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## *The Method Method*

*review by Stuart Glover*

*Writing as a Business*

Ken Method

ABC Books 2002

184 pp, AU\$29.95

ISBN: 0 7333 1054 0

The hardest-working man in Australian writing has put out a book about how he does it. Unlike most 'how-to' writing books, there is no advice on managing point of view, voice, character development or any explanation of the irksome plot twists in some of Method's thrillers. Instead *Writing as a Business* is a nuts and bolts account of the business of writing. Much of the book seems a refit of his earlier *A-Z of Authorship*, published through the Australian Society of Authors, but it is a book whose time has come.

Method, from his position as Chair of the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) in the 1980s and as a member of the Queensland Government Arts Advisory Committee in the 1990s, has long condemned self-serving literary hierarchies. His 'Letter from Mt Isa' in the late 1980s, criticising the Literature Board's bias toward 'Balmain' writers, split the ASA. Tom Shapcott, long a defender of the Literature Board, took umbrage. There were many sallies and calls for resignation before the matter petered out. More than anyone else, Method, in unfastening the ASA's from the Literature Board's interest in self-evident excellence, fostered a new cultural of literary professionalism.

In this he is expert. While Method probably doesn't aspire to the Miles Franklin Award, he has had a productive writing career. In fifty years as a writer he has published over 30 educational texts, and seven novels. There have also been more than 20 major pieces for performance including radio plays, stage plays, animations, and a feature film. In the past ten years he has produced 40 or so television half hours. Mostly, he says he has opted to write educational books rather than another play or novel, because he asks whether 'the world really needs another third rate novel' (13).

Ten years on from the Mt Isa wars, *Writing as a Business* catches a wave of change in professional writing practices and in the way government and the academy view the writer. The knowledge economy, and its discourses, place the knowledge worker and the generation (and control) of intellectual property at the centre of the contemporary economic project. The writer, long an economically marginal figure, has been refurnished as the content creator, or the model input for the new economy. The freelancing career has become the portfolio career, where the writer repurposes intellectual property for substitutable platforms.

Method resists the utopian strain, and digital metaphor, of the new economy narrative. The book focuses on income maximisation through good management of intellectual property, contracting, general business practice, and making

market-focused choices. Methold is not optimistic about the career of the contemporary writer. The foreword to the volume gives an earnest account of the dim economics which limit writers' financial prospects. He does, however, reflect a shift in writers' economic practices and the institutional conditions of freelance practice. Methold, while adding the digital domain and the internet to the portfolio of contracting possibilities, does not see them as transformational. Wisely, this book is a recipe for avoiding penury, rather than guaranteeing fortune.

Within the scope of these aims the book succeeds in providing sensible advice. Its concentration on taxation, contracts, budgets and business basics is a welcome departure from the literary institutional focus of Irina Dunn's *The Writer's Guide* (Allen & Unwin 1999) - the nearest competitor. While a useful addition to any aspiring writer's bookshelf, sometimes, as with many self-help books, *Writing as a Business* panders to the remedial needs. Many established writers will find the information too basic, but perhaps this is justified by Methold's claim that 'writers are among the world's worst business people' (12).

Methold's introduction places the commercial and artistic goals of writers in opposition. For him, embracing one involves forsaking the other. Or, at best, a balance must be struck between these two goals. This seems simplistic. There is obviously a tradeable economy for high art products - such as literary novels - alongside the content industries which trade more mundane creative goods - such as educational textbooks. These categories are, of course, dangerous and contingent, but only reflect market differentiation, rather than market exclusion.

Methold solves this opposition in the same way that contemporary creative industry theory tends to. He evacuates from his theory of the writer as a manageable economic input, any concern with the aesthetic or social effects of writing production. The contemporary writer's task is no longer one of romantic interpretation and signification, but to plan, manage and deliver. The writer moves from being a quasi-spiritual aesthetic touchstone, to being a micro-enterprise. This shift is valuable: it provides authors with an economic and professional identity with which to contest the persistent romantic discourses of authorship. Method's aesthetic blindness and economic functionalism reconfigures the writer as a market-sensitive micro-enterprise, demanding the skills of any small business. It frees the writer from the garret, even if it ignores the commercialisable value of the romantic narratives surrounding the author. The book is a valuable if vexing contribution.

