The exhausting earth

review by Zinia Mitra



Christina Houen
This Place You Know
Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2019
ISBN 978-1-76041-743-7
pb 242pp AUD32.50

*A man does not mean anything.
But the place.
Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles
into the muddy current,
a man becomes the place.*

(Mahapata 1976: np)

Christina Houen's *This Place You Know* is a memoir. The book is in three parts, 'Martha's Story', 'Anna's Story' and 'The Last Song'. It begins with a Prologue and ends with an

Epilogue. The memoir of Christina's mother, Martha, and Christina's own childhood experiences are, by the author's own admittance, drawn from archival records, her mother's handwritten memoirs and her own memoirs. Much of Martha's story is imaginative reconstruction of her thoughts and actions.

The first part of the book occupies 'Martha's Story'. Martha is a classic scholar from the coast. She takes up a teaching job and goes to a man's town in the outback. Martha's first days are filled with letters to her parents. She soon falls in love with Henry, a local man. They decide to marry and find their dream place beside river Murrumbidgee. 'The Place' (in a chapter with the same title) is a harsh unforgiving location with recurring droughts and hurricanes. Martha begins her life with her love for Henry, with a dream and scanty furniture. During Martha's first pregnancy, Henry helps her and runs the place. He makes a front lawn and plants privet hedge. He plants a cedar tree which grows to cover the house like an umbrella. He takes care of the livestock. Martha begins to "feel" the place but has her fits of discontent. She eventually gives birth to five children: David, Vera, Malcolm, Simon, and Anna. The pages of Martha's story reflect the lived experience of many women, filled with everydayness of cleaning, housekeeping, running the house, excitement and love for children, worries and cares of children. The early days of Martha's and Henry's marriage, establishment of their sheep flock and beginning their family with five children coincide with the Great Depression. Australia, especially rural Australia, is hit hard. World War 2 follows soon after. Unreliable rainfall and drought make farming even more unwarrantable. It is difficult to domesticate the demanding landscape. Poverty and the oppressive heat of the lake district summers of Australia combined with solitude make life even more difficult. The overwhelming fear of another pregnancy takes its toll on the pair. A final pregnancy occurs when Martha is forty-five.

'Anna's Story' begins in July 1946. Anna is a sensitive imaginative child. She grows up in the native house in the harsh landscape. One-by-one, the older children leave home to attend boarding school. The fun-loving Henry finally begins dating another woman, loses interest in Martha and the family and abandons them for her. Martha decides to continue to work on the property on her own. It is challenging but she is persistent. The seven-year-old is her only help. She also receives occasional help of her sons who return during school holidays. A few years later, Henry returns to reclaim the prospering farm. When families broke down, in the days prior to the 1975 Family Law Act, women could demand little from their husbands. There was no provision for alimony and women were bereft of all social security. Martha has to leave the farm. She returns to her teaching career again to support Anna and pay for her boarding school. Anna's story speaks of her difficult childhood in the same place, her adolescence, the cleaning and washing of mother that fills up lives of women. A sensitive girl she notes her parents quarrel. Fairy tale imagination fills up her imaginative mind. Finally, when her father abandons them, she and her mother are a team. Later in the book an older Anna meets her father who is in the hospital and an amputee. Henry intimates her his side of the story but Anna knows how her mother had to settle for a paltry sum. She visits Hay after her parent's death and finds the place changed. She lets go all the memories she had been

holding on to. We learn in the end that she herself is divorced and her children are taken by her husband.

Another presence is strongly felt in the book, that of nature. An almost Hardian nature is alive and active throughout the book. When the courting Martha and Henry kiss in 'Courting', in a characteristic Hardian way there is a sudden loud crack and a splash that startles Martha and she pulls back. A branch of a tree breaks and falls from an 'overhanging tree into the river' (34). When Martha feels trapped with five small children and much housework to do, nature 'is dark with brooding storm clouds massing in March skies every afternoon, promising rain but remaining closed' (73). In spite of the presence of the river, it is an arid landscape. Sometimes there is no relief from heat. There are repetitive concerns of 'drying up' (44). The house dries up 'cracking and shrivelling to a carapace like the discarded cicada shells on tree trunks and fence posts' (44). Martha is anxious that she herself will dry up.

There is not only drought, there are also dust storms. Martha writes:

We still get dust storms sometimes. At least they've brought some good: seeds of perennial saltbush from South Australia. It is small creeping tough plant that survives the harshest summer, and the sheep love it. (75)

This landscape is woven into the lives of Martha, Henry and Anna. Murrumbidgee river is an unfailing part of the landscape. Murrumbidgee is like no river Martha has seen before. When Henry talks of his dream place on the river, Martha feels 'strangely happy and hopeful' (31). Martha absorbs the landscape: 'The landscape is so different from the coast. The plains are flat and stretch out in a huge area to meet the horizon. The only thing breaking the circle is the belt of trees that winds along the rivers course' (37). The river is Anna's nightmare. She dreams of the rising river, wall of waters gushing and roaring down the riverbed overflowing the edges and pushing down trees. When Anna revisits the river after her parents' deaths, she is left disoriented. The sandy beaches are gone, the banks are bare and muddy. She bids farewell to her parents' memories and to the memories of her childhood. She finds the place changed with 'more certainty, greed rules and dictates the way land is managed' (229).

In the Prologue we are introduced to a wrinkled skinny woman tending vegetables at night. She walks leaning on her stick to another bare patch. The old woman, like the Sybil in the epigraph of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, symbolises Hay. She reappears in the Epilogue. In the end there is hope of rain in the land threatened by drought. She moves to take shelter.

