

The University of Melbourne

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*Products of the Discipline*

*The Park Bench*, Henry Von Doussa, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2005

*Road Story*, Julianne Van Loon, Allen & Unwin, 2005

*Dora B*, Josiane Behmoiras, Penguin, 2005

*In A Bigger City*, Tina Giannoukos, Five Island Press, 2005

*Onward Bound*, Helen Klaebe, The Australian Outward Bound Foundation, 2005

I had thought that a review of books produced in writing higher degrees programmes in Australian universities might call forth something of a cornucopia. With the discipline now established in most universities in the country, there are more than thirty higher degree programmes - enough to allow UWA Press's New Writing series to source solely from creative writing courses. Even confining the scope of the review to a one-year crop, I expected perhaps a dozen books, across a range of genres, subjects, styles.

I was right about the range.

The five books submitted as products of Australian writing programmes cover the spectrum from poetry to non-fiction. Such diversity makes generalisation difficult, but the very framework for a review of 'university books' assumes some grounds on which to approach these texts as a group, and invites inquiry into the 'zeitgeist' of a specific literary culture. I have, moreover, my own subjective interest in looking for links between these very different texts, as a means of continuing a dialogue established in a previous issue of *TEXT* about the kind of literary ecology that might be fostered by creative writing courses (Sved 2005). To this end, I will survey the books individually, before moving on to a discussion of their relation to the creative writing discipline.

Henry Von Doussa's *The Park Bench* is a fragmentary tale which takes as its subject the Australian gay (male) scene and, specifically, the aftermath of a failed relationship between Dan and Lennie. Encompassing many voices, the novel is ambitious in its attempt to fathom the multi-perspectival world of the gay community - from the defiant teenager copping it in an outback town, to the middle-aged man trapped by denial and a dead marriage. The voice of Lennie is the constant through these

spatial and perspectival trips, taking the reader back, gradually, into the murkiness of his relationship with Dan.

The pervading feel of the narrative is a kind of frustrated limbo - partly a product of Lennie's state of mind (stewing in his flat, searching listlessly in old meat markets), partly of an overriding sense of entrapment. The married man's only release is a furtive trip to the local beat; the small town boy has no recourse but to spit in the burger patties of the local bigots, and when he does leave the town it turns out that 'any regional piss-hole had the same effect' (56).

Thankfully there's humour in the book - Lennie's voice is wry and snarky even at his lowest ebbs. There are also moments that seem to hold out the promise of something more, like a meaningful meeting of eyes between two visitors in a mental hospital. ('He looked back twice more before we got to the men's toilet opposite the reception desk. My heart thrashed about as it had when I was a clueless kid at the beach. The fear and anticipation of a pick-up never lessened.' [61])

Von Doussa's language manages to be both lyrical and conversational, and the real test of the book - the credibility of its many personae - is handled well; the characters who share Lennie's park bench are believable and individual, even when given no more than a fragmentary life. An effective debut-with-a-purpose novel, although closer to novella in length.

Julienne Van Loon's *Road Story* is probably the best known of the five books under review, having won the 2005 *Australian/Vogel Award*. A 'Vogel book' is a bit of a coup for this kind of review, since the award and its recognition of young and emerging authors would have to be the shining light motivating many students of higher degree writing programs (note 1).

Diana Kooper is the nineteen-year-old protagonist of *Road Story* - on the run from her life in Sydney, having left her best friend Nicole in the carnage of a car Diana drove into a power pole. She catches a country train back towards the small towns of her youth and ends up dropping anchor on a whim in a middle-of-nowhere truck-stop owned by Bob, a man with his own problems who doesn't ask too many questions. She takes a job as kitchen hand and tries to immerse herself in the monotony of road-side life, dominated by the truckies with their endless appetite for pies and coffee.

Van Loon's writing is pared back and unwavering, especially when it comes to the truckies' parlance. The fragmentary narrative and restrained prose make Diana an intriguing and slightly elliptical character. Her affair with the young truckie Andy is conducted in snippets of physicality and half-gleaned sentiment, and people around her seem to respond to Diana like a bit of a weirdo, although her voice is steady and capable, especially for a nineteen-year-old.

