Michelle Austin  
*The Inheritance of Ivorie Hammer* by Edwina Preston

Troy Benson  
*Dissonance* by Stephen Orr

Chiam Chuang Chao  
*The Messenger Bird* by Ruth Eastham

Gillian Dooley  
*Cat and Fiddle* by Lesley Jørgensen

Gillian Dooley  
*The Childhood of Jesus* by J.M. Coetzee

Lauren Dougherty  
*The Remnants* by John Hughes

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi  
*Life Goes On* by Hans Kielson

Piri Eddy  
*Pangamonium* by Zanesh Catkin

Kay Hart  
*Black Mountain* by Venero Armanno

Rajender Kaur  
*Softly As I Leave You* by Chandani Lokuge

Dunja Nedic  
*Ask the Dust* by John Fante

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia  
*Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* by Chi Vu

Melanie Pryor  
*Hannah and Emil* by Belinda Castles

Adam Quinlivan  
*Nightfall* by Will Elliott

David Robjant  
*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid

Jorge Salavert  
*The Mountain* by Drusilla Modjeska

Mohammad Saleem  
*Blood* by Tony Birch

Umme Salma  
*To Silence* by Subesh Jaireth

Martina Sciolino  
*A Hologram for the King* by Dave Eggers

When a novel is described as containing a circus, a brothel, or even both, there is a danger of cliché. Such themes used to be associated with novels by Angela Carter, and have more recently come back into fashion in a new development of Neo-Victorian fiction with such novels as Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). While some of these novels, like Faber’s, form compelling reads, however, many fail to live up to their publicity and some are hugely disappointing.

Edwina Preston’s novel, on the other hand, is an evocative piece of fiction that begins with the introduction of a travelling circus to the fictional town of Canyon. When the narrative opens, the first character to be introduced is a prostitute, Marianne Ward, in the neighbouring town of Pitch, who is sent to Canyon by her brothel madam and quickly becomes sexually entangled with the aptly named circus owner, Arcadia Cirque. Marianne, becoming pregnant by the morally dubious Arcadia, absconds from Canyon in disgrace, never to be seen again and pursued by Otto, Arcadia’s brother. The added mystery of Arcadia’s murder is then left tantalisingly unexplained in the opening part of the story.

The opening is promising and evokes further curiosity in the main text of the novel. Here the narrative shifts forward forty years to detail the discovery of an old man, believed, and eventually proved, to be Otto Cirque, living in an abandoned outhouse and accused of the murder of Arcadia following the discovery of skeletal remains during the excavation of an old and dilapidated house. The man then disappears, in homage to Harry Houdini, just before the occurrence of another suspicious death. These mysteries are juxtaposed with the much more obscure identity of the main protagonist, Ivorie Hammer, who is pregnant at the beginning of the novel and questioning her own parentage. It is revealed early in the novel that she has been raised by a midwife by the name of Morag Pappy, but that she has no clue as to the identity of her mother besides a single earring, a coin-like token and a lock of hair.

While there are several rather obvious clues in the early part of the novel that suggest what the denouement will be, the story has enough mystery and energy to drive it satisfactorily. The main action in this novel is divided between Canyon and Pitch, where Ivorie makes several new discoveries, and this protects the plot from the dangers of stagnation that inevitably arise when setting a mystery tale in the confined and unvarying space of a small town. However, because of this, there is also a noticeable lack of smoothness and subtlety in the narrative construction, which gives a slight sense of a *deus ex machina*; the solution being unavailable in one town it will naturally materialise in the other.

Preston’s decision to shift the time period from earlier events to a later period in which the previous happenings are investigated and judged is also far from original, though it does fit the novel into a current trend for historical family saga novels that contain a hint of the mysterious, such as those of Kate Morton. The use of the circus is also a well-used motif as seen in recent works such as Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants* (2008) or Erin Morgenstern’s *The Night Circus* (2011). Such works contain a magical element which adds a spark of mystique to tried-and-tested constructions of stories focused, primarily, on human relationships and self-discovery; yet such novels also find wide readerships for these exact reasons.

Preston’s story, therefore, is intriguing and engaging, while the narrative tone, as of a conspiratorial and omniscient narrator directly addressing the ‘dear reader’ at various points,
is reminiscent of the work of William Makepeace Thackeray or Henry Fielding and works well to draw the reader into the plot. The unknown history of central characters also lends this novel a kind of Dickensian undercurrent as of The Pickwick Papers or Our Mutual Friend. Also like Dickens’ work, this novel boasts an eclectic cast of characters with highly unusual names from the well-respected Mr Borrell Sweetley, who is elected Acting Bailiff in the murder case, to the singular figure of Mrs Po, on whom Ivorie has to rely when she goes into labour.

All of the stylistic choices serve to earn the novel its place within the Neo-Victorian canon, but there is also a clear determination to enforce the Australian setting and to make clear that, although many of the literary influences are British the novel itself is not. This is further affirmed by allusions to Dickens as ‘a British gentleman who writes [novels] very well’ (146). The overall achievement is, therefore, rich in scope, and something of a hybrid in terms of authorial voice, narrative style and literary influence. Though it suffers slightly from the same clichés that all Neo-Victorian or Dickensian pastiches naturally carry with them, as the address to the ‘dear reader’ only emphasises, the plot and fluent writing style does its work to produce a compelling tale of intrigue, murder, suspense and discovery that makes Preston’s debut novel a treat to read.

Michelle Austin

In the wake of *Time’s Long Ruin* (2009), winner of the 2012 National Year of Reading Award for South Australia and longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2011, Adelaide based writer, Stephen Orr presents us with his latest novel, *Dissonance*, a re-imagining of the ‘Frankfurt years’ of Rose and Percy Grainger. Orr offers a harsh insight into obsessive love, manifested in the Bildungsroman journey of piano prodigy Erwin Hergert from one side of the world to the other. Struggling with commitment and sacrifice, alienation, confusion, death, war, sexual desire and ruthless reality, Erwin succumbs to ‘the one thing that ruins every man. Weakness’ (251), after discovering that his initial uplifting sense of being a ‘man and a child’ (105), is fleeting.

Orr introduces us to a fifteen-year-old Erwin practicing piano under the watchful eye of his dominating mother Madge, at their house on God’s Hill Road in Barossa Valley, South Australia. Vividly describing the setting, Orr delicately guides us to Erwin, ‘producing music that fell out of the window into a garden full of wildflowers’ (3-4). Music is a daily six-hour commitment that dominates Erwin’s spare time, forced upon him by Madge, who lives vicariously through her son and dreams for him to be Australia’s first great pianist. With this strict daily routine, Erwin’s home life is far from that of a normal child. He is awarded little time to play outside and is denied spending time with his German father Johann, who has been exiled to the back shed by Madge; her assurance to Erwin: ‘I saved you from him …You’ll thank me one day’ (20). Madge allows Jo back inside the house when he is diagnosed with cancer, but only long enough to die, further strengthening the community’s opinion of her as ‘a stingy old misery guts who’d driven her husband away’ (51).

Like Percy Grainger, whose mother Rose moved him to Frankfurt, Germany in the hope of achieving greater success as a pianist, Erwin and Madge depart for Germany to further Erwin’s talent, because ‘no one made their career in Adelaide’ (91). They arrive in Hamburg in 1938. Germany is under the control of Adolf Hitler and World War Two is looming. If the constant marching, protesting, sirens and air-raids aren’t enough of a distraction, Erwin meets Luise and realises there is more to life than music. His time spent with Luise increases and Madge slowly loses control of her son and the strict schedule she imposes on him. Adding to this, Erwin’s somewhat questionable father figure Professor Ivan Schaedel, makes him realise that ‘the piano is only a box of strings and hammers, hopes, fears and probably disappointments’ (158).

Aside from racism, violence and disturbing scenes depicting brutality towards Jews in a war-frenzied Germany, the twisted relationship between Madge and Erwin is dark, provocative and perhaps Orr’s strongest exploration in *Dissonance*. Madge’s possessive attitude towards Erwin infiltrates his life and moulds his mind as he grows into a troubled adult. While it is suggested by Madge that ‘Erwin is … peculiar’ (285), Orr allows us to delve much deeper into Erwin’s disturbed reality, with narration from his perspective. Madge commits her own form of torture, exposing her hypocrisy and likening her to the Nazi soldiers whom she despises for tormenting defenceless Jews, when a young Erwin disobeys her and she whips him with ‘one of the old horsewhips she’d used on Jo’ (69). This violent scene is intensified as he uncurls himself ‘and lay across her lap like an overgrown baby’ (71). The vulnerability of Erwin, and Madge’s psychotic possessiveness over a teenage boy who goes from foetal position into the arms of his attacker, is strongly exposed and paves the way for a scene of flagellation that follows.

Erwin’s sexual fascination with pain and its disturbing connection to the domination of his mother is clearly demonstrated by Orr, when Erwin has his first sexual fantasy about Luise and imagines Madge watching and handing him the whip ‘as he unfurled it and started whipping Luise across the back and buttocks’ (180). Erwin begins to whip himself and what initially begins as perhaps punishing himself for being so weak and disobedient, soon becomes a way of empowering himself and asserting control over his own actions. This evolves into release of stress, frustration and sexual tension as he uses it to regain his manhood and suggestively the manhood that was stripped from his father. Orr’s exploration of possession and the struggle for power in a dissonant relationship crumbling amongst the chaos of war, is successfully and powerfully executed with graphic imagery and shocking insight into the victims psyche.

Despite Orr’s shockingly wonderful exploration of the psychological horrors of a heavily possessive and dependent relationship, cohesively complemented and reflected in the destruction taking place in the environment around the characters, Dissonance is not without its inconsistencies. While jumping between the past and present thoughts of the characters is successful in strengthening access to their intentions, thought process, and state of mind, while also providing back-story, these transitions aren’t always made smoothly. Initially, and even after getting used to it, the jumpy prose can at times be jarring and break the flow of narration. This isn’t so discordant that it takes away from the story, and therefore it is excusable, but other factors such as the introduction and disappearance of seemingly important characters leave the reader questioning and, at times, unsatisfied.

Dissonance is a gripping exploration of the extremities of love, power struggle and control in an unstable environment, expressed through pleasing prose from Stephen Orr.

Troy Benson

Many of us will probably remember, as school students, the subject History as one of the most boring one has studied. As children, we probably had no interest in what the textbooks contained. However, it is simply not accurate to say that youngsters are not interested at all in what happened before their time; they just need something entertaining to focus their attention. Schoolchildren who moan or doze off at the pages of their textbooks, might ask for more when their grandparents tell them similar stories in their own voices. Maths is another boring chore, but children will take the numbers enthusiastically when it is needed to crack codes or write hidden messages. Ruth Eastham is certainly aware of this, as she demonstrated with the cryptic clues and historical background in *The Messenger Bird*.

Eastham’s book has several good points that will make it a popular book among younger readers. I believe that a good story is one that easily allows the reader to step into the shoes of the protagonist and the setting of the story. This effect begins on the cover: in the foreground is an image of a young boy; the intended readers know this is a story that is centred on a protagonist they can relate to. The dull-coloured background, with silhouettes of World War II planes, clues readers that this story will have something to do with history. The designer also added an amazing touch: at the right side are alphabets that can only be seen under the light at certain angles. This effectively ties into the secret codes and messages theme, and provides readers with a proper start to an adventure. Within the story itself, readers follow the characters to various historical places in search for clues. They also have to learn about the backstory of those places and certain historical events, such as the use of the Enigma Machine. With these, Eastham has managed to write a story that satisfies the readers’ imaginations and adventurous spirits, whilst providing educational information at the same time.

We have seen it many times, on screens and literary pages, where youngsters who are aware of threats or dangers are ignored by adults because of their age. These stories mostly end with the younger characters solving the plot by themselves without the help from any ‘useless’ adults. In real life, young teenagers do not like being treated as if they are children, or being left out of events important to them. These factors are considered as readers follow thirteen-year-old Nathan Vane into the story. Eastham not only gives her targeted readers an outlet where they can fulfil their fantasies and imagination, she also presents with them realistic troubles so the readers can connect with Nathan emotionally.

