



**Hecate's Australian Women's
Book Review 18.2 2006**

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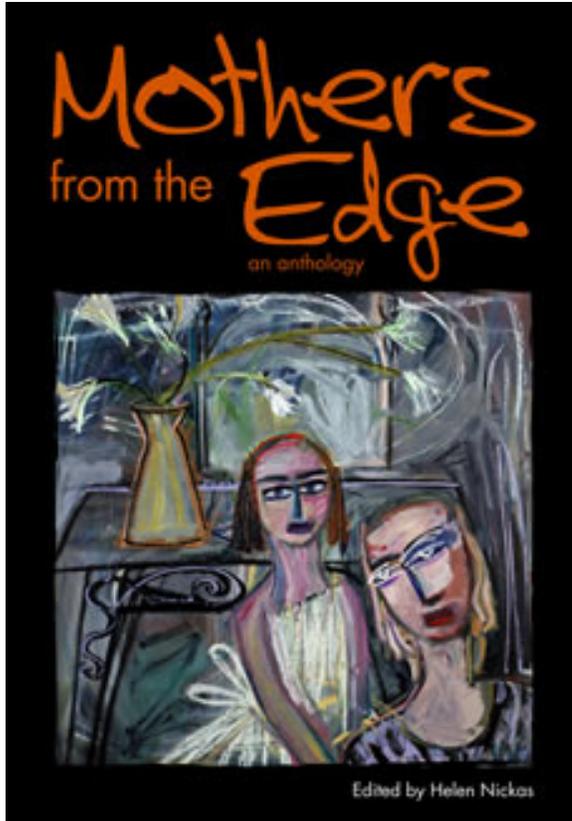
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Demeter and Persephone: Contemporary Perspectives

Helen Nickas (Ed). *Mothers from the Edge: An anthology*. Victoria: Owl Publishing, 2006.

Reviewed by Jena Woodhouse



Mothers from the Edge is the latest title in the series *Writing the Greek Diaspora*, whose general editor, Helen Nickas, teaches Greek Studies at La Trobe University. In compiling this collection of prose writings across several genres, Nickas invited contributions on the theme of mother-daughter/ daughter-mother relationships from 28 Australian women of Greek ancestry, or, in the case of one contributor, having married into Greek culture

As she confides in the introduction, Nickas visualised her story-tellers sitting in a circle, 'laughing, crying, reminiscing, eulogising, mourning, celebrating, exulting, reflecting or intellectualising' (7) in response to their assigned topic. Noting that her 'professional interest in women as mothers and daughters coincides with, and is triggered by, Feminism and Multiculturalism - the two most significant social phenomena since the seventies'

(9), Nickas observes that, 'not just in Greece but around the world . . . patriarchy interfered in the most elemental relationship, whereby one gave life to the other, and distanced the daughter from the mother', adding that 'A daughter may be cherished in our world, and in our times, but hated and wished dead if she were born as the fifth daughter to a poor family in a Greek village in the [nineteen] thirties' (9).

Simultaneously widening the focus to the mythological while particularising it in cultural terms, Nickas indicates the concrete significance of the myth of Demeter and Persephone for women of the Greek diaspora. Several of the narratives in the collection focus on the impact geographical and cultural separation can have on the mother-daughter, grandmother-granddaughter relationship:

The windows of the bus were covered with mist. Anna rubbed the window and looked outside. There was Yiayia, standing pale, alone in front of the gate with the two large oak trees. Everything she had in her life was on that bus, leaving her. Everything she had struggled for as a widow, all the hardship and pain, all came to this.

. . .

Years later, a telegram arrived addressed to my mother: 'Your mother gravely ill in hospital. Burned. Come as soon as possible.' It was sent by the village priest.

The cold, impersonal voice of the hospital nurse on the phone a little later, still rang in Anna's ears:

'Send money for morphine, she is in unbearable pain, she won't last long. It's best if she goes.' (Martha Mylona, *Early in December*, 191)

Apart from several harrowing accounts of separations brought about by the migration of sons and daughters (the diaspora), an experience familiar to people of many cultures over the millennia, but accelerated and intensified by the major demographic shifts occurring throughout the twentieth century, this collection contains tales of childless women who nurture daughters not their own biologically (Vasiliki Nihias, *Atalante Battles the Harpies*); women who become mothers later in life than most (Konstandina Dounis, *Sophia*); women whose children perish (Vasso Kalamaras, *Kyra-Kalli's Daughter*); women who write letters to a future grandchild (Gillian Bouras, *Letter to my Granddaughter*).

In her introduction to this cycle of stories, Nickas comments: 'In many cases, I have no way of knowing—nor am I concerned—whether the contributions represent fact or fiction. I treat them all as fiction. Even those which appear to be autobiographical (employing real names and places), I treat as fictionalised autobiographies. What interests me rather more is that they ring true in their own literary reality.'

Ring true they do. The impression for this reader is of a collection of secular icons, some damaged or partly effaced, others precariously intact. Portraits, glimpses, scenes, histories, fragments, vignettes. Crystallised, compressed narratives. Language (in many cases not the first language, but the second) as a vehicle and a vessel for experience, remembered and relived as immediate; words sharpened and intensified by their work as witnesses to anguish, regret, resignation, luminosity, frustration, separation, longing, melancholy, passion, sorrow, remorse, anger, alienation, empathy, catharsis, joy, forgiveness, unconditional love: multiple perspectives and perceptions of women's odysseys; haunting memories.

While far from being exclusively Greek phenomena, the words *diaspora* (dispersion), *xenitia* (foreign lands, and by extension, life in exile) and *nostalgia (yia tin patrida)* (homesickness), denote a peculiarly Greek understanding and interpretation of these conditions, and, in a culture that has seen more than its share of emigration brought about, particularly in the twentieth century, by political contingency and economic exigency, there is a considerable body of literature and a wide-ranging genre of songs devoted to this theme.

In refocusing on the matrilineal element of the diaspora experience in the Greek-antipodean context, a relatively neglected aspect of the social and cultural effects and personal impact of deracination and mass migration has been brought to the reader's attention. This is all the more significant for the fact that the daughters and granddaughters who tell these tales are in a position to do so that their mothers and grandmothers in many cases were not; literacy being a (frequently exclusively) male preserve in rural Greece, even as recently as the mid-twentieth century in some parts of the country.

As Nickas notes in the introduction, 'No two pieces recount a similar experience. So even if one may question how many variations to the mother-daughter

experience theme there can be in a collection of twenty eight pieces, the answer is: twenty eight' (12).

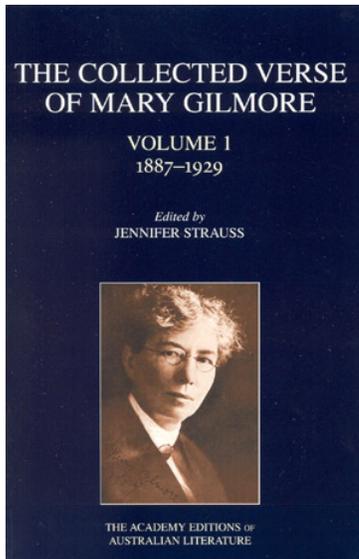
Whether because I am both daughter and mother; whether because I have spent ten years of my life in Greece and can therefore relate on an experiential level to these stories, I registered their impact in a visceral way, and found myself reading some of them with tears on my cheeks. There is no pretence about these tales. They narrate their emotional journeys through difficult terrain with integrity and an intensity that comes from the mother culture, and cannot be compromised by the language in which they are told, which, for many, is not the mother tongue. These stories, individually and collectively, are told in voices that ring true, going to the heart of their matter in evocative and unforgettable ways.

Jena Woodhouse's latest publication is *Hidden Desires: Australian Women Writing*, compiled and co-edited with project initiator Christina Houen. Other publications include poetry collections, a children's novella, and fiction. Her work has received awards in all three genres. She is working on a Ph.D in Creative Writing.

Don't Bury the Pain, Resolve It

Jennifer Strauss (Ed.) *The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore: Volume 1 1887-1929*. The Academy Editions of Australian Literature. St Lucia: The University of Queensland Press, 2004.

Reviewed by Deborah Jordan



Every reader of Australian Women's Book Review should have The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore Volumes 1 1887-1929 and proposed The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore Volume 2 1930 on her bookshelves. Why? Simply because Mary Gilmore is one of Australia's most important past white woman poets and these two volumes will be the authoritative editions. The questioning of culture, identity, gender, race and nationhood, modernity and environment in societies around the globe is still unresolved, especially in Australia. 'A true poem', wrote Nettie Palmer when reviewing Gilmore's book of poems *The Rue Tree*, 'like any other work of art, will not yield up its real qualities at first glance', (Vivian Smith ed, *Nettie Palmer*, 410) and we need hardcopy for reading and re-reading and re-evaluation.

Even in this first beautifully presented volume what a plethora of riches we finally have! Through the highest possible standards of scholarly editing we can read 'every published poem' and access 'all the variant versions available to readers' during Mary Gilmore's lifetime. The first volume opens with the poem 'After the Shipwreck' first published in Bathurst as early as 1887. It includes substantial earlier selections—*Marri'd and Other Verses* (1910), *The Tale of Tiddley Winks* (1917), *The Passionate Heart* (1918), *The Tilted Cart* (1925) and numerous uncollected but published poems in between. The volume has all the useful apparatus of fine scholarly editing—a chronology, index of first lines, and introduction engaging with and extending Gilmore scholarship. It is a wonderful achievement.

The collection is well framed in its biographical and historical context with various sections: 'A working life', 'The New Australia Movement and Colonia Cosme', '1902-1910: The re-emergent writer', 'To Sydney again, and marital re-arrangement', The War, the Goulburn Years, and right through to the last years covering the second volume, ending with a section on editorial rationale. The poems stem from the period when Mary Cameron established herself as a school-teacher, after a traumatic time as pupil-teacher. Her bush childhood is reminiscent of that of Henry Lawson—their mothers were both journalists. Mary, though, unlike Henry, established herself financially and taught for over a decade (the introduction addresses the important cultural and economic issues surrounding literary production).

The Collected Verses allows us to make multiple readings against the grain of Gilmore's biography, giving us insights into key historical events, her political philosophy, her strategies and insights. Poems are included about her extraordinary adventure with the charismatic socialists Annie and William Lane to form a new settlement in Paraguay (and Mary Cameron was earlier the model for Nell in Lane's novel *The Workingman's Paradise*). Initially, being a single woman, she was not included; later, when called to teach the children, she made her own

way to South America. The utopian vision of the new settlement is explored in one of many poems, 'Women of New Australia':

And women shall turn no longer
And sigh in a childish face,
And wish that their arms were stronger
To fight for a breathing space. (A7)

What kind of feminist was Mary Gilmore? Here she offers a critique of the effects of women's crippling restrictions and regressions. 'The Lament of the "New Woman"' resonates with cycle of liberation and containment of the hippy women of the New Age in the late 1960s and early 70s, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchens built with their own hands.

