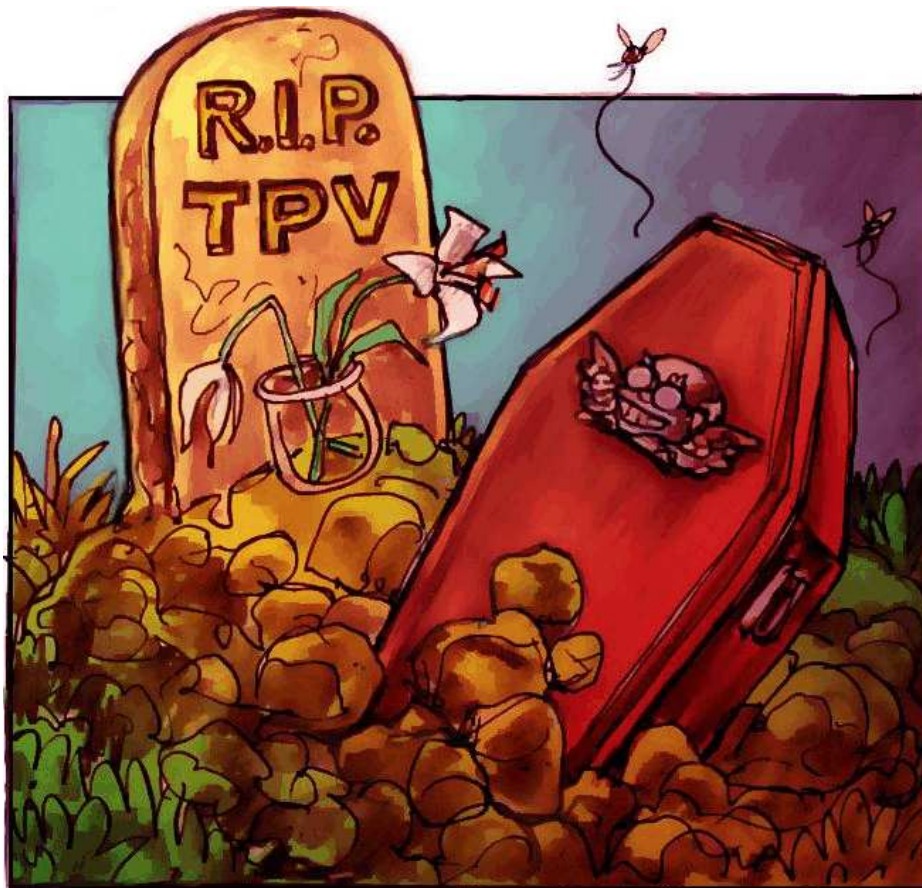


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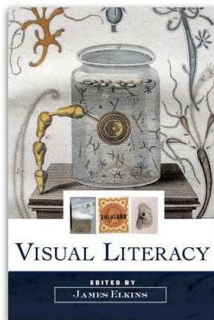
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## Taming the dishevelled beast of visual literacy

### BOOK REVIEW

*Margaret Woodward*

**Elkins, James (ed.). *Visual Literacy*, Routledge, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-415-95811-0. RRP: \$27.95.**



In his preface, editor James Elkins describes 'visual literacy' as a 'dishevelled field'. It is this field – or minefield – that he invites readers to enter via the essays (originally conference papers) presented here.

Given that much university education is dominantly and sometimes entirely text-based, the central issue of whether there can and ought to be a stronger emphasis on the visual is a valuable, challenging, perhaps even threatening one, for denizens of academia.

Contributors come from diverse disciplinary areas, such as law, education, politics, technology, medicine, science, art, visual studies and culture. In the conference context, the writers were able to hear and appreciate different positions, familiarise themselves with each other's ideas, and redraft their papers for publication.

There is a somewhat privileged position because of this, and because of their having begun with a common interest as well as a specialised knowledge and language that not all readers will start with or share.

Nevertheless, Elkins' hope is that those who read the essays will gain at least a provisional sense of what the 'theories, practices, competencies and literacies' associated with 'visual literacy' might mean for tertiary education in general and for their own work in particular.

In addressing this concern, each essayist supplies what is in both senses of the word a 'partial' description of visual literacy, its significance and limits.

Approaches vary. Dallow, for instance, explores the 'interdisciplinary dimensions' of visual literacy, whereas Enquist reports on how recourse to the visual can help to bridge the communicative 'gap' between the focus of clinicians on diagnostic images and the concerns which find expression in patient-created imaging.

Such differences have to do not only with the professional preoccupations of particular contributors but also with the significant question of whether 'visual literacies' belong within or are separate from the concept of 'visual literacy'. (One might also ask what links there are between 'visual literacy' and other forms of literacy.)

What would it mean to affirm the place of the visual within all areas of tertiary education? What kind of university would enable this and what freedoms are involved or need protection? There is no easy or one-dimensional solution, as Simons shows in his comments on

the current state of universities and the political shifts required to achieve such a goal.

By adding photographs, the editor has tried to redress what remains a significant imbalance in this book — the dominance of text and sparseness of images.

The understandings of ‘visual literacy’ evident where images are employed deserve critical consideration. Some images seem to serve solely as adjuncts to the text; some, as illustrations; some, as if it is best that verbal explanation or interpretation precedes the reader’s seeing or ‘reading’ the image.

Do these practices manifest the writer’s view of ‘visual literacy’ and perhaps of the habitually text-oriented? What do they leave out? The quality of the book’s images is another concern.

Focus on the academic sphere should not limit the book’s readership. For instance, Sherwin’s essay on the use of images in legal contexts is informative for lawyers, school teachers, students, or anyone who cares about justice. Ideally, *Visual Literacy* will spur its readers to approach this ‘dishevelled’ creature with their own questions about its nature, importance and pertinence, rather than rush to bring it to premature tidiness.

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## Kangaroo cull echoes colonial shame

ENVIRONMENT

*Tony Kevin*

The culling of kangaroos on military land in Canberra seems ironic given that the kangaroo is one of two native animals on the Australian coat-of-arms. As many citizens equate the military with the country's defence the cull is symbolic of an attack similar to the flag burning that has earned the ire of many Australians. It is problematic having a living national symbol.



People have objected to the cull on several grounds. The charge that killing the animals is inhumane seems to have been answered adequately by RSPCA approval of the methods being used. However, there is a symbolic level on which the cull represents a national shame.

Not surprisingly, members of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy have been prominent in drawing attention to the unique position of the kangaroo in Australian life. It is not surprising either that they have attempted to save the kangaroos by claiming sovereignty over the land being used by the military.

While the linear reasoning might have made their task almost impossible, all Australians should recognise an element in this cull that goes beyond sentimental attachment to national symbols.

Aboriginal activists established the Tent Embassy near the Old Parliament House to draw attention to the status of indigenous people as outsiders. When the parliament moved to its new premises in 1988, the Embassy attempted to claim the old building as unoccupied crown land, and members were incarcerated for trespass.

In 2000, the Embassy moved to a park in Sydney, a situation convenient for overseas visitors to the Olympics. The local council attempted to have the campers moved on, as though they were vagrants.

Despite the recent apology delivered to the Stolen Generations by Prime Minister Rudd, the Embassy still has a role. Indigenous people still face both formal and practical disadvantages.

Some years ago, one member of the Embassy told me of the connections that indigenous people have with the kangaroo. She pointed out that one of the most devastating effects of European settlement was occasioned through fencing.

Fences exclude Aboriginal people from their traditional areas and so disrupt their cultural

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practices. But they have also disrupted the normal patterns of kangaroo movement. Consequently, kangaroos came to be regarded as enemies by farmers and pastoralists and, eventually, by motorists.

There seems to be something pernicious about an action that confines kangaroos to a small area, then refuses to move them elsewhere and finally decides that they must die.

Apparently, scientific evidence suggests there are too many kangaroos in the military establishment. According to the logic, unchecked population growth presents a threat because the kangaroos will then starve to death.

Perhaps the military is being humane and does not want to see the kangaroos dying slowly of 'natural' causes. On the other hand, this logic could be based on a denial of the superior population control methods used by marsupials. Kangaroos are known to regulate their reproductive activity according to seasonal conditions. They can delay the maturation of their young so that the strain on the mother's body is minimised.