Nathan witnessed his father, Leon, being arrested on the night he and his family were supposed to celebrate his birthday and their housewarming. However, just before he was taken away, Leon left his son some clues, so that Nathan can help prove his innocence. Such an important trust between an adult and a young teen, or even between parent and child, is probably what many young teenagers wish to achieve. Nathan’s older sister Hannah, was also present, yet Nathan was the one given the heavy task. This is probably a way to show that age does not necessary indicates one’s abilities, despite what some readers might think. The first chapter also taps into some of our worst fears: that someone we love is taken away from us, possibly forever, on a day that was supposed to be happy. Therefore, instead of monsters in the attic, readers experience a very realistic threat: the disappearance of a beloved family member. Such a danger also allows a truly worthwhile goal – to reunite one’s own family.

As I have said, many stories aimed at younger audience portray adults in positions of authority as stupid, ignorant, and of no help at all. In *The Messenger Bird*, adult characters...
are unable to help Nathan in his quest to prove his father’s innocence; however, Eastham manages to provide ample justifications. Nathan’s mother tries her best to appear strong and keep the family together, even though she is clearly on the verge of breaking down, as any wife would be when told that her husband could be imprisoned for life. The other authority figure, the family friend and lawyer Mr Edwards, is also unable to help, apart from giving Nathan a small but vital warning. This is due to the antagonists having approached him before the plot started, thus limiting his options. With these portrayals, readers are shown that, sometimes, adults are helpless not because they choose to be, but because they truly do not know what to do. At the end of the story, some adults do actually provide some help.

Nathan initially intends to save his father alone, but he eventually enlists his two friends in his quest. This can be read as a way to allow Nathan, and by proxy the young readers, the feeling of independence. Instead of having answers and instructions given by an adult figure to solve a problem by another adult, Nathan has to give it all in his efforts to crack the secret code. Being independent does not mean that one does not require help from others, nor does it mean simply receiving orders from another and then taking action. One first has to do everything one can within one’s own ability before seeking aid from another.

As realistic as Eastham manages to make it, this is still a book intended for younger readers. The main antagonist is Rose, a traitor who frames Leon. Rose is a civil servant who is part of a group involved with selling state secrets. It is established that soldiers have been killed because of this, and Rose displays no regrets about this. Yet this heartless character took her time to get rid of the children after they did what she wanted them to. If this story was set in a more mature setting, I believe that Rose would have shot the protagonists from behind, instead of pointing the gun at them and confessing what she had done. In the end, Rose survives being crushed under a falling building,. In an adult novel, she would probably have ended up being burnt to death, instead of surviving with broken limbs.

Overall, *The Messenger Bird* was a very entertaining read., . It is essentially a young teen’s answer to *Da Vinci Code*, minus all the religious imagery and controversy. Or, a young British reader’s literary equivalent of the United States’ film *National Treasure*.

Chiam Chuang Chao
Lesley Jørgensen. *Cat and Fiddle* (Scribe, 2013)

It’s a slightly risky venture, playing with the classics. Writing sequels is probably the most perilous of all, but even what Lesley Jørgensen does in *Cat and Fiddle* can founder. However, she steers confidently among the jagged rocks of pastiche and the hidden currents of slavish imitation, and brings her novel safely into the lively port of romantic comedy with a firm hand on the tiller of satire and affectionate parody.

The novel brings together two families, in keeping with the tradition of the great classics of fiction. The Bournes are English landed gentry, slowly clawing their way back to prosperity with the help of the National Trust and a strategic marriage to a Greek heiress. The Choudhurys are Bangladeshi immigrants who represent an intriguing combination of Western education and Muslim traditions, the parents as well as the children straddling, sometimes in unexpected ways, the often uncomfortable divide between the beliefs and values that make them who they are, and the pressures to become more like their British compatriots.

The classic to which this novel most clearly alludes is *Pride and Prejudice*, and in its bicentenary year this link will be given prominence in the marketing. It is not the only Austen novel which surfaces, often in the tiniest hints, but it is the most fundamental to the novel’s structure. Thus we have a rich, upper class man (Richard Bourne) attracted to an intelligent woman outside his usual circle (Rohimun Choudhury), who initially despises him, and who has a mother keen on getting all her children safely married. There is a slightly disreputable younger sister (Shunduri) – but only one, and also an older brother (Tariq) with his own very modern set of problems. The parents’ marriage provides another parallel, but none of these similarities are straightforward. Mrs Begum, despite her obsession with matrimony, is no Mrs Bennet: when Austen writes that Elizabeth’s mother is ‘occasionally nervous, and invariably silly’, it is the omniscient narrator speaking. When Jørgensen writes that Mrs Begum is ‘incessantly active and occasionally silly’ (377), however, this is not only a less harsh judgement, but it is her husband, Dr Choudhury, who makes it, and it is compromised by the reader’s understanding that Dr Choudhury is, despite his belief to the contrary, not actually in a position to take the high moral or intellectual ground in his marriage. He is vain and obtuse about many things, and, despite his academic achievements, is unaware how skilfully his wife manages him.

I would suggest that pursuing the parallels between the plots of the two novels is a diversion best avoided. *Cat and Fiddle* can stand very well on its own without needing to borrow the lustre of its forbear, and I found that speculating on which character in *Pride and Prejudice* equates to Tariq, or where Richard’s brother Henry and his wife might slot into Austen’s story, only distracted me from my absorption in this very engrossing novel. Jørgensen’s narrator is often witty, but the multiplicity of narrative points of view is another point of difference from Austen. Austen pioneered free indirect discourse, as we know, but still had no qualms about acting as the omniscient narrator when it suited her, in a way that few twentieth- or twenty-first-century novelists would regard as quite proper. Jørgensen channels at least eight of her characters at different times, allowing us to see their failings and insecurities from the inside, which makes it more difficult for them to be mere objects of satire. Thus Dr Choudhury cannot help attributing the sidelining of historical architecture, his speciality at Oxford, to his professor’s disappointed hopes of romantic involvement with him: she is a woman, after all. But he is nevertheless a figure of real pathos, and his concerns about what is happening at Oxford are justified. The satire is sometimes less complicated.
When Shunduri’s boyfriend Kareem batters an opponent with his shoe in a street fight, and as he puts it back on, thinks ‘You certainly couldn’t do as much damage with some cheap Kays shoe. And forget trainers. These handmades had real weight in them. … Investment dressing was what it was all about’ (365).

There is also plenty of satire directed elsewhere. Mrs Begum, worried about her son’s reluctance to get married and his self-directed anger, decides that it would be ‘far better that he married and could direct all this anger against the EU and the French, like … everyone else in this village’ (369). The brittle lives of the fast set in London, the dealers in art as well as drugs, come under scrutiny, along with the Oxford dons over-impressed by Saudi money and the British royal family seen through the affectionate but sometimes critical eyes of Mrs Begum. The wit of the narrative doesn’t always depend on satire: Richard’s reaction to a Bangladeshi meal followed by betel-nut and tea involves a feeling ‘as if he had been run over by a steamroller and then somehow overinflated’ (314). Another source of delight is the subtle rendition of speech rhythms. Mrs Begum is always making someone ‘a cup-of-tea’, the hyphens signifying a change in word stress from ‘tea’, where it would fall in the more ‘standard’ version. The young people often end their sentences with ‘yeah’, so you can hear the déclassé Londoner in their voices, even when the rest of their speech is quite grammatically correct.

So read Cat and Fiddle for its own sake, not because it owes a debt to Jane Austen or any other forerunner. It’s a long novel – 500 pages – and it may take a little time to get you hooked, but once that happens you won’t want it to finish. I won’t give away the ending. Suffice to say that although things seem to be progressing satisfactorily for most of the main characters, all loose ends are not perfectly woven in. But then, neither were they for Austen’s characters, except in the most literal and unimaginative reading. For Jørgensen, as well as for Austen, ‘happy ever after’ is not only improbable, but less interesting and life-affirming than the provisional optimism on which she ends her novel.

Gillian Dooley


I have always resisted reading Coetzee allegorically. I took to heart – possibly through wilful misunderstanding – his statement to David Attwell that ‘a critical practice whose climactic gesture is always a triumphant tearing-off, as it grows lazy (and every orthodoxy grows lazy), begins to confine its attentions to clothed subjects, and even to subjects whose clothes are easily torn off’; and ‘in the act of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath – (“Behold the truth!”) it exposes a naiveté of its own. For is the naked body really the truth?’ Bolstered by Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Against Interpretation’, I felt justified in resisting the search for meanings below the surface of Coetzee’s novels, or indeed anyone else’s.

But what is to be done with a novel titled *The Childhood of Jesus*? It’s not only tempting to read it as allegory: there seems to be no alternative. Not, of course, that it is simple to do so. The parallels with the New Testament, the novel’s most obvious intertext, are far from simple. A man and a young boy arrive in Novillo, a city in a Spanish-speaking country, and are confronted with a blandly courteous but indifferent bureaucracy which at first fails to provide basic necessities. They have been on the road for a week, from a camp called Belstar. So at first, one is might think that this is an allegory of the appalling treatment meted out to refugees, always remembering that the child, as we must presume from the title, is a Christ figure.

But after a few initial inconveniences the man, to whom the authorities have assigned the name Simón, and the boy, David, find adequate shelter and means of sustenance, and make friends among the other residents of the city, all of whom appear to have arrived by the same route. Everyone in Novilla is newly-made, and everyone has forgotten their old life, except Simón, who alone, it seems, is unsatisfied, who alone has an ironic cast of mind – the others ‘see no doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things seem and the way things are’ (80). His fellow workers, however, do indulge in a sterile kind of philosophising which ‘just makes him impatient’ (144).

As I read, I tried out theories. Is Simón Joseph, the ‘stepfather’ of the Jesus figure? He is adamant that he is not a relative, and is only caring for the boy until he can find his mother. But when he finds the woman he intuits to be David’s mother (not literally, but in some vague but more important sense), he seems to play the part of Gabriel at the Annunciation. At other times I thought that this new world was the afterlife, though with rules unfamiliar in the Christian tradition: its inhabitants can die, but will then pass from this world to another. And if this is heaven, it is remarkably full of irritants, major and minor.

Naturally none of these theories work perfectly, or even well. The one that I was most convinced by overall was that this was the world that some might think is contemplated in the New Testament, where an anodyne kind of ‘goodwill to all’ is the rule, although what part the child has in bringing this about is unclear: he seems to be by his nature both upset by and bound to unsettle this new world, where ‘none of us has a past,’ where ‘we start anew’ (116).

In form, this novel is not a new departure for Coetzee. The narrative is focussed through the familiar third person character, a man in late middle age, with feelings and beliefs which are out of step with the world in which he finds himself. He is only subtly different

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from J.C. in Diary of a Bad Year or Paul Rayment in Slow Man. The scene-setting is sparse and never exceeds that which is strictly necessary for the action. In fact, the usual connective tissue of fiction is sometimes missing – the transitions from place to place, from situation to situation – pruned away, no doubt, to allow imaginative space for the reader. Or to create a dream-like state which does not have to conform to the rules of everyday life.

I admit that I found the experience of reading The Childhood of Jesus disappointing. After the astonishment of Summertime, and the intellectual excitement of Diary of a Bad Year, the simplicity of the narrative, the slightly drab precision of the voice, even the perversity of the main character, were less than compelling. And then the implicit insistence on making interpretations which were nevertheless doomed to failure was dispiriting. I think, though, that this is a book which even more than his previous works requires a continuing effort of comprehension, or perhaps assimilation (rather than interpretation). Its simplicity makes it memorable. There are not many characters, the plot is straightforward. But the demands on the reader are complex in inverse proportion, because so much is left unsaid. As always, one is forced to wonder what Coetzee is up to, and as always one realises that we will never know for sure.

Gillian Dooley

*The Remnants* is John Hughes’ debut novel, but it is by no means his first work. Hughes’ first book of autobiographical essays *The Idea of Home* was published in 2004 and won the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards for non-fiction in 2005 and the National Biography Award in 2006. Since Hughes’ talent obviously lies with essay writing perhaps it is not surprising that *The Remnants* is written in a similar form. While it is a fictional novel, it is presented to the reader mainly as an edited manuscript and comes complete with footnotes and a comprehensive, and somewhat daunting, reading list at the beginning. Readers of traditional fiction may need to keep an open mind, as each chapter is a different recollection of a moment of time or an event from the perspective of a different character. There is hardly a linear plotline to follow, and even the main character, R. H. (Robert Hughes) states in the introduction ‘I hesitate to call it a novel’ (6).

