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Kathleen Jones, Katherine Mansfield: The Story-teller (Edinburgh UP, 2010)

Biography is a tricky genre, and a wider one than most of us recall until we open another biography and find it utterly unlike the last. Even the biography of an author, with its well-ordered, just-before-birth to just-after-death coverage, might focus on humanising or demonising, might focus on making the work reflect the life or the life reflect the work, might seek to please the scholar or the fan. Like so many other biographies, Kathleen Jones’s 2010 biography of Katherine Mansfield is like no other biography I’ve read before.

Mansfield, unlike modernist contemporaries and friends such as D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, is primarily known for her short stories (among them ‘The Garden Party’) and for being born in the colonies (New Zealand) rather than in Great Britain. The transnational aspects of The Story-teller root themselves in this outsider position, emphasising that even ‘Katherine’s childhood was spent on the insecure margin,’ as coloniser occupying the space ‘between a recent immigrant civilization and the encroaching wilderness, inhabited by an older, non-European culture that was being dispossessed’ (14). Jones offers the position of the ‘permanent outsider’ (128) as a key ingredient in the making of this storyteller, whose ‘double heritage’ (19) and ‘struggle for one definitive identity’ (22) will only grow more important after she moves to England.

‘Born across two cultures’ (22), the Mansfield painted here will never feel quite at home. First, she’ll become ‘convinced that she will be unable to become a creative artist’ unless she moves to London (75). Later, she’ll insist that London destroys her ability to write, that she can only write in Paris, that she can only write in the country, that she can only write away from the country. She seems briefly at home as ‘part of an expatriate social group’ in Germany (117), where she will ‘sing Slavic songs’ (117), acquire ‘a love of Russian novels’ (118), and find that – in these surroundings – ‘poems and stories are spilling out of her, almost faster than she can write them down’ (118). This period spent with other outsiders is among the most productive of a career that will often stagnate for long periods.

Jones should be credited for allowing this key ingredient to emerge and reappear throughout the text as a sort of musical motif, rather than trying to use it to drive all 500+ of the book’s pages. Even with section headings like ‘The Two Katherines’, ‘In Search of Katherine Mansfield’, and ‘The Member of a Wandering Tribe’, Jones’s biography never seems overtly focused on this single aspect of Mansfield’s life. In fact, Jones does not even restrict herself to the territory of the author’s life, often leaving the subject of Katherine for whole chapters to talk about the lives of Ida Constance Baker or John Middleton Murry in the years after Katherine’s early death.

And this is what makes The Story-teller unlike every other biography I’ve read. Structurally, the book is curious to say the least. It is non-linear, with Mansfield dying more than once. It plays with narrative time, speeding and slowing, sometimes understandably (with an entire chapter on ‘The “Blooms Berries”’) and sometimes less so (with multiple chapters on the second Katherine, Murry’s next wife, Violet). The reader becomes less sure it is really all meant to be a portrait of Katherine.

One could argue that what results is a sort of modernist genre of biography, reminiscent of the definition of modernism put forth in Mansfield and Murry’s collaboration on Rhythm magazine. Their modernism focuses on an ‘idea of rhythm in art’ we might tie to the unusual narrative rhythms of The Story-teller that, yes, now that we think of it, forgoes any ‘capricious outburst of intellectual dipsomania’ in favor of identifying ‘essential forms

... essential harmonies ... the essential music of [Mansfield’s entire] world’ (144-5). If ‘Art is the true and only expression of reality’ (145), perhaps the biography of an author must be more artistic than academic; perhaps the biography’s key figures must become characters?

I’m not sure, but this theory would be one way to explain the sometimes unexpected judgments (one character ‘writes bitchily’ to others, [292]), assumptions (‘if John had brought a harlot in off the street the reception could not have been cooler,’ [204]), and moments of mind-reading (‘John believed that Katherine’s spirit lived on,’ [166]) in the book. As a reader, I did not for a moment suspect Jones of the kind of ‘not wholly false, [but] not entirely truthful’ ‘creative approach’ Murry took ‘to the editing of [Mansfield’s] notebooks’ (179), nor do I find any evidence of Jones following the ‘natural liar’ Mansfield’s lead in “embroidering” everything’ (72). But Jones does seem to exhibit ‘Katherine’s talent to become her characters and to see the world from within their minds’ (90), a trait Mansfield fans might appreciate very much in a biographer.

