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'The Seven Clever Women.'

By Gloria Beckett.

The painting communicates how I perceive my own urban Aboriginal art forms, space, style and figurative lines in a contemporary, western context.

In addition, the art is also representative of my traditional values of culture, and connection to land. As an Aboriginal woman I have pushed the boundaries of Aboriginal art, suggesting that we Aboriginal women who live in towns and cities have our own place of dreaming; we may live and dress in a modern, western culture, but we maintain strong links in our lives with our culture and practices.

The painting depicts seven Aboriginal female spirits, one spirit for each day of the week. The imagery articulates the importance of women's roles, and that spirituality in all its aspects is integral to our personal needs.

The lady dressed in red and green is symbolic of the land and the environment.

The golden brown headed lady dressed in gold and yellow is representative of the sun spirit. We need the sun to sustain life. The crisscross gold is a graphic illustrative art form of country – the sun sporadically shines its rays over the land.

The lady with the blue maroon head wears a cosmopolitan array of colours, and this communicates the blues, pinks, whites and golds as the wealth of land.

The lady with the blue is the water spirit who role is to shower the wattles and gums, and preserve the landscape and the lush environment of blue, white, gold and yellow flora.

The lady with the grey head is the free wind spirit within us. We are blessed with nature and elements, and the wind twirling over our bodies signifies freedom.

The lady sitting down making damper is the gatherer, and the ray coming out of the food suggests that this is wealth in itself, food for life, that which is needed to sustain life.

The pregnant lady is the fertility spirit, and fire is needed to maintain growth.

More information about Gloria Beckett's art can be found on Daniel Abad's website www.indigenousconsultancy.com.au

Editorial

By Carole Ferrier.

Just a brief editorial this time around given that – as well as our usual reviews – you have four fine feature articles that address important issues. Our cover painting is by Gloria Beckett who, as well as being an important artist in oils and ceramics, is also a prominent activist in the Stolen Wages campaign (see Ros Kidd's article in our last issue). Over Christmas the new film on Frida Kahlo will be showing and we can gather our energies to organise in the new year against the likely unleashing of weapons of mass destruction on the Iraqi people.

Setting the Agenda: The Politics of Feminist Publishing in Australia

By Louise Poland.

In seeking to redress the imbalance in the representation of women writers, many feminist publishing ventures in Australia, though not all, set their sights on creating books 'by women, for women, and about women.' On reflection, this theme was ultimately inadequate. The formula, 'by women, for women, and about women', could just as easily apply to popular romance fiction or to a popular women's journal, as it could to non-fiction feminist discourse or women's literature from feminist presses. Indeed, as Sybylla Press editors Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson have claimed, defining writing as feminist writing, or books as feminist books, may not be useful at all 'if it allows people to forget that all writing is political – including the kind that wishes to appear neutral.'¹ Not only is each reader's definition of 'feminist' not uniform but, as Gibbs and Tilson observe, 'to categorise writing as feminist or not, is to overlook the effects of reading.'²

At the outset, however, it should be noted that there is a critical distinction between feminist *writing* and feminist *publishing*, even though the latter both depends on and advocates the former. An initial analysis of feminist publishing and feminist presses identifies the following publishing rationales: redressing women's absence from the published record; eliminating sex-role stereotypes; reclaiming and reprinting women's writing; publishing new writing by women; presenting the diversity of women's writing to the world. These strategies are significant in that, first, they have led to an increase in readers' access to previously unavailable texts and reclaimed these texts; second, they have been part of the feminist resistance to the mainstream; and third, they have sanctioned women's experience.

Just as feminism ranges from conservative to radical points on the political spectrum, visions of feminist publishing vary from feminist press to feminist press. Notwithstanding, most feminist publishing seeks to circulate writing that offers a feminist analysis of the social construction of women's lives and/or a feminist representation of female experience. For a feminist press, its feminist analysis is central to its list development and to the politics of the texts it commissions. The relationship between feminist politics and the economics of publishing is an important and often vexed aspect of any definition of feminist publishing. Many early feminist presses were politically and culturally-led in their publishing programs yet, increasingly, the commercial aspects of publishing have loomed larger in feminist publishing in Australia, as contemporary feminist presses respond to the demands and challenges of cash flow and distribution in their bid to survive, and as mainstream publishers entered the chase for commercially successful titles and feminist bestsellers.

Furthermore, the politics of feminism informs organisational and publishing practice. A refusal to separate the publishing process from the output is central to most feminist publishing. This connection, fundamental to the identity and politics of many past feminist presses, has often prompted the adoption of feminist decision making models, such as consensus, over conventional organisational politics. It also promotes supportive and empowering environments for authors. In such a setting, authors are not only consulted, but centrally involved in the publishing process. Importantly, a publishing house's perception of its role in creating cultural space for female experience is fundamental to its feminist agency. Although, as Chris Weedon has asserted, publishing women writers does not guarantee texts that will challenge dominant norms or patriarchal values or 'employ a different, resistant, and specifically female discourse.'³

Much women's writing, not least romance, reproduces forms of discourse which place women firmly in patriarchal relations and encourage them to identify themselves with masochistic forms of femininity and find pleasure in so doing. Modes of femininity and of female desire which deny their own social construction are offered and, proclaim themselves to be natural. Challenge to accepted gender norms requires new ways of understanding gender as historically produced and changeable. It is here that feminist theory is so important.

Comparison of the philosophy, or editorial policy, of several feminist presses and journals highlights significant variations in the feminist theory that underpins the goals of Australia's feminist presses and journals.

Artemis Publishing, one of Australia's four surviving contemporary feminist presses, seeks to showcase women's writing, to give women a voice unmediated by others, and to break 'the silences that abound about women's lives and in women's lives.'⁴ Sybylla Press, the longest surviving (but now defunct) feminist press in Australia, created a feminist printery that was a significant site of resistance to the dominant hegemony in the 1970s; in the 1980s it moved into publishing books that were potentially transformative; most recently, it sought to 'produce titles that explored feminist and left perspectives ... fiction and non-fiction by women, with a special interest in new writers and work that is innovative in style.'⁵ Women's Redress Press' editorial policy was to 'publish a broad range of traditional and innovative works by women which will challenge the current boundaries of publishing in Australia.'⁶

Refractory Girl's philosophy grew out of 'an increasing conflict between a growing feminist consciousness and the academic traditions in which many of [the founding] women were working.'⁷ *Hecate's* refereed journal articles seek to 'employ a feminist, Marxist or other radical methodology.'⁸ The early *raison d'être* of Spinifex Press can be found in the front of its early titles: 'Spinifex Press is an independent feminist press, publishing innovative and controversial fiction and non-fiction by Australian and international authors.' On the eve of its tenth birthday in 2000, it defined itself as 'broad-based politically and commercially.'⁹

Significantly, the potentially transformative action of feminist publishing has not often been articulated in the last decade, even though it underpinned the vision of radical feminist publishers in the early women's liberation movement both in Australia and elsewhere: 'We wish to do more than help redress a balance: we want to upset the economy'¹⁰ and 'Feminist publishing aims to uncover and transform the symbols that shape women's lives.'¹¹ This transformative vision is 'relevant still today'¹² as, increasingly, is a vision of global feminism supported by feminist publishing.

Just as publishing women writers does not guarantee feminist writing, equally, 'which texts are available, which remain in print, which are widely distributed through education and publishing is not a neutral issue.' It is possible to trace the 'formative power' of the patriarchy¹⁴ in what is published, how books are distributed and which titles are actively retained and promoted in a publisher's backlist. It is extremely difficult for independent feminist publishers to compete with the distribution machinery of multinational publishers and, if distribution is ineffective, consequent cash flow problems can inhibit the current publishing program. Marketing also has a strong impact on the success of individual books and many a book has failed due to a poor promotion while other lesser books have gained a profile due to the support of marketing. Institutions, such as schools and universities, influence the success of individual book titles; the selection of a book for inclusion in the school curriculum can extend its life on the backlist, guarantee one or more reprints or, even, ensure its status as a 'bestseller.' The role of bookshops should not be understated either, and

contemporary concerns within the Australian publishing industry about the diminishing shelf life of books in bookshops – ‘a shelf life of somewhere between milk and yoghurt’¹⁵ – must also be recognised as a significant factor in the erosion of feminist book publishing and the marginalisation of feminist titles in book stores.

Book and journal publishing presents other challenges to feminists, especially book publishing that incorporates a number of aspects of the business world. Journal publishing ‘can operate more easily (not easily, just more easily) on the fly, with volunteer labour and lower overheads.’¹⁶ While book publishing offers reasonable ease of entry compared with other manufacturing industries, even a small publishing concern that aims to travel lightly incurs start-up expenses and overheads such as equipment. A feminist press that outsources its printing, as all independent presses in Australia now do, inevitably faces significant production costs, especially print bills.

Feminist presses must also reconcile issues of commercial and financial management with feminist autonomy, and may need to develop competence in some commercial aspects of book publishing – costing of book projects, cash flow management, pricing of books, distribution arrangements – if they wish to survive in a commercial environment. The risks of expanding a publishing program with bank overdrafts may also need to be resolved. As in any feminist organisation, and especially in those feminist collectives operated by workers with other full-time commitments, the risks of role strain and worker burn-out are also significant concerns. Unfortunately, these sites of struggle have overwhelmed a number of feminist presses in Australia’s publishing history.¹⁷ Most recently, in January 2002, Sybylla Press was formally disbanded after a seven-year publishing hiatus.

Reconciling the politics of feminism, (especially Marxist or socialist feminism) with commercialism also extends into the resolution of issues such as how a press determines its financial accountability processes – negotiating with bank managers, and printers, buying paper, and dealing with clients, for example, where a feminist press sells its printing expertise to the community, as Everywoman Press, Sybylla Press and Labrys Press each did. For those feminist presses that buy print services, there is the requirement of dealing with the often male-dominated manufacturing industry in order to publish. In the history of feminist publishing in Australia, there are multiple examples of feminist journals and feminist book publishers being stymied by conservative printers who refused to print feminist materials of which they did not approve.¹⁸

Government funding has been another site of struggle as most feminist presses, like other independent publishing ventures in Australia, have sometimes relied on government subsidies from federal and state-level agencies, such as the Australia Council, state government Arts departments or Employment and Industry departments. The availability of these grants depends on presses meeting extensive established criteria and being accountable not only for the financial management of a project, but also its content, the size of its print run, its production schedule, and sometimes, its distribution arrangements. With diminishing government subsidies and increasing government taxes, such as the recently imposed goods and services tax (GST), small feminist presses are increasingly financially vulnerable, as well as burdened by time-consuming accountability processes that detract their energies from book publishing.

A further significant challenge to feminist publishing, and particularly to the survival of feminist presses, has been the entry of mainstream publishers into the arena of publishing feminist books and women authors. As Artemis publisher,

Jocelyne Scutt, remarks: 'This has to be attributed to the boost feminist publishers gave, so that the mainstream publishers were more able to see the point – and the market.'¹⁹

Once they recognised that there was a lucrative market, multinational publishing firms such as Random House and Penguin Books, and independent Australian publishers, such as Allen and Unwin, quickly began to commission feminist books, develop feminist lists, and distribute other publisher's feminist lists. For example, in Australia, Allen and Unwin distributes Women's Press books, and Penguin Books distributes Virago Press titles, including its enormously successful list, Virago Modern Classics. Some mainstream publishers have also succeeded in poaching commercially valuable authors and titles from feminist presses. Furthermore, mainstream publishers have been significantly influenced by feminist presses, both in their list development and in buying rights to titles launched by feminist presses. As Spinifex publisher, Susan Hawthorne observes, 'It is not so much that we have been influenced by them, they have been influenced by us.'²⁰ Patricia Duncker further explains this view of the politics of publishing when she asserts that the mainstream presses 'let the women take the risks, then climbed aboard the financial bandwagon.'²¹

Importantly, feminist presses play the role of publishing first-time authors, who are often ignored by mainstream publishers due to the high level of editorial support required, and of publishing titles that are considered too risky, or experimental, or too 'cutting edge' by mainstream publishers. From the outset, feminist presses have been testing the market, and taking the risks, for mainstream publishing companies. In its role of cultural gatekeeper, multinational publishers protect the dominant literary culture and publishing environment. This presents serious threats to autonomous and independent feminist presses in a publishing environment that is increasingly dominated by profit-driven commodity publishing and in which there is little room to experiment. As Rhonda Black and Maryanne Dever observe:

Local publishers must ... compete book by book, list by list in a marketplace where the commodification of books into 'proven product lines' inevitably leaves little room to foster new and 'untested' ideas, written, edited, published and marketed locally. Indeed the desired product becomes the so-called international book.²²

This is as problematic for feminist presses as it is for any other independent publishers operating in an Australian marketplace that is firmly controlled by multinationals.

On another political front, feminist publishing has been and is seriously threatened by what has been called by Susan Faludi amongst others²³ the backlash against feminism. Not only has this seriously diminished demand for feminist books, it has also led to the gradual demise of some of the infrastructure that has previously supported feminist publishing. Both feminist bookshops and women's studies programs provided significant support to feminist publishing throughout the 1970s and 80s, yet in response to the backlash, feminist bookshops have decreased in number and some of those that have survived have adopted other agendas over feminist ones. In early 2000, as the Sydney-based Feminist Bookshop considered closing its doors after 25 years of feminist activism and bookselling to a once-loyal book-buying community, only three or four small feminist bookshops remained in Australia. To compensate, feminist presses such as Spinifex Press now engages in direct selling, and especially promote online selling in order to maximise margins on sales.²⁴ At the same time, the dilution of university-based women's studies programs and the substitution of gender

studies programs for women's studies programs has not only threatened feminist scholarship, but also diminished demand for feminist books, especially the more radical feminist titles from feminist presses.

However, despite these struggles and many others over the past thirty years, both feminist presses and feminist journals have profoundly affected the publishing and literary environments. Significantly, their impact has not been restricted to the publishing world:

We affected the political environment; we affected the social environment; we affected the economic environment; we affected the inner environment of readers, women and men; we affected the way that people thought about themselves in everyday life and I think that was extremely important.²⁵

Whether the feminist presses and feminist journals that have survived can further survive the current dual dangers – the current and ongoing backlash against feminism, and the challenges of multinational gatekeepers and profit-driven commodity publishing – remains to be seen. The courage and tenacity of feminist publishers is again being seriously tested.

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Notes

1 Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson (eds) *Frictions: An Anthology of Fiction by Women*, Sybylla Cooperative Press and Publications, Melbourne, 1982 p. x

2 *ibid.*

3 Chris Weedon, *Feminist Analysis and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford UK, 1987 p. 170.

4 Jocelyne Scutt, 'Artemis' in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford, p. 479.

5 Sybylla website [April 2000].

6 Editorial Meeting – Editorial Policy 14/3/83, Women's Redress Press Archive, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 6308/1.

7 Susan Tiffin, *Refracting Voices: Feminist Perspectives from Refractory Girl*, p. 27.

8 Imprint page of *Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation*.

9 Susan Hawthorne, interview with the author, September, 2000; Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein 'The Commercial is Political', unpublished paper, 1995, p. 7.

10 Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson (eds) *Frictions: An Anthology of Fiction by Women*, Sybylla Cooperative Press and Publications, Melbourne, 1982, p. 3.

11 *ibid.*

12 Phillinda Masters, 'A Word from the Press: A Brief Survey of Feminist Publishing' *RFR/DRF* vol 20, number 1/2 p. 30.

13 Chris Weedon, *Feminist Analysis and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford UK, 1987, p. 170.

14 *ibid.*

15 Stephanie Johnston, cited in Louise Poland 'Survive and Succeed: Independent Australian Publishing' *Publishing Studies*, Number 7, Autumn 1999, pp. 26–27.

16 Phillinda Masters, 'A Word from the Press: A Brief Survey of Feminist Publishing', *RFR/DRF* vol 20, number 1/2 p. 28.

17 Louise Poland, 'Printing Presses and Protest Banners: Feminist Presses in Australia.' *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 10, 2001. pp. 121–136.

