Sadiqa Beg  Review of *Coal Creek* by Alex Miller
Katerina Bryant  Review of *In Certain Circles* by Elizabeth Harrower
Sutapa Chaudhuri  Review of *Poetry d’Amour 2013: Love Poetry for Valentine’s Day* selected by Dennis Haskell
Sutapa Chaudhuri  Review of *The Double and Other Stories* by Maria Takolander
Kay Hart  *Review of Lost River: four albums* by Simone Lazaroo
Rajender Kaur  Review of *A God in Every Stone* by Kamila Shamsie
Lorenzo Mari  Review of *A History of Silence* by Lloyd Jones
Jennifer Osborn  Review of *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* by Fergus Hume
Murari Prasad  Review of *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* by Rabindranath Tagore edited and translated by Mohammad A. Quayum.
Jorge Salavert  Review of *Montebello* by Robert Drewe
Umme Salma  Review of *The Parliament of Poets: An Epic Poem* by Frederick Glaysher
Ruth Starke  Review of *The Eye of the Sheep* by Sophie Laguna
Kathleen Steele  Review of *Thicker than Water* by Judith Colquhoun
Emily Sutherland  Review of *Faded Letters* by Maurizio Ascari
Alex Miller, *Coal Creek* (Allen & Unwin, 2013)

Alex Miller’s *Coal Creek* is an interesting read for the kind of arbitrariness it offers to the reader. The novel has diminutive layers to probe into, but it does offer readers engagement until the end due to the trials and tribulations of the central character. *Coal Creek* is a captivating story of friendship, love, truth, betrayal with dramatic twists and turns where a young man, Bobby Blue, is caught in the battle between his faithfulness towards his friend and loyalty towards his boss. In between such conflict, there is an emergence of innocent love.

Set in the late 1940s, *Coal Creek* is a first-person narrative in which the central character, Bobby Blue, now an orphan, is born and raised in countryside Mount Hay, Central Queensland – it is a childhood spent ‘out in the camp mustering up the scrubs with Dad’ (4). Subsequently, he takes up a job as a deputy under the local constable, Daniel Collins (who has been shifted recently to Mount Hay). With the first-person narrative, the voice of the protagonist creates an ambiguity between the writer and the character – perhaps giving an autobiographical impression to the book. The description of the protagonist’s adventurous life in Central Queensland seems a landscape that is embedded in the writer’s own memory. In an interview, Alex Miller has said: ‘this one, there was no research to do. I knew Bobby in my head. I knew his people and I loved them’. Miller is able to reflect Bobby Blue’s rustic nature through a very simple language, unschooled expressions and grammatical errors such as ‘strangers was rare’ and ‘they is’.

The novel’s rustic setting creates the credible environment of great significance to the story. The opening pages describe the town, Mount Hay, as isolated. The isolated rural background implies everything simple, honest and peaceful – and every time the peace of the town is disturbed by the outsiders, the nature clatters with humanity. Though Bobby knows that the intrusion of the outsiders in their local issues will manifest in a total despondency of whoever gets involved in it, he, too, naively gets involved in their cynicism and that leads him to darkness. Bobby becomes prisoner to his own rustic nature and gets caught up in a vicious trap that leaves him with tragic debris of the past. With such convolutions, Bobby’s dilemma becomes a kind of saga of a liminal hero.

Daniel, Bobby’s Boss, who has served in war as a soldier, takes up the case of Ben, who is also Bobby’s childhood friend. Ben, who is starting to new life with his girlfriend, Deeds, happens to be an Aboriginal person – and therefore Ben is being hunted by police for kidnapping her. Daniel is beleaguered by his wife, Esme, who wants her husband to follow the case closely – solely for the purpose that the place would then be unsafe for her daughters too. Being outsiders, Daniel and his wife perceive the locals with doubt and disbelief. This becomes their tragic flaw. Though Daniel does not want Ben to be harmed, fate has something else in store for them.

I was captivated by the story that Bobby, who has lived all his life in the scrub, narrates. He is conscious of the mystery that the land possesses. However, the Collins’s fail to understand the way of life and feel they know better than the locals. The conflict between town and country is also apparent when the Collins’s attitude towards the country boys – Bobby and Ben – is later transformed into firm doubts. Although initially it seems Bobby’s closeness with Collins will develop into a pleasant relationship, in the course of time a master-slave relationship is subtly apparent now and then. Though very elusive, there is also a clash between whites and Aborigines when Aunt Rosie Gnapun complains about Ben for kidnapping her niece, Deeds – but in fact she has a grudge against Ben for beating her son.

1 Interview: Alex Miller, ‘The Sydney Morning Herald’ (5 October 2013).

Book reviews: *Coal Creek*, by Alex Miller. Sadiqa Beg.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
Bobby’s attachment with Daniel’s eldest daughter, Irie, culminates into a beautiful friendship where they both shared the same beliefs of half real world and half unreal world. Bobby’s tale of Old Murri people develops a yearning in Irie to live like them. However, Bobby does not want her to be caught in a world that can only exist in the mind and nowhere else. His bluntness disheartens her. Irie fails to see that the notion of half real world and unreal world cannot exist at the same time in the concrete society they are living in: ‘her dreams was what she seen as her real life, and she did not separate the two’ (192).

Thus, Irie runs away with her sister to search the land of Old Murri people. Unknowingly, they become involved in a clash that ignites catastrophe. There is a hardnosed change in Daniel and Esme’s attitude towards Bobby and they misjudge him for abducting the girls. Esme’s discreet suspicion is revealed when she says, ‘I told you there was no point giving this creature the benefit of the doubt’ (208). Daniel becomes a different person altogether: ‘the old time and its dreams have fallen behind him, broken and lost in the drift’ (213).

By placing the characters with mundane human frailties in an unusual situation, Miller crafts a unique drama. By questioning the adopted land and by not trusting the locals, Daniel and Esme – the educated elite crippled and trapped within the structure of hierarchy – constantly divide themselves from the people belonging to the underclass. In addition, Daniel’s lack of a tenacious mind leads to a tragic downfall. His misjudgment manifests into wicked behaviour when his daughters are lost. And Esme ‘in a state of fear and panic and extreme exhaustion … [and] was in no mood for acting reasonably’ (254) because she thought that Bobby and Ben were involved in kidnapping their girls.

A series of events follow one after the other as the story progresses – building up and creating tension and suspense. Miller’s saga wanders through the bush, its people and the way of the society. Coal Creek touches on several themes: love, trust, betrayal, powerlessness, injustices, and uncertainty in life. The book has been handled thoughtfully – building up pressures in setting as well as between characters – where fate becomes the guiding force in everyone’s life.

Sadiqa Beg
Elizabeth Harrower, *In Certain Circles* (Text, 2014)

Set in post-World War Two Sydney, Elizabeth Harrower’s latest novel entices with intriguingly everyday dialogue and dynamic characters. The book follows the intersecting lives of privileged siblings Zoe and Russell Howard and the orphaned Stephen and Anna Quayle. The idyllic middle class life of Zoe and Russell unapologetically clashes with Anna and Stephen’s perception of the world. Often dark, it is a tale of love, class and destruction.

Harrower wrote and then retracted *In Certain Circles* from her publisher in 1971. The reason is shrouded in mystery. Despite the book having sat on the shelf for 43 years, it has been dusted off and deserves to be well received.

In part one of the novel, Harrower comments on class with exchanges between the Howards and Stephen and Anna. Harrower states, ‘Zoe had wakened in this square stone house on the north side of Sydney Harbour, and learned soon afterwards from her family and their friends that she was remarkable’ (6). It is this sense of entitlement and the comfortable elitism held by the Howards that fosters a sense of class antagonism. Stephen and Anna cannot grasp the middle class rituals around conversation, and, much to the Howards’s disgust, do not wish to.

Tension is perpetuated by the elite family’s lack of understanding that it is luck that decides who is born into privilege. Zoe and Russell’s mother fosters these ideas through an emphasis on family status and history: ‘Her husband had… a few black-sheep labourers in his background’ while ‘her side was blameless: academics, solicitors, reliable men and women’ (50). In contrast, Zoe naïvely says, ‘You only think of orphans in fairy tales’ (9).

While Harrower writes about brothers and sisters, it is the female characters in the book that are the most vibrant. Anna, Zoe and Lily, who is Russell’s wife, each embody particular roles: Zoe the Wife, Lily the Mother and Anna the Independent Single Woman.

Harrower says as much in what she leaves out in her characterisation as in what she includes, fostering mystery through gaps in time and learning about characters through the lens of another character rather than an all-knowing narrator. This is especially so with Russell, whose character is never fully explored. We know he is charismatic and attracts people, but this is not shown. He remains on the periphery of the story, as Lily’s husband, Zoe’s brother and Anna’s love interest.

