

Elizabeth Jolley: A Cross-Cultural Life in Writing

BARBARA MILECH AND BRIAN DIBBLE

Curtin University

b.milech@curtin.edu.au and b.dibble@curtin.edu.au

Elizabeth Jolley is one of Australia's most significant writers: she published some two dozen books of fiction, essays and radio dramas, won every major Australian literary award, received four honorary doctorates, was awarded the Order of Australia for service to Australian Literature in 1988, and was named an Australian 'National Living Treasure' in 1997.

Her career has its roots in the UK, the place of her birth, schooling and early marriage. In 1959 she travelled with her three children and her husband to Perth, Western Australia, where Leonard Jolley took up a position as foundation Librarian of the University of Western Australia. She brought with her a trunk full of unpublished/rejected manuscripts which provided the initial materials from which she developed her published fictions and essays in Australia.

This article explores the institutional frameworks in Australia which enabled Jolley – a constant writer from childhood – to develop, in David Carter's phrase, 'a career in writing' from the mid-1970s onwards. It argues that Jolley rewrote her foundation manuscripts (written in another country) both to imagine Australian lives and to conform to Australian publishers' requirements. In doing so, it traces how the fiction and essays translate the experience of migration/exile, often thematised through the recurrent image of being 'on the edge,' into the particular and powerful ethic of love that informs Jolley's writing.

Keywords: Elizabeth Jolley; exile; migration; writing; publishing

Although the term 'migrant' usually is not used for Australian writers who come from English-speaking countries, especially England, Elizabeth Jolley was, in fact, a migrant and, as many of her critics have observed, an important theme in her work is that of exile.¹ To talk about the connection between Jolley's writing and her experience of migration, we have been inspired in a number of ways by David Carter's *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*. Jolley read and admired the work of Judah Waten, a Russian-born, Jewish-Australian, communist writer and cultural activist in Melbourne, whose family had migrated to Western Australia when he was an infant. There is a complex story to be told about Jolley's struggle to be

published following her migration to Australia in 1959 when she was thirty-six years of age, one that, like Carter's story, examines the cultural and institutional frameworks that enable a writer's publication.² As a prolegomenon to that story, we consider here Jolley's migrant experience – how the dislocation of her migrating to Australia from England was amplified by earlier British experiences of displacement, and how her remarkable writings can be read as a species of migrant literature that articulates a longing for belonging and negotiates a resolution in writing to the experience of exile.

The category 'migrant literature' is a relatively recent invention in Anglo-European literary studies and a consequence, in particular, of two socio-political transformations. The fundamental one is a worldwide movement of peoples – a movement initiated by World War 2 and the collapse of the great European colonial empires, and intensified by a subsequent half-century of continual regional wars, an increasingly globalised capitalist economy, and a mobility made possible by new transport and communication technologies. In the context of such vast politically and economically motivated diasporas, the second transformation takes place in first-world nations, for in those places it is not so much national borders that subsequently are redrawn as it is national imaginaries that are reconfigured.³ Thus the emergence of new political ideologies like multiculturalism, new social sensibilities like those we call postmodernism, new epistemologies like post-structuralism, and a new ethic whose emphasis is on the effects of power in defining difference and producing dis/advantage. In literary studies the post-structuralist turn takes the form of a shift from new-critical and Leavisite models of criticism, which emphasise cohesive national sensibilities and universal literary *qualia*, to conceptions of literature as articulating complex and discontinuous national imaginaries.

In this landscape, new genres, defined as much by their political and ideological content as by formal properties, appear and co-exist alongside traditional ones. Examples are women's literatures, post-colonial literatures, first-nation literatures, queer literatures – and migrant literatures. In the complex configuration of 'migrant literature' the focus is usually on literary texts written by authors who, impelled by political and/or economic circumstances, make a major cultural (and often linguistic) shift; and often this genre extends to second-generation writers who feel the effects of such translocation. In any case, whatever its varieties, migrant literature commonly articulates, to borrow a phrase from Rosemary George's study of twentieth-century postcolonial literatures, the theme of location and dislocation.⁴ Elizabeth Jolley migrated from the heart of the British Empire

to a former colony where English was spoken and British culture honoured, where the economy was strong and the effects of World War 2 were relatively distanced; and she arrived with a husband who had taken up a relatively well-paying, high-status job as Foundation Librarian at the University of Western Australia. For all these reasons it might seem something of a stretch to describe her work as migrant fiction – until one traces across her prolific writing the presiding themes of dislocation and location, of longing to belong.

