



200801517

Unbecoming Australians: Crisis and Community in the Australian Villa/ge Book

PAUL GENONI

IN 2000 Delia Falconer wrote an article in *The Australian's Review of Books* giving an overview of the vogue in travel writing for what she dubbed the 'villa book':

Once upon a time ... there is a man; he is English, middle-aged, recently retired from a career in advertising and likes to eat in restaurants. Or there is a woman, American, a professor of creative writing, who has travelled to this Latin country many times before and always longed to live here. And there is a villa on a hill – two storeys, a primitive bathroom, old stalls that once housed animals in the basement. The olive trees are overgrown, the shutters are unhinged and fading. It is love at first sight. The man or woman buys it. As you do.

... There are baroque legal systems and shifty builders to be dealt with, unwanted guests from home who view the new house as a hotel service. The local dialect or accent is difficult to master, wasps attack, the septic system floods. And the expenses – they're awful. But the local cuisine is as mouth-watering as it is simple, the markets sell fresh peaches and strawberries that are ripe to eat that day. There are monthly antique markets in the next village, sage and hazelnuts for picking in the laneways. The locals are charming, from the foxy bullshit artist who stops to offer dubious advice about vermin to the local fix-it genius who knows how to build a bridge or dig a well. ...

Gradually ... the former city dweller's impatience is replaced by a more laid-back approach to life. The garden flourishes, friendships develop,

children are born or visit, limbs grow tanned and supple. Life is sweet. The new neighbour feels, as much as it is possible, at home. (5)

Falconer goes on to refer to a number of villa books, including the two that are probably the best-known examples, Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989) and Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996). The Provence and Tuscan settings of Mayle's and Mayes's books serve to signpost the geography of the villa book, which is frequently set amid the Mediterranean delights of southern France and northern Italy. These are lands of bountiful sunshine, abundant produce, cheap wine, the siesta, the olive grove, the Latin temperament, Roman ruins and a seemingly endless supply of rural buildings awaiting the renovator's deft touch.

Falconer also made the astute observation that such books are likely to demonstrate differences according to the nationality of the author:

The Euro-nostalgias of an Anglo-Saxon Australian ... will play out differently to the fantasies of an American wishing to escape city violence and consumerism ... or an Englishman having an ironic and self-conscious stab at 'going native'. (5)

At the time of writing, however, Falconer had very little evidence from which to draw conclusions about Australian contributions to the genre. She mentions one Australian author who had written a post-Mayle book of the type, Geoffrey Luck,¹ but makes no further attempt to explicate the differences that might distinguish villa books written by Australians from those written by non-Australians. Some seven years later, however, we have a rash of such books written by Australians. These commenced with Virginia Ryan's *Where the Cypress Rises* in 2000; Isabella Dusi followed with *Vanilla Beans and Brodo* in 2001, and *Bel Vino* in 2004; Mary Moody's trilogy *Au Revoir*, *Last Tango in Toulouse* and *The Long Hot Summer* was published between 2001 and 2005; Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French* in 2002, and Monica Geti's *The Year of Sunshine* in 2004. The pace picked up in 2005 with Penelope Green's *When in Rome*, Sue Howard's *Leaning towards Pisa*, Henrietta Taylor's *Veuve Taylor* (republished in 2006 as *Escaping*), Barbara Biggs's *The Accidental Renovator*, Carla Coulson's *Italian Joy*, and Margaret Ambrose's *How to be French*. Almost as productive was 2006, with Elaine Lewis's *Left Bank Waltz*, Judith Armstrong's *The Maestro's Table*, Sonia Harford's *Leaving Paradise*, Sheryle Bagwell's *My French Connection* and Vicki Archer's *My French Life*.

¹ Falconer also lists Joan Marble as Australian. Marble, however, is American with no significant Australian connection.

The first thing to note about this list is something to which I will return: that all the authors are women. The only similar books written by Australian men during this period are Luck's *Villa Fortuna* (2000), Christopher Lawrence's *Swing Symphony* (2004), and Brian Johnston's *Sicilian Summer* (2005). Nor, it should be noted, do all of these Australian titles conform exactly to Falconer's description of the 'villa book'. For example there is a noticeable difference in form and tone between the Mayle and Mayes books and Isabella Dusi's almost anthropological description of life in Montalcino, Sonia Harford's framing of her personal narrative within a broader discussion of Australian expatriatism,² and Sheryle Bagwell's forensic assessment of various aspects of French life. Nonetheless, it is quite easy to fit each of these books comfortably within the villa book genre – narratives that recount the author's attempt to live the southern European dream in ways that are not available to 'tourists'.