Part three of *In Certain Circles* has strong themes of emotional abuse. Harrower movingly shows the systematic criticism and cruelty of Stephen towards Zoe. He hates her for her carefree childhood, and so over the period of their marriage strips away her youthful energy. Zoe’s thoughts and reflections on their conversational wars are so realistic that this reader consumed them with a locked jaw and tight chest.

Towards the beginning of the novel, the narrator says, ‘If you could believe what you read, Sydney was one of the largest cities in the English-speaking world’ (7). At the end, Sydney is ‘the world’s twenty-eighth largest city, with a population more or less equal to Rome’ (183). The author cleverly aligns the world’s view of Sydney with Zoe’s view. The difference in the city’s perception over time speaks to Zoe’s character where the brightness and strength of Sydney is aligned with her. By the end of the novel, Zoe, like Sydney, is rather small and is no longer unique but comparable to others. *In Certain Circles* spans from post-war to the 1970s, and with this comparison also comments on a change of worldview. There is a growing acceptance that there is more to offer than the ‘English-speaking world’, with Harrower cleverly comparing Sydney to Rome, something that wouldn’t have been done in the 1940s when Australia was elevated through being the child of the Monarchy. At the same time, Harrower also comments on how Australia is conveyed as the
periphery of Europe, being seen as less worthy and less culturally valued by the book’s English descendents. This is what Zoe refers to as a ‘national inferiority complex’ (127).

But part three of the novel remains the weakest. While the previous parts have been driven by closely examining the characters’ thoughts, everyday conversations and lives, the final section is thrust forward by an unlikely plot. Anna accidentally sends two suicide letters to Zoe and Russell, letters that she had written years ago. These she somehow confused with Christmas cards.

Zoe and Stephen’s marriage woes are resolved in a quick and unlikely fashion. This seems implausible considering the years of Stephen’s vicious emotional abuse. Further, Stephen’s ultimate passivity is unrealistic and therefore insulting to other women who have struggled to leave abusive partners out of fear. Zoe ends the book, stating, ‘the day was lovely… And now she could move on’ (252). It is unlikely that a woman who, as Harrower has described, been stripped of the carefree joy she once possessed, could suddenly feel such unbridled hope. Not much earlier, Zoe said, ‘I’m the guilty party… [I] agreed to be devalued to the point where I’m of less consequence than anyone in the world’ (152). Lily, Anna and Russell’s resolution is somewhat more believable but also suffers from being too tidy.

Harrower ties up the story in a rush, with a tidy resolution. It feels jarring and out of place in a novel which so intricately discusses the complexity of life and relationships. The ending is a product of the flaws of the novel, these including Harrower skipping over large passages of time between the three books. She glosses over the decay of Zoe and Stephen’s marriage, leaving the reader feeling as though they are missing out on the nuanced emotional hardship that Harrower writes so well.

At 250 pages, the book could have easily been extended to four hundred. The hastening of the novel meant that the ending was forced to escalate, giving a false sense of suspense and unlikely circumstances that ultimately disappoint the reader.

A wonderful novel is potentially ruined by an ending that is undeserving of Harrower’s flawless writing and portrayal of emotion. Harrower portrays the difficulties of women in a nuanced way: Anna struggling to live as a single woman on a low salary in the 1950s, Lily’s identity being connected to her children to her detriment, and Zoe suffering from emotional abuse and coming to terms with the failing of her marriage. These are the ultimate takeaways from the book. And because of this, despite weaknesses, *In Certain Circles* reinstates Harrower’s reputation as an influential Australian writer.

**Katerina Bryant**
Maria Takolander, *The Double and Other Stories* (Text, 2013)

*The Double and Other Stories*, the debut collection of short stories by Maria Takolander, is a wonderfully engaging collection of stories coming from the pen of a highly imaginative and scholarly writer. The stories in this collection are both pleasurable to read and intellectually stimulating. The collection contains twelve stories in two parts: the first part has eight stories including the title story, ‘The Double’, while the second part has four interlinked stories centred on an imaginary character named Zed Roānkin. One of the distinguishing features of this collection is the preponderance of literary allusion and intertextuality, as is evidenced by the titles of all the stories in the first part: ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, ‘Three Sisters’, ‘The Double’, ‘The Obscene Bird of Night’, ‘Mad Love’, ‘Paradise Lost’, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ and ‘The War of the Worlds’.

Apart from the obsessive use of intertextuality and allusions, the stories also show a fascination with doubles, mirroring and pairings – both actual and symbolic, and structural as well as figurative. In the opening story, ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, in which there is a strong oedipal element in the portrayal of the mother-son relationship, the indifferent and violent father is paired with the loving son who lends support to his mother and cares for the mother’s wounds, against the violence perpetrated on her by her drunk husband, his father: ‘I started cleaning the protruding thumb with the damp clump of paper. I noticed the breasts and nipples under the threadbare cotton of the nightie, and I saw that her lean thighs were smeared with blood’ (6); ‘I held Mum. I was taller than her by the time I was sixteen. I rubbed her slender back, my palms following the curve of her spine beneath her soft dress. She sobbed on my shoulder. I was trying to grow a beard, and I could feel her long hair getting caught on my cheek’ (17).

The title story, ‘The Double’, like many of the other stories, is basically a story of the migrant people, people who feel as if they have ‘lost half’ of themselves, who wish to ‘leave the past behind’ but are sent ‘things from the homeland’ still. In this extremely complex psychological story the female protagonist is haunted by her past that she sees mirrored in the black lake, ‘like a black hole in the centre of everything, drawing the world in’ (55): she walks slowly, her left leg lazy, her left arm almost numb by her side. Half of her body seems to have given up. It is lucky, she thinks, that she has another half’ (62). Her sense of being haunted by memories and her present experiences that seem to be a double of her past, in which her past life gets inexplicably repeated and mirrored in her current actions, finds resonance in her father’s traumatic memories of the war in which he had encountered a dead man who looked exactly like him: ‘Their father had been dragging corpses out of the trenches, from amid the snow and the blasted earth, when he had turned over the body of a Russian soldier and looked into the face – caked in blood and soil – of a man who looked exactly like himself. Olen kuollut mies, their father says to the table on which he is leaning. I am a dead man.’ (58) The use of structural mirroring succinctly delineates the father’s sense of being ‘dead’ that recurs in his daughter: ‘She wakes to a silence so complete that, for a moment, she thinks she might be buried. … She sits up as she reaches the pump at the puddle’s edge and glimpses her reflection in the dark water: her unbrushed hair, her white sleepwear. Then she is leaning over the water, almost as if she has a nosebleed, and she sees that it is a stranger there in the mirrored surface, her pale face muddied, her body bound in white sheeting’ (66, 78).

Takolander’s language is poetic, her skill as a storyteller is highly commendable, especially in the psychologically complex, intensely intertextual rendering of the stories in the first part. Though the stories in this section are different from each other, they carry a sense of foreboding and silence with a touch of melancholy. The imagery employed is often stark and sinister, with barren landscapes
and dark waters (the black lake spreading open at the heart of things, p.70) with a touch of Conrad here and there. The mode of narration varies from one story to the other, with shifts in points of view, and in the use of first, second or third person narratives. The stark, indeed sinister, reality of contemporary existence that is portrayed so masterfully in the first section of this collection sharply contrasts with the fantastic, even absurd, note sounded in the second section that centres on the character of Zed Roānkin, made more conspicuous by his absence. The Roānkin sequence is characterized by an episodic structure and fanciful imagination, with a touch of satire and elements of magical realism that blurs and blends the fine distinctions demarcating the real and the surreal. This sequence of four interwoven stories, that border on absurdity, displays a playful waywardness and whimsicality reminiscent of nonsense literature.

In this fantastic series, the elusive character of Zed Roānkin and his supposedly ‘handwritten ten-page stapled A5 pamphlet’ titled The Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry, become the focal point for some absurdist but strangely relevant deliberations on contemporary status of poetry and the nature of poets. Another fictitious but symbolic title that recurs time and again in this section and thus accentuates the agenda underlying The Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry is Workplace Fraud, a book that can prove crucial in exposing the pretence and ‘fake’ talents pervading the world of contemporary poetry, as exemplified by the ‘inestimable’ Professor Nute Berger, and ‘the Berger School of monumental poetics’. The uncanny presence of the double is evidenced powerfully in this absurdist, and often hilarious, section not only through the pervasive, if mystifying, presence of the absent poet-philosopher Zed Roānkin, who haunts the dreams and memories of the narrator-protagonists, but also through the structural doubling of the two stories – ‘A Roānkin Philosophy of Poetry’ and ‘Roānkin and the Librarian’ – in which the narrator first searches for and then at last becomes the elusive poet-philosopher Zed Roānkin herself bringing the collection to a full circle. In The Double and Other Stories, Maria Takolander thus promises her readers a delectable fare of richly woven stories, some with psychological intricacy or an uncanny foreboding and others that are fantastic and ridiculous, but all with an ability to keep the readers intrigued and engrossed.

