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Sumia Sukkar’s debut novel, *The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War*, delicately entwines a young boy’s experience of Asperger’s syndrome with the setting of the Syrian war. The novel discusses grief, violence, mental illness and the difficulties of living during war. The novel is written from 14-year-old Adam’s perspective (except for three chapters where his sister, Yasmine, narrates) and centres on his relationship with art and his family. Painting is a vivid motif throughout the book and Sukkar expresses Adam’s emotions through colour. Purple is pain: ‘I close my eyes and everything turns purple. Did I press a purple button in my body by accident? Yasmine says I twisted my ankle’ (64). Green is portrayed as a colour of illness and death; Adam thinks, ‘She usually talks a lot and is ruby red, but now she is green’ (29) after Yasmine’s suicide attempt.

Red is also a strong repeated image throughout the book. Sukkar uses it dually, juxtaposing life and death through red. Adam sees ruby as the colour of his beloved Yasmine when she is happy. He says, ‘When we play like this, she becomes my favourite and most vibrant colour, my colour ruby’ (12). Alternately, red is also used to portray death, especially when Adam paints blood with blood: ‘I have a part of me that is pushing me to take some blood and paint. So I do’ (152).

Colour, then, is a running theme; each chapter is named after a colour and the author repeatedly describes Adam painting war scenes. Adam’s art works to show the state of the war in his hometown, Aleppo, as well as the state of his mental health. As the novel progresses, Adam’s mental health worsens and this is conveyed through his art when he begins using the blood and hair of people who have died in the war in his paintings. Sukkar portrays art as Adam’s lifeline; it keeps him alive and is his coping mechanism. This is portrayed quite literally in one scene where Adam eats his paint. Adam consumes green paint, a colour which Sukkar has portrayed as representing illness. Adam makes this clear, stating, ‘It’s a weird feeling but it tastes green’ (154).

*The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War* contains graphic portrayals of violence. Yet Sukkar manages to balance this against Adam’s endearing and childlike personality. While the book is emotionally dense, it isn’t unbearable for the reader. Sukkar crafts this impressively because she does not water down the violent circumstances of the Syrian war.

However, in one instance Sukkar, in an attempt to maintain the balance between portraying the war truthfully yet uplifting the reader, is too light-hearted:

‘There is still dry blood where the ear was cut off but it isn’t a lot. I pull it up to my mouth and start whispering about what I dream of doing in Damascus’ (270). Through this she portrays how violence has become normalised in Adam’s eyes and the isolating effects of war, yet the scene also risks being glib.

Laura Guthrie’s afterword refers to *The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War* as a ‘young adult novel’ (311) but the dark themes and graphic depictions of violence and sexual violence contradict this. Even though it is from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who thinks in a quite childlike way, Even though it is from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who thinks in a quite childlike way, the content may be too mature for many young people.

Sukkar puts forward a clear representation of the murder and kidnapping that is occurring, yet is purposely vague about the participants of the war. Through Adam’s eyes, the reader doesn’t understand why the war is happening. Yet Adam has a strong but perhaps simplistic sense of who is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’: those who are violent are ‘bad’ and those who help him and his family are
‘good’. The simplistic notion is powerful to read; it highlights the damaging effects of war without giving way to the opinion that war can be a political necessity.

Sukkar keeps her discussion of Syria’s political climate purposely vague. Traditionally, Adam would be considered an unreliable narrator. He is a boy who has difficulty interpreting social interactions that are not explicit in nature. However, in this situation he is a reliable narrator; he interprets the war and violence around him and reaches no clear conclusion of why this is happening. He says, ‘This war is unfair, there are no uniforms or clues’ (89). Sukkar also addresses the political through Adam’s brothers: Isa, Khalid and Tariq. They attend war protests and their involvement in the war results in violence. Khalid describes the effect violence has on his stance on politics, stating, ‘Has anybody from your family died? … That’s why you’re still interested in politics and I’m not’ (292).

_The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War_ also extensively deals with themes of women’s autonomy during wartime. Sukkar breaks the continuity of the book, set in Adam’s perspective, to give voice to his sister, Yasmine. Yasmine is kidnapped, tortured and raped. Through Yasmine’s hardships, the character states, ‘I want to die and let go of all my worries and pain’ (201), Sukkar highlights the particular difficulties faced by women in war zones.

