

ELVIS DOWN UNDER: SIMULATIONS OF A US POP ICON IN AUSTRALIAN FICTION

Paul Genoni

Elvis will not leave the building because his image remains, if anything, *overflowing* with meaning and historicity.

Thomas C. Carlson¹

Elvis is such a packed cultural symbol.

Shady Cosgrove²

During a late-career concert in Atlanta, Elvis Presley proclaimed from the stage—probably to the puzzlement of his audience—‘Watch the feedback Bruce or I’ll send you back to Australia in a kangaroo pouch.’³ The comment was directed at his sound engineer, Australian Bruce Jackson. It marks, to my knowledge, the only public expression by Presley that he was aware that Australia existed. Needless to say, however, when this comment was made in late 1976, Australia had been very aware of Elvis Presley for over two decades.

Presley died in the year following the Atlanta concert, and his death was followed by the public mourning, career reappraisals, reissuing

1 Thomas C. Carlson, ‘Bit Parts: Dismembering Elvis in Recent Hollywood Films’, *Film Criticism* 24.1 (1999): 75.

2 Shady Cosgrove, *She Played Elvis* (Crows Nest: Allan & Unwin, 2009), p. 29.

3 Presley’s Atlanta concert took place on 30 December 1976. Film and sound are available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8ydbxsu2dQ [Accessed 15 January 2010]. The comment regarding Australia can be heard at six minutes and 45 seconds.

of product, and massive upturn in sales, that have been witnessed subsequently with the demise of pop-culture figures of similar stature, such as John Lennon and Michael Jackson. In the wake of that predictable short-term response to Presley's death, however, something more interesting began to take place—something with little precedent in terms of its scale and global reach.

That is, while the physical Elvis had certainly passed away, Elvis-the-icon embarked on a posthumous career that was every bit as lucrative, nearly as influential, and that is by now, more long lasting than the one that sustained him in life. Both in America and elsewhere there was a collective reluctance to let Elvis go, as if his sudden passing had left many with a need to cling to the vestiges of his life and glittering career.

One of the most obvious manifestations of Presley's healthy afterlife were the continued rumours and belief that his death was a hoax and a conspiracy, and that somehow, somewhere and for some reason, he was awaiting the right moment for his greatest comeback. For years the occasional Elvis 'sighting' titillated the international press and gave his demise an unsettled afterglow.

Presley's death also gave impetus to another phenomenon, the Elvis impersonator. The practitioners of this zombie artform crossed ages, ethnicities and genders, seemingly united by the belief that they were passing on the memory of Presley's presence in a barely diminished form. If Elvis had indeed left the building, his spirit could nonetheless be found hard at work every Friday night at the local bar or juke-joint or RSL club.

Beyond these very apparent indications of the desire to retain Elvis, there also developed further, and perhaps more interesting layers of representation of the deceased star. Presley's image and various fragments of 'style' that informed it (snatches of clothing, language, mannerisms) began to be consciously borrowed, referenced, or re-invented as part of a bewildering array of cultural production that allowed 'Elvis Presley' to survive and proliferate as part of social, political, cultural and intellectual discourses from which he had been largely excluded in life. Elvis art, Elvis cartoons, Elvis comics, Elvis films, Elvis songs, Elvis poetry, Elvis fiction, all shaped up as genres, or

sub-genres, or subversive genres, that gave form to what Greil Marcus described as a massive communal art project. As Marcus wrote:

When he died, the event was a kind of explosion that went off silently, in minds and hearts; out of that explosion came many fragments, ... No one, I think, could have predicted the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life: a great common ... conversation between spectres and fans, made out of songs, art works, books, movies, dreams; sometimes more than anything cultural noise, the glossolalia of money, advertisements, tabloid headlines, bestsellers, urban legends, nightclub japes. [It] was—is—a story that needed no authoritative voice, no narrator, a story that flourishes precisely because it is free of any such thing, a story that told itself.⁴

While accepting the spirit of what Marcus wrote, the purpose of this paper is to consider one element of Presley's 'second life' where there is an authoritative voice, or at least an authorial voice, in the form of literary fiction that is in some way 'about' Elvis Presley. Moreover the texts I will focus on are written by Australians, inevitably raising questions as to why it is that Australian authors elect to participate in this spectacle of the Elvis-who-refuses-to-die.

