

Annette Stewart, *Barbara Hanrahan: A Biography* (Wakefield Press, 2010)

Barbara Hanrahan is an unusual figure, perhaps a unique one, in the history of Australian cultural life. She was profoundly gifted not just in one art but in two, and she maintained her practice both as a visual artist and as a writer until her death; she was prolifically productive in each field, and equally highly regarded in both, for her writing, like her artwork, reveals a startling originality of vision and an equally startling capacity to realise that vision.

Hanrahan was born in Adelaide in 1939 and brought up in an all-female household after her father's death at 26 from tuberculosis, when she was only a year old. For all of her formative years she lived with her mother, grandmother and great-aunt in a modest house in Adelaide's inner west, a house that looms large in her diaries, in interviews and in her autobiographical writing as the focal place of her memories, her inner life and her social and emotional formation.

It's an inspired choice for Stewart to begin the book at the point, in 1963, when Hanrahan left Adelaide at the age of twenty-four to study at the Royal College of Art in London; chronologically as well as in other ways, this is the central hinge of her life. She lived and worked in England during her twenties and thirties, living for most of this time with her partner Jo Steele, but from the mid-1970s began a series of moves back and forth between England and Australia, the charms of each country wearing off the longer they stayed. After Hanrahan was diagnosed with cancer in 1984, they were mostly based in Adelaide but travelled extensively after her recovery. In 1988 the cancer recurred and Hanrahan died late in 1991, a few months after her fifty-second birthday.

Annette Stewart is a literary scholar and it's perhaps inevitable that her biography focuses more confidently and more often on Hanrahan's writing rather than her visual art, though the book contains a generous and carefully chosen assortment of her prints in very high quality reproduction, a good call on the part of the Wakefield Press as the plates not only illustrate the text but give the reader an excellent idea of the range and quality of her work.

It's a conventional and straightforward biography with one exception: it ventures into some fairly basic Freudian notions early on, but Stewart seems uncomfortable with the terminology and her knowledge of psychoanalysis seems limited and dated. It's a relief to the reader when she finishes with Hanrahan's childhood and turns to her writing as the main subject of discussion, for there Stewart is on her own safe professional ground as a literary critic, dealing with material on which she has already written an earlier book. One useful insight, however, is provided by Stewart's observation that in writing her prolific and obsessive diaries for nearly all of her adult life, the highly-strung Hanrahan was practising a kind of self-administered psychoanalysis in which her anxieties, angers, hatreds and fears could be expressed.

Stewart occasionally and briefly allows herself a personal voice as biographer, often when discussing her interviews of Hanrahan and the views of the people who knew her best – her partner Jo Steele, her mother, her friends Elaine Lindsay and Irene Stevens – and it's one of the techniques that keeps the book lively and engaging. But sometimes this meta-narrative descends cheerfully into near-absurdity, as when

Book reviews: *Barbara Hanrahan* by Annette Stewart. Kerry Goldsworthy.
Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Stewart describes Hanrahan's pilgrimage to the Deep South on the trail of Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty, writers whom she admired and with whom she felt a strong affinity: 'The positive factors which Barbara responded to in their work were their passionate regionalism, their awareness of bizarre contradictions and, above all, the atmosphere of evil they were able to invoke.'

Stewart is, in turn, on Hanrahan's trail, and at this point the reader begins to wonder about the nature and purpose of literary pilgrimage, and about what sort of information or inspiration such trips are expected to provide. For Hanrahan herself they obviously provided much: inspiration, ideas, re-energising, and perhaps a fulfillment of what was obviously a profound general need to pay homage. But more than once on such a biographer's pilgrimage – on a visit to Hanrahan's childhood home, and again on a visit to Flannery O'Connor's grave in Milledgeville, Georgia, both sites of profound significance for Hanrahan – Stewart herself says blankly that she saw nothing special about them. She doesn't enlarge on this, and it leaves the reader wondering somewhat uneasily whether she thinks Hanrahan is making a dramatic fuss about nothing, and where she feels Hanrahan's genius as an artist resides: surely all artists, especially those as emotional and intuitive as Hanrahan, are distinguished as much by their way of seeing the world as by their way of expressing it.

Yet it's one such alienated moment that provides a glimpse of Stewart at her best. Momentarily liberated from her scholarly carefulness and her obviously strong sense of obligation to her subject as she recalls her own disorientation and difficulty as a solitary traveler in the Deep South, Stewart's writing suddenly soars into a new dimension:

There seems to be no centre to the towns, none of the comforting mental focus of equivalent cities in England or in Australia. Instead there is always and only the highway, a kind of deathlike river of life, with everything, but nothing, strung along its sides.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this book is the sure-footed way it creates a narrative of creative development out of Hanrahan's writing. With the confidence of someone who knows her fiction very well, Stewart traces the directions of her development in subject matter, style and approach from her first book, the autobiographical *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973) to her last, *Michael and Me and the Sun* (1992), on which she was still feverishly working in hospital as the disease, now spread to her brain, finally began to claim the use of her arms and her eyes.

Stewart's restraint and dignity in writing about the final years of her life equals Hanrahan's own in living them out. It's remarkable, as it was in reading Hanrahan's diaries when they were published in 1998, to read this account of a woman who spent so much of her life in a state of anxiety or rage now fronting up to protracted physical suffering and knowledge of her own impending death with such fortitude and grace.

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