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Reviews contents

TEXT review

Memoir and moral dilemma

review by Ian Macphee

Peter Mitchell
Compassionate Bastard
Penguin Group, Melbourne 2011
ISBN 9780143566229
Pb 300pp AUD24.95

From prologue to epilogue, *Compassionate Bastard* is gripping. Peter Mitchell's arresting, flowing style has humour (mostly gentle but sometimes ironic) and an underlying compassion for the human suffering with which he was confronted in the Immigration Department as a member of the Compliance Unit and as manager of the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney.

Mitchell wrote *Compassionate Bastard* as part of a PhD at the Central Queensland University. The subtitle is 'How an ordinary bloke came to manage Villawood Detention Centre and still live with himself'.

Most readers would empathise with Mitchell's handling of the moral dilemmas facing him in the Compliance Unit and at Villawood. After reading the brief prologue I could not put the book down. We learn about the emotional pressure upon staff at Villawood, and of the grotesque burden borne by its manager; a burden few in Canberra could even contemplate. It illustrates the excruciating challenges faced by many humane immigration officials and the plight of those fleeing persecution. Mitchell reveals all ethical dilemmas with engaging eloquence. He confides: 'learning to deal with our most basic emotions was part of the career we'd chosen, whether we liked it or not' (129). 'It was a daunting realisation' to discover that his job 'was inherently extreme – not only physical, but also psychologically and emotionally scarifying' (129). This was part of his 'expanded appreciation of the desperation and human vulnerability that, at times, affects us all – especially in the unpredictable collision between personal motivations and the impersonal machinations of government' (129).

Readers will likely feel confronted by the burden imposed upon immigration staff and asylum seekers who have fallen victim to the bipartisan failure of government after government since 1996. Most states would welcome asylum seekers for processing and ultimate settlement if assessed as refugees. No state government has proposed this alternative to the federal governments that built the detention centres. Mitchell's brief history of Villawood and its transformation in the Howard years is compelling reading for any Australian with a sense of 'a fair go'.

Compassionate Bastard should enable readers to better understand the issue of asylum seekers. It complements two other excellent books by Australian journalists: *The Boat People* (1979), a collection of articles for *The Age* enlarged by respected foreign correspondent and diplomat Bruce Grant, and *Dark Victory* (2003) by distinguished journalists, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson. The latter reveals shameful acts by the Howard Government from Tampa onwards and the capitulation of Labor from the principles it had shared with the Fraser Government regarding those seeking asylum in Australia after perilous boat voyages. Mitchell's book concludes with his views of policy that followed Tampa.

The Boat People and *Dark Victory* document the suffering of those fleeing persecution in other countries and the perils they faced in coming to Australia. In *Compassionate Bastard* Mitchell reveals the third phase of trauma: mandatory detention in Australia. *Compassionate Bastard* is a memoir, yet it is the detainees who are at the centre of Mitchell's attention.

Readers may form their own judgments as Mitchell reveals his administrative dilemmas. Mitchell leaves the reader in no doubt about his contempt for the privatisation of detention centres. 'Dignified detainee security' was not compatible with making a profit (166). Dedicated public servants were 'given nominal responsibility for administering an almost impossible contract' (168). They no longer had control; merely influence. Yet, as Mitchell states, the minister had a clear duty of care to the people his department had detained (168). Prior to privatisation, Mitchell and others sought dignified approaches to detainee security and liaised with refugee support groups. Privatisation ended that. Detainees did not receive assistance even when in acute mental condition.

Few voters could imagine the suffering of asylum seekers or detention centre staff unless they read this book. Mass escapes, hunger strikes and self-mutilation gained some publicity at the time, but anyone who cares about Australia's humane values should read the chapters that Mitchell dedicates to these issues. In the final chapter and epilogue, Mitchell states his views on refugee policy clearly without being dogmatic. To my mind there is an opportunity for rational debate to flow from *Compassionate Bastard*, in contrast with the constant exchange of political insults that deepen the ignorance of voters regarding the suffering of asylum seekers in this land.

Compassionate Bastard also provides commentary on Operation Safe Haven, which Mitchell managed in 1999. The scandal of Howard's policy of flying Kosovars to Australia for temporary residence when they could have been settled in neighbouring countries until stability had returned in Kosovo is revealed starkly. It was to give Howard a humane image before they were sent home as soon as the UN declared Kosovo safe. Mitchell was ordered to insist that all return. He did so. But then the government made 'a backflip' (264). Some who refused to go were allowed to stay. Mitchell felt guilty about those who had not wanted to leave but who

trusted his order: 'I felt that my word and good faith had been undercut by the pragmatism of the hour' (264).