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**TEXT**

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## *Against the Flow*

*review by Rob Watson*

*Against the Flow: Education, the Arts and Postmodern Culture*

Peter Abbs

Routledge Falmer 2003

173 pp. Pb & Hb

ISBN 0-415-297915 (HB); 0-415-29792-3 (PB)

When I met Peter Abbs in the 1970s he had recently begun working at Sussex University, where he is now Professor of Creative Writing. Within months he had invited me to contribute to his journal, *Tract*; subsequently he invited me to write a chapter for one of his books on the arts in education, and this led to my writing the volume on film for the Falmer Press Library of Aesthetic Education. He has drawn a number of writers into creative collaborations in this way and, in addition to the central achievement of a body of poetry far more rewarding than the work of better known contemporaries, Abbs has been an indefatigable polemicist, arguing across several decades now for a vision of education in the arts which has not dimmed yet remains to some extent unrealised, despite the many teachers he has inspired.

There have been several periods when the educational value of the expressive arts seemed to be accepted, but instrumental goals would inevitably act as a critical counterbalance. Abbs, in any case, perceived the limitations of placing too great an emphasis on creative free expression. His position, while seeing the making of art as crucial, shared a living historical sense of the tradition with writers like T.S. Eliot. He wanted, and still wants, the profound experience of and engagement with great art to enable students to find forms of expression which are not merely personal and self-indulgent outpourings, but whose form and content may achieve a more significant level of observed and felt truth. If, as Matthew Arnold suggested, art can take on some of the functions previously in the domain of religion, then the creation of artworks may become a profound undertaking, and I think the potential of this connection, however tenuous it sometimes appears, runs vividly through Abbs' work and gives it an urgent radical edge while simultaneously appearing almost conservative - which it isn't.

The paradox is probably inevitable: we write in the present and towards the future, but unless we know how to value the past we are bound to trivialize what we do, consigning our efforts in advance to that moment before they too recede. But if we *only* look at what has been done before, we risk losing that unique opportunity each of us has to make new sense of the world we're in. Without a context that extends beyond our immediate contemporaries we are battling at the least with an unnecessary ignorance of appropriate styles and techniques, and the result will too often be work which repeats clumsily what was done elsewhere and better. Axiomatically, if we hope to discover the genuinely new form appropriate to our voice and time, we must assimilate modes of expression which have preceded ours - the new is perceived by that which it develops from, like other organic forms.

*Against the Flow* is structured less as an attack on postmodern culture than as a defence against what Abbs sees as its potentially dehumanizing aspects, and thus it is an affirmation of 'that active movement from diffuse self-consciousness to articulate self-awareness'. One of its most striking features is the use of autobiography: each of the book's eight chapters begins subjectively, with a memory. This is not at all what one expects to find in academic discourse, of course, especially when several of these 'preludes' have a powerful poetic resonance, but that is the point - they remind us of the power of non-academic language to articulate experiences which cannot otherwise be communicated. 'I have chosen,' Abbs explains, 'a poetic and philosophical language to pit against the anodyne and functional language of current educational discourse'. And again, 'this book is written to defend the Socratic play of meaning, the power and pertinence of ethical judgement and aesthetic discrimination'.

At times while reading *Against the Flow* I found myself not exactly in disagreement but anxious to state my enthusiasm for what Shklovsky called 'the junior branch' - my own conviction would be that one is nourished by all sorts of things, including some of the products of mass culture, and that what they communicate is mediated essentially by what one brings to the experience. There might be a fundamental temperamental difference between the magpie inclusiveness - at times indiscriminate - of the novelist's appetite and the precision and exclusiveness of the poet's eye. But maybe we meet in autobiography or, rather, in a shared concern with the problems of articulating an empirically based conviction in such a way as to overcome the limitations of the merely personal. I think anyone concerned with questions of meaning ('What should art serve? What is culture for?' - Abbs' questions - might be extended to 'What am I for? How can I say what needs to be said?') will find useful approaches here.

As a novelist and a teacher of writing I confess I have found much literary theory over the last thirty years or so painfully inadequate to my needs - too little is written for or from the perspective of the developing creative writer, and most novelists are, after all, too engrossed in their work to explain what really matters for its composition. Several sections of *Against the Flow* have a succinct clarity that provides sudden and rewarding illumination. Everyone's familiar enough with the Joycean epiphany, for instance, but the way Abbs re-states it as a form of wisdom revives and makes it something the artist can more readily work with. Similarly, the Socratic elenchus becomes - with quotations from Emily Dickinson - a means of purifying thought, not merely as a dialectic of refutation but also by emphasizing the unexpectedly positive position attained through learning that one does *not* know.

