Contents

Nicole Anae: *Five Seasons* by Syd Harrex

J.C. Bannon: *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* by Mark McKenna

Sanghamitra Dalal and Chandani Lokuge: *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum

Gillian Dooley: *Instead of a Book* by Diana Athill

Tony Gibbons: *The Riddle of Father Hackett* by Brenda Niall

Winton Higgins: *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion

Winton Higgins: *Stieg & Me: Memories of a Life with Stieg Larsson* by Eva Gabrielsson with Marie-Françoise Colombani


Payal Khuran: *Bhog and Other Stories* by Ankur Betageri.

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri: *Beautiful Thing: Portrait of a Bombay Bar Dancer* by Sonia Faleiro

Lorenzo Mari: *Daddy’s Wings* by Milena Agus, translated by Brigid Maher

Logan Mickel: *The Man in Blue Pyjamas* by Jalal Barzanji.


Jennifer Osborn: *Midnight in Peking* by Paul French

Mohammad Saleem: *The Good Muslim* by Tахmima Aham

Jorge Salavert: *Spirit House* by Mark Dapin

Jorge Salavert: *Tales, Poems and Songs from the Underwater World* by Daran Kamali

Emily Sutherland, *What Remains* by Denise Leith

Nick Turner: *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

Syd Harrex, *Five Seasons* (Table One, 2011)

I remember reading an anecdote recalling when the poet Stephané Mallarmé offered a witty homily to the painter Edgar Degas. The painter complained to Mallarmé of his frustrated attempts at creating a sonnet despite a wealth of ideas, to which Mallarmé rather wryly remarks, ‘It’s not with ideas that one makes poetry, Degas, it’s with words.’

Mallarmé’s elliptic riposte inspired for me a self-styled distortion: perhaps poetry reviews are written not with words, but rather ideas.

Writing reviews for collections of poetry can be an intensely personal and remarkably sensitive enterprise. The force of the encounter between text and reflection, between words and ideas, intensifies further when one has a personal experience of the poet – as the anecdote between Mallarmé and Degas perhaps shows. Is it possible to offer a response to poetry, or any other literature, from a purely objective standpoint when you and the author share an acquaintance?

You would be correct in assuming that there is a story to tell here between Syd Harrex and me. So, I shall tell it.

In the open restaurant of the Mercure Hotel, Nadi, Fiji Islands, it is easy to appreciate the poetry of daily life. The pleasure of place swells twofold when one is in Nadi to attend the First Fiji Literary Festival. Under the theme ‘Creativity Across Communities; Imagining and Imaging the Pacific,’ the 2011 festival brought together local and international scholars, writers and creative artists, from around Fiji and beyond the Pacific, myself included.

Seated as I was at a table in the Mercure’s ‘Rokete’ restaurant – overlooking a kidney-shaped swimming pool, sun-baked deck chairs, a tropical garden, numerous palm-trees stretching to an azure sky, and a deliciously cool and creamy cocktail in hand – how vivid becomes the charm of the scene when sharing the company of a man described by Brian Matthews as ‘One of this country’s more original and moving lyric poets.’

Long days followed of ensconced reverie at ‘our’ table; conversations about poetry, sessions of poetry writing, reflections of life, of the past, of loves lost and found, at times intoxicated by a profound sense of congenial simpatico – and others by pure overindulgences – these occasions comprise my recollections of Syd Harrex.

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Imagine then, if you will, endeavouring to subtract those experiences from memory when writing a review of his latest collection *Five Seasons*, abstracts of which were in fact read at the First Fiji Literary Festival; I among a small number of orators.

Is it possible? Does one even try?

While I cannot promise a wholly objective review, whatever that is, I will make a concerted attempt to share my reception of *Five Seasons* in light of the eminent Australian academic Professor A. R. Chisholm’s caution; if one spends ‘good money on a poetry review [one] ought to find some poetry in it.’

Syd Harrex’s latest collection, *Five Seasons* has been edited and compiled by Melinda Graefe and Molly Murn, both postgraduate students at Flinders University. Their introduction is itself a rich and deeply thoughtful meditation on the poet and his work. Read it and you will understand the value. For this section proves exceedingly useful as a kind of existential compass via which the reader might navigate the thematic concerns mapped throughout the collection, as well as orientate oneself to the collection’s organisation. *Five Seasons* is divided into five sections; ‘Spring,’ ‘Summer,’ ‘Autumn,’ ‘Winter,’ and ‘Out of Season’. While the majority of poems are newly-published, some, such as ‘In Memory of Gwen Harwood’ (‘Spring’), ‘Eclipse,’ ‘Blood Bank,’ ‘Return to Sender’ (‘Summer’), and ‘Paddo Plus’ (‘Winter’), have been previously published elsewhere.

It is clear from the individual works that the poems track a personal journey, or rather a series of journeys, which at times intersect, then depart, and merge and then remerge to realise an altogether new trajectory. These are poems of travel in time, but they are also poems of time; of a particular time as much as a particular place, and of a particular person as much as a particular encounter. Traversing decades at points only to then claim a moment in breathtakingly vivid detail; Syd opens the door to a journey where the reader becomes an ever-moving passenger. We shift, as he does, in literary spaces where time expands in one moment and then truncates in another:

**This is My Room**

This is my room. Here I am, here
I have to leave to sleep in a real bed.
I’m not schizoid. Just like any lover,
sumptuous with desiring before autumn’s …
shall I say passed or conveniently out
of the way. But now is high summer,
the clouds on heat, erogenous images
multiplying on towels on the beach.
And the outside world’s out there silent
or gregarious as the case may be; while here,
the library of questions never answered,

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3 Alan Rowland Chisholm, ‘A Sheaf of Poetry,’ Melbourne *Argus*, 23 October 1948, 21. By ‘ought to find some poetry in it,’ Chisholm, I am sure, refers to the necessity to include references to the poet’s poetry in a review, rather than Chisholm’s inclination to simply disparage a reviewer’s prosy attempts to respond to poetry. Yet it appears a successful disparagement whatever his agenda.

4 Molly Murn and Melinda Graefe’s paper, “‘No Man is an Island’: Sense, Memory, and Illumination in the Recent Poetry of Syd Harrex,” was read by Sudesh Mishra at the First Fiji Literary Festival, FNU, Namaka, October, 2011.
Five Seasons embraces that we are each acutely aware of the seasons throughout our youth, but that as we grow older they never emerge as we remember them. Time and season no longer fully equate. Autumn is not quite spring. Winter seems more temperate than we recall. Spring offers shades of summer always with the dark prelude to winter. Autumn and spring are seasons in between. The sequence of the seasons is somehow out-of-cycle as a catalogue of time when we look from the short days of our adulthood to the long summer-times of our past. Five Seasons is more than a meditation on what was ... once. It creates a new world where past and present things interrelate, like the seasons, within a re-conceptualised cycle of time, life, memory, love and loss that creates room for out-of-season-ness.

By offering the reader slices of his life once lived and now commemorated, his poems invite complicity in that truly human pastime: remembrance. For me at least, I am transported back to the days I often stood gazing out over Hobart from the peak of Mount Wellington (‘Up and Down the Slopes of Mount Wellington’), or returning to Hobart for a very brief visit in 2010 (‘Back in Tassie’), or to the recollection of my days as a postgraduate spending hours in the Morris Miller Library reading the works of a much-admired poet (‘In Memory of Gwen Harwood’). From my here-and-now I occasionally believe these were my halcyon days, although at the time these moments appeared as merely everyday life.

Such is the season and out-of-season tricks of memory:

**Sublunar Lovers, and Other Miscalculations**

I have a presentiment of dark clouds over snow-covered Mount Wellington returning to haunt me when the full moon is lazy and my release framed. (43)

Indeed, as we are in the journey of reading Five Seasons compelled backward, forward, and to those slippery places in between, we too recall our own many seasons and there discover a prickly satisfaction in the riddle of being and remembering. As mortality is the lot of human life, Five Seasons embraces the gift of observation by making possible encountering a world where meaning is hindsight, foresight, in-sight.

So too do the poems in this collection explore those ‘times’ which do not quite fit within the order – the season – of things. This is the bittersweet kind of in-between-ness that forces the reader to wonder at the afterlife from the armchair of their here-and-now. This is a time between time – between time of life and the inevitable time of death – and thus, poems between the order of things. We are forever in life between that profound contradiction of reconciling death while in and between negotiating life:
**Piece of the Moon**

*For Danny and Norman*

(i)  
They brought home pieces of the moon,  
thus abolishing poetry:  
put them back, you say.

(ii)  
To be late  
with studied nonchalance –  
to one’s lecture, wedding,  
or funeral –  
has a high priority  
in your repertoire of the ideal.

(iii)  
If man fucked up earth  
who fucked up heaven?

(iv)  
A poem is the result  
of a mind moving  
from why to how –

like foliage in the sun.  
Poetry is how, not why,  
you postpone your death. (57)

And so, to appropriate Mallarmé’s enigmatic remark, I believe *Five Seasons* acknowledges Syd Harrex as the master of writing poetry not with words, or even ideas, but rather with time.

The cycle of *Five Seasons* is unique and celebratory precisely because its literary works relishes the impossible delight of being in, and out, of season.

**Nicole Anae**
Mark McKenna, An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark (Miegunyah Press, 2011)

It seems that around twenty years since his death has been a good time to re-evaluate the work, life and times of the historian Manning Clark. Two substantial biographies have appeared recently. In 2008 Brian Matthews gave us a major portrait of Clark, particularly in a literary context, and was the first to reveal some of the contents of his extensive diaries. But it could not be the last word on this extraordinarily complex man who left so many traces and trails of his life both public and private for biographers and scholars to discover. Mark McKenna’s fine and comprehensive study was some seven years in the making but it has certainly been worth the wait. It is as riveting and fascinating as its subject and very readable. Not surprisingly it has been shortlisted for prizes and recently won the Premier’s Award for Non-fiction at Adelaide Writers Week. (A disclaimer here: I was one of the judging panel).

Clark had a great influence on Australian historical discourse, beginning in the 1940s, as the compiler and editor of accessible original documents of Australian history, then through his magisterial but flawed six volume history of Australia (1962 to 1987), to his last years as a leading public intellectual. Always a figure of note and controversy, in his heyday he was an instantly recognisable figure commenting on the state of Australia and the Australian psyche. But his death saw the inevitable re-evaluation of his contribution. Within two years his publisher, Peter Ryan, denounced his masterwork as full of inaccuracies and errors and something which, astonishingly, Ryan now felt ashamed to have published. Then three years later Clark was ‘exposed’ by the Brisbane Courier Mail as a Soviet agent and recipient of the Order of Lenin (which is rebutted and contextualised in this book). Even in his largely sympathetic biography McKenna explores and unravels Clark’s claim to have seen the broken glass in the streets of Bonn in the immediate aftermath of the notorious ‘Kristallnacht’ in Hitler’s Germany. Clark’s wife Dymphna did indeed see it, but Clark, arriving weeks later, convinced himself that he had been there too. But the fact remains that Manning Clark is still probably among the two or three best-known Australian historians.

This major work is a very well written and researched biography of a significant Australian – and very complex man. His life and career could be seen as highly successful. His diary, notebooks, and vast accumulation of letters and other items were intended to be the basis for a monumental posthumous biography and in McKenna he has found someone up to the task.

Clark was clearly aware of his power and influence as a teacher, lecturer, commentator, and writer and sustained his positive public image throughout his life. His importance for the study of Australian history is undoubted. As McKenna says, Clark sparked the interest of the post-war generation in Australian history. His book of select documents on the subject became and remains a standard text in schools and universities. It opened the study of Australian history to many people, giving it a significance and academic respectability it had lacked except in limited circles. He put the story of Australia in an international context and in its geographical setting. One of the consequences of Australia being ‘inextricably connected to Asia’ was that ‘White Australia was a phase in Australia’s history that had to end lest the country find itself isolated in its own region.’ Australian history for Clark was a great struggle between our geographical location and our British heritage and ties to Empire, between Catholic and Protestant, between the concepts of the
Enlightenment and less embracing realities of frontier settlement, between philistinism and culture.

