Creative and Life Writing

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Complete Book Reviews.  

‘When you travel across the ocean on a boat, all your memories are washed away and you start a completely new life. That is how it is. There is no before. There is no history. The boat docks at the harbour and we climb down the gangplank and we are plunged into the here and now. Time begins. The clock starts running... ’ (17)

J. M. Coetzee’s latest novel makes for difficult reading. I have read *The Schooldays of Jesus* three times, and each time I pick up a new thread to follow, but am somehow unable to piece together the work’s complete meaning (if there is ‘one meaning’). On the one hand, it references both Russian and Spanish literature (Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*) whilst alluding to the son of God in its title, and on the other, it can be read on its own as a meditation on the concepts of passion and memory. Like in 2013’s *The Childhood of Jesus*, we don’t see Jesus at all and he isn’t mentioned by name. In fact, we might as well be situated in a world where Jesus doesn’t exist, as the characters’ conversations lean toward the philosophical rather than the religious. There is not the slightest mention of religion or prayer. The elusiveness of the book’s titular character leads one to an allegorical reading, rather than a literal one. What the allegory is, though, I cannot be sure. We are privy not to the childhood and schooldays of Jesus the son of God, but of a self-assured young boy named Davíd, and his parents are not Joseph and The Virgin Mary, but two strangers: the boring middle-aged Simón and the sexless, perhaps virginal, Inés.

At the beginning of *The Schooldays*, the reader is reunited with this unlikely trio as they flee the fictional migrant town of Novilla, in hopes of securing appropriate education for their surrogate son. They arrive in Estrella (Spanish meaning ‘star’), a city described by Simón as having no sensation and no feelings, and are soon directed to the city’s Academy of Dancing. The Academy does not teach traditional maths or writing skills, but instead focuses on dancing as a way of calling down the stars and of embodying certain numbers. These dance lessons are taught by the philosopher-cum-musician Juan Sebastián Arroyo and his beautiful ‘alabaster’ wife señora Ana Magdalena Arroyo (presumably named after Johann Sebastian Bach and his second wife Ana Magdalena), and in different capacities, are accompanied by Dimitri and Alyosha (named after *The Brothers Karamazov*).

I recently heard Coetzee read two chapters of the novel at a conference in London, and was struck to hear that he pronounces the story’s place names using traditional Spanish pronunciations: Novilla is ‘No-vee-ya’, whilst Estrella is pronounced ‘Ess-tre-ya’. Without having read the book, a person could be forgiven for thinking that Coetzee was saying ‘Straya’ – a popular term Australians use to talk about the country we call home. As an Australian, it is very difficult for me to detangle Coetzee’s novel from the time and place where it was written: Adelaide, Australia in the 2000s. I initially read the novels with an increased sensitivity to the fact that Davíd and Simón came to Novilla by boat, whereas one can speculate that if the boat had been set for Australia it probably would have been turned away. According to the Refugee
Council of Australia’s website, ‘Australia is the only country in the world that sends people who come by boat to tiny poor islands, where they are detained and, for some at least, seem to reside there for the rest of their lives’. Whilst Davíd and Simón are not subjected to imprisonment on a small island, their arrival to Novilla is rife with problems, including not having enough money to buy food and having to sleep under a tarp in a government worker’s backyard: it’s a landscape where the government workers are not sympathetic to these new migrants. In this new place they are forced to learn a new language and are washed clean of their memories – so washed clean that when Davíd is separated from his initial travelling companion on the boat, he cannot remember who it was.

Like its predecessor, *The Schooldays* is set during an unspecified place and time, which *Slate* writer Mark O’Connell speculates ‘may or may not be the actual afterlife’. In this incarnation of the world, its inhabitants are forced to learn Spanish – though one wonders how these characters did not lose their sense of language in crossing the water that washed their memories clean.

Novilla is described by O’Connell as a ‘Hispanophone socialist utopia’ where Simón finds employment lifting and moving grains, whereas in Estrella, he earns money by delivering pamphlets advertising products that people don’t need. It could be argued that we are to read the novel as if all the dialogue were actually spoken in Spanish. As for the novel’s setting in time, Ron Charles, reviewing the novel for the *Washington Post*, notes that ‘the technology – cars, radios – suggests the 1930s’, somehow forgetting about Davíd’s previously expressed love of a cartoon mouse who ‘has dog named Plato’. In a letter to Paul Auster Coetzee writes that

> I too have, willy-nilly, become a twenty-first-century person, yet I write books in which people write (and read) letters, books in which the most up-to-date means of communication employed is (now and again) the telephone, which happens to be a nineteenth-century invention.

So, it appears that it would be a fool’s errand to try and situate the novel within a certain time period based on which technologies are prevalent. The most information we are given about Estrella is that it is bigger than Novilla, and has a marketplace, administrative buildings, a modest museum, and an art gallery (2).

Much of the novel’s tension surrounds Davíd’s disavowal of his name, as he tells everyone that he meets that his real name is not Davíd, and that Simón is not his real father. Juan Sebastián suggests that, unlike adults, ‘the child ... still bears impresses of a former life, shadow recollections which he lacks words to express’ (67). It is unclear here if, as O’Connell suggests,

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the passing of an ocean by boat is a metaphor for the soul crossing into the afterlife. When one of the novel’s characters is murdered in a crime of passion, Simón says that in the afterlife she ‘will be able to start afresh, just as you and I did, washed clean of the past, without bad memories to weigh her down’ (163). Much like travelling across water on a boat, the journey from life to afterlife leaves the memory blank. In what might be a tongue-in-cheek move, David – resident of Estrella – proclaims that he doesn’t want to go to the next life, he wants to go to the stars (139).

In my reading and re-reading of J.M. Coetzee’s *The Schooldays of Jesus* I have been provided with many different potential interpretations and a range of ideas to pursue, but am unsure of which tangent deserves more authority – or if any of the things I’ve picked up line up correctly with Coetzee’s vision of his text. I anticipate that a challenge many first-time readers will face is to know what to make of the work, and they might need to go back and read it again. I’m also guessing that Coetzee probably doesn’t care if his readers’ visions of his work align with his own, and that the text’s many possible interpretations are all part of a larger game. After having read it three times, I still don’t know what I think of it. However, I am determined to solve its meaning (even if it doesn’t have one).

**Sienna Barton**  
University of Adelaide

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*The Schooldays of Jesus* by J.M. Coetzee. Sienna Barton.  

Susan Fealy’s poetry volume imparts intricate, visual, moody and surreal subtleties, with the alacrity and refinement of a true philologist. The narratives reconfigure the subject matter, making salient the beautiful, the tender, the refractorily timeless with immersion in experience. Symbolism, allegory, and metaphor are richly deployed throughout the volume. Most certainly, Fealy has a refined appreciation for art, literature, and film; her talent for transmuting these into poetic creations attests to this. The reverence however, rests more in the visual than the existential: even the very sad is still very visually pristine (*Flute of Milk; In Lieu of a Statue*). This somehow denies the potential for a full sense of suffering; the beautiful overrides the tragic, but again, the yearning presides over the beautiful:

The plate-glass windows fledged
a pale galaxy: your skin, your face,
your eyes, quiet and distilled
as the points of stars.

I wish I could have measured you
with a compass and a star chart. (30)

Art, film, nature, and love are recurrent inspirations and themes. Syntax melds with mood. Perhaps Fealy purposefully designed the syntax of her poetry to enhance its content, but if so, it is very subtle. For example, one can sense the lines of traveling blue in these extended ellipses:

Blue eyes do not contain blue—
they just swallow less
blue light—
it travels like bees
into the eyes of another. (19)

Bees visit us again in ‘The Price of Honey.’ The jewelled queen bee is at the centre of a microcosmic drama of oppression. Indeed, she is laden with royalty in her opulent ‘gold-tessellated chamber’ where,

She pulses with eggs
at the heart of this strange
masonry of molten flowers. (40)

In ‘How to Dive in Kelp Forest,’ line endings create pause analogical to the slow movement of the water, the boat on it and the fronds beneath:

The stripes braid together, grow air-filled bulbs, float
each frond towards the surface.
Do not jump into a mess of greenish-gold. Wait for the swing of the boat
to move away … (32)
Similarly, the artful timing of the lines’ endings in ‘Almost Palimpsest’ attends to the suspense and menace of the words; the poem itself bespeaks a terrifying threat that can only grip a writer. The subject and the threat are indeed literally words, that are intensely waiting to be written:

He glimpsed a swarm of shadows like a silence
before a hammering of bees. They massed now
a tumult of black, a writhing meniscus of wings. (39)

‘In the Formal Wear Shop’, our subject is a tailor, with a penchant for tidiness. The tone and the syntax is playful, giving rise to a sweeter notion of romance’s potential. The narrator considers proposing to this metaphorical ‘bower-bird’ gentleman, but later decides it is better to ‘hem dreams up’, than yield to the abandon of love as ‘unfurled shirts’ (20). Have not we all imagined relationships with someone we desired, only to recant on the basis that our imagination has been more fertile and liberated than material reality?

Intricate miniatures of nature are artfully distilled and conjoined with a tender morality (In Lieu of a Statue; Flute of Milk). In ‘Everest,’ Fealy takes us from climb to descent, from optimistic boyhood to isolation and abandonment. Again, the use of form to impart the sense of elevation and expansion:

I felt more like an astronaut no clouds a curving horizon. (70)

There is something about thinning oxygen and endless space in its treatment of the lines in the first verse, followed by the more cramped second verse, mirroring diminishing options as frostbite, narrow descent and falling ensue.

It can be asked when reading any poem, what is it that I am in search of? For many it will be meaning; for some it will be meaning and literary form. Fealy’s poems have an abundance of both. The surreal poems are there too, for those who can contemplate and navigate the freedom in the verse. The reader will not be left floundering. Sometimes Fealy offers clues to her inspirations, for example this one, inspired by artist Tacita Dean’s short art-movie, titled ‘Film’:

II
In this tunnel of light
No paintbox of blood:
White noise
Flickers polka-dots,
Around its navel
The waterfall runs backwards.
The single pine at dusk
Collects pink neon spots—
Like wormholes.
Like cracks that distil
What light there is. (60)
Fealy named her poem ‘Film’ after Dean’s art-movie of the same name. As Dean tells us: ‘I work like an artist. I don’t have a plan. I find the way through, by working.’ And therein is a suggestion about how to read poetry: take up the book, you don’t need a plan. You’ll find the way through, by reading.

A final word for ‘Breast Imaging’. It captures the cadence of waiting for, attending and departing from an appointment, where idle thoughts cross one’s mind in the waiting room; passive, unconscious observations. The patient sees breast-laden metaphors in the bird’s breast, and the circumference of apples. Iambic parameter gives it a no-nonsense flavour that bespeaks the practical necessity of marching through these things. As such, the poem has a dutiful temperament, in the sense of a duty to oneself fulfilled by way of medical checks. Overlaid are the unconscious recognitions of the desire to protect oneself: ‘her head snuggled down into the green of herself’ (48). In the black glass (48-9), presumably of the reception desk, and the captured black bubbles in the breast imaging itself, the blackness reveals the menace such appointments seek to avert.

In summary, Fealy’s book is indeed beautiful, to be savoured and enjoyed without haste, and appreciated by the cultured critic as much as the novice reader.

Annette Couch

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Can a novel be a fugue? This is the question US writer Margot Singer asks herself, implicitly in her first novel, *Underground Fugue*, and explicitly in a *Paris Review* article. ‘Could I write a novel about fugues in the form of a fugue? The idea was thrilling.’ As I have been pondering questions about the links between music and literature recently, the article caught my attention and I decided to read the novel.

Singer’s four protagonists are temporary neighbours in early twenty-first century London. Lonia, a refugee from Hitler’s Europe, is dying. Her daughter Esther has come from America to look after her in her final weeks. Next door, Javad, a neurologist originally from Iran, lives in a state of preoccupied alienation from his teenage son, Amir, whose secret life he hardly suspects. Threaded through the narrative, anchored by a prologue, is the slowly developing story of a mysterious man who has washed up on a beach in Kent without identification, unable or unwilling to speak in any language but the music he plays on the piano in the mental institution.

*He plays for hours, his body swaying, his fingers tracing patterns along the keys: chord progressions, arpeggios, halftones, quavers, counterpoint.*

*Listen: everything you want to know is in the music.*

*The voices rise and fall, call and answer, take flight.*

Javad is called in as a consultant to see if he can help this man, ‘a possible case of dissociative fugue’ (57). Esther follows the story in a desultory way in the media, between other more pressing personal concerns. Esther is herself an amateur pianist and Javad hears her through the party wall playing Bach fugues on her mother’s old German piano. The narrative flow is handed back and forth among the four characters, mother and daughter, father and son, each in turn taking up themes of flight and connection, memory and loss. Their lives touch, intersect, part, combine, separate again. Each of the seven parts starts the pattern of countervoices again, with variations introduced to the order and the number of the voices as the novel progresses. Structure is clearly vital.

But can a novel be a fugue? Singer is not the first to take up the challenge of trying out the idea. As she writes, somewhat wryly, in her *Paris Review* article, ‘The sheer difficulty of translating a musical fugue into prose actually seems to have attracted many writers to the project, although – perhaps fortunately – I didn’t know it when I set out to try.’ Perhaps one challenge of writing in a musical form is deciding how explicit to make the connection. For me, a line is crossed when Esther, fleeing from the demands of nursing her dying mother, happens upon a lunchtime performance of Bach’s *Art of Fugue*. Esther reads the program notes: they are quoted:

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The fugue, she reads, is both metaphor and form. Its variations make connections between seemingly unlike things and reveal the ways in which the new is recreated out of the material of the old. It shows us how the present is always in conversation with – in counterpoint with – the past. (73)

The passage describing the concert – her immersion in the music, and the paths of memory and speculation she traverses while the music washes around and through her – is Singer at her best, lyrical and trenchant. My only reservation is whether the reference needed to be quite so obvious. Perhaps it did: it is understandable that in the structure of the fugue, one of the most complex and demanding artistic forms of all, Singer was able to find a metaphor which showed her a way forward with her novel: ‘the form was what I needed to open up the story’, she writes.

A novel can’t be a fugue. What works in music can’t literally work in narrative: although there are similarities, the differences cannot be dissolved. But a novel can be contrapuntal, cerebral, intricate, beautiful, powerful; combining voices at different registers to make a harmonious whole. Underground Fugue is all those things. It doesn’t need to be a fugue; it can partake of the nature of a musical form but still be a wonderful novel, doing all the things a novel can do which a fugue – or any musical form – can’t do. And thank goodness her chance encounter with the idea of the fugue – psychological and musical – helped Singer find her way when she was lost in the maze of writing her first novel.

Gillian Dooley

At the beginning of WWII, Romania fought alongside Germany against the Allied forces. However, in August 1944, following a coup d’état, Romania changed sides. It is during this messy transition that Ilse Johansen’s story begins.

Ilse was a German woman, born to a Danish father and a German Latvian mother. She enjoyed a privileged childhood, was well-educated and was taught German, Russian and Latvian. During her time in the prison camps, she would also learn some Romanian.

In August 1944, Ilse was working in a hospital in Bucharest when the city was invaded by the Soviet army. German soldiers were forced to surrender. Though Ilse was not herself in the German army, she wore the uniform of the Nazi party during her civilian duties (xxi), and was forced to surrender along with them. However, as she was able to speak three distinctly different European languages, she was valuable to the Soviets as a translator. It is undoubtedly this skill that helped keep her alive in the prison camps for five years, despite multiple escape attempts.

Though it is toned down in her memoir, likely because it was written post-WWII when the atrocities committed by the Nazis had become well-known, it is clear that Ilse was a Nazi herself, or that she at least supported the Nazi party. In the introduction to the memoir, written by Heather Marshall (a relation of Ilse’s), we are told that while there is no evidence that Ilse was a member of the Nazi party, ‘it is probably safe to conclude that she was’ (xxi).

However, the holocaust is not the focus of this memoir. It is not even mentioned in passing, because this is not a story about Germany or the holocaust: this a story about a resourceful, strong and determined German woman who somehow survived five years living in Russian prison camps.

Ilse’s memoir, translated from the original German, is chaotic. The writing is abrupt, which creates a sense of urgency in the reader, as though what you are reading is not a re-telling, but is something that is happening right now. There is also little emotion in Ilse’s writing. While Ilse does seem to be moved by the tragedies she is forced to witness, and is compassionate towards others, she comes across as reserved and mostly observant; unwilling to get too involved in the happenings in the camps if they do not concern her.

At first, this detached style can keep the reader at arm’s length. We are never fully invited into Ilse’s heart or mind, nor that of any of her fellow prisoners or friends. There is almost a void between reader and writer. However, this detachment can result in moments of poignancy when, after being kept away from the story, the reader is brought back when they are reminded that the pitiful characters Ilse describes were real people; people who are lost to history, nameless, and who may now only exist within the pages of Ilse’s memoir.

Ilse knows that these dying men will be lost, that their comrades who have promised to pass on their ‘last greetings’ to their families will likely die and be lost themselves, and nobody will remember them. She tries to remember their names, but is unable to. She describes time she spent with a staff sergeant from Munich, his ‘hands and face so swollen that his comrades have to feed him’ (54). She washes him, and he shows her a photo of himself as a handsome young

man, standing with his wife and child. He is unrecognisable. She will not remember his name, but when she thinks of him later she will simply think ‘surely he must have died’ (54). It is likely that nobody will ever know who this man was, and his wife and child may have never known what became of him. Despite Ilse’s emotionless retelling, moments like this, which are peppered throughout the memoir, are gut-wrenching.

However, there are moments of irritation. When one attempts to trace Ilse’s journey on the map provided (which one may wish to do, as there is a lot of travelling), one may be hindered by the illogical placement of said map. Rather than being placed at the front of the book in an easy-to-locate position, the map is placed some 30 pages into the text, after the translator’s preface, the acknowledgements, the editor’s introduction and a secondary introduction (all essential reading) and before the memoir itself. The commonly occurring typos in the text also tend to distract the sharp-eyed reader and disrupt the story.

The truly amazing part of Ilse’s story is that she survived. She survived starvation, hard labour, wearing thin summer clothing in -50C temperatures in Russia while cutting down trees and dragging them back to camp. She survived broken ribs without medical aid, bed bugs, lice, dysentery, numerous attempts at rape and regular beatings. Despite all she experienced, she was determined to live, and so she did. As Ilse herself said, ‘it would be cowardly to surrender to one’s fate helplessly’ (107).

Lauren Dougherty

Stephen Orr is an Adelaide-based writer and teacher with several books to his name. Two of his works, *Time’s Long Ruin* (2010) and *The Hands* (2015), were longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary award. His latest work, *Datsunland* (2017) is a compilation of short stories, mostly set in Adelaide and country South Australia.

In the opening story, *Dr Singh’s Despair*, an Indian doctor has been lured to South Australia with pictures of vineyards and beaches and the promise of a better life for him and his family. Upon arrival, he is unceremoniously deposited in Coober Pedy, where he is promptly forgotten about. The car that was meant to collect him from the airport never arrives. Dr Singh is forced to wait 90 minutes in 54 degrees celcius heat for a taxi that collects him, then abandons him overnight in the desert when the carburettor breaks down and the driver hitches a lift into town, leaving Dr Singh behind.