The central relationship of the novel - between Diana and Nicole - is convincing and sad, conducted in retrospective fragments that become more insistent as Bob's gambling demons begin to disrupt the rhythms of the truck-stop. (Though they're built on entirely different paradigms, I couldn't help tallying similarities between the relationship at the centre of this book and that between Lennie and Dan in Von Doussa's novel - retrospective fragments, same-sex intimacy, drug addiction.)

Whereas Van Loon submitted *Road Story* as a novella as part of her Creative Writing PhD, it has been packaged and marketed as a novel, which seems to me to put the book on a bit of a false footing - there are half-stories that would perhaps have been fleshed out in a longer work. Bob's gambling problem, for instance, and the chaos that ensues from it, seems like an external mirror and prop to the psychological traumas of Diana's remembered life in Sydney - which is what it is really, in a narrative that can only sustain one significant psychological exploration.

Van Loon's novel shares with Von Doussa's more than the novella length (and retrospective same-sex relationships ruined by drug addiction). Both are books with a deliberately narrow focus - necessarily so in works of this length, but also effective in conveying a sense of foreclosure of possibilities. Von Doussa's characters are hemmed in by the gay scene, the bigotry beyond it and the closet; Diana Kooper's story is an inversion of escape, she runs from the trap of her life in Sydney to an illusion of safety. When her past catches up with her, the decision to run again only augments the sense of entrapment, of being caught in a loop. It is the constricting of perspective that makes both books successful novellas, committed to singularity, to the closed world of their characters. I return below to a discussion of this foreclosure of perspective, and what it might mean in the context of the creative writing discipline.

Josiane Behmoiras' *Dora B*, a memoir, depicts a spatially bigger world but one in which characters have little control over their lives. The Dora of the title is the narrator's mother, a middle class Jew by birth whose family moved from the idyllic surrounds of Edirne in Turkey to Paris when she was a girl. For this move her grandmother cursed the family line, and Dora's life seems to have played out this curse - her parents and all her siblings bar one die in Paris, Dora becomes an itinerant scavenger and, after the death of her last remaining brother, falls deeper into an undiagnosed mental illness manifested in delusions and paranoia. She and her daughter Josi (the narrator) live rootless lives, Dora refusing to settle in the one job where she is truly valued, working for a kind Parisian doctor. She takes her daughter with her on the road until eventually they are arrested for vagrancy and, when they are found to be Jewish, signed up for emigration to Israel.

In a transit camp (the *ma'abara*) at the edge of 'the promised land', Dora and Josi think they will find peace and security. But their new life quickly becomes dominated by the cruelty of their neighbours - persecuted people intent on inflicting persecution, who use the small props of life in the *ma'abara* as ammunition, stealing food and paving stones from Dora, ridiculing her eccentricities and eventually progressing to physical violence. All this plays into Dora's paranoid fantasies about 'her enemies', she speaks to microphones in the walls and stops Josi from forming friendships and continuing her education. Josi grows into her role as her mother's protector, a role she continues to play until she emigrates to Australia in adulthood. Dora, by now itinerant again, is too intimidated by the bureaucracy of travel to follow her daughter, precipitating a crisis of loyalty as Josi must decide whether to accept her new life or stand by her 'baglady' mother.

*Dora B* presents a powerful depiction of migrant alienation, of mental illness and the self-perpetuating cycle of persecution. The book also explores the more optimistic territory of family loyalty and love - filial and

maternal. Dora never stops struggling to provide Josi with a home and a sense of security. Behmoiras focuses on food as a maternal gesture, and on the trappings of their life in the asbestos hut. That Dora's attempts, through circumstantial or psychological misfortune, ultimately fail is never a source of rancour in the narrative, whose dominant chord is nostalgia for the moments of joy combined with a cold-eyed clarity about the horrors of the past.

