

# EUREKA STREET

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THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY  
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# EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY  
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## A hard rain

**A**S THIS ISSUE OF *Eureka Street* was about to go to press, there were reports out of Guatemala that as many as 1400 people were feared to have been buried alive in the highlands village of Panabaj, by a mudslide triggered by torrential rains from Hurricane Stan. The victims were mainly poor indigenous Mayans living in improvised dwellings on mountainsides and close to riverbeds.

This is but the latest tragedy for a people who have been living precariously for decades. As Lucy Turner reports (see 'Guatemala's unforgiven', p18), 83 per cent of the more than 200,000 victims of Guatemala's 36-year civil war were also indigenous Mayans.

That the victims of Guatemala's civil war suffered unconscionable human rights abuses at the hands of fellow humans is indisputable. Less clear is whether the victims of the mudslide suffered because of what the insurance companies commonly call an Act of God, or whether their suffering can be attributed in any way to you and me. There is mounting evidence that global climate change is accelerating, increasing the likelihood of more frequent and more severe floods and droughts (for the devastating effects of the latter on the nomadic peoples of Niger, see Anthony Ham's 'Anatomy of a famine', p14).

Human activity, primarily the burning of fossil fuels, is now generally regarded as a significant factor in global warming. Even the Bush administration (while still refusing to sign the Kyoto agreement on greenhouse emissions) has admitted that the problem is partially of human making (see 'Power politics', p7, by Tim Thwaites).

No one is claiming that climate change caused hurricanes Stan, Rita and Katrina, or the recent Pacific typhoons, but if our actions are contributing to a climate which makes such storms more likely, surely we owe it to the dead, maimed and homeless (not to mention ourselves) to examine those actions more closely.

Two recent Australian books are good places to begin: Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers* (Text, \$32.95) and Ian Lowe's *A Big Fix* (Black Inc, \$16.95). Both offer practical solutions to reducing our greenhouse emissions.

This year it was a hard rain that fell along the coastal communities of the Gulf of Mexico, from the First World to the Third. Next year, or the year after that, it could fall much closer to home—or not at all. ■

**Robert Hefner** is the acting editor of *Eureka Street*.

## Dangerous practice

**A**FTER THE DEPLORABLE Bali bombings, the deportation of American peace activist Scott Parkin may seem trivial. But both events invite us to ask what kind of an Australia we want.

The publicly verifiable facts of the case are clear. Mr Parkin was visiting Australia speaking on non-violent protest. He is an opponent of the war on Iraq, which the Australian Government supports. His activities do not seem to have concerned authorities in the United States. He was arrested, detained, deported and charged for costs after an ASIO report that evidently satisfied the Government and the Leader of the Opposition. His lawyers have appealed against the decision, and the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security is reviewing the case.

The judgment made by ASIO and the grounds for it are not clear, even though they led to Mr Parkin's deportation and affect his reputation and his future ability to travel freely. But although the grounds may not be made public, a version has been leaked.

After brutal bombings it may be necessary or excusable for governments to harm people without disclosing the grounds. But it is a dangerous practice because such measures erode the values that they profess to defend.

The development of national security states usually begins when they identify a group of dangerous people, of terrorists.

They then build resources for identifying terrorists and their sympathisers. The list of those under surveillance and considered to be dangerous inevitably grows. It comes to include those who are opposed to government policy.

Having identified so many enemies of the state, governments further restrict personal liberty and due process. Since the information on which they act is privileged, they then provide misinformation.

This process can be studied in South Africa after it turned to apartheid. Its excesses always become patent when history turns. The defects, malice and absurdities of intelligence assessments become public. But that is small consolation to those whose lives have been damaged. Nor does it heal the shame with which citizens later gaze on their nation's conduct.

In Australia, we may believe that it could never come to this. But the treatment of asylum seekers by successive governments shows that truth, human dignity and decency are expendable when they stand in the way of executive will.

As we reflect on what happened in Bali, the Parkin affair reminds us that, like bombs, arbitrary powers assumed in the name of national security can threaten our identity. ■

**Andrew Hamilton** is the publisher of *Eureka Street*.

## This special gift

Like Andrew Hamilton (*Summa theologiae*, September–October 2005) I am reluctant to be the fool who rushes in, especially as his column is the first thing I read in each issue, and I am conscious also of Henry Beard's warning, *Et casu Latine loqui cum sodale societatis Jesu ne umquam conaris* (May you never try out your Latin [or anything else] on a Jesuit).

Like Hamilton, I have some questions to ask of Jan Anderson's report of her research in her book *Priests in Love*. They are centred on the theme of justice. I am deeply sympathetic to the plight of those men who, in good faith, answered a call to ministry and find themselves unable to meet the celibacy conditions. Sometimes this is the result of some very unenlightened training processes in days gone by and lost opportunities to begin the development of a mature personality, or of heavy demands made and not supported. I am conscious, too, of how easy it is to practise self-deception in these circumstances. In particular, I am conscious that the partners of the priests in this study are vulnerable because of the inequality of their positions and the impossibility of public recognition.

While Anderson and her interviewees address these issues and she accepts that the committed relationships are responsible, I believe the issues must remain relevant. The thrust of her argument, it seems

to me, is that these priests and their partners do not simply see themselves as victims in a sad tale, as Hamilton puts it. They have taken responsibility to maintain their commitment to ministry and also to follow a path to becoming authentically human; in other words, to find a solution to the problem. (It is difficult to consider these untested ideas without resorting to cliché.)

Hamilton makes it clear from the beginning that he is responding to an argument about compulsory celibacy for Catholic priests. Anderson and her interviewees also make it clear that the gift of celibacy can and has been a source of grace for the Church over its history, although they also make the point, I believe, that the two calls, to ministry and to celibacy, are not necessarily tied together. They also draw on the human history of the Church to suggest that compulsory celibacy has a non-graced story as well.

