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Evelyn Conlon is a novelist and short story writer from Ireland. She is distinctly artistic and is the member of the aosdána, the Irish association which honours distinguished artistic work. She is no stranger to Australia. She lived there in the 1970s and her novel *Not the Same Sky* (2013) is set for the most part in Australia. She is an accomplished writer who has been a writer-in-residence in many countries. Her base is in Dublin, Ireland.

To date Conlon has published three collections of short stories: *My Head is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993), and *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2001). Apart from the short stories, she has also produced novels, amongst which are *Stars in the Daytime* (1989) and *A Glassful of Letters* (1998). Her last novel before *Not the Same Sky* was *Skin of Dreams* (2003), shortlisted for the Irish novel of the year.

*Not the Same Sky* begins with a Prologue. The temporal setting is 2008. The character Joy Kennedy receives a letter from Australia asking for a donation for building a memorial to the 4414 famine orphan girls that were shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850. It has 35 chapters excluding the Prologue.

Chapter 1 begins in the year 1848 with the story of Matt Dwyer, an Irish servant to the English Crown. The temporal setting is during the great potato famine in Ireland. Dwyer is in charge of the lists of the dead and those who have emigrated. This list is to go to England with him.

The account of the potato famine is historically placed between the years 1848 and 1850 and it strengthens the mould of the fiction created by Conlon. The story revolves around 4 young women, Bridget Joyce, Anne Sherry, Honora Raferty and Julia Cuffe. These women, who work in the same workhouse, are deported to Australia.

The four friends become diasporic in a strange land as they cross oceans from their homeland Ireland. They lose things that every human being values in this world: their family, friends, identity and language.

Australia is a colony of England. In this new colony the women invent a new life for themselves and become very strong individuals. They conduct a journey of a spiritual, mental and physical form via their migration.

The language that Conlon uses to tell her story is descriptive and very straightforward. The absence of bombastic language lends thoughtfulness to the fictions. The novel is like a documentary that is being acted out by the characters. It can be labelled as a historical fiction.

This historically set novel is a powerful rendition of memory and the capability of the mind to shut out the past, dislodging itself from the stark circumstances of everyday life. The novel in its own way is elegant as well as subtle in the way it renders the story of Ireland, the potato famine and the migration of the victims to Australia to build a new life, culture and diaspora. Within this tragedy of migration which entails one uprooting oneself from his/her identity and history, the fiction is suffused with humour – as are many Irish narratives that deal with tragedy, such as *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt.

The novel is set in two time frames, the present and the past. As has been stated above the Prologue begins in the year 2008. Then we are taken back in time to the potato famine. After 29 chapters of the past, in chapter 30 we face the present again, in Dublin, Ireland.

The novel presents to us the experience of capital punishment, as used to be the norm in Britain’s past. The laws used to be very stringent. Australia used to be a land where prisoners...
were sent to in order to reform them. This can be traced in Charles Dickens’s English classic novel *Great Expectations* (1861). The main character Pip has a benefactor who was deported to Australia. *Not the Same Sky* is a very insightful work of fiction which renders the story of life and death, as well as punishment via two continents and two generations.

The ending of the novel is beautiful. Conlon uses the migration of birds from one continent to another as a metaphor to describe the act of migration. During winter birds fly to sunny places which are warm and can give them food. Thus, humans are compared to birds, and their winter is when they face difficulties and hardship in their own country. To find a better future and place of residence the men or women who are victimised, either by circumstance or other forces, move away from their place of birth, uprooting themselves, their culture and background, and leaving behind a history that is neither remembered nor forgotten, like cobwebs in an abandoned house.

**Halimah Mohamed Ali**
Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

Khaled Hosseini’s *And the Mountains Echoed* sees the author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* return to his native Afghanistan once more with a story of sacrifice and its consequences. It begins in 1952 as young siblings Abdullah and Pari are led by their father Saboor across the desert, towards a meeting which will tear them apart: Pari is to be sold to a rich couple to allow the rest of the family to survive the winter, the finger cut to save the hand. We follow the consequences of this decision for those involved, and how this then affects others near them, in a series of nine narratives from different perspectives. The narration moves from the siblings’ step-mother Parwana in 1949 to Adbullah’s daughter in 2010, from a poor village in Afghanistan to the suburbs of the United States, but each story is linked to the others and the siblings in some way. It truly is a novel of echoes.

The narrative styles used for these different sections vary widely. We are first given an almost campfire-like experience with Saboor reciting a fairytale to his two children, Abdullah and Pari; this is a first-person present tense story framed by third-person past tense narration. We then move into Abdullah’s mind the following day as he walks with his father and sister toward Kabul, in a simple third-person past tense section. Parwana, Saboor’s wife and Abdullah and Pari’s stepmother, then tells the story of how she came to be with her husband in third-person present tense with flashbacks to the past. Nabi, Parwana’s older brother, gives us a letter he has written in first-person which switches between the present, at the time of his writing, and the past events that led to and followed Pari’s adoption. Idris, who lived across the street from Pari’s adoptive family as a boy, tells us of his return to Afghanistan after the war in pure present-tense. Pari’s account of her life in Paris, from her tumultuous relationship with her adoptive mother Nila Wahdati to the raising of her own children, is in third-person present tense with past flashbacks, and is also interspersed with excerpts from a magazine interview with Nila. Adel, the young son of an Afghan war criminal and the narrator who is perhaps most tenuously connected to the central story, tells us in third-person present tense of his meeting with Iqbal, Abdullah and Pari’s half-brother. Markos Varvaris, the doctor who moves into the Wahdati residence after they are gone, speaks to us in first-person present tense, again with past tense flashbacks, and finally young Pari, Adbullah’s daughter who is named for his lost sister, narrates her search for her namesake in first-person present tense with flashbacks. It is clear from this list that readers may occasionally feel lost with the shifts of both character and style, but it is a credit to the author that this feeling of displacement at the beginning of a new chapter never lasts long.

Even though the style of the novel may change completely between different sections, these are always linked together in some way. Nabi’s letter is sent to Markos and later passed on to Pari; a party mentioned in the letter forms a large part of Idris’s narrative; a photograph on the wall casually noted by Idris during the party is very important to Markos’s story. Even characters themselves tend to be linked to other characters, with the somewhat vain, beautiful Nila Wahdati being echoed later in the novel by Madeline, right down to their allegedly abusive fathers. The repetition of this particular character trope may spoil the suspense of Markos’s section for some readers by making Madeline’s behaviour predictable, but for the most part picking up on all
of these echoes and discovering the notes that reverberate throughout the novel is satisfying, especially as there are conflicts between the stories at times. Nila in particular skirts the truth on occasion to present a better image of herself in her magazine interview.

While Hosseini does deal with some confronting themes and ideas – there is a particularly harrowing scene involving a young girl and the aftermath of an axe attack – the interconnectedness of his narratives means that everything has its place. Nothing feels as if it has been added simply for shock value or to elicit emotion from readers, although there is certainly plenty of emotion in the story and the way it is written. The language may stumble at times, but also presents some effective images, as in an early scene with the two siblings:

Abdullah rolled to his back, and Pari adjusted, fitting her cheek into the familiar nook beneath his collarbone. He breathed in the coppery smell of desert dust and looked up at a sky thick with stars like ice crystals, flashing and flickering. A delicate crescent moon cradled the dim ghostly outline of its full self. (29)

The language used in scenes like this gives the story an almost fairytale-like quality, which seems to be consistent with the author’s intentions. In an interview with The Guardian, Hosseini suggested that his novel is ‘kind of like a fairytale turned on its head’. The narratives towards the middle of the book do not generally give this impression, but the initial myth-like story of the div introduces the novel in a manner reminiscent of a fairytale, and the final chapter clearly subverts these expectations. It does this quite overtly: a character believes that her problems have been solved by a ‘magic chant like a genie in a fairy tale’ (373), a song from the beginning of the novel which she repeats, but the narrator tells us she will soon realise she is mistaken. The story may begin like a fairytale, but it does not end like one. Hosseini, however, is careful not to leave us hanging with this ending. It is safe to say that the siblings do find each other again, but not in the manner that we imagine – a twist neatly foreshadowed at the beginning of the story. Everything is linked, with each section of the story echoing another part of it in some way, and the end is no exception.

Shari Argent
Rachel Hennessy, The Heaven I Swallowed (Wakefield Press, 2013)

Why does Grace, the protagonist and narrator of The Heaven I Swallowed, Rachel Hennessy’s second novel, choose to adopt Mary, a young Indigenous girl, forcibly removed from her family by the New South Wales government? Is it loneliness? Grace is a middle-aged widow, her husband, Fred, having gone missing in action during the recently concluded Second World War, and her suburban-Sydney life is a tedium enlivened only by a dissipating Christian faith and the gossipy, insincere society of a widows’ group. Is it regret? Mary was to be the name of Grace’s miscarried child, and her swooning first encounter with the adopted Mary suggests the girl is a daughter-surrogate: ‘I had dreamt of those kinds of eyes, looking up at me from my arms’ (6). Or is it patriotism, a sense of duty, which motivates her? Upon first reading about the assimilated children, Grace finds her ‘heart swelled with pride’ for her compatriots ‘helping those less fortunate to find their place in the new utopia’ (8), and she later imagines Mary to be ‘the epitome of my goodness, the difference I was making to the bustling boulevard’ (13).

In truth, Grace’s motivations feel irrelevant, for they are only surface excuses for a deeper, darker undercurrent: the delusion of white superiority that gripped Australia in the mid-twentieth century, resulting in the tragedy of the Stolen Generation. Through Grace we experience the nauseating, ingrained racism of this delusion first-hand. Disgusted by the swarthiness of her charge – ‘how black Mary’s hand was next to my skin. It implied a certain kind of dirtiness’ (12) – Grace absurdly vows to ‘keep her out of the sun, try to get her to fade a little’ (12). Later, signs of Mary’s despair are brushed aside as the wild emotions of a beast: ‘after all, she was a baser creature, closer to primal than me, more connected to passion and hunger’ (67). Even the emergence of Mary’s birthmother, who is desperate for reunion, fails to puncture Grace’s fantasy that she is the girl’s saviour:

This is what I had to keep in my mind: she could not be as good for Mary as I was. The clothes I could give her, the way of speaking, a chance to read and write, domestic knowledge, the reining in of her baser instincts. (77)

As a socio-historical symbol, Grace is effectively repellent, her every thought and action causing the contemporary Australian reader to cringe. Hennessy, however, has more ambitious plans for Grace, seeking to depict her as a complex, perhaps even sympathetic, figure. Central to this strategy is Hennessy’s casting of Grace in the role of orphan. Her parents having been dealt ‘the swift hand of death’ (75) when she was only a toddler, Grace was brought up in a convent by a group of savage nuns with ‘a love of suffering’ (49). This tragic back-story is only briefly sketched out, but its influence on Grace’s later life is emphasised by her continuing obsession with the orphan stories of classic literature: Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, and Tom Jones.

Although sympathy for Grace may elude the reader, her orphanhood does create some intriguing parallels between her life story and the narratives of the stolen children. Mary is terrified by the prospect of returning to the girls home she had been removed to, a reaction that astonishes Grace, but would not surprise any reader familiar with the Bringing Them Home report, which documents countless institutional abuses at least equal to the nuns who, Grace laments, ‘tore the skin of our hands and buttocks to shreds in emulation of the lashes laid on Jesus’ back’ (49). When Mary longs for her mother, it is a cause for Grace to recall the desperate yearnings of her own childhood: ‘how often had I created a fantasy family as a child – the perfect mother and steady father, the gaggle...
of brothers and sisters who would laugh with me’ (70). Grace’s rootlessness has left her emotionally anesthetised, living ‘as if I was outside of myself, detached and only half there, noticing foolish details’ (113), a state the Bringing Them Home report (1997) believes is common amongst members of the Stolen Generation: ‘many separated children would be likely to have difficulties in relationships because their feelings would be numbed’. 1

Once raised, however, these connections are never satisfactorily explored. In fact, the relationship between Grace and Mary, ostensibly the novel’s crux, remains largely undeveloped, barely budging an inch from its starting point. It is, instead, crowded out by a menagerie of subplots – such as the truth behind Fred’s absence, and the possible paedophilia of a neighbour – that feel irrelevant in comparison. Any reader hoping for Grace’s transformation from a symbol of white prejudice to a beacon of white reconciliation will be left disappointed – the best insight that she can eventually muster is that Mary, like herself, has secrets: ‘there were thoughts and angers and hopes and hurts I knew nothing of, little balls of pain she hid as well as I did’ (102). When Mary disappears in the novel’s second half, Grace simply absolves herself of the girl’s burden – ‘I no longer wanted her black face to belong to me’ (123), and the novel continues on without her, until a late, partial reunion is contrived.

The novel’s cover declares that ‘The Heaven I Swallowed is a compelling and confronting tale of the Stolen Generation’, but this is misleading. Mary, and the tragic generation she represents, are never more than secondary concerns in a plot focused on a white woman, Grace, attempting to make peace with a tragic past. Grace is an admirably nuanced character, and the revelations of her myriad secrets are well plotted-out, but it is difficult to concentrate on her journey when the reader knows there is a far more important story occurring off-stage, the barest hints of Mary’s inner turmoil casting everything else into shadow. Mary is a blank character, yet the spaces in her personal narrative are easily filled by any reader familiar with the Bringing Them Home report, or powerful Indigenous narratives such as Sally Morgan’s My Place and Doris Pilkington’s Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence. There is a compelling story here, but unfortunately it remains untold.

It is no coincidence that Mary’s disappearance corresponds with the novel’s most effective section. Free of distraction, the reader is able to focus on Grace, and the quiet denouement to her story is satisfying. Yet while Mary remains in Grace’s custody, the two do share some affecting moments. In one scene, Grace is bemused by a seemingly aimless pile of gum nuts and leaves on Mary’s bedside table, and instructs the girl to ‘put them in piles or rows or something. They look like rubbish’ (80). It is a clever metaphor for all the white meddling the Indigenous of this country have endured since the invasion. Despite a white protagonist, this novel cannot help but be about them: victims of a delusion beyond both one’s comprehension, and sympathy.

Alex Cothren

Kenneth Mackenzie, *The Young Desire It* introduced by David Malouf (Text Classics, 2013)

In 1937, Kenneth Mackenzie’s first novel, *The Young Desire It*, was awarded the Australian Literature Society’s gold medal. Amongst the widespread acclaim, however, there was one prevalent objection to the novel, as David Malouf recalls in his excellent foreword to Text Classic’s recently republished edition: ‘a common complaint against *The Young Desire It* is that it is a book in which … “nothing happens”.’

True, the plot is thin. It is a year-in-the-life of Charles Fox, an adolescent country boy whose idyllic life on an isolated Western Australian farm is disrupted when he is sent off to boarding school. There he must learn to cope with the bullying of his peers, the increasingly uncomfortable advances of his schoolmaster, and a strenuous academic workload. Charles’ only respite is the love of a young schoolgirl, Margaret, who, after a chance meeting back at the farm, becomes the centre of his awakening adolescent desires.