Dr Singh forces us to look at our country through a foreigner’s eyes, and feel his insult and confusion. Unable to connect with his new Australian acquaintances (‘He’d never be able to make conversation with people who were proud of their genitals’ [21]) and take his continued misfortune with the good humour expected of him, he is quickly written off as not being ‘the one’. It is assumed he will last six months in his new position, at most.

What surely marks one of the most frustrating and insulting times of Dr Singh’s life is presented humorously, in typical Australian fashion.

With the exception of *The Confirmation*, which takes place in Ireland, each story that follows *Dr Singh’s Despair* is definitively Australian. Orr’s writing carefully evokes the overwhelming nothingness of the outback, and the defiant resolve of the people living in this void who somehow, for some reason, continue to live there. Orr’s characters are not just people who live in the country, they are a part of it. They have been dried by the harsh sun, pulled into the red sand, and planted like a failing crop:

Barb watched her husband read. Grey hair. Bleached-boot skin, calcified by a sun that ruled and ruined everything. Wheatsack eyes that drooped as they emptied across a face of spreading liver spots and varicose decay. Fat chin. Permanently rheumy eyes. A shoddily ploughed forehead, the tynes set too deep. And all this on a man barely forty. (29)

The final story in the collection is *Datsunland* itself, a novella which was originally published in the 54th edition of the *Griffith Review* in 2016. *Datsunland* introduces us to William Dutton, a dispirited guitar teacher who never quite made it as a serious musician, and his 14-year-old student, Charlie Price. Charlie is equally as dispirited as William, having ‘already worked out that most people [are] stupid’ (193), as well as being weighed down by his own tortured genius and general teenage apathy. Seeing a lot of himself in Charlie, William feels a connection to him and they bond over their love of music and discontent with society. Perhaps not surprisingly, their relationship quickly becomes inappropriate. This is a common theme running through many of the stories in *Datsunland*: selfishness, self-obsession and denial.
Though it is the title piece, *Datsunland*’s inclusion in this collection is perhaps a little misplaced. At 103 pages, it is almost as long as the preceding 13 stories combined. If you do not know that going in, you may find its length overwhelming. It also does not have much more to say than the shorter stories did, therefore I do not feel that its verbosity is justified.

Though the stories in *Datsunland* illustrate some of the uglier aspects of life and Australian culture, there are moments of subtle humour that can have the reader smirking in even the most serious of circumstances. In *The Confirmation* (which could be loosely based on the Kingsmill Killings in Ireland in 1976), a bus carrying mostly Protestant builders is pulled over by a vigilante gang with semi-automatic weapons: ‘Each of the men on the bus had a vacant expression – as though they’d just cut a piece of expensive timber to the wrong length.’ (117)

Orr forces us to look at the aspects of Australian culture that we would prefer to pretend don’t exist. We are the lucky country: a country of sand and surf, barbeques, shark encounters and casual alcoholism. But maybe we are not so lucky. In *Datsunland* Orr highlights our shortcomings: our abandonment of our country folk, who reside too far from any major city to be given much thought. He shows us our selfishness, depravity and racism.

The strength in Orr’s prose comes not just from his dark reflection of our culture, but in his ability to know when to say nothing. We don’t need the characters of two grieving parents to tell us how they feel when they are told that their soldier son’s name will be placed on the coward’s list, published in their small town local newspaper, because, it is presumed, he ran away from his troop during battle. We don’t need the abused child to explain how the abuse affects him. The pain and the sadness of it all is right there. Orr offers his characters little chance for redemption, so in the end pain and sadness is what the reader is mostly left with.

Lauren Dougherty

In 1970, 28-year-old Zhang Yihe (b. 1942) was studying literature at the Chinese Opera University when she authored the combustible and life-altering remark that would warrant her two-decade incarceration as a convicted counterrevolutionary: ‘When someone climbs to the top, all of that person’s friends and relatives get there, too’ (vii). Seemingly harmless, Yihe’s comment caused Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, to take offence, presumably because rather than abject self-effacement, Yihe’s remark confidently alluded to social mobility.

Yihe’s *Red Peonies: Two Novellas of China* poignantly recollects her experiences befriending inmates in a remote women’s labour prison under the despotic rule of Chairman Mao. Presenting the first English translation of Yihe’s inaugural novellas, *The Woman Liu* and *The Woman Yang*, this edition will ultimately comprise a collection of ten stories. The novellas cannot be read apart from context provided in a 2017 interview, during which Yihe stated: ‘I always believed that in order for China to walk a better path it would be necessary to reach the right historical judgement. In this case, it’s the eradication of Mao’s ideology.’

Central to this process of eradication is recording and preserving the narratives of those who suffered, and perished, in Mao’s penal system.

In *The Woman Liu*, Yihe chronicles the life story of prisoner Liu Yueying, a fragile woman with a violent past. Yihe’s prison stature changes considerably at the time of the ‘year-end program’ during which ‘each prisoner had to write a report summing up her efforts to reform herself over the past year’, of which a humbly penitent self-assessment could inspire government clemency and possibly reduce sentences (23). Illiteracy is not uncommon in the prison, and Yihe learns that her university education is an enviable commodity. She agrees, not without a degree of harmless self-interest, to help prisoner Liu Yueying write her reform narrative: ‘I liked to help prisoners write their summaries because this offered the only opportunity to talk with others and to feel that my life was somewhat normal’ (24). Now ordained the prison’s impromptu oral historian, Yihe chronicles the haunting autobiographical accounts of an otherwise voiceless population of woman prisoners.

Scarcely content with her life’s mundane domestic routines, Liu births a son who distracts her from her arranged, servile, and loveless marriage. When her husband is suddenly diagnosed with incurable epilepsy, Liu’s life becomes unbearably claustrophobic, as she is required to care for a boorish man whose disturbing paroxysms grow increasingly severe. The pivotal episode comes at a cinema when her husband, succumbing publicly to an epileptic fit, is abandoned to the aid of strangers by Liu, who furiously flees the theatre in humiliation. Repugnance drives Liu to strangle her husband during the next seizure and, following a grisly dismemberment, she prepares a human kimchee of his remains.

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1 Stuart Lau, ‘Zhang Yihe on CCP Atonement,’ *Modern Chinese Culture and Literature Resource Center*, The Ohio State University, 5 April 2017.

As a sensitive chronicler, Yihe carefully avoids playing the role of an overweening therapist, eager to diagnose or glibly simplify the complexities of Liu’s past. Rather, she is concerned how dissonant social forces – such as modernisation, political suppression, and vestiges of feudal orthodoxies (arranged marriage and patriarchy, for example) – might compel someone to rebel barbarically against these pressures. Yihe, although admitting no excuse for Liu’s violent outburst, sympathetically reads her behaviour, at least partially, within a specific social context: ‘People became demoralized because of poverty, degenerate because of grievances, and foolish because of ignorance. […] I didn’t know why male prisoners committed crimes, but it seemed to me that women prisoners were usually motivated by dissatisfaction’ (34). In the story’s concluding events, following a botched reconciliation with her estranged son, the ageing Liu quietly acknowledges that her final home and resting place is the prison.

Among the pages of her novellas, Yihe features the photography of Chinese artist, Xing Danwen (b. 1967), whose work dwells eerily on themes of urban loneliness, anonymity, isolation, and technological waste. Images, such as ‘disDONNEXION, Images A14, B4, A5’, 2002–2003’ (62, 70, 71), depict heaps of tangled phone wires, cellphone chargers, and knotted chords, hinting to a lonely substratum of human existence despite the ubiquity of technologies that sustain global connectivity. Danwen also portrays isolated women in high-rise condominiums and vacuous corporate environments. ‘Urban Fiction, Image 17 (and Detail), 2004’ (92, 93), depicts a business woman, atop a towering building, poised in suicidal yearning. Providing powerful graphic counterpoints to Yihe’s narratives, Danwen’s work draws attention to the isolation of women in a globalised world.

Yihe’s second novella, The Woman Yang, chronicles another prisoner’s narrative, detailing the violent consequences of a thwarted marriage of a young Chinese couple, Yang Fenfang and Ho Wuji. Preventing Hu from proposing to Yang is his lowly social status as a landlord’s son. While Yang and Ho begin a clandestine romance, her sister and brother-in-law pursue Captain Liu Qingsheng as an eligible match. They arrange for the two to meet and, during an awkward double-date luncheon, Yang notes with distaste the Captain’s ungainly and stiff military demeanour. Eager to settle the young girl into marriage, her sister and brother-in-law’s matchmaking chicanery persuades Yang to accompany Liu on a visit to Shanghai. Upon arriving, Yang learns that Liu holds an authentic marriage license ‘with an official red seal’ (119). The provincial Yang, though, is quickly dizzied by Shanghai’s glimmering opulence and bustle. Liu pampers Yang, going so far as selecting her lingerie, an unknown commodity for a country girl: ‘She was startled: the bra could actually alter the lines of her body. Even her posture changed: she was more erect than she had ever been and appeared taller. She also looked more attractive than before’ (120). Candies, restaurant delicacies, and brassieres number among the wares Liu uses to obscure Yang’s judgment. A wedding at the Shanghai barracks looms inevitably as the trip comes to an end and, quarrelling internally, Yang reflects, ‘She should stop being naïve and come to terms with reality. For a comfortable life, one needs material goods’ (124). That wedding night, Yang ‘endured his onslaught like a corpse’ (126).
Returning home a disillusioned married woman only intensifies Yang’s trysts with Ho. One night, Ho’s jealousy drives him to spy on the married couple at their home, where he witnesses the husband’s perverted coercions and cruel sexual degradation of Yang. A fight ensues, and Ho stabs Liu. While Liu survives the attack, Yang is imprisoned and Ho is executed. The second half of Yang’s story concerns her time in a women’s prison, coping with the loss of Ho, the hardships of incarceration, and the sexual abuse she endures as a voiceless subject of China’s corrupt penal system.

Reifying Yihe’s otherwise ghostly prison counterparts is, ultimately, the solidifying and shaping power of memory, an effort to grasp meaning, if not perfect cohesion, from lived experience no matter how traumatic. The stories are at their best when, ephemerally glimpsed, Yihe draws our attention to instances that frame the women of her past in common humanity – a beautifully plaied braid, a smile, a resonant laugh. Guard Deng, writes Yihe, ‘loved to laugh and when she did, dimples appeared in her cheeks’ (25). For these women, guards and prisoners alike, are far from broken hostages of penal cruelty, but humans aglow with singularity, even hope.

Sebastian Galbo
Sheila Delany, The Woman Priest: A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal’s Novella, La femme abbé (The University of Alberta Press, 2016)

‘What is love?’ asks Agatha, the heroine of French writer Sylvain Maréchal’s fascinating novella, La femme abbé (1801). Love is many contradictory things in this compelling short tale. It is an incurable malady (9), ‘a god who makes miracles’ (30), ‘indiscreet and reckless’ (30), ‘profane’ (32), and above all, ‘it is never satisfied’ (33). In Sheila Delany’s translation of Maréchal’s novella, we trace Agatha’s increasing self-delusion as she pursues her irrational love for a priest in the Catholic Church, Saint-Almont. Love becomes a deity in this story of deception that explores themes of religion and gender as well as human nature.

The Woman Priest: A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal’s Novella, La femme abbé (2016) is the second in a set of three translations of Maréchal’s work planned by Delany. The first was published in 2012, also by Alberta Press as Anti-Saints: The New Golden Legend of Sylvain Maréchal, a translation of La nouvelle legend dorée (1790). The third will be a translation of Pour et contre la Bible (For and against the Bible, 1801). Delany considers these the most interesting among Maréchal’s ‘voluminous production, not least because their themes of religion, sex, and politics remain so current’ (viii).

Maréchal (1750-1803) was an essayist, poet and political activist. La femme abbé (1801) tells of the extraordinary lengths Agatha goes to in order to be near the object of her love. This includes dressing as a man, at first in order to assist the priest in performing the mass, and then to gain entry into the seminary where she becomes Saint-Almont’s private secretary, spending every day in his company while she trains to become a fully ordained priest. No good comes of this deception and obsession. Agatha reveals her identity and is banished from the seminary, eventually dying from grief in an underground cavern.

The novella takes an interesting form, combining letters with excerpts of dialogue and exposition from an external narrator. After a brief preface, there is a series of 27 letters that begins as an exchange between two women, the main protagonist Agatha, and her married friend Zoe. The two friends have opposite temperaments: Zoe is ‘prudence itself’ whereas Agatha is referred to (and indeed refers to herself), as imprudent (25). Zoe’s five letters are pleas for her friend to see reason and not give in to her passions, which Agatha ignores. Part-way through the narrative, Zoe moves from Paris to the colonies (which turns out to be North America). Agatha decides: ‘From tonight on, I am starting a journal of my life, and it will be addressed to you. I will tell you all my mistakes, I will recall your advice, and God will do the rest’ (23). Agatha’s journal reveals her deepening obsession as her deception progresses and she tries to justify her motives as stemming from a pure, selfless love.

Love (or Saint-Almont) becomes Agatha’s object of worship rather than God, and religious ceremonies become sacrilegious performances as Agatha uses them not to glorify God but to revel in her love for the priest. Her fervour has erotic undertones, as Delany points out in her Introduction to the translation. Agatha occasionally admits to her guilt then just as quickly
contradicts herself: ‘My God! Pardon me if I have dared to make sacred things serve a profane love; but it is you who have put the passion into our hearts; they are not crimes – I feel this in the purity of my intentions’ (32). There are interesting parallels between Agatha’s love for Saint-Almont and Christ as the bridegroom of the church, even to the point of having Agatha wait three days (the time the Bible says it took Christ to rise from the dead) on two occasions as she enters into another significant and deeper phase of her deception: after three days she enters the seminary, and on the third day Saint-Almont confirms her as his private secretary (35). In these ways, religion and the Catholic Church are critiqued through Agatha’s actions and her explanations of them, including recollections of the reactions of others to her apparent devotion to the Church.

The novella is also interspersed with dialogue that recounts exchanges between Agatha and the object of her love, Saint-Almont, and later, Agatha and Timon, the saviour who cares for her in her demise. Then, toward the end of the text, the narrator intervenes as the story reaches its denouement, claiming knowledge of events from ‘the publisher of [Agatha and Zoe’s] correspondence’ (44). In this way, we find out ‘what finally became of the unfortunate heroine of these Letters’ (44). Even as she is dying from grief Agatha still refuses to admit culpability for her actions, but neither does she renounce God: ‘I am not guilty, neither in men’s eyes nor before my God. I have committed only imprudence … My God is just: in me he leaves an example from which young girls will be able to profit’ (50). These subtle comments on gender occur occasionally and although Agatha is ultimately the victim of her passions and delusory love, she is also a subversive figure who defies conventions.

It is through the external narrator that we meet Timon, the sensitive soul who has retreated underground due to his disillusionment with French society. Delany reads Timon as having similar characteristics to Marèchal, whose ‘faith was in nature and reason’ (x). Timon is described as a ‘misanthrope’ and seems connected to the Timon of Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens (1607). He has retreated from a world that does not subscribe to his philosophy. He pleads with Agatha to stay with him in his underground sanctuary, saying ‘You have followed the voice of Nature, who never deceives, but your religions and your laws contradict her. It’s they that do all the evil’ (52). With the aid of Timon, Agatha and Zoe reunite and Agatha ‘expire[s]’ in Zoe’s arms (59). Zoe and her husband return to North America, taking Timon, whose misanthropic ballad concludes the novella: ‘return to the peaceful laws / Of Nature: only she is right’ (59). Thus, Marèchal ends the novella in North America with an uncanny (if trite) twist of events that bring the remaining characters together. According to Delany this could be a comment on the relative untaintedness of life in the colonies compared to France. Whatever the intention, La femme abbé is a cleverly constructed text and an entertaining read that contains layers and subtexts worthy of consideration for what they suggest about gender, society and religion. Delany’s task of translating the work so that it can reach a wide twenty-first-century audience is something to be celebrated.

Robyn Greaves

The genre of travel writing is one that has historically been difficult to pin down or define. Its diversity makes it resistant to simple categorisation and it has frequently been overlooked as an inferior and unreliable form of writing. Travel writing displays inconsistencies and incongruities which have caused critics to consider it ‘only in most cases to move beyond it’, as Patrick Holland and Graeme Huggan point out.¹ Despite this mixed and often ambivalent reception, travel writing is now recognised as a significant corpus of work belonging ‘to a wider structure of representation within which cultural affiliations and links – culture itself – can be analyzed, questioned, and reassessed’.² If travel writing as a genre has a history of being disparaged, then this is exacerbated when it applies to nineteenth-century women travellers; early studies dismissed women’s travel writing as largely autobiographical and unreliable.³ So it is gratifying to read a book such as Aneta Lipska’s *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington: the Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* (2017), which scrutinises hitherto overlooked travel texts written by a woman who was influential at the time she was publishing, but whose travel writing has been neglected by critics.

Lady Marguerite Blessington was a significant social figure and writer of her time and her life has been the subject of some critical examination. Lipska offers a survey of the literature about Blessington in order to explain the point of difference of *The Travel Writings of Marguerite Blessington*: a comprehensive study of Blessington’s travel texts has not been undertaken until now, even though Blessington has been mentioned in studies of women’s travel writing and her work in this area is claimed to have done ‘much to popularize the Grand Tour amongst “women of quality”’ (Jane Robinson, quoted in Preface xviii). As Lipska points out, the nineteenth century saw a burgeoning of British travellers to the Continent as travel became more accessible. Blessington could participate in a mode and style of travel many of her readers could only access through reading accounts such as hers. Lipska compares and contrasts four of Blessington’s travel texts, published almost twenty years apart: *A Tour in the Isle of Wight, in the Autumn of 1820; Journal of a Tour through the Netherlands to Paris, in 1821; The Idler in Italy* (1839–40); and *The Idler in France* (1841). Lipska points out that the subtitle of her study – *The Most Gorgeous Lady on the Tour* – is indicative of Blessington’s reputation amongst her contemporaries. Blessington’s texts serve to produce an image of the author that acts as ‘an index to her socio-cultural status’ (xiv). The nature of travel discussed in this book is a privileged one, as the titles of Blessington’s texts suggest. Her social position allows her to be an

² Holland and Huggan viii-ix.
‘idler’ and ‘tourist’, spending long periods of time in European cities, exploring their aesthetic pleasures such as art galleries and museums. She sets up elaborate households in these cities where she entertains various guests in the role of salonniere.

Lipska’s book is divided into three parts, each dealing with certain aspects of Blessington’s texts. It begins with a discussion of the books as artefacts, including the ways they were promoted and marketed, and Blessington’s fictional strategies. Parts Two and Three are organised into chapters examining aspects of focus across Blessington’s narratives: natural scenery, ruins and edifices, sacred art and religious practices, and city spaces. The subjective experience of travelling is emphasised through this examination as we see how social, national and gender positions influence the travel experience and the narration of it. This extends to the form of the narratives: the journal was an acceptable form for women of this period to co-opt in order to make public comment. Blessington’s travels did not take her off the beaten track and her wanderings were largely confined to city-scapes, focusing on art galleries and museums and matters of society such as food, conversation and fashion. As such, Lipska’s book offers an examination of another manifestation of the genre of travel writing that is not about the experience of travelling as constant movement toward something new and exotic, but rather the experience of spending extended periods of time in civilised spaces and idling through them, appreciating the aesthetics of mostly material objects rather than the natural features of a foreign land. Even the engagement with foreigners is limited and peripheral; these texts offer instruction on the aesthetics and social mores of places rather than being tales of adventure in exotic locales.