18 Susan Tiffin cites the example of a Sydney printer refusing to print its Lesbian Issue, *Refractory Girl* 5, 1974 – see *Refracting Voices: Feminist Perspectives from Refractory Girl*, Refractory Girl Feminist Journal, Sydney, 1993, p. 30 ; the establishment of Sybylla Press printery in Melbourne in 1975 relieved numerous feminist groups of their ongoing battles with conservative printers who refused their business and returned print-ready copy with graffiti all over it – Trish Lukin interviewed by Tess Moloney, Melbourne, 1989; and as recently as 1993–94, *Lilac*, a lesbian feminist journal based in Tasmania encountered difficulty in securing printing from conservative print businesses until one print shop employee allowed women to come in after hours and print for themselves.

19 Jocelyne Scutt, interview with author, Hobart, October, 2000.

20 Susan Hawthorne, interview with author, Melbourne, July 2000.

21 Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992 p. 40.

22 Rhonda Black and Maryanne Dever, 'Chasing Popularity: On the Difficulty of Publishing Ideas in Australia.' *Arena* No 2 December 1992/January 1993 p. 41.

23 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1991.

24 For example, see Spinifex Press website where direct sales are promoted, together with overseas contacts for distributors: <www.spinifexpress.com.au> [October 2002].

25 Stephanie Dowrick, *Women Writing: Views and Prospects 1975–95*, Panel session: 'Publishing: Fact and Fiction', National Library of Australia, 1995: <www.nla.gov.au/events/dowrick.html> [February 2000].

Personal Reality and the New Reality of Interpretation

By Dorothea Rosa Herliany.

Throughout our lives, in everything we do each day, we are confronted by a world of symbols. The more we realise the importance of communication, the greater is our need to combine and transform those symbols.

In the realm of politics, for example, language can sometimes become a tool for silencing opposition through the manipulation of communication. When this happens, language ceases to be a living thing and instead symbols take on their own urgency. When riots take place in a particular region, when people kill, rape, and steal from each other, these symbols of force come together to form one long text which we need to be able to read in order to understand why and how such things could happen.

This happened to me when I wrote a number of poems set against the background of the removal of Megawati Sukarnoputri from the leadership of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) by political force. The event is now called 'the affair of the 27th July'. At the height of those actions, I was at the Jakarta Arts Centre, in the street known as Cikini Raya, not far from what was happening. I was happily sitting and chatting in the front part of the arts complex, when two of my friends were suddenly chased and fiercely set upon by some soldiers, even though none of us had any idea what was happening. We saw truckloads of armed men wearing uniforms driving past. It felt as though we were in the middle of a war. Suddenly some of the men got down from the trucks and started chasing anyone they could find. I ran away as quickly as I could, especially once I saw a young woman wearing a Muslim head-scarf being chased. They must have decided that she was an activist, because they viciously started kicking her. I didn't wait to find out what would happen next. I just ran and hid in a toilet inside the arts complex.

The events gave birth to this poem:

One Day in July ***July 27, Jakarta***

suddenly I was drowning
among thousands of running people
I ran in every direction I could
enclosed by sorrow, trembling each moment,
feeling silent and empty inside

I couldn't do anything: I should
have wept but couldn't,
I was chained by grief

I couldn't say how sorry I felt
I couldn't sing,
I could only pray
among the anxious houses of fear and hope

Taman Ismail Marzuki, 1996

In my lack of understanding, my fear of being killed, and the terrifying reality all around me, another poem was born.

A Pilgrimage to a Rocky Place
To our Orators

Stones speak in silence,
hard in the roaring, aimless currents,
wounds form in the air, blood flows,
dripping for hundreds of years, sweeping away
the sweat of our silent consciences

Rocks speak in cold words,
squeezing thousands of years of longing
into hard shapes, searching for room
in the emptiness filled with the harsh breathing
of wild animals,
searching for land
in a small space within the soul.

I choose the language of rocks
as a way of breaking
the arrogance of your being.

In situations like these, what else can we trust but symbols?

Subsequent reports in the mass media, the statements released by the authorities, the self-defensive statements, and the subsequent debate, all encouraged me to place my trust in the silent symbols which circulated around me. I even wrote a poem for Megawati at that time.

A Poem of Tears

So things have come to this,
it no longer matters whether we weep or laugh,
it is all the same. We live among thousands
of fossils, clowns from an age long gone,
the death of the past is hidden
by this century's jokes.

There is surely nothing you can say,
but it wouldn't matter anyway,
the air is full of nonsense,
we can only choose to listen in silence,
and stammer, to forget our convictions,
no longer trust the language of our hearts,
to hate the foolishness we see in our mirrors
and in the pictures of ourselves.

There is surely nothing to weep for.
Why should you? It is clear
that we no longer believe
in tears.

Taman Ismail Marzuki, July 1996

So literature is a world in which we can play games: games with words, sounds, meanings and mood.

Or, to speak in slightly broader terms: a literary work embodies whole worlds of experience, emotion and of thought. So when a writer creates a work of literature, she must inevitably relate everything she wishes to write to her own worlds of experience, feeling and thoughts. I use the plural term 'worlds' for a reason. The word relates to both our inner and our outer worlds, and is therefore closely related to the ways in which we experience everything. The artist will always try to write about those things which are closest to herself.

Which is simply to say, that the process of literary creativity does not take place in a vacuum. The literary process is one of space making more space for itself, and time making more time. It is connected with the reality which surrounds it, and with the unfolding history of the literary tradition into which it is born.

But I must also immediately remind you that no matter how tightly connected a work of literature may be with its surrounding time, place and reality, it is never a faithful photocopy or reproduction of its environment. The reality of a work of literature is not factual but a fictional form of imaginative reality. And the reality of a work of literature will always create new realities when a reader enjoys it through her own worlds of experience and thought. Which is to say as well that literature is always a realm of symbols which opens itself and ourselves up to various different interpretations. The reality contained in my poetry is a transitory reality, which readers are free to use to create their own.

If I can refer to my own concrete adaptation of the events of July 27 again, I think that what I have written there can take on a universal reality based on the realm of human experience which is connected to fear, anxiety, the power of deceitful tyrants, oppression, and the robotlike obedience of an apparatus determined to terrorise society – and even, finally, to the desire to appreciate how important life is in our own time and place.

I once read a poem by an aboriginal poet called Oodgeroo Noonuccal. One of the verses I still remember says:

No more boomerang,
no more spear
now we all civilized:
colour bar and beer.

I sense that the poem was written out of a subjective world of experience, things she had herself experienced, and which she had to redescribe in her writing. As a reader new to her works, I was able to interpret my new experience through my awareness of a modern culture destroying an ancient culture by means of the practices of racial discrimination and the consumption of alcohol.

The process of literary and personal creativity are two things which are, nevertheless, closely intertwined with each other. Creativity is, obviously, a process of creating something. But the creative urge, or the personal urge to create, is always motivated by certain particular events, which have their own specific nature.

Based on my own experience, the creative drives which finally give birth to my poems and short stories are usually triggered by various events which I am, nevertheless, seldom able to map in any very precise way.

Yet, in general, they tend to be provoked by specific obsessions, by a specific problem or set of problems, or may be triggered by a particular mood.

My poetry arises from my restlessness, my rebellion, my opposition, and even from my thinking about something which is still a long way off in the future. Some of my poems have even been described as rebellious and aggressively feminist. I think, to use my own words, my own subjective disagreement creates a personal attitude to which I can give free expression. When I do that, the idioms I then create are sometimes aggressive, and even perhaps pornographic. My poetry is, among other things, a way of expressing myself honestly and with perfect freedom.

To take a different example. When I first read my own work about train journeys, and waiting at train stations, I experienced many things which I never thought about while I was writing, such things as death, accident and disasters. It was not until the time when I was actually a passenger on a train which was involved in an accident in a tunnel in West Java, killing hundreds of people and almost plunging my own carriage into a river, that I really understood the poetic significance of what I had written.

But the world of experience which I wished to create in my writing was always more than death and disaster, or of periods spent waiting for something to happen, of people moaning in their suffering.

My creative process begins with real experiences, real moods, real thoughts, and real subjective feelings. But when my work is finished, it opens itself to various other experiences, and the range of interpretations is as free and as autonomous as my readers are.

This was written in Perth in August 2000.

Dorothea Rosa Herliany is a major contemporary Indonesian poet. Born in 1963, she has published ten volumes of poetry, including the recent bilingual collection *Kill the Radio: Sebuah Radio Kumatian* (2001) and her selected works 1985-2000, *Para Pembunuh Waktu* (2002). She is Director of IndonesiaTera, a non-profit organisation working in the area of social and cultural research, publication, documentation, and the development of information networks relating to culture, education and social awareness.

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A Ribbon Around a Bomb: Identity and the Body in the Diary of Frida Kahlo

By Grace McQuilten.

A bomb is in itself still; it lies dormant, waiting to metamorphose into an explosion. The bomb is silence. The bomb is the potential for violence. The bomb is the space around the explosion; it is the peaceful space prior to, and the devastated space after the explosion. It is the past and the future of the explosion. It is anticipation and regret. It is frustration.

Frida Kahlo always appears to us masked; her face is still, her body idle, her clothing arranged. She appears to us in expressions of blank pain, stoic endurance. The imagery around her, however, betrays this blank expression, betrays the masking of her elaborate dress. It betrays her and hints at violence. The imagery around her body, her hair, her eyebrows; whether in the form of a dead bird at her neck or a hand hanging from her ear, hint at an explosion... An explosive pain, a fragmented body, a disrupted sense of self: hidden, masked, bound by a metaphorical ribbon. When André Breton described Frida Kahlo's artwork as 'a ribbon around a bomb'¹ he summarised the external perception of Frida Kahlo herself; the constructed-self of her artworks, the impact of her physical presence. Frida was violent, painful, passionate, expressive and dangerous, yet this danger was contained. The potential for her explosion was bound by symbolic ribbons: her costume and masking, her husband Diego Rivera, her self-portraiture.

In the masking of her body with elaborate clothing, and in the construction of her self portraits, Frida created an iconic figure of herself; strong, enduring, endlessly suffering, always beautiful. This construction of her external identity in her paintings managed to disguise the fragmentation and vulnerability expressed in her diaries, of her internal self. Where 'her luxurious dresses hid her broken body,'² her self portraits masked her broken identity. What her diaries reveal is a much less assured woman than her paintings suggest; a woman whose identity hinged on her relationship with her husband; a woman whose identity was shattered through the shattering of her body. A woman who exploded out of her ribbons and onto the page.

André Breton's description of Frida articulates her attraction, but it also articulates an underlying oppressive view of female sexuality, which highlights one of the most important cultural factors in Frida's work; the dominance of her relationship with her husband in the representation of her self. It was for Diego that she dressed in the traditional Mexican Tehuana dress, masking her body and reinventing her identity; during their separation she cut off her hair and stopped wearing the Tehuana clothing. In her diary, references to Diego rise time and again; showing the fusion between their identities in her perception of self:

Every moment, he is my child.
my newborn babe, every little while,
every day, of my own self.³

While she expressed violence and pain and female sexuality in her artworks, this violence was masked; controlled by the distancing of the viewer, the masking of her expressions and the beauty of the works. Breton did not describe her as 'a vein around a bomb.' Like her artworks, Frida was controlled, in a sense, by her beauty; her desire to conform to the ideals of her husband and her politics. While she was still subversive and her ideas were revolutionary, her revolution was an

inherently personal and internal one; the true political force of her work lay in the quiet eruptions of her internal world into the external ribbon-self that she painted both physically and metaphorically. While she challenged society, particularly through works like 'A Few Small Nips'(1935) and 'The Suicide of Dorothy Hale' (1938-39), the force of this challenge relied on her first setting up an expectation of beauty, before slyly undermining it ('Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair,' 1940).

This duality between beauty and ugliness was reflected in the duality of masculine and feminine in her work, and in the contradiction between her radical potential and social conformity. It also points to the duality between her internal world and her external construction of self. The imagery that surrounds her steely face emphasizes this border by hinting at violence and a lack of control. By exposing her body, in particular her internal organs, Frida undermines the beauty of her external body, her clothing, her expression. It is the veins, arteries and blood of her body that echo an explosion, and contradict the ribbons of the external world, and it is this internal explosion that is prevalent in her diary work.

In her relentless self-portraiture, Frida portrays herself with detachment; exposing her body and her pain, both physical and psychological, with a symbolic distance. The result is a unified expression of identity, in which the physical torture she experienced is blended with the psychological sense of fragmentation this pain caused. Where she appears calm and steely in her paintings, her diary speaks otherwise:

Colour of poison.
Everything upside down.
ME? Sun
and
moon
feet
and
Frida⁴

Her self-portraits, in this sense, act as psychological mirrors, reflecting back to her a unified image of her identity, a combination of her inner turmoil with the external world. They link, in this sense, to Jacques Lacan's theory of the formation of identity; a child faced with its image in a mirror finds a pleasing sense of unity in the image, which contradicts the fragmented sense of self felt internally, and creates at the same time a feeling of alienation with the image in the mirror. While in her portraits her body is unified, in her diary she writes 'I am DISINTEGRATION.'⁵ In this sense, her artworks act as a metaphorical mirror; whilst her elaborate and beautiful costuming in life hid her fractured body, her artworks act as a mask over her fractured sense of self, its 'lack of harmony, its unfitness.'⁶ While they unify her image, they also alienate her from her internal sense of self, from her body. Perhaps it is in the disruptions on the pages of her diary that she explored a closer connection to her body and, importantly, a freer exploration of her identity.

A bomb has no reflection. No eyes in which to see itself reflected. Is it the reflection? Mirrored. Watching. Still, silent, unresponsive. Whole. Perfect. Ugly. Dormant ... on the verge of violence. So still. Betraying noise. Betrayal of blood. Play of light on glass: a vision. Without pain. Waiting.

The pages of her diary link more closely with an internal, unconscious sense of self. As writing and artwork that is expressed with passion and lack of constraint,

her diary has a chaotic, abstract, fractured feel; extremely expressive yet incoherent. Julia Kristeva suggests that underlying language and the symbolic order of the external world lies a *semiotic chora*, a space that links to early childhood, associated with the mother and the unconscious.⁷ This semiotic chora is displaced at Lacan's mirror-stage by the introduction of language and the patriarchal functioning of society. It continues to disrupt the symbolic order, however, through the eruption of repetition, gaps and the irrational in language. These semiotic eruptions are inherently feminine and are closely linked to the female body. This disruptive language can be seen right through Frida's diary, with reference to the body and sensation;

The green miracle of the landscape of my body becomes in you the whole of nature. I fly through it to caress the rounded hills with my fingertips, my hands sink into the shadowy valleys in an urge to possess and I'm enveloped in the embrace of gentle branches, green and cool.⁸

Kristeva argues that through the writing of the unconscious and bodily space associated with the semiotic, women can enter and disrupt the patriarchal language that traditionally excludes them. The fragmented and physical language in Frida's diary, in this sense, can be seen as linking very closely with the semiotic. Where her artworks portray a carefully constructed 'bomb', a silent suffering, her diary portrays the explosion. Her body rises up and screams through the pages, contradicting the masked and stoic appearance of her face in her self portraits.

This explosion of the internal also undermines social expectations; it freely engages in self questioning, in the search for identity. It allows for a fluid interpretation of self; one that incorporates unconscious sensation with conscious thought. It expresses honestly feelings about love and social expectations. It allows for the eruption of the feminine. This internal explosion in writing, allowing for a deep understanding of self is, I think, where the power of the diary, journal and autobiography lie. Frida doesn't need specifically to speak politically; she speaks for herself, and this self-expression resonates among women generally. As Nancy Mairs says in 'Remembering the bone house', 'I want my 'life,' in reporting the details of my own life, to recount, at the level beneath the details, the lives of others. No modesty is entailed here – simply the desire to celebrate the private rather than the public world of human habitation.'⁹

Just as Frida was overshadowed in her public life by Diego, so her diary is at times overshadowed by his presence. Through the exploration of her private life, her internal world and the level beneath the details, however, Frida's experiences of her body and her identity have well transcended the presence of Diego in their influence on the public world. This shows the ways in which the personal can infiltrate and override the political. Her personal imagery and her internal world resonate on a universal level:

Years.
Waiting with anguish
hidden away, my spine
broken, and the immense glance,
footless through the vast
path...
Carrying on my life
enclosed
in steel.¹⁰

Frida Kahlo's diary, through its exploration of her internal world, through the eruption of her body and her fragmented sense of identity, explodes the carefully groomed ribbons that confined her social 'bomb.' In the process, it both validates the exploration of feminine identity and illuminates the relationship between the female body and society.

