
This anthology begins promisingly with an Introduction by John von Doussa, Queen’s Council, a humanitarian who was a judge of the Federal Court of Australia from 1988 and also President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission from 2003 to 2008, a position he still held at the time this book was published. Von Doussa writes:

Reading is an act of engagement which may provoke thought, engender sympathy, or stir debate and discussion. And reading is a way to discover the lives of others and, by so doing, learn something about our own lives. (ix)

Experiences of immigration and resettlement in a country very different culturally from one’s own are expressed in this anthology through biographies, short stories, essays, poetry, autobiographical fiction and, in one instance, a ‘radio play.’ Storytelling and art, von Doussa says, provides ‘a forum for peaceful dissent’ (xi). The anthology is remarkably peaceful. Several contributions reflect the culture of complaint and political correctness to which we have grown accustomed over the preceding two decades but the dominant mood is one of optimism.

The anthology is a mixed bag. Interleaving each short story or narrative with a poem is clearly an editorial device to include the poems. But poetry is an arcane field, individual efforts difficult to publish, and the arrangement suits well enough. More critically, if a verse is so obscure that the poet finds it necessary to add a footnote to explain it, as Alexander Chang does (203), then something is amiss. If he had titled it ‘Summer Blue Adelaide Hills’ all would have been well.

I noticed two typographical errors (missing words: /of/ page 5; /then/ page 142), which suggests, hearteningly, that a spelling checker was not relied upon. It is incorrect, however, to refer to the short entries of the ‘Contributor’s Biographies’ as biographies. They are more correctly profiles evidently written by the contributors themselves, a common practice in publishing. One has to navigate these carefully when looking for a specific writer, for many non-western names defy alphabetical categorisation because they use different conventions in spelling and word order. One oversight is that translators of a poem, unless they are the authors, are not included in the profiles although acknowledged in footnotes or in-text parentheses. Translation, like transcription in oral history, is a hard-won skill. In an anthology representing multi-ethnic contributors translators deserve more credit.

Several contributions contain infelicities. Bel Vidal’s thirteen page article on Alberto Dominguez, an Australian casualty of September 11, notes: ‘we are left with only a little more knowledge about this man than the men who killed him had’ (1), but would the killers have known anything about Dominguez, or cared? Some short stories/articles
are self-conscious to the point of being self-indulgent. Bruce Pascoe, a prolific writer and editor of short stories over many years, has a throwaway sometimes irritating style that, however, slowly draws the reader in because of the tangled relationships told in the story line. Jihad Chehab El-Atrache asks: ‘is it that her heart is pounding even harder, that the trembling of my heart is melting into hers?’ (105), which is scarcely better than Ingrid Bergman’s heart beating in resonance to Nazi cannon fire, arguably the most awkward of clichés in the film Casablanca.

‘Of Clouds and Friends’ by Samantha Sirimann Hyde, at nine pages, is one of the longer offerings. It is an example of a failed short story, the intended surprise ending given away at the midpoint where the reader can see coming the cheating of the protagonist out of his money. A real surprise might have been the return of the money. The eight-page article ‘Transitional Cultures’ by Arasa is a mix of formal reporting conventions, academic jargon and informal chat with attempts at humour. ‘The Swami’ by Apeetha Arunagiri (ten pages) is about India and not Australian immigrants at all. Written in the latest street language (‘It was so not funny’) it is claptrap: ‘adopting practices in tune with natural processes is the overwhelmingly strongest possible financial orientation,’ ‘a consciousness of the tyranny of the petty mind as opposed to the vastness of the silent wellspring of creativity’ (221, 222). It does not belong to this anthology.

While the worst aspects of the contributions are pretentious writing, careless argument and poor plotting, there are appreciable offerings.

Gloria Corliss, a Goori woman, remains ‘continually saddened’ by what is shown in the media about her people, and she expresses a viewpoint that in my experience is found often among persons of Aboriginal descent, linking the old stories of her family to the place of her people in the wider society:

stories told to me by my mother and father, my grandmothers and aunties and uncles … have sustained me throughout my life and they continue to do so now. They have also kept me from becoming bitter about the treatment of my family and Aboriginal people (63).

Being patient with oneself and allowing time to change and adjust reflects an ideology of patience voiced by a number of contributors:

It takes several generations at least for the jelly to set into some kind of mould to provide a pedigree for the future children of the clan’ (Mary Pomfret, 90).

I had gained a glimpse of what it was to be me, a Persian-Australian woman, and that it was perfectly okay to belong to two different cultures (Mahsa Anderson, 132).

… being able to ‘blend in’ to the point that we have has brought us many rewards


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He made his own decisions here and it offered him a peace of mind which was lacking in his war torn homeland (Samantha Sirimann Hyde, 168).

Heather Nimmo’s ‘Awa’ the Crow Road’ represents the anthology’s twin themes of courage and complaint. Written as a script with dialogue and scene notes, it is the longest in the collection. It deals with Scottish immigrants and reminiscences: childhood humiliation at a school poetry recital, immigrants from other cultures. A lively contribution – it employs flash backs and cross-genre conventions such as the reading of a letter and the reciting of poetry – ‘Awa’ the Crow Road’ was a pleasure to read.

Although the focus is Australian there are comparisons with other parts of the world, and anecdotes that touch upon perceived Australian racism. Freedom of speech including dissent is exemplified in debate so welcome to von Doussa:

The recent claim by some Muslim people that Australia should adapt to their cultural traditions is probably the first time that an immigrant group has challenged the institutions, social mores and civic values of the host nation which they chose to enter (Arasa, 209).

Although I criticised Arasa earlier, this is a good point.

Mahsa Anderson’s essay ‘This Thing Called Culture’ (126-134) appears central to the anthology, literally and figuratively. Culture is a slippery concept, hard to define and having different meanings depending upon the person talking about it. Anderson writes about difference, identity and friendship: ‘The school I went to where I met some of my best friends and was expelled from for being a Baha’i’ (133).

About sixteen years ago I recall hearing an Italian speaker state that: ‘It’s racist to ask how a name is pronounced.’ In the anthology:

I may always have to respond to the question ‘Where are you from?’ or always be asked to spell that peculiar ‘unusual’ name but that says more about the nature of our culture than about my being different (Anderson, 134).

I suggest that one thing it says about the nature of Australian culture is that many are polite and respectful and ask such questions with a desire not to offend. I would like to think that social mores have changed since 1993. One value of this anthology is that, as well as raising our cultural awareness, it demonstrates that such changes are taking place.

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