The Simulated Elvis

Marcus' *Dead Elvis* (1991)—from which the above quote was taken—was one of a number of scholarly texts that appeared from the early 1990s onwards recording how, and explaining why, Presley had retained such an unprecedented presence for a deceased star. Others included John Strausbaugh's *E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith* (1995);⁵

4 Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 'Introduction' [n.p.].

5 John Strausbaugh, *E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith* (New York: Blast Books, 1995).

Gilbert Rodman's *Elvis After Elvis* (1996);⁶ George Plasketes' *Images of Elvis Presley in American Culture, 1977–1997* (1997);⁷ and Gregory Reece's *Elvis Religion* (2006).⁸

It is not the purpose of this paper to join the discussion about exactly why Presley has generated so many persistent signifiers in the cultural landscape, although it is perhaps relevant to note Rodman's assertion that, 'Elvis' posthumous career is too large, too scattered, and too diverse to be easily circumscribed or explained by any one meta-narrative.⁹ It is also worth noting that in so far as these books had a precursor in exploring Presley's cultural persistence, it was Australian McKenzie Wark's article, 'Elvis: Listen to the Loss', which appeared in a 1989 number of the Australian journal *Art & Text*.¹⁰ Wark wrote of Presley's rise to fame on the back of his genius for discovering and amalgamating the fragments of disembodied musical culture that made their way via radio to the cultural melting-pot of Memphis. Elvis, claims Wark, represented 'Talent in a brand new bag,' with the ambitious young singer possessing an 'openness, [his] antennae tuned into the minutiae of immaterial culture.'¹¹ According to Wark, Presley was the first performer who instinctively understood what it meant to make music in an immaterial world, wherein his physical presence was secondary to his massively and mechanically reproduced voice. This account of Presley's artistic origins allows Wark to explain—or explain away—the persistence of Elvis in the post-mortem phase of his career, because his physical presence was never intrinsic to his celebrity. Wark writes that following Presley's death, we are left with,

6 Gilbert Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London: Routledge, 1996).

7 George Plasketes, *Images of Elvis Presley in American Culture, 1977–1997: The Mystery Terrain* (New York: Harrington, 1997).

8 Gregory L. Reece, *Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King* (New York: Macmillan, 2006).

9 Rodman, p. 24.

10 McKenzie Wark, 'Elvis: Listen to the Loss', *Art & Text* 31: 24–28.

11 Wark, p. 26.

the sacrifice of the presence of life to its endlessly ululating echo. Graceland stands as a monument to the moment in the passage of G.I. Elvis, to the moment the body is doomed to recorded culture, to the cult of the dead. The universal tributes to Elvis are no accident, but a way of preserving this signal moment, the day his regal robes and commanding stutter became the recorded ghost that still walks, the lifeless flesh that returns forever to Memphis in a long black limousine ...¹²

Wark's analysis situates Presley's initial impact and lingering presence within a framework of the technologies of modernity that allowed his voice and image to proliferate globally.¹³ Another twenty years on, however, and Wark's 'endlessly ululating echo' is heard even further from its source, as we are faced with a Presley who evolves ceaselessly through a process of (re)invention that constantly imbues his image with layers of signification that are increasingly remote from their origin. Presley's abundant semiotic afterlife has transformed his image into a postmodern phenomenon—a prime example of what Jean Baudrillard described as simulations, the shallow but seductive images, divorced from the reality and circumstances that are their genesis, and that mask rather than reveal the essence of the thing they represent. As Baudrillard noted simulations are not a matter of imitation or parody, but rather 'of substituting signs of the real for the real itself',¹⁴ to the point where they forge their own reality. That is, simulations assume a capacity to generate subsidiary images that are primarily informed by those previous simulations rather than by the reality that was originally signified. In the case of Presley, the extraordinary multiplicity

