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Swedish writer Peter Fröberg Idling calls his novel about the political and cultural machinations of 1950s Cambodia a ‘fantasy’. He does so, perhaps, to make clear that he is not writing, nor attempting to write, a work of history. In conception and on the page, *Song for an approaching storm* is quite an odd book, but in a good way: in the novel’s best moments, it soars because of its oddness.

The novel is split into three entwined parts, with each part focusing on the lives of a key character. In Part I, a young would-be revolutionary called Sar juggles his political aspirations, some open but some hidden, with his love for, and commitment to, his fiancé, Somaly. In Part 2, a senior politician called Sary makes Machiavellian waves at election time, while wooing the much younger Somaly. Part 3 focuses on Somaly, a young woman from the elite ruling class who, amongst other matters, reflects on ‘the role that tradition had allotted her in the life she was expected to lead’ (243).

Idling’s portrait of Sar is the book’s high point. Sar is a fictionalised version of the man who later became known as Pol Pot, the long-time leader of the Khmer Rouge. The Pol Pot period in Cambodia (1975-79) was one of the most criminally brutal of the twentieth century, and in term was a key period in a decades-long era of war and bloodshed in Cambodia and the Indochina region.

The dichotomy of Sar’s life is set in the novel’s opening pages: he reminisces about a fine dinner with Somaly before he drives to meeting place and exchanges passwords with a cyclo driver, who takes him to a secret meeting. He is forever alive to the possibility of being caught: ‘Tuck your handkerchief down into the breast pocket of your jacket so it won’t offer a white target for a marksman to aim at’ (13). Idling’s second person narration in Part 1 draws the readers towards Sar, inviting an unlikely empathy. Sar is deceptively laconic: there is a great deal going on behind his carefully constructed façade. At times, he is compassionate — scarily and confusingly so for the historically aware reader. At other times, his single-mindedness is chilling, although, again, the power of the historical figure-in-waiting contributes to the potency of such moments.

Parts II and III of the novel, focusing on Sary and Somaly respectively, pale a little in comparison to Part I. In fairness to Idling, this is inevitable because the shadow of the future Pol Pot hangs over the story like a malignant shadow, even when he is not the novel’s central focus. Sary is a study of power and of privilege (he likes his fine French wine). He craves a more sophisticated Cambodia, even though he himself strains for sophistication. The portrait is fascinating, although at times there is something slightly forced in the depiction of his authority.

Somaly, a beauty queen with a bristling intelligence, invests much time in pondering her own future as well as that of the country. She must decide whether to marry Sar and so to risk losing her inheritance. But this decision is just a small element of her thinking: her ideas and dreams evolve and expand, often framed around issues of gender and societal constraints. At one point — in a passage Idling handles beautifully — Somaly reflects on the ‘small minority of people who understand what is beautiful and the great majority who do not’ (259), going on to meditate on the need to peel away layers before the true beauty of an object can be revealed.

Idling handles particularly well Somaly’s tricky relationship with her mother: ‘In Maman’s defence, it has to be said that Somaly thinks she can sense a hint of underlying goodwill in that cool and reserved look, as if Somaly is some kind of natural resource, as yet unrefined. Or rather, perhaps, a domestic animal that can be trained. *In any case, someone something can be done with*’ (252, emphasis in original).
Song for an approaching storm does not have a thin plot: the intrigue of a love triangle plays out before a backdrop of politics, emerging radicalism and the blunt assertion of power. Nonetheless, the novel’s characterisations drive the story’s momentum and generate the most sustained interest. Idling has a wonderful eye for detail, and a deft way of imbuing a descriptive passage with weighty meaning without overburdening it or doing so too obviously. Although there are sections a little heavy on background or exposition (especially in Part 2), Idling generally strikes a reasonable balance between attempting to describe a complex web of official and subterranean politics without resorting to over-simplification or, alternatively, without allowing the novel to get bogged down in detail. In any case, some of the over-explanation, even when it arrests the story’s momentum, is fascinating.

In the end, Part I of the book dominates because Idling’s version of Sar mingles with the reader’s awareness of the historical figure of Pol Pot — this mingling will occur even if, perhaps especially if, readers have a sketchy knowledge of the Pol Pot period. The portrait that results is notably unsettling: a love-struck young man who, a couple of decades after the events depicted in this novel, becomes one of the most reviled figures in history.

Patrick Allington
Gerbrand Bakker, *June*. Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer (Scribe, 2015)

Dutch author Gerbrand Bakker illustrates the effect of tragedy and connected memories through a series of intersecting vignettes in his latest novel, *June*. Bakker begins with a summer’s day in June 1969, detailing a visit from Queen Juliana in rural Holland and the resounding impact of this day on the Kaan family 40 years on. It’s a tender portrayal of family, exposing the different ways in which people experience a shared history.

The novel traces a single day, each fragment narrated through a different perspective: the village baker, a cemetery caretaker, a woman on a train and each member of the Kaan family. Reading *June*, a sense of stillness permeates the novel. Bakker shows the quiet of rural landscape and country living. His writing focuses deeply on the details, like a crack in a glass window or the sensation of pressing your thumb in cuttlefish bone.

Each detailed image, however, brings a sense of foreboding as if because one tragedy is 40 years past, another is lurking. The detail and stillness of Bakker’s writing is exemplified in its form. The vignettes work to create a complete image of a family’s experience in one point in time, giving heed to the past. As such, there is no plot moving forward. The reader’s knowledge of a family’s history is continually extended and coloured as the Kaans move through one day.

The novel begins with Queen Juliana’s visit to the Kaan family’s village. Bakker touches on the nature of celebrity, the Queen thinking while sitting on a temporary lavatory, constructed just for her: ‘I am sixty years old ... For more than twenty years I have been sitting in my official capacity on lavatories like this’ (10). However, *June*’s main focus is the interesting within the ordinary: the aftereffects on a man who is given a brain injury in a motorcycle accident, an old mother hiding away from the world ‘up on the straw’ (108) and a young boy covering graves in cow shit because he ‘wanted to see what would happen’ (193).

*June* centres on the three Kaan boys, Bakker showing the moving on of one generation to the next. A resounding theme of the novel is characters’ understanding and coming to terms with their parents’ faults. The Kaan boys try to coax their mother out of hiding in the straw, something she does when she experiences hardship. She throws glass bottles but they still show her compassion: ‘now she’s throwing real bottles. Fortunately, we’re not over there,’ Klaas explains to his daughter (203). Their elderly father chops down three trees on a whim and Klaas shows nothing but concern; his heart ‘misses a beat’ (168). This theme is extended through the cemetery caretaker’s relationship with her son, Toon. She is unable to accept him as a gay man who forges his own identity yet he accepts her neurosis in caring for her husband’s grave. Bakker also extends his reach beyond family, showing the interconnected roles people have with each other within a small but dynamic village.

Bakker also carefully alludes to gender and sexuality in *June*. Rather than being blatant, he steps around queer identities and gendered roles, allowing the reader to reach their own interpretation. In *June*, Bakker repeatedly revisits Jan and Toon’s sexual encounters, portraying the briefest of touches. He shows them holding hands, touching or having sex in single images rather than descriptive scenes.

Bakker also depicts a continuing theme of unfulfilled female desire. He portrays a cemetery caretaker’s sexual fantasies (boldly including rape fantasies) and the discord between her vivacious sexual desire and her ability to assert her own sexuality. She cannot be intimate with the baker, a man she sees regularly. She can only lie in bed next to him. The closest she gets to asserting her desire is to dye her grey hair a stark shade of black and to remove her jacket on a hot summer’s day.

Similarly, Anna Kaan expresses her unfulfilled desire to be acknowledged by her husband: ‘She was so desperate for him to look at her’ (43).

In June, Gerbrand Bakker’s voice and style is at its most refined. The novel is a subtle and moving portrayal from which a reader can gleam the ways in which we are all connected through our family and our shared past.

Katerina Bryant

J.M. Coetzee has now published two books containing ‘exchanges’ – specifically this, intellectual exchanges, rather than ‘interviews’ where the questioner asks prompting questions of the famous author. The first is *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (2013), a correspondence with Paul Auster that began in July 2008. Now there is *The Good Story*, in which Coetzee and the English psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz discuss fictions and their place in psychotherapy and in the human psyche, and their relations with ‘reality’ or truth. There is an Authors’ Note at the beginning but little in the way of explanation of how these discussions came about or when they took place.

However, the note mentions an earlier ‘product’ of their ‘engagement’ and gives a reference to a 2010 article in *Salmagundi*, beguilingly titled ‘Nevertheless, my sympathies are with the Karamazovs’. Curiosity as much as academic rigour led me to seek this article out, and I was rewarded with the kind of circumstantial detail I crave. The article is actually (or purports to be, but I think actually is) an email correspondence beginning in May 2008 and running for the remainder of that year. Arabella Kurtz’s initial email, sent out of the blue, asks Professor Coetzee if he would consider discussing with her (either in person in front of an audience, by videolink or email) ‘what can be learned from your work from a psychological point of view’. Their initial negotiations are included, a feature missing from both books. The interesting possibility now arises, since the exchanges with Auster were suggested by Coetzee at some time after the meeting between them at Adelaide Writers’ Week in February 2008 and before his first published email on 14 July 2008, that the idea of carrying on such a correspondence with a view to publication might have been in a sense prompted by Kurtz’s approach to Coetzee in May 2008.