A particular difference between a number of these Australian texts and the villa book as described by Falconer is that they feature urban rather than rural locations. Australians, particularly younger ones, are more likely to be attracted to the major cities of Europe than some hilltop village, no matter how appealing the rural lifestyle may be. Turnbull, Biggs and Lewis build new lives in Paris; Bagwell in Paris and Lyon; Green in Rome; Coulson in Florence; and Howard in Pisa. Taylor and Archer, on the other hand, both find houses to renovate in Provence; Mary Moody is located in the Dordogne; and Dusi and Ryan in Tuscan and Umbrian hill towns respectively.

The broad genre to which these books might be said to belong is travel literature. They are promoted as such, win awards for travel writing, and are inevitably grouped with 'travel narratives' in bookshops. They are, however, removed from what might be considered classic travel literature, if that is understood to be a form based on a narrative version of the 'grand tour' in which various scenic, manmade and cultural wonders are described in the course of a continuous journey from A to B, and probably back to A again. In other words, they are demonstrably different from the art of travel writing as practiced by Paul Theroux, Jonathan Raban, or Colin Thubron. Indeed in reading these books it becomes obvious that they are almost devoid of

2 The experience of 'being abroad' recounted in the villa book cannot be equated with the classic experience of Australian expatriatism as it existed before the age of jet travel. Many of these latter-day 'expats' return frequently to Australia, and may divide their lives between Australia and their country of choice. Harford, in the only one of these books to address the subject of expatriatism at length, adopts the use of the term but acknowledges that it is a shifting concept. According to Harford the ease of international travel 'calls into question the definition of an expatriate' (74), and in 'this globalised era, when most people at some stage of their lives can afford to travel overseas, "abroad" is neither as daunting nor as glamorous as it once was' (111).

accounts of journeying that are integral to many classic travel tales. The villa books take the fact of travel for granted – in their globalised worldview there is no need to account for the logistics of travel when trans-national journeys are commonplace and the destinations they feature are so obviously within the reach of international airlines. Rather, these books are about being *in situ*: that is, they are about the destination rather than the journey.

The destinations are, however, represented in a particular way. It is apparent, for example, that remarkably little attention is given to what are usually thought of as ‘tourist attractions’. For example, Penelope Green in *When in Rome* describes several years living in the Italian capital, but makes virtually no mention of the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel or the Trevi Fountain. There are passing references to the Spanish Steps, the Forum, the Pantheon and the Piazza Navona, but principally as places where Green goes to meet friends or socialise. When she does travel, as in a sequence when she journeys around Italy with her mother, Green dispenses with Naples, Sorrento, the Amalfi Coast, Pompeii, Perugia, Venice and Tuscany in a mere four pages. The imperative driving the narrative is to return to Green’s new life in Rome. It is about learning to speak Italian, moving between shared houses and poorly paid jobs, making friends and taking lovers, about experiencing and adapting to the challenges and exhilaration of culture shock. The story being told in *When in Rome* is that of Green herself and her relocation.

It is my contention that these books are not primarily travel narratives, but a form of autobiography. This is hardly a revolutionary thesis, given that the overlap between the two genres has been often noted, and indeed is almost unavoidable. Travel writing is a form that in its intersections between public space and private experience invites and legitimates the autobiographic response. Both genres have notoriously indefinite and permeable borders, and scholars of both life writing and travel literature have had to negotiate the relationship between the two. Paul Fussell (203), and Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan (14), are amongst those who have contemplated exactly what form of life writing is constituted in travel writing and reached the tentative conclusion that it is memoir rather than autobiography *per se*. Gillian Whitlock has also discussed the relationship between travel writing and autobiography and concluded that

To read travel writing in terms of autobiographics is to sharpen the focus on the production of the self in these texts, to think about how the writer might invent herself in relation to place. (77)

Whitlock’s words – ‘to think about how the writer might invent herself in relation to place’ – take us towards the questions that are asked in this essay.

What exactly is meant by the invention of self in the context of such books? What can we generalise about the places to which authors of the villa books choose to relate? If these books are autobiography, then exactly what type of autobiography are they?