*The Remnants* consists of journal entries and stories recounted after the fact. It is ‘a book made out of books’ (8), as the narrator describes it. The timeframe jumps back and forth, with the stories recounted being far more significant in themselves than the details of when they happened and the order they happened in. This is best described by the author himself, through Robert, who meditates on memory:

The memory I’m on about is not like a geological layering of rock strata, it doesn’t just lie there in a kind of sedimented torpor, earliest experiences at the bottom, most recent at the top, but is in reality a cement-mixer jumble of time, the earliest still perhaps the most vivid and all surface, but always in a state of flux and small chaos, moving in and out of loss, of the metamorphosis that comes from such heavy liquefying pressures ... a hubbling bubbling lava of the past, where whatever is hottest at any moment boils up and bursts out through the surface. (58)

*The Remnants* could be described as a ‘cement-mixer jumble of time’ where the timeline of events is almost insignificant, and ‘whatever is hottest ... boils up and bursts out through the surface’.

Contributors include Robert, who has translated his late father’s manuscript (originally written in Russian) and provides his own commentary on his father’s work as he travels to Italy to re-trace his father’s footsteps. While we read chapters in the perspective of Piero, an artist, and Eugenio, a boy who one day wandered out of the mountains and into Perio’s life, perhaps the most interesting of all the characters is Anna. It is Anna’s relationship with Robert’s late father that is the most engaging part of the story, but Robert is the first character we are introduced to. As the novel begins, he is in a cafe in Arezzo, Italy. He has his father’s translated manuscript with him and plans to travel to Piero’s home, and other places his father visited, and provide his commentary on them and how they have changed over time. He is accompanied by a beautiful Polynesian woman named Angel who attempts to teach him Italian and with whom he has an affair.

Much of the story revolves around Robert’s late father’s relationship with Anna Ivanovna Kuznechikaya, who approaches him after he has given a lecture on St Francis of Assisi and asks him to translate a poem for her written by the late Osip Mandelstam, known in the text mostly as M. Anna is perhaps the most intriguing and memorable character in the text. We see her in present day as an elderly Russian woman with a secret and a tragic past.
but we also read about her when she was a young and beautiful mother who nursed the dying poet M. in his final days. The text flips back and forth between these two Annas, allowing the reader to learn a little bit more about the mysterious aged Anna after each chapter written from the perspective of her younger self.

However, *The Remnants* does risk excluding readers with its didactic style and frequent passages in Italian and Russian. These foreign passages are untranslated, and there is little motivation for readers to go to the effort of translating them themselves. This is a book very obviously written by an academic, and its erudition and pretension is at times extremely off-putting. It is very easy to get lost in the lengthy musings about time and language and have to start the whole page again (if you care enough to do so) if you’re to understand it by the time you reach the end. Hughes is obviously a very clever writer, and some of his passages must take a very clever reader to get to the end of them without feeling befuddled. Take, for instance, this passage on pages 55-6:

> I’m Australian, New World born, from the lands of Pharaonic cartography, born of Ptolemaic rapture, conjecture-rush at emptiness’s fear, like oceans rushing craters newly formed in some vacating mountains’ wake, that must be landed and peopled with all manner of freaks and chimeras of hybrid-graft, miscégenated queering and gargantuan mongoloid hobgoblin mutations befitting an antipode of such fantastic terror …

I’ll admit that I struggled with such overwritten passages. *The Remnants* demands a lot from its readers, but it is not without reward if you’re able to persevere. Perhaps the most thought-provoking theme revolves around Piero and his penchant for painting frescoes that were designed to only reveal their true meaning after a hundred years of deterioration. It makes one wonder how much of oneself is revealed over time by one’s own age and deterioration. As we are worn down by the effects of life, perhaps we begin to display aspects of our personalities that we thought were private and forever hidden.

However, despite being privy to their private journals and musings, it is difficult to understand and relate to Hughes’ characters, and therefore it is difficult to care about them. Some readers may find that the challenges of this text combined with the sometimes dull characters make reading this novel an exercise in futility. Robert, the only living narrator, is not a particularly likable character. He begins the novel by cheating on his girlfriend with Angel, who he routinely objectifies. There are also occasional bursts of misogyny and sexism that may put some readers on edge. Anna, while being the most interesting character, is hardly more engaging. She is defined by her sufferings and by the relationships she has had with the men in her life. We know her only as Kolya’s mother, Evgeny’s lover, Sura’s wife, M.’s nurse and Robert’s father’s curious companion. As she does not develop a strong identity and connect with the reader, her tragic ending fails to move.

None of the remaining characters are particularly memorable either, and if there is a long enough gap between their contributions it is possible to forget they are even a part of the story. While Hughes has obviously had success in the past, *The Remnants* is an ambitious novel and it is possible that Hughes bit off more than he could chew by beginning his career as a fiction writer with such a challenging concept.

**Lauren Dougherty**


*Life Goes On*, the literary debut of Hans Keilson first published in German when the author was in his early twenties, is an illuminating fictional autobiographical account of Keilson. The novel splatters a murky scene of political upheaval of the period right before the ascent of Hitler in the political arena of Europe and of the economically ruined Germany between the world wars. The tale ricochets around the hardships of the Jewish store owner Herr Seldersen – an almost bankrupt textile merchant and decorated World War I veteran – along with his wife and son, Albrecht. Herr Seldersen’s character is roughly modelled on Keilson’s father and Albrecht on the author himself.

Hans Alex Keilson was born on 12 December 1909, in Bad Freienwalde, a spa town near the Polish border. He trained as a doctor in Berlin, but because of Nazi racial laws which prohibited the Jews from practising medicine, he had to take to teaching swimming and gymnastics at Jewish private schools.

*Life Goes On* was banned by the Nazis in 1934. Kielson’s editor, Samuel Fisher advised him to leave Germany to avoid any further difficulties. Two years later Keilson emigrated to the Netherlands with his future wife, Gertrud Manz, a graphologist who could also anticipate the imminent danger in the form of Hitler. Keilson brought his parents to the Netherlands in 1938, but failed to convince his father, who ‘received the Iron Cross in recognition, but he never wore it’ (77), to spend life in hiding as he was doing. His parents were sent to Auschwitz where they died. In the Netherlands he established a pediatric practice but, out of caution, stayed in a separate accommodation from Manz, though on the same street. When their daughter was born in 1941, she said that the father was a German soldier to avoid any dangerous repercussions. Later on, he specialised as a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst. He produced a pioneering work, ‘Sequential Traumatization in Children,’ as a psychotherapist dealing with the treatment of trauma in Jewish children after the World War Two. Keilson would spend rest of his life in the Netherlands.

When *Life Goes On* was rereleased in Germany in 1984, Keilson summed-up the novel’s historical and autobiographical features for an afterword. He notes the book is

the story of myself and my parents in the small-town capital of the district of Mark Brandenburg, and later in Berlin – the story of an independent small businessman and his economic downfall, set in the political, social, and economic upheaval of the years after the First World War, the period of the Weimar Republic, the hyper-inflation, and the rise of National Socialism. (261)

*Life Goes On* illustrates the distress of failing economy of the period of the Great Depression. The turmoil is portrayed through a broke Seldersen and his hard up customers. From the opening pages, with Herr Seldersen sitting, without having much to do, in his shop reading the whole newspaper three times in a single day, the Zeitgeist is registered. Albrecht observes:

That winter was the first one when all the poverty and misery was out in the open. Unemployment was rampant, sometimes affecting both father and son in the same family, and people came by and told stories, complained about all sorts of things, and were all so discouraged. There were no signs of new hope anywhere. (13-14)
The pervasive joblessness has taken its toll on Seldersen’s customers. He gives credit to his customers, but very few of them pay back the debt. He strives hard to save his dying business, but ends in a failure. The stage is set for the sixteen-year-old Albrecht Seldersen to combat an unending series of troubles. He is an above average but unfocussed student who loves to read, and enjoys roaming with his best friend, Fritz, through their town and its surrounding countryside. Perhaps, this was his escape from realising his father’s worsening situation.

Albrecht goes to a medical school in Berlin to continue his studies and begins to play violin in a band to pay for his own expenses and then to support his parents. Berlin was at that time going through a pronounced social turmoil with violent protests and tumultuous politics. Albrecht notes:

It was as if everyone had gone crazy … they were standing on the corners, howling and screaming, and every time a police car drove by, with teams of policemen on the running boards, clinging like burrs to the car – holding on with one arm, ready to jump down at once when the order came – the screams only got louder, echoing from one side of the street to the other. (162)

It is in Berlin that he attains political consciousness, though in the novel he abstains from making explicit comments on politics of the time and he gives evasive hints on such matters. The end of the novel originally had a communist inclination, and was rewritten on the advice of the editor.

Fritz, the handsome youngster who ‘could make anyone in the world laugh’ (43), also tries to evade his plight in a period when ‘there were bad days, as there always are, but now there were too many of them, coming too often; you had to wait too long for a single good day’ (42), but all of his schemes – leaving school in between to get a job, planning to move to America for better prospects – fail, as the company in which he works goes bankrupt and he does not get a work visa in America and has to come back to Germany. The pressure on Fritz mounts, as he does not get a job even in Germany, and ultimately he puts an end to his miseries by ending his life.

As the novel ends, despair is rife among people. The tone of the novel helps recreate the temper of Germany of that time. Keilson has an unassuming style which helps delineate complex human interactions. That rancid era is relived and revisited in the morbid ambience of the novel.

Keilson confesses that he is not a professional story-teller: ‘I’m not even a proper writer’. He creates a world and he draws his characters from his own life. The characters of Life Goes On are finely hewn, carefully balanced and appear real. They sound reasonably convincing. As a true representative of that time, the characters in the novel are confused and anxious. Kielson exposes confusion of his characters when Albrecht’s asks himself ‘Why in the world was he here? How had he ended up here, where he wasn’t happy, and where life was starting to unfold in a powerful but at the same time almost indecent way?’ (141).

The artistry of the novelist lies in juxtaposing contrasting characters together. They have been delineated with precision. Fritz, who ‘had the strength of a grown man and the restlessness of a boy; he wanted to take serious action for once and make something happen’ (61), is prompt in converting his decisions into actions. Contrary to him is Albrecht who describes himself as: ‘No bomb-throwing, that kind of big brave action is not for me, I leave
it to people who are stronger than I am’ (239). Fritz’s comment on Albrecht confirms Albrecht’s assertion: ‘You haven’t seen nearly as much as I have, my boy, you don’t have the courage, not even the courage for the truth’ (186). Between Herr Seldersen and Frau Seldersen, Frau Seldersen ‘remained the stronger and firmer of the two; heaven knew what secret soil she drew her strength from’ (229).

*Life Goes On* is a socio-historical novel. It takes us to a time which is very different from what we experience today. The novel echoes a time ‘when no one knows where we’re heading’ (6), a time when a ‘depressed, defeated mood held sway everywhere’ (84), a time when people were committing suicide ‘out of poverty, shame, God knows what’ (89), a time when ‘darkness hangs down from the branches like deep sadness’ (45). It outlines a period when ‘each turn of events pulled the others along with it, in a long chain of misfortune following one upon the other’ (104) and people were insecure about their future: as Herr Seldersen says, ‘Who knows what’ll happen between now and spring?’ (13). The novel takes us to a time when ‘there was a new wind blowing – you could tell from many little things’ (34). Herr Seldersen’s statement, ‘It’s a hell of time we’re living in’ (89) describes much about the milieu. The overarching presence of misery in the novel stages a low-spirited, gloomy and full of melancholy atmosphere.

At the age of 100, with his one copy of the first edition of *Life Goes On* in hand, Keilson told the *New York Times* that he would love to see his first novel reissued, and translated as well. He said, ‘Then you would have my whole biography’. After *Life Goes On* Keilson published only two more novels; he did not involve himself in much literary labour because, he asserted, ‘he’d lost his audience’. Though his third novel, *The Death of the Adversary*, sold well in America and was one of *Time*’s top 10 books of 1962 along with fiction by Faulkner, Roth, Nabokov, Borges and Katherine Anne Porter – Keilson had receded to literary oblivion until Ivo Jarosy decided to resurrect him by translating *The Death of the Adversary* in English. The literary translator Damion Searls chanced upon another of his novels, *Comedy in a Minor Key*, in the bargain bin of an Austrian bookstore and translated into English. The novelist Francine Prose, in the *New York Times Book Review*, declared both works masterpieces and their author a genius. She notes: ‘Rarely have such harrowing narratives been related with such wry, off-kilter humor, and in so quiet a whisper’. She goes on to suggest: ‘Read these books and join me in adding him to the list, which each of us must compose on our own, of the world’s very greatest writers.’