12 Wark, p. 28.

13 Wark's analysis was supported by fellow Australian John Frow, who agreed that the 'real person of Elvis is always and from the beginning a copied person, the authenticity of which derives from the fact and the extent of copying, of representation.' John Frow, 'Is Elvis a god? Cult, culture, questions of method' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1.2 (1998): 203.

14 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and simulations,' *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 167.

and richness of the subordinate, corrupted images that now 'sign' Elvis Presley flourish to the extent that they have become the principal means by which the deceased star is recognised and known.

Elvis Fiction

One of the many forms of cultural production where the dead Elvis has left his trace is fiction. As Reece writes in *Elvis Religion*:

I was completely shocked ... to discover that Elvis had such an important place in contemporary literature. Much to my surprise, it seems that Elvis stands among the ranks of recurring literary characters such as James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan and Conan the Barbarian. Like these characters the character of Elvis has featured in countless works of fiction. Unlike his companions, however, who ended up trapped in one particular genre or another, the character of Elvis appears in a diverse set of literary genres and has been brought to life, or back to life as it were, by a diverse set of authors. Elvis has made appearances in mystery novels, in science fiction stories, in historical fiction and in parodies ... Out of all the places that I found Elvis in my studies, the world of fiction remains the most surprising ...¹⁵

It isn't possible to account accurately for the amount of Elvis fiction. An online site 'Elvis Presley: A Life in Books',¹⁶ currently lists some ninety titles, but it is very incomplete. It does not, for example, include any of the Australian novels discussed in this paper. Two things about Elvis fiction are, however, apparent from scanning this or similar bibliographies. Firstly, as Presley bibliographer Mary Hancock Hinds has noted, before his death 'there was no such thing ... as Elvis fiction'.¹⁷ It is a body of fiction shaped by both the unremarkable reality of Presley's

15 Reece, p. 71.

16 Available at: www.xs4all.nl/~vnhouten/ [Accessed 8 December 2010].

17 Mary H. Hinds, *Infinite Elvis: An Annotated Bibliography* (Chicago: A Capella, 2001), p. 271.

physical death, and his quite remarkable symbolic persistence through various post-mortem manifestations. It is notable that very little Elvis fiction—particularly with literary pretensions—features Elvis Presley as a character, but instead dwells on Presley in simulated forms. This is achieved most commonly through the figure of an Elvis impersonator who manifests Presley’s spirit in scenarios where the King himself never trod. There are also novels that re-imagine Presley’s life as it might have transpired had he not expired in August 1977; those that feature fans dealing with the implications of his death for their own lives; appearances by the spirit or ghost of Elvis as it continues to move people and shape lives; accounts of Presley’s fictional bastard children as they deal with the legacy of the superstar-father they never knew; and even novels that resurrect the character of Jesse, the twin that Elvis lost at birth.¹⁸

A second notable feature of Elvis fiction is that although titles from the United States are the most prevalent, it is an international phenomenon. There are numerous titles from the United Kingdom, plus contributions from South Africa (Christopher Hope’s *Me the Moon and Elvis Presley*)¹⁹ Nigeria (Chris Abani’s *Graceland*)²⁰ India (Ivar Tabrizi’s *The Avatar*)²¹ New Zealand (Nigel Cox’s *Tarzan Presley*)²² France (Laure

18 Into this final category might be placed Australian musician-cum-novelist Nick Cave’s, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (London: Black Springs, 1989). Although the novel makes no direct mention of either Elvis or Jesse, it has been argued by Nathan Wiseman-Trowse (‘Oedipus Wrecks: Cave and the Presley Myth’, in *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell, eds. [Farnham: Ashgate, 2009], pp. 153–66) that this story constitutes one of a number of occasions on which Cave has explored the Presley myth. Wiseman-Trowse examines the novel’s central character, Euchrid Eucrow, as a corrupted version of the classic Presley myth. In Cave’s version, the ‘good son’ dies at birth and the malevolent Euchrid, representing ‘an inversion of the mythical, archetypal Elvis’ (163) lives on. The notion of the lost twin is also an important element in Gail Jones’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’.