Susanna Egan, in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (1999), has written about the use of unresolved crisis to propel narrative as the distinguishing feature of twentieth-century autobiography. Egan argues that whereas crisis has long been an element of autobiography, the genre has traditionally demanded resolution. What is characteristic of manifestations of crisis in modern autobiography, however, is that crisis remains 'current and continuing' (5) at the time of writing. David McCooey, writing in 2006, refers to Egan's work in emphasising the similar proliferation of unresolved crises in recent Australian autobiography ('Going Public' 28). McCooey broadly categorises the forms of crisis found in Australian autobiography as being of the body, the nation, personal identity, history, or faith. The texts to which he refers are of a type that more formally adhere to the autobiographic genre than do the villa books, but this key aspect of his analysis remains relevant.

Certainly there are crises aplenty in the texts under discussion here, although several of the types described by McCooey are notably absent. The crises at issue in the villa books are in the main resolutely personal. They include relationship breakdown in the cases of Armstrong and Lewis, a relationship crisis for Geti, death of a spouse in the case of Taylor, a personal health crisis for Howard, generalised mid-life crises for Dusi and the just-turning-fifty Moody, a pre mid-life crisis for the just-turning-thirty Greene and, in the case of Carla Coulson, a crisis seemingly brought on by excessive consumption of the spoils of globalisation:

I had it all. Well, that's what everybody told me. A smart Art Deco apartment in Darlinghurst, Sydney, filled with beautiful objects: a Murano chandelier from Venice (Italy), a handmade vase from Bahia (Brazil), chairs from Copenhagen (Denmark) and rugs handmade in Rajasthan (India). My wardrobe was overflowing with beaded dresses by Collette Dinnigan, ruched leather stilettos by Gucci and clothes that looked more like art by Akira. Fresh flowers were delivered on Mondays; and on Tuesdays the cleaner let herself in and put my 55 square metres back into perfect order ... My successful business of thirteen years afforded me trips to exotic locations around the world to collect even more beautiful possessions for my home.

Sounds good on paper, but in reality I felt just like another invisible female fast approaching my use-by date in a city that worships youth. (1)

The 'crisis' may also be as simple as wanting to escape whatever ails the author about Australia, or a general malaise accompanied by the author's sense that she could live a fuller, richer life elsewhere:

To me Paris was more than a gorgeous city with a romantic aura – it was a place where dreams became reality. At home in Melbourne, I was surrounded by people who watched what food they put into their body, recycled rubbish religiously, and even had things called 'clothing allowances' they put in something called a 'budget'.

In a world that was becoming increasingly sensible, to me, Paris was the ultimate fairytale. Paris was a place where beauty, elegance and style reigned supreme ... (Ambrose 15)

Or, as Sheryle Bagwell writes: 'I just wanted to get away from Australia. It didn't really matter where. Paris was as good a place as any' (1). Whatever the exact nature of the crisis, however, the response is to address it by leaving Australia as part of the quest to make a new start, and create a new life.

The trope of the quest is a key element that has long united travel literature and autobiography. The narrative structure of both genres is driven by the concept of the journey, usually physical for one, and metaphorical for the other, but with ample scope to unite these two journeys in a way that enriches both. The common villa book devices of physical relocation – finding/renovating a home, learning a language, making new friends, and adjusting to the stark seasonal variations of the northern hemisphere – are rich in metaphorical possibilities when it comes to tales based on crisis and the quest for recovery. Therefore, whether or not 'going away' or 'leaving Australia' makes sense as a strategy for dealing with crisis, it certainly does in terms of a narrative grounded in a search for personal recovery.

Tony Hassall has noted the importance of tropes derived from questing in Australian literature generally, and one of the three central motifs he identifies is 'the quest for the "home" in Europe' (390). Traditionally this quest for Anglo-Celtic Australians has focused on a return to the home in the British Isles. For more recent generations, however, Britain is simply too familiar, too convenient, and too much like their Australian home.³ The Mediterranean lands on the other hand offer a degree of familiarity and convenience while

3 Sonia Harford, who spent time in Amsterdam and Rome, writes that she and her husband preferred continental Europe because it 'lay outside the traditional stronghold of Australian expatriatism, Britain' (79).

remaining sufficiently exotic, particularly by virtue of the language barrier that remains one of the key constituents of 'otherness' in these texts. Situating the quest for the European home in France or Italy also enables an author to effortlessly mobilise the complex array of lifestyle associations that distinguish these societies, and which are the second key ingredient of otherness or difference. These lifestyle associations are built on the popular belief that Mediterranean countries have avoided the worst ravages of modernity, and they serve to highlight the deeply nostalgic impulse driving the villa book fantasies. In its urban form this nostalgia is manifested as a longing for romance, style, and a commitment to physical beauty. In its rural form it is about tradition and ritual, harmony with the seasons and their produce, and of life lived more slowly and simply. In either case it is about a vision of life grounded in the *Gemeinschaft* (community) rather than the *Gesellschaft* (society) – and it is used to produce an account of lives lived intimately, intensely, and deeply grounded in place. These are also ways of life, and types of community, which according to authors of the villa book, are not found in the suburbs of Australia.