It seems unlikely that an animal with such an understanding of environmental pressures and such a developed biology would breed itself into extinction. This suggests these kangaroos would not be in crisis but for the activities of the military, and that the cull is primarily for the convenience of human activity in the area.

In searching for a way to live in this ancient land, non-indigenous Australians often pay lip-service to the necessity to learn from the indigenous people. This can apply at the level of living sustainably in synchronisation with the land, and also at the level of developing a genuine Australian spirituality.

We have largely failed on both counts because we have refused to trust indigenous people, their cultures and their traditions.

It seems likely that the Coorong at the end of the Murray-Darling River system will be dead in a few years and yet we show little concern. The cull of kangaroos might seem far removed from these broader issues, but it is symbolic of a deeper failure to trust anything indigenous, which may explain why we are heading towards environmental catastrophe.

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## French war drama's slack grip on story

FILM REVIEW

*Tim Kroenert*

***Un Secret*: 105 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Claude Miller. Starring: Cécile De France, Patrick Bruel, Ludivine Sagnier, Mathieu Amalric, Valentin Vigourt**



This French period drama sounds compelling on paper. Part coming-of-age film and part tragic love story, stained by the smoke of the Second World War and the crippling angst of the Holocaust, it belongs to that class of films that locate the emotionally and ethically complex stories woven into the brutal tapestry of that era.

Unfortunately it suffers from an inefficiency of structure which means that as a piece of cinematic storytelling, it is worthy but unsatisfactory.

The first act is intriguing. Seven-year-old François (Vigourt) lives a haunted existence. Ghosts and guilt lurk in the corners of the house where he lives with his mother, Tania (De France) and Jewish father, Maxime (Bruel).

Smart but scrawny, François feels like the second prize in his disapproving gymnast father's life. Evidently this has something to do with the titular 'secret'. The early part of the film deals with François as he edges closer to the truth, in order to understand his parents' troubled past and forge his own sense of self and destiny.

A touch of magical realism that suggests François' childlike imagination, and the restrained charisma of young actors Vigourt and Quentin Dubuis (who portrays François at 14), mean this first act is quite striking.

Unfortunately the revelation of 'the secret' is less striking. It comes via an extended, meandering flashback, which comprises the bulk of the remaining portion of the film. This is lazy, tedious storytelling, particularly given that viewers will be able to guess the outcome very early, at least in general terms.

I won't retread the film's painstaking steps. Suffice it to say that Maxime has been married before, and that he became estranged from his first wife, Hannah (Sagnier) and adored son Simon (Orlando Nicoletti) during the War, after the Nazis began imprisoning France's Jews.

The estrangement came about due, in part, to Hannah's emotional decimation at the hands of her neglectful husband, who is infatuated with her brother's wife — the statuesque blonde athlete, Tania (destined, as we know, to become his wife and François' mother).

Hannah's tragic choices, if poorly made, are understandable in light of Maxime's neglect,

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and underscored by her desire to neither deny nor conceal her cultural roots.

This is in stark contrast to Maxime — dark featured and muscular, but slightly bowed under the perceived and resented weight of his Jewish heritage. The degree to which his self-loathing prompted his infatuation with the decidedly un-Jewish Tania, and his subsequent emotional abuse of Hannah, is not clear.

The questions regarding cultural identity, matrimonial propriety and parental instincts that pervade the film are interesting — it's a shame they are not articulated more concisely. Some stories require a 'less is more' approach to keep a tight grip on their audience. The meticulous explication of *Un Secret* leaves the fist decidedly loose.

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## **AFL Demons hope last really will be first**

SPIRITUALITY

*Kylie Crabbe*

Even in secular societies Christianity is preserved in proverbs. For example, in Jesus' saying, 'the first will be last and the last will be first'. Maybe that sounds a little optimistic — like the solace of wooden-spoon-winners all over, a defiant war cry for the backend of the premiership ladder.



I wouldn't know if Jesus ever played competitive sport, but he did know a thing or two about systems of rank.

Take the ancient world's penchant for lining guests up around a dinner table in order of importance. Not so much the modern day angst over the politics of seating plans at weddings, as the out-and-out assumption that a host can measure each guest's importance and simply tell them where they rank. Public shaming or flattery on a regular basis, depending on where one falls.

Well, for those who've been following the Aussie Rules this season, the modern day shame of those ranked last is ably described by the trials, tribulations and (brief) elation of the Melbourne Football Club. They had six demoralising losses before a recent, unexpected win. The Chairman's speech, the Captain's injury and the Coach's newness to the position did nothing to help.

So, given that the Demons look to have the bottom of the 2008 ladder all tied up, they've naturally copped plenty of criticism. But at some level they've just been bearing the natural consequences of a system of rank: where there are winners, there must be losers too.

My criminology lecturer once referred to this kind of thing. He'd been asked to advise some schools in the US about why students fail. He went about his research. He surveyed teachers, and they gave well-reasoned answers — students fail in school because they have unsettled home lives, for example.

Then he went to the school board, and told them why students fail: 'Because you already decided that a certain percentage of students would fail. You standardise for it.'

In systems designed around rank, someone will always be at the bottom. There are risk factors — like students in unsettled homes, or football teams with long injury lists. But such factors are just the things that shape who might be at the bottom. That someone will be there has already been determined.

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Perhaps the Demons might be comforted by remembering that, in football, there really is movement between first and last. They might've started out badly, but they did beat Freeo, and there'll be other seasons anyway. In fact, for a system of rank, the AFL's pretty egalitarian. The draft system and the priority picks help. And there is always next year. (There have been 43 next years since Melbourne was last Number One).

Unlike football, however, our other ways of ranking people — by what stuff we have, where we went to school or where our family comes from — are rarely fluid. Those at the top are practised at consolidating their advantage. It's into this human condition that Jesus said that the first will be last and the last will be first. And, from those he hung out with, he knew what it was like to find yourself at the bottom of the pile.

We might wonder, though, is it any better to just reverse the order? To keep the ladder going, but stack the teams at the bottom so they become the winners? Surely that's a time-limited solution. But don't be fooled into thinking Jesus means there might be a 'good' and a 'bad' way to go about ranking people. I think he's saying something quite different.

Jesus hosted dinners at which 5000 or more people sat wherever they wanted. He told parables in which people who had started working at the beginning of the day or late afternoon were all paid the same amount at the end of the day. He wasn't on about just tinkering with the ranking, like some new magic-bullet draft system; he was on about a new way of seeing the world — looking past social ladders to genuine human equality.

Not everyone's into that. Those accustomed to the advantage of coming first are reluctant to give it up to participate in something new. Why be free to sit anywhere, when you're used to the seat of honour?

But that's how we could come last: by falling into the trap of keeping on weighing each other up. By looking at those who used to be further up or down the table, and just holding off from joining in the feasting while we work out how the seats should be assigned.

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## Gardening while Burma generals fiddle

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews



Lush fleshy fronds rise up on all sides. Spiky foliage towers like a cliff. Large flying creatures dip and buzz aggressively. Magpies probing past stems and trunks look like giant black and white hens as they irritably scuff and scrape. And the sky seems impossibly high ...

Well, everything's relative. The reason for these strange perspectives was not that I had somehow got lost in the Amazon jungle but that I was lying flat out on the chunky earth with my face inches from the busy ants and being dive-bombed by patrolling bees.

From that position, everything — encircling plants, bushes, clumps — looked somehow bigger and threatening. It must be hell being a mouse: no wonder they're always darting and cowering. The world down there at ground level bristles with danger. Everything seems immense — taller, bulking larger than you — except the ants, but even they, so close, are other-worldly, with their articulated bodies and determined, stoic pathfinding — as if they're onto something you ought to know about but never will.

The reason for my earth-bound posture was that I was tracing a string of wiry weed that had led me further and further until, stretched out beneath waving fronds and dipping branches I was looking it in the eye, so to speak, as it wound in and under some tall *Cymbopogon ambiguus* or, as we earthbound grovellers have come to know it, lemon grass.