These are the bare bones of a coming-of-age narrative, but from them Mackenzie fashions a wholly muscular, hot-blooded portrait of a young man; a psychological profile so precise that every shift in Charles’ mood carries the tension of a thriller. It is amongst the best written in the genre, a true Australian classic whose power has not diminished over the generations.

The novel starts in terror, with Charles nearing school gates that loom ‘like the blind open jaws of a dead shark, sinister and smally cathedraline’ (8). After years in the company of only his mother and a handful of servants, Charles arrives with an ‘angelic innocence’ (5), entirely ignorant to the ‘the awful horror of the danger of human beings’ (61). His delicate features soon mark him as prey to a crowd of cruel boys, ‘lips curled with a certain gleaming expectancy’ (15), who carry him off to be stripped and humiliated in an empty classroom. Worse even than the physical intimidation, is the realisation that Charles’ old life, in ‘a world where he had been left alone, happily free’ (6), is over, his identity now coalesced into a society of others: ‘he had never seen so many beds; his own present insignificance began to dawn on his consciousness’ (19).

In such an environment, Charles is forced to grow up quickly, discovering a heretofore-unapped reserve of defiance, and ‘learning how to use his clenched hands’ (38). Mackenzie laments this transformation as one in which the instinctive innocence of childhood is polluted by an adult’s need for reason and suspicion: ‘The brilliance of his own dawn had gone like the day’s, clouded over by a high wind from the north-west and distressed by a questing breeze of doubt’ (96). Charles is frustrated by the loss of his ‘simple perspective of faith and innocence’, and he rails against adulthood to Margaret: ‘Can’t we just live, without thinking? It spoils everything. I was terribly happy, and now I feel sad’ (213).

The anxiety of adulthood is encapsulated perfectly in one of Charles’ masters, the Englishman Penworth. Educated at Oxford, and possessing ‘an intelligence not frequently to be met’ (247), Penworth is nonetheless deeply dissatisfied with his life, viewing his post amongst the ‘little wretches’ (27) of Australia as a sort of intellectual purgatory. When he first meets Charles, the boy is naked – victim again of the school bullies, and the sight of his pale, bare body stirs in Penworth ‘some strange sensation of pleasure and shame’ (50). The master circles his pupil for a time, confused by his own urges, and at ‘great pain to explain … what were his objects in cultivating the boy’ (118). Eventually, intellectualism gives way to
action, and Penworth, desperate to find ‘some response to his own will’ (140), kisses Charles ‘clumsily and hard on the lips’ (140). Charles is bewildered by the incident, but no more than Penworth himself, who is ‘abashed by his own damnable desire for the whiteness and innocence of the boy’ (182). Mackenzie handles this potentially sordid plotline with a deft touch: his interest is not in the scandalous nature of Penworth’s advances, but in the torment instinctive desires can bring to the rational adult mind.

The beating of Charles’ own erotic pulse begins when he meets a pale, round-faced schoolgirl named Margaret, whilst holidaying back at his mother’s farm. Appropriately for Charles, a boy ‘deeply sensitive to all weathers’ (171), Mackenzie sets the arc of their young love against the changing of the Australian seasons. They meet in autumn – the brilliant summer of Charles’ childhood has ended, and like ‘the dagger-points of the first new green coming through’ (94), his body has begun to germinate, ‘aching as though for rain’ (96). Almost miraculously, Margaret appears, her presence affecting Charles ‘as unexpectedly and enchantingly as the telling of some romantic secret’ (101). Separated over a lonely winter, they are reunited when the landscape, like their burgeoning desire, is ‘green and flowered and springing in its growth’ (188). Amongst ‘a madness of bees’ (190), they quietly gaze into each other’s eyes, and Mackenzie is perceptive enough to recognise the deep impact this confirmation of another’s lust has upon Charles: ‘its effect upon him was like that of a burst of thunder to one who has watched the lightening and waited’ (207).

Finally, comes the heady summer of the couple’s consummation. In a lengthy, glorious passage Mackenzie sends his young lovers marching through the hot day in search of a cool spot to lie down together, the heat ‘like a wave bearing them, too strong, too urgent now for pause’ (324). This should be a joyous time, and yet there is something quietly tragic about the scene; Margaret’s face is ‘flushed and grave, with a frown darkening her grey eyes’, and Charles senses something ‘moving with inexorable leisure to a close before he had realized its event’. They are free at last, and it is freedom that the young desire, but what a strange freedom, helplessly impelled as they are by ‘the terrible willingness of the flesh, and the mysterious purpose of its desire’ (325). In the end, Mackenzie gently mocks the triumphant actions of these young lovers, not because they have ended their childhood, for this is inevitable, but for doing so under ‘the illusion that what they did they did by the blind volition of their own single will’ (339).

Alex Cothren

Michael Sharkey’s *Another Fine Morning in Paradise* is a book of astonished apprehending; these gobsmacked flights of non-fiction fantasy are loud with the klaxons of existential questioning, and Sharkey’s alarms signal a particularly Australian malaise. These authentically desperate ontological pastorals manouvre less toward the aubade, mourning instead an exhausted romance with ‘the People’s Republic of No Problems’ (55). This paradise is an Australia-as-failure, where the ‘fun is obligatory, words for laughs’ (55); in this place ‘where nothing you’d think of occurs,/ and repeatedly’ (25), the brute descendants of colonisers roam territories still largely unknown as the poet looks on, irascible and jocular, woe-filled while ode-ing knowingly.

‘The Garden of Earthly Delights’, which opens the collection, is a swift meditation on the empty ambits of utopianism: how humdrum a place where everyone belongs to a leisure class of ‘Trim-limbed men and women (who) spend their days at sport and picnics’ (11), and where ‘each tomorrow they would do the same again’ (11). In this poem Sharkey exercises an uncanny gait across idealised territories where, soon enough within the impossible zones, ‘they took a vote and ended’ the equilibrium. From here the poems swirl closer to home, kinetic and energetically recording idiosyncratic movement –

The Internet tour touts the local charm:  
the faux-Victorian veneer, detention centre-style motels,

the yearly Festival of Car Yards, wine and waterfalls and sheep,  
a sky that’s pink at five p.m., and trees that God  
has polished bright that shed their skin as if they’re glad  
to see us watching, church bells banging weddings out  
throughout weekends until the strike and hum  
of workdays kicks back in and Heaven’s once again  
remote, as Heaven should be (42)

The themes here – weather and metaphysics, labour and pleasure, unions intimate and/or associative – map the logos of our weird shapes; within these sites, Sharkey is a meta-realistic training a wry eye on the disequilibrium and dissembling. His critiques sharpened, we are the ‘Objects In A Mirror (which) Are Closer Than They Appear’ (50); the poet beholds our Antipodean, once-Edenic wrong-footedness where now ‘our anthems are the hit tune of America’ (45), and culture performs amid ‘the smog-blurred ziggurats of cash’ (64). These reflective texts are satirical, dystopian but never vituperative; in the readymade zones of colonisers-now-colonised –

the bully wins  
the money, girl and car and our applause.

(50)
At heart, these (mostly) heroic couplets interrogate sites of an inauthenticity that is loud with enculturated anti-heroism. Amid the ‘MacFish’ and ‘Mack trucks’ (51), antagonists are ‘waking up and cannot face the ugly thing that’s in the mirror’ (80); these poems, then, are confrontations asking us to consider what passes as sustenance as instead a banality –

we take communion in a box: the What’s Your Beef
and Squid Delicious, All of Italy to Go, the Randy Rooster’s

breasts you won’t believe you’ve sunk your choppers into,
and at John Frum’s pub and discotheque,

a complimentary always for a friend on Topless Nights. (45, 46)

In these engulfed, inorganic and dislocated locales, Sharkey parodies the passing parades of us, understanding our malnourishment as psychic. Perhaps thunderstruck at the unassailable impoverishment, his is often a trenchant register –

Driving like the mentor of a suicide club,
passengers awash with pheromones,

designer drugs and vodka slammers, through
our Arden, close to midnight, our John Keats

of panel beaters chucks a donut even
chasing cops applaud. (46, 47)

In these sub-urban wildernesses of ‘broken glass and fists and pavement pizzas’ (47), the wildness is untamable: underlying Sharkey’s humour-filled derision, though, are the deeper contours of despair. Punters, perverts, forebears, travel guides and pilgrims, farmers, poets and Mall dwellers – citizens one and all – shape a meandering collective identity which weaves, Golem-like and often idiotically, throughout this collection; mapping populations of local fauna, the terrain is often quipped-filled … ‘Can I help yous?’ (70) echoing alongside ‘Who Do You Think You Are, Jesus? Just Fuck Off’ (44).

Sharkey is far too clever, though, to simply play out gestures of despair-into-antagonism; instead, the poet works to coax, charm, and humour readers toward self-recognition. Thus, lines such as ‘In a Silver Age, your hair, at least, is right’ (64) and ‘The Second last drink always is the one that does the damage what/ possessed me to announce I love these cocktails I could drink them/ all night long’ (80). But Sharkey also never averts his poem from a moral compunction: as in ‘of nothing, nowhere’, where there are now in the ruins of the idyll –

No, no birds for years, oh ten, yeah, twenty.
Plenty then. The whistling ducks, sandpipers,

seagulls. Clever fellers made em disappear,
and all the wetland, put a fence in. Dust there now. (48)

Sharkey is moral without moralizing, tongue often firmly wedged behind cheek; and he often shifts into the inflections of a demotic mock outrage, as in “‘Sort After” Neighborhood’ –

What use is
Heaven if the ones refused admission

can’t be sent to some Nauru or Christmas Island
of the damned to keep the ignorant in bliss? (15)

Asking readers to observe those governances which sort zones into sought-after and exclusionary places, Sharkey’s is an incisive and inclusive (and, often, one senses, fool-suffering) critique which remains astonished that morality remains the preserve of either angels (‘What would you like to do now?’ asks a bird/ that was human but chose to fly [16]) or politicians, all-too-eager and far-too-underwhelming in their rhetoric regarding the ‘overcrowding Paradise’ (79). Sharkey is singing a different tune, intelligent with bright anger that is neither aberrant nor obnoxious but instead beseeches and, in its own ethical way, is ‘full of fight’ (44). The last line is the coda that unlocks his imperative: ‘Lines I improve, boundaries erode’ (92). This book is indeed not just for laughs, though laugh you will. In our politically-moribund times, Another Fine Morning in Paradise stands as important Australian book, and perhaps a classic.

Dan Disney
Barracuda is Danny Kelly, totally dedicated to becoming a world champion swimmer whatever the cost. Barracuda is Christos Tsiolkas’s searing account of his inner life, from the child Danny to the man Dan. Danny’s Dad is a truck driver, his Mum is a hairdresser, they live in ‘dirty-pissy-scummy Reservoir’ in Melbourne’s suburban north-east. But Danny’s drive and talent win him a swimming scholarship at a private school known to us only as ‘Cunt’s College’ where he has to find his way among the spoilt sons of the rich and privileged. Never believe anyone who says there are no class divisions in Australia.

I could write about the narrative structure (complex but tight as a drum) and the characterisation (unnervingly recognisable); the point of view (always Dan/Danny’s, but switching from first to third-person) and voice (urgent, unrelenting). If I analysed all that I could find out something about how Tsiolkas compelled me to keep reading through all the venom and shame and hatred of the first part of this novel. I could write about symbolism and patterning (all precisely controlled and orchestrated) and themes, values, morality, even politics (all explicable and powerfully managed) – what he is saying – but that would be a poor surrogate for the experience of reading, fighting through, this novel. What I want to write about, if I can, is how it feels to be trapped in the thwarted, constricted mind of this young man for the few days it takes to read his story. By degrees it becomes unsettling, then upsetting, then distressing. The boy Danny is so terrifyingly at the mercy of his own driving ambition and the expectations of his family and his snarling coach, so coldly single-minded in his repudiation of everything which might impede him – his swimming rivals, any sexual release and its resulting enervation, the slightest nick in his perfect skin – that he lives on a knife-edge of violence, hatred and shame, and the sense of impending catastrophe is almost overwhelming. The man Dan is shamed by his failure, haunted by despair and hopelessness, dogged by self-loathing. As Part One ended, I was ready to cry, Christos, have mercy!

And he does. Part One is ‘Breathing In’ – holding in breath and guarding secrets and hiding feelings. Although the narrative is not chronologically linear and in both parts moves back and forth before and after the event that changes Danny’s life, Part Two is gentler. In it Dan breathes out, gradually releases his pent-up aggression and tension, forgives himself and makes peace with his father. Tsiolkas will take us to the darkest places – as he did in Dead Europe – but the undeniable faith in humanity which surfaces at the end of the earlier novel almost – almost – shades into sentimentality towards the end of Barracuda.

Some might say that at 513 pages the novel is longer than it needs to be. Few would accuse Tsiolkas of an elegant prose style. He can skewer a pretentious character or a hypocrite, but he is no satirist. There is no comedy or irony. He wants to provoke, to get under the reader’s skin. But his style is perfectly suited to his purpose, with barely a false note. And despite the jaggedness of this narrative, effected by the sometimes disorienting shifts backwards and forwards in time, there is nothing sloppy or half-baked about its construction. I was drawn compulsively into the book, and wanted nothing more than to be carried along and subjected to its buffeting without stopping to make notes, but I couldn’t help noticing how well it was pieced together, how satisfying the arc of the narrative, how many little resonances and echoes there were binding the whole work together. The tone of much criticism of this author has been suggestive of a raw, explosive, untamed talent, a rough
diamond. If this were ever true, it is true no longer. *Barracuda* is passionate and uncompromising, violent and profane, but it is a skilful, accomplished – and intensely satisfying – work of art.

Gillian Dooley
Rod Jones, *Julia Paradise* (Text Classics, 2013)

Rod Jones’s first novel, *Julia Paradise*, debuted in 1986 to critical acclaim. It promptly won the fiction award at the Adelaide Festival in 1988 and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, as well as being runner-up for the Prix Femina Étranger in France. In short, Jones’s first novel was a roaring success. Twenty-seven years on, and *Julia Paradise* is as confronting and evocative as it was in 1986.

Set in Shanghai in the 1920s, the narrative follows Kenneth ‘Honeydew’ Ayres, a Scottish physician and disciple of Freud, who psychoanalyses the homesick wives of British expatriates. The exoticism of China, among other things, appears to have a maddening effect on these colonial women, and Ayres is never short of patients. To Ayres, the string of wives suffering nervous disorders and various drug addictions has become ‘common to the point of banality’ (13), and when first presented with the drooling and barely lucid Julia Paradise, Ayres does not immediately see anything special or interesting about her case.