The chapter on wisdom and ways to reach understanding is followed by one which offers a 'cultural map of autobiography' from Heraclitus to Roland Barthes. The implications clearly outlined within the modest scope of this section are staggering for all character-based narrative writing. I was already aware of ways in which the integrated, consistent sense of self and identity had been exploded in the latter part of the last century, but by presenting his summary historical review Abbs provides a forceful reminder of how dependent the very concept of individuality has been on constructions in language made at various points across more than two millennia.

...before Heraclitus...the concept of self was essentially epic and tribal and... Heraclitus marks a key stage in the dramatic emergence of the self, as does the later work of Plato and Socrates and the long 500 year tradition of the Stoics. This classical concern was then deepened by the passionate Christian quest for salvation. It was the Hebraic tradition, in confluence with the

Hellenic, which gave birth to the genre of deep subjective autobiography in the form of Saint Augustine's Confessions...until Rousseau's work...radically changed the pattern of narration and interpretation. This pattern was psychological in manner and it opened the way to a psychological reading of human experience...and culminated in the twentieth century in the birth of psychoanalysis. Finally, towards the end of that century we witness a crisis in identity, a questioning of the very notion of self. In this crisis the psychological reading of human life is put in radical doubt... Postmodern writing...set out to systematically destroy what was seen as the comfortable illusion of a continuous identity.

Heraclitus, Saint Augustine, Rousseau and Barthes are presented in more detail, naturally, and the argument about what to do in face of this crisis is carried on through the book, but the fragmented passage above should suggest why *Against the Flow* is the kind of work teachers of writing should be armed with. By placing the moment when our students are beginning to write in a context just dense enough to isolate its major challenges, Abbs helps to focus and direct their attention to ways of creating work that may see them through.

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## *Syncretism or Synchronism?*

*review by Cher Coad and Patrick West*

*Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors*

Brandilyn Collins

John Wiley & Sons 2002

212pp AU\$26.95 Pb

ISBN 0-471-05894-7

Actors who become writers know that their writing benefits from their experience in stage or screen productions. For most actors, a first engagement with a character comes about through a preliminary reading of the script. In this situation, the actor thinks about how to translate the writer's words into actions and emotions. Some actors appreciate a lot of guidance from the writer at this stage. Others prefer to depend upon the power of their individual creative interpretation. The writer's relationship to the actor might exhibit similar variations. What is it that an actor can learn from a writer or a writer from an actor? If the author becomes possessive of the script there is the potential for character workshopping with the actor to be difficult. But some writers are quite self-effacing and open in their relations with actors. Obviously much depends on the initial quality of the script. That special ability to suggest without explicitly proscribing a character paradigm is sometimes missing.

But who exactly is this generalized writer in search of a genre? Brandilyn Collins imagines a readership of novelists for her book and does not once mention the scriptwriter. She thereby denies a voice to that whole body of writing and associated theory that draws attention to itself in the space between page-based writing and the flesh-and-blood actor in the *mise en scène*. As we read *Getting into Character*, we found ourselves increasingly concerned about the argument that Collins endeavours to prosecute. It is a fine and original thing to try and bridge the chasm between two very different creative processes, novel writing and acting, but perhaps the connection between novelist and actor would be better formulated via a detour through the person of the scriptwriter?

This book certainly breaks new ground in the 'how-to-write' field. Whether it lives up to the quite extravagant claims of the author is something that we intend to test here. To us, it all comes down to the sheer difference between acting and the production of words, and the possibility of a relationship between them that would be more than just a delightful parallel or an analogy.

The seven secrets of the subtitle to Collins' book are lifted from the Method Acting principles of Constantin Stanislavsky. Collins devotes a chapter to each secret: 'Personalizing', 'Acting Objectives', 'Subtexting', 'Coloring Passions', 'Inner Rhythm', 'Restraint and Control', and 'Emotion Memory'. A boxed epigraph outlines what that chapter's secret means for both the 'Actor's Technique' and the 'Novelist's Adaptation'. Reducing Stanislavsky's insights to the level of simple technique might raise an eyebrow or two amongst actors. To novelists looking to supplement their own practice with a secret from another creative area, that one

word 'Adaptation' promises a lot. Turning the page, the reader finds Collins entering into explanatory mode, fragmenting each secret into its components and pushing home the point with still more words in boxes.