Be that as it may, *The Good Story* continues the exchange begun in the *Salmagundi* article. However, it seems that the dynamics between Kurtz and Coetzee have subtly changed. In the article there is a sense that Kurtz is deferring to the eminent writer and professor: ‘I would be interested to hear anything more you had to say about your rudimentary psychology of moods,’ she writes (67): the questioning goes in that direction, rather than the other. In *The Good Story*, the current seems as often as not to run the opposite way, and not only because Coetzee begins each chapter or section with an extended query, often ending with a petition such as ‘Help me to get beyond this point’ or ‘Am I wrong?’ Kurtz even expresses the occasional hint of impatience: ‘As a therapist trying to help people who are in distress, it is simply not relevant whether something is truth or fiction in the philosophical terms you set out. We have been over this ground before’ (136), she writes; and a little later, ‘If psychoanalysts do not accept fiction, fantasy and make-believe as an ordinary, healthy part of life, then I really do not know who does’ (146).

Their discussion could be summarised as an exploration of the interaction between truth and fiction, particularly in relation to the self. Towards the end of the book, Coetzee writes,

> Your faith seems undimmed that we can learn to ‘be ourselves’. Would that it were so simple, I say to myself. To my mind, it will be enough if we can settle on fictions of ourselves which we

1 J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, ‘Nevertheless, My Sympathies are with the Karamazovs’, *Salmagundi*, 166/167, Spring 2010, 39-72.


can inhabit more or less comfortably, fictions that interact sans friction with the fictions of those around us. (177)

But the operation of fictions in fiction is, in his opinion, a different matter:

It is hard, perhaps impossible, to make a novel that is recognisably a novel out of the life of someone who is from beginning to end comfortably sustained by fictions. We make a novel only be exposing those fictions. (191)

In the earlier exchange, he had expressed a similar idea slightly differently:

You suggest that the writer’s responsibility is ultimately aesthetic. This may be so – I can treat this character as I please as long as it contributes to the making of a good novel – but to some, perhaps many, writers it also feels like a responsibility to the real, to constructing a world that is some kind of version of the real world and (more important) that makes the features of the real world more visible.³

There is much in these two sets of exchanges – there is depth rather than breadth. Coetzee readily admits they are repetitive, and not ‘systematic and/or consistent’.⁴ The book is a handsome hardback, with a public prominence beyond the aspirations of a paper in an academic journal. Nevertheless, to me the most arresting statement is one that Coetzee makes in the article:

you refer to the invention of fictional characters. ‘Invention’ is not the world I would use. To me it is a matter of putting together a pattern of clichés (the already-written) and patiently waiting for the slip when the ‘character’ puts in his/her own word; and then allowing that original word to grow and grow; and ultimately erasing all the earlier clichés, which you no longer need.⁵

As a description of the creative process, this has a ring of authenticity because of its unexpectedness as much as anything. But it also seems deeply familiar, as anyone who writes would know: the clichés come easily, so let them come; but perhaps the mark of an accomplished writer is to defeat them, replace them, displace them with original thoughts and constructions and expressions.

One small point of irritation with The Good Story: a decision must have been taken at some stage that the gender-neutral singular would be best achieved by using the third person plural pronoun. Perhaps this has become so standard as to be unremarkable, but still constructions such as ‘the teacher is a pretender who has not proved themselves yet puts themselves forward’ is unappealing in the extreme (167). I find it hard to understand why a fastidious writer like Coetzee would willingly allow such clumsy prose to appear under his name.

Gillian Dooley

³ Coetzee and Kurtz, ‘Nevertheless’ 51.
⁴ Coetzee and Kurtz, ‘Nevertheless’ 72.

Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Chatto & Windus, 2014)

Darky Gardiner loathed Tiny, thought him a fool and would do everything to keep him alive. Because courage, survival, love – all these things didn’t live in one man. They lived in them all or they died and every man with them; they had come to believe that to abandon one man was to abandon themselves. (186)

Such a paradox of nature would be amusing if read in a different context. But not in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a stark novel that unveils the impossible realities of a POW camp on the Burma Death Railway. Written with the aid of his father’s recollections as a POW, Flanagan’s narrative is an assertion on humanity’s immense need to survive despite desponding circumstances. Many other reviews have focused on Dorrigo Evans’s love-affair with his uncle’s young wife, although it is peripheral to the central theme of war. In fact, Amy Mulvaney is a prerequisite to a deeper understanding of Evans’ post-war life as a womaniser. Nakamura’s cold-blooded acts too are a precursor to a life full of complex atonement and extreme kindness, illustrated in his refusal to swat even a mosquito.

Only one word can correctly define this book: horrifying. A succession of paragraphs is exhaustingly descriptive and thorough. Flanagan’s prose sometimes wrenches the reader away to places unimagined, disarmed by the shocking military overtones, and yet with no word and no intrusion from the author to tell the reader what to feel. It rightly claims the epithet that has been attributed to it: a masterpiece, no less. The words flow without any specific exaggeration, without even the usual punctuation marks, exhibiting the author’s confidence in the ability of the increasingly stark physical setting to enhance the emotional setting. He makes ‘belated witnesses’ out of his readers, and draws them into events with a medium of representation that, on the surface, encourages dispassionate observation.

The POWs do not cry at any point throughout their suffering. They seem to reconcile to the impossibility of having anything better than the muddy and continually rainy forests, and the meagre amount of the sour old rice for breakfast, one-tenth of the normal quantity. Except for the imminent slapping or worse, their bodies, reduced to skin and bones, have nothing to pull themselves up with. A list of infectious diseases like cholera and beri-beri, in addition to the unhygienic surroundings, deepens Dorrigo Evans’s helplessness in treating them. Catheters made of bamboo, drips made of kerosene tins, needles made from thorns – all caused by an acute scarcity of medicine and equipment – intensify the misery.

Governed by nothing but an ideal – and an unreal ideal at that – of devotion to the emperor and the Japanese spirit, the authorities who are involved in the making of the Death Railway are as ‘free’ as their captives. Personal discontent and regret have no place in their minds, though life in the camp is intolerable with its privations that make human survival impossible; rather than food, manipulative drugs are provided by the government to raise their benumbed spirits. Violence is as easy as watching beautiful water droplets rolling together on the bright surface of a shining metal sword, a sort of training given prior to their first beheading of a man. No matter how long they beat Darky Gardiner, or anybody else for that matter, there seems to be no revival of their long-dead consciences. Readers may wonder at the magnitude of the horror of it all, and be gripped with a desire to see it ended. But Flanagan does not want readers to forget all too quickly – there’s the same incident exposing the savage in humans as seen through the eyes of yet another witness.
After the war, the POWs attempt a normal life. But for many of them, neither the security of employment nor the comfort of a loving family can erase from their experiences the deep wounds of the past which have long-forgotten to bleed. They have nobody who will understand them, to expiate the wound with the sharp, hot knife. They can neither speak about it, nor forget it. Flanagan is subtle in bringing out their otherwise suppressed fears by portraying them as over-kind, over-careful fathers. A similar attempt at normal life by the Japanese officers, the perpetrators of the crime, is also overshadowed by their need to expunge themselves of their dark past. Nakamura’s post-war success extends for a considerable time until death grants him ‘poetic justice’. Death, after all, is the ultimate revelation of everybody to himself.

In this post-war recollection of the dreadful horrors of war, dominated by a note of death and suffering in a POW camp, Flanagan masterfully interweaves the influence of war on the human psyche, as well as the power of love and memory to create an extraordinary drive to go on with life.

P.S. Gayathri and P.L. Rani

David Lagercrantz’s *The Girl in the Spider’s Web* is a continuation of the Millennium Series written by the late Stieg Larsson, and published posthumously starting in 2008. The Millennium Series novels were international bestsellers, and Larsson’s death left some readers wanting more. Lagercrantz attempts to create a fourth novel for the series. He brings back to life Larsson’s compelling characters from first three novels, while also creating new characters and adding intrigue that keeps readers interested and connected to the series.

In Larsson’s original conception, Mikael Blomkvist, a Swedish investigative reporter, became famous for solving the disappearance of Harriet Vanger, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. He was assisted by Lisbeth Salander, a very private but skilled hacker who had a troubled past and an aversion to authority. Mikael later vindicated Lisbeth who was accused of murder. The two, an unlikely duo, become a skilled crime-solving team.

In *The Girl in the Spider’s Web*, Mikael has taken some hits which have left his reputation in question. Many believe his best days as a journalist are behind him. In the middle of the night, he receives a call from Franz Balder, a renowned scientist who wants to see him right away. Knowing he needs a good story to revive his career, Mikael agrees to the meeting—but arrives seconds after Balder is shot to death in his bedroom. He enters the home to find Balder’s autistic son, August, who has just witnessed his father’s murder. August is not only autistic, but a savant who has the ability to weave his own style into the world created by Larsson while weaving his own style into their personalities. He builds the story slowly, without mention of Lisbeth Salander until the end of the fourth chapter. The tension builds and when she finally arrives on the scene, it’s as if she never left. Lagercrantz’s ability to bring Larsson’s characters back without missing a beat shows a good writer can carry on where another has left off. He immerses himself in the world created by Larsson.