Sarah Turnbull, for example, is appalled to find herself living in suburban Paris, outside the *periphique*, and therefore outside the imagined setting for her new life. Turnbull's nostalgic Parisian fantasy is apparently crafted from classic and clichéd cinematic representations, and in particular she envisions the city as being unlike suburban Sydney in its promise of an intensely urban community:

Frankly, if I'd wanted trees and blond Labradors that badly, I would have headed home to Sydney's North Shore. What I want is to live in one of those old white apartment buildings run by a grumbling concierge, round the corner from a crowded café where I can read the newspaper each morning while the barman banter with a regular line-up of red-wine raconteurs. Nearby there'd be a couple of trusted bistros serving melted *chevre chaud* at lunch, heart-warming *cassoulet* for dinner. I want to step out my front door and be amid the buzz, the bohemian poets, the brasseries, the bums, the crooked boutiques, the achingly beautiful window displays, the chic *mesdames* with spaghetti legs and neurotic terriers. In short, I want to live in Paris. (57–58)

Turnbull eventually moves into the second arrondissement where she experiences the inner-city 'Parisian *quartier* of my dreams' (103). Here she finds an apartment, begins her modest renovation, and creates her new French life:

The most wonderful thing about our new apartment is the location, smack in the city centre, within walking distance of almost everything – the Marais, the Tuileries gardens, the Left Bank, the Louvre. Most fantastic of all, we'll be just around the corner from the lively market street, Rue Montorgueil, a picturesque seven-hundred metre stretch of *fromageries*, fish shops, florists, bakeries and fruit and vegetable sellers who bugle their bargains six days a week. The street is the main artery of a rectangle-shaped *quartier* that's unique in the inner city because it is entirely paved and closed to regular traffic. This only heightens the villagey feel of the neighbourhood, the impression that it is somehow self-contained and separate. (102–03)

The concept of the 'village' expressed by Turnbull is vital to these books. Indeed, whereas Falconer proposed the notion of the 'villa book', I think it is more accurate to think of the 'village book'. And although Falconer writes of the villa book as an essentially pastoral form, as Turnbull illustrates, the city village is also alive and well in the Australian romantic imagination.⁴ For a generation of Australian women writers it is the village, a concept foreign to their native land – a place of cities, suburbs and towns – but which nonetheless carries a raft of nostalgic connotations that has become the vehicle for personal transformation. With its nostalgia-laden suggestions of a contained world, of traditional values, and a type of community grounded in respect for the individual, the village remains as the local antidote to a series of global ills – although paradoxically for Australians, it is a version of the local which is accessible only because of the benefits of globalisation.⁵

Sheryle Bagwell has a similar experience in Paris, of finding herself in an urban village that is demonstrably un-Australian:

Paris is clogged with traffic, the metro is crowded, space is at a premium and the people can be rude, but you can always escape into your own

- 4 The appeal of the urban village to the Australian imagination was first evidenced by Alister Kershaw's *Village to Village* (1993), in which an Australian journalist recounts his forty years of living in France. The first 'village' referred to in the title is the several areas of Paris where Kershaw lived after the Second War. When the atmospherics of his beloved Parisian village are eroded by urban redevelopment ('The old fraternity of the rue de Charonne was at an end' [77]) a frustrated Kershaw decamps to a rural village in the Berry where he regains the lost sense of community.
- 5 Rosamund Dalziel has suggested that the choice to write autobiography becomes a form of defence against the forces of globalisation, and may also serve in itself as an act of crisis resolution and community building: 'Writing autobiographically offers possibilities for analysis and creative resistance to the globalising forces oppressively moulding the self, and may also create a space for social reconnection and healing' (*Selves Crossing Cultures* xix).

village-like neighbourhood; those marvellous congregations of apartments and speciality shops that are grouped around a square or a market. Survivors of urban modernisation, these Parisian villages have every service you are ever likely to require – from cheese shops and butchers and bakers to cobblers and seamstresses. Each has its own character and sense of community. These are the things that are missing from the suburbs – the sort of middle-class dormitories where I grew up that lack a heart and a soul. (31)

According to the logic of the villa/ge book, if you find a place with ‘a heart and a soul’, you will be free to feed your own heart and save your own soul. In this way the recovery from crisis is intimately linked with the sense of place and community provided by the village.

