Complete Book Reviews: Fiction and Life Writing

Jenny Bożena du Preez  
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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of queer and trans narratives, perspectives and scholarship, and Colouring the Rainbow: Blak Queer and Trans Perspectives (2015) can be seen as a valuable contribution to this emerging body of work. This collection of life stories and essays by First Nations People of Australia is edited by Dino Hodge. At its core, he explains, are issues of ‘indigeneity and colonialism with regard to gender and sexuality’ (vii). The collection brings together multiple and varied perspectives, which have been divided into three sections. The first is a series of life stories, the second a series of essays and the third consists of academic essays. Thus, it is both an archive of lives whose diversity has been erased from ‘official’ Australian history, and a critique of the discourses that perpetuate this erasure.

In the opening lines of his introduction to the collection, Troy-Anthony Baylis explains that it ‘is as if history has constructed Aboriginality as being so pure and so savage … that if tainted by the complexity of sexuality and gender, mixed ethnographies, mixed geographies and mixed appearances, the whole look would be ruined’ (1). Colouring the Rainbow goes a long way to exposing this denied complexity. Not only does it lay the narratives of activists alongside the essays of academics, and not only does it contain the stories of those whose genders and sexualities refute the colonial claim of heterosexual indigeneity, but the issue of Aboriginal ‘authenticity’ is raised by a number of the contributors. Together, these contributors shatter the idea of Aboriginal ‘purity’ with the representation of the rich, difficult complexities of their lived experiences.

Part One of the collection, ‘Inner Reflections – Life Stories’, contains fascinating narratives by a range of indigenous people, with sexual identifications ranging from sistergirl (trans is the more mainstream term), gay and MSM (men who have sex with men). While each story is unique, all of them describe the contributor’s struggle to come to terms with their sexuality and/or gender and their indigeneity and how they might reconcile the two. Read together, these stories not only emphasise the shared struggle of being queer/trans and Aboriginal, but also reveal the differences in individual experiences. For example, while Brie Ngala Curtis notes that most of the discrimination she experiences comes from Indigenous men, Laniyuk Garcon-Mills has experienced greater acceptance from her Aboriginal family. Most of the narratives, however, emphasise the importance of culture and staying close to family and country. The exception is the story by R.J. Sailor, which details how he is excluded from both non-Indigenous and traditionalist groups, as well as from a Euro-centric GBLTIQ community. While the rest of the contributors find acceptance and strength in Indigenous and queer communities, finding ways to be both/and, Sailor asserts that he is loyal only to his individual identity (75). However, his narrative still resonates with the other contributions, in that it reflects the vulnerability of being queer/trans and Aboriginal in Australia, as manifested in high school bullying, high suicide rates and the high probability of dying in prison.

The first two essays of Part Two: ‘An Emergent Public Face’, address HIV/AIDS and its impact. The third is a collection of reflections by performers in OutBlak Adventures, a ‘performance project exploring personal, funny and moving stories of coming out and what’s it like to be different in and out of family’ (152). The final two essays in this section deal with public pronouncements denigrating queer Aboriginal people. Dr Mark McMillan unpacks the effects and implications of an Australian journalist writing an article about him, questioning his
blackness and implying that his ‘dubious’ indigeneity coupled with his gayness should have precluded him from winning the Fulbright Scholarship. In the final essay, Steven Lindsay Ross, responds to a ‘homophobic rant’ (182) by boxer Anthony Mundine claiming that indigenous culture precludes queer sexuality.

Part Three, ‘Looking Out of the Mirror – Essays’, contains four academic essays. Respectively, these cover the dual imperatives of decolonising the queer and queering the decolonial, interrogate what individual stories can say about a broader community, critique the three-tier identification system, and consider the role of history-making might play in legitimating a queer/trans indigenous identity. Positioned at the end of the collection, these essays provide a theorisation of many of the issues raised more personally and subjectively in the preceding contributions. Thus, the academic perspective is not the reader’s introduction to the concerns at hand. This, and the academics’ inclusion of their own personal experiences in their essays, serves to foreground the fact that their theorisations are of discourses that have a very real impact.

Focusing on the intersection between race and queer and trans subjectivities within a country with a colonial history, this collection resonates with work coming out of various African countries, such as African Sexualities, edited by Sylvia Tamale. In some ways, the weaknesses of Colouring the Rainbow are also its strengths. The inclusion of non-academic contributors, whose writing skills are not necessarily polished, means that some details of certain of the narratives can be hard to follow and that a clear line of argument can be difficult to establish. The collection of a diverse array of narratives from very different contributors means that, although themes do reoccur within the collection, it is a somewhat choppy read. Part Two, in particular, does not quite cohere as a grouping. However, it is the very inclusion of this multitude of very different contributors that makes the collection so valuable. The ways in which the collection challenges the neat confines of its packaging reflects the impossibility of ascribing any single narrative to the complex subjectivities that emerge at the intersection of queer/trans and Aboriginal, belying the conceptualisation of the Aboriginal as ‘purely savage’. It seems to me that the line recurring throughout Sandy O’ Sullivan’s essay – ‘This is the experience of an Aboriginal lesbian. And it is not.’ (222) – could serve as a refrain for the entire collection. By bringing together individual stories, the collection both tells the story of a broader community, and reminds the reader that individual lived experiences can never quite be contained within social categories such as ‘queer’, ‘trans’ or ‘Aboriginal’.

Jenny Bożena du Preez
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Hyeonseo Lee left North Korea on a youthful lark in 1997. In 2013, she became possibly the most famous defector from that country after her TED talk championing human rights went viral. The three parts of her memoir, *The Girl with Seven Names*, cover her life in North Korea, her life as an illegal immigrant in China and her final settlement in South Korea where she is finally joined by her family. That Lee’s defection from one the most repressive, closed societies on Earth was an accident is just one of many ironies threaded throughout her memoir.

Lee lived a comfortable existence in North Korea, afforded by her *songbun* – a classification system based on loyalty to the regime. Her family’s *songbun* allowed her father a military rank and her mother a middle-class job, but it also allowed a certain freedom to bend the rules of the totalitarian nation. Lee’s family were trusted to live along the Chinese border, and there a culture of capitalist endeavour – founded on smuggling between the two communist countries – is tacitly encouraged. Markets fill the cracks in North Korea’s centrally-planned economy; illicit imports undergird the failed ideology of *Juche* – self-reliance; and the drug trade provides the government with foreign currency.