At the beginning of *The Girl in the Spider’s Web*, Lagercrantz includes a description of each character from the Millennium Series who continues in the fourth novel. With this addition, a reader

can pick up the book and enjoy it without having read the first three novels. *The Girl in the Spider’s Web* is able to stand on its own; however, I would definitely recommend reading the complete series.

Compared to Larsson’s raw, gritty style of storytelling in the first three novels, *The Girl in the Spider’s Web* seems a bit watered down. For example, after a childhood filled with abuse and neglect, Lisbeth has become a cold, hardened loner who lacks social skills. But Lagercrantz has given her compassion and she has more dialogue in this book than in the first three combined. Perhaps because she sees many of her own attributes in August, she comes to care for him and goes to great lengths to ensure he will have a better life than she did.

There was a delicate balance to be maintained in continuing Larsson’s work. It was important for Lagercrantz to shape the characters in his own way while taking care to respect Larsson’s creation. I think he was able to accomplish this feat skilfully, and I look forward to reading the next book.

Dana Gibson
Peter Monteath, Mandy Paul and Rebecca Martin. *Interned: Torrens Island 1914-1915* (Wakefield Press, 2014)

*Interned: Torrens Island 1914-1915* by Peter Monteath, Mandy Paul and Rebecca Martin immerses the reader in a grim and often forgotten chapter in South Australia’s history. The prevalence of German culture was strong in the state from the mid-1800s through to World War I due to a large number of immigrants from Prussia, Bavaria and Hanover. At the breakout of war, many German and Austrian nationals living in Australia were imprisoned in internment camps. Adelaide’s internment camp was Torrens Island, located in the Port River estuary, opened in October 1914 and closed just under a year later in August 1915. Monteath, Paul and Martin use a multimodal approach of written language and photographs to reveal the story of the Torrens Island Internment Camp and of those interned there. A combination of photographs taken by Torrens Island internee Paul Dubotzki, extracts from the diaries of internee Frank Bungardy, and additional information and images providing historical context give the reader a comprehensive and firsthand perspective of life on Torrens Island.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the sentiments of the time through the story of the *SS Scharzfels*, the vessel which was unfortunate enough to sail into Adelaide on the day it was announced Australia was at war with Germany, flying a German flag and unaware of the news of war. Despite the fact there were British subjects aboard, the men were not allowed to disembark the ship. Chapter 2 looks at South Australia’s German heritage and the role of German culture in Adelaide, stating that ‘decades before the term “multiculturalism” was invented, South Australia had provided something of a model of how it might work’ (9). The British Australians and German Australians lived and worked amicably side by side for many decades. Chapter Three examines how the Torrens Island internment camp came into existence. At the breakout of war, German and Austrian nationals were required to report themselves to their local police station. The Australian Government had the power to detain enemy aliens as delegated by the Imperial Government:

Enemy reservists were of particular concern … in September further instructions were received stating that all enemy reservists and enemy subjects of military age found on ships should be detained. The following month the regime was extended: all enemy subjects whose conduct was considered ‘suspicious or unsatisfactory’ were to be interned. (19)

Chapter 4 delves into what life was like on Torrens Island for those detained there. During this time the detained men lived in tents and worked ‘collecting wood, digging latrines and cooking’ (43). The men who were not occupied by such duties faced empty days with little to fill the hours. Chapter 5 concludes with the implications of the closure of the Torrens Island camp.

In the beginning, life in the camp and discipline was relatively laidback. Then in early 1915 Captain George Edward Hawkes took over as commandment of the camp ‘owing to his reputation as a firm disciplinarian’ (47). The tone in the camp changed dramatically, and this change ‘might never have become known outside the camp, except that word got out of abuses being perpetrated on prisoners by Hawkes and his men. As a result, the military authorities had to confront some awkward truths’ (47). Paul Dubotzki’s photography provided evidence of the abuse, and prisoners managed to get a photo smuggled off the island in a boot sent to the mainland for repair. The authors suggest, but

do not know for sure, that the evidence of abuse in the camp may have been one reason for the eventual closure of Torrens Island.

The respect and consideration Monteath, Paul and Martin have taken in creating *Interned* can clearly be seen in the thoughtful composition of text and pictures which allows the reader to become immersed in the reality of that time. The included text is succinct and provides essential historical context while also introducing the reader to many of the internees held on the island. The text is there as a support to the photographs, which carry the narrative. The writers never allow the text to intrude onto the photography’s space, granting the reader the opportunity to discover Torrens Island through their own interpretation of the picture narrative. Chapter Four is a striking example of the consideration taken when composing the text. The first sections of the chapter describe what life was like for the men living on Torrens Island, often through extracts in Bungardy’s own words taken from his diary:

> Owing our tent being small, and very inconvenient to use it as Bedroom, Kitchen and Dining room combined, we wher forced to procure bags at 4p a piece, old Potatoo Bags. Went out into the Busche under guard, procured some sticks, and we soon had a rough and ready Bush Kitchen and dining room. (43)

The text is interspersed with images of the internees, accompanied by short snippets introducing the reader to these men, along with images which illustrate their lives in the camp. One of the included images is the cover of Issue 2 of *Der Kamerad* (The Comrade), a magazine the internees published and distributed amongst themselves in June 1915. These aspects humanise the internees into individuals and invites the reader to consider them as such rather than as a collective, nameless group. In the second part of the chapter the text is silenced and a series of Dubotzki’s photographs take over the narrative. The photos are given space to breathe, with only one image per page or double-page spread. A short caption for each photo is the only text the reader has for guidance as the photographs illustrate the sombre atmosphere and primitive conditions in the camp. A particularly poignant photograph shows a group of seven of the internees, all young men, posing for the photo in front of their tent (56). They could easily be a group of young men on a camping trip together, not prisoners. Another photograph depicts the injuries inflicted by a guard on an internee’s backside with a bayonet (85). Without such images the truth of what occurred in the camp may never have survived. Respect is afforded not only to the reader, but to the subjects and the subject matter in allowing the internees’ own recollections and observations to shape the reader’s perceptions.

Yet what is most confronting about this book is not the poor treatment suffered by the internees but the public’s ignorance of the abuse taking place in the camp and the fact that this part of South Australia’s history is so little-known. It resembles the years of silence surrounding Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers in offshore detention centres. If not for those willing to speak out, these important parts of history would be lost.

*Interned: Torrens Island 1914-1915* presents the reader with an otherwise hidden piece of South Australian history. Monteath, Paul and Martin respectfully capture the experiences of the internees through the internees’ own eyes, shading in gaps with historical context to give the reader a rich understanding of the circumstances surrounding Torrens Island.

Raelke Grimmer

*The Poets’ Stairwell* is a picaresque novel about Claude Boon and Henry Luck, English-born Australian poets who travel through Europe in search of their respective muse. There is a feeling of autobiography about this fictitious novel. That’s perhaps due to the use of Gould’s journals from his 1977 travels with his friend Kevin Hart,¹ which he drew on for Boon and Henry’s itinerary as well as for some of the characterisation in the novel.

Henry Luck is a precocious confident scholar and voracious reader, focused on progressing his career as a poet. Claude Boon, who prefers to be known as Boon, is much less driven both in his career ambitions and his approach to life generally. It is Orientation Week and Boon has just concluded the welcome to the Arden Poetry Society when Henry approaches to introduce himself. Boon is preparing to graduate as Henry is preparing to begin studies. It is Henry who suggests that he and Boon travel together once he’s graduated. Boon agrees to wait for Henry, and excited, they propose an agenda:

Yeats’ grave in Ireland ... the room where Verlaine shot Rimbaud, Wordsworth’s route through the Alps, stand on the beach where they burned Shelley’s body. Dante’s Florence, Byron’s Venice, Plato’s Athens. (43)

Henry’s girlfriend, Rhee, is an equally bright and dedicated student. Boon likes her and finds her calmness attractive, but it is sharp-witted Eva Swart, the declared feminist follower of Marx and Lenin, who intrigues him. He has been fascinated by her ever since her dance at a protest rally, and thinks of her as a ‘collision of fierce politics and loveliness’ (23), Henry, on the other hand, describes her as having a ‘soul-of-mud’ (32). Interestingly, Rhee and Eva are friends, a challenge to Henry once he and Boon arrive to stay with Rhee in London before heading off on their grand adventure.

During a stopover in Bangkok, en route to London, they stroll about the hustle and bustle of this teeming city that both overwhelms and excites them with its energy. As usual, they discuss poets and poetry, and are deeply engaged as Boon starts a thought, Henry pounces and runs with it. Oblivious to their surroundings, they are an easy target for a trio of opportunistic, glamorous prostitutes: three very tiny, but tenacious women. The antics of the three beautiful women, Henry’s ‘I don’t know what do she wants from me’ (50) and then later his ‘No baht. No barter’ (51), resolves his dilemma. The next morning when Boon encounters a women and her python, his hysterical response becomes almost slapstick comedy (54-55). Underneath it all is the subtext of poverty in a city bustling with tourists, fair game for locals who seek to part the more gullible among them from some of their US dollars, if not then at least some baht.