As Keilson said, ‘It’s not unusual for works of literature to be rediscovered decades after they were written. But the odd thing with my situation is that I am still alive while that’s happening.’

The novelist delivers the story with authenticity. The novel by all means secures a place in the must read list.

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi
**Zanesh Catkin, Pangamonium (Midnight Sun Publishing, 2012)**

Pangamonium is Zanesh Catkin’s first novel and the second work by Midnight Sun Publishing, a newly minted Adelaide publishing house. The novel is brimming with ideas; there are car chases, fire fights, a conspiracy surrounding some not-safe-for-work unmentionables, and all of this within the vibrant and bustling world of an imaginary Asiatic nation, Panga. The characters are often quirky and endearing, and Catkin’s description of Panga is fully realised; he builds a weird world that seems almost tangible.

Catkin is not a bad writer: his problem is that he overwrites. Jokes get overplayed, wrung out for every last drop; the narrative breaks away and meanders on curious but unfulfilling tangents; sentences often give one extra puff too many. There is no doubting that Catkin has really enjoyed writing this novel. However, there is a distinct sense that what Pangamonium needed was a more ruthless editor, someone to cut the extraneous fluff without being overly precious. Much of what is here is good, some of it is great, but there are too many moments when Catkin’s relentless description simply does not quit.

Pangamonium is supposed to be a comedy; it says so on the cover. Roughly speaking, it is a satire on capitalism and globalisation, with elements of travel writing spoofed for good measure. And yes, there is a thread of critique of capitalism, the evils of money and the oppression and human sacrifice it engenders. Sometimes this works; sometimes, it feels clumsy:

> Daid’s fortune – Easter’s inheritance – my pension plan – it wasn’t fated to do ill, but ill had been done with it in the hands of less than scrupulous people. That did not make money evil; it made it a force that could be used either way. (262)

The tone of the piece, both bizarre and frantic, means that the impact of any such critique is largely lost. Whenever Catkin tries to get serious it jars and feels inconsistent with the rest of the novel.

And as a purely comic fiction, Pangamonium suffers this same inconsistency. The jokes often feel forced, and rather than chuckling as I read this, I groaned. Catkin uses parody, slapstick, puns (‘to be known as a shoe company would have horrified them – what if the bottom fell out on footwear’ [40]), and while they fit the overall tone of Pangamonium, they fall flat far too often. Successful comedy is usually built on timing; the punch line has to come at just the right moment, otherwise the audience won’t laugh. A good author can pace their prose, but with comic writing the timing needs to work just right, and Catkin doesn’t have the chops yet to pull that off. Add this to Catkin’s penchant for using big chunks of exposition to describe some of the more comical scenes, and it just ends up feeling laboured.

Which raises the question: why tell this story as a novel? I had the feeling that it would have worked better as something animated; think South Park, or The Simpsons. Catkin spends so much time setting up visual gags that would be seamless in the medium of television, but here they become clunky and overplayed. I wanted to find Pangamonium funny, if only because it tried so hard to be, but for me, it simply did not work in this written form.
Where Catkin best succeeds with his comedy is in his characterisations. Francis is a cynical and sarcastic freelance travel writer, looking to find some meaning to his life by way of losing himself in exotic Panga. He is paired up with larger than life Easter, a genial and comforting man, except when his blood sugar levels are low. Their odd coupling is fun and I got the most enjoyment out of their back and forth bickering. Daid in particular, an ex-military man who believes in honour above all else, is great. He is obsessed with Bollywood films, and we get these scenes that play out like a Bollywood actioner through Daid’s eyes. ‘Prince Rajid calculated the distance and angle required to shoot the driver, at the same time registering the presence of his companion, a shabby European’ (182). And it is here, where Catkin lets his quirky characters do the work, rather than trying to force a joke out of them, that Pangamonium is exciting and engaging.

Still, there are some nice passages of pure prose here. Catkin does prove himself to be a good writer, and there were one or two moments of inspired writing that I really wish could have featured more:

Even on a still day the maize tassels hung east, away from the prevailing westerly; jitterbug butterflies flew into the breeze, and so generally moved to the west; iron ants tasted of steel and built tall spires of mud that were oriented to the magnetic pole; and the village dogs within their home range were like sentries, keeping their backs to village. (178)

Passages like these really showcase Catkin’s skills; he is not forcing a joke, and he is not getting caught up in untangling and teasing out one of Francis’ digressions. Rather, moments like these feel relaxed and natural, and the narrative is better for it.

I think it is important to place Pangamonium within the context of a first time novelist’s career, and a young publishing house in its infancy. Catkin’s potential is evident, but I think he still needs to find his voice and discover his strengths. He has wild imagination, and he certainly enjoys writing, but Catkin needs to know when to reel back on his writing, to bring a level of nuance to his prose, and achieve subtlety. A larger, more experienced publishing house might have been more demanding with their editing, and turned Pangamonium into a tightly tuned and restrained novel. As it is, however, Pangamonium suffers from overwriting, and a glut of ideas which might not all work together as smoothly as one might hope. It is great that Midnight Sun Publishing has taken a chance with Catkin, and while I don’t think he has crafted a particularly inspired novel, he has been given room to experiment and play with his writing, an experience that will hopefully help Catkin grow and mature as a novelist.

Piri Eddy


Like a continuum of ever-widening circles *Black Mountain*, by award winning author Venero Armanno, is a story within a story. The underlying themes are the search for belonging and a sense of self that is basic to humanity.

It is primarily Cesare Montenero’s story, but it is also Mark Alter’s, even though his is a cameo appearance in the Prologue and Epilogue. Initially, I wondered whether the Prologue was even necessary, but both sections work to set up the initial situation that leads to Cesare’s revelations in the chapters between and to complete the circular style of the novel.

Mark Alter has a recurring dream and the creature of his dream haunts him as if etched into his psyche. In the prologue Mark is a dropout from university law, who at 22 years of age is bored with merely drifting through life and settles on a project he hopes will help him ‘find himself’ (12).

More than one-third of this novel is set in the sulphur mines of Sicily at the turn of the twentieth century when Sicily’s mining and export of sulphur (brimstone), an essential contribution to the munitions industry, was reaching its peak. It is a period when families of the large country estates are beginning to feel the pinch of increasing taxes imposed on their properties. These elite families are selling out and moving to the cities.

It is also the time when impoverished families with too many children sold sons into slavery in the sulphur mines. The writing in this section of the novel is very good, quite vibrant as it creates a sense of the isolated mining life and the suffering of the children. I could almost smell sulphur fumes and feel the skin-searing heat of the mines. It shows the unrelenting pace of the miner’s work to extract huge loads of crude brimstone that the child slaves are required to deliver to the surface. Miners, paid by weight of the load that the smelter’s cart collects, wanted to clean out the mine and go home to wife and family. I could hear the groaning and painful breathing of the puny boys as they tote load after load, as much as 40 pounds per load. I could see the trembling of their tired frail legs; feel their relief to heave a load into the waiting smelter’s cart; their pleasure breathing in the fresh air as they view the surrounding landscape. Although it is a bleak scarred one due to the mines, at least there is daylight and fresher air to be enjoyed on the surface. There’s also Luisa, the smelter’s tired overworked carthorse, always ready to nuzzle the boys’ gently as they pat her. Luisa brings warmth to their otherwise loveless existence.

On top of this misery, which was surely harsh enough for the boys to endure, the miners isolated from female companionship frequently consigned a *carusi* to provide them with sexual gratification.

This is the life of Sette, initially in service to Giozzi, a pottery, ceramics and tile-maker who sold him to Giovanni, who in turn sold him to Salvatore. Salvatore is the worst of all masters. He truly makes the life of his slave boys a living hell.

*Sette*, which means ‘Seven’. So at the start, there were at least six others like me. There must have been many more who came later, children nicely labelled Otto, Nove, Dieci. They got rid of me young, sold me, I believe, at maybe four or five years of age. There’s no town or village that I was born into, and I don’t remember the faces of any people who surrounded … me. (11)
Sette is aware he is not like the other boys. Not only does he have absolutely no memory of village or family life before the mines, but also his amazing recuperative powers, even after the toughest day, make him unusual. He’s no better fed, equally puny to look at, but somehow manages to keep going. Even injuries, from beatings or accidents in the mine, heal quickly. When he attempts escape from the mines and the brutal Salvatore, he is hunted and tracked down, and receives several bullet wounds, but remarkably he survives.

This is a turning point in Sette’s life due to the intervention by Don Domenico Amati. It is where Sette is recreated to become Cesare Montenero (140). There is a pulling back from the almost brutal energy of the writer’s style towards a gentler historical style in keeping with Sette/Cesare’s new life. Gone is the despair and cruelty of the mines and the more immediate threat of life and death that period of Sette’s story covers.

Don Domenico is an odd, remote character preferring to eschew society and from time to time beset by moments of mental instability. However, he is a kind mentor to Cesare, perhaps becoming close to a father figure for the youth, though emotionally distant. Domenico ensures Cesare learns manners, is educated and properly prepared for life as a young gentleman. He encourages Cesare to explore life and to ‘become who you are’ (138).

This is very much a story about men, although not gender specific in its writing. Because of the nature of the content there are few women. For Sette/Cesare the most important women are Rosa Bortolotti who becomes the mother he never knew, Veronica who aids him to explore life, and Celeste whom he loves.

Be who you are, or become who you are, is a phrase often used in this novel. In the Prologue, Mark Alter reflects that ‘One day I will find myself’ (12). The aging Cesare Montenero in a phone call with Mark tells him, ‘Once you’re here you’ll know where you are’ (25). Later, ‘So you’ve found me’ is the enigmatic note Mark finds, instead of the mysteriously absent Cesare, when he discovers hidden documents at old writer’s isolated property in the Australian countryside.

Genealogy is another important theme. Domenico tells the younger Cesare that ‘One hand passes on to the next … Isn’t that the way we renew ourselves?’ (184). That’s certainly a thriving interest today with the popularity of the television program Who Do You Think You Are? as well as the growing use of Ancestry.com for people undertaking family research. We all want to know our roots to make sense of ourselves.

So what does it mean to be human? Is it our ability to love, laugh, cry, and feel empathy? Is it to be found in science as it researches the means to remain youthful, stave off the afflictions of old age, and seek the possibility of escaping our mortality. This book will keep you thinking for quite a while after you’ve read it.

Kay Hart

Chandani Lokuge, *Softly As I Leave You* (Arcadia, 2011)

The long shadow of 9/11 and the xenophobic hysteria it provoked against ‘terrorists’ in the western world haunts Chandani Lokuge’s *Softly As I Leave You* even though it is located continents away in Melbourne, Australia; only here the context is Sri Lanka and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict.

Arjun, the beloved son of the irksomely discontented female protagonist of the novel, Uma, is killed by some thugs who, misinformed by the media, assume him to be a terrorist. This terrorist angle drives the plot of the novel even though its principal narrative thread revolves around the oft-rehearsed themes of diasporic fiction: the cost and benefits of exchanging one’s native culture for another, and the tangled loyalties and fraught nerves born of the in-between-worlds subjectivity of the immigrant. The angst of the unproductive, often self-destructive struggle to suture a life between ‘home’ and abroad is complicated in this novel by the minefields of an inter-racial marriage and an adulterous relationship.

The third of Lokuge’s novels after *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) and *Turtle Nest* (2003), not including a collection of short fiction, *Moth and Other Stories* (1992), *Softly as I Leave You* begins on a slow turgid note as it delineates an unlikable female protagonist, the remarkably self-absorbed Uma presented as a stereotypical exotic beauty with honey skin, lush raven hair and sparkling, come hither eyes that can go from being drenched in love, to being distant and disengaged. However, despite the clichéd character descriptions that threaten to asphyxiate the narrative at first, the novel gathers steam and tells a compelling story of love, betrayal, and loss as Uma and her devoted husband, Chris, himself a first generation Australian of Italian origins, are forced to confront the loss of their son, Arjun, and find a way to re-connect after long years of a slowly unraveling marriage.

