

Life Writing Seminar - Abstract:

Susan Sheridan

Adjunct Professor in Women's Studies and English.

Sue.sheridan@flinders.edu.au

Lost Generation: Women Writers in Postwar Australia

Australia, 1959: In Tasmania, poet Gwen Harwood starts sending out her poems under male pseudonyms, after several encounters with misogynist literary editors; Dorothy Hewett, silent for the previous decade, publishes *Bobbin Up*, a successful novel in the social realist mode approved by the Communist Party (of which she was a member) but one that allowed little scope to her poetic gifts or her theatrical ambitions; Elizabeth Jolley arrives in Perth from England and begins to send out stories, but must wait until 1976 to publish a book. They are but three of the generation of women writers who were largely lost from view in the 1950s and 60s, and who are now in danger of being eclipsed in subsequent histories.

I plan to write a book length group biography about them, and I'd like to use this paper as an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities and problems of such an undertaking. In looking for answers to the question of why their early careers were so beset with difficulties, I hope at the same time to create a picture of the literary culture of the period that will be different because of the presence of women in it – and to offer accounts of these women's writing lives that will expand our understanding of their art and its continuing significance.

A group biography of writers is something of a contradiction in terms. No writer wants to see her self as simply one of a 'generation', and I'm aware of a tension between the necessarily individualist cast of mind of the writers and my feminist and socio-historical interest in what they had in common, how they dealt differently with similar circumstances. With its focus on the professional writing lives of its subjects, my book will bear only an oblique relationship to the genre of individual literary biography. In the more open area of 'life writing', however, I can re-visit some questions that were raised as long ago as the 1920s by Virginia Woolf – what are the social conditions necessary for women to get 'a room of one's own' and what happens to writing when they do – as well as explore other, more recently-elaborated questions of cultural politics, such as those concerning memory and collective identity.

There are precedents for the kind of group life writing I want to attempt: Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* (1982) deals with the 1920s-30s generation of women writers in Australia; her discussions of individual writers have a common reference point in Nettie Palmer, with whom they all corresponded, and the writers themselves were all active politically although they covered a spectrum of left-wing positions. 'My' writers have no such common politics, nor have they [as far as I know] a comparable network of epistolary friendship. Another feminist study of a group of women writers which was able to draw, like Modjeska's, on extensive archive collections of correspondence, is *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-*

1940 (1987) by Gillain Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers. These modernist women (who include Gertrude Stein, H.D., Dorothy Richardson) shared a commitment to experimentation in living as in writing, and a 'loose professional network' founded on female patronage, both literary and financial (xv).

Again, my subjects do not appear to have any comparable links. Divided from one another by geography, marriage and politics, their individual isolation from one another was sometimes compensated by literary friendships with male peers. Yet few of them moved in the literary circles created around little magazines or had much of a presence as editors, reviewers or lecturers. The literary scene is the context in which I will need to place them, in order to explain their 'eclipsing' from it. It was a period when writers such as A.D. Hope, Judith Wright and Patrick White won international recognition. It was a high point for local publishing enterprises, and also the moment when *Meanjin*, *Quadrant* and *Overland* first appeared, literary magazines that still dominate the field today. Why is it so scarcely populated by women writers? I need to find ways of relating the women's individual stories of publication successes and failures to the broader context of literary and other cultural institutions (such as the ABC), to book and magazine publishing, and to aspects of cultural policy including both government subsidies to the arts, and censorship law and practice. Here I will be able to draw on recent scholarship on the history of the book. But my challenge as a writer will be to get the right balance between individual stories and these broader contexts.

My title, 'lost generation', consciously echoes the name given to American writers of the 1920s, Hemingway and others, where 'lost' has the double connotation that their formative experiences of the Great War alienated them from mainstream American life and its dreams of security, and many of them chose to live in exile in Europe – or in Bohemian Greenwich Village. It is an ironic echo in that despite their alienation from the mainstream literary culture, most of these post World War 2 women writers lived superficially conventional lives of middle-class marriage and motherhood, settled in one place. Nor did they appear have any sense of themselves as a distinct group. Apart from these ironies, however, there is another set of connotations of the title phrase, one that I am sceptical of. 'Generationalism' – baby boomers, X and Y - is a recent media construct that is regularly used to explain phenomena as diverse as the changing faces of feminism, age of marriage and habits of consumption. If the concept is to have any explanatory value at all it will have to be used with full consideration of differences of gender, class, region, religion, education and sexuality within that 'generation'.

In the full paper, I intend to use the story of one writer – Jessica Anderson - as a way of illustrating each of these possibilities and problems.