Although the book abounds in descriptions of nature that often become almost poetry, there is an unmistakable feminine voice that is not drowned in the lyrical images of natural surroundings. 'I would have loved to study law', writes Martha early in the book, 'but Father said it was not a suitable profession for a lady. Indeed although the first female law student graduated from Sydney University in 1902 it wasn't until 1918 that women were entitled to practise in New South Wales' (22). The voice is dominant especially in chapters like 'No Place for Girls' and in 'Boys are Different'. The latter describes the terrible abuse little Anna

is exposed to. The book also shows the modifications in the outlook of the three generation of women. Martha mother was a figure the children took for granted. She was a figure in the background, sewing, cooking, cleaning and polishing who ‘saw home as a sanctuary from the outside world, and her main focus was to shelter her husband from the stresses and pressures of his work when he was at home, and to bring the children up to respect him, the home, and the family’ (22). Martha’s own experience of marriage falls short of this model her mother had set. Martha’s husband abandons her and she fights to keep the land and works to look after Anna. Later Anna is the one who breaks the family.

The memoir is also a chronicle of social history of life on the land and the silent role played by women in farming.

This Place You Know, Christina Houen’s first book, speaks of heartache, deception and forgiveness. It explores love and love’s outcomes in a realistic approach. The book is meant for quiet reading. There is lyricism in the prose and sometimes the lines take flight to becoming poetry. Women will find their tales told in the realistic portrayals of Martha and Anna, and the courage with which they face the hard facts of life. Much of their suffering is because of the structure of the society conjoined with the unforeseen events like the Great Depression, the Stock Market Crash and the Second World War.

Eliot in ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ makes a point that ‘the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’ (Eliot 1919: 55). In the end, *This Place You Know* says that one’s place is not a simple equation of a country one lives in, it is one’s blood and bones, one’s nerves, that never leaves its natives wherever she/he lives, whatever she/he does. When one dies, it is always going to be this place one knew (237). Eliot spoke of ‘tradition’ as not just the immediate past but the distant past, the cognizance of the entire pastness of human history and literature ‘that compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order’ (55). Houen is acutely conscious of her place and time, of her own contemporaneity as much as her past which directs and shapes her present. She concludes her memoir with an awareness that the best way to end a broken story is to close the circle.

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TEXT review

An air of intertextuality

review by Deb Stewart



Mary Pomfret

The Hard Seed

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2018

ISBN 9781760416072

Pb 247pp AUD32.50

The Hard Seed by Mary Pomfret is an intriguing novel – a blend of mystery and philosophy with a fair dose of literary allusion and floral metaphor stirred into the mix. It soon becomes obvious that one is reading multiple narratives containing casts of similar, yet different, characters with seemingly overlapping stories and generally dysfunctional relationships, particularly within their family circles. The theme of the outcast, or the ‘black sheep’, is apparent as family members gang up to ostracize one of their flock who dares to examine and write about life, and who they fear will expose family secrets.

The novel begins with a letter from a solicitor to an editor requesting their assistance with an unpublished manuscript, written by the late Iris Bloom, and left as part of her estate along with ‘an adequate sum for her writing to be put in order so that it might be forwarded to potential publishers’ (5). The manuscript contains a series of handwritten letters addressed to someone named Rose, along with a literary work dedicated to her. Investigations carried out by the solicitor have failed to find anyone of that name among Iris Bloom’s family, friends or associates. So begins the mystery. Who is Rose?

Whether intentional or not, several references in *The Hard Seed* evoke other literary works and a sense that the narrative is operating on many levels. There is an air of intertextuality about this novel. At times Iris’s letters remind me of Elizabeth Jolley’s novels. Thinking of the mysterious Rose and why the manuscript might be dedicated to her, this reader was reminded of *Citizen Kane* and the mysterious “Rosebud” – the final word of a dying newspaper magnate, played by Orson Welles.

...as it turns out, “Rosebud” is the trade name of a cheap little sled on which Kane was playing on the day he was taken away from his home and his mother. In his subconscious it represented the simplicity, the comfort, above all the lack of responsibility in his home, and also it stood for his mother’s love which Kane never lost. (Wellesnet 2007)

The name of the deceased author, Iris Bloom, and other character name permutations of the name Rose, suggest the unfurling of an overarching floral metaphor, blooming perhaps out of the hard seed of the title. Late in the novel, one of the characters becomes a florist, adding weight to the expectation that the sustained floral metaphor is a key to deciphering the meaning of the novel, of connecting the seemingly separate stories. The name Bloom suggests Leopold Bloom, the narrator of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* who, like Iris, is an outsider – a Jew in Dublin, while Iris is estranged from her family. In her first letter to Rose, Iris wonders about her first name:

Sometimes I wonder about my own name. I think I would have liked something more glamorous. But I console myself with the notion that Iris was the messenger of the Greek gods who guided souls to the Elysian Fields (14)

while Bloom, in *Ulysses* is compared to the Greek mythological hero Odysseus / Ulysses (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019).

There appear to be two main narrative sections in this novel. One is titled Roisin, in which the main character, Roisin, a writer, travels to visit her estranged family on the occasion of a garden party for her parents’ wedding anniversary. The other, titled *Rosa*, begins when the central character, Rosa, is twelve years old and returns home to find that her mother has gone and she is now expected to take care of her father and siblings. In later life, Rosa becomes a playwright and one of the characters in her dramatic work is Rosaleen. So, we have Roisin, Rosa, Rosaleen and Rose, to whom Iris’s letters are written. ‘What’s in a name? that which

we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet’ (as Shakespeare put it in *Romeo and Juliet*).