Blessington traded on her position and celebrity status to sell books. She was a friend of Lord Byron, publishing Conversations with Lord Byron in 1834. She foregrounds herself in her travel narratives through self-promotion and ‘exploitation of the fictional formula of the fashionable novel’, for example by making Byron a protagonist in her account to add extra appeal for her audience. Lipska recognises the multi-faceted narrative persona Blessington adopts to suit her purpose, describing this as ‘self-fashioning’ (xiv). This self-fashioning is largely in response to social conventions, and what was considered acceptable for women in this period. Lipska compares Blessington’s narrative persona across the texts, noting the development of the author in the intervening years, such that Blessington allows her social status to speak more strongly through the later Tours: ‘an author emerges who has become much more self-assured in terms of her manner of writing, and who only selectively abides by the received conventions of travel writing’ (129), whereas in the early texts Blessington presents herself as a ‘modest novice’ and adopts a voice that combines ‘apology with assertion’ (47). While these positions are sometimes contradictory, they were common devices used by women (and men) to provide their readers with pleasure, or entertainment and instruction.

Occasionally I found myself wondering how sections of the book related to travel writing, such as the section on Byron at the end of Part One, but this illustrates the nature of the genre and its various manifestations. Blessington’s personal relationship with Byron seems to have...
been one she stressed in her narratives as having a significant influence on her travelling and on how she saw the places she visited.

Lipska’s eminently readable book is a welcome addition to the corpus of work on travel writing, particularly nineteenth-century women’s travel texts. While she does not take an overtly feminist stance in regard to her subject or argue for a distinctive feminine tradition of travel writing, Lipska notes the ways in which women tended to construct their narrative personas to comply with social conventions, thus making their texts acceptable to a wide audience. Lipska fulfils her purpose to conduct ‘a critical reading of … Blessington’s four travel narratives, and to broadly contextualize them within social, cultural and literary phenomena of the first half of the nineteenth century’ (xiii), thus extending and adding to our knowledge of the cultural work performed by travel writing across time.

Robyn Greaves

Transit has never been so pretty as with Niloofar Fanaiyan. In contrast to the volume’s cover image, hazed with a red filter suggestive of unwelcome daybreak and circadian arrhythmia, Fanaiyan casts a net of motifs – flowers, clouds, hills, trees, light, colours, windows, doors, fruit, salt, sea, spices, scents – that loops pleasantly around her collection, despite the non-linearity suggested by the fractures and repetitions of the titles listed in the contents.

Transit and its cousin travel are not, of course, solely physical experiences: Fanaiyan explores a range of their effects, giving pragmatic pre-departure advice in ‘Leaving’ (‘Remember to say goodbye / Hide the key’) while expressing a keenness to embrace less certain and more exciting realms. Her treatment of light and shade stands out, with shadows of motion observed under different skyscapes where light patches are very light, as in ‘Red Film’ with its pulses of colour, and the dark paradoxically enhance the heaviness and inevitability of transit, with melancholy detail:

This was never meant to be our home  
we rented four walls and a patch of soil  
taught ourselves the local language (‘In a many-layered cotton sling’)

Such lines can potentially be laid against a global political discourse concerning asylum seekers in feeling if not in a bold statement of solidarity. Elsewhere, transit appears to be a hollow where sensory memory settles (‘Goodbye’), whereas other poems relay transit as providing distance from which to view the minutiae required to make sense of the world:

City lights far below signal sleepy households  
unaware off our passage outside. We skirt  
its invisible lines – its mountains taller  
and its border wider every time, and every time  
we are turned away. (‘Flying over Tabriz’)

In ‘Finding’, this preoccupation is revisited at ground level: ‘it’s not in the city but in the people / in the city …’ Fanaiyan also shows transit as a space for rebirth through memory, as in the prose poem ‘I remember the day I was born …’, which includes an arresting image of the earth flinging ‘the plane to the sky’. The last two poems in the collection underline a calm appreciation for transience, for longing and return, which is nothing other than an apt conclusion. ‘And now we start again’ writes Fanaiyan in ‘Pomegranates’, evoking the cyclic habits of restless souls. I am not convinced the poet intends the re-start to take a new direction.

*Transit*’s longer poems are carefully crafted and more assured, especially compared to poems like ‘On the way’, which apparently serves to punctuate more than enhance. Similarly brief poems scattered throughout (29-30) seem little more than puzzlingly neat descriptions and add to a sense of disorder within the collection, as do the regular epigraphs (12, 26) that appear without the warning of a blank page to divide sections, possibly due to the formatting of the physical
book; the spacing between stanzas in ‘Pomegranates’ is also problematic. ‘Secrets of Salt’ is a lengthier poem that repeats variations of the Persian proverb ‘Del be del rah darad – hearts lead to hearts’, printed in Farsi with English translations aligned to the right margin. Both devices are successful: the refrain (a reorientation of the radif?) resonates and the shifting of the reader’s focus between languages, fonts and page alignments introduces a kind of ‘micro-transit’ to the act of reading. Similar forms are used for ‘Pomegranates’ and ‘Song of the Caravan’, with the latter repeating images of the rooster, crouching forms and shadow, suggesting another contemporary reorientation of Persian poetics. Similarly, ravani (flowingness) is hinted at in Fanaiyan’s series of poems that repeat or nearly-repeat the first and last lines (36, 38, 40, 53), with ‘Winter’ demonstrating a thoughtful sympathy between theme and form. Yet by the time the penultimate poem states twice: ‘There is only one hour left’, I wondered if the cycle isn’t overused; why the hour hadn’t already come.

Often Fanaiyan uses formal phrases such as ‘bade me follow, ‘but for …’ and ‘in the midst’. which are not out of place in the context of her nostalgic journeys; other choices like ‘precipitation’, ‘whooshing’ dust, ‘wispies clouds’, the ‘sticky sweetness of marshmallow’ and the ‘light minerally smell’ of salt are unformed or lacking in finesse – or at the least, do not excite with their freshness. While repetition within certain poems works well, the repetition of phrases between separate poems (‘smell of coffee and butter’; ‘smell of garlic and butter’) niggles, as does the unusually heavy hand displayed in ‘The luggage was packed’.

Transit is indeed pretty and inclines towards effortlessness, presenting few knots to unravel within its soothing lyricism. This could be the main challenge of the collection, or the chief component of its appeal, depending on what the reader seeks to take away from the experience of engaging with poetry, as with travel.

Kathryn Hummel

Sarwar Morshed’s (un)poetic universe ranges from some Mediterranean Turkish sea beach to the Bangladeshi river-bed of Naf and in between lies the drowned body of a poem. Yes, waking up amidst a series of grave humanitarian crises of the present world order that is laden with newly reinforced forms of xenophobic hatred and geo-political power games, the biggest challenge for us is to compose or appreciate a poem. But just the way poetry had proved wrong the prophecy of a deeply agonised Adorno and survived Auschwitz, this time it survives the exhausted footsteps of the mass refugee exodus worldwide. In Sarwar Morshed’s ‘diachronic collection of poems’ that he wrote ‘over the last two decades’ in order to get himself some cathartic relief we witness such a fallen world. The microcosm of the Morshedian (de)poeticised universe snapshots almost all the aspects – from local to global – of infernoesque human misery. In that sense, it’s a rhapsody, as the title aptly suggests, not singing the glory of some ‘la la land’ but lamenting the miseries of postcolonial hinterlands marked by ‘carbon footprints’ and ‘surgical strikes’ caused by the neo-coloniser power-regimes. Again, it is ‘depoeticised’ as it renders everything around us poetic, that is in reality prosaic and non-poetic. As if it is meditatively targeted to the world audience to register and make sense of what ‘new low’ we have collectively come down to. In doing so the spectrum of Sarwar’s poems on one hand, deals with international issues like those related to United Nations and SAARC(The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) policies, ISIS(Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) aggression, Middle Eastern crisis etc. On the other, he narrows it down to the ‘Village Politics’. It casts a geopolitical gaze and exposes the international ‘green gurus’s’ and ‘liquid Messiahs’s’ irresponsible use of and almost maddening obsession with carbon credits, fossil fuels:

Measure you may the enviro-crusader’s carbon footprint
As he globe-trots piling credits on his obese carbon profile.
Never mind, in exotic locations on eco-holiday does he relax,
Ready is he to depocket valuable dollars as carbon tax.

(‘Portrait of an Envirophile’)

Again, in the poem entitled ‘In Praise of Hydrocarbon’ he writes,

In B & B and Co. flows the blood of Volpone,
Around the seven continents and five oceans they alone
Understand the ‘battle-worth’ of Hydrocarbon.
Hence, launched the duo thousand ships
To abduct this ‘Liquid Helen.’”

By ‘B &B and Co.’ he boldly exposes the mindless greed of world leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair and their ilk. Maybe the latest one in line would be Donald Trump. When it comes to such bold stances on the hypocrisies of the oil- worshipping world leaders Morshed spares none. He blatantly criticises the politico-militarist moves of ‘Rogue States’ who under the

garb of bringing civilisation to several geographically crucial regions, actually bombed the countries. He also criticised Israeli oppression on Palestine and UN’s utter silence on that. Invoking the ethico-moral death of the democratic spirit of the UN, he writes in the ‘Requiem for U.N.’

This genocide-friendly unity of nations
With extra-care tending
The weeded garden of poison-trees.
When Hutus and Tutsies blood-bath
The UN closely observes the situation,
When Israel unchilds, unhusbands and unfathers
The Palestinians, the UN
Appeals to both the parties to exercise restraint
When Myamarese exterminate the Rohingyas
And the West-engineered Arab Spring
Has torn the Middle East asunder,
The UN condemns and condemns and condemns!

Along with U.N., Sarwar takes a dig into the moral bankruptcy of SAARC. He criticises how the organisation is all about the two big nuclear super powers – India and Pakistan – and is solely dominated by the former. He also pungently criticises the terrorist organisation IS, synominising it with a poisonous serpent whose hissing adds to the ‘summam malam’ of the world.

Morshed indeed, deploys the device of poetry to address each and everything that bothers his sensitivities and makes his heart bleed. While writing about them, his stand, of course, has been that of a pro-subaltern poet-rebel. Be it taking up the issue of some heinous crime against the ‘RMG girl’ in ‘Cry No More Penelope’, or paying tribute to the victims of Nimtali Fire tragedy in ‘Nineveh Lands on Nimtali’ or speaking for the rights of the most disadvantaged pleb-citizens, his poems reflected a deep sense of empathy that is aware of the ‘poetic injustice’ around the world. For example, in poems like that of ‘Orang Bangla’ he addressed the deplorable plight of Bangladeshi migrant labourers who migrate to Malaysia in search of livelihood putting everything at stake only to be subjected to a life of absolute slavery.

Apart from mourning the abuses of power worldwide, another crucial theme of Morshed’s poetry is to lament and mock at once the phenomenon of, let us say, ‘digitisation of human emotions’. In poems like ‘Texting Tears’ and ‘SMS’ he amusingly documents his displeasure regarding the changing pattern of expressing human affect. It seems as if Morshed’s poetry is very much aware of the FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google)-zeitgeist of the world and struggles to come to terms with the capitalist onslaught on human psyche. But this struggle never loses its humour. Neither does it fall short of wit. On a lighter note, he entertains the reader with a brilliant sense of mock-epic mannerism evident in his poems like that of ‘Ode to Bodna’, ‘Portrait of a Bibliophile’ etc. In fact, he knows the exact recipe of how to make a cool mocktail out of humour and seriousness to get his reader high to the exact extent that would enable her to appreciate the poem-message. For example, his hilarious tale of a Bangladeshi
‘formalin baba’ in the poem called ‘Formalin Baba: An Unpoetic Tale with Poetic Justice’ is extremely amusing. Again, his (mock-)epic handling of the same theme in the essay entitled ‘Bangladesh: The Formalin Republic’ and suggesting as to why US should spare countries like Iraq and search for WMD (weapons for Mass Destruction) in the fruit markets of the ‘formalin Republic’ of Bangladesh since the latter’s heavy use of poisonous chemical in food industry make us go rofl, at the same time compelling us spare some thought on the barbaric acts of the ‘rogue states’.

Apart from its witty usage, Sarwar’s poetic diction is marked by his obsession with neologisms. Often the diction is unpretentious and aim at achieving a cut-throat honest chilling effect. At times, the straightforwardness of the poems is such that it problematises the distinction between the ‘prosaic’ and the ‘poetic’. In other words, he further blurs the shadow line between the two.

While reading Morshed, one may feel the provocation to hear the undertones of a typical Ginsbergian, Beat generation style ‘Howl’ing. He addresses the issue of international organ trafficking, in poems like that of ‘To Currency’, ‘Banking’ ‘Xenotransplantation’. An active reader of his poems can pit this phenomenon against the growing racialism worldwide at present and see for herself the intended irony underneath the thematic arrangement of Morshed’s poetic scheme. Also, Morshed laments the blatant molochisation (reification in a Ginsbergian sense) or ‘mortgadging of human soul’. Alongside, traces of Eliotian love for allusion and references to a lot of things ranging from Greek myths to the vernacular, ‘Bodna’ can be found. Just like Eliot, Morshed is aware of the human decadence and ethical bankruptcy of the current world order. To conclude, reading Sarwar Morshed holds renewed significance in the wake of the current Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh’s role in this concern. Both in his collection of essays called In the Castle of My Mind (2015) and in his poems in Depoeticised Rhapsody he bravely talks about the postcolonial refugee crisis in general and Myanmar’s Rohingya crisis in particular. Such necessary enunciation brings in the element of pragmatism in the aesthetics of his poetry.

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A striking thing about Arundhati Roy’s writing is her phonological sensitivity. From *The God of Small Things*: ‘He’s a filmactor,’ she (Baby Kochamma) explains to Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, making Adoor Basi sound like a Mactor who did occasionally Fil.¹ In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Deputy Commandant Ashfaq Mir offers to show a militant to a well-known journalist: ‘Would you like to see a milton?’ (p. 227). Apart from such attention to detail, which is common to both her novels, it is hard not to notice her evolution as a writer – from someone who handled a story set in small Kerala to someone who has dealt with a large canvas depicting issues as wide-ranging as Kashmir, transgender rights, Dalit (lower caste) issues, left-wing movements in east central India and colour politics in the nation. She is consistent in her commitment to ‘small things’: if it was mainly children afflicted by quietness and emptiness in the first, here it is a motley group of displaced and marginalised people who set up residence among tombstones. It is a changing India, where the violence of caste is superseded by the violence of dispossession brought about by land acquisitions by powerful corporate groups in the villages surrounding the big city. Roy’s sociological eye remains sharply delightful as she captures the larger Indian reality of the subtleties of caste system (a Baidya is a Brahmin, but not quite), describes the Hijra (transgender) community in Delhi and passingly mentions the global impact of Malayalee nurses.

The author is slightly experimental with the narrative perspective and chronology, which should not be a challenge to the experienced reader. The novel starts with the attempts at self-discovery of a Delhi Hijra and her circle slowly expands by including other interesting characters including a charming young Dalit man, curiously named Saddam Hussein. It develops to a point where more characters are introduced in a major anti-corruption event that turns out to be a pivotal point in the novel.

Part of the story gets to be told from the perspective of a bureaucrat who reeks of elitism, obedience to traditional and modern hierarchical structures and banality (in the sense of Arendt’s *Banality of Evil*). The rest of the story revolves around three of his friends from his college days – Tilo, the unconventional, half-Dalit, wandering woman; Naga, a radical university student who transforms to an extremely successful journalist writing about the Kashmir situation; and Musa, a quiet and sensitive man forced by circumstances to respond intensely to the insane situation in Kashmir. Tilo’s deep friendship with Musa takes her into the depths of the political crisis of Kashmir. Her description of the problem in Kashmir is sharp: ‘Martyrdom stole into the Kashmir Valley from across the Line of Control, through moonlit mountain passes manned by soldiers’.


The story ends with the picture of a rapidly urbanising India, which pushes the motley group of dispossessed individuals to their happy shelter in a graveyard.

What befalls the soldier Murugesan is indicative of the multiple layers of violence in the country. Murugesan, the dark Dalit from Tamil Nadu, is teased for his complexion by his colleagues and the locals of Kashmir. However, he represents the army that often resorts to violence to maintain peace in the valley. But back home in Tamil Nadu, he is a Dalit who cannot expect a dignified treatment in his village. By juxtaposing different instances of violence, the reader is often made to see the tensions underlying the functioning of a complex democracy. The range of issues woven into the novel’s plot is as broad as the issues Roy has been engaged with in the last two decades. The clever device she has adopted to tie these issues together is the wandering Tilo. Resilient and clear-sighted, she is detached enough to understand issues in different parts of the country and empathic enough to make personal connections with the victims of various kinds of violence.

Arundhati Roy’s journalistic side can be an occasional turn-off for the avid fiction-reader. Roy’s simultaneous self-cultivation (or bildung) as an informed activist as well as a writer clearly comes through in the way reportage is interwoven into the fictional narrative. Perhaps in modern India, very few can afford to practise the craft of fiction-writing while remaining indifferent to what is happening around them. There are two interesting correlations here with respect to orientations of two groups of Indian writers who write in English. First, there are those who present the rising urban middle class’s brighter picture of the country. Then there are the ones like Roy who refuse to ignore the Adivasis (the indigenous inhabitants who traditionally lived in forest land) who are displaced by industrialisation and the urban slum-dwellers who are displaced by the growth of the organised city. Although we get glimpses of a deeply context-sensitive writer’s attempts to ‘seek joy in the saddest places’ and ‘never, never to forget’ (to use her own phrases from the non-fiction work *The Cost of Living*), this novel is likely to remembered more for its celebration of the country’s diversity than as an exceptional work of art. Good readers will have read much better novels.

**Jobin M. Kanjirakkat**

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The question regarding the worth of poetry in translation is age-old. ‘It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation,’ said Salman Rushdie, ‘but I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.’

My journey into poetry in translation began with Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali or Song Offerings, a collection of poems translated into English from their original Bengali.

Published in 1912, Song Offerings was a quiet sensation in its time, in that it placed Tagore in the pantheon of world poets, largely responsible as it was for his being the first outside of Europe to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Offerings also had a personal significance, in that it led me not only into the poetries of other lands, but also to that question of such poetry, in original versus translated form. Rushdie’s statement, after all, though positive regarding translated poetry, by its juxtaposed ‘always’ and ‘also’ does acknowledge such a dichotomy. With due respect to Rushdie, however, I believe that there is a bit more to it than that: a translated poem, although seemingly in the lap of the gods, is nevertheless firmly a case of the god being the translator.

With Song Offerings, any such dichotomous question, however, became no question at all: Tagore himself did the translating from Bengali to English, on the basis of English being as much a home language for him as Bengali was. The translation of Poems of Rolando S. Tinio, Jose F. Lacaba & Rio Alma on the other hand, has been done by a second party: Robert Nery.

Though living in Sydney, Nery was born and raised in the Philippines, and, as is demonstrated by his introduction to this book, he is fluent in both official languages of that country, the languages he has worked with here: Tagalog (Filipino) and English.

Working from one home language to the other then, and being an acknowledged poet in his own right, Nery’s outcome should be seamless. Nuance and idiom of thought as well as speech, along with a host of other attributes, would come naturally to him, again in both languages.

