

## **Tampa Proof?: Australian Fiction 2002-2003**

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In accepting the Australian Literary Society's Gold Medal for *Gould's Book of Fish* in 2002 Richard Flanagan made the following assessment of the current state of Australian fiction.

Australia has become a country relaxed and comfortable with a certain sort of writing, small in compass, imitative in form, obvious in its limited aspirations. It is a flabby writing that neither challenges nor confronts, that does not rub against the grain... Do not mistake me: I am not arguing for some new nationalist literature, nor am I trying to rehash an old idea of great national novels. My suspicion is that great novels are ever anti-national, rising beyond them, opposing fundamentally the nonsense of national pretensions with the mess of life.<sup>1</sup>

Flanagan had certainly earned the right to this opinion. *Gould's Book of Fish* issued as potent a challenge to 'national pretensions' as any novel in contemporary Australian literature. Drusilla Modjeska recently made a similar plea for a revitalisation of Australian fiction, claiming that:

...too much of our recent fiction has become safe; our novels have lost their urgency, protected by the soft glow of 'history', or iconic characters, or mythologising, or a folksy downhomeness, or linguistic display, or a kind of mumsiness.<sup>2</sup>

Flanagan's and Modjeska's words were fresh in my mind as I read the new Australian fiction published between mid 2002 and mid 2003. I was intrigued to assess the extent to which novels published in this period might meet their challenge. Would a post-One Nation Australia, enmeshed in debates about Tampa and the Pacific Solution and engaged in the build up to war in Iraq give rise to a fiction which addressed itself to the idea of a nation in transition? Or would these circumstances simply compound the nostalgic retreat into the historical novels about which Modjeska complained?

The period under review was, in one sense at least, a slow time for Australian fiction. The year was missing a blockbuster, the sort of novel anticipated by the reading public and the media alike as an opportunity to test the pulse of Oz lit. There was no new novel by Carey, Winton, Astley, or Malouf. Nor was there a new Grenville, Bail or McDonald. No new Garner or Hall. There was a new Keneally - but there is always a new Keneally.

It was therefore, an ideal period for new voices - the first novelist, or perhaps the developing writer seeking to consolidate on earlier achievements. In the absence of established names they had the opportunity to attract additional notice and reviews, and unencumbered by the expectations of an established audience they could engage with the 'mess of life'.

The good news is that there were a number of new names that did make an impression, and none more so than Gail Jones. Not that Jones is a neophyte exactly. She has previously published two collections of well-received short stories, *The*

*House of Breathing* (1991) and *Fetish Lives* (1997). Nonetheless, *Black Mirror* marks her debut as a novelist, and it is a remarkable achievement.

The novel traces the lives of two women, surrealist painter Victoria Morrell and her biographer Anna Griffin. The women are connected by childhoods spent in the Western Australian goldfields, where Victoria moved as a young girl in 1910 and where Anna was born many years later. The narrative is unveiled in two timeframes, a 'then' as Victoria moves to London and then Paris in the 1930s in pursuit of her art, and a 'now', as Anna eventually follows in pursuit of the aging Victoria.

The goldfields connection is a powerful element in the novel and provides many of the symbols which unite and embroider the lives of the two women. As Anna realises, 'We share images... What could be more intimate? The desert. The mines. The search in darkness for gold' (35). It is also many of these same images which inspire Victoria's surrealist visions, and Jones makes a desert childhood seem like the obvious preparation for submersion in the modernist art circles of inter-war Paris.

Some of the novel's themes are common to recent Australian fiction; the journey to the Europe married to the encounter with modernism, the secret family history, the powerful impression left by childhood trauma, and the troubled relationships between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. And in terms of genre, *Black Mirror* conforms to the *kunstleroman* (artist-novel) a common if under-examined form in Australian fiction. There is, however, nothing commonplace in the way in which Jones handles her material. Hers is a fully developed literary intelligence, able to seamlessly mesh narrative, character and imagery (in addition to the images of desert and labyrinthine submerged worlds mentioned above, we encounter strangulation, fire, blindness, drowning and swans).