Why was I submitting myself to these indignities? Because I was preparing the ground for 50 lemon-scented verbenas — *Aloysia Citriodora*. Not to be confused with the 135 lemon-scented gums — *Corymbia Citriodora*— that we nursed painfully through the drought losing only ten which I was about to replace as soon as I emerged from the garden's unfathomable depths.

The decision to embark on this citric extravaganza had been unanimous, formally taken and ratified at a domestic conclave (now comprising, after numbers of defections under the 'emptying nest' protocol, two members of whom only those with an extra X chromosome have the vote).

Lying flat out on the burgeoning, warmish earth, enveloped by the sounds and circumstances, the rough diplomacies and sharp interventions of the sub-arboreal world, the understorey of tangles and shades, it's easy to wander in the mind, to flit from flower to

flower of thought like the bees before your eyes among the physical blooms.

The poet Andrew Marvell — a man who loved gardens and the idea of gardens, though rarely getting himself muddied, spider-webbed, scratched or encrusted under the fingernails — precisely caught the capacity of the garden to engender thoughts and fancies which annihilate ‘all that’s made/To a green thought in a green shade’.

The garden, for Marvell, was a mute critic of man’s foolish ambitions: it was a mistake to seek peace ‘In busy companies of men’ when it could truly be found ‘Only among the plants’. The bustle and nervous aspirations of society were ‘rude’ in comparison to the garden’s ‘delicious solitude’.

In his ‘An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland’, Marvell portrays the all-conquering and murderous Oliver Cromwell as ‘burning through the air’, bringing down ‘palaces and temples’ and, at last, claiming ‘Caesar’s head’ — the life of the king himself.

Yet this ‘restless Cromwell’ Marvell sees emerging, as if plucked forth reluctantly by national emergency, ‘from his private gardens, where/He lived reserv’d and austere/As if his highest plot/To plant the bergamot’. The burgeoning garden is the natural state but circumstances dictate war and mayhem.

Marvell lived in dangerous times. His ‘Horatian Ode’ is a miracle of ambiguity, beneath the surface profoundly disturbed by Cromwell’s destructive, massacring progress, yet always adjusting the psychological and moral balance just so, in order to retreat from a potentially fatal partisanship.

The formal and ordered natural world of the garden is among many other things political, a place where disturbing thoughts can be ‘annihilated’ but only temporarily, a place from which the recluse can burst on a slaughtering rampage. Even that original ‘happy garden-state’ could not last: ‘twas beyond a mortal’s share/To wander solitary there’, so changes were made and Paradise was lost.

Momentarily recumbent in my citric-fragrant haven, I could not be — you would think — further from politics. Not so. It would be better, for example, if it rained: farmers are on the brink of ruin and that is, among other things, a political problem.

And how can I luxuriate here when half a world away, generals as brutal as Cromwell are using natural disaster to repress the weak and powerless?

And this earth that is my temporary bed has turned on the people of Sichuan Province, killing, maiming destroying. More guilt, as I, ‘reserved and austere’, enjoy the peace of my garden, which is calming, reassuring, but — in a world smaller and more volatile than Cromwell’s — irremediably political.

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## Remembering Hassan

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

*Bernard Appassamy*

Practically anywhere I stood on Mauritius, I could see a basalt mountain in the distance. In year 9, our geography teacher asked us to trace from a map onto tracing paper the contours of all the scattered mountains, and then join them. They formed the ring of the giant volcano from which my island had erupted 8 million years ago.



A mountain-like figure, always on my horizon, was Hassan.

Hassan owned a fabric shop in the capital, Port-Louis. He was a Muslim who had known my four grandparents, and sold wide ranges of fabric to four generations of my extended Catholic family.

Before the advent of imported ready-to-wear in the late '70s, Mauritians had all their clothes, linen and furnishings custom-made. A number of fabric shops, mostly owned by Muslims, were spread out over the island. His was the oldest and, in its heyday, the biggest. My mother accumulated most of her dowry at Hassan's, as did my two sisters. Later, my nephews' baby clothes were planned there.

On the phone last week, my mother apologised. 'I thought I'd told you, I'm sorry ... About six months ago ... How old? I imagine in his late 90s ...'

He lived above the wooden and corrugated iron shop with his wife and family. I never caught more than a glimpse of their quarters, which were accessible through an outdoor spiral staircase that overlooked a single tree, an old mango. That tree had a history of bearing fruit earlier than the mango orchards throughout the island, and every summer, before any mangoes went up for sale, Hassan had already treated us to a raffia basket filled with his Maison Rouge mangoes.

As a child coming to the shop with my parents and sisters, I made a beeline for the basement, a cramped space with a low ceiling where the latest shipped-in stock was delivered. I snooped around the aisles, peeped into half-unpacked pine crates and marvelled over the suppliers' foreign stamped addresses. Through the floorboards above my head, I eavesdropped on muddled conversations punctuated by the sound of stilettos and the snipping of large tailor scissors.

By the time I eventually made it back upstairs, my parents had gathered a pile of fabric rolls mostly to clothe the family until the next season. My mother thought out loud the appropriate length needed from each roll which Hassan then swiftly unravelled. I was fascinated by his

skill at either carefully cutting through a piece of fabric or boldly tearing it across.

My more recent visits to Hassan's now weathered shop followed different rituals. Soon after my arrival on the island, I received a message through the grapevine: 'Please come and say hello.' I was first welcomed at the front counter by one of his elderly, grey bearded nephews who ushered me through a familiar meander of gleaming corridors. Each room was dedicated to a type of fabric; some rooms were even subtly gender specific.

I avoided venturing into the silk and chiffon for-ladies-only room, as my mother and sisters did the wool for-men's-suits room. Generally, boundaries around cotton and linen were more fluid.

Hassan's office was right at the back and filled floor to ceiling with swatches. I would find him sitting at his desk with his short, increasingly crouched figure almost disappearing behind large amounts of paperwork. He would rise from his chair, straighten his immaculate white Kurta and white crochet cap, and greet me.

The conversation covered a set pattern. We both knew what we felt comfortable talking about, which rooms we could share. The quality of Australian and New Zealand wool, customs duties and sales tax, unreliable suppliers, his declining clientele and health, my job, and living so far from my family. With time, he replaced 'And when are you getting married?' with 'Will you come back to live here again? You don't want to grow old overseas, do you?'

Invariably, he loomed to 'Now, surely you need at least one suit. Shall we have a look?' Later at the cashier, he asked conspiratorially '... on Papa's account?', and we both laughed.

Today, through my bedroom window, a skyline of inner city terraces and satellite dishes stare back at me. Nine thousand kilometers away, standing under the front verandah of my family home, I would be facing the Corps de Garde mountain, named after its resemblance to a sentry — like Hassan, always on duty.

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## Terrorist fear exposes Dutch intolerance

COMMUNITY

Ashlea Scicluna



The Netherlands is widely known for its image of tolerance. Many tourists travel to the capital city, Amsterdam, keen to experience life among people with a famously relaxed attitude towards marijuana, prostitution, euthanasia, abortion and same-sex marriage.

In reality, the popular perception of the Netherlands as a tolerant country is only a half-truth. Legalising controversial issues is emblematic of the Dutch view that what cannot be prevented, may as well be made legal and regulated to maintain order and safety. It is a combination of deep pragmatism and tolerance.

With this in mind, it is easier to understand how beliefs such as Geert Wilders' (pictured) have come to exist within the Netherlands. Wilders made world headlines, and commanded considerable Dutch attention, with the release of his film, *Fitna*. The ten-minute film juxtaposes verses of the Koran with images of Islamic violence from all over the world. *Fitna* urges Dutch citizens to defend their freedom and stop the penetration of Islam.

Although Wilders claims to be interested in warning the Dutch people of the dangers that their Muslim compatriots pose, these dangers are limited. There has only been a single act of Islamic terrorism in the Netherlands — the murder of film director Theo Van Gogh in 2004.

Yet a Europe-wide poll shows the Dutch have a higher perception of terrorist threat than most of their European neighbours. Fundamental to this is a belief that Muslims intend to force a foreign system upon the Netherlands — that a menacing Islamic way of life will encroach upon the traditional values and hallmarks of Dutch identity.

This sentiment is indicative of a system that has failed to understand and accept its Muslim population.