The meditative act of braiding. The slow and careful precision as pieces of hair are weaved through each other and interweaved with ribbon. The complex interaction of hand, hair, eye. The threading of body with silk. The binding and weaving of the body. The hiding of the body. The bomb. An exploded body.

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Notes

- 1 Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2001, p.25.
- 2 The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self Portrait, Harry N Abrams Inc. Publishers, New York, 1995, p.23.
- 3 The Diary of Frida Kahlo, p.205.
- 4 The Diary of Frida Kahlo, p.271.
- 5 The Diary of Frida Kahlo, p.225.
- 6 Ibid, p.275.
- 7 Kelly Oliver (Ed), The Portable Kristeva, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997.
- 8 Ibid, p.216.
- 9 Nancy Mairs, Remembering the Bone House: An Erotics of Place and Space, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p.6.
- 10 Ibid, p.273.

Re-membering My Mother's Body

By Sylvia Martin.

The unthinkable has happened; my mother is dead. The woman who for so long intoned, with the fatalism of Racine's Medea: 'This is the last time I will ... take the plane trip to visit you ... see the changing colours of Autumn ... smell the salt sea air', that it became a family joke.

In recent years, when I have made the trek from northern New South Wales to Melbourne to visit her, she has stared up at me wide-eyed with amazement and incomprehension when I first appear armed with a big bunch of flowers: at the door of her unit in the retirement village, then in her room at the retirement hostel and, finally, by her chair in the dayroom of the nursing home. She doesn't know who I am, this large middle-aged woman bellowing: 'Hullo, Mum ... It's Sylv!!' *Sylv? She is a little girl skipping, curls bobbing, cheeky smile...Sylv is a young woman, slim and serious, auburn*

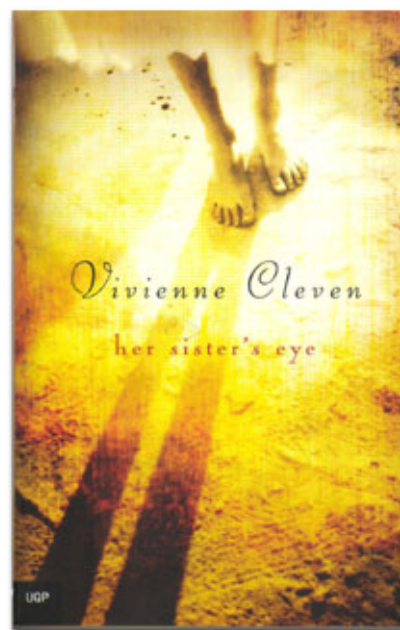
curls tamed into a neat French roll... Under the scrutiny of that blue gaze I feel myself ballooning till I fill the room with my presence, my offering of flowers a gaudy overstatement on her shrivelled lap.

My mother was what was known as a 'big woman' when I was a child: tall, straight-backed – an imposing figure at the blackboard, commanding instant attention from her motley group of fourth-graders. You didn't muck around in Mrs Martin's class! I know; I was in it one year. When we walked into church on Sundays, she would stride down the aisle, the scrap of speckled netting on her hat the only frivolous note, my short-legged father struggling to keep up. At the beach, I would steal glances at the generous curve of her belly as she sat under the umbrella in her floral one-piece bathers.

We weren't a family to parade our bodies, even in the privacy of our home; Mum was English and it was the early 1950s, after all. But I do have clear memories of her struggling over the complicated rows of hooks and eyes on her flesh-pink corsets. Did she ask me to help her do them up? I'm not sure, but my detailed recall of their intricacies suggests that she might have. Over the boned edifice, she would draw on a pair of large white pants with loose legs under which protruded the suspenders to which she attached her stockings.

We weren't a family who cuddled and hugged either, although there was no lack of love in our Housing Commission home deep in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. I have no recollection of the feel of my mother's skin on mine, no memory of being enveloped by that capacious body.

What I do have is a vivid memory of being in the bath with my mother in the green bathroom with the lethal gas bath-heater that I refused to light, even much later when I was a teenager. I think the bath sharing must have happened only on special occasions, as I was aware even then that this was a treat and not to be taken for granted. When I was in that vast bath alone I used to get cold because the water level was strictly monitored and it never covered my body, so I had to splash myself with hot water to ward off goose-pimples. When my mother was in



the bath with me the water reached to the very rim, threatening to slurp over the edge if I wriggled too much. I don't remember our bodies touching, although they must have as we were wedged in together, but I do remember warmly the pink hillocks of flesh, her surprisingly small breasts floating lazily on the water's surface, the soap bubbles nestling in her navel. The water sucked and gurgled as she stood up at the end, rudely breaking my hypnotic trance. Rivulets of water streamed from her belly and legs but couldn't stop the level in the bath from receding miraculously to the few inches I was used to.

That body is my body today: the small, still firm breasts, the belly that seems to have a life of its own, the fleshy shoulders and heavy thighs.

My mother's body, on the contrary, simply melted away in her last years. Instead of looking down at me, as she had done even when I was an adult, she barely reached my shoulders when she took my arm on our walks to the shops. Her fingers grew elongated and bird-like and we had to get her wedding and engagement rings made smaller so they wouldn't fall off.

When she was 88, she was diagnosed with cancer and I stayed with her in the hospital to help her prepare for the operation that would remove the affected breast. As I helped her undress in order to put on the white cotton hospital garment with the ties at the back, I was shocked, and moved, when the body I had not seen naked for more than forty years was revealed. Her breasts were almost flat, defined only by two girlish pink nipples. The translucent, paper-thin skin on her shoulders and upper arms with its tracery of blue veins fell in soft drapes and folds, as if surprised that the body it covered no longer needed its generous dimensions.

The strange beauty of that body, its vulnerability and its resilience, is a memory I will cherish. I hope that memory will help me appreciate the changes in my own body as I age, at the same time as it melds with the memory of the warm body in the bath in a continuity of femaleness. My daughter, too, has the same body.

Sylvia Martin is a NSW writer.

Incantations of Grief and Memory

Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye*. Brisbane: UQP, 2002.

Reviewed by Janine Little.

The experience of reading Vivienne Cleven's second novel, *Her Sister's Eye*, is both compelling and curious, to the extent that it has remained with me for several weeks as I try to say what I want to say about it with some kind of reciprocal cleverness. With its tricks of character and construction, Cleven's work deserves no less than that from a reviewer. That is why I depart from a newspaper's recent description of *Her Sister's Eye* as a more ambitious but 'less successful' work than her David Unaipon Award-winning *Bitin' Back*.

Success has a habit of disguising itself as the routine or frustrating small acts performed sometimes consciously yet, at other times, as implicit aspects of a much larger achievement. It is in the latter, bigger picture interpretation that Cleven should be recognised as an important new talent in Australian women's writing, and not because this novel, broken into its smaller, constructive acts, sometimes slips into what seems like their merely routine performance. One of the reasons for this reaction is that the novel reminded me so much of the huge and technically intoxicating novels of American Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. From its outset the comparison is probably unfair, given that Morrison has eight novels behind her, while this is only Cleven's second. The comparison is a way of acknowledging the contribution that *Her Sister's Eye* makes to expanding the parameters of Aboriginal women's prose, and the place that it has in broader literary traditions. I will elaborate upon this acknowledgment later, but it is first helpful to illustrate my point about technicalities.

Four years after being tormented by it in *Paradise*, I still have Morrison's incantation of grief and memory working on me as I read anything that attempts to cover its music, learn its spells, and speak its language. When it attempts to do this as explicit technical manoeuvre, *Her Sister's Eye* is less successful than when it flows through the music, magic, and language that are so powerfully Aboriginal. The most significant illustration of this aspect is in the construction of the character, Sophie Dove, and her relationship with the river running through what would otherwise be the standard and stifling bigotry of Mundra, or any country town, Australia. Sophie's 'conversations' with the river engage the historical power imbalance between the white small-town establishment and the black 'fringe dwellers' in a dimension where altogether different alternatives are possible. When Sophie takes revenge on her rapist, the sadistic Mr. Drysdale, it is the river that determines its form:

Mister Peekaboo comed down to the river that awful scat cat day. Not even knows, as mad as he were that it were his big time.

Sofie say: Swimmin.

Boo say: Yeah, with no clothes on.

Laugh he do. His trousers everything off. White like fish belly in the water. He swims right in the middle and a thing happened. The secret thing.

'Help me! Let me go! Let me go you, little bitch! I'll fucking kill you! You bitttch!'

That Sofie knew that no person can help when the river say what gonna happen. That way things be. Dancin on water won't do good a tiny bit.

Face blue like the sky hands reachin at Sofie he go bubblin under there to the fish house. That ol house a mud.

He be no more Mister Peekaboo. He be keepin company with em all – eatin weeds under the river. Ain't like Sofie hard hearts just it were the goodest thing to do (58).

The river translates the otherwise historically certain victim-abuser relationship represented by Sophie and Drysdale into one in which an order of things related to the physical setting in/on the land can be ultimately restored. This may be one of the key points of departure between Cleven and Morrison, in that Morrison's portrayal of violence and retribution depends upon the solely human creations of dispossession, torment, and cruelty. While these are apparent in Cleven's story, its emphasis on the land as the locus of power differs from Morrison's application of geographical displacement as the catalyst for human encounter.

This is probably why the use of lyric throughout *Her Sister's Eye* seems more like a gesture to that particular style than a device for character or scene development. I tended to experience a bit of style overload when Sophie's singing of one particular song was combined with these 'river conversations' and stream of consciousness prose that also had a functional necessity of formulating and moving the plot. Cleven tries to do so much with her 233 pages that this character, along with others, ends up standing just a little bit too far apart from us in the sheer and obvious effort of their very being in the story. The other casualty of this effect is the way in which events that are supposed to have some significance either go nowhere, or turn out to be far less compelling than they could have been – with a bit more restraint on technicalities. For example, the scene in which Sophie is discovered in hiding with the missing child, Kenny Austin, appears at first instance to hold some thematic significance, but there is no mention or resumption of its purpose after its initial appearance. Secondly, the incident of arson by Sophie on the Red Rose Lady, Polly Goodman's, house seems flatter than it might have been with less competition from parts of the narrative owing much more to history than fiction.

The two characters that I wanted to work and live much longer than they did, and who highlight the point made above, are Archie Corella and Caroline Hughes. Both Archie and Caroline have major roles to fulfill in *Her Sister's Eye*, not the least of which is serving as the two poles of Australia's violent history of race, sex, and class oppression. Alienated and tormented by the cruelty of those who, by circumstance rather than strength, had held power over their lives, Archie and Caroline have to reach back into memory to find a way to survive it. Reminiscent of Katherine Susannah Prichard's concerns in *Coonardoo*, the relationship between the two is nevertheless a reversal of the well-explored portrait of the white female landowner and the obedient, black servant. Caroline, for instance, wants desperately to be accepted by the country women's hypocrisy club, the Red Rose Ladies, altogether they are complicit in the years of abuse she suffers from her husband and son.

The Red Rose Ladies, however, have joined the male population of Mundra in constructing her as 'mad' because she befriends an Aboriginal woman who defies the town's unwritten apartheid to walk around its streets. Archie Corella turns out to be the scarred survivor of the retribution taken against the woman, his mother, wandering for years around the country to grieve the murder of his twin sister. Between both of them, the black woman, Murilla Salte, who cares for Caroline in the Drysdale house, is the stabilizing force contradicting past representations of Aboriginal women in similar situations as hapless victims. As the protector figure for the vulnerable in the story, Murilla's solid and strong character sometimes makes it difficult to understand the relationship she has with Archie. The two appear early on to have unresolved issues to work out and, when Archie reveals his true identity at the end of the novel, the ambiguity remains.

Because Murilla's grandmother seems, Sally Morgan style, to hold the secrets that pull all of the threads together, another few chapters at least would have aided the story in doing so.

There are heavy and complex themes to be explored with any lasting sense of satisfaction in the 233 pages with which Cleven has to work. I could have sat with Archie and Caroline for another 200 pages, if it meant that I would have had more time and more story in which to appreciate their tragedies, and the ways in which they dealt with them. Australian publishers have, for several years now, encouraged their writers to produce 'short books' and are loth to commit to anything exceeding an 80,000-word limit. In Cleven's case, the task of achieving balance, restraint, and complexity of scene and character in this short scope was impossibly large. It would be wonderful to read a novel for which she is given the space, and support, to tell the story she can tell, and it would be a shame if that had to happen outside of Australia. Cleven seems well suited, however, to taking up a residency somewhere in the United States, where publishers are less frightened of long stories and writers dealing with such themes can end up winning Nobel Prizes.

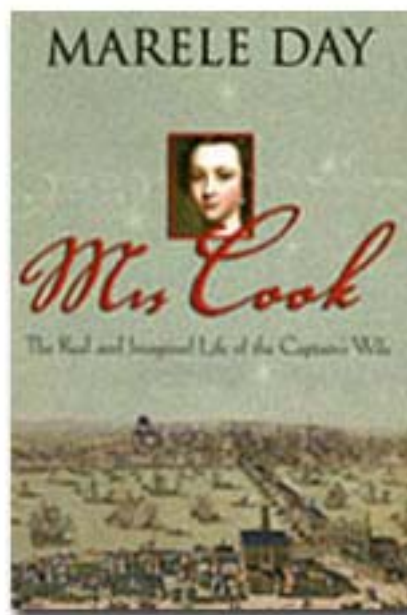
Janine Little has worked as a University lecturer following her completion of a PhD that discussed issues of race in recent Australian and American literature and culture. Before and after that she has been a journalist. She lives on Macleay Island.

The Invisible Private

Marele Day, *Mrs Cook: The Real and Imagined Life of the Captain's Wife*. Allen and Unwin, 2002.

Reviewed by Caroline Webb.

Marele Day's *Mrs Cook*, a portrait of Captain James Cook's wife, joins an increasing number of works that are basically novels titled for actual historical figures. This flight to the imagination as a way of considering history exploits the postmodern perception that history is not objectively knowable. The success of such works depends primarily on novelistic qualities: the ability to evoke an era and bring to life the individuals within it as human beings. Day's remarkable 1997 novel *Lambs of God* demonstrated the power of her ability to imagine experiences that are in effect, if not in fact, remote from present-day life. But I found *Mrs Cook* disappointing. The characters surrounding James and Elizabeth Cook are shadowy to the point of forgettability (I kept having to check who was who) as Day focuses on her central portrait – and that portrait remains too banal to support her conception of the eighteenth-century domestic world.



The flat style that served Day well in evoking the quirkily limited world of *Lambs of God* is less effective here, and frequently seems merely limp. Dialogue is reduced to a minimum, presumably to avoid the awkwardness for the reader of eighteenth-century diction (the unhearing Elizabeth's 'I'm sorry?' strikes a jarringly modern note), and much of the narrative records events. Descriptions of thoughts, meanwhile, emerge from flatness only into romantic cliché: 'In that crowd of well-wishers Elizabeth felt alone. She could not share their excitement, their anticipation for the voyage ahead, but she did her best to keep a smile on her face so that when James looked back, this is what he would see, what he would remember' (p. 202).

The novel as a whole is structured by a conceit that seems engaging, but produces a problematic paradox. Day sets out to tell the private life of the stay-at-home wife of Captain Cook, but she constructs it in a series of chapters each titled for an object from this life found (for the most part) in public archives and museums. These objects are appealingly varied; they range from formal documents such as James Cook's will, to a Chinese porcelain teapot (the latter a nice testimony to the domestication of the exotic in Elizabeth's experience). They feature, sometimes prominently, sometimes incidentally, in the chapters named for them, as Day traces Mrs Cook's experience. The result is a distinctly episodic text. Its near-fragmentary nature reminds the reader of the tentativeness of the historian's reconstruction of the past – even though the story Day tells, like many postmodern biography-novels, engages with her protagonist's private emotions throughout.