In many ways Uma and Chris’s marriage embodies the failure of adult relationships burdened by the silences and misunderstandings resulting from diverse backgrounds and life histories. In framing these conflicts in terms of the wisdom of detachment taught by the *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred Hindu text which can be seen as a life manual about negotiating the ethical crises that confront one in daily life, *Softly As I Leave You* juxtaposes, contrarily, the cultural and psychological conflicts particular to Uma and Chris, against the universal and eternal lessons of the Gita. Uma’s self-obsessed quest to seek fulfillment as an individual threatens her family life and ultimately results in the death of her son as he reels from the accidental discovery of her adulterous relationship. The novel is an extended rumination on human desire and seeks to parse the various layers of Maya or self-delusion that cloud Uma’s consciousness in terms of the complicated skeins of her life over-determined by her race, gender, and immigrant status. Ultimately, these contribute to her being an unfulfilled wife, an obsessive mother, a guilty and resentful daughter, and a discontented professional woman whose ambitions are thwarted in a country that sees her as an outsider.

In truth, although *Softly As I Leave You* meanders around the subtleties of Uma and Chris’s relationship complicated by Uma’s deep umbilical ties to Sri-Lanka, her patrician family past and a possessive father who berates her for reneging on her duties in marrying a ‘foreigner,’ the most compelling and empathetically evoked parts of the novel are its representation of grief, specifically the grief of losing a child. The plot hurtles toward the killing of Arjun, a young man barely twenty years of age, who is mistakenly painted as a ‘terrorist’ because of his fund raising activities for a Sri-Lankan foundation for war orphans, and is brutally killed in a violent encounter with some hoodlums over the pretext of a girl.
The gut-wrenching loss of a child is imaginatively evoked and eventually functions to bring Uma and Chris together after a long painful period of separation as they come to terms with the many differences between them. Arjun’s death catalyses the end of Uma’s adulterous affair with Liam and forces her to reckon with the egocentricity that made Arjun the unwilling object of her nostalgia and guilt-borne desire to stay connected with Sri Lanka, its language, culture, and politics. In many ways Arjun becomes the unfortunate scapegoat whose death crystallises the overwhelming psychic toll paid by the families of those such as Uma who are living between worlds and who fail to transform the here and now into home. In that sense the full symbolic value of the house that Uma and Chris and have lived in only becomes clear at the end. Both Chris and Uma need to check out, to travel back to native homelands, Italy or Sri Lanka, to realise the significance of their Melbourne house as the home they have built together, as a refuge from the divisions and tensions outside.

Although the Sri Lankan Sinhala-Tamil conflict is explored with some complexity, it remains distant and serves as a literary device to resolve the trajectory of Arjun’s character in the novel. In the end, Uma’s adulterous affair with Liam and her extreme neediness becomes the altar at which the happiness of her family is sacrificed as Arjun, and then Chris, discover this illicit relationship and are shattered. The terrorism subplot, which could have become a more credible part of the narrative if it was situated more complexly in the current political and historical moment, loses urgency as the narrative tends to roll into one: the plight of the Australian aborigines, the violent histories wrought by British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, and in Sri Lanka in particular, the discrimination of race and gender experienced by Uma – all are mentioned in one continuum of a saga of injustice which are evoked without being particularised. The subplot of Chris’s visit to Venice and the introduction of new characters, his Aunt and Uncle, with their particular regrets and sorrow, seems extraneous to the plot. Similarly, the introduction of the young journalist at the end who provides a precious sense of closure and justice to Uma and Chris by presenting Arjun’s true story in the media, is problematically portrayed as yet another man who is erotically drawn to the exotic Uma. Although the pitfalls of cross cultural relationships are seen most disastrously in Uma, Chris’s immigrant heritage in Venice does not seem to be nearly as much as an obstacle. In contrasting these two figures, the novel seems to ask how much of Chris’s sense of being at ease with himself and his culture springs from his racial and gendered superiority as a white male?

The title, *Softly As I Leave You*, echoes the lead song of a Frank Sinatra album which met with only middling success, and in some ways this is true of this novel as well which is a mixed success.

**Rajender Kaur**
John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (Canongate Books, 2012)

I assume that my reason for choosing to read *Ask the Dust*, the third novel John Fante wrote (though the second to be published), is similar to many people’s: it has earned the praise of Charles Bukowski. As Bukowski is not especially renowned for undeserved or indiscriminate admiration, the 2012 Canongate edition featuring an introduction by the late author will likely attract many new readers to Bukowski’s little known hero. *Ask the Dust* is one of four books featuring Arturo Bandini, Fante’s alter ego, in what has been termed ‘The Bandini Quartet’. It’s the most popular novel of the saga and has seen something of a renaissance over the past decade, likely in part due to Robert Towne’s 2006 film adaptation of the book.

The problem is that if you are familiar with Bukowski’s writing, *Ask the Dust*, despite being published more than three decades before Bukowski’s debut novel, will feel a little too familiar. If the quote ‘good artists copy, great artists steal’ is to be taken as gospel, then Bukowski can certainly be deemed a great artist. But whether it’s because Bukowski has become notorious enough to make his alter ego worth caring about, or because he simply is a writer who provokes more investment in his characters, it is this lack of investment in Fante’s protagonist that is fundamentally missing from his writing.

There are moments of very basic yet astonishing beauty in *Ask the Dust*, like Fante’s description of the sun as simply ‘a defiant red ball as it sank beyond the sea’ (112) and his assertion to his love’s lover that ‘the ink spot you have splattered will never be examined from a longer view’ (138). But they overwhelmingly do not make up for the, at best, faceless (at worst, loathsome) characters.

Where a passionate but damaging relationship is promised in the blurb, the liaison between Bandini and Camilla Lopez, a waitress whom he almost arbitrarily becomes enamoured with, oscillates between revering and humiliating. Camilla is initially depicted as sympathetic, but her pandering to Bandini even as he readily insults and attempts to destroy her ultimately renders her weak and unlikeable. Though fragility and flaw will often add depth to a character, Camilla is only ever shown through Bandini’s perception, and while the inability to see her as a whole person is a shortcoming on the part of the protagonist (presumably a deliberate construction by Fante), it also makes it difficult to extrapolate much about her beyond the very simple slice we are shown.

Bandini is similarly exasperating, inciting the same kind of frustration as Knut Hamsun’s unnamed protagonist in *Hunger*. Bandini likewise perpetuates the self-destructive and desolate characterisation of writers so common to Fante and his contemporaries, but at only 23 years of age, Bandini’s vulgarity and bitterness often come across as simply unnecessary. He is reckless with other people and with money, and lacks perspective on his own success, preferring to flaunt the little he has achieved rather than feeling encouraged to further his accomplishments.

Though Arturo Bandini the writer is certainly self-indulgent, he does thankfully spend enough time writing to indeed be considered a writer, and Fante’s descriptions of his protagonist’s creative process are worthy of admiration:

> My plight drove me to the typewriter. I sat before it, overwhelmed with grief for Arturo Bandini. Sometimes an idea floated harmlessly through the room. It was like a...
small white bird. It meant no ill-will. It only wanted to help me, dear little bird. But I would strike at it, hammer it out across the keyboard, and it would die in my hands. (22-3)

The depiction of Depression-era Los Angeles is another accomplishment of the novel, painting the city virtually as a character unto itself rather than a mere backdrop. But these fluid and undemanding descriptions don’t compensate for Bandini’s aimless roaming, as he searches for something, perhaps distinction or love, that is never really altogether clear.

As much as we all want to believe that we live in a meritocratic society, the truth is that many people deserving of accolade and praise never receive it. This is how we might justify the recognition that E.L. James and Stephanie Meyer have been awarded, whilst far more deserving writers have been overlooked. The same has happened in virtually every other sphere of the arts. But for all the praise John Fante has received from many, including Bukowski, who tout Ask the Dust as one of the great American novels of the twentieth century, this hero worship could be considered parallel to the kind of obsession with various women that both Bukowski and Fante have depicted in their writing: once their alter egos have become fixated on a given woman in a narrative, often with very little prompt or reason, their attention is unswerving.

Ultimately, John Fante is indeed a brilliant writer. There are many passages that can be appreciated for their rhythm and splendour without necessarily having to consider what is actually being communicated. However, my lack of investment in Arturo Bandini, as well as the repulsion and frustration I often felt towards him, are reason enough to not pursue reading the remaining books of The Bandini Quartet.

Dunja Nedic
Chi Vu, *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (Giramondo, 2012)

Chi Vu’s artistic work has, perhaps, made its most significant impact in the Australian artistic universe with the bilingual performance *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide* (2009). The work was adapted from her text which, along with other instances, has been published in various reputable national journals and anthologies. *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (2012) gives continuity to Vu’s preoccupations with the Vietnamese/Australian dynamics, in the process confirming her to be a truly inspired and talented writer.

‘Storytelling is a way of creating a sense of belonging and reaffirming your identity’, Vu has told Phil Kafcaloudes apropos of her recent contribution to the collection *Joyful Strains: Making Australia Home* (ABC Radio Australia, 28 January 2013). It then might strike the reader as odd that *Anguli Ma* is a gory murder story. Vu is, in fact, a part of the generation of Vietnamese refugees who in the 1980s flowed towards the Australian shore. Though the journey was admittedly long and arduous, it is the emotional and psychological violence of the (cultural) crossing which comes to the surface in the novella, suggesting Vu is speaking about more than her own experience. Her book drew inspiration from a traditional Buddhist folktale about a serial killer instructed by his teacher to kill a thousand people and arrange their severed fingers as a garland so as to reach enlightenment (Angulimala, as he is later known, means a ‘garland of fingers’). The traditional tale links up with the modern tale set in Melbourne’s Western suburbs in the 1980s where a Vietnamese abattoir worker becomes a murderer.

*Anguli Ma* puts forward a convoluted network of cultural explorations which, like the author’s previous works, point to the migration not only of people but also of violence, trauma and loss. Vu subverts the argument often used by anti-migration supporters when she gives her immigrants names, aspirations and, perhaps most of all, implicitly contrasts the formers’ fears with the terror of the Vietnamese of being deported if any of them does something non-Australian. The immediate reasoning is the correlation of non-Australian with un-Australian which is presented very provocatively through the intended killing of a dog. Having violence and fear as the intertwined and grotesque backbone of the novella, it is perhaps no surprise that, with the exception of Anguli Ma himself, the work is pervaded by women. Though they might dominate the text and appear to have achieved various levels of autonomy, such is questioned by their being both immigrants and human beings traditionally subjugated by men; take Dao, for example, who is trapped in her paradoxical universe: fear of Anguli Ma – who reminds her of Vietnamese women’s role – and her disdain for her Australianised son. He shows no aggression which she comes to equate with laziness, lack of ambition and unmanliness.

*Anguli Ma* is most notably a piece of writing which stays true to its dual and explicit influences without trampling on its differences: it is based on a Buddhist tale but it has assumedly both Asian and Western gothic flavours. It is, in reality, a remarkable exercise on the postcolonial gothic in its gore, horror and the representation of helpless female victims whose vulnerability is reread in the light of their migrant condition; the reclaiming of the monk figure is particularly delightful in its ambiguity: the teacher who led Anguli Ma to murder blends with the Buddha who saves him. There is, however, no sense of cultural translation from the book’s language (the text is sprinkled with Vietnamese expressions) to the bogeyman monk/serial killer dragging his meat sack through the streets of Melbourne. This Vietnamese bogeyman gives body to the fear of the monster following the white woman.
(and man) home, an additional feature of the related type of fiction, the imperial gothic. In Vietnam he is known as ông ba bí or ông ke and though he has not made it into Marina Warner’s pivotal study *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (1998) there is no doubt that the menacing creature shares prime characteristics with the mostly Western bogeymen Warner focuses on. These, however, are by no means strangers to the folklore of many Asian countries, including Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore. In this gothic element Vu also succeeds in avoiding a postcolonial swindle: the bogeyman who flung children into his sack and then ate them is now made to represent one of the most dreaded criminals of our times – the child abuser. In the end, however, the child is saved, so to say, by the skin of her teeth.

