Complete book reviews – Creative and life writing

Nicholas Birns
Three poetry books: *The Poetic Eye* by Michael Sharkey; *Patterns of Being* by Heather Sladdin; *Meanwhile, the Oak* by Heather Taylor Johnson

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Gay Lynch
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*Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* by Tim Winton
Michael Sharkey, *The Poetic Eye* (Brill, 2016)
Heather Sladdin, *Patterns of Being* (Heather Sladdin, 2016)
Heather Taylor Johnson, *Meanwhile, the Oak* (Five Island Press)

Michael Sharkey has long been known as one of Australia’s most congenial, collegial, and agile poets and literary critics. One might have expected this anthology to be an assemblage of various tribute and assessments, all done with the urbanity and goodwill long known to be Sharkey’s hallmark. What a surprise, then, to realise that this collection, though indeed various, generous, and informative, tinged throughout with what Gordon Collier, in his preface to the book, calls Sharkey’s ‘evanescently ironical’ but not ‘acidulous’ personality (ix), is really dedicated to one theme: the shared cultural practices of Australia and New Zealand.

It is thus totally appropriate that the book is part of Rodopi’s renowned Cross/Cultures series, because Sharkey’s work is postcolonial not just in being firmly situated in an Australian culture whose poets, from the ‘deliberately strident’ Ronald Robinson (57) who yet ‘tried to extend the English language’ (59) to the ‘distinctly accessible’ yet ‘philosophical’ Gwen Harwood (282), could presume neither recognition nor readership from the broader Anglophone world beyond Australia’s shores. In other words, writing about Australia alone would be postcolonial enough. But Sharkey chose to cast a wider gaze. Across the Tasman.

Sharkey starts out by advising the reader that, between Australia and New Zealand, ‘similarities are perceptive’ and ‘differences are profound’ (xiv). Accordingly, while noting the shared colonial heritage of the two countries, as well as their shared cosmopolitan turn in the twenty-first century, Sharkey refrains from a systematic comparison between the two literary cultures. Symptomatically, Sharkey notes that his interest in New Zealand began when he studied with two noted New Zealand academics, Michael K. Joseph and Terry Sturm, the latter of whom, then at Sydney, encouraged Sharkey to go to Auckland to study – Lord Byron! That a canonical English poet, albeit one who wrote about a fictional Polynesia in *The Island*, was what brought an Australian to New Zealand speaks volumes.

What Sharkey brings to this task is above all fairness. One would not expect that Sharkey would particularly embrace the poetry of Kendrick Smithyman, a poet often forbiddingly intellectual and verbally dexterous, but Sharkey has a wonderfully deft way of isolating such a poet’s virtues – he says that Smithyman, along with Bill Manhire – and the apposition is itself striking – is ‘drier, trickier’ (16) than other poets – while making clear he feels more sympathetic to poets such as David Mitchell (1940-2011), a poet whom I had never even heard of before, but who Sharkey renders vividly as a poet of ‘zip and irreverence and swing’ (549). Sharkey is particularly good with poets who – on both sides of the Tasman – have several levels to the poetry from the casual to profound, a quality he brings out particularly well in the work of Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Sharkey speaks of the critic, and reader, ‘inhabiting a poem’ (574), and this is a quality we, as auditors of a poem, can share with the poems’ author – the experience of inhabiting. And Michael Sharkey proves again and again he inhabits poems superbly well.

Despite the asymmetry and incommensurability of Australia and New Zealand, you cannot really understand one without understanding the other, and Michael Sharkey, with his characteristic lightness of touch, has done as much as anyone to indicate this.

Heather Sladdin and Heather Taylor Johnson similar traverse the Anglosphere, though both have engaged one of its more imposing components in the United States. Taylor Johnson is originally
American but now living and working in Australia, whereas Sladdin was born in Australia went to Carolina to study, and is now again in South Australia, around Adelaide. Sladdin’s *Patterns of Being* is a rather unusual verse noel, not in its subject-matter – growing up and coming to personal and aesthetic consciousness, which after all is the subject of Derek Walcott’s *Another Life* – but in its form. The poem unfolds in short stanzas of short lines, often three or less, often moving, in a staggered away, rightward across the page:

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as a hot sun lifts
    windows open
    to catch dust
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Mum reads poems
from the *Golden Treasury*… (14)

These lines force the reader to hinge on each breath, and induce an extraordinary intimacy: we do not just rush past the details of childhood in order to conjure a sort of arc of formation, but are induced to linger, to pause over each detail, to take it in. Some of the images are absolutely striking, and could be probing poetic aphorisms in themselves:

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Lilly’s tin house is blue
    In the setting sun (16)
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Metal, colour, light all come together in an arresting tableau, one vouchsafed by the internal rhyme, hidden in the para-couplets middle, between ‘in ’ and ‘in ‘. Sladdin’s open, unrhymed staggering lines are indeed anchored both by this internal sound-play and by the intensity and focus the writer puts into all of her images. Sometimes the line-lengths mimic motion:

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dry spinifex
    rolls
    across the russet verge (23)
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Not only is this glimpse of landscape iconically and characteristically Australian, but the rolling of the spinifex is limned by the way the verb, ‘rolls’ does not even begin in space until the line with the spinifex in it ends, delineating the process of motion, just as the line with the russet verge carries the eye further perhaps into what Bill Ashcroft has called ‘the horizontal sublime’. The plural in the volume’s title, *Patterns of Being*, is a clue: the focus here is less on an overall trajectory than on how meaningful discrete patterns are. Yet these are patterns, not, as in Virginia Woolf’s similar title, moments; and the material Sladdin gives us clusters into several fairly defined maps, helped by the fact that each of the poem’s individual sections has a title and a gloss. The point-of-view character, Anna, grows up amid the beauty of nature and a loving family and is just discovering her own perception and sensuality when, rather like in a Janet Frame novel, her cousin Dawn dies tragically. This trauma leads to a distinct separation between the paradisiacal and the fallen, and to Anna’s role as discoverer of the world to recorder of it. In the second book, Anna imagines her bereaved aunt, Lilly (Dawn’s mother), as she is hospitalised, put in a wheelchair, and suffers from old age and regret. Anna then imagines Aril, the mermaid she experiences an encounter with just before Dawn’s tragedy, and the sea-creature’s search for humanity. It is a scenario hard to make compelling in a poem, but Sladdin brings it off. As she grows towards adulthood, Anna becomes Annie, and the canvas becomes wider: we meet Lily’s war-scarred father and the Sydney painter Patrick Bon Arbour (somewhat
out of a Patrick White or David Malouf novel), and Dawn’s murderer Rufus (whose Indigenous background makes his case more ethically complicated than it would otherwise be), seen through the prisms of Annie, Lilly, and Aril – the real, the margined and the imaginary. The reader is left with the moving image of:

the red sand
the dust of time
and the memory of Dawn (200)

When beginning Sladdin’s book, I had no idea what to expect: I found Patterns of Being narratively absorbing, emotionally riveting and above all tangibly and poetically rendered. In terms of the trans-Tasman frame raised by Sharkey’s collection, Katharine Mansfield and Janet Frame would, I think, have loved it.

Heather Taylor Johnson’s poetry is replete with the life of the body, in sickness or in health, at rest or in motion. Some of Taylor Johnson’s liveliest poetry is inspired by a trip to South America, whose energy and diversity has proven galvanising to her poetry, as seen in ‘Los Perros’:

Their ragged clothing gnawed in patches
of gnarled clumps like feral field
of stinking swamp in the crowded streets
and trash is what they have to eat. (90)

The doubled ‘gn-‘ sound and the alliteration of ‘stinking’, ‘swamp’ and ‘streets’ as well as ‘feral’ and ‘fields’ make this not just compassionate social observation but verbal kindling, enabling the next stanza to catch fire, as a dog sits on the ‘red tin roof’ thus rendering the dogs both ‘above’ and ‘below’ the street, ‘the smell of their embryos floating in the air.’ Taylor Johnson’s poetry of South America nimbly avoids the tourist gaze, exhibiting a space where ‘dulce de leche’ coexists with ‘racism’ and ‘slander and earthquakes’, where the tango composer Carlos Gardel and Tony Abbott exist on the same simulacral plane.

Taylor Johnson’s South American poems were provided with thematic weight of the book; most of the rest of her work is characterised by soaring and stunning lyricism, one radically open to experience and persistently observant as seen in ‘Life Science in the Garden at Alberton Primary’ where the life in nature is celebrated even amid decay and damage. ‘Yellow zucchini leaves are wilted, not fallen/sleeping, not dead’ (24), is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ‘woods decaying/never to be decayed’, and exudes a similar sense of how admitting there is dross and refuse in nature actually intensifies the exuberance of the glory of nature. The children at the Alberton primary school ask what is the ‘purpose of marigolds’ and their teacher responds ‘the purpose of beauty is to be.’ Like the apothegm at the end of Keats’ Grecian Urn ode, the sententiousness is earned by the sensory details of milkweed, goji berries, and zucchini leaves. Taylor Johnson’s poems are realistic about sex, male rage, and various states of animality, but also take time to stand in praise of nature, often specifically located in Australia: the Mallee, the Hay Plain, Braidwood, and Bateman’s Bay, where, like ‘a heavenly swatted fly in the blue of a lazy bubble/we move through each second’ (79). Her responsiveness to what is, beautiful or ordinary, and her multifocal rendition of experience mark Taylor Johnson out as a poet not just verbally dexterous but genuinely rewarding to read. Although the poetry of Toby

Davidson is much more overtly spiritual than Taylor Johnson’s, her work reminded me of his in its openness to the contemporary, while still participating in and soliciting a lyric strain of utterance.

Taylor Johnson’s book was blurbed by Michael Sharkey, and her poetry embodies Sharkey’s vision of a poetry both imaginatively bold and temperamentally compassionate, a poetry pursued with high spirits but above all to be taken seriously.

Nicholas Birns

The cover of Nicolas Rothwell’s new book suggests that reflection is at least partly what he is referring to with this title, and reflection that is broken into uncountable shards of mirror glass, all shapes and sizes. A sense of infinity about it, of the eternal. Quicksilver is, of course, liquid mercury, which was once used as a coating for mirrors; the word is also used as a descriptor for rapidly-changing and unpredictable. Thinking about his body of work, reflection is present throughout, about an ancient landscape, aspects of human existence that are both unpredictable but also unchanging, the quest for meaning versus the rapid changing nature of modern life.