Her mother’s involvement in this trade insulated her from the great famine of the late nineties, but it also exposed them to constant risk. North Korea is, after all, a country where people can be publicly executed for not crying enough and where suicide is considered an act of defection that will result in a whole family being marked as traitors. The system relies on people breaking the law, but this leaves them ever vulnerable to the changing tides of policy or some petty denunciation – in a strange reverse confession, citizens are expected to denounce each other’s disloyal behaviour publicly once per week. The caste system, the denunciations and the culture of fear make people ‘complicit in a brutal system’ (150); people are forced to repress others, as ‘only the ruthless and the selfish … survive’ (38), and to repress themselves, as ‘everyone wears a [metaphorical] mask’ for self-protection (20). It is likely no coincidence that one of the few years to be explicitly mentioned in Lee’s memoir is 1984, as she lived a life with an uncanny resemblance to George Orwell’s famous novel. In these circumstances, even Lee’s wearing of fashionable shoes could have marked her as disloyal. Because of her relative freedoms, Lee was able to illegally slip across the border; because of the repressive and unpredictable system of control in North Korea, it quickly became unsafe to return.

The most fascinating part of Lee’s memoir is this first third, which lifts the veil on the repressive North Korean nation. As one of the rare detailed accounts of life in the state, *The Girl with Seven Names* is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the Korean Peninsula. However, the second section, covering Lee’s travels in China, is an all-too-common story. There is a level of tension as Lee brushes up close against refugees who are either forcefully repatriated or exploited in the sex trade, and many events are a personal culmination of geopolitical forces that will demand contemplation from the thoughtful reader. However, the text itself is largely a just-the-facts account with functional writing and little introspection. That said, the final section does offer a final, intriguing irony, as Lee and her family try to find a place in this new world. While many defectors leave in desperation, due to the famine or political exile, Lee’s family had a stable life. In South Korea, they find themselves to be
social outcasts without a way of making a true home. While Lee has devoted herself to
gaining the education she was denied and to promoting a freer North Korea, she is also left
with uncertainties about what she and her family have lost.

Andrew Craig
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Poets have the toughest job in literature today. In the loosest terms, regarding success in any of its measures, poets receive a slice of the pie so thin as to be virtually translucent. Bestselling novelists carve out huge, dripping chunks of the market, filling their plates with prizes, speaking engagements and shampoo commercials (probably). Writers of non-fiction, romance and the now-all-encompassing ‘speculative’ fiction all carve off their own portions. A stroll around any library or bookshop where the physical objects are still kept available will account for the rest of the pie. It’s a hard-working booklover who locates the poetry, at the bottom of a corner shelf, all raw paper and unfamiliar publishers’ logos. But they’re worth searching out. These are the bravest, hardest-working artists committing words to paper in the whole field. No writer does it for the money, but the love and talent it takes to put poetry between some covers, to actually get it there in the first place, means that simply opening a book by a poet is a rare and special experience.

Part of the reason you don’t see too many poets driving Bentleys is that poetry as a consumer product is hard work. Airport novels are a thing. Airport poetry collections are not (they could be!) Poetry is demanding and intellectually vigorous in ways most readers aren’t used to. You can actually become exhausted after a few pages of good poetry. Great poetry can, with just a few words, last its reader a lifetime. But there is a trade-off. Imagine a stern ballet director, gathering her new dancers around for a pre-rehearsal pep-talk before breaking out the slippers and toe-plasters. ‘I ask a lot. I expect more,’ says our director. Someone coughs. They are immediately sent home. ‘But it will be worth it,’ she continues once the sobbing cougher has left the building. The best poetry is always worth it. Giannina Braschi is such a poet. She is the stern ballet director, her readers crouched in silence at her feet. Braschi’s command of the English language is formidable. Open any page of *United States of Banana* and there will be at least one passage which could be carved into a concrete monument and left for future generations to contemplate.

*United States of Banana* is set in post-September 11 New York in which the author, accompanied by Hamlet and Zarathustra, sets out to free the Puerto Rican prisoner Segismundo. The king of the United States of Banana imprisoned Segismundo one hundred years ago for the heinous crime of being born. When the king frees his son and makes Puerto Rico the fifty-first state, this has a huge effect on the international community, with superpowers new and old suddenly struggling for power in the new world order. Braschi is a deeply political writer, and the twisted world of *United States of Banana* vibrates with anger at oppression. This is an author who has lived within the United States as a latina outsider and her position as insider/outside makes her the perfect protagonist and messenger for this fanciful, metaphor-rich story of Latin America rising up as the United States begins its long tumble from supremacy.

If only poetry didn’t get in the way.

The text is broken into two parts; Part One is a series of short essays, setting the scene for Part Two, which is written entirely as a play. Braschi’s abilities as poet are massive. Her command of language and meaning is whip-sharp, and her style folds and repeats and sings. The text often seems restricted by the very page it’s printed on, as though it was written to be performed, rather than merely read. Part One’s essays are all first person, spoken from Braschi’s authorial perspective and the only way to place the narrative voice is onstage, holding forth to a room full of performance poetry enthusiasts.

This crowded, monologic style remains much the same throughout, with em-dashes acting as the bulk of pause-points, barely allowing the reader time to draw breath in the face of the relentless oration. While much of the poetry is fine and there are some beautiful gems to be
discovered, the torrent of ideas is so dense that reading *United States of Banana* becomes an exhausting experience. Before long, impatience sets in. Braschi’s stern ballet director demands huge swathes of time and thought, sadly delivering only the odd pirouette in return.

For example, making the bulk of the narrative a play encourages the reader to conjure their own setting, but Braschi consciously provides almost no stage directions and only the most cursory set-descriptions. This would be manageable if the text itself weren’t so deliberately free-wheeling. Characters come and go, leaving the impression of an experimental play reading, with the players walking onto an empty stage, delivering a line or two and leaving.