*Julia Paradise*, the Australian wife of a Christian missionary, suffers from Zoopsia, a condition which causes her to have vivid and terrifying hallucinations. Her visions typically take the form of snakes, toads and vermin, the ‘classically loathsome creatures’ (11), and can throw her into a fit of violent terror or paralyse her with fear. She has also taken to wandering the streets at night, taking photos of Shanghai’s decrepitude under the belief that she is a ‘serious photographer’ (13), while falling into sleep-like states during the day and occasionally speaking in snatches of German. Concerned for her health, her husband, the reverend Willie Paradise, takes her to Ayres for psychoanalysis.

Ayres, an obese and self-indulgent hedonist, has little interest in Julia Paradise until she tells him tales of her childhood, during which she was a victim of rape and incest at the hands of her father. Johannes Kohl, Julia’s father, is fascinated by images of birds mating. He lured the young Julia into a sexual relationship by introducing it as a game he called ‘playing birds’ (53). There is a theme running through this novel of strong, large men using small, frail women and girls to satisfy their urges, beginning with Julia. Aroused by the alleged origin of Julia’s trauma, Ayres begins to use her to satisfy his own deviant desires.

*Julia* is not the only woman to suffer in this manner. Rather, down a particular street in Shanghai, one Ayres is familiar with, child prostitutes lift their skirts and expose themselves to potential clients. Once the reader is aware of this it becomes clear why so many Western women in this story succumb to nervous disorders and drug addictions, and are only miraculously cured of their conditions once they are sent home; perhaps these Western women are not suffering from a simple culture shock, but are instead maddened by the violence and immorality they are forced to witness, and ignore, every day. Even Ayres is forced to confront the sadness of his own depravity when he visits a painter friend to ‘make use’ of one of his young models. Ayres views the painting of Lucy, a young prostitute, which the artist has been working on. In the painting the girl is nude and has a pained expression on her face:

> Morgan has captured there the sadness of a man’s receding desire, a desire not entirely satisfied, and on the girl’s face, the despair of repeated rape ... the suddenness and force of his movement makes her cry out as he bends her forward against the wall. As he fumbles with his trouser buttons the sadness and the pity of it sticks in his throat. (108)
The entirety of *Julia Paradise* reads like the vague recollection of a detailed dream. In parts it is lucid and the plot is easy to follow, but then it flows into a new narrative that feels unreal and in that moment it is not possible to determine if what you are reading is real thought or action, or a perverse fantasy. Jones’s prose is fractured, and the reader is forced to chase the tail of the last of Julia’s recollections, while not being sure of exactly what it is they are chasing. Perhaps the intention of this is to give the reader a better understanding of Julia’s condition; you may see the colourful snake of the narrative in the periphery of your vision, but as soon as you move to focus on it, it will disappear. *Julia Paradise* is mesmerising, and some paragraphs require immediate re-reading just so you can indulge in Jones’s eloquence.

However, no amount or manner of reflection can stop this book from being an unsettling read. The vivid images so adroitly conjured by Jones, along with the fractured narrative, have the effect of a bad dream that fogs the mind and refuses to clear. Maybe the reader can recognise the unreality of a nightmare, but there is no denying that the horrors in this book exist. Jones offers no salvation and little comfort, and this could leave a reader with the sensation of unfinished business.

Nevertheless, a frustrating lack of resolution and redemption take little away from what is an intense and confronting novel. Equal parts beautiful and repugnant, *Julia Paradise* is worthy, and desirous, of a second reading.

Lauren Dougherty

Exactly what readers can expect from Heather Taylor Johnson’s third book of poetry is evident in its title. *Thirsting for Lemonade* aptly characterises expat Taylor Johnson’s poems about being an American in Adelaide, South Australia, from her volume’s nostalgic depiction of saccharine childhood Americana to its fixation on the heat of the Australian summer. In these two worlds, liquids such as lemonade become agents of epiphany and soul-satisfaction. This motif is central to the book, which is divided accordingly into two major sections (‘Things’ and ‘Spaces’) by a core of eight ‘Water Poems’, of which this one, ‘Lemonade’, is typical:

There are places where time rests a little longer.
I wore ponytails, had unshaved legs, my problems
were small and monumental.
I seemed to sing pop songs all day long.

There is a portable snack stand at a beach
a backyard with a jungle gym
a picnic in a wooded park
freshly squeezed lemonade.

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it is the glint
the sparkle of sun on fruit, the straightforward joy
of quenching thirst: lemonade, just
lemonade.

Liquids are transliminal in Taylor Johnson’s poems, bridging generations, nations and seasons, and sensuous in their many forms: alcohol, rain, ocean waves. Liquid is thus a vehicle for embodiedness that transcends the expatriate’s perpetual concern with displacement. Taylor Johnson is at her best when the things and places of her poems become peripheral to her more liquid abstractions of physicality and emotion. In the poem ‘Split’, for example, an ironic list of cultural appropriations meant to convey the essence of US-Australian identity is redeemed by the far more measured, sensorial final passage:

and the smell of the sea, how it drifts to me
wherever I am when dusk clears its perfect throat
and floats over the city’s red roofs

and seeps between the gum nut trees
and the way we rejoice in a morning rain
and the scent of eucalyptus it brings:
these monumental things.

What the poems sometimes lack in musicality is made up for by Taylor Johnson’s clear sense of popular reference points, which wield great emotional heft. Yet the juxtapositions she sets up by way of these, between past and present and between the US and Australia, are too often trite and clichéd. Thus, the past is a giddy and blithe whirlwind of college, sex, ‘binge drinking and finding my soul’, while adulthood is a concession to committed love, child-rearing and suburbia. The ‘Things’ that populate her first section, embodying relationships and experiences, are distinct but unilluminating: Australianness as a Hills Hoist; heartbreak, a vinyl record on repeat and Cheerios the distillation of a typical American childhood. Moreover, there is no real sense of place in the poems of the third section, ‘Spaces’; rather, place is reduced to the space ‘between what we know’, an inventory of touchstones:

The big sky
my mother’s face
pizza sauce served thickly.
‘Awesome’ ‘cookie’ ‘garbage can’

Port dolphins
gumtree bark
the footy the ocean
a roasted chook.

An exception is the poem ‘Things’, which captures tenderly the poignant awkwardness of an adult family reuniting to discuss with their parents their wills. Here, the cherished ‘things’ and future inheritances that connect a daughter to her parents – the Rolling Stones and a baby grand piano – are personal and distinctive, and the uncanniness of a childhood home is clear but understated in the image of familiar crockery in different drawers. As a result, the poem has a veracity that sets it apart from many others in the volume, with their more generic emblems for common experiences.

What Taylor Johnson’s things and places really convey is a sense of distance and connection. Her poetry records unashamedly the sentimental attachments that many readers will recognise, which strand us all between homes, times and selves. The book will be accessible to most readers. In fact, the glossary at the end of the volume is mostly redundant for the Australian reader: curiously, as a Melbouranian, I found Taylor Johnson’s depiction of the US more familiar to me than her Adelaide. Hers is the instantly recognisable America I know from advertisements and TV shows. Similarly, I suspect that North American readers will recognise her dry, hot, ugg booted Australia, even if her portrait of America is superficial at times. Both Australians and Americans reading this volume will
thus experience moments of recognition but also, more powerfully, a sense of foreignness, and herein lies the potency of Taylor Johnson’s work: she allows her reader to see ‘home’ from the outside and so to experience the emigrant’s state of constant in-betweenness.

Sarah Dowling

What’s not to love about love – or love poems? They allow us to indulge in expressions of admiration and longing. They touch on our better behaviour and wishes, our devotion and commitment; and they can provide a platform for addressing the sense of loss implicit in unreciprocated desire. Importantly, they permit us to wallow in our emotions in a place where hate seldom has anywhere to hang its hat.

But love poetry also inhabits a territory that is often unliterary; where its exponents might expect they need nothing more than the urge to tell about their emotional state. A fair critic would not deny the possibly real sentiments underlying such poetry, but should also not turn away from cracks in the design of the material. So it is with this anthology: while the notion of collecting love poems is nominally a ‘good thing’, the quality of the poems is sometimes found wanting.

Editor Mark Tredinnick is a prize-winning poet himself. One of the pleasing aspects of *Australian Love Poems* is his warm and insightful introduction. Sure, there are statements about how many submissions were made and how hard it was to narrow if not winnow the selection, but those almost obligatory expressions (and statistics) aside, he clearly conveys knowledge of his subject. One might also be tempted to surrender to the well-honed quotable quotes that, though reflecting a truth, still have a greeting card flavour about them:

Poems are the prayers of the secular world (1)

Love is the poetry of the body and the mind (5)

Love may be poetry’s most natural habitat (6)

One enters love like the underworld, or the future (11)

Then again, it is difficult for a poet to completely avoid a poetically telling mode when explaining an editorial outlook.

Many thematic anthologies resort to a simple chronological ordering plus a long reach into the past, in the manner of Betjeman and Taylor’s *English Love Poems* (1957). This may also get around those nagging copyright and royalties issues. Alternatively, they label sections for a linear journey from courtship to rapturous union, and perhaps subsequent loss. These are the volumes you are liable to find in bookshops where the shelf says ‘Verse & Sentiment’.

Before returning to Tredinnick’s anthology, I would like to look further about the field. James Fenton’s *The New Faber Book of Love Poems* takes a different tack compared with the kind of book I described a moment ago. He does not much explain the rationale behind his choices, and though they stretch back to the seventeenth century, he settles for the serendipitous effects of alphabetical sorting by author name: ‘as useful a way as any of jumbling the poets up, so that they seem to speak to each other, and hear each other sing’.\(^1\) Old and new lie together in a manner that allows the reader to see correspondences between nearby pieces as the reading itself progresses. You might think that such ordering would tend to diminish such connections but Fenton has chosen carefully, and it works. Lauris Edmond’s *New Zealand Love Poems* (Oxford University Press, 2000) is another title that

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shrugs safe pathways, tending to prefer the subversive and oblique in both its poems and their arrangement.

One can also find poems collected for reading at weddings, frequently clichéd and cloying, though in my experience often well received at the functions themselves. Perhaps an exception is Adam O’Riordan’s edited collection *When Love Speaks* (Vintage Books, 2011), which is inclined to take more risks and to credit the audience with more intelligence, despite the somewhat conventional structure of following the order of the Western wedding service. O’Riordan, like Fenton, organises material so that one poem may seem to talk to another, and he welcomes the strange, ecstatic, and even unhappy poem.

Thus we do not need to resign ourselves to *Australian Love Poems* necessarily conforming to a pedestrian rationale and organisation. Thankfully, Tredinnick offers its poems in sections that avoid some of the more predictable categories.

But then there is the abiding question of what one wants from love poetry, anyway. The answers may be various. It could be to answer curiosity about how others discover joy in love or suffer for the lack of it. It may be to explore the art of the writing, the technical virtuosity in the crafting of a poem. It may even be to borrow lines for reading to a loved one. And the varied moods of the poems, too, are to be tasted: elegiac, tentative, headlong, joyous, realist, hard-nosed, mournful, wistful, and so on.

There are many poems to savour in *Australian Love Poems 2013*, but also quite a few whose place I would argue is undeserved. Some poems in the anthology adopt a direct approach to tackling affairs of the heart, at least outwardly. Stephen Magee’s ‘Brief loves’ is simply sketched and unadorned, denying a numbness that nevertheless informs the narrator’s voice. It opens:

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And then one day
he simply said
there was someone
else (280)
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Blending the heightened pleasure of love with the sorrow of absence, Chris Mansell’s delightful ‘Once, Spring Morning’ (285) takes a similarly uncomplicated path towards its final season metaphor. Nothing is overdone in its delivery of not so little griefs. Michael Crane achieves a lovely note of humour in his over the top ‘On her Wedding Day’:

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Who is going to tell the groom
that a thousand men are in mourning,
and that limousines parked
on the street have her name
engraved on their number plates? (186-7)
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Jennifer Compton works gentle wonders with her poem on love between older people in ‘He Nods Off’ (199), as a woman senses loss foreshadowed when she spies her partner having fallen asleep in a chair out of doors. In a very different mode, Anne Walsh Miller’s ‘Everyone Waiting for a Cab’ (254) is a delirious gush of words that a reader can surf across and yet not lose touch with the detail. It as if someone rather tipsy has just embarked on a monologue with a lover, driven by an irresistible longing to pour out a previously dammed excess of emotion.
Erin Shiel sensually essays a reunion of lovers in ‘Nacred’, painting with tender detail that is restrained, and also offers a judiciously poised open ending. It begins:

He arrives like a southerly. She ushers him in. Hungry
As he always was. They have three hours… (89-90)

Kate Lumley’s ‘La Petite Mort’ (316) is a direct and consummate rendering of a chance encounter on a jet flight that reveals one person’s experience of death and love intertwined. The hint of taboo promotes rather than undermines the feeling of the lovers’ commitment.

On the other hand, there were less successful works such as the worn imagery of Ben Adams’ ‘love’ (21), Stevie Nicholson’s ‘text poem’ (30), which seems to be included simply because it employs a txt format (sorry, already old hat), and Fiona McIlroy’s saccharine ‘Just One Kiss’ (32): ‘the fire in the belly / of two poets / about to ignite’. Joe Dolce’s ‘Estrella’ ballad (39) is scarcely juvenile. Rereading it reveals no apparent irony that might explain its wrenching style.

Anthologies are often curious beasts, uneven but hopefully with highlights, and Australian Love Poems 2013 is no exception. Love poems have no innate immunity from the critical eye, and the act of assembling an anthology of love poems – while it might be opportunistic and even occasionally cynical – must be capable of withstanding scrutiny. John Betjeman (paraphrasing Samuel Taylor Coleridge, without attribution) writes that ‘poetry, like no other art, can crystallize by using the right words in the right order those thoughts and conditions which love provokes’.

A test of a poetry volume’s worth to its reader might be to see which poems one returns to, which are memorable, or which ones acquire a dot next to their listing on the contents page, for instance, because they had an impact on first encounter. Mark Tredinnick writes that, ‘Poetry keeps its secrets; but … tells us our own. All good art performs this holy trick’ (7). You won’t find any pages listing individual poems and poets at the front of this book, by the way, but there is an index of poems’ titles at the back – and mine has lots of dots. I guess that means that this anthology is speaking some of my secrets, if not all of the time.

Steve Evans

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I am a Peter Goldsworthy fan and to date have read, and enjoyed, *Maestro*, *Three Dog Night*, and *Everything I Knew*. Goldsworthy’s collection of short stories, *Gravel*, was my introduction to the author’s work and my favourites from this collection remain ‘The Nun’s Story’ and ‘Shooting the Dog’. My enjoyment of Goldsworthy’s writing derives not only from his storytelling ability but also from his creation of ordinary characters living their everyday lives. As a writer he seems to enjoy taking the unexpected direction, and is not afraid that it may not be the most comfortable choice for the reader.