In all this, McKenna reveals Clark as reflecting a very personal struggle within himself, from his boyhood as the son of an Anglican clergyman to his deep contact with British and European culture and values immediately before World War II, and so to his career in Australia, much of which was spent in the nascent national capital, but nevertheless provincial town, of Canberra, first at the Canberra University College which was part of Melbourne University, and then at the newly established ANU. Not that Clark did not welcome a kind of exile, for he never felt he quite belonged anywhere in particular, but, as McKenna perceptively points out,

his arrival [in Canberra] dovetailed perfectly with his own ambitions. The city was an experiment in creating a national culture and Clark was about to embark on a parallel journey: to write the nation’s history, each monumental volume another pillar in the edifice of Australia’s identity. (304)

His multi-volumed history was the first since that of G.W. Rusden in 1883. When Volume 1, ‘From the earliest times to the age of Macquarie’, was published in 1962, it had huge impact. The eminent historian Keith Hancock said that it ‘made Australian history now a part of man’s spiritual pilgrimage’. It was Australia as a whole of itself without apology, ‘the first genuinely postcolonial history’ (440).

It is interesting that at this time it was welcomed by conservatives who saw it as moving Australian history from the left wing ‘mateship, workingman’s paradise on the march towards Labor’s light on the hill’ version into something more broad and balanced (440). Later of course Clark was seen as the standard-bearer of a certain type of social democratic history that those same conservatives condemned. As each volume appeared Clark’s reputation as a prophet increased, flowering during the Whitlam years and later as an inspiration to Paul Keating’s brand of nationalism. The history is very much the voice of Clark as McKenna describes it, ‘sonorous and logistical, biblical and outlandishly grave – a voice that seems to elevate Australia through style and tone alone.’ At the same time his reputation as an historian was diminished by the errors of fact which littered the work and his increasingly eccentric and personal interpretations and speculations. McKenna points out that both at the time and since few historians have sought to engage with his work. Even friends and colleagues were reluctant to review it and some who were close to him felt it was not real historical writing. Colleague John La Nauze, the eminent historian of Australian Federation – and arguably Clark’s treatment of the Federal period in volume 5 of his History is the weakest – refused to read it as he said he ‘didn’t read fiction’ (456). Clark was extremely sensitive to criticism and quite vindictive to those who dared to venture it.

Clark assiduously kept and even annotated voluminous notes and personal correspondence throughout his life and kept a diary of his private musings. It is these that give the book its power. McKenna makes it clear that Clark was setting up and preparing his materials for a future biographer, signposting and attempting to influence the way in which he is portrayed. Clark may have hoped to direct the way he was presented, but by his skilled and judicious use of this material McKenna manages to resist the posthumous directions of his subject and provide a true and rounded picture. In the process he shows how and why biographies of prominent persons like Clark should be written. Clark’s diaries reveal a totally different person from the confident attractive charismatic public figure and show him as a

man full of self-loathing and spiritual longing and fear. His remarks about his wife and his marriage, read by Dymphna after his death, are sadistically cruel, although it is hard not to see them as contrived. McKenna deals with all this, including his infidelities, insobriety and other moral failings, without sparing his subject.

As the judges said in his citation for the Literary Award,

the picture that emerges of the man and his life is by no means a series of heroic tableaux. There are enough warts to seriously challenge any ‘great man’ thesis, and McKenna produces not only a definitive portrait of the man but also of the evolving determinedly Australian culture he was part of for the much of the twentieth century.¹

But it must leave open the question of Clark’s future place. His monumental ‘A History of Australia’ is too personal and eccentric to be a point of reference for future scholars; but as a great literary work, and in terms of its influence on our perception not just of Australian history but of the nation and how it was shaped, it will be rediscovered from generation to generation.

J.C. Bannon

¹ Announcement of Literary Awards, Arts Department, SA Government, March 2012.

Amidst a number of publications commemorating the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, Asia’s first Nobel Laureate in Literature (1913), Mohammad Quayum’s translation of Tagore’s short stories from the Bengali original deserves especial mention. Quayum’s brief, succinct biographical essay and comprehensive introduction set up the context to these nineteen stories of myriad variety, written across a range of time (1891-1941). Quayum’s careful selection confirms that Tagore was indeed the ‘Master Poet’ (Kaviguru) who virtually pioneered the short story genre in Bengali literature during the late nineteenth century.

The predominant context of the selected stories is late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Tagore’s patriotism is evident in his vivid portrayal of the landscape of rural Bengal, its sights and sounds, culture and custom. However, the selection is also significant in illustrating the ways in which Tagore subtly transcended the bordered context of Bengali life and culture to articulate his humanist philosophy of the fundamental values of self-respect and co-existence of humankind. Written with a tinge of pathos, or subtle humour and irony, the stories assert Tagore’s empathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his disapproval of gender hierarchy and caste discrimination, and his opposition to the narrow utilitarian pursuit of the material at the expense of truth, creativity, morality and spirituality. Consequently, characters such as Ratan (The Postmaster), Nirupama (Assets and Debts), Hemanta (Sacrifice), Chandara (Punishment), Balai (Balai), Kamala and Habir Khan (A Woman’s Conversion to Islam) exemplify Tagore the reformist who relentlessly argued against societal inequalities and injustices.

Though written more than a century ago, Tagore’s stories could not be more relevant to a twenty-first century readership. His vision of synthesis and intercultural alliance offers a panacea to our contemporary world riddled with factionalism and fundamentalism. In Quayum’s words:

Tagore believed in a dialogic, interactive world, in which communities and nations would bear a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality towards one another, and shun exclusivity, parochialism and idolatry of geography for a centrifugal outlook, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions. (xxiii)

Translations are often criticised for failing to transport the delicate cultural and linguistic nuances from the source language to the target language. One of Tagore’s creative innovations was to change the literary medium from formalism to living speech, to experiment with the natural rhythms of spoken Bengali. Quayum’s translation of Tagore’s stories is exceptional in its retention of the subtleties of Bengali expression. It not only transfers the colloquialisms commonly used in a daily Bengali household but brings alive the minutiae of the rural milieu, be it the innocence of Ratan (The Postmaster) and Mini (Kabuliwala), or the quarrelsomeness of the poor, illiterate housewives, Radha and Chandara (Punishment).
The other outstanding feature of this volume is Quayum’s success with translating what is more complex – the intricacies of human relationships. We particularly note, for instance, the delicacy of the translated script that suggests the understated relationship between the child Ratan and the Postmaster in Tagore’s gem-like story, *The Postmaster*. It is with quite unusual craftsmanship that the inner radiance of this story is retained in the translation, in the poignant revelation of a child’s innocent longing for love and belonging against adult (ultimately, life’s) indifference.

Generally, the stories read almost as though they had been written originally in English. At no moment does the reader get lost in the translation, either linguistically, culturally or psychologically, and this surely is the ultimate test of a translation. Footnotes that explain Bengali cultural mores, customs and habits enhance the value of this volume for a wide global readership. This is a book that deserves a secure place in local/international, community/tertiary libraries as well as in private collections.

Sanghamitra Dalal and Chandani Lokuge
Diana Athill, *Instead of a Book: Letters to a Friend* (Granta, 2011)

I first encountered Diana Athill through her memoir *Stet* while doing research on V.S. Naipaul, but like a someone introduced by a mutual acquaintance who then goes on to become a close friend, I have for some time now been an avid reader of her books and I treasure her for her own sake.

Athill was an editor, and made a significant and scantily-rewarded contribution to the success of the André Deutsch, the publishing firm that gave Naipaul his first break and published many other significant writers, including Jean Rhys and John Updike. Since her retirement she has pursued a new career as an author in her own right. Now, at the age of 94, she has eight successful books to her name. The latest, teasingly titled *Instead of a Book,* consists of a collection of her letters to Edward Field, a New York poet with whom she has corresponded since 1981. This is really a joint venture, since her letters were transcribed, lovingly, by Field and his partner, Neil Derrick, and Field provides an introduction to match Athill’s. Unfortunately she has not kept his letters to her, so it is only one side of the correspondence, but she adds illuminating notes where necessary.

Athill disarms the reader immediately in her Introduction, when explaining how her friendship with Field began:

I am a bad reader of poetry. When it is complex, greatly condensed and obscure I don’t like it because I believe that the purpose of language is communication. If something which has to be expressed can only be put on paper to the satisfaction of the expresser in what amounts to code, I am prepared to take other people’s word for it that it is beautiful but I don’t want to read it. At the same time, however, no one can be quite unaffected by the surrounding intellectual climate, which means that often I find that poems I can understand leave me feeling that anything so easy can’t be much good. (viii)

Field’s poetry, however, delighted her, especially because, in his words, ‘the whole point of poetry is subject matter, saying what I have to say, saying what has never been said before, what’s not polite to say’ (ix). Athill is an expert at saying ‘what’s not polite to say’, and though, as she says, it is difficult to resist the intellectual fashions of the time, she constantly pushes against them. She gives Field some advice about his memoirs:

Why don’t you buck the trend and say, ‘What’s all this nonsense about seduction by older men? It was delicious’ and then tell all. Though perhaps your compatriots are more pious than Europeans in their observation of passing fashions in thinking, so this might not be very good advice. (123)

As she, Edward and most of their friends are approaching extreme old age, illness and death are inevitably constant preoccupations. However, this is not as tedious as it might have been. Athill is bracingly honest about her long-time companion Barry, whose gradual descent into debility and senility is charted in these letters. Breezily, she wrote that a party she and his friends held for him in 2006 ‘went well’, and then went on to describe how he ‘behaved disgracefully’, complaining about the food, not thanking anyone for his presents, and ‘stump[ing] off back to bed half way through the first course. … So we went ahead and


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enjoyed ourselves’ (298-9). Eventually, he became too much for her, approaching 90, to cope with, and his niece in Jamaica came to the rescue and arranged for him to move out there. ‘It was a shock, and of course it was sad that our long relationship had come to this: but simultaneously it was a most profound relief’ (318-9). And, without being in the least bit sentimental, Athill has found compensations in growing old. For instance, since ‘one ceases to be a sexual being … I have become free to love men without wanting to go to bed with them, which is surprisingly delightful’ (vii). When her mother died in 1990, she missed her, but all the pain was ‘blanketed by gratitude’ because ‘she was so stunningly lucky in the way she went’ (55). The fear that we have to face, it is implied, is not death itself but the long months or years of pain and dependency which might precede it. Above all, she has, ‘in spite of all the heavy reasons for anxiety and sadness … been experiencing amazing and inexplicable moments of well-being’ (194). These letters don’t offer any false consolations, or take the terror out of growing old and dying, but they provide a chart to what might lie ahead, and somehow that is reassuring.

When the letters began in 1981, Athill was still working with André Deutsch, and would be for another eleven years. As the book progresses, her own writing career took off and she discovered the pleasures of moderate celebrity. In 1985 she exclaimed at being quoted in the New York Times ‘as tho’ I were Somerset Maugham or someone!!!! Wow!’ (28). When her book Make Believe was published in 1993, she was delighted to be given prominent place in the Spectator, though she soon learned that ‘that thing about fame is that it’s here today and gone tomorrow’ (95). To illustrate this point, she tells Field that one of the only two ‘fan’ letters she had received was ‘a three-page effusion, illustrated, about Black Penises – unfortunately so wildly incoherent that we can’t make out whether the writer is in favour of same, or against them, although it’s clear that he does believe them to be much much much bigger than white ones’ (96). There is something very cheering about an 85-year-old woman who can find this not threatening or offensive, but merely amusing. One symptom of celebrity causes her some gentle self-examination:

I’m coming to the conclusion that real fame would be appallingly corrupting, given the qualms that can result from insy- insy-mini fame! My ability to make an audience beam because I’m so nice seems to me deeply susp…ect. I suppose the sensible thing is just to enjoy it while given the chance. (242)

She was, however, ‘very cross’ about the reviews of Make Believe: ‘None of them seem to recognize a beady eye when they see one’ (96). But of course other writers are fair game. When having dental problems, she says, ‘I considered a course of Prozac, but chose instead to plunge into a rereading of the novels of Anthony Trollope. I once found them boring, but for this emergency they are just the thing’ (125).