One could quibble about the necessity of the last twenty pages which serve to tie up loose ends that may have been better left frayed, but there is little in this tautly constructed novel which is superfluous or out of place. Jones also possesses that rare ability to delight with sentences or passages which seem perfectly formed – where it is difficult to imagine a word or phrase being altered in a way which would not dilute the appropriateness and power of her writing.

Saskia Beudels's *Borrowed Eyes* has several points of comparison with *Black Mirror*. It has similar transitions between different time-scapes, it also explores the power of memory and the lingering influence of trauma, and in its way offers another version of the *kunstleroman*.

The central character is Vivien Carmichael, and the outline of her story is based on the life of Australian nurse Vivian Bullwinkel who was the sole survivor of a Japanese war time atrocity. As Beudel points out in her closing acknowledgments, however, 'the depictions of her existence after the war, and of how she lives with the aftermath of her survival bear no resemblance to her actual life' (298). It is the way in which Carmichael deals with her survival that is the central issue of the novel, with the details of the central incident only emerging towards the end of the narrative.

The story of Carmichael's war years and her narrow escape from death are revealed when she is visited by Martin, who she had first met in the Indonesian prisoner of war

camp where she spent the remainder of the war. Martin is Dutch, and was only a boy when they met and formed a bond after Vivien taught him to paint. When they are reunited in Australia he is working as an artist, and travelling en route to America where he wishes to settle. Together Vivien and Martin re-create the stories of their lives up to the time they met in the prison camp and their memories of their wartime experience. Vivien is keen to recall a time when she lived 'more intensely, more ardently, more precariously... so that everything else dulls in comparison' (286), and she is now consumed by a fear that her life since has become 'hollow, and shifting, and coreless' (288). Martin, on the other hand has been using his art to forge a vision of the world unencumbered by the war which blighted his childhood, and he is unsettled by Vivien's insistence on recovering the past. He too, however, is condemned to living in the shadow of his wartime experience.

*Borrowed Eyes* is intelligent, elegant and persuasive. If at the novel's conclusion there is a sense that the *ennui* which has slowed Vivien's life penetrates the novel itself a little too deeply, this remains nonetheless a convincing demonstration of an impressive new talent.

Survival is also at the centre of Sarah Hay's first novel, the Vogel Award winning *Skins*. This is another novel with an historical foundation, being based on the wreck of the 'Mountaineer' off the south coast of Western Australia in 1835. *Skins* recounts the events that unfold as the survivors of the wreck, including Dorothea Newell, her sister Mary and brother Jem, come to shore on Middle Island near the present day Esperance. Here they fall in with a camp of sealers living with their Aboriginal women. The camp is led by the charismatic and occasionally violent African-American, John Anderson.

Hay explores the various accommodations that individuals make in these extraordinary circumstances, in particular the shifting personal alliances that eventuate as the sealers, the shipwreck survivors and the Aboriginal women adjust to the changed power relationships on the island. Dorothea finds herself drawn into a relationship with Anderson that is initially based on expediency, only to find that she feels an increasing affection for the island's strong man. The quiet heart of the novel, however, is with the Aboriginal women. Almost mute, with the status of chattels and attracting little more notice than the seals they are called upon to slaughter, they eventually demand attention because of their constancy and humanity in a situation that becomes increasingly dangerous and bestial.

This is a remarkable debut novel; bold, imaginative, and in its way quite challenging. It is a testimony to Hay's deft control of her narrative that it pushes on in unexpected directions, without at any point seeming false or capricious.

Kathryn Heyman's *The Accomplice* also features the aftermath of a shipwreck off the Western Australian coast, and is notable for being the second novel (after Arabella Edge's *The Company* (2000)) in recent years to be based on the wreck of the *Batavia*. Together with the recent publication of a new historical account, Mike Dash's *Batavia's Graveyard* (2002), it suggests the extent to which the extraordinary events which took place on the Abrolhos Islands in 1629 retain their power to shock and enthrall.

*The Accomplice* is faithful to the known facts of the voyage and its aftermath. The narrative is recounted in the first person by eighteen year old Judith Bastiaanz, who is travelling with her family en route to the East Indies. During the voyage she forms a relationship with soldier and nobleman Conraat van Hueson. Despite some clumsiness in the dialogue, seemingly born of an uncertainty when dealing with the manners of the period, Heyman successfully builds the tension during the voyage as the portents of evil accrue. The narrative really hits its stride, however, after the shipwreck. The latent brutality explodes into the frenzied and murderous reign of Jeronimus Cornelisz, to which van Hueson is a willing accomplice. Judith's own judgments are complicated by her affair with van Hueson, and it is only after she witnesses his participation in the slaying of a young boy that she comprehends his involvement in the tyranny perpetrated by Cornelisz.