It's who will pound my mate [herbal tea],
And who will grind my corn,
And who will mend my house, when
The grass is thin and worn. (A32)

Gilmore's less well-known translations from Spanish of radical South American poets add an important dimension to our understanding of the range of her work. Married to William Gilmore in Paraguay, she worked as a governess and taught English to earn a fare back to Australia. Hers was an ongoing and long-term engagement with South American literature; she even hoped to publish a distinct collection.

Mary Gilmore was an extraordinary woman—poet, essayist, journalist, editor, widely read and variously referred to as a national monument by contemporaries. Damed and given a state funeral, she was also a feminist and a 'self-defined Labour woman'. Her life span included the nation-building activities of the colonial liberals, the great strikes of the 1890s, white women's franchise, World War One and so on through to the 1960s. Can we claim her as an ecofeminist or even a Green? In 1924, in *Modern Australian Literature*, Nettie Palmer called her essentially 'a woman's poet' and, indeed, her early poetry was about aspects of women's experience: not only courtship, love, marriage and child-rearing, but also prostitution.

Gilmore is best known for her 'brief concentrated lyrics of human experience'. Dorothy Green, in her essay 'A Deep Gust for Life' in *The Music of Love*, accorded her the highest accolades with her 'oeuvre of astonishing range and bulk, in which there is a large number of poems of timeless perfection, the kind of utterance only found among the great masters'. Gilmore wrote of the transformative power of love:

My garden was a wilderness
Of weeds that mimicked woes;
And then love came, and at a touch
Each weed became a rose. (B109)

For anyone who spends time with a two year old, her poems about babies and children might appeal:

Kissin', kissin', kissin'!
Lordy! ain't he sweet!
Rosy roun' d' mouf
Rosy roun' d' feet. (B59)

Tiddley Winks gems, poems about an eight-year-old girl or so, are scattered throughout; there are others on relationships with loved sons and daughters and the reverse—poems of infanticide.

'Eve-Song' which has been anthologised is in the present edition; Gilmore's haunting masterpiece, 'Never Admit the Pain' is not and we must await the second volume for copy. This poem, 'Never admit the pain, Bury it deep, Only the weak complain,' has always somewhat perturbed me, given its iconic importance especially for that generation of women of the 1950s. It appears to advocate all those strictures 'Cover thy wound, fold down' that we have since rejected—repression, stoicism, silencing, invisibility, and condonement of individual suffering. Earlier poems in the present volume deal with the same theme:

Of Women

We who look outward to the sun
And dream of things we might have done,
See visions of a spirit's flight
Beyond the sight, far lost in light.

. . .
Yet is no mountain top more fair
Than kindly hearth-smoke climbing on the air! (E54)

Green has asked her incisive questions about Gilmore's intellectual and emotional life, and wondered about whether both her femininity and her intellect were sufficiently cherished, or rather was she immensely internally deprived. These issues of male/ female relationships and Gilmore's role as a breadwinner and more—on Gilmore's fabrications, the issues of racism and appropriation of Aboriginality—all get a nuanced and sensitive handling by Jennifer Strauss. Through the rich diversity of poems, too, we start to get a different understanding of Gilmore's world; of her capacity to look at truth from a number of angles; of her ability to speak of different solutions and strategies; and of the power of her intuition, her spiritual insight and understandings of different dimensions. 'Never Admit the Pain' with its last two lines 'Silence is still a crown, Courage a grace' may be read as a critique of the suffocating emotional effects of femininity rather than advocating repression; we may want to understand 'grace' in the spiritual sense.

In the mid years of her life, from 1908, Gilmore wrote the regular 'Women's Page', for the Sydney *Worker*, the weekly labour paper. The Page's 'Poet's Corner' offered a space for Gilmore's poems many of which were first published there. It was a radical space where she could integrate, explore and develop ideas about class, gender, environment and, later, Aboriginality. She could express her concerns and compassion, reflect on her work for the underprivileged. Through her regular output, a body of readers must have been built up, an audience who knew her work and learnt to understand and trust her vision.

In Australia, the critical consideration of identity, nationhood and the Australian legend often descends to de-politicised discussions of 'pioneers', 'folk culture', 'nostalgia', 'romanticism' and 'national identity'. The myths of the Australian dream, the heroic Anzacs, mateship and *terra nullius* are all concepts that need to be re-worked in view of the crisis in late modernity, where we face the dangers of cultural nationalisms that have become, as Alain Touraine's *Can We Live Together?* would have it, 'too closed' (300). Gilmore's views were far more complex than belief in the concepts of the fair go, the happy hearth and the Anzac myth. She was no vapid 'poetaster' or 'poetess' as Geoff Page believes in his snide dismissal of her nature poems in the *Canberra Times*, 17 June 2006. Hers was a sustained vision and articulation of the ideals of an egalitarian democracy. Just how Gilmore's environmental imagination and deep engagement with ecology might mesh with our own responses to Global warming could well be the subject of a PhD.

The case for full-scale critical editions of major Australian works is overwhelming as the general editor argues. On the other hand will the Oxbridge approach

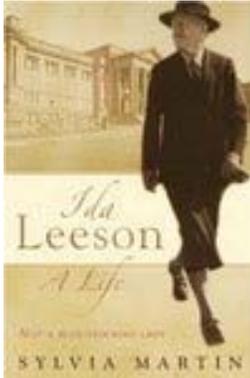
generate a wider appreciation and understanding of Gilmore's life and work— and of the issues she addressed in view of students studying for International Baccalaureats, and supposedly falling numbers in Australian literature? Strauss has orchestrated this wonderful volume. We await the second volume that some of us may be able to afford, and an electronic version. Strauss rightly reminds us that judgments as to what are 'trivial' 'do not always coincide even within the same era, let alone across boundaries of time, class or gender'(xxx). There is still plenty of need, however, for a critical guiding thread through these poems and verse that is not only a biographical frame but also an aesthetic one, and we can hope Strauss will lead us on.

Dr Deborah Jordan is a Research Fellow in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History, University of Queensland. She has published widely on early twentieth century literary and cultural history, including the suffrage movement and a biography of Nettie Palmer, and is currently engaged on editing the Palmers' correspondence.

Not a Blue-Stocking Lady

Sylvia Martin, *Ida Leeson: A Life – Not a Blue-Stocking Lady*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006.

Reviewed by Maryanne Dever



In her biography of Ida Leeson, Sylvia Martin produces not only a compelling account of the life of this intriguing woman but—equally importantly—she extends the contemplation of writing lesbian history she began in *Passionate Friends* (2001), her study of the interlinked lives of Miles Franklin, Mary Fullerton and Mabel Singleton. Those outside the field of Australian literature and those whose research has never taken them into the fine institution that is Sydney's Mitchell Library may not recognise the name Ida Leeson. Leeson was the first woman to head the Mitchell Library, which she did from 1932 to 1946, and she played a critically important role in shaping the collections upon which so many of us have since drawn our research on Australian literature and history.

As we learn, Leeson's appointment to this position was thought highly controversial, if not scandalous at the time. Newspaper headlines proclaimed with horror: 'Woman Likely to be Appointed'. Sylvia Martin amply demonstrates this through her analysis of this pivotal episode, Leeson's life and career can tell us much about the struggles of earlier generations of women graduates in the professions, about the class and gender politics of professional advancement in this period and about the crucial role played by particular individuals in the formation of the nation's great cultural institutions. And yet, Martin also makes the point that, in the decades after she left the Mitchell and her former colleagues in turn retired, the 'memory of [Leeson's] reign there was gradually lost...No memorial to her had ever been set up; even her personnel file had somehow disappeared'. Without this timely biography, ironically Leeson might well have been lost to Australian cultural history, the very field she did so much to support in its early phases.

Leeson was in many respects an unlikely candidate for such a pioneering appointment in what was to become a leading cultural institution in this nation. As Martin stresses in her subtitle 'Not a Blue-Stocking Lady', Leeson did not have the middleclass background that distinguished several of the other contenders for the same post. While she was an honours graduate of the University of Sydney, the academic success that provided the foundation for Leeson's distinguished career was extremely hard won. The daughter of a carpenter from the then working class suburb of Leichhardt, Leeson was anything but a typical blue-stocking intellectual and relied on fierce determination and scholarships to take her first to Sydney Girls' High School and then to university where she studied history. And while the stereotypes would suggest that the life story of a librarian—even a distinguished one—might border on the tedious and unexciting, Leeson is in fact a fascinating figure. The photo of her in her characteristically severe tailored suit marching across the cover of the book provides the first indication that she was a woman to be reckoned with. She is also a woman who presents the biographer with particular challenges. In this subtle and perceptive exploration, Martin shows us the way Leeson—despite her profession as a librarian—is someone who defies easy categorization. As she observes early on, 'what a conundrum is Ida Leeson herself: a woman who looked like a man (was even mistaken for one on occasions) rising

to a position in the Australian library world that had previously only been held by men, in a profession that is culturally inscribed as feminine'.

Starting work at the Public Library of New South Wales as a twenty-one year old graduate, Leeson soon began her upward journey through the library ranks. She learned cataloguing from Christopher Brennan ('his cataloguing, though brilliant, was a bit uneven'). Brennan is only one of the many literary luminaries who have walk-on parts in her life story; others include Miles Franklin, Marjorie Barnard and Henry Lawson. Leeson moved on from the Public Library to the formidable task of organizing and cataloguing David Scott Mitchell's magnificent collection of books and other archival treasures of Australia and the Pacific ('the Mitchell bequest'). But perhaps the most exciting moment professionally is when Leeson's sleuthing while on leave in the UK in 1927 leads to the identification of the missing (and presumed lost) third volume of Matthew Flinders' logbook in the Public Record Office there. This great find sits awkwardly against the venal politics that attended her appointment as Mitchell Librarian only a few years later.

Equally interesting is Leeson's life outside the Mitchell. For example, at the same time as she was pursuing her career as a librarian, she was also—for a time—joining Walter and Marion Burley Griffin in their experimental social (and architectural) community in Castlecrag and the photos included in the book contain one of Leeson sitting hunched over an electric hand-lamp that she was holding to provide lighting for players in a production in the amphitheatre the Griffins had built in Castlecrag. And in an era when marriage and motherhood were still considered the most appropriate goals for women of any class, Leeson again defied convention by pursuing her professional ambitions and by forming a life-long intimate partnership with another woman, Florence Birch. Most confounding, however, is that fact that while Leeson had an obvious professional investment in the preservation of the nation's documentary history, she was less assiduous when it came to her preserving the documentary traces of her own history: she left no personal papers and one can only speculate as to the complex motivations that led to this situation. While Martin is more than alert to the vexed nature of 'evidence' in the writing of lesbian history, it must nevertheless have been frustrating to have had so little to work with here. In her chapter 'Ida and Florence' she describes the profound impact on her writing of her first sighting of a striking early studio portrait of the pair (c. 1910). This image—reproduced in the book—sits suggestively at one end of the span of their relationship and, at the other, Martin offers Nancy Phelan's recollection of meeting up with Leeson shortly after Florence Birch's death. Phelan tells of how: 'She looked absolutely frightful. She was sort of a pale yellow...And I said, "How are you, Ida?" And she said, "Bleeding inside"'.