Sukkar also comments on women’s agency in everyday life through Yasmine. After her mother’s death, Yasmine becomes the carer for the family; she looks after Adam, cooks, cleans, works and is denied a life with the man she loves. She states, ‘I have always looked after my family from day one and have never had a day for me. I don’t even have a family of my own. No child to name or laugh with, my only child is Adam, and he isn’t even mine’ (202-03). Sukkar also touches on career opportunities for women, Yasmine telling Adam, ‘I wanted to be a photographer but mama told me to be a nurse. It’s more feminine.’ (96). Notably, Sukkar addresses issues that women face worldwide, not just women in war-torn Syria.

The author comments on the erasure of Yasmine’s identity through the literal erasure of Yasmine in her father, Baba’s memory. As a consequence of the stress of the war, Baba loses his mental capacity. He often mistakes Yasmine for his deceased wife and, in one scene, is violent: ‘Yasmine is on the ground with her hand on her face and Baba is standing up shouting at her’ (94).

_The Boy From Aleppo Who Painted the War_ is short for a book that addresses themes of gendered violence, war and family dynamics. The novel has an impressive range and depth beyond Adam’s light-hearted musings. Sukkar’s writing is skilful, layered and includes insightful cultural details. This works to disarm the singular image of violence the media has painted of a war-torn Syria; Sukkar portrays love and culture as well as violence.

**Katerina Bryant**
Dominique Wilson, *The Yellow Papers* (Transit Lounge, 2014)

Everybody wants to feel like they belong somewhere, and for most people ‘home’ is where they belong, wherever that might be. But what happens when you’re forced to leave your home and find your place in a new, very different world to the one you have known? Dominique Wilson was born in Algiers to French parents, but civil war forced her and her family to flee to Australia. It was these early experiences of war and displacement that inspired Wilson to write her debut novel, *The Yellow Papers*.

The novel opens in China in 1872. The country is still coming to terms with its defeat in the two opium wars, and the imperial government has opted to send a group of gifted young boys to be educated in America and later, as adults, to bring the secrets of the west back to China. Chen Mu is one of these boys.

Though initially scared to leave his village and his mother, and angry about being sent to live amongst ‘the barbarians’, Chen Mu adapts to life in America more readily than he had anticipated. At seventeen, an educated and respectful teenager, he feels ‘more American than Chinese’.

When he develops a passion for botany, he leaves his school without permission to seek out the Venus flytrap and for the first time encounters violent prejudice. Too afraid to seek help in America, and too ashamed to return to China, an injured and terrified Chen Mu stows away aboard a cargo ship bound for Australia. The ship is several days into the journey before he is discovered, delirious with illness and injury, and he is locked below deck to tend to his wounds.

In Australia Chen Mu begins work as a gardener for a wealthy pastoralist. He meets Edward Billings, his employer’s young grandson, and he captivates the young boy with tales of exotic China. Edward’s deep fascination with China shapes his entire life, eventually leading him to Shanghai after he becomes an expert in Chinese antiquities. Edward feels more at home in Shanghai than he does anywhere in Australia, and he falls in love with Ming Li, the beautiful wife of a wealthy Cantonese businessman. Though she returns his love, war separates Edward and Ming Li time and again, and each time they must make sacrifices and fight to be reunited. Meanwhile, in Australia, facing hatred and racism, Chen Mu falls in love with an Indian woman.

While the subject matter is powerful, Wilson does the story and its readers a disservice by distancing us from her characters. There are many opportunities to press upon readers the horrors of war and to force us, just for a moment, to feel a fragment of the pain that her characters must feel. But none of these opportunities is truly exploited. The writing, though brilliant and engaging, is reserved. The agony of the characters is treated with a detachment that suggests overwhelming and unjustifiable suffering is merely a part of life. It certainly is for her characters, and for the thousands of child prostitutes and the victims of war, dying in the streets of cholera or starvation, who are nothing more than a backdrop to the story.

In one instance Ming Li sees a toddler sitting in filth and prodding a ‘pile of rags’, trying to get a reaction from it. Ming Li passes by without thought or comment. Such was Ming Li’s indifference that it wasn’t until my second reading of the novel that I realised the unresponsive ‘pile of rags’ was the child’s dead mother.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this book is the painstaking research that must have gone into it, and the resulting depth of detail, particularly from an author who, until *The Yellow Papers*, had only published short stories. The time line of the novel stretches across a whole lifetime, encompassing many major events and political upheaval. It is a tale, or several tales, of love that
continues to blossom despite the hideousness and depravity of war. Like the red poppy that defiantly bloomed on the battlefields in Northern France and Belgium in WWI, the love that develops between Edward, Ming Ling and Chen Mu cannot be thwarted.