Whereas in *Skins* Dorothea submits to a relationship with a man who she expects to be violent and then adjusts to her growing feelings of tenderness, in *The Accomplice* Judith forms a relationship with a man she loves only to find that she must face the truth of his murderous ways.

*The Accomplice* is not without its 'bodice ripping' elements, but it is redeemed by its drive to make an essentially serious point, in that it provides a timely reminder of the conditions under which evil can flourish, and the extent to which all those who do not actively resist are implicated.

Coastal Western Australia is also the setting for several novels with more contemporary settings. The most intriguing of these is Brett D'Arcy's *The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks*. It is almost inevitable that a novel dealing with Australian beach culture will boast an endorsement by Robert Drewe, and the front cover of *The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks* carries his assessment that in this novel 'the Australian collective unconscious is wrestled to the ground and pinned down'. This hyperbolic judgement is difficult to sustain unless you believe that the nation is unconsciously preoccupied with the search for the perfect wave or the danger of impending shark attack, but this is nonetheless another assured first novel.

The setting is an unspecified surfing town south of Perth. The central characters are a family consisting of Tom ('the Old Man'), his wife Adelaide, teenage son Eddie, eleven year old 'Floaty Boy' (so called because of his unnatural buoyancy) and baby Sal. The family's life revolves around surfing, low-level drug taking and Tom's attempts to eke out a living by dealing in surf-related collectibles. They are surrounded by a group of Tom's like-minded friends, referred to collectively as the Cronies.

It is, however, Floaty Boy's story, an episodic coming-of-age drama in which remarkably little of any real consequence happens. The interest in the narrative is sustained by the boys shifting perception of the world as he tries to establish his position within the close but strained family and in the wider society of the Cronies and the various surfing subcultures ('sand punks' and 'pool rats'). Indeed it is characterisation that is D'Arcy's strength, and there are memorable characters created in Floaty Boy and his parents, in particular the loyal Adelaide who staunchly supports her family's marginal lifestyle while suppressing her own middle class aspirations.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press has an admirable record of supporting new novelists from the West, and they have done so again in the period under review. Mike Williams's *Old Jazz* commences with the reclusive thirty-something Frank Harmon living in his beachside house near Albany on the south coast of Western Australia. His almost hermetic existence is disturbed by two women – the Canadian girl Laura he meets working in a local bar, and Marcia, who rings without warning to announce that she is the sister that Frank never knew he had. Moreover, she is coming to visit him the next day.

What Frank learns from Marcia's visit sets him on his path back to his native England, haunted by the memories of the mother who died when he was young, the violent father he hardly knew, the Aunt who raised him, and the mysterious man caught in a photograph playing saxophone in a London club in the late 1940s. *Old Jazz* is part mystery and part romance and part midlife coming-of-age story. The storytelling is quite traditional, but Miller lifts his narrative with his capacity to create believable and fully realised characters. Frank forms a convincing centre to the story as the man who has his sense of self suddenly and severely disrupted, and he is surrounded by other characters who are equally well realised as they attempt to deal with the grief and anger raised by belated revelations.

Fremantle Arts Centre has also given us Graham Kershaw's *The Home Crowd*. The novel has plot resemblances to *Old Jazz*, in that it deals with the story of another Western Australian – this time a resident of Fremantle - drawn back to his birthplace in England to deal with unfinished personal and family business.

Kershaw doesn't do any more than necessary in order to relate the story of George Fielden's attempt to bridge two relationships and two continents and find a way of getting to know his recently discovered twelve year old son. Along the way Fielden must cope with his emerging understanding of the extent to which he has abandoned not only a past love, but also a place to which he is instinctively drawn. Kershaw is acute in his rendering of the physical and social landscapes of Fremantle and the dismal north England setting of Whinely. There is nothing extraordinary in this novel, but it is a tautly constructed tale imbued with an understated suspense and a mounting realisation of bleak consequences.