Rothwell describes *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003), *The Red Highway* (2009), and *Belomor* (2013) as fictions; they are the precursors to the new book, with *Quicksilver* as a ‘companion piece’ to these, a reflection on the previous journeys and their narratives. On his website1, Rothwell states this about his works: ‘Some are fictive, some lie close to the daily world we occupy, some stand far apart. They share a goal: they seek to convey something of the scale and grandeur of what surrounds us, and what remains beyond us.’

*Quicksilver* is composed of six ‘reveries’ that delve into the relationship between humans and nature, not only in the Australian but the European experience as well. Or more particularly, the focus is on the European in Australia, and how we read the landscape with eyes from another world, and think and write about it in words from another language, rather than the language of the Australian landscape and its original inhabitants. The author’s own writing reflects this, I think, as he writes of Indigenous art and its sacredness, mainly through European cultures, whether it be explorers, artists, religious figures or other European influences.

Rothwell thinks about landscape with, and through, literature, so in ‘Into the Red’, in which he records his travels across the western interior, his encounter with a Perentie compels him to remember Tolstoy’s lizard. In ‘Words and Nature’, he discusses Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker* and links the filmmaker’s transcendent view of nature with the Pilbara. ‘The Mirror That Creates: Australia Imagined in Western Eyes’ contains complex ideas about how Australia was shaped by the concepts of those from elsewhere, so that the language used was not from the country itself or its original inhabitants, at least initially. As a result, he feels, ‘loss and longing are coded in’ the language, a ‘nostalgia for a world that is not present, and cannot be present’ (109). He sees this in the writings of memoirists and poets, especially those of the last century.

In ‘What Lies Beyond Us’ he presents ideas about writing that are evident, perhaps, in his works, which themselves flow between fictional and non-fictional. He is interested in hybrid forms of writing, feels that the novel may be at an end, and that, indeed, all imaginative writing may be in danger. He quotes Deborah Eisenberg, who feels the ‘pure licence’ (144) afforded to writers is due to the sheer irrelevance of their work: they are no threat. However, despite this gloomy, almost apocalyptic tone, he sees hope in Australia exactly because the country is an incomplete project: ‘a culture that remains unplayed-out, conscious of what lies before it rather than the golden chapters of an impossibly vanished, all-dominating past it feels obliged to desecrate; conscious, too, of the indigenous realm that at once questions and underpins it’ (147). The writers he is thinking of seem mainly to be male history and nature writers, such as Tom Griffiths and Mark McKenna, although he does also mention Germaine Greer’s *White Beech* (2013). I would like him to consider other writers (women, Indigenous) who tackle the

1  [http://nicolasrothwell.com/](http://nicolasrothwell.com/)
Australian landscape and undertake journeys within the country, and within the self, such as Saskia Beudel, Kim Mahood and Alexis Wright. I also disagree with pronouncements about the death of the novel or imaginative writing. As Jane Smiley has said, the novel form is ‘extremely capacious’ and is irreplaceable; we don’t have to declare one form dead in order to experiment with other forms.

The last chapter, ‘The Gleam of the Outsider: Seeing with Wide Eyes’, discusses Jean Dubuffet and his Collection de l’Art Brut, an ‘outsider’ art collection, and the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn and his interest in the art of the mentally ill. Rothwell sees that outsider art and that of Indigenous Australians is connected as they both produce art that comes from within rather than from ‘clichés of classical art or art that is fashionable’ (176).

The longest and central chapter is ‘Quicksilver: Reflections’ which takes the reader into complex territory concerning chaos, upheaval, sacredness, and transformation. The author returns to a childhood place, the Praha Hotel in Slovakia, and tells the reader about medieval Kabbalah and the cult formed by Jacob Frank in the eighteenth century, and his influences. These beliefs are dark and chaotic, involving the pursuit of havoc as a goal, as a utopia. He leads the reader from here into the work of German ethnographers Frebenius and Petri, who witnessed momentous changes in the spiritual world of societies in the Kimberley and surrounding regions. The havoc and chaotic energy is echoed in the collapse and energy of these societies as new cults replaced old religions, the sacred never disappearing but transforming (like quicksilver). Petri described it as a disruption of the ‘spiritual equilibrium’ by European colonisation (45); Rothwell notes that it is not fully understood by mainstream society how Aboriginal spirituality was transformed.

He moves into the genesis of the Western Desert art movement in the Papunya settlement, and the conflict over the revealing of sacred emblems. Once again, the Aboriginal understanding of what happened was different to official accounts. It was a time of grief but also, according to Rothwell, a ‘further instance of upheaval in the realm of belief’ (49). The artists did not anticipate the interest from the outside world in their art, and there seems to be some debate as to the effect of this on them and whether it is ultimately destructive or liberating. Rothwell seems to believe it to be the latter: ‘but once the first transgression has been made, once the sacred, that quicksilver, has been put in play, you can never tell where it will go’ (52).

I sense that Rothwell is forming a body of work that is ongoing, thinking back to the eternal quality of quicksilver reflection. This book does not contain the conversations with characters that are a strong feature of his fictions; these are often critical of the narrator, argumentative, revealing, harsh, melancholic or disruptive. In a sense these self-interrogations bring the reader into the writer’s thought processes effectively. But it does anchor these other works and take the reader into other realms of thought, about sacredness and landscape, sacredness of landscape, and the European struggle with Australian Aboriginal understandings of country and spirituality.

Sue Bond

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The Beachcomber’s Wife by Adrian Mitchell (Wakefield Press 2017)

Nature writing sometimes seems to be an occupation exclusively for the solitary man. Perhaps it is an expression of a mythic frontier experience – a rugged individual proving themselves in the wilds and escaping the degenerative influence of the city, civilisation and domesticity. American nature writer Annie Dillard summed up this masculinised view in the 1970s: ‘It’s impossible to imagine another situation where you can’t write a book ‘cause you weren’t born with a penis. Except maybe Life with my Penis.’ Wives – being one or having one – just don’t seem to belong.

The enduring trope of the solitary man in the wilderness is largely a legacy of Henry Thoreau, who camped by himself on the edge of a lake at the bottom of Waldo Emerson’s garden and tried to live a self-sufficient life on the land, free of money, employment or female company. His resulting memoir, Walden Pond, has exerted a profound and lasting influence the nature writing ever since.

One nature writer who absorbed that influence was E.J. (Ted) Banfield, a Queensland turn-of-the-century journalist. After being diagnosed with tuberculosis and suffering a nervous collapse probably precipitated by overwork, Banfield sought to live the Thoreauvian dream by retreating to Dunk Island off the north Queensland coast. He lived here for 23 years, building his own house, growing fruit trees, tending cows and goats and fishing, and writing of his experiences in a series of books Confessions of a Beachcomber (1908), My Tropic Isle (1911) and Tropic Days (1918). He died here, of peritonitis, in 1923.

Banfield opens Confessions with an epigraph by Thoreau and confesses to being a ‘cheerful’ disciple. But the most notable Thoreauvian characteristic of Banfield’s books is not his documentation of household economies, his philosophical musings or his descriptions of nature, but his insistence on the solitary wilderness experience.

Unlike Thoreau, Banfield was not alone. He met his future wife, Bertha Golding, in England and married her in Townsville in 1886. Despite the difficulties caused by deafness, Bertha accompanied her husband on his retreat to Dunk Island. And yet she hardly rates a mention in Banfield’s accounts of his years on Dunk save a dedication ‘To my wife’ in My Tropic Isle and the ambiguous use of plural pronouns. Like Anne Dillard in Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek, Banfield felt it necessary delete his domestic partner in order to conform to Thoreau’s solitary archetype.

Unlike either Dillard and Thoreau, Banfield did not have to manufacture the wildness or isolation of his experience. Dunk Island was genuinely remote. When Banfield became ill, there was no way of calling for assistance and when he died, Bertha was forced to wait for three days, before a boat came close enough to hail.

It is within the confines of these harrowing three days that Adrian Mitchell reflects on Bertha’s life and experiences. As she left no account in her own voice, Mitchell has, by necessity, imagined one. A fabrication, by his own admission, but ‘not falsification’ (176). In many ways, Mitchell is rewriting Banfield’s own words from the perspective of the invisible partner, perhaps building on the way that we become interwoven with our partner’s personalities and traits, mimicking their mannerisms and voicing their turns of phrase.

‘I catch myself sounding like him,’ says the wife (4).

And perhaps her husband returns the favour.
‘I find my words in amongst his, my observations. No acknowledgement; but there they are.’ (68).

Mitchell is listening to what’s missing from the text, reading it inside out as it were. There is no ‘factual’ way of reconstructing that which has not been recorded or documented, but an absence in a text leaves a particular shape, a shadow, and it is that blank, yet defined, space that Mitchell skilfully writes within.

Mitchell admits that his novel is a critique of Banfield. After all, leaving your wife entirely out of your shared life is, by anyone’s standards, a strange thing to do.

‘It is almost as though he was ashamed of me, or embarrassed by me. I didn’t suit his sense of himself, the one that fills his essays’ (68).

But if Mitchell’s reimagining is a critique, it is a warm and generous one, suffused with the kind of longheld affection that cushions the inevitable irritations and annoyances. And while the book re-examines Banfield’s world, it also echoes it, reinvigorating the depiction of the Dunk Island that Banfield loved, perhaps in a sharper, crisper, more incisive voice that modern readers will find more amenable than the original.

Such hybrid novels – ‘factions’ or reimagined histories – carry an inherent frustration with them. Despite the fact that we know they are novels, we instinctively trust them to be true. We suspend disbelief whenever we read fiction. We don’t read novels as fantasy – not even fantasy novels – we read them as a constructed ‘truth’, as an otherworldly reality. And so when fiction is attached to a known historical event or person, the line between truth and story becomes blurred. The reality of the otherworld bleeds into this world. The voice of Peter Carey’s imagined Ned Kelly now speaks for the historical character. Kate Grenville’s Secret River shifts our vision of Sydney’s early history. There is a legitimate basis for the tension between novelists and historians.

It is testimony to both Mitchell’s scholarship and skills as a novelist that I felt this book was Bertha’s account. Her voice, her character, her experience are so beautifully constructed that I was entirely persuaded of her authenticity. By drawing on Banfield’s own writing and historical analyses such as Michael Noonan’s A Different Drummer, Mitchell is able to reconstruct such a convincing and authentic narrative.