Throughout, Martin is alert to the need to weigh her sources and source material carefully, conscious that more than one story or interpretation may be struggling to emerge from her material. This is never more apparent than in the chapter 'The Spinster's Bloomers' where she interrogates the multiple meanings that might attach to the oft-related story of Leeson's 'mythical underwear': the almost certainly apocryphal account various people—most particularly 'historian, dream weaver and storyteller' Manning Clark—gave of glimpsing Leeson's knee length bloomers and colourful garters. In this chapter, Martin meticulously unpacks the complex sets of prejudices and preoccupations that fostered this 'curious story that circulates among people who knew Ida Leeson'. She concludes that the story—which is filled with dodgy dates and other factually questionable elements—is little more than 'a male fantasy': not the sexy kind, but 'nonetheless sexual'. Indeed, Martin reads the bloomer story as symptomatic of the anxiety produced among men by women such as Leeson who challenge the heterosexual economy by their androgyny. This chapter was one that Martin always knew would be provocative, but its inclusion shows her to be both a daring and subtle scholar

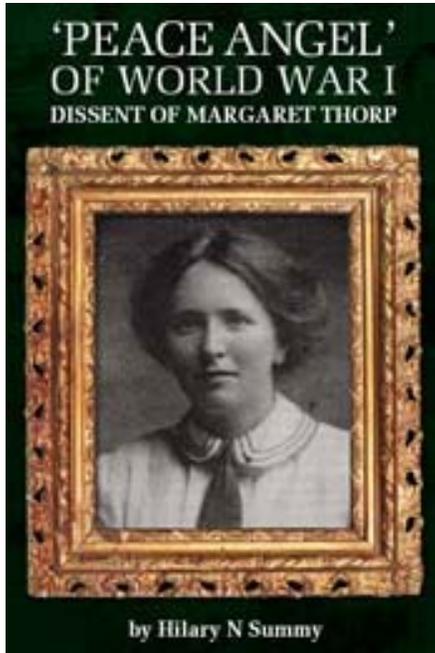
Although this book is very much Leeson's story, there is no escaping the fact that this biography is also the story of a city. The Mitchell Library has since its inception provided a focal point for Sydney's reading and writing communities and, just as Leeson's career is inextricably linked to key periods in the Library's development, so too the Library sits as an index of that city's intellectual and cultural growth. It is this blending of a study of a single life and career with an effective mapping of the history of both an institution and a city that is Martin's particular achievement in this biography. And it also probably accounts for the number of readers who have commented (favourably) on this book as 'a Sydney story'. And story-telling is one of Martin's strong suits. She opens with a singular episode in 1935 when Leeson, in Tahiti examining early European records, found herself seated at a café adjacent to the Hollywood film director, Frank Lloyd, who was completing shooting *Mutiny on the Bounty* starring Charles Laughton and Clark Gable. She overheard Lloyd lamenting to a companion that, despite his best efforts, he had not been able to locate and view Captain William Bligh's logs which he felt would have added 'greater authentication' to his film script. 'To both men's surprise', Martin tells us, 'a little white-haired lady at the next table...leans over and says "I know where they are".' Martin threads signal episodes such as this one into a compelling story of Leeson's hard work and ingenuity, often against a background of professional rivalry, prejudice and intrigue. This is a very satisfying and shapely biography and one that makes readers look forward to Martin's next project.

Maryanne Dever is the Director of Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University. She has published widely on earlier twentieth century Australian women's writing.

Peace Angel

Hilary Summy. *'Peace Angel' of World War 1: Dissent of Margaret Thorp*. Brisbane: Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2006.

Reviewed by Gail Tulloch



'Peace Angel' of World War 1, by Hilary Summy, sets out to tell the story of Margaret Thorp, and to answer the question of why her life's work for peace has been overlooked. The first reason Summy suggests is a dearth of information about her work—a need this monograph admirably fills. The second suggested reason is that Thorp does not fit easily into a single category—and again, Summy persuasively demonstrates this. Though her Quaker background was formative in her life—grounding her lifelong pacifism—other dominant influences include socialism and feminism; the three being seamlessly integrated in a way that resists pigeonholing. This perhaps helps explain why she is not as well known as Emma Miller or Vida Goldstein, though this monograph makes a good case as to why she deserves to be.

Well written, thoroughly researched, and elegantly produced as a monograph from the

Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland, *Peace Angel* describes Margaret Thorp's background: born in the UK into a Quaker family, and attending a Quaker girls' school in York, and a Quaker college. Her connection with the Young Friends Movement was central, most notably at a conference in 1911, before her family came to Australia the same year, where her father was to be temporary headmaster of the Friends' School, Hobart.

The Australia the Thorp family migrate to is well captured by Tulloch. White Australia rules after the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, and the Defence Acts 1901-9 have produced an emphasis on compulsory military training. Australia was the first English-speaking nation to introduce compulsory military training in peacetime and from 1 January 1911 it involved all Australian youths between the ages of 12 and 26—a prospect staunchly opposed by Quakers. Dr Thorp was involved in the foundation of the Anti Military Service league, which became the Australian Freedom League, and was a delegate to its first conference in Adelaide in 1913.

The monograph powerfully evokes the pre-war turmoil in Australia, after the 1890s strikes, the Depression, and the Brisbane strikes of 1912. Summy argues that most Australians initially supported the war, but were polarised after Hughes' plan to introduce overseas conscription. The Brisbane Industrial Council was the first labour body to condemn it.

Summy describes the formation of the Australian Peace Alliance in Melbourne in 1914, which the Society of Friends joined along with the Women's Peace Army (WPA), which was founded by Vida Goldstein in Melbourne in 1915 out of the Women's Political Association, also founded by her in Melbourne in 1903. The Women's Peace Army confined its focus to peace and anti-militarism, and Thorp

became a key member. She also established a Peace Board branch in Brisbane, and liaised with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Council of Women, the Rationalist Society, the Theosophical Society, and the YWCA. Some members of the YWCA, including Freda Bage, supported pro-war activities. Thorp herself was anti-conscription, anti-war, and anti the White Australia policy, so many of her alliances could only have been partial.

Thorp became the Secretary of the Women's Auxiliary of the Anti-Conscription Campaign Committee, with Emma Miller as President. Summy brings out the bitterness and physical violence of this period. The referendum was lost in 1916, and Thorp was physically attacked and ejected from a meeting by pro-conscription women in 1917. Soon afterwards she left for Buderim to care for her father. Summy suggests the demise of the WPA in Queensland was due to her departure and Emma Miller's death in 1917.

Although this part of her life is downplayed in her autobiography, it has clear affinities with her later concerns for the treatment of enemy internees, and her job as a factory inspector in the Department of Public Works—a job she left in 1920 to accompany her mother to the UK. From there she went to Germany, and to Vienna for the third International Congress of the International League for Peace and Freedom. She went to Russia via Poland, where Arthur Watts, her future husband, was working, and then lectured on Russia in Australia and New Zealand, before taking a job as Welfare Superintendent for Anthony Hordens in Sydney. She left this job too, to move to the Blue Mountains on account of her husband's health. The marriage ended when he returned to Russia, while she was disillusioned with the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution.

She continued working as Welfare Officer for the NSW Society for Crippled Children, then as the Executive Secretary for the Good Neighbour Council, and as a lecturer for the UN on Unicef. In her early 70s, in the 1960s, Thorp worked for the Australian Council of Care for Refugees. She surely deserved her 1957 MBE, and her 1974 award as NSW Senior Citizen of the Year.

Margaret Thorp's is a story that deserves to be told. It's a story of a woman of extraordinary faith and purpose who was clearly good at working with different groups, and who contributed a great deal to the labour movement in Queensland, as well as the peace movement.

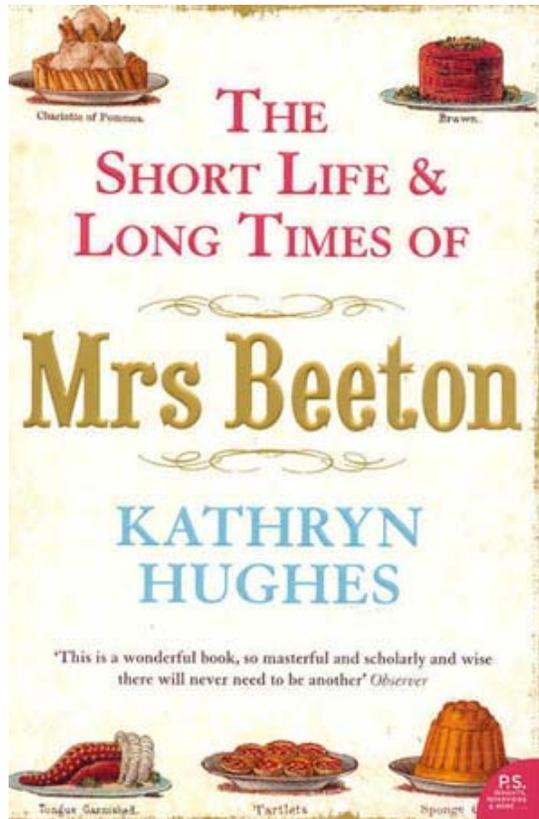
Summy captures the conscription turmoil well, where the fabric of society really seemed in danger of giving way. This speaks to our time, where the peace message often seems to have little purchase. It is perhaps because she stays with it longest and develops it more deeply that this is the most lively part of the book; it falls away a bit in the sixth chapter, becoming rather disjointed and a catalogue of what came next. But all in all it is a well-told story of a remarkable life, of great integrity and significance, and a book that amply demonstrates that Australian war historiography involves more than accounts of men and battlefields.

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Mrs. Beeton: The Fashioning of a Domestic Goddess

Kathryn Hughes. *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*. London: HarperCollins, 2005.

Reviewed by Sharon Bickle



Long before Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver—chefs whose culinary talent is rivalled by their ever-present media celebrity—Mrs Beeton was the iconic matriarch of British cookery. As a media personality in her own right, Mrs Beeton has been produced and reproduced for each successive generation as a definition for domestic femininity in Britain and Australia. One hundred and eighty years after her birth, Mrs Beeton's name continues to sell under licence a wide range of products. As Kathryn Hughes hints in the title of her biography, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*, the life of Isabella Beeton, the young editress of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* who started writing *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (*BOHM*) (1861) at age 21 and died at age 28, represents only one part of the complex identity that is Mrs Beeton.