Australians in the United Kingdom seems to have been *de rigueur* for recent Fremantle Arts Centre novels. Tracy Ryan's second novel (after *Vamp*, 1997) *Jazz Tango* takes up the theme of the expatriate, in this case young working class Jas, who is struggling to maintain herself in London when she unexpectedly receives a marriage proposal from upwardly mobile musician Todd. Jas finds herself thrust into a world for which she is ill-prepared, the world of the educated, accomplished, soft radical, well-to-do achievers and career vegetarians of the ascendant classes of Blair's Britain.

The story unfolds in a voice that shifts between that of an omniscient narrator and an internal stream of consciousness dialogue delivered by Jas – a generally effective means for presenting her hesitant embrace of unfamiliar circumstances. England remains a puzzle to Jas, she is uncomfortable in the physical side of her marriage, and she lacks the social confidence to embrace Todd's friends and relatives or her own

budding career as an academic. Her developing relationship with Miriam seems to be the one chance she has to centre her identity.

Unacquainted as Jas is with the nuances of her environment she fails to grasp what is an open secret amongst Todd's friends and acquaintances – his bisexuality, the fact that he is 'jazz tango' as one character puts it. Sexually inexperienced at the time of her marriage, the novel traces Jas's growing awareness of her own sexual interest in women, which eventually leads to an affair with Miriam. *Jazz Tango* delves into the sexual politics of this situation, as Jas and Todd both deal with the implications of their wavering sexuality and the desire to maintain their relationship despite their physical and emotional ambivalence.

*Jazz Tango* is accomplished writing and storytelling, although the sum impact is minor.

Ambivalent sexual identity is also at the centre of Judith Armstrong's *The French Tutor*. Emily King, is mid-thirties, a Proust-loving Francophile who returns to Melbourne after time studying in Paris and Oxford and enjoying brief but satisfying relationships in both. Working as a college tutor she finds herself attracted to Lewis Lincoln, an elder academic economist of some note. Emily undertakes a relationship with Lincoln with a view to making it permanent, only to find that her lover leads an enigmatic and elusive lifestyle. What Emily initially believes to be a commitment phobia is discovered, through the gradual revelation of Lincoln's bisexual relationships, to have a deeper and more biological basis.

In addition to this central relationship *The French Tutor* offers a deft study of the shifting alliances between Emily and her women friends and their partners, and a vivid interplay between the novel's narrative and the plot and characters of *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*. What seems in its early stages to be a reasonably slight and pretentious campus-comedy, eventually blossoms into a compelling (if still slight) morality tale, with Armstrong managing a provocative straddling of some of the fault-lines in modern sexual relationships.

As noted the year produced a number of novels set on the coastal fringe and offshore islands, but it also featured – as usual – others which took the journey into the continental interior as the basis for their narrative. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these – having won the Miles Franklin Prize for 2003 - is Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*. The plot revolves around the developing relationship between Melbourne-based academic Annabelle Beck, and indigenous man Bo Rennie. The two are brought together when Annabelle returns to the landscapes of her childhood in inland Queensland while undertaking a survey of traditional sites of the Murri and Jangga people, and Bo is appointed as her assistant. Their excursions bring them in to contact with a past complicated by their inter-twined families and shared histories of settlement conflict.

These ingredients promise a lot, and Miller is admirably ambitious in dealing with his challenging subject matter, but perhaps the whole enterprise is just a little too earnest and 'by the numbers'. Despite Miller's best efforts to shape a story which confronts the issues of race violence, government paternalism and reconciliation as they affect the lives of individuals, the promising raw material is ultimately overwhelmed by his

incapacity to rid the narrative of some of the very assumptions he set out to address. This is most apparent in the failure to breathe any real life in to his two major characters. Annabelle and Bo remain constrained by the stereotyped representations of white middle-class academic woman and taciturn, wise indigenous man to the extent that they remain remarkably bloodless and unengaging – a fundamental problem in a novel which retains many elements of a traditional romance. It is a problem not helped by their having been burdened with some unexpectedly clumsy dialogue.