It results from an historical failure. When immigrants began arriving in the Netherlands in the 1960s, from Morocco, Turkey and other countries, they came as guest-workers and in response to an active invitation by the Dutch government. At the time, political thinking concluded that since these foreigners would not take up permanent residence in the Netherlands, there was no need to nurture their Dutch identity.

In fact, it was seen as a righteous thing to allow guest-workers to maintain their own customs and beliefs; this was, after all, the Dutch way.

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As the situation changed and immigrants became residents, the government was slow to recognise the need for formal integration and has been playing catch-up ever since. The children of the original guest-workers are now second and third generation Dutch citizens who are torn between two cultures. These one million Dutch-Muslims, in a country of 16 million, are living largely in isolation from the mainstream culture.

This isolation of communities has historical resonance in the Netherlands. 'Pillarisation' referred to a time when the major religions were effectively segregated from each other. You either belonged to a branch of Protestantism, to the Catholic Church or you were secular.

From birth to death, the Dutch were cocooned in a world of their own — if you were born in a Catholic hospital, you went to a Catholic school, listened to Catholic radio, married a Catholic, and were buried in a Catholic cemetery.

This crucial period in the formation of the modern Dutch nation lasted until the 1960s, when rising secularisation brought the pillars down. It seems this phenomenon has been replaced by a new division along cultural lines.

In a speech late last year calling for the Koran to be banned, Wilders proclaimed that 'a moderate Islam does not exist'. While his statement was rejected by three quarters of Dutch citizens, the same poll illustrated steady growth in support for Wilders' controversial Freedom Party. A further 70 per cent of citizens feel political parties do not discuss Islam often enough and 65 per cent are pessimistic about integrating Islam in the Netherlands.

Most Dutch rarely mix with the Islamic population, begrudgingly tolerating their existence. This is a negative and regressive form of tolerance that harks back to the days of pillarisation.

There is a schism within the nation that can only be reversed if it is recognised that tolerance in the Netherlands has become a burden. The foundations of the myths that form Dutch identity are ungrounded. This needs to be acknowledged.

Positive forms of coexistence should be pursued on the basis of what the Dutch and their Muslim compatriots have in common, not that which separates them. Wilders' frustrations and fears have unearthed a discussion that the Dutch people need to have.

---

## **Living in a poem is rent free**

POETRY

*Heidi Ross and Margaret McCarthy*

### **Lament of the Urban Poet**

It's hard to make things rhyme  
When you're running short of time  
And you cannot seem to get your thoughts on paper.

No matter if you could

You still wonder if you should  
Or if you'd best find a less indulgent caper.  
But you try to relax  
Cut the TV, phone and fax  
Play your favourite instrumental, light a taper.  
Put your mind to the chore ...  
When a knock upon the door  
Makes the brewing verse just disappear like vapour.

*Heidi Ross*

### **Living in a poem**

*For BL*

Living in a poem is rent free  
Its lease is eternal  
Save a stanza or two  
Poems with north facing windows  
Warm as decent childhoods

---

May overheat without warning  
Verse apartments near parks  
Offer tall trees and summer parties  
But the daylight is complicated  
By the untraceable histories of dapples  
In the poem where you live  
Passenger balloons ripen  
Like apricots at first sun

This poem is inhabited  
By bakers of real cream matchsticks  
And fruiterers who convert pessimists with reggae smiles  
Your poem shares espresso, verandas and amici  
It offers haiku brandy for clarity  
Casual iambic measure for strolling  
Then limericks to lighten future composition  
This poem you live in is abstract like time  
Measured or chaotic, it has rhythm,  
Is constantly recomposed  
Not tied to bricks and mortar  
There are no contracts  
Enhancements are encouraged  
Your poem, as described, is wholly portable  
It may be taken from residence to residence  
Without undue disruption  
And — as the price of fixed dwellings soar around you —  
Your poem does not charge rent

*Margaret McCarthy.*

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## What Kevin Rudd can learn from Gordon Brown

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Economists marked the Rudd Government down on its first budget. Rudd gave priority to honouring election promises such as tax cuts, over tapping into the collective economic wisdom to do whatever it takes to cool the economy and arrest inflation.



To this point, Kevin Rudd has shown himself to be a man of his word. As Michelle Grattan [put it](#) in *The Age* on Friday, he has a 'refreshing fetish about keeping promises'. The Budget's announcement of the scrapping of temporary protection visas delivered on yet another election promise.

More work remains to be done. Frank Quinlan of Catholic Social Services Australia [wrote](#) in *Eureka Street* last week that the Budget 'may mark a shift towards a fairer more inclusive Australia'. He said the government has released some very encouraging policy under the 'Social Inclusion' banner, but 'policy and speeches will only be converted to action once substantial funding is allocated to the task of engaging with Australia's most marginalised groups'.

Words are easily lost. We only need to look to the UK, where Prime Minister Gordon Brown appears to be leading the Labour Party, and the country, into the wilderness.

On Thursday, Peter Scally SJ, editor of *Eureka Street's* sister publication in the UK, *Thinking Faith*, [asked](#) what has become of the 'moral compass' of the man dubbed 'Son of the Manse'. Brown's values were strongly influenced by his father, a Church of Scotland minister. He was known to be a strong believer in the 'old Labour' values of public service, social justice, the sharing out of wealth and concern for the poor.

Delivering the Pope Paul VI Memorial Lecture for the British Caritas affiliate CAFOD, in 2004, Brown [said](#) :

If we could together by our actions... collectively change the common sense of the age so that people saw that poverty was preventable, should be prevented and then had to be prevented ... | then all else we do in our lives would pale into insignificance and every effort would be worth it.

But Scally nominates a series of moves in which he 'appeared to abandon his high principles in an attempt to be clever and outwit the Conservatives'. These include the '10p income tax band', which means more than 5.3 million people on low incomes will be worse off. Scally lists

not-so-clever blunders, and their aftermath. 'Every time it blew up in his face.'

As a media performer, Kevin Rudd has shown himself adept at remaining on message with his words. May he do the same with his actions.

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## Burying Australia's inhumane refugee laws

POLITICS

*David Manne*



In recent years protection for human rights in Australia has degenerated. This has been especially marked in the area of immigration. Indeed, the refugee regime in Australia may represent the Western world's worst practice. Key features have included mandatory, indefinite, non-reviewable detention, temporary protection visas, the Pacific/Indian Ocean Solutions, naval repulsion of asylum seekers arriving by boat, and 'excision' of Australian territory to prevent people from applying for asylum in Australia.

Although the changes made after the Palmer enquiry mitigated the human suffering, the changes have been largely bureaucratic. The change in Government has opened the way to a more fundamental review of refugee policy and legislation.

The policy of granting only temporary protection visas to on-shore asylum seekers violated many human rights principles and treaty obligations. The policy re-traumatised thousands of recognised refugees fleeing tyranny from places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Burma. Refugees were discriminated against according to their way of arriving. They were denied rights to family reunion and travel documents. They were reassessed arbitrarily after three years, and risked losing their refugee status if their visa expires. They lived in a twilight world.

The Labor Government's abolition of TPVs is a commonsense and humane decision. But a more substantial review of immigration policy and legislation is still required. This must recognise that immigration legislation has departed from the application of normal legal principles that lie at the foundation of our legal system, such as access to legal advice and courts, and anti-discrimination principles.

Reform of refugee policy should place within the mainstream Australian legal system and ensure that it meets international human rights obligations. Although this will require new legislation, many abusive practices can be changed within the framework of existing legislation.

The Pacific Solution caused great human suffering. It involved 'excising' Australian territory to prevent claims for protection under the Australian legal system, warehousing asylum seekers who arrived by boat in Nauru or PNG, denying the right to legal assistance, deciding claims for refugee status outside the rule of law, and refusing durable resettlement to those found to be refugees.

The Government has dismantled the Pacific Solution, however it has retained the excision provisions. New arrivals are condemned to detention on Christmas Island, and continue to be denied access to the protection of the Australian rule of law. This risks replacing the Pacific Solution with an Indian Ocean Solution.

The legislation that underpinned the Pacific Solution needs to be reformed in such a way that asylum seekers enjoy equal protection under the Australian legal system.