I. Jolley's British Experience

Those themes have roots in Jolley's life in England, which involve two overlapping cycles related to longing and belonging, the first cycle producing more a feeling of homelessness, the second more a feeling of lovelessness. The general outlines of the story are already known to Jolley's readers, including the facts that her parents also struggled with issues related to location/dislocation and longing/belonging: in his late twenties, Jolley's father, Wilfrid Knight, was disowned by his father on arriving home after imprisonment as a conscientious objector against World War I – his father threw him out into the street with a shilling for having brought shame on the family. Jolley said of him, 'My father's exile came about because of his ideals'.⁵ Jolley's mother, Margarete Fehr Knight, was even more an exile for being a refugee from post-war Austria – she met and married Wilfred Knight in 1922 while he was in Vienna with a Quaker relief mission, moved to England with him, and was never quite accepted by her parents-in-law because she was a foreigner who spoke the language of the enemy. Of her, Jolley said, 'Because of her marriage my mother was an exile. . .'.⁶

When Jolley's mother and father settled in Birmingham, the pair formed a volatile household. Its atmosphere deteriorated when Jolley (then Monica Elizabeth Knight) was eight years old and her schoolteacher-father insisted on home schooling for his two daughters. During the day Jolley often endured her mother's tirades until icy silence ensued on her father's return home. If she and her younger sister, Madelaine, went out to play, they found themselves 'exiles in their own street,' neighbouring children sometimes tormenting them for not having to go to school or taunting them for speaking German, the language of the household.⁷ Nor were matters helped when her mother formed a special friendship with a Mr Berrington when Jolley was about ten years of age. Jolley alludes to

all these circumstances when in her earliest biographical reflection when she remarks, 'Perhaps my vicarious experience of homesickness and exile starts, without any knowledge or understanding, from the early memories of incomparable unhappiness.'⁸ This sense of an incomparable unhappiness linked to homesickness/homelessness was reinforced when, having rebelled against her mother by hitting back when disciplined, her father arranged for her to leave home to attend a Quaker pacifist school in Sibford some thirty-five miles southeast of Birmingham. It was 1934 and Jolley was eleven years of age.

Her first experience of Sibford was one of acute homesickness, intensified by her awareness of being 'on the edge' (to invoke a recurrent phrase from her writing) because of not being a birthright Quaker. But in a short time Jolley found a species of home at the school, or at least it became so in memory. Sibford's pastoral setting in the Cotswolds, the caring staff, the boys and girls, some of whom remained friends for life – all this provided Jolley a familial nurturing that was also an access to a community. By contrast, the decade of the 1940s led to an acute experience of homelessness. It began with her leaving Sibford in 1940, at seventeen, to train as an orthopaedic nurse at St Nicholas and St Martin's Hospitals in Pyrford in the south of England just as England's 'phoney war' ended and the bombing of England began. Young and inexperienced, hopeful but hapless, caught up in a dislocated world, Jolley both learned her profession and felt lonely and miserable at Pyrford. She escaped some eighteen months later by graduating from Pyrford and enrolling as a probationary nurse at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Though not far from her family home in Wolverhampton, Jolley again turned to an institution for a sense of belonging, and again her experience was dual: at the Queen Elizabeth she found a sense of vocation, an excitement in being professionally capable, and a possible community; but again she felt 'on the edge' for being a poor schoolteacher's daughter among trainee nurses whose families were far better-off than hers.

Her gathering sense of being on the edge – of longing to belong – was intensified in Birmingham after she re-met an orthopaedic patient she had nursed at Pyrford, fell in love with him, and fell pregnant. He was Leonard Jolley, who had sufficiently recovered from his osteoarthritis to have married and become Librarian at the Selly Oak Colleges near Birmingham. From this point onwards, Jolley's pattern of internal exile escalated. Forced to resign from Queen Elizabeth because of her pregnancy, but unwilling to return

to her parents' home, she found a position as a live-in domestic in a household where she was underpaid and overworked. After the birth of her child in April 1946, she secured work as a live-in domestic in yet another but more congenial household, all the while remaining friend to Leonard Jolley and his wife, Joyce Hancock Jolley. She remained relatively happy in this new substitute home for a number of years until one of the sons of the household proposed marriage, which caused her to travel with her four-year-old daughter in May 1950 to become Matron at Pinewood in Hertfordshire. Pinewood was an ironic version of Sibford: ostensibly a progressive school run by a devotee of A. S. Neil, it was, in fact, a dystopia for the unwed mothers or mothers-to-be who formed much of its staff, all of whom were underfed and ill-paid, if paid at all. For Jolley, Pinewood was an image of Home as Hell.⁹