Some sections have the effect of pages and pages of sums which must be solved in the reader’s head. Concepts float and flit past, but stopping to consider them loses the thread. The repeating themes and ideas sometimes offer a familiar landmark, but after half way, begin to have the same effect as finding the same letter in a bowl of alphabet soup. *United States of Banana* is a thick, ambitious text. It’s not impenetrable, but it seems designed to be. The obscurity of the prose consistently trips up the message. It is doubly frustrating when Braschi alludes to this tendency, almost a need, to cover up her own work:

> Sometimes my words are poor in thoughts and rich in fantasy. Poets like to muddy the waters and then they want to see through those muddy waters. … They see the dirty waters and they don’t know what to do with the dirt—because they prefer the waters crystal clear—and only an editor can separate good from evil—clean from dirty. But the nature of the poet is to see through the mud. To throw dirt in people’s faces—without distinguishing a king from a beggar. The clumps must fall where the chips do—in everybody’s face—without distinction. All of them should feel the mud—and smell it—and find a sapphire in a pig’s shit. (63-4)

It’s a fine treatise on poetry that disrupts, that must be worked for, but it also exposes a huge contradiction in the purpose of the text. Its political themes – post-September 11 US and an impending new world order – are inspiring. They consistently bubble to the surface throughout, each time adding to the promise of meaning. This is Braschi’s world and the West, the US in particular, needs to see the path she travels. It’s a compelling vision of the future, but it’s badly muffled. It is as if the overall purpose of the text is to demonstrate how truly obfuscated these talented, alternative latino voices are in the contemporary United States. This is certainly borne out by some initial sections on the complexity of speaking Spanish in the US:

> It is my desire to express my native self with my foreign tongue and to make my foreign tongue part of my native self. The fact is that speaking my foreign language I have become more distant. I hardly remember the tongue I first spoke—and as I grow and mutate in this language—day after day—I observe that some days I regress to the memory of the day I was born but my cradle is empty. (39)

A hundred pages later the reader is still clawing through Braschi’s beautifully tangled prose, searching for sapphires and coming up with pinches of Shakespeare. What began with the thrill of a loud, intelligent poetry performance, dwindles to the polite frustration of being trapped in an elevator with a genius performance poet. You are drowning in ideas and you cannot escape, you cannot complain and you cannot contribute.

**Sam Franzway**  
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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.  
Isabelle Li, *A Chinese Affair* (Margaret River Press, 2016)

*A Chinese Affair*, by Isabelle Li, is a collection of short stories about migration divided into four segments, each narrating four tales. Some of the stories are connected through the characters and sentiments, which provides a heightened emotional expression. This connection results in the reader gaining a better understanding of the character's suffering. The yearning for familiarity and homesickness does not need to be discussed each time anew. The subtle connection between characters not only gives a context to the events; it suggests a universality of emotions and experiences. A family death, nostalgia, or homesickness becomes a shared experience.

Nostalgia is also heightened by the use of Chinese aphorisms and phrases in narration, and the absence of these phrases from the characters' lives. In a foreign environment, the characters fail to express themselves, resulting in a solitary remembrance of the past. This failure not only heightens their loneliness but gives hope of a better, satisfactory life for which the characters only need to find a better expression of their sentiments.

The first segment of the book narrates stories connected through the longing for an expression and homesickness in a foreign land. The characters change their names in a desire to fit in in the new country and to have a fresh start. Li signifies this as the cause of the characters' suffering as she says: ‘it is important to know the correct names of anything, because language is all we have – words are symbols, and when symbols do not represent reality, they lose meaning, and we lose our ability to think’ (33).

In the second segment, Li tells stories set in China. These talk about dual nature of personalities and the need for characters to find a space of their own. They have secrets that they guard with smiles and silences.

The third segment of the book is about love, loss, and land. Li pictures love as an unattainable desire. In these stories, characters compromise love for the sake of their families or even because of their past, which they do not want revealed. Readers not only come to know of the lives of characters in these particular stories but also end up adding to an understanding of the previous ones. Although a melancholic read, the stories are not dark, and end with hope for happiness and contentment for the characters.

Characters in the book suffer acutely from an inability to express themselves in all the stories, but the final segment of the book particularly deals with this issue. Unshared past, unexpressed grief, and unsent messages are the topics of these stories. The characters face misery as a result of their sensitivity and failure to express themselves. In the story ‘Two Tongues’, the main character fails to convince a famous poet to have his work translated; the poet's argument being that an expression cannot be copied into a second language. Li has presented this as the cause of the characters' grief. The fact that characters cease to use their mother tongue becomes their hamartia. However, their tragedies are not eternal and can be overcome simply by coming to terms with their past.

With two tongues failing them, the characters depend largely on images to express themselves. ‘Shadow of Gold’, ‘Blue Lotus’, ‘Lyrebird’, and ‘Narrative of Grief’ are especially rich in imagery, and images rather than dialogue convey the deeper meaning.

The stories take sudden sharp turns. The reader is left without a guard, and it is up to the reader to make connections between different sides of the story. A similar relation exists between the stories. Some appear as a different dimension of the life of a character from another
story. This not only creates depth but intimates the connection between the reader and the character. The collection of short stories becomes a cubic representation of a community where each side is given a fair share of expression.

As a collection of migration stories, this collection gives an expression to problems of identity, nationality, language and expression. The world is shown as a global village with people related to each other irrespective of race and nationality. Li shows how people do not let boundaries keep them from a better life; her characters are always ready to take the plunge to escape, live, and explore. Her stories are an insight into Chinese culture and society, with its positive and negative aspects objectively discussed. *A Chinese Affair* is an enjoyable read. It not only takes its readers to multiple countries but also encourages them to think of the world as a boundless place where nationality or race is a matter of diversity, not division.

Saba Idris  
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Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese-born writer working in Scotland. Her work mostly deals with the issues of cultural clash and of space for migrants. Specifically, *The Kindness of Enemies* deals with the problem of Islamophobia in the West after 9/11 – which persists even after ten years and creates an atmosphere of insecurity for Muslim migrants – and then moves on to give the reader an insight into other problems that migrants have to face in a foreign land. The main dilemma highlighted in the novel is of identity and the need to be comfortable in one’s own skin. Along with this narrative, Aboulela gives us a piece of Islamic history by exploring jihad and Sufism, what they actually mean to Muslims and how people have come to distort their meanings in the present time.

The novel begins with Natasha describing her accidental stay at Malak and Osama’s home. This leads her to witness Osama’s arrest due to a suspicion that arose purely on the basis of his name. Natasha suddenly starts to feel insecure about her alien-ness in the white world, where she will never become a part of the community. As a result, she absorbs herself in her thesis about Shamil Imam, and simultaneously the narrative begins to shift focus to Shamil Imam’s jihad against the Russians. As Shamil Imam’s jihad progresses, so does Natasha’s personal jihad to find an identity in an insecure world.

Through Shamil Imam, the novel unravels the mysteries of jihad and Sufism, as well as the polygamous family unit common in Muslim cultures, and the different ways in which civilisation is defined in different cultures. Through Natasha, Aboulela discusses the dilemma of identity, the need of foregoing one’s indigenous beliefs in the face of societal pressures, and the conflicts caused by judgment on the basis of culture and religion. The novel shows how Natasha loses her freedom of opinion because it may stand in the way of her academic and professional success and, most of all, because it may cause her to be treated as a lesser citizen than native-born Scots. Through Malak, the novel also gives an example of an amalgamation of culture and religion: the balance that is needed for harmony between the physical and the spiritual.