The damage done to human beings by mandatory, unreviewable and indefinite detention has been demonstrated. The policy not only violates Australian obligations under various international treaties, it also runs counter to the principles governing detention in Australian law, which provide that it should be for specific 'protective' reasons, that it should be for a finite period, and should be open to legal challenge.

Even recent reforms leave release into the community entirely at the minister's discretion. It is disappointing that in the Budget far more money is being committed to exorbitant and inhumane incarceration of innocent people, instead of more reasonable, inexpensive and humane alternatives.

This detention regime must be changed to enshrine the principle that detention is undesirable and should only be used as a last resort. Any use of detention in the processing system should be limited in time, subject to judicial review, and be only to check identity, health and security issues. Those presently in detention should be released with appropriate rights to welfare and to work.

The cornerstone of the existing system is ministerial discretion. The minister is invested with more than 20 sets of powers that enable him to decide matters as significant as people's opportunity to be reunited with their families and to be protected from persecution. The minister cannot be compelled to hear cases, give reasons for his decisions, nor is his judgment reviewable. All the evidence suggests the exercise of these powers has been arbitrary, whimsical and unwieldy, and the advice given to ministers often flawed.

The question here is not which minister or government has been tougher on decisions, but whether correct and just decisions have been — or are capable of being — consistently made. The minister must avoid the folly of making flawed decisions under a failed system.

This framework must be changed to give responsibility to administrative decision-makers and to courts under clear legal and policy guidelines. The whole field should be brought under the mainstream legal system that governs administrative decision-making.

The core of these suggestions is to bring immigration law into the mainstream legal system. It should operate under a set of principles and doctrines that reflect our international obligation to respect human rights. But because history suggests political considerations often lead to an unjust and cynical policy, principled immigration reform would be greatly strengthened by the introduction of a Federal Charter of human rights.

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## 'Buy Australian' catchcry fuels arts renaissance

Book review

Richard Flynn

**Wolf, Gabrielle. *Make It Australian: The Australian Performing Group, the Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre*. Sydney, Currency Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-086819-8163. RRP: \$39.95**

'The APG (Australian Performing Group) helped bring about a renaissance in Australian theatre,' writes Gabrielle Wolf, author of *Make It Australian*. 'The 'New Wave' of the late 1960s and 1970s was the first major outpouring of new Australian drama since the decades surrounding Federation in 1901.

'At no other time has there been more plays written and staged by Australians ... Between 1968 and 1981, at least 350 Australian plays were produced in Melbourne alone. The APG contributed a third of them.'

*Make It Australian* is a fascinating account of writing and performance developed in two small drama 'spaces' in Carlton, Melbourne: first at La Mama and later the Pram Factory.

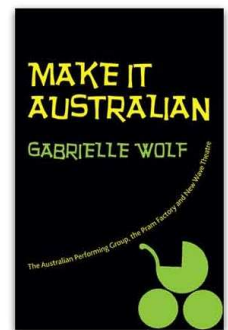
It was a time 'when theatre was central to the hot issues of the day, and a mirror for a country seeking a new image, enraging, exciting and always entertaining'. Robert Menzies was prime minister, so there was much for left-wing arts activists to agitate about. They thrive best, it would seem, under conservative governments.

The *dramatis personae* of Wolf's work include John Romeril, Geoffrey Milne, Barry Oakley, Max Gillies, Sue Ingleton, Graeme Blundell, Jane Clifton, Bruce Spence, Evelyn Krape, Greig Pickhaver (aka H.G. Nelson), Jack Hibberd, Barry Dickens and, on and off, David Williamson. Interviews, discussion of a wide range of plays and painstaking poring over stacks of 'minutes of meetings' form the fabric of her study.

While some readers may associate 'Buy Australian!' with businessmen such as Dick Smith, he was not the first to propose that consumers should favour the local brand. Not surprisingly, the arts industry has been a leader in raising the consciousness of Australians to what they could produce in their own backyard.

Initially, the idea that maybe, just maybe, the local product was inferior was not accepted as sufficient reason for preferring the import. If it was Australian, that was good enough — 'Make it Australian, make it local, tell our story!' But patrons were not always so accommodating.

The APG was an 'arts collective', in which everyone was originally considered equal — directors and designers no more important or influential than the actors. New ideas and



structures were at its heart, though many proved impractical and were quietly abandoned.

When Government grants started to flow, some at APG were conscience-stricken about accepting assistance from those they were warring against or criticising. Of course, they soon realised that it was not from politicians but all taxpayers that the funds came.

The Whitlam Government (1972–75) saw the arts awash with money as never before (or since). There was soon little for the collective to rail about. Coupled with that, the Pram Factory was sold and so, deprived of its 'home', by the end of 1981 the APG was no more.

Nonetheless, its role in the development of Australians' awareness of the importance of the home-grown product is undeniable. Many former members are active in theatre and allied fields to this day.

Although Wolf presents an overview of how things were, she concedes those actually involved would have a different slant. That said, this examination of a significant 'mover and shaker' in the development of the nation's writers and performers is definitely worth some attention.

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## What nuns contributed to patient care

### COMMUNITY

*Frank Bowden*



The last time I saw her before she died I was surprised by her desire to live. I had met her doctor at the lifts on the way into the ward. 'I doubt that she'll make it through the week,' she said. The deep red blood in the bag suspended over her bed would turn her parchment skin pink but we knew that the next crisis might be the last. She held my hand and pulled me down to her to kiss me on the cheek.

'I have a feeling that I'll be much better tomorrow,' she said. Tears welled in her eyes. 'I'm very tired though. The blood only lasts a few days and then I'm back to where I started.' A nurse entered the room and adjusted the flow rate of the transfusion. I made my apologies and caught a taxi to the airport.

Fifteen years earlier my mother had died in the same bed and it had been Theresa who met me at the lifts with the news. She was in tears then too. She cried whenever anybody on her haematology ward died but, I liked to believe, she cried especially for my mother.

Theresa was a short woman with an enormous bosom that, through the layers of her habit, had comforted countless crying babies. She had a bad back and held herself stiff and upright. She hosted the weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at the hospital but she drank a sherry each evening and she loved bright and cheerful company.

She was strict but she knew that the younger staff nurses needed latitude and she allowed some innovation and limited democracy. She was tolerant of young medical residents because, having worked with several generations of them, she knew that they usually grew into wiser doctors.

She was prayerful but not pious and the occasional profanity escaped her lips. Her faith was simple but its certainty kept many of us from making the final break with belief. We loved her because she acknowledged that caring for unlovable people was hard: she channelled our anger away from the patients without denying us the right to feel it.

Theresa taught me many things. One day I had told an elderly man that the cancer in his lungs had spread to his bones and I felt that in relating his prognosis I had managed to find the delicate balance between hope and hard reality. Theresa took me aside later that day and told me that the patient felt sorry for me, having witnessed my distress in conveying the bad news to him. 'Remember, this isn't about you,' she told me.

She taught me that it was impossible to tell someone how long they were going to live.

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Patients put considerable pressure on you to give them a specific time — a mother needs to make plans for her family, an estranged son may wish to reconcile himself with his father — but a number will almost always be wrong. The family of the patient whom you have told has three months to live will resent it when their father dies in three weeks and the patient who lives for six months after being given three may derive false hope of a cure.

Our job, she said, is to prepare patients and families for the weeks and months ahead, to inform them of the likely process of death and, hardest of all to convey humanely, its inevitability.

Then, in one of those commonplace medical ironies, she was diagnosed with an indolent but incurable bone marrow disease. In her last year she was unable to go a week without a blood transfusion.

A few months before she died, she invited me to her convent across the road from the hospital. I had never been past the ground-floor sitting room where the nuns received their visitors. But this day she asked me to follow her up the stairs.

Her tiny room contained a narrow bed, made up with hospital linen and blankets. There was a crucifix above the door and a hand basin in the corner. This was where she had lived for over 30 years. Her window overlooked a back street lined with parked cars but no trees; a draught rushed under the gap between the door and the linoleum floor. We stayed for a minute or two, then she led me out and down the stairs without any discussion.

Today there are almost no nuns left in the hospitals to provide this kind of mentorship, to create a philosophy of practice that is lived, not written down in unread mission statements. Modern hospital management theory recognises the importance of workplace 'culture' but it is singularly unsuccessful in knowing how to create one that works for the sick. We knew how to do it once. But we seem to have forgotten.