Ronaldo S. Tinio, the first of the three poets of Poems of... was born in 1937 and died in 1997. He received a Masters Degree in Creative Writing in 1958 from America’s University of Iowa as a graduate of its internationally renowned Writers Workshop. Though a recognised poet now, as Nery says, Tinio in his lifetime was better known for his work as an educator, essayist and critic, translator and thespian.

Tinio’s poems in this collection have a world-weariness, a sense of inexorability, of life being only about people and things wearing out.

A collage of such is ‘Song for the Dead’:

The Old Fellow is dead, the cobbler with a shop
Who was Aunty’s partner in her business
Of comic books and weekend magazines.


My sib said:  
The heart was massaged  
Without benefit. (24)

‘Downstairs’ continues in that vein:

In a corner, piled on top of each other, chests  
Full of clothes too good for wiping with:  
Fine shirts, yellowed, most of them,  
Their sleeves heavy with knotted silk ... (30)

There is some resistance, though still the inevitability, in ‘Storm in the Ateneo’:

Here I go, plunging into the storm.  
Let the umbrella turn inside out.  
Soak the office shoes in the rain if necessary.  
Shrink the not-unshrinkable trousers.  

I won’t shrink.  
Not me, even if I’m blown like a clothesline  
And soar like a scream – (34)

That Tinio identified with the anti-Romantic Bagay group of Tagalog poets who eschewed explanation or analysis to concentrate on description, reaffirms the fatalist mood of his poems in this collection.

The second poet of the collection, Jose F. Lacaba, was born in 1945 and wrote journalism in English in the 1960s. In 1979 he also attended the University of Iowa International Writing Program, when he was already a well-known Tagalog poet. Lacaba has also been a magazine editor, and a prolific screenwriter involved in a number of important Philippine films.

Whether in English or Tagalog, Lacaba’s language is universal. In his ‘Letter from father to son’:

We talk about many things,  
and we have nothing to talk about.  

We talk about a lot of things,]  
trivial things,  
yet never talk about  
what’s close to the bone.  

You are flesh of my flesh  
blood of my blood  
but don’t show me  
what’s deep in your heart.  

You have nothing to whisper  
and I have none to ask. (64)

The humanly familiar continues in ‘The old’:

The children leave one by one  
till only the old remain.

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One by one the children leave –
O time after all is fleeting. (54)

Lacaba can also evidence a lyricism recognisable to Western classical tradition, as in ‘Maria Makiling’:

> Throughout the land the news has spread
> struck dumb she hugs her knees.
> Our nymph to the wilderness has fled.
> She loves a faithless boy. (61)

The little that I have seen of Lacaba’s poetry elsewhere, has mostly concentrated on the mordant, even the humorous. I found his poems in this collection important, in that they indicate there is more to his work. These are poems that are reflective, lyrical, and appeal to human universality.

The third poet is Rio Alma, the pen name of Virgilio S. Almario. Alma was born in 1944 of a peasant background but was successful in attaining a university education in the Philippine capital Manila. As well as being a recognised poet, Alma has followed the same polymath path as Tinio and Lacaba, having been an artist, critic, editor, educator, translator and director and chair of a number of Philippine cultural bodies.

Nery describes Alma’s prolific output as impossible to fully represent in this book. However, Alma’s rural upbringing, closer to the natural world, can be seen here in a number of his poems, which is in contrast to those of Manila-raised Tinio and Lacaba.

In the longer poem ‘On Anxiety’ extremes of Filipino weather become metaphors for those of emotion:

> Moreover, anxiety is the rainy season of the heart without a rainbow
> And the monsoon’s lash and the lightning’s slash is all you get.
> Morning eludes you,
> The lamp’s flame is a fallen prayer, whose voice ebbs, flickers; (84)

Such parallels continue in ‘My Mother’s Monsoon’:

> Reclaiming the paddy field she advanced
> In her mildewed sleeves and faded gaiters,
> The cone hat her shield against many monsoons past,
> In fulfilment of that vow on my father’s death. (91)

In another long poem, ‘The Returning Herons’, images of farm and field are juxtaposed with those of domestic life:

> In the foreground of the heron and the buffalo’s
> Intimate conversation, we see a fat rice stack,
> A ladle that worries over a boiling clay pot;
> A handsome maiden singing by the kitchen window;
> A schoolboy’s wrestle with pencil and paper. (95)

Nery also describes Alma as Neruda-like in his ambition, and as ‘many-stranded.’ The rice paddy, the palm grove and the monsoon, the wet and dry seasons of tropical South-East Asia, can be seen as one of those strands.

There is an energy in the work of the three poets here that appears to have been brought through by the translator, rather than introduced by him. The soul of a poem, after all, is both its emotional and intellectual energy. To paraphrase yet another polymath, Walter Benjamin: ‘the task of the translator is to release in his language, the language of another; to liberate the language of a work, in his re-creation of that work.’ ² Nery, as the acknowledged poet he is and in working from one of his home languages to another, would have succeeded in such ways with his three poets.

John Miles


Bashabi Fraser, *The Homing Bird* (Indigo Dreams, 2017)

Bashabi Fraser’s *The Homing Bird* is essentially a beautifully-produced booklet containing fourteen poems; for the most part, these explore the poet’s relationship with India and Scotland. The title-poem, headed ‘Kolkata’ and ‘Edinburgh’, gives us a panoramic view of how these two cities have shaped her consciousness and imagination. She is, indeed, a citizen of both, and these world-renowned cities anchor her dual identity as Indian and British, bearing in mind that they are also distinctive capital cities, Kolkata of West Bengal, and Edinburgh of Scotland. Both parts of the title-poem intertwine personal memories of the poet as a girl and university student with comments about the cultural and political significance of the two cities, by means of the traditional technique of apostrophe, which involves addressing them as persons.

What comes across in ‘Kolkata’ is a strong sense of its population’s teeming, variegated dynamism, as in these lines alluding to the effects of Partition:

… you became a haven  
For the bereft and bereaved,  
The city of migrants … (7)

But these lines are a mere speck of detail enhancing a poem rich with contemporary and historical resonance. The final section gives a deeply sympathetic description of exhausted ‘rickshaw wallahs’, yet it also eschews sentimentality when defining them as ‘that remnant of bondage / And embarrassing labour, a burden of the past …’ (9).  

Part II of ‘The Homing Bird’, addressing ‘Edinburgh’, has an entirely different feel to it. ‘Kolkata’s / Undaunted sprawl’ (11) is contrasted to Edinburgh’s more sedate pace of life, reinforced by its newly-built tram system, which like building the metro in Kolkata was for a time very disruptive:

When the metro was the excuse for organized chaos  
In my old city, now transferred to the knotted  
Reality of Leith Walk and Shandwick Place,  
In my chosen dwelling space.  

And now the gleaming white trams weave with confidence  
Down Princes Street where people meet in this intimate city. (12)

But for the poet what makes Edinburgh uniquely special is its many literary associations, as embodied in its street-scape and architecture, and recognised by UNESCO:

… in this City of Literature  
Where Rebus frowns through Fleshmarket Close  
And Hogwarts looms in the many-towered splendour  
Of George Heriot’s School … (13)

The allusions are very contemporary, since it is Ian Rankin who created DI Rebus and JK Rowling, inspired by the architecture of George Heriot’s, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, so Part II focuses not so much on Edinburgh’s past, but very much its present. It does remind us, however, of the following:

*The Homing Bird* by Bashabi Fraser. Mario Relich.  
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You remain, Edinburgh, the urban inspiration
Of Geddesian vision and a Makar’s delight. (13)

Patrick Geddes did, in the early twentieth century, formulate an integrative vision of how Edinburgh could combine its past glories with modern buildings and gardens to further enhance the cityscape. The Edinburgh Makar, moreover, is the city’s official bard, and the current one Alan Spence was inaugurated at the City Council recently, but he also harks back to the Edinburgh court poets of the Renaissance, such as William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas.

There is also a certain amount of ambivalence in how the poet relates to Edinburgh:

But have you accepted me, Edinburgh?
You are no stranger to me, for I know
Your wynds and crescents, each curious close,
Your basalt rock and Forth view. (12-13)

... But will you let me blend in Edinburgh
With the flowing pen power you hold in your folds? (13)

In the context of the entire Part II, however, these lines sound like the playful musings of a sceptic, of the kind that David Hume would have recognised. It’s Bashabi Fraser’s ‘Makar’s delight’ in what Robert Louis Stevenson has called ‘the precipitous city’ that provides the dominant key. ‘Homing Bird’ illuminates two aspects of the poet’s psyche, how her consciousness was shaped by Kolkata and her imagination by Edinburgh, relatively speaking, because consciousness and imagination cannot really be separated. It is undoubtedly a major poem.

The other poems in the collection are all related to the two parts of ‘The Homing Bird’, extending explorations of identity in various ways. Two of these, ‘India Calls’ and ‘In My India’, itemise what has been gained and what has been lost since independence, and the country’s place in the globalised economy. In ‘India Calls’, diversity is the key to everything: ‘Kurtas vie with collared shirts / and saris rival mini skirts’ (23). ‘In My India’ obliquely denounces sectarian political trends in contrast to a more liberal-minded India in the recent past:

In my India we were moving
With the world, pushing orthodox
Boundaries, countering ignorance
In the Spirit of Rabindranath
In tune with Gandhi’s tolerance. (26)

The poem ends with this clarion-call: ‘Give me back my India!’ (26).

Another poem, ‘Walled-In: Walled-Out’ reads like a reflection on our age of resentment and pinched expectations. It begins with a line alluding to Robert Frost: ‘Do good walls make good neighbours?’ It goes to show the consequences of simply building walls to keep out ‘the other’.

Here is an excerpt:

So while walls shut out
Suicide bombers, harvesters, employees
Of the starving free, they shut in

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The waller who cements fear
In brick and stone … (18)

One of the most delightful poem in this outstanding collection is ‘Christmas: Burra Deen’. It intoxicates the reader with festive images of celebratory decoration:

A warm wrap-around sun of fun
And of trees with paper leaves
Cut into leaves of fir foliage, defying
The ambient green branches and colourful
Butterfly hues on bushes redolent
Of colonial migrations of dahlias,
Cosmos, petunias, poppies and
Chrysanthemums in white plenitude
snow-like on a soft Christmas night. (29)

The conclusion makes clear that Christmas is also an Indian national holiday:

… and the nation slept
To wake up on a national holiday
on Burra Deen – the Big Day of Christmas. (29)

Bashabi Fraser is well-known for her poems in From the Ganga to the Tay (2009), Ragas & Reels (2012), and Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers (2015). The Homing Bird is on a smaller scale, but very much like a Mughal miniature painting, and it therefore shines with a jewel-like brilliance.

Mario Relich

India has been the home to great poets and seers, writing in Indian languages including English. And in India we find that creativity is an aroma of a poet’s heart. There is the pleasure in the recognition of an enlightened moment in poetic creation, followed by a heightened awareness and sensibility. Poetry’s task is to reconcile us to the world of experiences where all-pervading loving togetherness can exist. The poet is an ardent artist of words and phrases. At times, Bibhu Padhi’s poetic pool is redolent with a hurried system of questions and answers:

> Words have ceased to arrive
> at your doorsteps, as they used to. (‘Returning’, 128)

For Padhi, all poems are doors of the mind. The poet shows us the steps of a ladder of time. Time flies around these poems:

> The crows sit over yesterday’s
> dead fish. (‘Sea Dream’, 15)

Poetry saves men and women from moments of frustration and dejection. Mundane wishes come and go. A poet has a sensitive heart to feel all these arrivals and departures of wishes and dreams:

> Every lost thing is imagined
> and wished for – (15)

For Bibhu Padhi, only the senses are moving among the objects of senses. Thought is a mental act. The poet wants to sign in the peace accord of minds with a whirlpool of images that vary in nature. Men and women live with dreams, dreams for a better tomorrow. For the poet, absences stay in the midst of dreams, resulting in attitudes and actions:

> The smell of salt and lime
> rolls over the sand and the sky
> dreams of sea rise
> all about me, as I stand. (27)

Padhi’s musings are often short, compact and witty; at times interspersed with longer poems which all attest to the poet’s vast knowledge of life. Even so, the poems in this collection are more than the experiences and realisations of life. The poet rather moves towards an aesthetic celebration, not just physical, but spiritual.

The poems are to be appreciated for their rhetoric and the variety of linguistic devices used to convey his reflections:

> Summer: I shall not
> call you now, when
> the erratic February
> rains here. (‘Summer, Dhenkanal’, 102)
Rain has a soul. For Padhi, each small rain drop sings. Rain binds myths in coastal Odisha. All the leading poets of Odisha write about rain and rivers. Padhi’s poetic sensibility navigates on hearts that come out of the rains, and into the sunshine to soothe his sores. The poetic self of Bibhu Padhi generates meaning out of dry, repetitive and prosaic terrains of life’s daily acts, where imagination conjures up mysteries of the heart. Most of his poems are a collage of ideas, effortlessly streaming from lived moments of creative pulls. Touching is knowing. Padhi is a psychological poet for whom each touch is different, more than the objects:

Touch. You can feel how
the touched words pulsate within you. (‘Returning’, 129)

Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, two culturally rich towns, appear again and again on Padhi’s poetic canvas:

It is noontime
in the old town. (‘A Bird About to Fly Way’, 110)

Among the many talented poets of Odisha, past and present, it is an obvious fact that Padhi’s poems strike a distinct note. His poems significantly break free from the overwhelming compulsions that prudes and purists determine to be the defining routes that poetry must track to remain truly poetic.

This is where everything ends,
Love. (‘Betrayed’, 138)

Odisha is the land of Jagannatha tradition. Jagannatha in a local legend was a tribal deity who was co-opted by Brahmin priests. The theology, rituals and nuances associated with the Jagannatha cult combine Vedic, Puranic and tantric themes. The sap of history of the land of Odisha has a long pedigree:

Such are the turns of history
that what is forgotten by most
is what troubles the mind. (‘Looking Back’, 92)

Jaydeep Sarangi


Haifa, Israel, May 2001, and a heavily pregnant woman, a doctor, is at the site of a bomb blast, picking her way carefully through the dead, perhaps looking for her husband who is not answering his phone. Her attention is suddenly caught by a coloured gemstone lying amid the rubble; ‘the last thing she sees before she passes out is a mangled body lying in a heap over in one corner. Red lipstick still perfectly frames the dead woman’s lips’.

From these opening pages the narrative of *The Waiting Room*, a debut novel by Australian writer and physician Leah Kaminsky, jumps back to six hours earlier. It’s a technique we’ve grown familiar with through television: the reveal of the body before the title credits, then the scenes of familiar domesticity, the ‘normal’ before the catastrophe. In this case, the doctor, Dina, her husband Eitan and young son Shlomi are having a hurried breakfast before leaving for work and school. In the background Radio Haifa is alerting listeners to a possible terrorist attack in the city. Melbourne-born Dina has lived in Israel for ten years and has grown used to such warnings – there was a bombing in the centre of Tel Aviv just yesterday – but this is the first time there has been a high alert in Haifa. Conscious of her child’s presence in the kitchen she switches the station to one playing Mozart.

Time moves slowly in a waiting room, and so it does in the opening pages; it is chapter six before Dina finally reaches her clinic. And slowly the reader realises that this is a novel not only written in the present tense but in real time: this is one climactic day in the life of a family doctor living far from home, and the narrative will move at her pace and in her head. A female Leopold Bloom, if you like, setting forth into the streets not of Dublin but of Haifa.

The child of Holocaust survivors, Dina is accompanied on her commute, as she is everywhere, by her dead mother, a constant presence in her life and voice in her head. She sees her, too:

Looking at her now, it’s hard to believe that Dina’s mother was once a beauty. Granted, death hasn’t done much to enhance her appearance: the unkept bleached hair, grey roots showing, her pink nightie peeking out from under her quilted dressing-gown, orange slippers on her feet. Her mother hasn’t changed since the evening she died. No Fashion Police in the afterlife, it seems.

Before leaving home, Dina and her Israeli-born husband have been arguing: she wants to return to Melbourne, he doesn’t. She is worried about the safety of her children (she is eight months pregnant), and is plagued by visions of Schlomi as an 18-year-old conscript if they remain in Israel: ‘She is living into his future, stepping out with him onto the battlefield … reaching for him as he falls to the ground’.

Dina lives ‘into’ her past, too; her dreams are filled with her dead relatives who arrive ‘carrying Kugel, gefilte fish, pickled herring and chopped liver with fried onions, trying to force their food and the horror onto her’. Almost everything Dina experiences, from snapping her shoe heel to hearing a recipe on the car radio, brings her mother to mind, and her mother’s ‘unavoidable tales’. Mostly these are short and entertaining; a few, like the story of buying carp at the Lodz fish market, go on far too long. But one does wonder how Dina keeps her mind on her patients and their treatments with these constant maternal interruptions. Which is perhaps intentional: Dina

would be a better doctor if she were more focused and less emotionally invested. At one point the account of Dina’s day stops for a full eight pages to tell the back story of an Iranian woman sitting in her waiting room. It’s a harrowing tale but it sits oddly in the middle of the free indirect narrative which places the reader inside Dina’s head and outside on the streets of a city facing a terror alert.

Anyone who has read Lily Brett will be familiar with ‘survival guilt’ felt by the offspring of Holocaust survivors. Dina has it in spades, although she attempts to shrug it off or, as a teenager in Caulfield (‘a place hope went to die’), to fuck it away with the ‘nice Jewish boys’ approved of by her mother and, like her, ‘unborn at Auschwitz station, but forever standing on that platform, in line, waiting to be chosen, to be sent right or left’. She rummages through her parents’ hidden papers, ‘determined to find the document that would reveal she was someone else’s child, desperate to prove that she had been born unstoried, rather than carry the dark pages of her parents’ life in her veins’.

It’s writing like this that will constantly reward readers of The Waiting Room, but the clinical details of Dina’s day are also enhanced by Kaminsky’s own medical background – how to break the news to a patient, for example, that she is not carrying a longed-for child but has a cancer that will kill her within three months. (She fudges it.) Haifa is brought vividly to life; readers will close the novel feeling as if they have visited the markets, cafes and shops with Dina, and travelled the same traffic-clogged streets and narrow laneways.

The fragmented story is true to personal memory, particularly traumatic memory: this is how we make sense of things, by putting together shreds of stories, words and asides that often occur to us at inopportune moments. The inanimate objects that lodge themselves in Dina’s memory – her mother’s shoes, her father’s glass eyewash cup – have their counterpart in the hundreds of thousands of objects taken from deported and murdered Jews and now displayed behind glass in Holocaust museums around the world.

But The Waiting Room is not solely a Holocaust novel; it is a novel about what it is like to live with fear in a country in a prolonged state of war. (Kaminsky herself lived in Israel for ten years.) Dina longs to take her children home, to visit her mother’s grave, to watch the black swans on Albert Park Lake, to be in a safe city. ‘Do you honestly think Melbourne is that much safer?’ Eitan asks her, and given the recent terrorist attack that left six pedestrians killed in Bourke Street, he has a point.

Whether to stay or go is a constant source of conflict between husband and wife. He calls her a galutnik, a Diaspora Jew and a coward; he is a sabra, a strong Jew born on a kibbutz. But Dina, through her patients, knows that the courageous Israeli woman can also suffer from panic attacks and stomach ulcers born of an intense fear for her children.