Paul Ardoin


Writing the life of an author poses particular difficulties: it would be ridiculous not to examine the author’s writings but there is not enough space to analyse them fully and the intentional fallacy looms large in such analysis. In literary critical biography it is easy to fall between the stools of literary criticism and biography. Joanna Woods politely notes that her project ‘produced a number of challenges’ (9) but each of these books straddle the divide remarkably well. Indeed, Michael Sharkey’s book on David McKee Wright exhibits a depth of research and poised, intelligent literary judgement. Strictly speaking, Charles Baeyertz was not a creative writer – he was principally a music critic – but his creation and long term editorship of the *Triad* magazine generate the same issues. McKee Wright was a creative writer but he was also an editor of the *Bulletin* for ten years (hence Sharkey’s title), so both men had strong magazine roles. Sharkey declares his ‘interest in coterie networks of writers, editors and publishers’ (17) and McKee Wright’s magazine work and journalism enable Sharkey to work to his philosophical view that writers should be studied in relation to their society and times. Joanna Woods effectively concurs, so that both these books provide fascinating portraits of literary life in Dunedin and Sydney particularly, and in New Zealand and Australia more broadly, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Baeyertz was born in Melbourne (in 1866) but left for New Zealand in 1891, returning to Australia, but now to Sydney, in 1914. McKee Wright was born in Ireland in 1869 but brought up in England from 1877; he emigrated to New Zealand in 1887 and moved to Sydney in 1910, leaving his wife and son to face the unpaid creditors. Baeyertz died in Sydney in 1943, McKee Wright in 1928, and each is mentioned in the other’s biography, not always in terms that flatter the other book. Woods shows that Sharkey’s statement that Baeyertz ‘regarded New Zealand as “Philistia”’ (Baeyertz’s term) (123) is misleading and that the description of ‘Morton’s Triad’ (296) – perhaps following Peter Kirkpatrick’s statement in *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* that the *Triad* was ‘nominally edited by its founder, C.N. Baeyertz’ – is simply wrong. Baeyertz and McKee Wright’s experience of literary life in both New Zealand and Australia make it unsurprising that they had friends in common, such as Pat Lawlor, Frank Morton (who from 1908-1923 wrote much of the *Triad*), and Adam McCay. A.G. Stephens also moved across the Tasman, as did Henry Lawson and others, and these two books deepen our understanding of literary and cultural interactions in what even in my childhood was commonly called ‘Australasia’. Both Baeyertz and McKee Wright were cosmopolitan in outlook, far from endorsing any Bush school or nationalism; both stood for artistic formalism and against Modernism; both led complicated marital, Bohemian personal lives; and both displayed a Victorian industriousness that can leave you exhausted just reading about it.

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Baeyertz founded the *Triad* in 1893 and edited it until 1925, without any Arts Council funding, initially writing most of it himself, supplemented by clippings from overseas journals and newspapers. He took it to Australia with him in 1914 but changing times and libel cases took their toll, together with Baeyertz’s perhaps understanding New Zealand’s *mores* better than Australia’s. Woods accurately describes the magazine as having a ‘mischievous spirit’ (191), with Morton’s provocation of sexual wowsers and Baeyertz’s take-no-prisoners musical and artistic critiques being the principal sources. Baeyertz was a brilliant music critic, a kind of Antipodean George Bernard Shaw, impudent, brash and unafraid to take on big targets such as Nellie Melba and John McCormack. Nevertheless, a lot of what he wrote seems to have been bluff arrogance, which Woods is often inclined to let him get away with. She notes without apparent irony that in 1914, ‘Within a few days of his arrival, he had posted off an authoritative overview of Sydney’s cultural life for inclusion in the July *Triad*’ (163). Perhaps it is more important for such a magazine to be lively than to be accurate, and neither Baeyertz nor Morton hesitated to be provocative; certainly anyone experienced in literary and cultural magazines has to admire someone who could keep one going for 32 years, through changes of content, style and design. Its Australian contributors included Mary Gilmore, Ethel Anderson, Kenneth Slessor, and Hugh McCrae, who eventually took over editorship under the title *New Triad* until 1928. Woods describes how Baeyertz went on to present classical music on Sydney commercial radio (yes, commercial radio) and become the resident ‘Tutor in Voice Production’ at the ABC.