Hughes's biography is one of a number of excellent biographies of Victorian women that have appeared recently. These biographies are written by feminist archival scholars who have wrested an amazing wealth of information from difficult to find or access life-writings, the public record, and through reading the silences surrounding women's lives. Among these are: Linda K. Hughes's *Graham R.* (2005), on the Decadent poet Graham R. Tomson (vere Rosamond Ball/Rosamund Marriott Watson); Sally Mitchell's *Frances Power Cobbe* (2004); and Vineta Colby's *Vernon Lee* (2003). Taken individually, these texts seek to reclaim the exceptional lives of exceptional women. Taken collectively, they represent a substantial reworking of our understanding of the significant contributions women writers made to the literary and social movements of their time, and a reconception of what was possible for the Victorian woman.

Bella Beeton, young wife and up-and-coming female journalist, and Mrs Beeton, ubiquitous licensed brand-name, are only two of the multiple textual identities that inhabit Hughes's book. The text itself is as much a biography of the *BOHM* as of its author. The pale blue of the dust jacket, its culinary illustrations, and the distressed gold leaf of the title are visually suggestive of the *BOHM*. Each chapter is interspersed with interludes that explore and contextualize the imaginary household of Beeton's book. Indeed, considering that on her death Isabella Beeton was 'a young married woman of no particular fame or social cachet who had written a cookery book that was said to be doing rather well' (326), much of

the story of Mrs Beeton happens posthumously and is interwoven with the story of the ill-fated Beeton publishing house and Beeton's husband, Samuel Orchart Beeton. The juxtaposition of textual identities: the young lovers, Bella and Sam; the all-knowing Mrs Beeton of the *BOHM* providing the last word on household efficiency and economy; the fashionable editress of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*; and the Mrs Beeton whose name endorsed successive cookery books but whose own voice had been almost completely effaced by the 1923 edition (399), produces some wonderful ironies as well as some fascinating reading.

Part of the irony stems from the fact that while the *BOHM*'s Mrs Beeton is an icon of Victorian womanhood—Lyttton Strachey imagined her as 'a small tub-like lady in black—rather severe of aspect, strongly resembling Queen Victoria' (qtd in Linda K Hughes, *Graham R.* 4)—Bella Beeton, *née* Mayson,, was never a part of the Victorian establishment: she never hired a footman, she never catered a dinner party for 60, and, at the time the *BOHM* was being written, had no need of a nurserymaid. Rather, Beeton and her husband were of the aspiring middle classes. The Dorlings (Isabella's mother remarried on the death of her father) and the Beetons were involved in horse-racing and tavern-keeping. Henry Dorling was clerk of the course for Epsom Racecourse, and Hughes presents the reader with an evocative description of the rag-tag rabble to be found on the road to Epsom around Derby Day. Dorling pressed the Grandstand into service to take the overflow of his impressively large blended family of 21 children. Even Bella's childhood, spent on makeshift cots that could be whipped away when the Grandstand was needed for business, seems to confront later Victorian notions of the separation of public and private spheres.

In her depiction of the courtship of Bella and Sam, Hughes makes good use of surviving letters to draw a picture of the character of her subjects. Sam is depicted as working manically to establish his publishing business, but also shiftlessly obfuscating to avoid having to spend time with Bella's censorious family, and to give time to rakish bachelor pursuits. Bella, as well as displaying all the self-consciousness of a young woman in love, is more worldly than one would expect (she seems to know some of what young men in London get up to), is often blunt and demanding with her errant lover, and not at all prudish in her early explorations of sexuality.

Hughes reads the subsequent marriage of Bella and Sam as significantly influenced by Sam's probable bachelor life in London. Hughes reads the gaps and silences in the historical record surrounding Bella's initial difficulties in bearing a healthy child, and Sam's increasingly erratic behaviour after Bella's death as indications that Sam contracted syphilis during this time and passed it on to his new wife. There is, of course, no direct evidence of this in the historical record, but Hughes certainly makes a very plausible case for it, although to my mind not quite as convincing as Rachel Holmes's argument regarding the intersex status of James Miranda Barry in her biography *Scanty Particulars* (2002). Perhaps the grandest irony of this biography, however, may be that the very proper Mrs Beeton was actually produced by the effects of syphilis on a young bride. Isabella Beeton, with no child to care for and a series of early still-births to forget, was soon co-opted into writing for Sam's *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and to take on the production of a cookery book in spite of her lack of culinary experience or expertise.

Beeton emerges in the biography, not as a Victorian domestic saint, or even the efficient housewife of the *BOHM*, but as a very capable journalist and businesswoman. Hughes does not attempt to refute Elizabeth Acton's accusations that Beeton plagiarized in the writing of her *BOHM*. Rather she contextualizes the process of writing, demonstrating that all the cookery and household advice books of the preceding hundred years borrowed and lifted material from those that came

before. Hughes shows that Beeton's plagiarism involved reading and lifting from an extremely wide and impressive range of texts. What Beeton brought to domesticity was not originality, not even in her previously credited invention of the modern recipe (ingredients listed and followed by method), but rather, Hughes argues, her organization of all this material into a coherent system of household management that celebrated the qualities necessary to run an efficient Victorian home. More than that, Bella had an important role in the operations of the Beeton publishing house. Sam and Bella made business trips together to Paris in the 1860s to negotiate deals with contacts and suppliers, and Hughes makes it very clear that it is Bella and her 'careful little rows of figures' (276) who had the business acumen, and who grounded the little Beeton publishing empire. Even after the babies began to come—ultimately only two survived—Bella remained an important business partner in the firm. It is not surprising, then, that after Bella's early death from puerperal fever, Sam was unable to keep the publishing house running and eventually sold his inventory and the Beeton name to Ward, Lock.

The final section of the biography deals notionally with the posthumous rise to fame of Mrs Beeton and her book but this potentially very fertile area, ripe for analysis, is given a mere 29 pages. Perhaps Hughes felt that she had already exceeded her biographical mandate in narrating the fate of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and the *BOHM* through the excesses of Sam's later period (which Hughes attributes to the effects of tertiary syphilis), and therefore gives Mrs Beeton's afterlife in the twentieth century, her reproduction in the image of whatever culinary fad was foremost at the time, only a cursory glance. This approach is somewhat surprising because, to this point, the biography is extremely innovative in terms of the genre, incorporating not only the insightful interludes but also creating Mary Price, an imaginary reader of the first edition of *BOHM*, and the way in which she might have used the book to help her prepare for a dinner party.

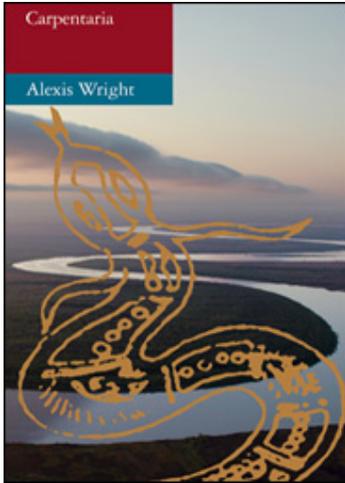
In addition to all this, Hughes also examines the longstanding family dispute between the Dorling-Beeton families, previous biographies, and the way in which the Beeton family, particularly Sir Mayson Beeton, unsuccessfully attempted to control the reception of his parent's lives. However, the biography is strongest where it draws from Hughes's extensive knowledge of the nineteenth century to contextualise Beeton and her *BOHM* within the milieu of Victorian society. The actual Mrs Beeton emerges against this backdrop not as the ultimate angel in the house, nor as a historical spokeswoman for the post-feminist move back to domesticity, but rather unexpectedly, as a very professional early woman journalist.

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The Best Australian Novel for Years ...

Alexis Wright. *Carpentaria*. NSW: Giramondo Publishing, 2006.

Reviewed by Carole Ferrier.



Carpentaria was launched by Jaqui Katona and Murrandoo Yanner at the Brisbane Writers' Festival on 15 September, with Katona saying that she found it 'fiction that redefines the political landscape' as well as being 'a legacy for a younger generation for the struggle before them', and 'a story that I hope will sustain my kids.' She also referred to the 'political debt to the Gulf with the campaigns against mining,' in which Yanner has of course been prominent. Wright talked of one of her central concerns in writing the novel as being the question of: 'How do you mend the broken line – the effect of colonisation?'

Wright's earlier novel, *Plains of Promise*, focussed upon three generations of women and their emergence from reserves and missions. The quest of Eliot, who travels off to seek for, but not find, the answer to the curse that seems to be on the mission becomes in *Carpentaria* several wanderings and quests, engaged in almost exclusively by male characters. Generally the female characters in this text are quite peripheral to the action, and one in particular one might have liked more of is Angel Day - in the view of her husband, Normal Phantom, 'a hornet's nest waiting to be disturbed' (13). They live on the edge of the town rubbish dump - in even more straitened circumstances than the poor whites in Janet Frame's *Owls Do Cry* in that Angel has created her home entirely out of it. They belong to one of the four groups in the town of Desperance, the Westside mob. Joseph Midnight controls the Eastside mob; they claim to be the original traditional owners and have invented the name of Wangabiyas for themselves. There is also an Uptown crew of whites represented by the Mayor Stan Bruiser who considers 'If you can't use it, eat it, or fuck it, it's no use to you.... Everyone in town knew how he bragged about how he had chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he ran them into the ground and raped them' (35). The fourth group is the old people of the Pricklebush, who watch and sing but are largely disregarded by the others.

Apart from epic heroic quests and struggles there is also a burlesque humour. The local cop, Truthful, like Bruiser is depicted with a carnivalesque excess similar to Vivienne Cleven's in *Bitin' Back* (given rein to even more in the the play than the novel). There is also a dry ironic humour at many points, in almost throwaway lines. such as the passage about Joseph Midnight's being responsible for the plague of cane toads because he brought them in so they could get the fifty cent bounty for catching them. Midnight agreed to the establishment of the mine for money and 'This was what he got for his native title rights. Money to shoot all the pigs.' Far from this curbing the feral pig problem, 'He let his useless relatives take all the little baby piglets home for pets and they bred up ten piglets each' (53).

Desperance (desperate hope, that the novel attributes to Matthew Flinders in inventing it as his middle name) is renamed Masterton by the state government, but every time the 'disinterested proletarians of the Main Roads Department' arrive in the town to erect signs designating it as Masterton, the locals pull them down. This means, of course, that 'strangers only had a snowflake's chance in hell

of finding their way around these parts' (60). The novel works at many levels, through from this humour and irony to a lyrical and poetic evocation of the age-old presence of the rainbow serpent. The shifts in register produce a heteroglossia that is beautifully unified through a narration that has great confidence and authority.

In the early part of the novel, the arrival of bemused and unseeing white Europeans is allegorically re-enacted by the emergence of the figure of Elias from the sea. Another periodic arrival in town is Mozzie Fishman, with his cavalcade, or 'crusade' of people in old, dust-covered cars, 'totally responsible for keeping the one Law strong by performing this one ceremony from thousands of creation stories for the guardians of Gondwanaland' (124). Norm Phantom is a friend of his, although 'a follower of spirits out in the sea' (129), and although his wife Angel leaves Desperance with him.