Predictably, however, the intensity of the modern urban experience is not for everyone, no matter how amenable it is to being romanticised as a form of village life. The rural village – small, enclosed, secure and comforting by virtue of its age and adherence to tradition – is frequently represented in villa/ge books as a powerful remedy for the stresses of modern living. As described by Henrietta Taylor, such a village might act not only as relief from modernity in general, but from Australia in particular:

But I had needed a holiday from life, and maybe this cocoon of Saignon was the place to be ... In this isolated little winter wonderland my day-to-day existence was becoming slower and tamer. The frenetic lifestyle of rushing children to and from school, ballet classes, gym lessons and soccer practice, the lack of parking, the city streets jammed with honking cars all disappeared like a bad dream ... Away from the distractions of Sydney, and far from family and friends, life was growing more ordered. (*Veuve Taylor* 207)

Even a rural village, however, may be insufficiently ‘local’ to provide the association with place and community that is necessary for rebuilding a life. In *Vanilla Beans and Brodo* Isabella Dusi writes of her relocation to the Tuscan village of Montalcino. Dusi recounts her gradual acceptance by the Montalcinese, and in turn her growing awareness of her identity as a resident of Pianello, one of the four *quartieri* of the village. The two main narrative threads, one revolving around an annual archery tournament between representatives of each of the *quartieri*, and the other with the attempt by the residents of Pianello to buy their local church, situate Dusi as belonging to the ‘village’ within the village that is Pianello. The book’s climax finds her at the archery tournament, fulfilling her role as a resident of her *quartier*:

Rising spontaneously to my feet, unable now to see the arrows flying down the range because tears of happiness sting my eyes, I wave my blue and white scarf at our archers and, throwing my fist into the air and screaming as loudly and passionately as I can, join in the chant: *Pi...a...nello! Pi...a...nello! Pi...a...nello!* (442)

Dusi's villa/ge book concludes, as many do, when she realises that she does indeed feel at 'home' in the new place. Perhaps not like a local (indeed for a newcomer to claim to be entirely localised may mean admitting that a village has lost its power to work its transformative magic), but sufficiently at ease to recognise that she has indeed crafted a new self – a village-self – that is separate from her Australian identity: 'I know this is not my hill, I know I can never be ... Montalcinese, but the search is over, I will run no further. I have found my home in Montalcino' (*Vanilla Beans* 442).

Many of the villa/ge books feature a similar moment of epiphany, as the author declares that the resolution of crisis ('the search is over') goes hand-in-hand with embracing a place and the community and way of life that accompany it ('I have found my home'). This is frequently conveyed as a realisation that the author's adopted Mediterranean life has put her in touch with some essential element of life that has proven elusive in Australia. As Carla Coulson writes:

For me, living in Italy has stripped back life to expose what truly counts. Time and again it has revealed to me that life isn't about climbing the corporate ladder, working late nights and leaving the office when the city is dark. It isn't about driving the latest car and having smart dinner parties ... Life is about people and the emotions we share with them. It's about the real *ricchezza* (wealth) in life – family and friends. (176)

And for Vicki Archer:

I realise my dream has come true. Our home is filled with family and friends, and friends of family and their friends. We have a magnificent view overlooking the Alpillles, olive trees that continue to prosper and a garden that wraps the *mas* in serenity and calm. I have come to understand that making time and taking time is a pleasure to be enjoyed, not a nuisance to endure. Falling in love with this place all those years ago changed my life as I knew it; my *coup de foudre* opened the door to another life, my French life. (216)

It appears that if Australian writers, women in particular, fail to find in their towns or suburbs a sufficiently nurturing community then they will seek it elsewhere. As David McCooley – writing about the importance of place in

Australian autobiography – notes, ‘in the absence of a significant home, going home for Australians may mean going elsewhere’ (*Artful Histories* 159). Currently the ‘elsewhere’ of choice for a number of Australians is Mediterranean Europe, a place that tantalises with its beguiling lifestyle associations, focused as they are on the nostalgic and romantic appeal of the village home.