The imagery and metaphors in *Anguli Ma* are proportionately violent in their representation of diverse but convulsive migrant selves. Furthermore, elements of the folktales are deftly reused in the light of the migrant condition at the heart of the novella: the highway murderer is envisioned as the wandering Vietnamese, misguided and lost, desperately trying to retrieve a sense of integrated identity through the exertion of violence (the wandering element is a traditionally gothic one too); Angulimala’s inborn disposition to violence is reinterpreted as the migrant’s own disposition which is socially ingrained in the collective white mind; contrastively though, *Anguli Ma* also reappropriates the idea of reformation. Regardless of one’s past, of the immigrant’s past, possibly of aggressive acts committed in order to survive, emotional and physically, the war left behind and an alien society, redemption can be achieved. Vu discloses how such acts are complex and also self-inflicted as she constructs the serial killer’s internal struggle towards salvation. The reader is thrust inside the killer’s mind and made to feel his disorientation and sense of homelessness: ‘Alone in the kitchen … his sneer collapsed and was replaced by the dead countenance of a man severed from history. It is a form of liberation, he thought, from your own conscience, from all expectations of life’ (36-37). Nonetheless, one is subtly made to feel that, in the process, Australia can be redeemed itself as the emotional place where salvation occurs. The several voices the killer has simultaneously reveal his self-fragmentation but also the feat of his enlightenment: alternately Anguli Ma and the Brown Man (notice the racist overtones) and finally the Monk (replacing other monk identities). Besides mirroring the name changing of the folktales, through this technique the author is faithful to the original concept of psychological evolution as she has the reader accompany the character’s internal journey ultimately to the moment of his complete redemption: ‘Everything is inside everything else. … Within each thing is the other. That is the nature of Emptiness. … He observes the dying down of his anger, and the diminishing of its light in his mental landscape’ (105).

This is an impressive little book which will please the readers at large and, hopefully, also draw the attention of the attentive critic who will relish the carefully orchestrated thematic and structural features it has to offer.

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia

For lovers of historical fiction, the third novel from The Australian/Vogel’s Literary Award winning author Belinda Castles, *Hannah & Emil*, seems like the perfect reading choice for an afternoon in the sun, or an evening by the fire. Woven through with dreamy prose and poignant anecdotes, the story follows the fictionalised lives of the author’s grandparents – a fact revealed by the author in a note at the beginning of the book. Hannah, a Russian Jew, leaves London and works as a translator in Brussels, where she meets Emil, a veteran of World War One, who has had to flee his hometown and leave his family. The two fall in love, and settle briefly in England before Emil is shipped to the harsh, wartime climate of Australia for being an enemy of war. Castles’ narrative is elegant, and provides an interesting perspective on persecution, loneliness, endurance and determination born of love. It has all the makings for a timeless romance, denoted by the cover of the book which depicts a laughing, embracing couple. I wondered momentarily if they were the author’s grandparents.

Ultimately, this epic tale of hardship and cross-contintental love failed to engage me. I began *Hannah & Emil* with a clean slate, because historical fiction is not a genre which I have much familiarity with, or enthusiasm for. Yet there were other reasons why the text didn’t engage me. Castles was trying to do too much: her primary incentive for writing *Hannah & Emil* wasn’t clear. Was the author’s desire a personal one to pay homage to her grandparents? Or did the consideration of their personalities simply serve to flesh out characters who occupied roles in the greater picture of World War Two? I couldn’t help but wonder if Castles was too close to her subject material. In an interview with Angela Meyer, Castles commented on the fact that she had some memory of her grandmother to work with, but only had impressions of her grandfather. One of *Hannah & Emil*’s greatest strengths is Castles’ grasp of humanity. Her characters are flawed, vulnerable, and courageous, displaying great endurance and possessing an astonishing capacity for love and loyalty. Hannah voices a secret hope that ‘the nib of my pen would break open the skin of the world’ (165). This quote, while referring to Hannah’s desire to venture out from the secluded family life she has experienced so far, is an apt indicator of her fearless attitude to life. When she meets Emil, wandering in a traumatised state after leaving Germany, a great tenderness develops between them that is particularly striking given that both Hannah and Emil are very independent, uncompromising characters. It is Hannah’s first experience with a man:

And then I must have slept again, because I woke briefly to a thing entirely new to me: I was lying on my side, with a man’s knees tucked up behind mine, his body repeating the shape of my own, the weight of his hand resting on my waist, the light breath of his sleep rushing softly past my ear. (221)

At this point in the text, the slow-moving plot begins to come to life. The narrative until now has followed the protagonists’ lives separately: this provides context for their different backgrounds, but the plot felt disconnected and drifting. Emil’s character is less defined than

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Hannah’s; his nature is somewhat reserved, hinting at the trauma he has undergone, and the fact that the reader meets him as he is being forced to leave his home seems to set the tone for the unfolding of his narrative, wherein he is mostly a solitary figure, alienated largely due to his anti-Nazi beliefs when in Germany then his German heritage when in England. He is a solitary figure, a fact that contributes to the loveliness of the humanity in the relationship that develops between him and Hannah, who is forthright and fiercely loving.

Once Hannah and Emil meet, I found myself drawn into the dynamics of their relationship, reading on in order to discover if the protagonists prevail against extraordinarily bleak odds and end up together; ultimately, this is the factor that lends the most strength to an otherwise unremarkable text. While Castles loosely bases Hannah and Emil’s story on that of her grandparents, most of the plot is fictionalised. The knowledge of this fact lent a strange double-awareness to the narrative as I read what it related, and simultaneously wondered exactly what Castles had researched and at what point she crossed over into fiction. In the prologue – set in Sydney, 2005 – Flora remembers her grandmother Hannah, and the suitcase of memorabilia that she left her. This introduction doesn’t seem to serve a purpose other than to contextualise the last section of the book where a middle-aged Hannah wishes to gift the baby Flora with a story: to be precise, the half of the story that is hers to give. This element of what the reader might assume to be thinly disguised autobiographical fiction does little to enhance the integrity of the text, and once again recalls the sticking point that I couldn’t move past: Castles’ familial investment in the story she tells is very apparent, and inevitably hinders the narrative by undermining the strength of and objectivity toward Hannah and Emil.

Melanie Pryor

Nightfall starts with the death of the main character. Or rather, the reawakening of Aden in a picture frame, in a bathtub, in a world that existed in his grandfather’s imagination. His arrival heralds the fulfilment of a prophecy for the inhabitants of this strange land, none too soon, as the obliterating Forgetting threatens to engulf the entirety of Nightfall. Elliott’s in familiar territory with this story of fantastical horror, grotesque characters and other worlds. His debut novel *The Pilo Family Circus* was short-listed for the International Horror Guild award for best novel, and, irrespective of genre, won the ABC Fiction Award. The Stephen King-like subject matter allows his work to be comfortably classified as horror, but unlike King there is a constant comic thread that runs through *Nightfall*. The distinctive Australian voice of Aden clashes with the cockney/soldierly/Middle-English dialogue of the characters he encounters, forcing the reader to visualise the action through Aden, laughing when he does and being repulsed when he is. Considering his post-life existence his only-mild curiosity is understandable, so the characters he encounters are the ones who are amazed and fearful of his appearance. The unfortunate owners of the bathtub, the hideous Gorr family are stunned as he strolls into the kitchen, sets the scene and says ‘Yo’:

The young Gorr stared at him, half-chewed meat lumps slopping from his gaping mouth to his head in a stream very slow to end. Aden cleared his throat again and said, louder, ‘Yo. Hi. Um, greetings from Earth. Hi. (18)

The balancing between the wacky and the macabre is handled deftly, best typified by a chapter seven titled ‘Corbert and Mr Gorr’. The patriarch of this family eats his breakfast with the stiff and proper Corbert, before they both proceed to the shed where Corbert willingly restrains himself and Gorr goes to work torturing him with all manner of instruments. They both play their roles efficiently, extracting blood for the victim’s employer, and the cheeriness they exhibit as they go about this happy little task is enjoyably quirky. During their ‘morning tea break’ they discuss the recent events of their village, Days Past, the implications of the appearance of the boy in the bath and, gossip and torture over, Colbert leaves, brushing away the shortbread crumbs. (Then he thanks his tormenter and announces to the reader his first name: Alfred. The sincere gratitude and then the ridiculous ordinariness of that name, after knowing only the very fitting Gorr, made me burst into giggles. That, and the fact that that means his name is Al Gorr, although definitely not the environmentalist/politician type.)

Elliott’s diagnosis with schizophrenia at nineteen potentially provides some interesting insight with which to view *Nightfall*. The construction of a mythical shadowy world places Aden as the only relatable character, one that we can make sense of and who (it is hoped) will make sense of this world for us. In a way, those afflicted with mental disease embody this viewpoint, of the whole world and its people not making sense, and being completely alien in society. That is a scary notion, and perhaps is the idea the Elliott tries to convey. Aden is not without humour or sympathies or reason, but his memory and concept of his former life is (almost) lost.

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I am a fan of the genre in general … but I couldn’t say I was a fan eagerly awaiting Elliott’s next publication (as I might for Stephen King). Having work compared to King is a double-edged sword for the successful horror writer. On one hand, it indicates potential for a wide readership, but it is also reductive, and creates an expectation of the reader for a certain type of novel. It is perhaps unfair in Elliott’s case, as his aesthetic is less towards the descriptive, and the tone is much lighter – there’s a lot of laughter in this book, from the moment we meet the grotesque Gorrs. Inevitable comparisons will be made when trying to forge one’s own identity in genre fiction, whether apt or not. For me, this book is more reminiscent of *Shadowlands* by Peter Straub; dark humour resides in the nihilistic protagonist finding his way in a strange, neo-Gothic landscape. That was also a book I struggled to get through. When the omniscient narrator moves to focus on secondary characters, the effect is jarring and not altogether necessary. This is where the novel falls down; having closely aligned the reader with Aden, Elliott’s attempt at providing a context for his adventure is not always successful and, rather than being explanatory, the motivations of other characters are somewhat muddled. The problem lies in the creation of a fantastical new world, where cause and effect have a tenuous relationship at best and the main character lurches from scene to scene with no apparent direction. To hold the interest of a reader who may not be interested in the genre and when there is precious little to hold on to is hard work indeed, and it is questionable if Elliott achieves that. Although the clichés of the genre are admirably avoided here, perhaps it would have benefitted from some cliff-hanger chapter endings, some supernatural thread that could narrow the reader’s focus and maintain suspense.

Adam Quinlivan

The chief character, Changez, begins precisely as the author began, as an Ivy League New York city suit, of Pakistani extraction. The ‘fundamentalism’ about which he begins to be reluctant is revealed to be his lucratively rewarded recording of a company’s ‘fundamentals’ in his valuation report. Indeed the Chicago school of economics is a religion – one both utterly mad and extraordinarily dangerous. But having shaped the theme and title, Hamid’s love of puns comes on so fast you wonder whether the ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’ identified by the *London Review of Books* can permit the intrusion of any believable human being.1 Enter Erica, American love interest. ‘I am Erica’ – Doh! If this is too cryptic, Hamid spells it out for you. Changez loves both Erica and America, but Changez despairs of both Erica and America. This transpires because Erica is seriously Hot, but goes nuts slowly due to being in love with a dead boyfriend – so that ‘I am Erica’ is stuck in the past, just like America. At this point there might be some cog missing in the delightful allegorical symmetry, given that ‘I am Erica’ is supposed to be in love with the past, rather than with somewhat freshly minted economic theory. Anyway, unable to deal with either Changez or changes, ‘I am Erica’ commits suicide, just like America …

Beyond this ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’, the encounter with ‘I am Erica’ gives Hamid a chance to suggest how an Ivy League accountant on $80,000 a year might fall out of love with the American dream. The process is only slightly foreshadowed by not wanting to look full in the face the suffering involved in asset-stripping, and only really begins when ‘I am Erica’ goes nuts and won’t see Changez no more. Changez is upset by this development. In fact, America itself is revealed to him as a mad empire. Changez still has an $80,000-a-year job in that empire, but Erica’s insanity is somehow the madness inherent in the system – and one which severely curtails his access to sex. These are mere fore-shocks. The earthquake comes when Changez goes to value a publishing firm in Chile, and the publisher, not wanting to be downsized, puts it to Mr hot-shot American that accountancy is from the Devil, and that he would do better to be with the Islamists. Changez, already all aflutter about ‘I am Erica’ then chucks the job and the empire, but instead of writing novels of undeserved critical success, he ducks out to lecture on the evils of America at a University in Lahore. That choice eventually attracts the interest of the CIA, and around this point I suspect Hamid is no longer writing what he knows. The story is told entirely in the first person by Changez, in extended address to a mysterious silent American sent to kill, arrest or watch him (we do not discover which). But this lone American is on Changez’s (re)adopted territory now – every street menaces, and in suggestion of the Arabian nights, it is not knowing who might be about to be shot or beheaded at the next interruption in the narrative which grips the reader to the next page – it is a gripping tale. I kept murmuring involuntarily ‘run soldier, run!’ This was as much to save the fellow and myself from Changez’s mauling self-justifications as from his knife.