Every chapter concludes with two 'Study Samples'. Comprising extracts from a wide range of literary sources (mainly novels) these parts of *Getting into Character* are interpreted by Collins as explicit realizations of the secret just introduced and explained. Sometimes the choices of author and text seemed arbitrary and badly in need of contextualization (not to mention, in Mark Twain's case, at least a modicum of theory about fiction/non-fiction relations). 'Exploration Points' follow every sample. Resembling a 'model' examination paper, these sections comprise question-and-answer couplets that hamstring originality of response at least as much as they reinforce the lessons of the chapter. Disconcerting to say the least. This author keeps the reader on a tight leash. Perhaps this is because she would like to repress any interrogations that might start to unravel her showy thesis. What, for example, do Charles Dickens, Jacquelyn Mitchard, Leo Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and Jane Austen actually have in common when it comes to acting? Or, did the secrets start before Stanislavsky (1863-1938)? And where, above all, are examples of similar magnitude of actors in an engagement with acting?

Collins concludes her book with two appendices. The second is entitled 'Books on Method Acting by Stanislavsky and Boleslavsky' (Richard Boleslavsky was an actor and director of the Method school). A short summary of one Boleslavsky and three Stanislavsky texts is followed by a table that cross-references the seven secrets with chapters in these publications. In 'A Word about the Appendices,' the author comments of the works listed in Appendix A 'Additional Books on Writing Fiction' that they are no more than *supplementary* to her expression of the secrets. 'The Secrets we've discussed here are unique enough to the fiction world that you will not find them mentioned - much less discussed - in other writing books' (191). Collins appears to be claiming a significance for herself in the field of writing studies that might rely on an exaggeration of the actual quality of the insights contained in her book.

What concerns us considerably is whether Collins has managed to actually generate something of interest for novelists to use when they sit before a blank page, out of her theorization of the experiences of actors preparing for and inhabiting a part. We suspect not. *Getting into Character* seems rather to exhibit in different spaces the effects that both actors and novelists aim for in what could well be argued are very nearly antagonistic fields of creative activity: the page; the performance space.

Chapter Six of Collins' book almost seems to undo all of the rest. It's as if one has suddenly landed in another book. 'Restraint and Control' reads very much like a section from one of the publications about writing faintly derided by Collins in her Appendix A. Where is the influence from the actor in such passages as:

The key is to use the most specific verb possible. Many verbs are just too general to be very descriptive. These include verbs such as *stand, look, see, walk, move, talk, sit*, and so on. If your character is sitting, is she slouching? Slumping? Perching? (152)

All wise advice to be sure, in its way. But one feels the strain at the heart of the higher-level argument. As conceived of by the author of *Getting into Character*, acting and writing form two roads that don't ever really meet. Such as it is, the logic of her argument requires that issues of acting are never really brought into fine focus for the reader. How could they be anyway? For the actor, it's mainly not words. For the writer, it mainly is. Where do the twain meet?

Brandilyn Collins is at her best when, in chapters like 'Coloring Passion' and 'Action Objectives', she maps out how to create believable characters. There is much of value here - writers can also inhabit parts. Yet in a book that is so much about process she begs the question of process just as significantly. Acting and (any sort of) writing are nothing if not very different.

In our view, the better question for Collins would be, what is left for the novelist to exploit when the fire-walling differences between the two modes of creativity are extracted and neutralized? Unfortunately it is precisely the assertiveness of these differences that seems to have seduced Collins into a series of meretricious claims. To us, this explains the peculiar absence of the scriptwriter, a figure around which many of the questions that Collins brings into play have already been responded to in both theory and practice. The scriptwriter is probably our current best hope for continuing to work through the problem of what, say, a novelist (but why not also a short-story writer? or a poet?) might be able to learn from an actor. (The alternative would be the minor line of enquiry asking what, emanating from the actor, somehow bypasses the scriptwriter, as he or she engages with the issues of writing for performance, and ends up, previously untouched, in the novelist's court. From where the scriptwriter might, in turn, retrieve it. What thin and uncertain trajectory would this be that the novelist somehow intercepts?)

Sometimes from big things little things grow. This is our summary of *Getting into Character*, a publication too easily cut down to size.

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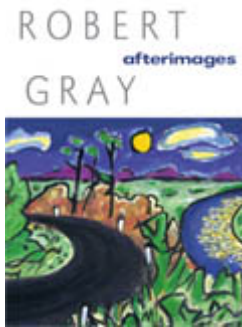
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# *The Fullness of Reality*

*review by Steve Evans*



*Afterimages*  
Robert Gray  
Duffy & Snellgrove 2002  
AU\$22.00 Pb  
ISBN 1 876631 22 8

According to the cover of *Afterimages*, Kevin Hart acclaims Gray the 'greatest English-speaking poet of the natural world now writing'. Whether one agrees with the sweep of that statement or not, there is no argument that the natural world is Gray's hallmark territory, or that he has been hailed as one of the country's pre-eminent poets. Does *Afterimages* maintain the reputation?