When the novel does reach a high point, in the undeniably powerful confrontation between Bo and his grandmother's sister, a traditional Jangga woman, it is insufficient to drag the narrative from beneath the weight of its own good intentions. This is a highly readable novel, and those who are attracted by its prize-winning status will find some reward, but the disappointment is that one would hope for a more significant achievement by a writer of Miller's skill. It is possible to admire what this novel attempts, while regretting that it is not wholly successful.

A journey into the continental interior is also the set piece of first time novelist Stephen Orr's *Attempts to Draw Jesus*. It is also another novel with its roots in actual events, in this case the death of jackaroos Simon Amos and James Annetts in the Gibson Desert in 1986. In the novel we encounter two young men, Jack Alber from rural South Australia and Clive 'Rolly' Rollins from Adelaide, at the point of leaving school and with few apparent options in life. They eventually drift together and accept an offer to do some jackarooing at inland stations. It is a choice that eventually proves fatal.

This is an engrossing if slightly undisciplined read, which would have benefited greatly from some editing. The representation of the inland deserts (place of danger, place of redemption) is a little too predictable, and the novel's ambitions – particularly in terms of its spiritual and religious elements – outreach its achievements. Nonetheless it is a genuine attempt to further the investigation of young lives confronted by the possibilities and limitations of adulthood, and an indication of the ongoing fascination with those who surrender their lives in desert regions.

Anson Cameron is another novelist who has previously written of the continent's further and drier reaches in *Silences Long Gone* (1998). In his latest novel, *Confessing the Blues*, however, travelling inland gets no further than Canberra. The novel follows the fortunes of would be rock-God and reluctant tyre-dealer Mark 'Mako' McKeenan as he faces the failure of his dream to make a living playing music in the style of a latter day Jimi Hendrix. Having trouble coming to terms with his diminished possibilities he sets out to gain revenge on the man who initially fuelled that dream, renegade radio dj Be Good. As the lives of Mako and Be Good become increasingly entwined they encounter patricide, a *menage a trois*, vice-regal patronage and the redemptive power of blues with a backbeat. Out of all this Be Good is eventually forced to confront the fading appeal of his own dreams and values.

Although an entertaining read, *Confessing the Blues* suffers from a series of extraneous elements (an Indian tyre fraudster, a radio station's declaration of independence from Australia) and a self-conscious 'smartness' in the writing that

serves to distance the reader from the material. The result is a novel substantially less appealing than Cameron's previous efforts.

The disillusionment of middle age also underpins Graham Jackson's *Accounting for Terror* (a novel blessed with the irresistible subtitle *The Recollections of a Retrenched Bank Manager in Rural Australia*). Although in the early reading *Accounting for Terror* appears to be a regular picaresque coming-of-age novel with many standard elements – issues with parents and church, a tentative attempt at University, a troubled offsider, a lost love - it is eventually transformed into something much more adventurous and timely. As the unnamed narrator enters middle age he finds his gathering neuroses reflected in the disaffected underbelly of regional Australia. The only things sustaining him in the face of a crumbling and globalized rural economy are an uncertain marriage and a waning faith in Bob Dylan.

You may wonder where a story about a failed rural bank manager with a subtly subversive past and a Bob Dylan fixation might lead. The answer is straight to the heart of post-*Tampa* Australia, a nation bedevilled with tainted ideologies, uncertain faiths and potentially violent solutions. As the narrator realises that the malaise infecting his own life also reaches deep in to the core of the nation, he answers the terrorist's call to arms.

In her much praised *Moral Hazard* Kate Jennings (an expatriate Australian, having lived in New York, where this novel is set, since 1979) reminds us that middle age and beyond can lead to problems other than fading ideals and disappointed expectations – although the novel depicts its share of both. The narrator Cath recalls the previous six years of her life, during which she passed into her fifties, earned her living as a speech writer for a Wall Street banking firm, and nursed her older husband, Bailey, through the terminal stages of Alzheimer's Disease.

*Moral Hazard* tells two related stories, firstly of Cath's struggle as a liberal leaning child-of-the sixties coming to terms with the rapacious and testosterone fuelled world of high finance, and secondly, her private battle to maintain control of her personal life as Bailey's need for care becomes overwhelming. Both of these situations raise intense moral dilemmas which are relevant at a time when we find barely regulated corporate implosions and debates over euthanasia are the stuff of daily headlines.