In the final pages we return to the bomb blast, learning with a shock exactly where Dina is, what has been targeted and who has been killed. And when her dead father visits her hospital bed, Dina learns – or is reminded of – the secret of his past and her beginning, just as her own daughter is born. Now, more than ever, Dina wants to go home to Melbourne. When she does, she takes her children to visit her mother’s grave and is finally able to lay her to rest.

Ruth Starke
Flinders University.


Mohsin Hamid’s most recent novel, *Exit West* (2017), focuses on the concept of belonging in relation to place and space in a politically unstable global landscape. Replacing the second person address – or narrative apostrophe – that characterises the Pakistani author’s earlier works of fiction, *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), with an omniscient third-person narrator, Hamid situates his tale in the past, in an unnamed city on the brink of civil war. The city’s anonymity acts to universalise the context in which the novel’s characters find themselves, and encourages the reader to imagine how one’s own city might change if subjected to a similar scenario. As the situation in the nameless city deteriorates, and militants belonging to an undisclosed faction wrest control from government forces, the novel’s protagonists, a young couple named Saeed and Nadia, flee the country of their birth in search of safety. What is curious about their escape, however, is that it occurs via neither the Mediterranean Sea nor the well-traipsed overland route west, to Europe. Rather, Nadia and Saeed travel through a door. But this is no ordinary door, for it has the ability to ‘take you anywhere’ (69). In the same way that the otherwise unremarkable closet in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* functions as a passage to another world, the door in Nadia and Saeed’s city acts as a portal to a place far removed from their home. However, despite the teleportative qualities that Lewis’s closet and Hamid’s door share, there is an important distinction between them: the latter is only one of many and, far from being unique to Nadia and Saeed’s city these magical doors are being used by people the world over to escape their own perilous circumstances. In fact, nearly every chapter of *Exit West* includes a detailed reference to a door which has inexplicably transformed into a passage from one part of the globe to another. Examples include doors leading from the Philippines to Tokyo, from Rio de Janeiro to Amsterdam, and from Kentish Town to Namibia.

The global proliferation of these mysterious doors grants Hamid’s novel a sweeping transnational scope, as the author details, amongst other people and places, the memories of an old woman in Palo Alto, the disturbance caused by the presence of a door in the house of a retired Naval Officer in San Diego, and even an afternoon in the life of a young political activist in Vienna who is fighting against the rise of the far-right in her city. The narrative quality of these temporal and spatial oscillations situates the individual struggle of Saeed and Nadia’s migration within the broader geopolitical and economic context of the world-system (101). Hamid’s use of these magical doors thus effectively ties the local to the global in a cosmic corridor of connection through which characters are transported from the known to the unknown.

In the case of Nadia and Saeed, the first door that they take leads them to the Greek Island of Mykonos – a location synonymous with the plight of refugees attempting to enter Europe. After a few turbulent months on the island, the couple escapes though another door. This particular portal leads them to London, and it is in England’s capital where Hamid’s depiction of the scope of the refugee crisis is at its most demonstrable. Once in London Nadia, Saeed, and many other migrants are made to feel unwelcome by ‘nativist’ mobs that desire to reclaim ‘Britain for Britain,’ and are subjected to acts of violence at the hands of the country’s police and armed forces (131, 132). The protagonists and their fellow refugees find themselves cordoned off in...
militarised ‘zones’ – dystopian and dangerous areas known as ‘dark London’ (142). It is under these conditions that Nadia and Saeed’s relationship begins slowly to fracture – a result of their perpetual ‘state of unnatural nearness in which any relationship would suffer’ (138).

Regardless of the foreseeable end of their communion, the couple leaves London together through yet another door, which this time takes them to the town of Marin on the outskirts of San Francisco. It is on the West Coast of the United States that they part company; Saeed falling in love with an imam’s daughter and Nadia with a chef. Love can see one through difficult times, Hamid seems to suggest, but it is itself not immune to change. In the same way that Nadia and Saeed migrate to and from various places, they also migrate towards and away from one another. This appears to be the crux of Hamid’s novel: the notion that ‘we are all migrants through time,’ irrespective of whether or not one leaves the place of one’s birth (209).

The front cover of Exit West depicts a piece of paper being pulled back to reveal a yawning abyss in the shape of a door; its inky blackness beckoning the reader towards an unknowable future. In this future, the novel implies that there is hope – hope for a better world in which one acknowledges the inherency of migration to the human condition. The novel asks the reader to understand that one does not belong to an imaginary homeland but to a global community. Exit West is a tale of love in the time of migration (though Hamid would doubtless wince at this reductionism) but it is also about how one is, as an individual, responsible for society at large. This is a societal matrix that requires and demands coexistence. Unlike The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the supernatural elements of Hamid’s latest novel begin and end with his inclusion of the teleportative doors. The migration of refugees to Europe and the geopolitical west is no fantasy story. Rather, it is a chronicle of struggle; struggle for place, space and recognition in a disorderly and unpredictable world.

Philip Sulter
Quinn Eades, *Rallying* (UWAP, 2017)

In the opening poem of *Rallying*, Quinn Eades quotes the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray: ‘Call yourself. Give, yourself, names.’ then presents us with a fourteen-page poem in which the poet moves swiftly, however fragmentedly, from a little girl who cares for her sister, to a heroin addict and sex worker, to a male writer. There are other identities, too, that fall in between, each as crisply visualised as the one before. It’s called ‘How to disappear in your name’, and it’s an adapted form of haibun, where memories are a rush of prose, and reflections in short-stanza verse follows. And it’s stunning. It’s closely aligned with Eades’s ficto-critical(ish) 2015 debut prose work, *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body*, a book of non-fictive feminist poetics, a highlight of my reading last year. They were written side by side and they cover the same territory, but rather than see *Rallying* as a new way to write *all the beginnings*, I see it as a new way to write the body: the body as child, the used and addicted body, the mothering body which has its foundations in the female birthing and therefore the nourishing and giving body, the body in love, the trans body. In a single poem, which, unlike the rest of the poems in the book is not bracketed by a titled section but stands alone as its own body, so to speak, Eades paints the person who held each name, and each name comes together to culminate in ‘Quinn’, and in Quinn.

She is PK/Francis/Stevie/Rayne/Persephone/Sarah/Mama/Karina/Quinn. She takes them all and holds them inside her skin. She is all names, for herself: she is no one named.

If ‘rallying’ is the action of coming together to support a person or cause, or the action of digging into the depths of one’s capability to keep going, then in this first book of poetry, Quinn Eades is in full-on rallying mode, supporting the body in writing it raw, and writing it raw in order to keep the body going. The poet writes that he learned to ‘carry myself like a wound’ (16), a sentiment echoed throughout the book. Though, like the poem’s title, ‘Shine on me’, suggests, the book basks in resilience. This body, in its abjectness, belongs; this body, in its push and pull, loves.

*Rallying* has its foundations in feminist theory, and I read it as a book that could easily be added to the canon of Australian feminist poetry, but the debate on whether or not trans bodies are bodies that can speak for feminists is real. That being the case, *Rallying* is Exhibit One for why transgendered people can identify as feminists. Eades writes about mothering from a place of such brutal honesty that I can’t separate the personal confessional from the cultural political:

Sometimes, in the yawning day (because time is like breath) I would have a shower. It was an activity for us, like pram walks and tummy time. There was the undressing and dressing, busyness, blessed movement, and in between, this: water. My back against the lime scaled glass, thigh become plug. The sound of the shower tray filling. The way Zach would press his whole body into mine, clinging limpet rockling darling downy goosling lost against my chest. Stinging water dreaming warmth me singing

*take these broken wings and learn to fly, all your life,*

you were only waiting for this moment to arise.

It made a beautiful picture. My voice. The water. His curling trust. But in my head I was doing this: laying him down in the shower tray and watching as the water rose, tickling at his ears, then covering his cheeks, pooling over his eyes, entering his mouth and nose. It’s not that I wanted him gone: it was that I couldn’t go on. I couldn’t go on but there was no choice. What really happened was this: I kept singing. He kept curling. (51-52)

Poetry like this makes women question our place as natural ascenders to unconditional lovers of our children. No doubt the ‘unconditional’ in this poem is present and powerful, but so is having the strength to say that there is nothing natural about it.

And so we come back to the body. Babies are part of the body because they begin in it, are extracted from it, then take from it, and so these poems of babies that lend themselves to poems of love and domesticity – and they do make up a significant portion of the book – are always, again and again, about the body.

When we get home I decide to bury
the placenta – it has been defrosted for this moment.
I expect love but find instead the gag from leaking
bits of blood onto the brick.

The animals gather, Penny licking.
The burying, the gagging, the burying. (35)

This burying of the placenta is a burying of the body, just as children’s neediness consumes the body:

It is almost unbearable,
the nearness of these children. The feeling
that they are trying to swallow me. (42)

Children invade the body, almost like a sickness might, embedding themselves, feeding themselves, trying to get back in once they’ve been successfully removed.

And so we shift seamlessly to the ill body, where sickness is so intrinsically a part of the body that there is no separation until one – either body or sickness – is killed:

You bloom, necrotic, spotted, carrioned.
Dead egg carrier you torque, you double, you
shout at the tear that is my
groin back ribs leg knee throat back
back back back back.

He can’t find you. They talk
about us in third person not knowing
we are fourth person poetic split by pain.
They want to send us home.
Dragonfruit: bloom, split, tear, twist, turn.
But they do. Find you. They spear
you and bag you. Pull you through
a hole in my belly after their metal scissors
snip at your talk. Dead moon. Distended.

And then.

And then you are gone. (109-110)

But what happens when serious illness is taken away from the body? Like a child who has died, the illness, though gone, will always live within the body. These things – children, illness, addiction – leave such lasting traces within our bodies that they help form our identities. Eades is about this: identity.

So much of this book depends on writing, which may sound an obvious thing to say, but Eades also writes about the writing body and its crucial place in his enduring identity.

I grab at text like it is making meaning where I lie. Like it will still be here later. When I leave. When every part of me is dustmaker and you can’t remember the colour of my eyes the way I sound when I cough. That stretch. I grab. At text. (115)

Text sustains the body and will replace it when the body is gone.

Less successful in Rallying are poems that concentrate on foreign place. In these poems, such as those found in the section ‘Away with Them’ taking the poet out of the safety of the domestic space of tea, Callistemon, climbing-children and love, is akin to taking him out of his own skin. The body is lost, reflection is stilted; the poems feel distracted, as if something is missing. A poem like ‘To be kissed’, however, works because though Eades relates an experience of being kissed on the cheek by and kissing back a woman on the streets of Lisbon, he sees himself reflected in the woman: body as recognition of body.

This is a striking debut, heralding the arrival of a new voice in Australian poetry that has plenty to say and does so with a rare blend of research and lived experience, theory and memory. His choice of form, too, is unique, and it’s here that I want to mention the book’s final poem. Just as ‘How to disappear inside your name’ is an introduction that prepares us for themes to come, ‘Tender Bodies’ is a conclusion that summarises the themes (the sections are titled ‘Boycunt’, ‘Writing’ and ‘Love’). Both poems are prose poems in paragraphed stanzas, though verse twists its way through in the form of traditional stanza poetry in ‘How to disappear’ and lines ‘lifted/loved/taken’ from Gertrude Stein’s ‘Tender Buttons’. Both are also poems of the body as trans. For me, they’re the most expansive and exciting poems in the book. The opening of the section ‘Boycunt’ reads:

The difference is spreading.

WHAT IS IT

People want to know at dinner but suppose dinner is a house and the work is never done and no one will eat the rainbow shards thrown by crystals hanging in the floor.
Suppose the floor is a rubbery hollow. Suppose you have made yourself a hole that is not a hole that wants to be empty and full and eaten and revered. Suppose you are that hole. (142)

‘Hole’ and ‘habitus’ and ‘change’ repeat throughout the dense seven-page poem so that even the easily-lost-in particularly difficult poetry can return to the core, which is the body in its lacking, in its social positioning, in its transition and, as the poem ends, as ‘Re/produced’, also a play on the poem’s structure.

It’s not an easy time to be an Australian poet. As our government resists the arts through unsupportive funding schemes, most publishers won’t take on poetry. It’s too difficult to financially rationalise; it simply doesn’t sell. In 2016 University of Western Australia Publishing made a bold move to oppose this trend and established its poetry series. In 2016 they published four books of poetry and this year a whopping fourteen. The idea is to create a diversified list of established and emerging poets, some who are lyrical, some experimental, and really showcase what’s happening now in Australian poetry. Thank goodness for diversification and hats off to UWAP for recognising Eades, because Rallying doesn’t comfortably fit into any type of poetry I’m aware of at the moment, and it needs to be read; Eades needs to be heard.

Heather Taylor Johnson

Gone are the days of triumph narratives where chronology moves from good health to a catastrophic loss of health, and ends, finally, with an enviable level of acceptance – thank goodness. Illness doesn’t work that way so why should the narrative? It’s too simplistic a telling and shows us nothing of the fractures of the self that won’t heal. The current trend of the genre embraces a non-linear form, experimentation with fragments and unconventional structures, which not only makes reading a more stimulating practice, but also reflects the fluctuations of the dis-eased body and the mental work that accompanies it. In the prologue to *Notes on the Flesh*, Shahd Alshammari promises as much by saying her book is what Audre Lorde calls a biomythograph, where the story of the individual is an interwoven tapestry of different genres and realities. She writes:

> Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, history, they are all part of the narrative. *Notes on the Flesh* is written on the body, from the body, from existence, from the experience of being here, fully here, and sometimes, only there in my head, or through someone else’s story, living vicariously through someone. Some of these stories are narrated by others, and as always, there is no boundary between the self and the other. (iv)

This is what I’m interested in as a movement forward in the genre, though I’m not quite sure this book has reached its biomythographic potential.

What we begin with is a young Kuwaiti girl caught between two cultures; her mother is a Western-looking Palestinian and her father a Bedouin with strictly Arabic values. She refers to her and others like her as hybrids. ‘I never could understand the concept of belonging, of fitting in’ (3). The flesh then begins in a place of culturally smeared boundaries and liminalities, allowing readers to glide, rather than leap, into a similar corporal space. Before we get there, though, Alshammari offers up a memoir of the female body trying to determine its worth in a landscape of a traditionalist patriarchal society. How to be seen when you’re supposed to be hidden? How to understand sexuality when for women it’s forbidden? She poses these questions calmly and almost blamelessly through glimpses of crushes, friendships and love. A diagnosis of MS, however, intensifies her thinking and we see that the analogy between the second citizen status and disability is a focus of the self.

Part I is called ‘Mythography’ but it reads as a straightforward biography chronologically told. It’s not until we get to Part II, ‘Voices of Lovers’, that we meet new narrators and characters and follow new plotlines. We’re told in the author’s bio that *Notes on the Flesh* is Alshammari’s first collection of short stories, but I see only Part II as having fictional stories, and even that is confused because the stories of others are interspersed with a continuation of the autobiogaphy of Part I. Structurally, this doesn’t do the word ‘biomythography’ justice and it doesn’t work as a strengthening device for the book. Its randomness is ultimately a lack of randomness, it’s balance officially unbalanced. I’m left confused about the author’s decision to
switch things up half way through the book whilst attempting to follow-through with her memoir when I wanted the experimentation with form to inform my reading.

Part II, however, is where the book thematically comes together. Alshammari’s ‘notes’ (read ‘short short stories’) on the difficulty of holding onto love for female Muslims in the Middle East mirrors that of the memoirist’s experience of losing the love of a man due to her illness. Intersectionality’s at work here and it’s a strong point in this book. Neither Alshammari nor her ill-fated lovers can catch a break because this is not a triumph narrative at all; it’s a book full of complexities that are written on the flesh and sewn into the psyche. The deeper Alshammari’s body falls into her illness (falls into love) and meets with disappointment, the stronger her determination is: ‘Marriage was a social contract, a contract that made no sense to me at all. It was about products, about how good the goods were, and whether you were worth purchasing’ (78).

There is much to praise in this book though I’m unconvinced with the language’s simplicity and dependency on cliché (‘Everyone around us looked the same; everyone had the same features – everyone except him’ [87]), and too often the author reverts to an amateurish summing-up, complete with italics to really drive in the point (‘But I didn’t understand, and I couldn’t forgive him. Like the doctors, he had betrayed me’ [98]), but I believe it’s a bold book, an illuminating one, and one worthy of discussion. I point to the epilogue:

Is myself just my body? Must it be a body that is lovable? A body that is healed only through love? Whose love? Should it be mine? Is self-love the answer? But we need human connection, human touch. We need to be acknowledged, approved as worthy of love, deemed human, stamped as ‘good’. To break away from boundaries, borders of the mind, the taboo of the body, what is it we need? Is it just desire? And, is desire for the terminally ill romantic? (111)

I commend her for tackling these questions with honesty, imagination and creativity.

Heather Taylor Johnson

The experience of travelling to a city may not be just a matter of crossing geographical boundaries, it can become a process of creating new forms of identity especially when these cities have their unique spatial significance. Gillian Jein finds herself obliged at the beginning of her book to answer some fundamental questions that will certainly arise in the reader’s mind. To answer the question: ‘Why the French travellers?’ she sets the main concern of her book to be an understanding of ‘urban modernity’: ‘the prismatic interrelation of travel writing and the urban environment as open, mutually engaged modes of making meanings for modernity’ (2); a task that can be achieved by ‘[tracing] the emergence of networks of representation … as a mobile constellation of intersections, or “crossings”, between different national, cultural and historical identities’ (2). As the traveller usually brings into awareness a set of alternative interpretive positions from which to view the modern city, the ‘French traveller’ represents someone who brings to bear on London and New York perspectives of political, historical and ideological difference, which combine to weave threads of externality into the fabric of these cities’ modernity’ (2).

The discourse leads to more questions like ‘why the traveller?’ and ‘why the city?’ The traveller stands out as the outsider who enters, engages and departs the city within more temporally and spatially restricted frameworks that differ from the spatio-temporal borders of the inhabitant of the city. Cities are conceived of as spaces where social, political and historical relations undergo constant negotiation and where the realities and representations of urban life are in persistent and dynamic states of becoming: ‘cities constitute one of the most complex spatio-temporal sites of identity formation’ (2). Hence, travel writings are discussed as some experience to explore the notion of exchange out of which ‘narration’ emerges as a moving, spatial practice.

Another question comes out: ‘why London and New York?’ The author finds in the ‘French perspectives’ of London and New York ‘a contextual mesh’ that is so relevant to the themes of interest to the book: ‘exchange, movement, meaning-making and their bearing on urban modernity’ (3). Such a reading of urban modernity, represented in these two capitals of modern Western culture, will help her unbind other traditional or monolithic readings that represent it as a homogenous, undifferentiated entity: ‘in this way, we will speak of “modernities” in the plural to challenge better universalist notions of “civilization” and of “modernity”’ (3). From the French perspective, it becomes clear that London and New York represent alternative models for the cultural, visual and architectural expression of modern Western civilisation (4). Whereas London represents ‘the architectural manifestations of England’s constitutional monarchical government’ (3), New York ‘brings into awareness yet other tensions inherent in French conceptualizations of the modern self on an increasingly transnational and technologically mediated global scene in the twentieth century’ (3).
Thus, Jein, a lecturer in French Studies at Bangor University whose research in French urban cultures focuses on the aesthetics and politics related to the articulation of urban spatialities, embarks into some spatial practices of French travel writing from London’s Crystal Palace in 1851 to the skyscrapers of New York in the 1980s. This book, which came out of her doctoral research with its survey-like nature, investigates how eight French writers: Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Dyssord, Jules Janin, Alfred Leroy, Paul Morand, Georges Perec, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jules Vallès, produced in their travel writings possible meanings for life in the modern city. The spatial planning of these cities, and the way they are seen and represented, is a key element in formulating alternative identities that are the product of the multiplicity of urban modernities which in turn reproduce the historical and cultural differences of the ‘West’.