This prompts the question, why is it that the Australian villa/ge books have been written almost exclusively by women? Certainly there is no such obvious gender discrepancy in the international market, where a review of the most high profile of such books reveals that it is likely that women authors are in the majority, but for every Annie Hawes, Carol Drinkwater or Sally Loomis, there is also a Jeffrey Greene, Chris Stewart or George East. Part of the explanation may simply be commercial, in that Australian publishers very likely anticipate a largely female readership for books set in exotic locations and featuring tales of crisis and recovery. With their narrative trajectory of desire created, withheld and fulfilled, the villa/ge books remain at least analogically a romantic form. As Barbara Hanna and Juliana de Nooy demonstrate the romantic element of such books has been a cornerstone of their marketing.⁶ The nexus between the autobiographic and romantic components of villa/ge books and their commercial success is made apparent when Mary Moody describes how she intended to write ‘a sort of travelogue’ (*Last Tango* 110) of her time in France, but at her publisher’s insistence shifted the focus to the personal aspects of her experience, with an unravelling tale of sibling separation, mid-life romance and marital infidelity.

Ros Pesman has claimed that Australian women have long been more likely than men to write about their travel experiences, but they have been ‘less likely to be published’ (12). Pesman demonstrates that Australia has a long history of women travellers, and concludes that the domination by men of published travel writing reflects the continuation of a genre that was based on narratives of exploration, imperial expansion and male desire:

It is men who embarked on the heroic journeys of myth and literature, of exploration, of naming, of adventure, of quest, of discovery of self and the world. The Grand Tour was a male rite of passage, a process of male

6 Hanna and de Nooy demonstrate the reliance of American marketing on the foregrounding of the romantic elements of the villa/ge books but it is also apparent in Australian editions. The front cover of Taylor’s *Veuve Taylor* proclaims, ‘A new life, new love and three generations in a small French village’; Biggs’s *The Accidental Renovator* announces ‘A true story of recklessness and romance’; Howard’s *Leaning towards Pisa* is declared to be an ‘An Italian love story’; Moody’s *Last Tango in Toulouse* features ‘Torn between two loves’.

accumulation and 'sowing of wild oats'. Travel was male territory and its metaphors were male-gendered; the language of travel is of conquering virgin territory, of penetrating the landscape, of knowing and possessing. (6)

It can be argued, however, as Sidonie Smith has done (xiii), that over the course of the twentieth century the technologies of modernity and their socio-cultural effects have provided women with greatly enhanced opportunities for travel which have in turn furthered their engagement with published travel writing. What has followed is a newly feminised paradigm of travel-generated discourse, in which travel is described in terms of feminine rather than masculine desire. It is a change evidenced by Sarah Turnbull's introduction to *Almost French*:

France is like a maddening, moody lover who inspires emotional highs and lows. One minute it fills you with a rush of passion, the next you're full of fury ... Yes, it's a love-hate relationship. But it's charged with so much mystery, longing and that French speciality – *seduction* – that we can't resist coming back for more. (ix)

Both the act of travelling and the art of travel writing have therefore been substantially feminised, and it is apparent that the contemporary Australian villa/ge book, with its emphasis on the village home, community, crisis resolution and personal transformation is a 'feminine' form.⁷

It is also arguable that women are more likely than men to use the villa/ge book's particular confluence of travel writing and autobiography to trace a self in transition. The small body of critical examination of the genre (see for example, Sharp) has noted the residual imperialism that often mediates the contact between the male author and the *paysan* or *contadini*, whereby the rural labourers and their society serve the narrative by acting as rustic and humorous foils to the knowledge and authority that is assumed by the narrator. In such a circumstance it behoves the narrating subject to represent himself as

7 The domination by women of recent Australian travel writing extends beyond the villa/ge book. A related form is the 'husband and wife touring book', and as examples such as Sally Hammond's *Just Enough French* (2002), Ann Rickard's *Not Another Book About Italy* (2004), and Katrina Blowers's *Tuning Out* (2007) attest, it is the wives who come home and write the travelogues. And as evidenced by the subtitle of Blowers's book (*My Quarter-Life Crisis*) it is another genre in which narrative is impelled by personal crisis. The villa/ge books also have domestic counterparts as examples of mid-life downsizing narratives, and whether of the 'sea-change' (for example Susan Kurosawa's *Coasting* [1999]) or 'tree-change' variety (Patrice Newell's *The Olive Grove* [2000]), these Australian-based accounts are also more likely to be written by women.

a stable and authoritative presence, dispensing much and learning little from the ensuing interaction:

The women authors of the Australian villa/ge books pretend to no such authority. The use of crisis and recovery to impel narratives in turn requires the narrator to adopt a more receptive response to her new community, and to be willing to destabilise her identity in ways which leave her open to the influence of those she encounters. In such cases, as Virginia Ryan recounts, authority resides with the locals, and the author questions her own presence in the intercultural exchange:

Knotted and gnarled like an ancient olive tree, shrivelling up with age, he positively radiates kindness, and embodies many of the best qualities of Italian workmen. There is a particular authenticity about him, as if he has never worn a mask.