Stylistically Behmoiras' narrative is structured to reflect the experience of a fragmented childhood, in vignettes rich in sensory detail and pared back of narrative comment: 'I should have chosen still photography. My universe is merely an assortment of fragments... I find my own voice weak and I edit it out of the story.' (185)

A narrative that gave free vent to the emotional upheaval of watching the mother descend into bag lady could easily have devolved into melodrama, whereas Behmoiras' story is moving without being emotionally manipulative, evocative without obviously trying to evoke. The stylistic choices in Behmoiras' book, and the fact that they share some common ground with Van Loon's and Von Doussa's styles, have interesting implications when the works are viewed as representatives of university creative writing. I return to this point below.

In the book of poetry, *In a Bigger City*, Tina Giannoukos, like Von Doussa, uses multiple voices to illuminate various perspectives on a communal reality, a 'scene', in this case the many lives of the city - which is realised sometimes as a literal, sometimes a general or metaphorical place. Also like Von Doussa (and to some extent all the writers covered so far), Giannoukos' focus is on the marginalised elements of a wider society, the transient or itinerant, the outsider within.

With its focus on urban alienation and the compelling toxicity of the city, Giannoukos' writing shares some of the characteristics of grunge, without being confined by the quotidian or the literal (she moves easily into exotic, ancient and sometimes dream-like city spaces). There is a sense of inevitability but also continual surprise at the relentless appetites of the city. The junkies and prostitutes and car wrecks are interspersed by moments of lightness ('other people's conversations / like bubbles of hope' [24]). Many of the poems are grim in subject but handled with a satirical touch. And the voices, whether modern or ancient, are anchored in local parlance.

There is a forbidding sense of struggle running through the set - between the super-surveillance of authority and marginalised sites of rebellion. And there is affection for the underdog, the shifting layer of downtrodden humanity beneath the hum of the city. Overtly or through metaphor, these poems are socially and politically engaged, though never didactic.

I now ask: is it possible to draw any early generalisations about 'university books' from this small crop of work? Giannoukos, Van Loon, Von Doussa and Behmoiras are all first-time authors (of full-length works at least) employing narrative styles that tend to the fragmentary and minimalist. *Dora B* attracted one piece of publicity that firmly linked the memoir to its academic roots - unfortunately (though interestingly) in a negative light. Mary Rose Liverani writes in the *Australian*:

Hold back, don't be too legible and, above all, be cool. The gospel according to a modern phenomenon: the creative writing school. I've finally got it. Until *Dora B*, I felt only an irritation with the odd manipulative writer whose products started appearing on my desk in the past year or so... Now I realise these writers are not aberrations. They're the advance guard of the cool school of creative writing, coming to you from your nearest university. It took Josiane Behmoiras's memoir of a vagabond childhood spent traipsing behind her dysfunctional mother, Dora, to bring all the principles into focus...

The determined stifling of emotion, the attempt to cerebralise feeling to some kind of G-spot in the brain triggered formulaically, the narrow range of states of mind the narrator is allowed to recall and their generally negative tenor, the excessive holding back, is all very clever and detached but, in the end, will readers give a damn about the characters? I doubt it. (Liverani 2005: 12)

Ironically, Behmoiras' memoir, more than any of the other books discussed here, has been pitched at and accepted by a commercial market - warmly reviewed by women's magazines (note 2) and published so far in three countries. Partly because of this evidence that the book functions on levels other than the cerebral, and partly because of my own response to it, I don't agree with Liverani's critique, but I find it interesting in relation to the books under review for what it says about perceptions of university creative writing, especially when Liverani discusses Behmoiras' formal poetics.

Liverani characterises the discrete scenes through which *Dora B* is narrated as 'closer to shards, barely more than 100 words, edited to within a syllable of their existence and carefully juxtaposed to say "here be pain", "here be outrage", "here be pity, destitution, domestic violence..."' There are two levels on which this critique goes to work: the memoir's fragmentary structure; and the micro-craft of Behmoiras' writing, her pared-back, adjectivally sparse use of language. On the syntactic level, the stylistic decisions enacted in *Dora B*, as well as in *The Park Bench* and *Road Story*, seem to obey a ubiquitous command of the creative writing workshop: to *show, don't tell*. Behmoiras never engages in emotional extrapolation (at least until the last section of the novel, when the narratorial tongue seems to loosen a bit). She narrates the action and juxtaposes the effects of emotional states with eloquent scenic detail. Showing, not telling.