There is much to admire about this novel. It is difficult not to cheer at the excoriating view of financial markets as being 'perilous, jerry-built, mortared with spit and cupidity, a coat of self-serving verbiage slapped on to tart up the surface and hide the cracks' (142). There is also an undeniable emotional tug in the straightforward and entirely personal manner in which the character of Cath describes Bailey's decline and demise, and Jennings has fortunately resisted any temptation to concoct an all-too-predictable romantic outcome between Cath and her mentor Mike.

As engaging as it is, however, there remains something essentially slight about *Moral Hazard*. Perhaps the targets for satire are a little too obvious and perhaps the moral choices a little too stark. It is a potently spare and contained novel, but unlikely to be remembered as a major achievement.

Unlikely as it may seem, Alzheimer's Disease is also at the centre of a second novel this year, John Clanchy's *The Hard Word*. Clanchy is better known for his short stories, and it is a decade since his previous novel, *Breaking Glass*.

*The Hard Word* is an ambitious work, in both subject and method. It is not every male novelist who would tackle one female voice let alone three, as Clanchy writes alternate first person narratives of dementia sufferer Grandma Vera, her daughter Miriam, and Miriam's daughter, Laura. There is a slight unevenness of tone in the novel, although this is not the result of Clanchy's inability to manage the female voices, but rather the shifting sense of *purpose* which underlies the narrative. In the early pages the novel has something of a comic element, reading like a *Mother and Son* pastiche, but it gains in seriousness and intensity as the story of Grandma Vera emerges, and her battle with Alzheimer's Disease increases the pressure on the family. Importantly this is a blended family, where identities are already strained by broken parental affiliations and half-sibling relationships.

It should be noted that *The Hard Word* also weaves in some *Tampa* reflections through Miriam's job teaching English language to migrants and refugees. The lives of her students are revealed as they are called upon to use the power of memory and their hesitant English to re-create their troubled pasts in front of their fellow learners. This is powerfully affecting material, particularly because at the same time Miriam is forced to endure her own identity being diminished by Grandma Vera's failing memory and reduced ability to communicate. At the novel's conclusion, however, it is shared grief for the departed Vera that allows the family to begin to restore its own fractured identity.

Grief, in this case for a lost partner, is also at the emotional centre of Richard Yaxley's *The Rose Leopard*. Vince Daley is a would-be writer in his thirties, who is apparently blissfully married to Katherine ('Kaz'). They live a seemingly idyllic life in the Queensland coastal hinterland, with their two children who are rather annoyingly referred to as Milo and Otis. Vince's life is changed forever by Kaz's sudden death.

The worst of this novel is in the opening sections as Yaxley struggles to establish Vince's wise-cracking persona, and unfortunately the romantic banter between he and Kaz comes off as lame rather than spirited. The tone of the novel improves rapidly after Kaz's unfortunate demise when Vince is pitched into a massive grief, made more difficult when he is called upon to cope with the scheming of his wife's erratic family.

The plot thereafter deals with a series of revelations which shift our understanding of the relationship between Vince and Kaz, and Vince discovers that in order to come to terms with his wife's death he must also make some adjustments in his relationships with those who remain behind. Coupled with this is the parallel story of Vince surrendering his ambitions to be a writer, while at the same time re-discovering the healing and redemptive power of story. The novel's modest success lies in its representation of Vince's grief, and the satisfying conclusion to his journey of recovery that avoids being overly sentimental.

Grief and its convulsive effect on families is also central to Carolyn van Langenberg's *The Teetotaller's Wake*. The principal character is Fiona, 'the errant, prodigal, self-

centred, stubborn bitch, the acquisitive snob and couldn't-give-a-fuck lesbian daughter of the decent and respectable old settler family, the Hindmarshes' (23). The novel's opening finds her travelling north from Sydney to the coastal dairying community of Newrybar to attend her mother's funeral. Here she runs headlong into her relatives – the uncles, cousins and particularly her sister Gillian - who provided the life and colour and interest and distress to her childhood.