Gray's work has consistently been characterised by both gentle philosophising and a very visual embrace of the natural world since his first volume of work appeared in the early 1970s. The appearance of a further collection raised the question whether Gray would continue to hone his craft in what had become comfortable terrain or strike out for something new. There is 'new' in *Afterimages* and it mainly takes the form of a high proportion of longer poems.

Mention should be made first of the inclusion of several line drawings by the author. Gray's sketches are economical; they make interesting companions to the poems. His landscapes offer a tilting perspective, often a view over rises or down a slope. They seem to be concerned with seeing things obliquely, perhaps discovering newness in a fresh angle. The portraits on the other hand are flat and more direct, recording impassive faces. But what of the poems?

Gray has always varied form, mostly through playing with line length, and occasionally trying a prose poem. His 'Thomas Hardy' is a sterling example of controlled structure here, and 'Fourteen Poems' presents a series of short pieces for which Gray is renowned. He has a keen eye for seeing the world in an atom, and the potential for energy in stillness, such as:

Late afternoon sun  
found in the back of the shed.  
cornered and still.

('Fourteen Poems' 31)

In 'A Bowl of Pears', Gray shows an acuteness of observation and freshness of image that inform much of his previous writing: 'the snow-clean juice with a slight crunch that is sweet' (50). In 'Homage to the Painters', however, he seems

to be merely practising his scales. In seven groups of lines, each comprising two couplets, Gray furnishes the reader with simple colour-based images. The result is lacklustre, and oddly distancing, though such a minimalist style may eventually produce something more satisfying:

a sulphur-coloured hill  
a burnt orange triangle

a red tractor  
a long plume of gulls

(Homage to the Painters' 62)

Gray's painterly eye is better represented in the longish 'Home Run' where there appears, 'spreading through acres of grass, a seemingly broken water / coloured like the water / that we washed our brushes in at school' (73). This is Gray at his most precise, and there are many other satisfying instances.

But now to that question of length. *Afterimages* departs from Gray's previous work in that five of the 25 poems run for between five and 10 pages, and a further four are prose poems. This also signals a shift towards a more conversational voice; one that seems deliberately less concerned with creating vivid imagery. That is not to suggest that the words are less carefully weighed, of course, but a different effect is achieved. The subtle tension that commonly marks Gray's smaller pieces is not as evident in some of these larger works and their relative looseness is not yet as successful.

A case in point is the longest poem, the first verse of which sets up a meditation that extends over more than eight pages:

Things, Berkeley says, are the language of God,  
this world that we know is really His thoughts -  
which Hume remarked brings us no conviction,  
but to me it is almost justified,  
for things that are worthy of such existence,  
of ultimate stature. It often seems  
I am listening to them. What could it mean,  
that intuition? I think the appeal  
is their candour, it's the lack of concern  
at being so vulnerable. So we sense  
they are present entire. One feels these things  
that step through the days with us have the fullness,  
in each occasion, of reality.

('The Drift of Things' 52)

There is a circular logic in the premise here and the anthropomorphy that renders objects sentient still niggles, despite allowance for poetic licence. Though 'The Drift of Things' tends towards polemics and didacticism, it is a poem that rewards re-reading. Readers who infer from its relaxed tone and sheer length that its message is easily gleaned, may not give it that opportunity, however. Sadly, another big work, 'The Dying Light', sags in its length. A narrator's (Gray's?) homage to his mother, it begs a tidier narrative, especially because it works a commonly mined seam.

The prose poem, 'Flemington Races', is a list of observations that might well have dwindled to nothing much except for the apposite close in which:

The horse has just been struck, and has won by  
 a nose, which it doesn't understand; it simply waits, head lifted,  
 patient,  
 unmoved, and it has all of the dignity that is here.

('Flemington Races' 49)

There is detail to savour in another prose piece, 'Damp Evening', where 'the ferry is slow and squarely-built, and is as tightly packed with light as a truck with bales of hay' (29). This loving attention to the physical world and especially to a sense of its sacredness is manifest in 'Chameleon'. The poem begins with listening to rain in the countryside at night and emerges, with the narrator, into first light. It ends:

It is the lightning from the start of time.  
 All of these things that we see must be the metamorphoses  
 of such fire. One configuration burns  
 and becomes another, and will burn. That light  
 is an interweaving, with nothing  
 beneath it. Everything arises from the foam  
 of light, and keeps the nature  
 of flame, and makes its own abyss,  
 and the light in itself is our blessedness.