Mitchell's account of the integration of asylum seekers from East Timor and Kosovo at Sydney's East Hills Centre illustrates how successful refugees have been in settling in Australia. In those cases most were able to return to their homelands when peace returned. Although Mitchell records the experience at that camp as 'a wonderful celebration of life and humanity' (267), he concludes that his role had been 'a depriver of people's liberty, no matter how compassionately done' (271). He 'was increasingly conflicted by the velvet gloved, iron-handed bureaucracy' (272). Government orders became increasingly harsh and Mitchell was expected to enforce orders that could only compound the suffering of desperate people. Mitchell found it difficult but discharged his orders as humanely as possible. Mitchell writes openly of the stress suffered by some humane officials and of the courageous decency of those who ignored the heartless orders of their superiors – including the Minister of Immigration and the Prime Minister.

Refugee settlement studies show that desperate people have blended into our community when assisted. Vietnamese refugees are an outstanding example. I believe Australia must return to those humane and practical policies: 'policies that processed refugees under UNHCR supervision offshore or onshore in community accommodation that enabled asylum seekers to gain skills, jobs and health examinations, thereby not compounding their trauma as much as brutal barbed-wire detention does' [1].

In the early days of Villawood and other detention centres, asylum seekers were held for short periods, given an assessment and, if granted temporary or permanent residence, received English language education, working skills, health examinations and interpreting services. This settlement was co-ordinated by federal, state, and local government, without the intrusion of petty politics. But, Mitchell reveals, the protracted process of mandatory detention in the Howard years made ultimate settlement even more difficult for the refugees. The percentage of those seeking asylum here comprised only 1.04% of the global total in 2010. As for the cost to taxpayers, detention costs in the same period exceeded $800 million. And, as Mitchell writes: 'happy endings are few and far between in the human misery industry that was the daily work of the Immigration Department' (109).

Notes

[1] Studies associated with the Department of Immigration and the Refugee Council of Australia and the Edmond Rice Centre. return to text

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Marr, D & M Wilkinson 2003 *Dark Victory*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW return to text

Ian Macphee was Minister for Immigration & Ethnic Affairs, 1979-82.

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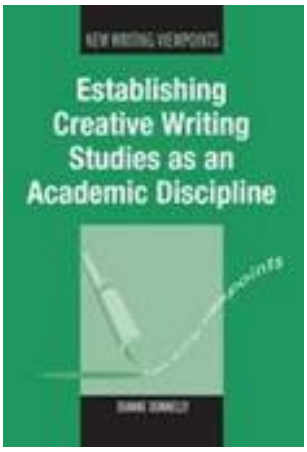
TEXT review

Forward to an academic discipline!

review by Jeremy Fisher



Dianne Donnelly
Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline
Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK 2012
ISBN 9781847695895
Pb 176 pp GBP19.95

When I first moved from a professional involvement in the writing and publishing industries to an academic position as a Senior Lecturer in Writing, within hours of taking up of my appointment I was firmly put in my place by one of my colleagues in Communication Studies. 'Writing is not a discipline!' I was informed. And nor is it. It is still a creature subservient to either or both literary and composition studies. Hence the relevance of Dianne Donnelly's book, part of the New Writing Viewpoint series edited by Graeme Harper.

Donnelly argues not for 'creative writing' but for 'creative writing *studies*', seeing a parallel with the emergence of composition studies as a discipline in the 1990s. I take issue with Donnelly's use of the word 'creative'. The idea that creative writing is different from other forms because of its supposed artistic dimension should be well and truly buried by now, but this remains the central tenet in Donnelly's argument. This represents the major problem I have with the pedagogy of writing as it commonly articulated. The teaching of that form termed 'creative' is very often hived off from the teaching of other forms, and students are very often denied any context for their writing beyond self-expression and some dim concept that they are creating 'art'. In the real world, writers write to earn a living: their 'art' is circumscribed by editors and publishers, and by market expectations. A writer can earn more from ghosting a biography or providing interest to an annual report than from a first novel, let alone a poem. Therefore I include 'creative' forms of writing alongside others in my teaching - believing that best equips my students with the craft and skills to most effectively use writing when they must make their way in the real world.

One of the problems of Donnelly's book for me is that it makes almost no engagement with the world of publishing, nor does it seeks to place the works produced by students on any but an artistic plane. There are other values that need to be considered, not least being the market potential for these works. The current best-seller *Fifty Shades of Grey* by EL James emerged from an online writing group that used mimetic and workshopping practices similar to those used in most writing classes. The book has enormous value in terms of financial return, but how many university based writing workshops would encourage a student to pursue such a venture?

Another book selling well at present, though nowhere as well as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is *All that I am* by Anna Funder. Funder is a product of university writing programs. Her first book, *Stasiland*, was a meticulously researched work of non-fiction documenting the role of the Stasi in the former German Democratic Republic. Her current book traverses similar ground in fictional form. I mention these books because to me they offer opportunities for exploring context, reception, production and audience in writing studies in quite different ways. That is, works and writers should be examined holistically, within their social and cultural contexts.