The oscillation between the Natasha-Osman story and Shamil Imam’s story demands an active reading of the novel and encourages the reader to compare Muslim history with the Muslim present. These two stories are not disconnected despite being from completely different time-frames and geographical boundaries. Both of them hold equal importance. However, at one point in the novel, the narrative of the past begins to occupy greater space than the narrative of the present. It remains a question as to who is the protagonist of the novel – whether it is Natasha or Shamil Imam – as the novel begins with Natasha but ends with Shamil Imam.

Through these narratives, Aboulela fights stereotypes regarding Muslims and jihad. Jihad is an integral part of the Muslim faith and it has come to be associated with terrorism. As a result, Islam is generally considered a religion that spreads violence. Through the novel, Aboulela discusses the real meaning of these ideologies and shares instances from history that solidify her ideas. The reader gets to know about the real values of the religion through these characters and becomes able to distinguish between original teachings of Islam and the distorted version that is presented by propagandists. However, this is not done in a manner of a commentary and readers will not feel like they are sitting in a religious sermon. The novel is a series of instances through which readers are free to draw their own conclusions.

The novel is written with great consciousness of amalgamating the present with the past, and the movement between these two narratives increases the need for attentiveness on the part of...
readers as they are left to draw connections between the two narratives. Aboulela deals with a subject that has become a global political issue in a manner that brings attention to its apolitical aspects. In both the narratives, religion is foremost a private issue and becomes politicised only through external intervention. The novel is a literary work that can be read for an exercise of the mind, for insight on culture, and for a light, leisurely read. Aboulela is a writer that every reader of literature should read, as her works give a realistic insight to her characters’ lives. By writing about personal values, Aboulela does not cover the characters’ flaws but discusses them freely. Readers do not encounter a perfect world with amazing characters that come out as heroes; they see a world within which characters must struggle to make their space.

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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 her 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 Willansi’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
Alastair Sarre, *Ecstasy Lake* (Wakefield Press, 2016)

*Ecstasy Lake* is well-named. For we know that most things with the word ‘lake’ in them are associated with nefarious criminal activity: dragging the lake; Chandler’s *Lady in the Lake*; Veronica Lake; and Robert (B)lake. Sarre’s fast-paced, unpredictable and highly readable crime novel is the second to feature South Australian protagonist Steve West (the first being the political thriller, *Prohibited Zone*¹). The novel opens with West flying into Adelaide. He soon begins working for his millionaire mate, Tasso, applying for a mining lease on outback land that may contain billions of dollars in gold. *Ecstasy Lake* is also well-named due to place being such an integral part of this novel. And rightly so.

Place is often considered the fifth Beatle of crime fiction. Why? Firstly, natural and human-made environments lend themselves to the plots of crime fiction (imagine the game of hide and seek without any trees or buildings). Secondly, the feelings evoked by particular locations (of claustrophobia, isolation, impending invasion etc.) can augment the feelings of dread and anxiety we lovers of crime fiction seem to find so damn pleasant. Crime fiction fulfils various psychological needs. Some of the best examples paradoxically exaggerate readers’ own anxieties and then relieve them by (generally) presenting a solution to a mystery. This shows us that all problems are surmountable – even if trudging through Hell is required to reach a solution. The way that Sarre uses Adelaide and environs to expand our anxieties is to tap into the oft-quoted axiom that Adelaide is a big country town where we cannot keep anything secret; after all, we residents are only two degrees of separation away from someone who knows what we are doing. Another local fear this novel draws out is that Adelaide’s underworld – and possibly overworld – is controlled by ruthless bikie gangs.

One of the many things *Ecstasy Lake* does with brilliance is to consciously and frequently discuss place. The opening sentences set the tone:

> We flew in over the low woods of the Mount Lofty Ranges, hazy, lazy and ready to burn. The city lounged between the hills and the blue tongue of the Gulf, the Torrens Island power station stacks standing like forgotten survey pegs at the edge of the salt pans. (1)

The reason why continual references to place do not become overcooked is because West is a mining engineer, who inhabits the world of engineers, miners and geologists. This clever choice of profession allows West’s geological and geographical descriptions to make perfect sense, even when he describes people. In West’s paradigm, for instance, the forehead of the aptly named mining security expert, Goldsworthy, ‘looked as hard as a rock face, and straw-coloured hair ran up on either side of it towards the summit, like summer grass on Willunga Hill’ (58). References to actual local places such as Willunga Hill, Globe Derby Park, Edinburgh Hotel, Hindley Street and Glenelg make the story relatable and idiosyncratic. Other places are not named but are easy and fun to work out – such as the End of the World hotel in Hindley Street or the 30-storey building West occasionally works at in Currie Street. (A pleasing detail is that this building includes West’s name in the title. You with me? If not, Google immediately!) Part of an exciting action sequence is set in Morphettville Racecourse. This setting has a fine pedigree, for Arthur Gask’s excellent crime novel *The Secret of the Garden*² (originally published in 1924) also used this racecourse as a crime setting. Nevertheless, many of Gask’s novels and other early Australian crime fiction used a highly

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unusual ‘zero setting’, due largely to a lack of postcolonial confidence in Australia’s cultural and commercial entitlement to host crime fiction. Unfortunately, with a modern history of assorted serial murders that have attracted national and international (negative) attention, Adelaide now has the seedy credibility to refer to its particular quirks, perks and underworld jerks. An ongoing discussion throughout this book is that Adelaide can be a great city. Surely, a part of this is to name it in culture and people’s imaginations in the way that Ecstasy Lake does.

Angry Penguin Max Harris was an enlightened whitefella who believed in writing about the Australian landscape in a particularly Indigenous-Australian way, which recognises the spirituality of place. As Indigenous-Australian identity is so connected to place, some form of Indigenous acknowledgement is a necessity in Ecstasy Lake. This comes in the form of Joe Bettong, whose mob is not identified and whose country includes the outback ghost town of Parakilla. Bettong’s country also contains the goldmine. The way West and Tasso treat Bettong with genuine respect is a political comment on how Indigenous Australians should be treated in general, but particularly in relation to mining rights. As with his first novel, Sarre’s Ecstasy Lake demonstrates that, providing action and pace are not neglected, the crime novel is about solving problems and, therefore, suggesting solutions to political and social problems is certainly within the genre’s wheelhouse.