Although Day sees her decision to trace the life through a series of objects as 'in character' for Mrs Cook, who left a house stuffed with artefacts of various kinds, the private/public paradox shadows the work from the start. Day's point is

presumably to illuminate the necessarily local and private experience of the lower middle-class eighteenth-century woman as opposed to the well-charted adventures of the famous man. But Day's exploration of her subject's life too often depends on the presence (or absence) of Elizabeth Cook's husband.

The novel begins by tracing the lives of Elizabeth Batts and James Cook in parallel: we are treated, thanks to a souvenir print made using ice, to a vision of Elizabeth's parents at the Frost Fair two years before she was born, then to a glimpse of James at the age of eleven, in the same year. The latter shows us (partly via a flashback, which seems a bit of a cheat) his early fascination with ships and the sea. We follow them through their youth together. The young sailor James comes to lodge in the inn that is run by Elizabeth's stepfather, so he discovers the child with her whistling toy bird. Later, aged thirteen, she meets him for a few seconds and becomes instantly infatuated. Both, it appears, remain fascinated by these rare glimpses – although it is unclear why they didn't see each other more often when he was staying in the inn – so the characters come to share the sense of their fates also enforced upon the reader. (This can seem either charming or cliché; I found the images of their early lives generally appealingly presented.) After they marry, James' side of the story disappears and we see only through Elizabeth's eyes, in a neat twist on the conventional idea of the pre-postmodern woman's story as ending in her marriage.

Day's project seems, then, to be informed by feminist values such as are manifested in her series of crime novels featuring Claudia Valentine. Her focus on Cook's wife rather than on Cook himself draws our attention to the domestic life of the ordinary woman. James' long absences left Elizabeth solely in charge of her household – its responsibilities and above all its cares. Day's depiction of Elizabeth's experience of James' absence includes the pain not only of missing him but of bearing, and losing, several of their children while he was on his voyages. (The infant losses are attributed to obvious or unobvious internal weaknesses rather than to the infections so common in pre-Lister childbirths.). Her suffering at her children's deaths is a key element in Day's portrait of Elizabeth's life. Its gradually numbing effect is moving, giving point to Elizabeth's passionate speech to her husband before his final journey:

You think you are the only one to voyage? I have made discoveries I didn't wish to make. Three children dead. Do you know to which bleak shore that takes me? You said your tribulations started on that long reef of New Holland, but the reef of grief is endless and the coral sharp as knives. So many times I have been stranded there alone, James, without you. I doubt I can survive another voyage ... (p. 247)

The personal, Day seems to be saying, is the core of experience, the most private and most significant landscape, and it is explored by the wife alone. However extraordinary James' adventures may be, he has no access to the immediacy of childbirth and has separated himself from the immediacy of loss. By contrast, Elizabeth can imagine James' life, if only in glimpses; the public man generates documents from which she, like her own and James' biographers, can share, or try to share, those public experiences.

This is of course the paradox on which the book depends, but it results in some oddities. Day notes at the beginning that Elizabeth outlived James by fifty-six years; we might therefore expect that her portrait would show us those years, would help us picture the life not only of the married woman but of the aging widow who survived well into the nineteenth century. Instead the fifty-six years (1780-1835) are given in fifty-seven pages, a small fraction of the book, and the record of Elizabeth's experiences following the death of her last two children in

1793 is given even more briefly. To have extended the portrait would have required more research, and the imagining of another half century of English domestic life, but not to have done so unfortunately leaves us with the same idea of the woman we might have had before: her life, the domestic life, seems to have significance only when related to that of the great man. Once the Captain is dead, his wife's life has no value; she remains after all merely 'Mrs Cook.'

Day may be suggesting that the eighteenth-century woman was socially constructed to perceive her life in terms of her relationship to her husband and children, as though she did not exist except in relation to them. But this is not really how she has portrayed Elizabeth. Her final vision of the old woman of ninety-three emphasises the woman's own dreams of exploration:

"Elizabeth," the bird called once more. How her heart thrilled to hear that voice. Up, up they went, over the whiteness of ice. The bird . . . had found the tides of wind and sailed with them. Below was the continent of ice, yet Elizabeth felt warm and safe in the feathery bosom. She saw all the peoples of the world as the bird rode on the winds circling the globe. Eskimos, Tahitians, English, Chinese. Higher and higher he went, towards the stars that were her babies, and higher and higher, to the bright star, whose light would guide her into the Great Ocean. (p. 346)

Although Elizabeth is resting in 'the feathery bosom' rather than flying herself, the bird does not seem to be identified with the adventurous Captain so much as with the toy of her childhood, Sam Bird, that had first attracted James' attention to her. The suggestion is rather that the Captain and his wife have shared a dream, one that he could realise in actual voyages but that she could achieve only in her 'imagined life.' It is a pity that Day did not locate this suggestion more fully; her interest in objects in the end limits our sense of Elizabeth's imaginative life as well as of her 'real' one.

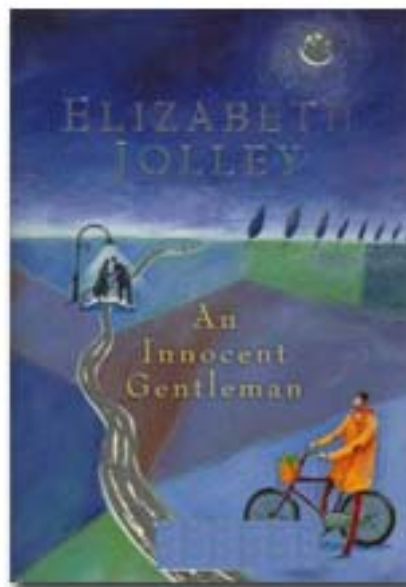
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On Human Kindness

Elizabeth Jolley, *An Innocent Gentleman*. Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 2001.

Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic.

Freedom is a profound human desire in the name of which emotions are spent, beliefs harnessed, lives sacrificed. But what are its benefits? The answer offered by Elizabeth Jolley's latest novel *An Innocent Gentleman* is at the same time funny and sad, practical and elusive, like any other advice that avoids clichéd prescriptions or fixed perspectives. Jolley's (apparently) unpolished style and the repetition of information indicate that the author is replicating an inner monologue, although whose monologue is often hard to tell. The narrative is delivered in the third person singular, but at one moment the third person is Henry, a gentle husband, and the next Muriel, a feminine wife he looks after and takes care of in all respects, even the most personal. An odd clue pops out every now and then in the form of an incongruent fact that gives away a conflict of interest and indicates



that particular section must have been voiced by this or that character, but it's not until much later in the novel that we learn the cause of these discrepancies.

Jolley's novel takes place in the landscape of her childhood, England's industrial Midlands, amidst the people and situations inspired by fragments of her memory. A father who was a devoted teacher, a mother craving for the comfort of the genteel classes, children getting home education instead of going to primary school, the subtle nuances of philosophical signification allowed by the German language, the sublime pleasure of music making – all these motifs are put in the service of one theme, that of freedom.

The book opens with a 'cast list' and a couple of excerpts from the main body of the novel interspersed with two passages from Thomas Mann. Structurally, this looks like flashes of memory triggering recollection, sometimes occurring before a story starts to unfold. But the true sense of beginning is created only when the piano playing scene and its gripping imagery take possession of a reader's imagination. The description of spiritual and sensuous rapport shared by Muriel and the family guest 'Mr H or Mr Hawthorne – more later', in playing a movement of a Beethoven sonata, a moment fully appreciated by the husband Henry who is their audience, sets the tone of the novel's discourse. It is the time of World War Two, and the great German composer – who initially dedicated his third symphony *Eroica* to Napoleon and then revoked his decision, and much later composed his only opera *Fidelio* around the subject of freedom – is a perfect metaphor for the controversy that arises – controversy that will have, as soon becomes apparent, not only political, but deeply personal implications as well.

Thus *An Innocent Gentleman*, while being a book about memory, is above all a book of reflection. And indeed, the sentiment aroused by it is, despite its intricate mode of communication, neither confusion nor anxiety. Rather, it is alertness and contemplation, the only human faculties that can be of any help in the event of

the 'simultaneous chaos' that marriage can sometimes become. For, philosophical dimensions aside, Jolley's novel is about quotidian matters, such as fine manners and tolerance. Should there be complete freedom in a relationship or are there degrees of freedom? What are we to make of Henry's attitude: 'Wanting to please and respect Muriel, he had given what could be looked upon as an exaggeration of freedom. This freedom was, he thought, written into their marriage.' All along, Jolley is talking of truth and honour – freedom and courtesy. Freedom is not simply having your own way, argues Henry at one point in the novel. The problem is, of course, that what he has in mind is love – and love is emotion, isn't it? It is supposed to be a synonym for happiness, the most elusive of human ideals. Love is, like music, a rather complicated matter. Take the following proposition, for instance: 'Music required an intellectual approach as did the reading of poetry and drama and certain books of non-fiction, as well as the various kinds of fiction.... It was the combination of the mind and the movement and the memory, all of it enlivened, animated by the full force of the imagination and by desire. It was a learned and a sensory approach' and, hence, the source of a profound aesthetic experience that made Henry happy. It also 'fitted with the idea that the origin of genius is in the imagination.'

A salient point of Jolley's novel is that Muriel is a specific type of woman, typically feminine. That image is created by the syntax she uses, by her family history involving an authoritarian mother, by her infantile psyche – that is, her helplessness showing her also as capable of heedless cruelty. She is, of course, pretty and her teaching profile indicates she is by no means stupid. In old fashioned terms, she is a perfect woman and her weaknesses are all encouraged by her arguably over-permissive husband. Not overtly, though. For delusion is part of any philosophical approach, and the possession of another human being can be nothing other than a fancy. This illusion – that Muriel 'belonged to him' – is what partly lies behind Henry's acquiescence to and his acceptance of the situation. And this also explains why he takes too much responsibility and is humble to the point of being self-effacing. The multi-dimensional nature of the family controversy is reflected in the two essentially different personalities. While his wife is driven by a desire for social ascendancy, Henry finds solace in the act of creation, and writing is one of the catalysts that for him has a healing capacity; housework is another.

Posed amidst these undisguised autobiographical details is once again the undying question: What happens in the case of absence of power and lack of control? The only answer hidden in the discourse is that it depends on the psychology of the characters involved and their mechanisms of delusion. Of seeing and not believing. But also on the method of accommodation. Somebody in the novel, for instance, says that Henry turns everything into a joke. He, himself, admits at one point: 'Henry knew, all along, that this freedom in the marriage, so-called freedom in their marriage, really encouraged a decadence, a deterioration, a turning away alongside the standards of an artistic decadence which, before they were married, he and Muriel had both believed in and been refreshed by their belief.' In this sometimes endless adult game, children are just sounding boards for their parents' emotions. Henry and Muriel's daughters have no names; they remain 'the little girls' to the very end.

An Innocent Gentleman has all the best features of Jolley's fiction writing. It is an explorative work to the point of scientific exactness in terms of both structure and style of narration, without eclipsing the emotional aspects of human existence. Jolley's characters are endowed with tenderness and sympathy; while in melancholy and grief dominate their lives and they are thwarted by endless anxieties, they do not lack humour or endurance. Dreams bring tranquillity to Jolley too. 'On the whole I prefer to write the imagined rather than the

autobiographical. I have to understand that the one cannot be written without the other,' she said not so long ago – in 1992.

The healing touch of human sympathy for the sufferings of her heroes points to Elizabeth Jolley's incessant endeavours to recognise herself, and thus everyone else. 'Without some kind of recognition how can we love? I think it is necessary to love and to care deeply before attempting to write. Writing is an endless questioning towards a hoped for understanding,' she emphasised many years ago, at a symposium in Perth back in June 1978.

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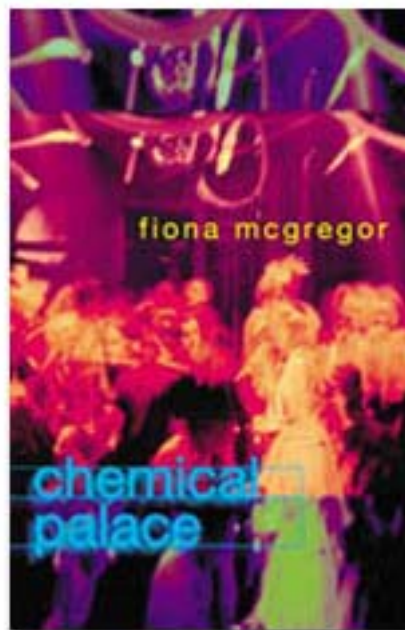
Bringing Down the House

Fiona McGregor. *Chemical Palace*. Allen and Unwin, 2002.

Reviewed by Carolyn Hughes.

It's not cool to talk about 'grunge fiction' anymore. Very five minutes ago. Yet out of grunge comes *Chemical Palace*, a fiercely written ode to the Sydney queer scene and its sub-cultures. It is also a tale of intensity and excess, and of the relationship between the sub-cultures and the city they inhabit.

The brilliance of this book is not in the plot or character construction. It is the style. This book hisses and spits at the gritty realism of grunge. The post-modernist format slides through vignettes to flashbacks to lyrics. Another strength is the descriptions of the outrageous outfits and the drug use that fuels their creators. This subject matter lends itself well to McGregor's sharp and poetic prose and the ultra-cool cuts of dialogue between the group of friends who put on wild parties in the spirit of 'if you can't find what you want, create it yourself.' Even the cats get into the spirit; they 'make an art of idleness and vanity.'



However, the writing is so absorbing that it threatens to absorb the characters too. Despite their flamboyance, they compete for attention with the prose itself. The characters are also inhibited, ironically, by their excesses. They show how eccentricity and fetishes can be restricting. They are all constrained by their extraordinariness and suffer from alienation when confronted with the ordinary. When their freedom and creativity is threatened by the profit-driven mainstream, these people are threatened as well.

There is also a sense of the invisibility of their world beneath the workaday existence. Some of them have ordinary jobs that they do alongside people who are oblivious to their other world. One of them has a job at the hospital where they don't know 'her thoughts on the universe, sex and religion or what she got up to after hours ... At the office, interstate, they didn't know about James, his repertoire of outfits like a book of bad fairy tales cataloguing almost twenty years on the dance floor and his true passion music. Slip's buried as well beneath kitchen chores four nights a week.'

This is anti-suburbia, what you would see if you picked up Sydney and looked underneath it. The characters are a sampler of alternative underbelly types and anti-heroes. All of them have pasts that are rough but somehow sexy. However, we don't really get to know any of the characters because for most of them their existence is bound up with what is physical and external. They are put together as an interconnected group rather than all drawn around a central protagonist, although the character called traffic gets a bit more focus in the last quarter of the book.

The narrative starts to follow her around towards the end, particularly as she slides backwards after breaking up with her girlfriend. She is into piercing and pain and uses this for ghoulish effect in performance art by sticking needles and hooks into her flesh. Like many others in her milieu, traffic's body is her canvas where she experiments with sex, drugs, clothes, hair and make-up, and sado-masochism. Her body is also her limitation as she tries to cope with the constraints of injury and addiction. It is important to note though that McGregor does not conflate drug use and queer sexuality. The drug use is more related to the underground dance and performance scene, where the two seem to be highly compatible.

While the prose kicks in straight away, it does lose momentum towards the end. Perhaps it's the wearing off, the coming down, but it does lose some of force of the earlier pages. The themes continue reasonably evenly though: this is a novel of relationships, image, music, life and death, sex and drugs of all kinds. If you blew out handfuls of brain cells in Sydney in the nineties, by the end of this book you might be able to remember where they went.

Ultimately the book raises questions about the direction of queer culture and its appropriation by the mainstream. Are there pockets that remain as invisible as these characters did to everyone outside their realm? Or does queer culture no longer exist because it is absorbed into the mainstream? Now that drag shows are practically family entertainment, what is happening in alternative performance?

McGregor uses the style of the times to say something about the times that produced that style. If sub-cultures are diminishing, at least McGregor breathes life into the world of prose with this distinctive and distinguished novel. During its pages I thought more than once of Dransfield, with the odd combination of freshness and world weariness. I hope McGregor follows the advice in the last words of her book: 'Have fun, keep going ... keep creating.'