Sutapa Chaudhuri

Poetry d’Amour 2013: Love Poetry for Valentine’s Day, selected by Dennis Haskell, is an anthology that showcases the poetry of 40 poets hailing from Western Australia. It includes work by invited poets performing at the soiree Poetry d’Amour 2013 held in South Perth, as well as poems from entries in the 2013 Poetry d’Amour Love Poetry Competition organised by the Western Australian Poets Inc. Based on romantic love, this distinctive anthology boldly engages with the age old theme and successfully provides its readers a fresh perspective on love and the changing notion of valentine in the contemporary times. Poetry d’Amour 2013 is enriched with a perceptive and erudite introduction by the renowned poet-editor Dennis Haskell that re-establishes the link of love with madness and poetry through a clever use of intertextuality, indeed references to and quotes sourced from canonical poems and poets – ranging from Virgil to Shakespeare, Tennyson to T.S. Eliot – all help establish the range, scope and perennial interest of love as a theme for poetry, a theme well loved by poets all over the world and at all times. The introduction, quirkily subtitled ‘The Cruel Madness of Love’, sets the mood and creates the right ambience for an anthology of Valentine’s Day love poetry. Not only does it let the readers have a rare glimpse into ‘tradition’, that is, the love poetry of olden times, but, most importantly, it also amply showcases the new age poets and their ‘individual talent’, to adapt a well-known phrase used by the venerated poet-critic T.S. Eliot. By connecting the old with the new, the traditional with contemporary and/or original perspectives, Haskell’s introduction sets the tone of the poems to come – poems that speak of the perennial emotion of love but from myriad points of view that are nevertheless situated firmly in the contemporary times. The timeless continuity of the theme is also suggested by the framing quote taken from Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) that contextualises the theme of love in a 2013 anthology.

‘Love is [a] territory ever open to exploration, even though it has been written about for centuries, but poets do need to find new ways to express that exploration,’ writes Haskell in his introduction (viii-ix), and the poets selected for this anthology do exactly that. Each of the poems selected for this rich anthology illustrates not only a novelty in perspective, tone and treatment of this old theme but also an imaginative exploration of this timeless, yet often, as Haskell succinctly states, ‘the most forbidding of poetic subjects’(ix). With subtlety and thoughtfulness, the poets of Poetry d’Amour present the varieties of love in contemporary life. Interpreting the theme of love in surprisingly innovative ways, they successfully create poems that range from the simple to the complex, the sophisticated to the quirky; the use of poetic imagery and techniques, too, are striking in their inventiveness. Many of the poems deal with the anguish of separation and absence of the beloved one, as well as with dream and desire; a few others relate the concept of love with madness or cruelty. The associations of dream and nature with love is further accentuated by the cover illustration titled ‘When Sleep Turns to Dream’ by the artist Beba Hall, which lends an added charm to the present volume.

The poems that won the 2013 Poetry d’Amour Competition have been printed first in the anthology, and their imaginative variety in tackling this age-old theme innovatively is truly remarkable. The winning poem, ‘Broken Memory’ by Gail Willems, is one of the best in the whole selection in its psychologically intricate, complex treatment of love from the perspective of loss and longing, bereavement and memory. The other three poems by Gail Willems included in this selection – ‘When’, ‘In the Mirror It’s Today’ and ‘Paths Of Selkie Silver’, too deserve special mention as
these poems also foreground the complex emotions of love with a subtlety that speaks to readers. Willems’s poems speak of an everlasting togetherness in love, a place and a mode of being wrought through memory, where ‘your heart enters mine/ alone we happen along in silence’ (53).

The second place winning shape poem, ‘The Flowering Tree’ by Vivienne Glance, delineates love as an experience of transformation through an all-embracing empathy that obliterates the distinction between the Self and the Other and lets the speaker see the world from a different perspective, acquiring with the girl ‘who can change into a tree of jasmine flowers’ an ability to ‘converse with air and rain … [to] hear the rain-soft/ children laugh’ (3). Karen Murphy’s poem ‘Hinge’, the first among the three commended poems, on the other hand, succeeds in realistically capturing the act of lovemaking in words, one of the most difficult aspects of love to represent in poetry.

Among the other two commended poems, the simplicity of Sally Clarke’s poem, ‘Claire – Dear Little Sister’, that deals with love and loss experienced in a war, contrasts sharply with the complexity and technical intricacy of Peter Bibby’s apparently simple poem ‘The Invite’, in which three seven-line stanzas make up a single sentence. This experimentation with technique can again be observed in the use of unconventional punctuations in Scott-Patrick Mitchell’s ‘Processional’. Gary Colombo De Piazzis ‘My First’ and Josephine Batten’s ‘Longing’ both speak of the timeless yearning for an absent lover, Alison Matthews’s ‘Unconditional Love’ delineates the love of a mother for her little son – a love shown to be as fulfilling and as complete as the normative model of heterosexual love – while Rhonda Rice’s ‘The Other Woman’ brings to the fore the voice of the Other woman, sensitively deploying a marginalized perspective to foreground the emotions of a socially tabooed love. Jean Snelling’s ‘Diamond Wedding’ is especially touching in its personal tone as it wistfully connects the present with the past through the memory of a lost love that still sends an eternal ‘invitation’: ‘inviting me to spend/ my life with you’ (25). ‘Stop Sister’ by Julie Watts or ‘Poem for Everywoman’ by Glen Phillips, on the other hand, employ women-centric perspectives to represent the theme of romantic love.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate Haskell’s opinion that, ‘Although it has been experienced, examined and dissected for centuries, it [love] retains a large element of mystery’ (viii). It is this sense of mystery, an extraordinary feeling that is indescribable in words, that pervades the poems included in this anthology and successfully keeps alive the readers interest in the age-old theme. In his poem ‘Letter to Rhonda’, Haskell captures this ‘wordless’ feeling perfectly: ‘only love can pursue/ silent, where words fail completely’ (34). Love, truly, is perhaps ‘a country discovered by chance’(60), as Annamaria Weldon so perceptively says in her poem ‘The Practice of Belonging’, and the poems selected for Poetry d’Amour 2013 have been fortunate enough to discover and preserve this omnipresent, omnipotent, yet extremely elusive emotion. Poetry d’Amour 2013 is thus noteworthy as an anthology that ‘surrenders’ to the myriad emotions of love successfully.

Sutapa Chaudhuri

Simone Lazaroo’s fourth book, *Lost River*, continues a theme around Asian-Australian relations. It’s a work of fiction, including the created southwest Australian setting, Lost River, where the events occur (Author’s notes). Ruth Joiner is facing the fact that she may die soon, but how is she going to explain this to her daughter, Dewi. Ruth’s life so far has not been an easy one: Dewi is a child given to happiness, not Pollyanna-style, but a luminescence (54-5) and Ruth is determined to fight the odds as long as she has strength to do so. She is equally intent that Dewi should know how much she’s loved.

David Matthews is Dewi’s father, but he doesn’t know that. Ruth meets him within hours of her arrival in Lost River as a 17-year-old on a quest to find her future (94). She notices him as she is strolling towards the river while savouring the fizz from her first-ever sip of Fanta. Older than Ruth, he is on a mission to document the landscape before it is forever changed by encroaching housing developments and the burgeoning tourist trade.

Discovering that Ruth needs a place to stay, David offers the spare room in the dilapidated old house he rents. The arrangement works well. Ruth thinks he is nice and interesting, and rapidly develops a crush. Ruth is happy.

It all changes when David suddenly announces one evening that he is going away for a while but that Ruth is welcome to stay on in the house. As a character in the book, David is the mysterious element to be teased as the story unfolds.

Ruth has always enjoyed rescuing lost things and having people considering it her special gift. Working at the opportunity shop suits her. She is good with people like Katy (47) and the disadvantaged women (44) who come looking for clothes and toys for their children. Ruth listens; she is kind to them all, pretending not to notice extra items stuffed into bags but not paid for (45).

It’s in a box at the shop that Ruth finds four unused photo albums, a well-used pocket diary titled ‘An Oriental Wisdom 1976’. Ruth has a fondness for quotations and this diary has lots of them: ‘Sure need some wisdom right now’ (1). She dithers over a travel guide to Bali, deciding to slip it into her knapsack along with the other items: after all, ‘no one’s looking’ (1). She drops a few coins into the cashbox, locks the dusty front door and heads for home.

Ruth sets to work and over time the four photo albums become a journal, a story of a family: a mother, an absent father whom the mother portrays as the love of her life, and a child named Dewi.

Ruth Joiner never yields to the ‘victim’ mentality. The strength of this book is in Ruth’s transition from careless teenager to mature adulthood. She manages to make a loving home in spite of extreme poverty, to ensure that special occasions such as birthdays are celebrations. Her calm approach to parenting helps her daughter through disappointments to ensure the child’s self-respect and readiness to move into a life with a future. It is summed up beautifully in one of their conversations: “Am I different from you Mum?” … “In lots of ways.” *Happier for a start. Let it be. Please. Ruth prays …* (86)

This could so easily have been a dark, bleak story. Instead it is an enjoyable, happy one. The child Dewi is delightfully portrayed. Ruth shows that no-one else can really be responsible for another’s happiness; it’s up to the individual, but it sure helps to have friends, some laughter and fun with people you care about and who care about you.