Reading *The Hard Seed* is compelling, rather than difficult. The multiple narratives create mystery and invite the reader to unpick the relationships, stay alert to the quasi-overlaps in story detail and attempt to join the dots, to seek connections. Whether or not these connections exist might remain elusive but the possibility of connections that could unravel the mystery and shed light on the hidden secrets alluded to will appeal to the ‘detective’ in the ideal reader.

The novel is beautifully written with often poetic prose. It has the feel of the Gothic and the suggestion of cleverness in its literary form, perhaps employing a range of literary devices to deliberately disrupt the reading experience and puzzle the reader? The novel includes letters, a review, stories, parts of a play, poems, recounted dreams, a section of crossed through text, and songs – notably, three ‘Rose songs’ featuring blossoms and blooms.

The writers in the novel have all experienced resistance to their writing, and strong objections from members of their families, including accusations that they will reveal family secrets. *The Hard Seed* incorporates several philosophical signposts, often in the form of headings such as ‘Not all legacies are an act of generosity’, ‘Truth is for Philosophers’, and musings on memory, facts, evidence, truth, and transforming experience into art.

The Hard Seed contains a reference to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and echoes of a madwoman in the attic, as well as a number of references to Shakespeare. For the reader equipped with a rich grounding in literature and some exposure to literary theory, the recurring motif of carpet, and whether or not it actually existed in the room, may remind one of Henry James’ novella *The Figure in the Carpet* (1916) and how it has come to symbolise the key to understanding the writers’ work while also, in a sense, resisting interpretation. In *The Figure in the Carpet*

An unnamed narrator reviews the latest novel by the author Hugh Vereker, and congratulates himself on having divined the true meaning of Vereker’s book. But at a party, he overhears Vereker telling the other guests that the narrator’s review was “the usual twaddle”. When Vereker discovers the narrator heard him badmouthing his review, he seeks to mollify him by telling him that *nobody* has managed to divine the true meaning of his work, but that there is an idea present in all of his novels, which he likens to the complex woven figure in a Persian carpet, which provides the “secret” or “key” to understanding all of his work. Spurred on by this, the narrator sets out to discover what ‘the figure in the carpet’ really is that will unlock the secrets of Vereker’s work. (Tearle 2020)

In *The Hard Seed*, these references to carpet could be a playful nod to the quest for meaning by the reader, the critic and the reviewer. Is the author having a quiet chuckle at those who

attempt textual analysis to determine what the story is about? The carpet is also a hiding place for the ‘truth’. In the section headed ‘A shadow play: Dark Rosaleen’, for example:

VOICE ONE: Well, it’s hard to know the truth of the matter but clearly something was swept under the carpet.

VOICE TWO: That’s if there was a carpet. (237)

There’s a brooding darkness in *The Hard Seed* and a sense of yearning, emanating from loss. The loss of a mother; the loss of a child, a husband, and the loss of family. In Iris’s words, ‘all writers do cruel things to the characters they love’ (15) but life itself can be cruel and ‘endings are never neat’ (243). The crux of the narrative and the ‘secret’ alluded to are discernible to the perceptive reader, but the text remains open to interpretation. Nothing is certain and it is unclear whether there ever was a carpet.

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Deb Stewart is a South Australian poet, musician and songwriter. Her most recent collection of poetry The White Line of Language was published in 2019. She is also a retired librarian.



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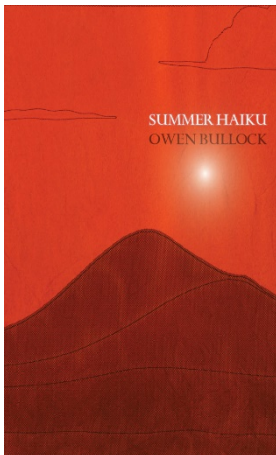
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TEXT review

That simple-yet-elusive something: appreciating haiku of seasons and camping through conversational reading and writing together

review by Jayne Linke and Amelia Walker



Owen Bullock

Summer Haiku

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2019

ISBN: 9780648404279

Pb 69pp AUD8.95

The core of the haiku is that light touch and simplicity which shines on the spirit of the poem ... that certain something that is almost impossible to explain ... maybe wabi sabi. (Bruce 2018)

Now, in my ageing and more mellow days I've come to accept questions for just what they are – questions. At last I allow mystery to be mystery. And this is where haiku fits in. (Dobb 2017)

We meet in the café with the orange walls, as we have on a semi-regular basis for some time now. But today is different. Usually we meet to talk about poetry, and Jayne writes some. Today we are meeting to read and review Owen Bullock's *Summer Haiku* – a new experiment for us, and our first foray into co-authorship.

As the *TEXT* reviews co-editor largely responsible for matching books with reviewers, I was stumped when *Summer Haiku* landed on my desk. Like a haiku, the book itself is small and unassuming: pocket-sized, with a cover I at first glance thought red. When I gave it more time, I appreciated magenta mountains against a red-gold-orange sky with pencil outline clouds and what could be a sun or a moon glowing white and sharp, yet hazy, as though through mountain fog. I point this out not simply to compliment the publisher (though it stands that such elements of the book-as-object result from time and energy that deserves more recognition than it sometimes gets). I point it out because my experience of appreciating *Summer Haiku*'s cover is analogous to what a good haiku lets its reader experience: something that initially seems simple, but which on closer inspection unfolds into more and more thinkable readings, associations and possibilities. The problem is, only some readers are open and attuned to the haiku manner of unfolding, and even the right reader must be in the right headspace – an unhurried space of calm, with plenty of time for unpressured reflection. (Try finding that among academics in today's culture of precarity, panic, deadlines and ever-increasing demands, as Palmer & Cantrell [2019] eloquently describe).