Diana Athill is now living in a home for the ‘active elderly’ and still makes the news from time to time: her recent story ‘A Hopeless Case’ has been longlisted for the Sunday Times short story award. When Instead of a Letter was published, ‘the correspondence still continues, as does our friendship, but it seems to me that this is the time to write FINIS’, she writes in her Postscript (327). An affectionate and trusting friendship, a dry wit, self-deprecating honesty and the complete absence of sentimentality make Instead of a Book an absolute delight.

Gillian Dooley
Biographies of those who are not major players in historical events but are there and involved in lesser capacities are always fascinating. They can cast light on the major events but, more importantly, they examine the way in which lesser figures act and react in history. They can give a feel for the times in which they lived and raise questions which do not readily spring to mind. Such is the biography of William Hackett SJ (1878-1954) by Brenda Niall, aptly entitled a ‘riddle’ though it would seem the plural, ‘riddles’, is far more appropriate.

Hackett was born and raised in Kilkenny, one of nine children born to a doctor and his wife. This was the Ireland in which Michael Davitt founded the Land League in 1879 and the Land War started in 1880. Parnell was President of the Land League in 1879 and till his death in 1891 agitated for Home Rule for Ireland. Hackett’s father was a vociferous supporter of Parnell. This did not make him a favourite son of the Catholic hierarchy. Niall gives a good account of Hackett’s life in those years. The first riddle for the reader is to ask oneself what permanent effect these early years might have had on young William.

Hackett was then sent to a Jesuit boarding school, Clongowes Wood College, in 1890. Clongowes was a closed male community and, apart from school holidays, Hackett remained there for five years before leaving to train as a Jesuit. We have here a boy who grew up in a household that rebelled against English rule now deliberately subjecting himself to the far stricter rule of a religious order. By 1900, aged 22, Hackett is in France studying in the Jesuit house at Vals. The next riddle is what became of his early upbringing in these years. Niall gives a clue when she quotes a letter Hackett wrote to his brother, Dom, in 1898 in which he writes of ‘those horrid Parnellites … when they assail the priests’ (35). Is early upbringing so easily cast aside?

Hackett then served as a parish priest and teacher in Limerick and in 1915 returned to his roots by organising students in a cadet corps with the avowed aim of being ready to defend a free Ireland. It was also at this time that he met radicals and revolutionaries like MacDonagh and Pearse. Then came the Easter Rising and Niall quotes a Hackett letter: ‘It was thrilling to be quite suddenly plunged from profound peace into the actualities of war’ (59). At this time Hackett was 38 years old and the riddle is to find a consistency in his character and beliefs.

For the next six years Hackett was involved in minor ways with the Irish struggle for independence. He knew and met the major players on the Irish side. The high point of Hackett’s involvement came with the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations in 1921. He admitted to causing much harm: ‘Peacemakers – like myself – did much harm in getting Republicans to make concession after concession to peace, but the English did not want peace’ (123). The following year he was sent by his order to Australia, never to return. Why? This is the riddle which Niall explores but does not solve. Niall and Gerard Henderson have been involved in lengthy email exchanges about the riddle and the full text of these exchanges appear in Gerard Henderson’s Media Watchdog Issue 61, 9 July 2010. In this correspondence Niall takes the view that ‘the riddle was not so much why Fr. H was sent away from Ireland, but why he wasn’t sent earlier’. Henderson disagrees with Niall and offers reasons for Hackett’s exile.
Hackett’s life in Melbourne revolved, at various times, around parish work, Xavier College and the Catholic library which he founded. He was an intimate of Archbishop Mannix and well known to those who frequented the library, Bob Santamaria, Vincent Buckley and the rest. Through the library he became connected to Catholic Action and the fight to drive the communists out of the trade unions. Clearly a man who got involved wherever he was. Is that a function of being gregarious, which he was, an idealist, or a chameleon?

It may well be that we all change our views over a lifetime, and some of these changes might be radical and seemingly inexplicable to others. Other changes may be more moderate and seemingly explicable. In order to comprehend any change it is necessary to see the world from the point of view of the actor. He or she is the final authority. In order to understand actions of a person we rely upon conventions to a great extent. When these conventions are not seen to apply we ask questions such as ‘what did he think he was doing?’ For the biographer the problem, if one is not just to give a bald account of the facts, is to endeavour to see things from the subject’s point of view and to include that in one’s account and explanation of what happened; a difficult task when the subject is dead. Niall has gathered a great deal of material which, while not conclusive (who would expect it so?) leaves it to the reader to come to an understanding of a Kilkenny boy from the nineteenth century who became a traffic fatality in mid twentieth century Melbourne.

Tony Gibbons
Book reviews: Blue Nights by Joan Didion. Winton Higgins. 
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Joan Didion, Blue Nights (Fourth Estate, 2011)

On page fifteen of this memoir, Joan Didion describes her daughter Quintana’s picture-perfect wedding on 26 July 2003 in the cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. She continues:

Could you have seen, had you been walking on Amsterdam Avenue and caught sight of the bridal party that day, how utterly unprepared the mother of the bride was to accept what would happen before the year 2003 had even ended? The father of the bride dead at his own dinner table? The bride herself in an induced coma, breathing only on a respirator, not expected by the doctors in the intensive care unit to live the night? The first in a cascade of medical crises that would end twenty months later with her death?

The father of the bride, John Dunne, had been the author’s devoted husband and professional collaborator for forty years. Her account of her mourning him, The Year of Magical Thinking, came out to critical acclaim in 2005, just before Quintana died. Blue Nights focuses on Quintana’s death and the agonies and questions it remorselessly evokes, about ‘illness, the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness’, because ‘when we talk about mortality we are talking about our children’ (4, 13).

The two books present a fascinating contrast. The Year of Magical Thinking tracks the course of a classic mourning, the sort we all face when we lose someone very close to us. Appropriately, Didion cites Freud’s once-more famous essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, with its insistence on mourning as harrowing but essential work, in the course of which lapses in one’s sense of the reality of death (‘magical thinking’) punctuate constant regurgitations of poignant, excruciating memories of the deceased, until the ‘work’ is complete, the reality principle is restored, and one can live fully again. In Blue Nights the revisiting of sharp, unhidden memories recurs, only now they carry a heavier burden, above all fear and remorse. Here we’re confronting a singular loss, the death of one’s child, recognised by the tragedian Euripides and many since as the greatest grief we mortals can know. In Blue Nights the earlier discursive tone is gone; the language is terse, rhythmic, cutting, as it fitfully returns to critical scenes and the italicised tags that first erupted in them.

Life with Quintana begins so casually. On a boating holiday in early 1966 Didion mentions to a friend that she and John would like a baby. The friend introduces her to one of her friends, an obstetrician. A little later, while Didion is in the shower, the obstetrician rings from a nearby hospital. He’s just delivered a beautiful baby girl, the mother can’t keep her, do Joan and John want her? Jump in the car and come on down.

In that terrible hindsight gained at Quintana’s slow death from a cerebral hemorrhage, the author sees that, under the cover of this good fortune, she’s been drawn into a world she didn’t know existed. ‘Once she was born I was never not afraid’ (54). The usual fears around a child’s physical vulnerability fall into the shadow of the fear elicited by the child herself – her implacable presence, her inscrutable needs, her overwhelming dread as an adopted child of a new abandonment (including her adoptive mother’s fragility and distraction), increasing lability, and occasionally surfacing death wish. What if you hadn’t been home, the child
demands, what if you couldn’t meet Dr Watson at the hospital, what if there’d been an accident on the freeway, what would happen to me then (82).

On a conventional reckoning the good fortune is all Quintana’s. Snatched from an unfortunate birth, she grows up the only child of a creative, harmonious union: her new parents belong to the wealthy cultural elite, they take her to wonderful places, Hollywood film sets; family and friends wear haute couture, and they stay at the best hotels. But none of this meets Quintana’s needs, quells her fear of abandonment, or even manages to obliterate the warning signs that so unnerve the author, such as her desperate clutching after adult status with its apparent invulnerability instead of living out the blithe childhood she’s offered in carefree California. ‘Was I the problem?’ Didion now asks. ‘Was I always the problem?’ (33). ‘When we noticed her confusions did we consider our own?’ (92).

Again on a conventional reckoning, Didion short-changes us about the adult Quintana; she died aged thirty-nine, after all. We’re not even told what she looked like. We get an outline of her university education, her career, and her recurring mental disorder, eventually but dubiously diagnosed as borderline personality disorder. (‘I have not yet seen the case in which a “diagnosis” led to a “cure,”’ or in fact to any outcome other than a confirmed, and therefore an enforced, debility’ [47]) But again, we should resist the conventional reckoning. Writing at seventy-five years of age, Didion is impatient with trivia, dilution; she’s struggling, she tells us more than once, to be ‘direct’. At her age nothing else will do. “You have beautiful memories,” people said later, as if memories were solace. Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone … Memories are what you no longer want to remember’ (64).

She’s unfurling a tragedy, her own tragedy told in the first person, but the constituent elements of it are ours: we can all look back on the now unredressable distance and missed signals and opportunities of the long child-parent interaction, some of us from both directions. Such are ‘the ways in which we depend on our children to depend on us, the ways in which we encourage them to remain children, the ways in which they remain more unknown to us than they do to their most casual acquaintances; the ways in which we remain equally opaque to them … The ways in which our investments in each other remain too freighted ever to see the other clear’ (53).

Fine literature sheds a unique light on ethical questions, Martha Nussbaum argues in Love’s Knowledge, especially on that ur-question, how should one live? It does so because it alone can deploy imagination and attention to particulars so as to illuminate the workings of contingency, fragility and mortality in human life. Following Proust and Henry James, she compares quality literary works to ‘angels that soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering their readers a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world,’ one that expresses ‘bewildered human grace.’ ¹ Blue Nights is a fierce little angel, not at all pre-Raphaelite, but it does soar, and leaves our responsiveness much enlivened.

Winton Higgins


Eva Gabrielsson worked with Stieg Larsson, author of the *Millennium* trilogy, for thirty-two years, and they lived together in Stockholm in a de facto relationship for thirty of them. Though she worked as an architect by day and he as a leftwing investigative journalist and writer, their shared social activism and hand-to-mouth circumstances meant their personal and work lives intertwined with unusual intimacy, and unfolded at a frantic pace that left no time for prudent management of personal health and legal affairs. This last circumstance set the scene for tragedy. In late 2004, aged fifty, Stieg died intestate of a sudden heart attack, having just delivered the trilogy manuscripts to the publisher.

As the trilogy became the phenomenon we know today, Eva found she’d inherited nothing, not even any influence over Stieg’s literary output. Swedish succession law was as bereft of provision for de factos as Stieg’s father and brother, the beneficiaries of his intestate estate, were of anything approaching basic human decency. They have continued to pocket all the royalties (estimated at US$15 million in 2010) and to allow publishers free rein to bowdlerise the texts in translation, thus blunting their political point, and to sell the film rights to the highest bidder. At various stages they even looked like seizing Stieg’s half of the flat Eva had shared with him. Their behaviour is all the more breathtaking given that their remoteness to him in life (Stieg grew up with his grandparents) is matched only by their cupidity towards his earnings in death. As the prominent Swedish crime writer, Leif GW Persson, has commented, not even (the exorbitantly imaginative) Stieg Larsson could have come up with a plot like this.

To put it mildly, then, Eva Gabrielsson has a tale to tell. *Stieg & Me* makes an authoritative contribution to what has become Sweden’s and the publishing world’s scandal of the century. She enjoys massive public support, including from the dedicated Norwegian website [www.supporteva.com](http://www.supporteva.com), in the miscarriage of justice she has suffered. And it is a tale that is still unfolding. Prompted by the waves of public disapproval washing over them, Larsson père and frère make periodic limp gestures through intermediaries or media releases to ‘negotiate’ with Gabrielsson, the first item on their agenda being to gain custody of the vanished laptop on which Stieg was writing the fourth book in the *Millennium* series when he died. It was last seen in the offices of *Expo* (the real-life forerunner of the *Millennium* magazine of the series) which he and Eva had founded and where he worked.