I enjoyed the writing craft on display, almost a master class in the skills that turn solid research into storytelling, showing rather than offering speeches about issues such as encroaching urbanization and tourism and their effect on regional communities that have initially been built
around farming. Characters such as Nellie (103-4) and Lizzie (89-93) at the mission or Katy (149-150), passing through Lost River on walkabout, offer insight into Indigenous life. An exchange between Ruth and her employer, Eloise, as Asian bus tourists request ‘Roo?’ (48) and the bus driver interprets ‘They want Skippys’, is a delightful moment about racism as Ruth’s Balinese-Australian adds to the confusion.

As Ruth and Dewi battle what life throws at them, the responses of bureaucracy and reactions from the broader community touch on matters such as child welfare, adoption, single parenting, and poverty.

If there is a weakness to be mentioned, perhaps it is the occasional feeling of interruption to the flow of the story because of the back and forth nature of the construct that had me re-reading some of the text to get back on track. However, this criticism is a minor matter. The style and structure are a big part of the book’s charm.

It is interesting that the blurb calls Lost River a novella in spite of its 300 pages. It is a very nice book to hold, a pleasant change from those bulky 500-800-page tomes that have become popular of late. The beautiful cover design might make one ignore the adage about not judging a book by its cover.

This is definitely book club reading material. It would certainly engender good discussion, and the publisher has developed notes for book groups, which are available via their website. It could also be a discussion starter in secondary school around the underlying issues, although it may not have enough ‘action’ to immediately cause teenagers to be lured into reading it.

Kay Hart

Kamila Shamsie, A God in Every Stone (Bloomsbury, 2014)

A God in Every Stone is the prolific, award winning Pakistani writer, Kamila Shamsie’s sixth novel. It follows on the success of her previous work: the City by the Sea (1998) and Kartography (2002), both shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize; Salt and Saffron (2000); Broken Verses (2005); and Burnt Shadows (2009), which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and has been translated into more than twenty languages. In 2013 she was named a Granta’s Best of Young British Writers. Much like these previous works, A God in Every Stone explores the intricacies of human relationships against the backdrop of historical forces that shape the destinies of both individuals and nations. A sharply political novel, A God in Every Stone examines the underside of empire through the lens of the intimate and the personal, ambitiously telescoping wide swathes of time and space from the Achaemenid empire in the time of Darius I in the fifth century BCE to British colonial rule in India in the early twentieth century. Herodotus, Odysseus, Alexander, Darius I, Scylax, Chandragupta Maurya, Gandhi, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: these are but a few of the names mentioned in this sweeping tale spanning centuries, connecting India and the West. A God in Every Stone tells the stories of an amateur British archeologist Vivian Spencer Rose, and a Pashtun soldier, Qayuum Gul, who is blinded in one eye at Ypres in World War I fighting as part of the Allied forces on behalf of the British. The novel closes with the little known Kissa Khawani Bazar massacre of 23 April 1930 in Peshawar in which over 400 peaceful demonstrators protesting discriminatory colonial laws were gunned down by the British and their bodies removed by trucks and buried unceremoniously.

A God in Every Stone is nicely timed. Published in the centenary year of World War I, which is currently being commemorated widely across Europe, and especially in Britain, it participates in revaluations of the ‘Great War’ by addressing more than a few of the blind spots in the collective memory of the British by foregrounding the heavy toll paid by thousands of Indian soldiers who fought for the Allied cause as part of the British empire. Shamsie underscores the grand irony of these humble soldiers, most from peasant backgrounds with little education, laying down their lives in distant Europe for a foreign cause they scarcely understood.

The grim battlefields of Somme and Ypres that have become hallowed names in British collective consciousness for the valour and courage shown by British soldiers are recalled in the novel with a different agenda. The novel illuminates the sacrifices made by these soldiers with compelling empathy while indicting the hypocrisy of the British. In particular, A God in Every Stone pays homage to the unsung sacrifices of proud Pashtun soldiers fighting an unfamiliar enemy in unfamiliar lands in Flanders, France, through the characters of Qayuum Gul and Kalam Khan and evokes the intense, almost homoerotic, bonds of brotherhood engendered by war. Returning home from England, Qayuum muses, ‘If a man is to die defending a field, let the field be his field, the land, his land, and the people, his people’, only to discover that he feels no emotional connection to the maulvis and merchants, the courtesans and beggars he sees in the streets of Peshawar as he walks home from the train station (101). Even his proud tribal affiliations to the Yusufzai pale in contrast to the affinity he feels for the regiment he has left behind, the 40th Pathans, comprised of men of all different ethnicities: ‘Rajputs, Punjabis, Dogras, and Afridis’. Through his longing to return back to these men, A God in Every Stone questions the socially constructed divisions of race and nation that pale into insignificance in the face of the deeply call of brotherhood forged in the battlefield. More tellingly, the novel illuminates the divided loyalty of Muslim soldiers of the Indian Army who refuse to fight fellow Muslims in Turkey. It traces the slow disillusionment of Indian soldiers at the

discriminatory treatment they receive in British hospitals in Brighton and their consequent radicalization against the hypocrisy of an empire that exhorts the natives to fight for freedom and justice but denies them these very rights as second class citizens in their own countries.

And yet, World War I is merely a small part of the sweeping historical backdrop of the novel which is structured by the intersecting narratives of Qayuum Gul and Vivian Spencer Rose, a young British archaeologist who spends her life trying to become the son her father never had. Her quest to locate the lost circlet of Scylax takes Vivian Rose to Peshawar where she befriends a young boy, Najeeb, who turns out to be Qayuum’s brother. Najeeb becomes Vivian’s ‘civilizing mission’, as she takes on the task of tutoring him in the Greek language and inspiring him to discover his own heritage and patrimony in the many archaeological ruins surrounding Peshawar.

According to Herodotus, Scylax, who was tasked by Persian Emperor Darius I to chart the course of the Indus river in the fifth century BCE, is thought to have begun his explorations from the settlement of Caspatyrus, which some historians conjecture was located in the vicinity of the present day city of Peshawar in Pakistan. And it is this tumultuous region of the South Asian subcontinent, bordering Afghanistan, that Shamsie renders with deep pathos. In evoking Peshawar’s fragrant orchards, storied bazaars, as well as its layered history as a once thriving seat of Buddhism, the novel complicates the one-sided representation of Afghanistan in the western media today as a strife-torn region embroiled in the ‘War on Terror.’ By presenting Peshawar through a historical lens as an ancient city which has been an important part of several great empires, including the Gandhara, Kushana and Mughal empires, and the Hellenic empire under Alexander the Great, among others, A *God In Every Stone* forces the reader to take a long view and re-vision the city and its people as complex, multi-layered, cultured. Peshawar emerges then, as a once hallowed seat of Buddhist learning, and the pacifist protestors, the *Khudai Khidmatgars* (servants of God) led by the venerable Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who are ruthlessly gunned down by the British in April, 1930, are framed within another lineage extending back into history, beyond the immediate influence of the non-violence preached by Gandhi.

And so it is that Peshawar emerges as the truly vibrant character in the novel, beyond Qayuum Gul and the indefatigably curious Najeeb Gul tutored by Vivian Rose. Shamsie writes with a painterly eye and successfully evokes not just sights and smells of the differing cultural locales such as Qayuum’s humble house in the old city but also the created ‘English’ atmosphere of the British club and hotel. While the details of the archaeological dig at Labraunda and Shahji Ke Dehri in Peshawar are rendered with imaginative richness, capturing the deep time of history, other details such as references to the suffragette movement, the VAD, and the Armenian massacre are hurriedly passed over. The walled city which is the site of the violent melee of the Kissa Khwani Bazar at the end of the novel has more emotional resonance and texture than the cast of new characters hastily introduced in the end. After a leisurely pace delving deftly into the subjectivity of Qayuum and Vivian Rose, and describing in detail the various obstacles and clues in the quest for the circlet of Scylax, the narrative becomes overloaded toward the end with new subplots.

The novel careens to a close by introducing a whole new cast of characters when Vivian returns to Peshawar in the waning days of Empire. The mysterious green-eyed girl, Diwa, who ministres to the wounded, is an enigmatic but ultimately an unrealized character; similarly unrealised is the romantic encounter between her and Najeeb Gul. Shamsie has captured with particular skill and empathy the emotional contours of an intensely male world and female characters like Diwa and her sister in-law, or Qayuum’s female relatives, are peripheral to this world.