In the manner of the picaresque, Gould has created a raft of characters; more of them are oddball than rogues and rascals. There’s the anarchic Beamish, often found in Eva’s company – both enjoy being punk. They plan political pranks to disrupt gatherings in order to make a statement; occasionally Beamish is over the top, almost dangerous. Eva tends to disappear before disaster strikes, leaving him to do his worst and take the consequences. Titus, an American, is a professional acrobat who uses his skills to exercise his rights under the Second Amendment. His subversive street

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performances are more a danger to him than to those who gather to watch. Willi the German truck driver who can hold his own with Henry in a discussion of Aquinas and his writings.

There is plenty about poetry, philosophy and history during the intense discussions between the poets and chance-met strangers. Henry as always, talks of poets and philosophers on a first-name basis, and continues to display his remarkable ability to choose the most appropriate poet and verses for the occasion. After such discussions, his insistence on providing Boon with a list of suggested reading matter annoys Boon, even as Boon acknowledges how apt the list may be. Henry’s discourse on the Swiss Alps and the poetry of Wordsworth is one of those occasions for Boon.

Almost a sideline to the main action are the ‘imagination’ games Boon and Henry like to spring on one another in the belief it develops their poetic skill. I particularly enjoyed the instance that they strolled past a Venetian rail yard full of ‘rusty old locomotives stacked three stories high’. Challenged to come up with an image, Boon promptly delivers ‘a copulation of prehistoric snails’ (144).

Henry’s ordered, somewhat safe, approach to life, his dedication to poetry as he perceives it and his constant habit of reading in all sorts of situations, periodically stifles Boon, who takes off for a spot of spontaneous adventure on his own. Eventually Henry agrees to join him on the road, in spite of the opinion that it is undignified. It’s in Venice that their luck runs out and they are forced to sleep among the Venetian gravestones. Oddly, it is Henry who holds firm that ‘Venice provides’ (147). Next day, Venice honours his faith through a chance encounter with two Yugoslavian women, a mother and daughter team working as translators at the poetry conference that has booked out the city’s accommodation. Jelena declares a complete dislike for Australians, poets especially, even though Boon just rescued her from a gang of youths. However, her mother, Branca, joyfully proclaims them as ‘authentic Australian poets’ and decides to rescue them from another night among the graves and invites them to the conference as well. Branca has another agenda, and what occurs is a truly hilarious escapade leading to unexpected challenges for Henry’s poetic career.

It is in Assisi that the ‘poets’ stairwell’ makes an appearance, and, for me, this is a turning point in the friends journey (201-208). Martha, the plumber from small-town America, proves to be the most unexpected and most poignant character the men meet. Henry senses that, like him, Martha is searching for direction in her life. As he patiently seeks to provide an explanation of ‘reality’ for Martha (256), another side to Henry is revealed.

This very funny book is Claude Boon’s story, and through his narrative and observations the reader is able to know Henry Luck. This book is about friendship: its beginnings, its challenges, and how it can uplift or put down, cause jealousy and hurt through blissful unawareness more than deliberation much of the time. It is an excellent representation of the claustrophobia that close proximity as travelling companions over several months can cause.

Kay Hart
Nicholas Jose, *Bapo* (Giramondo, 2015)

*Bapo* is the name given to an unusual kind of Chinese painting that tricks the eye into thinking it sees a collage of fragments. The word literally means ‘eight broken’, where eight is a Chinese lucky number and broken (damaged, worn) suggests that luck has run out, and if it has that there’s another kind of luck in simply surviving, less glorious maybe, but not so bad in the long run. (1)

*Bapo* is a collection of 18 stories by Nicholas Jose, written using what he terms ‘a kind of writer’s bapo’ (2). It is indeed a kaleidoscope of historical progress, personal memory and experience. While it’s not directly about China, its ideology or its politics, indirectly these elements are present. A collage of characters, among them artists, intellectuals, officials and travellers, allows readers a glimpse of a China reinventing itself.

‘Donkey Feast’ is a perfect opener to display this *bapo* style in a story hinting rather than telling directly the events from which a group of eight artists, reunited by a feast and a photograph, now seek to salvage and retrieve some kind of cohesion:

> together around the table, the same people or not, as the turbid water that has flowed between us washes out to sea. In sight is the moment of first connection, before life’s divergences, the turning of the backs, the forgettings and betrayals. That’s the heaviness behind our eyes as the ritual of cleansing plays out. (11)

As this one-time ‘band of brothers’ (14) drive home they pass by the scene of a crash. They are unanimous in deciding not to offer help, discovering fear and mistrust still hovering after all.

In ‘Ha-ha-ha!’, an unremarkable artist suddenly gains notice among foreign tourists, which leads to a visit from Party delegates with a proposal the artist may not easily refuse (30-31). However, in a clever twist the artist responds with an ultimatum of his own. Perhaps it is the voice of his 95-year-old grandmother that he hears commenting ‘that in a crisis governments and politicians always make the wrong decision’ (21).

‘Kong: Fossil’ explores the value of finding a centre and self-discipline, freedom and the importance of family. A fossil passes from an about-to-be-exiled father, an expert in birds and shells, to his wild and wayward son, Kong, who he fails to discipline. Eventually the son migrates to Australia as a political refugee. Once more the fossil is passed to another generation in a family reinventing itself.

‘One Fine Day’ explores the arena of cultural exchange and partnerships as it parallels the story of *Madam Butterfly* through a woman at a bus stop who tells fellow passenger Ping about being left behind by her western lover: ‘Jumping from the balcony was not the right answer’ (50). Perhaps Madam Butterfly was not the right answer to begin a partnership either. ‘Loving China’ is a delightful story of love-at-first-sight between Cara and Claude, Australians with a common attachment to China. Revelling in their shared discovery of China, they believe fate is cementing their lifetime bond. Wealth and power exploited for personal ends in ‘The Game of Go’ as an academic Professor Theo Weiss and his Chinese rent boy, Princie, each broker a game of power and sexual politics gradually reversing fortune and shifting power. ‘Beautiful Island’ is an ironical peek at free enterprise in an exchange between a Chinese marketing entrepreneur and a New Zealander negotiating a potential partnership to bring Kiwi Fruit (Chinese gooseberries) to China.
‘Angled Wheels of Fortune’, so titled after the sculpture near Sydney’s Kings Cross, concludes Part 1. Rain, painting, poetry and umbrellas thread through eight cameos narrated by a tourist sheltering at a café. I enjoyed the meditation about ‘which pronoun to shelter under’ (138) and also the beautifully descriptive prose:

I gaze out at the rain as it ... polishes fat ducks as they waddle over the muddy bank, brightens green leaves against the shining black rocks of a Zen garden. The rain falls on the pond in countless circles that come and go like a crowd of umbrellas ... the line that rings of ripples cross is endless exchange from light to dark and back again. ... The ducks stay on the pond. I’m the one who flies away. (136-37)

This piece is a wonderful collage of the opposites of China, busy frenzied life in a hugely populated city but also elements of quiet, calm and peaceful enjoyment.

Part 2 is an anticlimax as it shifts away from China and the bapo style, entering short story form to explore emotional and personal aspects of partnership. ‘Marriage Bonds’ revolves around a ménage à trois in which each party is captive to the other even as each would prefer to break free to move on alone. In ‘Tripping’ a drug trip goes awry and the tripper is rescued by a couple with whom friendship grows. ‘After the Show’, ‘The Aunt’s Garden Story’ and ‘The Disappearing Book’ each explore aspects of coming to terms with the changes and loss that old age brings. ‘George’ is the oddity in the collection. A beautifully written tribute to the iconic orang-utan now honoured with a statue at the Adelaide zoo, it is perhaps an indulgent memory from the author’s own childhood.

‘Diamond Dog’ returns to China, hinting at the potential for China-Australia partnerships through a friendship between a lonely Australian boy and an only precious daughter of an immigrant Chinese artist living across the street. It is the girl’s courageous act when she rescues the boy’s dog about to be the meal of an over-zealous python that wins her family respect and belonging in the neighbourhood.

Nicholas Jose’s mastery of the written word is evident throughout; his is a voice of personal experience as Cultural Advisor to the Australian Embassy 1987-1990, during which time he experienced Tiananmen Square first hand. These multi-layered stories are easy to read, but best taken slowly; allow time for reflection and re-reading. Like all good works of art, it is worth taking time to discover light and shadow, perspective, and the deeper potential within.

Kay Hart
Transnationalism, a topic important in redefining and understanding geopolitical space and human identity, has recently gained international awareness and recognition as an urgent human condition and issue. This collection of essays focuses the transnational perspective on US Ethnic Studies, especially those communities which have been ‘historically aggrieved’ (xiii). The editor, Aparajita Nanda, attempts to reconceptualize Ethnic Studies and bring it into a global framework, examining its influence on Transnational Studies, while looking toward a broader discussion across disciplines and nations without ‘obscuring the particularism of the many different kinds of ethnic affiliations covered by Ethnic Studies’ (1). To this end, Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism contains multiple perspectives and maintains two levels of analysis through the collection, appealing to both the popular reader as well as the academic.

