

Susan Sheridan, *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making Their Mark* (University of Queensland Press, 2011)

Three decades ago, Susan Sheridan reviewed *Exiles at Home*, Drusilla Modjeska's study of 'Australian women writers, 1925-1945.'¹ She wrote then that Modjeska's work 'breaks new ground in that it opens up perspectives on a whole period of history through the lives and work of a group of women writers ... As the first ever book-length study of Australian women writers, *Exiles at Home* sets a high standard.'² In 2011, Sheridan's debt to this earlier research is evident: in the introduction to *Nine Lives*, she cites *Exiles* as 'a key precedent for the present study' (20). Her own work on her nine chosen authors is as illuminating, in terms of Australian feminist and cultural history, as Modjeska's study of women novelists of the 1920s and 30s.

Susan Sheridan covers the writing of poetry as well as fiction in her analysis, providing a wealth of insight into the work of five poets and four novelists. The poets are Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett and Dorothy Auchterlonie Green; the novelists Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley, Amy Witting and Jessica Anderson. Together these women make up the 'nine lives' of the book's title: as many lives as the proverbial cat.

All of these writers struggled with the act of writing in postwar Australia. As Susan Sheridan observes,

Literature was a particularly unwelcoming and uncertain profession for women in the 1950s and 1960s. To account for that uncertainty requires a complex set of interlocking explanations, in terms of the social, political and cultural climate of the times – the ideologically driven ousting of women from public life in the postwar period, the dominance of Cold War cultural politics that few of these women participated in, current literary tastes and whether the kind of writing they were attempting was understood or valued, and finally their distinctively feminine commitments to marriage and family. (5)

This is the context in which Sheridan places her nine writers, women who were born between the first World War and 1930, 'whose early careers during the postwar decades took various roads to success, some much longer and more winding than others' (2). She devotes a chapter to each author, and her analysis of their lives and work – from the early success of Judith Wright to the late blooming of Elizabeth Jolley's career – makes fascinating reading.

Gwen Harwood published poems under male pseudonyms, argued with incompetent editors and slipped acrostics into her poetry ('So long Bulletin' and 'Fuck all editors'.) Amy Witting was selected for the Patrick White award, a tribute to writers whose work has gone unrecognised; she was a writer whose success was not

¹ Drusilla Modjeska. *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers, 1925-1945*. (Angus & Robertson, 1981)

² Susan Sheridan. 'Women, Writing and War: Looking Back on the 1930s' [Book Review] *Meanjin*, 41.1. (1982): 89

celebrated until very late in her life, when she was in her seventies. Jessica Anderson had to wait for 'easier financial circumstances' before she produced her best work.

Susan Sheridan charts these writers' journeys with insight and elegance. One of the strengths of her book is the way in which she draws the finer details of these very different women's lives into her central theme, the 'gendered patterns of cultural production and reception' (6). Women writers have always fought particular battles, ranging from complicated relationships with their male peers to the difficulties of combining marriage and motherhood with a literary career. Sheridan's study illuminates this: it is an example of Virginia Woolf's belief that a woman writer needs 'a room of one's own', and brings to mind Jane Austen's struggles with her work in the shared space of her family's drawing room. We are reading about Australian women writing in the middle of the twentieth century, but the story is the same.

Sheridan's meticulous research in *Nine Lives* encompasses the authors' unpublished correspondence as well as contemporary reviews, early publications in literary magazines, autobiographical work and interviews. (She acknowledges a special debt to the 'invaluable' oral history collection in the National Library of Australia [20]). The extent of her research is impressive; speaking as a librarian, I was delighted to see so many of the rich resources in our archives, manuscript collections and libraries used in this project (258-260). Speaking as a reader, I benefitted from Sheridan's generous bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter – a wonderful resource for discovering more about these writers – and also appreciated the excellent Bibliography.

Susan Sheridan has used literary 'critical analyses' of her authors' works 'sparingly, since my focus has been principally on the production and reception of their earliest published work, rather than on the themes and strategies of their writing' (20). This provides a rich cultural and feminist history, but I was sorry not to learn more about the literary aspects of the work of these nine authors. The poetry of Gwen Harwood, in particular, is often deeply revealing of her experience as a woman writer:

The clothes are washed, the house is clean.
I find my pen and start to write.
Something like hatred forks between
my child and me. She kicks her good
new well-selected toys with spite
around the room, and whines for food.
Inside my smile a monster grins
and sticks her image through with pins.³

I have always wanted to learn more about this 'monster' and I will gladly return to Harwood's poetry, enhanced by the insights in *Nine Lives*, to do so. It is a tribute to a talented author and researcher when a reader turns, with delight, to the primary sources. I am confident that many of Sheridan's readers will return to, or discover, the poetry and the fiction that is celebrated in *Nine Lives*.

Jennifer Osborn

³ Gwen Harwood, 'Burning Sappho,' *Selected poems* ed. Gregory Kratzman (Halcyon Press, 2001): 57.
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Book reviews: *Nine Lives* by Susan Sheridan. Jennifer Osborn.
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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>