She essentially co-wrote the first three books with him, she credibly contends, and she alone could complete the fourth book with any authorial integrity. It is not as if the Muse bestowed any special blessing on Stieg as a wordsmith; rather, the happy union of moral passion, the investigative journalist’s craft of hair-raising exposé, and racy revenge fantasy personified in the idiosyncratic feminist superhero Lisbeth Salander, has driven the trilogy towards unheard-of international popularity and stellar profitability. Presumably Eva alone could bring all these desiderata to the task of rounding out his (and her) unfinished work.

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Sadly this English-language edition of her own book does not do her story justice. When my copy arrived I thought it had been self-published, such was the quality of the paper, the cover and the layout. I had to look twice to reassure myself that it really did carry Allen & Unwin’s imprint.

On working my way into it, I became more and more confused about the authorial voice. Eva ostensibly tells her story in the first person, but there are various indications that Marie-Françoise Colombani – a writer for the French fashion magazine *Elle* and author of a book of interviews with Séguilène Royal – is actually holding the pen. The text has then gone through a further process of translation, with the inevitable losses and gains, at the hands of an American French-English translator. Without access to the non-English antecedents, slippages cannot be identified, except in one glaring instance: Eva / Marie-Françoise relates (214) that she and Gunnar von Sydow last year published a book whose main title is given in the original as *Sambo* (literally ‘living together’). This is the normal modern Swedish word for de facto, one which plainly denotes Stieg and Eva’s standing with each other. Yet it is translated as ‘concubine’ – a category last heard of in imperial China. Allen & Unwin’s publicity release duly notes that Eva Gabrielsson has written ‘books on a variety of subjects including concubinage and architecture’. Such bêtises do little for one’s sense of resting in safe hands when reading a translated text.

But the sheer artlessness of the prose style turns out to be a redeeming feature. The story itself is a case of *res ipse loquitur* – the facts speak for themselves, and undue affect or embellishment would have weakened their impact. The reader thus gets a restrained (and therewith powerful) account of Eva and Stieg’s relationship over all those years, their shared feminist commitment, his specialisation in exposing far-right groups, the harassment and death threats this work attracted, the travails of establishing and sustaining *Expo*, his sudden death, and the appalling aftermath for her. Any reader who has also read the *Millennium* trilogy (especially the first book) will get an enticing sense of the autobiographical inputs they contain.

For this and many other reasons, this is a book for *Millennium* aficionados. More importantly, it is a reality check for anyone who believes gender equality has been achieved, even in Sweden.

Winton Higgins
Paul Scott (1920–78) may be best known as the author of the quartet of novels that gave us the Granada television series *The Jewel in the Crown*, broadcast in 1984. As these two expertly edited collections of his letters show, Scott proves to be a writer of great sensitivity and subtlety, one who strained for accuracy in his fictional depiction of the final days of the British Raj. For this reason alone, he deserves wider recognition for his craft. The letters continually illuminate details of his work as a novelist, his self-conscious and perceptive evaluations of his and others’ work, and the experiences that shaped his fiction.

It’s revealing to read in a 1953 letter to literary critic Oliver Stoner, for example, that Scott sees his fiction to be chiefly concerned with how “men & women … are increasingly aware of the absence of roots, increasingly aware that whatever “place” they’ve made for themselves is artificial” (Vol. 1, 89). I take this to mean, in his view (which I find compelling), that his own Anglo-Indian characters struggle with the sorts of bewildering changes in their sense of location that all modern individuals must face.

As a literary agent and editor, Scott worked with many writers, including Graham Greene, M. M. Kaye, Arthur C. Clarke, and Muriel Spark, and his letters concerning them and Britain’s fictional output in the post-war years are richly revealing. As editor Janis Haswell observes in one of her several informative introductions throughout these volumes, ‘As an agent, Scott was above all a reader who was particularly skilled in recognizing a publishable book and also in diagnosing what would be required, in terms of revision’ (Vol. 1, 60). Scott’s (for a writer) insight into the broad canvas of editorial work in the 1950s through 1970s, alongside his own struggles to make his own mark on this canvas, reminds us of the contingencies – personal and social, economic and political – that influence the production of art.

Haswell’s thorough introductions, in conjunction with Scott’s own letters, point to certain experiences that appear to have deeply informed Scott’s life and fiction. These include his ambivalence regarding sexuality (though gay, he married and had two daughters), his visits to India, and his friendships, both in Europe and India. Late in life, for instance, he states, ‘I cannot change my nature, or demonstrate affection’ (Vol. 1, 322), a poignant confession in an intolerant era. (An unspecified demotion in rank while in army service, at the age of 20, hints at a sexual crisis.) Just how this shaped his writing is debatable, but his sensitive portrayals of both men and women in *The Raj Quartet* may owe something to his sexual awareness. His own demotion, too, may have helped open his eyes to the injustices of British rule in India. He detests, for example, the English couple he meets in Bombay, at ‘Luhu’ (presumably Juhu) Beach, who are there for ‘commercial’ reasons and whose crass racism and ‘icy’ airs ‘made my blood boil’ (Vol. 1, 314).

India naturally takes centre stage after Scott revisits the subcontinent at this time (1964) and in subsequent years to understand the country he was writing about. In the process, as his letters show, he found that India had, despite his initial hesitancy, become a familiar friend.

Readers of this journal will wonder about the ultimate standing of Scott’s literary output. He wrote in a period that has since been termed, at least in relation to the British,
‘imperial nostalgia’, which M. M. Kaye’s novels reflect, for example. The contrast of this attitude to that of Indian writers, such as R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao and, later, Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai, is stark, as innumerable postcolonial critiques have shown. Scott’s fiction, however, manages to avoid his peers’ predisposition to mourn the end of the Raj (even if the television version of his work sometimes slips into this tone). For this reason, his work will stand, and his literary reputation will continue to be well served by scholars like Haswell.

The only quibbles about these volumes concern the Subject Index, which could have been fleshed out to include, for instance, literary themes, historical events, and biographical topics that scholars would find especially helpful.

It has to be said that these letters are not artful, nor were they meant to be: Scott’s professional side doubtless informed his mostly functional epistles. The letters nonetheless offer us a valuable biographical window onto Scott’s work methods and ideas, as well as the everyday life of a postwar English writer. Those interested in Scott, and in postwar fiction more broadly, will find much to appreciate in Janis Haswell’s admirably annotated volumes.

Alan Johnson
Ankur Betageri’s *Bhog and Other Stories* can be considered as an anthology of life’s emptiness, examined from a sociological-cum-psychological perspective. Existence becomes painful for humans due to gross poverty, as is explicit in the story ‘Bhog’. Some stories are bitter, extremist and near surrealist. He has dealt with all the present-day existential problems of contemporary man, the trials and tribulations which humanity has to face.

Some stories, like ‘Big Bear Remembers Kako’, can be considered as heroic examples of human courage and endurance. Betageri lets the characters expose themselves in true Chaucerian fashion, and the reader is at times left wondering at his clinical efficiency in dealing with the characters. The story ‘A Record of the Fag End and Aftermath of a Broken Love Affair’ reflects a general demise of human relations.

The stories exude a highly disturbing and unsettling feeling. The author has employed a creatively innovative armory of dismantling power and unsettling ambience. ‘Atmaram Harbhaji’ is an incongruous mingling of the banal with the bizarre, highlighting the degenerate and perverted ethos of a demonic society. Demonic cravings existing in an evil society produce a chaotic and dystopian existence.

The story ‘The Big Bicycle’ depicts man’s psychological struggle in a world in which all values are suspect and all attempts to achieve identity are subject to frustration. ‘The Armour’ gives a pen-portrait of modern-day existence which has proved to be totally futile in all its attempts to gain credibility. Consequently, the story demonstrates the tragic failure of modern man to nurture and to assert his unique selfhood.

‘The Armour: An Allegory’ uses powerful symbolism to describe death. The human body is likened to a prison, and the seven vices that influence and empower the prison are redefined as youth, madness, sickness, beauty, rage, love and silence. We spend our whole life blindly running after these and forget the true meaning of life and existence. We all know that we are mortal and one day will leave this earth for the heavenly abode. But we forget this stark reality and start fighting with the seven armours. It’s only in old age that we realise the reality:

But with age you leak out the holes and slits of armour like water. Again you have to face the bars with lions raging around. You know for sure that you are moving towards them – flowing towards them – towards those tongues waiting to lap you. (2)

It is implied that death is waiting for you just as the lions are ready to pounce at their prey at the very sight of it. Death is a predator and there is no escape from it. Betageri refers to the Hindu custom of burning bodies after death. When we die we become mere memories, and our armour is left behind: at the time of death fighting for beauty, love, and youth all seem trivial. He explicitly highlights the bitter truth of life and existence. Even existence becomes a non-entity after death. This cycle goes on and on. The futility of human existence is wonderfully explained in this allegory.

In the story ‘Malavika’, the writer has tried to show the dilemma of present generation which is confused and not focused on their priorities in life:

The strange fact was that though she had earned good marks in high school and had come to Bangalore to study she wasn’t much interested in studies … Most of her free
time was spent lazing around in shopping malls. ... Where to park the car ... which are the best places to hang out in MG Road ... she either knew these things or showed keen interest in knowing them. (101)

Through lack of proper guidance and failing to taking life seriously, today’s generation ends up wasting their precious lives, giving rise to feelings of loneliness, despondency and hopelessness. Malavika says:

Have you ever felt this way? As if life had suddenly drained all meaning: as if everything had become meaningless for no reason ... A deep, tormenting feeling that you can’t bear the burden of living anymore. (105)

Her tone reflects dissonance and despair. The present generation is directionless and doesn’t know what will be the outcome of their lives. Life is ambiguous without any solutions. The futility exhibited in this story makes us ponder and search for the solution to this riddle called life.

In all, Betageri’s stories display an assortment of existential problems that human beings face in the modern world. Remedies need to be found, otherwise the situation will become worse and lead to a doomsday for which humans are themselves responsible. He highlights the topsy-turvy world which left unattended could lead to a stifling existence, but although his vision is tragic throughout, he leaves scope for solutions and improvements, and offers hope to humankind.

Payal Khurana

When Sonia Faleiro set out to report on Bombay’s bar dancers, she thought she knew what she would find: voiceless, downtrodden women, the helpless victims of poverty and exploitation in a male dominated world. Instead she met Leela, a fearlessly outspoken and charismatic nineteen-year-old woman. Leela had been dancing in Bombay’s bars since she was thirteen, having fled the abuse of her father in her native village near Meerut. With her sharp wit and stubborn optimism, Leela was the highest paid dancer in a bar called Night Lovers on the notorious Mira Road. She had a ‘husband’ who was already married and was also the owner of the bar, a few lovers whose names she could not remember, a mother who was parasitically dependent on her and an adored best friend. But when an ambitious politician ordered the shutting down of the city’s dance bars, Leela was forced into the most precarious kind of sex work and had to trade her proud independence for mere survival. Finally she decided to travel to Dubai to work as a bar dancer there. The account ends on a sombre note with the hint that despite Leela’s fearlessness and grit and desire to emerge a winner, society and all the forces in it are against her. Even if she may want something else, ‘who will permit Leela what she wants?’ (212)

Based upon extensive research conducted in the bars and brothels of Mumbai as well as interviews with bar dancers, bar owners, sex workers, hijras, madams, gangsters, policemen and other characters, this piece of investigative non-fiction is brought alive by the author’s keen powers of observation and description. Leela’s story is not new: it has been playing out for decades in the crowded cities and slums of India, and even in villages, where parents are forced to sell their children into prostitution out of sheer poverty. What makes the story dramatic and soul-touching is the skill of the journalist Sonia Faleiro who crafted it. She has successfully created a vivid and intimate portrait of a young woman fleeing abuse and poverty to build a life on her own terms, in a city bent upon reinventing itself.

It is also the compelling story of an unlikely friendship between two young women from different worlds. ‘From Leela’s point of view, our friendship was an adventure. She was seven years younger than me, but only she could teach me what I wanted to know’ (6).

The author’s skillful use of the slang and peculiar lingo used in such places sparkles with energy and excitement and gives the account a racy and vivid style. Undoubtedly, Faleiro has written a small masterpiece of observation and intimate reportage which opens up a hidden world with startling insight.