However, I am resistant to the idea of a direct link between the books' formal characteristics and creative writing pedagogy. For a start it is not clear that Australian creative writing has any one, unified pedagogy (note 3); and, with a lack of empirical research into the methods or outputs of the discipline, this line of argument leaves all 'university books' vulnerable to open slather criticism premised on teaching methods (note 4). I also have authorial input that warns against reading at least one of the books as a paragon of workshop poetics - Behmoiras says that stylistic decisions were made, and a sizable chunk of *Dora B*'s final narrative was already written, before she ever enrolled in a Masters of Creative Writing (note 5).

What then can be made of the fact that these books bear certain similarities? Rather than an unreflective obedience to workshop poetics, I

would like to consider evidence for a wider, more meaningful connection between the books and the academy. At this point I should elaborate my subjective interest in the debate, which is, of course, informed by a particular view of how things fit together - a view that coalesces around 'culture wars', a concept at once ubiquitous enough to need no explanation and diffuse enough to sustain none. My small square of culture wars - the turf that overlaps with creative writing's disciplinary issues - is concerned with the gulf between academia and the public sphere, and the risk that creative writing students will fall into it (note 6).

There are a number of themes that emerge in any discussion of culture wars and that concern the books under review: identity politics, youth, and the depiction of marginalised social groups being the most significant. Since the dual ascendancy of grunge (albeit briefly) and creative writing courses (apparently more lasting), literary criticism has tended to characterise emerging Australian writing according to certain fatalistic dictums, one being that there are *too many* books, and that not enough of them are *big* books - in size, subject, political scope. The many small books are often written by young or first-time authors, who are marketed aggressively through the round of literary festivals and media appearances and then, when their small books fail to make it big, are dropped. Whether or not this characterisation of the book industry (note 7) is accurate, it is a perception that influences the reception and self-perception of first-time authors, especially young ones. Rather than perpetuating it, I argued in a previous issue of *TEXT* (Sved 2005) that *small* books might be a desirable thing - that a healthy literary culture might look like that described by Delia Falconer, where specificity rather than universalism is encouraged, diversity rather than inclusivity:

we need to acknowledge that history itself has moved along with our literature; that the very concept of a novel that can sum up "our" present might be dated.

It may be that the novels that tell us who we are are already here, or need rescuing from the queer, koori, grunge, po-mo, historical, or multicult baskets. It may be that we need to stop scanning the horizon for the old-fashioned "political novel" and learn to read novels that trace the byways of globalisation in private lives as "political" too... Our best sense of ourselves will come out of the broadest ecology of novels (Falconer 2003: 34).

I further proposed that university creative writing, located within a diversity of academic departments and engaged through shared environment and sometimes course structure with intellectual currents flowing from women's studies, postcolonialism, queer studies, etc, might foster this kind of literary ecology, especially considering the relative freedom from commercial pressures that the academy allows (note 8).

This then is the lens through which I view the crop of books under discussion: first-time publications all of which engage with stories about people on the periphery, and about the specific experience of living through an assumed or forced identity ('migrant', 'fag', 'wayward youth'). In this light the sense of structural insularity discussed above, of deliberately confining narrative focus to a specific social experience, can begin to look like a textual decision with political overtones, or at least implications, and the stylistic decisions enacted are allowed a significance beyond knee-jerk adherence to the pedagogical dictum of *show, don't tell*.

The fragmentary narratives of *Dora B* and *The Park Bench* create a sense of *ungraspability*, of being unable to form a unified story or personal identity from lived experience. On the syntactic level, Behmoiras' and Van Loon's formal minimalism can similarly be seen as a product of, and means of conveying, trauma and identity crisis - as the Josi of *Dora B* says, 'I don't want to comment with complete phrases on what I cannot fathom' (185).