The theoretical framework that the author uses to explain how these writings produce the city brings together some ‘strands of theory, context and poetic analysis’. A survey of some influential theoretical approaches for understanding cities (Chapter One) leads to some spatial practices that work on two main axes: the city ‘as a material condition’ and the city ‘as a narrative space’ (19).

Two urban travel accounts of London: Jules Janin’s (1851) and Jules Vallès’ (1876), show how these writings produced a French space in Nineteenth-Century London (Chapter Two). While both works are concerned with two different architectures of London, they both exhibit ‘a consciousness of space as a material configuration of modernity’ (65). In contrast to these accounts of orderly London, the disorder of interwar and World War II London as revealed and reconstructed by Jacques Dyssord and Alfred Leroy (Chapter Three) show how ‘spaces of disorder,’ ‘the secret city’ and ‘dark tourism’ perform ‘in correspondence and contrast with the monumentality of more official sites’ (107-8).

Shifting to New York (Chapter Four), the city ‘considered by many to be the capital of the world’, manifested the shift of power in the ‘West’ from the ‘imperialist Europe’ that dominated the nineteenth century’s imagination of civilisation to the ‘new global political order increasingly dominated by the capitalist market economy and American foreign policy’ (139). The writers discussed in the chapter, like George Duhamel, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, represent the city’s architecture arrangement as the ‘American order’ through their European identity (140). More accounts of New York (Chapter Five), like Georges Perec (1980) and Baudrill (1986), shift the focus from the previous ‘simplicity of the outward geometric’ as represented in the ‘panoramic of the crowd’ toward the ‘complexity of the spaces in-between the lines representing the ‘multiplicity of the urban identities’ (172). More questions are raised by examining if the ‘interpretive mode of travel’ that is applied to travel discourse as a means of producing social space can instil ‘a proper sense of mobility’ (171).

Working at a somewhat sophisticated conceptual level that is located on the intersections of cultural geography, politics and aesthetics, the book is preoccupied in all its aspects of analysis with the question of modernity and the challenges it poses to the travel writers about their sense of their place in the world. These challenges are clear in the notions of French identity as it was
negotiated in relation to other centres of the ‘West’. ‘Urban Crossings’ was an earlier suggestion for a title of the book that clearly expresses its central theme. Thus it manages to explore the dialectical relationship between spatial entities (city structure and architecture) and the representations of the urban life, contributing much to body of work on urban cultural studies and modernity.

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The cosmopolitan desire to transcend national borders and to create a global community remains akin to state policies of multiculturalism which former settler colonies such as Australia and Canada developed to preserve and embrace ethnic differences. However, just as the former has been challenged in recent years because of its inherent Eurocentrism and the latter as having a potential counteractive effect of eliminating differences, both terms are now under new scholarly investigations as in Sneja Gunew’s *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators*. 

In the acknowledgements, therefore, at the very beginning, Gunew identifies two tasks carried out in the book: one is to continue with her career-long efforts to unveil alternatives to monolithic cultural entities as products of national cultures; the other is to juxtapose, as well as to differentiate between, Australia and Canada in this process. A decade away from her earlier ground-breaking comparative work on multiculturalism, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*, this new work not only reinvestigates multiculturalism against different social and historical contexts, focusing particularly on its Australian and Canadian ramifications, but also puts forward the idea of post-multiculturalism, echoing fittingly current neo-cosmopolitan debates over a previous ‘blindness concerning many groups, histories and geopolitical areas that were overlooked in the past and that need to be brought to the center of our culture criticism’ (3). Adopting Lyotard’s concept of ‘post’ as ‘future anterior’ (back to the future), Gunew argues that the missing elements in the old dynamics of state multiculturalism offer possibilities for alternatives. Nation-states and globalisation fail to fully connect us to the world, whereas the cosmopolitan dimension (most notably the element of multilingualism) in the works of post-multicultural writers ‘hinge[s]’ national cultures and globalisation. By drawing eclectic examples from post-multicultural and Indigenous writers in settler colonies including Canada and Australia, together with transnational writers across diasporas from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, China and India, Gunew contends that post-multicultural writers (and artists) are figures who ‘offer a cosmopolitan mediation and translation between the nation-state and the planetary’ (11).

Besides the six gracefully organised body chapters, *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators* is bookended by the introduction (‘The World at Home: Post-multicultural Writers as Neo-cosmopolitan Mediators’) and conclusion chapters (‘Back to the Future and the Immanent Cosmopolitanism of Post-Multicultural Writers’) presenting both in title and in content the main argument of the book. Through a crisp and pointed delineation of the massive displacement of refugees and asylum seekers, the closed European borders, and a re-emerging binary between West and non-West (Islam) in the past decade, Gunew argues for the need to render a new framework for literary and cultural studies which invites people to think in ‘planetary’ instead of ‘global’ terms. More specifically, she identifies the need for moving beyond the monolingual paradigm dominating Anglophone literary studies.

Chapter One, ‘Who Counts as Human within (European) Modernity?’ starts with unfastening the global reach of cosmopolitanism by asking a significant question, ‘who counts as European?’ First looking at outlier figures from the English canon such as Frankenstein’s Creature and Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula and then focusing on Christos Tsiolkas’s Dead Europe from contemporary post-multicultural writing, Gunew gives textual examples of different manifestations of Europe in varied imagined geographies and temporalities. Meanwhile, projecting the same question onto Australian and Canadian cultural and social canvases, Gunew refers to ‘European’ as a ‘Floating Signifier’ that relies upon specific historical and colonial situations for a definition. Through her literary and cultural interrogations of the word ‘Europe’, Gunew makes it very clear that it is valuable to ‘break down the global reach of cosmopolitanism so that it signals its historical contingencies, internal differences and discrepant modernities’ (31).

In the second chapter, ‘Vernacular Cosmopolitans’, the author borrows from Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of the stranger and uses the threefold structure of ‘imagining the stranger’, ‘imagining oneself as stranger’, and ‘being interpellated as stranger in the place one calls home’ to first help examine European cosmopolitanism via some recent fictions that include the central and eastern margins of Europe. She then looks at ‘Eur/Asian’ cosmopolitanism by drawing on the works of several diasporic ‘Eur/Asian’ artists. Writers and artists from these groups, defined as vernacular cosmopolitans, construct their voluntary ‘estrangement from one’s own culture identified as one of the necessary symptoms or attributes of the new cosmopolitanism’ (52).

Starting with a review of current diaspora criticism, the third chapter, ‘The Serial Accommodation of Diaspora Writings’, holds that diaspora subjects equal either post-multicultural writers or transnational cosmopolitan writers. Taking the textual examples from three women writers based in Canada and Australia respectively who mediate their relationships to India, Gunew uncovers in particular complexities of the serial accommodations of diasporic women writers. Their writings demonstrate ‘new and flexible subjectivities’ (69) which serve as our optimal existence within uneven global mobilities. A quick reference in this chapter to the significance of Indigenous groups in unsettling postcolonial myths of nationalism anticipates a focused discussion in Chapter Four, ‘Indigenous Cosmopolitanism: The Claims of Time’. Gunew holds that the only groups under the circumstance of globalisation who could currently occupy the universal are those who are ruthlessly excluded. Aboriginal people, for example, have their own cosmology in which everything is animated. They are primarily interested in the supposedly hyper-local which refers to specific tribal areas, termed also as their immediate “countries”. Indigenous cosmopolitanism facilitates a planetary mode of thinking as well as a neo-cosmopolitan debate over post-humanism. Through her rich reading of works by indigenous writers such as Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, and Canadian Thomson Highway, Gunew extols Indigenous Cosmopolitanism as a temporal and spatial alternative to the conventional rendering of cosmopolitanism.

Continuing with her challenge to the inherent Eurocentrism of cosmopolitanism by looking into global English, Gunew in the next chapter, ‘The Cosmopolitanism in/of Language: English
Performativity’, discusses different linguistically enunciative positions as reflected in novels from both China and the Chinese diaspora. Either doing cultural translations in their works to a globalised readership or translating between a Chinese localism and the particular context of an Australian readership, these writers show a ‘thematic interest in English as a path to an alternate functioning of globalization’ (95). Reflecting further upon the effects on languages and their speakers produced by globalised mobility, Chapter Six, ‘Acoustic Cosmopolitanism: Echoes of Multilingualism’ examines oral dimensions of multiculturalism in Australia. The ‘accents’ from other languages, disrupting the authority of English and colonial monolingualism, ‘reinstate a yearning for homogenous origins’ (97). This yearning represents a cosmopolitical dimension that indicates connections to the world and therefore remains less constrained by homo-hegemonies engendered by monolingual ideologies.

Restating in the conclusion chapter her invocation of Lyotard’s logic of the ‘post’ and what is previously forgotten in multicultural and cosmopolitan debates, Gunew recap’s the efforts made by writers and scholars since the 1980s to set up multicultural literary studies in Australia. As she builds her conclusion largely upon the Australian context as compared to the more multilingually diverse situation in Canada, the book as a whole has a pointed revelation of the ‘more sporadic and ad hoc’ studies in Australia over ‘multicultural’ writers and calls for a continuous and more targeted scholarly discussion on the topic.

In Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators, Sneja Gunew proposes a cosmopolitan reading pedagogy, which, although she herself admits to be ‘stammering’, offers a new literary and cultural critical approach. Gunew also traces her own migrant and diasporic experience, using her first-hand perception to give further voice to (post-)multicultural and (neo-) cosmopolitan discussions. Sneja Gunew’s well-established expertise in multicultural literature and the comparative standing and approach she takes in her research renders this monograph a scholarly production which is both versatile and inventive. Her proposal of the term ‘post-multicultural’ in literary and cultural arenas couples dexterously with current neo-cosmopolitan debates and thus creates ‘a new cultural politics and ethics’ (3) that meet contemporary challenges.

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Under Terrorising Eyes: The Indian Novel in English


What kind of world do we live in? The question you’ve just confronted used to be, once upon a time, an elite question. It used to be so because only a handful of our ancestors (mostly male) bothered about such inconsequential questions. But the world we’ve inherited from our forefathers has changed much over the years. And the question has now become a popular one. A whole host of reasons can be pointed out. If you happen to be a citizen of a postcolonial nation and also happen to be aware of the things happening in cultural studies, you’ll most probably point your finger to one of the man-made monsters of modern times called imperialism. And if you grew up in the angry 1960s, the criminal in your eyes would perhaps be capitalism itself. But the factor that outshines others in pulling the question down to a mundane plane is the increasing visibility of terror across the globe, a trend set in motion by that most spectacular act of terrorism, remembered by the date of its occurrence – 9/11. One of the aftermaths of that event has been (and still is) a radical defamiliarisation of our much-loved world. And we could not help asking: what kind of world do we live in? The questioning continues.

In her book *Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India*, Meenakshi Bharat attempts to show how that increasingly pressing question has opened up possibilities for one of the most thriving cultural industries in India, the Indian novel in English, and imposed at the same time formal, ideological-moral and representational constraints on its practitioners (8). With terror having become an integral part of life the world over, Indian English novelists can’t but deal with the issue both on the local and international front. The first three chapters (of Part I: The geographical ambit of the postterrorist novel) engage with the many faces of terror within India, while the fourth one focuses on its global connections. Bharat delineates the ‘formal and thematic ambit’ of what she calls ‘the postterrorist novel’ in Part II, containing an equal number of chapters. *Troubled Testimonies*, however, opens with an introduction in which Bharat defines ‘the postterrorist novel’ and for which she rightly deserves special thanks. For it’s not only well-written but also almost totally free from critical jargon, a quality so rare these days in academic writing and which, I think, will go a long way towards warming readers to the book.

As far as India is concerned, the state that has been the most conspicuous theatre of terror and violence in recent times is the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Accordingly, novels focused on Kashmir form the focus of critical analysis in the first two chapters of Part I of *Troubled Testimonies*. These works, as Bharat puts it in her choice of titles for the chapters, represent Kashmir as a ‘sad paradise’ and its ultimate ‘collapse’ (vii). The first chapter titled ‘Sad Paradise: Kashmir I’ analyses three early texts on ‘the Kashmir front in the context of terror’ (28), including Vikram Chandra’s *The Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000), *Bunker 13* (2003) by Aniruddha Bahal, and Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Both Chandra and
Rushdie, according to Bharat, identify the ‘crumbling’ of ‘the common Kashmiri tradition, Kashmiriyat, which cuts across differences of religion’, as the most unfortunate consequence of the unrest in Kashmir (34, 29), while Bahal exposes ‘the corruption in the [Indian] army that misuses its power to milk the volatile situation for its own selfish ends’ (33).

Over the years the postterrorist English novel on Kashmir has become more nuanced, reading the crisis in the Valley from a wide range of perspectives, a point amply borne out by the novels Bharat studies in the second chapter with the title ‘The collapse of paradise itself: Kashmir II.’ Jaspreet Singh’s Chef (2010), for example, explores how the on-going conflict in Kashmir has contributed to the ‘crude supposition’ that ‘the Indian, in subjecting himself to the discomfort of being in Kashmir’ is ‘patriotic and commendable,’ while ‘the Kashmiri, responsible for the stink, is a Muslim, a terrorist, and hence, not to be trusted, certainly not to be loved’ (44). Unlike the other novelists mentioned so far, Singh, however, doesn’t hesitate to offer ‘a solution’ to the prevailing ‘confrontational politics’ in Kashmir (45). The problem is best addressed ‘through cultural rapprochement and not through military intervention’ (45). Bharat discusses four more texts in this second chapter: Basharat Peer’s journalistic personal account Curfewed Night (2010), The Collaborator (2010) by Mirza Waheed, Shafi Ahmad’s The Half Widow (2012), and The Garden of Solitude (2010) by Siddhartha Gigoo. Kashmiris themselves, the authors of these works took to writing Kashmir because they had grown up ‘in the 1990s on Kashmiri soil’ under the shadow of the ‘nerve-wracking terror’ and whose lives ‘had been touched by the daily violence’ (48). As such, these texts ‘have the deeply personal element of the ‘memoir’ embedded in them’ (42). It is, however, The Garden of Solitude which, as Bharat sees it, is an important intervention as far as the genre of the postterrorist novel is concerned. For the novel brings to light the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits who are ‘hounded out of the only homeland that they had ever known for generations’ (56).

Kashmir is, however, not the only backdrop against which Indian terror unfolds itself. In fact, terror in India is ubiquitous, especially including such high-profile targets as New Delhi and Mumbai. In the next two chapters Bharat sheds light first on violence in parts of India other than Kashmir and then on its global geometry. With the expansion of the scope of terrorism, motivations for violence also become diverse. Upamanyu Chatterjee in English, August (1988), Rohinton Mistry in A Fine Balance (1995), Arundhati Roy in The God of Small Things (1997) and Aravind Adiga in The White Tiger (2008), for example, touch upon the Naxalite movement that ‘has arisen because of a general dissatisfaction and malaise resulting from an increasing sense of marginalization by the centre’ (64). But it’s ‘the canker of communalism’ that stands out as a key factor triggering terrorist violence in India (66). In Jimmy the Terrorist (2010), Omair Ahmad presents the portrait of a terrorist called Jamaal who comes to be called Jimmy. Jimmy becomes a terrorist because of the ‘hurt and injustice’ that he and his minority community face on a daily basis in India (69). Much in the same vein, Juggi Bhasin, in his 2012 novel The Terrorist, tells the story of his Muslim protagonist Murad who gradually veers towards terrorism as a consequence of terrorist attacks that turn all Indian Muslims suspects in
the eyes of other Indians. Misunderstood and distrusted by other Indians, Muslims like Murad fall an easy prey to ‘the overtures of terrorism’ (77).

Bharat works on three texts to substantiate her conclusion that terrorist violence is ‘a worldwide phenomenon’ (82). Through a detailed analysis of such texts as Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (also discussed among novels on the theme of violence in Kashmir), *God’s Little Soldier* (2006) by Kiran Nagarkar, and Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), Bharat is able to show how these works situate the issue of terrorism in a global context and thus highlight the interconnectedness of terrorist attacks the world over (85).

If Bharat offers a broad survey of terror-focused Indian English novels in Part I, in the chapters constituting Part II she investigates terror in relation to graphic fiction (and its e-version), gender and trauma. By virtue of being a new cultural phenomenon and also because it has an added advantage in that it can use multiple colours, frames, images and shades to create a composite text, the graphic novel can represent terror in a ‘subversive’ way (105). As far as gender is concerned, the postterrorist English novel from India is no different from its siblings. Not many women novelists (in English) are to be found who deal with the issue of terrorist violence.1 Also, barring a few exceptions (Sana, for example, in *The Terrorist*), in most cases women are represented as passive rather than active characters, and Kashmir itself as ‘the beautiful feminine’ (140). Whether on a small or large scale, the most obvious psychological fallout of terrorist violence is trauma. As such, all the texts Bharat works on in her study are to a greater or lesser extent trauma narratives. Not only do they bear witness to acts of violence but also help the victims regain a sense of self.

The postterrorist Indian novel in English, as Bharat reads it, is possibly more subversive on a different front: it problematises the ideology as well as the teleology of officially endorsed Indian nationalist discourse as a consequence of which the famous Nehruvian vision of ‘unity in diversity’ comes to be regarded as suspect. Caught between forces of terrorism and counter-terrorism, an Indian can’t help re-examining the grand narratives of national identity, progress, and autonomous self (170).

Troubled Testimonies is a well-written study of the Indian postterrorist novel in English. Students and scholars interested in South Asian cultural studies will definitely benefit from its original and perceptive insights. For non-academic readers the book articulates an informed answer to the question with which I began: what kind of world do we live in? Apart from a few typos, however, it’s worth pondering whether sweeping observations regarding the ‘global’ reach of postterrorist Indian English fiction (7), exclusive use of Urdu by Indian Muslims (107),

1 There are a few in Indian languages such as Hindi. Bharat specifically mentions the name of the award-winning Kashmiri author Meera Kant (134). With the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, however, that gap has been amply filled.
and ‘sensational’ coverage of terror attacks by the media (172) don’t work to diminish the intellectual sophistication of an otherwise meticulously researched work.

Md Rezaul Haque
**Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain**
edited by Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel (Anthem Press, 2016)

Emine Sevgi Özdamer’s protagonist in the tale *Career of Char: Memories of Germany* is ‘a witness of the solitude of the German high rise dwellers’. As she goes through her daily routine she ‘listens to the sounds of loneliness’¹ and is able to inhabit only a rigidly fugitive state of mind.