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## Budget could mark switch to fairness

### POLITICS

*Frank Quinlan*

There is much to be celebrated in the Rudd Government's first Budget, but also many questions left to be answered.

The Budget papers are densely packed with references to 'Working Families'. In many cases these references relate to initiatives that are aimed squarely at low and middle income earners, such as direct assistance in the form of tax breaks and child care, but also indirect programs to increase training and other opportunities for the future.

'Working Families' means different things to different people. Some 'working families' are made up of single parents on low incomes and their children. They will benefit from changes to taxation arrangements and the child care rebate, but will still be under pressure to return to work quickly rather than provide direct care for their children or undertake significant re-training to improve their long-term employment prospects.

Some working families comprise two working parents on high incomes. These families, too, will benefit from tax cuts and the child care rebate, but will also continue to enjoy the massive taxation and superannuation benefits that are available to high income earners, but not to low income earners.

Tax cuts look set to deliver the greatest benefits to people on the lowest incomes. This is an important first step in sharing Australia's wealth more equitably. In order to pay for some of these programs we have seen a new focus on means testing. Family tax benefits will be withdrawn from high income households. This is a welcome shift in policy.

If government spending must be constrained in order to defend against inflationary pressures in the economy, then it makes sense for spending to be better targeted. Targeting households earning less than \$150,000 still covers a very large proportion of the voting population.

We need means testing, to ensure we are not spending resources where they are not needed. But during such buoyant times, we must also do more needs testing — ensuring those on low income and benefits have the resources they need to provide food, shelter and dignity for themselves and their families.

For those 400,000 or more Australians who are unemployed, tax cuts are of little value. While the cuts may provide increased incentive for some to return to work, they are of little use to those who lack the skills and capacity to re-enter the workforce without substantial assistance.



For this group we see an emphasis on an overhauled Job Network system, with a focus on education and training in addition to job placement.

This is an important measure. For some years now Catholic Social Services Australia has been advocating changes to the Job Network that deliver greater emphasis on assistance to the most disadvantaged, greater flexibility in how services are delivered, greater flexibility in how resources can be spent by agencies to buy services or supports for job seekers, and decreased administration. In principle at least, this budget makes claim to deliver on all these fronts.

The current range of employment services will be combined in a single integrated service, provided under a single contract. Job seekers will be divided immediately into four streams depending on their level of disadvantage, and a greater proportion of the total funding pool will be spent on those considered most disadvantaged (although this total pool will be considerably smaller due to a decrease in overall expenditure).

Better education and training opportunities will help many Australians to escape poverty traps. Time will tell whether these opportunities can be taken up by those with the greatest need.

There remains a question, however, about where Australia's most vulnerable citizens will find their place in this new order. For a range of complex reasons, some Australians will always remain outside the workforce, or will participate only at its fringes. For others their caring duties or their temporary incapacity will mean dependence on a welfare payment of some kind for a considerable period of time.

The budget papers reveal very little about this group. There are no substantial increases to entitlements, even though it is widely acknowledged that those living on such payments in Australia today are living a life of poverty.

Little light is shed on the nature of any programs that will be developed under the 'Social Inclusion' banner. The government has released some very encouraging policy in this area and delivered some very encouraging speeches on the subject, but policy and speeches will only be converted to action once substantial funding is allocated to the task of engaging with Australia's most marginalised groups.

This budget may mark a turning point. It may mark a shift towards a fairer more inclusive Australia. If we are to ensure that all Australians can live a fairer, more dignified life there is still much to be done, and not all of it is funded by this budget. This budget does represent a substantial change in direction. Time will tell whether that new momentum can be sustained.

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## The alien landscape of a tumultuous midlife

FILM REVIEW

*Tim Kroenert*

***Then She Found Me*: 100 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Helen Hunt. Starring: Helen Hunt, Colin Firth, Bette Midler, Matthew Broderick**



When a well-known actor serves as director of a film in which they are also the star, the term ‘self-indulgent’ readily springs to mind. Doubly so when the director/actor in question is Helen Hunt.

Since winning fame for her seven-year stint in the 1990s US sitcom *Mad About You*, Hunt, hardly a chameleon, has cruised through a string of movie roles, simply ‘playing herself’.

It turns out that ‘playing herself’ — really a dysphemism for her naturalistic acting style — is a strong feature of her directorial debut. As an actor Hunt has entered middle age gracefully, and allows herself to appear both physically and emotionally haggard in this proudly adult drama about the ticking of the biological clock.

Hunt portrays April Epner, a 40-something, devoutly Jewish teacher enduring a midlife crisis of crushing proportions. A number of factors have converged to send her seemingly on-track life off the rails. Top of the list is the departure of her husband, Ben.

Portrayed by Broderick with a perfect mix of childlike vulnerability and purely adult selfishness, Ben flees the matrimonial home, unable to deal with their failure to produce a much-wanted child. But not without one final, awkward bout of lovemaking — April’s desperation to make Ben stay, colliding with his boyish desire to get his rocks off.

The repercussions of this terminal coupling are predictable, although the precise ways in which they will impact upon later events is surprising.

Days later, April’s adoptive mother dies. In the midst of April’s grief, charismatic talk show host Bernice Grace (Midler, in full-blown comic relief mode) materialises, claiming to be her biological mother and trying to insinuate herself upon April’s already complicated world.

As if there weren’t enough emotional plates to keep spinning, the recently, painfully single April is starting to fall for Frank (Firth), the father of one of her students, himself an emotional train wreck of a divorcee.

This is an unashamed tearjerker, which treads some emotionally complex terrain, despite its soapie conceits. The real triumph is that it’s also very funny — that Hunt finds the capacity for humour as well as heartache demonstrates great insight and compassion for humanity.

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Amid the ensemble cast, Firth is a standout, marrying his usual foppish charm to brooding and, at times, literally aggressive grief. From the moment he walks on screen it's clear he's damaged goods — which makes him an equally kindred and destructive partner for the similarly damaged April.

None of the characters is perfect, least of all April, although she tries to manoeuvre the alien landscape of her tumultuous midlife with her dignity intact and her faith still strong. With her longing for motherhood competing with the resonant ticking of the biological clock, you can hardly begrudge her the occasional misstep.

## Rudd 'quiet diplomacy' could help stem Burmese cyclone crisis

POLITICS

*Tony Kevin*

In 2005, the UN General Assembly and Security Council agreed that each State has the responsibility to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. With this responsibility comes the idea that sovereignty can, in some circumstances, be breached when a State fails in its duty.



It is now more than 12 days since Cyclone Nargis struck Burma's delta region with devastating force, causing many thousands of deaths — a number that is set to spiral due to subsequential disease, starvation and exposure. Yet the Burmese Government continues to conduct business as usual, making no effort to speed up visas for foreign aid agencies desperate to get relief teams, supplies and infrastructure into disaster zones.

Given the UN doctrine regarding 'responsibility to protect', should concerned nations intervene in Burma in order to stem the humanitarian crisis?

China, Burma's great power ally and protector, and a permanent UNSC member, wouldn't countenance invasion or military threat. Nor would ASEAN, though it is Chinese power that counts here. This leaves persuasive diplomacy.

But the Burmese junta will not be persuaded by governments, like ours, which it knows would be pleased to see it fall. Because Australia has an embassy in Burma, we will make representations (as other embassies will) to get the aid moving. These will be met with indifference, because the junta knows we are not its friends.

Effective pressure may be exerted through a willing China, the one country whose views it heeds. So the issue becomes how to influence China.

There are two ways to do this. First, through quiet bilateral diplomacy by countries such as Australia, which have good relations with China. Here is Mr Rudd's opportunity. If he succeeds, we won't necessarily know about it. Quiet diplomacy works best when its successes are not trumpeted. I pray this is being done, for the Burmese people's sake.

Secondly, through the UNSC. Cyclone Nargis, an internal Burmese civil disaster, has nothing to do with international peace and security. But then, nor did East Timor.

Timor was the template. Since Timor, the UN Security Council can take interest in a major human rights crisis within a country that is being badly managed by its government. If the

Burmese government is causing mass deaths through gross neglect of its duty to protect its people, the UNSC can legitimately take an interest.