Probably because of the availability of source material, Woods is better on the public man than the private, although she does demonstrate clearly the gap between the two. She writes clearly and intelligently about a colourful character and goes a long way to achieving her aim of demonstrating how the *Triad* years in New Zealand included many ‘large-minded men and women’ (219) with a knowledgeable appreciation of the arts. The book is beautifully presented, with a useful index and a wonderful cast of photographs, and this can be said of Sharkey’s biography too.

Geoffrey Dutton once dismissed David McKee Wright as a writer of ‘particularly anaemic verses’ and this would be a pretty fair assessment of the way he has been seen for many years. Michael Sharkey notes that ‘revision of Wright’s literary status began in earnest as soon as he died’ (359) and he was ‘largely expunged from the record of Australian poetry’ (20); you would have to pinch yourself to recognise that he was once a literary giant. Sharkey claims that ‘it is impossible to argue with the taste of another age’ (361); personally, I don’t think this is true, but it is striking that probably no-one in the maelstrom of literary activity in Sydney in Wright’s period – the 1910s and 1920s – could have foreseen that Henry Lawson and Kenneth Slessor would come to be seen as the great writers. As Editor of the *Bulletin* McKee Wright published them both, although of course Lawson’s reputation was established before McKee Wright ever reached Sydney. Apart from his statement, ‘It is futile to suggest that Wright’s [light verse poems] were not up to Slessor’s standard’ (180) – Slessor’s best were better than Wright’s best, but they were better than everyone else’s too – Sharkey proves an astute judge of McKee Wright’s voluminous output. He establishes McKee Wright as a witty satirist (including of himself), at times a delicate lyricist, and a poet with superb technical command. Sharkey demonstrates that much of McKee Wright’s bad verse – and he does not hide the fact that there was plenty of it – was driven by the need to earn money.

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McKee Wright’s output, published under pseudonyms that Sharkey has detected as well as under his own name, is staggering. For example, he published 122 poems in the Bulletin in 1922 as well as ‘contributions to other journals’ (276). Sharkey calculates that McKee Wright published 1600 poems in the Bulletin in nineteen years, an average of more than 80 per year! Needless to say, he did not hesitate to publish himself. This together with his editorials, journalism, and publications in other magazines, including competition prizewinning poems, makes it difficult to complain about contemporary workloads, even given that this was an age in which poetry could be a form of current affairs. McKee Wright managed this while his private life was often in turmoil. He also built cabins and furniture, was a prizewinning gardener, bred chooks, became an expert collector of fine china, and it’s tempting to say God-knows-what-else. His life was extraordinary: he moved from being a Congregational parson and strong Temperance man, then a bushman, in New Zealand to being a bohemian beer-drinking poet, editor and journalist in Sydney, with one marriage and two other relationships, the last with the writer Zora Cross, and a number of children. It comes as a surprise to find that at the time of his death he was only 58, given how much he packed into his life.

Michael Sharkey explores this life fairly fully, with a poet’s eye and in fine prose. He is fair-minded and not afraid to make judgements, noting that McKee Wright’s poems ‘were characteristically vitiated’ by ‘padding’ and a ‘love of adjectives’ (251) learnt from Tennyson. McKee Wright’s editorship was by turns generous and astute then wrongheaded: he ‘dismissed George Moore and Bernard Shaw’ and proclaimed James Stephens ‘the saving grace’ of the Irish renaissance, and argued that Lawson’s poetry was better than his prose. Yet in many respects McKee Wright seems to have been an admirable writer and an admirable man. As with Woods’s study of Baeyertz, we never feel that we get inside McKee Wright; perhaps that is impossible. Michael Sharkey’s book remains a very impressive biography and an important contribution to our understanding of a period which lay the foundations for modern Australian literature.

Dennis Haskell

Stephanie Radok is an Australian artist and art writer. *An Opening*, recently longlisted for the Stella Prize, is her first book.