As part of the effective portrayal of place in Ecstasy Lake, attitudes and speech patterns of Adelaide ring true. For example, Adelaideans can relate to Tasso’s comment that Adelaide ‘is a town where the most important question you can ever be asked is which high school you went to’ (25). And whether West is at a pub ordering a ‘schooner of Pale’ (202), or telling someone, ‘Don’t be a dick’ (141), the language is very familiar. As talented a crime writer as Peter Temple is, his characters’ clipped dialogue is often so laconic that it is unrecognisable. Sarre’s dialogue, however, is often laconic (in the case of West) but still appears natural. In fact, Westie is one of the great smartarse voices in crime fiction. One potential danger of the casual smartarse hero is that he/she may convey too much humour and not enough angst to be really dark and twisted. A cunning device Sarre uses to address this is for West’s brother Luke to suggest that West’s flippant one-liners are actually a neurotic way of avoiding painful introspection: ‘You always deflect when there’s a danger of getting personal, don’t you? Make a joke of it’ (243). Nevertheless, one sometimes feels that West needs a few failed marriages behind him and an ongoing opium addiction. It would be interesting to see more obvious neuroses in our lovable smartarse in future novels – of which I hope there are tens. For along with the mood suggested by place, the neuroses of a crime novel’s protagonist can also serve to increase readers’ anxiety levels in the way that we love and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs would be stumped to explain. That aside, Ecstasy Lake is a stupendously good example of how a crime novel can entertain deeply while provoking thought and the best sense of patriotism.

Michael X. Savvas
Flinders University

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‘Anna was a good wife, mostly …’

This is the first line of American poet Jill Alexander Essbaum’s debut novel. The author of several collections of poetry and the associate editor of the online journal *Anti-*, Essbaum teaches at the University of California, Riverside, and lives in Austin, Texas, but like her *hausfrau* heroine Anna Benz she once lived in Zurich. Readers might struggle, however, to find any area of domestic life in which Anna Benz could be considered a ‘good wife’. An expat American, she lives in comfort and affluence in Dietlikon, a pleasant suburb of Zurich, with her Swiss banker husband Bruno and three young children. Her widowed mother-in-law, Ursula, is a constant if grudging child-minder as Anna spends her days attending language school; after almost ten years in Switzerland she has mastered only rudimentary German, and nothing at all of Schwiizerdütsch, which ‘leaps from the back of the throat like an infected tonsil trying to escape’. Nor has she a bank account or a driver’s licence – trains and timetables modulate her daily life – and she deliberately keeps herself apart from the other mothers at the school gate. Depressed, listless, unable to summon any enthusiasm for life, Anna is a prisoner of her own making. ‘Boredom, like the trains, carried Anna through her days.’ (‘Get a job, I was silently urging; be a Red Cross volunteer.’)

At the instigation of her husband (‘I’ve had enough of your fucking misery, Anna. Go fix yourself’), she is a patient of Jungian psychotherapist Doktor Messerli, and the interactions in her office are part of the narrative. Messerli has encouraged Anna to enrol in language classes. ‘It’s time you steer yourself into a trajectory that will force you into participating more fully with the world around you’, she tells Anna, a sentence that might persuade the reader that it is the good doctor who needs language lessons. The advice works after a fashion: what Anna doesn’t tell Messerli is how she is ‘participating’ with the world and alleviating boredom: by engaging in short-lived but intense sexual affairs. Her present one is conducted during the day after language class with Archie, a fellow student. Her previous lover, and the one she misses fervently and is sure she loved, was Stephen, the father of her youngest child, Polly, although nobody knows that but Anna. Soon Karl, a friend of the family, will come along. There seems to be no end to the men eager to flirt and sleep with her. Adultery, Anna discovers, is ‘alarmingly easy’.

There is plenty of sex in this novel but the descriptions of it are emotionally detached and matter-of-fact, mirroring Anna’s own preferences. Thus love in the afternoon with Archie:

> Anna had never been mad about foreplay. She was not one of those women who needed to endure complicated half hours of rubbing and prodding and explosive plyometrics [sic] before her body tensed and the dam holding back her pleasure burst. Her desires were basic. *Put it in, take it out. Repeat for as long as possible. …*  
> They fucked so hard that afterwards neither could walk.

Of course it is not love but since she never tells Messerli about these infidelities readers are left to draw their own conclusions about what is driving Anna. Her husband is a bit of a workaholic and after ten years together they have little to say to each other; like Anna, he is economical when expressing his feelings. This is a weakness in the novel: Bruno is too lightly sketched for us to understand Anna’s frustrations with the relationship or his subsequent behaviour when he finds her out.

Our heroine’s first name is a link to that other fictional tragic heroine, Tolstoy’s Anna, while there are echoes in her story of another frustrated wife, Emma Bovary. As in those novels, we
expect that things will not turn out well, and we hardly need to be given the heavy hint, in the opening pages, that Swiss trains run on time except ‘when someone jumps in front of one’.

Anna refuses to make herself likeable, either in her daily life or to us, the readers. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing; but passive, sad and miserable characters are rarely engaging unless we are given insights into their minds and souls and can empathise. It is hard to empathise with Anna, but travellers planning to visit Switzerland might take along this novel for in-flight reading. As Anna drifts around her adopted city, the reader is treated to an almost street-by-street guide to Zurich, as well as descriptions that could come straight from the pages of a tourist brochure (‘Rapperswil is a picturesque city on the eastern end of the lake about thirty kilometers from Zurich. Built on a Bronze Age settlement, its sinewy alleyways date to medieval times ...’) and insights into the Swiss who, ‘like the landscape upon which they’ve settled ... are closed at their edges. They tend naturally towards isolation, conspiring to keep outsiders at a distance ...’

Anna kept me at a distance too, until an unspeakable tragedy sends her spiralling down into chronic depression and a long, final section that is totally gripping, even though one can see it coming. It is no less sad for that.

Ruth Starke
Flinders University

From the moment you pick up *Maralinga’s Long Shadow*, there is little doubt the book is something special. It has soft covers, with the added luxury of thick, glossy inner paper, giving it the extra heft it deserves. The back cover is decorated with beautiful Indigenous artwork, while the front cover features bright red Desert Peas overshadowed by a distant mushroom cloud. As with the outer covers, the title page is a visual feast of powerful Indigenous art, and this continues throughout the book, informing a narrative captured with simplicity and genuine empathy by the author, and adding another dimension to the colour, and black and white, photo plates.

I must admit it was impossible to resist flicking through the book before reading, to admire the intricate artwork and read the information on the picture plates. I am not suggesting, however, that this book is a lightweight table decoration. The artwork is detailed, and informed by the artist’s deep love and knowledge of her subject, and the photos are a visual diary of the grace and strength of a woman and her family in the face of a shameful era in Australian history.

The story tracks the life of an Indigenous woman, from her birth at the Ooldea mission where missionaries name her Yvonne, and her mother names her Tjintjiwara; to her teenage years when her first baby was taken from her; onwards to marriage and unwitting exposure to radiation with her husband at Maralinga, and finally through an adult life spent giving to others through creativity and community enhancement.