19 Christopher Hope, *Me, the Moon and Elvis Presley* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

20 Chris Abani, *Graceland* (New York: Picador, 2004).

21 Ivar Tabrizi, *The Avatar* (Victoria: Trafford, 2004).

22 Nigel Cox, *Tarzan Presley* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004).

Limongi's *Fonction Elvis*)²³ Canada (Andre Major's *La Folle d'Elvis*)²⁴ and Australia.

This international manifestation of Elvis-in-fiction begs the questions as to 'why', as Presley was in many ways an intrinsically American phenomenon. Not only was his musical repertoire the product of American traditions, but his impact and notoriety were built upon transgressions across boundaries that were essentially American; white vs black; city vs rural; north vs south; Perry Como vs Robert Johnson. And in Elvis' case his global popularity wasn't the result of in-person exposure to his famed backbeat, as he never performed outside of the United States other than for a handful of Canadian concerts in 1957. If, however, as Wark argued, Presley's triumph represented a potent manifestation of modernity whereby the immaterial prevailed over the material, then it also coincided with the point at which the products of American popular culture became irresistibly global.

Elvis' global triumph as it was manifested in Australia is recalled in Barry Donnelly's novel, *Boys by the Sea* (1989), a coming-of-age story set on the central NSW coast in the 1950s. The restless young Hermann, wrestling with his years of thwarted teenage ambition, appeals to the precedent set by Presley:

Take, for instance, the new singing sensation that is sweeping the world. Take Elvis Presley, for instance! Do you think he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth? No siree! Elvis came from Memphis, Tennessee, out of a little weatherboard house no better than yours. Nobody ever heard of him! Do you think it worried Elvis Presley that he didn't have a piece of paper from some fancy university to wave around? No, siree! Elvis didn't sit around moping. He didn't stop to think about the world being fixed. It all started because he wanted to make a record for his mother. And what did they find? Talent! Real, natural talent—and Elvis let the world have it, straight between the eyes!²⁵

23 Laure Limongi, *Fonction Elvis* (Paris: Leo Scheer, 2006).

24 Andre Major, *La Folle d'Elvis* (Montreal: Amerique, 1981).

25 Barry Donnelly, *Boys by the Sea* (Sydney: Collins, 1989), p. 178.

These words draw upon classic elements of the Presley myth; the humble birth; the innate talent and ambition; the disdain for convention; the mother love; the meteoric rise from backwoods obscurity. But Donnelly also take the myth forward from its origins to its consequences—‘Elvis let the world have it, straight between the eyes!’ Indeed although the term ‘globalisation’ may have had little currency in Presley’s lifetime, it could be argued that the youth music culture that he kick-started in the 1950s was one of the first and most pervasive globalised social movements, constituted at a time before pop-culture began to fragment under the ubiquity and immensity of its immateriality. As rock critic Lester Bangs wrote, ‘I can guarantee you one thing: we will never again agree on anything as we agreed on Elvis.’²⁶

But despite his global appeal Presley developed and retained his symbolic function as a representative American. To both Americans and non-Americans it is his status as an icon of certain American experience and values that can make his symbolic presence so compelling. As American Thomas Carlson wrote in an analysis of Presley’s ubiquity in recent Hollywood films:

Elvis is our national Rorschach, our virtual cultural referent by means of which we are able to engage in a complex ideological discourse on issues of collective importance to us.²⁷