Carolyn Hughes is a Brisbane writer, and sometimes tutor, who hopes the old adage that poverty aids creativity is true.

Lesbian Invisibility: Internalised Homophobia, the Torture of Silence

C. C. Saint-Clair. *Silent Goodbyes*. 1st Books Library, 2002.

Reviewed by Evelyn Hartogh.

Although Queensland decriminalised male homosexual activity in 1990 (lesbian activity was never prohibited), and the state's 1991 Anti-Discrimination Act covers 'lawful sexual activity' the Act contains the exceptions of work that deals with minors, and activities (and by extension identities) which offend religious beliefs. The Anti-Discrimination Act has then created legally permissible discrimination towards gay men and lesbians. While recent 2002 reforms have made same-sex couples equal in many laws to heterosexual defactos and outlawed vilification against LGBTs, it still remains that church-run institutions can demand that a worker does 'not act in a way that defies the teachings of the church while at work or in a work related activity' (*Queensland Pride #164*, 6 December 2002). The workplace where this permissible bigotry is most felt is in the classroom since teachers must still take into account the religious beliefs held by parents and held by or imposed upon students. Since the law still supports certain discrimination towards gays and lesbians, the consequences are not only external homophobic ridicule or abuse, (homophobia being unlikely to vanish overnight even though technically now outlawed) but also the psychological nightmare of internalised homophobia.

Silent Goodbyes is narrated by Emilie, who is angered and anxious over hiding her sexuality, and expects negative consequences if any of her work colleagues discover she is a lesbian. Emilie works in Brisbane at an educational institution where 'my boss [is] so homophobic that he's inserted a clause in the staff contracts that clearly leaves any gay employee totally vulnerable to a contract termination' (3). Emilie ponders why she accepts this 'homophobic dictate' (3) and why she believes 'lying and distancing' (3) are her only choices; 'I resent the professional closet I'm in' (7).

Emilie barely speaks to any of her co-workers for fear they will suspect she is gay and she will be fired. She fantasises about being a praying mantis and biting off her boss Graeme's head, watching his body 'thrash around while I calmly chomp on it' (1-2). Emilie seems to enjoy these violent fantasies and is glad to find the spare time to indulge in them: 'I can stay where I am for another few minutes ... and get back to the slow metaphoric dismemberment of Graeme' (22). She feels a lack of control over her own thoughts and sees them as 'unavoidably revolving around the figurative mangling of Graeme' (4).

Emilie also assumes her co-worker Mary is homophobic because she is married and academic. She envisages Mary's husband Jim as 'a total bore around the dinner table. I imagine her two boys slug like, stoop-shouldered and anaemic' (81). Emilie, with no evidence, convinces herself that Mary hates gays: 'I know the side she'd be rooting for. Oh, how I hate that, all of it. I hate it, hate it. Hate it!' (199). Yet, it is only Emilie that tortures herself with hate, as it turns out that Mary's sister is gay, 'a self-proclaimed butch' (297), and Mary is not judgmental or homophobic at all. Emilie is forced to come to terms with her own prejudices: 'I may have dismissed this woman ... too quickly ... on the basis that she's straight and married and has children' (269).

Silence, secrecy and assumption colour all of Emilie's relationships. Although she claims she would not be a good liar and that 'pretending to be anti-social is much easier' (3), Emilie lies to her girlfriend Solange when her feelings change (147-8)

and breaks a date with 'a half-truth type of explanation' (161) – although she also admits to: 'Having lied to Solange about my backload' (163).

There is a wonderful voyeuristic quality to *Silent Goodbyes*, since the reader is privy to both Emilie's private thoughts and the contradictory nature of her self expression. It seems slightly ironic that Emilie teaches Communication but has great difficulty in relating honestly with anyone, as well as putting most of her emotional energy into disaster or revenge fantasies, and seeming unaware of the effect of her hostility on others. A sailing trip to the Whitsundays, with her girlfriend Solange, becomes a nightmare of catastrophising in Emilie's mind as she puts herself through agonising mental torture, and swears and shouts at her girlfriend constantly. Emilie's eventual realisation that most of her anxieties are unfounded comes too late to save her from losing her girlfriend Solange and chasing the already-taken Roberta.

Triggered by her imagination, Emilie runs through all of the painful emotions that would occur if her girlfriend Solange ever did get hurt. Emilie first panics and swears when Solange stretches her arm out to passing dolphins (44-5). Then she imagines various other dangers: a deep-sea creature (47); sharks (49); stonefish and jellyfish stings (56-7); the current sweeping Solange away (59); coral grazes (103); and hypothermia (120). None of Emilie's predictions of disaster come to pass and tragically she is so distraught over her catastrophic fantasies that she cannot even be relieved when Solange returns safely from swimming. 'All I hear is that she almost drowned ... [and] her irrepressible impulsiveness ... had already spoiled three out of five sunsets since we had begun the trip' (60).

Her constant fears for Solange's safety quickly begin to ruin the spontaneity of their holiday. She blames this on Solange: 'My preoccupation with her movements had kept me from watching the dolphins' (44); and 'her antics had deprived me of that unique thrill' (45). Emilie calls her anxiety 'concern' which she sees Solange as rashly dismissing, 'that leaves me, as per a predictable pattern, on the edge of an annoyance I feel justified' (71). She projects her own negative behaviour onto Solange when it becomes clear they are breaking up: 'OK, I'm being punished. This, too, is new. A tantrum, is it?' (169). Yet, by now tantrums are not new to the reader as Emilie has been throwing them at home, on the boat and in her car. Emilie is not only unaware of the effect of her temper tantrums, she even forgets them entirely when later recalling the sailing trip in her mind (168).

Solange and Emilie's breakup is first described by Emilie as 'Solange's sudden bifurcation, desertion' (191) and again 'Solange's desertion' (203) and 'Solange's abrupt interruption of our relationship' (215). On the boat Solange had explained to Emilie in exasperation, 'I think you really need to respect me for who I am ... even if you don't get it ... I'm not a child' (107). Emilie shows little insight into how her controlling and hostile mindset contributed to the break-up, although eventually she admits 'my share of responsibility' (225). But not before Solange is forced to again explain to Emilie the effects of her behaviour: 'You haven't moved on from thinking of me like a child woman You spend so much of your energy worrying about me, making me feel ... inadequate' (222).

After they break up, Emilie finds out that Solange had been unfaithful, and she plays the wronged lover to her friends (202) while simultaneously beginning a secret affair with Roberta, a visiting expert to her workplace. Most of Part II (235-341) of *Silent Goodbyes* deals with Emilie and Roberta's affair, in the form of e-mails, letters, conversations, reveries and fantasies.

Roberta seems to represent Emilie's idealised self; she imagines that Roberta would 'never winds herself up about anything or anyone as I do' (4). On the sailing trip, Emilie begins comparing the calm Roberta to the spontaneous Solange: 'I don't imagine her [Roberta] capable of any rash decisions, any more acting on impulse' (209).

From the very beginning of *Silent Goodbyes*, Emilie begins to see as faults the very qualities that had originally attracted her to Solange. She admits some envy of Solange's 'ability to take risks' (14) and loves her 'energy and that irrepressible lust for life' (35) but soon begins to see these same qualities in a negative way: 'my lover's shortcomings revolve around an erratic sort of impulsiveness' (42); 'I ... rank some of her more impetuous choices close to irresponsibility' (46). While Emilie sees Solange as not being cautious enough, she herself is cautious to the point of losing much of the pleasure of life. Emilie and Solange's subjective risk assessments differ so greatly that almost no middle ground can be found.

For one brief moment Emilie contemplates her own reactions and behaviour and asks herself 'am I attempting to control her? ... attempting to change her into a lover more suited to my cautious nature?' (109). Solange explains to Emilie that her new girlfriend is able to let go: 'she does whatever she feels she needs to do ... Not what she thinks she *should* do' (227). Emilie sees this kind of attitude as a deficiency of caution, a 'Healthy fatalism' (230).

Control is important to Emilie: 'it was up to me to anticipate and call every move ... I just needed to be more vigilant, to anticipate more' (41). She expresses much regret and uncertainty over her choices: 'I should've insisted that Solange and I practise a few real life drills' (42); and 'Maybe I should've been more willing to do the companionable silent thing, instead of selfishly stretching my time alone at home. I could've gone along with her to Roger's too. Could have? Should have' (176). Emilie panics when her emotions seem out of her control: 'I know my jaws are clenched ... I need to move back, away from the fear Away from how she's *coping* I need to control all of this a lot better.' (62: author's italics)

She admits to herself that she has a negative attitude to life, but shows little desire to change: 'What a grump I am! I know. Can't help myself. Maybe I do need some kind of penance' (74); 'I'd much rather just lie here on deck, uncomfortable with my uncomfortable thoughts, and wallow in angry resentment' (122); and '*I just want to wallow and feel sick*' (202: author's italics). On board the boat Emilie has a brief moment of illumination when she finally asks herself: 'Are my worry and my growing irritation on the right, or the wrong, side of reason?... On the wrong side of reason that'd make me controlling and manipulative. My impatience with her would be born out of narrow-minded, self-centred motives. Is it?' (117-118). Eventually Emilie begins to grasp the torment she puts herself through: 'I need to stop myself from what's becoming an encroaching state of almost constant anxious alert' (123).

Despite her desire for control, Emilie has a sense of powerlessness and sees herself as 'the product of whatever life experiences I happen to have had' (46), not as an active agent in her life. She sees her shortcomings as 'impatience towards little, niggly things that persist on going wrong' (42) and understands that 'getting so worked up ... about anything ... wasn't the way to go' (225) but does nothing to motivate herself to change and instead berates herself: 'I hate not having what it takes, the full tackle' (199) or punishes herself: 'I had set about flagellating myself' (163); 'forgive me father, for I have sinned the sin of the uninvolved' (83).

The physical manifestations of her anxiety and panic attacks are described as '[my] insides are wrapped in a tightening knot' (53-54) and a 'queasy feeling ... at the level of my solar plexus, the depository of all emotions, particularly the nasty ones, my friend-the-psychiatrist had said' (167) and 'warning beeps deep inside my head ... they will, in time, trigger a full on frenzied and manic brain-numbing alarm' (172).

The recent death of her cat still haunts Emilie and she recalls: 'A soiled rag, I thought, as I reversed out of the garage and into the street' (5); 'my little black cat ... had died on the spot. Or so I chose to believe' (92). Emilie does not seem to have yet accepted her cat's death and sadly decides that 'animals, the ones we truly love, are too much of a responsibility' (5). However she begins to patronise Solange as a pet and often describes her as a dog: 'Puppy-like, full of energy' (29); 'like a big puppy, buoyant and bursting with energy' (164).

Back at the institution, Emilie's fears of being outed manifest when a student asks her if she is a lesbian. She humiliates and lectures the student, gaining his anger and certainly not respect (194-8). Her over-reaction startles the student, yet Emilie believes she is coming across as calm and collected, 'I need to project that I'm not the least rattled by what's just happened' (198). Emilie is very shaken by her confrontation but manages to show some insight into her internalised homophobia: 'I hate the paranoia it generates in me' (199).

The physical and emotional pain that Emilie goes through is very real to her, and unfortunately more real to her than looking at her own behaviour. When Solange broke of their relationship I felt no sympathy for Emilie, because of her swearing, shouting, hostility and bullying of Solange on the boat. Emilie's outrage at Solange's unfaithfulness also seemed highly hypocritical when Emilie embarks on an affair with Roberta.

The existence of real and/or imagined homophobia had isolated Emilie in her workplace but the novel ends with some hope in Emilie's new friendship with Mary who is not homophobic, as Emilie had assumed. Tragically, Emilie's anxiety is not overcome in the course of the novel and her judgmental, controlling, negative attitude continues unchallenged. Emilie's fixation that she is unable (rather than unwilling) to change makes her suffering even sadder.

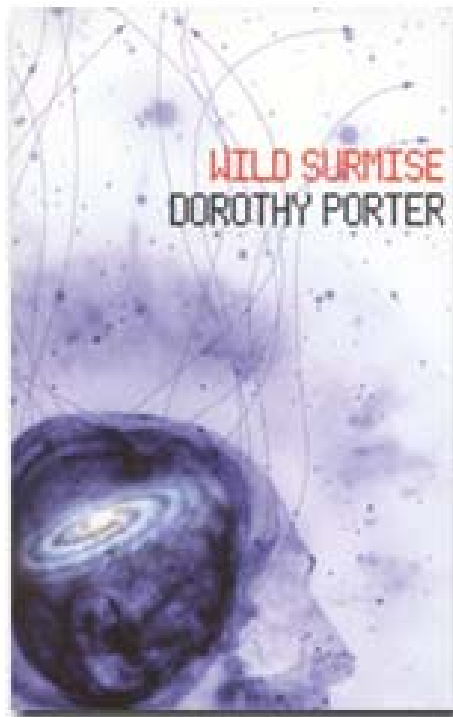
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Planetary Influences

Dorothy Porter, *Wild Surmise*. Picador, 2002.

Reviewed by Rose Lucas.

Discovery is always so sexy. To go beyond the dull safety of the known and to stand, on the brink, of the entirely new is pure, intoxicating, visceral pleasure. The lungs, the heart, are suddenly filled with the rush, the dizzying self-losing/self-finding incipience of it all. Dorothy Porter's new verse novel, *Wild Surmise*, borrows this moment – and indeed much of the plot line – from the Keats poem she quotes at the beginning: 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken;/Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/He stared at the Pacific – and all his men/Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –'. The narrative structure of Porter's poem recreates and revels in this moment of extravagant looking, of eyeballing an alterity that exceeds the looker but which is nevertheless about to be claimed as your territory, your intimate. It also takes the reader on the inevitable downer that follows such a high, the rebound into limitation and loss implicit in the dual possibilities of addictive excitement or duplicitous betrayal in the *Wild Surmise*.



Alex, the central narrator, is 'astronomy's glamour girl,' hooked on the study of Europa, 'Jupiter's smoothest moon' whose 'freezing/toxic silence' intrigues her. What does it/she consist of? Is there any life that can be determined within her, any point of connection between the human observer and this distant, tantalisingly unreadable text? The motif of discovery – and of an ultimate failure of translation and connection – is echoed in Alex's sexual obsession with the unattainable Phoebe, herself a reacher for distant galaxies. Their passion is hot, demanding although inequitable and hedged into the compartment of the affair; Phoebe's image, 'thriving and multiplying/in Alex's capitulating cells,' erodes the substance of her marriage to Daniel. Written with the now familiar raw, eroticised energy that Porter infuses into her poetry, Alex's sexual obsession with Phoebe, like her scientific obsession with the flickering, luminous images on her computer screen, represents a compulsion that fatally distracts her from the discoveries to be made within the home, within the seemingly already-charted deep waters of marriage. Daniel's illness, the cancer that inexorably dislocates his failing body and 'the amazing neural galaxy/in his skull,' literalises the theme of self-damage, the dark and ravenous impulse to destruction that stalks the desire to *know* and to possess.

Not surprisingly these are echoes of themes we have seen before in Porter's increasingly significant body of work. From the motifs of crime detection in *The Monkey's Mask*, archaeological discovery in *Crete*, astronomical contemplation in *Other Worlds*, and damaging self-deception in *What a Piece of Work*, Porter has

always been concerned with a paradoxical poetry of the 'big sexy risk' – its excitements, its new territories, as well as the threats to identity which it poses, its egotism and potential to inscribe the new with the text of the old, of the self. This is seen with tragic consequence in her persona of *Akhenaten*, whose revolutionary vision is overtaken by his own repeating narrative of self-obsession.

Part of the strategic risk for Porter has also been that of genre crossing. In all of her now 4 verse novels, she juggles the tension between the effects of narrative and characterisation and those more commonly associated with a lyrical poetic – the almost contemplative moment of intensity, where the extraordinary is glimpsed, experienced, through the veil of the ordinary. The initial shock of this blend of styles and perceptions has certainly modified through repetition, although it continues to signal a fierce determination to launch poetry and its potentially cathartic effects beyond the sphere of conventional, the expected, and into the rough and tumble of a wide contemporary readership.