Hamilton is correct to point to the deep earthing of clerical celibacy in Catholic history. I believe that Anderson and her interviewees do see this as well, but that her argument points to an equally important issue, which is simply the social reality that for a very large proportion of the Church earthing is largely not providing nourishment, and that it is nourishment that is the central issue.

It is in his final sentence that I believe Hamilton shifts the terms of his contract with his reader. His 'splendid foolishness' is reminiscent of some of the writing of



G. K. Chesterton, especially his biography of St Francis. While we need reminding that it can be gloriously human to have such heroic generosity, we must also remember that this was a special, and not compulsory, gift. In these times it is difficult for any organisation to justify a request for heroism. People are too suspicious and mindful of past betrayals to hand over what is now seen as their own responsibility.

Times, and the signs of the times, have changed and so has the Church, particularly in its recognition of the vocation of the baptised and the call to be faithful in marriage or in partnership. These might be the splendid foolishness that fertilises these challenging new times. To read the signs of the times does mean reading with the analytic tools available in these times, and I hope Anderson is widely read.

**Martin N. White**  
Prospect, SA

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## A parting word

When I first became editor of *Eureka Street*, my predecessor, Morag Fraser, left me a book as prescribed reading. It was James Thurber's *The Years with Ross*. It described the early years of *The New Yorker* under its founding editor, Harold Ross, and the peculiar brand of managerial madness he pioneered there. His system of paying writers was notable. He created a schedule that only he understood, and made payments only when he remembered to. His example has been infectious in publishing houses since.

In her ode to grammar, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, Lynne Truss describes an argument between Ross and Thurber about the proper use of the Oxford comma. It ended in fist-cuffs. Thurber insisted that the only acceptable usage was 'red, white and blue', Ross that it was 'red, white, and blue'.

I tell these stories of quirky passion because I shall treasure similar stories of the passion for truthful writing and of human vagary as I leave *Eureka Street* to take up a new role with the

Australian Nursing Federation. No doubt the movement from Church to Trade Union sponsorship will generate more stories!

I would like to thank you who form the *Eureka Street* community. You have encouraged me most deeply when you have told me that *Eureka Street* publishes views and arguments that others do not. It is precious because it hosts a forum for public conversation in Australia, one in which new writers can join. It has been my privilege to enable this conversation between writers and readers.

I would like to thank particularly Morag Fraser, Andy Hamilton SJ, Jack Waterford, Michael McGirr, Anthony Ham and Robert Hefner. I am grateful to them as mentors and friends. Robert Hefner has kindly agreed to act as editor of *Eureka Street* for the coming issues. His sensitivity and experience will ensure that you will continue to enjoy *Eureka Street* and to be drawn into the conversation it represents.

—**Marcelle Mogg**

## the month's traffic



## Hallelujah haka

KIWIS FOCUSING TO A NEW DESTINY

**S**ECULARISM HAS EXORCISED many devils, and church inanities deprived us of most counter-availing angels, so it's no wonder that into the vacuum rush groups like Destiny Church, a Maori-based Pentecostal community with its strength in New Zealand's North Island but with outliers in Australia.

After a slow start this seven-year old church now hits the headlines with great regularity in NZ. On 4 March, for example, its leader, Brian Tamaki, addressed a 'pro-family', 'Defend the Legacy' march in Auckland that attracted 5000 people. He took the opportunity to launch a political crusade against NZ's godless political parties. Prime Minister Helen Clark was denounced as an atheist, and Don Brash, the National Party leader, though of Presbyterian lineage, was also far too liberal to be a true believer. Prayer, Tamaki told his supporters, was no longer enough. They were urged to vote in the recent national election for Destiny New Zealand, the church's political wing which campaigns under the slogan 'Nation Under Siege'. Although it made a pitch for the Pacific Island vote, and claims God as its main sponsor, it hardly raised a whimper of interest, polling only 0.5 per cent.

Destiny Church looks, at first glance, like a typical American-style tele-evangelist network. It has a simple answer to everything and is very savvy in its use of the internet and the media. Tamaki is a gifted and personable speaker who got himself elected as 'bishop' on 18 June, though he does go on at considerable length. Like some of its close allies, such as the City Impact Church in Auckland, Destiny Church operates with big budgets, based on an in-your-face insistence on tithing, and appears to suggest that personal and financial success will flow

to believers. Its razzmatazz is impressive and it has an undeniably popular—or should one say populist?—touch. It doesn't talk, for example, of baptism but of 'being dunked'.

It communicates enthusiasm, warmth and security. Much is made of Brian and Hannah Tamaki and their three married children as role models for the movement. It sees itself as a 'breakthrough church' that is 'beyond church in the traditional sense'. Its official statement is somewhat coy about its own core values, but much is said about 'establishing the Kingdom', and restoring 'biblical order'.

In New Zealand religion is generally treated with courteous disdain. It has been largely written out of the history books and the public arena. Almost the only public religious ceremonies taken seriously are those from the Maori tradition, itself strongly influenced by Christianity. But Destiny Church is different. It really stirs the spirits. Its fierce opposition to recent civil unions legislation, for example, which provides legal security for gay couples, led to angry and imaginative counter-demonstrations. Green and Labour Party MPs such as Judith Tizard have the church in their sights.

The Auckland City Council, citing safety reasons, gave a firm 'No' to Destiny Church's original intention of marching right across the Harbour Bridge to protest against civil unions; so instead, it proceeded along Queen Street in the city centre. Secondary school students at Wellington High also wanted to say 'No' to the use of their school premises by the church, but were unsuccessful in the end. Such awareness of religious issues in schools is unprecedented in New Zealand. The considerable wealth of Destiny's leaders, Bishop Brian and Pastor Hannah Tamaki, offers opponents hostages to fortune which are, of course, gratefully received.

Destiny Church regularly makes headlines because it thrives on provocation. It sees itself as a 'genuine counterculture' and is committed to exposing 'current trends, philosophies and mindsets', i.e. anything smacking of 'liberalism'. It has 'had enough of liberal behaviour' and corrupt media. Soon, it fears, 'expressing a biblical position on homosexuality will be a criminal offence'.