Writing about another woman’s writing about memories of the art that has shaped her life in small and large ways may be seen as art, or life, at several removes: a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy, a blurred and degraded imitation. And yet, of course, art is no mere imitation of life but the creation of something new. It may shock, lure, or persuade an audience into seeing something afresh or experiencing life differently. The current fashion in the visual arts is to shock, or conversely, as Nicholas Jose puts it, to be ‘off-putting and hermetic.’¹ Writers of non-fiction, on the other hand, often favour the gentle art of persuasion. But Stephanie Radok’s writing lures the reader into an alternate reality which, magically, becomes our own. Like the nest of a bird, or a drawing made by the careful accretion of many lines, this book constructs a welcoming space that invites stillness, contemplation, and perhaps incubation.

Jose describes *An Opening* as ‘a memoir wrapped around a discussion of art and a discussion of art wrapped around a memoir in such a way that makes the two indistinguishable’.² A collection of essays assembled like a calendar, one for each month of the year, it dances between past and present, object and idea, personal and poetic modes, noting the passage of time and the complexities of memory. These are not merely personal, but lyric essays, a form which

partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.³

The style of these essays is lucid and direct, grounded in sensory experience and in the rhythms of ordinary daily events like taking the dog for a walk. Radok’s calm insistence that art is both personal and political pervades every paragraph. It is a book by an artist and lover of art about looking, about thinking, about making connections, and about love. ‘It is what artworks make people feel or think that is important, not how much they cost or even who made them’ (3). Strange, isn’t it, that this needs to be said? Radok shows how art reaches deeply into our lives in unexpected and ordinary ways: the tattered calendar cutting kept for decades and left behind in a photocopier, the postcard stuck to a laundry wall, or the persistent memory of something, seen perhaps only briefly, that alters one’s thinking utterly. This book is also, however, an astute commentary on art in Australia and internationally by a respected writer already influential, through her catalogue essays and articles, in the perception and criticism of and theorising about art, especially migrant and Australian Indigenous art, for which Radok has a particular passion.

¹ Nicholas Jose, back cover blurb, *An Opening*.
In discussing a work by artist Elizabeth Gertzakis (111-12), Radok observes that ‘somehow this personal story becomes exemplary of anyone’s story … It … uses ordinary everyday experience as the subject for art, which is to say it reveals commonplace personal experience to be culture.’ Furthermore, ‘it establishes an intimacy with the reader so that their interior voice too is felt as potentially shared or shareable’ (113). *An Opening* also does this. The book is itself a work of art, a cocoon of memoir and observations about particular artworks that welcomes readers to likewise remember and muse upon the relationships we form with art, whether directly or via reproductions, momentary or enduring, and how those relationships influence our lives.

Daniel Thomas writes that Radok’s ‘contribution to Australian art is idiosyncratic and determinedly marginal’⁴. It is ironic that such writing can be called *marginal* – even, as here, with a positive spin. Rather, it ought to be called *essential*, for it reclaims art as personal territory, celebrating the connections between our ordinary life and our aspirations, the moments of tenderness and intimations of (im)mortality that haunt even ordinary people, and the talents human beings harbour for wonder, truth, generosity, and creation.

Michele McCrea

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⁴ Daniel Thomas, back cover blurb, *An Opening*. 

Book reviews: *An Opening* by Stephanie Radok. Michele McCrea. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013. 
Starting with a telling introduction by the editors of the collection, *Alien Shores* is an impressive volume of creative work in the field of Refugee and Displacement Studies. The book is neatly divided into six parts, the titles of all these parts drawing their imagery from the ocean, the ocean which figures prominently in many of the tales told in the collection, and also acts as the divider and connector between international borders across the globe.

The first part is titled ‘Ancient Tides’. The only story in this part, by Sophie Masson, is remarkable as a story of hope and life as it symbolically refers to the simultaneous loss of home as one knew it and the gaining of a new one as an outsider within the span of a single day.