Then I glanced at the poem that has for fifteen years been pasted on my study wall – on every study wall in every place I've lived, or bedroom walls in share-houses where I had no other room of my own. It's a poem by Jayne about learning to walk again following a serious car accident. It is but a few lines – but what lines they are. I have read it again and again, yet it grabs me afresh every time. The language is unpretentious: no flourishes for the sake of flourishes, just statements of things as they are. Yet every word is charged and sparks in multiple directions. I can read the whole poem in half a moment, but the process of appreciation continues and changes always. This is characteristic of all Jayne's poems (see Linke 2017, 2020a) and precisely what is needed in a reviewer of a controlled-yet-intricate work like *Summer Haiku*.

I emailed Jayne to ask if she'd be up for it. She agreed, but we both knew we'd have to do things a little differently: Jayne's accident has made writing and many other things far more involved and more challenging for her than they are for most people. Although she has learned to walk in small ways, she requires a motorised wheelchair both at home and for all outings. Holding a pen to write is an exhausting feat of strength and coordination. The old clichés about writing as a lonely process and the struggle for motivation are exacerbated for those with limitations on mobility that in turn limit access to spaces, experiences and social interactions – things that I, as a writer, find crucial for feeding inspiration and the desire to write. To combat this, and in addition to maintaining what is now a friendship of two decades, our coffee catc-ups are about me giving Jayne provocations in response to which she pens short poems that her mother and carer, Helen, types on a computer later.

To write this review, reading and discussing *Summer Haiku* takes the place of the usual loose-themed and/or open avenues of conversation and literary inquiry Jayne and I would ordinarily pursue in meandering search for poetic triggers. We begin on page one: a haiku about summer heat.

‘Subtly resounding,’ Jayne murmurs with a nod as she takes the poem in. We read it aloud a second time, which Melbourne poet Myron Lysenko once told me is important for appreciating haiku poems on both their immediate and deferred levels. After a pause, Jayne reaches for her paper and pen. She writes:

Like a shawl, it holds
 Body heat in, an aura
 It shimmers, vague fuzz (Linke 2020b)

This response simultaneously pulls me elsewhere and back to the poem by Bullock, which evokes the ‘snap and crack’ of broom seeds – of pods bursting in the summer heat (1). Jayne’s evocation of heat as a tactile bodily experience and the visible haze it creates causes me to recognise the mixture of visual, tactile and auditory senses at play in Bullock’s poem, too. This becomes a new lesson for me in how to read not only the rest of the poems in *Summer Haiku*, but all haiku and poetry generally. As Bruce (2018) notes, the economical power of poems that somehow express volumes through but a few words is elusive, often a mystery. The juxtaposition of multiple senses is, however, one device that seems to support it. This quality in Bullock’s work is one Jayne and I continue noticing as we continue reading *Summer Haiku*. We agree quickly, it is a profound, accomplished book.

Bullock’s opening poem about heat sets the scene well for those that follow, which describe moments of camping – from a single trip or several?¹ Jayne and I are unsure, but this ambiguity does not detract from our reading experience. If anything, it enhances it, for going camping tends to invoke different relationships with temporality to those typically observed in cities, suburbs, workplaces and other structured, oft-busy places. This is brought to my attention by Jayne’s poem in response to Bullock’s depiction of camp corn tasting ‘of last night’s smoke’ (13). Jayne writes:

Camp Life:

The horde eats, plays, competes,
 Juggles life’s intermission
 People come and go. (Linke 2020b)

and:

Camp Waking Up:

Tents unfurl, a stretch,

A yawn. The morning happens.
The lunch gong? People throng. (Linke 2020b)

The quick leap from breakfast to lunch in Linke's poem perfectly captures the sense I also gain from Bullock of time that is simultaneously stretched and compressed – of being so in the moment that a half day can pass in what seems but a flash, and yet the sensory wonder of smelling smoke or biting into corn can resonate for many eternities. This brings me to appreciate the subtle skill with which Bullock has ordered the collection: *Summer Haiku* – which actually contains two sections, the first on Summer and the second on Winter – resists what would have been an easy temptation to order poems in ways imitative of any heavy-handed chronology. The poems instead take an order of recall and reflection much like sifting through memories in private or chatting casually with a friend about events that come to mind in the order they come to mind. Contrast and an emotive arc are created through variations in the types of moments and experiences the poems focus in on. Frequent moments of humour – for instance, finding pillows on the fifth night of camping (3) and a llama that 'cleans its teeth / on the wire fence' (12) – complement more sombre reflections on growing older (5) and death (16). Celebrations of ecological beauty, such as in Bullock's poem about a yellow butterfly transforming 'from piece of air / to piece of air' (8), enhance the poignant urgency of poems that recognise human-caused environmental problems such as plastic in waterways (11), species endangerment / extinction (23) light pollution (9) and climate change (10). Jayne and I also delight over the thought Bullock has devoted to visually positioning his words and lines in ways that add yet more to the experience of reading – for instance through devices of alignment, indentation, and significant spaces between words or lines. The 'Winter Poems' section foregrounds this especially. One of our favourite poems in the Summer section is about an 'i n c h w o r m' on a Scrabble board (30). In response to this, Jayne writes of 'Shifts':

Shifting moods, and rooms
Changing hands, a new dealer. Or, new game?
Boundaries will move! (Linke 2020b)

I think to myself how boundaries are indeed shifting within me as Jayne and I read and think about *Summer Haiku* together. Through her responses to Bullock's astounding book, she is helping me appreciate elements of haiku I would previously have missed. It really does feel like a whole new game. Or as per the final poem of Bullock's Winter sequence, like being washed over by a sunset in which:

...the tide brings
the colours in (57)

Notes

¹ Later we read in the back of the book that the poems were ‘written over three summers, camping on our piece of land near Waihi in Aotearoa, New Zealand’ (58).