Leonard Jolley and his school-teacher wife, Joyce, were graduates of University College London with degrees in English (and he with an MA and a diploma in Librarianship). Both seemed to adopt Jolley as their special project while she was at the Queen Elizabeth. They gave her books and records, took her to plays and on picnics, had her to their flat (where she sometimes overnights) and generally instructed her in what was politically correct and otherwise *comme il faut* according to the Jolleys' largely Bloomsbury values. Again, Jolley found a sense of family, one that both echoed the literary and musical sensibilities of her parents and provided an access to a wider community. What resulted was a kind of *ménage à trois* that thrilled her for the attention she received and the learning she acquired. Leonard Jolley self-consciously served as her Professor Henry Higgins, and she was a passionate mentee, though sometimes she felt awkward, and sometimes guilty, at disguising from Joyce the extent of her involvement with him. When she became pregnant to Leonard Jolley (Joyce becoming pregnant to him some six weeks later) and so started on her circuitous path to Pinewood, he protested his love, visited the houses where she worked, met her for trysts in parks, and exchanged surreptitious messages with her by post. But he did nothing to regularise their situation. It took her moving to Pinewood to provoke him into telling Joyce about her, after which he found a job as Librarian at the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, moved there, and did not contest Joyce's divorce suit against him.

Jolley joined Leonard in Edinburgh in September of 1950 – another migration, and another hopeful anticipation of family/community/belonging. In their first home together, their love flared passionately, although he could be disagreeable. They married

in December 1952, their son was born in 1953, and a second daughter arrived in 1955. By then marriage and monogamy, coupled with Leonard Jolley's confessed dislike of children, rendered their relationship more companionate than passionate. Again Jolley suffered the experience of internal exile within a beloved or substitute family. Leonard Jolley did not consult her when he applied (successfully) from Edinburgh for a better job in Glasgow. Nor did he again, when next he applied (successfully) to Perth's University of Western Australia to take up the position of Head Librarian. Much later, regarding their move half-way round the world, Jolley said, with telling ambiguity, 'For my part, I trailed along like an obedient squaw. The desire for space was irresistible...'¹⁰

A line Leonard Jolley wrote in his wife's diary before they sailed on the *Orion* from Tilbury to Australia was also ambiguous: 'Family life is the same all over the world and Perth will be the same as Glasgow...'¹¹ In that line there is the echo of all the internal exiles Jolley had experienced: as a child somehow different to the other children in her street; as a girl at boarding school; as an unprepared teenager making her way in a war-torn world; as a young woman finding a way to be what we now call a self-supporting single mother (but at the time more an exile from 'proper' society); and as a newly married woman still hoping for both passion and family. It suggests the complex, deeply layered experiences of homelessness and lovelessness that Elizabeth Jolley brought with her as she migrated.

II. Jolley's Australian Experience

Elizabeth Jolley arrived in Australia with a trunk full of manuscripts, including short-stories she had begun and drafts of at least two novels, one called *The Feast of Life* which twenty years later metamorphosed into her Vera trilogy – *My Father's Moon*, *Cabin Fever*, and *The Georges' Wife*.¹² The trunk also contained the notebooks and diaries she kept from the time she entered Sibford until she left Glasgow. They show that she started writing stories early and regularly, stories that reflected her preoccupations of the moment. For example, while at Pyrford Hospital she wrote 'Lehmann Sieber,' a tale about a German-speaking family whose idyllic existence is threatened by the impending visit of the wife's mother – a story that can be read against her unqualified love for her father and qualified feelings for her mother.¹³ All these and the other unpublished manuscripts demonstrate, not just the kind of early and sustained writing in any and all

circumstances that marks a significant writer, but also, and even more, the ways in which Jolley's imagination from the beginning articulates themes of location and dislocation, belonging and longing, through metaphors of family and home. And her early writing in Western Australia did the same.