('Chameleon' 12-13)

Gray's poetry often appeals to arguments based around matter's unity being made clear in opposition, in dependent dualities such as light and dark, etc. 'Chameleon' is one of his most fluid examples. Deft use of sound helps to achieve a seamless transition from a description of the world as object to the point where it is beheld as Maya, or play.

And speaking of fluidity, it is images of water that permeate *Afterimages*. There is still Gray's abiding concern with light, as indicated above, but water glistens throughout the collection - in gardens, on roofs, on floors, in paddocks, in streets, as sea, and so on. True, there is seldom water without light, but the volume is awash (pun intended) with Gray's keen imagery of the latter. That it never drowns the poems is testament to Gray's mastery.

*Afterimages* presents a poet still critically concerned with the intertwining of the physical and the spiritual. It is clear that the longer pieces in the collection are a mixed bag, needing more refinement. Shorter poems in the collection argue eloquently for Gray's continued focus on them if for no other reason than that they are still more accomplished, but there may be good results to come in future from his pushing into new areas. In the meantime, there is plenty of material in *Afterimages* to gratify both existing fans and those recently discovering Robert Gray's poetry.

*Steve Evans teaches literature and writing at Flinders University in South Australia. His sixth book, Luminous Fruit, was released in July 2003.*

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# 'Well, I don't know where the hell you come from, mate.'

*review by Patrick Mangeni*

*eliXir: a story in poetry*

Ali Alizadeh

Grendon Press, 2002

70 pp. AU\$16.75 Pb

ISBN 0 9579445 19

Ali Alizadeh, a poet of Iranian descent, has woven a story of, in and about many things. *eliXir* is not just 'a story in poetry' (title page) but a creative adventure, a collage of narrative experimentation. In a combination of narrative style shifting from the 'first person' into 'other persons', Alizadeh fluidly integrates dramatic dialogue in typical theatrical form, crafting a poetic rendition that 'mirrors' the futility of a poet in a world of competing and often conflictual values: a materialist ethos that strips sanity, disrupts humanity and constipates philosophy in these dark alleys of capitalism. Through the lens of life in an Australian city, Alizadeh engages with and bares the futility of a post-industrial automated society whose linearity causes a haemorrhage to the dreams and lives of a young rock star Felix, his black Persian-born pal and poet Arash, Belinda the actress and, Gemma (Jasmine) whose blue eyes tell of a man's obsession.

Gemma, with the nose of a hunting dog, is a depressed, suicidal neurotic knocked off the catwalk by a cocktail of metal-hearted rapists who line into her their cold phallic rods, reducing her to a defenceless macho feast. She will later dare an equally numbed, ostracised, infatuated and disillusioned dreamer, Felix - a failed rock star - to a rocking demise. Pushed to the edge in a combination of guilt and blame from Arash (for the death of his housemate, Felix) she dares him into an exposed and 'unrehearsed' erection before fears of paternity and her naked leap into falling space jerks him into a protective cleavage, spiralling them in suicidal descent through a high-rise, high enough for a poet to tell the story of the protagonist, of Persia's poetic heritage and the dilemmas of today's world. This is the most powerfully told part of this story.

*eliXir* is not only a telling poem that invents form, it is a story of beauty, of youth, of hope and dreams reduced to vulgarity, to a race for a suicide of 'diced bones and sliced sinews' (37), smeared on impersonal rails of an automated society. It is a harsh reality rendered through artistic curves. Told in a mixture of forms: narration, poetry and typical postmodernist alterity, Arabic, mathematical symbols and words fuse in telling synthesis freeing the limits of imagination and beauty in the infinity of possibility. The diction, particularly the register of the protagonist's, borders on the lewd: tongues get so 'bushy' that a shaving ceremony seems inevitable. But within character and thematic context, this 'bush' organically, and relevantly so, draws from the soil that feeds it. Alizadeh plays critical letter games, dancing down the alphabetical ladder, casting a critical and reflective dice across the Iranian revolution, Muslim fundamentalism and into a child's disorientation in an Australian 'bush of colour'.