How might this be done? On the Timor model, the UNSC could meet now to request an urgent report from the Secretary-General on the crisis, on what UN and other relief agencies are doing, and on what problems they are encountering in delivering aid.

The UNSC could then agree to send an urgent fact-finding mission to Burma, headed by a senior UN ambassador, to report directly back to the UNSC on what the problems are and what needs to be done.

The UNSC could then pass a resolution, by vote or consensus, condemning the Burmese Government's failure to

protect its people. We are talking about a few days of active crisis diplomacy here; not weeks.

This is a strategy of ratcheting-up of world disapproval. Long before the sanction of a UNSC resolution, a UNSC mission to Burma would of itself be a strong rebuke to the Burmese government. For it would not be needed, if the latter had been doing its job in letting relief aid flow unhindered to the people.

Such a process would necessarily involve China's willing cooperation. China as a permanent member with right of veto could unplug the process at any time it chose.

The advantage of this Security Council route is threefold: it takes the form of growing public pressure on the junta, it respects China's importance, and it engages China publicly.

The formal moves by the Council would as always be preceded and accompanied by vigorous unreported bilateral diplomacy in New York, to and among the 15 UNSC members.

Here is Australia's second opportunity for quiet diplomacy. Parallel with our bilateral representations to China, we should seek to engage the UNSC, on the lines suggested above. This is what the UNSC can do, under the

'responsibility to protect' doctrine. It is Australia's duty as an active UN member to press for it.

By working correctly through the UN Security Council system, in ways that respect China's dignity and power as a permanent veto-wielding member, Australia would not antagonise China.

Australia is not a Security Council member but as a member country of the UN, concerned for humanitarian reasons, can seek urgent consultations with the Secretary-General and the 15 UNSC members, to advance such policy proposals.

China is the most important interlocutor at this point. But it is important that others like the

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US and France be asked to contribute to a real solution.

These two strategies — both working mainly through China, one bilaterally and the other in the UNSC context — are the ones most likely to help the suffering Burmese people. Let us hope Mr Rudd and DFAT pursue them vigorously.

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## The human face of Burma's death toll

EYEWITNESS

*Anonymous*



Today I returned from one of the areas most affected by the cyclone. Nearly 30,000 people here met a watery grave. In Kyalatt, Phaypon, Bogala and the villages around, thousands perished.

Today Burma weeps and the tears of the innocent wound us. I have seen the suffering of the graceful people who live in these parts. When nature compounds their agony, the heart is torn with despair.

I went far off to Phaypon, down the Irrawady river. With bodies of human beings and cattle floating alongside the boat, we reached a destroyed village.

We were the first outsiders to reach the villagers. Cyclone Nargis bombed them, flattened them and left their spirit shaken.

In an assault of 'shock and awe', nature attacked the hapless men and women at night from the seas, the river and the air. Howling winds at shrieking velocity tore through settlements, like fighter bombers.

It is a sad sight. To my eyes — which have seen the effects of the Tsunami and the Kashmir earthquake — this is really overwhelming. Nature unleashed a storm of death and mayhem, wounding an already suffering people.

Yesterday, with tears in their eyes, women explained how the waves snatched their babes from their breasts. A mighty tidal wave became their grave. The mothers weep.

As our boat moved along, a body of a five-year-old boy drifted across our path. He is the child of a mourning mother somewhere. The boy drifts in unnamed waters, waiting for burial, unwept and unnamed.

People do not have drinking water and there is no food. Children bite at coconut shells. Decaying debris lies in the waterlogged terrain. Dead animals are spread out near the debris. The people have neither the energy nor the will to bury them. There are many refugees, living in roofless churches and monasteries. Help has not reached them.

We are doing what is possible in Burma. During the last two days we have been reaching out to the starving people. With the price of diesel skyrocketing and fuel not available,

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transport is still a problem. There is still no electricity or water even in Yangon.

Burma is in deep mourning. The count of the dead has passed 80,000 and is still rising. The majestic Irrawady was the mother to the people. It gave them food, was their waterway, winding through some of the most beautiful rice fields in the world. The delta had an alluring beauty before Irrawady yielded to the fatal charms of Nargis. The mother became a monster, the beauty a beast.

The lands and fields were raped that night. It will take ages for the people to return to normal. Apart from their material needs, they will also need great fellowship.

In a remote corner of the village, wading through slushy mud, we reached a small broken church, where famished refugees were waiting for people from the outside world. When we reached there, they welcomed us with gratitude and served a cup of Burmese tea. It was all they had.

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## Tips for a more discerning budget night

### POLITICS

*John Warhurst*

This evening's Budget is a major political event, perhaps the biggest one of the year. But, like all budgets, the whole package (the Treasurer's speech plus the accompanying papers) is so big that it is difficult for anyone to get their head around it. As a consequence, many of us latch on to relatively trivial details. Here are some points to aid your thinking as you are watching tonight.



The Budget normally condenses a whole year's politics into a single document. In the case of the Rudd Government it is less than six months. It is the culmination of months of hard work and argument by ministers, public servants, pressure groups and lobbyists. The final decisions are taken by Cabinet.

It is one of the most important markers of the year because it is a major parliamentary set piece between the Government and the Opposition. In a non-election year like 2008 it is probably the most important marker of all.

Any budget is about trade-offs and choices between available spending and taxing options. There are inevitably winners and losers; those who will be pleasantly surprised by the outcome and those who will be bitterly disappointed.

A first-year budget in a three-year electoral cycle is the best opportunity that any government has to produce a mean, tough budget full of cuts to spending and rebuffs to sectional interests. A government can give out goodies and election bribes in years two and three.

A budget is a particular challenge for a Labor government seeking respectability, given popular skepticism about the party's economic credentials. It must meet the expectations of the business community and the financial press while not disappointing its traditional supporters too much.

The Budget is a technical document, hard for any amateur to decipher. Even the professionals need time to digest its details; hence the media lock-up where journalists and pressure groups are given a head start over the rest of us to give them more time before they are asked to comment. Be aware of the distinction between new money being made available and old money previously announced, spending allocated in small chunks only over the longer term, and spending only kicking in at various times in the future.

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The best short cut to understanding the Budget is to see how the assorted pressure groups, like business, farmers, the welfare lobby and the ACTU, respond on the night and during the following day. Their responses can be predictable, but they do have expertise and experience even though they are self-interested.

The Budget is the biggest day of the year for the Treasury department. It is a good example of the huge advantage the Government has over the Opposition in available resources, because the Treasury is there to support the Government.

The Budget is the Treasurer's Big Day too. It may be the making of Wayne Swan if he gets it right. He lacks the commanding presence of previous treasurers such as Paul Keating and Peter Costello, so he has been under pressure. But after a shaky start he's doing quite well against one of the rising stars of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull. A win by Swan over Turnbull would shake the Opposition's confidence even more than it has already been shaken.

If Labor wins general acclaim for this budget it will have cemented its hold on government and probably even guaranteed its re-election in two-and-a-half years time. That is a big call, but the moment is that big. The task of the Opposition leader, Brendan Nelson, and his party will have been made immeasurably more difficult.

On the other hand, if Labor falters then the Opposition has been given its first big opportunity since the 2007 election to make inroads into Labor's strong lead in the opinion polls.

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## **The sweet, potent scent of bacon**

POETRY

*Thom Sullivan*

### **Via Anglesea**

*— for Simon, Nicholas & James*

Waking to pungent country air  
in unfamiliar country — yawning,  
scuffing verandah-boards  
with numb, chill-blunted toes —  
prising a stiff bath-towel loose  
from a rank of luminous pennons  
adorning the verandah rail.  
And out beyond the verandah,  
beyond a near fence-line,  
cattle and kangaroos graze icy grass  
and a grey sky winces  
with the first cold light of dawn.  
From beyond a stand of scrub  
the domestic world insists —  
the churr of early traffic,  
elusive enough that it might yet be  
the celestial hum of legend —  
the shifting of the spheres.  
And in a further window  
a light snaps on to the slow sounds  
of life stirring within. And soon

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the sweet, potent scent of bacon  
rouses me from the stillness  
and the senses' distillation.