I doubt that Donnelly would disagree with me on that point, but how that approach should be incorporated into teaching the production of writing may be another matter. After an introduction that traces the emergence of creative writing studies, Donnelly provides a taxonomy of creative writing pedagogies. The seven parts of this section outline various approaches to teaching creative writing. One of the features of this book is a section providing the results of a survey of the workshop model that tends to underpin the teaching of creative writing. This is valuable information on its own and Donnelly's forensic analysis of the data is lucid and refreshing. The book concludes with a section on the academic home of creative writing studies and a final argument on the legitimacy of the proposed discipline.

The book is well researched. While Donnelly's American background (she teaches at the University of South Florida) is evident in her spelling and the predominance of American data and sources, she also makes reference to British and Australian research in this field. She offers a measured and cogent contribution to what I would prefer to call the emerging discipline of writing studies. I recommend it to all teachers of writing. A couple of pedantic nitpicks: I don't know what font the book is set in, but the question mark is very annoying. It looks as if it is upside down. Also, there were some irritating typos.

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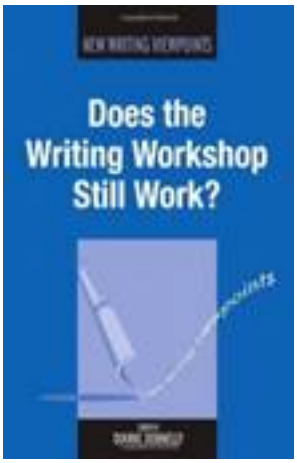
TEXT review

What's in a workshop?

review by Marcelle Freiman



Dianne Donnelly (ed)
Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?
New Writing Viewpoints
Multilingual Matters, Bristol 2010
ISBN 9781847692689
Pb 238pp AUD38.20 Amazon price

The question of whether the writing workshop still 'works' is timely given the extent to which it has become ubiquitous. The workshop is, as Donnelly rightly says, writing's 'signature' pedagogy, and as such should be coherently reviewed for its efficacy, suitability and pedagogical rigour. Although I came to the book wanting a radically new structure, if this was possible, for an alternative way to teach writing, particularly given the increasing moves to large classes and teaching creative writing online, having read it, I recognise the extent to which the writing workshop is pliable, adaptable and resilient. Although it is also flawed and problematic for students and teachers, no-one, including these contributors, has come up with a better way of teaching.

At the same time, it is obvious that writing workshops conducted in today's universities bear little resemblance to the early, selective workshops where experienced writers brought in their writing for peer feedback in groups facilitated by well-regarded published writers, and this was considered enough. Tracing the change from those early (and un-questioned or critiqued) writing workshops, it is obvious that universities and university teachers have changed; tertiary education has become a much larger enterprise with a markedly varied student body; writing programs have developed at Bachelor, Masters, MFA and PhD levels; and creative writing has become a discipline related to the humanities and creative arts. Systemic change, the nature of universities and the characteristics of a very diverse student cohort have driven changes in all university teaching, including writing.

Donnelly acknowledges all of this in her 'Introduction: If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It; Or Change is Inevitable, Except from a Vending Machine' (the final phrase to conjure the humanistic nature of workshops). Donnelly's aim for this collection is as a substantial contribution to the debates and dialogues on writing, and 'to explore current practices of creative writing's signature pedagogy as part of an overarching inquiry into the field with a secondary goal to ascend *creative writing studies* as a distinct discipline independent in its own scholarship' (10) – that is, to assert such a professional identity alongside that of *literary studies* and *composition studies*.

The dominant context of this book is that of US based programs and disciplines. In this collection of 17 essays (including Donnelly's introductory essay), 13 are authored by US writing academics, there is 1 essay by an Australian, and 3 essays from the UK and Scotland. This is not to say that the essays do not offer anything to teachers in Australia and the UK, but rather that the dominant US contexts, particularly in terms of composition studies, create a different track of pedagogical and disciplinary research to that which is more familiar to Australian and British teachers. In particular, in Australia there has been more uniform development of the university sector and academics and teachers are accustomed to interrogating their teaching through research scholarship.

But global changes in student cohorts, university demands and culture and technology present challenges to established teaching models everywhere. For example, Donnelly points to cultural self-absorption of the 'Google Generation' (10), and their inability to focus on study and on others in the classroom. Other contributors discuss changing to entry-level abilities, course requirements and the need to vary workshop teaching in response to student learning needs. The contributors approach these challenges creatively: the writing in the essays is lively and insightful; and their experiments, observations and analyses provide much to engage with for writing teachers internationally.

In this book, the 'idea', or assumed understanding of what the workshop is, is applied as a teaching model. It is a dynamic context for teaching and learning, and while what happens there is examined, the different challenges for the workshop at different levels and in a range of program structures is not comparatively dealt with – rather, individual teachers write about their teaching experience without broader reference to creative writing teaching *as a discipline*. There are very real differences between the workshop for MA or MFA students when compared to undergraduate and community college students. These differences affect every aspect of teaching, from class size to entry-level capabilities and desired learning and/or publication outcomes. Andrew Cowan director of Creative Writing at East Anglia University in the UK addresses this issue in his recent article in *TEXT*, 'A life event, a live event: The workshop that works', where he discusses Donnelly's text and several others. The model of 'workshop that works' most cogently, in Cowan's view, is one that: aspires to publication; predominantly involves peer-review activity at graduate (or postgraduate) level; and which is highly collaborative, as against other feasible models, many of which are canvassed in Donnelly's book.