Nanda, a scholar in both Postcolonial Studies and African American Studies, has assembled essays which examine not only the networks that link the US to the rest of the world but also qualities of literature which minimize borders. According to Nanda, these essays look toward a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between ethnic and transnational literatures (6). In focusing on the spread and influence of subcultures, Nanda argues, Western hegemony will be reconciled with what she calls ‘fragmentation’, the rise and scattering of ‘transnational subcultures’ (6). Although the series claims to focus on ‘literature’, the editor has taken the cultural studies approach and views all products which document culture as literature. Thus, the essays range from analysis of speculative fiction and art objects to personal reflections and theoretical discourse.

The book is divided into four clearly-introduced sections, giving a background note to the title and a general overview of what each essay will cover. Section 1, ‘Identity Politics’, includes a thought-provoking essay by Wlad Godrich, ‘Beyond Identity: Bearings’, which addresses a range of topics from think tanks to dictionaries to an Italian filmmaker. While discussing these topics, Godrich focuses on the theme of a productive notion of identity based on Heidegger’s exploration of orientation, via Charles Taylor as recognition, arguing it is a key concept in the shifting space of identity. Both Keith P. Feldman and Esra Mizre Santesso deal with authors who are within the intersection of a transnational space and the Muslim diaspora. Feldman examines, through a perspective heavily influenced by Postcolonial theorist Edward Said, the racial struggle of Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad, her participation in the Hurricane Katrina aid group movement ‘refugees for refugees’, and the sense of identity she conveys in her poetry, especially the collection breaking point. Similarly, Santesso argues that Camilla Gibb’s Sweetness in the Belly addresses problems of identity for Muslims in post-empire Britain. Nanda gives a brief recap of Lilith’s Brood before analyzing the protagonist and another main character in Octavia Butler’s trilogy to demonstrate how these characters have qualities that redefine hybridity and embrace what she calls a ‘postnational complexity’ (65). The last essay in Part 1, by Seulghhee Lee, begins with Amiri Baraka’s black transnationalism to which Lee contends Baraka’s contribution to black discourses on love is a positive, if radical, source for black identity.

Part 2, ‘Legacy/Trauma/ Healing,’ opens with a brief introduction by the editor and then moves into how the past affects understandings of identity. In Pal Ahluwalia’s essay of personal reflections of on the genocide in Rwanda, he reflects how tragedies can moves us forward toward healing. Even more than that, he envisions a new discipline devoted to reconciliation studies. Steven
Lee’s essay argues that Karen Tei Yamashita’s use of non-linear time in her novel *I Hotel* both defies the submissive attitudes ethnic minorities have been expected to maintain in the US and underscores the politically dangerous communist sympathies of some of those minorities. Cameron Bushnell and George Hoagland examine the historical (in)visibilities of Blackness and its impact on how we view our knowledge of its relationship to the past, especially in ways that transcend or cross US borders. Bushnell hypothesizes that Rita Dove, in writing *Sonata Mulattica*, as both a poetry-influenced historical investigation and a contemporary celebration of George Bridgetower, has created a new genre which will gain meaning and significance by its subjectivities over time. Hoagland, after explaining the myth of Blackness, argues that Paul Beatty’s satirical novel *Slumberland* actually works to highlight the shortcomings of the myth and its inaccurate place in African American literary history. In another essay dealing with the past and time, Cassel Busse begins by briefly explicating how Derrida and Benjamin treat the idea of ghosts as relational between the past and the present; she then questions whether that understanding informs or contradicts the presence of animal spirits in Thomas King’s novel *Truth and Bright Water*.

Part 3 of the collection, ‘Literary Crossings,’ begins with questions posed by postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft about the possibilities of the lack of borders in the world. Ashcroft himself responds with a literary, historical, and philosophical discussion of why it is so difficult for us to imagine or actualize a world without borders, focusing on Giorgio Agamben’s concepts of *homo sacer* and ‘state of exception’. Ashcroft argues that the space that literature inhabits is the space in which we can imagine possibilities, hope, and transformation. Debora Stefani and Pamela McCallum examine novels written by transnational authors who explore a myriad of intersectionalities in their works but who also create hope in their dealing with the difficulties of those intersectionalities. Stefani argues that the protagonist in Monique Truong’s novel *The Book of Salt* creates his own transnational space in 1920s Paris through his ethnic and sexual identities and the special relationships those allow him to have within the story. McCallum recounts the dialogue Biyi Bendele’s *The Street* has with the novels of Virginia Woolf, while the novel simultaneously relates the experiences of a diasporic population living in London. The Paris-educated Tunisian filmmaker Nacer Khemir’s film, *The Dove’s Lost Necklace*, according to Cynthia Mahamdi, explores and creates a new vision, not just of the historical Al-Andalus but also of the possible future and transnational experience which offers a different concept of globalization. In the final essay of Part 3, Juan Velasco uses a personal anecdote to introduce the reader to the topic of borders, but quickly brings the topic into focus by examining it in the context of the bilingual autobiographical trilogy of Francisco Jiménez, showing the ‘potentiality’ of the experiences of a young boy and the transnational space against tremendous obstacles and violence.

In the final section, ‘Established and Emerging Canons: Revisions and Re-Visions’, Hertha D. Sweet Wong argues that the location-specific art installations of Heap of Birds are part of a continuous struggle to deconstruct Western hegemonic notions of identity, time and place. Wendy Robbins, with Clarissa Hurley and Robin Sutherland, investigate the ‘double understanding’ of non-white feminists as expressed in their ‘life-writing’ from the perspective of women of academe in Canada and how those experiences have helped to shape that academic world of today. Meta L. Schettler examines the both significant and radical relationship of the haiku form in African American poetry through a close reading of several Black poets and a clear summary of the Haiku form and history both in Japan and elsewhere. While contending that US literature should include non-Anglophone language contributions, Su-ching Huang, in the final essay of the collection,
describes both Liu Daren and the themes that predominate his writing: melancholy and the hysteria of Chinese male immigrants.

An Afterword by John C. Hawly brings the book to a graceful close. Hawly reiterates some of the important themes and counters the arguments of those who may not see the value in such studies. The essays, although not all dealing with US literature as the series would suggest, were engaging and encouraged the readings of the companion essays. As for the inclusion of essays dealing with topics outside of US Literature, Nanda says in her introduction to the collection, ‘This volume seeks to overcome the inherent U.S.-centric aspects of much scholarship in Ethnic Studies’ (1). By broadening the anthology to include literatures beyond the borders of the US, Nanda really is actualizing her goal of a broader discussion across many disciplines and borders.

Catherine Hauer

Mo Yan, a brilliant and controversial Chinese author and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2012, uses writing to elucidate the development of the People’s Republic of China, beginning with the extreme poverty and famine of the early years, through the adversity of the Cultural Revolution, and on to the country’s economic rise. Yan, an apolitical figure, is more controversial outside of China because many view his writing as cruel and lacking humanity, while Chinese readers perhaps view his writing as an explanation of their history and a former way of life. As a reader of the former type, I offer a review of Mo Yan and his work as an outsider looking in.

Mo Yan’s *Frog: A Novel* is written as an epistolary novel, made up of five books, with each book being preceded by a letter from the narrator to an unknown Japanese mentor. The novel’s fifth and final book concludes with a nine-act play. For western readers, the arrangement of the novel takes some getting used to, as it is not a common format used by western authors.

*Frog*, beautifully translated from the original Chinese edition to English by Howard Goldblatt, takes readers on a barbaric journey through China’s history, primarily focusing on the implementation of the government’s one-child policy. The policy was one of many extreme measures used to slow China’s birth and population rates in the 1970s. *Frog* focuses on the brutal execution strategies used by authorities to enforce this policy, and the determination of the people to circumvent it.

Set in the rural town of Gaomi, China, the narrator of the novel, Xiaopao, tells a story about the life of his aunt Gugu. Gugu, a once highly-revered and well-known midwife, delivered thousands of children in Gaomi when it was acceptable for Chinese families to have as many children as they pleased. Gugu’s modern midwifery skills and methods were crucial for the town of Gaomi, as the old midwife practitioners used ‘witchlike’ child birthing methods that were sometimes lethal to both mother and child.

With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Gugu’s role drastically changes from revered midwife to hated abortionist. Gugu’s unfltering loyalty to the Communist Party is proven in the novel when she states, ‘I have always been a Party member, and I will die a Party member!’ (58). Her loyalty continues to flourish when she becomes the head of the Communist Family Planning Committee, responsible for executing China’s one-child policy at all costs. Gugu, abetted by her devoted intern, Little Lion, mercilessly execute the policy by forcing vasectomies upon men and the implantation of intrauterine devices (IUDs) and late-term abortions upon women. The people of Gaomi attempt to defy the policy, but each attempt turns out to be an unsuccessful one. It isn’t until two mothers die in Gugu’s care that she loses her fervor for executing the one-child policy, and is compelled to retire. It is in her retirement that Gugu feels a tremendous amount of guilt for the horrible actions she has committed in her life. She feels she must cleanse herself from these actions, and does so by creating a clay doll for each child she destroyed.

Near the end of the novel, Xiaopao, the narrator, shifts focus from Gugu to his wife, Little Lion, and a modern-day bullfrog farm located in Gaomi. The bullfrog farm is a façade, disguising a woman surrogacy operation taking place at the establishment. At a post-menopausal age, and under the influence of deeply-rooted Chinese culture, Little Lion feels as though she has failed in her role of matriarch. She has never been able to have children, thus she has never been able to provide her husband with a son to carry on the family name. For the sake of her matriarchal role and Chinese culture, she pays a woman surrogate, Chen Mei, to birth a child for her and Xiaopao, a son. *Frog*
concludes with a nine-act play that describes the exploitative maltreatment of Chen Mei, the surrogate mother of Little Lion and Xiaopao’s son.