The church presents a militant face to the world, some of its members lining

up in black shirts or—more recently—all in white. To see them at full stretch performing a haka is a somewhat fearsome sight, as it is probably meant to be. For those of us with longer memories, muscular Christians—whether in black or white T-shirts, bodyguarding their 'bishop'—brings back very unwelcome memories indeed. Populist Christianity used to get off on anti-Semitism. Now it's the turn of the gays.

Numbers are hard to estimate, but they are not insignificant—certainly in the thousands. Destiny says it has 20 pastors throughout New Zealand, and some 35,000 members. It has developed its own bookshop, health and fitness centre and bilingual early child-care centre. Leaders in the mainstream churches, including the Baptists, are warning that Destiny is a force to be reckoned with. There is some envy of its ability to find a style and a language that appeals to young, alienated Maoris, and well beyond.

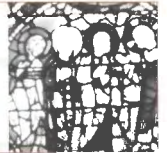
One wonders, however, if it has bitten off more than it can chew with its latest move into politics. The Labour Party had, until recently, rock-solid political support from the Maori Ratana Church, but generally Kiwis see off religiously-toned parties very smartly. As a niche cultural movement Destiny Church has been quite successful. One cannot see it, however, making much headway politically in full-employment, pragmatic New Zealand. Theologically, it is febrile, and one hardly needs to be a prophet to see the pitfalls ahead for it as a church. Personally, I feel sad for its gullible followers, and still more for those caught in its line of fire. It is, no doubt, a sign of our reactive times. Once again, the shortcomings of the mainstream churches come home to roost with a vengeance.

—Peter Matheson

## One last stand

SPAIN'S CATHOLICS TAKE TO THE STREETS

**T**HESE ARE DIFFICULT times for the Catholic Church in Spain. Buffeted by plummeting popularity among Spain's once staunchly Catholic population and outraged by the secular reforms enacted by Spain's socialist government, the Church is preparing to make one last stand.



The Church may thus far have failed to defeat the government's legalisation of gay marriage—a legal challenge to the law's constitutionality is still pending—and fast-track, no-fault divorce. But, undaunted, Spain's major Catholic organisations are threatening to escalate their campaign of mass street protests and civil disobedience. At issue in this latest battle is the government's plan to make religious education voluntary in public schools.

Although Spain's 1978 constitution protects religious diversity, the previous conservative Popular Party government—which was voted out of office three days after the Madrid train bombings in March 2004—made a Catholic subject called Religious Fact compulsory for all students.

Under the previous law, the Catholic Church had exclusive control over the curriculum in religious education and sole power over the appointment of teachers. Other religions could not be taught. Failure in Religious Fact meant that students could not qualify for university education.

In a statement denouncing the new government's plans to remove religious education from the list of compulsory subjects, Concapa, the largest organisation representing Catholic families, warned: 'All actions are legitimate in seeking to modify this project, which is an attack against freedom of education, the right of a school to choose how it teaches, and the right of parents to educate their children as they see fit.'

Concapa also claims to have gathered up to three million signatures in a petition which, it says, demonstrates 'the unhappiness throughout society against a law that has no democratic consensus'.

Before he became pontiff, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger warned Spanish Catholics that they were duty bound to oppose the new laws 'clearly and firmly'. His predecessor, Pope John Paul II, similarly denounced the government's changes to religious education, warning that 'new generations of Spaniards, influenced by religious indifference and ignorance of Christian tradition, are being exposed to the temptations of moral permissiveness'.

The Church has alienated a large swathe of the Spanish population with the stridency of its protests—a recent survey found that just 10 per cent of Spaniards express significant confidence in the Church. The Catholic hierarchy has also been forever tainted by its decision to

## A new understanding

**F**ORTY YEARS AGO, Vatican II promulgated one of its last documents: the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Many have said that it was too optimistic about modernity. Some commentators locate that optimism in the heady days of the 1960s and argue that since we are now more aware of humanity's radical brokenness, the document's optimism should be tempered. The *Pastoral Constitution* is certainly a good deal more optimistic than the Church's dismissal of modernity prior to the Council. However, in my view, the debate over the Council's optimism is a furphy—it distracts attention from the fundamental shift in the Church's relationship with the world, articulated by the Council.

In the 150 years before the Council, the Roman Catholic Church's pessimistic evaluation of modernity was intimately related to its understanding of its role in the world. The world view of Christendom collapsed as new understandings of the individual in society arose and the Church was separated from the state. When the Church lost its directive role in the world, it saw the world as lost from God. In the *Pastoral Constitution*, however, the Council considered the Church-world relationship in a fundamentally new way. It finally, officially set aside the hope of re-establishing the Church-state alliance on which Christendom depended. It also set aside the blanket condemnations that characterised the Church's attitude to modernity in the 19th century: 'The Church also recognises whatever good is to be found in the modern social movement.'

Yet the change effected was more fundamental than the Church simply shaking off the mechanisms that facilitated the Christendom world view. The *Pastoral Constitution* articulated a better, richer theological description of the Church's role in the world. This new relationship is built on two key insights. First, the Council recognised that history has intrinsic significance for the way in which God acts in the world, and that therefore the Church is charged with the task of remaining open to the presence and purpose of God in history. Second, the Council recognised that the Spirit of God is at work in the modern world, both in individuals and in social movements.

Condemnation would hardly be an appropriate response to a world in which the Spirit of God is at work. Rather, dialogue and discernment will be the Church's crucial tasks. In the Council's words: 'Impelled by the belief that it is being led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole Earth, God's people works to discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity.'