Rajender Kaur


Writing a memoir seems to be a routine step in the career of many transnationally acclaimed writers. The New Zealand author Lloyd Jones, for example, has recently come to the genre of memoir after publishing more than ten books, including some novels which have been translated into many diverse languages, such as *Book of Fame* (2000) or *Mr. Pip* (2006). *A History of Silence* (2013), however, is far more surprising than the simple accomplishment of a routine task. In fact, this is a text which escapes any easy definition: it also includes, for instance, a thorough reflection about the earthquake which devastated Christchurch on 22 February 2011, but it is not in any way an instant book about the recent catastrophe. Jones aims at a broader goal, which is eventually revealed by the very last quotation of the book, taken from Joseph Brodskij’s collection of essays *On Grief and Reason* (1995): ‘If art teaches us anything, it is the privateness of the human condition.’

*A History of Silence* fully shares Brodskij’s ambition: by blending his own family history with the narration of the earthquake, Jones manages to build a unique ‘history of silence’, establishing many interesting connections between the two narratives and providing them with further elaboration. According to the author, indeed, both his personal family story and New Zealand national history show the ‘gaps and fissures’ (40) of silence, as they have grown ‘out of a deliberate forgetting of what [they] sat on’ (37).

More specifically, the gaps in the history of Christchurch emerged when, after the earthquake, the city faced the problem of soil liquefaction, due to the fact that urban development – principally based, as the author repeatedly recalls, on the massive use of concrete – did not take into account Christchurch’s ‘wetland history’ (23). Also, Jones’s family history is shown to be heavily influenced by forgetfulness, as the author states that for many years his knowledge of his family past has not gone beyond the biographies of his own parents.

Given these premises, the 2011 earthquake triggers an enquiry both in the history of Jones’s own family and in the national past of New Zealand. Initially, the author seems driven by a feeling that might be even labelled as ‘wishful thinking’: ‘I felt that all I had to do was identify the unacknowledged events of the past and history would be visible’ (88). The quest for truth, however, might be misleading, as family stories are often based on invented tales, as the author eventually admits (181). At the end of the book, Jones eventually gets to a slightly different conclusion, which emphasizes awareness over truth: ‘This is what it is like to acquire history. You become knowledgeable about things you never expected’ (268).

Among the unexpected findings of the author’s quest, there is the disclosure of his grandmother’s story, previously marked by oblivion for her bad reputation as a ‘fallen woman’ (194). Maud’s story, in fact, closely recalls the plot of Nathanael Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), showing the existence of deep analogies between the Victorian culture of white settlers in New Zealand and the cultural legacies of Puritanism in the United States. Once again, this comparison insists on the impossibility to consider the author’s family history without reflecting also on the national history and culture: to use one of Jones’ most brilliant expressions, family and national histories are ‘worlds within worlds’ (57).

The birth of Maud’s ‘bastard’ daughter is related, then, to the idea of New Zealand white settler culture as ‘bastard civilization’, which ‘rises on its own conceit as “self-made”. It is as singular as a plant in the desert – luminously present and ducking all questions as to how it came to be there, apparently self-seeding and self-sustaining because there is no other clue to what sprouted it’ (230).
What might seem, at first glance, a harsh criticism of New Zealand history and culture should be actually nuanced by the author’s personal involvement in the same process of ‘bastardization’. Acknowledging that ‘the bastard is the godfather of the outsider’ (229), Jones explores the creation of marginality within New Zealand settler culture – affecting, for example, his grandmother because of her ‘deviant’ sexual and family life – as related to the marginality felt by the same New Zealand settlers in relation to the former metropolitan centre. In other words, the failure of the project to build ‘another England’ (93) at the antipodes was still haunting New Zealand at the times of Jones’s grandmother, making New Zealand society even ‘more Victorian’ than Victorian England. The same troubled relationship with the former metropolitan centre also resurfaces when the author makes reference to the encounter between white settlers and the Maori population: though seldom central to Jones’s poetics, this issue often emerges between the lines of his books, as a constant reminder of another huge silence in New Zealand national history.

At the end of the book, Jones manages to restore the memory of his grandmother, rewriting, thus, part of New Zealand cultural history. Visiting his grandmother’s grave, he completes a work of mourning that his parents were not able to accomplish. In this process, the role of the earthquake appears to be decisive: symbolically, it has shaken many foundations – ‘texture, language, heritage, entitlement’ (40), as the author aptly reminds – but it has also prompted Jones to look for his own roots. The discovery that ‘roots are hell to deal with’ (65) eventually turns out to be less negative than expected, fulfilling, instead, the purposes of the literary topos of the descent to hell. Interweaving ‘worlds within worlds’, Lloyd Jones shows, once again, that one needs to pass through hell – be it a devastating earthquake or a silenced family past – in order to acquire a new knowledge of one’s own history and culture

Lorenzo Mari

Text Classics promises to ‘unearth some of the lost marvels of our literature’ and one of its nineteenth-century treasures is this remarkable book. Published the year before Sherlock Holmes made his famous first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), this early Australian detective novel became the runaway international bestseller of its time. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold in London and it was subsequently translated into eleven different languages. It was wildly popular in Australia, particularly in Melbourne. In his introduction to this Text Classics edition, Simon Caterson suggests that the book’s setting in the Victorian capital ensured that ‘virtually every literate adult’ there read the book from cover to cover (vii).

My interest in *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was piqued during Australia’s National Year of Reading (2012). In June that year, Melbourne celebrated its own detective novel by holding a series of public readings in Federation Square. The ‘Weekend Read’, part of the Light in Winter cultural festival, was orchestrated so that chapters of Hume’s popular novel were read aloud in cafés, pubs, libraries and bookshops throughout the city during the winter months. Like the successful ‘One City, One Book’ programme popularised in the United States in the 1990s, the ‘Weekend Read’ promoted a community-based, citywide reading of a single novel at one time.

Fergus Hume’s mystery very much lends itself to this kind of reading: it is an enjoyable, exciting and satisfying story. Determined to escape from his unrewarding work as a Melbourne law clerk, Hume was very keen to write a bestseller that would capture the public’s imagination. He took his inspiration from Émile Gaboriau’s popular French detective novels, and set about writing ‘a book of the same class; containing a mystery, a murder and a description of low life in Melbourne’ (vi).

The dramatic twists and turns of the sensational plot, the liveliness of the writing and the colonial setting immediately appealed to a wide audience. The same features attract readers today; the *Sunday Times* has listed the Hansom Cab mystery as ‘one of the 100 best crime novels of all time’.

The novel opens with a series of documents detailing the circumstances of a murder. First there is the newspaper report in *The Argus*:

On the twenty-seventh day of July, at the hour of twenty minutes to two o’clock in the morning, a hansom cab drove up to the police station in Grey Street, St Kilda, and the driver made the startling statement that his cab contained the body of a man whom he had reason to believe had been murdered.

This is followed by a transcript of the evidence given at the inquest, presenting the testimony of the cab driver and introducing the physical clues to the crime: a chloroform-soaked handkerchief, a Russian leather cigarette case, and a soiled kid glove. The jury declares that the unnamed deceased was poisoned ‘feloniously, wilfully and maliciously’ by an unknown person, and a letter of reward is issued for information leading to a conviction for the crime.

The investigation proper then begins as the police detective, Samuel Gorby, and later the lawyer, Duncan Calton, enter the boarding houses, clubs and drawing rooms of St Kilda and East Melbourne. One of the pleasures of the novel is Hume’s vivid and realistic description of the city’s...

---

social milieu, from the elegant salons and well-provided dining tables of the very rich to the filthy rooms in the slums off Bourke Street. The cast of characters is similarly varied: cab drivers, burlesque dancers, landladies, prostitutes; doctors, lawyers, businessmen and heiresses. Hume’s verisimilitude is such that an enthusiastic reader can trace the progress of the novel on a map of Melbourne today, from the precise location of the Burke and Wills monument (where the fatal cab ride begins) to the Treasury Gardens, the Melbourne Club on Collins Street and the narrow laneways around the city.

Fergus Hume draws on the emerging features of detective fiction – the crime, the clues, the investigation – but also on the conventions of sensation fiction. Family secrets, concealed identities, mysteries, bigamy and murder were part and parcel of this popular genre that flourished in the 1860s. Like Wilkie Collins and Mary Braddon, Hume treats his readers to the excitement of disappearing wives, disreputable men, illegitimate children and any number of skeletons rattling in the family closet. The paper trail established at the beginning of the novel continues with stolen documents, half-burnt letters, cryptic notes and a hand-written confession. There’s even a highly dramatic (and fatal) sleepwalking scene. But as in all good sensation fiction, there is a serious side to the melodrama. Hume depicts a society that brutally divides rich and poor, one that fosters slum conditions and acute poverty, one where only the thinnest of veneers stands between wealthy respectability and social disgrace.

I recommend The Mystery of a Hansom Cab to anyone who enjoys reading Sherlock Holmes short stories, or to readers who take pleasure in the sensational aspects of the novels of Victorian authors like Charles Dickens. My recommended reading time would be a cold winter’s night: Hume’s delightful and entertaining novel is set in July in Melbourne. It goes well with an open fire, a glass of mulled wine and a comfortable sofa: perfect winter reading.