*Wish* is such a novel. It proved to be divisive among the author’s loyal following and resulted in losing him some loyal fans. The novel’s voice is that of its narrator, J.J. (6). Structured as four books, each one provides a distinctive layer that constructs important segments from a year of his life.

Book One introduces J.J.’s background, his personality, his obsessive nature and his respect for the deaf community and their culture:

> I’m not deaf, but I’ve always felt more at home in Sign. Both my parents are deaf. Deaf as posts. Deaf as adders, deaf as beetles. And proud as peacocks. Deaf Pride long before there was a word, or a sign, for it. I learnt to speak with my hands from birth, there was no other way of reaching my parents. (6)

In his thirties, J.J. has recently experienced a messy divorce. He’s drifting through life, lacking in self-esteem, feeling lonely and isolated having moved back to live in his parents’ home. He describes them as ‘two small neat people in a small neat house, most comfortable, finally, just with each other’ (48).

J.J. returns to teaching at the Deaf Institute, where one of his former students, Jeremy Hinkley, is now the coordinator. Jeremy’s patronizing attitude doesn’t help J.J.’s flagging self-worth:

> He smiled indulgently. ‘You might notice a few changes about the place, J.J.’ … He leant back, wallowing in his armchair, savouring the sweetness of the moment; his former teacher sitting in his office, cap in hand. … ‘We’ve been developing a different … philosophy.’ … he signed the last word, a half-familiar hand-shape, borrowed from Amesland – American Sign Language. (10)

Hinkley’s body language and personal comments regarding J.J.’s failed marriage and the parting shot ‘to feel free to take some of my classes J.J. … I’d like to think I could be of help’ (12), is not well received. J.J. loves teaching and states that his ‘most satisfying relationships have been with students’ (11), relationships he views ‘as a kind of love … selfless and pure … dependent on a likeness of mind … a journeying together’ (11).

Once more in the classroom, the initially hesitant J.J.’s confidence quickly returns and the class becomes relaxed, responding well to his teaching style. Things are moving along nicely until the entrance of late arrivals Clive Kinnear and his wife Stella disrupts the rapport between teacher and students. The couple are animal liberationists who have enrolled in Basic Sign as they want to be

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1 ‘Animal Tales’, First Tuesday Book Club, Jennifer Byrne [http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s2288030.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s2288030.htm)

able to continue educating their mute ‘adopted daughter’ Eliza (40). Their facility and hunger to learn Sign is a joy to J.J., and as classes progress, they rapidly become ‘teacher’s pets’ (51). A friendship seems to be developing between them and J.J., lonely and vulnerable to their flattery – blissfully unaware, he doesn’t consider they may have another motive. The discovery that they are pursuing him to privately tutor Eliza disappoints even as it intrigues J.J. (105).

As Stella flirts with him, and the coldly self-contained and logical Clive shares ideas and information about his research and writing, Clive and Stella eventually reveal that Eliza is a fully mature, eight-year-old biologically engineered gorilla, liberated from a laboratory where experiments in communication between animals and humans is being undertaken (125). Eliza has been learning basic Sign. Finally J.J. meets the intended pupil. His first reaction is one of awe, but as Stella urges Eliza to perform J.J. is cynical about any real skill (124). Eventually J.J. takes the job.

In Book Two, J.J. and Eliza’s teacher-student relationship develops. It makes for enjoyable reading, even though a corner of my mind retained a sense of disbelief. Eliza proves an adept student, quickly adopting the Sign nickname of Wish (159). J.J.’s no longer drifting: the daily sessions with Wish/Eliza become the high point for him, his enjoyment growing to the point of obsession.

Books One and Two form the larger part of the novel; they’re engaging and contain many delightful moments. Books Three and Four are quite short in comparison but they present the biggest challenge to the reader. I had to take a break from the novel when reading Book Three. In fact I put it aside fully intent on quitting at that point. But I couldn’t let it go, and returned after a day or two to complete the novel. I’m glad I did. These last two books made me feel anger, disgust and deep sadness in turn.

Essentially a love story, Wish explores a love of language and a curiosity about animal intelligence, as well as issues surrounding the ethics and moral dilemmas of animal experimentation.

It looks into the world of the deaf with empathy, although I wondered what the deaf community felt about the context in which such insight is provided (101). The illustrations of hands using Sign, which appear throughout the novel, work well in conjunction with the text. There are passages of almost poetic prose, such as ‘how to write of these things here? How to pin a pair of fluttering hands – the wings of a butterfly, a bird – to a flat page? (6) or ‘the passion, the ballet of eye and brow, mouth and tongue, the little shrugs and body mimes, the complete performance’ (7).

James Bradley’s Animal Farm introduces this Text Classic of the original 1995 publication with a well-put passage:

it is difficult not to be amazed that a world of meaning so different from the one we inhabit lies close at hand … mainstream society’s casual marginalizing of the deaf and their culture … a failure to comprehend the possibility of other, quite different ways of being … as we strive to teach dolphins and birds to speak and apes to sign, our solipsism blinds us to … richly complex worlds of meaning quite unlike our own. (XII)

What is it that makes us human? What differentiates us from animals? Can there be meaningful friendship between humans and animals based on intelligence? Or in the end is it basic instinct that governs? Do animals really think, learn and reason or is it mere repetitious copycat behaviour seeking to please the dominant human? What is, and where should we draw, the moral line-in-the-sand in this debate? Goldsworthy doesn’t attempt answers, he raises ideas, leaving readers to love or hate the novel, but his desire seems to be to provoke readers to think deeply.

Kay Hart
Georgette and my mother were cousins. They both lived in Paris and used to see a great deal of each other in their youth. They had quarrelled one day over an absurd question of family inheritance … In her anger, my mother had called Georgette a grabbing harpy, but Georgette took this observation rather badly. She had no doubt hoped no one would ever discover this flaw in her character …

A vain hope indeed, as readers will realise upon their first encounter with Georgette in this story. Set in postwar Paris, *Chalk, Cheese & Caviar* is an autobiographical work where the author remains on the periphery, observing the lives of Georgette and her family. Accordingly, the title refers to the vastly different natures of Georgette’s three daughters Claudette, Justine and Nicole; the narrative details their growing up and the separate turns their lives take in adulthood. In her dual role of author and narrator, Etiennette Fennell illustrates clearly that although you cannot choose your family, you can still love them, and forgive them their faults.

The self-styled matriarch of the family, Georgette is petulant, spiteful and grasping by turns. Motherhood is both the shield behind which she hides her insecurities, and the weapon she wields without compromise against her daughters, seeking to bend them to her will: ‘They were told so often they were failures, that they were beginning to believe it. Their mother being the person they trusted most, she must have been right’ (24). In the great cultural centre of Paris, the girls lead a cloistered existence dominated by Georgette, who does not allow them to pursue interests outside the home: ‘[U]ntil they married, the girls’ days, outside of school, would be spent with household duties … That was the best training they could have since that was what their lives were going to be about’ (24). Georgette also subscribes to antediluvian ideas of class and racial superiority, which surface sharply after her middle daughter Justine brings a black schoolmate home to play one afternoon. Bewildered by her mother’s prejudice, and confined by the restrictions placed upon her daily life, Justine begins to foster a rebellious attitude, but fearing Georgette’s repercussions, keeps it to herself.

Only Nicole, the youngest daughter, manages to break free of her mother’s sphere of influence. At the age of six, she heard a violin played for the first time and was enthralled by the music, but her request for violin lessons was rebuffed stridently by Georgette. Two years later, little has changed. Nicole, beginning to understand that her mother, ‘instead of being a loving mother, was setting out to undermine her and what she wanted to do with her life’ (3), appeals instead to her quiet and unassuming father. Alfred, who was married to Georgette ‘not quite against his will, but without enthusiasm’ (5–6), is far more sympathetic to Nicole’s needs, and arranges the necessary violin lessons without Georgette’s knowledge. Georgette never forgives her daughter for what she sees as a flagrant act of disobedience, and maintains an attitude of hostility towards her ever after. Claudette and Justine, too, are jealous of their sister’s achievements and disparage them wherever possible, dismissing her as a ‘misfit’ (31). Claudette goes further by culling some of Nicole’s precious books (she is the only one in the family who enjoys reading), and informing on her to Georgette for reading when she should be doing chores. However, Nicole’s music and her innate strength of character sustain her even within her emotionally starved and abusive home environment; she blossoms into a confident young woman and skilled performer, and embarks upon a successful career as a violinist.

The family’s fortunes change when Georgette inherits a fortune from an elderly countess, having befriended her with some such ends in mind. Etiennette herself enters the picture now; as mentioned earlier, her mother and Georgette were cousins, and Etiennette has fond childhood memories of her aunt.
memories of playing with Claudette, Justine and Nicole. After so many years apart, their reconciliation is not what Etiennette expects at all. She finds Georgette and her elder daughters greatly changed in personality, and wonders whether this is a direct consequence of their sudden wealth. All three women impress her as selfish and materialistic, ‘bound by convention and the false niceties of the bourgeoisie’ (68). As adults, both Claudette and Justine have become domineering and overbearing, reducing even Georgette’s presence during their superficial conversations. Meanwhile, Nicole has married and is rapidly attaining fame and success as a musician; she enjoys a full and fruitful life quite alien to that of her sisters.

The strength of this tale lies in its characters, some sympathetic and likeable, some odious and tiresome, but all, ultimately, very human. We see this most early in the adult Justine, with her frustration of an unfulfilled life and a deep-seated fear of being alone. She attempts to give her life meaning by taking an aromatherapy course (and ostentatiously referring to herself as ‘Doctor’ ever after), and seeks the love she desperately craves by adopting a bohemian, sexually adventurous lifestyle. Her selfishness, vanity and lack of consideration for others are not merely a façade for the greater good within; she is a thoroughly flawed character. Yet her behaviour is understood, if not justified, by her longing to be loved, to matter to someone. She also demonstrates a kindness and tolerance at odds with her upbringing; she has never subscribed to her mother’s xenophobia, and is completely unruffled when her daughter Lara gives birth to a black son: ‘I will love him whatever shade he turns out to be. I can’t see what difference the colour can make to a person’ (150).

Claudette is the other extreme case in point. She is the daughter most like Georgette, and has inherited her mother’s opinions and prejudices in full. Parsimonious to a fault, she never dines out, never attends a concert or visits a museum, and walls herself up as closely as Georgette always did. Yet after the birth of Lara’s baby boy Guillaume, Claudette feels an unexpected rush of love, and is mortified by how hollow and insular her life and views now seem. She begins to question her childhood treatment of her sister Nicole, and to wonder how much of herself is the result of blindly following Georgette’s example. She warms to Lara’s black in-laws and begins cultivating a new tolerance, as well as an appreciation for music and beauty. Claudette’s awakening, and the transformation that takes place under her determined efforts, is deeply moving, and when little Guillaume expresses a desire to play the violin like his aunt Nicole, Claudette’s response is very different to Georgette’s.

Nicole is always lovely, and even Georgette redeems herself somewhat in later life, when she ‘becomes the type of loving mother with Lara, giving her a stable and happy life, that she should have done with her own daughters’ (74), but it is the complex portrayals of Claudette and Justine that resonate most powerfully. Etiennette Fennell has delivered a formidable insight into not only the relationship between mothers and their children, but also the lasting damage that can result from a mother who is, in many ways, still a child herself.

Kate Hayford

Sushi Das’s memoir deals with the ramifications of being a daughter of Punjabi migrants in 1970s Britain. Das, in a darkly humorous tone, details her ongoing battles against the image of the good Indian daughter ‘under control’ (104), from writing ‘Geldof is God’ (71) on the headboard and attempting to avoid an arranged marriage. From a reader’s perspective, Das can be viewed a ‘thrice displaced migrant’ negotiating a variety of migrant discourses between Indian, British and Australian cultures. Themes of home, belonging and space reverberate through her work as well as the negotiation of diasporic identities in transnational and transcultural spaces by the narrator. Das appears to be seeking a centrality, constantly renegotiating her identity within the paradigms of her conflicted personal history.

The most striking image within the memoir is that of a suitcase. As a young girl Das packs one as part of her plan to run away from home, writing SIOUX (7) as a play on her name, reflecting her bicultural struggle; her father carries one on his migrant journey into Britain and Das again packs when moving to Australia. The book comes full circle with Das’s daughter Lotus, named after India’s national flower and the offspring of an interracial marriage in a multicultural society, using Das’s old suitcase to stock her treasured toys (276).

Avtar Brah writes that ‘At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey.’ (180). Das’s father sets out in 1963 as part of a wave of migrants from the Commonwealth seeking to make a new home in the West. The book reverberates with images familiar from movies such as *Bend it Like Beckham*. The young Sushi, like Jassi, the young Punjabi protagonist of *Bend it Like Beckham*, identifies herself as ‘an outsider in her parents’ culture’ (13). Where Das excels is in her ethnographic detailing and clear images of the control exerted by the British-Punjabi community’s hegemonic discourse, vividly evoked through the narrator’s eyes. ‘Izzat’ (90) or the ‘honour’ was the community’s byword and in 1970s Britain ‘losing face’ (106) was the greatest fear. Later, Das appreciates the sacrifice her parents made for her as their community shunned them following her first marriage, to a white man.

Das’s dark humour leaves the reader torn between laughter and sympathy as she navigates between her mother’s disappointment at her unimpressive bust, comparing her breasts to two aspirins on an ironing board (18), and the unfairly high value placed on the Indian male child (16). Das’s quirky humour surfaces in her portrayal of her mother’s struggle with the English language and her father’s obsession with keeping ‘undesirable elements’ (79), namely white boys, out of his daughters’ lives. This provides the reader with candid glimpses into the dichotomy of the Punjabi-British migrant existence. Das’s humour emerges again in her gently funny etching of intercultural communications in instances such as her mother offering to dye Tom Hyland’s white hair black on their wedding day (266).

Essentially, the book details the story of several marriages; the arranged marriages of Das’s parents and her sister Vin and her two marriages to ‘outsiders’. Das appears contemplative never judgemental in her analysis of her parents’ marriage, especially as she is simultaneously moved yet bewildered by the Hindu *Karvachauth* ritual of a woman fasting for the husband’s longevity (51). Das refers to arranged marriages which are not forced as ‘mere matchmaking’ (267), raising her voice only against forced marriages (137). She cautions Australia where there is ‘no more awareness of Indian culture apart from cricket and curry’ (268) and yet where multiculturalism is now the trend,

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to beware of similar problems given the influx of migrants from more tradition-bound cultures. Das questions the structures or lack thereof of the Indian community worldwide in support of abused women (130). While it might be taken by some as proof of Das’s status as cultural outsider, she raises a valid point. Das deems the romanticising of Indian arranged marriages by Westerners at large and the British in particular as ‘toadying’ to Indian culture.