The *Pastoral Constitution* does not offer a global evaluation of modernity. Neither does it advise whether optimism or pessimism is a wiser stance. It does articulate a fundamentally new understanding of the Church-world relationship as a dialogue. ■

**James McEvoy** teaches at Catholic Theological College, Adelaide.



## Power politics

**Y**OU CAN BE FORGIVEN if you were unaware that Australia is now part of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, an organisation established last July to promote the development and transfer of clean energy technologies among India, China, Japan, South Korea, the United States and Australia. Together these countries are responsible for more than half the greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, and their economies are all heavily dependent on coal, either as producers or users.

The countries have clubbed together to develop technological solutions to the greenhouse problem. In other words, they want to be able to continue to burn fossil fuels with impunity and avoid the consequences. So the partnership is about engineering ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

There are some very positive aspects to this. For starters, it signals a complete change of tack by the White House. It's an admission that the world actually does have a problem and that it is at least partially of human making, which means we can actually do something about it. In addition, the two most important thrusts of the partnership—locking up carbon dioxide in rocks underground or under the ocean and developing clean-burning coal-fired power stations—will be very useful in the fight to limit global warming.

But Archimedes thinks the whole approach misses the point. First, even if it works brilliantly, it's hardly a permanent solution. It just buys time, until we run out of oil, then gas, then coal. We will still end up having to develop some sort of renewable or infinite source of energy down the track. Why not start now? Second, the partnership supports and rewards the same sort of greedy, exploitative, short-term thinking that got us to this point in the first place. And third, it tends to reinforce the geopolitical status quo, which is why, perhaps, it seems such an attractive solution to George Bush and John Howard. The increasing dependence on technology to stave off the evil consequences of wasteful energy use will exacerbate the economic inequality which favours countries like Australia and the US, but which is also beginning to make the world such a dangerous place today.

Not even all of America is convinced that the kind of approach engendered in the partnership is the best way to go. Nine American states are working towards a Kyoto-style agreement to cap the greenhouse emissions from their power plants. They even want to establish a carbon trading system. This alternative approach—which is also being canvassed by cities and states in Australia—would involve using less energy more efficiently, and boosting the research, development and introduction of renewable forms of energy in increasing amounts. Moving towards such economies based on smaller, more efficient, decentralised power generation seems to be a much more robust form of social organisation.

After observing the performance of the US administration in coping with Hurricane Katrina, Archimedes suspects that many in the rest of the world are no longer so sure that the superpower still has a mortgage on the best ideas of social organisation. As regards climate change, what we need is not a new way of engineering but a new way of living. ■

**Tim Thwaites** is a freelance science writer.

stand wholeheartedly alongside the dictator General Francisco Franco who ruled Spain for 37 years until his death in 1975.

But the Church in Spain—or at least part of it—has not always been thus. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival in El Pozo de Tío Raimundo—a Madrid shanty town—of a Jesuit priest, José María Llanos.

For Father Llanos, who died in 1992, a rigid adherence to the Vatican's edicts or the current association with conservative orthodoxy was not the Church in which he believed. He was a card-carrying member of the Spanish Communist Party at a time when Franco was obsessed with communist plots against him.

Father Llanos, along with his colleague Father José María Díez-Alegría, became the first of Spain's 'worker-priests' and Europe's pioneers of liberation theology, associating not with the powerful but with the poor.

At the time of their arrival in El Pozo, the barrio on Madrid's southern outskirts was one of Europe's poorest, with no running water, roads or sewers. The natural-born radicalism of the impoverished residents found a voice in the two priests. Father Llanos once famously refused to pay the full one-peseta bus fare on a local municipal bus. Instead, he told the bus driver that a peseta 'would be for the whole bus, and seeing that half of it is broken, I'm only paying half'. Within days, El Pozo residents were doing likewise. Within weeks, El Pozo had a new bus service.

Not surprisingly, a prominent columnist in *El País*, Spain's largest-circulation daily newspaper, recently marked the anniversary of Father Llanos's arrival by stating, 'It was because of these priests that the area advanced out of the most abject poverty.'

In contrast, the Church's current brand of dissent would be anathema to Father Llanos, taking as it does as an enemy not inequality but the freedom of Spaniards to live the life of their choosing. ■

—**Anthony Ham**

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# Needle work

A FEW WEEKS AGO, having been persuaded to plan a trip to steamy Asia, I went along to my GP for an assortment of vaccinations. As a traveller mostly to Europe, I hadn't endured the needle since cholera had been struck off the list of evils threatening antipodean travellers. Before that, easily my most memorable encounter with preventative medicine was a typhoid injection in the army.

This procedure was carried out under a high-noon Puckapunyal January sun. We stood around for a long time for no apparent reason—a penchant for inexplicable hiatus was characteristic of our National Service leaders, and exotic rumours would flower and spread during such intermissions. Eventually, we shuffled forward towards the two or three sweating, ill-tempered, needle-jabbing practitioners at the head of the ranks, where those who hadn't already fainted from heat or dread were duly inoculated.

As I approached the front line, I incautiously watched as the medic more or less threw the needle like a dart at the exposed flesh of the bloke in front of me and then, swearing at some problem with the plunger, unscrewed the barrel from the needle, which remained protruding from the patient's arm, and screwed on a new one. And so the long day wore on—a signal one for me because since then I have always consciously looked away from the action on the rare occasions when I'm enduring needles for this or that no doubt excellent reason.

But all of that was a long time in the past and my sturdy habit of looking elsewhere long since established when I fronted up to my GP for a battery of protection against the bacteriological and viral assaults awaiting me in our near north. These involved typhoid (again!), a pre-emptive strike against hepatitis A, and the painful administration of a disincentive for some encephalitic pestilence the name of which escapes me.

As I was leaving, I inquired casually if there would be any side effects. Instead of reassuring me, he wanted to know why I'd asked.

'Well,' I said, 'as a matter of fact, I have to give a talk tonight. I'm launching a new CD by John Schumann ...'

'Of Redgum fame!' he footnoted, obviously pleased to show he was up with the pace.