Differences for writing workshop levels are based, in Cowan's discussion to find 'what works' (the question posed by Donnelly), on the requirements for learning, and content, at course and program levels. Commenting on the PhD workshop, which also includes higher degree level literary reading and criticism, he writes:

> … it offers itself less as a corrective to the traditional workshop than as an alternative, and thereby takes its place among the promiscuity of models that might, in summary, be arranged along a horizontal axis that has as one pole the wholly taught, exercise-based class for beginners and at the other pole the wholly discursive workshop for advanced (perhaps already published) writers, with a vertical axis that begins with recreational or high-school-level classes and ascends through the BA to the MA and MFA, and then on to the elite MA and MFA programmes exemplified by the likes of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. (npn7)

Cowan's matrix is useful in locating the variations and possibilities of what constitutes workshop teaching at different levels. It provides the kind of definition that should be considered in any full discussion of the relevance and viability of the workshop model. There must be other possibilities available for what 'works' in a workshop, beyond peer review. In the framing of the current discipline it is important to be clear that these interventions go beyond the needs of individual teaching and classes, and include factors such as degree and programme standards. At the very least, Donnelly and others point out, the workshop is a space for learning in which a variety of activities can take place, including, as appropriate, peer-review of student work.

The essays in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* demonstrate a range of approaches, questions, experiences, contexts, analyses, frustrations and enthusiasm, from teachers of university creative writing who are clearly passionate about their teaching and committed to their students. Many variations of the workshop are presented here: the inclusion of literary readings; hands-on writing exercises in class; informing one's teaching with various theoretical perspectives; taking into account students' diversity and cultural and gender differences; ethics; issues of power and autonomy.

This *is* a rich collection, yet in some ways, the essays in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* give the impression (to an Australian reader) of scholarship on the writing discipline being done in a vacuum. Almost none of the research refers to extensive work already done by Australian and UK scholars on framing the discipline of creative writing published in *TEXT* and in the foundational collections of essays, such as *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* edited by Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady and *Creative Writing Studies: Practice and Pedagogy* edited by Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll. Perhaps another project could be a dialogue between their approaches, generated by their differences as well as their similarities.

In preparing their contributions, writers were asked to address the title question of whether the writing workshop 'still works', and to engage with ways of revising and reinvigorating the 'tired workshop model' (Donnelly, 23). Although much of this collection presents work based on workshop 'case studies' of what teachers do in their teaching practices, the essays also function well beyond being a teaching manual. They (variously) analyse in-depth, theoretically and reflexively, seek research-based frameworks, and create pedagogical methodologies, which they argue, 'work' for their teaching. They have sought what is advantageous and what is difficult in workshop teaching and learning, for teachers and students. None of them are prepared to jettison entirely the workshop model, but rather to find ways to transform it, resulting in manifestations

that are exciting and original. For example, Katherine Haake's 'Re-envisioning the Workshop: Hybrid Classrooms, Hybrid Texts' offers the framework of the workshop as a 'contact zone' based on the work of Marie-Louise Pratt's 'Arts of the Contact Zone' as a way of dismantling the assumptions of the workshop and students' writing, at the same time using 'auto-ethnography' to enforce the validity of their own vernaculars. Sue Roe in 'Introducing Masterclasses' focuses on readings and comments by writers and other creative arts practitioners, such as artists, on their processes to stimulate discussion and reflection on creative practices (a fiscally economical approach to the idea of masterclass). Leslie Kreiner Wilson offers the daring 'Anonymous Floating Workshop' as an alternative model in 'Wrestling Bartleby: Another Workshop Model for the Creative Writing Classroom' and Mary Ann Cain explores the potential of spatiality and otherness in the workshop, incorporating 'Third Space' theory into her teaching in 'A Space of Radical Openness'. These four essays appear in the fourth section 'New Models for Relocating the Workshop' which presents, I think, the most innovative theoretical thinking in this collection.