Das’s move to Australia as a British Indian migrant affords her deeper insights into issues of national identity and the sense of being an outsider for a long stretch of time (228-9). She identifies with her mother’s feelings of alienation: ‘I now understood how Mum must have felt washing nappies in cold water and pushing me around in a pram in the park whole day.’ (231). She also faces the fact that being an outsider takes on many hues as her first husband, John Hobson, comments it is better to be Indian than a ‘pom’ in Australia (232).

Das limns disturbing images of racism within the Anglo-Saxon discourses from the British boy openly taunting her of smelling of curry (60) to the Australian woman at the National Library cruelly asking her to move away because she smells bad. (234). Most disturbing in the latter instance is the utter silence of other spectators. As Das says, she felt ‘small, humiliated and very far from safety’ (ibid). Das speaks with the voice of a migrant who bore the full brunt of a Britain which was not sensitively attuned to the culture of its former colonies; yet in case of marriage, both times, she has felt culturally and emotionally attuned to Anglo-Saxon males. Das’s second marriage to the much older Tom Hyland also reflects a growing emotional maturity. She and Hyland appear to have translated a friendship into a marriage, unlike the illicit and exciting passion of her relationship with the ‘other’ as with her previous relationship with John Hobson.

Das is clear that every individual should be free to make his or her mistakes (248). There is a bit of a Walt Disney feel to the last few pages with the utter camaraderie of the family reunion in the US and with Das in her sister’s comfortable lounge musing on the end of the era of arranged marriages in the family (280). Ironically, at times Das appears to be at a cultural crossroads, questioning her decisions and wondering if an arranged marriage would have spelt future happiness and perhaps growth of love (243). But Das concludes on a note of reconciliation and a deep appreciation for her parents who have ultimately and gracefully accepted it all, whether it is Vin’s move to the US, her brother Raja’s British-Chinese wife, or both her marriages. She views the ‘tyrannical distance of Australia’ (237) as a ‘boon’ which helped resolve her issues with her family. Overall, Deranged Marriage is worth a read as the migrant female voice cuts across cultures, compelling us to recognise common human follies.

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy

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Ali Alizadeh, Transactions (UQP, 2013)

It seemed nothing short of serendipitous when I surveyed the pile of review books on the editor’s desk the day before I flew via Dubai to visit my daughter in Malta, and found Transactions (2013) by Ali Alizadeh, a novel at least partly about a ‘spoilt Emirati girl’, set in airports and transit cities around the world.


Transactions fits cross-genre: part thriller, part realist drama, part satire, part diatribe against global capitalism and every other patriarchal ism. It seems that Australian/Iranian academic, poet – shortlisted for the 2013 Prime Minister’s Literary Award for Ashes in the Air – and prose writer Ali Alizadeh agrees with Naomi Klein about our contemporary preoccupation with skanky sex, materialism and celebrity, and our failure to face up to the effects of globalisation on humanity and on climate.

Yes, Mum. We really are a global village. A simple village, with only one dusty street flanked by friendly locals and their quaint huts. And our street leads to the hell of exploitation. Lies. Our friendly country folk are inbred vampires. Our pretty cottages, built upon layer upon layer of charred skeletons (148).

Power disparities that form along lines of gender, religion, race and class, and the darker secrets of globalisation, ignite the dramas of the book. Sex as a commodity and tool of oppression lubricates the mix: erotic asphyxiation, voyeurism, double penetration, bondage, rape.

A third person present-tense narrative prefaces the first story in Transactions, inviting readers to identify with a girl writing on her laptop at Schiphol airport, a blue aura emanating from her lapis lazuli pendant.

In the first story, the girl, vegan ABC journalist Anthea writes a letter to her mother now deceased. This epistolary narrative reveals how she introduces herself on a same-sex dating website to the CEO of a ‘social empowerment’ company. Her Maoist poet, Afghan mother has been ‘eliminated’ by the CIA and her daughter seeks revenge.

Readers will get to know her work over many stories and by her calculated intelligence. Globally mobile – ‘I probably spend more time on air than on land’ – she is e-connected, cashed up and hyper-reactive (146). The action begins with an extraordinary act of violence that will offer readers who like kick-arse females engaging traction. Further into the narrative, they might find themselves cheering. The slippage between one damaged character and another, one story and the next, all linked by ironic hooks and reversals, carries the dissonances of the plot: strange relationships between neighbours, clients, colleagues, gamers, daughters, and fathers, too. The central motif of the lapis lazuli pendant, with its penetrating Phoenix eyes, works metaphorically as restorative justice, Empress, a new beginning and, ironically, an empty sign (145).

In each story, reasons for the flip from antagonist to protagonist, and victim to perpetrator rapidly become obvious. Deep historical wounds have been inflicted, for the most part by males on females: rape, trafficking and abuse. Apart from Anthea, the cast includes Sumia, spoiled,
anti-Semitic daughter of a Dubai sheik and first-person narrator of three stories, Zhang Lin, successful gamer who takes up a dangerous challenge, Lily, infertile New Zealander, Karina, disaffected university student turned sex worker from the Ukraine, gay writers and actors who are not exempt from cruelty, directors of NGOs and their African clients and an Iranian nuclear scientist. Female characters seize life by the throat but also play with your mind as by turns they elicit your sympathy and abhorrence.

On first reading, and despite the links between them, nailing down the characters’ identities may challenge you. Halfway through the book, while being sprayed for foreign insects, grounded on the plane for an hour on the Larnaca tarmac in Cyprus, I constructed an elaborate graphic organiser to help me separate and link the characters and their narrative strands.

The story moves fast. Snappy dialogue imbued with tension kept me turning pages. Eventually the vignettes helped me visualise a vendetta that leaves behind a trail of dead: strangled, drowned, hung, poisoned, raped and driven to suicide. Victims, cowed and repentant go meekly and swiftly to their death. In a different book this might undermine tension. Balancing humour and social commentary, Alizadeh does not allow his cast of zealots to prevaricate and yet, one character draws this distinction: ‘I will not be cruel. I will not enjoy my work’ (146); then in retrospect, ‘I’m feeling uneasy, I’m becoming cruel’ (146). I felt implicated, as a reader and as a global citizen.

He sets up paradoxes between humanity and country, and justice and revenge, to explicate themes of power and exploitation. He uses multiple narrative perspectives, hooks and reversals, to lambast gender, class and race stereotypes. He employs butterfly effects not unlike those used by Mexican film director Alejandro González Iñárritu in Babel (2006), suggesting that the world is smaller than it has ever been and that we are all responsible for each other. His characters are globally connected via travel, fast internet, social aspiration and sexual commerce. We discern thin lines between terrorism, fundamentalism and justice in acts of violence. Perhaps that is Alizadeh’s point. ‘The monstrous fetishes of global Capitalism cannot forever remain hidden under the sanitised mask of a happy harmonious “global village”,’ he commented after the 2008 GFC.1

Dubai airport’s duty-free mall turns over millions of dollars – more than any other airport mall in the world. Ceiling-high signage, a quote from the first Maktoum Shiek, tells the story: ‘What is good for the economy of Dubai is good for the Emiratis.’ You might meet versions of Alizadeh’s Sumia and her father, smoking in the first-class lounge, shopping in the duty-free mall, propping up the bar in designer clothes. Her problems with anger-management and her incendiary attitude to education offer Alizedeh a chance to showcase a savagely comic register. ‘The Fool’, narrated by Sumia, is alive with malapropisms: ‘ignorant Infidels who hate us Arabs. I expositioned the truth about their racistim’; ‘I know advanced English phrases like I can’t be shagged’; ‘There is no Global Warming which is not real. It’s a dirty Jew conspiracy like the Hollowcast’ (217-221). For the most part Alizadeh writes in clean, pointed language with few figurative or poetic flourishes.

Foreshadowing exposes hypocrisy and double-dealing. Latter stories are particularly rich in irony, black humour and heavy satire that could be labelled absurd. ‘You wanna make the shift from porn to mainstream cinema, don’t you?’; ‘By showing my breasts?’ the Ukrainian student turned sex worker/porn-star asks her director (154). Some of the writing is deliberately

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1 Susan Hornbeck, Publicity UQP, Media Release, Transactions, Ali Alizadeh, UQP Short Fiction Series; An Australian initialism standing for Global Financial Crisis.
clichéd in the service of satire: for instance, a philandering CIA defector describes ‘a stunning Indian research student whose vagina had been nothing short of a wonder’ (114). References to Aussie porn films – The Golden Fleas, The Great Barrier Grief – verge on slapstick/schlock. In Chopped Down Under … the anti-hero ‘eliminates the Aussie killer by lopping off his head with a boomerang’ (155).

Alizadeh also takes the hatchet to culture, family life and academia. He satirises a global literary award in which, according to a Japanese judge, Billy …’s ‘novel is going to win the Nobel prize’, it being ‘so full of wisdom and compassion and truth. Like a Johnny Cash album’ (192). In some instances, I felt sledgehammered and wished that Alizadeh had trusted me more. Having said that, complexity and the kind of moral conviction you hope good novels will carry counterpoints this. Alizadeh ululates and rages with feminists.

Creating a diverse range of characters enables him to traverse important twenty-first-century anxieties about migration, asylum seeking, child labour, pornography, violence, murder, financial crises, suicide, rape, nuclear accidents, PTSD and human trafficking. References to Medea suggest that under certain circumstances women as well as men will kill their own (177). This message is further cruelled in a theatre production in which an actor, a ‘famous part-Aboriginal former athlete’ with a ‘magnificent cock’ plays Medea as a househusband (165).

‘You should have served humanity. Not just your country,’ says a vengeful phoenix swooping in on her kill, and this seems to be Alizadeh’s metatext (122). The book’s denouement neatly turns the tables and not without irony when Tamil Niromi reveals her true identity. Even as it entertained, Transactions filled me with disquiet, validating my worst fears about globalisation.

Gay Lynch
Jhumpa Lahiri *The Lowlands* (Knopf, 2013)

As critics point out, Jhumpa Lahiri’s work has long been subject to cultural criticism first (articles examining hybridity abound) and literary criticism second, an issue she seems conscious of in her latest novel, *The Lowland*. The title itself refers to a literal hybrid object: the strip of land separating two ponds – or the productive space between two binaries. Likewise, the opening scene positions two twin boys scaling a wall separating a rural town on the outskirts of Calcutta from the Tolly Club golf club, a rather overt locus of the colonizer. And, not surprisingly, the twins are punished for this transgression into the colonizer’s territory. In fact, it would be easy to argue that the entire novel is about trespassing into the colonizer’s territory and getting punished for it. But before we settle for such a convenient reading, Lahiri lowers the boom that the oppressor in this situation is not the colonizer, but the local policeman. From this, we are to understand that this is not a novel of colonial oppression. It isn’t even a story in which the colonized police each other. Largely, the punishments within *The Lowland* are enacted on and by the self, a series of intentional separations that cause either regret or resignation. Such dichotomies create a framework for both the novel’s characters as well as its structure, which sometimes results in characters that feel more ‘stock’ than Lahiri’s more memorable protagonists such as *The Namesake’s* (Mariner, 2004) Gogol or Twinkle of ‘This Blessed House’ (*Interpreter of Maladies*, Mariner, 1999). These dichotomies create a structure in which two possibilities are always plausible: we follow one trajectory, always aware of the other that might have been possible.

The twins whose punishment initiates us into the world of the novel are the first neat dichotomy: Subhash and Udayan. Subhash, quiet and cerebral, leaves India to pursue a graduate degree in the US, working his way through the traditionally established orders and hierarchies of academia. His twin, Udayan, charismatic and passionate, remains in India and becomes a co-operative of the Naxalites, a movement that the book later identifies as having ‘self-defeating tactics, lack of coordination, unrealistic ideology’ – all the vices and passions of young idealists.

While the characters may be somewhat stock, this isn’t the point: what we are really looking at is the split of possibilities, two trajectories diverging from the same point, each contrasting with the other.

One model for this divergence is the personal. Udayan’s death becomes a point that alters the trajectories of everyone’s lives: Subhash returns to India for the funeral and, finding Gauri – Udayan’s widow – pregnant and oppressed by her traditional in-laws, provides her an escape by marrying her and bringing her back to Rhode Island with him. It is a series of significant shifts that the narrative revisits often, reconstructing the series of events, trying to make sense of exactly how they happened.

Gauri often thinks of her husband’s death, imagining him as a young man, aging him to parallel her own aging process. In late middle age, she recalls

when she was married to Udayan, her recurring nightmare was that they had not met, that he had not come into her life. In those moments returned the conviction that she’d had before

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2 Naxalites: the far-left Maoist Communist movement of the 1970s that sought to remedy class inequality. One of their most extreme tactics involved guerrilla style warfare in Calcutta and rural areas, actively assassinating ‘class enemies’ (see Sumanta Banerjee’s *The Naxalite Uprising*).
knowing him, that she would live her life alone. She had hated those first disorienting moments after waking up in their bed in Tollygunge, inches away from him, still cloistered in an alternate world in which they had nothing to do with one another … After his death began the internal knowledge that came from remembering him, still trying to make sense of him. Of both missing and resenting him. Without that there would be nothing to haunt her. No grief. (Lahiri 6.1)

For Gauri, her present life is the ‘alternate world’ or the wrong version of history. She is always keenly aware of and keening for what she perceives as the correct version in which Udayan survives.

This understanding of personal historical trajectories is also applied to political historical events. While Gauri indulges in constructing a version of her life that contains Udayan, the novel poses the same question of the impossibly idealistic and violent Naxalite movement. Having lived through the movement and lost her husband to it, an older Gauri now converses with a young student studying the event:

Her impressions were flickering, from a lifetime ago. But they were vivid inside Dipankar [the student]. All the names, the events of those years, were at his fingertips … Dipankar had studied the movement’s self-defeating tactics, its lack of coordination, its unrealistic ideology. He’d understood, without ever having been a part of things, far better than Gauri why it had surged and failed. (Lahiri 7.1)

While it is possible to understand the Naxalite movement and Udayan himself as idealized entities and their subsequent failures and deaths as historical events, Gauri can only comprehend each as the moment when history shifted in the wrong direction, away from the intended trajectory of what should have been her life: marital bliss, an equalized India that she might never have left.

Gauri is not the only character to fixate on the past. Subhash, too, constantly questions how his brother’s death has affected his own life and identity while Bela – Udayan and Gauri’s daughter that Subhash raises as his own—considers the implications of Gauri’s actions on her own life and that of future generations.

This perpetual deconstruction is a collective wishing to revise and reconstruct one crucial moment in order to alter the current reality. Lahiri’s talent is in quietly rendering the experience of yearning and regret without sentimentality. It is also worth mentioning that not all characters are as dark as Gauri. Some are able to escape the fixed backward glance. Some are even able to construct new and productive identities located in the present reality.

Like most other historical events and persons, the symbolic lowland itself is eventually altered and obliterated. It becomes a lost thing that matters little to the rest of the world save those who lived on it and define their identities by it. For them, it is a landmark without which navigation becomes difficult, for some even impossible. The novel provides a compassionate and complex examination of identities that are defined by loss as well as the reconstruction that can – or cannot – take place after. Certainly, the reader who wants to dismiss these identities as ‘stock’ can. The reader seeking hybridity between the dichotomies will find it. And the reader who doesn’t mind mingling complex structures with occasional complex emotion will not be disappointed.