This fugitive mind-set seems to ripple through the collection of reviews, ideas, discussion and deliberation presented in the pages of the collaboration *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain*, the fugitive state being one that still works to that old idea of supply and demand. Capitalistic, yes, in so far as one must sell to buy, but literature takes on a higher status than simply the paper and words on the page, and the GDR wanted ideas, cultural variances, the possibility of imagined travel to exotic places for citizens who could not leave. My aunt (born before the War in what became the GDR) remembers holidays spent at hotels by the lakes where sport was the fun and travel was never offered unless you were an Olympic medallist, or a politician. But they wanted ideas that supported their own ideology and, even better, ideas that showed how other countries behaved badly. The GDR loved to show how their sporty living (never mind that the athletes were being doped with massive doses of steroids), their equality and communist ideals, were better than the rest of the capitalist nations.

My own research and subsequent writing of a novel on the GDR doping scam Theme 14.25 attempts to unpack the phrase ‘rigidly fugitive’. This oxymoron bears witness to a common exilic pathology of strain and estrangement. This strain and estrangement lives within this well-put-together collection. The often reactive writing, cross examination and highly original supposition on the relationship between authorship, the state of the GDR and the reading and writing of Australia – such a bright sunlit country – brought to mind a moment when I stood, over-dressed, in a fiercely air-conditioned room on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. The blazing sun was so fierce I’d had an ice cream melt before I even unwrapped it and I’d had to shelter on my short walk from our rental accommodation to this room – to speak to a somewhat bored crowd of students who resembled a kaleidoscope of butterfly. I began to tell them about a cold damp land where people were locked away for many reasons, including daring to read the wrong book. The locations could not have been more different, and I, being second generation German, could not have felt it more keenly. How wonderful was it then, to read other thoughts on this ‘rigidly fugitive’ nation and the literature of Australian writers. To be part of this discussion on the GDR. Take Anna Funder as one such modern writer, who brought the GDR to

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the world and Walter Kaufmann whose ‘works brought the world to the GDR’ (140); dark and light mixing to create a vivid connection of cultural psycho-geographical opposites.

Andreas Glaeser’s wonderful book *Divided in Unity* (not included in the reviewed collection) presents the reader with a study of the GDR police force (the people’s police, the Stasi etc.) and the Western police force during their amalgamation at the fall of the Wall. Both sides soon realised they were not only dealing with a wall made from bricks and mortar, but ‘walls in the heads of people’. This notion resonates within the collection of essays that unpack the notion of censorship, for example ‘[Dymphna] Cusack’s and [Katharine Susannah] Prichard’s critical and socialist sympathetic work to demonstrate that “the grass isn’t greener on the capitalist side” made them highly desirable as writers’ (123). Censorship takes many forms: for example, William James Blake wrote how he was ‘a nobody in America relatively, but here [the GDR] I am a Marxia writer’ (211).

Oh to be a big fish in a small communist pond.

A theme that follows many of the chapters is how the GDR’s publishing industry monitored and took note of writings that focussed on the ‘depiction of discrimination against Australia’s indigenous population’ (167). Perhaps the ‘walls in the heads of people’ take on many forms, allowing the GDR publishing industry an alternative censorship, a partial blindness: this was a state that shipped women and men to prison for no more than the crime of listening to western radio, reading a book that was banned, being in the wrong club, saying the wrong thing. It wold seem that it is easier to blame others than take blame for your own wrong doing.

Rigidity is considered. Funder is described as displaying ‘an almost brutal rigidity when it comes to “remembering” or “recollecting” the past’ (234). In her review of the film ‘The Lives of Others’, she states that ‘the Stasi provide no material for the expression of belief in humanity’ (234). Glaeser’s idea of ‘walls in the head’ could be extended (perhaps) to include how ‘the clock ticks differently’ in the GDR, an expression used by East Germans to explain the differences between East and West thinking. This fugitive mind-set is a product of totalitarianism itself. The Stasi have ‘walls in their heads’; walls that have been carefully built by the communist state in which they were born and represented as its citizens. It is not that easy to be seen as human if you are made to do terrible things day in, day out. Time and time again history presents us with horror and we exclaim ‘how can this happen?’ How can people spy, inform, kill, on such scale, and each time we cannot imagine what it feels like to be without choice, to live in a way that is prescribed because many of us are ill prepared to inhabit such empathy, to imagine, truly, what it might feel like, and for many it was not them who suffered the consequence, but their children or grandmothers. The ones who can’t fight are often the ones held to ransom. I don’t believe Funder displays a rigidity as such: her writing is alive with

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3 Glaeser 143.
feeling and sensitivity. You only need to read her characterisation of Ruth in the novel *All That I Am*, to sense how Ruth is written as believable and empathic.

The collection has, at its base, this dilemma: how can *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (struggle to come to terms with the past) be addressed through comparison? How can we, here in our free world, understand how things were done then, and what those things meant for readers who had to live in them as they avidly pored through the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, or Ergon Kisch’s *Landung in Australien*. I hope discussions such as *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain* will continue and grow in scope.

Anne Lauppe-Dunbar
For a writer not yet in her forties, the publication of a Companion to her work might be considered as a canonising effort, driven both by the quality of her literary production and the quantity of academic investigations on it. If the author is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the allure of her status as a public intellectual should be added, as her belonging to mainstream transnational literature in English has often produced wider debates (mainly concerning her positions about African feminism and Afropolitanism) than the ones usually circulating in the academic sphere.

This Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, edited by Ernest N. Emenyonu, a renowned scholar in the field of Postcolonial African Studies, takes up this double challenge, avoiding both canonisation tout court and the reproduction of the most contingent aspects of the contemporary cultural debate, and contributing, thus, to a much-needed critical reassessment of her literary and intellectual production as a whole.

The seventeen essays included in the Companion, in fact, produce an ‘internal dialogue […] enhancing the integrity’ of the volume, as explicitly defended by the editor in his introduction (7). Mainly coming from the Nigeria-US axis – recalling, thus, Adichie’s biographical background – but also from other countries around the world (United Kingdom, India and Spain, among others), these contributions build a complex and plural perspective on Adichie and her œuvre. This polyphonic criticism aptly corresponds with the multiple identities being represented in Adichie’s works, within the typical attempt of diasporic literature to overcome the binary opposition between two countries and cultures, seeking, instead, multiple attachments. Also the treatment of gender issues is much more detailed (and enriching, for the reader) than the debate which followed the label of ‘Happy African Feminism’, coined by Adichie in the 2012 TED Talk ‘We Should All Be Feminists’.

This polyphony has unintended consequences, though. The high fluidity and readability of those articles which are more prone to divulgation is associated with more structured and academic essays, in an uneven mixture which might from time to time disorient the readership. Besides, the combination of different positions inevitably ends up developing some specific arguments to the detriment of others. For example, Emenyonu’s claim that ‘there is a sense in which it could be said that the great Nigerian war novel did not exist until Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun’ (7) seems to lack the discussion of the other ‘senses’ in which the Nigerian-Biafran conflict has been narrated since its conclusion, nearly fifty years ago. Emenyonu himself is a great contributor to this field, since, at least, his renowned and still very valuable essay The Rise of the Igbo Novel (1978), but this and other references are not explicitly discussed with reference to Adichie’s novel.

Also Chikwendu Paschal Kizito Anyanwu’s argument that ‘Adichie, with the panoptic lens availed her by her historical location, goes beyond Achebe’s prophetic military coup [in his 1966
A Man of The People] to narrate the consequent civil war’ (140) does not seem to be completely satisfying. Adichie might show a fuller understanding of ‘corruption in Nigerian politics’ – as mentioned in the title of Anyanwu’s essay – as this phenomenon both preceded and followed the conflict, marking several decades of Nigerian postcolonial history. However, this does not exclude the possibility that Adichie – who did not directly experience the conflict – might have a perspective on Nigerian-Biafran war which is at least as partial as the one enacted by Achebe, who was directly involved in it.

In addition to this, the internal dialogue between the seventeen essays, plus the introduction, is structured along a mainly chronological axis: after the first essay, in which Louisa Uchum Egbunike discusses Adichie’s whole oeuvre in terms of ‘orality, history and the production of knowledge’ (15), six essays are devoted to Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus (2003), four to Half of a Yellow Sun (2007), two to The Thing Around Your Neck (2009) and four to Americanah (2013). This choice inevitably turns out to be a selective one, as the exclusive focus on novels and short stories prevents the discussion of Adichie’s ‘minor’ works, as aptly quoted in the very useful and exhaustive ‘Appendix’ (263-290) compiled by Daria Tunca: Adichie’s collection of poems Decisions (1997), her play For the Love of Biafra (1998) and her essay We Should All Be Feminists (2014).

A fuller discussion of Adichie’s literary antecedents would have also been of an interest: though a canonising move in itself, this analysis would have contributed to a deeper understanding of her transnational literary and cultural formation. While Adichie’s self-declared and often evident reference to Chinua Achebe is often recalled, there are only some passing references to other writers, such as the Nigerian-born writer Buchi Emecheta – whose Destination Biafra (1982) can be aptly compared to Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun, adding, thus, to the comparison actually made in the Companion by Iniobong Uko (59, 65) between Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood (1979) and Purple Hibiscus – or the Guinean-born Francophone author Camara Laye (101-102, 171). Scant reference is also made to the Nigerian diasporic literature, whose female constituency is briefly recalled by Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez: ‘Chika Unigwe, Helen Oyeyemi, Sefi Atta, Promise Okeke, Unoma Azuah and Diana Evans’ (245). However, as Adichie’s primary biographical and cultural attachment is the Nigerian American diaspora, reference to authors such as Chris Abani, Helon Habila or Anthonia Kalu cannot be avoided.

While these clarifications might have interested both the academic and non-academic reader, the choice being made in the Companion is nonetheless noteworthy, as it focuses on some important themes – multiple identities, gender, domesticity and transnationality – whose in-depth analysis helps to better position Adichie’s whole oeuvre, shifting away, at the same time, from the intricacies of the contemporary cultural debate on Adichie’s position within Afropolitanism and African feminism. Jessica Hume’s contribution on domestic and food-related spaces (87-100), Silvana Carotenuto’s reflections on Adichie’s responsibility as a writer (169-184), or the analysis of ‘hair politics’ in Americanah by Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (245-62) are only some examples of the brilliant critical moves being made in the volume.
In conclusion, despite some episodic absences, this Companion certainly stands as a relevant contribution to the discussion on the works being published by a writer who could be defined – in a formulaic, if oversimplified way – ‘very easy to chat about, very difficult to write on’.

Lorenzo Mari

Gender and madness appear in the question that opens this book: ‘What is a madwoman?’ (ix). The answer is provided through the lens of feminist literary theory, psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory; Laura Deane is a lecturer at Flinders University with expertise in literary theory and world literature. As the title of the book also indicates, ‘Australian literature’ is the prime focus of her enquiry, with ‘colonial paranoia’ playing an important part in the analysis.

‘Australian literature’ is a broad term to encompass a critique of the three Australian novels that form the core of Deane’s thesis: Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and Kate Grenville’s *Lilian’s Story* (1985) and *Dark Places* (1995). These ‘three novels of women’s madness’ (xvi) are subjected to insightful and original readings that support Deane’s contention that

In Australian women’s writing, madness operates against a backdrop of gender relations that distorts and limits women’s experience and opportunities. Madness remains an important theme in the works of women writers informed by politics of gender ... these gender politics are also the product of colonialism. (xv)

It is this connection between ‘the abuses of patriarchy’ and ‘the abuses of the colonial enterprise’ (xxi) that enables Deane to make her ‘important contribution to critical interpretations of both novelists and also to the interrelations of feminist and postcolonial literary theory.’ Critics have long recognised the work of Stead and Grenville as fertile ground for feminist literary analysis. Late 20th-century critical anthologies such as *Who Is She: Images of Women in Australian Fiction* (1983) and *Constructing Gender: Feminism and Literary Studies* (1994) include well-known essays on their vividly-created female protagonists; Deane cites an array of feminist literary criticism in the course of her book. The ‘colonial paranoia’ argument is less widely canvassed.

Grenville is more easily associated with colonialism than Stead. Her award-winning historical fiction (*The Secret River; The Lieutenant; Sarah Thornhill*) forms a trilogy set in the colony of New South Wales; *Lilian’s Story* and *Dark Places* deal with the story of a woman born at the turn of the twentieth century ‘whose ambitions do not align with the gendered codes of colonial gentility’ (85). Kate Grenville is very well-known for her thoughtful fictional and non-fictional examinations of Australia’s violent nineteenth-century history and race relations. *The Man Who Loved Children* is a novel of mid-twentieth century misogyny and family politics set in 1930s America. But as Deane clarifies in her introduction,

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1 Susan Sheridan, quoted from the back cover.


By situating the novels as narratives of colonial psychosis, I take up McClintock’s call for ... a psychoanalysing of colonialism as the over-arching cultural framework structuring the Australian context of the gendered relations of power ... In Chapter 3, I read The Man Who Loved Children as a narrative of colonial psychosis. (xxvii)

This is a scholarly monograph based on Deane’s PhD thesis in English and Australian Studies; Australian Psychoses: Women’s Madness and Colonial Psychosis was completed in 2012 and awarded a prize for doctoral thesis excellence in the following year. In publishing this work, Deane reaches a wider audience. According to the promotional material, ‘This provocative work will be essential reading for students of Australian literature, cultural studies and gender studies wanting an insight into the Australian psyche shaped by settler colonialism.’

Certainly the content of the book addresses important questions in all of these fields, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to postgraduate students and scholars who already have a strong background in literature, cultural and gender studies. For other students of Australian literature and culture, I would recommend it as a potential item in a reading list that included less complex material – there are a number of excellent books and journal articles on Stead and Grenville that are helpful and enlightening at undergraduate or general readership levels. It is difficult to write for multiple audiences in a vocabulary that engages specialist academic interest while remaining accessible. Gender, madness and colonial paranoia in Australian literature is a published thesis rather than a book written for a new audience; it is complex and ambitious in its application of ‘a post-Reconciliation lens to the study of Australia’s gender and racial codes’ as it places ‘Australian sexism and misogyny in their proper colonial context’ through Stead and Grenville’s remarkable novels.

Jennifer Osborn

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2 Quoted from the back cover.
3 Quoted from the publisher’s website, https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498547338/
Multiculturalism is an unruly theoretical beast with deep cultural entanglements that can, at times, be put to contradictory uses. Add postcolonial theory and marginalisation to the mix, and you have a beast in real danger of fragmenting into a welter of contested ideologies and analytical confusion. Thankfully Multicultural and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature, focusing as it does on predominantly texts from the Indian subcontinent, avoids generalisation and presents an ‘admirable introduction to subaltern voices’, as Shirley R. Samuels writes in the Foreword (ix). The essays are separated into three sections covering the marginalisation of women and ethnic groups; considerations of nation-states and global community; and the status of those considered sub-class, particularly the Untouchables in Indian society. Most of the essays include close readings of postcolonial works of fiction that address the above concerns and engage with current and emerging feminist, postcolonial and multicultural theories.

Mukuta Borah’s ‘Displaced Denizens’ considers a conflict that is not widely reported in western nations, through a close reading of the literature of displacement from the state of Assam. Borah’s analysis of the representation of the state’s displaced peoples reveals depressingly familiar accounts of ethnic violence and social unrest, along with the resulting exploitation and marginalisation of women. Borah’s reading of Jayanta Kumar Chakravarty's short story ‘Xangamat Axatoor’ posits death as the ‘ultimate form of displacement from all communal understanding’ (42). When a young, unknown girl is pulled from a river, and a member of the community covers her with his ‘blue gamosha’ she ‘suddenly becomes a complete Muslim girl’ (43). The clothing used to cover her both causes confusion about her identity and demonstrates the communal need to construct identity, even when there may be no foundation for the construction.

In ‘Nation-State and State of Nationlessness’, Guru Charan Behera suggests Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient is primarily concerned with deconstructing grand narratives of nation and history. He cites Benedict Anderson’s thesis wherein the nation is perceived as an ‘imagined community’ created through narrative and reinforced in cultural practice (70). Behera suggests this state of affairs means the postcolonial writer is tasked with deconstructing the grand narratives of the nation-state. He argues that Ondaatje succeeds in this task through the accommodation of several intertexts and foregrounded heterogeneity, thereby ‘presenting a space where the boundaries of nations, lands, and identities are glossed over’ and the boundaries of ‘history and fiction, archaeology and myth, fiction and poetry’ are blurred (70-1).

Overall, the essays seek to engage with postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and marginalisation without becoming part of the larger, omnipresent narratives of intertwined colonial imperialism and masculine superiority. Unfortunately, the balancing act can be hard to maintain, as the linguistic choices in Poonam Pahuja’s problematically entitled ‘Scrutinising the..."
Dark Stature of the Second Sex in Society’ reveal. While discussing the subjugation of women in a selection of Shashi Deshpande’s novels, Pahuja refers to women as the ‘second sex’ and the ‘weaker sex’ in society (159). I must point out that the essay intends to highlight the way in which Deshpande attacks entrenched double standards and the lack of female empowerment in her culture. While it is understandable that phrases like ‘weaker sex’ are often used as shorthand for an entrenched cultural norm, it would be preferable if scholars considered the reinforcing power of such wording.

Multiculturalism and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature would have benefited from thorough line-editing, as there are enough typos to distract, but this is a minor quibble. Every essay in the volume will provide a thought-provoking read for students of Cultural Studies or Literature who have an interest in the texts, voices and cultural concerns of scholars and authors from the Indian subcontinent. For example, two essays that make for fascinating reading are Fatima Syeda’s analysis of the mute fury of the Untouchables, and the persuasive argument raised by Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi and Sheikh Nahid Neazy, that Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935) should be treated as a social document rather than fiction.

Overall the collection asks the reader questions, offers alternative perspectives on multiculturalism, marginalisation, and post-colonialism, and piques interest in works of fiction that may not have encountered the western tradition may not have encountered. The result is a collection that reflects the editors’ reference to Graham McPhee’s belief that the ‘social chaos agitated by modernity has become a perennial problem’ (xiii). The hopelessly marginalised in modern society are, therefore, carrying the ‘burden of despotism’. This, the editors suggest, means that the ‘work of or for the marginalized has to locate a place for itself in an enormous international market’ because ‘cross-border mobilizations and geographical dispersion’ of peoples represents ‘a serious challenge for the unheard voices’ (xiii). In this sense, the editors have successfully curated a collection that reflects the belief that marginalised groups in the modern world are not struggling for survival so much as struggling for ‘recognition and identification’ (xiii).

Kathleen Steele

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Any serious reader of Austen will agree with Margaret Doody’s starting point that ‘Names of places and persons in Austen’s novels are chosen with equal care’ (4). This alone justifies a book devoted entirely to Austen’s names. However, having accepted this challenge, Doody comes up with a mixed bag. Some parts of what she writes are persuasive and illuminating but others are far-fetched and unconvincing. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the book arise from Doody’s fascination with the historical significance of names, reflected in two claims at the beginning of the book: first that ‘[Austen’s] novels display an acute attention to the shimmer of historical significance within names. Austen achieves meaning that goes down deep into layers of English history and relationship to the land’ (3); and second that ‘[Austen] appreciates the weight of history borne by names. … Surnames are not only remnants but conductors of history’ (11).