Behmoiras' book is of particular interest as a memoir, a document of historical experience. In one of its major reviews, in the *Australian Book Review*, *Dora B* was warmly recommended as an addition to the school syllabus, 'a valuable addition ... because of what it reveals about the pain of migration, the underside of the multicultural ideal' (Bloch 2005: 31). History in general and school syllabi in particular are of course contested arenas at this time in this country. Proposing *Dora B* as a historical document with which to teach students about the lived experience of the past and present is to propose an ideological agenda at odds with the current political ideal: that of Howard's 2006 Australia Day speech, with its 'national character', its drawing back from being 'too obsessed with diversity', its general emphasis on consensus politics (Howard 2006). As well as its content - the migrant experience, 'history from below' - the form of Behmoiras' book represents a challenge to the dominant (male) paradigm of objective history: as a memoir, an embodied account staking the claims of subjectivity and personal truth.

Feminism, generationalism, the increasing post-colonial visibility of different cultural and ethnic sub-groups and a corresponding emphasis on localised histories and stories. Is it drawing too long a bow to link these sweeping academic and social concerns to four very different books emerging from creative writing courses on opposite sides of the country?

Probably. I hope that future years provide more books and more scope for generalisation.

I have left *Onward Bound* until last because Helen Klaebe's cogent account of the first 50 years of Outward Bound Australia is the element that problematises any attempt at neat summation. Even the nomenclature I have been using doesn't seem to fit this book, which was produced (according to the acknowledgements) with the help of Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Research Centre - well-named to express the generic slipperiness of Australian 'creative writing'. Klaebe's book is a thoroughly researched and well written account of the shifting organisational fortunes of Outward Bound Australia, which began with 'a challenge by an English gentleman to an Australian Changi POW survivor in a Sydney hotel' (blurb). The narrative is structured chronologically, charting the growth of a modern organisational culture from what was a well-meaning but amateur venture; from a boys-own-adventure course to a co-ed and inclusive institution offering courses for older people, people with disabilities and 'youth at risk'.

The history is published by Outward Bound Australia (I assume it was commissioned by the organisation), providing a paradigm of creative *industry* that casts off clichés of the isolated artist following a trail of inspiration or the university writer scribbling in the ivory tower. Well written and broad in scope as it is, *Onward Bound* is essentially a resource for Outward Bound Australia - I can see stands of the (very shiny) book

appearing in head offices. Although, frankly, I would have preferred another novel, memoir or book of poetry to read, the inclusion of *Onward Bound* in this year's selection of 'creative writing' books is valuable, as a reminder of the scope of industry that Australian writing courses encompass, the difficulty of generalising and the need for more grounded, empirical research in the area over a period of years.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of creative writing schools and the Vogel, see Krauth, 1999. Return to text
2. See for instance: *Australian Women's Weekly*, September 2005, p. 308; *Good Housekeeping*, February 2006, p. 40; *Harper's Bazaar UK*, March 2006, p. 154. Return to text
3. Diversity within the discipline is apparent even at the level of departmental habitat: Australian creative writing courses are variously housed in departments of English, Cultural Studies, Communications and Media, Social Sciences and Creative Arts. Return to text
4. Paul Dawson, for instance, claims that show, don't tell, used as an unreflexive teaching tool, has perpetuated a dominant culture of minimalist realism in the workshop. See Dawson, 2005, p. 103. Return to text
5. Private interview, 16 August 2006. Return to text
6. The most crucial manifestation of this gulf is the public media's suspicion of and hostility towards critical theory and postmodernism. For a discussion of this suspicion, and its implications for 'university writers', see Sved, 2005. Return to text
7. See for instance: *ABR* forum, 2000; Modjeska, 2002; Preston, 2004. 8. It is also worth considering whether the demographics of university creative writing - likely to attract young and/or first-time authors - might tend to encourage engagement with 'the byways of globalisation in private lives'. Return to text
8. It is also worth considering whether the demographics of university creative writing - likely to attract young and/or first-time authors - might tend to encourage engagement with 'the byways of globalisation in private lives'. Return to text

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