Bertha never wrote herself into Banfield’s story, but she did visualise herself into it. Last Leaves of Dunk Island, published after Banfield’s death by Bertha, included a series of plates, which reveal a smiling, round-faced woman, suggestive of a tolerant and easy-going nature. In the introduction he wrote, their friend Alec Chisholm expressed the sentiment that Banfield had not, that Banfield would never have, achieved the life he had without his ‘cultured, courageous, merry little woman.’

The Beachcomber’s Wife cannot be Bertha Banfield’s account of her adventures, but this written fictional account enriches our understanding of her life and gives her a place of her own alongside her husband. Perhaps future nature writers will feel less constrained by the Thoreauvian fantasy and recognise that women too can make their own trails into the wilderness, like Robyn Davidson, Kim Mahood or Eleanor Alliston, alone or with families. The Beachcomber’s Wife reminds us of a prolonged deafness to women in nature writing. Mitchell’s willingness to listen to a

long silent woman’s voice not only rectifies an historic imbalance but, in the process, has produced a delightful and insightful novel of marriage, isolation, adventure and a life in nature.

Danielle Clode


As an undergraduate in the 1980s, I took French translation classes with the famous Professor Colin Duckworth at Melbourne University. I was less impressed then than I am now at his story of sleeping in Voltaire’s own bed (sans Voltaire, needless to say); and we all did grow rather tired of hearing about Samuel Beckett, on whom he was a world authority. I had left university by the time he started acting in *Neighbours*; probably that would have impressed me most of all.

However, his approach to language, as a writer, critic and translator, has stayed with me. He was superb at demonstrating the balance between accuracy and tone in the choice of words; how sometimes a less literal translation could more effectively capture meaning and mood. Nowhere is striking this balance more critical than in poetry.

Hence I was very intrigued by the opportunity to review this double offering: a volume of new and selected poems by South Australian poet Jan Owen, as well as her translation of selected poems from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil, or, maybe, The Bad Flowers). An Australian woman in the 21st century, and the 19th century French inspiration for the Decadent movement – it seems an unlikely pairing.

I started by trying to understand Owen’s own poetry, which has been recognised by several literary awards. The collection covers a broad range of topics, written with a deft and light touch and filled with scents, colours and muted emotions.

Within several poems, there are lists of colours that are almost poems in themselves, drawing attention to both similarity and difference. In ‘The Morandi Museum’, the iconic bowls and jars of the artist are ‘cream, taupe, terne, green’ (50). Guavas, still-lifed into more bowls, are a parade of green in ‘The Arrival’: ‘jade, emerald, malachite, vert, … loden, reseda, celadon, sage’ (64). The fish in ‘Carp with Suckerfish’ are ‘bronze, vermilion, white and one pure silver’, ‘pearled, mottled, plain, and the leader, nacreous persimmon gold’ (65). The lists invite you to recite out loud and revel in how grey-scale words evoke vision.

My favourite poems in this collection include ‘More on the Dinosaur’ about dinosaur sex:

No wonder they almost died out,
with one full minute between stubbed tail and ouch,
their logic couldn’t connect cause and effect. (105)

Wait, almost died out? Before I get too carried away with *Jurassic Park* disaster scenarios, I remember that the latest research has confirmed that today’s birds are the descendants of dinosaurs.

‘The Kiss’, which opens the collection, gives a fairytale quality to the meeting of a woman and an old-fashioned Polish gentleman, who kisses her hand in a way that is both personal and eternal (9). This man makes another appearance in ‘First Love’, supplanting her schoolgirl crush on Archimedes with his romantic European moustache and pigskin gloves (28).

‘The Egyptian Room’, inspired by the South Australian Museum, juxtaposes life and death as impatient schoolchildren interact with the case holding a mummy’s coffin:

Stillness rose from the stone and wood
and earthenware: they breathe in mysteries
lightly, carefully touching all they could –
the hunting mural, Khafra’s cold black knees. (p 91)

I don’t know what it is about the cold black knees; but they are just right here.

Owen rarely applies rhyme across an entire poem as she does in ‘The Egyptian Room’; rather
rhymes make strategic visits. She frequently uses slant rhymes which you can almost but not
quite hear, and every now and then one pops out to startle you, or please you (e.g. ‘The
Marriage’, Leaves section, 48).

There are gems of lines that stick with you: The art of losing is a one-way trip, the art of
letting go is a return (‘The Irises’, 102), or Elastic as phlegm (‘Kohlrabi Soup’, 32), which sums
up my feelings about kohlrabi soup entirely. However, the poems often seem to lose their way.
The hook that gets me in dissipates and a change of direction mars the feeling by the end of the
poem.

Having come to grips with Owen’s poetic styles and themes, I wondered how her modern
approach would deal with the stilted conventions of classical French poetry.

The Baudelaire volume has the virtue of presenting both original text and translation on
facing pages, thus becoming the perfect lesson in the translation of poetry. Owen invites the
reader to compare how she has overcome the tyranny of rhyme and metre which may hinder a
contemporary reading of Baudelaire.

As always with translation, something is lost and something gained in the process. As Owen
says in her preface, ‘Great classics are absolutes; translations are interim hybrids’ (9), and ‘It is
certainly disappointing to forgo fine shades of meaning or the subtle effects of certain sound
patterns’ (11). Her aim was to make the translations convincing English poems in their own
right. (Fortunately Owen eschews Baudelaire’s liberal use of exclamation marks (typical of the
era), scattering them more sparsely – they are irritating in both original and translation!)

My first action was to go to my favourite from Colin Duckworth’s translation class,
Harmonie du Soir’ (58). It’s a strikingly dark poem about love and memory, replete with
Catholic imagery. ‘Harmonie du Soir’ is written in a style called pantoum, supposedly derived
from a fifteenth-century Malay form. In the westernised version, the second and fourth lines of
each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the following stanza. Thus it presents
particular challenges to the translator. How does Owen’s translation measure up?

The original is full of long vowels which slow you down as you say them. In order to
replicate the meaning, Owen has had to abandon the languorous quality, and the shorter vowels
give the translation a certain breeziness.

Owen rendersostensoir (monstrance) as Eucharist, in order to half-
rhyme with abyss and
achieve the needed structure of the pantoum. It’s a neat solution, but the visual image of the
consecrated host on display in an elaborate receptacle above the church altar is submerged.

Reposoir, the altar of repose, is similarly difficult, as this is a historical feature alien to most
Australian readers. ‘Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir’ becomes ‘The clear sad
sky’s an altar and resting place’. It’s clean, but somehow unsatisfying.

Some translations work better than others. For example, Owen conveys perfectly the tone of
‘L’Albatros’ (24), in which the captured bird is made fun of by the sailors – a metaphor for the
poet’s burden. ‘A Carcass’ (46) and ‘Causerie’ (74) are successful in catching both rhyme and
metre. ‘Les Litanies de Satan’ (150-155) beautifully mirrors the pattern of the church responses,
turned on their head:
You who with your hardy lover Death
engender Hope – sweetest folly on Earth,

O Satan, pity me my long despair!

In comparing the two volumes, it is inevitable to note the contrast of styles. Owen’s poems have an airiness so different to the (frequent) syphilitic gloom of Baudelaire. Her light and fluid use of rhyme is a stark contrast to his relentless rhyming in the convention of French poetry of the time. Her words trip off the tongue, whereas his drip like treacle.

Nonetheless, there is often a synergy between the two. Owens’ ‘sunset always makes her think of blood’ (‘One Hundred Famous Views of Edo’, 54) surely echoes ‘le soleil c’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige’ (‘the sun is drowning in its own congealing blood’; Harmonie du Soir); and there are many more such echoes of common sensory experience. Owens’ love of the poetry and respect for language shine through both works.

A recent visit to a well-known Adelaide bookshop confirmed what I had been reading in the literary news: that there is a resurgence of interest in poetry, with a proliferation of creatively-themed anthologies and new works. In this climate, Owen’s recasting of Baudelaire for the modern ear is timely and welcome. Here is a final taste (‘The Death of Lovers’):

We shall have beds imbued with faint perfumes,
and flowers from sunny lands on shelves above
the sofas deep and welcoming as tombs
will bloom for us as sweetly as our love. (157)

Alice Gorman

In the introduction to *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, Stephen Muecke writes,

> Presenting the stories as narrative art is a way of justifying a writing which tries to imitate the spoken word. When language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important. Just as it would be unjustifiable to rewrite a poet’s work into ‘correct’ English (in other words to take away the poet’s ‘license’), so it would be unjustifiable to rewrite the words of Paddy Roe’s stories. (9)

Muecke’s assertion that the ‘form’ of Paddy Roe’s words matter, and furthermore that it would be ‘unjustifiable’ to rewrite Roe’s stories, takes on a special significance in this particular edition of *Gularabulu*. After all, the UWA Publishing edition of *Gularabulu*, published in 2016, follows in the wake of the original 1983 edition as well as a 1993 edition, both published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The existence of three editions of this particular book is a testament to its enduring value, but it also presents an opportunity for interrogation.

Muecke is the editor of *Gularabulu* – a fact that in the UWA Publishing edition of this book is confined to a tiny mention on the copyright page. Muecke’s contributions are not acknowledged elsewhere – not on the front cover, the book’s spine, the title page, or even at the end of his 16-page introduction. Previous editions of *Gularabulu* named Muecke everywhere but on the front cover. The UWA Publishing edition mentions Muecke in its back cover copy, but it does not make clear the nature of his contributions to the book: ‘Stephen Muecke is a leading Australian academic whose work has encompassed a number of disciplines in the humanities. With Paddy Roe, Muecke is co-writer of the prize-winning *Reading the Country*.’ This begs the question, ‘Did Muecke also coauthor *Gularabulu*?’ The answer is ‘no’, but that is not clear from the UWA Publishing edition of this book.

Why does any of this matter? Because how Muecke’s, and also Roe’s, intentionality was transferred to the page matters deeply in a book like *Gularabulu*. Muecke is very clear that he does not want to ‘take away the poet’s “license”’, which is another way of saying he wants to respect Roe’s intentions. For Muecke, this translates into a highly unconventional approach to transcribing Roe’s oral stories:

> The texts are divided into lines whenever the narrator pauses. The length of these pauses is indicated by one dash per second of pause. Hesitations in mid-line, at which points the breath is held at the glottis, are indicated by commas. (17)

Roe, a Nyigina man born sometime around 1912 in the northwest corner of Western Australia, was already a legendary figure when he sat down with PhD student Muecke in the late 1970s. The stories Roe shared with Muecke represent ‘the continuation and reassertion of an Indigenous oral narrative tradition’ (13). However, the form of the stories as they are found in *Gularabulu* represents a remarkable innovation, as can be seen in the following representative excerpt:

> so this old fella -
> come back with fish one day he can’t find his missus---
> he waited there till late --
> so he said ‘What happened to my missus? -
> must be gone fishing ah that’s all right” he said -- (24)
This excerpt, which follows the rules for transcription set by Muecke, clearly looks like poetry – which explains Muecke’s aforementioned assertion that, ‘when language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important’ (9). Indeed, it is precisely the form of the stories contained within Gularabulu that make it such an interesting and important book.