I imagine that although they would never show it, these polite workmen must think us romantic fools, typical city people with ludicrous notions about 'quality of life' in rural communities. And I have a burning sensation of being unmasked when he turns and smiles back at me. Flustered, I feel like a fraud. (12)

Ryan's description reveals the extent of the romanticisation of the foreign culture and its people that can be a troubling aspect of the Australian villa/ge book, but it also points to the willingness of many of these Australian women to open themselves to the influence of the Mediterranean and its people.

It is in the confluence of Mediterranean place and community that the various crises that infuse the Australian villa/ge books find their resolution. Whereas Egan and McCooey noted that unresolved crisis was at the heart of contemporary autobiography, it is the seemingly inevitable resolution of crisis that is a hallmark of the Australian villa/ge book as an autobiographic form. It is also a characteristic that further underlines the inherently romantic qualities of this particular form of intercultural life writing.

There has been a considerable amount of work done in recent years on intercultural and transcultural life writing. For the most part this has focused on texts that relate the personal histories of forced transfer. They are mainly diasporic narratives – accounts of lives disrupted by exile, or economic or political migration – or the narratives of mixed race identity. In either case the analysis has focused on the representation of self that results when nationalities, cultures and languages are straddled, and in particular on how the individual struggles to form a singular and stable identity in such circumstances (Besemeres; Besemeres and Perkins; Dalziell; Parker). As Egan

concludes: 'Constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, explorers of diasporic identity are surely the quintessential autobiographers of the late twentieth century ...'(122).

What distinguishes the villa/ge book from other forms of intercultural narrative, however, is that the severance from the birth culture is a matter of choice, and rather than being an occasion for rupture, it is embraced as an opportunity for personal healing. The authorial subject has elected to be somewhere else, often in the hope of 'becoming' someone else; and rather than being caught in a struggle to consolidate her identity she is actively choosing to fragment, or at least bifurcate, her sense of self. Indeed the discursive goal of these texts is often to highlight the creation of the second self – one that is at odds with, or at least distinguishes the author from, her Australian self. As Penelope Green declares:

the beauty of moving to a new place is reinvention. In my imagination I see myself riding on the back of a *motorino* all Audrey-like, with one arm around Marco, the other hanging onto the scarf wrapped around my hair, on my way to the opera. And there I am again, sitting around the family table with Enrico, being told by his mamma that I cannot leave the house until I have had another serving of her *torta*. (55)

Sheryle Bagwell writes, 'Abroad, you can carve out a different persona for yourself' (285); Elaine Lewis concludes, 'it seems to me that my French persona is different from the Australian "me"' (317). In the case of Mary Moody, adopting a Mediterranean home allows her to construct an identity that is not only different from, but also more authentic than, her Australian self:

Here I am simply an anonymous woman from the other side of the world ... It's such a novel sensation being an unknown quantity after five decades of being my father's daughter in the world of journalism; my husband's wife in the film industry; my children's mother in the local school community; the gardener's friend in the world of television lifestyle shows. Here I am just me. It's wonderful. (*Au Revoir* 83)

Delia Falconer argued that living abroad has become a new high-water mark for an increasingly wealthy middle class obsessed with a 'culture of conspicuous consumption' (5). Certainly some of these books do manifest an odd tension between the claims to a simpler, less-acquisitive life, contradicted by an ongoing concern with acquiring and decorating the right property, and they also demonstrate a heightened desire to 'consume' experiences that are appropriately local and authentic. It could be argued that even the very choice

to write such books attests to the authors' resolute pursuit of the social capital that accrues to foreign or exotic places. The villa/ge book it seems is both life writing and lifestyle writing. But perhaps in so far as something is being 'consumed' or 'acquired' in the villa/ge book, it is the second identity, the non-Australian self, living the enviable, transformed and crisis-free life in the village. In a world where for many people issues of selfhood, nationality and home *are* the crisis, for Australian authors of the villa/ge book it is casually assumed to be the privilege of the post-modern, globalised individual to acquire a new homeland and a new self as a means of redeeming their troubled Australian lives.

Acknowledgement: I would like to record my appreciation to my colleagues Joan Wardrop and Mary Besemeres for their comments on a draft of this paper.