Jennifer A. Marquardt

Anita Heiss’ *Am I Black Enough for You?* is a compelling and deeply affective memoir on community, family, alliances and the complexities of identity. This work contributes to Heiss’s prolific oeuvre as a proud Wiradjuri woman, writer, educator, public speaker and literary critic. Heiss is the author of historical fiction, non-fiction, social commentary, poetry and travel pieces and the creator of an innovative genre of commercial women’s fiction named ‘Koori chick-lit’, or ‘choc-lit’, featuring urban Aboriginal women.

The thought-provoking title of the memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?*, reflects its preoccupation with identity. Posing the question, Heiss invites readers to reflect, consider and reconsider stereotypical and received notions about Aboriginal identity. The memoir begins with an act of self-defining, attesting to its importance and necessity, as Heiss embraces her diverse selves, firmly rooted in her identity as a Wiradjuri woman: ‘I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no one’ (1).

Throughout her introductory chapter, Heiss challenges stereotypical notions of Aboriginal identity, asserting her connection to her land and community. Analysing terms such as ‘Aborigines’, Heiss reveals the problematic constructedness of such terminology connected to the history of invasion and dispossession, emphasising once again the importance of self-expression and self-representation.

Following the introduction, Heiss references her much-publicised suit against conservative columnist Andrew Bolt and his article which targeted Heiss and several others, claiming they have chosen their ‘Aboriginal identity’ for personal and professional gain. Along with eight other plaintiffs, Heiss took Bolt to court for breaching the Racial Discrimination Act and won the case. She reflects on Bolt’s discriminatory and inaccurate assumptions and challenges prescriptive notions about Aboriginal identity emerging from colonialist imagination. Winning the case against Bolt, Heiss significantly contributes to countering problematic representations of Indigenous people in the media and encourages dialogue on equality and accountability.

Political engagement is a recurring thematic thread in this memoir, written in an accessible, engaging and occasionally humorous style. Heiss’s writing is confident and dialogic, as she invites her diverse readers to either examine their own assumptions and prejudices or recognise a part of themselves in her experiences. However, one of the most compelling aspects of this memoir is Heiss’s sense of accountability as she uses her platform as a writer to empower her readers, address issues in her community, challenge racist assumptions and encourage relentless self-representation. Admitting her own privileges, she works to empower and motivate her readers across cultures. As she writes, ‘That’s what it means to be Aboriginal to me: to be active, to be political’ (146).

Heiss’s love for family, community and friends forms the core of the memoir. In the first few chapters, she details her childhood, growing up in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, Matraville as the child of a Wiradjuri mother and an Australian father. She experiences racist assumptions and the complexities of inhabiting different cultures from an early age. In particularly moving passages, Heiss details her affectionate relationship with her parents, their loving marriage and her siblings. She views her parents’ marriage as an example of overcoming differences and obstacles or real love which ‘knows no boundaries, least of all race’ (25). Heiss also details her parents’ story, recounting the way her parents met and

started a family. In a chapter entitled ‘Being Elsie’s daughter’, Heiss expresses her admiration for her mother, including a moving poem, ‘Ode to My Mother’. She tells her father’s story in the next chapter, ‘Joe-the-Carpenter’, describing his Austrian background and family. In particular, Heiss insightfully relates how her father, as a white migrant from Austria with a life-long accent and her mother, a Wiradjuri woman, were both at times excluded from the notion of ‘Australianess’.

Dedicated to social and political change, Heiss details her experiences as an educator working to promote Indigenous literacy and highlight the value of education as a necessary prerequisite for challenging racism and strengthening Indigenous communities across Australia. Criticising historical erasure and national amnesia in her discussion of education and the curriculum, Heiss argues that the history of massacres, invasion and the Stolen Generations should be included under ‘Australian history’ and taught as part of the national Australian history curriculum (101). Her engagement with reclaiming histories is reflected in her historical novel on the Stolen Generations, *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney, 1937* (2001), which she discusses in a chapter aptly named ‘Writing Us Into Australian History’. Affirming her role as a politically engaged writer, Heiss relates that she wrote the book ‘to give voice to those who are without one’ (194).

Apart from historical fiction, poetry and social commentary, Heiss also writes urban Aboriginal women into the Australian literary canon with her ‘Koori chick-lit’. The memoir reveals Heiss’s motivation for writing commercial women’s fiction in novels such as *Not Meeting Mr Right, Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*, explored in a chapter tellingly named: ‘On Being Koori Bradshaw’. Inventing a new genre featuring urban Aboriginal women, Heiss invests her protagonists with energising qualities; they are ‘urban, educated, articulate, career-minded women’ (215) with dreams, aspirations and dilemmas. Most importantly, they are explicitly politicalised, multifaceted and compelling characters who challenge one-dimensional, tokenistic literary representations and affirm, in Heiss’ words, ‘the common bonds we all share’ (225).

The memoir also relates Heiss’s experiences as an academic and a writer engaging with academic audiences and researchers. Heiss’s decision to do a doctorate in Aboriginal literature reflects the necessity for re-centering academic discourse dominated by elitism and whiteness. As she writes: ‘I wanted students and researchers to be reading the voices of Blackfellas talking about our own writing, not the voices of white academics who’d written about Black authors after doing desktop analyses of what other white academics have written about Black authors’ (107). Heiss’s critique of whiteness and entitlement is particularly highlighted in passages describing encounters with white academics claiming to be ‘Aboriginalists’, or experts on Aboriginal issues, as well as researchers who appropriate oral testimonies and photographs for career purposes and self-promotion without the communities’ permission. Challenging white hegemonic discourses, Heiss underscores the ‘decades of appropriation and exploitation of Aboriginal cultural material in the arts’ (140) and calls for more accountability.

Heiss decides to leave academia after a conference in Fiji, where she was invited to speak at the Pacific Epistemologies Conference. At the conference, she contemplates the alienating nature of academic language used to define and discuss Indigenous people. Pointing out academics’ lack of practical engagement, or ‘academics talking purely to other academics’ (131), Heiss’s criticism highlights the need for making academic knowledge more accessible, inclusive and politically engaged. She contrasts western societies’ view of
education as a consumer product founded on competition, individual gain and rights to Aboriginal values of cooperation, community and accountability (142). Taking this discrepancy into account, Heiss emphasises the importance of gaining education for Indigenous people as means of self-defining, political strategising and reclaiming rights.

Another important thread in the memoir stems from Heiss’s travels, as she situates her discussion in international contexts. As a well-travelled writer and public speaker, attending conferences and book tours as well as conducting overseas research for her books, Heiss engages with international perceptions on Indigenous Australians and identifies stereotypes acquired through Hollywood and Tourism Australia campaigns. Most importantly, Heiss emphasises the value of transnational alliances between Indigenous people, facing similar challenges in resisting appropriation, exploitation and erasure of their culture. In particular, she acknowledges the influence of African American politics and culture on Aboriginal Australians and describes her admiration for Oprah Winfrey as an influential and persistent figure.

Acutely aware of the prevailing effects of colonialism, Heiss uses her writing to challenge racism, empower communities and reclaim the right for self-definition. This well-written, accessible and deeply intimate memoir is a compelling read which will be of interest to diverse readers, particularly students and educators across disciplines and contexts. Positing self-representation as a basic right for all, the memoir reflects the author’s perseverance, dedication and most importantly, inspiring optimism.

Maja Milatovic
Maddaddam is the third and final instalment in Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s dystopian trilogy, skilfully blending together the tales of Oryx and Crake (2003) and The Year of the Flood (2007). The two previous books occur over the same timeline, but from different sides of the sociological fence and Maddaddam picks up where the two texts came together. This dark and entirely too likely post-apocalyptic story of survivors could be a joy to read for the scientifically inclined, as each instance of science and technology in the book is possible in our current world. Atwood herself stresses this in her Acknowledgments at the end of the book, stating that ‘although Maddaddam is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction or are not possible in theory’ (416). Atwood is known to disagree with the genre-label of speculative fiction or dystopia; however, the post-apocalyptic setting and the glimmer of hope for the future carried by her characters evidence her use of the dystopian genre. Though Atwood’s depiction and understanding of gene-splicing and current technological capabilities must be praised, her clichéd portrayal of computer hacking may roll some eyes – ‘Zeb had magic fingers: he could play code the way Mozart played the piano, he could warble the cuneiform, he could waltz through firewalls like a tiger of old leaping through a flaming circus hoop without singeing a whisker’ (119). Furthermore, the book claims to take place within the twenty-first century, which is not only a stretch of the imagination, but also dates it uncomfortably close.

Atwood tells each book in a dual narrative thread style, creating a curious stylistic blend of oral story-telling and speculative fiction as her characters recount pre-apocalyptic events and struggle to survive in their harsh new world. The survivors are joined by Crakers – fascinating gene-spliced and bio-engineered humanoids designed without human flaws – and it is their naivety that forces readers to reevaluate how they see the world as the central character Toby attempts to explain it to them. Questions arise, however, over Toby’s nature as an unreliable narrator. We switch from Zeb’s version of his past, brutally real, to the watered-down stories Toby then feeds the Crakers and we cannot help but wonder if sheltering them is helping or hindering them in the long-term. Toby, a God’s Gardener from The Year of the Flood, takes this storyteller role from Oryx and Crake’s Jimmy, or Snowman-the-Jimmy as the Crakers call him, wearing a Red Sox baseball cap and pretending to listen to the words of now-deceased bio-engineer Crake through a plastic watch. The Crakers are almost childlike in their innocence and belief in the all-powerful Crake and uncomfortable parallels can be drawn between them and children. Many of these terms – Crakers, God’s Gardeners, Painballers etc. – may cause new readers to struggle and it is obvious that Maddaddam does not work as a standalone book. Too many terms and references are taken for granted as common knowledge within its pages and, as such, the book can only be read after at least one of Oryx and Crake or The Year of the Flood have been read first. Most of the human characters go by the names they took as Crake’s bioengineers, which had to be the names of extinct animals, so many new readers and even some readers familiar with the previous books may be confused over the identities of Swift Fox, Ivory Bill, Manatee, Black Rhino, Katuru and Zunzuncito. This confusion turns to amusement with the names of the Crakers, as Crake sought to take human power away from history by naming each Craker after a historical figure:, Abraham Lincoln, Empress Josephine and Blackbeard each grace the pages of Maddaddam.

The Crakers aren’t the only bio-engineered life forms to make a return appearance in Maddaddam: murderously clever pigs with human brain tissue, originally designed as organ farms, return in force to hound the survivors. The Pigoons, as they are called, are well-crafted characters
that are deviously sly, with a better understanding of strategy and warfare than the human survivors. The Pigoons were first introduced in *Oryx and Crake* as massive pigs designed with extra human kidneys, livers, hearts and brain tissue and are a subtle pleasure to read as Atwood continually outsmarts not only the survivors but also the reader too with their cunning tactics and curious blend of animal nature and human intelligence. The Pigoons seem to be a halfway point between the human survivors and the Crakers, as they have human minds in animal bodies whilst the Crakers have almost-human bodies and minds free from all things detrimental to humanity – music, sexual jealousy, religion, violence. It is a question of nature versus nurture with these three groups of almost-humans – the Crakers are fostered by the human survivors but are separated from them by their naïve believe in peace and lack of knowledge about the world. The Pigoons are, for the most part, the enemy of the survivors, but the rituals they have developed with their human brain tissue lend them a decidedly human quality when they attempt to form an alliance with the humans over the matter of a murdered piglet. Fifty pigs approach the gun-toting humans and, ‘in the middle of the group, two of the boars are moving side by side; there’s something lying crossways on their backs. It looks like a mound of flowers […] it’s a dead piglet’ (269).

The question of nature versus nurture rises again in relation to the Crakers. Though they were genetically designed not to have music, or history or religion or art, they follow a religion with Crake and Oryx as their gods and creators and sing and purr to show their praise and prayers. They make effigies of ill humans to purr over and follow the rituals set out by Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* to tell religious tales. Toby teaches the Craker child Blackbeard to read and write and he writes what can only be described as the bible of the Crakers’ creation, unintentionally creating an almost circular fate for the Crakers in respect to human flaws.

Our story is seen mostly through Zeb’s flashbacks and Toby’s storytelling and journal as the survivors come to understand the strange practices of the Crakers whilst fending off marauding Pigoons, scrounging for supplies, searching for other survivors and fighting brutal Painballers. However, as a reader, I was less concerned or interested in the fight for survival than Zeb’s flashbacks to his gritty pre-apocalyptic life and his current love affair with Toby. Atwood seems to be showing us that even in this harsh new world, we are unable to eliminate unnecessary human emotions – sure, we want the survivors to survive, but we also want to protect the Crakers, and Zeb to love Toby and Amanda and Ren to be okay. We, along with the survivors, seem unable to relinquish our last shred of human hope and need for love. It is this unbreaking shred of hope, which lends *Maddaddam* a decidedly dystopian quality as it also exhibits the fears, rather than hopes of history, like social and political progress becoming an overbearing faceless administration.

Dystopian science fiction, as *Maddaddam* seem to be, stems from environmental degradation, where the attempts are made (by Crake, by Toby, by Adam) to change the world, and elements of social critique and a hope for a utopian salvation are exhibited.

As with the best dystopian stories, Atwood’s tale is a bittersweet story of life and death, hope and fear for survival, and a plethora of emotions as perfect and varied as the Crakers themselves. Anger, jealousy, sadness and fear – *Maddaddam* pushes all the buttons, right or wrong, in a manner reminiscent of the mood organ in Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Unlikely friendships and alliances abound not only in the complex social circle of the survivors but between the survivors and Crakers and the survivors and Pigoons, too.

*Maddaddam* is definitely not for everyone. Though a thoroughly enjoyable book, its subject differs from that of *Oryx and Crake* and *Year of the Flood* rather drastically – rather than serving as a cautionary tale against the abuse of science or religion, it is more concerned with the day-to-day life of the survivors as they deal with mundane matters. Though still a scientifically rich text abundant with social critique and imagination, there is less interest in the current-day events of the books than

Book reviews: *Maddaddam* by Margaret Atwood. Caitlin Roper.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
in the flashback scenes. *Maddaddam* does not work as a standalone book; however, as part of the trilogy it is a wonderful conclusion to a chronologically complex and emotionally diverse story of the follies and destruction of humanity, rich with a scientifically accurate exploration of genetic engineering, the end of humanity, what it means to be human and what happens when those definitions become blurred.