But representative Americans must live—and in Presley’s case die—with the consequences of their iconic status, and one response in Elvis fiction is to have the singer serve as a symbol of American cultural and military imperialism. This is most apparent in novels set outside of the developed west, such as Chris Albani’s *Graceland*. Set in Albani’s homeland of Nigeria, *Graceland* follows the adventures of teenage Elvis. Named by his mother for her love of the singer, Elvis ekes out a living impersonating his namesake on the beachfronts of Lagos for tips from foreign tourists. Elvis’ dream is to escape to the US and earn a living as a

²⁶ Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburettor Dung* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 216.

²⁷ Carlson, p. 73.

dancer, but in the meantime he is caught in desperate circumstances of poverty, petty crime, and military brutality. He is also caught between the myriad products of US pop cultures that sow the seeds of unquenchable desire, and the subterranean tug of the diminished culture of his homeland. The military power of the US is interrogated in P.F. Kluge's *Biggest Elvis*,²⁸ wherein a trio of Elvis impersonators, each representing Presley at a different stage of his career, ply their trade around the US military bases in the Philippines, with each 'Elvis' starkly symbolising a different aspect of American imperial power. Australian novelists have similarly linked Presley to American military influence in south-east Asia. In Christopher Koch's *Highways to a War* (1995) one of the correspondents covering the Vietnam War repeatedly plays or sings Presley's 'Can't Help Falling in Love';²⁹ and in John Donnelly's *Magic Garage* (2002) an Indonesian General moonlights as an Elvis impersonator. When he is attacked and badly mauled by a tiger that serves as the defender of a squatter settlement on the verge of redevelopment, his white Elvis-jumpsuit is left in tatters.³⁰

Elvis in Australian Fiction

Australian fiction writers have not, however, always needed to go offshore to find a place for Presley in their narratives. The singer's reinvention as a global, postmodern omnipresence is the subject of Gail Jones' 'Heartbreak Hotel' (1997),³¹ a story grounded in Presley's status as both iconic American and postmodern phenomenon, and containing one of the carefully constructed accounts of the formulations of modernity and/or postmodernity that are the hallmark of Jones' fiction.

The story commences in suburban Australia of the late 1970s, in the aftermath of Presley's death. The unnamed teenage female narrator grows up infused with desire for the neighbourhood Elvis impersonator.

28 P.F. Kluge, *Biggest Elvis* (London: Vintage, 1996).

29 Christopher J. Koch, *Highways to a War* (Port Melbourne: Heinemann, 1995).

30 John Donnelly, *Magic Garage* (Canberra: Pandanus, 2002).

31 Gail Jones, 'Heartbreak Hotel', in *Fetish Lives* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), pp. 114–25.

Every Elvis was an avatar. God had dreamt up Elvis but one was simply not enough. Thus Teresa Papadopolous, Elvis-next-door, was another irrefutable sign of the one true faith, another undead performer to contest all those mendacious rumours. (115)

By being Greek, female, and given to impersonating the younger rebellious Elvis rather than the mature Vegas-crooner, Teresa both honours and subverts Elvis. And something else sets Teresa apart. When not being Elvis and dreaming of attending the 'Annual Elvis Presley Impersonators' Convention in downtown, limo-lined glassy LA' (122), she is a student of existentialism, given to discussing Sartre, Heidegger and Kierkegaard as part of a conversation about the Hollywood career of her idol. As a precocious existentialist, Teresa is able to calculate the equation between existence and essence in such a way that it explains the ongoing presence of Elvis in the world, believing that his spirit, his 'accumulated essence, *aka* star quality' has 'rent the fabric of space-time' (120). For Teresa, it is this manifestation of an 'Astral Elvis' that explains continued sightings of the supposedly dead singer.