It is with great regret, then, that I report that the form of Gularabulu has been mangled in its most recent edition. In the five-line excerpt above, for example, the number of dashes at the end of a line – each dash representing a one-second pause by Roe – differs from earlier editions of the book. In fact, four of the five lines have different numbers of dashes at the end as compared to earlier editions. Of course, without access to the original recordings of Roe’s oral storytelling, it is difficult to say which edition got it right, but there are strong indications that it is not the UWA Publishing edition. For example, the typo in the fifth line where a double quotation mark is used in place of a single quotation mark, and also the lack of a space before the dashes in the second line, suggest lax copy editing standards. What we find in these five lines is symptomatic of problems that run through the entire book. Indeed, it seems likely that the notoriously problematic process of optical character recognition (OCR) was used to create this particular edition based on a scan of a previous edition. Furthermore, in the story ‘Big Dog’, 13 lines have been mistakenly duplicated – they appear both in the middle of the story and at the very end. These are not small problems; these things matter for all the reasons Muecke explains in the introduction to Gularabulu.

Paddy Roe’s Gularabulu is an incredibly beautiful and affecting book, not to mention a landmark work of Indigenous Australian storytelling, but I recommend that readers find a used copy of either edition published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Per Henningsgaard
Meditations on being and knowing habituate the text, whose speakers struggle to come to terms with their limitations: What can’t I know? What can’t I be? Stephen Edgar draws on a rich body of literature to explore ontologies and phenomenology, and crafts poems that are so dynamic, the reader will find him/herself in the text, throughout the text, as s/he asks new questions alongside the speakers, or perhaps identifies with one of the many voices that surface. Given the scope of philosophical and poetical thought from which the poet draws, not all referenced authors are mentioned explicitly. What one finds, then, is an intricate intertextuality in Edgar’s marvellous and marvelling tenth book, *Exhibits of the Sun*. In this way, form echoes content, in that what is seen or known is no more and no less important than what eludes one’s grasp.

In first-, second-, and/or third-person pronouns, the speaker/s interact/s with the reader from a variety of vantage points that exhibit planes touched by the sun, in microscopic nearness or macroscopic distance, as s/he/they question/s the process by which meaning is made. Walter Benjamin and Marcel Proust are acknowledged for their influence, and unnamed journeymen and women souse the speakers’ observations to boot.

The reader suspects s/he hears traces of Alexander Pope first, in ‘Jacarandas’, as s/he observes ‘A child, in thrall to purple, who wants more / Than more can satisfy’ (10).

Walt Whitman’s 28 young men appear to surface in ‘The Sculptures by the Sea’:

... swimmers
   Dripping into their shadows as they amble
   Around and through each other on the sand,
   Adhering oozily among the waves. (18)

A moment of identification between the observer and the observed connects the second-person addressee of ‘Grand Canyon’ to an unnamed figure, who ‘Finds where you are’ (62), and again we hear Whitman, now asking, ‘What is it then between us?’ (1385).

A speaker observes, ‘And on the square these actors and events / Transpire and play on’ (62), and Whitman responds: the actor or actress plays ‘The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like, / Or as small as we like, or both great and small’.2

Edgar’s speakers and sources are not only those he names, addresses, or otherwise identifies, but they are also the broader tradition within which he roots the text, a tradition that is neither national nor global, neither microscopic nor macroscopic, only, but is both and all. Jean Beraud, John Hughes, Oswald Spengler, Amanda Stuart and others visit the text, taking no more the behind nor the fore than Benjamin or Proust. They feature in the experience of becoming that is each reading of each poem in the text.

What then does the reader make of the relations, which are the text, not the focus only, but the source, as well, from which the focus draws? To approach a name would appear no different a pursuit in *Exhibits* than to approach any of the other many planes presented. ‘Planes’, in that the universe presented is no composite whole, but consists instead of those composite parts upon which the focus of the sun is shone: ‘Nothing’s more abstract than reality’, observes the speaker in

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2Whitman 1385.

‘Morandi and the Hard Problem’, ‘These surfaces propped up against the day / To hold the light’ (50). As the moon reflects the sun, and so is known, so too is each encounter, each illuminated surface, established in relation to that central force, light. A surface enters light and so is known.

The multiple shifting identities and surfaces that are the characters and nonhuman planes that inhabit the poet’s universe, then, are discursive – and yet Edgar’s speakers balk at the limits of language. This trepidation toward these limits is visible in ‘Let Me Forget’:

Behind that door, past comprehension,
Beyond imagining, the universe;
The laws upon
Whose unknown code the selves that you rehearse
From day to day are based; oblivion. (31)

If a surface enters light and so is known, then that same surface obscured by any barrier – a door, in this case, or distance, even where ‘No human presence has been known’ (11) – is not removed from being known, but is merely abstracted even further. ‘Behind that door’, which might be distance, space, or time, exists the broader universe, parts of which the speaker knows, others he does not, and other parts, still, he knows but chooses to ignore: the screaming lobster in the boiling pot is described but not named, for instance; and yet the speaker acknowledges these conspicuous absences in writing ‘Let Me Forget’, an elegiac ode to the presence of light as something that masks an ever-encroaching absence.

The speakers unite in this absence, as each exhibits the process by which s/he makes meaning. There is no grand narrative for this process, other than that there is absence and that meaning is made.

‘What’s it about?’ the speaker in ‘Paris’ demands. ‘Come on. No jokes’ (28). The text’s central question—meaning—is posed, and is met only with language games, or ‘jokes’.

‘How will they make those actions correspond,’ another speaker queries, ‘To some imagined grand event / When they themselves are cast among the clues’ (38)? In this poem, ‘The Clues’, the speaker shows a process of making meaning in relation to both time and space, indicating names as other mere features, or ‘highlights scattered and askance’, across the sunlit planes on which the speaker’s life is lived and the reader comes to recognize her/himself.

‘…not understood, but held in mind,’ yet another speaker observes, ‘A weight of reference and felt perception / Solidifying out of thin air’ (66). The fragmented imaginary, that ‘thin air’ out of which reference solidifies, speaks to discursive limits yet again.

Each of these speakers speaks to the absence, and to the filling in. The ‘weight’ of reference, which is the composite material of language itself, solidifies out of this absence; the ‘clues’ one uses to construct meaning include the self, and as such further indicates the limitation of scale seen throughout these poems; the speaker in ‘Paris’ asks forthright that ancient question as old as recorded history, and receives nothing but language games in response.

The philosophy Edgar grapples with is not easy. The questions are difficult to ask, and impossible to answer. And yet Edgar aptly leads his reader on this journey of questioning, wrought from his own experience. He does so with the precision of craft over language, music, meter, and rhyme that only a seasoned poet could accomplish without calling disproportionate attention to either content or form.

The resulting collection is so masterly that the reader is not likely to notice until many poems into a first reading that most of the poems follow end-rhyme schemes and adhere to set meters. These features are not, however, a rule. Shifting is both a central concept and characteristic feature of this collection and, as such, the speaker, tone, address, gesture, and features in each poem...
vary according to the poem’s needs. Ever reaching toward the sublime in the beyond, Edgar describes such unreachable heights as ‘Charged with the thrumming potencies of un-ness’ (51). The reader might also find this beyond further than his or her reach, and yet s/he will also experience the thrumming potencies as they surface in the text.

Zach Linge

At her Adelaide launch, English academic Lucy Durneen suggested that the sixteen stories in her debut collection embody Freud’s theoretical drives, death and sex. It is true that the stories are full of longing for the resolution of these two instincts, the kind of longing with which many readers and writers may identify, and yes, their creator is well-versed in psychoanalytic theory, but they do more than that.

The authorial voice keens, its intelligent and moody existential angst offers no answers as it articulates important questions about love, art and feminism, some of them ‘conjured in therapy’, but, nevertheless, the stories are full of hope – *Um beijo* – ‘two feelings at once, of being cast away, and longing; a feeling of being shipwrecked and also sighting land’ (133). Durneen strives to hammer down language in the face of chaos even as she recognises the task as futile.

Suddenly it feels as if the seventy-eight percent of my body that is water is trying to get back to the sea. *Sehnsucht*, the Germans call this. An intense yearning for a thing far-off, a thing that no word in the English language can define. (54)

The characters could be everyman and everywoman, perplexed and battered by life, by turns questing and despairing, and whose stories are full of undiluted passion but Durneen speeds them though the narrative at a cracking pace. The abrasive and youthful Alicia in ‘Noli me Tangere’ exemplifies this. The creative writing academy informs *Wild Gestures*’ style – plenty of hooks and narrative reversals, show don’t tell, metafiction – but in a virtuoso way, forsaking the pared back, banal and bloodless prose accepted in some markets and by uncommitted readers. Durneen may well delight scholars but not in a showy way that might deter a fledgling reader. Drawing on and subverting traditional storytelling techniques, she references mythology, including the Bible, theory and the literary canon: ‘closer they drew to fairy stories’ (71).

Durneen frequently writes in first person, in some stories a perspective not immediately revealed until two pages in, when a narrator stops explaining their de facto subject. Most are focalised through limited or selective third person point of view. At least two are written in second person and without strain. In ‘Let it Out’ she directly addresses the reader, compelling them to listen, as if it matters, and in confessional, declarative and confidential tone:

This is the thing that happened to you and Claudine L, two summers ago, when you were on exchange in Buenos Aires. Your Drama and Therapy Year. You weren’t going to talk about it, ever, but what the hell. (83)

Hospitals and places of palliative care, bars and rooms in colonial places with Old Towns, and iconic writerly places (Buenos Aires, Paris, Berlin Zoo), especially beside the sea (old Goa, Tangiers, The Flaming Sword Hotel, Eden) offer moody settings.