**Caitlin Roper**

*The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is Karen Bennett and Chris Mingay’s translation of the João Cerqueira’s Portuguese alternative history novel *A Tragédia de Fidel Castro* (*Saída de Emergência*). This review is primarily concerned with the English translation, which has been nominated for the 2014 Montaigne Medal and was the finalist in the Historical Fiction category of the USA Best Book Awards, winner in the Multicultural category of the same awards and ForeWord Book of the year winner in Translations (Adult Fiction).

The prologue of *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* sets the tone of a dry, playful satire. God, in his heavenly quarters, receives a call from Fátima, a real-life Portuguese civil parish, who anxiously informs him that war is about to begin. Careful note must be made here, as the pronouns for God are not capitalized. As Cerqueira states in his preface, the book takes place in ‘an imaginary time and space … All characters and organizations mentioned are entirely fictional’. Cerqueira lists Christ, God, JFK and Fátima as being in no way connected to the son of God, ‘the creator of the world and men’, the US president and the Portuguese site of a miracle of the same names. However, he admits that Fidel ‘perhaps has some similarities with the revolutionary leader and dictator, Fidel Castro’. That being said, it is difficult in the beginning to disassociate the characters from their famous namesakes. Indeed, some readers have apparently been somewhat offended by the fictionalized versions of God and Christ. In any case, God agrees to persuade his son to intervene in the impending war, as both instigators – JFK and Fidel – are claiming to act in his name or in a manner derived from his teachings.

Though a short novel, *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is rich with metaphor and multiple layers of meaning. It stands as a not-entirely-subtle reflection of the current state of politics the world over and the place and efficacy of religion in politics. An early example of this use of metaphor describes the effect Cerqueira’s unnecessary repetition sometimes has on the reader, when Fidel contrives to give a rousing speech to his followers. Here, the narrator drily notes that:

> He [Fidel] had repeated the same arguments time and time again, until they had simply become a tasteless mass thrust down the throats of his glutted company. They, with mouths open, partook endlessly of the revolutionary host offered by the high priest despite waves of nausea.

*The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is often too wordy and long-winded in its efforts to impress a point. While Cerqueira’s use of metaphor is sometimes delightful, at other times the intricate metaphors are weakened by long-winded and unnecessary repetition; I would argue that the same dry points could be made much more powerful in an extended essay rather than in fiction. That being said, *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is a humorous, enjoyable read and the absurdity of some of its situations are truly comical yet eye-opening, when the subtext is read in relation to current and recent political practices. Metaphors are successfully drawn between the farcical rituals of political movements and the game of chess as each player finds his role changing. J.E. Hoover believes himself Queen to Fidel’s King, yet finds himself nothing more than an expendable pawn. For the readers, this metaphor is an obvious comment on the ruthlessness of power and expendability of political pawns. Similarly, metaphors are drawn between political machinations and a form of dance similar to the courtship or mating rituals between animals when Fidel is bizarrely disguised as a voluptuous woman dancing to an electronic beat. He finds himself frenzied in his efforts to maintain his appearance, struggling to keep up with the dance moves expected of him as the public hungrily...
strips him with their eyes. Readers can plainly see the underlying message of political leaders struggling and often failing to maintain the pretenses they are making to the public. As such, the translators must be credited for completing what was clearly an intense task bringing *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* into the English-speaking world.

In this regard, the translation process and the attitudes toward translators are more appealing that Cerqueira’s text itself. In a 2013 interview, Cerqueira praises his translators, saying that they have a ‘fascinating profession … the literary translator is also a writer – in a way he creates another book with the same story’. He describes this as a very difficult and complex task … sometimes the meaning of some metaphors and other literary techniques can be misconstrued. On the other hand, as my book is a satirical work, transferring the humour into English was crucial – and this they managed quite well. In the end … I learnt a great deal and grew as a writer.¹

*The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is technically proficient and a prime example of the power of translators yet fails to provide a sustained output of entertainment. Whilst admittedly humorous, it quickly loses its appeal through over-reliance on repetition to the point where it becomes a rambling backtrack over the same few points with a very loose, almost insignificant plot taking second place to social, political and religious commentary.

Caitlin Roper

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Roshanak Amrein, *Songs from a Far Island* (Gardoon Publishing House, 2012)

*Songs from a Far Island* (**Zemzeme haye az Jazire Dur**), the second collection of lyrics written by Roshanak Amrein, is the serene, placid but melancholic resonance of a suffering soul. When the reed-flute is separated from its reedy bed,1 when home, ‘the place where, when you have to go there, /they have to take you in’2 is lost, such a moan flows from the heart of the sufferers. Amrein is no exception. In a supple and gliding tune her songs flow like the silent deep brook and captivate the heart of the readers straight away.

In a world of the play of power and dominance, Roshanak Amrein is a downtrodden one. She was born in Iran before the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and lived through the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Though during this period of unrest many migrated to Australia, the safe and popular haven for the refugees, the case was not so for Amrein. In Iran she faced perilous political intolerance and discrimination due to her Baha’i faith. She experienced a shocking and traumatic time when her mother and brother had been expelled from University and her uncle had been executed. Thus her homeland becomes ‘the desert’ (Stream 18), ‘the burnt gardens’ (Endure Broken Voice 16) and ‘the poisonous space’ (The Story of Captive Stars 19) from which she had to flee. But as they were not permitted to travel, they had to wait long ten years to come out of it. Nevertheless, Amrein migrated to Australia and with all the golden opportunities open to her she became a cosmetic dentist in Adelaide.3 Consequently her poems become pregnant with conflicted feelings between her home and her new home. A type of in-betweenness – on one hand longing for home, a place of memories where she will never be able to return, and on the other hand, lack of cherished attachment to new home – burdens her lyrics with woe.

When, in an interview,4 Amrein was asked whether ‘it’s book of longing, it’s a book of love, it’s a book of exile,’ she says, ‘it’s a book about bravery, about courage and about standing up for justice and for truth.’5 I assume it combines all these themes. She talks about suppression and tyranny in Iran:

They have captured  
The stars of the velvety night-  
Those who were our guides to the daylight  

At the darkest point of time (The Story of Captive Stars 19)

Or

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1 Translations and Versions of ‘The Song of the Reed’ (Masnavi, Book 1: Lines 1-34)  

2 Now listen to this reed-flute’s deep lament  
About the heartache being apart has meant.  
2. Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me  
My song’s expressed each human’s agony, (Mojaddedi, 2004)


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Book reviews: *Songs from a Far Island* by Roshanak Amrein. Umme Salma.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.  
In the planet that I call home,
people of power
give execution orders
and forests and rivers and lakes
and whales and gazelles and eagles
and thousand year old trees
fall like autumn leaves. (My Planet, My Home 30)

Or

Be silent!
put your pens down!
and we do. (The End of Story 32)

– about her tear-jerking separation from it:

This was our story.
It began with the day our nest burned down,
and we flew away
unwillingly. (Melodies of Exile 36)

Or

Did you see how I flew away
so quietly
that no sleeping eye opened
to shed my farewell a tear? (Streets 27)

Or

The day our hands
didn’t even get a chance for a goodbye
I thought of you
and how hard this separation will be,
and how heart breaking. (Separation 42)

– about her coming on a faraway land:

but for me there is a sense of calm
in knowing
there are trees home to high soaring birds
and seas that have abundant food
for the mightiest creatures. (My Planet, My Home 31)

Or
I have arrived,
on your soil-
shameful,
unwanted,
uninvited. (Shells 45)

Or

In these far away islands,
In this paradise of tinsel leaves
only our songs are missing.
we came
and sang the story of a distant home
on treetops.
[…]
But the island
never understood the meaning of our songs
when its branches
were being filled with sorrowful birds. (Melodies of Exile 36-37)

– and about the spirit of protestation and the revelation of light, truth and justice as the obvious outcome of darkness:

Strike the daf!
As a hand would slap
the face of the oppressors.
the ones who want happiness
silenced
and love disgraced. (The Warrior Who Plays Joy 49)

Or

My eyes are open,
sorrowful but waiting,
with a thousand sorrows weighing on my shoulder,
I remain waiting.
may be a bright morn will arrive.
may be the sun of truth
will rise from the peak of Alborz. (Brothers 13-14)

Or

I speak of a heart
that beats for freedom
of eyes
which like wild flowers of the mountain
look to the high skies of truth
and of the one
who has risen like a mountain
to face the storm. (Tale of Rostam 54)

Or

Father was right.
the homeland will be free
when her children
recount so bravely
the stories of the past
in their songs. (Streams 17)

Or

My last words
will wash your hatred like flowing water.
Love is the only way
out of this darkness
to the limitless realm of freedom,
to the boundless joy of spring. (Last Words 7)

Roshanak’s poems are enchanting to read because of her apt use of allegorical imagery. Instead of direct names or indications imageries after imageries come and all imageries are woven around nature. Tree, leaves, seedlings, garden, birds like doves and canaries, rain, streams, shells on the beach playing with the waves, seasons like spring and autumn, blossoms and so on recur in the poems. The upright personality is sketched as a solitary tree on a highest mountain-top whose thoughts are ‘his emerald leaves’ and who ‘Alone/ facing the storm’ ‘sings a melody in silence’ (The Lone Tree 5). In ‘Endure broken voice’, she compares herself with an ‘injured dove /who has taken refuge/in a strange tree’ after ‘the lush garden of home’ was burnt (15-16). Again, in ‘Sounds of Captivity’, she evokes the image of ‘a singing canary’ for whom ‘there is no spring, /no forest, /no flight, /no you’ (38). Also she draws analogy between their broken hearts with the broken pieces of shells which are ‘played by the waves of destiny’ (Shells 45). The image of the seedling is painted in different ways. In ‘The End of Story’, she writes that because of the suppression they are silent but in their minds ‘a seedling grows’ that they water as if it can be one day a ‘shady shelter/for the children of justice /and the birds of peace’(32), or in ‘Mother’ she contends that in her arms ‘there is a seedling’ that one day will be ‘a mighty tree’ to be a ‘shade’ ‘for the people of the garden’ (29). That’s why I feel, after Emily Dickinson, her poems are the finest ones I have ever read. Here readers will have no hard nut to crack but an encompassing beauty and mystery to unveil.

The bilingual text Songs from a Far Island (Zemzeme haye az Jazire Dur) is divided into two – thirty-six poems in the Persian language and the English translation of thirty-five, excepting ‘beman’. Because of the adaption of the sprightly movement of modern verse form, the poems in Persia are as sweet and elegant as in English. The passion and emotion that she wants to convey are conveyed
perfectly in both languages. The poet’s mastery of English language (within a very short period of
time after her migration to Australia in 1994) is really praiseworthy. Sometimes I become confused in
which language she wrote the poems at first!

I hope Roshanak Amrein’s songs will fascinate many, especially those whose home is lost.

Umme Salma

Acknowledgement: I thank heartily Mr. Abul Hashem, Chairman, Department of Persian Language
and Literature, Chittagong University, Bangladesh, who spent his valuable time to make me
comprehend the poems in Persian in comparison with the English equivalents.
Several years ago, I was fortunate to see prolific Chinese/Australian poet Ouyang Yu reading and discussing some of his poems at Flinders University. Although at the time, I was far from being a snickering teenager, one poem in particular struck me: ‘Looking for cunt’. The poem, unlike what the powerfully blunt title suggested, was about Yu’s earnest quest to find through an electronic dictionary what the word ‘cunt’ means. The startling honesty and inherently comic premise made this poem vividly memorable. I was hoping that Yu’s novel The English Class would contain the same elements that made the poem in question unforgettable, but it was not to be. Early in the book, there actually is one of the comical, potent images I associate with said poem. As a truck driver in China in the 1970s, protagonist Jing has to transport a truckload full of human excrement. This image works well as a symbol of how Jing sees the work he does and as a surreal contrast to his growing preoccupation with transporting ideas from one culture and language to another, but there could be more of such images in The English Class – a shitload more. [Post-modernist pondering: Those last three words were unfair and self-indulgent, a slightly cruel trading of an author’s integrity for a cheap laugh – if not po-faced confusion.] Of course, it is not Yu’s responsibility to write the novel I wanted him to write [and how would he know?], but The English Class did lack some of the widely agreed upon rules of engagement in storytelling.

The problem is that the first three quarters of the book focuses on ordinary lives of ordinary people, with a protagonist who remains unlikeable, yet never enough to become an interestingly evil anti-hero. So it can be difficult to really care about what happens to such an aloof and self-absorbed ordinary man – paradoxically, one who tries very hard to be something other than ordinary. We first encounter Jing at the start of his career as a truck driver, but his ambitious penchant for learning English words propels him forward to become a student of English at university, with the promise of eventual recognition as a writer. We the readers are co-opted as students within The English Class, and in the process we learn more about English and Chinese and the challenges of translating and thinking across the two languages. This contrivance is a good one but could have been used better, for the example explanations chosen do not read as particularly striking or profound.

There are clues within this novel that the author is aiming for a certain type of realism (and not the stylised variety). Jing himself reads the bleak and pessimistic Victorian writer, George Gissing. He also says that he read ‘The Old Wives’ Tale by an Arnold Bennett [and] … it is something so ordinary, so engrossing’ (247). Unfortunately, this equation of the ordinary with the engrossing is not always valid. A novel that dwells too much on the banal can soon become the literary equivalent of TV’s Big Brother. [See post-modernist pondering above.] Yu himself hints that he may be aware of the inherent challenge in this style of writing when, in one of many post-modernist reflections on the act of writing, he mentions ‘these regular interruptions … may be considered … an excuse for your inability to weave an interesting yarn’ (250). Many readers would love the ordinary world evoked through much of the novel, but it is not a new thought that more dramatic things can happen to real people than fictional ones. In George Gissing’s 1891 novel, New Grub Street, the realist writer Harold Biffen says with (uncommercial) defiance,
I shall never … write anything like a dramatic scene. Such things do happen in life, but so very rarely that they are nothing to my purpose. Fiction hasn’t yet outgrown the influence of the stage on which it originated. Whatever a man writes FOR EFFECT is wrong and bad.¹

Or is it? The English Class would benefit from greater dramatic intrigue and more of what Roland Barthes coyly called ‘reticence’²: teasing out the story to build up suspense. And although Yu successfully creates an authentic and undeniably realistic other world, the time of the settings is not always apparent. The novel could use what Dorothy Sayers referred to as ‘the trick of particularity’:³ small details that make a fantasy world seem more real. But more importantly, in this case, they would serve as practical reminders of the era being portrayed, which is mostly the 1970s … I think.

As mentioned, scattered through The English Class are the author’s post-modernist ponderings. But as with many such post-modernist devices, once we are reminded that we are reading a created story and our willing suspension of disbelief is severed, then what? The points of these interruptions do not necessarily go anywhere or become integrated into the rest of the narrative in a meaningful way.