The second part is aptly titled ‘Tidal Force’, as the three stories in this part deal with extreme emotions experienced by human beings across cultures and borders in sometimes dramatic, sometimes tragic turnarounds which result from the tensions arising from their socio-political milieu. That leads to the first story, by Deepa Agarwal, titled ‘The Path’, which is set in the backdrop of the Battle of Tarain that was fought between the Hindu and the Afghan armies, recreates the horror and confusion of the times as one of the characters broods over the repercussions of his decision to run away from the battle and save his life. ‘Morichjhãpi’ by Amitav Ghosh depicts the trials and tribulations of the Bangladeshi refugees who had settled in an island called Morichjhãpi in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India. Exploited in their native land by the powerful and ill-treated in India, these nowhere people appear in Ghosh’s story as a mass of vulnerability. The last story in this segment ‘Sins of the Mother’ by Jamil Ahmed, is a poignant story of tender love, faith, and the attempt to carry on with life in spite of long-drawn conflicts. The issues of porous borders in the Pakistan-Afghanistan territories and the severe impact of governmental decisions on the marginal of the land are very delicately put in this piece.

The third segment is titled ‘Turbulent Crossings’. ‘Dera Baba Nanak’, the first story of this segment is originally written by Joginder Paul and translated in this edition by Naghma Jafir. Drawing from the ghastly memories of Indo-Pak partition, especially in the depiction of the character of a mad man who is searching for his lost penis so as to ascertain his own identity as either a Hindu or a Muslim, the author refers not only to the mindless massacres that took place during the partition but also to the futility of such actions. ‘Remembering Timor-Leste’, by Susanne Gervay, is a sensitive story written from the perspective of a child who remembers her sister being dragged away by enemy soldiers from her home in Timor-Leste. In ‘A Wall of Water,’ Michelle Cahill gives us an account of the loss of home and the acceptance of a new reality and a different way of life for the refugee. Sarita, the central character in the story, witnesses the negativity amongst the locals in Australia about refugees and the governmental and bureaucratic bias against people genuinely in need of asylum and shelter. ‘The Dust of Life,’ the final story of the segment, by Arnold Zable, is not only a story about refugee and asylum seeking, but also about the large-scale physical, psychological, and cultural violence of the long-drawn Vietnam War.

The next section, titled ‘Adrift’ begins with Anu Kumar’s lucid story ‘Big Fish’. This is the story of a fisherman family in Tamil Nadu, India who catch a stranger from the sea in

their net and how the family, especially the young girl Munni, regard him and treat him as one of their own, till the Indian government intervenes to arrest him. This is a poignant story as the stranger offers definite hints of being an innocent family man lost in the sea. ‘Life Hanging in the Balance’ by Abdul Karim Hekmat is the next story, in which Musa, the central character in the story, has witnessed bloodied violence by the Taliban from Afghanistan; seeking asylum in Australia and being denied that by the Refugee Review Tribunal leaves him with no hope for either a present or a future. The next story in the segment, ‘Ariel’s Song’, is about Ariel, a four-year-old girl who was used to a comfortable life in Australia before her parents become homeless by a twist of fortune. The living conditions for the homeless are so filthy that it she becomes seriously ill.

The next segment titled ‘Counter Currents’ begins with a story by Meenakshi Bharat titled ‘The Lost Kingdom’. Written in the backdrop of the Indo-Pak partition, this is the story of a young girl’s curious search for a playmate in the backyard of her grandparent’s dwelling, and the revelation that it brings. ‘Without Address, Without Name’ by Sujata Sankranti, the next story of the section, is set in Bengal, India and focuses on the struggle of a young mother to survive in an alien land with dignity for her child and herself. ‘The Ogre’, by Ali Alizadeh, is a story about drawing a line between sympathy and cautiousness with regard to the issue of asylum seekers. The story is about the narrator’s empathy for a fellow Iranian who was in a detention centre in Australia for a long time and the consequences of it. Its somewhat abrupt ending provides an anxious quality to the story.