'Right,' I said. 'Anyway, Schumann's made a wonderful CD, setting some of Lawson's poems to music. And, being a bit of a Lawson man myself, I was asked to advise on the project and ...'

But he was interrupting again. I don't know if you've noticed but there are certain professional people—GPs, medical specialists of one kind and another and dentists prominent among them—who are keen to show they are not prisoners of their own narrow field. Discovering that, prone under the Damocletian scalpel, or stretched out on the examination table, or espaliered on the dentist's chair gasping for air and desperate to swallow, is

a literary person, they suspend hostilities entirely to talk books, announce preferences or test you out.

And so, true to type, my medico said: 'Lawson. Born in Auburn.'

'No, that was C. J. Dennis.'

'Ah yes, of course,' he said, 'Lawson was the one who wrote *Clancy of the Overflow*.'

'Banjo Paterson.'

'Then Lawson made that famous jump at the Blue Lake.'

'Adam Lindsay Gordon.' I grinned deferentially to show that he was allowed to get these things wrong, just as I would make a mess of trying to give an injection. To each his own, said my smiling, tolerant visage.

IT SET ME THINKING, though. How rapidly, how irretrievably, I wondered, are our stories and their tellers and the language in which they are told retreating into a miasma of internationalised pop culture so that even the educated are losing track of the makers of our cultural heritage, the tuners of our original voice. And no sooner had I entertained this well-worn thought than the AFL considerably popped up with a resounding answer by attempting at the last minute to substitute Delta Goodrem for the long since contracted Silvie Paladino to sing the national anthem at the Grand Final.

Each woman is a wonderful and successful artist in her field: Goodrem, however, is a household word because she is part of the popular culture. Its vernacular is Americanised and its music is the stuff of international charts. I presume the AFL reckoned that this would speak more loudly to the fans than the operatic tones of Paladino. We should hope that they were wrong.

In the end, Paladino did the job, though you wouldn't have seen much of her: the panning TV cameras ignored her physical presence almost completely. But the voice was the thing.

Anyway, some hours after my needles, and suffering no after-shocks, I celebrated John Schumann and the Vagabond Crew's *Henry Lawson* in a way Lawson himself would have thoroughly approved. In his introductory remarks, and without, I swear, any collusion with me, Schumann said that although a Delta Goodrem launch would no doubt draw a larger attendance, perhaps a celebration of Henry Lawson, as one of the founders of our literature and our vernacular, was a more notable and important *Australian* event. He was applauded to the echo and even if he was preaching to the converted, it's encouraging to think that the converted are still around and vocal. ■

**Brian Matthews** is a writer who lives in South Australia's Clare Valley, whose southernmost town, Auburn, is the birthplace of C. J. Dennis.



# Tough love

**T**HE INTERESTING, AND PROBABLY ENDURING, thing about *The Latham Diaries* is not Mark Latham's critique of the Labor Party, or even what the book tells about his own self-centredness and self-destructiveness. What might endure is the funeral pyre of the 'climb the ladder of opportunity' Laborism that Latham tried, without great success, to articulate.

Latham genuinely saw himself as a Third Way politician, reaching for the images he sought to evoke about himself and the modern Labor Party. The ladder stuff, and his projection of himself as a disadvantaged working-class boy made good and wanting to make it better for others, was critical to this. So also was the phrase he once blurted out, then later bowdlerised, of his mother's once telling him that there are two types of people in the world: the workers and the bludgers.

Labor was going to shed all of this bleeding-heart stuff of being the party of the underclasses, the whingers, the work-shy and the welfare lobbies. It was, rather, the party of the aspirational working man who wanted a decent education for his kids, a healthy fun environment and rewards for effort. Not a party without compassion, of course, but with warmth and energy for the strivers and the triers, and punishments as well for those who wouldn't shape up. Aborigines? Well, they were disadvantaged and needed some extra help to climb on to the ladder of opportunity, but only so as to put them in an equal place. Refugees? Well, they were just criminals at the end of the day, weren't they?

This was the Mark Latham and the Labor Party packaged for the last election, even if the disparagement of the poor was *sotto voce*. This was the Labor and the Latham who failed, even against a government which had shown every sign of having had its run. And which was, of course, not only reaching out, with much the same narrative, to the constituencies Latham claimed to be able to speak for, but doing so with far more conspicuous success. And, with that success, developing not only a new lease of political life but a radical new agenda not only for industrial relations changes but revolution in the welfare system.

Indeed, it is the welfare-to-work agenda that will mark the Howard Government far more than any industrial relations changes it is able to push through. Some have underrated it, in part because of Howard's cunning at the time it was announced in the budget context. Large sections of existing welfare recipients were 'grandfathered out'; the changes, when they come into effect next July, will affect only new recipients. That muffled the squalls, or the capacities of the lobbies to present an array of pitiful cases of people who would be demonstrably worse off. But the generosity of the initial exceptions is to be more than paid for by the

ideological purity of the new rules which, if they work, will transform not only the welfare system but Australian society. If they work. It's all about work, and, in particular, the firm conviction of the Cabinet that work of any sort is better than a benefit. The attack is particularly focused on those of the welfare generations so long off payrolls that their children have seen no examples of getting up to go to work each morning, or the steady, ennobling and dignifying processes of earning one's own way. Nor is it only about getting people work-ready, in the sense of mechanically cycling them through make-work projects until they build up work habits and learn that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

In the tough talk and hairy-chestedness of the committees there is none of this nonsense about training options, or letting people stay on welfare by going off to university or whatever. Training money, so far as there will be any of it, will be only for show, and at least one remove from the primary object: to wean people off welfare. And if we can't make the bludgers work, we will make their lives so much more difficult by requiring them to traipse daily from potential job to potential job, with documentation of their efforts, that some of them will seek jobs just for relief.