The first half of the novel is set at her mother's funeral-come-wake. This section passes as a fairly inconsequential comedy-of-manners, as relationships are re-established and memories both pleasant and painful are recalled. The novel's second half, however, assumes a darker and more melancholy tone as it evolves into a meditation on the nature of loss. Fiona discovers that she has been deprived not only of a mother, but that her move away from the rural community of her childhood and the ensuing separation from her extended family has entailed other kinds of deprivation for which she now grieves. Against this she balances the attraction of her life in the city and the new lover who awaits her return.

*The Teetotaller's Wake* is effective without being wholly successful. Some of the ingredients, particularly the sub-text of the previous loss of the land by the traditional owners the Bundjalung, are expedient and poorly integrated. The narrative, however, holds interest, in particular the theme of loss of innocence coupled with the surrender of a childhood identity that had seemed secure. The issue of the clash of city and rural values, and the sense of displacement shared by those who have made the transition from one to the other, is also one with which many readers will empathise.

I referred earlier to the ubiquity of Tom Keneally, a 'problem' which unfortunately threatens to diminish the impact of one of our most accomplished novelists. It is pleasing to report that *An Angel in Australia* is one of his finest recent achievements. The success of his 'international' novels notwithstanding, it seems that inner-city wartime Sydney and the workings of the Catholic Church have given rise to some of Keneally's best writing.

This tale involves a murder, an attractive and lonely wife with a husband serving overseas, a priest in conflict, a stereotyped Catholic detective and several American servicemen. Of these stock ingredients Keneally constructs a searching account of the various forms of personal and national crises that haunted the nation's premier city in its darkest hour. It may well be that *An Angel in Australia* reads as if it were a follow-up to some Keneally's earliest novels such as *The Place At Whitton* (1964), *The Fear* (1965), or *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968), but that is intended as a compliment.

And finally, I will admit to having found a guilty pleasure in Trevor Shearston's *Tinder*. This novel also brings us full circle, as Gail Jones's description in *Black Mirror* of Victoria as 'an errant and lonesome young woman, a firelighter, a reprobate' (229), could apply perfectly to Kiah, the arsonist at the centre of *Tinder*. If you read it, as I did, during a summer when the country suffered more than its usual quota of bushfire crises then this tale of arson and obsession set in the Blue Mountains will seem unusually resonant. And if the subject of arson seems trite, be warned that Kiah is motivated by the erotic potential of fire, and she finds a willing partner in the narrator, Graham.

*Tinder* can be read as little more than the sexual fantasies of a middle-aged man, but the story is economically constructed, with a fine feeling for character, and a trim and suspenseful plot which never over reaches itself.

Was it then a good year for Australian fiction? Yes... and no. In the absence of the bigger names a number of first time and early career novelists did make impressive contributions. Of the first novels noted above I would be surprised if any other than Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* still has an important claim to attention five or ten years hence, but it would be disappointing if we do not hear more from Beudel and Hay. Of the previously published novelists, Keneally, Clanchy and Jackson have all produced important additions to their body of work.

But to what extent did the novels discussed address the challenge issued by Flanagan and Modjeska? Although I shy away from Modjeska's assessment of 'folksy downhomeness', there is a profound note of domesticity in many of these novels, particularly those with contemporary settings. The common themes include disputed parentage, familial death, midlife crises, inter-generational conflict, and the emotional pull of childhood places. These might be read as being indicative of the lingering identity crisis associated with postcolonial cultures. Equally likely, they reflect a retreat from a more troubling identity issue - one with contemporary origins and its roots in a politics and a public sphere that are overfamiliar, careworn and incapable of appealing to our better instincts. Whereas the media and non-fiction will be reactive in these circumstances, we should hope that fiction could break free of mannered responses and investigate new ways of conceiving of ourselves and our place in the world. These novels do include some hesitant gestures towards addressing the mounting unease shared by many Australians about their country and its relationship to the world, but – with the exception of Jackson's *Accounting for Terror* – these remain muted and coded at best.

In closing, however, I note that there is already another new Keneally available, *The Tyrant's Novel*, and that it confronts head on the use of detention in deserts as a means of dealing with asylum-seekers. That is some reason for optimism that Australian fiction might yet engage with 'the mess of life' as it is found outside the domestic sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Flanagan, 'ALS Gold Medal Acceptance Speech', *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 1 (2002): 117.

<sup>2</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, 'The Present in Fiction', *Timepieces*. Sydney: Picador, 2002: 214.