The last part of the book, ‘Riding the Tide’, features five stories all of which weave across the common theme of coming to terms with their own uprooting and eventually celebrating survival and success in the land that adopted them. Bijoya Sawain’s ‘The Limp’ is the story of Nipen and his family who have migrated from East Bengal to Shilong, Meghalaya, India; the story takes the reader through one local Khasi woman’s genuine affection that helps Nipen’s family stand on their own in the new land. Tabish Khair’s almost autobiographical ‘A State of Niceness’ is about an Indian citizen’s reconfiguration of his own self as he settles down in a West European country and his growing affinity towards his adopted geographical space. ‘My Sister’s Sister’ by Julia Mackay-Koelen is the story of Lil and Linh as they discover the pain and pleasure of their unusual connections to a refugee family. The last story of the collection, by Linda Jaivin, is simply named ‘Karim’. A story of hope and regeneration, this fine narrative is about a young refugee’s struggle for survival in an alien land and the celebration of his success at it.

Overall, an absorbing read, Alien Shores lives up to its title as it takes the reader along the turbulent rides commonplace for people in exile and migration and sensitises the reader to the issues concerning the refugees across the world.

Punyashree Panda


Have you written a cookbook yet? What’s stopping you?

Cookbooks invariably make up at least 40% of the non-fiction book sales in this country. I don’t know whether that fact has influenced Charlotte Wood, whose last novel was the excellent *Animal People*, but she writes a food blog called ‘How to Shuck an Oyster’, and she’s apparently a brilliant cook. Perhaps an editor gave her a little nudge away from literary fiction and towards the more profitable genre of Foodie Books.

*Love and Hunger: Thoughts on the Gift of Food* bears the dedication ‘for my friends’. It might be very rewarding to be a friend of Charlotte’s, I thought, as I flicked through the pages, taste buds stirred to life by Duck Ragu with Porcini, and Lamb Tagine with Dates and Raisins (Serves 8). So lots of friends then, or lots of leftovers. The book is a memoir about food and the place it occupies in Wood’s life, with added recipes, which seems to be an ever-growing trend in publishing circles. It’s about food that is cooked ‘with love’, and how often have we heard Masterchef contestants and TV chefs use this phrase? I think it just means that a dish has been cooked with a lot of care and attention to detail; in other words, *skill*.

There is a cover recommendation from the esteemed Maggie Beer, who is also a great advocate of cooking with love. Apparently the book contains ‘So many tidbits shared … and things I needed to know’. (If Maggie Beer needs to know so many things, what hope for the rest of us?)

Like Beer used to be, Wood is a passionate home cook with some twenty years experience in the kitchen. There is a lot of practical advice and philosophical discussions about food. Who knew that there were special comfort foods for those flattened by grief or bereavement or illness? And there are 75 simple, classic recipes. But no photos. Not even a sketch of the finished dish. You’re on your own here. But Wood’s instructions are crystal clear; she guides you every step of the way and her chapter titles are intriguing: Regaining your Kitchen Mojo with Chicken Stock; The Joy of Competence; Do I Dare to Eat a Peach? And at the very end of the book: Five Grains Everyone Should Know How to Cook. (And yes, quinoa is one, even though it’s a seed.)

In the introduction Wood has a shot at what she calls ‘the almost obscene contemporary obsession with what I think of as fashion cookery’. In this she reminds me of Gay Bilson, who has the same passion for and takes the same pleasure in simple cooking. Charlotte Wood writes even better than Bilson, and Bilson is a *chef*, so her writing is sometimes on a higher level than mere home cooks can aspire to. Charlotte Wood is like a friend who says ‘Hey, have you ever thought of cooking couscous in orange juice?’

**Ruth Starke**

As Buddhism’s engagement with the West deepens, its need to adapt and change is sometimes pertinent. Traditional understandings and practices around gender, ritual and superstition can sometimes be met with rather spectacular scepticism in the West (and often justifiably so), but many of the core principles of the Buddhist tradition – which are less about belief and more about practice – are being embraced by Westerners like Lesley Synge.

Synge’s latest publication, *Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them*, is a personal testament to the Buddhist tradition of walking, dwelling, and being in the forest. This backdrop of the natural world is important in the context of Buddhist practice, for whatever truth the Buddha found in meditation, it was a truth rooted in the real. An image we may recall of the Buddha in this context is that of him seated cross-legged with one hand touching the ground, calling the earth to witness. In its own way, *Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them* is an extension of the same project. It is a captivating, thoughtful and thought-provoking read. The mountains of the title are more than metaphors; the writer’s engagement with them is physical and spiritual, singular and collective, emotional and intellectual.