Teresa eventually leaves the neighbourhood and the narrator follows her progress at second hand. The stories she hears are inconclusive, confirming only that Teresa has moved to the US, leaving the narrator in little doubt that she has made it to the Elvis Presley Impersonators' Convention. Here, she imagines that Teresa becomes lost in a Baudrillardian extravaganza of semiotic excess:

in every vision, astral in its profundity, she was there performing. There were rows of sparkly dancers, Viva-Las-Vegas-style, Elvises of every confirming configuration, and the theatrical ecstasy of excess replication: miles of black hair symmetrically duck-tailed, lip-curls agogo, forests of pumping legs, pelvic gyrations of pornographic proportions. (125)

There are echoes of Teresa's ethnic-Elvis in the character of Akmed Joseph Allam ('Joe'), in Dorian Mode's *A Café in Venice* (2001).³² Joe

32 Dorian Mode, *A Café in Venice* (Ringwood: Penguin, 2001).

is a Palestinian Christian of mixed Christian-Muslim heritage, with a Lebanese Christian wife. They live in Gaza where Joe earns his living as an Elvis impersonator, worshipping the man he describes as the ‘Best there ever was, best there will ever be’ (119). Joe dreams of emigrating to the United States, where he plans to make a living as a professional Elvis Impersonator. The incentive to turn this dream into reality is provided when Gaza is occupied by the Israeli army. When Joe attempts to escape to the US by fleeing firstly to Lebanon, his wife and child are shot and killed at the border by Israeli soldiers.

Unable to migrate to the US Joe eventually settles in Australia, and by mischance ends up owning and managing a roadside pizza café in inland South Australia. Here he continues to ply his trade as an impersonator, entertaining customers with appalling renditions of Presley classics and conducting full-scale ‘concerts’ in his café. All the while he continues to dream about pursuing his career as an impersonator in the US.

Despite having suffered a profound personal tragedy as the result of transnational warfare, Joe is a man devoid of national or political identity. Indeed many of his customers think he is Italian, an illusion he perpetuates in order to sell pizzas. Joe is seemingly a post-national man, his identity grounded not in national sentiment or ethnic allegiance, but rather on his lifelong commitment to that most global of personalities, Elvis Presley.

Quite often, when he was down, Joe actually thought he was Elvis. I mean, *really* thought he was Elvis. He’d talk about missing Priscilla. And how difficult it was filming *Blue Hawaii*. On those dark days, it was hard for him to distinguish fantasy from fact. Sometimes I had to point out that Elvis wasn’t actually born in the Middle East. (149)

Indeed Joe’s only identity marker with regard to nationality or ethnicity is a profound anti-Semitism resulting from the killing of his family. But even in this his identity is eventually destabilised when he forms a new romantic attachment with Ruth, a New York Jew. Joe woos Ruth with his version of ‘Love me Tender’, the same song with which he had

impressed his wife-to-be over twenty years previously, and soon she is dressing as Priscilla to his Elvis.

Joe's story is but one in a complex novel that deals with issues of identity, personal attachment, and the inevitable tensions that arise between personal desire and community obligations. For several characters their dreams are expressed as a desire to travel to the US, a dream that is embodied in an open air-ticket to New York that is traded between them as their circumstances fluctuate. At the novel's conclusion the ticket is passed to Joe, offering him—as with Teresa—the chance to fulfil his dream of earning a living by taking his version of Elvis to America.

Elvis is represented in a form other than an impersonator in Julie Capaldo's *Weather* (2001).³³ The novel features Ruby Seabourne, a woman possessed of extra-sensory powers. Ruby is described as an 'angel' who is 'not totally of this world' (42), and she works from her house as a fortune teller. Her otherworldly powers and natural wisdom are called upon to deal with her very worldly son, Cosmos, who works as a manager at The World Mega Supermarket. The World—as the shopping centre is commonly known—is described as a 'world unto itself, a religious experience, a Shrine to Consumption ... [where] People were told what to buy, where to buy, what to eat and how to live' (2–3). In order to provide for further expansion of this symbol of global consumerism it is necessary for Cosmos to acquire Ruby's house, and he becomes engaged in a plan to have his mother moved to a facility for the aged.