Lauren Dougherty
Madeleine St John, *The Essence of the Thing* (1997; Text Classic, 2013)

Many Australian readers will have discovered St John – an enigmatic literary figure, who took odd jobs to support her writing habit, lived alone but with cats, and smoked furiously – late in her life, as I did because she published her first book after the age of fifty having lived as an expat in London for thirty years. She set only one novel in Australia, about a Sydney shop girl: *The Woman in Black* (1993).

*The Essence of the Thing* was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize, and is St John’s third novel. Text republished it as one of their Classic series, with an introduction by Helen Trinca, who wrote *A Life of Madeleine St John* (2013). Readers interested in St John’s backstory – the suicide of her mother, her difficult relationship with her father, her tearing up of her biography of Helena Blavatsky – may also enjoy Trinca’s book, winner of the 2014 Prime Minister’s Prize for Non-fiction. After St John died in 2006, a flurry of interest arose in the Australian press.

*The Essence of the Thing* opens on the first page in a compelling way: Nicola Gatling, who works for an arts organisation, returns from the shops with a packet of cigarettes and is confronted by her boyfriend, who, in caddish fashion, is attempting to evict her from her flat in Notting Hill, indeed, from their relationship. He no longer loves her and assumes that as her office salary cannot match his own, she is not in a position to buy him out. It is no spoiler to mention, therefore, that the awkwardness of who to tell and what to do, drives early action.

St John may have avowed the term feminist but it quickly becomes apparent that her engaging and intelligent protagonist does not deserve to be treated with such contempt. Jonathan is a bit of a bastard: “Please don’t cry anymore”, he said. “It really isn’t helpful” (10). Her reasonable willingness to give up a place she has made home with inexpensive but tasteful effects seems surprising. The meaning of love, the status of women, social class, and commitment-phobia in men, including their attitude to reproduction – on which the plot turns – are the main subjects of the novel. Contemporary readers may identify with Nicola’s disappointment when her hopeful love for Jonathan turns out to be ‘friends with benefits’:

‘Oh, that,’ said Jonathan. ‘That means nothing. Sex … It has **nothing** to do with love’ (105);

‘You’re an attractive woman, obviously any man in my situation would have been glad enough to fuck you, it doesn’t mean anything one way or another’ (118).

The action plays out over several weeks in 1990s London. The novel’s open ending suggests a potentially circular plot, although one that folds back upon itself in flashbacks, and is focalised in a disconcertingly bouncy way through several of the main characters: his friends, Lizzie and Alf, and hers, Susannah and Geoffrey. Apart from Jonathan, who is frequently described as a prat, they are intelligent and likeable, thirtyish, married Londoners. Gender differences are well delineated:

‘Honestly, Geoff. This is no time for joking. Nicola might be in **real** trouble.’
‘Not her. That chic little Notting Hill set-up with the deluxe plumbing and the stuffed shirt laying down the old claret. No way. She probably just wants help with her vol-au-vents’. (14)

‘Do you have to be tolerant, and humble, and imaginative, to know anything about love?’ [asks Geoffrey of his wife]

‘Yes.’

‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘you’ve just made a serious point. How disconcerting.’ (28)

The dialogue sparkles with wit, underlining the tensions of modern marriage, especially the affording and caring for children; Nicola proves unfashionably generous and adept at the latter. Several times, St John metaphorically presents ironing as a site of domestic politics in a way that is quite prescient for present-day Australian women.1

Nicola distinguishes herself in quiet intelligent ways, showing stoicism and moral fibre. She also takes a submissive role in relationships: ‘“Yes, master,” said Nicola. Bliss’ (61). Post breakup and out with gay friends, she obediently smokes their spliff, undergoes a makeover and swallows a pill before a long night of drunken club hopping. But the novel charts her personal growth and, on several occasions, the reader might well admire her elan, her forthright speech and, indeed, her physical aggression. Sympathy for Jonathan, even when he is weighed down by doubt, darkness and self-pity, may be in short supply. Nicola and Susannah come to believe that women need to be ‘Tougher. More ambitions. Ruthless’ (212).

Well-paced and replete with now commonplace short chapters, the novel’s sadness is laced with satirical humour: ‘I suppose you’d rather be pumping iron, isn’t that what they call it, in some foul gymnasium, with a lot of blacks, and women wearing silver leotards’, Jonathan’s mother says (77).

The prose is spare, supple and elegant, and constructed for the most part in dialogue that, occasionally, falls into a mechanical ‘jolly hockey-sticks’ register, with frequent play on the words ‘whizzy’ and the suffix ‘ish’ (15). With few attributions to support the identification of character or mood, readers will need to pay attention. The third-person omniscient narration sometimes sounds perfunctory or slick: ‘“let’s go to bed, shall we.” So they did’ (32); ‘He did. There were’ (88); ‘So they did, and, as a matter of fact …’ (196). Nevertheless, St John is a fine writer and this book is no grungy Australian bildungsroman; it is more a comedy of manners, perhaps or a Roman à clef.