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Dr Marcelle Freiman is senior lecturer in English and creative writing at Macquarie University and executive member and past chair of the AAWP. Her current research interests include creative writing as discipline, practice and research; post-colonial and diaspora literatures; and poetry, her area of creative writing practice. She has published articles in TEXT*, in* New Writing: The International Journal of Creative Writing *and contributed chapters to* Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice *(eds Brady and Krauth) and* The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet *(eds Cousins and Howarth). Her poetry publications are* Monkey's Wedding *(Island Co-op, Woodford, NSW) and* White Lines (Vertical) *(Hybrid Publishers, Ormond, Vic) and she has published numerous poems in literary journals.*

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TEXT review

Transporting the reader to another place

review by Gail Pittaway

Graeme Lay (ed)
Home and Away: Award-winning Travel Stories by New Zealand Writers
Holland, Auckland, NZ 2012
ISBN 9781869663735
Pb 224pp NZD 34.99

Graeme Lay is well chosen to be the editor of this collection; as a writer of fiction for children and adults, he has also written or edited other books of travel writing and been the editor of five collections of New Zealand short stories, at last count. The contents for *Home and Away* were selected from submissions invited from award winning writers of articles over twenty years of writing and awards presented by the *Travel Com* organisation. All were originally published in a wide range of journals – from travel trade magazines such as *Destinations* and *Traveltrade*, to daily newspapers as dispersed as the *New York Newsday, The Australian Weekend* and the *Timaru Herald*, to magazines, in particular the New Zealand *Listener*, Auckland-based *Metro* and *North and South*. Incidentally the group, *Travel Communicators* or *Travel Com* was established in 1992 after one of the founders attended a conference of the Australian Society of Travel Writers in 1991, 'with the aim of promoting higher standards of travel writing by New Zealanders' (7).

As Lay states in his excellent introductory essay: 'New Zealanders are born to travel'(6). The OE or overseas experience is a rite of passage for most young New Zealanders, and is considered a significant qualification for them to acquire, regardless of their education or heritage. Well written and enjoyable as these stories are, the 'envy factor' must be taken into account. Not every reader wants to sit and read a smorgasbord of other people's adventures, and a collection of thirty-five very different pieces about the same number of different places is not easily read in one sitting, by even the most supportive and indulgent of readers. Best then for each story to be read as a nightcap, or aperitif, or for the more serious delve, to read as a selection, by geographic grouping. There are eight such sections,

generally evenly distributed between travels in Asia, America, Europe, Britain and Ireland, Australia, the Pacific, and Africa. The section, New Zealand and Antarctica (as one group) is the largest collection, with nine articles, for the most part about remote or unusual treks in the hinterland of each island or that vast white continent.

Lay's introduction sets the ground for some of the questions the critical reader might ask, such as what is travel writing? Is it all commercial or personal? Does it have to be positive, or picturesque, or exotic? Is it appropriate to be a tourist and make political observations? Lay sensibly identifies the parameters of his selection for this edition: each piece needed to have a good story, be well written, and give an interesting view on the subject: '[A] successful travel story is quite different to a travel guide, which is merely a manual of: "where to go, what to see, how much it costs"'(8). As in fiction, strong characters make a travel story interesting, as does a well-evoked setting, which need not be exotic. What distinguishes the collection is the diversity of subjects and the quality of the writing; this fits Lay's prerequisite that, '[a] good travel story illuminates as well as describes' (9).

There is reflection and information aplenty in *Home and Away*. Lay's own piece, *Looking for Gaugin* informs on art and history as well as Gauguin's legacy in the Pacific. Graham Reid's description of the tragedy that is the Solomon Islands prefaces the later fictional work of Lloyd Jones in *Mr Pip*; 'So this is where our clothes come to die' being his first sentence in *Teetering on the Brink*. There's an honest account of a visit by James Frankham, with a first nation chief, Buffalo Tiger, in Florida's Everglades National Park: 'I feel more than a little conspicuous; one skinny white guy with a boatload of Indians who have spent the great portion of their lives campaigning for the return of land from people my colour' (*River of Grass* 39).

In the Asia section, Karen Goa's account of her visit to Goa is charming for its humour and self- deprecation over her unusual (Scandinavian) surname, culminating when the airport official says as they are departing; 'You like Goa so much that you changed your name?' (14). Paul Bush's story of a literary walk in Dublin seen through the bottom of at least five glasses of Guinness is pure comedy. As with Michele Hewitson, who tries to resist London but falls in love, Bush captures the phrasing of the locals as in this window sign, 'Live every day as if it were your last and one day you'll be right' (138).

Interestingly it is the stories set nearer to home, in the Pacific (including New Zealand), Antarctic and Australian sections which resonate in my memory. Michele A'Court is well known as a stand-up comedian and television personality in New Zealand but also a fine writer whose columns used to add whimsy to *Your Weekend*, the magazine section of *the Dominion*, and *the Waikato Times* and *The Press* newspapers. Her account of being sent to cruise on the liner QE2 is a very positive view of the elderly and wealthy classes at play: 'It's … the sense that whatever you want, you can have: meet Graham Kerr, have a massage, see a dentist, chat to a psychologist, … free yourself from unsightly cellulite, listen to a harpist, help yourself to three kilos of smoked salmon, … improve your computer skills and celebrate mass. And that was just Friday' (82).