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Before sustaining injuries in an accident, Jayne Linke completed a Bachelor of Social Sciences at Adelaide University. In later years Jayne has published two anthologies through Ginninderra Press: Moonbeams in the Bitter Rain (2017) and Nature’s Cache (2020). She has read at Friendly St, The Hills Poets, and for disability and rehabilitation students at Flinders University.

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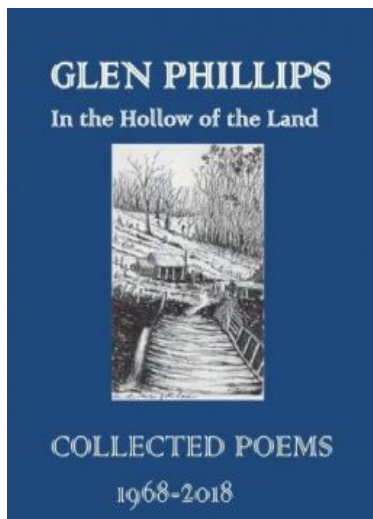
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TEXT review

Akin to musical composition: Fifty years of language and landscape

review by Tony Hughes-d'Aeth



Glen Phillips

In the Hollow of the Land: Collected Poems 1968-2018

Wild Weeds Press, Greenmount WA 2019

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In the Hollow of the Land collects sixty years of poetry by Western Australian writer Glen Phillips in two volumes published by Wild Weeds Press. Glen Phillips was born in 1936 and the poems stretch from the author's early 30s into his 80s. In terms of a career, it is notable that the production of poems by Phillips has tended to accelerate in the latter years, and has been particularly prolific since his retirement from Edith Cowan University in 2001. Taken together, the poems in *In the Hollow of the Land* provide a significant document of record not just of a sensibility that is responsive to his world, but of this world itself.

But what is Glen Phillips' world? In the most general terms, Phillips is a landscape poet. Indeed, in the latter phase of his career he was the Director of the International Centre for Landscape and Language, a research grouping he set up at Edith Cowan University. Landscape, once such a privileged aesthetic domain in Australia, is a term that has fallen into some disrepute, partly because in the postcolonial era the term is considered to encrypt the proprietary gaze of Empire. Be that as it may, the lyric landscape poetry of Phillips is an authentic expression of the particular modalities of belonging that have shaped his inner life. There are three main localities that feature in his poetry: the first and, for this reason perhaps most significant, is the wheatbelt of Western Australia; the second is rural Italy, particularly Tuscany; and the third is China, with a particular focus on Zhejiang province and its stunning ancient capital of Hangzhou. These three regions, while not exhausting the range of Phillips poetry, nevertheless run powerfully through his collected poems and it is not exaggerating to suggest that delineating the genius loci of each constitutes an animating principle in the two volumes.

The organisation principle of the two volumes is avowedly random, according to the insightful preface of Dominique Hecq. As a literary historian, I confess that I would like to have had these collected poems appear in a chronological order, or at least dates of publication or composition included in parentheses with each poem. That said, many of the poems do note dates in their titles or dedications – '1985 New Year Midnight in Tian Anmen Square', 'Regarding the Southern Ocean' (Point d'Entrecasteaux, Windy Harbour, 2001), and so on. But perhaps I am not the ideal imagined reader in this respect, and someone who wishes to read the poems for their own sake will be quite comfortable with the way that the poems unfold according to what Phillips (again in Hecq's Preface) conceives as something akin to musical composition.

Phillips was born in Southern Cross, at the eastern edge of the wheatbelt as you head from Perth towards Kalgoorlie. His father taught in country schools, mainly in the wheatbelt, between 1931 and 1949, so the first years of Phillips' life were spent in towns like Mukinbudin, Lake Grace and Pingelly. His mother's family had started farming in Beverly in 1905, in the very early days of the wheatbelt. Phillips himself was a teacher at Northam Senior High School between 1959 and 1961. So, it is not surprising that Phillips' poems about the wheatbelt are the most layered, transected by generational memory and shot through with the shards of early childhood. I found the poem 'The Blazer', which remembers a father in the eyes of a child, particularly moving:

I was only five and my father's sporting world
 in small country towns was something else
 from his family duties, as our lives unfurled.
 We clustered around mother, held fast
 to our childhood games, completing chores
 that if shirked we'd be brought to judgement
 when he came home pleased with good golf scores,
 cricket win.

...But the gloom spread
 and I well recall seeking his blazer scent
 behind the bedroom door, inhaling comfort

from leather elbow patches as I leant
 against sleeves and folds. (196-97)

Phillips can be located in relation to other wheatbelt writers of the post-war period, most notably Dorothy Hewett, Barbara York Main, and John Kinsella. The title of Phillips collected poems, *In the Hollow of the Land*, recalls the famous opening line of Hewett's memoir *Wild Card*: 'The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away'. Phillips is a distinctly gregarious writer and has been a pillar of the Western Australian writing community, particularly through his involvement with the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA) and his heroic work to save the home of Katharine Susannah Prichard in Greenmount, which now houses KSP Writers' Centre, which Phillips established. He knew Barbara York Main through the FAW(WA) and the last time I saw Glen was in fact at Barbara's funeral in 2019. One of the poems that caught my eye in this collection was 'Scrub Cities: Remembering *Between Wodjil and Tor*'. *Between Wodjil and Tor*, published in 1967, was a pioneering work of nature writing by York Main which traces the intricate natural world in the remnant bushland adjoining her family's farm in the central wheatbelt. Phillips' poem gently riffs off the rhythms and diction of York Main's work, giving them a new yet assonant intonation:

This anti-city
is dreaming
in insect hum
and rustle of feet
over leaf-litter
along ant trails;
in the catacombs
of termite mounds
in call of currawong
and flicker of bronzewing (197)

The poem continues in much this way and the pleasure is simply the pleasure of naming, the act of giving words to the intricacies of life. It finishes on a characteristic note of humility: 'we other travellers haunt / the twilight of our lesser texts' (199).