Norm's son Will is involved in the fight for land rights and against the Gurfurrit mine, but 'talking like Che Guevara made the huffy people's hair on the top of their heads stand straight up on end. A chill ran right down their backs. So! Without saying a word, because the meek do not speak, they went heave-ho, in favour of chucking out wildness' (392). Nonetheless, eventually the mine buildings all go up in flames, with some help from Fishman and a whirly wind.

Towards the end of the novel the whole town of Desperance is destroyed by a cyclone. Will is left by it on a floating island of debris and rubbish, that is eventually to turn into an actual island. Norm is at sea for 40 days with Hope and Bala, Will's son; when they land again Hope disappears to search for Will, and Norm and his grandson return alone to the wrecked town inhabited only by a few dogs, with Norm planning to 'rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath' with 'song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh' (519).

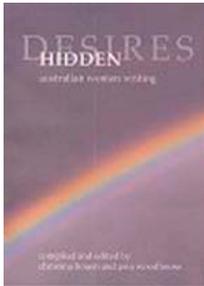
It is impossible in a review to do justice to the brilliance of this extraordinary novel and I can only urge you to buy it and read it. Giramondo Press are to be congratulated for publishing it, in times when publishers are hostile to big works. This is a very big novel both in its size and in its qualities and it should win lots of prizes.

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Women's Hidden Lives

Christina Houen & Jena Woodhouse (Eds). *Hidden Desires: Australian Women Writing*. Canberra: Gininderra Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Ann-Marie Priest



With a title like *Hidden Desires: Australian Women Writing*, one could be forgiven for expecting a book filled with erotic revelations about Australian women. But this collection of prose and poetry by a diverse group of Australian writers is actually very light on sex, and even on romance. The secret longings of the women in this anthology are mostly associated not with their lovers or even with their children, but with their parents.

This makes sense when you consider the way the editors, Christina Houen and Jena Woodhouse, define their theme. In their brief introduction, they explain that they were looking for pieces in all genres that 'tell of women's experiences that lie beneath the surface of daily life—the secret, inner life, the repressed, the unrepresented, the unacknowledged'. For many of these writers, what has been unrepresented and unacknowledged seems to be the complexity of women's obligations to others. Thus in the first story in the collection, Janey Runci's 'The Visit', a middle-aged woman hides behind the door to avoid an impromptu visit from her elderly parents. As her father hobbles across the garden to peer through the window, where he can see the tell-tale light from her computer screen, she flattens herself on the floor. The scene—indeed, the entire story—is permeated by guilt. What kind of daughter would shut the door on her infirm parents (her mother has dementia) and calmly sit down at her computer to write? Or, more generally: what kind of daughter would put her parents in a nursing home?

The answer, one suspects, is the kind who defines herself as a person as well as a daughter. But to ask—let alone begin to answer—such a question in a culture in which women are still expected as a matter of course to take on the primary care of others is quietly but undeniably subversive. The woman in Runci's story cannot escape either her guilt or her empathy as she struggles with her conflicting longings for loving family relationships and a life of her own.

This kind of moral complexity is typical of the pieces in this wide-ranging anthology. There are several stories about women who care for the aged or incapacitated, and they are tense and spiky, torn with ambivalence about the caring role, about ageing, and about submerged but painful family relationships.

Other stories return to childhood to explore similar tensions, and it is a pleasure to read these richly textured and finely nuanced evocations of girlhood in Australia. The settings—from the bush to the coast to the city—are vividly rendered: this fictional landscape, like so many of the stories themselves, has the ring of authenticity. Laurel Lamperd's 'Waiting for the Train' powerfully evokes the precarious life of a child growing up in a run-down country station house during the Depression, while Pamela Baker's 'Howard's Way' gives us all the sights and sounds of a bakery at a time when the loaves were still delivered by horse and cart, as well as an oblique, child's-eye view of the hidden desires of a Good Wife and Mother.

Julie Gittus's 'Whippy Taken' uses the lazy heat of a beachside town in the holiday season as the backdrop for her story of a young girl's sexuality, and her growing

awareness of how her relationships with others are mediated by her changing body. It's refreshing to read a story in which a child is the agent of her own sexuality, rather than the victim of someone else's. At the same time, the story never diminishes the complexity of an adolescent's developing desire in a world that is all too ready to read her as a sexual object.

One or two stories do deal directly with adult sexual relationships—notably the fairy-tale-like 'Mary Magdalena O'Hara Burke' by Narelle McCoy, which tells of a woman of mythological sexual power who experiences ecstasy when she massages a man's feet and dries them with her hair. For me, this story doesn't quite work, jumping uneasily back and forth as it does between elements of the fairy-tale genre and those of contemporary realism. But its conclusion, in which its heroine takes her leave of love and floats away to a freer life, seems emblematic, in a way, of the relationships in this book. The characters tend to be running away from romantic love rather than towards it.

When writers do speak of more obviously transgressive desires, they are nevertheless far from X-rated. The story 'Drag Race', for instance, tells of a woman whose hidden desire is to dress like a woman—or, rather, like a stereotypical female prostitute or pop-star, with 'tarty shoes', 'tight, sluttish dresses', 'lurid eye make-up' and 'costume jewellery'. Ironically, the only way she can legitimately do this is by pretending to be a man in drag. It's a puzzling premise—a woman who can claim her femininity only by feeding it through a male performance of womanhood—and perhaps for that reason, genuinely interesting. But this is the closest the collection gets to anything remotely kinky.

In general, the diversity of this anthology, the mix of writers, subjects, genres and voices, is one of its strengths. It ranges from stories to poems to short prose pieces to a fragment of a screenplay, and from narrative realism to more experimental styles. Melissa Lucashenko's story 'Singing the Revolution Blues for Alice' stood out for me. This is the work of a writer absolutely sure of her voice, and completely at ease with her subject matter—the loving support of one woman for another, making life a marginally better option for her than suicide. The less successful stories, to my mind, are the less realistic ones. Without a context, it is hard to get a sense of what, for instance, Cassandra Atherton's story 'Libretto' is about. Is it surrealism or is it a vampire story? I had similar difficulties with 'A Price to Pay', which seemed ultimately just too complicated for a short story.

Through all the pieces, though, a picture of Australian life emerges that is always vivid and often compelling. The chief pleasures of this book are not only the revelation of women's hidden lives but also the sense of recognition that stalks you as you move from piece to piece. This is Australia as women have experienced it, a fictional landscape of our own, both real and mythological. Jena Woodhouse's story 'The Drought' is a case in point, evoking with great power both a specific, and devastating, individual experience—a couple forced to sell their property due to drought—and a timeless sense of the connection between a woman and her landscape. Its resonance at this particular time is, of course, inescapable. Equally powerful is the depiction in Vasso Kalamaras's 'Two Women' of an elderly Greek woman living in inner-city Perth who befriends her aged Aboriginal neighbour. These are stories that give us ourselves.

Ideally, I would have liked a little more context for the theme of 'hidden desires'. Houen has apparently completed a master's thesis on the topic, and it might have added to the interest of the collection to have a sense of how she originally conceived of it, and of the motivation behind the project. On the other hand, the lack of exegesis meant that I was constantly asking myself how each piece explicated the theme as I read, which certainly made my engagement with the text more active. In the end, what is of lasting value in this anthology is the

complex, densely textured picture of the Australian women's lives it presents, the snapshots of thought and feeling, childhood and old age, losses, regrets and memories, yearnings and revelations—and, yes, desires, hidden or otherwise.

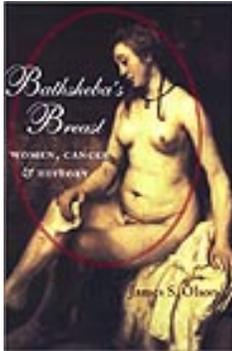
Ann-Marie Priest is an academic at Central Queensland University. She is the author of *Great Writers, Great Loves: The Reinvention of Love in the Twentieth Century*.

Breasts, Breastfeeding, and Cancer: Anecdote and Analysis

James S. Olson. *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer & History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Alison Bartlett. *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding*. NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Rhonda Shaw



In his 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*, the sociologist C. Wright Mills contended that there is value in using personal life experience in intellectual work. Akin to the slogan attributed to Carol Hanisch in 1969, 'the personal is political', Mills' argument was that, since the social analyst was a part of society, her personal troubles were public issues.

This auto/biographical aspect of social commentary and criticism are present, to a greater or lesser degree, in both *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer & History* (2002), and *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding* (2005). In fact, the historian, James S. Olson describes writing *Bathsheba's Breast* as 'self-administered psychotherapy'. In his preface to the text, Olson offers the reader a personal anecdote about his own anguish and decision over cancer treatment choice, and the subsequent loss of his left hand and forearm to sarcoma while writing the book. Here Olson puts anecdote to good use, drawing parallels between his own experiences and those of women with breast cancer. He then begins chapter one with another anecdote that gives the book its name, *Bathsheba's Breast*. The story begins in 1967 when an Italian surgeon and art aficionado, T. C. Greco, was admiring Rembrandt's 1654 painting of his mistress, Hendrickje Stoffels, at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the painting, entitled 'Bathsheba at Her Bath', Greco noticed unnatural colour, pitting of the skin, and an asymmetric distension to Stoffel's breast. Subsequent research revealed Stoffels had died after a long illness, from which Greco concluded that she had suffered from breast cancer.

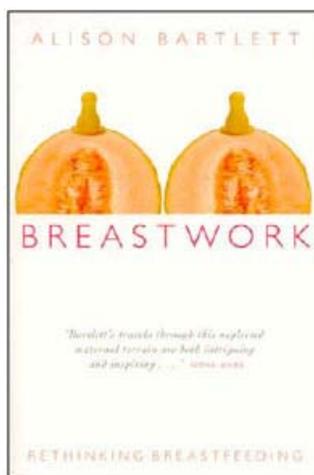
The opening chapters of Olson's meticulously researched text tell the lives of prominent women throughout history who also suffered from breast cancer. From the Egyptians 3500 years ago to the turn of the twentieth century, Olson chronicles the evolution of breast cancer treatments by (predominantly) male physicians and surgeons, and follows the lives of women who have confronted the disease. The women whose stories Olson recounts include: Queen Atossa; Dr. Jerri Nielsen; Anne of Austria (the wife of Louis XII); George Washington's mother, Mary; 'Nabby' Adams; Fanny Burney; Alice James; Rose Lee; Adolf Hitler's mother Klara; Shirley Temple Black; Betty Ford; Happy Rockefeller; Minnie Riperton; Susan Sontag; Marvella Bayh; Nancy Reagan; Rose Kushner; and Fran Visco. Although each story is sensitively and sympathetically narrativised, the chapters in the first half of the book are difficult going. They include graphic descriptions of aggressive breast cancer treatment for women at a time when empiricism and experimental method was beginning to emerge as paradigmatic in science and medicine. Among the mutilating surgical procedures Olson reports, is the emergence of the Halsted radical mastectomy in the nineteenth century, which dominated breast cancer therapy for almost 100 years, and involved the removal of the entire breast, chest muscles, and lymph nodes in the armpit. The Halsted mastectomy was further radicalised by the introduction of antibiotics and blood transfusions when these became available. From Olson's account, we learn of the

increasing professionalisation of male dominated medicine and surgery and the objectification of female patients who were expected to accept their male doctors' counsel 'unquestioningly' (120).

