Cassie Flanagan Willanski, *Here Where We Live* (Wakefield Press, 2016)

Short stories have come back into vogue – publishing them at least – although I’m not convinced that more are being read. *Here Where We Live* signalled this change in 2014 when it won the Wakefield Press Unpublished Manuscript Award at Adelaide Writers’ Week for Cassie Flanagan Willanski, the first time a short-story collection had been chosen in this category. Some of the stories are no more than two or three pages long, others more than 20, the last 40; Oliver and Clay appear in three, which might suggest a story-cycle form.

All were written as part of MA research on white people writing about and for Indigenous people over the past two centuries. The writing of ‘other’ remains a potent question for fiction writers, as passionate responses to Lionel Shriver’s address on appropriation, at the 2016 Brisbane Writers’ Festival underline. Flanagan Willanski’s Author’s Note declares her non-Indigenous status in relation to ‘Oak Trees in the Desert’, in which she breaks with convention and writes an Indigenous character from a first person-narrative perspective, and also flags the mention of real people – poet Rachel Mead and Adnyamathanha man Buck McKenzie, for instance, others lightly disguised as fictional constructions.

The nine stories are set in various parts of rural SA: the west coast, the Coorong and south coast, the Limestone Coast and the north. Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships – and I’ll come back to this – climate change and the natural world, and human relationships in general, are common subjects of the collection and informed by Flanagan Willanski’s worked as an environmental activist and community outreach campaigner for the Wilderness Society of South Australia.

‘My Good Thing’ begins the collection strongly suggesting that women who marry into Indigenous families and, therefore, give birth to Indigenous children, have a right to engage in a supportive way, with their children’s culture. ‘This is my daughter’s country’ stakes that claim in the first line and continues on: ‘These are her father’s eyes, her grandmother’s eyes, back to the Dreaming, looking out of a face just like mine … I carried her but she came from this land’ (2). The story offers a lovely fusion of contemporary and traditional culture in which, young men ride dirt bikes, the baby sits in a box to protect her from scorpions, and her father carries her in a baby pack whereby she ‘faces outwards, with her legs dangling’ (4). It also conveys gentle ironies. The Indigenous grandmothers maintain waterholes and remember the bush as refuge during the times when children were snatched, and the white grandmother in the city wants the baby brought home to safety.

In ‘Drought Core’, a single mother flees with her children from a broken relationship. The protagonist directly addresses climate change when a drought-stricken gum crashes into her new kitchen: ‘That’s the thing about climate change. It comes home to you’, and ‘We went south in search of rain, climate refugees from the arid city where the water was running out’ (10). The children possess unusual wisdom and understanding drawn from their cultural heritage. Jenna and Rhiannon the older children speak confidently about the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous people and yet wake in the night in terror. They accept the presence of ghosts.

In some stories, concerns about climate and nature are accompanied by a general disquiet about contemporary social problems, such as the prevalence of medicating children with ADHD, family breakdown, urban/rural miscomprehension, private and public schooling and de-schooling, managing creativity, equality in love.
The book’s genre is broader than cli-fi and more than YA, or bildungsroman, although many of the protagonists are young. The narratives begin well and mainly bowl along. They showcase lively dialogue. The prose is clean but evocative, a strange meld of ordinariness and nature’s lyricisms, offering natural authorial wryness, a wistful winsomeness, broken occasionally by humour. Flanagan Willanski takes us up close to the natural world, moving fluidly between sea and desert but human dramas take centre stage and the narration highlights this: ‘Sleeping on his chest, that delicate craypot of flesh and bones’ (106) and the sunrise bobbing like a newborn baby’s head on the horizon, the feeling of morning crisp on my skin. These are my own woollen sleeves, these are my dirty hands pushing my hair back and feeling it thick and lovely with desert dust. (96)

The mood of the collection is mainly gentle and laced with humour but occasionally despondent, suggesting a need to flush out old systems and face failure: ‘In the house I felt guilt. My husband and my children were not enough’ (97). The writing sometimes shies away from the peculiar and the particular; smell, for instance is frequently mentioned without specific reference. I noticed a Blytonish cliché: ‘We ate toast with lashings of butter and jam’ (104) and some romantic ones too: ‘He sounds like a dish’ (105).

Landscape is evocatively presented. The authorial voice conveys longing for meaning and certitude, a sense that nature will sustain us and must be protected, and searches for epiphanies, mainly for Gen X women, often flushed with blood and a desire to act. Stories are narrated in first, second and third person and set mainly in contemporary narrative time but often looking back on childhood and adolescence.

Predictably ‘Stuff White People Like’, contains gentle satire. The protagonists in this story are close, and frank with one another: ‘Oliver and Clay were married. They had told each other things. He had got terrible marks in primary school and she had an abortion when she was twenty-three’ (51). At a beach corroboree in a remote rural area where Oliver works, Clay gently ribs him about white privilege, making him feel awkward. When she reads from the book by Christian Lander from which the story’s title is drawn, she undermines his certainties about the way whites should behave. Both feel crippled with self-awareness about their relationships with Indigenous people but the story ends on a note of tentative optimism.