The first half of the book is presented as a combination of free-form poetry and haiku, and provides an account of a journey Synge took to South Korea to teach conversational English in 2002. She took her then twelve-year-old son with her, and the two experience a degree of alienation and culture shock, the result of their having very little language in common with members of their host community. The boy retreats to the forest to play, and his mother to her teaching and her meditation practice. Yet the landscape has its influence on them, and it is a long-lasting one.

Synge observes the South Korean land and its people with the sharp eye of the outsider, paying gentle and good-humoured attention to the unavoidable riddles that arise through cultural difference. At the same time, she is only too aware of her own limitations, especially linguistically:

> Korean poets - I see your dilemma:
> rice is too beautiful for words and barley
> won’t stop dancing (24)

The area in which Synge and her son stay is an isolated rural district in the far south, dwarfed by Duncheol Mountain, which they traverse each day. Synge tucks into her minimal teaching duties with good spirit, and engages best she can with the traditional Buddhism practised in the region, but the boy is recalcitrant:

> My assistant’s on strike. Day after day he spends
> spread-eagled on the High School’s entrance boulder
> and won’t budge –
> unless to tramp under new-leafed oaks
> plotting squirrel taming and bear capture, heroic and alone.
> The mountain is his mother now (26)

At the mid-term break, Synge’s son joins a school tour to the beach, while she opts to climb a peak in Jiri San, one of Korea’s oldest mountain-based national parks. The trek is crowded with Korean pilgrims travelling by moonlight to witness sunrise at the peak of Chonwangbong and the poem which describes this journey – ‘Excursion to Jiri San before the mid-term holiday’ – contains some extraordinary lines (‘Here under slow swirling stars is / a lunar movie of countless human shadows’ [34]). And yet, I couldn’t help but feel the writing in this piece was a little too prosaic, the language lacking in specificity. This, and some of the other lengthier poems in this section of the book need to surprise us more as readers. Synge’s skills with rhythm can sa...
of the Korean journey, for example, has now blossomed into a young adult. Declan’s awareness of Buddhist principles and respect for the forest is different but no less complex than his mother’s. One of the slow journeys referred to in the book’s title is surely the journey of parenting Declan.

Synge effortlessly combines personal reflection on meditation and her own wry observations of fellow walkers with some useful history of the beautiful Gold Coast Hinterland region. Her acknowledgement of indigenous history and the Yugambeh people’s connection to land in the area is respectful and forms an interesting aspect to the essay, particularly as she and her fellow walkers move through and respond (through meditation) to some key sacred sites. At the same time, the experiences of the early Europeans are thoughtfully considered. The influence of the mountains, their sheer scale in relation to a single walker, is clearly profound. And, again, the ability of language to capture such relationships and experiences is called into question: ‘All this projection of human thought onto a natural phenomenon – is it a help or a hindrance?’ (90)

The ‘Eastern Australia’ chapter of Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them is, in my view, an outstanding contribution to Australian nature writing. At the same time, it also makes a worthwhile contribution to literature about the contemporary Western Buddhist experience. The book bears witness to the way Australians have embraced Buddhism, and in turn demonstrates how Buddhist ethics and practices might enable us to engage with our own landscapes more meaningfully.

Julienne van Loon

It is widely acknowledged that the processes of migration and integration involve self-reinvention and transformation. Many of the 27 autobiographical stories comprising Joyful Strains focus on this aspect: as Irish migrant Chris Flynn observes in his reflection ‘Gun for Hire’, ‘Here, it doesn’t matter who you used to be’ (133).

While this may be true, the process of re-invention necessarily involves a dislocation, both geographical and emotional. For those who arrived without the benefit of English and those from culturally diverse countries the sense of dislocation, of a divided self is especially acute. In ‘Night of the Living Wog’, Dmetri Kakmi, who migrated with his parents from a Turkish village via Athens to settle in suburban north Melbourne in 1971 at age 10, vividly portrays his sense of bewilderment: ‘The dilemma was that the rules were different in this country and I did not know how to interpret them’ (27). Forced by his headmaster to assume the name ‘Jim’, because ‘In Australia we can’t pronounce your name’ (27), Kakmi recalls, ‘From then on, not only did I not know where I was but I was no longer who I had been … the peasant boy was stripped of place and identity … Dmetri was familiar to me … Who was Jim?’ (27-28).