Olson also points out early differences between breast cancer treatment in the USA and in Europe, and the politics and economics associated with variations in treatment. Notably, there were fewer women physicians in the USA, where the preference was to perform mastectomies. However, by the late 1960s Halsted mastectomies were beginning to be eliminated due to scientific evidence levelled against their efficacy, and what Olson attributes to the 'American breast fetish' (117). As Olson is American, he is concerned with the obsession that American culture has with the sexual and erotic breast, and with dominant cultural expectations of breast size and desirability. At this point in the book, the tone changes considerably, as Olson discusses breast implants, the sexual objectification of women, and the question of breast reconstruction. Disappointingly, however, he skims the rise of feminist demands in the sixties with regard to women's health care and activism, resulting in less well-researched chapters than those in the beginning of the book on women's experiences of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Olson concludes his study by examining recent debates over the politics and economics of mastectomies and lumpectomy, and the so-called cancer counterculture and alternative cancer therapies. He briefly addresses cancer treatment drugs such as tamoxifen, as well as environmental carcinogens, but glosses the topic of genetic breast cancer inheritance. The book ends where debates in New Zealand over a new generation of breast cancer drugs are currently raging. Specifically, Herceptin, which is available to 22 OECD countries, including Australia, is not yet available to New Zealand women in early treatment of breast cancer. While Olson identifies a number of historical constants about breast cancer, particularly the persistence of the disease despite treatment advances and innovation, it is clear that breast cancer is no longer something women are reluctant to speak about, but a public issue of considerable magnitude.

In the popular imagination, breastfeeding and lactation are often viewed as marginal topics for feminism and feminist analysis. Olson himself appears to subscribe to this view. In one place in *Bathsheba's Breast* (240), he states that 'many feminists associated breast-feeding with social and economic impotence, since it bound women to the home instead of the workplace. Rejecting breast-feeding seemed an act of liberation.' A cursory glance at the contemporary breastfeeding literature demonstrates that if this were the case at the height of the second wave women's movement, then it certainly is not so now (see *Australian Feminist Studies*, 2004; Blum, 1999; Giles, 2003; Hausman, 2003, Lupton, 2000). *Breastwork*, Alison Bartlett's most recent book, is part of this new wave of feminist writing that has put breastfeeding and lactation on the intellectual map.



Bartlett's approach to the topic of breastfeeding and lactation analysis sits firmly within a cultural studies tradition, an approach that has generally found favour within Australian feminism. In short, *Breastwork* is an examination of the cultural meanings attached to breastfeeding and lactation practice in contemporary society, and how women have contested and renegotiated these meanings and practices in the public and private domain. One of the aims of Bartlett's text is to construct alternative narratives to think about breastfeeding (5), and in so doing debunk the prevailing view that it is in women's "nature" to breastfeed.

Indeed, if Bartlett opposes the view that a woman's breasts are made simply for the purpose of suckling young, she is also critical of the more recent discourse that breastfeeding is an art form best taught to women by a new army of lactation consultants and breastfeeding advocates. According to Bartlett, breastfeeding is an act or a performance; something women "do", and this doing is a gendered, socio-historical, and cultural construction.

Breastwork marks the culmination of a project Bartlett has been working on since her early essay, 'Thinking Through Breasts', which forms the basis of chapter one of the book and which was published in the UK journal *Feminist Theory* in 2002. Except for chapter five, 'Pictorialising Breastfeeding: models of maternity', each chapter in *Breastwork* is adapted from previously published articles in national and international journals. Chapter five of *Breastwork* deals with representations of breastfeeding, particularly the unambiguous separation of maternity and motherhood from sexuality, which has historical precedents in the Maria Lactans imagery of the nursing virgin. This chapter, incidentally, provides a useful counterpoint for those gaps in Olson's book regarding the collision of the functional and lactating breast with the sexual and erotic breast.

Like Olson, Bartlett is adept at combining personal anecdote with intellectual work. In *Breastwork*, she couples her experience of mothering with thinking about maternity drawn from philosophy, cultural studies, and the social sciences. She begins the book by drawing on the insights of French feminist theorists who hold that 'the body of the writer indelibly marks their writing' (2). Suggesting that we need to write with, and through our bodies, Bartlett quotes Jane Gallop in arguing there is value in writing that recounts an anecdote from everyday life and then attempts 'to "read" that account for the theoretical insights it afforded' (3).

It is precisely this anecdotal quality that links many of the breastfeeding accounts, events, scenes, and stories (from TV, newspapers, staged performances, and word of mouth) that Bartlett discusses in her book. Here she joins other commentators (me included) in arguing that just because breastfeeding reproduces human life at the level of the mundane and quotidian, this does not mean it simply repeats it or that it is beyond insight or reflection. In fact, Bartlett suggests that while women's breast experiences are socially and culturally specific, they may also correspond to an embodied logic or intelligibility that is all their own (59-60).

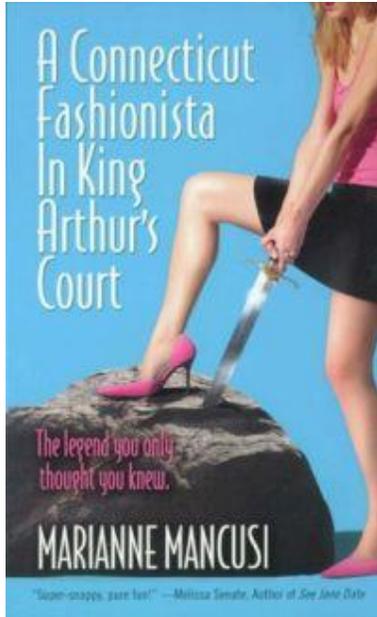
Bartlett's writing style is highly readable, and *Breastwork* is no exception. Because the book bridges both lay and academic breastfeeding concerns and issues, it has broad appeal. Clearly there is more work to be done in this field, and reading *Bathsheba's Breast* and *Breastwork* in conjunction with one another makes me wonder if Bartlett could return to some of the themes alluded to in *Breastwork*, but not explicitly addressed. What, for instance, would Bartlett make of epidemiological evidence (low fertility rates, postponing childbirth, high fat diets, improved nutrition and early onset menarche, decreased breastfeeding rates, longevity) that Olson foregrounds in his book; specifically that cultural and social changes have contributed to shifts in biological processes that are potentially cancer causing for women? It is the weight of such accumulating evidence that makes analytical commentary such as Bartlett's imperative if we are to counter views that breasts without function have no future (see Olson, 114).

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Here's One to Burn at the Stake

Marianne Mancusi. *A Connecticut Fashionista in King Arthur's Court*. New York: Lovespell, 2005.

Reviewed by Julia K. Maurus



Hear ye, hear ye, whoso shall lift this sword from the stone, the same is rightly born to drive it through the book entitled *A Connecticut Fashionista*, and spare every maiden from the vile content therein.

I gave *Fashionista* a chance in spite of its title, and what did I get for it? A chick-lit bitch-slap in the face. Mancusi has poured out a bimbo persona, slathered it in pink and plucked a title to match the quality of her English. There has to be a better name.

Fashionista of the Round Table?

Kat Jones, the stereotypical *Fashionista*, is a fashion writer who gets sent back in time to medieval England. After a bit of a rough start and a drawn-out, belated realisation that this time-travel phenomenon is genuine, she gets chummy with Queen Guenevere and King Arthur, whereupon she contributes her lingo-laden two cents' worth to

every fight and fiasco in the land.

The plot is predictable and, while I'd like to say nevertheless satisfying, the only urge to continue was out of a desire to finish it quickly so I'd never again be seen reading pink-covered chick-happy junk. Girl power is only as strong as a writer who gives women credit and writes with recognition of the effort it takes to please them.

Mancusi's insulting formula drags impressive women's writing like the *Girl's Night In* series through the mud. Kat is a diet-crazed stiletto addict who's more concerned about her butt 'looking fat' than about how she'll get back to the millennium in which she was born. Pop culture references suffocate the few successful gags; I struggled to tally even half a dozen instances of the book's advertised 'laugh-out-loud humour'.

How about *The Fashionista of King Arthur's Court*?

There's plenty of drama, but that doesn't mean it's the convincing kind. Our diva prances along and promptly labels every medieval man a bastard or a jerk the moment he annoys her. It can only be assumed that Mancusi spent weeks inventing and collecting fashionista quips and phrases for use at half-page intervals.

'Man, talking medieval is exhausting,' Kat whines. She should try enduring unrelenting 21st century chick-babble. Pop prose is, like, totally smothering, man. Any reader would be surprised that she waits until page 138 to deliver the line about 'curiosity killing the Kat'.

Mancusi is particularly fond of line-length adjectives. Kat, for example, holds grudges against 'the I'm-in-a-rock-band-and-have-no-job-losers' and her 'I'm-

running-out-for-cigarettes-and-never-coming-back-father'. But this one takes the cake:

Lot has the no-armor, quicker-movement advantage. The other guy has the whole nothing-gets-through-the-steel-plates-and-chain-covering-my-body thing going on.

Fashionista's Guide to Finding a Knight in Shining Armour?

Inconsistencies in the opening chapter make it difficult to establish the heroine's swinging character, and the blurb is inconsistent with the greater part of the book. While Kat, on her adventure through medieval legend, is certainly trying to avoid 'scuffing her Manolos', she isn't necessarily cautious not to change history.

Sir Lancelot, Kat's Knight in Shining Armour, really does come to the rescue as *Fashionista's* saving grace. The spicy romance includes many a medieval rendezvous, a 'fight to the kiss', and a memorable kiss-in-the-dark. Mancusi also deserves credit for her chapter-ending cliff-hangers. It's just a pity nothing follows them but more cringe-worthy blabber.

Chit-chat rules Mancusi's writing, and evidently her lifestyle as well. When asked in a blog, 'If you could have any job in the world, what would it be?' she answers, 'I would want to be a socialite like Paris Hilton. How cool would it be to have practically unlimited money and all you're required to do is party all the time!'

Now we know the inspiration behind Kat's tantrums, and witticisms like, 'Oops, sorry. Brain fart.'

Since her *Fashionista* debut, Mancusi has clung to her fluffy style (*What, No Roses?*) and dived into Young Adult fiction. Next year we can look forward to *A Hoboken Hipster in Sherwood Forest*, which promises a just-as-air-headed heroine moaning about 'twerps in tights'.

Medieval England, Fashionista-style?