That the pivotal character of Erica is a soggy sheet of cardboard need not trouble Hamid, since on the offered analysis the habits of America in economics and the Middle East

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1 Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Not Entirely Like Me’, *The London Review of Books* (29.19 4 October 2007). ‘There’s an almost delightful allegorical symmetry to the flow of events, as well as a sensuousness and finish that might belong to some other form of art: music, perhaps.’ For musical reasons, ‘almost delightful allegorical symmetry’ is edited on the cover blurb to read ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’.

are similarly inexplicable. It’s a nice point. But it’s hard to regard this equality of incomprehension as insight. We see only into the singular figure of Changez, and there at his own estimation of himself, which reinforces an impression of the novel as a fantastically elaborated autobiography, and not a particularly insightful one at that. What minimally opens the book to the world is the suggestion, possibly inadvertent, of a hurt and possessive love for America at the core of Changez’s anti-Americanism – which suggestion somewhat undermines the earnest ‘political message’ of the book. For it is fitting that Changez should regard his agitation against the great Satan as a way to re-establish contact with ‘I am Erica’, who he imagines watching him on CNN as he strikes some blow against Empire. The hotel rooms in I-am-Erica’s heaven no doubt have satellite TV for exactly this sort of séance, and Hamid himself hopes, at the core of his polemic, that his mad beloved liveth forvermore – and will return from the dead to rescind her rejection of him, perhaps in the pages of The New York Review of Books.

David Robjant

In his 1956 poem titled ‘New Guinea’, James McCauley wrote about a

Bird-shaped island, with secretive bird voices,
Land of apocalypse where the earth descends,
The mountains speak, the doors of the spirit open,
And men are shaken by obscure trances.

Drusilla Modjeska’s first work of fiction has a New Guinean mountain speaking to its characters, both the indigenous peoples, who live under its majestic shape, and the Western characters, who are enchanted by its beauty and the mystique of the rich culture of those indigenous peoples whose lands they visit.

Papua-New Guinea is our closest neighbour to the north, yet for most Australians (yours truly included) it remains a mystery, a mostly unknown land that was a colonial dominion until its independence in 1975. While the Kokoda trail keeps drawing thousands of Australian trekkers every year, mainstream Australia is largely uninformed about the rest of the country and its peoples.

*The Mountain* begins with a brief prologue that brings the reader to a restaurant opposite the Sydney Opera House in the year 2005. Jericho, who ‘first came down from the mountain to Rika, barely five years old’, is meeting Martha, his ‘other mother’, for lunch. We are told that Rika and Martha, who used to be best friends, ‘like sisters’, haven’t spoken to each other for thirty years (2). Thus, the omniscient narrator introduces the history of the conflict between the two women. This is one of the subplots of the novel, and it is certainly a gripping one.

Jericho wants to know what happened thirty years before, but Martha appears to be evasive: ‘Her heart feels tight. There’s a part of her that wants to say to Jericho, *Let us bear the burden of the past, it should not be yours*’ (4). Thus, the mystery of what caused the conflict between the two Western women is from the beginning interspersed with another (unavoidable?) conflict, that between the Western view of the world and the indigenous view embodied by the Mountain people.

Photographer Rika arrives in Port Moresby, the young wife of British anthropologist Leonard, somewhat older than her. Something she may not have been aware she had is almost immediately awoken by the place and its peoples, and that something is further stirred after she meets Aaron, a brilliant local academic recently returned from Australia. When Leonard goes to the highlands to film the tribes, Rika stays in Port Moresby, where she befriends Aaron and his ‘clan-brother’, Jacob (22). As Leonard remains in the highlands, a powerful and meaningful relationship develops between Aaron and her, which is tested when Aaron is bashed by racist bigots.

Modjeska’s novel connects many complex issues in a free-flowing narrative around the lives of a group of people who witnessed the end of colonial rule and the beginning of a country’s struggles to become truly independent. The background is solidly portrayed: the reader can feel the many tensions that characterise postcolonial societies, like the friction between the resistance (and the reluctance) of the traditional to give up its preponderance on the one hand, and the observable need for modernisation demanded by the younger generations on the other.

This tug-of-war between the needs of the collective and the individual aspirations becomes a major focus in Modjeska’s narrative in the central part of the novel. These
tensions, the ebbing and flowing of Rika’s personal expectations against the exigencies that the birth of the young nation will demand from Aaron are successfully reflected not only in the two central characters, Aaron and Rika, but also in their interactions with the numerous secondary ones.

Structurally speaking, *The Mountain* is broadly divided into two main parts. The first comprises the years before independence, and takes us to the moment that Rika is gifted a young boy, a *hapkas*, the child of a white man and a black woman. The child’s name is Jericho: he is the son of Rika’s estranged husband, Leonard, and a Mountain woman. The second part takes us to more recent times, 2005, when Jericho, by now a successful art historian based in a London gallery, returns to Papua New Guinea. Jericho is once again united with his childhood friend and sweetheart, Bili, a passionate lawyer defending the tribal people against the economic interests of powerful companies. Romance blossoms: ‘Before they fall asleep, still face to face, Bili rests her hand over his eyes. ‘You’re in Papua now, remember,’ she says, ‘If you look too long into a woman’s eyes, she’ll take your soul’ (262).

When Jericho returns to Papua New Guinea, his place of birth, we read how he will slowly undergo a very profound transformation. After a few days in Port Moresby, he goes to visit the teacher and author Milton, a former friend of Aaron’s circle. From his house, ‘the mountain will be in the line of his sight with nothing to obscure his view’ (302). He feels the call of the Mountain, but is it because he has never really left it? Does he carry within himself the ancestral spirit? Thus, the Mountain is constructed as more than a powerful symbol of New Guinea. It is felt as a force that draws Jericho’s spirit, and when he finally joins the clansmen in the tribal dance he becomes ‘pure rhythm’, he can feel ‘the pulse … that continues in another sphere of existence’ (365).

The novel closes with another lunch, this time in Port Moresby, in 2006. Martha meets Jacob, now a government minister and a very rich man, and whose secret relationship with Rika Martha has kept silent about for more than 30 years.

Intensely and richly written, in *The Mountain* the reader can hear many voices. Some come from the past and are far removed from our daily urban routines; they are the voices of the clans, the sounds of their ancient rituals of dance and hunting. Others are closer to our time and to our mindsets: the voices of the struggle against the abusive and recklessly destructive exploitation of natural resources. Modjeska carefully balances the narrator’s point of view so that the reader can remove the colonial tinge that otherwise might be unavoidable. Particularly at the beginning of the *The Mountain*, I often found myself re-reading passages in order to ascertain whether a certain character was white or black. The fact that the characters come across so utterly convincing simply adds to the value of this literary work.

Modjeska has authored a tasteful novel about a place in the world she obviously loves and feels part of, and the reader will be the more grateful for it. Even though the reason why the two friends fell apart after the sorrowful day of Aaron’s accident is not ultimately revealed, it matters not. The novel is a delicately if heavily layered literary construct that bridges us to a mostly unknown island. Despite the evident background of Modjeska’s own experience of living and working in Papua New Guinea for a few years and frequent subsequent visits, *The Mountain* bears all the marks of a work of well-wrought fiction. It is, as the author has explained herself, a radiant example of ‘informed imagination’. After this belated but terrific debut, readers of Australian fiction can look forward to more novels from Modjeska.

**Jorge Salavert**

*Blood*, the debut novel of accomplished short story writer Tony Birch, is a story told from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old boy, Jesse, who sets out on a journey to protect his half-sister Rachel from the atrocities of one of her mother’s many boyfriends, Ray Crow, who has a perverted interest in Rachel. The book is set on the back roads of Victoria and Melbourne. The despairing predicament makes the protagonist, Jesse and his sister, Rachel move through caravan parks, shabby cigarette-choked motel rooms, bouncing between country towns, cities and states. There is no one to look after Rachel except Jesse, as their mother, Gwen, an immoral, drunken, unstable and self-indulgent woman, is always busy hopping from one failed relationship to another. The men brought home by their dissolute mother are real troubles for both Jesse and Rachel.

The novel is deeply immersed in the fundamental bonds of family. There is the theme of blood, too, from which the book takes its title: the shared blood of promise, the blood of family ties, and the blood of violence. In its first appearance, the blood oozes from the fingertips of the teenage narrator, Jesse, and his younger sister, Rachel. Jesse slices their thumbs and holds them together to fasten their lives and make them ‘whole’ after their mother – full of malice over breaking up with her latest boyfriend – tells an agitated Rachel that she and Jesse were conceived by different fathers. There is a great loss of trust between Jesse and Gwen, as he tells it:

> I didn’t trust anything Gwen said. Once, when she was having an argument with my pop he’d called her a ‘born liar’. It sounded strange because I didn’t see how a person could be born a liar. But as I got older I thought that if anyone could have, it would be Gwen. (11)

From the moment Jesse saw Rachel wrapped in a blanket at the hospital, he was certain that he would be the one to look after his little sister. Jesse has assumed most of the parental responsibility for his eight year old sister Rachel ever since she was born. Their careless mother Gwen, who does not like to be addressed as ‘mum’ as it makes her feel old and who has a ‘habit for latching onto men who were good with their fists’ (19) is apparently too indifferent to provide a stable childhood and the sort of care they need. Jesse, fatigued by Gwen’s false promises, is aggressively protective of his little sister, and with the ritualised mixing of blood from their fingertips, he vows to always safeguard her from harm. Though Jesse sometimes entertains the idea of running away from his unbearable circumstances, he soon realises his commitment to protect his sister from any harm and drops the idea.

These siblings have a troubled childhood. They lived hand to mouth, as their mother would get casual petty jobs in bars. They had a very unstable life. The siblings’ longest stretch in a stable home is their time living in a dilapidated farmhouse near Melbourne airport with tattooed ex-con Jon. At first they fear he will be ‘good with his fists’, like other boyfriends of Gwen, but instead he turns out to be a rare stabilising influence and the only father figure in their lives, baking cakes and sharing life-advice such as: ‘Any fella inside for the time I did, they carry their history with them. Your body is a map. Or a book’ (34).Their stay with Jon does not last long, as Gwen finds his domestic ways unexciting and kicks him out. The only other pause from their continuous ordeal comes when they stay with Gwen’s father, a reformed alcoholic, who comes as a spark of hope and stability in their life. They get
to see a glimpse of a different way of living, though ultimately it turned out be just an ephemeral interlude.

Jesse’s circumstances made him generally behave like someone older. His insight is learnt from the inescapable struggles for survival from the awfully violent and traumatic incidents in his life. Birch echoes Jesse’s voice with substantial genuineness, coupling the naiveté of youth with a peculiar kind of maturity born of a tough upbringing and the responsibility of looking after his younger sister since he was five. He has intelligence beyond his years, but he is still very much a kid. The bond between Jesse and Rachel offers the narrative a compelling emotional centre, and some scenes – like the Christmas spent with Pop, when the children receive their first real Christmas presents – are almost heartbreaking.

Birch uses the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a motif. Jesse and Rachel see this movie at an outmoded theatre one afternoon. There is an obvious indication that the two children identify themselves with Jem and Scout and draw comfort from their characters.

The tale is straightforward and simple, with few flashbacks and a single narrative voice. I found myself wanting to know what happens to the siblings next, but this was thwarted by the abrupt end of the story. Otherwise, it is an engrossing and heartrending story about the bond between siblings and the strength of children. The book carries the complexity necessary for making it a compelling read. The unpretentious language and simple structure of the novel are enriched by Birch’s vivid and complex characters.

Mohammad Saleem

Subhash Jaireth’s *To Silence* is a rare specimen of fiction. It consists of the fictional autobiographies of three real historical figures: Kabir, the fifteenth century Indian poet; Maria Chekhova, the famous Russian writer Anton Chekhov’s younger sister, and Tommaso Campanella, a Calabrian philosopher, astrologer, theologian and poet. Here Subhash Jaireth fuses historical truth and imaginative elements in such a riveting manner that the reader will swing between a feeling of truth and a sense of fictionality during reading and have a pathetic provocation to believe that the events of the lives of these three are true, not imaginative creation using information from history. And this play of fictionality and non-fictionality has made the text more charming.