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri

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Ten years after its publication in the *New Left Review*, the brilliant article by Jonathan Arac ‘Anglo-Globalism?’¹ still seems to have provocative relevance. Whilst Arac’s harsh criticism of Franco Moretti’s essay ‘Conjectures on World Literature’ – published in the same journal two years earlier, in 2000² – has been gradually debunked by other world-literature scholars, such as Vilashini Cooppan in 2004,³ his warning that transnational literature is mostly exchanged by means of the English language and Anglophone culture and thus might be homogenised by these hegemonic forces, cannot be easily forgotten and put aside. In order to deal with these cultural pressures, a great deal of work – as one of the first thinkers in the field of world literature, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, already knew in 1827⁴ – has to be entrusted to translators.

It quite often happens, for instance, that non-Anglophone texts, when translated into English, lose their linguistic and stylistic features and lose their ties with specific – i.e., regional, or trans-regional – locations.

Luckily, this is not the case with *Daddy’s Wings* by Milena Agus, translated into English by Brigid Maher for the Australian publishing house Scribe in 2011, three years after its publication in Italy as *Ali di babbo*.⁵

Maher’s translation manages to manipulate Agus’s multi-lingual text brilliantly, transforming the double mechanism of domestication and foreignisation of the Italian text, which blends Italian and Sardinian (sometimes with explanatory paraphrases or footnotes, sometimes without giving any clue), into a tripartite mechanism reproducing the same equilibrium between Italian, Sardinian and English.

This linguistic refinement provided by the translator might help Anglophone readers to place themselves in a story which is set mostly in Sardinia and is narrated by a Sardinian writer without misleadingly feeling the severity of the cultural and political conflict actually taking place, as the plot might reveal. Before giving a brief summary of it, it is important to notice how the translator’s work underlines the fact that Agus’s text is not a vindictive localist novel, but rather highlights all the effects of the existing tension between ‘continental people’ and ‘islanders’ on the lives of the characters, sometimes exploring this wound profoundly and sometimes describing it in a milder but still impressive way. The choice of the narrator – who is, not coincidentally, a young girl with a typically changeable mood and attitude to life – reinforces the author’s ideological standpoint.

The plot revolves around the struggle of a Sardinian woman known in her village as Madame to preserve her house and small hotel from the greedy assault of developers who want to buy her property in order to build a new tourist resort there, thus exploiting one of the last bits of untouched territory on that part of the Sardinian coast. This is the central point of an otherwise multi-faceted family narrative ironically recorded by the young girl’s blinking eyes.

It is precisely the self-knowledge gained by this child throughout the thirty-five sketches making up the novel, and her finally coming to terms with the figure of the missing father – symbolised by the ‘daddy’s wings’ of the title – that permits a comparison between Milena Agus and the Australian writer Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991), as the Australian press has already noted in their reviews of the book.

The young narrator and Madame, together with the narrator’s aunt, mother and grandmother and the neighbours’ grandmother, all seem to be ‘strayed queens’, to recall the title and themes of Hanrahan’s key novel Where the Queens All Strayed. Even in this case, however, Agus depicts the psychological development of her female characters without entering deeply into the conflict between psychoanalytical and gender perspectives (leaving it to Hanrahan, as Annette Stewart’s essay Woman and Herself: A Critical Study of the Works of Barbara Hanrahan has shown), preferring to describe it with the lightest of touches and smiles.

Once again, then, it is Italo Calvino’s imperative about lightness – discussed in the first of his Six Memos for the Next Millennium – that informs Agus’s text. This does not mean that the themes of Daddy’s Wings are treated in a light-hearted or superficial way. As has been mentioned above, Agus’s stylistic choices present a very conflicted background, emphasising the negative, and sometimes even tragic, effects, but this does not prevent her always giving a glimpse of light. Notwithstanding the loneliness and misery of her characters, she never gives up on the possibility of love and happiness, as she is always ‘seek[ing] and learn[ing] to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then mak[ing] them endure, giv[ing] them space’, as Calvino has it.

This glimpse of light is rendered metaphorically through the possibility that the child narrator will fly away on daddy’s wings, but this psychological journey can also be related to the possibility of other physical and textual travel.

In fact, some passages of the story are set in Italy and Paris, clearly removing the possibility of any hypothesis of localism – which could be a serious limit for this kind of novel – and confirming that such a ‘truly’ Sardinian story is in fact a trans-local story, making the different places, cultures and stories meet and mix together. The presence of hybridising processes does not substantiate, on the other hand, a fully enthusiastic trans-local reading. Exemplary, in this respect, is the characterisation of the narrator’s aunt, who has been researching Leibniz in many foreign universities, but is unable to apply her intellectualist jargon to her native reality, whereas the narrator’s grandfather and the narrator are fully able to grasp the essential meanings of their experiences in life, even without having left the island.

The physical and intellectual journeys, whether material or imaginative, which cross the text may prepare us for the transnational journey of the novel itself, which has already had tangible resonance in Australian literature. Maher’s powerful translation is a great starting point.

Lorenzo Mari

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9 Italo Calvino. Invisible Cities (Harcourt Trade, 1974) 164.

‘For some reason I thought poets like me didn't have to worry about the mundane aspects of everyday life’ (99).

With this statement Kurdish poet and PEN Writer-in-Exile Jalal Barzanji expresses a sentiment shared by poets and writers the world over. Only, for most of those poets and writers, the ‘mundane aspects of life’ do not include three years of unjust imprisonment, recurrent beatings, government censorship, and exile. The first autobiographical offering from Barzanji, *The Man in Blue Pyjamas*, is a memoir detailing not only the cruelty and brutality of the Ba’ath regime under Saddam Hussein, but the power and eventual triumph of the written word over censorship and ignorance.

Barzanji’s memoir begins with, of all things, an explanation of the pyjama-wearing customs of Kurdish men. He describes one chill evening in 1986 when he had opted to lounge in a pair of thin, blue pyjamas rather than his thicker white ones – a decision he would come to curse over the next three years – when the Iraqi secret police suddenly burst into his home. Torn from his family, friends, and his writing, Barzanji would spend the next three years in prison wearing those same blue pyjamas. His crime: writing nature poetry.

Part prison memoir, part meditation on the power of the written word, Barzanji’s account is at times evocative of Victor Frankl. Interspersed through it all is Barzanji’s love affair with writing:

I knew I had lost some weight because my pyjamas were very loose. I also was covered in rashes. I was desperate for a bath and for some good food. Imagine nothing else but bread and water every day. I had cramps in my stomach and was constantly constipated. But to be denied pen and paper was simply beyond endurance. I wanted a complete record of my imprisonment, but I was afraid I couldn’t rely entirely on memory. Pen and paper would’ve been my salvation. (22-3)

He presents his story in a disjointed narrative that continually jumps over geographic and chronologic boundaries. After discussing the morbid details of his imprisonment (beatings are common, disease is rampant, and the prison, once a library, is so packed the inmates are forced to sleep standing up), Barzanji jumps back to his childhood in the tiny village of Ashkaftsaqa. After a detailed account of his youth, the narrative then switches to Barzanji’s adolescence in the Kurdish city of Hawler. He recounts his years spent playing football, his education at a recently-opened teaching institute in Hawler, and trying his best to get on with daily life during an uneasy cease-fire between the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish freedom fighters, the *peshmerga*.

From there Barzanji dedicates a chapter to his love affair with the written word, describing to the reader his affinity for poetry and the herculean effort involved in getting his works out. His first collection of poems, *Dance of the Evening Snow*, would be rejected by government censors three times before meeting with approval. Barzanji explains,

There was no real reason for the rejection. My poems were non-political. They were an effort to create something different and beautiful. But that made little difference. Because the censors were so paranoid, they would reject whatever they were not familiar with. (119)

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The narrative then returns once more to Barzanji in prison. The details of his own misery are interspersed with retellings of the stories of some of his fellow prisoners and clandestine communications with his wife until suddenly, rather abruptly, his captors open the doors of the prison and the inmates are commanded to leave.

Still under government suspicion, Barzanji attempts to flee to Europe via Turkey. The remainder of the memoir deals with an ill-fated attempt to smuggle him into Greece, his subsequent exile in Turkey, and his eventual asylum in Canada as a political refugee.

The lack of coherence in the narrative leads to occasional difficulties in reading. Not only are the chapters desultory and scattered, but Barzanji is given to frequent tangential reminiscences – and even reminiscences within reminiscences – that sometimes destroy any semblance of a narrative thread. To his credit, Barzanji begins the memoir with an admission of disjointedness and the explanation ‘A human memory does not sort out pictures and stories in a chronological sequence, or in a straight line. We remember in sudden flashbacks, out of order’ (1), but the warning does little to help the reader follow along.

Despite this, The Man in Blue Pyjamas is a noteworthy accomplishment. Barzanji has created a poignant memoir brimming with authenticity and many readers, despite nationality, will find in him a kindred spirit. His openness and compassion make him an endearing figure – a tender man who wants nothing more than to embrace the world and memorialise it with words. His story serves as a chilling reminder of the dangers many writers still face simply by putting pen to paper.

Logan Mickel

This latest selection of thirty-four short stories from New Zealand delivers a wonderful array of themes and voices from the country’s literary field. Some Other Country is the fourth edition of short stories from New Zealand, a collection from Victoria University Press which was first published in 1984. Stories about loss, adolescent confusion and failed relationships, amongst other things, populate the pages of this volume.

Arranged in chronological order, the stories date from Katherine Mansfield’s story ‘At the Bay’ (1922) to Tracey Slaughter’s confronting first-person narrative ‘Consent’ from 2007. In their introduction, the editors note that they wanted to be generous in their selection of stories from the last thirty years, and decided that each author could only be represented by one story, but that they were not overly concerned with considerations of length. In short, their choices were governed by the desire to print the ‘best stories’ they could find (xi). In reaching this goal, works by iconic authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Joy Cowley, Vincent O’Sullivan and Damien Wilkins sit alongside prose by emerging authors such as Tracey Slaughter and the more-established Alice Tawhai to span almost ninety years of writing in New Zealand.

The stories chosen reveal multiple communities under the signifier ‘New Zealand’, where Pākehā and Māori cultures sit alongside one another, and at times provide – obliquely – entry points into their companion stories’ musings, and indeed, into other countries. In this sense, they fulfil the editors’ claim that ‘the New Zealand to be found in these pages is not the place depicted in glossy picture books or economic profiles’ (x), at once complicating and enhancing how the place is imagined.

The first story, Mansfield’s ‘At the Bay’ begins quietly, describing a shepherd’s walk around a bay amidst a panoramic, beautifully blanched early morning landscape. The bay provides a locus for the stories of the Burnell family that weave through its waters and shore, and Mansfield’s prose is luminous at it attends to fleeting details of connection and disconnection amongst its members. Hope within despair is evident throughout, such as in a little girl’s entreaties to her grandmother to never die (23–4), a promise which is never made, yet forgotten about moments later in their laughter.

Joy Cowley’s story ‘The Silk’, originally published in 1965, describes one autumn where an elderly couple – Mr and Mrs Blackie – prepare for Mr Blackie’s death, both aware that the approaching season will be his last. Cowley’s story centres on a treasured piece of Chinese silk that Mrs Blackie decides to sew into a pair of pyjamas for her husband. In the mottled afterglow of Mr Blackie’s death, the beauty of the silk persists, along with its embroidered landscapes. Examining the cloth closely, Mrs Blackie notices bridges throughout the embroidery hitherto unnoticed, and one bridge grows to include other details where once only the bridge lay. The narratives in this collection function much like this bridge; as the reader peruses their pages, the stories ripen and expand to conjure miniature worlds of exceptional richness.

This productivity is also apparent in Alice Tawhai’s story ‘Māori Art’ (2007), which traces a trajectory of colonial suppression through to the reclamation of Māori culture through the narrator’s genealogy of family names. In this story, intersections between Māori and Pākehā systems of meaning are explored, and each of the narrator’s family names is...
imbued with a particular association such as emulation, anger and recovery. In this way, the filial and the colonial are intertwined, as proper names demonstrate shifting relations between Māori peoples and their colonisers.