I was already familiar with Steve Braunias' eulogy to the train from Auckland to Hamilton that brought him to my hometown and workplace, Wintec, each Tuesday when he was Editor in Residence for our Journalism

stream in 2010. Subject to repeated budget cuts, train travel is almost defunct in New Zealand tourism today so this piece reads as even more valedictory in 2012. Furthermore, Hamilton is rediscovered as a dreamy destination – not the usual viewpoint for those who endure its northern highway with a stream of motels and used car yards. Braunias' sequences of language evoke the rhythm of the train and something of the expansive way that rail can follow a river and softly enter a township. The Waikato River, he muses, 'did something to the landscape – opened it out, and somehow relaxed it' (210).

There are only two Australian stories. Perhaps a little predictably but nonetheless most enjoyably, one is about the great red continent and the other about some 'fair dinkum' characters. Both, of course, offer deeper insights into each place and the way people walk upon it. In *The Big Somewhere*, Greg Dixon describes the literal ups and downs of a seven-day trek on the Larapinta Trail, including a walk up Mt Sonder at dawn. Through the eyes of a New Zealander accustomed to temperate climates, green lands and snow capped mountains, the extremes of rock, sand, and sun hit hard upon the senses, and the land itself is a vast geology lesson. In complete contrast, in *Doing a Wharfie*, Fergus Blakiston spends time in Cooktown, Cape York, alternating his days between the wharf and the pub, where 'an assemblage of beards lines the bar' and where he falls into conversation with a couple of blokes called Daveo and Simmo who find out he is a Kiwi. I laughed out loud to read, '"They're a very patriotic people, the Kiwis," opined Daveo, rolling a smoke with calloused fingers. "They'll do anything for their country except live in it"' (103).

Perhaps the most impressive tale is Mike White's *Wide White Land,* which follows Sir Edmund Hillary's last trip to Scott Base in Antarctica and explores his dealings with that continent. White recounts how Hillary set up a base for New Zealand there in 1956 – the first person to achieve that goal since Amundsen in 1912 – after beating the British team led by Fuchs to the South Pole. White manages to capture history, controversy, landscape and invention, evoking wonder at both the land and the modest octogenarian: 'Story after story is delivered in his low rumble, like a V8 idling at the lights, tales from a life overflowing with adventure and endeavour with countless moments worth reliving' (202).

It's reassuring to know that the twenty years of promoting travel writing in New Zealand have been so rewarding and successful as to bring about this fine collection.

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TEXT review

A South of the mind

review by Jane Browning

Dallas Angguish
America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South
Phosphor Books 2011
ISBN 9781466371408
Pb 218pp USD11.99

During truancy from an all-boys Catholic school, a reclusive Dallas Angguish spent mornings watching the local Toowoomba television station's reruns of black and white films set in the American Deep South. Later, the works of Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty and Tennessee Williams became part of his 'life-long fascination' (x) with the region and its depictions.

The South that Angguish writes about in *America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South* is 'a landscape that exists beyond the physical boundaries of the Southern states' (ix). It is 'a South of the mind, a metaphorical South' (ix). The result is a collection of travel tales that are set in a poetic, yet realistic landscape, and which convey Angguish's humorous, self-deprecating and intimate reflections of the South.

'The Raptors' is the most personal of the tales, and is located near the end of the volume. After a nasty confrontation with 'two crazed owls' (141) behind the counter in a bookshop, Angguish seeks comfort in a bottle of bourbon and the bosom of his landlady, a kind-hearted woman in a state of 'reckless dishevelment' (138) who reminds him of his mother:

> In the moment, my catharsis evoking hers, she mistakes me for her son. She purrs, "There, there honey… momma forgives you." My heart trembles, like an autumn leaf right before its slow and glorious fall to the earth, and then takes up a slow and even beat.' (148)

For the most part Angguish is willing to see the best in the South's characters, and is a sensitive medium for their distinctive voices. He is wary of some. Such is the case in 'Cemetery' where amongst the 'neo-classical crypts that look like scaled down mansions' (26), Angguish avoids a tour group and being 'caught up in the whirlpool of their sightseeing' (28). He is lured under the shadows of a giant tree by a young African-American man coated with dust from construction work, giving him the 'appearance of an ancient warrior' (29), but in the end he resists the man's request to stroke his white skin. With other characters he's less cautious: the deceptively benign Cody in 'Vieux Carré Awesome Voodoo and Mutual Pleasure Society'; and the death-driving incarnation of Jimmy Dean in 'Ellen "Jimmy" Dean'.

Angguish insists he's a 'zealous skeptic' (38), a description he wields as a talisman during his travels in the South. His 'anxiety about the strange' and his '(rather intense) fear of death' are 'doorways through which that world of phantoms and magic might enter and take hold' (52). Where in America Divine the superstitious seek graveyard dirt, dust ground from cemetery bricks, or voodoo paraphernalia, Angguish desires the 'even breath' (52) of objectivity. Under the spell of research he seeks out the tale's namesake Dalanchise Delacroix, a ten year old famed for her readings. As soon as he arrives she has his measure: '"Don't be getting' off your little scooter," she shouted …'I aint got nothin' to tell you" (54-55). Angguish is not yet 'ripe' (56).