In the final section of the book, the story takes an unexpected turn and becomes more interesting and poetic when Jing moves to Australia and, with not uncomplicated identity re-assignment surgery, becomes Gene. Gene genie, let yourself go. And he does. The final scenes and reflections on Australia, combined with the prior Chinese context, qualify The English Class as a significant literary record of cultural interaction between Asia and Australia. And Gene’s eventual mental, physical, spiritual and linguistic breakdown is genuinely surprising. This disturbing comment on the failure of language to save and transform a life may also be memorable in a quite different way from that of Yu’s ‘Looking for cunt’. It reflects the experience of some migrants who travel to a new country with optimism and become disillusioned and traumatised about the cultural differences that challenge and confuse their identity. The sense of hopelessness after reading The English Class may linger in the way that the desperation and pain of Gissing’s characters, defeated by poverty, haunt the reader. Perhaps I’ve changed my mind. Twist ending book review.

Michael X. Savvas

¹ George Gissing, New Grub Street, 1891, online, accessed 27 February 2014

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Those of us who are fortunate enough to have listened to the ABC broadcasts by Robert Dessaix will recognize the voice as soon as they begin to read *As I Was Saying*. It is not just the authorial voice, but also the memory of the mellifluous tones of one who makes the listener feel that he or she is the only one who matters. For me the content was always beguiling and the choice of phrase untroubled by cliché.

Robert Dessaix is now known more as a writer than as a broadcaster. His books range from the personal account of his birth mother, *A Mother’s Disgrace*, the novel *Corfu*, and books that give accounts of his travels but which are so much more: *Night Letters* and *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev*. He moves from fiction to non-fiction and back again, as he explains in the introduction to another of his collection of essays, *and so forth*, which is the closest in intent to *As I Was Saying*. In this introduction he writes: ‘Trust, in other words, not truth was what was vital. And so I began to play more devious games, in both my fiction and non-fiction – and especially in the enchanted wood lying between them’ (n.p.).

In *and so forth* Dessaix offers insights into the person behind the author, broadcaster, linguist, traveller and self-confessed dilettante. He does so with a certain air of abandon, having concluded the introduction with the instruction to trust him. In *As I Was Saying* there is still the conversation with the reader but perhaps more in the nature of private musings to which we are privy, should that be our desire. Nonetheless, I still maintain that Dessaix conjures up the conceit that he is communicating with just one person – his reader or listener. He begins:

I am sitting in my tower, cogitating. Not meditating – I never meditate, I don’t have the knack – but rambling in my mind, alert to unexpected provocations. The mountain to the west, I see, is misting over. (1)

And we are there, too, agreeing that cogitating is far superior to meditating for a writer, and noticing the mist over mountain as does Dessaix. He muses on any number of subjects, following them with an essay, or an address that he gave on the same theme. Generally these segue effectively, so we do not lose the sense that this is a flowing thought journey on any number of fascinating topics, albeit one with many digressions along the way. Dessaix makes even the mundane fascinating. Nor does he allow himself to be trammeled by too much specific detail. He is a considerate writer:

I leave a few of the details hazy as a rule … one doesn’t want to stifle readers’ imagination or make them feel stuck at home. On the other hand I don’t want them blowing about the sky like escaped balloons. I like a bit of tethering. (130)

When writing of his youthful passion for the painter Dufy, someone ‘second rate’, he describes the effect of his colourful works:

Violent, but in a childlike way. Sensual, rhythmic, refined – each canvas an allegretto. Not like Lane Cove at all. The only thing that quivered at our place was the Kelvinator. (162)
In *As I was saying* Dessaix writes of topical events in among the reflections on Henry the Navigator or Homer’s style. He writes of an Australia that began to look ‘as if it might exist’ some decades ago, until its citizens collectively missed that chance of finding who and where they are. He writes of ‘hundreds of heritages … transported to this new country, lovingly unpacked and lovingly set up like sacred shrines’ (175). The result, from his perspective, is that Australia lacks a strong sense of itself, a melding of all the cultures and ethnic groups who have come to these shores to join with those who were already there, to create a sense of identity.

A chapter I especially enjoyed, and one which attracted a great deal of reader response when it was broadcast in the ABC program *Linguae Franca*, is ‘The Subjunctive’. His is a lone campaign to restore this tense to our every day language. The picture of Dessaix in an aeroplane leaping to his feet and calling out ‘Hullo! Subjunctive!’ when a voice announces, ‘It is important to us that you are aware of the safety features’ (192) is wonderful. What the voice must mean is that we ‘be aware of the safety features’, and while acknowledging that in the end it doesn’t really matter, Dessaix then goes on to argue for the greater use of the subjunctive. At the same time he admits that if he’d known ‘what a hodge-podge of ifs and buts’ his explanation would end up as, he would probably never have embarked on it.

It is tempting to find dainty morsels from the text to tempt and titillate, to tease and trifle, because the book abounds in leaps and follies, skirmishes and excursions in to so many areas of life and culture. Dessaix is a man who loves language, literature, travel and ideas, and this love shines through the prose. This is a book you can dip into and read with great enjoyment. You may not agree with all that he writes. I certainly didn’t. But he will make you stop and think about why you disagree. And always, there is the distinctive voice, the humour, the self-deprecation in case we think he is taking himself too seriously. At the end of the book he announces that he has been dreaming in his tower for quite long enough, so he is off to Lisbon: ‘It’s a place where you can mislay yourself deliciously, as I am now ready to do’ (220).

Emily Sutherland

It was Newton who said: ‘If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’. Something similar could be said by many of the authors who are inspired by writers who have gone before them. Valerie Volk, in her verse novel, may not have seen further than Chaucer, but she has seen him from a different angle and that makes for an interesting and evocative narrative. In doing so, she draws on the richness of Chaucer’s characters and the charm of their stories. But by putting her verse novel into a modern context, she has allowed herself a greater freedom to explore the thoughts and motivation of the pilgrims in a way that will resonate with contemporary readers.

Volk’s pilgrims are not riding to Canterbury, but travelling in a bus to Oberammergau, Germany, for the Passion play that has been staged there every ten years since 1634. Their journey takes four days, which matches the time span in *Canterbury Tales* – and the characters portrayed by Volk match those in Chaucer’s poem. In case the reader is not familiar with Chaucer, the contents page lists the characters in *Passion Play* against those in Chaucer, and each section is prefaced by a verse from Chaucer. I wondered if this was necessary, as the characters do stand complete in their own right, but undoubtedly part of the interest of the novel is its reference to the medieval poet. One feature not found in Chaucer is the character of Caroline, a journalist who has joined the pilgrimage in search of a good story for her magazine, while using the time away from her married lover to assess their relationship. Caroline moves the narrative along while allowing us to see the pilgrims through another’s eyes. In the same way, the reader is allowed access to the thoughts of the pilgrims, a privilege not allowed Caroline, nor one allowed by Chaucer.

The Prologue explains the way the tradition of the play came into being with a confession by the man who brought the plague to Oberammergau in 1633, by returning to his wife and family from the village where he had been working in a village where the plague was rampant. The Passion play and the villagers’ promise to repeat it every ten years was their way to placate God and end the plague. The man who had brought the infection to the village found no relief:

I must accept the truth, the truth I have denied
I knew full well what I was doing
When I came back.
It was my choice to come.
The guilt is mine. (11)

The narrative then moves to the twenty-first century, as we meet Caroline, who sets off rather reluctantly to undertake the journey as an journalistic assignment. As the story progresses, we see her changed both by the stories she is hearing from the pilgrims and also by her own reaction to the Passion play, and the story that it enacts. Few of the pilgrims are motivated by religious fervour, but all are in some way affected by what they see. All have a story to tell, and Caroline makes it her business to ferret out these stories.

It is impossible in this review to outline all the characters but The Wife of Bath, or her alter ego, will give a glimpse:

Yes, marriage can become a habit, just like any other. And, after all,
If anyone should know this,
Surely I’m the one. Four husbands down the track –
Another poised there on the starting blocks –
You must agree that I am qualified
To talk about the state of wedded bliss. (111)

Some readers may feel a little reluctant to begin a verse novel, thinking of it as a very long and difficult poem. Reading *Passion Play* will dispel that myth. The text moves comfortably and smoothly, falling into place with a natural rhythm. Volk has also succeeded in capturing the voice of each pilgrim with striking individuality. Consider, for example, Josef the Plowman, describing how he had to shoot his animals in a time of drought:

Fair broke her heart – and mine –
That morning I went out and shot the lot
No choice. They were half dead of thirst in any case.
And scrawny. No fodder. (202)

Stephen, the Scholar, regards his fellow pilgrims with contempt, while trying to repress his own guilt that he had used another scientist’s work:

But now it haunts me.
I am a thief who shrugs his shoulders,
Justifies his acts, but can no longer
See his mirrored face without recoil. (99)

The bus taking the pilgrims to Oberammergau transports a diverse group of pilgrims, just as did Chaucer’s cavalcade to Canterbury. We come to know their stories and we learn how the play itself affects each in a different way. Some find a type of redemption; others come to face themselves more honestly. None is the same person as the one who had set out four days before. Caroline has the last word:

I am indeed a part
Of all those I have met,
and must learn who I am.

Endings are beginnings.
So while I cannot see what lies ahead,
My journey too must end
As I return from Oberammergau. (324)

Emily Sutherland
Kevin Roberts, *Writing the Tides* (Ronsdale Press, 2006)

I should declare my hand at the beginning: I first met Kevin Roberts almost 50 years ago at a country high school in the Riverland of South Australia when I was 14 and he in his first teaching position. His appearance was shortly followed by the arrival of a young Greek female teacher. It is fair to say both parties made an impression.

In a poem, ‘New Australian’ Roberts recalls the ‘passionate black purple blood-red’ of full skirts, the eye shadow, ‘the long black hair in a mane’, of the girl he was to marry, despite opposition from ‘My Tusmore aunt [who] told me we’d have black babies’ and her (Maria’s) Ikarian father. They are still together, and whatever misgivings both sides of the cultural divide might have held seem to have been defused by the couple’s marriage in a third-party country:

> ... the first day it snowed  
> in Canada after our wedding  
> we held up our tongues  
> to the unique and christening flakes. (167)

Roberts’ subsequent absence from Australia since has not amounted to exile. He has been back often; one section of this collection, devoted to poems from his ‘Red Centre Collection’, reveals his ongoing fascination with the Outback:

> The night before I leave Uluru  
> I build a campfire, dry gum  
> spurts into flame, the spiders  
> scatter like my convictions (126)

Other poems reflect the duality of nationality he has taken on. When he suggests that negotiating the ‘deadhead’ – the submerged and dangerous log of Canadian waterways –

> ... is like  
> walking in thick grass  
> in snake country  
> watching 20 feet ahead  
> for the thing to rear up  
> and strike (91)

it is if as he is recognising that the unknown, menacing or indifferent forces which are never far from his poetry, respect no frontiers.

Elsewhere, ‘New Poems’ contain samples like ‘Aussie Rules 1’ (whose evocations of the behaviour of a ball which ‘gambols abrupt as fate’ might be superficially puzzling to his North American readers). But it is succeeded in ‘Aussie Rules 2’ by the link between the ball’s fickleness and the loss suffered by his widowed father:

> how he loved the game  
> hated
the unpredictable point
of the ball its erratic dip
spurt and jump knew
somehow it was linked to her
my mother’s amazing and pointless
disappearance (159)

Some of Roberts’ best poems date from his career as a commercial sea fisherman in Canada. ‘The Fish Come in Dancing’ captures the initial excitement as a school of fish are taken on the line:

iridescent
dark torpedoes
flurry of white silver
spray
as they jump

succeeded by a kind of revulsion as ‘blood and guts crawls / into every crack’ until, as the fish

... flop flat and
dull rainbows on their sides
fade

he confesses:

it gets harder to love
the things
you kill. (86-7)

Nevertheless, his fascination (or addiction, as anyone who has ever fished can understand) remains:

sitting cramped in the drifting boat
ice still on in the shade
eyes bright
for the quick flash of the rod’s tip
oiled spurt of the reel (13)

As always in his poems, though, Roberts goes deeper. From the same collection he describes a rainbow trout:

tricked and hooked
they die like ballet dancers
leap and turn
sinuous as oil
graceful as clouds

choreography by Pan

I could not do it that way (15)

The last line of the poem could almost anticipate the selection from ‘Cobalt 3’, which chronicles Roberts’ battle with cancer that probably should have killed him. As always his reactions are spare and unflinchingly honest. From ‘Betrayal’ he acknowledges,

No matter what the books tell you
or the full care voices of lovers

you’re on your own (135)

‘Phone calls’ reinforces that:

The first few times the phone rings
you blow it

No one knows what to say
and you’re no help
too angry, scared and bitter
to bother with sentiment, besides
they all seem to have written you
off (133)

There are uncomfortable associations there for most of us, I suspect. But the poem is relieved by Roberts’ sense of humour (which may have been a factor in his survival) as he recalls the brash phone call from Australia:

‘Hey Blue what’s this
I hear about you and the big C?
I’m bloody glad it’s you and not me
old mate!’

And you relax and laugh
at last, at the stupid honest horror
of it all. (134)

Even in recovery, which the writer compares to the end of a film’s making, when

the curtain falls, the director shouts
cut, that’s a wrap ... (148)

he knows he cannot escape the disease’s legacy:
... the shadow rat sleeps still
in your flesh, wakes some nights
scurries in the tunnels of your bones
and you jolt bolt upright
into a role you know
you never want to play again.(149)

I referred earlier to Roberts’ wife, Maria. The writer celebrates her and their relationship in several poems in this selection. Jealousy and doubt intrude into ‘Aubade: Exeter’:

I grab the telephone
at the third ring

no one answers

it keeps me wide awake
in the grey dawn (47)

while ‘Brighton Beach’ reflects the ties that nag even at soul mates:

like this sea and sand and tide
we move in and out
of each other’s reach
grating in love one upon the other (42)

but the ‘Procrustean Bed’ is no doubt addressed to his companion, when he describes how its owner shapes her lover to its size, so that he who ‘will know nothing of this’ may

awake to her soft curves at his back
hear in her bed, her birds
sing in the dawn
and consider himself
blessed among men. (192)

And she is also commemorated in what I think is the finest poem in the collection, ‘The Reach’, where Roberts’ repeated and anguished demand ‘What does the body / reach for?’ is resolved in the conclusion:

at night the clear bark
of sea lions turning
in the cold sea

and the back log breaks
into two red flares
I turn to you
to your body warm in the dark
discover the body
reaches for itself

it reaches for
itself (27)

I find the tactileness of Roberts’ poetry, his uncompromising honesty, his spare and yet rigorous examination of his world, and ultimately his celebration of it, compelling. He has always been a person with an appetite for life and illness has not diminished it, nor his literary output: his most recent novel, *The Winnowing Circle*, came out in 2013.

This may not be the place to mention the personal debt I owe him, but I have to: he has also been one of those rarest of things, a born teacher, who managed to coerce his English students at my high school into making an acquaintance with modern literature which we would otherwise almost certainly have managed to avoid. I am grateful to him for recognising, cajoling and sometimes – even – indulging me when I was 14, and making me want to write.

Reg Taylor