Ruby's special powers are more pervasive than her ability to see the future; she is deeply sensitive to both her spiritual environment and is in contact with the deceased. To help her in her troubles she is visited by none other than the spirit of the King himself, who has troubles of his own. Although dead for over twenty years Elvis has been unable to find peace by fully passing over to the other side. His spirit has been restlessly travelling the world for these years, traceable by the occasional sightings and bizarre weather events that follow in his wake—apparently the result of his extraordinary magnetism—in places as far apart as Alaska,

33 Julie Capaldo, *Weather* (Milsons Point: Random House, 2001).

Peru, Fiji and Japan. Elvis declares to Ruby that he is 'sort of stuck' (72) and realises that 'surely there is more to [the afterlife] than becoming the weatherman or being glimpsed in McDonalds?' (73).

Together Ruby and Elvis are able to help each other to solve their various problems. Elvis almost destroys The World Mega Supermarket by hurling lightning at it, and then suddenly realising that his true purpose was 'to *save* the World' (253) he calms the flames with his singing. In the process he learns the lessons necessary to complete what he refers to as his 'map', the knowledge he needs in order to finally accomplish a transition to death.

The most recent Australian novel to use simulations of Presley as a symbol of cultural persistence is Debra Adelaide's *The Household Guide to Dying* (2008).³⁴ Adelaide's novel is narrated by Delia Bennet, a woman with a terminal disease, and tells the tale of her attempt to settle some business from her past surrounding the death of her seven-year-old son ('Sonny') many years previously, and her relationship with Pearl, a woman whom Sonny had befriended. Pearl's main commitment in life is to Elvis Presley and keeping his memory alive. She is President of the Amethyst and District Elvis Fan Club, for which she organises quasi-religious gatherings for an eclectic group of fellow devotees. As Delia muses, 'in a secular age, it was probably as valid a religion as anything else' (233).

Pearl recognises that young Sonny is a talented singer, and she introduces him to the songs of Elvis. Sonny takes to the music immediately and delights in both singing and performing as Elvis. Abetted by Pearl he is soon dressed up in satin suits and embarked on a career as one of the youngest of Elvis impersonators, performing at gatherings of the fan club and at local fetes and parties. But the fact of a six- or seven-year-old Elvis impersonator doesn't seem particularly odd or unusual. As Delia notes, the act of simulation required little grounding in reality:

the impersonators ... existed in every possible shape, size
and dimension, so that the world abounded in short, grossly

34 Debra Adelaide, *The Household Guide to Dying* (Sydney: Picador, 2008).

fat, bald, bearded, female, disabled, bespectacled, black and blind Elvis impersonators. There were Elvis impersonators who couldn't sing. (234)

Sonny's career as an impersonator is, however, cut short when he is killed in a road accident. Delia gives permission for his heart to be donated for use in a transplant patient. As the boy's heart is removed his favourite Elvis songs are played in the operating theatre, and afterwards he is dressed for burial in the 'costume of pale blue satin and silver foil rhinestones which was his current favourite' (280).

Towards the novel's conclusion, as her own death nears, Delia sets out to find the person—a young girl, Amber—who had received Sonny's heart. She is eventually located and the two have an emotional meeting. They discover that Amber has inherited, through 'cellular memory' many of Sonny's personality traits and his likes and dislikes. This includes, not surprisingly, a love for the music of Elvis Presley. As Amber explains:

I also developed a taste for more adult music, hated all the kiddy stuff I used to listen to. I remember hearing Elvis singing 'Burning Love' on the radio one day and just started singing along. Somehow I knew the words. (372)

So again Elvis proves indestructible in his simulated forms—firstly kept alive by the devotion of a quasi-hippie in regional Queensland; then reborn through the enthusiasm of her child protégé; and when the child dies, transported intact into a new host in the form of Amber.