This tough love, of course, is for the good of the demoralised underclasses. Ask any aspirational voter of the sort Mark Latham claimed to represent. They didn't get where they were by hanging around Centrelink! The quality of their lives comes from their own efforts. Sure, we want governments to provide schools and hospitals and better services, but frankly, we are all a bit jack of all of these whingers who think the primary role of government is to send them a cheque each week. Really, it might be tough for a while, but it would be for their own good to be cast into the cold hard world. Especially some of those single mums whose mothers were single mums and whose children have never had a role model of someone who ever had to work for a living. You can imagine how it will be pitched.

So will John Howard call it compassionate conservatism? Not on your nelly. He'll be pitching it pretty much as Third Way stuff of the sort that Mark Latham was forever implying. And Kim Beazley may even be too distracted to fight it hard. First, he will be on the mission of his life to water down the industrial relations legislation that critically threatens his patrons. And he will be asking party strategists: how much of this, in place before we take power, will actually help us when we are in power? The answer, from the sort of people he listens to, might well be: quite a bit. ■

**Jack Waterford** is editor-in-chief of *The Canberra Times*.

# Seeking justice for Jack



Jack Thomas leaves the Melbourne Magistrates Court in February after being granted bail. Photo: AAP/Julian Smith

Jack Thomas is one of the first Australians charged under the Howard Government's new anti-terror laws, but is he really a threat to national security or merely a sacrificial lamb?

**A**S ORDINARY AS A SLICE of bread. This is how a 31-year-old man shovelling dirt in a suburban front yard in Werribee, west of Melbourne, is described by his neighbour. Moving earth as a favour for another neighbour, Jack Thomas is reputed to be generous and hard-working. He's also alleged to have links with terrorists.

Those neighbours who peered out their windows on a November morning last year witnessed a Channel 7 camera crew outside the home in which Thomas, his wife Maryati, their two daughters and his elderly mother-in-law were sleeping. The crew was there to capture on film several police storming into the Thomases' house with machine-guns and Alsatians. They'd come to arrest a man the media had already dubbed 'Jihad Jack'.

Thomas was shackled and kept in isolation in Barwon maximum security prison. He faced three charges: altering his passport, receiving funds from al Qaeda, and providing support to al Qaeda. Facing up to 55 years in prison if

convicted, Thomas is pleading not guilty to all charges.

'The person we know and love bears no resemblance to the myth you read about in the papers,' says his brother, Les Thomas.

Thomas is one of the first Australians charged under the Howard Government's new anti-terror laws. His supporters claim he is an ordinary bloke who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. If it happened to Jack, they say, it could happen to any of us.

'There's a school of thought that says Jack is a sacrificial lamb in Australian politics in the war on terror,' says his lawyer, Rob Stary.

Liberty Victoria's Brian Walters SC describes the Government's actions towards Thomas as 'most improper', 'an abuse of power' and 'a breach not only of human rights, but of the law'.

Thomas's support campaign, Justice 4 Jack, has attracted several hundred supporters around the world. America's most outspoken political dissident, Noam

Chomsky, has declared that 'Australians should be alarmed' about the Thomas case. Among authors, legal bodies and academics who have signed up is Dr Tim Anderson, the civil libertarian wrongly convicted for the 1978 Sydney Hilton bombings. He flew to Melbourne to support Thomas, whose case, he believes, has sinister parallels with Anderson's own framing and wrongful eight-year imprisonment.

Thomas came to the attention of Australian police after a series of fateful events. In 1996 he began a spiritual journey that would eventually lead him to Islam. Introduced to the faith by friends at the Footscray market, where he purchased produce for work, he was impressed with the 'serenity' of practising Muslims and was attracted to Islam.

'I found it hard to understand my brother's conversion to Islam,' says Les Thomas. 'Being fed crude media stereotypes, I was completely ignorant of the rich tradition of culture and learning in the Muslim world, but I could see Jack

had found a profound sense of meaning and peace in his new religion.'

Thomas married his Indonesian-born wife, Maryati, in South Africa, and the two made their haj pilgrimage to Mecca. In 2001, with baby daughter Amatullah, the family travelled to a number of Islamic countries, including Afghanistan, to experience life the Muslim way.

'We pleaded with Jack not to go,' says Les Thomas, 'but he and Maryati were

But Thomas missed his family, and eventually decided to return home. Preparing to board a plane from Pakistan's Karachi airport on 4 January 2003, he was arrested and detained without charge in military prisons in Karachi and Rawalpindi. For a fortnight, his family had no idea of his whereabouts, only to learn of his arrest through media reports.

Thomas was interrogated by the CIA, FBI and Pakistan Secret Service. Alleg-

He was kept in solitary confinement. He was locked down for 21 hours a day. In the three hours he was not locked down he was required to wear handcuffs, leg irons and restraints. He was allowed one contact visit with his family per month and that through glass. He requested contact with a psychiatrist, but found it very difficult to obtain psychiatric support. That is a breach not only of his human rights, but of the law of Victoria.'

The question as to why Thomas was arrested and charged in November 2003 remains. Rob Stary suspects it may have been politically motivated. 'The case against Mamdouh Habib is collapsing, the case against David Hicks is on its knees.

So, a school of thought says, well, we need a sacrificial lamb in Australia. There was one Australian who was detained in Pakistan and that's Jack Thomas.'

Writing to Attorney-General Daryl Williams in April 2003, the Law Institute of Victoria's president Bill O'Shea noted that Thomas's detention in Pakistan 'comes within the broader context of the growing trend across many nations to disregard the rule of law in the name of "national security"'. O'Shea said that even though Thomas was being held in Pakistan, the Government was still obliged to ensure that Thomas's right to be informed of the charges against him and access to legal representation be respected.