Death, love and language are common subjects, relationships in crisis and the mutual incomprehension that results a common theme. The narratives take many surprising turns, deepen and draw back in a way that may delight a literary reader: references to music, art, books, history, architecture. Take it or leave it, Durneen loves language, her narratives

unapologetically rich, literary, and subversive, her synapses firing off in a lot of directions (popular, scholarly, poetic, playful and profane), but always brought under control by mood and plot. The stories also capture the zeitgeist in all its absurdity: ‘Here is the question: what should I change? My shoes, or my life?’ (117).

There are worldly brands and lists – ‘removed eyelash curlers, twenty Gitanes, a box of tampons’ (97). The description of smoking a joint in ‘This is Eden’ attends to all the senses, evoking mood and place:

the man is holding out a the joint, delicately, like I have seen people hold fragile animals and scale models of famous battle heroes. There is a faint scent of soap about him, lavender cut with something hard and antiseptic. Close up to the bowl I can see the olives are marinated in little pieces of garlic. The way he holds it, the joint, it is almost tender. (187)

Some of the best black humour appears in ‘It Wasn’t Stockhausen’s’ in which Bill Hare and his palliative care nurse Ivy struggle to create the narrative of his death: for instance, ‘Even in the rainforest they still get cancer’ (139); ‘gastronomy bag exploding’ (146); ‘the sedative coursing through his system like a canoe flying over rapids’ (151). In the middle of the night, lucid and desperate with last-stage pain, he begs a story from the nurse, who reluctantly obliges, then when he complains about its poor denouement says, ‘I’m a nurse, not a fucking writer. Oh God. Are you going to report me for that?’ (150).

Generally, the subject of sex is dealt with in beautiful ferocity and irreverence: for example, ‘He waited until the moon was full and fucked her in the dunes’ (183); ‘wants it in the ass’ (203); ‘luminous comet, breasts are hard little onions …’ (206). Sexual choice is closely aligned with feminine freedom.

Suddenly it becomes very important to have tried scuba diving. Suddenly it becomes very important to have eaten shellfish, that have not been boiled continuously for at least three minutes, or to fuck whom you want. (50)

‘And What if it Isn’t’ rages against the quest for romantic love and meaningful sex. Two literary academics on sabbatical in Berlin, ‘both fluent in the language of wild gestures’ and with so much in common, fail to progress their relationship. When the unfaithful wife returns to her husband, her unsent letter conveys her frustrated desire to the reader in a controlled feminist rage:

don’t do it like that. You’re not unblocking a drain. You move your hand in the direction of where he is frantically looking for change, playing a bit of Spanish guitar, what even is it? You move your legs differently, up a bit, back a bit. You imagine gestures of extraordinary wildness that bring another mouth to yours, summon them deep in your prefrontal cortex. Cortex isn’t erotic. You lose it. Your husband sighs, a slow sigh of desire exhausted, so one of you is satisfied. One of you is as good as it gets. (176)
‘To the Men I have Tried to Seduce with Prose’ rants at partner perversity: ‘The question everyone asks about the location of the clitoris is the wrong question. What I am saying is: tell me about winds. Fuck me in the violets above Fiesole (180).

Durneen invents surprising and beautiful images: ‘orchid pink gullies of your lower intestines’ (146).

The city at night is submarine, dark, like a Caspar David Friedrich. I paddle downstream. I slip in and out of streets like they are bays and I am a boat, nudging into harbor. Any floating vessel will do; the Jumblies went to sea in a sieve. I cast out and sail into the centre of the moonlit city and I wear the silence like a fur. (49)

In 2006, literary critic Malcom Knox applied the depictions of birds in books by four successful writers to illustrate his point that in their vivid and particular detail they were signifiers of literary fiction. Durneen has a thing about birds, referencing them indirectly – ‘tipping her head as if to drink from her’ (66), ‘I came at the world from the shadows, hooded and shackled’ (190) and ‘smoke leaves my mouth like a bird ascending’ (188) – and directly – a Festival of Birds and ‘a cloud of birds ascend into an almost perfect arrow before forging ahead on some unseen thermal’ (34, 76). Perhaps because I’m a fellow twitcher I noticed the birds, a lot of them, flying through the texts. And because they enact freedom but are vulnerable, their arrival is often prescient of darkness.

Birds offer Durneen more than scene setting. She is not concerned as much with birds’ birdness, their flapping struggle against the elements, as with their symbolic weight, their everness and their easy deaths: ‘The boy flipped him the bird and backed off, skimmed out into the street. A caesura, broken softly’ (77); ‘Just this morning I saw something when I crossed the street at Solferino, a bird in the road, hit by a car and thrashing into tarmac, its neck and legs broken in opposite directions, like someone had stamped on a clockwork toy’ (105).

The metafictive ‘Everything is Beautiful is Far Away’ carries all Durneen’s trademark signs: darkness, yearning, the turning of the intellect to art: ‘Today the sheet is a breathing sheet of lead. The entire sea is a stone, shattering. I am out of metaphors. The sea is just the sea’ (54).

You don’t know why people have such a problem with clichés. Clichés are about the truest things you know. It is as if the world was simultaneously nodding when you hear the words the rain lashed at the windows. It says: your loss is enormous. It says: even the weather is crying for you. You would have to be living on Mars not to know this. (99)

I let myself break the dark pools of his eyes, allowing the cliché because what the hell. (135)

Going back through the stories I wonder why I have marked so few negative notes and it is because I am scratching to find any: a few typos, one awkward phrase. The poem that prefaces the work seems utilitarian but pleasure in the ensuing writing soon overtakes any initial misgivings. A harsher critic might suggest the text is over-laden with references or that
Durneen’s dialectic verges on passivity or nihilism, but dark energy also offers surprises and pace.

Like the protagonist in ‘And What if it Isn’t’ Durneen has orchestrated her ‘contest of wild gestures! ... sexier than it sounds’ in this collection (172). She offers the bounce and strut of someone who knows language and whose mind runs in all directions at once – she is a reader, a thinker, a liver, in all intensity— ‘It’s the sort of truth you can’t put in a story because who would believe it’ is stated in an ironic way (109). This debut publication may bring good fortune to independent publisher MidnightSun because, despite the title, the writing is taut and strong and well-crafted. Durneen may not need to gesture quite so wildly now that she is launched, albeit from the Antipodes.

Gay Lynch
Laura Bloom, *The Cleanskin* (The Author People, 2016)

How irresistible to review a novel that shares an almost identical title with your own: *Cleanskin* (2006), but in any case, Laura Bloom’s very accomplished third novel *The Cleanskin* differs from mine in subject and style.

According to her acknowledgments, *The Cleanskin* is a work of fiction. It lightly draws on the assassination of Belfast human rights lawyer Pat Finucane, and on the Murphy Affair, during which a Sydney judge was subjected to a campaign of smear and innuendo, over accusations that he perverted the course of justice. He was convicted and later released upon appeal.

The death of Martin McGuinness, Irish terrorist turned political peace-broker, on 21 March this year reminds us of the thin line between idealism and terrorism. Bloody atrocities carried out under his leadership of the IRA will never be forgotten by the families of McGuinness’s victims. And yet, and yet, there is always more to the story. A revolutionary would name political contradictions. Would the present détente between the British and Irish Governments have held as long without the agency of McGuinness, in particular his manipulation of key figures, in back rooms? The essential dilemmas raised in Bloom’s novel resonate with the McGuinness story and with other stories in which activists survive their past and reimagine themselves.

Part political and psychological thriller, part *Bildungsroman*, and part analysis of place – 2009 Mullumbimby in the Northern Rivers area of NSW, 1992 London, and 1980s Sydney – *The Cleanskin* is set out non-chronologically. The climactic London scenes remind me of bag searches conducted to avert Irish terrorism during my 1970s visits to the British Houses of Parliament. And in March 2017, the symbolic significance of the Parliamentary site is once more underlined, as a target for terrorism carried out by a disgruntled, lone male who suffered racism as the descendent of an historically different, colonised people. Bloom’s narrative traverses the complex subject of terrorism and its links with politics, religion, class and zealotry. With particular reference to gender, she puts activist bullying, naivety and betrayal, under the social justice microscope.

The driving question uppermost in a thriller reader’s mind might be, how do youthful rebels fortunate enough to evade the law and stay alive, begin again without further damaging their family or their sanity? For a reader of psychoanalytic bent, Bloom’s treatment of Freud’s drives, sex and death, may be uppermost: ‘Sex is the ultimate connecting, Megan used to think back then. Maybe killing is, thought Halley now’ (67%).

Male activists have always exploited, as cannon fodder, young women who believe they are equals in an unequal world. Educated or politicised, beloved or scorned by their father, these girls overcome their terror to act as bravely as any man. Susan Errington’s historical novel *Ice Letters* (2015), albeit set in a different era, would make an excellent companion text to *The Cleanskin*. A secondary theme recurs through Bloom’s narrative: what happens to the sons of silenced or murdered heroes and sheroes, particularly during late capitalism. In some families, the pursuit of pleasure and micro-managed materialism can blunt their children’s passion and personal drive; in others it can fire them up.

Bloom weaves three historical times to create her novel narrative, which is also roughly divided into three sections. The story opens in 2009 when Irish Aidan swoops into Mullumbimby on his Ducati, seeking an informant on The Cause who has gone underground.

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1 As I read this book on my Kindle page numbers were not available, so I have provided percentages to show the approximate location of the quotes.

We glimpse the town as it comes into view, but his gaze is summative, cursory, he is on a mission and, from the beginning, there is a sense of urgency, a continually quickening pace. By the end of the chapter we know crime and time has been done, and that a few surprises await protagonist Halley, who has been off the map in Mullum, where she runs a café with her husband and son.

The novel then backtracks to 1989 Sydney where privileged Megan is reaching puberty, aroused and shocked by new feelings and several surprising family events. Bloom’s Sydney scenes also commence on a note of high political drama. Megan’s father, the highest-ranking Irish Catholic barrister in New South Wales, abandons his appeal against conviction for influencing a court case, for both idealistic and venal reasons. The family’s privileged life within a large house overlooking the harbour, with magazine décor, a private jetty to dock the boat, a Mercedes and BMW in the driveway, expensive food and entertainment, gardeners and housekeepers, counterpoints the whole-food, natural product, unmaterialistic karmic ethos of Mullumbimby. In 1989, Megan is 17 and she makes things happen: when an older boy visits to comfort her after father’s arrest, she kisses him. Bloom writes astutely at the beginning of the novel about the Catholic ethos of hard work and lived justice that Megan exemplifies, along with her privilege, although witness and action haven’t quite reached her consciousness.