It is hard to read Yvonne’s story without feeling outrage at the treatment meted out to the traditional owners of the land surrounding Maralinga, because her story also involves a national story about the criminal disregard shown to our first people by the Australian Government in the 1960s. As the events of Maralinga unfold, there is no sense of consideration for the Indigenous people’s rights, culture or humanity. To add insult to injury the ‘newly formed Yalata Community Council was granted salvage rights to Maralinga’ and when they enquired about the safety of the area, they were ‘assured there was no cause for concern’ (57). The salvage crew took blankets and utensils left by the army and distributed them among the community, unaware that the dust on the items was toxic (58). Yvonne, her husband, and their young children stayed at Maralinga longer than any other family, and she said,

> Mens were itchy from pulling buildings down, scratching all night. Later came out in sores all over their chests. I seen the men working trying to cover drums over, full of poison. Whitefellas all had masks and protective clothing. White boots, gloves, hoods, goggles, overalls. But none Anangu. Anangu men had nothing. My husband just had ordinary clothes and they made him drive front-end loader to bring drums of poison ... they should have given him something to put over his mouth. (64-5)

Unfortunately, most of the community members who were involved in the salvage at Maralinga experienced life-threatening illnesses and early mortality.

One shouldn’t imagine, however, that this is a narrative steeped in self-pity and anger, because in spite of the hardships and unfairness suffered by Yvonne and her family, there is little sign of anger and resentment. In fact, the mix of photos and stories reveal a woman of dignity and compassion, with a ready smile and helping hand for anyone in need. There are also moments of rejoicing in the book, for example when Yvonne is finally reunited with her and her husband’s firstborn son who was taken from her by officials without her consent.

Yvonne has the starring role in this story, but her story is also the story of a community that has lost fathers, mothers, siblings and children, and also their land and cultural heritage, because of a short-sighted act of callous bureaucracy. I believe this book should be mandatory reading in every school in Australia because its real power resides within its subject, Yvonne, and her ability to maintain her humanity, and build community through compassion, love, and strength in the face of terrible hardships and unreasonable odds.

Kathleen Steele
Ice Letters might be described as a love story, but to limit it thus is to do the author a great disservice. It is much more. Errington explores the relationship between Dora and Daniel during a period of conflict and change in Adelaide. In retrospect World War I may be seen as a call to fight for King and Empire, but at the time, and especially as the war dragged on, there was a significant anti-war movement, which, in its turn, flirted with the feminist movement and socialism. In the summer of 1916, when the story begins, the heat both enervates and arouses strong emotions in those who meet clandestinely to plan their opposition to the conflict. While the women meet in genteel groups with endless agendas, Dora, devastated by the loss of her brother Edgar at the front, feels alienated by women’s continual talk and lack of action: ‘I am weary and too sad for all this talk. Too fed up with talk’ (20).

Her rejection of this group with its chin cups and ineffectual activity is accentuated by the sudden change of tense at the beginning of Chapter Four: ‘She left so hurriedly that her hat was forgotten, left on the table near her seat, a lost fragment of her presence … She plunges into the street. drawing in a gulp of arm evening air, and walks bareheaded along Ebenezer Street in the moonlight’ (22-23).

We feel her anguish and her need to rebel, to do something that would move along the cause of pacifism. Her first idea is to take off her shoes and walk bare-stockinged, but she rejects this idea and instead lets down her hair, literally and symbolically.

Daniel acts out his pacifist principles by printing anti-war publicity, an activity that he conducts in secret. He and Dora work together in this as well as on a collection of poetry by Rudyard Kipling to be eventually published. He is a poet who was tremendously popular at the time and who also represented some resistance to the idea of white supremacy, thus suiting those who rebelled against British domination. Yet in spite of forward-looking ideas, the acceptance of socialism and the need for a new order, there is no equality of the sexes; it is the men who dominate: ‘Daniel and Malachy talked politics and then Daniel talked philosophy and Malachy disagreed with him. Dora felt like a spectator at a duel’ (31).

Daniel, needing breathing space from the pressure of war hysteria, applies to join an expedition to the Antarctic and is accepted. Rather than escaping the war, he finds himself in a situation that mirrors that of the soldiers in the trenches; a group of men isolated in a confined space. He writes to Dora and signs himself, ‘your forlorn and faithful lover, Daniel’ (164).

Letters were an important part of life in that time, so, in using this device to move the narrative, Errington recreates that sense of families waiting for letters from the front, soldiers at the front waiting for letters from home, as well as the normal communication between friends and family. And what of the letters? These letters are not sent. In the case of Dora, they are in her journal; in the case of Daniel, they are letters written in the Antarctic, where there is no postal service. The letters succeed in revealing the experiences and thoughts of the two lovers from a more personal perspective; lovers who now have to face a decision without the support of the other, a supreme test of their beliefs. The novel moves inexorably towards the point of decision for both of them, and Errington shows an unerring sense of pace as the story develops. By slowly building the sense of place, the force of the characters and their interaction, Errington takes the reader to a point of high tension, which is ultimately resolved.
The character of Malachy, socialist and activist, moves through the narrative like a threatening Svengali. Totally self-absorbed and manipulative, he adds a further point of conflict and doubt, both for Dora and the reader. At one stage he moves into Dora’s house, as a boarder not a lover, even as he plays on her vulnerability.

Edgar, her dead brother, becomes as real to us as if he were still alive, as he is still in Dora’s thoughts.

Much can be made of the sense of place in literature. In Ice Letters, Adelaide in the war years comes alive. We feel the heat, the dust, the shadows, the streets, the uncomfortable clothes, the social restrictions. In the Antarctic, we are faced with an icebound wilderness, where men battle with the elements, where survival is a victory: ‘No-one had warned him [Daniel] about the blizzard. He had expected Antarctica to be a land whose supreme quality would be whiteness and silence, but where he had expected stillness, he found flux’ (188-189). The reader experiences the Antarctic more through the perceptions and actions of the group than through descriptions of the landscape, although the sense of isolation, cold, dark and the noise of the wind evoke the sense of ‘otherness’.

Ice Letters is a book that provokes thought and engages the reader, a fitting addition to the group of fine novels that have been produced by South Australian women writers.