Jolley appreciated many things about the community she encountered in the housing enclave at the University of Western Australia where she first lived with her husband and three children, a community that included a number of central Europeans displaced by World War 2. Yet, at the same time, she desperately wanted to become a published writer, and thus simultaneously was grateful for and resistant to becoming absorbed in the life of the Tuart Club, a faculty-wife organisation then central to UWA life. So, for example, always wanting to belong (and canny about doing so), she welcomed fashion advice from new friends, but never quite changed those habits of dress that seemed consonant with her (and Leonard's) imagination of who they were – no make-up, no bra, sandals and a caftan made from curtain material another faculty wife had tie-died.¹⁴ In 1962, a few years after their arrival in 1959, she and Leonard bought a house in a suburb nearby the university, a colonial 'Federation' home that appealed to their sensibilities. Then in 1970 they purchased an old cottage on five acres in Woorloo, thirty miles east of Perth. Both places – house and cottage – promised her space for writing, space for a 'room of her own' and a distance from the demands of university community life.

Jolley soon learned how to juggle writing with family and other work commitments: she wrote before dawn (and in snippets throughout the day) until she had to make breakfast for the family, see her children off to local schools, and drive her husband to work (as well as back and forth for lunch). Between times she would go to one of the jobs she undertook to earn money to pay for the typing of her manuscripts – as a door-to-door salesperson, as a house-cleaner, and as an aged-home carer. All those occupations competed with her writing for her time but were complementary for how they provided material for it: she was her own model for the salesmen and cleaning ladies in her early short stories and for the protagonist of her first novel, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*; and some of the characters in her early stories exhibit some of the characteristics of her husband and her own children. In any case, consciously or otherwise, she established the conditions that would enable her to achieve a goal she

revealed in her diaries some twenty years earlier when at Queen Elizabeth Hospital: 'Oh God grant me the power to be a writer and to be famous!'¹⁵

Jolley's passion on migrating to Western Australia was to be a published writer – in her journals she recounts the repeated rejections her submissions received across the decade of the 1960s: in one of those years some 39 submissions were rejected.¹⁶ Yet, the publishing scene began to change in Australia in the 1970s. The impact of global diasporas and consequent ideological shifts found shape in Australia in several ways under the Whitlam Labour government (1972-1975), including not only a new multicultural framework for its immigration policy but also a new emphasis on Australia's cultural independence from Britain, an emphasis that produced both a film renaissance and support for local literatures in the forms of art-access programs and regional publishing houses. All this is reflected in Jolley's early publishing history: Western Australia's newly founded Fremantle Arts Centre (1973) hired her to teach in their arts-access program; its regional press published Jolley's first two collections of short stories in 1976 and 1979; another (transient) regional press, Outback Press, published her first novel, *Palomino*, in 1980 (republished in the same year by the then-expanding University of Queensland Press); Fremantle followed by publishing a second novel in 1981 (*The Newspaper of Claremont Street*); and Queensland published her third novel in 1983 (*Miss Peabody's Inheritance*).

Only then, with the publication in 1983 of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* by Penguin-Australia, did Jolley achieve her life-long ambition to be published by Penguin – the British publishing house of her youthful desires, now accessible in Australia because she had become a published author of note, and because Penguin-Australia, established in 1946 largely as a distributor for its English parent company, had responded to post-war configurations by beginning to publish Australian works in 1963. With the exception of Fremantle's 1984 publication of one more novel (*Milk and Honey*) and its reprinting her first two short-story collections in one volume (*Stories*) in the same year, and the exception of Queensland's 1985 publication of *Foxybaby*, Jolley remained with Penguin-Australia for the rest of her writing career.

Jolley wrote out of the complex knowledge of exile she brought with her to Australia: her confused sense of it in her family home; her encounters with it through the war refugees she met both at Sibford and in her parents' home; her acquaintance with it through the foreign soldiers she nursed at Queen Elizabeth Hospital; and – above all – her

personal experience of it as a kind of displaced person from the time she first left home for Sibford. All this informed her experience of what it was to be a privileged (English-speaking, white, middle-class) 'new Australian' in post-war Western Australia: her first prize-winning story, 'A Hedge of Rosemary,' was about a man who had migrated when very young 'from the Black Country in England, from the noise and the dirt of the chain-making industrial area where people lived crowded and jostled together in indescribable poverty.'¹⁷ A decade later, in Jolley's first collection of short stories, *The Five Acre Virgin* (1976), migrants are the main characters in ten of eleven of the stories; and they are also the main characters in eight of the ten of the stories in her second collection, *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979). Nearly fifteen years on, in her last collection of short stories, *Woman in a Lampshade* (1983), migrant characters are the focus of eleven of its seventeen stories.