The Australian Government claims that Thomas is a 'sleeper agent' awaiting instructions from al Qaeda. Based on the interviews recorded during Thomas's detention in Pakistan, the Government alleges that during his time in Afghanistan, Thomas met and discussed plans with Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir; that he undertook military training at al Qaeda's Al Farooq training camp in Kandahar; and that he was a guest in al Qaeda safe houses. It is further alleged that Thomas has seen or met Osama bin Laden, and was given \$US3500 and an airline ticket to Australia by al Qaeda. Thomas is alleged to have overheard a plan to shoot down a plane carrying Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, and to have discussed a plan to liberate a prisoner from Guantánamo Bay. In Thomas's bail hearing, magistrate Lisa Hannan reportedly said no properly instructed jury

## The Australian Federal Police have admitted in court to finding no evidence to incriminate Thomas since his return from Pakistan

committed to it. The US was pretty supportive of the Taliban during this period. There wasn't a lot of criticism from the West at this time.'

Thomas says his interest in Afghanistan 'was not in the Taliban but in being a good Muslim'. He was, says his brother, 'very sensitive to the suffering of Muslims in places like Chechnya. He wanted to help the people of Afghanistan who had been abandoned by the world and left to clean up after decades of conflict with the Soviet Union.'

At the time, Les Thomas points out, 'there was no law about travelling to Afghanistan or the north-west frontier of Pakistan. People have forgotten what the pre-9/11 world looked like.'

In Afghanistan, Thomas became disillusioned, particularly with the Taliban, which he considered 'excessively cruel'. He says he and Maryati were planning a return to life in Australia when the planes fatefully ploughed into New York's World Trade Center. Thomas 'was horrified' at the events of September 11. Before the US invasion of Afghanistan, the family left for Pakistan. Amatullah developed pneumonia, so Maryati left for Australia with her while Jack planned to follow shortly after.

Learning that federal police had questioned his family in Australia, and hearing BBC reports about Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib in Guantánamo Bay, Thomas got cold feet, fearing he'd face the same predicament. He decided to wait in Pakistan, staying at the homes of friends who would later be implicated in statements allegedly extracted under duress.

edly subjected to a range of physical and psychological torture, including being chained to walls, strangled to the point of near-death, deprived of food and water and forced to sleep on wet concrete floors, he says he reported this to the Australian Federal Police several times. The police say that Thomas complained only once. During a recorded interrogation later heard by a Melbourne court, Thomas requested a lawyer, but was denied one.

The recording was made three months into Thomas's imprisonment, allegedly following prolonged spells of sleep deprivation, violent abuse and threats to harm his family. This, says Thomas, is when he finally broke. In a March 8 interrogation, he told his captors what he thought they wanted to hear. After five months, he was released without charge and allowed to return to Australia. Here, he sought medical treatment for psychological damage. Australia's foremost expert in torture psychology, Professor Patrick McGorry, testified in court that he had no doubt that Thomas had been subjected to torture.

The AFP have admitted in court to finding no evidence to incriminate Thomas since his return, even though he has been under near-constant surveillance. It's this lack of legally obtained evidence, and his subsequent treatment at the hands of federal and state authorities in Melbourne's Barwon prison, that enrages civil rights advocates.

'Mr Thomas, who has been convicted of no violent crime at any time,' says Brian Walters SC, 'was held in the Aca-cia maximum security prison in Barwon.

could convict on the basis of this evidence. Given that his trial is pending, Thomas can't answer these accusations publicly.

Thomas was eventually granted bail in February 2005. In granting bail, Chief Magistrate Ian Gray again questioned the likelihood of the Government's evidence being admissible at trial. But the Government launched an appeal, attempting to have Thomas's bail overturned. While this failed, Thomas nervously awaits a Supreme Court trial that will set a precedent in Australian criminal legal history.

To the objection of media organisations, the Government has successfully applied for a closed court for 'national security' reasons, 'which is ironic,' says Stary, 'considering the media stunts.' In addition to the frenzy generated at Thomas's arrest, during his bail hearings, Thomas was taken into court shackled, and flak-jacketed counter-terrorism officers conspicuously checked the court for bombs.

'I've been practising for 25 years and I don't think I've seen an accused person being pursued in as zealous a fashion as I have with Jack Thomas,' says Stary.

Thomas's lawyers have asked for the forthcoming trial to be conducted in an open court, believing that justice will more likely be served if the process is conducted on the public record.

'The rules, it seems, have been thrown out the window,' says Stary. 'Jack Thomas's case represents a very important milestone in criminal legal history. We know that every Western government is seeking more powers in their so-called war against terror. Unless we stand up and fight vigorously for Jack Thomas's rights, there will be people suffering the same sorts of repressive circumstances that Jack Thomas has been subjected to: solitary confinement in detention, confessions extracted in circumstances in which they would never be admitted in a conventional criminal case.'

Brian Walters claims the Thomas case demonstrates how Australia's terrorism laws 'are a win for the terrorists, because they undermine our democracy'.

In April, Noam Chomsky issued a statement saying, 'The actions of the Australian Government in pursuing Jack