When she receives the call at Youth Group, less the call to God than to make things right for the underprivileged kids she meets there and to be with leader Dom:

The contrast between their lives and hers made Megan feel like crying.
‘I want to do something,’ she’d say fiercely when she got home.
‘Do well at school. Go to university and change things’, her father would say like a chant.
(11%).

Bloom also captures the complexity of a quasi-hippy community that is never simply a place of respite. The township of Mullumbimby, 35 kilometres from Byron Bay, is an idyllic tourist village located at the base of a mountain, surrounded by forests, creeks and rivers and close to the coast. Iggy Azalea was raised here. Bloom paints a sympathetic portrait of the idealism in the community, the artistic bent of many of its citizens, the slow pace of life, the alternative foods, remedies and lifestyles but she also beards the hippies in their den. Mullum, as the quasi-ocker locals name it, also has the lowest vaccination rate for children in Australia. Fewer than 50% of two to five year olds are fully vaccinated, raising the ire of the medical profession, aiming for national herd immunity.

At 37, Halley acts out her passions in Mullum, in timetable slots as short as Pilates’ sessions. She is smart and sexy and strong. But her thoughts are tempered by complex analyses of relationships and self. Millennial readers should love her intelligence and drive, her obsessive overthinking, her dark regrets over a past that, despite hereditary idealism, went wrong.

Liam, Aiden and Dom, the three Irish brothers and antagonists, were victims of crime because their lawyer father was gunned down in their home in Belfast during the Irish Troubles. Each is intriguing in his own way. A church social worker, a student, an actor turned activist, they appear as rugged individualists rather than conventional romantic heroes. One of them wants to overturn the patriarchy, colonial in particular, but to install his own version, rather than rid the world of toxic masculinity. One of them imposes moral strictures and a caring paternalism that undermines the protagonist’s autonomy to disastrous effect. All of them are damaged by family secrets and lies.

As the title suggests, the protagonist is a cleanskin, and she suffers the usual exploitations. This is a timely book, showing the way young idealistic people can be radicalised. Young
Megan begins pragmatically: ‘It was quaint to her, the way he seemed to think this was about religion’ (8%).

Despite its 240 pages, the narrative romps along, occasionally simmering at a dangerous level of tension when inevitable actions are delayed but not ultimately thwarted. Bloom is adept at adapting register and never bores. Her dialogue is never banal. In each community, conversation acts as dialectic to deepen the reader’s understanding of the characters’ moral and psychological stands and it is richly conceptualised. Game theory, referenced as a paradox, ultimately brings players unstuck because maintaining their *modus operandi* only works statistically (60%). While reversals in the narrative often surprise, violent precedents remind the reader that luck aside, these characters will act in dangerous ways, even against their best interests.

Bloom wields language with energy and precision, pausing only to create deft metaphors that amplify mood: ‘the labels were pasted on, and the blame was laid, and the past with its secrets and its riddles settled between them like a raven into its nest’ (14%).

She harnesses lyricism almost entirely to further plot. In this extract, Aidan is about to disclose the details of a terrible revelation:

> Aidan focused on breathing deeply, looking out at the fast flowing river. The sandy shoreline was empty of people as evening approached, the mountains behind Mullumbimby fading away into a wash of deep purple. A mist rose from the water, blending blue into green into the gold of the river merging into the horizon. (58%)

Part 2 contains many twists and turns, and double and triple crossings, until when everyone seems complicit, especially one of them in particular, the reader finally discovers, like Halley, that there is no moral high ground upon which to stand. All relationships are contaminated by political machinations. Tragedy after tragedy ensues. In the end, Halley’s husband, a supra-analyst who chooses silence, offers hope for their future.

Although disconcerting, initial unease about the price parents pay for losing their children must be weighed against the destructive power of civil war, political flight to the other side of the world, and the complex secrets that lie within even the best units. Bloom is psychologically insightful: ‘Just this short irritation brought Nuala back to life. Her river of words, like a weather pattern you entered, swirling around you with a logic and energy of its own’ (57%).

The novel reminds us that our past can come back to bite us, even in a small community of blow-ins with poor social security records. Publisher The Author People is a newish independent press with a small list but they should stay with Bloom who is a fine writer. Even should *The Cleanskin* fail to achieve brilliant sales, because of limited promotion resources rather than its readability, the book deserves to appear on prize lists.

**Gay Lynch**
Michelle Cahill, *Letter to Pessoa and Other Short Fictions* (Giramondo, 2016).

Having signed at least three well-received books of poetry into the world, Michelle Cahill, established poet, sometime essayist, medical practitioner, and founding editor of *Mascara* (whose journal mandate is to publish migrant, Indigenous, and Asian-Australian work), has released her first compilation of short fiction. Cahill’s multiple and widely-ranging experience and talent infuse the oneiric volume with a dense heterogeneity: captivatingly cultivated, albeit sometimes to the point of sounding, looking, or seeming overly-contrived in its efforts to display a cutting-edge ‘post-something’ contemporaneity.

This inaugural collection of 24 often epistolary and regularly auto-bio-travel-stories begins with the titular letter to Pessoa and ends with ‘A Miko Coda’: a tail and coda-tale historically and etymologically derived from western traditions of musical composition (the 24 preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys J.S. Bach published as *The Well-Tempered Clavier* comes to mind, as does its successor, the *Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues*), here infused with a swirl of Shinto orthographics from the jinja priestess, female shaman, or shrine maiden, ‘infinite possibility of hypertext’ (239).

Permeated by eastern spiritualism or by an autobiographically accidental even occidental desire for such experience (where and into what familial lineage one is born is literally not a matter of choice for the neonate), the genre-migrating collection traverses the geographical spaces of a global and trans-national world based in the Asia-Pacific (Cahill’s home base of Sydney serves extensively as backdrop) with variously simulated visits elsewhere also: to Europe and the British Isles, for instance, but also to South America and the United States, parts of Africa and elsewhere outside the Asian places the collection commonly visits (India, Thailand, Nepal, Hong Kong). Throughout the collection various reading gestures attend textual migrations from place to place, and explicitly single out several more or less migrant writers born in and moving among disparate world-wide addresses: Fernando Pessoa, of course, and, for brief example favouring still better-known writers writing here and there in some sort of exile: Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Jacques Derrida, and J.M. Coetzee (one could also include Jean Genet, travelling writer and sometime French Foreign Legionnaire titularly alluded to by David Bowie’s ‘The Jean Genie’1:1 exemplary as counter-culture icons both, along with Neil Young, who also makes an appearance as addressee in the collection, or Kurt Cobain, co-founder of grunge musical group Nirvana, who gets a collection mention [139]).

Like Cahill herself, who in a *Muse India* interview speaks of ‘the writer’ as an ‘artist who is always an exile,’2 most of the writers singled out above as denizens of her fiction are exemplary for their transnational experience, and for the birth or life of their writing ‘in exile.'

Salman Rushdie identifies migration as unremarkably central to twentieth-century experience. Indeed, writing in some sort of migratory exile has never been an unusual circumstance. Textuality, etymologically linked to tapestry weaving as a potentially mobile home, has known migrancy from the beginning. And, despite some always attendant sense of loss, writing in exile (a state the once-migratory Edward Said has keenly and carefully celebrated as a potentially ‘potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture’) has often been an especially productive

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experience. For confirmation, one needs only to add James Joyce and Samuel Beckett to the names previously listed.

Although Beckett presents a special case, none of these writers, dead or alive, Cahill included, have immediately faced the devastating plight of migration in its most brutally war- and poverty-induced manifestations, to which Cahill sometimes alludes in her collection, most notably in a brace of stories continguously presented nearly half way through. ‘A Wall of Water’ tells the story of a family’s migration to Australia as focalised through a character identified by book’s end as one of Cahill’s (Pessoan) ‘heteronyms’. The story begins and ends with one of the narratively much later Australian Christmas Island disasters in which – this time – 50 refugees die. This is a story economically framed by ‘grief for those [who] drowned and [for] those who survived: Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds’ (72). The adjacent and unusually brief narrative, ‘Sleep Has No Home,’ ferries us into the memory-experience of a young girl who has survived an attack by the Mehdi in post-Saddam Iraq, and who ends up joining the scramble of migrants reduced to having ‘no country, no certificates, no money left to pay the rebels’; in this state, the girl joins potential survivors whose ‘tongues burn with a story we cannot speak’ (76). The brevity of the story (matched only by the collection’s coda and one other story in the collection, a ‘Letter to Derrida’) is telling: that Cahill directly and explicitly does no more with the migrant disaster erupting around us is to her credit – this is not exactly her story to tell any more than the story (fictionalised this way or that) of Derrida’s non-death.

But there are other stories of migration to tell, the telling of which is likely itself always to be some kind of migrant act that in this case implicitly, willingly, links Cahill to Borges and Nabokov – born 1899 in the West and the East respectively, who in their teens migrated under some pressure from one cardinal point to the other and, later, at least partially back again – and to the Africans of European descent from her named list of letter-receiving writers: Derrida, who saw himself as an ‘Algerian exile,’ and Coetzee, widely quoted on his self-expatriation to Australia as saying that he has not left South Africa as much as he has ‘come to Australia’. Cahill too was born in Africa – Kenya in her case – though by chiasmic reversal she received her earliest schooling in London, while her titularly epistolary recipient, born in Portugal a decade or so before Borges and Nabokov, received his formative education in Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Like her older and better-known African-Australian compatriot, Coetzee, and like those other now dead writers she welcomes to her collection, Cahill is strictly speaking neither a refugee nor an exile; but she too clearly knows something about what it takes to make writing one’s home irrespective of one’s actual location: migratory writers of this kind take their cue, knowingly or otherwise, from the exiled writer Theodor Adorno of Minima Moralia, a morally-imbued text informed, as Said puts it, by Adorno’s ‘belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing,’ a home lodged, that is, in the kind of writing able to ‘cross borders,’ and to ‘break barriers of thought and experience’: a ‘nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal’ exile of writing.6

Crisscrossing thus and thus chiasstically crossing from place to place and person to person, often in pursuit of other writers, and going into exile from her first practice of poetry per se, Cahill’s lettered stories and storied letters spread themselves around the already-mentioned brace

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6 Said 184 and 186.