WORKS CITED

- Ambrose, Margaret. *How to Be French*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland, 2005.
- Armstrong, Judith. *The Maestro's Table: Food, Talk, Convivio*. Melbourne: Text, 2006.
- Archer, Vicki. *My French Life*. Camberwell, Vic.: Lantern, 2006.
- Bagwell, Sheryle. *My French Connection: Coming to Grips with the World's Most Beautiful and Baffling Country*. Pymble, NSW: Fourth Estate, 2006.
- Besemeres, Mary. *Translating One's Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002.
- , and Maureen Perkins, eds. *Translated Lives*. Special issue of *Mots Pluriels* 23 (2003).
- Biggs, Barbara. *The Accidental Renovator: A Paris Story*. Smithfield, NSW: Sly Ink, 2005.
- Blowers, Katrina. *Tuning Out: My Quarter-Life Crisis*. Sydney: Murdoch, 2007.
- Coulson, Carla. *Italian Joy*. Camberwell, Vic.: Lantern, 2005.
- Dalziell, Rosamund, ed. *Selves Crossing Cultures: Autobiography and Globalisation*. Kew, Vic.: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2002.
- Dusi, Isabella. *Bel Vino: A Year of Sundrenched Pleasure among the Vines of Tuscany*. London: Pocket, 2004.
- . *Vanilla Beans and Brodo: Real Life in the Hills of Tuscany*. London: Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Egan, Susanna. *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999.
- Falconer, Delia. 'Gallopings Gourmands.' *The Australian's Review of Books* 5.11 (2000): 5–6.

- Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Travel Writing between the Wars*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Geti, Monica. *The Year of Sunshine*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland, 2002.
- Green, Penelope. *When in Rome: Chasing la Dolce Vita*. Sydney: Hodder, 2005.
- Hammond, Sally. *Just Enough French*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland, 2002.
- Hanna, Barbara E., and Juliana de Nooy. 'The Seduction of Sarah: Travel Memoirs and Intercultural Learning.' *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 3:2 (2006): 1–17.
<<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/view/117/311>>.
Accessed Sept. 2007.
- Harford, Sonia. *Leaving Paradise: My Expat Adventure and Other Stories*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2006.
- Hassall, Anthony J. 'Quests.' *Australian Literary Studies* 13.4 (1988): 390–408.
- Holland, Patrick, and Graham Huggan. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998.
- Howard, Sue. *Leaning towards Pisa: An Italian Love Story*. Milsons Point, NSW: Bantam, 2005.
- Johnston, Brian. *Sicilian Summer: A Story of Honour, Religion and the Perfect Cassata*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005.
- Kershaw, Alister. *Village to Village: Misadventures in France*. Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1993.
- Kurosawa, Susan. *Coasting: A Year by the Bay*. Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder, 1999.
- Lewis, Elaine. *Left Bank Waltz: The Australian Bookshop in Paris*. Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 2006.
- Luck, Geoffrey. *Villa Fortuna: An Italian Interlude*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: New Holland, 2000.
- Mayes, Frances. *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1996.
- Mayle, Peter. *A Year in Provence*. London: Pan, 1989.
- McCooley, David. *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- . 'Going Public: A Decade of Australian Autobiography.' *Australian Book Review* 281 (April 2006): 25–31.
- Moody, Mary. *Au Revoir: Running Away from Home at Fifty*. Sydney: Pan, 2001.
- . *Last Tango in Toulouse*. Sydney: Macmillan, 2003.
- . *The Long, Hot Summer: A French Heat Wave and a Marriage Meltdown*. Sydney: Macmillan, 2005.
- Newell, Patrice. *The Olive Grove*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 2000.
- Parker, David, ed. Spec. issue of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 28.1 (2005): 1–192.
- Pesman, Ros. *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1996.

- Rickard, Ann. *Not Another Book About Italy*. Sydney: New Holland, 2004.
- Ryan, Virginia. *Where the Cypress Rises: An Australian Artist in Umbria*. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Lothian, 2000.
- Sharp, Joanne P. 'Writing over the Map of Provence: The Touristic Therapy of *A Year in Provence*.' *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*. Ed. James Duncan and Derek Gregory. London: Routledge, 1999. 200–18.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*. Minneapolis, Minn.: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Taylor, Henrietta. *Escaping*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2006.
- . *Veuve Taylor*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Turnbull, Sarah. *Almost French: A New Life in Paris*. Milsons Point, NSW: Bantam, 2002.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. London: Cassell, 2000.