In the act of pursuing or evading certain characters, Angguish takes in their landscape. In 'John of the River Reed Cross' his increasing perambulations are to shun a towering street evangelist whose roving intercepts Angguish in whatever approach he makes to his favourite lunch venue. The detours foster an appreciation of Savannah architecture 'that sends a certain type of traveler – middle-aged, middle-class, middle-American – into a white-sneakered frenzy' (112-113). He ends up being invited into a Regency style mansion to tour its fixtures by its elegantly drunk owner.

The book has twelve tales arranged in three parts. 'Heaven Come Down' is the sole tale of Part Three, and the longest of the volume. Here Angguish arrives in Homeland, southern Georgia, finding it to be 'a veritable nest of rednecks of the mud and blood type, all of whom seemed to eye [him] as though [he] was a brain-damaged deer that had wandered unknowingly onto a rifle range in the middle of hunting season' (157). The town, however, is a gateway to Okefenokee Swamp, and Angguish's impromptu tour guide is Isaac, 'an Adonis in the swamp' (151) compared to Angguish's expectation of Swampers to be 'toothless inbreeds with three nipples' or 'parasitic twins peering out from between the zippers of mud and blood smeared hunting jackets' (157).

Spanish moss delicately wreaths most of the tales. While driving to Okefenokee Swamp with Isaac, it 'formed a kind of continuous veil through which [they] coasted' (177). Swamp vegetation in this tale is pervasive: water lilies, lichen, and the meat-eaters, 'red-veined pitcher plants and sticky, cherry-colored Sundews' (154).

> Then there's the Swamp Cyprus forests that stand in shallow pools of black water, draped in long tendrils of Spanish Moss. They're like clusters of petrified mummies knee-deep in oil, ghostly and stately at the same time; their reflection on the still water like a mirror into the cave-like

> burial mounds of long-dead Mississippian Indian kings (155).

The mention of the long-dead Indian King recalls the first tale in America Divine, 'Shallow Water, Oh Mamma', where a psychologist interloping in post-Katrina New Orleans tries to assign a cause to her patient's possession by a phantasmal Indian King and is in turn possessed. Angguish only makes a cursory appearance in this story: he spies the psychologist on a street corner, appearing to be 'just another crazy person among the many who haunted the streets of the French Quarter' (22). The Indian King's tentative refrain in the last tale is a reminder of the South's history, and works as a warning about trying to simplify others' states of mind or motivations.

In 'Heaven Come Down' Angguish is present when Isaac plans for his childhood friend Billy to have 'some sexual healing' (198). While initially surprised by the circuitous and religious nature of their intended assignation, Angguish takes on a gentle wisdom, looking over the side of the boat, pretending not to listen.

This tale exquisitely intertwines extracts from Flaubert's *The Legend of Saint-Julian*, the curse of the swamp witch Black Hattie, and the mutual desiring of Isaac and Billy. This is the most sophisticated example of Angguish's poetic structuring of the themes in *America Divine.*

Seven of the tales also appear in Angguish's first collection, *Anywhere But Here*. They have been developed and work more satisfyingly in this volume dedicated purely to the South. It's voluptuous and haunting aesthetic is ideal for the tales' study of otherness, gender and sexuality. The South of Angguish's mind is a darkly funny and enchanting place to visit.

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TEXT review

Maybe the book has to bite you like a dog: *Southpaw*'s displacement

review by Helen Gildfind

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> Falling objects go down, go south
> Flying objects go up, go north
> And that is how my contest
> With the globe came into being
>
> – from *Globe,* by Ali Jimale Ahmed (3)

Southpaw is 'a journal of writing from the global south' aimed at encouraging 'south-south' dialogue (1). The journal's editors, Alison Caddick and Chris Beach, have used the theme of 'displacement' to shape the journal's first edition, claiming that colonialism and globalisation have made displacement 'overwhelmingly an experience of peoples of the South' (1). In content, the journal's writers primarily focus on the 'negative' experiences of dispossession and enforced exile. However, the journal's variety – its many literary forms, its visual art, and the diversity of its writers' backgrounds – shows how even the most wounded human soul can draw profundity and beauty from the rubble of their experiences.

Ali Jimale Ahmed's *Globe* (quoted above) opens the collection and perfectly compliments Kevin Murray's essay on 'The Idea of the South': both writers demand that readers question the equatorial line that splits their globe in two. To gaze South, Murray argues, is to comply with 'a

bipolar world with an historically asymmetrical relationship between imperial powers and their colonial subjects' (7). Murray emphasises how arbitrary the North-South divide is when he explains how the development of painting resulted in both the 'ascendency' of the 'vertical', in art, and the 'culture of the map' (8). Maps, he explains, take a 'horizontal' and connected experience of the world and transform it into something vertical, something detached from us which we can only experience by travelling our eyes 'up and down' (8). Murray shows how verticalism and developmentalism have rendered the South both 'below in space' and '*before* in time' (11).

