Brian Dibble, Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley (University of Western Australian Press, 2008)

English-born Elizabeth Jolley (1923-2007) was one of the most feted and widely loved Australian writers during the 1980s and 1990s. She made many public appearances, where she honed her slightly dotty grandmother persona to perfection. As well, she taught creative writing at Curtin University and, before that, at the Fremantle Arts Centre. The two books of essays edited by her agent, Caroline Lurie, Central Mischief and Learning to Dance, contain insights into her views about the art of fiction. Yet despite her articulate presence, and the subtle and sympathetic readings her work has attracted, there remains a mystery at the heart of Jolley’s writing, from the riotous anarchic comedies like Miss Peabody’s Inheritance to the complex remembrance of things past in her trilogy of autobiographical fictions about Vera Wright, and the strange final novels.

Brian Dibble’s biography of Elizabeth Jolley solves many puzzles about links between her life and her fiction, without attempting to penetrate this mystery at the heart of her work. His title, Doing Life, and the cover image of Jolley looking out through a glass pane, suggest her endurance – of the life sentence, as it were – and the compassionate yet detached gaze of the writer. Yet the life was rich in delight as well as suffering, and its facts were often more bizarre than the fictions that Jolley made out of them. She herself had written about her parents’ marriage and the ménage a trois on which its survival seems to have depended, in the story ‘Mr Berrington’ and in the Vera Wright trilogy. The biography confirms that her schoolteacher father, a World War 1 conscientious objector who had been disowned by his own family, for many years welcomed into their home his Austrian wife’s ‘friend’, a barrister, as some kind of compensation for her disappointment in the marriage. Elizabeth (born Monica Elizabeth Knight) and her younger sister Madelaine were inevitably drawn into the power play among the adults. The experience seems to have left the young Elizabeth without a clear perception of her own boundaries, psychologically trapped in the pattern and bound to repeat it. At nineteen she became the third side of the triangle in the marriage of a couple some ten years older than herself, Leonard and Joyce Jolley.

The biography also confirms that she was bisexual, at least in her youthful love affairs. Both the comic lesbian couples in the early novels, and the passionate attachments to women experienced by her more serious protagonists (Laura in Palomino, Hester in The Well and Vera in the trilogy) form an important dimension of the range of loves – parental, filial, incestuous, heterosexual, homosexual – through which her characters grow. But always in her fiction the physical expression of sexual passion takes second place to the desire for intimacy, a unity of selves like that imagined by Plato as two halves of a single whole. Dibble rightly assigns a central place to this desire in Elizabeth Jolley’s life and work, and links it to her later emphasis on friendship as an alternative to love. Yet his account of her relationships with women, both those to whom she turned as mentors and those to whom she was
passionately attracted, is muted. This may be in tactful recognition of the fact that she always refused to answer questions about her sexuality, like most women of her generation; but it does seem to me to underplay a key aspect of the treatment of love in her novels, the association of love with loneliness, secrecy and lack of reciprocity.

Giving more weight to her sexual ambivalence might further illuminate the conflicted relationship with her parents, not to mention her lifelong devotion to Leonard Jolley, a man who is portrayed in the biography as an egotist of the first order, capable of large and small cruelties. When she bore her first child to him out of wedlock, his wife also bore a daughter – and on his return from a research trip he brought each child an identical dress. He made Elizabeth wait for years before committing himself to their marriage. Once when they were eating out together he saw a woman he knew, and remarked that if she saw them together she would take Elizabeth to be a ‘common prostitute’. He applied for the position that required them to migrate to Perth without consulting her. Even at the end of his professional life, he did not invite her to his farewell party. Awful Leonard stories like this abound in the book, yet they must have been related by Elizabeth herself, either in conversation with her biographer, or in the journals to which he had access. Loving a difficult person, an ungenerous spouse, was the great example set by her father, and by no means shameful in her eyes. Besides, Leonard was in a sense her education, having read classics and English literature at university while she had only nursing training beyond her school years. She enjoyed his acerbic wit as well as his intellect and the moments of intimacy they brought. As well, her need to be needed was fulfilled by looking after him, a man who suffered most of his life from rheumatoid arthritis.

Above all, he encouraged her writing. Most of her books are dedicated to him: The Travelling Entertainer, for example, contains the lines from a poem in German, ‘You have first taught me,/You have opened my eyes/To the unending value of life.’

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Elizabeth Jolley, the writer, is the immensely long apprenticeship she served before any of these books appeared. Her first, Five Acre Virgin, was published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1976. Yet she had been writing seriously since she and Leonard moved to Scotland in 1950, and a novel written then, The Feast of Life, was eventually, some forty years later, transmuted into the trilogy of My Father’s Moon, Cabin Fever and The Georges’ Wife. For the first fifteen years in Australia she had almost no contacts with other writers or publishing outlets and her work was constantly rejected. This delayed publishing history explains one puzzling aspect of her early work, the difficulty in assigning period and sometimes place to her stories, when she uses anachronistic slang terms like ‘hep cat.’

Brian Dibble is well placed to be Elizabeth Jolley’s biographer. He was a long-time friend, to whom she gave privileged access to materials in addition to the literary manuscripts held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. The notes attest to the hundreds of contacts he made in pursuit of information about her life. His comments on her writing attest to a deep and perceptive knowledge of it. He and his partner Barbara Milech have put together an invaluable on-line research collection (http://john.curtin.edu.au/jolley) and have published extensively on her work. The task of ordering so much material and making a narrative out of it must have been even more daunting than for most biographers. He describes his method as ‘layering carefully chosen facts, images and the words of others’ within each chapter as an ‘attempt to suggest the plenitude and complexity of the subject’s life’ (xii). This

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discontinuous layering moves from one subject to another and back again, but there are times when one would have liked less detail and more reflection on aspects of the story. Nevertheless Jolley’s readers are in his debt for this generous and carefully-wrought study of an extraordinary woman, her formation and her art.

Susan Sheridan