Mancusi's biggest oversight was her failure to put a reminder on the cover that all readers first switch off their brains. Come to think of it, I'd say the appalling title is only a positive thing. It will deflect many a vulnerable damsel. Just one glance and they'll know better.

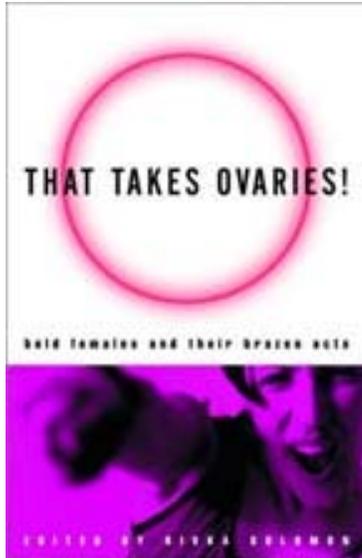
Kat thinks it's torture being locked in a tower. At least she isn't locked in a tower reading this torturous book.

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Having a Pair: Ovaries and Oratory

Rivka Solomon (Ed.) *That Takes Ovaries!* Random House/Three Rivers Press: New York, 2002. Reissued 2006.

Review & Interview by Evelyn Hartogh



In the last four years over 300 *That Takes Ovaries!* Open Mike events have been held from America to India to Italy. Like the collection of stories edited by Rivka Solomon, women share their real life stories of courage, and Rivka collects more stories. It began as a glib remark at the end of a dinner party, where she substituted ovaries for balls, which raised a laugh and gave her an idea. Due to illness, Solomon was unable to embark on a book tour, so instead she began to administer Open Mike events all over America. The interest was phenomenal and soon the events went international. As 2006 draws to a close events are taking place during December in Italy, Australia and India, and Solomon is still collecting more stories.

The *That Takes Ovaries!* movement revisits the traditions of oratory and story telling in groups. Thus the collection of stories is in constant evolution and growth. It has become a mutable text, as Solomon is flexible and adaptable to how the event is presented in different cultures and countries. The events operate as fundraisers for local women's groups and international causes, with a particular emphasis on female genital mutilation and separately, sex slavery. Currently in Australia, *Amnesty International* has become involved in hosting Open Mikes as part of their *Stop Violence Against Women Campaign*. The events attempt to be responsive to the community needs that are raised at the event. Solomon uses the following example to illustrate this point:

The work we did with women who are prostitutes in India (women and girls who had been forced into sexual slavery when they were just girls) has had fruitful results. Bobbi Ausubel, from *TTO* [*That Takes Ovaries!*] went to India for one month and helped the girls to come to a place where they could begin to re-frame how they saw their own lives, from victims to brave survivors. And then felt confident enough to share their stories of courage with each other, with the end goal of sharing them with officials (politicians, landlords, police, etc) in an effort to begin to demand that their basic needs get met. It is a process that is in progress (Rivka Solomon Interview 2006).

The heroism of the women's stories in the collection range from a journalist fearlessly reporting on honour killings, to a teenage girl shaving her hairy legs into horizontal stripes, to a woman writing 'Rape' on every Stop sign, to a gang of women destroying a porn shop, to women recalling being the first in high school to wear trousers in the 1960s. Solomon divides her collection into sections: acting on instinct; slow deliberate actions; taking control of bodies and sexuality; refusing to wait to be rescued and saving yourself from danger; rebelling against unjust laws; uniting with others; and finally, women daring to act in that most 'unfeminine' but 'ballsy' trait: anger. A lot of the women in this chapter commit

minor criminal acts, often vandalism, but none of them regret their actions, or their anger, and they gracefully accept their community service or fines.

Angry women range in acts from spouting off sassy one-liners or dumping their drinks on unwanted men, to the hilarious adventures of The Dyke Disposal Unit (DDU) who protect mothers and children by running their abusive partners and fathers out of town. In her introduction to this section, Solomon analyses the oppressive notion of being nice and accommodating, which is counter-productive, to women protecting themselves and, above all, fighting back. She asserts, 'self-defence is innately human; could it have been conditioned out of women . . . abusive men know: It's a safe bet that when you target a woman that you won't have a fight on your hands' (189).

The role of the fighter and the hero is predominantly the narrative domain of male protagonists and male authors. From Hercules to James Bond, to Dirty Harry, the image of action is a male image. It is pervasive to the extent that the women who tell their stories in *That Takes Ovaries!* are very conscious that they are acting against their gender. To be passionate, madcap, enterprising, meddlesome, determined, unpredictable, headstrong, and to throw caution to the wind, are all improper acts for women but desirable in men. Heroic women are depicted in fiction as unusual, even unnatural, almost masculine and somewhat abhorrent. The female hero is usually a lonely, tragic figure. Triumphant but bitter endings met all recent cinematic portrayals of hot-blooded strong-minded women such as Angelina Jolie's *Laura Croft Tomb Raider*, Jennifer Garner's *Elektra*, Kristanna Loken's *Blood Rayne* and Halle Berry's *Catwoman*. All these heroic women lose more than they gain, almost as if they are divinely punished for breaking out of a passive feminine acceptance of fate. However, this is not the case in the real life heroic women's stories in *That Takes Ovaries!* – these women reap the benefits of courage, and increase their self-respect by fighting back.

By continuing to collect the stories at all the Open Mikes, Rivka Solomon has let the text of *That Takes Ovaries!* remain open. Even a play based on the book has toured and evolved alongside the Open Mikes. So while we are fed the myth that women suffer dire consequences if they act with daring, in reality, Solomon's collection shows, women improve their lives by taking chances. 'Having a pair' isn't just a load of bullocks.

For more information about *That Takes Ovaries!* visit: <http://thattakesovaries.org>

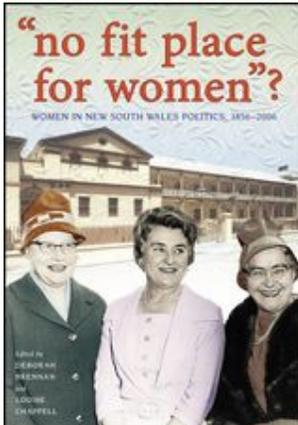
For more information about *Amnesty International Australia Stop Violence Against Women Campaign* visit: <http://www.amnesty.org.au>

Evelyn Hartogh is a freelance writer and performance artist with a Masters in Creative Writing (UQ 2002) and a Masters in Women's Studies (GU 1997). Her website is located at <http://www.empressev.net>

Women in State Politics—First Queensland, Now NSW—Four to Go

Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell (Eds). *No Fit Place For Women? Women in New South Wales Politics, 1856–2006*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006.

Reviewed by John McCulloch



Books about women in politics have tended to deal with Australia as a whole, and what makes *No Fit Place For Women?* so valuable is that it gives an in-depth coverage of a single state, New South Wales. Jointly edited by Deborah Brennan and Louise Chappell, the publication includes contributions from 14 women and two men, all with biographical notes, and is divided into ten chapters and a lengthy introduction.

These cover a range of topics including gender and politics; an analysis of MPs' first speeches; women's suffrage; women in the ALP, Coalition, minor parties, and independents; women in the bureaucracy; women's advisory committees; advocacy and lobby groups; tension between white and Indigenous feminists; and young women in politics.

The first chapter, by Deborah Brennan, gives a good account of 'women's view' on politics, despite saying that this was not its intention. Jenny Donovan's chapter associates the growth of many women's clubs in the nineteenth century with women gaining in confidence and learning to public-speak, and organise: it points out that many of the suffragists were also members of literary groups in which 'can be found the intellectual roots of feminism for Australian women'. The writer is also at pains to combat any notion that NSW women achieved the franchise easily in 1902.

The chapter by Janet Ramsay deals with domestic violence and how it wasn't identified by women's groups as a problem until the mid-1970s, and not acknowledged by the UN until 1993. The author makes the very interesting point that when the WCTU campaigned against 'drinking', this may have been code for male violence.

Rebecca Huntley and Janet Ramsay's chapter is devoted to Labor women and the difficulties they experience negotiating the Party structures; it also analyses the history of women-friendly legislation which resulted in child endowment, sole parent benefit, and equal pay for equal work. The chapter by Don Harwin and Jenny Gardiner deals with Coalition women, and shows that, although the Liberal Party condemns the ALP for affirmative action, it has always provided similar opportunities for its own women under a different name. Although the authors don't put it as crudely as this – preselection rarely has anything to do with merit.

The next chapter, by Anika Gauja and Rodney Smith, details the background of minor party and independent women, and the issues they have pursued in parliament. The authors conclude that minor party/Independent MPs are more likely to be male (the exact opposite to the situation in Queensland). This chapter contains some handy tables.

Louise Chappell's chapter is divided into two time periods, 1880–1970 and 1970–now. The author discusses the Wilenski Report, and the reforms of the Wran

Government—sexual assault centres, women’s health centres, women’s refuges— and compares the commitment to women displayed by the Wran, Greiner, Fahey and Carr governments. Three steps forward with Wran, two back with Greiner, stationary with Fahey, and one step back with Carr just about sums it up.

Sue Goodwin discusses Women’s Advisory Committees under ALP and Coalition governments. The author is pessimistic about the future of WACs if they remain subject to political interference. The chapter by Marian Sawyer, with Jasmina Brankovich and Gail Radford, is about the Women’s Electoral Lobby and the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the large number of submissions prepared by WEL on a diverse range of issues affecting women.

Sarah Maddison’s chapter explores the gulf between white and Indigenous feminists. It posits that activism is different for young women, and offers two case studies: young student feminists who have no contact with older feminists; and young feminist activists in a community group who work in a supportive environment with input and assistance from older women. This chapter is a must for all feminists, young and old, who wish to better understand each other’s point of view.

Although the notes, index, appendix and tables are especially valuable, the book lacks a bibliography, which would have been beneficial to future researchers. Nevertheless, *No Fit Place For Women?* is an invaluable addition to our knowledge of women in Australian politics.

John McCulloch is a PhD Candidate in the School of English, Media Studies & Art History at the University of Queensland. He is the author of *The Suffragists* and *The Legislators* (UCQ Press, 2005), and of articles in *Hecate* and the *Queensland Review*, on women in Queensland politics.

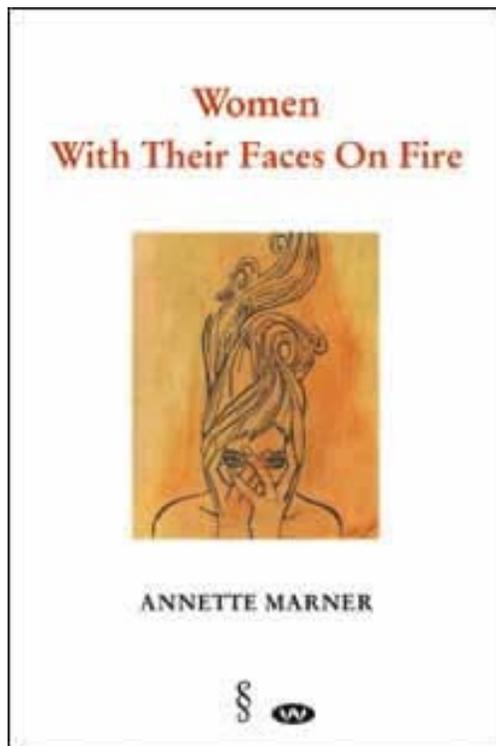
Burning Poets

Annette Marner. *Women With Their Faces on Fire*. South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2006.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki. *Peeling Apples*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.