In its multiple rendering, you can read it as a play, then as a story, then experience it as a poem, at different points and very often simultaneously. Alizadeh does his tale with speed while sucking in our senses with a compelling simplicity that awes with admiration. The pace is varied and the style indicates a craft of narrative economy. The character(s), and mood, theme and conflict, and what Oscar Gross Brockett would call the 'scheme of probability' (*The Theatre: An Introduction*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston), come with the first bell. The Pen that gives the title of the first movement becomes a metaphor whose poetic significance and centrality to the narrative is meticulously carved into the protagonist's journey and this politics of segregation and waste. But it is also a symbol of resilience, of the immortality of the word, and the triumph of hope.

The most difficult part of the book for the reader to endure is 'the city' (13) section which comes across like a billboard of auctioneers, traffic, road-rage each flexing the other in time-conscious style. This gravy of hybridity, stylistically splashed on the page, calls for the patience of a goat trainer to appreciate. But that may as well be beside the point. In fact the author just does it; captures 'Bonfire, The City' (27): a country's cascade up (or is it down?) from prison, to settlement, to colonial Federation to a capitalist symphony. It is a creative re-configuration of social matrix, coarse indifference, and, even hope, in this filth of potential - that is if you look far across the line.

Alizadeh's story could as well be pulling its thread from a biographical bobbin and weaving its cloth with the needle of a searching consciousness. In fact the author and main protagonist, Arash, are both Iranian migrants who enter Australia at the age of 14, write poetry, have been delivery drivers and kitchen-hands as well. But unlike Alizadeh who graduates with a BA with Hons from Griffith, proceeds to a PhD at Deakin and publishes his 'medicinal potion' *eliXir*, Arash, whose name is tar on the Australian tongue and is subsequently abridged to 'Camel Fucker' (65), gets disillusioned, does a urinary feat on an Anzac memorial, is thrown out of university and winds down his own poetry manuscript, *The Quest* (10), in a style that is an event in itself.

In the last part of the story, Alizadeh executes a denouement and exposition through prosaic narrative relaxing its poetry, descending into linear storyboarding but keeping the narrative's thematic and visual line.

But Arash (or is it Alizadeh?) has an eye for eyes. He fiddles a melody of romance 'in the shoulder-length dyed black hair and magnetic blue eyes' (38) of desolate Jasmine, the girl who does not smell like her flower of fancy. Shifting from the blue eyes of Jasmine, his lingering obsession, to the blue eyes of the hostess on his flight to exile, he takes the reader across time, culture, to the 'mystical Ghazals of the Poet of Shiraz' (57).

Despite her descent from airhostess, to model, rape victim, neurotic and a callous stripper who causes two dramatic exits for two passionate young men, and misses her own through a timely act of a suicidal embrace, Jasmine keeps the story's philosophical thread by carrying on the magic Pen to Arash on their dream-sequence-like epic descent from the clouds of alienation, to a 'poetic death'. It is an epic journey to 'soul's destination' (52) whirling us through the prism of humanity, prehistory, ancient civilisation, the crucible of fundamentalism, Cartesian reductionism and the egoistic insanity of pacifist civilisation: our times' senseless pride and suicidal intolerance.

Alizadeh is not singing a song of resignation however, nor is he locking meaning in the caves of death for in the final moment he creates another life between Jasmine and Arash. Like the 'Ancient prophet Zoroaster who believed life was the field of constant battle between evil and light' (69) the poet Alizadeh preserves the

pen through a journey of time, disuse and infectious rot, and on our cave crafts a message of hope in these very words:

And on the walls of our cave  
I carve  
With the Pen's tip  
Ready to cut  
And release the poetry  
Of confession  
and the alphabet  
of absolution  
so that I unlock the coffers of language  
so that I'll print freedom  
On the pages of life's prison. (60)

*Patrick Mangeni, from Uganda, is currently studying for a PhD (Applied Theatre) at Griffith University. His play Operation Mulungusi & The Prince won the National Book of Uganda Award (NABOTU) in 2000 and was nominated for the Uganda Literature Prize in 2001.*

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## *Parkville Days*

*review by Catharine Coleborne*

*Attic Dweller*

Melissa Petrakis

Melbourne: Domain Media, 2002

Paperback

66 pp, AU\$25.00

ISBN 0 9585394 3 X

Melissa Petrakis is a Melbourne-based poet with two volumes of published poetry to her credit including *Attic Dweller* and *The Naked Muse* (2001), both published by Domain in South Yarra, Melbourne. This is my first encounter with her poetry. *Attic Dweller* is an attractive book, the kind I would linger over in a bookstore and enjoy before buying. Inside the front cover, the 'Attic' is explored through the themes of 'garret' (where poets sometimes dwell) 'high', 'elegant', and other metaphors of architectural style like 'wit' and 'taste'. Petrakis has used *Roget's Thesaurus* to evoke her own poetic space, and the resulting poetic edifice here is accomplished and neatly designed.