### **Flotsam at Gibson's Steps**

— *for Simon, Nicholas & James*

A stone-hewn stair and slatted, salt-encrusted decking  
lower us by stages to the sand —  
the cliff-face shouldering us out over the swell.  
In one place run-off wrinkles the scarp —  
the stone gone mossy, sedge-ripe and lurid green  
and plunging tendrils of sodden vine.  
And through a mist cold rain comes on,  
lighting the skin — the sensation  
seared by a burring, blustering wind.  
We pucker the sand: our four sets of footprints  
blurring with the shuffle of other feet,  
blearing where we err toward the tide.  
The beach ends, subsumed again where cliff and surf collide,  
where a stone-stack has toppled,  
jagged its head against the cliff and tumbled  
into a mass of mottled stone and rubble.  
We take our last photos perched atop the wreckage —  
in triumph. And turning back along the beach  
we pause to kick and wonder at wooden flotsam  
braided by a hash of kelp. Spars, beams —  
sea-damp, phosphorescent and slick —  
becoming bone beneath the teething sand.

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### **Summer Dam**

Long weeks, its eye crusts over,  
squinting hard against  
the noondays' aching light —  
by late-December, the hollow socket  
is plated shut by scales of yellow silt.  
The dust whispers on.  
Muzzling cattle dribble strings  
of hot saliva — their bellowing  
echoing on into the haze.  
A mob of kangaroos  
hammers off across the paddock  
in a squall of chirring locusts —  
riding the shoals of brittle grass,  
breasting them like waves.

### **When the Rain Comes On**

When the rain comes on it is sudden and heavy  
and we are caught in open ground. Running on  
across the hay-trash, we shelter beneath  
a fire-gutted blue-gum — the only vegetation  
on this side of the paddock — to wait  
for the downpour to pass. Long since seared,  
the tree still squeezes up a thin flock of foliage,  
its torso charcoal-brittle in parts — disfigured —  
contorting upward in one sheer exertion  
  
from a stubble of spectral flames. In childhood days

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we played here — where grey, pared roots  
pool dung and rain. And still, the trunk  
worn smooth — waist-high — and tallow-roan  
by generations of chafing, lice-ridden cattle —  
honing old wood to grub-knotted bone.

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## Small symbols of hope amid Myanmar cyclone devastation

EDITORIAL

*Andrew Hamilton*



As the scale of death and destruction in Myanmar becomes clearer, the pervasive response is one of helplessness.

We feel the ordinary helplessness of being distant from those who suffer, and of being dwarfed by the scope of the suffering which we read about. We feel helpless because anything we can do is too little.

In response to the catastrophe in Myanmar we may also feel helpless rage at the callousness of its military rulers. They ought to serve their people but do nothing to help them. They even obstruct international efforts to help.

In these floods everything is out of joint. Nature is out of control; thousands of people must lose their lives rather than live them. Granaries leach grain to the waters rather than store it; international power is ineffectual before local resistance.

The challenge in the face of so much helplessness and so much contrariness is to keep alive the hope that things can be different, that shared humanity is more than a comfortable abstraction. That challenge is not logistical but spiritual. So although the Christian feast of Pentecost, celebrated yesterday, will do nothing concrete for the victims of the flood, it may suggest what is involved in keeping hope alive.

Pentecost is about large hopes. It asserts the Christian hope that when Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, he reconciled all human beings with God and one another. This hope ran contrary to all available evidence about the power of Jesus' death and about reconciliation between human beings.

The story of Pentecost supports hope through small symbols. The large hope that all humanity will be reconciled is caught in the small story of people who are divided by language but who hear in their own tongues a single speech delivered in another language. This story keeps alive the larger hope. It also gives power to the memory of Jesus' death and rising.

In the face of the helplessness engendered by the flooding in Myanmar, it is also important to attend to symbols. Here too small symbols may support the hope that we can make a difference, that tyrannies are not forever, and that our common humanity is more than a nice metaphor.

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Symbols are there to see in Myanmar: NGO's mobilising to respond to the crisis; the generosity of people giving to help others so distant; efforts of diplomacy trying to make an intransigent regime less inhumane; Buddhist monks enduring.

Symbols don't bury the dead or feed the starving. So they can be dismissed. But they can also encourage us not to lose hope.

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## Workplace pranksters become intolerable bullies

POLITICS

*Moira Rayner*

Workplace bullying was included as a specific risk to occupational health and safety in most States' workers compensation legislation more than four years ago. It's generally defined along the lines of 'unreasonable repeated behaviour that threatens, humiliates or intimidates or undermines a person and is a threat to health and safety'.



This is not completely unlike definitions of discriminatory 'harassment'. The Sex Discrimination Act 1984 defines sexual harassment to include an unwelcome act of a sexual nature which makes the person affected feel threatened, intimidated or humiliated, and which a reasonable person would expect to have had that effect.

Bullying and that particularly noxious form of it, sexual harassment in the workplace are thought to cause billions of dollars of loss and damage in the workplace. The most common outcomes are division, retreat from social participation, lost productivity, distress and emotional if not psychiatric injury, dramatically increased sick leave, absenteeism, and staff resignations.

Most victims try to pass instances of bullying off as minor, but they most certainly are not. Sexual harassment statistics kept by anti-discrimination agencies such as HREOC and state and territory equal opportunity bodies show the most common outcomes of complaints are victimisation, the departure of the complainant, enormous costs to investigate the case, and the eventual departure of the alleged harasser.

Australian 'larrikins' and good humour men appear to still operate under a mistaken impression that their intentions — nearly always, to get a laugh from their peers — is what determines whether or not bullying or discriminatory harassment is something for which they should be called to account.

Recently AFL Footy Show veteran Sam Newman made offensive references to Caroline Wilson, a colleague on another football show, during a 'spontaneous' skit involving a mannequin designed to look like Ms Wilson. He defended the skit as satire, though a number of senior women football administrators called it for what it was: a public put-down of a smart sporting commentator linked with her perceived sexual attractiveness, because she's a woman. It was also a very public bullying incident.

Newman is not alone in his misjudgment. On 28 April the leader of Western Australia's

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Opposition broke down in tears at a press conference. A couple of days earlier an unnamed woman staffer was revealed to have complained that in December 2005 Troy Buswell had 'sniffed the chair' she had been sitting in at his parliamentary office, in front of other staff members.

He said at the time it was done for a laugh. It appears he wasn't aware of the standards of workplace conduct despite having previously admitted to snapping a Labor staffer's bra as a drunken party trick. He's learning the hard way that there are limits on what is acceptable, even when colleagues laugh or turn a blind eye.

Buswell's sudden distress may have been contributed to by his political colleagues' 'look-away' attitude to his past jests. WA's Deputy Liberal leader Dr Hames was reported to say Buswell was a 'rough diamond with a robust sense of humour' who had since cleaned up his act. It remains to be seen if Buswell will relinquish his leadership.

Should we feel sorry for those accused of being bullies and harassers? In a way, yes, because they do not — and in some cases, will not — empathise with the effects of their conduct on others.

I have conducted many workplace incident investigations since 1994 and I am fairly unshockable. I have heard truly appalling stories, and understand the personalities, history and culture that permit careless talk and offensive acts to take place.

In all the time I've been doing it, excluding my years as an Equal Opportunity and HREOC Commissioner, only once have I heard of a similar incident (in a government office). Its consequences were so serious that they led me to make my first and only recommendation that the employer should consider dismissing the joker forthwith.

That man was more culpable than Buswell or Newman. He was intelligent as well as ambitious. He had been allowed to get away with bullying behaviour by his managers who waited for someone to complain and didn't act on things they saw and heard.

What was most disturbing in all these cases is that colleagues seem prepared to speak out about the effects of months or years of jokes and putdowns and bullying at work, only under cover of anonymity and/or confidentiality. In my case, truly disgusting bullying conduct was only revealed after a particularly targeted staff member had been so grossed out that he was unable to face that workplace for one more day, without becoming physically ill.

Workplace bullying is a massive problem throughout Australia. People get hurt, businesses get damaged. It is especially serious when the perpetrator is a leader. Employees and management should work to undermine the look-away culture that allows such behaviour to flourish, and permits an intolerable bully to hide behind the mantle of 'prankster'.

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