Cate Kennedy. *Joyflight*. Queensland: Interactive Press, 2004.

Reviewed by Misbah Khokhar



After reading these three remarkable collections of poetry, a male friend came to visit me. He took one look at me as I opened the door, and said, 'What's wrong with you?' I think what he saw was the sleeplessness in my eyes, the restlessness, the fact that I definitely didn't want to be disturbed from my thoughts. And as I thought my response would make sense to him, I replied, 'Oh I've been reading poetry'. This is a good sign for me. The restlessness, the thousand burning questions and memories and future possibilities that poetry can evoke in me, the niggling urge to write. I want poetry to take me inwards, I want it to make me boil over, to empty me, to be transported to rapture, to even allow me a place of stillness. While I can't say that each poem did this every time, what I can say is these three books are connected together by the ploughing of emotion, by their shared responsibilities of storytelling, by their obvious love of

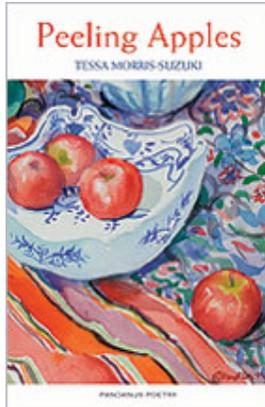
language, by the opportunity they gave me to curl up inside each of these books for a while and find moments of stillness, poems that were demanding, receptive, screaming—poems making me turn inward and experience.

In Annette Marner's award-winning collection, the reader is bound to an intimacy of childhood memories and borders that bleed between subjects and objects. The poems do indeed uncover wounds, not yet healed over, and for this the reader might be grateful. The lines of her poems are pared down, sharpening language like a knife, re-telling the painful initiation process of being a young girl learning how acceptable and even expected it still is in this world to hold back your words. In 'The Hollow Tree', the subject expresses the cruel initiation of being silenced and how the repercussions of this knowledge leads to a hollowing out of the individual, who searches for re-connection and a voice of her own. 'I was only little/when I learned/to eat my words/the mistakes I wasn't allowed to make,/I bit my tongue to the anger/it was a sin to feel (5).

Loss and absence are not limited to humans, and Marner traverses the animal kingdom, where Frogmouths mourn, lambs are slaughtered, and the 'universe is born from zero' (3). This collection is divided into four parts, Bruises On Brand New Hearts, which traces the stories of childhood and lessons learned, Caring For The Wound(ed), nine poems which explore ideas of inner and outward landscapes,

kinship and love, *South Of The Desert Country*, where each poem traces the experience of loss and love through intimate encounters with the land.

In the last section, from which the title of the book comes, we are again introduced to the themes of female oppression and emancipation, animal cruelty, body politics, and a wonderful re-telling of Roger McGough's 'Let Me Die A Young Man's Death'. This re-telling is the perfect culmination for the journey on which the book takes the reader—from childhood initiations, the adult world of loss and deception, into a strong autonomous identity that asks for death not at the hands of injustice and violent men, but the death of an old lady, 'Let me die an old woman's death, not a vexed Bex, out of breasts death, or a bashed and finally beaten, for not wanting him' (86).



Can you peel an apple in one great slice never severing the cord of skin until all the sweet pulp is revealed? This is what Morris-Suzuki does with her poems. She whittles away with the sharp knife of language to reveal the fruits of experience and shared memories. The last poem of her collection is also the title for her book. *Peeling Apples* might also very well serve as a metaphor for the process of writing. What fruit did Eve bite into and what does this fruit represent? We all know the answer and in each woman we all suspect deep down that she was a clever woman.

The apple, the fruit of knowledge, is the perfect metaphor for the shared experiences that women recall and the lessons of life that they pass on cryptically in poetry.

Peeling the apple as a trope is suggestive of seeking the underbelly of existence, the sweet and sour of flesh, and sometimes the unexpected worms and bruises under the surface. To do so is to engage in a sensual experience, the act of which resurrects for the subject of the poem an almost hallucinogenic experience that calls up the dead.

'I win and lose and smile and speak/ a language drained of memories./ But still these mundane moments snag and tear:/ in undreamed cities/knife in hand/ paring back the years' (51). What is also noticeable, in this poem particularly, is the assonance of sounds, repeated throughout, imbuing this poem with an easy and subtle rhythm. It is Morris-Suzuki's intimation of rhythm that makes me wonder about the influence of Haiku.

Although traditionally a haiku contains a maximum of seventeen syllables, with lines structured in a five-seven-five pattern, perfect for breath, Morris-Suzuki, it must be noted, does verge into an element of 'paring' back, a minimalist use of words that might suggest an influence of the Haiku form. 'A small wind stirs/like wakefulness/after the troubled dreams of day/leaves/in the fading garden/start to breathe' (6). And considering Morris-Suzuki does live between Canberra and Japan it seems highly likely that as a poet she has not quarantined the influence of Japanese Haiku from her own work.

This book, unlike Marner's, is a book of certain endings, and of greater gaps between life lessons where celebration occurs: 'or shall we let our words/join hands and dance/dance together/whirling in polkas/mazurkas square dances/hornpipes tarantellas/louder and louder' (20). It is in this raw exposure where the reader dwells, concerned with the exposure of wounds not yet healed, it is the mark of the magician, the voice is one who shapeshifts into animals, slips between different personas. In Morris-Suzuki's poetry it is one distinct voice that translates the images, whereas the voice of Marner's poems is liminal and fractured through its occupation of different memories.

In 'Makeover or Through The Looking Glasses', we are presented with an archetype of female body anxiety which, in a similar vein to Monique Wittig's experimental prose 'The Lesbian Body', pulls back the flesh, exposing the insides, the places a mirror cannot reflect. This dissection of the female body, like Wittig's prose, is also calling for a deconstruction of language.

In this sense both poets are concerned with paring back surfaces, with writing from the outside inwardly, a bodily deconstruction. 'Glass to glass is infinity/ but she can't see it/ because she's somewhere in her teens with a body/ that reeks and bleeds at will.' Marner casts light on the abject while Morris-Suzuki observes its containment: 'The Weather house hides its life/ behind the carved hearts of painted shutters' (38).



In *Joyflight*, by Cate Kennedy, one stumbles upon a photo album, a diary of mementos and messages. Her poetry is visceral, heart-breaking. It is a book buried in the earth. Musicians and painters will often describe the sythesthetic properties of their medium, and though it is medically understood as an involuntary process whereby the direct input of information designed for one sense produces perception in one of the other four senses, Kennedy's poetry is liable to produce sythesthetic responses in the reader. It is a visceral evocation of snapshot memories and landscapes that enables the reader to occupy the different perspectives Kennedy has set up. Take for example the experience of imagining the working environment of Leonardo Da Vinci, in her poem 'Blue': 'grinding cobalt and linseed/wasting painting time/coming up with

equations/I see a studio of copyists/refining the buttermilk complexion/ of La Gioconda/those dense oils/dust motes/ saturated silence' (22).

Her collection is divided into two sections, 'That pure torn-open moment', and 'Burning the world's almanac'. The 'torn-open moment' occurs both for the subject and for the reader who is able to occupy the voice of the poem because though the experiences may be foreign to the reader, Kennedy is a storyteller who pays close attention to setting the scene in each of her poems. This genuine attention to detail and subtlety allows the reader to enter into the poem and experience the rupture of realisation for the characters of each poem.

To burn the world's almanac would literally mean to burn a source of knowledge that is considered a compendium of the world's facts and bits of information. I like the idea that each person is themselves an Almanac, as this title suggests, a source of facts, stories, lessons, and titbits. As the title to her second section of poems, it strongly suggests that there are many facts and figures and stories that are never told and Kennedy takes the opportunity to place poetry in a position to voice these stories. These are moments concerning human experience, the celebration of friends, the delicate textures of lived experience that are never written into an almanac. 'So worn with use, your bent sculptor's hands/ prise these up from pine needles and cold Autumn wetness/ No leaf's red could match the colour of your hair/ and you with your basket/knowing all the names/ smelling of sandalwood/ you are my good and benign rural witch. (52).

Her poems are tightly bound to location and to the stories of loved ones. Her writing represents the task mistress, the one who must get her hands dirty, who does not pass up the opportunity in her poetry to write about distressing topics

and to transform these everyday scenarios into full-blown universal questions. It is difficult not to imagine the pain and distress that the young calves feel at the loss of their mother's milk, as she writes of it in 'The Weaners'. But Kennedy then takes this idea into the human sphere of loss that we all experience. What I appreciate about this poem is that she has painted the picture so graphically of the calves' suffering, but I feel that while the descriptions of their suffering are intensely perceptive, the link between their suffering and our own is a very tentative one: 'It's a litany of grievance/the weaners/are only learning what we all have to learn - /to live without it/to keep pressing along those fences/to keep forgetting why' (7).

My thoughts run riot after this poem, because while it addresses the cruelty, I remember that the calves are weaned from their mothers so we can drink their milk. So I don't know if I'm entirely convinced that their loss and deprivation can be adequately connected to the human infant experience of this loss, considering we are the cause of their loss of mother's milk. However, this is part of the pleasure of reading her poems, namely, that as a reader I am moved enough to still be re-negotiating the underlying issue of this poem days after I have read it. From Kennedy's stories I really feel she has lived close to the land, has worked on the land, and her strong storytelling abilities give her poems a power of invocation that permits the reader to dwell within the experiences she describes.

A certain resilience seems to have been cultivated to write of Kennedy's topics. It is difficult for me to forget the image of nuns caring for the graves of their sisters and then also weeding out and preparing their own graves. In 'Nun's Graveyard', Kennedy has chosen to resurrect the lives of women forgotten, covered over by time, their graveyard 'choked with wild yarrow and dandelion' (42), but still through her storytelling she is able to paint a snapshot of their lives, to give them breath, to remind us of the shared knowledge that life binds us all to inevitability. 'For all is relinquished in the end,/without adornment or achievement, without flowers:/the date you left this world/and the first name, the name that turned you/ in the green and saturated orchard one day,/called you to this chapped humility' (43).

Misbah Khokhar is studying her Masters of Creative Writing in Poetry at The University of Queensland, collecting a series of poems titled 'No Middle Path'. She is also a performance poet who has released a spoken word CD, 'The Pythia', through LadyBug Press in Canada, and is currently working on film, music, and live performance.