Petrakis is also reflecting on 'Parkville days, 1999' so we're invited to recall the elegance and physical spaces of inner-city Melbourne. Reading her work far away from the place, I am drawn back to its contours in many ways. In 'bagels & baby juice' (27) the poet shops and returns home with 'salmon focaccia / from Thresherman's'. The 'college air' evoked in 'the knowledge base' (31) is air I've also breathed, and the university is present elsewhere in this city. Places distant from Melbourne provide a little contrast: in 'at Cootamundra' (52) the poet tries out her landscape painting techniques and attempts to capture the sparseness in the gum trees against sky.

But this is not poetry that lies still, simple, on the page, despite first appearances. It's the sometimes complex inner life of the poet that takes centre-stage in this work. And because identities are shaped by cities, I also recognize the emotional experiences articulated here as being part of a shared, collective city landscape, or a shared world beyond the city. Even the gums at Cootamundra say more than we thought:

a man's resolve  
                   stark  
 as the narrow  
 eucalypt  
 rod-strong  
 its reed-fragile  
 appearance  
 a deception.

(from 'at Cootamundra', 52)

I immediately liked the 'sparseness' of this body of work. Whilst sometimes more prosaic than Petrakis perhaps intended, the poetry is well-observed and often

acutely aware of the limitations of language, or one's grasp of it. One of my favourite poems is 'basil' (19). It tastes and smells of herbs, mushrooms and somehow, sex. 'I have a feeling', she writes, 'for which / I have no language'. Her inability to recall or simply to know the Greek words for herbs stands in for her inability to articulate everything - not every feeling can be described, or become a poem. This is an anxiety in Petrakis' poetry and it seems to be one common to female poets. Another poem, 'I lose my language' (21), reminds me, at least in terms of its theme, of Margaret Atwood's poetry, or Adrienne Rich's work.

It is also very brave work, because as in all the best poetry, the poet's voice is at once vulnerable and self-assured. The poem 'serious' (2), also used on the back cover of the book, takes an accusation - 'He says / I am serious / such a small, serious thing: / like coal, like / uranium / he says' - and pulls it apart, examines it, turns it in the hand like an object, to both make sense of it and to laugh at it. In the same way that reflecting upon how a word is spelt makes it seem strange, this poem says a great deal about the meaning of a word and conveys an irritation with its connotations.

Another poem here that impresses me, both in itself, and because of the function it performs in relation to the whole work, is 'American package' (54). I was curious about the story of the poem - 'A package has come / from America / three days ago / it has come / and I have not opened it' - partly because I would never be able to not open a parcel for three days, and mostly because here a whole other world outside the city suddenly intrudes, sneaks in, just as letters, postcards and parcels often do. I like finding out what's in the package: 'postcards / from places / in and around Seattle', and 'a child's statuette / from a Disney film, / bubble gum and temporary / body tattoos'. And I liked knowing that the things are sent by 'a friend I made once / on a train'.

So it's the inside and the outside worlds of the poet that matter in this poetry. Petrakis is perhaps at her best when observing others, or maintaining a careful distance from her subject matter. One of the most effective poems is 'Attending a reading' (56). It's a scene I also somehow know. It's visceral - 'her tongue/lashes to the side of him / and her tongue / slips from about / his shoulder' - and it is dark. It is about the public performance of poetry and the public performance of a relationship. There's a desire here to mark a defining moment and to capture, as one might in a photograph, an event that affected or left an impact on people.

The title poem 'Attic Dweller' (63) lifts the poetry up, somehow, and into another space, with its musical quality. Other poems are physical, and bend and twist; still others are about feeling cold or emotionally barren. Petrakis is at her best when looking outside herself, but her articulation of inner life works effectively here to scrape away the surfaces of life in the city and beyond it.

There are many good poems in this book. I can imagine them performed or read in the poetry haunts of Melbourne. Domain has produced the book in a high quality format. I look forward to more work from this poet.

*Catharine Coleborne is an historian who lives and works in New Zealand. She studied poetry writing for a short time with Alan Wearne at RMIT. Her poems have been published in Antithesis, Moveable Type, Farrago and Small Poppies.*

*Attic Dweller* is currently available at a number of independent and more mainstream bookshops in Melbourne, Victoria, and at Gleebooks in Glebe, NSW.

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