The text offers sparse clues to her Australian background apart from odd slang which may prove to be Cockney-derived in any case, and a wry intertextual reference to her first novel: ‘some footling tale about some shop assistants in an antipodean department store, fretting about their wombs and their wardrobes and other empty spaces’ (74). Having French-Romanian heritage and living as a London expat for thirty years, St John disavowed herself Australian, although she was born and raised in Sydney. Her protagonist vows ‘to live through this as decently as she can. She was not British for nothing’ (123). For some reason riffs recur around her surname: Gatling, ‘like the gun’ (108).

1In late 2014 journalists reminded their readers of 2010 statements made by Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, on this subject: ‘What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing is that if they get it done commercially it’s going to go up in price and their own power bills when they switch the iron on are going to go up.’ http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/politics-news/abbott-repealing-carbon-tax-best-thing-i-did-as-minister-for-women/story-fn59hqld-1227164048700
Not withstanding the absence of mobile phones and digital technology – a word processor is mentioned – the novel has a light contemporary tone that should still appeal to twenty-first-century readers. Its genre straddles literary realist/marriage plot/refined post-chick lit with scholarly reference, including ‘bricoleur’ and ‘malheurs’. It is curiously bereft of party or national politics. Nicola is interested in homemaking, wining and dining with friends, and love. Newly single, ‘she was free, she was horribly, abominably free’ (103). By the end of the novel, we are in little doubt that she has agency, is imminently employable and an attractive candidate for marriage – but will she be successful? We leave her in Chelsea about to cross the river on her way to a new life and engulfed in sadness.

Gay Lynch

Kevin Roberts is a hyphenated writer: he grew up in Adelaide in South Australia, and is long-term resident of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. He’s probably best known in both Canada and Australia as a poet, though he has also published a fair amount of prose fiction. *Lions* does not say anywhere explicitly that it is autobiographical, but it is persuasively so, fiction or not. It does introduce itself, however, more poetically, as ‘random fragments of the coloured shards of memory shaken in the careless kaleidoscope of time’.

The tale is told from the perspective of a small boy and his family in Adelaide in the latter half of World War 2. Third-person rather than first-person narrative, it seems to hover between personal memory and collective history. It is convincingly true to period, capturing all the social tensions and emotions of the seemingly endless waiting on the inevitable – the relentless advance of the Japanese enemy across the Pacific toward Australia and the bombing of Darwin. It conveys the emotional experience of mothers and children whose husbands and fathers are often fighting on other fronts for much of the time. Yet it is not really a novel of youth, or even of maturation; it is shot through with an older man’s sense of loss, nostalgia, regret and mortality.

There is an existential loneliness to the man’s revisiting the people and places of his boyhood, now that his parents, brothers, aunts and uncles have all gone to their graves. The whole protective family web has been blown away, and the boy is the last man standing, which makes this brief and fragmentary narrative both emotionally complex and compelling. But there is a message here too. If death comes to all, what is the point of war!

Roberts explores the impact of war on women and children, remote from battle yet trapped in its tragedy. But the emotional recoil of this wartime story comes from a rejection of violence as a crucible of masculine identity, by one who has felt firsthand the profound and prolonged damage of it: father lost in New Guinea, missing in action; eldest brother killed in Korea, laid to rest at Kapyong; next eldest missing in action in Vietnam. Only the youngest son survives to visit his mother’s grave in his waning years and confront the pain he has spent his life seeking to avoid. We see the image of that pain in the making on the book’s back cover: a small black-and-white photo of a young boy in a slouch hat, a toy handgun holstered on his hip, a quiver of arrows and bow on his shoulder, and finger on the trigger of a rifle pointed at a target outside the frame – the unknown enemy.

It is the image of a young lion, the boy–warrior and dreamer, who imagines at night the sad and lonely roaring of the lions from the Adelaide Zoo, though it is too far away really for him to hear them. Sixty years later he returns to his old haunts, and to the zoo, where he confronts the image of himself as a man: an aging lion in a ‘false’ concrete den, stretched out on a concrete floor behind thick iron bars, all alone, twitching in his sleep as though in a bad dream. This human–animal neither requires pity nor expects liberty.

We learn a lot about lions along the way: lions in myth, in literature, in art; lions as image, as symbol and as icon. But here is what we really do to lions: we take them captive, enslave them, lock them in cages and then demean them as ‘dirty beasts’. Is this what we also do to men?

