

Brenda Walker. *The Wing of Night*. Penguin Viking, 2005.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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Love and war: where would fiction be without them? Brenda Walker's new novel *The Wing of Night* is subtitled 'a novel of love and war'. She is not concerned with the causes of war and the big picture, but with the shattering effects on individuals.

The war, in this case, is World War One – the Great War, as it was known until, unthinkably, it was surpassed so soon afterwards. Two men from rural Western Australia leave on the same boat from Fremantle, with their horses, to fight with the Light Horsemen at Gallipoli. The women who stayed home to wait for them, one a wife, one a new lover, are neighbours and friends. Elizabeth, a city-bred woman alone on her affluent husband's farm, is snubbed by her social equals and Bonnie, a young widow with a small chicken farm, becomes her only ally. Their lives mingle in unexpected ways over the coming years.

*The Wing of Night* is prefaced with an epigraph from Henry James: 'My own taste has always been for unwritten history and my present business is with the reverse of the picture.' James is clearly a model and an inspiration for Walker. She dwells on states of mind, on reflection rather than action; on the hours before the battle, rather than the battle itself. This makes the narrative rather static: there is a plot but the events are large and intractable, connected by memories, dreams and solitary contemplation.

Walker's prose is at its best during these moments of stillness: 'The wheels of the train turned on the great steel rails under her feet. Her heart worked, her breath was in

order, her baby slept on her knee. Behind her reflection in the window lay the faces of the other women in the carriage, some speaking softly, some staring through glass and trees and moving water in the bright emptiness that lasts for a long, long time after a war.’

Bird imagery recurs through the novel. Elizabeth rescues a young crow and brings it up by hand. It becomes her pet, and its death clearly symbolises the end of a phase of her life. A new life starts as another ends in the final pages: perhaps a sign of hope, although the shadow of the century to come falls ominously on any child born in the 1920s.

This connection is not explicit in the book, but for all its solid particularity – sights, sounds, smells, the feel of clothes and grimy surfaces – *The Wing of Night* is not just about the first world war and these four characters. It concerns the aftermath of all wars, and is as much about what could be happening in the present and will happen in the future as it is a recovery of what Henry James calls ‘unwritten history.’