Jennifer Osborn

Rabindranath Tagore is by far the best-known Indian writer. Apart from his formidable reputation as the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in literature – in fact, the first Asian Nobelist – Tagore stands out prominently for his astonishing output of enormous fecundity. He wrote primarily in Bengali and enriched its literary canon with his multi-generic gifts. His genius was essentially poetic but, nonetheless, he has left his mark on a variety of art-forms. Tagore also tried to render some of his works into English in response to their growing demand fuelled by the Nobel Prize, but these attempts at recasting a part of his corpus may be taken as substantial rewritings or rearrangements for the bilingual/international reader, rather than exact translations. As Sujit Mukherjee puts it, ‘I always think of him as a monumentally monolingual writer who occasionally ventured into English.’

Tagore himself realized that he was falsifying his ‘own coin’ by rushing English renditions of his original Bengali writings. While translating his short stories, as Edward Thomson notes, ‘More and more he toned down or omitted whatever seemed to him characteristically Indian, which very often was what was gripping and powerful.’ Tagore’s lack of competence in recapturing his feelings and sentiments in another language has been met in varying measures by a flourishing number of recent translators of his short stories, such as William Radice, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Andrew Robinson, Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago, and Sukanta Chaudhuri. As an equipollent and eminently accessible English version of Tagore’s twenty short stories, the book under review passes the test with flying colours.

The translator, M.A. Quayum, is a distinguished Tagore scholar. In his textual transmission of Tagore we are assured of the collaboration of a native speaker of Bengali with an efficient user of English. Further, a biographical essay on Tagore and a comprehensive introduction offer a well-researched account of Tagore’s personal and literary journey with salient features of his versatile creativity. Tagore wrote most of his stories – 59 out of total 95 – in a little over 10 years (1890-1901), during an immensely productive period known as the ‘Shelidah period’. At the time, he was managing his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) while also editing magazines, namely *Hitabadi*, *Sadhana* and *Bharati*, and turning in poetry, plays and non-fictional prose. Fifteen stories in Quayum’s collection were originally written during this period and are representative of Tagore’s abiding themes, such as his espousal of women’s education, the peasant’s intolerable situation, and the complexities of human relationship, as well as his secular outlook and liberal stance on public issues. They also evoke the milieu of the Bengal Renaissance influenced by bilingual cultural collision.

The opening story, ‘The Postmaster’, is one of Tagore’s widely acknowledged short masterpieces, with multiple translations. It is an embodiment of the writer’s empathy for a poor, illiterate, young country girl, Ratan, who is faced with the creeping shadow of loneliness after a spell of solace in the company of the postmaster whose job brings him from urban Kolkata to Ulapur, a village in the back of beyond. The stirrings of colonial modernity in the form of an indigo factory and a post office have set the stage for the urban-rural encounter in this story, originally written in

---

2 Letter to Edward J. Thomson, 2 February 1921.
1891. The Indian Post Office was established on 1 October 1837 and by 1861 (the year Tagore was born) a total of 889 post offices had been opened. However, the story unobtrusively suggests that the Postal Service in British India was part of the imperial penetration.

Tagore’s passionate realism in this story is punctuated by poignant scenes of rude emotional wrench when Ratan hears from the postmaster that he has been transferred and is returning to Kolkata for good. Let us see how Quayum’s version of the Bengali original relates to another rendering of this story in English. Here is a passage as translated by Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago, where the destitute girl, realising that she has become attached to the lonely person, looks forward to a lasting human relationship. But the postmaster’s direct disapproval disappoints her hope:

After the postmaster had eaten his meal the small girl asked abruptly, ‘Dada Babu, will you take me home with you?’

The postmaster laughed, ‘What a notion!’ He did not consider it necessary to explain to the child why the proposal was so absurd.

All night long, sleeping and waking, the orphan girl was haunted by the laughing reply, ‘What a notion!’

Here now is the same passage as rendered by Quayum:

On completion of his evening meal, Ratan asked the postmaster, ‘Dada Babu, Will you take me with you?’

‘How could I do that?’ said the postmaster with a laugh. He never bothered to explain to the girl why it was not possible.

Throughout the night, in her dream and wakefulness, the girl heard the cackling laugh of the postmaster and his curt reply, ‘How could I do that?’

In Quayum’s notion of the verbal function and equivalence, the paradigm of Tagore’s mind for delineating the emotionally deficient man needs to be scanned and hence his use of ‘cackling’ and ‘curt’ in the postmaster’s response to the pre-adolescent girl’s innocent expectation. On the other hand, in their discreetly purveyed version, Dutta and Lago have eschewed creative deviation.

The eponymous novella-length story in this collection, ‘The Ruined Nest’, also deals with a sensitive woman’s feelings of abandonment and unrequited love. The narrative revolves around Charulata, an intelligent and gifted woman left to fend for herself because her husband, Bhupati, is excessively addicted to printer’s ink as the editor and publisher of his own English-language newspaper. Charulata enlist the intellectual companionship of Amal, Bhupati’s younger cousin. Their mutual spell develops into a tender bond. However, Charulata’s fragile nest of happiness breaks when Amal gets married and leaves for London. Due to financial reasons, Bhupati is forced to fold his newspaper business but, with his wife emotionally distraught in Amal’s absence, the ruined nest sours his solace. The story is a moving portrayal of the emerging modern woman in upper-class Indian families and its piquant triangle is without any trace of prurience.

The five stories in this collection written by Tagore in his ‘post-productive’ phase, including the posthumously published, ‘A Woman’s Conversion to Islam’, also resonate with the writer’s

principal concerns, such as rigid gender hierarchy, love of nature, indictment of social orthodoxy, and sectarian divide. Finally, in addition to their fine characterisation, Tagore’s stories are replete with social and psychological observation. Quayum has transferred the quantum of signification in the semiotic frame of the target language with formal annotation for enhanced understanding of the original without distancing effect.

Murari Prasad

Perhaps for those born decades after the early Cold War the possibility of an all-out atomic war, which would bring irreversible mutual destruction to the then two geopolitical blocs, never felt too real, but for the people who were raised in the 1950s and 60s such an end was indeed plausible and too credible for comfort. Perhaps not many Australians are aware of the nuclear testing the British conducted on the remote Montebello archipelago in the early 1950s. Prime Minister Menzies gave the British military virtually carte blanche to do whatever they wanted, and in the course of a few years several nuclear explosions devastated the main islands of the Montebellos. Apart from annihilating wildlife, the radioactivity would eventually claim the lives of many shorts-and-sandals-clad Australian servicemen, who were exposed to the blasts – basically used as lab-rats by our British friends.

Montebello is kind of a sequel memoir to The Shark Net (2000). I found its narrative pace and its openness truly enjoyable, even though some of the episodes interspersed within the whole narrative seem oddly placed if not outright out of place. Drewe has a great sense of humour which, combined with his vivid descriptions of not only the Montebellos but also other parts of Western Australia he mentions, makes for a highly pleasant reading. He has the sharpness of an investigative journalist while adroitly meandering from childhood memories to teenage angst to adulthood, as well as briefly quibbling on too-hot-to-handle issues of contemporary Australia.

He can also allude to his more personal fixations. The introductory chapter to Montebello is indeed a quirky story of a perilous encounter with a brown snake on ‘a dark and stormy night’ (1). Armed with a barbecue spatula and extremely worried about the possibility that the reptile will enter his daughter’s bedroom, he vanquishes it.

The episode is narrated tongue-in-cheek, just as any close shave with danger can be regarded as humorous in hindsight. Yet Drewe sees it as a defining moment. Possibly one of the most important traits any writer must have is the ability to laugh at himself or herself, and Drewe is wryly good at it. The snake adventure gives way to his admission to his obsession with islands.

He explains his love for islands as partly the result of the literature he was exposed to as a child: ‘Islands had loomed as powerfully in my life as they had in my imagination. As a child I was drawn to castaway stories’ (39). He naturally mentions the classics that continue to capture every child’s imagination: Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island, The Coral Island and Swiss Family Robinson, but also The Island of Dr Moreau and Lord of the Flies. Yet it was the small Rottnest Island off Perth that seemed to clinch Drewe’s heart for good and converted him to islophilia: ‘my islamonia soared when as a teenager I discovered Rottnest Island … where West Australians lost their virginity … they (well, I) imbued this particular desert island twenty kilometres off the mainland with a sensual quality not immediately evident to foreigners or Eastern Staters’ (43).