Murray's essay is the first of many in the journal which explore the power struggles at the heart of displacement. In 'Baguio of My Heart', Danilova Molintas recounts how her childhood home has devolved from a green idyll to an overpopulated city that smells like 'shit' (18). The insanity of her homeland's 'relentless drive' towards development (19) seems epitomised by the gesture of one mayor (whose own name means 'confused' in Filipino, 19) who cuts down a century-old tree and replaces it with a concrete imitation. Molintas' yearning for Baguio's 'past charm' (23) pours from genuine grief, but her nostalgia also reveals how the displaced can be unable or unwilling to empathise with the displacement of their displacers.

Kendall Trudgen recounts his time in Yolngu country, where the Northern Territory Government's 'Intervention' has forced a 'huge power shift from the local to the central … from locals to immigrants' (28). He shows how the Yolngu have struggled for decades to regain the stability they had before they were dispossessed of their legal and economic autonomy. (Djambawa Marawili, whose painting *Djunungayangu* is the cover image of this edition, resists 'pretty' pictures: 'I want people to look at my paintings and recognise our law'.) Like Murray, Trudgen sees a Western, economically rationalist image of society – where 'success' is measured by 'mobility up an hierarchy' and where 'wellbeing' is measured in material rather than 'spiritual and cultural' terms – being imposed upon Indigenous Australians (33). He calls for white Australians to walk as though they are 'immigrants in someone else's land' (35).

Martin Plowman's 'Traveller's Guide to High Strangeness' (which discusses Southern experiences of UFOs) and Yeeshan Yang's 'Dining With Plastic Boots' (which recounts a forty-something Chinese lesbian's struggle to enact her anthropological fieldwork in Suihu village) each offer insight into the quirkier – but no less important – sides of cultural and political life. Plowman shows how a person's interpretation of the impossible offers direct insight into the 'great web of meaning' that constitutes their culture (41). Yang introduces us to the 'vain and eccentric *nouveau riche'* who arecarving up China, openly expressing her disgust at the (losing / gaining) 'face' games that characterise the power dynamics which shape Chinese society (71). Meanwhile, Karen Lazar evokes the anger and horror of a man whose health has been displaced by a stroke, whilst Aliza Amlani's time in Colombia makes her realise that displacement is often a 'tactic' used by companies and governments to 'steal' land and resources (134). Finally, Batool Albatat shares her fifteen year old self's recount of being smuggled by boat to Australia after fleeing the first Gulf war. Her child's point-of-view emphasises how terrifyingly arbitrary the world must seem to those fated to endure such journeys.

Southpaw's poets include Liang Yu-Jing, Takako Arai, Juan Antillón, Álvarro Marín, Amina Saïd and Shu Cai. Luis Gonzalez Serrano's work is

particularly striking, revealing an El Salvador where 'children eat each other / and the malnourished become adults', the 'rain yawns and the earth snores', and men laugh 'instead of killing' and kill 'instead of crying.' In Serrano's world, a man doesn't travel, he flees: he 'forgets himself everyday / knows everything but saw nothing.' Serrano attacks an 'obese' Melbourne – 'a town desperate for an us-and-them' – and yells in frustration at the corruption that has torn open the veins of Latin America: 'what I want is instant change / the madness of fingers clicking' (44-7). Donna Abela's poetic radio play 'Aurora's Lament' is also compelling, introducing us to a Filipino woman who grieves for the lover who has 'dumped' her 'like a dog' (149) in the 'tin crypt' (148) of old caravan in coastal Australia. Aurora's cry 'Why was I exiled? What did I do?' resonates with the entire collection, as does her migrant status of being 'heart-crushed' and yet alive (141, 152).

Southpaw's prose includes Tony Birch's exploration of one man's shock and stasis as he mourns a dead child, while Karen Jennings presents a couple's struggle to survive after urban development exiles them to a nowhere land. Eerily, the 'ribcage' of a stadium takes on flesh as the couple disintegrate: when the woman gives birth to a deformed child, she only recognises its 'animal cry of something terrifying and lost' (55). Ruth San A Jong's 'Confessions of guilt!' also speaks to the universal, showing one woman's determination to shape her own life in Suriname despite her internalisation of her husband and family's damnation of her: 'I'm a real bitch', she says (98). Paul Maunder follows Stan around Cuba where he hopes to be 'reborn' as a true socialist. Instead, he finds what every fundamentalist is – perhaps – truly looking for: human connection. When a woman seduces and robs him, but then strokes his head until he sleeps, Stan realises he's the happiest he's ever been (107).

It is a brave thing to launch a new journal in a world that already has so many and which seems to be turning its back on printed text. However, *Southpaw's* original agenda and the diversity and high quality of its contributions promises to spark the interest of anyone who cares about how they are positioned in and by the world they live in.

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