Men who model themselves as “lions of war, our noblest and our best” (as Christopher Brennan poetised the warrior breed) are, as Roberts shows them, trapped and deluded. So are the lions of industry, or those of any other domain where the conquistadorial ego seeks to dominate. But,
in reality, a man like this ‘is a wandering escape artist haunted by his childhood and avoiding any commitment to his own family. ... He is good at excuses. Even manages to convince himself’.

Who is this man – the man who sees through that man? It is the same man, older, wiser, wounded, stripped of excuses, a writer of ‘beautiful lies’ who has learned through hard labour the cost of truth. If there is healing, it is outside the frame.

Russell McDougall

Discussing the importance of Indigenous languages at the 2011 Melbourne Writers Festival, Marie Munkara, the award-winning author of Tiwi and Rembarranga descent, said that ‘the spoken word is one of the most powerful weapons that we have on this planet. Words can be used as weapons of mass destruction and they can be used to heal the human heart’.¹ The words in Munkara’s new novel, *A Most Peculiar Act*, are imbedded in this duality of language and the result is an uneasy double-edged humour of spoofing oneself and joking back. The deadliness of Munkara’s humour is reinforced with the deadliness of the topic: the novel is about a life on a mission somewhere near Darwin which is subject to the protection policies of the Aboriginal Ordinances Act of 1918, and it climaxes with the Japanese bombing of the town in 1942. The narrator, as sardonic as the one in Munkara’s first novel, *Every Secret Thing* (2009), takes the reader on an off-the-beaten-track journey, and as the novel progresses, the bumps multiply.

The novel consists of twenty-three chapters, each referring to a different character or event. The key for decoding each story lies in a clause quoted from ‘The Northern Territory of Australia. No. [9] of 1918. An Ordinance,’ which precedes each chapter. In this way, the ‘most peculiar act’ from the title does not just denote the NT Ordinance but also the act of implementing the ordinance on the grass-root level, or how the act becomes enacted on the body. Munkara achieves this effect by constructing a whole plethora of quirky characters, some of whom implement the act, some of whom are being acted upon and some of whom work around the act, which explains why the author, in the Foreword, says that the novel is about ‘bloody-minded bureaucracy, blackfellas and bumptious egos’ (8).

The novel opens with the arrival of a new Chief Protector of Aboriginals, Horatio Humphris, aka Horrid Hump, the man whose utter incompetence is still not ‘good’ enough to ‘bugger up a situation that was already buggered’ (10). As new characters are introduced, classifying them into stock categories becomes increasingly problematic, because the capricious Lady Fortuna randomly spins the wheel of fortune. Thus, while camp patrol officers start off as flat characters, one of them, Ralphie, soon finds himself in a position usually preserved for Aboriginal characters: that of being ‘tolerated by few and wanted by none’ (68), when he loses his job in the Aborigines Protection Unit, and joins Aborigines living in the camp. The new patrol officer, Drew, starts off as a white woman who needs to pretend to be a man to get a job at a time when ‘women in the workforce would only ever rise as high as men would allow them’ (48). Aided by her ‘gender confusing’ name, she lies in her application for the patrol officer’s job. She knows that the authorities do not want the unwarranted expense of interviewing applicants in person, and her deep voice over a crackly telephone line does the trick. However, the fact that Drew is initially constructed as a hardworking woman in a markedly patriarchal world does not mean that she will maintain her marginal status based on prescribed gender roles. As the narrative reveals, there is always room for ‘improvement’ and Drew can and will develop into a demagogue and eventually become a tyrant. Munkara’s colonial hierarchy is anything but simple and the development of her characters anything but predictable.

The mastery of voice becomes most vivid in the construction of Aboriginal characters. This is where mimicry and mockery fill a dark void caused by protection and assimilation policies. To

achieve this effect, Munkara uses the same technique as in her previous award-winning novel, *Every Secret Thing*. Peripeteia occurs when ‘the considered dumb-arse knows the unsuspecting smart-arse isn’t as smart as he thinks he is because somewhere along the way the roles have quietly been reversed’ (*EST*, 67). The reader is introduced to numerous Aboriginal characters living in the camp, whose ‘jaw-breaking’ Aboriginal names have been changed, in the context of assimilation policy, into more ‘practical’ ones reflecting their appearance. What can we expect from Aboriginal characters such as Pickhandle, Fuel Drum, Old Nag, Donkey Face, Brumby, Horseshoe, or Mattock? In spite of the simple names, there is nothing obtuse in the way they work around the (camp) system, even when it means getting hold of grog and tobacco by giving the ‘whitefella’ or ‘yellowfella’ what they want.