When he finally gets the nod to join a crew of government ecologists on a species repopulation project on the Montebellos, Drewe makes the most of this perfect opportunity to write a memoir. His observations give added ironic value to the narrative account of his expeditions and experiences on the island camp:

alcohol is never far from your mind here. Seeing there were few named features on the charts to aid their navigation during the bomb tests, the British took it on themselves to name the Montebellos’ bays. They named them all after booze: Hock, Claret, Whisky, Stout, Cider, Champagne, Chartreuse, Burgundy, Chianti, Drambuie, Moselle and Sach bays. They also
named Rum Cove and Sherry and Vermouth lagoons. Appropriately, there is a promontory named Hungover Head. (82) 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 Drewe queries the rationale for a nuclear testing programme in that part of the world, he recalls episodes of his younger years in Perth: shark attacks, teenage crushes, football injuries. The passage of boyhood to manhood to adulthood – and Drewe’s decision to become a writer – is set against the engrossing account of the environmentalist group’s work on the archipelago and their joyous realisation that the native species reintroduction programme has started to pay off so many years after nuclear destruction took place there.

For all the remembrance of tragic events past and present Drewe brings into the book, Montebello affords a mostly positive outlook on life – the idea being that from the chaotic and destructive can emerge new life and beauty. Yet Drewe also reminds us – sometimes humorously, other times in a more sombre tone – that we need to be wary of the many dangers that may inadvertently appear out of nowhere, even in the midst of the most friendly and comfortable surroundings.

There is also some room for reflection. Drewe writes: ‘The idealistic thirteen-year-old who wished to be a friend to all peoples, to play La Vie En Rose to girls on the trumpet and ban the bomb, would have preferred there to be a stern lesson for mankind […] he didn’t know whether to be pleased […] or confused as ever’ (283). Perhaps, I suggest, the permanent state of uncertainty we first feel as teenagers is the stern lesson we can derive from every life experience.

Jorge Salavert

The epic poem is for the connoisseurs and the patient readers – I used to think when I got *The Iliad, Paradise Lost* or *Absalom and Achitophel* to read as a student of English a couple of years ago. I had the same feeling when I decided to read *The Parliament of Poets*, having becoming curious about a twenty-first century epic. So while reading a story about the Poet of the Moon, Frederick Glaysher appears to me a visionary, a man on the moon who dares to write an epic in an age of hurry and fury.

The central event of the epic is the parliament of the poets – ancients and moderns from East and West – on the moon, summoned by the Greek God Apollo and the Nine Muses to discuss ‘the threatened state of humanity’ and find ‘a worthy vision of life, meaning and purpose’ (23). The Poet of the Moon, the Persona and an ‘embodied spirit’ (28), reaches that parliament through a mysterious journey under the guidance of Cervantes. He has been chosen by the Muses to sing ‘a universal song’ (93) of humanity at a moment when ‘the world goes from bad to worse’ (30). The Persona feels blissful finding all the poets of the world on the moon who he so far has met ‘only in ink, the printer’s art’ (25). After some disputes among the poets about the sudden arrival of the would-be poet among them, Cervantes requests all to guide him as if he can find ‘the path of his own soul’ and thus ‘for each and every one’ (32) of the world. Then the poets plan a way and send him on some spiritual journeys – mostly with guides and once alone – to the inescapable past of the different civilizations of the Earth. He magically visits all the seven continents and encounters the beautiful and brutal records of the human world. He meets the thinkers, seers and visionaries at various spots who pour into him the light of wisdom to spread among mankind. Thus the epic-story lays the plot and involves living and dead in a vast panorama of time and place in a fascinating way.

The purpose of the spiritual journey of the Poet of the Moon is to seek deliverance of the modern human from the captivity of nothingness, nihilism and atheism, and from the resulting chaos and chasm of soul. From the versatile he gets scores of life-affirming lessons, yet the core meaning of all is that the Supreme Being as well as the earth is one, and so human beings are one nation irrespective of their clan, class, color, race, religion and gender. In this earth human beings are part of the Great Mystery’s creation and their duty is to keep the balance and harmony of the universe, to achieve union, to choose sacrifice, and to be self-controlled. In this manner Glaysher sings the song of ‘one Earth, without borders, Mother Earth, her embrace encircling one people, humankind’ (19).

Through the four-dimensional flight of the Poet of the Moon the readers apprehensively watch the spectacular vistas of the world and are introduced with mores, customs, conventions and beliefs of its inhabitants. The Persona visits the cave of Lescaux and Mogoa, the Himalayan foothills, the field of Kurukshetra, Angkor Wat, Dunhuang, the Big wild Goose Pagoda, Mt. Carmal, Chartres Cathedral, Fatehpur Sikri of Emperor Akbar, and so on. In this arduous supernatural travelling, his guides are Black Elk, Japara, Tagore, Hanuman, Sun Wukong, Du Fu, Saigyo, Yehuda Halevi, Dante, Wainamoninen, Tolstoy, Attar, Walt Whitman, the Simorgh, and Mbeku, the tortoise. He observes the battlefields, carnage of wars, cave-paintings, dancing, chanting and prayers and meets Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Shakespeare, Vyasa, kabir, Basho, Erasmus, Tennyson, Blake, Milton, Rumi, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Ezeulu and many others. During this observation he undergoes shreds of mental turmoil in every change of scene – sometimes he finds him tensed, sometimes joyful, sometimes grave and sometimes fearful. Going thus beyond the earthly dimension of reality, the Persona views the fragmented Earth and glues those fragmented parts into a totality with the teachings he has got from the sages.
Structurally *The Parliament of Poets* likens the traditional epics. It consists of twelve books where the invocation is placed in Book I and III. It is also well ‘prefaced’, and nicely introduced with an ‘Introduction’ along with the poet’s view on ‘The Verse’ form and ‘A prefatory Ode’. In the ‘Preface’ the poet expresses how the event of the visit of mankind to the moon in 1969 has stirred the thought of the poet to write an epic. The ‘Introduction’ outlines the story with the noteworthy information about the derivation of the title from Chaucer and Attar, two poets from two continents. Like Milton, Glaysher also explains that the poem is in blank verse, chiefly in iambic pentameter. But for variation often he uses the feminine ending, that is, an extra half foot of the measure to the ten syllables of blank verse after iambic pentameter. He asserts that he uses this because it is the most beautiful verse form in the English language. Finally, the prefatory ode sets up the poet’s style as a unique one. It looks neither like an invocation nor a prayer, but a letter or email, written to ‘the Honourable Patron’ (xvii), who never helped the poet in need. Now the Poet of the Moon does not need his help and he, like Dr. Johnson and Lord Chesterfield, wants to walk alone in his old and worn shoes (xvii). He decides to write an epic as if,

… She might not perish forever from
The Earth, nay, revive, rally, and lead the eyes
Of men ... (xviii)

At the end of the text we find a ‘Glossary’ of different religious and cultural terms related to different regions in order to facilitate an uninterrupted study.

*The Parliament of Poets*, in spite of being hefty, comprises more features to win the readers’ heart. I am citing some unforgettable, insightful lines here to note that point:

Sometimes Dreams are wiser than waking (42)

Or,  
Oh Europe!
Europe, a hallowed tale in the coloured glass, (179)

Or,  
What a sad and pathetic bunch we human beings are! Why the universe ever coughed us up, God only knows! (182)

Or,  
We are human, our duty is to give hope to the hopeless, love to the loveless, sustenance to the poor. (195)

Or,  
the shining moon is Shams, Shams the shining moon. (204)

Or,  
Time flows like river but the body cannot remain steady like a boat.  
The soul is a traveler that is forever in search of its far shore, its goal and aim. (90)

The poem is further enriched by the rarely-used epic simile, natural-supernatural description of the moon, the view of the earth from the moon, natural scenarios such as green lands, mountains,
rivers and forests, images of dresses and figures, and countenances of reverend personalities. The lucid and placid feet of the language moves deftly and smoothly from the beginning up to the last line of the poem.

Bravo to the Poet for this toilsome but brilliant endeavour.

Umme Salma

It’s a tricky business writing in the voice of a child, and even trickier when that child suffers from some kind of autism. Which kind afflicts little Jimmy Flick, the narrator of The Eye of the Sheep, is never spelled out, but think Geoffrey Rush playing David Helfgott in the film Shine. Jimmy demonstrates the same enthusiastic and energetic highs, the mental and physical excitability and the same rapid speech patterns and repetitions of remarks made to him:

‘How do you like your cock pit?’ I shouted. ‘Cock! Cock!’
‘That’s enough, Jimmy. Sit back and settle down.’ Dad sounded scared. (103)

This is Dad Gavin in a good mood. Easily embarrassed by his son’s manic enthusiasms and often enraged by them, especially after he’s been drinking, Gav is more likely to call his son a ‘bloody little retard’ and punch his wife Paula in some sort of retaliation. He punches Jimmy, too, and his older brother Robby, and the family live in dread of this monster who emerges as the level of the whisky bottle drops. The tension in the household is brilliantly conveyed, and it doesn’t make for comfortable reading.

Sofie Laguna’s previous novel, the much acclaimed One Foot Wrong (2008), her first for adults, also visited some dark places. As it also featured a naïve child narrator in a severely dysfunctional family, comparisons will inevitably be made with The Eye of the Sheep, but the novel it most closely resembles is Laguna’s children’s novel, Bird and Sugar Boy (2006). Both child narrators are called James, both come from divided homes, both run away from home to find a saviour, both end up in hospital and both their single dads turn up trumps at the end. In a children’s novel a positive or hopeful ending is mandatory; in The Eye of the Sheep it is a plot flaw since the previous chapters have done little to prepare us for one.