The novel *Frog* is at times challenging, to say the least. Mo Yan brutally illustrates the harsh realities faced by the people of Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. This may prompt some readers to withdraw from the text, but doing so would be a mistake. Though the novel may seem to only be an alarming representation of the history of China and its people, it is so much more than that. Yan’s use of magical realism brings the novel to life. Readers are introduced to colorful characters and descriptive settings. To see the novel for its true value is approaching it with an open and interested mind. Mo Yan’s *Frog: A Novel* is a dynamic work of art.

Brooke Ann Hogensen

At the time I agreed to review Adrian Mitchell’s *The Profilist* I was unaware of points of connection with my life and work. In 1840, 28 people, including my paternal settler ancestors as well as the ‘homicidal camel’ referred to in Mitchell’s disclaimer ‘An admission or two’, travelled up the Port River to Adelaide, in the colony of South Australia. It was the first European passenger vessel small enough to do so. The camel caused explorer John Horrocks’s death and was put down. It’s quite a yarn. In addition, Mitchell and I share an interest in Marcus Clarke, George Coppin, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Kendall and Lola Montez, subjects of my historical novel.

Mitchell’s fictional protagonist, Australian artist Ethan Dibble, a barely disguised Samuel Thomas (S.T.) Gill, has a lot to say about these well-known historical figures and about many others: artist George French Angas, colonial governors Eyre, Gawler, Grey, Hindmarsh, Hotham and Lachlan, explorers Burke and Wills, the aforementioned John Horrocks and Captain Strutt [Sturt], surveyor Nathanael Hailes and Henry Ward, aka Captain Thunderbolt. Mitchell uses aliases for many of his characters, each finely pointed with satirical intent. His stated reason, in Gill’s case, is the absence of extant diaries and letters.

The novel’s plot outlines English Dibble’s attempts to make a name and living for himself as a colonial artist, initially in Adelaide. Each chapter of the book begins with a watercolour or pencil sketch by Gill, a structure that suggests rather than resembles the fictional notebook in the subtitle. After it is alleged that his dog has bitten a ‘native woman’ he is summoned to court and feels publicly shamed. The case is dismissed but a hand injury prevents Dibble painting. Consequently, he carries debt including legal fees and rent in arrears, and his dog is summarily poisoned. Under duress, he tries desperately to keep ahead of the law – ‘a necessary thing, in the abstract’ – by fleeing and relaunching his career in the eastern colonies (138). While painting in the Victorian goldfields, he falls in love with an equally pragmatic pianist who travels with him to Sydney. Each new venture follows a similar trajectory.

The novel shows a pleasing symmetry, its narrator drawing attention to Portsmouth as his setting off place and to the convicts incarcerated there in hulks, many of whom end up insolvent and unhappy in Sydney like him. Bankruptcy acts as a marker for the overshooting of immigrant ambitions and with attendant themes: ‘The world is carved up by those with the biggest knives and forks’ (280).

The ‘natives’, class anxiety, art and self-knowledge are the main subjects of the novel. Dibble and George Coppin divide the people of Addle-Layed [Adelaide] and the eastern colonies into ‘Nobs and Snobs, two sides of the golden guinea’ and then he adds a third category: a squatter, ‘not up to their mark … a kind of John Bull in the antipodes (243). He also describes miners, farmers, mechanics and teamsters.

He casts racial aspersions on various groups but in a way that Gill might have considered fair-minded: about Cornishmen, he suggests ‘their conversation is not profound’ (120); he refers to the ‘industrious Chinese’ or ‘inscrutables’ becoming the victims of ‘shameful attacks by the Europeans’ culminating at Lambing Flat in murder (241-2, 248); he easily sidelines an Irish man as ‘full of blarney, of course, but surprisingly good company’ (253); he slips into the common nineteenth-century
stereotypes of Jewish people; he refers to a girl with a ‘frankish smile’ (12); and he calls Jacky, a ‘native’ who did odd jobs for Horrocks, ‘the real worker’ (243). Sketch 14, Gill’s ‘Native Dignity’ (date unknown), brings to the foreground two Indigenous characters in a parody of best dressed citizens, heads thrown back, the man in tails, carrying clay pipe and baton, the woman in tilting picture hat and the top half of a crinoline: ‘all the underworks are on display, and so also her bare legs’ (261). Dibble admires their insouciance but ‘it is the fashion that is burlesqued. They are curiously dignified’ (261).

There are many knowledgeable references to visual art and its techniques, in particular those relevant to a silhouette painter with an eye to the main chance:

I might add in a gilded epaulette or some collar buttons on the likeness of a young officer, hint at the neckline of a young beauty – especially when the image was for one of those young officers. Bronzing, we call this kind of embellishment, a touch of gold, or sometimes Chinese white. Just the suggestion, you see, to overcome the flatness of the profile The gentlemen seemed to appreciate a suggestion of rounded bosoms. (18)

Mitchell attempts to capture the consciousness of the observer/artist and his reasonable desire to bring human interest to paintings, to tell a kind of truth missed by competitors – ‘little vignettes from ordinary life that spoke of larger truths’ – and in the face of so many colonial agendas, to first and foremost make a sale (255).

Written in first-person past tense and a stylish but confiding epistolary style, the narrative revivifies colonial milieus of various places: newly settled Adelaide and its hinterland, Port Phillip Bay/Melbourne, the Victorian and NSW goldfield towns, and Sydney where Dibble seeks his fortune. Rural settings are well described, including the settlers’ bewilderment at the inversion of the seasons and the challenges thrown up by their extremes – the muted colourations of land and sky, local politics and idiom.

Mitchell is a fine writer. The narrative offers many lyrical depictions of landscape – for example, of Turon Fields: ‘At night the stars pierce the skies like points of ice, hard and glittering in a frosty sky’ (235). He represents urban settings with equal authority, including ribald crowds at the theatre, class politics on Collins Street, and conflict between the citified tax collectors and those in newly settled bush with no roads, streetscape or facilities. Apart from some long slow sections set in the goldfields, with little action and a great deal of exposition, The Profilist is a lively read. The pace is lively, rollicking even, and Dibble’s elegant language is laced with unrelenting humour: ‘after three months at sea, three meaningless months … this flat, forlorn, God-forsaken mosquito-ridden stinky swampland. It does not heave. It does not so much as undulate’ (2). Lovers of Laurence Sterne’s eighteenth-century comic novel, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Sandy, will feel quite at home with Dibble. He narrates the voice of a solitary observer, an outsider with a chip on his shoulder, one who gathers gossip in a sly malicious tone that exposes and injustice: ‘full of public office. He has a lady friend installed in a cottage’ (257, 270).

Particular malice plays out in Mitchell’s character Mr Florian Flute, whose ‘voice is flutelike and as high as a curate’s glittering glasses and inferior chin’ (81), and who resembles George French Angas, a rival who apparently attracted Gill’s ire, allegedly

by passing off four of his paintings as his own (257). In the novel, Flute makes fun of Dibble behind his back and snubs him in Sydney. Dibble describes Flute’s work as ‘lifeless … Flute is the mortician of nature’ (89). This negative portrait of Angas is not the first. Another can be found in Lucy Treloar’s debut novel, Salt Creek (2015). Nathaniel Hailes, ‘one of the lower lights of the colony’, also take a hit or two (63).

The choice of a love interest, inspired by a Mrs Gill who reportedly accompanied Lola Montez on the piano and may or may not have been Gill’s partner, is fictional and feasible. Mitchell wryly draws Elizabeth as a woman of her time and class. Montez, famous for her spider dance, reputedly performed without underwear, enjoyed opium, owned a lyrebird and a white cockatoo, and once removed her clothes to avoid arrest (206-7). Elizabeth smokes and drinks champagne and is, Dibble says, ‘experimenting with opium, if I am any good guess at the perfume’ (252). References to Dibble’s height suggest that he feels more than socially diminished. Sexual digs and references to venereal disease indicate that he is not entirely faithful to his partner, something he accepts as commonplace, particularly at the diggings.

I felt immediately at home in The Profilist, peopled as it is with familiar historical characters, and suffused with aspirational tone and Bohemian mood. Tropes of Melbourne’s Yorick Club stories could perhaps have been more differentiated from their sources. I saw connections between Mitchell’s Dibble and the ‘homicidal’ camel: emigrant survivors whose embattled and recalcitrant attitudes precipitated premature deaths. A fictional document in the Postscript concludes Dibble’s feisty tale.

The book is another fine production by Wakefield Press, beautifully designed by Stacey Zass. The cover, one of Gill’s self-portraits, encapsulates the wiliness and the signs of suffering in the face of adversity and ill health depicted by Mitchell in Dibble.

Dibble’s final musing question is ironic as well as rhetorical: ‘Is it possible to see who will succeed and who will fail?’ (271).