In her early stories Jolley often recycled plots, techniques, imagery, quotations, and phrases. She also recycled characters: for instance, Mrs Morgan and her children appear in the first six stories of Jolley's first short-story collection, and in the third collection she morphs into Mabel Doris Morgan who writes letters to her boarder/son ('Wednesdays and Fridays'), and then again appears as Mabel Morgan, the novelist in Jolley's radio play 'A Well-bred Thief.'¹⁸ And sometimes differently-named characters echo each other, like the Dutch land swindler Uncle Bernard who appears in stories in each short-story collection ('Outink to Uncle's Place' in the first, 'The Outworks of the Kingdom' in the second, and 'Uncle Bernard's Proposal' in the third) and who is akin to another land swindler, Uncle Otto, in the early novel *Milk and Honey*. Like Balzac in his *Comédie humaine*, Jolley treats her appearing/disappearing characters in such a way as to invest them with an aura of universality.

Throughout, the Morgans and most of the figures in the early stories are two-dimensional stock characters that figure in comedies or tragedies of situation, their common situation being homelessness. They are 'battlers' in Australian terms, or 'discarded' and 'discarders' ('feckless') in Jolley's terms. Many of them are homeless in the sense that they live in rented rooms or are patients in hospitals or nursing/old-age homes; some desperately seek to own land, often to marry or reunite with family on such land; and some who own land are obsessive about it, directing their attention to caring for the land, nurturing it as they might a loved one – even those who are rough on the land are capable of writing lyric poetry about it, as in Uncle Bernard's poem of the grapes in

‘Outink to Uncle’s Place’ – ‘Tokay, Shiraz, Grenach...’ That theme spills over into Jolley’s first published novel, *Palomino*, when Andrea thrills to Laura, her new-found love, when watching her total absorption in working the land lovingly – it is an image of the ways in which in many of Jolley’s early stories and first novels people find love for others and themselves through ‘cherishing’ (another key Jolley word) the land.¹⁹

The reoccurring motifs of migrant characters and attachment to the land in Jolley’s stories and earliest novels can be read against her British experiences of physical and emotional dislocation, and her consequent longing for a sheltered space, a place, a ‘family.’ Some of the migrant characters from Jolley’s early short stories persist into her first half-dozen novels (for example, in *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* Mrs Morgan reappears as an inmate in the nursing home, along with her daughter who figures as Nurse Shady and her son who is one of its nocturnal poker players). Yet, from *Palomino* onwards the emphasis in the novels comes to be less on the external situation of homelessness (though that always remains a motif) and more on the internal condition of lovelessness. It is as if, in the novels as opposed to the stories, Jolley views the world more from the inside than the outside – the novels becoming more and more character-based narratives, the people in them more and more rounded and reflective.

Two of the early novels – *Palomino* (1980) and *Milk and Honey* (1984) – are dense in regard to this shift, partly because they involve first-person narration, partly because the former is a complex intercalation of monologues, letters and diary entries and the latter a bizarre gothic melodrama, and partly because they are didactic *romans à thèse*. Both are ‘awkward’ in the way first novels often are, but together they form an early articulation of the meditation on love that the sequence of Jolley’s novels provides – complete with confronting examples. *Palomino* clearly endorses Socrates’ thesis in Plato’s *Symposium* (198d-212) that it is better to be the lover than the beloved. Thus there is Laura’s early love for her school-friend, Eva, as well as for her epistolary friend, Esmé Gollanberg, thirty year’s older and, like Laura, a doctor; similarly, there is Laura’s later love for Eva’s daughter, Andrea; and there is Andrea’s love both for the thirty-year-old Laura and for her own brother, Christopher, who is newly married but by whom she is pregnant. These extraordinary relations recall Aristophanes’ myth of love in *Symposium* about the origins and equivalent natures of heterosexual and homosexual love: we all try to find the complementary half from which we have been separated as the price of being human. Equally, *Palomino* suggests the extremes to which love can drive the lover: there

is Laura perhaps accidentally administering a fatal dose when Esmé collapses just after arriving for the visit for which Laura longed, but with a newly married husband in tow...; and there is Laura, having meditated on the lesson of love taught her by the Esmé affair (for which she is imprisoned) and so knowing more how dangerously narcissistic love can be, helping Andrea to step aside from their idyll when that is what Andrea needs and wants.