Emily Sutherland
Flinders University


Vincenzo Cerami is better known as a screenwriter than a novelist, although *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*, the Italian title of *A Very Normal Man*, was published early in his career in 1976 and was an instant success. The early acclaim owed something to the recommendation given by the Italian author Italo Calvino, whose *Marcovaldo* also portrays a man who could be described as a very ordinary man. There is a difference in the characters of Giovanni Vivaldi, the creation of Cerami, and Marcovaldo, who is hapless, endearing, and relatively harmless. Giovanni Vivaldi, on the other hand, while leading a life of stultifying boredom, comes to perpetrate a crime of sadistic cruelty with chilling indifference.

We first meet Giovanni Vivaldi with his son Marco, enjoying an afternoon of fishing at the small shack Giovanni intends to make his retirement home. His daily work is as a minor official in a Ministry where he calculates pensions, including his own, to which he attends assiduously. At home his prime interest is his son Marco, newly qualified as an accountant. Having a son who has reached such heights gives Giovanni great satisfaction, while he plots and schemes to have his son appointed to the same Ministry in which he himself has spent his working life. To this end Giovanni joins the Masons to avail himself of their influence. The induction ceremony is described in all its inept ritual, but Giovanni felt ‘completely at home in the Lodge … where he could find support among friends and the strength of unswerving logic bent on setting thinking to rights and restoring justice’. (36)

Having gained the support of his superior, he also gained a copy of the exam question, in advance, which his son Marco has to answer in the entry exam for the Ministry. It is an exam for which Marco never sits. He is killed in a random gun battle in the street, as he makes his way to the hall where the exam is to be held.

Life changes for Giovanni. His wife, who has existed as a shadowy figure ministering to her two men with coffee and food while Marco studies for his exam and Giovanni pores over the Freemasonry’s strictures and philosophies, has a stroke and sits helpless, sagging in her cane chair. His daily routine is punctuated by visits to the cemetery where his son’s body lies in a coffin among a number of other coffins, all waiting for a niche to become available so that they can be buried. From time to time he is called to the police station to inspect a line-up of likely suspects for the murder of his son. His workmates cease to treat him as a bereaved father, a change in attitude that diminishes him. ‘But as time went by he was pointed out less and less and he felt he was being erased. His shoulders slumped back into the curve of his jacket and his face got old and faded again, the way it used to be’ (71), until he finally recognises the man who killed his son in one of the police line-ups. Rather than report this fact to the police, he takes his own action to avenge his loss, and it is this action that he emerges as a man capable great cruelty.

What has Cerami achieved in this story of the very normal man? In his preface to the first edition, and quoted in this edition, Calvino wrote that, rather than being a caricature, the story is one of extraordinary events casting ‘a magnifying glass angled over the unredeemed ugliness at the heart of a civilised society – and over the tenacious lust for living which clings on in a world emptied of meaning’ (v). In the writing, there is simplicity which leads to a vivid portrayal of a very ordinary life with its routine, frustrations and limitations. The
conclusion is reminiscent of a medieval morality play. The evil-doer does not meet a violent end, but his life has come a full circle to become a life devoid of meaning.

Emily Sutherland
Flinders University
Yvonne Allen and Joy Noble (eds), *Breaking the Boundaries: Australian Activists Tell Their Stories* (Wakefield Press, 2016)

Merlinda Bobis and Belén Martín-Lucas, *The Transnational Story Hub: Between Self and Other* (Centre d'Estudis Australians, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, 2016)

Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi (Bhaktal and Sen, 2016)

For Gali Weiss, ‘the sharing of marks on paper is a political act with a political intent’, one that can ‘involve us – participants and viewers – in a way that the media, or even social media, cannot or has stopped doing’ (BB 110).

Here are three books that do just that.

The first, *Breaking the Boundaries: Australian Activists Tell Their Stories*, edited by Yvonne Allen and Joy Noble, anthologises 46 powerful narratives about ordinary peoples’ extraordinary efforts to drive change. This includes Weiss’s account of how she conceived and organised ‘Unfolding Projects’ – a transnational collaboration between Afghan and Australian women who, across divides of culture and geography, worked together to write and illustrate books that were exhibited to raise public awareness about the struggles Afghan women face. It also includes accounts from activists who have rallied for causes including but exceeding Indigenous recognition, refugee rights, environmental protection, transgender rights, healthcare awareness, fundraising for research, end-of-life care, and social justice broadly.

*Breaking the Boundaries* doesn’t shy from acknowledging the significant struggles activists endure. Yet in the face of challenges, its voices nonetheless resonate with energy and hope, making this book a deeply inspiring and empowering read for anyone who has ever dreamed of making a difference. Tales of small-yet-significant successes demonstrate how ‘ordinary people can change the world’ (Chris Loorham, BB 165) and that ‘there’s room for everyone in the puzzle’ (Mia Pepper, BB 208). Particularly inspirational are the beautifully-written accounts from school-aged activists Phoebe Brice, Savannah Brice, MacKenzie Francis-Brown and Maddison Day. So too Tessa Henwood-Mitchell’s account of how she established the aid organisation TIA when she was just twenty-one. The book is a great strategic resource for aspiring activists, for it shares approaches that have and have not worked well in the past, and it signals common snares. This can help activists avoid wasted effort and maximise the impact of their campaigns.

Another fascinating aspect of *Breaking the Boundaries* is its interrogation of what activism is and can be. The book reflects how activism is changing in response to developing technologies – for instance, through the rise of social media activist campaigns, as Mel Irons explains (BB 10), and through changed approaches to more traditional approaches like lobbying, as per Margaret Reynolds, who concludes:

…by all means continue with the professional presentation of facts and figures, but do remember that a creative lobbying strategy is often the one that makes the best impression for reform. (BB 59)

The collection also tackles thorny issues of privilege – particularly the activist’s capacity for inadvertently causing harm despite worthy intentions of helping. As Henwood-Mitchell sensitively

*Book reviews: Three titles: Breaking Boundaries; The Transnational Story Hub; Surviving in my World. Amelia Walker.*

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

explains, this is a particular risk when those from relatively privileged backgrounds seek to ‘save’
those experiencing injustice, thus reinstating hierarchies of helper/helped and powerful/powerless.
To combat this, Henwood-Mitchell urges would-be activists ‘to work side-by-side with these
communities, to learn from them’ (BB 94). Examples of strong side-by-side models can, I suggest,
be located in the book’s many chapters regarding the role the creative arts and writing can play in
creating social change. Weiss’s chapter (discussed earlier) is one example of this. Others include
Judy Blyth’s discussion of her work as a banner painter (BB 170-4) and Anne Riggs’s account of
the huge difference creative expression can make for people experiencing crises (BB 67-72).
Regarding writing in particular, anti-pulp-mill activist and published author Anne Layton-Bennet
champions the pen as her peaceful ‘weapon of choice’ (BB 36-7) and Jenny Scott offers an
insightful account of how community archiving helps honour lives and perspectives that dominant
histories might otherwise overwrite (BB 79-83). Indeed, Breaking the Boundaries itself offers, in
my view, a strong example of writing’s political force – for stories of activism are stories that
remind us, we do not have to accept the world as is. We can reject injustice. We can pursue better
ways.