Gay Lynch

By an odd coincidence, I started writing this review during Banned Books Week.¹ The subtitle of Freedman’s biography of the Talmud is ‘banned, censored and burned – the book they couldn’t suppress’. It’s not often that timing in life and literature coincide so neatly.

This is the story of a book’ (ix), but it is not one for scholars or readers interested in delving into the text of the Talmud and its teachings in the Jewish faith. In his introduction, Freedman makes it clear that,

>You are not reading a book about what is in the Talmud. This is the story of what happened to the Talmud, and the role it has played in world history, religion and culture. It’s not a book for experts, or for specialists. It’s a book for anyone who wants to know the story of one of the great classics of ancient literature. (x)

Freedman is successful in this aim: his book is well-researched, thoughtfully written and engaging. It will appeal to the general, educated reader. Anyone who is intrigued by aspects of the Jewish faith, the place of religion in world history, the development of ancient literature or the cultural impact of written texts will enjoy its range and depth.

Harry Freedman, a Jewish scholar, is a writer and academic with post-doctoral qualifications in Aramaic. He has divided his book into two parts: ‘The Talmud in its world’ and ‘The Talmud in the world.’ The first section, from ‘In the beginning’ to ‘The age of the giants’, covers the origin and the compilation of the many parts of the Talmud, its flourishing in ancient Babylon and its impact in the Middle Ages. Part II, ‘The Talmud in the world’, begins with the censoring, banning and burning of the book in thirteenth-century Europe and continues through events of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Holocaust of the twentieth century. The accumulated blend of facts and stories in this chronological approach is easy to follow, illuminating the cultural and historical impact of the text. The reader is left in the age of the internet where ‘the Talmud is a multi-dimensional, non-linear text in a web of connections with multiple paths ... to explore’ (212).

My own path through this biography of the Talmud led me along the winding route of the history of its censorship, from medieval Paris to Nazi Germany. The ethics of my profession, librarianship, are grounded in the freedom to read; I was fascinated by the accounts of the thousands of manuscript copies destroyed in twelfth-century France or suppressed through the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. From a literary perspective, I enjoyed reading about Eastern legends and European folklore, Abelard and Heloise and the Old Testament. From a historical perspective, there was also much to intrigue. For instance, I learnt that Henry VIII demanded that his officials study the Talmud in the hope that they would discover religious or legal grounds for his longed-for divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Freedman’s book is enlivened by his wide scholarly range and lively selection of anecdotes and facts.

But this book will not please everyone. Some scholarly reviewers have criticised Freedman for the lack of comprehensiveness in his study of the Talmud, and for the vagaries and tangents that he follows.² His target audience of general readers, though, is likely to appreciate the diversity and the

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richness of the composite picture that he presents. The index is an interesting guide to the range of material, including entries for Babylon, dictionaries, quantum theory, fleas (killing of) and lice (reproduction of). There is a helpful glossary and the generous bibliography includes many scholarly titles.

Recently I’ve seen the word ‘bibliobiography’ used for ‘books about books’ and read that Freedman’s The Talmud: a biography fits into this category\(^3\). Its companions could include Simon Winchester’s The Surgeon of Crowthorne (the Oxford English Dictionary), Melvyn Bragg’s The Book of Books (the King James Bible) and Anthony West’s The Shakespeare First Folio. Another well-received, recent example is classicist Christopher Krebs’s A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus’ Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich (2011). If ‘bibliobiography’ appeals to you, this intelligent and accessible biography of the Talmud is one to add to your list.

Jennifer Osborn

\(^3\) Dauber.
When Shirley Hazzard published her first short stories in the early 1960s in the *New Yorker* magazine, she was herself a New Yorker, working in a clerical job in the United Nations. As an emerging writer she became friends with the British novelist Muriel Spark, who was then living in New York, enjoying the success of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Spark introduced her, in 1963, to the man who would become her husband, the distinguished novelist, biographer and translator Francis Steegmuller. He was widowed, 24 years older than her, and possessed of a private income.

For the next 30-odd years they lived a life rich in friends and literary work between New York, where their circle included Lionel and Diana Trilling, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh and other literary luminaries, and Italy.

Born in Sydney in 1931, Shirley Hazzard spent her childhood there but at the end of the war moved with her family to Hong Kong, where her father had been appointed Trade Commissioner, and thence (after a short sojourn in New Zealand) to New York in 1951, where he had a similar appointment. The young woman’s UN job took her to Naples for a year in 1956, a formative experience. During that time she made a lasting friendship with a family in Siena, with whom she spent her summers for years afterwards. So by the time she began publishing her writing, she was already a cosmopolitan New Yorker, whose experience of the post-war world had brought her into contact with both the British forces in Hong Kong, and the American involvement in the new UN. Her writing career reflects both her literary and her political interests. She has published several books on the UN as well as essays and works of fiction. Her last novel, *The Great Fire* (2003), which involves a revisionary perspective on Hiroshima and the aftermath of World War 2, was awarded both the US National Book Award and the Australian Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Perhaps because of some lingering belief that she is an expatriate writer, perhaps because her oeuvre is relatively small (over half a century, four novels, two books of short stories and several volumes of essays and memoir) Hazzard is not widely recognised as the major literary voice she undoubtedly is. Although there have been some significant essays on individual novels, her work has been relatively neglected by critics, and Brigitta Olubas’s *Shirley Hazzard: Literary Expatriate and Cosmopolitan Humanist* (2012) was the first critical monograph to appear. In the book under review, Olubas has brought together a number of critical essays on Hazzard’s fiction with two biographical pieces (by Jan McGuiness, based on her interviews with the writer, and by Spark’s biographer, Martin Stannard). Her intention is to expand the critical conversation on this important writer.

Hazzard’s allusive, subtly layered prose invites critical readings that are attentive to its literariness, and to its characteristic movements forwards and back in time. Interestingly, her early novellas, *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966) and *The Bay of Noon* (1970), both set in Italy, have attracted more readings in this collection than the later novels. They yield up their riches to various approaches. *The Evening of the Holiday* is read through its use of irony (John Frow, ‘Future Anterior’) and through genre (Fiona Morrison on rites of passage and pastoral elegy). *The Bay of Noon* (1970) has Brigid Rooney reading for the reciprocity between landscape and character and Sharon Ouditt focussing on the representation of Naples itself, while Lucy Dougan explores many of its intertexts from the verbal and visual arts, beginning with Rossellini’s 1953 film, *Journey to Italy*.

There is already a significant body of critical analysis of *The Transit of Venus* in existence, but the two essays on it in this collection offer entirely fresh approaches: Gail Jones performs a virtuoso account of the way Hazzard imagines great historical forces at work in ordinary lives through her ‘bold wedding of stars, glass and human bodies’ (76); in his essay ‘Returning to the scene of the
crime’, Robert Dixon takes up the challenge of re-reading this text as a highly literary detective story where the clues all point to questions of ethical responsibility.

Claire Seiler’s essay is the only one to tackle *The Great Fire*. She begins by recounting some of the reservations expressed by reviewers when it appeared – ‘romantic in plot but retrograde in politics, rooted in postwar East Asia yet evidently “anti-post-colonial”’ – but she goes on to argue convincingly that these reservations ‘echo the defining ambivalence of the novel itself’ (100). This ambivalence she relates in turn to the trope of ‘suspension’ which distinguishes postwar Anglo-American fiction. Alongside this contextualising of Hazzard in mid-century literature, Nicholas Birns contextualises her UN stories, *People in Glass Houses* (1967), in mid-century Cold War politics. Highlighting the idealist roots of Hazzard’s satire on bureaucratic failure and American entitlement, he also points out that the Italy of her Italian stories is not only a literary construct, but also a Cold War terrain, which she examines as ‘a backdrop for psychological self-questioning and tragic romance’ (119-20).

This collection, together with Olubas’s monograph, will prove invaluable for readers and critics who want to explore the power and subtlety of Hazzard’s fiction. A bibliography of her work, including the non-fiction, would have been a useful addition.

Susan Sheridan
This is a multi-disciplinary compilation of work by senior Indonesianists from around the world – although mainly from the US – who met together at Cornell University’s Kahin Center for Advanced Research on Southeast Asia, in 2011, to discuss the state of Indonesian Studies, through reflection on Gauguin’s famous questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? The scholars who have contributed to this book have, over three decades, been influential in producing a great deal of knowledge about and insight into Indonesia. Collectively, their work represents the diversity and complexity of both Indonesia and Indonesian studies. The book is divided into disciplinary themes, namely anthropology, art history, history, language and literature, government and political science, and ethnomusicology. Editor Eric Tagliacozzo suggests that this publication should be followed up with a series of edited books, each devoted to one of these disciplinary areas, and hopefully including the voices of more Indonesian scholars.

Anthropologists represented in the book include scholars such as Marina Welsker (Cornell University), Danilyn Rutherford (University of California, Santa Cruz), Kenneth George (Australian National University) and Patricia Spyer (Leiden University). Each shares academic reflections and insights drawn from their field and their respective study sites across the sprawling Indonesian archipelago, away from the centre of power and fast economic growth (Jakarta and the island of Java). These scholars were pioneers in researching and analyzing local communities and identities during the New Order period, when most Indonesianists were focused on the centre. Their published works have significantly helped other scholars to understand the broader Indonesia since decentralization began in 2001, bringing local issues and dynamics to the national stage.