For over three hundred pages and over a period of some six years or more, Laguna addresses the failure of adults to look after children, whether they be parents, foster parents, or simply the system. Who will look after Jimmy? Not his abusive, alcoholic father who abandons his family after he loses his job. Not his big brother Robby, who can’t leave home fast enough once he grows big enough to punch back. Not his Uncle Rodney, who finds running a bait shop and looking after a problem child too much. Not the foster parents, with two other disturbed children to look after and strained nerves. Not the family doctor or the specialist who offers little hope. Not his teacher, who finds him a disruptive influence in class. And ultimately not his morbidly obese and asthmatic mother Paula, the victim of Gav’s rages over the years but who never fights back and always comes back for more. Paula is Jimmy’s refuge: she wraps her arms around him and calms him when a manic mood overcomes him; she shares his bed and counts sheep with him when sleep refuses to come; she allows him to stay home from school and away from the bullies in the playground. But when she is removed from his life, Jimmy’s world falls apart.

This sounds pretty grim, but it is not relentlessly so. Jimmy and Robby have adventures in the wetlands behind their house; Dad makes a go-cart and he and Jimmy have a rare afternoon of comradeship; he and Jimmy holiday at Uncle Rodney’s, fishing and swimming, and the boy and a dog called Ned make a lasting connection. Like Jimmy, Ned is prone to high excitement, yapping and running in circles:

Uncle Rodney caught him by the collar. ‘Easy does it, Neddy, settle down.’
It was the same thing everyone said to me! The same thing! (104)

Jimmy has only to touch the dog and ‘messages carried by his blood came to me from the animal kingdom’. Jimmy hears and sees connections everywhere, in the ‘networks’ that are inside people and plants and machinery and shops ‘and underground in the earth’s core’. It soothes him to read his collection of appliance instruction manuals (‘how to connect the hairdryer nose to the body...’) and he sees the ‘strings’ that join people. It is impossible not to be moved by this stoic little battler, or not to feel despair for the circumstances that have burdened him with such a handicap in life. But Laguna plays fair: she shows how domestic violence runs in families and how an abused child will often grow into an abusive parent. We may hate Gav, but we understand where his violence comes from.

And the title? Jimmy tells us that ‘If you look deep into the eyes of a sheep you can see a light. It burns right at the back of the head and it never goes out, no matter what happens to the sheep’ (21).

Sophie Laguna’s light continues to burn.

Ruth Starke
Thicker than Water is veteran Australian scriptwriter Judith Colquhoun’s debut novel, and she draws upon her years of writing, her knowledge of the television industry, and her experiences in Italy to deliver an entertaining narrative. The story begins when Lucy O’Connell’s mother, Kate, is on her deathbed and decides she must, at Lucy’s insistence, reveal the circumstances of her daughter’s conception. Lucy discovers her mother was raped by an Italian boy who subsequently escaped punishment and returned to Italy. Lucy is shocked and angered by the revelation and decides to take revenge. What follows is a journey across the world and a quest for revenge that ultimately turns into Lucy’s bildungsroman.

From the moment Lucy touches down in Italy, she begins to doubt her ability to make decisions and cope on her own, and so begins an examination of her inner demons. This facet of the novel is beautifully executed with Lucy’s inner narrative running alongside lush descriptions of Naples and later, the Italian countryside. There is also a rather serendipitous meeting with a young Italian man, who becomes important to Lucy’s future, and there are digressions into cultural mores and traffic rules (or lack thereof) in Italy that will amuse anyone who has visited that country.

Thicker than Water started as a telemovie treatment and its origins show at times. Certain scenes seem too much like a ‘scene’, as if the prose is fleshed-out stage direction. However, the strength of the dialogue and Lucy’s dry humour make up for this weakness. My main complaint with this narrative is hinging the plot on a flimsy revenge-urge. I could not believe in Lucy’s plan for revenge. Her mother suffered a terrible start in life at the hands of young man she barely knew, and lived with the contempt of her parents for years without complaint. She did not bring Lucy up to be an angry, vengeful woman. Add Lucy’s current stepfather, Geoff, to the mix; he is a caring man who tries his hardest to be available for his stepdaughter without being judgemental and it seems impossible that Lucy would actually follow through on her vengeful thoughts. Grief can certainly do strange things to a person, but her loving upbringing makes her rather childish and selfish behaviour hard to believe. Lucy could have easily embarked on her journey, and experienced all that happened to her, if in a slightly different order, without the construct of the ‘revenge quest’. I found her repeated attempts to talk herself into an action that she was clearly incapable of seeing through quite tiring. But this is a minor complaint about what is, in the main, an easy to read, enjoyable narrative.

Colquhoun does not make unfair demands on her reader. Thicker than Water is a pleasant reminder that reading is supposed to be a lovely escape: in this case to a beautiful country with good-looking, interesting characters and mouth-watering food.

Kathleen Steele

Italy’s involvement in both World War I and II may be considered as less straightforward and more complex than that of some of the other participating countries. Without wishing to involve this review in a dissertation about either war, it is important to note that although initially allied with the Austro-Hungarian Empire in WWI and an ally of Germany in WWII, Italy finally allied itself with Britain and France in both confrontations.

These shifts in Italian foreign policy are reflected in *Faded Letters*, which the author describes as a hybrid between a family memoir and a novel. The narrative is based on the life of Antonio Ascari, who was deported to Germany and then to Poland as a labourer in 1944, and who succumbed to pneumonia and died after the war as he attempted to return home. Beginning the story with an account of Antonio leaving Novara for Germany, while his wife Pina is so stricken with grief that she cannot bear to go to the station to say goodbye the story then turns back in time to the birth of Antonio in 1905. It traces some of the family history during the period up to the end of WWI, then through the difficult years up to the start of WWII.

At this point I need to comment on the font used in the printing of this novel. Because it blacks out part of some of the letters, vowels in particular, and smudges the top of the numerals in dates, it was very hard to actually follow the timeline within the narrative, and even the places in Italy where various members of the family lived and worked. I found this created serious difficulties in locating the events, which did not always follow a straight timeline.

Despite the difficulty in physically reading the text there is much to commend in this book, which uses research, family letters and conversations to give a picture of Italian life, especially the difficult years in Italy when the truce with Britain and France and the US had been signed and the Germans, once allies, became an occupying force. While Marshall Badoglio announced that he had asked General Eisenhower for an armistice, the people listened to the radio broadcast in the local cafe. Immediately after this, Mussolini, now in Munich, spoke, denouncing this action, speaking with contempt for the monarchy and declaring Italy a republic that would fight on with Germany and Japan. One can understand the sense of turmoil, confusion and conflicted loyalties evoked by these announcements.

The privations and hardships Antonio endured in the labour camp are the most poignant sections of the novel. Antonio found his life bleak and almost without hope until he thought of his wife Pina and her music, and returned to his past as an escape from his oppressive present:

> In that brick barracks that was covered with snow, in the north without hope, he listened once more to the music she used to play. He saw himself as a child, seated on a small wicker loveseat by the window. Next to him a grey-green cat. He had not thought of this in years. (119)

The music motif is picked up later when Pina, after a period of grieving, found that she could remember Antonio in the music that had formed emotional link between them: ‘All of a sudden she realized she was happy because she was with him in the music that he love, that she had taught him to love’ (143).
Antonio’s experience of captivity contrasts that of a younger relative, Claudio, who was a prisoner of war in an American camp in France. He was promoted to head chef and ‘always had wonderful meals … he had picked up strange habits. He spread his steak with jam because Americans eat them like that’ (149). This is in direct contrast to Antonio who scrounged rubbish heaps looking for any edible scraps.

The women left behind in the cities and villages suffered in a different way – looking for news, fearing invasion, sheltering from attacks from the air. Any who had supported the Fascists were subject to interest, and reprisals from the partisans, who waged guerilla warfare against the Germans. One young woman, Ester, is taken by the partisans to be questioned about her involvement with the Fascists. After being questioned she is taken to a barn:

They did not give her anything to eat, but she was not hungry … If she was to die the next day she could well spend the night awake. She began to pray nervously. The cold and the hunger did the rest. (115)

Ascari describes the thoughts and emotions of his characters, people of his family, as though he actually knew them. At times this is very moving, at others a little clumsy, for are all our thoughts profound? People struggling with momentous events may reduce them to something more manageable, something more mundane. *Faded Letters* offers a vignette of ordinary Italian families, with their hopes, courage, suffering and resilience during the difficult years of war. This resilience and courage, at times, leads to a rigidity, a lack of empathy, but in other instances the love and support for family members is evident. It brings to life this extended family, through letters, accounts and photographs. It throws a light on an Italy that no longer exists, but which prefaced what Italy was to become.

Emily Sutherland