Milk and Honey revisits the topic of love across age gaps (its protagonist, Jacob, is younger than both his wife, Louise, and his lover, Madge), infidelity, and sibling incest (between Louise and her brother Waldemar). Yet it is most interesting in its imagination of love as absolution for extreme or exceptional behaviour: after Jacob (falsely) is led to think he has killed his idiot brother-in-law Waldemar, and thus lives in the belief that he is a murderer, he discovers he has been manipulated by the family into marrying the Louise not just because the family then can control his money but even more because they thereby can provide for Waldemar. When Jacob remonstrates, Aunt Heloise tells him that the manipulation allowed them to keep Waldemar at home rather than institutionalise him, as they had had to do to his mother: 'Waldemar did not ask to be born,' she whispers; his father Leopold could not treat Waldemar, an 'innocent' (another key Jolley word), as if he were punishing him; and, besides, she says, her eyes filled with tears, 'You were given all our love and care... You will never understand enough all of Leopold's love for you.'²⁰ The novel ends with Jacob seeking forgiveness from Madge's husband and electing to serve as a cleaner in the asylum where Waldemar is a shave-nurse and Waldemar's daughter/sister by Louise is a serving maid.

Jolley's skill as a novelist developed rapidly as a result of writing short stories and recasting the early manuscripts that formed the basis of *Palomino* and *Milk and Honey*, to the point where she published ten novels during the 1980s. Her plots became more and more inventive, even as they more and more clearly articulated her constant theme: *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983) is a metafictional piece involving a novel-within-the novel and a character who regards its fiction as fact; *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (1983) is a prolonged meditation; *Foxybaby* (1984) a dream sequence that begins when the protagonist has an automobile accident at the outset of the novel, and so on. At the same time these early novels recapitulate the theme of homelessness or some analogue of it (the boarding school in *Peabody*, the nursing home in *Scobie*, the school-for-the-fat in *Foxybaby*; the Remand and the moving out of the main farmhouse in *The Well...*), even as they present

as sex-charged dramas that foreground passionate, unconventional, one-sided love (Peabody's for the older Diana Hopewell, Scobie's for the child Lena, Dr Steadman's for his daughter, Hester's for teenage Katherine...) – often with companionate lesbian relationships in the background, represented by zany jaunty but sad love-struck couples like Arabella Thorne and Miss Edgely in *Peabody*, Heather Hailey and Hyacinth Price together with Frankie and Robyn in *Scobie*, and Josephine Peycroft and Miss Paisley in *Foxybaby*. In these ways – in their representations of many kinds of homelessness and many kinds of sexuality – the early novels suggest the suffering of lovelessness, like Dorothy Peabody's, Martin Scobie's, Alma Porch's, Hester Harper's...

Put another way, when writing in Australia Jolley drew on her experiences of exile in England and Scotland to ground her portrayals of Australian migrants in her early short stories; then, in her novels, the concept of migrant in the traditional sense of the word gradually gives way to the concept of migrant as metaphor for the human condition, the condition of dislocation, displacement, and non-belonging consequent on not being loved, the condition of those like the love-lost people in Aristophanes' myth. That concept persists throughout Jolley's novels, though with different emphasis as they progressively were published from 1980 to 2001. In 1986 Andrew Riemer, in 'Displaced Persons – Some Preoccupations in Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction,' commented on this difference, remarking that Jolley, who belonged to no coterie, was in the midst of inventing a style peculiar to herself. 'At the risk of glibness,' he said, he regarded the 'mordant social comedy' of the earlier novels as her Australian side and 'the macabre, the obsessed and the introspective' inflection of the later novels as her European side.²¹

III. Writing, Rememory and Redemption

By the end of the 1980s Elizabeth Jolley rightly could consider herself an Australian writer – she had received an honorary doctorate, had garnered numbers of minor and four major Australian literary awards, and had been awarded the Order of Australia. Then she reinvented herself, as it were, through the publication of her masterwork, the trilogy comprised of *My Father's Moon* (1989), *Cabin Fever* (1991), and *The Georges' Wife* (1993). In those books, Jolley returns to the landscapes of her life in England and Scotland by returning to one of the manuscripts she brought with her in her trunk – *A Feast of Life*. In that earlier draft novel, Jolley, thinly disguised as the narrator and self-

consciously comparing herself to Madame Verdurin, a disagreeable social climber in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, retells her life and loves at Sibford, Pyrford, Birmingham, Hertfordshire, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In the Vera trilogy all those experiences are reconfigured, along with the experience of travelling by ship to Australia, to form a narrative whose effect is somehow to transform the early experiences of loss and exile – of homelessness and lovelessness – through the alchemy of a practiced writer re-living them in fictional form.