This oscillation between the expected and the unexpected, the near and the far is resounded in *Wild Surmise* on a number of levels. For example, Alex's dilemma between her passion for Phoebe and her domestic life with Daniel echoes the tension between the idealised marriage of Akhenaten and Nefertiti and the pharaoh's unlicensed, polymorphous sexuality. Although more time and intensity is given to the relationship with Phoebe, and although it is certainly associated with the notion of a riveting, if cataclysmic, vision of newness and difference, like Europa herself, it is finally seen as toxic, an impossible, unsustainable object of desire. By contrast, and surprisingly in some ways from the lesbian poet, it is the ordinariness of the known, of the heterosexual relationship in hand, which is valued, even if too late: 'You were always/ardently present ... /right there singing/in my careless hand,' Alex mourns.

In an image reminiscent of the language of *Crete*, Porter evokes the octopus – irredeemably 'other,' threatening, defended, fascinating, addictive, a creature of whatever deep you might like to name – to suggest these intoxications of risk, of the new planet, the new ocean, 'my lover, my monster mollusc,' as Alex dreams. Juxtaposed to this powerful, almost mythic creature, is the evocation of the garden, the reassuring continuity of the contained garden of Daniel and Alex with its humble lemon tree and sound of suburban birds. Neither position can ever be entirely relinquished, as the last poem suggests; both octopus and garden retain elements of desirability as well as suffocation and contagion. It is not an opposition to be resolved, in this or any of Porter's work, but rather embodies the unsustainable poles which frame the whirling, orbiting planets of our desiring selves.

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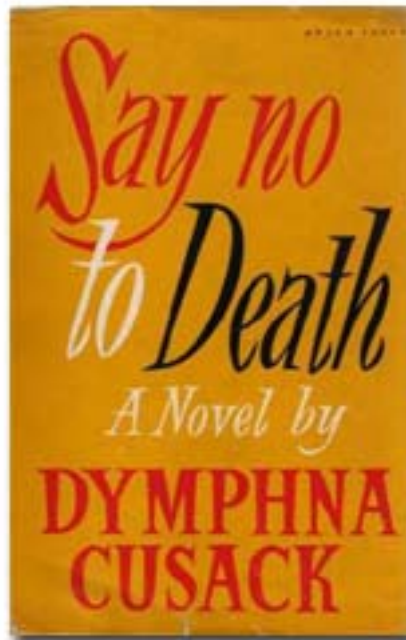
Death by Mismanagement: Cusack's Love Story

Review of Dymphna Cusack, *Say No to Death*. Sydney: Halstead Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Susan Carson.

Business is booming in Dymphna Cusack's *Say No to Death*, a story of post-war Sydney, black marketeering, and sacrificial romance. The same cannot be said for a public health system that struggles to offer a future for cash-strapped tuberculosis patients, such as the doomed heroine of this novel, Jan. For contemporary readers, however, the trajectory of Jan and Bart's relationship may seem less interesting than Cusack's evocation of the failings of government health policy in Australia and the fine account of this devastating illness in a city beset by wartime shortages.

Say No to Death was first published in 1951 and is often described as a blend of romance and social realism. As with other works published by politically engaged women writers of this period, its reviews were mixed. Many publications, especially international ones, praised the novel as a worthy successor to the best-seller *Come In Spinner* (co-authored with Florence James), while others treated it as a magazine romance. And of course, the government did not like it, as Marilla North's *Afterword* to this edition indicates: in the New South Wales Parliament it was mentioned as 'the kind of book that will damage tourism.'



North also documents the genesis of the novel in the death of Cusack's close friend, Kay Keen, from tuberculosis (TB) in 1948 and the attempts to curb the disease in Australia before X-Ray technology, drugs and public education campaigns began to work in the 1950s. Yet, as North points out, Jan is not Kay Keen, but an 'amalgam' of the many young girls who died in Australia from a lack of treatment.

Cusack's descriptions of the illness and the public policy issues involved are detailed and written from first hand notes and observation. She was apparently asked to write the book by Keen herself, and this request was supported by two doctors who were equally enraged at the lack of adequate sanatoria in New South Wales. According to Norman Freehill's biography, Cusack said that she started writing the novel in a 'frenzy of indignation and grief.' Did writing to fulfil such expectations advance or hindere the story of Jan and the roving Bart Templeton?

The couple's developing relationship in the face of severe illness is the focus of the book, although the occasional incursions of Jan's feisty sister Doreen, and the temptress Magda offer some relief. Certainly Jan and Bart seem under-developed. Bart's conversion from non-committed Aussie bloke to tender bedside nurse is not totally improbable (many people do nurse partners under difficult conditions for long periods of time) but for contemporary readers Jan's martyrdom may irritate. There is a sense that if only she could let down the tyres on Magda's car she could be redeemed.

If one sets aside the relationship of Jan and Bart, the novel is rewarding. Although Cusack did not set out to repeat the modernist associations developed in *Jungfrau* (1936), the character of Magda pays observance to changing times: she is the wife of a black-marketeer, a modern woman who is New Rich, with a nice car and a string of boyfriends. Magda and her car offer both sexual and geographic mobility: they meet on a country railway station in the middle of the night and, from that point on, Sydney and its Harbour and the suburbs are criss-crossed as Bart chases the ever-elusive cure for Jan, and Magda chases Bart.

Bart's journeys by train and car to the Blue Mountains sanatorium track, along with Jan's declining health, the changing seasons. Cusack's knowledge of the environment that she came to know so well during the war years is readily apparent in the lush descriptions of the landscape. Cusack and her children shared a house at Hazlewood with Florence James and her children in 1944, where the women wrote *Come In Spinner*. It was a productive collaboration and I recall James telling me about their life in the Blue Mountains with great affection.

Equally, Cusack captures the tempo of life in post-war Sydney. It was a time of severe accommodation shortages. Girls who worked in offices often rented rooms in hotels and boarding houses (the Oxford Street precinct was popular), and saved their pennies for an evening meal of one lamb chop and three vegetables in a local cafe. Generally, male visitors were not permitted in rented rooms – with landlords or landladies being uniformly ferocious, romance was conducted largely in public: benches in Hyde Park or the Domain, where the policeman on duty regularly moved one on during the night. Jan and Bart traverse the city and then retreat to a coastal shack for privacy.

Married couples tramped the streets looking for accommodation, often sharing with strangers, and office workers worked long hours in sometimes badly lit and ill ventilated premises. In *Say No to Death*, Cusack writes about Jan's work and home environments, the 'dump' of an overpriced and dank flat at King's Cross, the constant scrimping for small luxuries. One of the nice touches in the novel is the representation of the naivety that both Bart and Jan express in their dealings with medical authorities and state institutions. They trust in the system until it is too late, and they fail to recognize the economic foundations of recovery. Bart, at the beginning of the novel, senses that he is standing between 'two worlds' and knows he does not like either option, but it is his association with corruption by way of Jan's illness that seems set to change his outlook on life.

Cusack may have critiqued Australian frameworks of gender and class in the novel but, like many other works of the period, *Say No to Death* demonstrates a conservative attitude to race. An Aboriginal TB patient, called 'Darky,' is described as having rolling black eyes, and the white showing 'ghastly' against his skin. Such instances are, however, part of the cultural framework of the novel. This new edition of *Say No to Death* from Halstead Press gives readers an opportunity to take a step back into this framework, as well as to acquaint themselves with an uncommon oppositional perspective in the fictionalisation of the politics and culture of post-war Australia.

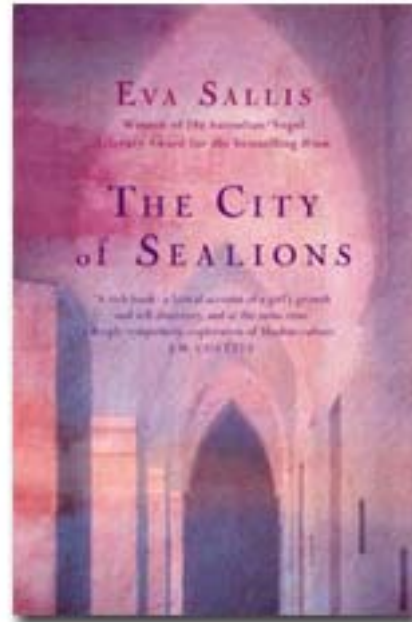
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On the Crossroads of Cultures

Eva Sallis, *The City of Sealions*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2002.

Reviewed by Jasna Novakovic.

Feelings of love and belonging are essential to people's sense of security, psychologists advise. Without them the self and the social environment cannot be accommodated. That state of mind develops in kids as a result of affectionate touch, protective vigilance, of doing things together and of sharing, more as a feeling than rational cognition. Eva Sallis's novel *The City of Sealions* takes this parenting rule a step further by placing it in a multicultural context and then monitoring the effects of aberration on a child. The method is faithful to the ways of the imagination: it veers between realistic experience and fairy tale, and uses metaphor to create mental images that will produce an emotive impact resembling that experienced in actual life.



Sallis's novel gives rise to high expectations but not all are fulfilled. The metaphor that carries the greatest potential of poetic signification in the novel is that of the ocean as a living organism. Sometimes it is a friend sometimes the Other, and it has the capacity to either liberate or terrify; it is a personification that stands for all the soothing angels and all the demons colliding inside the mind. What mars its effect from the start is excessive wordiness. More often than not, the varying forms of the ocean image, especially in the opening chapters, are cluttered with detail and create the impression of an artifice, rather than of a trope springing from an emotional state of the hero's mind. Thus, while an awareness of the hero's bond with nature as a replacement for human relationships and as the object of self-identification stays with us throughout the novel, the impact is somehow hollow and lost.

The personality of Lian, the novel's hero, is another site for exploration of enormous complexity. Lian is a young girl whose mother is a Vietnamese refugee – a sole survivor from a boat which sank within reach of the South Australian coast, and her father is Australian. Lian has a loving relationship with her father, but feels rejected by her mother. The pattern of family relationships would be rather conventional were it not for the ethnic element in it and the vicious resentment shared by both mother and daughter. Sallis wants to create an impression, it seems, that the mother's cruelty is caused by her devastating experience of war, but the nature of the molestation indicates instead that it has to do with her cultural background. Phi-Van's horrendous story that her daughter refuses to store in her own memory and which therefore eats her up from the depths of her unconscious, is the only psychological justification for the 'mean and nasty' treatment to which Lian is subjected. It is, however, not enough to remove a sense of clichéd vilification of a particular nation. This germ of controversy sits oddly with the novel's overarching paradigm of tolerance and the subsequent ironisation of American customary prejudice towards Arab nations. Still, the evolving understanding of the crippling effect that the lack of love has on a child is described in this novel with a masterful hand. If you want to find out

how emotional detachment is induced in human beings, *The City of Sealions* is the book to read. The workings of Lian's mind will tell you how exactly usual responses are killed in a growing child plagued by a desperate need to build a protective shield around her, since she can only communicate with her father and the ocean. In the community, Lian is merely 'a sloper' or 'a party livener' and her father is the only person who keeps telling her that she is 'as Aussie as they come and don't you forget it'.

The sociological aspects of communication are subsumed, however, under the psychological deconstruction of a human psyche. But in the second half of the novel which takes Lian into the Arab world, the two perspectives merge into a balanced view and another one is added - the role of language in shaping identity. Emotions and situations blend from one scene to another in the misreadings of cultural signs, in Lian's faltering attempts to express herself in a foreign language to foreign people in an alien setting, in the urge to conform and not stand out, to understand and to be understood. It is these naturalistic moments that make the novel a gripping read all along. The attempt to highlight the different character of imagination cultivated in western and Muslim societies through examples of literature is less persuasive, particularly in the crude juxtaposition of the story from the *Arabian Nights* about a Mermaid with Abdallah of the Land, given the lack of subtle, associative clues that would bind the narrative tissue together. Thus an ingenious attempt to merge two essentially different concepts of fictionalisation, the naturalistic and the fantastic/metaphorical one, and bring the two civilisations together through it, turns into a structural weakness of the novel. The paradox is that illusion is dispersed by the sections drawing on fantasy and the surreal. The implications of American war atrocities work well, by contrast, because they are purely poetic and evocative.

A single chapter giving Phi-Van a voice also comes as a surprise. It allows the author to convey a piece of information and to follow up on a character, but the manner in which it is done is not warranted by the structural logic of the novel. These ups and downs mark the closing chapters. The ocean, for instance, re-emerges in a brilliant twist to the story, which reaffirms its role as the central metaphor. It remains for Lian the agent of reconciliation with the external world. The objects, the fish and - above all - the sealions tell the story of her own Self; it is her own 'fairy tale'. And it alone has the capacity to make her relax and open up to the culture that is her Other. That happens, of course, through love. But the novel has to resolve the underlying psychological conflict involving the demonic figure of Lian's mother, as well. And it has to do it in a psychologically convincing way. But this is exactly what does not happen. Reminders of Lian's emotional detachment are reiterated so many times, that eventually they become irritating. A masterful argument turns into a contrivance. The peace of mind that Lian does achieve in the end is not fully justified either. For while the birth of Lian had no effect on Phi-Van and failed to improve her emotional condition (or, rather, aggravated it), Lian is 'cured' by her own pregnancy. So, how come? The final impression is that, for all these reasons, the two worlds are incompatible. But are they?

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Rediscovering 'Other' Black Australians

Marilyn Lake, *Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist*, Allen and Unwin: St Leonards, 2002.

Reviewed by Lynette Russell

This book has had wide acclaim, evidenced by the winning of the highly competitive Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 2002 Human Rights Award. It is timely and will no doubt be very useful to students of history, gender and Indigenous studies. Marilyn Lake is the author (or co-author) of several books and is considered by many to be the leading authority on the political history of Australian women. She is a highly respected historian whose research interests are focused on the twentieth century and encompass feminism, gender relations and women's political history, and she embodies the role of public intellectual, being frequently heard on radio and television or observed contributing to the popular press. As such, she is ideally placed to produce a biography of Faith Bandler a fellow public voice, a black Australian woman



who played a key role in raising the profile of Aboriginal rights and campaigned tirelessly for an end to racism and discrimination.

Biography as a genre enjoys significant current popularity. Within 'Indigenous Studies', it plays a particularly important role as it offers to a wide audience engagement with historical and political issues through life-narrative and experience. The extra-ordinarily popular Sally Morgan's *My Place* provided many non-Indigenous Australians with an understanding of their country's racist past and the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Roberta Sykes's autobiographical trilogy in which she situates herself as a 'Black Australian' (in contrast to being thought of as an Indigenous Australian) was both hugely successful and controversial. Although Bandler describes herself as a black Australian, the child of a South Sea Islander father and an Indian/Scottish mother, she is frequently referred to as an Aboriginal Australian (a recent internet search listed her as one of Australia's most important Aborigines!). This is a moniker she herself does not use, and one that Lake is careful to explain and detail. This interesting, little explored subject position, will, no doubt, be the subject of future research or undergraduate essays in which Sykes and Bandler, (and other black Australians with South Sea Islander, African American and other ancestries) are bound together, compared and contrasted.

Peter Mussing, Faith's father was one of the many thousands of South Sea Islanders enslaved, and working with the Queensland sugar industry in the years prior to Federation. Lake, along with Faith and her family are not certain if their father had officially applied for an exemption from deportation when the Commonwealth government strove to create a White Australia, with the Pacific Islanders Labourers Act 1906, which insisted on the deportation of Islanders brought to Australia. Whether he was a legitimate exemption from deportation or, as might be described today, 'an illegal', Peter Mussing moved to northern New South Wales, where he and his wife raised their

'large and close-knit family'. Faith was their sixth child and, in 1924, when she was five Peter Mussing died from influenza.

The poignancy of this loss so early in her life is subtly presented by Lake avoiding all mawkishness. Bandler's formative but too short years with her loving, tender and socially aware father provide Bandler with the foundation for her life's work. Subsequent to her father's death, she was keenly aware of difference, discrimination and prejudice.

Bandler's family headed by her indomitable mother, Ida, went on living in northern New South Wales and experienced the horrors of poverty so common during the Depression years. Coupled with poverty the Bandlers also confronted discrimination and Faith reveals that her time in the classroom was often distressing due to curriculum content, which she saw as putting down 'blacks'. However, schooling was not by any means a completely negative experience, as her admiration for her teachers testifies.