By comparison with the poems of the wheatbelt and the southwest of Western Australia, the poems that transpire in China and Italy have, by necessity, a more anthropological quality and they fit into that tradition of poetry that makes use its resources to offer up the strangeness of the traveller in the form of an image. Thus, we find in 'The Bird Market Canton II', the kind of vignette that hits the eye of someone who has no choice but to watch and wonder:

Old men carry them like closed lanterns
where flame of song in each throat
is quenched for coming night;
the birds, portraits framed in bamboo mesh,
the market stacks them one on one
in leaning towers. (87)

Yet the imagism of Phillips' poem, which he draws in part after all from the translations of Chinese poetry, seems to be generally deferential to the lifeworld that the poems are eavesdropping on. The beauty that he hits upon does not feel overly projected or imposed, and in that sense seems to be a genuine act of translation that while not wholly escaping the charge of exoticism, pays for it with the acuity of the observations and the precision of the metaphors. One can find similar stanzas in his

Italian poems, some of which were written originally in Italian by Phillips, and then translated back into English:

She goes out in the early morning
apron lifting with the chill breeze
across the meadow. Swinging
in her right hand the pail of milk
for the motherless kid; under
her left arm a sheaf of hay
for the other nannies and the old
billy with his comic beard and strut
like a prize fighter in the ring. (242)

In such moments, Phillips 'eye' is that of Hardy, Tolstoy or other provincial realists. It is the eye of regional difference experienced as a displacement in historical time. In that sense, he might also be compared to someone like Heaney, who writes with a double-vision in which a slowly exploding modernity revolves around something other and more ancient, and by turns durable and fragile, that is enacted daily in the rural lives of the characters that people his poems.

Dr Tony Hughes-d'Aeth is a respected historian and author of significant Australian literature. He has lived around the world, from Australia, to Europe and the United States, giving him a sense of how important the land on which we stand is in relation to our sense of identity.



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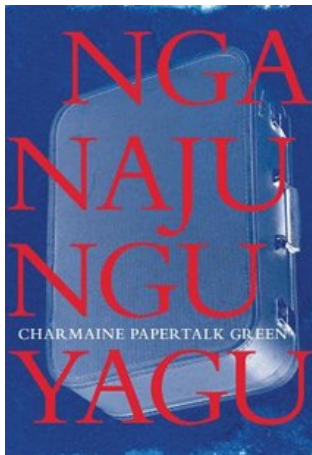
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TEXT review

Nganggunmanha:¹ Papertalk Green's gifts to life writing, visual poetry and more

review by Amelia Walker



Charmaine Papertalk Green
Nganajungu Yagu
Cordite Books, Carlton South VIC 2019
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Acknowledgement: this review was written on the lands of the Kurna people. I pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially elders, past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

Special thanks to Professor Jeanine Leane for reading a draft of this article and sharing her expertise on issues of cultural sensitivity.

Ngatha nganajungu yagu nganggurnmanha

I am still thinking about you my mother

Ngatha nganajungu mama nganggurnmanha

My father I am still thinking about you (4)

Charmaine Papertalk Green's *Nganajungu Yagu*² enacts a movingly profound re-membering of correspondence and connection between the author and her mother [henceforth yagu] across 1978-9 while Papertalk Green (the daughter/gaja) was staying at an Aboriginal girls' hostel and attending high school in Bentley, Perth. As Anita Heiss notes, this new work adds to Papertalk Green's impressive oeuvre, which extends back to the mid-1980s and comprises bold writings that remain 'eloquently powerful, respectfully challenging, and true to [Papertalk Green's] role in life as a Yamaji Nyarlu' (Heiss 2019: xiii). In line with Heiss, I see *Nganajungu Yagu* as a book that in addition to its vital insights about 'respect for ancestors, connection to country, the role of the poet and Yamaji identity' enacts an accomplished revival of 'the nearly lost art of letter writing' (Heiss 2019: xiii) and epistolary literature – a form powerfully deployed by feminist and anti-colonial writers including Alice Walker (1982), Monica Ali (2003) and Michael Ondaatje (1987) (see discussion in Bower 2017). In this review, I would like to extend Heiss' point further by observing how *Nganajungu Yagu* profoundly reimagines literary possibilities of life writing, historical writing, fictocriticism, poetry and more. My touchstones for this argument shall include, first, Papertalk Green's use of letters in combination with other texts, and then the poetic innovations she enacts, particularly visual and polylingual strategies. My decision to focus primarily on technique is informed by Alison Whittaker's edifying keynote at the 2019 conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (Whittaker 2019).³

In her author's preface to *Nganajungu Yagu*, Papertalk Green explains how '[f]orty years ago, words and feelings flowed between a teenage daughter and her mother' (xi) and how she, the daughter, carefully stored and protected the letters her yagu sent her in a 'red life-journey suitcase' that she 'carried across time and landscapes as a mother would carry her baby in a thaga'⁴ (xi). The letters Papertalk Green sent her yagu in response were lost, so in *Nganajungu Yagu* Papertalk Green reimagines and re-members them – reinstates membership to memories and experiences at risk of being dismembered and/as forgotten.⁵ The first letter appears on page twelve. It is preceded by a prose opening (1-2) that elaborates details on how and why Papertalk Green came to be living at the hostel, her experiences there, and the broader socio-historical context in which the events of this book took place. Ten pages of poetry then provide a sense of the emotions Papertalk Green's teenaged "I" experienced in leaving her home and loved ones, interspersed with current-day reflections on what the letters meant to her. She writes:

These are not just letters on paper

these are mother's letters to me

her daughter, blood, her hopes

These are not letters on paper

that can be crumpled and discarded
a long line of forever flowing blood
of Yamaji women bound together
from a continuous womb of love (8)

The first letter is dated 28 June 1978. It appears as three lines, set in italics at the top of the page. In this letter, Papertalk Green's yagu explains that she has sent a check for Papertalk Green's glasses. The letter also expresses parental concern – and boundless love (12). Beneath the letter, Papertalk Green, writing decades later, reimagines her response through a mixture of prose and poetry. The response begins in the style of epistolary discourse:

Nganajungu Yagu,

Thank you for sending me the money for new glasses and worrying about my eyesight. I did get shame when I became a teenage four-eyes... (12)

This then folds into a seeming interior monologue of thoughts and responses the letter cannot hold:

Foureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyesfoureyes
Yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba guru yalba (12)

The teenager as grown woman then reflects across time and distance:

Over the past forty years them glasses gurugilaaji ones
helped me see so many things outside small little town
opened my eyes they did as a teenager, mother, woman (12)

This play with time and memory is a feature throughout the book.⁶ Subsequent letters appear, like the first one, as brief italicised fragments in response to which teenaged and adult versions of *Nganajungu Yagu*'s "I" take turns to speak in dialogue with Yagu, one another, and the myriad other voices that perfuse this sophisticated-yet-utterly readable book, including voices of Papertalk Green's other family and community members, as well as the institutional, domineering voices of the invader culture against which *Nganajungu Yagu*'s central figure struggles. In addition to her yagu's letters, Papertalk Green incorporates historical accounts including quotes from a West Australian "Native" (sic) "(Citizenship Rights) Regulation Form" (39-43) and photographs of official stamps reflecting the 'black history' (and present) (Pearson 2016) this land problematically still referred to as "Australia" still bears. Together, Papertalk Green's careful curation of different texts, styles, temporalities, voices and languages makes for an accomplished symphony via which the author illuminates the fine details and big issues of the historic and/as present circumstances *Nganajungu Yagu* portrays.

Having discussed Papertalk Green's skilled integration of letters with other textual materials, I now turn from the macro to the micro – from the structure to its parts – to consider *Nganajungu Yagu*'s poetic innovations. Though Papertalk Green exhibits formal prowess in multiple areas, the two I am focussing on are visual and multilingual elements. In each of these Papertalk Green expands the scope for contemporary poetics, providing much for readers to relish and much from which poets may learn.

As multilingual poet and mailartist⁷ John M Bennet points out, all poetry is visual in some way (2016: 12). Use (and non-use) of line and stanza breaks influence where readers pause, where eyes are drawn, and the rhythms that come forth aloud or in the head. This in turn affects which words or lines gain emphasis, which ideas are grouped together or separated, and more. The term visual poetry is, however, typically used to denote genres and practices of poetry that especially foreground this element through incorporation, for instance, of typographical elements, diagrams, symbols and/or the arrangement of text in non-linear ways. These include differing approaches of and to asemic poetry, pattern poetry, concrete poetry and more (Bennet 2016: 12-13). Ecopoetry and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry are also genres that also exploit visual techniques, particularly via the inclusion or omission of typeless spaces as devices capable of holding as much or more meaning than explicitly printed words and symbols (Walker 2019). A similar approach is seen in Papertalk Green's poems 'Journey Beginning Things' (6) and 'Messages' (7), which sit on opposite pages in *Nganajungu Yagu* and bear a striking parallelism of shape. Both begin with four stanzas aligned hard left after which the final section of the poem leaps out to the right – still left-aligned, but set at a very wide indent so that the words begin at the same horizontal position as where the previous stanza ended. Vertically, there is also a big jump, or in other words, many lines of typeless space. This gives the sense of the poem's endings having been cut off or separated, which in 'Journey...' forges a soulful visual analogy to the final lines:

The teenaged girl
leaving on her own
with her red coolamon (6)

and in 'Messages' echoes thoughts of:

thana gagurlimanha:
separating from each other
moving apart away:
thana gagurlimanha (7).

Taking a different approach, but still incorporating much typeless space, the poem 'Paper Love' (10) is set in the middle of the page and consists mostly of one word lines, making for a thin vertical column broken occasionally by a five-to-eight word line. These could be branches extending from a tree or arms reaching out for love. There is also the possible thought of railway tracks or intersecting roads on a map – of how letters travelled between

yagu and gaja.⁸ Also striking in this poem is the bolded and italicised repetition of ‘-nha’, a Wajarri suffix indicating past tense (65) and ‘-manha’ for present tense (64). A reader focusing on just these words and their translations may think, *past, past, past – present, present, present*, and thus reflect on how the past remains present and everything with us remains present as past. This temporal emphasis resurges a few pages later in ‘Walgajumanha All Time’, which, in contrast to ‘Paper Love’ features long horizontal lines of text grouped into two-line stanzas with large areas of typeless space between stanzas. Flowing through these spaces is the repeated word ‘walgajunmanha’, which zig zags diagonally like a river or a snake. It means ‘writing’. Its visual deployment in the poem suggests the idea of writing into and from spaces of silence or erasure. It also reflects how writing can honour memory and bear witness to histories – including subjugated histories and/as knowledges – forging and maintaining crucial connections between people, communities and cultures:

We write about our existence pre-invasion / and that has made us visible
We write about our existence during invasion / and that keeps us visible (14)