In a discussion of the longing for belonging that characterises migrant writing, Alistair Thomson argued that 'Jolley's engagement with the Western Australian landscape confirmed the sense of belonging that had been initiated in the University Wives Club and strengthened by her success as a writer;' and, like many critics, found confirmation for his insight in Jolley's autobiographical writing: '[I]t was in Western Australia that I ceased to feel "on the edge" . . . creating for myself a Western Australia in which I am at home'.²² Still, as she drew on a *Feast of Life* to write the Vera trilogy, Jolley left that Australian landscape behind, something that Riemer found disappointing: he thought that *My Father's Moon* was a 'generally unsatisfactory work' for being more concerned with a 'social reality' that abandoned 'that transformation [which she] achieved most strikingly in those works written from the perspective of Australia, the country where she lives and the country that claimed her as its own once her literary reputation grew'.²³ Another reading of Jolley's 'career in writing,' however, is that only once she felt a sense of belonging, of home, could she return to the powerful experiences of internal exile that so formed her sensibility as a migrant writer and, through remembering them (once again) in writing, redeem them.

Memory is the special modality of the exile, and in the trilogy memory displaces the land as consolation for loneliness to such an extent that what Jolley calls 'the miraculous possession, the memory' becomes both theme and technique.²⁴ Thus the quotation from St Augustine that Jolley placed as the epigraph to the last chapter of *Cabin Fever*:

All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory. In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons, together with everything

I have ever perceived in them by my senses . . . In it I meet myself as well[.] I remember myself . . .²⁵

This image of a present self meeting past selves alludes to the way in which Jolley revisits early experiences of homelessness and loneliness from a sense of belonging derived from accepting a new land and being accepted as a significant writer.

Only then could Jolley focus on the painfulness of family life in a way that none of her early novels ever quite could; only then could she focus on her mother and father and their 'Friend of the Family,' and on the comparable ménage comprised of Leonard and Joyce Jolley and herself. In doing so she again meditates on the mysteries of love – its being the only saving grace among the miseries of living, its inevitable failure, and the life-givingness of loving despite such failure. Thus each novel in the trilogy ends with a moment in which the loneliness of its heroine is both acute and somehow redeemed through her re-memory (to borrow Toni Morrison's powerful phrase/concept from *Beloved*) of someone once intensely desired and dearly loved but no longer nearby. And thus Jolley's next book, *The Orchard Thieves* (1995), an elegant parable that tells of a woman loving her children and grandchildren despite what Jolley elsewhere calls the furies of family life²⁶—in this case, the elder daughter's proposal that the children sell off the family home and split the profits, even though doing so will render their mother homeless. Even as the mother/grandmother realises that 'it was possible for the child, the grown-up daughter, to hate the mother,' she practices the ethic that it is better to love than to be loved, thereby relinquishing her concern with being homeless to focus on her love for her children and, especially, her grandchildren.²⁷ As another Australian writer, Helen Garner (who became a close friend), remarked: 'The bottom line, for Jolley, is love.'²⁸

NOTES

¹ Those critics often follow Elizabeth Jolley's cue in 'Self Portrait: A Child Went Forth,' *Stories: Five Acre Virgin, Travelling Entertainer* (Fremantle, 1984). Of special interest are essays by Andrew Riemer, Helen Daniel and Alistair Tomson. See Andrew Riemer's three essays: 'Between Two Worlds – An Approach to Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction,' *Southerly*, Vol. 43 (1983); 'Displaced Persons – Some Preoccupations in Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction,' *Westerly*, Vol. 31 (1986); and 'Elizabeth Jolley,' *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers* (New York, 1991). See also Helen Garner, 'Elizabeth Jolley: An Appreciation,' *Meanjin*, Vol. 42 (1983) and Alistair Thomson, 'Landscapes of Memory,' *Meanjin*, Vol. 61 (2002).

² For an account of the publishing history of the first part of Jolley's career, see Barbara Milech, 'Becoming Elizabeth Jolley: The First Twenty Years in Australia,' in Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon and Chris Lee (eds), *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere* (Toowoomba, Queensland, 1999).