Kabir, Maria Chekhova and Tommaso Campanella, the three historical personalities from three continents and of three different periods, are the speakers here. They, with a deeper understanding about life and living, narrate the events of their lives when death is at their door. The first one as a Sufi presents his struggle in his mystic life against religious orthodoxies and materialism of the society; the second one as a woman with a creative faculty talks about her sorrow in a torturous time during World War Two and the third one as a priest tells about his perilous nonconformity in Inquisition-ravaged Italy. Their first-person narrative resembles soft and silent interior monologues flowing like gentle brooks with opaque waves. To my mind, between these two sadhus (religious personalities), the presence of Maria is dangerously attractive because she seems to talk about the universal human condition in a world of injustice and unrest. For this reason her stories clutch the heart horribly and a strange anguish stings it mercilessly.

Among the three parts of *To Silence* the life and times of Kabir comes first. He has been a weaver and has strong family bonds with parents and after that wife, son, Kamaal and daughter, Kamaali. From a very young age he has to listen to a call inside his heart and gradually he responds to that call and becomes attached to his own Guru in a world of beautiful suffering. Yet the path which he has taken is not easy to follow. Jaireth shows through Kalu, the only disciple of Kabir, how he breaks the boundaries of clearly-defined religion like Islam and Hinduism and creates one of his own—the religion of soul. We come to know that Kabir believes that God is one and the same whether he is called Allah or Karim or Ra-am. He hears all, so no need to shout five times loudly from minar, nor he is not hungry or thirsty, so no need to offer him foods in the temple. If anybody wants to feed him he can feed the poor. Again, he believes that there is no need to carry beads or threads for muttering the names of Ra-am. When human beings are in the womb, there are no religious signs to maintain. In these ways and more Kabir goes against the ritualistic religious tradition and points out the gaps in religious orthodoxies and baffles both Muslims and Hindus simultaneously. Before his death when both Muslims and Hindus claim him as their priest, he rejects both through a trick. He leaves the village at night and decides to leave his dead body for vultures and wild animals to be consumed. Thus he does not accept cremation or burial and invents a third one. Kabir has to struggle against the materialistic and utilitarian tendency of his son, Kamaal, also. He is too generous to forbid Kamaal to record his songs and thus preserve his name from any corruption and extinction. But at last nature serves him right by blurring the writing by the liquid droppings from pigeons on the fig tree.
The second narrator here is neither a mystic nor a nun, but a lady who as the sister of Anton Chekhov becomes a chronicler of her time. In a period of two world wars and the October Revolution she leads a long life of 90 years, burdened with memories and regrets. She herself is a teacher and later on after the death of her brother she becomes the director of the Chekhov House Museum. What is most touching in her narrative is the pressure of the time of severe genocide committed by Adolf Hitler in different various concentration camps during World War Two, such as Treblinka in Poland, where near and dear ones of Maria have been forced to death in the gas chamber. Her memories come back again and again in her lonely life in Yalta. She has a very good relationship with Anton, but because of his silence over the issue of her marriage, she cannot decide whether she should be married or not. In such a lonely life Egorushka, the four year old son of Olga S, proves a blessing to her. He represents the true delight of lovely life in a war-ridden melancholic atmosphere when everyone has become intimidated and diminished. She has somehow escaped the cruel grip of murderous time, but for that she harbours regrets. She thinks that a ‘But’ was treacherous word in her life, and for this word she has kept silence and has not spoken up like other Jews who were caught and sent into the gas chambers. So she hates the word very much and cries often, but finds no solace.

The last orator is Tommaso Campanella whose stream of consciousness is set in a period of his life when he gains freedom from life-long captivity under the patronage of the Pope Urban VIII. He is very depressed and dejected and takes long walks to come to terms with himself and the events taking place in Rome in the name of religion. Like Kabir he follows his own reasoning and does not accept Aristotelian or Copernican revelations about the universe. Moreover, he had a profound relationship with his Lord in his own way. He blames himself for the sin of sodomy with Pietro, ‘a ten year old boy of immense beauty’ (100) that he has committed in a moment of frailty in his life. Besides this, another sin also chases his conscience all through his life, that is, he has seen a rape scene, but has not done anything to save the girl. In his fictional autobiography one matter is very interesting to read, that is, his long letter to Galileo, the greatest astronomer. This intimate expression of Tommaso in the letter opens in front of us his progressive attitude towards the universe and its hidden truths.

I feel at this juncture I should say a few words about the meaning of the word ‘silence’. As I have understood the text, silence has three different meanings to these three different personalities. For Kabir, the Indian Mystic, it is a blessing. He chooses silence himself as canopy to gather omens from Ra-am and to respond to His call through words formed into songs. He even does not want to preserve his songs in any written form because he has conceived that writing process is perishable as any living creature and only transmitted spoken words can survive. And the words are important, not the person who first utters the words. For Maria Chekhova, silence is a burden. Bearing the history of an inhumane and cruel time in her heart she suffers day and night, but cannot find any solace except crying over the phone while talking with Olga, Anton’s wife. Having known too much about a vicious time she cannot endure her crestfallen existence and regrets that she is not dead with her all relatives in Treblinka. On the other hand, for Tommaso, silence means oppression which he wants to end through uttering words. But words seem to him excuses to cover his sin. In spite of this he wants to confess and say how like ‘driftwood’ he has been ‘carried
away by the deceitful thoughts’ (91). With these various meanings the text really becomes very stimulating.

The book is written in plain and lucid prose with many philosophical and epigrammatic sentences that soothe the heart and hearing at the same time. Easily its ideas about beauty, grace, sin, fame, silence, injustice and so on qualify it as a source of philosophical reasoning. As a result, To Silence is really a pleasant fiction to enjoy. Let’s try a first reading!

Umme Salma
Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King* (McSweeney’s, 2012)

Dave Eggers’ *A Hologram for the King* plots the expatriation of American Alan Clay, who travels to the United Arab Emirates to sell King Abdullah telecommunications for his city in development. The baldly named ‘King Abdullah Economic City’ would outdo Dubai in its expression of limitless ambition, in size, in defiance of habitat. Following Clay’s dogged attempt to find business there, the plot presents a series of displacements that show how ‘westernisation’ no longer exists as such. The proposed city, whose immediate models are eastern, is an obvious sign not of western imperialism, but of globalisation. Eventually, the contract Clay vies for is finally awarded to a Chinese company (one that has appropriated an American patent). Ultimately, Clay is a deterritorialised American for whom all roads lead east. Clay’s fate parallels America’s in the era of globalised techno-capital, its great age as a superpower supported by domestic production and national economic agency decidedly past. In the end, Clay remains in the UAE, hoping to be repatriated in a city that doesn’t yet exist. He is the very subject of multinational business, with no real home, no determinate national base. Thus Clay represents American industrialism that has literally lost its place in the world’s economy. He seems virtual, the eponymous hologram, no more American the golden arches or any other multinational brand (such as the Schwinn bicycles he once sold, lost to outsourcing and finally to China). On the other hand, Clay (as his name suggests) is constituted by earth, however pliable. Indeed, like the absurd but realisable city King Abdullah builds on earth that can hardly support it, Clay is a paradox.

Egger’s postnationalist theme displaces rather than foregrounds environmental concerns. While the novel includes careful descriptions of the mountainous land around Jeddah, the coast where the new city is in being built, the desert in between, all appear as an uncanny frontier where the American cannot adapt. No one can because the enthusiastic creation of all-you-can-eat markets promote blatant disregard for human and environmental wellbeing. Unfortunately, when Egger addresses the division of the virtual and biotic, he does so with romantic asides that maintain their separation. Nature, here, provides a romantic counternarrative to the story of economic progress: ‘The work of man is done behind the back of the natural world. When nature notices, and can muster the energy, it wipes the slate clean again.’ This Ozymandian mystique obscures the premodern history of coexistence between bioregion and human lifeways. The only past the novel really concerns itself with is Clay’s, with its domestic post WW II trajectory leading directly to the Middle Eastern present.

*Hologram* sounds the death knell of American exceptionalism as the late petroleum economy and the information age move the action decidedly away from a North American centre. The American Dream defined by immigration to American shores has itself become an export, many times removed. At one point, the novel describes a sandal merchant whose goods seem indigenous but are actually imported from India, where they can be made cheaply enough to earn him a castle, built in what may one day be the suburbs of the Economic City. Meanwhile, Clay and his staff experience one minor indignity after another attempting to do business with a nation state whose alliances are complex, obscure, and indifferent to the west.

The society Clay tries to immerse himself in, with not much success, is also a theocracy where civil rights are reduced to the worst nightmares of the Cold War, wherein individuals may be denounced by resentful rivals to the state at any time for transgressions.
(here, religious taboos), but where everyone who can finds a way to party like it’s always the end of a millennium rather than the start of a new one. Clay is dragged to one orgiastic bacchanal after another, in a country where drinking and sex outside the strictest possible terms are both illegal. At the same time, personal rights are vulnerable and ambiguous, where they exist at all, and slavery as well as labour exploitation is openly practised. The neoliberal version of globalisation that equates middle class development with an increase of human rights is put to the test here, but more: the midcentury ideology that made capitalism and communism the respective friend and foe of personal freedom is, in the new world order, replaced by a global economy where communists and capitalists compete to provide goods to theocracies, and labourers be damned.

This moral incongruity parallels a disjunction of another kind, one related to a paradox of mobility. Despite the futuristic nature of the technology that Clay retails and the energetic touting of the City as the new frontier, much of the novel depicts Clay waiting for meetings that never happen, his staff bored and enervated by one unproductive day after another while they wait forever for internet service or for the wiring that would let them set up a high tech presentation. The incongruity here is between rapid techno-capital development and conditions that cannot really support state-of-the-art trade. Clay’s business day consists of long, meandering cab rides from his hotel to the City, blocked or dropped communications, searching for functionaries who never show up at their offices, and coping with an underequipped worksite. Eggers depicts a constant sense of wasted time and empty effort without losing the narrative’s drive and his reader’s engagement, while he effectively deconstructs high speed business culture. These setbacks recall Don Delillo’s Cosmopolis where a forward-looking cyber-trading antihero stays stalled in New York traffic for more than half the book. In both cases, the authors reflect on a time out of joint in an entirely new way, a moment characterised, to borrow David Harvey’s famous term, by space-time compression that coexists with incongruous interruptions, as if an older physics were still at work, one that predates virtual reality, one where the rules of gravity still apply.

Hologram for the King reads a bit like a homage to Delillo with its slips into hardboiled syntax and in its way of rendering an alienated protagonist through prose both intimate and restrained. Eggers portrays an overwhelmingly complex world in a quiet way, through a character who is not himself literary or particularly analytic and whose self-involvement is as naïve as his engagement in Saudi Arabia. Alan Clay is a kind of ‘lite’ version of the Hemingway hero, a character pared down even from Delillo’s facile Hitler Studies professor, Jack Gladney. This is not to say, of course, that either contemporary lacks sophistication, but that their decidedly white, male protagonists are somehow historically and deliberately deprived of gravitas. Egger’s novel also shares Delillo’s interest in evoking emptiness. Pared-down episodes have a subtly sinister tone and a rich metonymic import: a brilliant confrontation between Clay and Filipino laborers over another American’s discarded cell phone; the probably irrevocable estrangement between Clay and the only Arab friend he has made over Clay’s own eagerness to display his prowess with a rifle. There are certainly notes of Richard Wright’s classic ‘The Man Who Was Almost A Man’ in that scene, leading one to ask, among other possible questions, why is Clay positioned as an initiate here, as a man who is not quite a man? The way that Eggers imagines Clay as a man-child in a world where there are no moral adults is an important theme of a novel where no one seems to be responsible for anything; everyone is working toward some collective goal but no one is capable of vision beyond impressing a King with the newest of playthings so that he, in turn,

might impress the world.

As a novel about the future of democracy in the multinational age, *Hologram for the King* is both elegant and chilling, like the spy novels of the Cold War era but without the heroics. A book whose title refers to a simulacrum, it is a book about absence, especially the absence of wisdom, an inauspicious condition for America’s initiation into a new world. That world, with its eastern-leaning economy, makes America the new *old world*, but one whose youthful optimism had long been hypostatised by the culture of retailed innovation, the moral adolescence of the new-and-improved. Eggers novel is neither satirical nor moralistic, rather, mildly elegiac. It shows us that something grave is missing.

Martina Sciolino