The most distinctive character is sixteen-year-old Sugar, a fringe-dwelling Aboriginal girl. From the onset ‘Sugar’, yet another misnomer, is constructed as ominous, though it is not of her own making. She gives birth to twins, which signifies bad luck for Aboriginals; she escapes from the hospital and arrives in the camp with the surviving newborn and joins Aboriginals who interpret her baby’s cries as the working of an evil spirit. So she must move again, from the camp to the Pound destined for ‘coloured’ Aboriginal girls. There she learns to become a domestic, has her baby girl taken away, and gets a job as a maid in the house run by an odd couple, Penelope and her Chinese lover Chou Chou. Penelope’s home is the setting for one of the final scenes of the novel: a Christmas party at which Penelope introduces a game of revenge. And what a revenge this turns out to be when the unexpected Japanese bombing of Darwin repositions the power relations among the characters. In this mayhem, Sugar is not going to be taken prisoner again.

*A Most Peculiar Act* is not a humorous work in the same manner as, for instance, Vivienne Cleven’s playful *Bitin’ Back* (2001). It is far more confronting because the phenomenology of Munkara’s humour is marked by ‘elastic polarity’, which makes the reader laugh and think, and the thoughts that impress themselves are not necessarily funny. The novel debunks stereotypes without falling into the trap of constructing new ones. This is a serious novel then, and not necessarily for ‘young adults,’ as it has been labelled.

As for the reader, there is nothing better than to be taken for a textual ride by Munkara’s witty narrator who has a keen eye for detail, especially when it concerns ‘a sliding scale of injustice’ (16) because ‘[s]hit is still shit no matter how big or small the turd is’ (16).

*Iva Polak*

How can the modern-day ghost story adapt to the new trends in literature in the twenty-first century? Which characteristics should an author discard from those traditionally ascribed to the genre, and which should be retained or transformed? These are questions readers will have to decide for themselves.

Michelle de Kretser’s novella brings to mind the extent to which Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic tales of horror and imagination showed the highest degree of innovation for the nineteenth century. *Springtime*, however, has no Gothic feeling to it; quite the contrary. The sun dazzles and ripples on Sydney’s Cooks River as the protagonist, Frances, walks her panicky dog Rod around her inner-west suburb whenever she’s not writing her PhD on the objects portrayed in eighteenth-century French paintings.

Frances has just moved from Melbourne to live with Charlie. The move (naturally) prompts the sort of conversations only Melbourne or Sydney people would consider worth having:

One of the things that had been said in Melbourne when she announced that she was moving to Sydney was, ‘You’ll miss the parks. Other things included: There are no good bookshops there. And, What will you do for food?’ (1)

Charlie has been previously married and has a son, Luke, who seems to enjoy tormenting Rod when he comes from Melbourne to visit his dad. De Kretser won the Miles Franklin Award in 2013 for her marvellous *Questions of Travel*, and here she mixes visual details and veiled hints in order to gently guide readers towards drawing their own conclusions: ‘The child would stamp his feet or click his tongue to attract Rod, all the while watching Frances from the corner of his eye – slyly, she thought. In the end, it was easier to put Rod outside’ (38).

It is during one of her long walks with Rod on the capriciously designed Sydney streets that Frances is first startled by what she believes to be an old lady wearing a pink dress and a wide-brimmed hat, accompanied by a bull terrier only she can see:

[The] partial visions, half-encounters, were repeated at intervals over weeks. One day, striding past the woman and her dog, Frances realised that whenever she saw those two she was alone on the path (11).

As in *Questions of Travel*, De Kretser’s prose is economical and progresses at a relaxed pace; she grasps the essentials in few words and serves them as if they were bite-sized canapés. This is how a secondary character is introduced at a dinner party:

Tim – muscles, aftershave – dealt out cards: *Tim Prescott, Creator*. He organised product launches, he explained, ‘all the way from concept to creative communication outcomes’. (26)

A different dinner party attended by Frances and Charlie sets the stage for Frances’s ghost story to be revealed. She will later try to minimise the effect it has, but de Kretser implies that their resulting disagreement might be about to cause more trouble to their relationship, already somewhat strained by Charlie’s ex-wife’s erratic behaviour on the telephone.