Tracey Slaughter’s narrative, ‘Consent’ (2007) is the closing work in this collection and it provides a vivid and disturbing account of gang rape from a woman’s perspective. The pain of rape is metaphorically expressed as a crown where ‘it will be hard to stand in it, hard to balance, hard to walk under its throb’ (490). Written from a first-person point of view, the story concludes by alluding to the ordeal of testifying to this trauma in court where the protagonist will be re-crowned ‘Miss Consent’ (491). Provoking vivid and visceral responses from the reader, this story ends the volume not with a whimper, but a bang.

In Vincent O’Sullivan’s story, ‘Palms and Minarets’ (1978), the unnamed protagonist remembers that his father would ‘take books up and lay them down as though there was something in them which roughness might spill’ (276). Similarly, this volume deserves to be treated with respect, and yet the stories within it are testament to the tenacity of narrative and the persistence of details which constellation each tale.

A useful feature of this volume is the ‘Glossary of Māori Words and Phrases’ located after the ‘Notes on Contributors’ towards the back of the book. An important adjunct to the preceding stories, it highlights the power of language and the nuances of difference within language. Upon finishing this collection, readers can also look ahead to the next instalment that will surely complement this ever expanding homage to New Zealand and its imagined countries.

Golnar Nabizadeh

Midnight in Peking on 8 January 1937 heralded the celebrations for the Russian Christmas. Rickshaw pullers waited for fares outside the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, while its occupants enjoyed dancing, gossip and champagne. Dark, freezing fog slid through the narrow alleys near the Forbidden City. And nineteen-year-old Pamela Werner, the daughter of the former British Consul, was killed.

Paul French’s book of creative non-fiction is subtitled ‘how the murder of a young Englishwoman haunted the last days of old China.’ His work is as much about 1930s Peking as it is about the police investigation into the murder of Pamela Werner; the crime story drives the narrative while the social history of the period and place provide the context and rich background material. Pamela Werner’s mutilated body was found in open ground at the base of Fox Tower on the Tartar Wall, the southern boundary of the city. The girl had crossed over from the European ‘Legation Quarter’, the walled sanctuary for wealthy foreigners, to Chinese Peking, a place of ‘narrow, crowded *hutong* or alleyways’, poor lodging-houses and opium dens. Her death was the product of both the place where she was born and the time in which she lived.

Paul French vividly recreates the life of a city existing on the brink of war. He has written about China before now – his books include *Through the Looking-glass: China’s Foreign Journalists from the Opium Wars to Mao* (2009) and a biography of Shanghai journalist and adventurer, Carl Crow (2006). He has also published analysis and commentary on China in international newspapers and magazines. *Midnight in Peking* is a new project for him, a movement from traditional non-fiction to the story-telling techniques of creative non-fiction.

The change is a successful one. French has a crime fiction writer’s command of narrative drive – the book draws on the techniques of 1930s *crime noir* – and the novelist’s gift for capturing setting and character with just the right detail. This is his description of Peking in June 1937, six months before the Japanese invasion:

> People ducked involuntarily at the sound of doors banging, a rickshaw tyre blowing out, a taxi backfiring. The sudden sharp screech of ungreased wheels of trolleybuses on Morrison Street sent shudders through people, where before it had gone barely noticed. What had once just been the frenetic cacophony of Peking life now rang alarm bells in the city’s subconscious. Were they here? Had they finally come? At times the tension of waiting seemed worse than the inevitable attack; at times it seemed it would never happen. (183)

Passages of writing like this kept me reading *Midnight in Peking*. French precisely evokes the atmosphere of both sides of the city: the privileged Legation Quarter and the dingy ‘Badlands’. He draws clear pictures of Pamela Werner’s sheltered life behind the walls of the European quarter: taking tiffin with family friends, riding her bicycle to the French skating rink, sitting down to dinner with her elderly, bookish father. Then the reader is plunged into the dark, frightening heart of the city:

> The Badlands had no street lights but major haunts like the White Palace dance hall had light bulbs strung up outside, while red lanterns advertising bars and restaurants

glowed along the *hutong*. Rickshaw pullers walked up and down in the cold, looking for fares. While this was technically Chinese Peking, foreigners were in the majority: a mix of criminal elements, dopers, drinkers and whore-mongers ... The dive-bars were open to anyone who fancied their chances. Here peroxide-blonde White Russians past their prime raised their sketched-on eyebrows and offered ‘business’ to the semi-comatose, the paralytic, the close to broke. (125)

The Peking Badlands are ‘White Russian territory, not a place where prim and proper English girls ventured unaccompanied’ (127): yet Pamela Werner is murdered here, and her mutilated body is dumped at the nearby Fox Tower. These ‘crime story’ aspects of *Midnight in Peking* draw the reader into the book, and French paces his revelations and deductions as skilfully as any writer of fictional *crime noir*.

While he was doing research in the archives and newspapers of Shanghai, Hong Kong and London, Paul French came across

my real breakthrough, my ‘eureka moment’ ... I was looking through a box of jumbled up and unnumbered documents from the British Embassy in China in the 1940s when I found a 150 page or so long document sent to the Foreign Office by ETC Werner, Pamela’s father. These documents were the detailed notes of a private investigation he had conducted after the Japanese occupation of Peking until he was himself interned by the Japanese along with all other Allied foreigners after Pearl Harbor. It was a fascinating document with a lot of new evidence.

I won’t say any more for fear of spoiling other readers’ experience of *Midnight in Peking* – just that French’s skilful use of this material provides a plausible explanation of Pamela Werner’s unsolved murder seventy-five years after the event. It makes mesmerising reading.

‘True crime’ seems to be a genre that lends itself particularly well to the techniques of creative non-fiction, perhaps because it is so inherently dramatic, a natural source for the visual and story-telling elements of this kind of writing. French cites a debt to James Fox’s *White Mischief* (1982) and John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1995), both highly successful books that make use of literary techniques to paint a compelling and unforgettable picture of a real crime. I was also reminded of the Truman Capote classic, *In Cold Blood*; more recently Kate Summerscale’s *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher, or The Murder at Road Hill House* (2009) deservedly won the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-fiction. All of these writers lay emphasis on the accuracy of their research (the non-fiction) as well as highlighting the literary (creative) techniques.

On his website, Paul French comments

I was thinking of books that had used literary devices to both tell dramatic true stories in ways that really convey the mood and sensibilities of the time and bring real characters to life better than might be possible in straight non-fiction … In *Midnight in Peking* no characters’ actions or words are invented, no locations are made up, the timeline is real and only what is known for sure is included – there are no

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suppositions, perhaps or maybes. That’s why I insisted on footnoting the book so that if readers felt I had strayed from the actual events into fiction they could refer to the notes and see the original source of the characters’ words, actions or motivations.²

He then enhances these facts with literary techniques: a strong narrative, an evocative setting, a convincing portrayal of his protagonists. French’s book embodies the best ideas of creative non-fiction: a true story told in a way that makes it far more vivid and compelling than the straightforward reportage of traditional non-fiction. I can’t recommend *Midnight in Peking* highly enough: sometimes truth *is* stranger than fiction.

**Jennifer Osborn**

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² French.

Tahmima Anam’s second novel *The Good Muslim* is regarded by many as a continuation of her accomplished prize-winning first novel, *The Golden Age*. Like the first novel, *The Good Muslim*, too, has the three protagonists: Maya, her brother Sohail, and their mother Rehana. The reader is reminded of the key characters in *The Golden Age*, but soon he realises that they are not the same people. This second novel is not a sequel to the first. It can be appreciated even without the earlier work.

After a successful and acclaimed first novel, expectations are high from the second. Readers as well as critics cannot help comparing the two and drawing parallels between them, more so when they are set in the same background. It is because of the first novel that the second gets its first batch of readers, but the novelist does not disappoint her readers. Instead, *The Good Muslim*, with its effortless narrative, is much more confident than her debut. It is safe to say that it establishes Tahmima Anam as a novelist, apart from the acclaim that her first novel received.

It is a story about faith and family shadowed by a war. The family that has taken active part in the war of independence has now to face the challenges of peace, within and outside. Maya returns home after almost a decade of absence and finds her beloved brother Sohail completely transformed. She still has the same revolutionary zeal, but Sohail has resorted to religiosity in its puritanical form. The ideological difference between him and his sister creates a deep seated schism in their minds. This difference is the central conflict in *The Good Muslim*. They have charted their own ways, opposite to each other’s, of moving forward in the shadow of the tortuous history. Maya is a liberal-minded ‘village doctor’ who helps women victims of war. She performs abortions so that the women who had conceived as a result of rape do not have to carry the stigma. Thus she witnesses misery all the time, everywhere. Sohail’s way of being a good Muslim is altogether different from his sister’s. He has embraced an extreme version of Islam as defined by the Tablighi Jamaat, which shuns the joyful life filled with music, friends and liberal values. Sohail wants to send his son to a madrasa and, as a result, a conflict ensues between them and comes to a devastating climax.

The novel gives human face to a nation’s tumultuous history. The theme, the legacy of war and how individual lives are affected, opens a window to human psychology and behaviour in different and contrasting hues. The war with Pakistan, then West Pakistan, that led to the formation of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, was a traumatic experience that played havoc with the lives of many in the newly-formed country. During the last days of the war Sohail found, in an abandoned house, a woman whose story still haunts him and, perhaps, has a vital role in his transformation.

The novel, triggered off by the cataclysmic events during the struggle and the way these events transformed individual minds afterwards, is important in many ways. The novel has been written not by someone who was a witness to what happened. Anam herself says in an interview, ‘I did lots of research for my first book which carried over to the second. I prefer to ask people who were there about their experiences.’

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the pain and trauma has subsided to a great extent, though the nation is still haunted by religious fundamentalism. This lends a sense of detachment to the depiction of truth.

The homecoming of Sohail from fighting in 1972 has been paralleled with the return of Maya in 1984 from her ‘crusade’ against the misery that has befallen women. Their approaches towards life and duty run along lines that do not seem to converge. Maya cannot digest Sohail’s ‘conversion’ to ritualistic Islam. Maya herself does not believe in religion and she resents that fact that Islam is ‘knotted among all the other things’ (119). She was not ready to submit her will and ‘become one of those people who buckle under the force of a great event and allow it to change the metre of who they are’ (126). She hits out at the religiosity that regards rituals and duties defined and dictated by it as more important than compassion and emotional attachment. On the contrary, Sohail needs refuge in the certitude of a faith in order to seek redemption for the savagery he has been a witness to as well as the savagery he, too, has perpetrated. Maya realises, at last, that his ‘conversion’ to religious fundamentalism has been effected by the guilt of war, and it is his means to survive the psychological after-effects. His faith enables him to cope with the turmoil in his psyche.

Anam has successfully handled a grim theme with consummate skill. The novel is full of strong emotional undercurrents and intense passions. At times, it is too real and looks like a memoir rather than work of fiction. However, it will find a pride of place in any discussion on how individuals’ reactions to war and violence may differ in an attempt to find solace and reconcile with the self. It also offers a case study of one who has turned into a fundamentalist, or allegedly so, which is significant especially at a time when the world has been witnessing a rise in fundamentalism of various hues in many countries doomed to be war zones. A must read.

Mohammad Saleem

If there’s one thing war veterans can teach the young – and I firmly believe there must be many a thing worth learning from them – it is this: war dehumanises human beings.

Dapin’s novel – his second – brings us face to face with the horrors of World War II POWs in Changi and the Burma Railway, but the reader should be grateful that humanity remains a significant aspect throughout the whole novel. Dapin uses a skilful narrative ploy to achieve this. *Spirit House* is mostly told by thirteen-year-old David, whose parents have split up. Young David has been sent to stay at his grandparents’ house in Bondi, but digger Jimmy Rubens, his grandpa, is a basket case. He has kept the trauma, the loss, the pain, the grief bottled inside for many years.

David is curious about Jimmy’s war experience. He would like to understand why Jimmy would not march on Anzac Day; the allure of war stories is very strong and he keeps asking questions. Despite being only thirteen, he is always present at the RSL drinking sessions where Jimmy meets his three Jewish mates, Solomon, Myer and Katz, war veterans like Jimmy. These RSL sessions and their dinners at the Thai restaurant produce the funniest dialogues I have read in a long time.