Indonesian art history is the next area explored. The chapters in this section present a broad survey of the rich and changing art and cultural landscape of Indonesia over three decades. The authors argue that studies of Indonesian art history throw light on many areas in Indonesian studies, including archeology, history, society and politics, and while there is increasing recognition of this, more understanding of the contributions made by scholars of art history to knowledge about Indonesia is needed. Astri Wright (University of Victoria) argues that it is important for art historians to engage with a broader range of scholars in the kind of exchange and collaboration that will enrich the state of Indonesian studies in years to come.

The next theme is history, with rich, reflective essays written by distinguished scholars, including Rudolf Mrazek (University of Michigan), Laurie Sears (University of Washington) and Jean Gelman-Taylor (University of New South Wales). These scholars pay tribute to the intellectual legacy of George Kahin in their field, through his work on the Indonesian revolution. Kahin remained a lifelong mentor for many scholars who studied Indonesian history at Cornell University from the 1950s-1990s. His work and ideas shaped Indonesian studies in the US and beyond, creating a critical historical view of Indonesian history – in particular the violent events in 1965 that brought down Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno. The centrality of Cornell University in shaping the study of Indonesian modern history is evident in the fact that Kahin’s former students took up academic positions in universities across the world, including Indonesia. Beyond this, these prominent historians (especially Gelman-Taylor) also urged scholars to address the need to support Indonesian historian Bambang Purwanto’s call for a re-examination of Indonesian historiography through
empathizing with the masses and giving more voice to the experiences of ordinary people in the writing of history.

The other section which stands out in this book is the government/political science section where three prominent political scientists, Edward Aspinall (Australian National University), William Liddle (Ohio State University) and Donald Emmerson (Stanord University), share their views on the state of Indonesian political studies. In introducing this theme, Cornell’s Thomas Pepinsky suggests that the origins of Indonesian political studies cannot be separated from the emergence of the Republic of Indonesia and the three seminal works of that era: George Kahin’s *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (1952), Herbert Feith’s *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (1962) and Daniel Lev’s *The Transition to Guided Democracy: Indonesian Politics, 1957-1959* (1966). Until the rise of the New Order, these works were highly influential reference points for a broad range of Western students and scholars of Indonesia seeking to understand the dynamics of the new Indonesian nation. However, in the aftermath of the violent events of 1965, when up to a million people on the left of politics were murdered, both Western and Indonesian scholars became divided by bitter academic debates over what really happened. To some extent, these positions have been maintained until today. Echoing Gelman-Taylor, Edward Aspinall calls for political scientists to pay more attention to the study of micropolitics – ‘the political activities and experiences of ordinary people’ - in the post-Suharto period.

There are substantial gaps in the survey of thinking about Indonesia that this book represents – there is no discussion of religion, gender and sexuality, or film, for example. Indonesian scholars are conspicuously absent throughout. Nonetheless, this is an excellent academic work that will be welcomed by new and older generations of Indonesianists as well as general readers.

Priyambudi Sulistiyanto
Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *Coconut Milk* (University of Arizona Press, 2013)

Samoan-American Dan Taulapapa McMullin is a poet and visual artist, who, while he now lives in upstate New York, spent significant time in both American Samoa and independent Samoa. His poetry is informed by the experience of being an immigrant to the States, but it also draws on his education studying avant-garde arts at CAL Arts under Laurie Anderson and John Cage. Such an education is not necessarily at odds with traditional Samoan thought and art though: ‘The most avant-garde works I know of in poetry are the most traditional pre-colonial Samoan texts, whose ways of thought are at the leading edge of my consciousness as a writer.’

As one might expect from the title, McMullin’s verse is rich: there’s word play, an awareness of history, and a celebratory sense of the whole of life. Coconut milk is literally found in almost all Samoan food. It is the stuff of life, ever useful. It comes to stand for Samoan culture, and for McMullin, that is ever present, wherever he is.

Most of the poems in the book are organised into poetic sequences – ‘Sa Moana’, ‘Turtle Island’, ‘Laguna Beach’ and ‘Fa’a Fafine’ – and numbered. These sequences connect the poems, but they also stand alone; it is a loose organising principle rather than a definitive one.

The ‘Fa’a Fafine’ sequences are linked by their attention to queerness, in a range of manifestations. McMullin has stated in interview that *Coconut Milk* ‘is also about my experience as a fa‘afafine immigrant, a queer person from an Indigenous transgender culture living a gay man’s life in American culture’. Fa‘afafine is a gender identity that has similar manifestations across Polynesian societies, though its expression, its reality, is limited outside of Samoa: ‘Among the fa‘afafine immigrants in the United States/ as children girls in Samoa/ as adults Gay American men, giving you/ this, the surface’.

McMullin tracks this in two definitive experiences. One is the experience of his mother dressing for work in San Pedro, California. After the smell of ‘lipstick, nylons, and perfume coming around the door’, his young self recalls: ‘When she was ready/ she would ask me to zip up the back of her dress/ the journey of my life began there’. The other is in the home village on Tutu‘ila, American Samoa, where, with his grandmother and great grandmother, he experienced the smells associated with the painting of tapa cloth, especially the dye ‘o’a and the non-sticking agent soga. His practice as a painter is linked to his identification with these old women: ‘Now working in oil paints the smell of the oils/ is pungent to remind me of fresh ‘o’a and soga’. Their artistry is in a sense his, the experience ongoing in his life and practice: ‘there is a day that never ends/ a small child and/ two old women’. His preparedness to see in his female line the antecedents for his own life and work is typical of fa‘afafine identifications and roles in traditional and current Samoan life, though it is generally atypical of western male artists.

McMullin uses Samoan vocabulary at times, thereby creating a doubled audience: those who understand it and those who do not, but often he re-enacts his word play in English, so the effect is present in both languages. This is most vividly seen in ‘Pray’:

Pray for both Tuna and Fata the orators say
Talo lua Tuna ma Fata

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http://www.essaypress.org/ep-34/#1UXyEzMCekCHQV1y.99 Published online. Accessed 11 October 2015.
2 Perez, 18.

Play with both Tuna and Fata my boyfriend said
Taalo lua Tuna ma Fata

The English is simply repeated in Samoan, but the word play remains in the substitution of ‘play’ for ‘pray’, and in ‘taalo’ for ‘talo’. The non-Samoan reader might feel alienated by the Samoan, but is in fact being offered the same effect. The poem goes on the recount a story that enacts this substitution. Tuna and Fata are legendary figures in Samoan history, as they saw off the Tongan rulers who dominated the islands for centuries. They stand for traditional Samoan pride and custom, which, since contact, has been overlaid with, and undermined by Christianity. It is something of a commonplace in Pacific Studies to note that Christianity has been indigenised at the same time as it has colonised, but nevertheless, much of the sexual acceptance and celebration of traditional life has been reversed by its presence. Depicting a young man who embodies contemporary ideals of manliness – he ‘works the family plantation/ Captains rugby for the village team’ – the speaker calls him ‘my manamea’: my darling, who brings ufi (yams) and  tako (taro) ‘Fresh baked from the farm in coconut milk’, and with whom he shares ‘vodka our ‘ava’ (‘ava being Samoan for kava). Citing 1920s African-American blues, the speaker ends with his assertion of the pleasure of tradition, even if his version is not to be broadcast in the same way as that of others in post-missionised Samoa: ‘Ufi and tako in coconut milk/ Ain’t nobody’s business/ but my own’. His is a suppressed pleasure, ‘play’ not ‘pray’, harking back to both former times and to the lived present. Coconut milk then comes to signify bodily play as well as the stuff of life, an essential for both life and living well and wholly.

There’s a clear politics to the expression of sexuality here, but there’s also a decolonising awareness in the collection, seen in poems about figures famous in relation to their time in Samoa. Robert Louis Stevenson is one, Margaret Mead another (both queered in challenging ways), but there’s also critiques of academics and missionaries, with their claims to knowledge, and their assumption of authority over Pacific cultures. The church is once again notable in suppressing both culture and sexuality, as seen in ‘Fa’a Fafine Poem Number Sixteen’, about the former joyous sexual celebrations of the Poula, the night dance. There is a rejection of commodified Pacific culture, ‘tiki kitsch’, in ‘Tiki Manifesto’: ‘Tiki mugs, tiki ashtrays, tiki trash cans, tiki kitsch cultures/ Tiki bars in Los Angeles, tiki porn theatre, tiki stores’. The enormity of this appropriation, its level of theft, is seen in the repeated lines: ‘Tiki mug, tiki mug/ My face, my mother’s face, my father’s face, my sister’s face/ Tiki mug, tiki mug’. Using Pacific islanders as a romantic backdrop ‘to make customers feel white and beautiful’ is contrasted with the serious neo-colonial predations still occurring in the region: protestors from Rapanui being shot down by Chilean soldiers, rape and murder in West Papua by the Indonesian military, and homelessness in Hawai’i, to name just some instances the poem mentions.

This collection is deceptively accessible, but it demands serious attention to the claims it makes for holistic life in the light of such predations. There’s a celebratory aplomb to an account of the Sydney Gay Games, and the decision to make a mark, in true fa’afafine style, by taking a ‘catwalk stroll/ in a big loop across the field’ in front of cameras in full drag.

Mandy Treagus