The power of the pen is similarly strong in The Transnational Story Hub: Between Self and Other
edited by Merlinda Bobin and Belén Martín-Lucas, the second publication under review here.
Produced at the Universitat de Barcelona’s Centre d’Estudis Australians, the e-book shares
outcomes from a case study that involved participants from Vigo, Spain and Wollongong,
Australia, ‘listening to and imagining their respective and each other’s coastal and regional cities …
in order to investigate the negotiation of difference’ through collaborative poetry, storytelling and
cross-genre writing (TSH 18). The project’s strong modelling of a rigorous yet creative
methodological model for knowledge generation makes this book a very worthwhile read for
anyone considering, undertaking or supervising postgraduate research in creative and/or cultural
fields. Regarding its own research contribution and cultural impact, The Transnational Story Hub
confronts issues of racial discrimination, ongoing colonial violence, and Indigenous rights abuses.
Yet the tone is optimistic, focused on possibilities of and for moving beyond injustice. The book
celebrates cultural diversity, challenges stereotypes and promotes positive social connections,
creatively envisioning more harmonious ways for global citizens to be and interrelate.

In addition to its worthy political objectives, The Transnational Story Hub is remarkably
beautiful to read. For instance, note the striking imagery and musical cadence of the following
lines, from the poetry of Mariló Gómez’:

Our conversation unfolds like colourful petals of winter flowers
Filtered through a prism of time, of maps and invisible borders,
Faceless loved ones and unheard conversations
Tears in the evening after the terror of the day. (54)

and from Joel Ephraims:

Book reviews: Three titles: Breaking Boundaries; The Transnational Story Hub; Surviving in my World.
Amelia Walker.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
The third book under review here – Manohar Mouli Biswas’s *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* – enacts a similar balancing of aesthetic wonder with political punch. The book is split into three sections: the first is a set of critical pieces that helpfully introduce an unfamiliar reader to Biswas’s important work, contextualising *Surviving in My World* in relation to his broader oeuvre and his impressive contributions to literature and culture; the second is the work itself, an autobiographical narrative detailing Biswas’s experiences of growing up in Matiargati, a remote village in Khulna (now Bangladesh), as a member of the Namashudra community; and the third is an interview transcript in which Biswas speaks with Jaydeep Sarangi, Angana Dutta and Mohini Gurav about his lifelong work as a human rights activist. Once again, the political power of the pen shines brightly, particularly in the interview, where Biswas declares literature as a ‘torch of liberation’ with the capacity to ‘demolish cultural hegemony’, to ‘open the doors of learning and culture to oppressed people’, and to ‘destroy oppressive culture’ (SMW 98). In Biswas’s view, literature can be not only ‘the source of inspiration for the oppressed people’, but also ‘an instrument which ignites consciousness and courage’ (SMW 97).

The autobiographical narrative of *Surviving in My World* is, in my view, a perfect example of the argument for the political capacities of writing that Biswas presents in his interview. The Namashudra people have been subject to rabid discrimination, socio-economic inequality, exploitation and violence, physical and cultural. By witnessing the impact of these historic and ongoing violences, Biswas raises awareness about the continuing injustice, about the need for change. Of the intergenerational impact of discrimination and poverty, and the colossal challenges entailed in breaking the cycle, Biswas writes:

> This pattern was not of one life, but that of generations. It was living like a prisnika – a water hyacinth – living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life! (SMW 39)

Yet Biswas does not write purely of suffering. Vitally, his account also demands attention to the cultural and intellectual richness of Namashudra life. This is important because it defends and carries on the valuable cultural knowledges and ways of being that oppressor cultures have tried to deny and suppress. *Surviving in My World* is filled with themes of community, friendship and support through times of crisis; of the power invested in sharing, even or especially when there is so little to go round; of the paradoxical ways in which hardship can breed gratitude, appreciation and generosity; and overall, of living boldly despite endless hardships – as the title suggests, of surviving. For instance:

> the people were poor almost to the point of starvation, yet they did not sell milk, not even the excess. Rather, if there were relatives among the neighbours whose cow had not yet delivered a calf, the excess milk would be given off to them free of cost! It was a gift of love. The
person knew that if ever his own cow delayed in delivering a calf, he too would get milk when he needed it. (SMW 18)

Also notable is the sheer aesthetic prowess of Biswas’s writing. His lively, lucid prose can transport a reader from tears of joy to pain and back again within the space of a few pages, and his textual voice is warm, like that of a dear friend, while his skill for imagery conveys vivid full-colour pictures in the mind. Translators Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi must also be congratulated for this – that is, for rendering Biswas’s Bengali original so exquisitely in English. For instance, consider the following description of the Khulna wetland:

by standing in a village along one of its edges, the villages on the other side appeared minute. The trees appeared short; the golden hued ripe rice fields were like courtyards neatly smeared with cow dung in the early morning. In someone’s huge sesame garden flowers had blossomed on each bush in clusters. Their existence was not visible from afar. Innumerable yellow flowers had blossomed in the huge field of mustard. From a distance it seemed that a village woman had spread wide her yellow sari. The small mango or betel nut gardens in some people’s houses were standing with their heads raised in a dark cloudlike canopy. The cows and calves that were grazing in the fields appeared to be standing still. Their movements would remain indiscernible. (SMW 18)

These aesthetic strengths of Surviving in My World vitally deepen its political impact. For, recalling Gayatri Spivak’s vital question of the late 1980s – ‘can the subaltern speak?’1 – Biswas’s answer is a proud demonstration not only of ‘speech’ (through writing), but of eloquence, indeed song, a melodious voice that through its beauty compels one to listen, to appreciate the value in what historically silenced speakers have to say.

Like Breaking the Boundaries and The Transnational Story Hub, Surviving in My World is therefore, in my view, a very important book – one with the capacity to drive real and necessary social change, not only in the Bengal regions about which Biswas writes, but beyond them, for Biswas offers a model of how situations of social injustice may also be challenged and remade in other global contexts. For these reasons, all three of the books reviewed here are, I contend, essential reading for anybody interested in activism, writing, cultural research, cross-cultural collaboration and/or the pursuit of more liveable societies through these and other means. I warmly thank and commend the writers, translators and publishers who have brought these wonderful works into print. Each page, each word helps nudge this world just ever so slightly towards better, fairer lives and relations, towards enhanced opportunities for all.

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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.