Bandler's capacity vividly to recall this time is seamlessly coupled with Lake's extensive empirical archival research and her formidable knowledge of twentieth century history. The result is a vibrant story, each page rich with Bandler's humour, warmth, remarkable intelligence, passion and, above all, a ferocious and unrelenting social conscience. In her early teens, Bandler recalls an event that left an indelible mark. She observed a group of schoolchildren bully and harass a Jewish child. Faith Bandler, ever the fighter, interceded and the group turned their attention and abuse to her. This memory marks the beginning of a desire to help others.

In the 1940s, Faith described by Lake as the 'modern woman' took up a cosmopolitan life amongst the cafés of Kings Cross, Sydney. With a highly developed social conscience, Bandler quickly emerged herself in the political and social movements of the day. Thus a political activist was born. In this context, she developed a friendship with the feminist icon, Jessie Street. Faith moved in circles that were exciting, provocative, she had great passion for the arts, especially music, and as a result she met many interesting people. In 1952, she married environmental engineer Hans Bandler. She and Hans had a daughter and an adopted Aboriginal son.

Supported and encouraged by Hans, Faith began to dedicate herself to political activism. In particular, she was involved in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, founded in 1958. FCAATSI provided the forum for both indigenous and non-indigenous people to work toward rectifying prejudice, racism and the social injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. While the Indigenous, activists were committed to the establishment of full Australian citizenship for their people. Non-Indigenous activists, of whom Faith Bandler was one, attempted to educate others regarding the injustice that existed for Indigenous Australians.

The establishment of FCAATSI was an exciting period for Bandler and, as Lake eloquently demonstrates, this was one of her life's high points. The key result of FCAATSI's activism occurred in 1967 when the Commonwealth government held a referendum to include Aborigines in the census. The significance of this time and the changes that were achieved were later explored by Bandler in her book *Turning the Tide*. This was, she emphasised, 'a personal history'. Lake, however does not present Bandler as simply a political activist – she is also a sensitive and strong woman, an author, a mother, a grandmother, a traveller and, above all, a storyteller who celebrates her Pacific Island heritage.

This is an important book, providing the opportunity to think about race and identity, citizenship, and public/ political activism. All issues that are contentious and intellectually engaging. Although *Faith* is clearly an affectionate biography, it is not an apologia; Lake has resisted the temptation to lapse into polemic, and the reader instead hears the gentle activist's own voice.

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Out There and Down There

Dr. Carol Booth, *Woman to Woman: A Guide to Lesbian Sexuality*.
Simon and Schuster: Sydney, 2002.

Reviewed by Evelyn Hartogh.

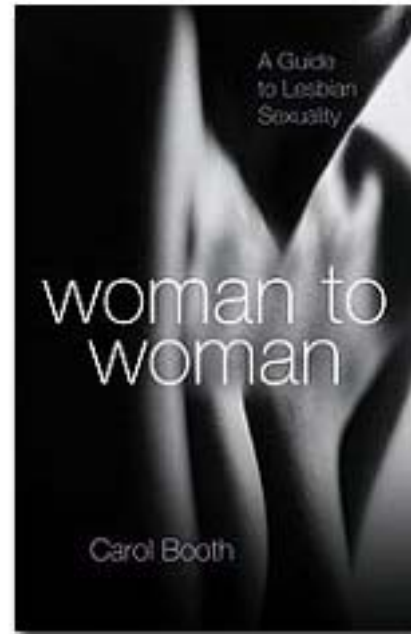
Woman to Woman is an immensely practical book. It deals with women's sexuality in relation to sociology, psychology, anatomy, and history. One of the great benefits of feminism, and the consequent academic areas of Women's Studies and Gender Studies, has been the ability to approach issues from an interdisciplinary angle. Booth's feminist framework allows her to introduce her reader to a brief history of the cultural shifts in attitudes to lesbians, discuss current medical research on women's sexuality, and deal in a calm and considerate manner with the reality of violence experienced by many women.

The uniqueness of women's lived experience and the diversity of lesbians themselves is well covered by Booth who intersperses her writing with excerpts from interviews with women. The voices of these actual women create a personal edge to the reporting of data, giving a human face to cold statistics and psychological theory. Booth has written her book for the general public but the desire to write it arose because no decent medical volume on lesbians existed.

Booth also provides an extensive list of Resources, in many areas of women's health and sexuality, as well as useful appendixes on orgasm, anatomy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This book is a valuable starting point for students, counsellors, medical practitioners – and anyone who wishes to understand more about women's bodies and lesbians' lives. The information that Booth provides on female anatomy, sexual response, and psychological reactions, is for all women, not just lesbians.

Woman to Woman provides the first extensive diagrams of the clitoris that I have ever seen. What I had thought was the entire clitoris is only the glans, the smallest but most visible portion. Below the glans of the clitoris (and below the skin) is a shaft, bulbs and two crura or legs, making the entire clitoris more than ten centimetres long. Booth explains that immense size of the clitoris was only a recent discovery. In 1981 the 'Book Team' of the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centres in America examined themselves and 'concluded that the anatomy taught to medical students was simply wrong' (20). The women showed that 'the clitoris was much more extensive and important to female sexual satisfaction than had previously been believed' (20). Yet their findings were not confirmed until 1998 when Dr Helen O'Connell, an Australian urologist, conducted dissections and published a paper which concluded that 'current medical descriptions of female urethral and genital anatomy are inaccurate' (20).

While *Woman to Woman* has a focus on the body with chapters regarding sexual health, self satisfaction, and negotiating sexual encounters, Booth also concerns



herself with social factors and generational differences with chapters on 'Making Connections', 'Older Lesbians', 'Young Lesbians', 'Coming Out', and my favourite 'Am I a Lesbian? Does it Really Matter?'. Booth's opening chapter in itself provides a great introduction to the contemporary issues faced by women while her final chapter celebrates the many women who shaped the Australian lesbian and feminist community. Again, her research is grounded by the interviews with real women. Booth uses these effectively to show ideas from different angles and contrast different experiences of lesbian women. *Woman to Woman* has a no-nonsense, nothing to hide approach, and gives fair time to a variety of perspectives.

Through her research into sexuality, Booth has to come to have 'a privately held belief that if cultural pressure did not exert its influence, then the way sexual orientation is distributed in our population would be accurately reflected by the bell curve' (130). Booth admits she has 'no scientific proof' (130) and her theory is 'not possible to test' (131), but rightly observes the problems in conducting research into human behaviour:

Cultural pressure makes it difficult for people to even recognise their desires. It also determines what people are prepared to say to researchers. It is a powerful force in determining the actions that we take in our sexual lives. (131)

Booth's theory that most people are bisexual and that only a small percentage are exclusively heterosexual or homosexual is a bold notion inside a book about lesbian sexuality. A survey conducted by *Queensland Pride* during the *2002 Brisbane GLBT Pride Festival* suggested that there still exists a general suspicion of bisexuals in the queer community. Booth has a very compassionate approach to sexual identity, and urges her reader to remember that 'it is okay to explore your sexuality for as long as you like ... sexuality is fluid ... you may never in your life reach a final decision. That's all okay. There is no reason why you have to reach a conclusion' (165).

The reality of the existence of homophobia is not underplayed by Booth who comments 'Australia is becoming a more tolerant place for lesbian women.... However, we do not have the same legal rights as heterosexual people' (10). Many chapters return to the existence of homophobia and offer a range of options to dealing with it, whether it is external or internal.

Choice, and the personal power to negotiate and feel safe in sexual encounters, is emphasised by Booth. This book is very much about empowering women by providing them with knowledge about their bodies and their rights. Sexual practice is still a taboo topic of conversation in many circles. By mixing research with interviewees anecdotes, Booth presents an accessible dialogue on women's sexuality. What makes *Woman to Woman* stand out amongst lesbian literature is Booth's conscious inclusion of such a wide range of women's voices and, consequently, diverse perspectives on what it means to be a lesbian.

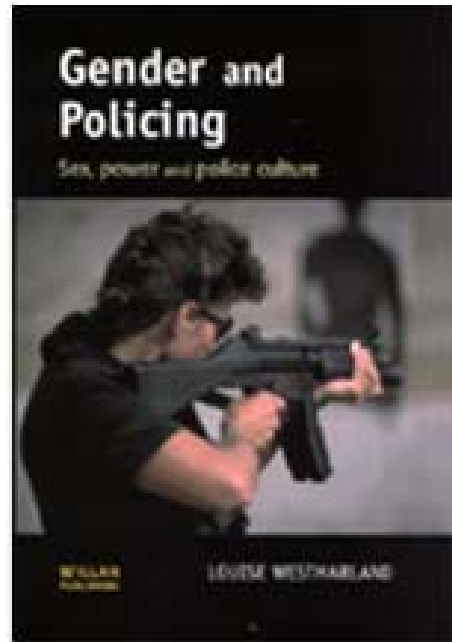
Evelyn Hartogh has a Masters in Women's Studies (Griffith University 1997) and a Masters in Creative Writing (University of Queensland 2002). She currently writes a column for *Queensland Pride Newspaper*, 'Pop Cult Sheroes' which examines fictional and historical representations of women.

Armed Bodies of Men – and Women

Lousie Westmarland, *Gender and Policing: Sex, Power and Police Culture*. Willan Publishing: Devon, 2001.

Reviewed by JaneMaree Maher.

Gender and Policing: Sex, Power and Police Culture presents the findings of research into police force practice, culture and socio-political context in the UK. Louise Westmarland notes that this is 'the first British study of its type, concentrating on gender as a central focus' (3). The research on which she reports details her time in two separate UK police forces; one large metropolitan one with over 3000 officers and another smaller force with 1300 officers covering a large rural area. Westmarland combined interviews and focus groups with extensive participant observation; working with patrols and in stations, she sought to become an 'informed stranger' (11). Six months was spent with police personnel in each research location.



In *Gender and Policing*, Westmarland is interested in two central questions that are interconnected. The first is how conceptions of gendered embodiment are deployed in police work, and how this impacts on the value assigned to certain aspects of this work both within the force and in society more generally. She seeks to consider 'how officers' gendered bodies define suitability for certain aspects of their work' (176). The second question is what impact these gendered expectations and perceptions have on the shape of police employment and promotion practices. She examines whether the oft-argued differential deployment on the basis of gender can be observed and what underpins it if it is present. *Gender and Policing* considers the role of gender in police work, how gender impacts on police responses to child abuse and sexual assault, and how masculinities are performed in particular types of police work.

Westmarland's project aims to combine theories of sex, gender and embodiment with participant observation, and to bring embedded theorisations to bear on police culture and practice. She argues that new theories of the body have allowed more complex interpretations of the relationship 'between biology and the social', that offer significant scope for examining police culture and gendered embodiment (4). For Westmarland, the body is assigned an important, but previously under-examined role in policing work. She constitutes her research around the understanding that 'policing has traditionally been an occupation where physical, violent labour has been accepted, required and valued' (4) This valuation of physical labour by serving officers is contrasted with 'arrested bodies [that] are usually assigned a certain status along a continuum of passivity and danger' (3). Westmarland argues that arrested bodies are often characterised as 'dirty and "disgusting" bodies, in the case of sex or drug offenders, [that are] are in diametric opposition to the bodies of women and children' (3). Thus, in this framing, police work has a particular connection to embodied experience and clean, proper bodies in the cultural landscape in which it takes place.

It is this nexus that is particularly interesting in *Gender and Policing*. Westmarland argues that the use of physical force is not only a key activity in policing but is also assigned a core value in police work. And all of this takes place in a Western context where physical force is also clearly identified as a 'masculine preserve' (136). Westmarland asserts that 'this study uses the gendered body to illustrate the way force and anatomy are determinants of competence in the police' (2).

Westmarland finds, as have other studies of police activity she identifies, that demonstrations of physical courage are a critical element of police work. She focuses on the importance of patrol work as the starting point for all officers, and considers how such activity is used to determine which officers become 'visible players' in the force (154). Her research method of participant observation, which involved significant time on patrol, sought to address limitations in existing research where studies of patrol work for police have suffered 'problems monitoring, recording and defining the nature of individual tasks' (99). Critically for this text, such studies have ignored gender. Westmarland's study reports on the assigned 'status of certain tasks in general policing activities' (14) and describes how the differential value of tasks like forceful arrests and responses to domestic violence incidents are important for understanding women's position in the police force and their access to authority. While demonstrations of physical courage are an important aspect of establishing one's credentials, 'stories concerning women making arrests which required physical courage were rare, and never told by male officers' (131). In *Gender and Policing*, in the two police forces studied, 'capabilities at "street level" seem to be controlled by maleness and reinforced by events, colleagues, members of the public and those who are arrested' (132).

The importance of feminist theorisations of the body and the gendering of work as analytical tools is borne out by the complex interactions that *Gender and Policing* is tracing. The privileging of essential notions of sex in how policing tasks are allocated and valued reflects not only discrimination within the police force on one level – such tasks rarely lead to the arrest performances that Westmarland notes as critical to advancement inside the police force – but they also indicate the extent to which social constructions of sex (masquerading as appropriate gender roles) determine other social and employment outcomes for both female and male officers. It is here that *Gender and Policing* entwines notions of gendered bodies with its second key concern, that of employment practice and workplace discrimination.

The central contention of *Gender and Policing* is that conventional readings of women's disenfranchisement from structures of hierarchy in the police overemphasise discrimination within the force. Such readings, for Westmarland, do not give adequate attention to the social and individual factors that impact on women's career decisions. *Gender and Policing* provides ample evidence of how notions of gendered embodiment are translated into work experience and practice for female and male police officers, but Westmarland refutes a blanket application of discrimination to the differential employment that is apparent in the police forces studied. She argues that 'perhaps it is more convincing to write about women being discriminated against by reproducing some unfavourable impression of the work policewomen do' (44). For Westmarland, 'the crux of the debate is the issue of what women actually do in the police and to what extent tasks and duties are being allocated on the basis of gender' (184).

Drawing on Lisa Adkins account of gendered work and her suggestion that 'an element of choice or agency is possible' (72),¹ Westmarland argues that some of

the career paths chosen by women within the police force may be related more to social conditioning and location than to specific practices of discrimination within the police force. One example she addresses is the overrepresentation of female officers in units dealing with sexual assault and child abuse, which offers some interesting paradoxes in terms of the broader project of considering the sexed body in police work. Westmarland notes that the preferences of both victims and female police officers must be taken into account in interpreting why female officers predominantly undertake such work. But she is aware, too, that 'it could appear that male officers can avoid dealing with matters connected with female bodies and physical assaults' (49), thereby reinforcing social constructions of proper bodies and who should deal with variations from this norm. In interpreting the set of interactions that make up this section of her inquiry, Westmarland favours assigning weight to the agency of female police officers. She contends that 'when women were asked whether child protection was "low status" work, many replied that if men saw it as such, then it was their problem' (180).

In analysing how differential deployment operates, Westmarland is keen to argue that the police forces she has studied do not necessarily prevent women police officers from accessing higher positions through their practice. While Westmarland argues there is an element of choice in women's position within the force hierarchies, her discussion of 'the vicious circle of incapacitation' (179), that emerges where gendered expectations and employment practices intertwine, indicates the critical need for ongoing conversations about how and where women are able to exercise such agency. Her conclusion that 'the factors which have been thought to prevent women from being promoted, rather contrary to expectations are not necessarily having a discriminatory effect' (184) is immediately qualified in ways that suggest a certain discontinuity between this finding and the material on which the finding is based. This disjunction suggests future opportunities for examining police practice through the rubric of feminist critiques of sex-segregated labour and its relationship to women's social roles. I was uncertain whether Westmarland's deployment of agency in this context worked to absolve the police force from responsibility regarding these gendered deployments and how they impacted on the capacity of female officers to progress in their careers.