It probably makes little sense to write the more traditional ghost stories in our IT age. *Springtime* successfully yet lightly negotiates the boundaries that characterise the genre. While a significant episode in the narrative, the sighting of the ghost feels nowhere near to being the most significant factor in Frances’s transformation. When challenged by Charlie to explain why she had kept mum about her supernatural vision, she quickly dismisses the possibility that it was a ghost:

> Ghosts called for calm and the application of logic. Don’t tell me what you feel, tell me what you think. … Research conducted under scientific conditions had proved that ghosts were only a smell which triggered fear in the brain. (59)

What previously is sarcastically (and self-referentially) called ‘a creative communication outcome’ now becomes a more pressing issue. Frances contrives a sneaky visit to the house where she believes she has seen the ghost, in order to validate her initial impressions. What she sees there should put an end to their argument. But will it?

*Springtime* is a charming novella, full of irony and subtlety, about a young woman moving between cities, with a rather surprising ending. It is marginally about the impermanence of humans in this world, but mostly it deals with how, imperceptibly, feelings and emotions change with the years. Even though people we had strong feelings for are, or feel, no longer close to us, they have nevertheless left their mark.

*Springtime* has been published in an exquisite hardcover by Allen & Unwin, and includes some fetching colour plates by photographer Torkil Gudnason.

**Jorge Salavert**
Wendy Scarfe, *Hunger Town* (Wakefield Press, 2014)

There are many events in Australian political history that seem to be either forgotten or subsumed into grand narratives of overcoming long odds, profiting off the sheep’s back or getting on with it in the spirit of the ANZACs. Wendy Scarfe’s historical novel *Hunger Town* reminds the reader of the diverse strands of opinions and movements in Australian political history, and of the civil unrest that found outlet in protest and factional battles across a depression-ravaged Australia.

The story centres on Judith Larsen, a young girl growing up on a Port Adelaide River coal hulk during the Depression. Australia is in a state of political upheaval, and although Judith is lucky enough to have a father who works, the burgeoning unemployment, hunger and political movements affect her family. When her father takes her to the Working Man’s Club, Judith discovers a mentor in Joe Pulham. He offers her books, shares his political and social ideas and leaves his small estate to her when he dies. This allows her to go to art school where she discovers a talent for cartoons and political satire.

When Judith meets her friend’s cousin, it appears the two couldn’t be less suited. He is a good-looking, charming young man with a head full of ideals and no prospects, and she is a clever, hard-working political satirist who understands the value of a dollar. Their marriage is a love story, but not in the romantic sense. It revolves around Harry’s political fervour, and his blind commitment to his communist mentor, Nathan. His attachment to Nathan is the fuel for many marital arguments, and results in Harry’s near death in war-torn Spain.

The inner lives of Harry and Nathan are only glimpsed because of Judith’s first person narrative. This is a shame because Harry is a rounded character who displays vanity, tenderness, selfishness and passion – he is wonderful and flawed. Nathan, on the other hand, is a cold fish who stirs others to passionate protest and puts their lives in danger. He is the type of troublemaker who is always somewhere else when the trouble starts. Nathan’s politics are clear, but the motivation for some of his actions remains opaque, and while this is often the way of the world, it would have been enjoyable to delve more deeply into his inner self.

I would also like to have seen some differences in Judith’s voice: her vocabulary and thinking remain the same from the opening narrative when she is a young girl of eight until she is a mature, married woman. Even though the narrative is looking backward at childhood, the continued use of first person gives the impression of being in the here and now with the child. When Judith sees a young Indian boy swimming near the hulk to retrieve the food scraps her mother has thrown overboard, she thinks he is a seal, but 'then a sliver of sun transfixed him...' and 'I raised my hand to wave, to acknowledge his cleverness – a piece of soggy bread did not seem distasteful to me.' The language and thought process seems too measured and formal for an eight-year-old. Allowing Judith’s voice to ‘grow up’ at the same time she does would have added an extra layer of authenticity to her journey. Many of Judith’s observations, from childhood to adulthood, reinforce a political or social observation, making it feel at times as if the historical weight of the narrative comes at the expense of character development.

*Hunger Town* is an ambitious work that reminds the reader of the sacrifices already made, and of those that may be required, to protect our democracy. It is a fascinating read for those of us who do not know Adelaide’s political history, and for those familiar with this era it will evoke powerful memories of a time of political foment, union strikes, protest and police raids. The detail and breadth
of the story is breathtaking and the novel gives an incredible sense of the political and cultural milieu of Adelaide in the Depression.