Similar cruel and insensitive treatment by adults in authority is reported by other contributors who migrated as children. The deliberate mispronunciation of Paola Totaro’s name as ‘Potato Tomato’ by her class teacher at an upmarket Sydney school in the 1970s directly contributed to her sense of alienation from her classmates (‘Pointing North’). In an effort ‘to melt in; … to feel … less obvious’ (72) during her teenage years Paola Anglicised her given name to Paula, but recalls her joy at reclaiming the name Paola when she commenced work.

Before the easy access to electronic media and communication, for many adult migrants, especially those bringing children, there was an added temporal dimension to the sense of dislocation from the country where their own identity was formed. That is, they are too far removed to see the changes happening in the society they have left and, as a consequence, the mores of their home country become frozen in time on the day of their departure. Several of those who arrived in Australia as child migrants report that they invariably found themselves mediating conflicts between a need to establish their place within the dominant power group of the classroom and the strictures of parental demands based on their own, often outmoded, experiences. For some, such as Diane Armstrong who with her Jewish family fled war-torn Poland, this was based on ‘relentless tension, anxiety and fear’ (134), and the necessity that to survive she must ‘be wary, and to keep my thoughts and feelings to myself’ (135). Like many, Diane had to transform herself ‘from a withdrawn Polish child to a confident fun-loving Australian girl’ (136).

Several of the contributors to this anthology share a sense of frustration and anger with the current political demonisation of asylum seekers and are heavily involved in supporting other refugees, including those held in detention centres. In ‘The Crappiest Refugee’ (162), Canadian Danny Katz brilliantly satirises the shameful political posturing that makes a mockery of the sentiments embraced in our national anthem, Advance Australia Fair:
For those who’ve come across the seas
We’ve boundless plains to share.

Parodying Canadian migrants to Australia as people who ‘insist on keeping their ethnic
culture, language and religion’ (163) and persist in ‘walking our city streets in small
intimidating caribou packs, offending everyone with their culturally insensitive Roots brand
Beaver Canoe sweatshirts’ (162-3), Katz humorously up-ends the oft-repeated complaints
about migrants’ reluctance to become ‘Australian’. Similarly, in ‘Confessions of a Ditch-
Jumper’ (56), fellow ex-Commonwealth migrant from New Zealand, Meg Mundell, also
reminds us of the preferential treatment accorded those from other Commonwealth member-
countries: ‘No-one’s ever accused me of stealing their job, jumping a queue’ (58). And how,
despite the fact that ‘roughly 30,000 Kiwis hop the Ditch annually, and half a million New
Zealand citizens currently live here … the tabloids and shock jocks don’t describe us as a
“flood”. And unlike African, Arabic or Asian immigrants, no one tells me to “integrate”’
(58).

Some of the true gems in this collection are those that illuminate aspects of Australian
life and culture either at odds with, or surprisingly attuned to, the author’s place of birth. For
example, perhaps there is no greater evidence of real integration than those who have forged
close connections with Indigenous communities, drawing on their shared struggle for justice
and freedom in their native lands. In the words of former Chilean political prisoner Juan
Garrido-Salgado, ‘Connecting with Indigenous Australians was as if another voice from both
far or near took our hands and moved us, making us open our eyes, making us laugh and
become able to talk about anything’ (223).

While, without exception, the authors of these memoirs express gratitude for the
haven provided by Australia, they also serve as a reminder that for migrants there are no all-
embracing happy endings: ‘Joyful strains’ are invariably coloured by the innate
consciousness that, as Ouyang Yu describes, he or she is ‘living in two places
simultaneously, one physical and the other metaphysical, an expatriate existence that merges
the real with the sub-real and the surreal’ (158).

Some of the memoirs contained in this collection are written with humour, some a
social commentary, some confronting. All display exceptional thoughtfulness and self-
awareness. **Joyful Strains** provides 27 wide-ranging snapshots of what it means to make
Australia home.

Lesley Wyndram

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Wyndram.

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