The acceptance of the rubric of choice to explain how female police officers make decisions about their career progression does not engage adequately with the question of how the police force itself contributes to the cultural constraints within which women make decisions. Westmarland's description of female police officers taking or accepting roles on the basis of their perceptions of aptitude and empathy, does not fully address how gender differences are drawn from culture into policing and then refracted back into society through the differential employment practices and opportunities in the police force. Her discussions of police culture suggest multiple layers of sex and gender based bias. Her examination of the comments offered by male police officers about women approaching squad cars, for example, offered a confronting pen portrait of a difficult and sexist environment in which female officers ply their trade, an environment where 'male officers commented on the bodies of attractive women, but were protected from challenge in the cocoon of the police car' (181). If this project seeks to 'explore the connection between police culture and gendered bodies on the street' (1), such interrelationships form a critical nexus for consideration.

Westmarland's account of the operation of the police force demonstrates the ongoing need for institutions to be evaluated for how they deploy gender within their own boundaries, but it also points to the need to evaluate how their institutional presence in society participates in the gendering of culture.

Westmarland makes important points about visible police work that form a central aspect of the role and status of the police in society. She notes that public expectation of the performance of confidence (171) and a 'heroic masculinism' (172) is a key factor in how police activity is viewed and experienced in the social environment in which it takes place. The visibility of such practices within institutions contributes to broader social perceptions of the bodily strength and capacity of women and men. This research indicates the need for further consideration of how the privileging of certain aspects of police work continues to embed law and public order in particular configurations of sex and gender. The extent to which the deployment of male and female officers in particular roles *itself* polices appropriate gender norms would seem to be an important aspect for further study. In *Gender and Policing*, Westmarland acknowledges that the actions of female police officers as sexual agents are noted and considered to have an impact on their experience in the workplace (28), but does not extend this insight to consider how such attitudes might impact on the notions of choice and agency that she identifies in workplace decisions.

Westmarland's discussion of her ethnographic method is an extensive one that offers a valuable reflection on the complications of research in the field as a 'participant observer'. She writes that the entry of the female researcher into the 'male world' has been discussed by many researchers (9) and that questions of access, and of 'bottle' as she describes it (9),² are critically important in how information on sex and gender is gathered even before such material is interpreted and represented. The cover of *Gender and Policing* offers the image of a female police officer holding a military style assault weapon. Such a challenge to conventional iconographies demonstrates the importance and the difficulty of a project like Westmarland's. In bringing the sexed body to the scene, many questions are raised which, as Westmarland notes, require multiple methodologies to be fully addressed.

Westmarland's exploration of police culture in the UK is interesting and instructive. There are no similar studies focused on Australia although *Gender and Policing: Comparative Perspectives* offers some account of the Australian context.³ *Gender and Policing* offers multi-layered account of how sexed identity and gendered attributes operate in such institutional environments; how they are assumed and contested by women and men within the forces she studies and embedded in cultures in which such policing activity takes place. The primary source material in this monograph will be of particular value for those interested in how law enforcement practice both reflects and reinforces gender and sex based boundaries in Western culture. This monograph reflects the ongoing importance of using sex and gender as tools to understand and rethink social institutions, especially those as central as the police force.

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Notes

1 Lisa Adkins, *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family and the Labour Market*. Buckingham Open University Press, 1995.

2 'Bottle' here refers to courage.

3 Jennifer Brown and Frances Heidensohn, *Gender and Policing: Comparative Perspectives*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000. In addition, there are some smaller scale studies on the history of women in the Queensland Police force and on educational opportunities for female police officers. See Nadia Boni, Kim Adams and Michelle Circelli, *Educational and Professional Development Experiences of Female and Male Police Employees*, Payneham, S.A., Australasian Centre for Policing Research, c2001 and Tim Prenzler, 'Concession and Containment: The establishment of women in the Queensland Police, 1931-1965', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* August 1998 v31 i2. The *Australian Journal for Women and Policing* offers insight into current activities of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing Inc <http://www.auspol-women.asn.au/journals.htm>.

Women Reading 'Terrorism'

Susan Hawthorne and Bronwyn Winter (eds.), *September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Amanda Third.

In 1988 North American feminist, Robin Morgan, published *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (recently reprinted as *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*, London: Piatkus, 2001). Whilst many of the concerns Morgan raised were worthy of further inquiry, in the intervening period since the book's publication, the problematic positioning of women in relation to the practice of terrorism has been largely overlooked by feminists working in the Western world. Until, that is, Spinifex Press responded to the events of September 11, 2001 with the recent publication of this edited collection.

Edited by Susan Hawthorne (Australian feminist activist and author) and Bronwyn Winter (feminist and lesbian activist who lectures in the Department of French Studies at the University of Sydney), *September 11: Feminist Perspectives* is a timely and welcome contribution to the debates about terrorism, war, and peace that have dominated both popular and political culture since the events that 'shook the world' last year. The text fits into a genre of what might be loosely termed the 'protest anthology', and sits alongside various other volumes that have emerged in response to September 11 (such as Roger Burbach and Ben Clarke's collection, *September 11 and the US War*, San Francisco: City Lights, 2002). What is unique about this collection is that it is the first of the post-September 11 anthologies to be entirely dedicated to 'feminist perspectives', to women's views. In this sense the volume's heritage can be traced to feminist anthologies that emerged in the 1970s to document the variety of women's voices that gave rise to 'women's liberation' in the United States. Indeed, it can be likened to second wave feminist collections such as Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); an anthology that helped to establish simultaneously both the feminist anthology as genre, and Morgan's international feminist reputation. Like *Sisterhood is Powerful*, the women's responses collected together in this volume comprise journalistic pieces, political statements, poetry, academic analyses, and personal accounts. So, you could say that Morgan's figure looms large here, that this collection is 'Morganesque' in more than one sense.

As the editors point out in the introduction, the collection aims to document a wide range of the views of women who spoke out, but were barely audible, in the aftermath of September 11 'so there may be no mistake as to the fact that women's voices were raised, publicly and massively across the world' (xx). So, this is in part about setting the record straight. It's about ensuring that in times to come there is material evidence of women's resistance to the warmongering that has gripped leaders and foreign policy officials; leaders who, as the collection points out time and time again, are predominantly, if not exclusively, male. And it is clear that the women who speak in this collection refuse to be implicated in this war any more than they already have been by virtue of their membership of



particular nation-states or their religious affiliations. The volume repeatedly, and often defiantly, insists that this is not a war waged by, or for, women, despite claims by representatives of official culture that this war will, for example, liberate the women of Afghanistan.

Hawthorne and Winter argue in the introduction that 'very few women's voices have made it into either the press or the anthologies. Even fewer of these voices have been feminist, with hardly any non-Western – or, indeed, non-US – ones'(xx). This, then, is the collection's greatest achievement; its most important contribution to developing feminist responses to September 11. Beyond setting the record straight, this collection performs the other all-important task of carving out a space for women, in particular those who often go unheard in the Western world, to speak and to represent themselves. It forges a space for women's voices marginalised or downplayed by mainstream/official coverage of September 11. This is a very positive playing out of an increasingly prominent (and sometimes patronising) preoccupation within Western feminism(s) with the need for women constructed by the West as 'minority women' and 'women of developing nations' to have spaces made available to them for self-representation.

The list of contributors is not only impressive, but is obviously shaped by a strong concern with inclusivity. The lineup includes a vast array of women of different cultural, ethnic and vocational backgrounds. For example, it features pieces by award-winning Canadian journalist, Naomi Klein; the courageous 24 year old Tahmeena Faryal, a committed Afghani feminist activist and spokesperson for the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan; singer/songwriter/poet, Ani di Franco; Israeli feminist peace organisation, Bat Shalom; UniFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women; Indian author, Arundhati Roy (who, incidentally, writes a particularly erudite piece); Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú Tum; and Pakistani journalist, Ayesha Khan, to name but a few. The result is a collection that, whilst making a space for the representation of the cultural, national and political diversities of the contributors and their agendas, nonetheless constructs a global feminist solidarity around the resistance to war and terrorism. Given that the publication schedule of this volume must have been very tight (the volume appeared in September this year, just twelve months after the attacks), the variety of contributions is a credit to the energy and organisational capabilities of the editors.

Containing over eighty five contributions, the book is arranged chronologically and divided into sections that trace women's responses not only to September 11, but also to the ensuing invocation of the 'war on terror' and its consequences. Part One organises these feminist responses in three stages: 'Whose Terrorism? 12 September to 7 October' documents the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; 'Whose War? 8 October to 13 November' gathers together women's reactions to Bush's declaration of war; 'Whose Peace? 14 November to 8 March' assembles a variety of feminist calls for peace and respect for human rights in the lead-up to International Women's Day. Part One opens with a poem by Patricia Sykes, and an email sent by Robin Morgan from her home on Manhattan Island to friends and colleagues on September 12. This is followed by a statement from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan expressing their sympathy for the people of the United States and calling for the US government to bring an end to their sponsorship of terrorist groups on foreign soil. And the remainder of this section continues in a similar vein. Reprinted here we have a mixture of personal responses from individual women, such as September 11 widow, Amber Amundson's letter to the *Chicago Tribune*; manifestos/political statements from a number of feminist groups and coalitions, both pre-existing and those formed

specifically around the need for a feminist critique of events; as well as documentation submitted to various formal bodies regulating or, in some cases perpetrating, the 'war on terror', such as the Australian branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's letter to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Like *The Demon Lover*, in Part One of this collection many of the contributors draw connections between patriarchy, war and terror; they link masculine culture with the propagation of violence. Collectively, these pieces locate the incidents of September 11, experienced by the West as an apocalyptic moment of terror that constituted the *Aufhebung* of the 'first war of the new millennium', as unfolding within a much larger continuum of global unrest and generalised violence. Indeed, whilst many of the contributors express their sympathy for the people of the United States, the point is consistently made that this is the kind of violence that many parts of the world live through on a daily basis, and that up until now the West has been complacent.

What the pieces of Part One have in common is an incitement to action, an urgent call for the mobilisation of concerned women everywhere. Calls for more in depth analysis of the gendered structures of society that (re)produce violence mingle with pieces that are primarily concerned with motivating women actively to resist that same violence in their everyday lives. In the latter category, some pieces construct women as inherently more peaceful than men, tapping into dominant understandings of women as maternal and nurturing. And many of the pieces position women (and often their children) as victims of male violence. There is a refrain throughout Part One that calls for those in power to take action to protect the 'real' victims of this war – women and children. Many of the responses are thus encoded in essentialist language characteristic of first wave, and embryonic second wave, feminist activism; a language, that is, born of the need to inspire women to unite actively to resist what was/is perceived as women's oppression. What is interesting about this use of language is that it illustrates the extent to which, when faced with the urgent need to respond as feminists, those immediate responses are informed and shaped by the legacy of what might be thought of as conventional activist feminism. This is not so much a criticism as an observation about the pervasive influence of traditional feminist strategies. However, it should also be noted that this language firmly locates the need for women's resistance within the terrain of dominant understandings of femininity. It draws upon the same kinds of narratives that, on the other side of the gender fence, have been used to legitimate the actions taken by men in positions of power.

Part Two of the book begins the kind of sustained critique of women's positioning in relation to the continuum of war and violence that is afforded by having had the time and space to reflect on September 11 and its immediate aftermath. The pieces in this section take the form of longer essays/reflections that work towards a more well-developed/sophisticated feminist analysis of terrorism and war than those found in Part One. Indeed, at times, the essays in the second half of the book read as a deconstruction of the range of positions assumed by women in Part One. For example, one of the more thought-provoking essays in Part Two is that of Ronit Lentin who argues that feminist writings about war have moved beyond 'excavating the gendered experiences of women towards theorising war, and peace as themselves gendered' (395). She goes on to analyse the Israeli feminist peace movement, arguing that its members have 'tended to valorise and essentialise women as ultimately "more peaceful than men", a theoretically problematic position' (395). In this context, we can usefully deploy Lentin's analysis to critique some of the claims that are made elsewhere in *September 11, 2001*. Similarly, Nahla Abdo runs a compelling argument about the need for an 'alternative feminism'. She claims that historically much feminist research into the

positioning of women in the Arab world has been characterised by an essentialist and Eurocentric/Orientalist approach. This has been countered, Abdo argues, by feminist Ethnicism 'that ended up largely falling into the trap of the Orientalist feminists, fighting one form of essentialism with another'(381). Abdo thus calls for a feminism that rejects the universalising and essentialising tendencies of both Eurocentrism and Ethnicism, and recognises the 'internal contestations, conflicts and contradictions among women'(389).

I am encouraged to see the inclusion of critiques of these kinds in *September 11, 2001*; critiques that urge feminists to rethink the ways in which we construct the boundaries that define our representations of women's concerns. For the language in which we encode these concerns in turn helps to shape the responses we get. Indeed, perhaps we need to think about new ways of articulating our concerns that will help us achieve our strategic ends. And whilst the excavation of women's experience is an important part of the feminist analysis, we must begin to think through the issue of terror in closer detail; to think about the ways that the gendering of both terrorism and war is structurally reproduced through everyday life. These two essays, for me, signal that we have moved beyond the culture of immediate response that defined our initial reactions, the kinds of reactions that are documented in Part One, and are moving towards a feminist culture that is both self-reflexive and long sighted in its portrayals of women and the issues that shape their everyday lives.

One of the things I have found frustrating throughout the September 11 ordeal, both as a member of Australian society and as a feminist, has been the lack of historical contextualisation of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Admittedly, there have been many noble journalistic attempts to provide a framework in which to understand the event, a framework that encourages us to realise that, as Robin Morgan points out 'it is, *not* just 'madmen' or 'monsters' or 'subhuman maniacs' who commit dramatic violence'; rather, 'tactics [such] as this attack come from a complex system of circumstances'(13). But for the most part they have failed to supplant the spectacular imagery served up to us over and over again by television stations 'showing action replay after action replay of the World Trade Center collapsing – edited to appear to happen in a matter of minutes and not hours'(xviii). We have had terrorist mutations of time; terrorism represented to us in terms of a temporal dislocation. We have had terrorism rehearsed in stereotypical terms. And we have had sound byte versions of terrorism and 'either-you're-with-us-or-against-us' rhetoric.

Finally, in the pages of *September 11, 2001*, we begin to gain an insight into the complex matrix of power and structural inequality that produces terrorist violence, and its corollary, war. In combination with arguments raised in Part One then, the essays in Part Two provide us with a social, political, economic and historical framework within which to make sense of the atrocities that unfolded on our television screens late last year. For example, Karen Talbot traces the history of US oil interests in the Middle East and the parallel histories of the wars the US has waged there. In a piece entitled, 'A War for Afghan Women?' Christine Delphy examines the history of US involvement in Afghanistan's internal politics in order to problematise Bush's claim that the coalition's war on terror is an altruistic venture that will liberate Afghani women. And Rosalind Petchesky analyses the connections between the practice of terrorism and gender-biased and racialised dimensions of neoliberal capitalism and various fundamentalisms. What essays like these provide us with is a sense of the history of recent events circumscribed by women's perspectives; a *herstory* (to use that cheesy but useful feminist term). Finally, here is a commentary on September 11 that speaks my language; some thoughtful analyses that articulate with my own concerns as a woman, and as a feminist.

This book is essential reading for anyone who is interested in understanding the ways women are positioned by the global events unfolding around us and shaping the contexts in which women experience everyday life. But be warned: it is not an easy read. The pages are filled with apocalyptic images of death and destruction, whether it be in New York, Kabul or elsewhere. Indeed, if some commentators have claimed that media coverage of September 11 has dumbed down our sense of the atrocities that have been committed recently by parties of both war camps, that we have become 'desensitised' to the violence that is being enacted on a daily basis around the world, then the pieces in this collection bring those acts into sharp focus. Evelyne Accad's description of the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian camps is one that will stay with me. She writes 'the bodies of women, children, old people, young people, their throats slit, their stomachs open, blood flowing into the earth'(423).

Importantly though, neither is this volume a comprehensive or definitive feminist statement. Rather, we might think of it as a springboard for further research and analysis. The variety of approaches adopted by the contributors to this volume often produces conflicting analyses. However, the rich diversity of responses contained in this collection is indicative of the ways women in different places are positioned differently by recent events. And these differences produce differing feminisms whose aims are often conflicting and contradictory. The challenge that feminists now face is how best to negotiate those differences. Indeed, this may very well involve rethinking what feminism and/or feminist activism means. That is, the value of this volume lies not only in opening up a space for women to reflect upon events, both recent and historical, but also in mapping the various terrains in which future debate will take place.

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