Kathleen Steele

I’ve been addicted to Christos Tsiolkas for years because his novels make me uncomfortable. They confront me with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, pornography, drug use and hard-core sex, and it’s relentless. In each and every one of his books he paints these same issues with bold strokes in dark hues, and I’ve never cared that he’s predictable (which seems such a petty word for a writer of his power). Again and again he asks his readers to contemplate what it means to be Australian, what it means to be a migrant Australian, what it means to be a migrant man living in Australia, what it means to be a migrant gay man living in Australia, and I’m always newly exhilarated returning to those questions because Tsiolkas does tension well. He writes characters who are fuelled by anger, who do shocking things, whom we somehow recognise in our own selves.

But I began to panic after reading the opening three stories in his collection *Merciless Gods*: what if I didn’t like this book because it was not a single work, pushing me onto a single resolution? What if the fact that it was fifteen single works pushing me onto the same resolution fifteen times made me deem the book ‘predictable’ in a way I cannot parenthetically rationalise? Would I still be able to retain my literary love affair with Tsiolkas? Would I have to somehow deny him? I didn’t know if I was ready for that. Thankfully, I needn’t have worried. I read *Merciless Gods* in full and I’m still an addict.

Still, there are some stories that feel very *same*, but the stories he credits as published elsewhere date back to 1995 (in Picador’s *New Writing 3* series) while the latest is from 2014 (*Overland*). That’s a nine-year-gap in publications, and possibly a bigger gap between when the first and last story were actually written, so it’s likely Tsiolkas had time to recover from each story, had time to write each story tackling the same themes as those that came before it with fresh eyes, just as he does with his novels. The question begs to be asked: do we? How many characters have to enjoy an end-of-the-night joint before we decide it might as well be the same character?

But experimentation does play a part in this collection and certain stories feel decidedly different from others. ‘Petals’, for instance, was originally written in Greek by the author then translated into English by the author, and the stiltedness of the protagonist’s broken English becomes the star of the story. His labour with the language, and the reactions to it from his inmates and the prison guards, position him in a sympathetic light, even though he is a murderer. But Tsiolkas might well be saying that no one is fully bad. People have stories which make them complex and sympathy is perhaps one layer from the surface. In the title story, even the very young are not immune to the notion of revenge, shaping their later lives.

In ‘Jessica Lange in *Frances*’ there is a graphic sex scene, and if you are at all familiar with Tsiolkas’s work that would not come as any big surprise, but this scene is literally turned into a kind of poetry, as Tsiolkas adds in line breaks, creating a breathlessness of the moment:

…I stroked his hair, his face, and
we were kissing and
his mouth was harsh, not a girl’s mouth, and his body was hard as it pressed against me, covering me, but the skin was just so soft, like touching the underneath of bark and I thought a few times, as we were making love, that
fuck, it’s a man, this is a man
but our bodies worked together, and I liked him coming all over me, groaning and swearing loudly,

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repeating
oh man oh man oh man
and as I was coming I had my eyes closed but I was digging my mouth into his neck and
I had to stop myself screaming, so I bit into him, because what I wanted to scream
was something about love.

Just as the structure of this sex scene is untraditional, so too is the overall structure of the story. Tsiolkas unsettles us in our reading, going back and forth from past to present, so that the affair between the protagonist and his abusive lover is not as straightforward as it might otherwise be. It is crooked, messed up, episodic and causal.

‘Civil War’, too, has a poetic flare in the telling. The protagonist is detoxing, trying to find God without the drugs, and he finds it in the Nullarbor after escaping a casual lover who has overdosed. The experience of discovering spirituality for the first time is much like the experience of drugs, though there is blackfella holiness in his vision, fitting the story’s theme. The casual lover was Aboriginal; the trucker who picked him up raves about killing all the boongs before they kill us. The protagonist in this story separates himself from the us/them dichotomy and tries to find a middle ground: the Nullarbor. I never thought of Tsiolkas as a nature writer because his work is so often rooted in the streets of cities, the toilet blocks and backyard barbecues, so this is something new. If I could pick one story to read from this book, and only one story, it would be this.

‘The Disco at the End of Communism’ and ‘Sticks, Stones’ would be difficult stories to pass by, though, because they work with another of Tsiolkas’s reliable themes: family. No, we can’t choose our family, and no, even when we try, we cannot live without them. By delving into these ‘unconditional love-based’ relationships and boldly showing that there can be real, deep-seated anger, even a complicated form of hatred at the core of them, Tsiolkas shows that no relationship is immune to scrutiny.

As much as the stories in Merciless Gods are disconcerting and as much as they give us a frightening view of humanity and the self, there is a certain amount of redemption that ultimately shines through. Tsiolkas’ ability to balance the two is what makes change in our world feel possible. But it is his ability to skew the balance toward ‘disconcerting’ and ‘frightening’ that makes him so addictive.

Heather Taylor Johnson