Conclusion

Gilbert Rodman commented that, 'Elvis' current ubiquity is particularly noteworthy, not just because he refuses to go away, but because he keeps showing up in places where he seemingly doesn't belong.³⁵ One of those places where Presley might be thought not to belong, is Australian fiction. Even if we accept that celebrity culture is ubiquitous and global, and national fiction is a redundant concept, these phenomena

35 Rodman, p. 1.

do not by themselves explain Presley's appeal to writers of fiction in Australia or elsewhere outside the US. We have not for example, seen a similar response in either fiction or other forms of cultural production, to the demise of other massively popular but deceased stars of stage or screen.³⁶

As noted earlier, in most of the literary fiction that refers to Presley the singer in some way survives his death. This is certainly the case with these Australian novels, whereby Elvis 'lives' in the acts of impersonation, in the devotion of fans, or in a spiritual/ghostly form. Greil Marcus offers one explanation as to why this might be the case, claiming that: 'Elvis was too big, too complex—too much—for any of us to quite take in, to see all at once ... Like Medusa, you can't look at him head on. So we look sideways'.³⁷

And looking sideways in Presley's case means looking at what he has become in death, at the various simulated forms by which his legacy is now manifested. In literary fiction this provides a version of Elvis Presley in which the singer is largely drained of his personal potency and reduced to his symbolic functions. This is not to argue that authors are necessarily disinterested in the achievements of the *real* Elvis, but rather they find his value to their fiction lies in his extraordinary evolving symbolic richness.

In part that symbolic richness is grounded in the transgressive reality of Presley's lived experience: the God-fearing white boy who sang the blues; the dirt-poor sharecropper's son who made it to the mansion; the rebel who served without complaint; the jailhouse rocker who became a staple of Hollywood beach movies; the 'hillbilly' who reached his apotheosis in Las Vegas. In the course of his life these contradictions were consumed by the global scale of his audience and the trajectory of a career-in-progress, but in death they have become the source of the bewildering multiplicity of symbols that feed the simulated forms in which Presley is now encountered. 'Elvis Presley'

36 It is worth noting that Anson Cameron's *Stealing Picasso* (2009) includes an unemployed gay Michael Jackson impersonator. It is apparent that this was written prior to Jackson's death.

37 Marcus, p. 28.

provides a signifier that is seemingly capable of absorbing any number of contradictory, anarchic or inverted signifieds. Indeed it is intrinsic to the symbolic role, and therefore the literary function, fulfilled by Presley in the post-mortem phase of his career that transgression and inversion have become the norm. As a result the image of Elvis Presley is now so rich, and yet so destabilised, that it appears to demand expression in forms that challenge our knowledge of the *thing* itself, and in consuming these images we are constantly required to re-imagine Presley, or—more accurately perhaps—what he has become in death. And what he has become is a paramount example of a reality subsumed by simulation, where every encounter with ‘Elvis Presley’ is burdened by the accretion of decades of (re)presentation that serves, in Baudrillard’s terms, to denature the thing that is represented. In the words of music critic Robert Christgau: ‘Elvis Presley ... has become a literary hero, his meaning defined at least as much by the texts he’s inspired as by those he created.’³⁸

It is in this multi-textual, simulated form, that we find the source of Presley’s fascination for writers of contemporary, postmodern fiction, irrespective of their nationality. For whereas Wark declared the young Elvis to be an avatar for a new kind of modernism, in death he has become *the* poster-boy for postmodernism. As Jones, Mode, Capaldo and Adelaide indicate in their fictions, Presley fascinates in death as he did in life, but the particular point of fascination is the *process* of simulation by which the dead Elvis is constantly given new life in ways that mask the original.

38 Robert Christgau, ‘The King and I’, *Village Voice*, 10 June 1997, available at www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bkrev/elvis-97.php [Accessed on 12 February 2010].