Sexual intimacy is well conveyed throughout the collection without primness or romance: ‘I tried to seduce him; it’s the body’s way … I wished our three children away. I wanted us back to the time before … Fucking in a hollow at the top of the country with a view spread out for miles, hidden behind the old dead bulk of wood’ (8). ‘I once refused to have sex with a good looking man who thought nuclear power stations were the solution to climate change’ (99). Many of the stories focus on how love fits with climate change. ‘Drought Core’ begins with, ‘The night my husband said he was going to leave me we were in the middle of a heat wave’ (8). The drama of the broken marriage plays out metaphorically in drought, death and bushfires and, in the final movements, with cathartic rain and a twist.

In ‘Night Blindness’, the visually impaired protagonist narrates the story of her parents’ breakup. The setting will be familiar to many Australians who have taken holidays on the SA South Coast, beautifully conveying the holiday world of ice creams, new friendships and lost shoes. It may also be familiar to those who remember protests against the building of a bridge across a space considered sacred by Ngarrindjeri female custodians. In Flanagan Willanski’s story Hindmarsh Island is depicted as a living entity and breathing … a place for formative experiences (21). It is also a place of disharmony, resonating but in a lower key, with the violence triggered by
developers’ determination to build the bridge at any cost. As a colleague and fellow protester with Ngarrindjeri people at the Hindmarsh Bridge site I have since refused to cross the bridge.

The protagonist’s severe astigmatism and the subsequent night blindness, flagged by the title as a conceit, illustrates her unwillingness or inability to understand adult unreliability or political hypocrisies, or to open her senses to the beauties of the natural world, which Flanagan Willanski depicts in lyrical prose. Her parents remain in the background of the narrative after the news of their separation, and in a scene both comic and woeful, Kel’s brother Jason chants WOMEN and peddles his bike to purchase the accoutrements – pads and chocolate – required to manage her first menstruation, on an island linked with the subject of female reproduction. The treatment of the parents’ divorce is left in their hands in a droll and unpretentious scene that is, I think, quite original. The brother’s register seems true: ‘you bloody bastard … Piss off for ever, you dickhead’ (25). Ten years later, the narrator recognises her childish self-denial. ‘I was crying for it all, for climate change and the bridge across the water …’ (36).

A fictional testimony by Susanna, a Maralinga-Tjarutju woman, whose family has moved back to the South Australian lands desecrated by British and Australian Government nuclear testing in the 1950s, opens ‘Oak Trees in the Desert’ and several more are interspersed, resembling conference bios (72). Set during an international women’s conference in Utah, this story is particularly relevant to recent SA Government fact-finding missions for the purpose of engaging public interest in nuclear waste storage. Flanagan Willanski mainly focalises the narrative through Bev, a retired widowed schoolteacher and inexperienced traveller whose husband served in the military at Maralinga. She addresses his ghost on her travel and conference experiences. This device enables some light instruction – expositions on fellow sufferers, in particular Native Americans, and on Indigenous affairs – but also some unreliable narration on a complex subject, thus rebalancing didacticism. The testimonies offer shared stories of intergenerational trauma brought about by nuclear testing, particularly manifesting in cancers and infertility. They also show the diversity of victims. The story expands themes of care, for people and for their lands: ‘she was his wife; his body was assigned to her care’ and it suggests that women standing, laughing and weeping in solidarity can affect change (77). Two effective twists in the story show an empowered Bev taking up new experiences. She rides a pony, speaks in public, bathes naked in a spa, reads out racist words from her husband’s diary. All of this is dealt with in gentle humour, the tension building slowly for a major climax:

she hasn’t been brave and hasn’t told anyone the most important thing of all, the thing that is bursting out of her chest looking for wings upon which to take off and to take Bev with it, to a place of peace. (89)

In ‘Some Yellow Flowers’, the last and longest story, two narrative threads representing two couples intertwine. This may challenge some readers. The second-person narrative relies on ‘my love’ to establish Jean’s relationship. Loretta and Jack travel to the Limestone Coast to view a shipwreck. Her period is late when she meets Jean who is grieving the death of her life partner. Both indulge in flights of fantasy in order to accept difficult life changes. Both feel painful longing for a past not quite resolved:

I cried in the dunes as they turned from orange to grey, and I picked flowers; and when I decided not to give to them to him, but to keep them for myself, I howled alone with the deep, keen feeling of missing out, like a gutted fish giving up its dreams of life. Simple and unrequited love. (139)
As well as dealing with the wreck of the *Maria* (1840), an emblematic event historically and differently narrated by Ngarrindjeri and government sources, one as a sexual assault occasioning self-defence, the other one as unprovoked massacre, the story traverses tropes of romance and anti-romance – jealousy and commitment – and themes of fragility relating to people and ‘country’. Humour enlivens the narrative in many places, for example, when Loretta describes the Ngarrindjeri tour guide at the wreck as resembling a ‘blue cartoon sperm’ (127). The yellow flowers appear in the narrative as well as in the title and carry symbolic weight. Flanagan Willanski concludes her collection with a story about human smallness set against a larger universe.

*Here Where We Live* is an original and engaging collection with many passages showing lyrical beauty and psychological depth. It draws strong lines between Indigenous knowledge, lawful custodians of the land, and the imperative for other Australians to work with them to acknowledge and address climate change. Flanagan Willanski knowingly faces potential criticism from Indigenous people who, increasingly, write and would like to publish more for themselves. ‘Having a go allows Indigenous people to engage,’ Larissa Behrendt, lawyer and writer, commented at Flinders University in 2004, ‘and if the writer is having relationships with Aboriginal people it will make a truer piece of work’.

**Gay Lynch**
Flinders University