The recollections of their times in Changi and Thailand are filled with shocking episodes of horror, of torture, of despair. However, Dapin demonstrates he can handle a story well and eventually lead it away from the likely truculence and despair of Jimmy’s memories thanks to the sharp sense of humour Dapin gives his POWs; obviously, this humour is but a defence mechanism against the nightmare life in the war concentration camps.

Intertwined in the novel are excerpts from someone’s Siam diary – the author’s name we only learn towards the end, and I can assure the reader it’s quite a surprise. These excerpts are tastefully written in a very poetic prose, a nice contrast to the explicit sexual banter, the swearing and the Yiddish with which Dapin sprinkles the Jewish diggers’ conversations.

The spirit house theme appears in the first chapter, a May 1944 Siam diary entry in which the Australian soldier takes shelter from the brutal Korean guards in a shrine in a cave. In order to regain sanity and dispel the demons that torment him forty years later in Bondi, Jimmy decides to build a spirit house in the front yard of his rundown house, where he intends to provide the final accommodation to the spirits of all the friends who died in the war and so find his inner peace.

His grandson David is happy to skip school and help him, despite Jimmy’s grumpiness and crazy outbursts. These are poignant, genuine exchanges between the teenager and the old man. David wants to gain the greatest possible insight into his grandfather’s troubled past, while Jimmy’s narrative moves from the most painful despair to hilarious anecdotes of his mates at the camps, among whom Townsville Jack stands out.

Townsville Jack comes across as a mysterious character, who would always refuse to reveal details about himself. Dapin’s depiction of Jack through Jimmy’s narrative constructs an image of a racing-loving larrikin (he organises frog races at both Changi and Thailand), a noble and loyal friend, and a rebellious, freedom-loving man who would fight injustice till the end.

*Spirit House* blends comic and horrible stories seamlessly: Dapin’s narrative depicts the era and the circumstances of an older generation of men who paid too high a price and
whose attitude to life may be met with incomprehension by the younger generations. Dapin seems to hint that, in fact, incomprehension may have taken place both ways.

I can attest myself to the fact that for traumatised people, telling and retelling one’s story is a necessity. In fiction, however (as opposed to real life), both characters and readers may enjoy the benefit of humour as a softening counterpoint. For Jimmy Rubens to feel at peace with himself, he needs to tell the story of these young Australian men who went to war as civilians, were ordered by his superiors to surrender to the Japanese Imperial Army, only to be treated as subhuman creatures while the officers received much more favourable treatment.

Despite the tonnes of jesting and hilarity in Spirit House, this is a serious novel that will not leave readers indifferent. Perhaps one day, we will be able to say with Myer, ‘I thought I’d wet myself, but it turned out to be the monsoon’.

Jorge Salavert
Daren Kamali, *Tales, Poems and Songs from the Underwater World* (ANAHERA Press, 2011)

Daren Kamali is a performance poet of Fijian, Wallis and Futuna descent, resident in New Zealand since 1992. This bilingual (English and Fijian) edition of his poetry (accompanied by a CD) was published in 2011.

Kamali’s poetry is a genuine if naïve attempt to connect the ancient Pacific Islander cultures to the twenty-first century peoples who have migrated, mainly to New Zealand and Australia. It is therefore a truthful attempt to reconnect displaced people to their original roots while reaffirming their presence in other lands and settings, and as such, it deserves attention.

The book includes seventeen titles. It isn’t a book of poetry in the strict sense of the word. A few of those titles are actually the lyrics to some of the songs on the CD; as it stands, the collection is a little uneven: somehow, one feels that hip-hop lyrics on the paper do not convey meaningful ideas as easily and/or eloquently as when accompanied by a beat box. Where Kamali reaches the reader/listener most effectively is in those poems where he reminisces about the ancient culture and traditions that are hardly seen or perceived outside the resorts where mostly Australian and New Zealand tourists flock for cheap accommodation, inexpensive reef diving and sunny hassle-free afternoons by the pool bar.

Kamali draws attention to the increasingly precarious state of the Pacific coral reefs (‘Ocean of Commotion’), where the harmful effects of overfishing, rubbish dumping, nuclear testing and pollution are compounded by ‘earthquakes/ and tsunamis’:

Humans are selfish creatures
they don’t care about us [sea creatures] anymore
our lives seem insignificant.

The migration of his family (and by extension, of many Fijians) is also a subject important to Kamali. ‘Immigrants’ Story’ is dedicated to the Kamali family, and talks of the sacrifice migrants make, yet they never give up their

undying love
for your people
your culture.

Apart from the CD, (probably a necessary complement to the book, since the song lyrics are not poems and therefore they cannot really be read as poetry), the book includes Munro Te Whata’s cartoon-like illustration of Kamali’s ‘He has superpowers’, as well as the reproduction of a lovely painting by Leahna Gill, who also designed the cover.

What I found lacking in *Tales, Poems and Songs from the Underwater World* is a more ambitious, in-depth exploration of the ancient cultural sources and motifs. Kamali does not appear to be searching for an epic in his poems. If tone, rhythm and symbolism are significant elements of poetry, they are scantily used in this book.

There can be no doubt Kamali is a fine performer (the CD is good proof), but his aptitude for live performance does not translate so well onto the page.
The tone of epic poetry for which the ancient Fijian culture rightfully deserves recognition is missing – at least in the English version. Of the Fijian translation, a language I know nothing about, I am obviously unable to voice an opinion.

I could not help comparing *Tales, Poems and Songs from the Underwater World* to Albert Wendt’s *The Adventures of Vela*, the splendid free verse novel by the formerly NZ-based Samoan writer, now a matai in his native village in Upolu. Wendt’s impressive effort captured Samoan myths, traditions and historical events with exquisite musicality, aptly reinforcing the undeniable oral quality of his free verse. Kamali may have taken a first step towards composing a rhapsody of the Fijian people and its ancient culture, but in order to reach that destination, a lot more will be required of the poetic power he has within.

Jorge Salavert

The fifty-second Boyer Lectures were written and presented by author and journalist Geraldine Brooks, and broadcast on ABC Radio National late in 2011. At the time of writing, the four lectures on the subject of The Idea of Home are still on the ABC website, both in transcript and as downloads (also via iTunes),¹ so you might want to save $25 – a high price for such a small volume – and seek them out there rather than in your local book store. It is, of course, a subjective judgement, but I much prefer the written version, finding Brooks’ voice too light and girlish and her delivery slow and drawling.

Brooks grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney, graduated from the University of Sydney and worked as a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* for three years before completing a Masters in Journalism at Columbia and then embarking on a career as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*. Her non-fiction titles, *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*, are informed by this stage of her career. All her novels have been bestsellers and she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *March* (2006); her latest title is *Caleb’s Crossing*.

On the Radio National website, she proclaims herself to be ‘more than a little in awe of being offered the opportunity to deliver the 2011 Boyer Lectures’, but given her illustrious literary track record, why the awe? When the Miles Franklin longlist was released this month, first time author Favel Parrett found herself among more famous names in line for the award, and expressed similar sentiments: ‘I feel a bit embarrassed,’ she told the *SMH*. Enough of such female modesty. I’d be surprised if any male presenter of the Boyer Lectures has confessed to awe, and my goodness, there are a lot of them; since the lectures began in 1959, a mere six women have been granted the distinction (with another three as co-lecturers with men).

In the first lecture, Brooks takes the wide view of one’s country as home, going in hard with an environmental message that was bred in her as a young journalist covering the campaign to save the Franklin River in the early 1980s. It turned her into an activist and was, she says, a ‘source of conviction about our responsibility to our only home, this fragile and beleaguered planet.’ Occasionally she reveals her expatriate status: ‘Everyone knows the story of the first Plymouth Thanksgiving,’ she writes, as if every Australian has studied American history.

In Lecture Two, ‘A Home on Bland Street’, she writes of growing up amid the ‘vast sprawl of red tiles and liver brick’ that comprised Australian suburbia in the 1960s. Unlike apologists such as Patrick White, Barry Humphries and Dame Leonie Kramer, who ‘did not grasp the emotional and imaginative richness of the lives played out against these frugal backdrops’, Brooks views this as a wholly positive experience and praises the ‘sustaining solidarity’ and sense of community to be found in the suburbs. It’s a refreshing take, and her affectionate portrait of home and family reminded me of the Adelaide novels of Barbara Hanrahan.

In lecture three, ‘At Home in the World’, Brooks discusses her life as a foreign correspondent, beginning with her involvement in the Sydney Olympics of 2000. Who knew she was a volunteer, ‘a speck of highly costumed colour in the extravaganza of the opening ceremony’? All seemed well with the world that night, but before the Games had ended,

¹ www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures

violence had broken out in Jerusalem and the next year the twin towers came down. ‘We were back in our accustomed element: Endless enemies, infinite wars.’

The lectures are highly readable and all begin with a personal anecdote that engages the reader before widening into a more focused discussion. The first one begins with her observing the local wildlife in her garden in Martha’s Vineyard; in the last, ‘A Home in Fiction’, in which she explains how she became a novelist, she’s reluctantly attending a lecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is unexpectedly swept up by the mathematician’s passion and vision. Although her field is words, not numbers, she concludes that ‘Like that mathematician, I am after nothing less than eternal truths: what is this world, how can we more perfectly describe it? Who are we, who have we been?’

The book is dedicated to three journalist colleagues who lost their lives far from home: Americans Daniel Pearl, beheaded in Pakistan in 2002, and Gad Gross, murdered by Iraqi soldiers in 1991; and Australian Greg Shackleton, murdered in Balibo in 1975.

Ruth Starke

When Anna Funder published the novel *All That I Am* in 2011 questions were asked as to why, after the success of *Stasiland* (2003), she had chosen to write her second book as fiction, based as it was on real people living through a specific historical event. She claimed that she was being true to history but that she had ‘massaged the political and emotional web between people’ which is not possible in non-fiction.¹ Once again we may ask the question as to whether it is more effective to set historical events in a fictional context, with the freedom that gives an author, or whether the unemotionally presented facts, as set out in non-fiction, give an accurate, and thus more effective account of real events. Denise Leith, in *What Remains*, gives a fictional account of the experiences of one war correspondent after having earlier publishing *Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists*, based on her interviews with people who had worked in war zones.

In the introduction to *Bearing Witness* Leith writes: ‘While journalists live with the horrors they witness and a commonly expressed sense of impotence, they all claim that their job is a privilege and their work has given their life meaning.’² Leith sympathises with their desire to make a difference, while admitting that in her work as a writer and a lecturer in international relations she felt powerless to change the world. In an interview with Caroline Baum she says that she found she could do it much better in fiction than non-fiction. Writing fiction was more satisfying, complete and whole. In taking the readers to the heart and emotions of someone she could reveal the truth of what happens.³

Before I began reading the book the blurb on the back cover of *What Remains* worried me. There were too many adjectives: arresting and powerful, tumultuous, naïve and idealistic and harrowing. One should not, however, judge a book by its cover. The events are dramatic and the reaction of the protagonist to atrocity, danger, suffering and death is described movingly but not sensationalised. It was not the ‘Bridget Jones meets Indiana Jones’ that I feared.

*What Remains* is written from the point of view of Kate Price, a relatively young and inexperienced journalist. Her experiences in a number of war zones disturb and shock her until the situation she faces in Rwanda becomes a turning point, and she is no longer able to feel any emotion.

At first I couldn’t see anything and I stumbled, nearly falling on the bodies at my feet, so I stood still, as my eyes adjusted to the gloom. I could hear a dull background hum, not sure what it was until I realized that it was the sound of the flies: big black and green blowflies. Thousands of them. Everywhere. The floor, the pews and the dais were covered in bodies. … At my feet was a little girl; her legs were torn wide and the flies were feasting. When I leaned down to close her legs the flies rose up and one got caught under my scarf. Frantically I pulled at the material to let it out, but it seemed to be stuck, buzzing and crawling around my cheek. Unable to breathe I clawed at the scarf with both hands to get it off my face and screamed. (120)

¹ Catherine Kennan, *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 September 2011
³ Bookshots.net/2012/02/denise-leith-what-remains accessed 4 April 2012

It is interesting to compare this account of the atrocities in Rwanda as experienced by the fictional Kate with that of the journalist Donatella Lorch, as reported by Leith in *Bearing Witness*.