Elsewhere, Papertalk Green employs visual techniques more commonly associated with concrete poetry, including boxes that contain and/or segregate sections of text. In ‘I Understand I Know’ (21), which uses three long narrow boxes, the sense of ordering and being boxed in is further heightened by the arrangement of words into lists as though they have literally been rounded up and forced into line(s). The five pages of the long poem ‘Cultural Genocide’ (39-43) similarly deploy their boxes (one per page) in ways that emphasise the domineering constraints of invader bureaucracy while also serving to signal the idea of filling out a section on a form. The text in each box responds to a question from a regulation form – heinous questions such as ‘Has the Applicant DISSOLVED tribal (sic) and native (sic) association for two years except for respect to lineal descendant or native relations of the first degree?’ (39). In each of the boxes placed below these questions, there seems far more to say than can fit into the small space given. The words strain at the perimeters of the boxes while the conspicuous space surrounding each box speaks loudly of how much remains unsaid.

Papertalk Green’s use of techniques drawn from multiple visual poetic traditions (of ecopoetry, concrete poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and more) is mirrored in the polylingual strategies via which she manages the feat of writing across five languages: Wajarri, Badimaya, Aboriginal English, English and Spanish. As per the book’s preface, the inclusion of Wajarri and Badimaya is especially significant because language is significantly connected with culture and keeping language alive serves to ‘honour ancestors, language centres, language workers and those Yamaji who have been and remain generous in passing on cultural knowledge’ (xi). Some poems, such as ‘Bushbroom’ (33) are written entirely in Wajarri, while others intersperse words, lines or phrases of multiple languages together. For readers who understand English but are unfamiliar with Wajarri, Badimaya and/or Aboriginal English, Papertalk Green provides glossaries (63-69) through which it is possible to translate and slowly make sense (the Spanish is translated in-text). Being such a reader, I found the

slow, attentive processes of turning and returning between poems and glossary a precious and enriching one. I remain aware that there is yet much beyond what I have accessed – subtleties of culture and inflection readable only to those who have studied longer and/or belong to the community. Nonetheless, as I go back and back to these poems I realise a few new things each time as words seen multiple times gradually become familiar. For instance, only the third time I returned to the untitled poem that ends with the line ‘Gudurdu warritharra’ (36) repeated three times could I appreciate this two-word repetition as a visual lub-dub or heartbeat. Because ‘gudurdu’ means ‘heart’ (63) and ‘warritharra’ means ‘sorrow, pangs of unhappiness’ (65), this raises the idea of a heart that keeps beating despite pain – an image of strength, determination and survival despite the odds, and just one example of the new ideas and possibilities Papertalk Green’s skilful integration of multiple languages have opened and keep opening to me as a non-Aboriginal person born on Aboriginal (Kurna) land. These are gifts of writing/reading for which I feel humbly grateful.

In combination with its visual devices and sophisticated integration of epistolary writing with multiple creative, critical and historical modes of text, *Nganajungu Yagu*’s polylingual strategies make for a seriously accomplished work that begs for repeated reading and re-reading. It is a book with the capacity to change thought and writing. It opens new possibilities across literary practices including but exceeding life writing, historical writing and poetry of multiple forms. *Nganajungu Yagu* strikes a deep affect that compels ethical responsiveness and drives crucial political points. It is certainly more than ‘Just Letters’ (9): it is a testimony, a re-membering, a keeping-alive and honouring of what must not be forgotten:

Gudurdu warritharra
 Gudurdu warritharra
 Gudurdu warritharra (36)

Notes

¹ ‘Nganggunmanha’ is listed in Papertalk Green’s Wajarri Glossary as ‘remembering’ (65).

² ‘Nganajungu’ = ‘my, mine’; ‘Yagu’ = ‘mother’ (64, 65).

³ During question and answer time, Whittaker was asked the question of which questions she wishes she would be asked more often. After a brief pause, she reflected that as a ‘Gomeri multitasker from the floodplains of Gunnedah’ (Whittaker 2018) she grows tired of always asked to speak from an Aboriginal perspective and/or have her work received through this lens only. She said she would like, sometimes, to be asked for her thoughts on literary technique, and for greater recognition of technical innovation to be given to the works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. While I recognise that one member of a community does not necessarily reflect the views of a whole community – Papertalk Green may or may not share Whittaker’s stance – I found the point a salient one for informing critical practice. As a reviewer, I have here in good faith tried my hardest to apply what I

learned from Whittaker’s keynote. Other reviewers will no doubt bring out the book’s political significance – which is immense – but I want to ensure that Papertalk Green’s technical feats also gain recognition, for this work does indeed extend literary practice and offers much from which aspiring writers may learn.

⁴ The ‘beautiful wooden thaga (coolamon)’ is ‘used to carry precious loads such as water and babies’. In her book’s opening section, Papertalk Green explains how she, too ‘carried precious things in [her] thaga, the RJS [red-journal suitcase]’ and thereby ‘carried [her] memories in [her] thaga forward’ (1).

⁵ Re-membering (restoring membership) is an important concept in life-writing, especially the life writing(s) of marginalised groups, e.g. women and colonised peoples, who have historically been dis-membered or cut off from society, and whose lived experiences and/as histories it is important to reinstate (see Jeffries 2015).

⁶ Though I have not chosen to pursue it in this review, this opens the possibility of considering *Nganajungu Yagu* in relationship to *écriture féminine* [feminine writing] that likewise plays with time and narrative ordering (see Atkinson 2014).

⁷ Mailart is ‘a movement based on the principle of sending small scale works through the postal service’ (Tate nd)

⁸ ‘Gaja’ = ‘offspring, child, daughter’ (63)

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