Of course it is true that all names, for people or places, have a historical meaning. However, this does not mean that either Austen or the reader will necessarily be aware of these associations or, if they are aware of them, that it is possible to identify which particular historical associations they will be aware of. In this regard place names are easier to relate to particular historical associations than personal names because they typically refer to only one place with a finite set of associations. (A quibbler could argue that it is the characteristics of the place itself rather than its name that Austen makes use of, but Austen so frequently merely names a place without describing it that it is the name itself that carries the significance.) Thus Doody is generally helpful in presenting the historical characteristics of counties and towns in a way that helps us understand why Austen has chosen to name those particular places and what associations they bring with them. Consequently she offers an interesting reading of Mansfield Park starting with a description of the small county town of Huntingdon, the birthplace of the three Ward sisters who figure so prominently in the novel, before moving on to consider the significance of Portsmouth, Antigua and Mansfield Park itself.

However, while Doody deals well with some places, her interest in the deep historical associations of place names betrays her with others. At times she seems to assume that merely to reveal the origins of a name must somehow demonstrate that Austen achieved ‘meaning that goes down deep into layers of English history and relationship to the land’. This is particularly implausible when recognition of the origin requires knowledge of Old English or a Celtic language. Thus Doody offers origins for the place names Windsor, Dawlish, Eastbourne, Brighton but without attempting to suggest that there is any relevance to the reading of the novels in which they appear. Sometimes when she does claim some possible connection with the role of the place in the novel, the suggested connection is extremely tenuous. Take, for example, her discussion of Everingham, the name of the estate of Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park. Earlier in the book, in a discussion of the central family of the novel, the Bertrams, Doody informs us that the name Bertram ‘is ultimately of Germanic origin: berht hraben = “bright raven”’ (127). Later she tells us that Everingham ‘has a Saxon name’ meaning ““the settlement of the followers of the man with the boar’s head helm”, or “of the man as strong as a boar”’.
before remarking that ‘the “boar’s head helm” would match with the “bright helm” of the Bertrams’ (334). Thus Doody has changed the interpretation of Bertram to ‘bright helm’ while suggesting a link between this helm and the (possible) helm of Everingham. But what reader could make this connection? And even if we accept that such tenuous connections are valid, we would want to know that Austen understood the original meanings of names of Old English or Celtic origin. Attempting to address this question, Doody points out that some versions of Camden’s Britannia contain lists of the components of Old English place names, but there is no evidence that Austen knew Britannia beyond the suggestion that her relatives at Godmersham might have had a copy (227-8). In any case it would not have given her the information needed to identify Doody’s ‘allusion’.

Doody’s treatment of personal names is similarly mixed. There is some pertinent commentary on the social significance of first names – for example Selina (168) and Biddy (105) – and she helpfully picks up on Fanny’s passionate association of the name Edmund with chivalry when Mary Crawford is only concerned that its presence signals Edmund is the second son (144). That Austen associated the unusual name Marianne with revolutionary France is plausible and suggestive but the further comment that the name combines those of ‘two regnant English queens’ is too much icing on the cake (109-10). Why this Mary and this Anne and not others? Doody claims that Austen’s writing ‘is dense with allusion, thick with multiple sensations and meanings’ (389) but for this to work the allusions have to be recognisable. Moreover Mary and Anne belong to the very limited set of first names normally used in Austen’s time. The only significance attachable to these names is their extreme ordinariness. As a result Doody’s attempts to find common characteristics in people named Mary (209) or John (168) are not convincing.

Surnames can also be tricky. One of Doody’s particular lines is identifying names as Norman or Saxon and drawing out the implications. However, her practice of identifying names as ‘Norman’ because they at some time were preceded by ‘de’ is misguided. De B(o)urgh might reasonably be described as a Norman name since it was borne by members of the ruling class in Norman England but the existence of a Leofric de Brandune in pre-Conquest England does not make Brandon a partly Norman name (99). Doody also associates the name with the Charles Brandon, first duke of Suffolk, but there is no convincing explanation of why this Brandon rather than others is selected. A similar arbitrariness of association affects her discussion of Ferrars (98), Jennings (96-98) and Collins (114), while her suggestion that the presence of an apothecary called Jones ‘offers the reader a light hint’ to look at Fielding’s Tom Jones as a parallel to Wickham (117) stretches the notion of allusion to breaking point.

The subtitle alerts us to Doody’s interest in wordplay, an interest she convincingly demonstrates Austen shared, even to the extent of making a sexually suggestive pun on ‘Lady Frances’ (‘Fanny’) (9). While some of Doody’s suggested puns are open to question others are more plausible, including the indecent suggestions of the name Box Hill (349) which she places in the context of a fascinating discussion of the place’s reputation as a locus of illicit sex.
There are good things in this book. However, for me too many of the objects of Doody’s ‘allusions’ are either arbitrarily selected or rely too much on arcane information not readily available to either Austen or the reader. Consequently I cannot endorse her claim that

while Austen magnificently deploys realism, … she is simultaneously setting up allusions and stirring them together to create an underlying surrealism that is all her own [my emphasis]. Here victims of Tudor beheadings may play with Civil War victors; Saxon kings and modern courtesans wander through the new shrubbery.’ (392)

If we accept her ‘allusions’ as valid, every realistic novel that uses real or realistic names carries such a surreal underbelly.

Graham Tulloch
Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Of late, Professor Terence Cave has shown a growing interest in Cognitive Literary Studies: he co-edited with Karin Kukkonen, and Olivia Smith *Reading Literature Cogntively* (2014), a special issue of *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* and has had a chapter entitled ‘Penser la littérature’ (Thinking with Literature) published in *Interprétation littéraire et sciences cognitives* (2016), a collection of scholarly articles edited by Françoise Lavocat. *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* is a further attempt to chart the territory of cognitive literary theory. An interdisciplinary approach, no consonance of paradigms, an inspiration from cognitive science research, a concern for issues in literary studies, and the use of multiple prisms, seem to be the chief characteristics defining this ever-broadening category.

Perception, language, memory, consciousness, emotions and motivity have, in turn, taken centre-stage in the cognitive science debates over the last 50 years. Today, the sheer diversity of mental processes (multiple intelligences, distinct memories, multifaceted perception, attention subcategories, etc.) whose complexity is gradually being acknowledged and investigated, begs for more research in the field of cognitive science while prompting other disciplines, like literary studies, to re-examine their long-held assumptions in the light of recent discoveries.

Yet, according to Terence Cave, ‘cognitive methodologies and explanatory frameworks have not yet begun to inflect the common language of literary study; indeed they often meet with resistance both from those who remain attached to traditional modes of literary history and criticism and from those who pursue variants of the literary theory that characterized the late twentieth-century scene’ (15). A challenge to this resistance, *Thinking with Literature* aims at redefining literature (both understood as a practice and as an archive) as a rich cognitive artefact, some aspects of which are being reassessed through the use of neurobabble with words such as implicatures, salience, emergence theory, affordance, motor resonance, cognitive mimesis, to name a few.

Retrofitting literary criticism with scientifically approved concepts enables Cave to afford (that is, to provide) ‘openings’ – the title of chapter 1 – and turn literary studies into a cognitive discipline. This craving for openings is a tacit acknowledgement that literary studies is suffering from intellectual asphyxia and is therefore in need of a strong wind of change. By expanding the content of the cognitive literary scholar’s toolbox, Terence Cave is also contributing to bridging the ‘gulf of mutual incomprehension’ between literary intellectuals and scientists which C.P. Snow notoriously identified in the wake of World War II.1

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Cognitive Literary Studies is strikingly reminiscent of countless methods of critical analysis which more or less involve a desire to establish a literary science. While Terence Cave is adamant that ‘Literary study is not an exact science, and is not likely to become one in the foreseeable future’ – his conception of academic criticism almost comes across as a scientific one when he qualifies his initial statement: ‘Yet it aims at precision, whether in its way of accounting for the detail of literary works, in its procedures for establishing those texts as objects of understanding, or in its recourse to historical and cultural contexts of all kinds. It aims at rigour of argument based on verifiable textual and other evidence, and if its arguments are probabilistic rather than apodeictic, that feature distinguishes it only in relative terms from the procedures of other disciplines’ (21). However, one might counter-argue that the rigorous approach is chiefly confined to its methodology: professional readers would indeed try to avoid the pitfalls of misquoting, of misrepresenting the book, of over-interpreting, of giving a slant to theories and ideologies, *inter alia*.

As the reflection unfolds, a sharper focus is placed on ‘the instrumentality of literature’ (55), on the idea that fiction would have a value, if not a function, perhaps even an adaptive one in keeping with the theory of evolution. Such revamping of the intrinsic value of literature (which could be defined as a larger category comprising any written or oral text proposed as an end product which possesses a certain degree of fictionality, ambiguity and aesthetics, *bereft of pragmatic function*) may hold the key to discarding blue-sky conceptions of it while giving teachers and book professionals a cogent argument for literature’s much coveted usefulness. As Cave elegantly argues,

> The aesthetic imagination is in principle insulated from the pressures of utility and functionality, but that doesn’t mean that it has no uses or functions beyond itself. Similarly, the fact that pleasure (in a broad sense) is a constituent feature of the aesthetic domain doesn’t mean that reading literature or looking at paintings or listening to music is just ‘fun’. (149)

This insistence on the usefulness of literature peaks in the last chapter with a detailed list of the variegated values of literature and an assessment of its evolutionary role which the author sees as ‘overdetermined and underspecified’ (142). For Cave,

> literature, in the broadest sense, participates fully in a *spectrum* of counterfactual imaginings and arises from the same fundamental cognitive capacity, namely the capacity to entertain mental representations (simulations, projections) that are not mapped onto

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2 I have recapitulated these literary approaches elsewhere. See *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave, 2016) 3-4.

3 The professional reader is not a reader who makes a job out of reading books, but a reader on a mission, with a set purpose. See my distinction between professional and nonprofessional readers in the opening chapter of *The Seduction of Fiction*.
immediate perceptual contexts and uses, and to multiply and compare those representations. (144)

Literature ends up being repackaged as a ‘cognitive affordance’, ‘an instrument of thought, while acknowledging that it may also be (or be read as) a vehicle of thought or even of knowledge’ (150).

Overall, with Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism, Cave defies the resistance to the culture of cognitive science both by colouring the language of literary criticism with cognitive methodology or explanatory frameworks and by affording a shift of angle which reconfigures the whole field of literary studies.

Jean-François Vernay

In her latest book E. Dawson Varughese takes on the difficult task of categorising and schematising a new genre of Indian fiction. Varughese’s analysis is deeply couched in generic approaches to understanding the value and position of literary texts socially and culturally. Her rhetoric relies on an implicit ‘Indianness’ of the texts that she analyses and the ways in which this ‘Indianness’ is communicated to the reader. As a nationalised study, the book would be of use to researchers interested in exploring literary expressions of Indian values and the ways in which India’s rich mythological history has formed and continues to form part of its culture. However, *Genre Fiction of New India* may also be valuable to researchers who are investigating ways in which speculative fiction is affected by the society and culture in which it is produced and what this contributes to meaning making.

Varughese’s first port of call is to set her study within a specific temporal space, that being post-millennial India. There are two primary movers which happen in this period in India that create space for Varughese’s study: the proliferation of Anglicised readerships and the growth of the publishing industry. This sparked a rise in Anglicisation that, coupled with the success of some Indian texts in the ‘wider Anglo-American market’ (9), led to the cross-pollination of Indian tradition and culture with that of Westernised genre fiction. Varughese briefly addresses the transnationalisation of texts and literatures and the universalism of Indian traditionhood, but after this brief digression she seems to leave this by the wayside. This undermines some of the surety with which Varughese later speaks on the ‘universal’ values communicated by quasi-mythological Indian texts like the *Rig Veda* and *The Mahabharata*. Rather, Varughese supplements the lack of this depth of transnationalism with a commitment to the conflict between the Westernised weird fiction genre and its conflict with the Indian concept of *itihasa*. The backbone of Varughese’s rhetoric relies on this conflict because it is the determining point which necessitates her justification of the new genre fiction, which she terms Bharati Fantasy.

Varughese’s Bharati Fantasy pivots on the role of *itihasa* within the post-millennial Indian consciousness. She constructs its opposition to Western mythologising as such; where in the West ‘myth uses “narrative” to convey certain truths’ (original emphasis), in India, mythology is ‘that which was believed to have happened in the past’ (30). In this approximation, *itihasa* is belief that the mythos upon which Indian culture has been built is, to varying degrees, factual. Using this argument, Varughese extends this to argue that her concept of Bharati Fantasy, in the vein of weird genre fiction, ‘narrates both a shared history and a set of attitudes for living’ (35). For all her talk of transnationalism and the universalism of these texts Varughese explicitly suggests that Bharati Fantasy is written for Indians by Indians, indeed the title of her book alludes to as much. In this way, Varughese promotes her argument that Bharati Fantasy offers a portal for authors to palimpsestically transcribe ancient Indian values and traditions onto modern
and present-day society. An interesting outcome of this is what Varughese describes as the ‘movement between ancient ideas of science and technology and contemporary ideas of the same [which] is both fluid and complementary’ (48). While this is quite often a theme of magical realism, which is part and parcel of Varughese’s analyses, it is the temporal shift between these ideas that is the most valuable to meaning making in Bharati Fantasy. It is the concept of itihasa which makes defines the value of Indian mythology, tradition and values to the present-day, and Varughese’s analysis of the genre fiction that portrays this expounds upon the value that the genre contributes to ‘the interface of science and belief” (99). It is clear, in Varughese’s construction of this genre, that she truly believes that literature is a portent for social and cultural change.

Varughese’s argument is most convincing when she is interrogating the formation of the weird in Indian literature and the ways in which the ancient mythology inform current texts and society. However, she suffers a rhetorical slippage in her inclusion of extended expositions which consider the authorial intent, biographical history and explicit meaning making of the authors themselves. The last quarter of the book are mostly dedicated to interviews conducted between Varughese and three of the authors whose texts she had chosen to analyse. While the intention behind including authors in a discussion around genre is perhaps understandable, these interviews contribute little to Varughese’s argument for the existence of Bharati Fantasy.

Varughese’s book would prove significantly valuable to researchers who are looking to analyse forms of speculative fiction particularly with relevance to socio-political and cultural significance. Indeed, some academics whose interests lie in magic realism may find Varughese’s exploration of the conflict between genre fiction and the Indian idea of itihasa fascinating in terms of perceptive dissonance. Varughese’s book, summarily, provides an insight the emergence of sub-genres of fiction in India and the impact of India’s specific time-space, culture and tradition upon the emergence of new literatures.

Pete Walsh


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Susan Sheridan, *The Fiction of Thea Astley* (Cambria Press, 2016)

Susan Sheridan’s latest book, *The Fiction of Thea Astley*, is a comprehensive cross-disciplinary analysis of the greater portion of Astley’s oeuvre. Interestingly, Sheridan’s analysis focuses primarily on the interrogation of the role of emotions in Astley’s novels and short stories. While the first chapter is aptly named, ‘A Study in Emotions’, it is from this platform which Sheridan launches her interrogation of the literary worlds created by Astley. Sheridan’s book is the perfect reader for researchers and enthusiasts interested in the broader thematic, generic and socio-political preoccupations of Astley’s bibliography. Sheridan is at her finest analytical self when she exposes the feministic undercurrent of Astley’s novels. She situates Astley’s works, as they should be, in a specific political and temporal space which Sheridan shows both creates and problematises Astley’s writing. This fierce indictment of the patriarchy is one of the key elements which Sheridan interrogates in Astley’s work.

 Sheridan is quick to establish her awe of Astley as a savage feminist, declaring that her writing style ‘mock[s] male pretension and assert[s] female rebellion’ (3). It is in this same paragraph that the reader is introduced to the first of many passages which extol the virtues of Astley’s writing, as Sheridan confesses that one of her hopes for the book is ‘confirming her [Astley] reputation as a major novelist … [to] reconsider her lifelong achievement’ (3). Sheridan is, at times, heavy-handed with her plaudits but makes a convincing argument for the canonisation of Astley’s work. The introduction of Sheridan’s book positions Astley firmly as a neo-pastoralist writer whose construction of parochial and provincial spaces undercuts the authority of patriarchal culture. Sheridan goes on to show how Astley’s early works accurately and incisively portrayed the disempowerment and marginalisation of women at the hands of this culture. In the first chapter Sheridan’s interrogation of Astley exposes a frustration with an emotional austerity that overshadows Astley’s narratological world. Indeed, it is this theme coupled with the alienation of the harsh pastoral in Astley’s writing with which Sheridan is preoccupied in the first half of the book.

Much of Sheridan’s analytical style relies exegetical rhetoric combined with textual juxtaposition and comparison. Sheridan’s knowledge of Astley’s work is unassailable and she uses this to her advantage when developing her central arguments. In addition to this Sheridan draws on the autobiographical influences on Astley’s work. Sheridan draws in elements of her authorial history in order to legitimate some of her claims about the meaning and value of Astley’s work particularly within the Australian canon. This focus on the biographical meaning of Astley’s work occasionally detracts and distracts from Sheridan’s analysis, but on the whole it exposes the ways in which Astley and her work have been created by her environment; serving to justify her canonisation.

Sheridan eruditely teases out the transgressive elements of Astley’s narratology, frequently exposing her flirtations with social, political and cultural undercurrents. Most tellingly, Sheridan sheds light on the ways in which Astley manipulates her characters to satirise and criticise
politics and society. Specifically, she highlights Vesper’s ‘penchant for shocking and bizarre
metaphors, not to mention gender dysphoria’ and his ‘sardonic, ironic voice and ... anarchic
humour’ as a form of the carnivalesque in Astley’s work (45). Furthermore, Sheridan contrasts
Astley with Patrick White to illustrate her preoccupation with male homosociality and
homosexuality, particularly ‘when a man is completely subordinated to another man’ (47). This
indictment of masculinity is another theme which Sheridan uncovers. She cogently argues that
the narrative of An Item from the Late News ‘links aggressive masculinity, nationalism,
militarism, and misogyny’ (81). Sheridan revisits this theme frequently throughout her book,
illustrating Astley’s disdain for and criticism of patriarchal masculinity.

While the book starts off with an emphasis on the study of emotions in Astley’s work, it does
not remain an explicitly dominant thread of analysis. Sheridan’s dialectics refer back to the
critical emotionality of Astley’s work, but it is more of a side-note than a full analysis except in
the first and last thirds of the book. In the sixth chapter, Sheridan addresses the trauma of
Astley’s characters, again keying into a common theme of her analysis; the pain of dislocation.
Sheridan interrogates this theme from a number of directions, primarily through the alienation of
the desolate Australian landscape but also through emotional drought, and vividly through the
narrative of dislocation for Indigenous Australians. Sheridan also identifies ‘the trope of
departure’ as a source of identity and emotional schism for Astley’s characters (112). Typically,
Sheridan explains, these forms of escape give the characters the emotional distance required for
Astley to cast ‘the darker elements of her vision’ (112) on the ways in which history has crafted
the contemporary culture. Sheridan goes on to show how Astley takes this exploration of
emotional dislocation beyond the psyche, illustrating how ‘memory and emotions are embodied’
through the analysis of ‘the physicality of his [Brodie’s] suffering’ (140). This notion is visited
frequently throughout the book, but coalesces towards its end.

The Fiction of Thea Astley is an erudite and cogent deconstruction of the primary and
auxiliary thematic preoccupations of Astley’s oeuvre. Sheridan’s intimate knowledge of Astley’s
bibliography is admirable and supports her analytical and critical conclusions.

Pete Walsh