What amazes and perplexes me and keeps drawing me back is trying to figure out what makes people tick. … For example, in the case of post-genocide Rwanda, after you did all the traditional, standard, post-genocide stories of the fighting, the mass graves and the retaliatory killings and revenge, you then had to start figuring out where the story was.\(^4\)

It is clear that *Bearing Witness* provided the research for *What Remains*. Is fiction more satisfactory than nonfiction? I found the fictional account of the various war zones more compelling and touching. What makes the difference is that while the firsthand accounts by journalists reflect what they saw, their reporting is constrained by their inhibitions and the limits they place on themselves. In addition they need to remain detached from the sights and suffering they are witnessing in order to maintain their sanity and professional judgment. In *What Remains* the events of Kosovo, Rwanda, Palestine Chechnya and Iraq are revealed in an outline of the causes of the conflict, the effect on the physical and social environment and the upheaval caused by all of these. Kate tells her story. In doing this she embodies the attitudes, frustrations and fears of journalists, at the same time writing frankly about her own emotional responses. Then there are people with whom she interacts. In Sarajevo there is the not entirely convincing story of the rescue of an old lady, put on a plane for England. There are the children she and Pete rescue from a bombed out cellar, the driver in Iraq who becomes a friend. More often, however, Kate, in registering the chaos and violence around her, acknowledges that she can do nothing to change the world. Even the reports she sends back to London are subject to editorial control.

Had the story been simply a roll call of war zones and adventures it would have had limited appeal. The love story between the photographer Pete McDermott and Kate, fraught as it is with misunderstanding, missed chances and their mutual reluctance to become involved in a difficult relationship, is threaded strategically throughout the narrative, developing the characters and engaging the reader. There is a refreshing lack of sentimentality in their dialogue:

‘What would you pay for me, my hero? What do you judge my worth to be?’
‘About a thousand pounds would do it, give or take a couple of quid. I don’t know’ he said turning around to look me up and down. ‘Maybe thirteen hundred, tops. You’re a bit skinny for the likes of the punters around here.’ (197)

Other characters are important – Peter’s friend John, who chooses to return home and save his marriage, while still torn by a desire to be in the thick of the action, Bella with her chaotic love life and Larry, the editor who recognizes that Kate is suffering from post traumatic stress long before she is ready to acknowledge that she needs a break. The problem is that the war zone becomes the reality and the idea of returning home to host dinner parties and talk trivia becomes abhorrent.


The book draws you in, in a very satisfying way, never succumbing to treacly sentiment or sensationalism. The story is of a young woman who transforms from an ambitious war journalist to a woman who has seen more than most of the world’s suffering, has experienced her own triumphs and loss yet who emerges at the end with hope, concluding that ‘life is good, the sun is shining and I’m not sure we should ever ask for more than that’ (375). The title, What Remains, refers to Pandora’s box. After she had opened the box and allowed so much trouble to escape she slammed the lid down. All that remained was hope. I was left with some hope as well and a sense of having been there. I cried at the end of the novel, and would recommend other readers to have their box of tissues at the ready.

Emily Sutherland
Andrea Levy, The Long Song (Headline, 2010)

The Long Song, Andrea Levy’s fifth novel and the much-anticipated follow-up to the multi-award winning Small Island, is essentially the fictional biography of a former Jamaican slave. The novel charts July’s life from her conception as the child of a slave and a white overseer, through her ‘abduction’ by the plantation owner’s wife, to her own involvement with a subsequent British overseer. The backdrop to these events is the Baptist War of 1831, the slaves’ rebellion, and the final end of slavery on Jamaica; equally, the novel is about what life was like for slaves after slavery. We see one controlling system, slavery, replaced by another, capitalism. The story is told by the now elderly July. Levy states, in a piece at the end of the book, that ‘Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out’ (318). July’s frequent addresses to the reader strengthen this, although right from the start we know that her son is her editor, signalling that Levy is interested in going beyond linear, reliable narration. For this reason, The Long Song is a more interesting novel than Small Island. It shares that novel’s emphasis on persuasive storytelling in accessible language; like the earlier novel, too, it shows that Levy is happy to make her central characters sometimes unsympathetic. At one point, overcome by jealousy, July has her lover Robert Goodwin served a large dish of cockroaches.

Slavery is not a new subject for fiction, although most of it is American: Levy is writing in the wake of Marlon James, Valerie Martin and Toni Morrison, although her tone and mode are refreshingly if curiously different. In ‘The Writing of The Long Song’, Levy wonders: ‘How could anyone write about slavery without turning it into a harrowing tale of violence and misery’, commenting that every book on slavery she had read was ‘not an easy read, with definitely little room for humour’ (316). The unexpected if gentle humour is provided by July’s complaints about her editor son, and the depiction of Caroline Goodwin, her mistress, as a once powerful but ultimately trapped, vain coquette. That said, the book is not short of horror and violence: we see July’s mother Kitty hanged, and the detailing of gruesome punishments handed out to rebelling slaves.

In the period after slavery, when the former slaves remain nonetheless controlled and exploited, Robert marries Caroline. Their union is the subject of a painting which, July tells us, is not a reliable document and has been subject to change. Such is the case with July’s narration, which is framed by the words of her son. Intriguing questions are raised here. He writes of her pleasure in the domestic realm; she complains about the tasks. When we think the narrative is over, July informs us that her son has demanded more; one large section of her life is not narrated, despite the protestations of her son. ‘But why must I dwell upon sorrow?’ she asks (305).

This brings us to some problems with the novel. July’s voice, as the last quotation shows, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century narrators of the Brontë sort, with sentences frequently commencing with ‘Reader …’ This is, possibly, an intentional pastiche, giving the authority of the nineteenth-century novel a new voice in a black slave. A typical extract is the following: ‘Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink’ (7).

The voice charms and engages to ensure that we like the character; violence is related from a safe distance, in comfortable, accessible language that does not necessarily convince.

as the style of an elderly former slave. Of course, it is not, for her son is the editor. But there lies the problem.

Levy has given us a slave narrative in the form of a self-reflexive novel, a book with all the characteristics of recent British postmodern fiction: unreliable narrators, competing points of view, but something that is ultimately reader-friendly and accessible. The unfortunate outcome is that Levy’s desire to bring forgotten voices to life does not achieve its goal, when the narration is held up for question by the end. Truth is dismantled, in favour of a strategy that is entertaining but by now rather tired.

It is tempting to judge Levy against the great Toni Morrison. *The Long Song* is not as powerful as the latter’s novels, but it is clearly not attempting to compete. Andrea Levy appears to have been infected by the kind of novels Yann Martel and Lloyd Jones have produced in *Life of Pi* and *Mister Pip*, where the worst horrors of humanity are depicted, and then essentially dismissed by a message of charm and warmth, or a narrator whose voice is fallible. *The Long Song* is a curious thing: it is a lovely book about slavery, but nonetheless it is always engaging, and admirable in its fresh approach to familiar fictional ground. A good book? Yes. A great, innovative piece of art? No. But Levy deserves a wide readership, and many who find Morrison unpalatable will enjoy her work and learn something about Jamaican slavery at the same time, for, as the lengthy acknowledgements show, it is a well-researched book. It is also much better than the novel it lost out to in the 2011 Booker Prize, Howard Jacobson’s *The Finkler Question*, and deserves its success.

**Nick Turner**

John Sutherland’s *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* is an entertaining 800-odd page literary history, which is simplistically structured in chronological order according to birthdates and gives informed profiles of carefully selected novelists taken from all walks of life and all parts of the English-speaking world. It is therefore a delightful treat to find the oft-neglected postcolonial writers (Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Alice Munro, V.S. Naipaul, Margaret Atwood, Rana Dasgupta, not to mention three Australian novelists) rubbing shoulders with the more classical names that are regularly put on high school curricula.

Patrick White’s vanity preened itself a little when he reported in a letter to Marshall Best that Anthony Burgess made the following statement at the 1970 Adelaide Festival: ‘A country is only remembered for its art. Rome is remembered for Virgil, Greece for Homer, and Australia may be remembered for Patrick White.’¹ If Professor Sutherland’s *Lives of the Novelists* is any proof, Australian literature is still epitomised by Patrick White, a prestigious role he now has to share with J.M. Coetzee (if one is inclined to accept him as an *Australian* novelist) and Peter Carey. David Malouf has obviously been left out in the cold for some reason, but I suspect that he will not come whining to Professor Sutherland about it.

Perhaps the 294 deceased and living novelists in the spotlight will be grateful to this Booker Prize judge-cum-critic for giving them additional exposure (even though all writers under consideration are renowned enough to dispense with that extra bit of lionising), but I doubt it. Sadly enough, in our age which saw the spectacular professional advancement of the celebrity writer – an age in which authors are more read about than read –, giving media exposure to the private lives of authors seems to be the safest way to ensure that people will take a vested interest in literature. But there is a fine line between spicing up what would otherwise be a tedious ‘biographical run through the novel in English’ (792), and proving how efficient ‘the bitchiness of literary London’ (771) is.

Engrossing though it is, *Lives of the Novelists* has the poor taste of mixing what should remain within the private sphere of authors with a cursory analysis of their works. The author of this bulky book of literary profiles contends that his writings have ‘been sustained by the belief that literary life and work are inseparable and mutually illuminating’ (xii). While I must admit that getting to know the personality and ideas of authors through interviews – which are part of what we call ‘l’épitexte’ in French – may shed new light on their works, I fail to see how J.M. Coetzee’s excessive privacy, Salman Rushdie’s strained relationship with his father, and Peter Carey’s ‘acrimonious divorce from Summers’ (740) illuminate the meaning of their literary output. More disturbing is the fact that Sutherland occasionally impersonates social commentator Lionel Pantaloon, an obnoxious character in Roald Dahl’s *Vengeance is Mine* (1980), when he speculates that Saki, a.k.a. Hector Hugh

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² Take it as a euphemism for ‘gossip columnist’. 

Munro, ‘was homosexual and, possibly, pederastic’ (277). One wishes Sutherland had taken a leaf out of Julian Barnes’s book by maintaining a ‘dignified silence […] about private things’ (751). In addition to these invasions of privacy smacking of sex-related gossip, which will undoubtedly help Lives of the Novelists hit the bestseller list, some provocative statements – such as ‘Orwell’s status as a writer of novels is debatable, but Orwell’s status as a non-fiction writer is unimpeachable’ (431) – will shake literature-lovers out their reading routine.

Covering such a broad range of novelists will inevitably lead to the inclusion of minor mistakes, not to mention the updates omitted because Lives of the Novelists appears to be a compilation of bits and pieces Sutherland wrote as a columnist and critic. One guesses that the Patrick White entry was originally written in the early 1970s, given that the author mentions ‘White’s recently published The Vivisector (1970)’ (519, emphasis mine). However, the profile has been partly updated because the author does acknowledge the existence of David Marr’s biography as recommended reading. But I doubt that Sutherland has actually read Patrick White: A Life (1991) because, as I have made clear in my article on The Twyborn Affair, the discreet White has never been interested in queer activism and never got involved in the Gay Rights Movement. So where did Sutherland read that ‘Over the next quarter century White would, from time to time, make known his liberal sentiments on […] gay liberation’ (522)?

This mixed bag of selected Anglophone writers ranging from classical novelists (like John Bunyan, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Nathaniel Hawthorne, etc.) and Nobel Prize winners (such as Patrick White, Toni Morrison, J.M. Coetzee) to more commercial fiction writers (Ian Fleming, Michael Crichton, Stephen King, to name a few) shows clearly, in a somewhat postmodern fashion, that no attempt is being made to enshrine writers or even to create a hierarchy of sorts. Rather, it seems likely that the worldwide popularity of the carefully picked names will vouchsafe the commercial success of Lives of the Novelists.

All reservations aside, and if Sutherland’s dubious techniques (i.e. the inclusion of muck-raking scandals and provocative assertions) are effective enough to stimulate people into reading (more) fiction, I can only wish him success with Lives of the Novelists, a book that duly pays tribute to his prolific literary career. In a short epilogue probing the new directions in fiction with the rise of the digital age, the author optimistically prophesises ‘a better sense and utilisation of the whole territory of fiction’ (797). Perhaps he would have been better employed setting an example with Lives of the Novelists.

Jean-François Vernay

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