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of core entries carefully approaching twenty-first century migration disasters as if the arrayed stories too, like the protagonist of ‘Fever’, are ‘destined to be in transit, on temporary visas’ (200), or as if they were ‘fragments of the mirror, as the ‘Letter to Pessoa’ puts it by way of beginning (4), reminding us readers of Pessoa’s ‘heteronyms’ (5) as we prepare to embark on a journey: ‘A train leaves this evening for Lisboa Oriente’ (5). Thus prepared for a trip, readers begin the following story, ‘Biscuit,’ in which they will meet ‘Crust,’ probably expecting by way of the collection’s title this green-eyed Kenyan Sokoke cat ‘born west of Nairobi in a dusty town’, who knows Swahili (7) and writes (9) by dipping her claw into a pot of sepia ink, to somehow connect Cahill’s native Kenya with Pessoa’s native Portugal and formative African years, perhaps all mediated by Cahill’s self-identified Goan Anglo-Indian heritage, given that Goa, one of the former Portuguese enclaves in India ceased to be Portuguese only in 1961 (when it was taken from Portugal by Indian military action).

But this is not to be. Crust bears witness to an intensification of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya – synecdochic anti-colonial African effort – and ends up on a plane en route to Australia. Crust, it counter-intuitively turns out, is not a Cahill heteronym (as identified by the ‘Notes’ appended to the collection). These latter are all human, and the connections are not especially motivated. ‘Sarita’ heads the list of Cahill’s ‘other selves, heteronyms in the Pessoan sense’ (245), and Sarita is indeed the focalising agent for the previously-mentioned ‘A Wall of Water’, which takes place in India and an Australia suffused by ‘jacarandas’ that ‘flowered during exam time at Sydney Uni’ (67) – emblematic flowers native to Brazil that have come to identify so much of the Southern Hemisphere – where Sarita ‘canvasses against racism and mandatory detention’ (68), and whence she ‘absorbs the latest update on the Christmas Island disaster’ (70). So Sarita is closer to Cahill than, understandably, is Nasrin, the focalizing agent of ‘Sleep Has No Home’: but why the need for Pessoan heteronyms if this is just a case of all writing being more or less autobiographical? Sarita appears again as a momentarily ‘homesick’ Sydney inhabitant (81) visiting Nepal while trying to rid herself of entanglement with yet another named heteronym, ‘Logan’ (‘The Sadhu’), but the link between this Sarita and the previous one is inconsequential in any heteronymic sense, an inconsequence underscored by the narratively unmotivated linkage to the heteronym named Logan, who might (or might not) be the unnamed narrating protagonist of the next story, ‘Disappearing’; such complications complicate themselves to little satisfaction and ‘heteronymically’ continue to confuse some following stories: ‘Finding the Buddha,’ for example, which supposedly orchestrates into the mix a ‘Jo’ in relationship with a ‘Luke’ – both unhelpfully identified as heteronyms in the concluding ‘Note’ at text’s end. Then comes some sort of reprise of ‘Borges and I’. Under Borges’s pen, this is a breath-takingly brief adventure into writing that resembles and resists autobiography. Cahill’s version is about fifty-fold the delicate length of the Borges original – about twice as long as ‘Funes, the Memorious’ and closer to the length of ‘Garden of Forking Paths’ – and it affords little or nothing to approximate the affect and effect of any of the three Borges works.

Cahill’s collection of storied letters is likely to resonate with contemporary readers, especially perhaps with youngish readers and with that youngish-part in all of us no longer young. For all readers it is likely to cause some pause here and there as it no doubt should do: the blogging and the sexting of the more or less auto-but-unnamed protagonist who wipes ‘the secretions off her body turning the dribble into ink’ (‘Dirty Ink’ 21), takes place alongside a later and more charmingly quirky letter to singer-songwriter Neil Young, which twice turns to lyrics from Young’s Rust Never Sleeps tour of 1978, citing ‘Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black),’ from which Kurt Cobain borrowed for his suicide note one of the same lines Cahill quotes in italics: ‘It’s better to burn out, than to fade away’ (146).
Cahill’s collection will open doors to readers who are – for whatever reason – not yet familiar with some or all of the writers she follows, and might prompt some research inquiry into attendant geo-historical situations not universally known. But for those who already know Larkin’s ‘Aubade’ – or Pessoa’s The Book of Disquiet, Borges’s ‘Borges and I,’ Derrida’s oeuvre and hors d’oeuvre, Coetzee’s Disgrace, or Różewicz’s Mother Departs – Cahill the writer of prose has less, perhaps little, even nothing, to add to the record (though, for that record, I find myself charmed by the ‘Letter to Coetzee,’ moved by the ‘Letter to Tadeusz Rózewicz’ [sic], and touched by ‘Duende,’ a tribute to Lorca more than to Hemingway; I find myself variously intrigued also by other, previously-mentioned migrant stories that make up this collection, sometimes – to their credit – by not so desperately depending on precursor stories). Neither as memorious as Borges nor as melodious as Bach, then – but who could reach such heights again? – the collection offers itself as another embroidered stitch in the record of migrant tapestry-fabrication.7

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7 Woven tapestries, from which weaving activity the word ‘text’ derives, can be thought of as portable homes, part of some versions of the migrant experience from the beginning. See Joseph Koerner, ‘Tapestries’ in William Kentridge, Thick Time (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016) 48-55. Kentridge tapestries collaboratively articulated with the Stephens Tapestry Studio, formerly of Swaziland but now located in Diepsloot, South Africa, regularly and compellingly concern themselves with migration – as does much of Kentridge’s work in other media.
Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. Twenty-two New Asian Short Stories (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2016)

When asked in 1898 about the most significant political fact in modern history, the German statesman Otto von Bismarck reportedly said: The fact that North Americans speak English. The manifold American dominance in the post-World War years has consolidated the colonial implantation of English in the former British colonies as well as taken it farther afield. Consequently, its world-wide spread in the wake of the British Empire has persisted within different cultures. It is increasingly used internationally in business, diplomacy, professional publications, the communications industry, the entertainment industry, and so forth, to the point where national exposure to English in societies has seeped into their intimate domains. The Asian scene of English, too, is characterised by profuse and variegated growth in its adaptation, acculturation and nativisation. The unique vitality of English in Asia is evidenced by a substantial body of literature flourishing in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Nepal and Hong Kong. The book under review is an authentic sampler of the current creative attempts in English by the writers of Asian origin.

To be sure, English has uneven spread in Asia, which consists of 48 countries. Statistically speaking, writers from the eight countries in Mohammad A. Quayum’s anthology where there is a sustained English writing tradition, constitute only one-sixth of the vast continent: they are apparently a tiny cluster. However, they are fairly representative of the Asian culture in that no language other than English has a pan-Asian presence. Major languages indigenous to Asian countries such as Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay and Bengali have large number of mother-tongue speakers but they are more or less limited to unilingual monoliths in linguistically and culturally pluralistic Asian societies. Although English lacks genetic nativeness in Asia, it has functional nativeness fortified by its status as an official or second language almost throughout the continent. With its prolonged presence the language has shed its distance-marking otherness and acquired a variety of daunting dimensions, including the creative processes at various levels to articulate intimate experience and concerns.

The short stories in Quayum’s anthology by Asian writers – one each from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal and Pakistan; four from the Philippines, five from Singapore and eight from India – exemplify supple use of English in depicting slices of Asian society and culture. These stories are not plotty narratives with complex and elaborate sequence of events. They are well-crafted empirical observations wedded to emotionally appropriate modes of human life. The representational exactitude leavened by humour and comedy in R.K. Biswas’ story, ‘Mail for Dadubhai’, Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind’s ‘The Idiot’s Guide to the Indian Arranged Marriage’, and Migs Bravo-Dutt’s ‘Must Love Dog’ is unmistakable. ‘Male for Dadubhai’ is written in an epistolary mode, with exchanges of letters between an elderly grandfather in Kolkata and his grandson in New Jersey. Lavanya Arvind’s story is a stimulating and perceptive satire on the mode of settling arranged marriages and the patriarchal values entrenched therein. The panoply of matrimonial negotiations exposes the attendant wily pretensions. ‘Must Love Dog’ is an amusing fabulation of a dog’s life for conveying an oblique moral message. Almost all the stories are traditional narratives except an experimental tweak in the chronological sequence of Damayanti Biswas’s ‘The Makeup Man’. Damayanti conflates seamlessly and ingeniously the narratives of Kajale, a young, ambitious Mumbai-based journalist, of Govind, a money-grubbing beggar in Mumbai’s lucrative location, and of Nitya, a talented actress perilously hooked on Bollywood’s meretricious hype and superficial swell.

In their varied portrayals Asian women prominently figure in Jessica Tan’s ‘Dragon Girl’ and Nandini Sen’s ‘Bonti’. Further, religion as a basic cultural mooring in multi-faith Asian societies animates these narratives. Quite a few stories feature this dominant cultural marker, particularly Muhammad Nasrullah Khan’s ‘In Search of God’, Stephanie Han’s ‘My Friend Faith, 1977’ and Barnali Saha’s ‘Hidden Riches’. The edifying import of Saha’s story is that we all have soul, a part of the imperishable divinity or a piece of Brahman within us, superior to material treasure that the protagonist is seeking to overcome his family’s poverty and deprivations. Overwhelmed by materialism, human beings tend to ignore the Ultimate Reality of the universe. Multi-religious strains in miniature are depicted in Cherrie Sing’s ‘Ghost Dreams’ with a message about the basic human values of love and trust in all religions. A variation on this theme is evident in ‘In Search of God’ which underlines ecumenical faith across diverse religious communities. A simple and unorthodox character, Dewaia, looks beyond the horizons of his fellow Muslims in line with the rich spiritual tradition in the subcontinent. Religious abuse by a polygamous and lascivious Muslim cleric is portrayed in Razia Sultana Khan’s ‘The Mollah’s Revenge’. This finely nuanced tale of an upright, innocent but defiant Muslim woman, Izam, engages an extremely tendentious and palpably moving issue in Islam and highlights entrenchment of gender and traditional inequities with pluck and call on all their courage to face the ordeals with stubborn persistence. Some, in contrast, are strong and fairly feisty. They defy the restrictions of gender and traditional inequities with pluck and call on all their courage to face the ordeals with stubborn persistence. Nandini C. Sen’s ‘Bonti’ tells the tale of Jochan and his daughter, Nabobita. Jochan is not a man of means but he dreams big for his daughter’s education. His colleagues are amused. His factory boss in Asansol feels insulted because his children studied in the same school where Nabonita has been placed. Even Jochan’s wife, Maya, is uneasy with her daughter’s liberated grooming and finds her ‘wayward’ and difficult to deal with. Eventually Nabonita’s dreams are shattered when she is sexually abused by her uncle, Maya’s affluent Calcutta-based brother-in-law, masquerading as a generous and kind caregiver. The crestfallen girl slashes her uncle’s neck with ‘bonti’, a kitchen knife, and drifts away in a brutalised and cynical state.