³ For a similar perspective, see Sabina Hussain, 'Label and Literature: Borders and Spaces in *Postcolonial Migrant Literature* in Australia,' *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Vol. 3 (2004).

⁴ Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* (Cambridge, 1996), p.171.

⁵ Elizabeth Jolley, "'What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink,'" *Central Mischief*, ed. and introd. by Caroline Lurie (Ringwood, Victoria, 1992), p.4. See also Jolley, 'Self-Portrait,' p.303.

⁶ Jolley, "'What Sins,'" p.4.

⁷ Jolley, 'Self Portrait,' p.304.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.303. See also "'What Sins,'" p.3.

⁹ During this moment of internal exile her parents were conspicuously unhelpful: in effect, her father shook his head and offered his prayers; her mother shook her finger and scolded her for being a fallen woman and an inadequate mother. It perhaps is not surprising, then, that in 1949 Jolley changed her surname to Fielding (in admiration of the novelist) in order to spare her family shame.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Jolley, 'Tricked or Treated?' *Central Mischief*, p.67.

¹¹ Elizabeth Jolley, *Diary, May 1958 – April 1962*, Elizabeth Jolley papers, Box A1 (Mitchell Library/State Library of New South Wales, Sydney), 4 November 1959.

¹² Elizabeth Jolley, *The Feast of Life*, Unpublished Ms, Elizabeth Jolley Literary Papers, Mss. 4880/3 (Mitchell Library/State Library of New South Wales).

¹³ The story is published, with commentary, in Brian Dibble, 'Plus ça change...: An Early Elizabeth Jolley Short Story,' *Overland*, No. 63 (2001), pp.47-50. Dibble notes that the name of the story's title character was derived from names of two girls she met while at a Hitler youth camp in Hamburg in the summer of 1939, Ingeborg Lehmann and Ilse Sieber.

¹⁴ Jolley's dual feelings of engagement and difference in regard to her new community were also evident when she joined the University of Western Australia's branch of The Save the Children Fund and volunteered to edit a recipe book for the organisation. The branch committee accepted her fundraising idea and editorial work. But it rejected her idea for a title (with suitable cover illustration): 'Greasy Joan'—taken

from the song in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2) ('When icicles hang by the wall, / And Dick the Shepherd, blows his nail. . . / Tu whit, tu-who – a merry note, / While Greasy Joan doth keel the pot'). In the event, the cookbook was published as *Cooking by Degrees* (Perth: n.d.). Jolley's culinary contribution was her recipe for Onion Soup.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Jolley, Diary, 5 December 1944, Elizabeth Jolley papers, Box A1 (Mitchell Library/State Library of New South Wales).

¹⁶ In interviews Jolley often referenced the journal entry that recorded this dismal tally. See, for example, Jennifer Ellison, 'Interview with Elizabeth Jolley,' *Rooms of Their Own* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1986), and Paul Kavanaugh, "'This Self the Honey of All Beings": A Conversation with Elizabeth Jolley.' *Southerly*, Vol. 49 (1989).

¹⁷ 'A Hedge of Rosemary' won the Fellowship of Australian Writers (State of Victoria) Short Story Award in 1966. It was first published in *Westerly*, 2 (1967), and then in Jolley's first collection of short stories, *Five Acre Virgin* (Fremantle, 1976).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Jolley, 'The Well-bred Thief,' in Delys Bird (ed.), *Off the Air: Nine Plays for Radio* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1995).

¹⁹ Elizabeth Jolley, *Palomino* (Collingwood, Victoria, 1980; London, 1980; St. Lucia, Queensland, 1984).

²⁰ Elizabeth Jolley, *Milk and Honey* (Fremantle, 1984), pp.119-120.

²¹ Andrew Riemer, 'Displaced Persons,' p.76.

²² Alistair Thomson, 'Landscapes of Memory,' p.92.

²³ Andrew Riemer, 'Elizabeth Jolley,' pp.380 and 374.

²⁴ Elizabeth Jolley, *Cabin Fever* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1990), p.7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.235.

²⁶ See Elizabeth Jolley, 'The Changing Family – Who Cares?' *Central Mischief*, p.83.

²⁷ Elizabeth Jolley, *The Orchard Thieves* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1995), p.121.

²⁸ Helen Garner, 'Elizabeth Jolley: An Appreciation', p.155.