The stories in this collection have distinct thematic flavour and stylistic elan. Barun Bajracharya’s portrayal of an indigent Nepali young boy in ‘Bishnumati Blues’ is engaging. Campus life figures in ‘Unnecessary Fictions’ as well as in Priscilla Macansantos’ story, set in the Philippines, and in Yeo Wei Wei’s ‘The National Bird of Singapore’. In the latter, the grasping syndrome of kiasu or highly competitive Singaporeans interwoven with the unpleasant elements of the country’s education system is skilfully evoked. ‘Detour’ by Glenn Diaz deals with political shenanigans in the Philippines. A multi-coloured sliver of Asian culture is offered in these stories. Their plot lines are causal and chronological, rather than strikingly experimental.
This collection of short stories is a sequel to Quayum’s earlier anthology, *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (2010). In this offering, he has rounded up many fresh contributors, adding to the quality and variety of Asian writing in English. These narratives are a valuable resource for studying transplanted varieties and diffusion of English in various degrees, in addition to revealing literary perspectives on Asian society and culture. Taken together, the two anthologies call for a conceptualisation of the dimensions of Asia’s English. They may well become a prelude to an Asian canon of the language.

Murari Prasad
How does one go about the impossible task of capturing on paper the essence of living in India? How does one answer the question: how do you like India? A difficult question for most westerners who visit India – but for Anne Benjamin who married an Indian and went to live and work there in the 1980s, it’s even more profound.

To answer this question is part of the challenge that Benjamin faces in her new book, *Saffron and Silk*. She quotes Nehru to explain the difficulty of the task: ‘To endeavour to understand and describe India today would be the task of a brave man – to say anything about tomorrow’s India would verge on rashness.’

Benjamin’s portrayal of India, in particular Chennai and rural villages, plunges the reader into the glorious unpredictability, the bustling momentum and energy, the faces, colours, sounds, aromas, flavours, bureaucracy, dust and heat of South India. As I have had the pleasure of staying in India many times, and having a favourite Anglo-Indian great-aunt whose mother’s family came from Madras (now Chennai), Benjamin’s recreation of the landscape made me feel I was there.

I was fascinated by Benjamin’s honest yet empathic appraisals of remote villages and the many problems faced by the residents: lack of water supply, poor quality soil, lack of roads and transport, poor health and low literacy, to name a few. To experience the extreme poverty in India first-hand is, as she warns, ‘not for the faint-hearted’. Neither does she resile from revealing the danger and fear of oppression and violence that await those who attempt to make changes to improve the lives of those living in poverty, especially women.

Dr Anne Benjamin is Honorary Professor, Australian Catholic University and Honorary Fellow of the University of Western Sydney. She realises early on that her role is to listen and learn, to give support to their ‘reasonable and modest requests’ when required rather than to impose ideas of western-style solutions. Language is a huge barrier, not least in remote villages where people speak in regional dialects of minority languages. The *Adivasi* people in Andhra Pradesh comprise ‘about thirty-three different groups, each with its own system of sub-groups. Each community has its own culture, traditions, crafts, livelihood and dialect’ (146). While English and Hindi are official Indian languages, many regional Indians are not literate in these languages. She wasn’t ‘cued in to the Indian variant of English’ in her early days there. On the topic of languages, Benjamin also discusses how she learnt to recognise differences in people’s skills with spoken and written communication in various languages. For example, a person may speak a language but not be able to write it down; or may be able to write fluently but not have pronunciation skills or enough confidence to speak the language.

Benjamin is not afraid to reveal her inner thoughts and conflicts in this narrative. This insight into how she sifts through the many experiences to find meaning and purpose is illuminating. As a western woman she is often ignored by men there. Among the women, though, she finds mutual curiosity and is moved by their welcome and generosity in sharing whatever they have and in trying their best to communicate with her. The challenges local women face and the practical ways in which they slowly and painstakingly improve the daily life for those in their village – with such little support and sometimes hindrance – is admirable.

Women move in and across the pages of this book. Some are from India’s rich past like the mythical Kannagi; some are her modern day counterpart, the fierce Kasiamma; others like the nameless Lambada gypsy in the remote settlement in Andhra Pradesh; others like Rosie and her ilk, who serve the smooth running of household life; there are women from
wealth and privilege, gracious and ungracious; there are the two wives between whose words we lived for most of my time in Chennai. Women have left their fingerprints all over this story as they have imprinted the story of India. Their lives are entwined, entangled with each other and with my life there. (175)

Benjamin’s time living in India occurred during some major political events, including the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which set off riots across the subcontinent, and the subsequent Sikh massacre. Waves of extreme violence and bloodshed spread throughout India. There were also corporate disasters such as the Union Carbide accident at Bhopal. ‘According to the Indian Council for Medical Research, nearly all the people in the area most severely affected by the gas leak (up to 86 percent) were from the poorest class in Bhopal’ (90). The site was contaminated with ‘chemicals that continue to poison the groundwater’. She doesn’t shy away from the fear and horror that these events unleashed nor the soul-searching that these generated.

What must it be like to go each day to a poisoned well and draw the water you need for your family – for washing, cooking, drinking? The poor know what the chemicals have done to hundreds of thousands of their family. They have no other option. That is poverty. (91)

Benjamin also experienced major personal events, such as her marriage to Susai (Benjamin) and the birth of her first child in India. Her resilience in the face of homesickness, language barriers, lack of cooking skills and often loneliness is remarkable. Nonetheless, I felt that Benjamin skirted around some of these more personal important events. I would like to know more about her relationship leading up to her marriage. In one paragraph, Benjamin writes: ‘When I left India after two months, I had seen enough’. She had ‘an armoury of reasons’ why she shouldn’t pursue her ‘interest in this man any further’. By the end of this paragraph, they made ‘a stunning bridal couple’ (8).

Her major focus, though, is the work that she and Susai undertake in Madras through a non-government organisation ‘committed to development of the poor and disadvantaged’. This grass-roots assistance directly helps remote villagers to improve their living conditions. It enables them to plan, develop and execute their programs to reach their particular goals, in their own way and on their own terms. The programs also provide training and employment for those working with them to ensure the continuity of the programs. One of Benjamin’s roles has been to assess the results of these programs. She has published widely and has returned to writing following nine years as Executive Director of Schools in the Diocese of Parramatta, NSW, Australia.

The narrative could have benefitted from further editing, especially with regard to chronology, to avoid repetition and give more of a sense of continuity. However, this is a minor distraction in a very readable and elucidating book.

Sharon Rundle

Tim Winton spent his childhood in suburbia and on Australia’s west coast as described in his autobiography *Land’s Edge* (1993). He wrote his way to become the darling of Australian readers who enjoy his rich prose that evokes the south-western landscape of his native land. He can be regarded as a writer who has a close affinity with the people and especially the land that he holds in high regard in his stories. Winton’s coastal narratives invariably vividly depict rural communities functioning in harmony with the beach culture.

Like many other major Aussie writers-cum-ecological pioneers – Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Judith Wright (who is quoted in the book’s epigraphs), Xavier Herbert and Patrick White – and contemporary activists such as Richard Flanagan, Tim Winton does not hesitate to write about sensitive environment-related subjects, such as marine conservation in his novel *Shallows* (1984).

*Island Home: A Landscape Memoir*, whose title is a blatant homage to Neil Murray’s popular song on Australia that was originally performed by the Indigenous Warumpi Band, partakes of this preservation culture by being more than just a provocative memoir on the ravages of time impacting on the environment.

The notion that there is some kind of geographical determinism testifying to the influence of geography on people is not new and was mainly propounded by Christopher Koch. To him, geography is a great shaper which has allowed those Australians who were the sons and daughters of cool-climate people to re-invent themselves as warm-climate people:

> We have begun to be a new, culturally distinct people. Of course, we are a European people essentially and, of course, the consciousness that comes to us from Europe is still here. But I think we've reached the point where living in a different landscape, a different hemisphere, has produced a different consciousness.¹

Tim Winton, though, is not concerned with international politics, nor with the Asian-Pacific region. His focus is more domestic, if not personal, fathoming the cultural, genetic and psychological impact of the Australian land:

> I’m increasingly mindful of the degree to which geography, distance and weather have moulded my sensory palate, my imagination and expectations. The island continent has not been mere background. Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geographically as family. Like many Australians, I feel this tectonic grind – call it a familial ache – most keenly when abroad. (10)

In a string of essays subdivided into ten sections and spanning over 30 years of reflections arranged more thematically than chronologically, Tim Winton makes an uncompromising plea for a more sustainable world whose conscientious long-term planning and ecobuilding strategies would curb the severe damage caused by not-so-well-planned urbanisation:

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Like most kids I didn’t imagine places had pasts. Even when I saw landforms and habitats gradually scraped away I didn’t register the change for what it was. I didn’t understand how permanent the forfeits would be. Humans break in order to build. And of course loss is an inevitable part of making, creating and surviving. But in exchange for what we surrender we surely have a right to expect something worthwhile, something good – developments that are mindful of their footprint, buildings that are sensitive to landscape, planning that considers the underlying cost and values change that’s sustainable. Business leaders love to rhapsodize about ‘a culture of excellence’ but if our citizens are any indication of the fruits of their labours, they seem content to bulldoze beauty and replace it with crap. (48)

Like most life-writing subsets (i.e. biography and autobiography), this memoir will effortlessly convince readers of its ecological cause through the intimacy it creates with its readership and emotional fusion, using what Susan Keen has labelled ‘ambassadorial strategic empathy [which] addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.’ No doubt that the sense of sharing the author’s innermost feelings in all sincerity will vouchsafe for readers’ emotional involvement and increase their responsiveness, thus contributing to effect social change.

Evidence shows that books have a definite impact on people. Some books like Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763) and Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964) take on a consolation value, hence accounting for the fact that they have quickly made the bestseller list in France after the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and on the Bataclan. Other books become symbols of resistance, which was the case of Lafayette’s *The Princess de Clèves* (1678) after President Sarkozy disparagingly commented on the irrelevance of this French psychological novel for civil service entrance exams. It is to be hoped that Winton’s *Island Home* will create a stir and raise greater awareness of the wrong directions Australian society could well take by disregarding the more sustainable options.

Jean-François Vernay

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