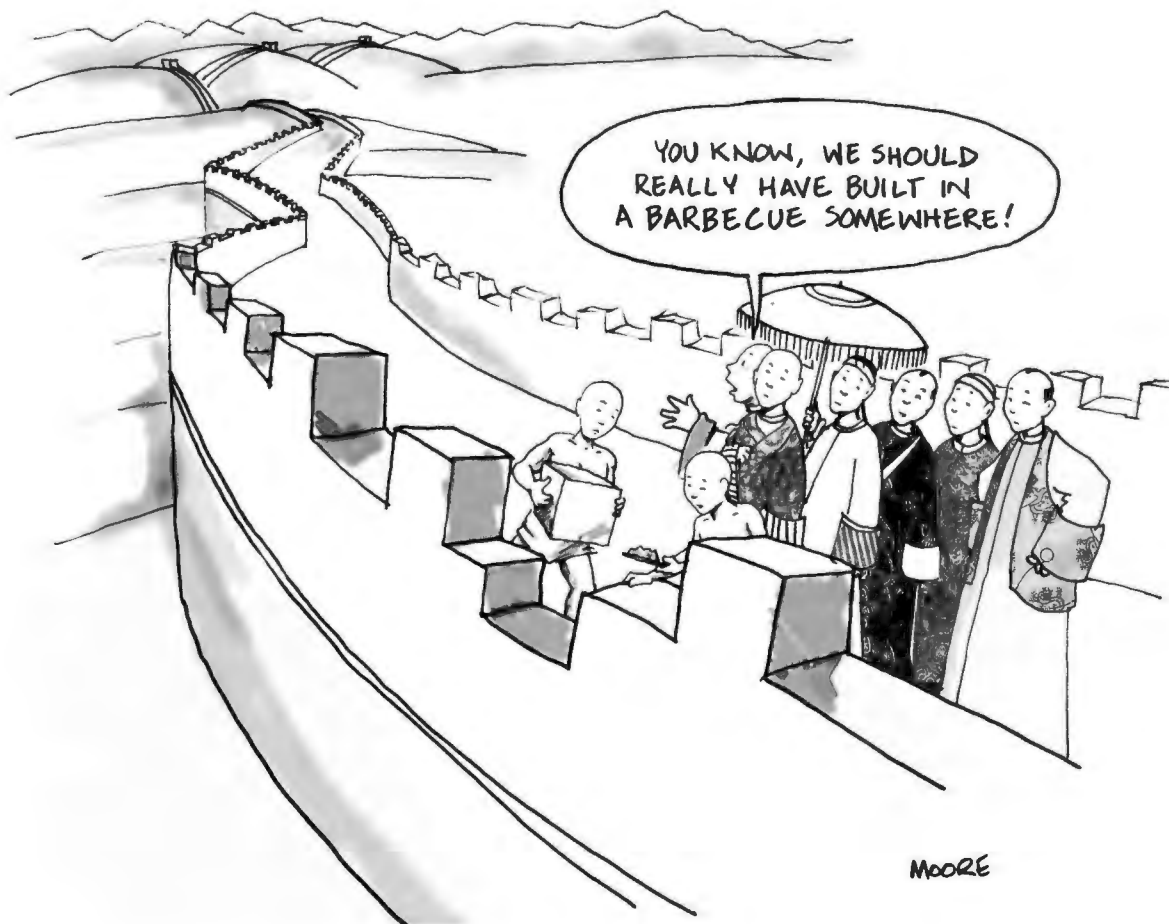
Thomas suggest that they are willing to trample on basic civil and human rights in the name of the "war on terror".'

Innocent or guilty, Thomas and his family will feel the effects of this trial for years. Having put their house up for bail security, other costs are mounting. 'The Commonwealth has financial means and resources for this case way beyond the capacity of the Thomas family,' says Ian Thomas, Jack's father.

Now out of prison, Thomas is working at different jobs to pay the mortgage on the house he planned to buy the day of his arrest, and the legal case he never imagined facing.

Of her son, Patsy Thomas says, 'The boy that came home is a very meek, very scared young man, and I'm hoping that old Jack's still in there. He's been shattered. We have to fight as a family to get that old Jack back.' ■

**Katherine Wilson** is a freelance writer. She was assisted in writing this article by **Stefan Markworth**, who made a documentary film about the Jack Thomas case.



# Anatomy of a famine

Niger's descent to the world's worst place to live has been paved with greed and good intentions

**T**HE LANDLOCKED REPUBLIC of Niger, on the southern edge of the Sahara, is one of the few countries on earth where famine is an everyday fact of life. Niger is officially the worst place on earth to live, according to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index.

Every year, more than 80 per cent of Niger's children suffer malnutrition. One in three die before they reach the age of five and there are barely three doctors for every 100,000 people. Average life expectancy is 42 years.

The famine that has gripped the country for much of this year—and belatedly made international headlines before media attention turned to Hurricane Katrina—had many causes: the Nigerien government's unwillingness to acknowledge there was a famine and jailing of local journalists who dared say otherwise; the men of southern Niger locking up food supplies when they went away to work, leaving their wives and children to go hungry; the international community subsidising its own farmers to outflank impoverished Africans able to produce the same food at a fraction of the cost; and the international community, which ignored the crisis until images of starving children started appearing on their television screens.

Crimes by the powerful men of Africa contributed to Niger's chronic food insecurity, but it must be galling for ordinary Africans who have little power—particularly Niger's nomadic peoples—to know they are also partly responsible for the droughts and famine that have cursed Niger for decades.

By forsaking their traditional patterns of life and their flagrant overgrazing of camels and cattle, so the argument goes, the nomadic herders of the Sahel and Sahara—primarily the Tuareg and the Fulani—ruined an already precarious land.

This premise of African responsibility for African woes has a long history. At the height of Niger's first great famine, which lasted for six years until 1974, and with abject disregard for more complex realities, Claire Sterling wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* that:

Carried away by the promise of unlimited water, nomads forgot about the Sahel's all-too-limited forage. Timeless rules, apportioning just so many cattle to graze for just so many days within a cow's walking distance of just so much water in traditional wells, were brushed aside.

Niger was once a land of relative plenty. In the 1950s, when it was still under French administration, farmers in the south of the country were encouraged to move away from growing the crops that had sustained their families for generations. Encouraged by international companies, French authorities and, later, the Nigerien government, farmers planted peanuts, a cash crop that could help meet world demand and integrate Niger into

the increasingly global economy. The French guaranteed high prices for Nigerien farmers, shielding them from the vagaries of the world market.

The early years were promising. Growth in production to the late 1960s was almost exponential, with hundreds of thousands of hectares of agricultural land devoted to the humble peanut. It was Niger's green revolution, an African success story. Already, by the early 1960s, more than half of the income of farmers in the Maradi district of southern Niger came from peanuts while 64 per cent of the peanut harvest came from Tahoua, farther north. Few if any of the farmers were nomads.

At harvest time, the joy of successful crops was tempered by new demands on farmers to repay the costs of the seeds and machinery. New seeds were introduced and productivity increased. With limited resources to buy the fertilisers these new seeds required, and with even less advice forthcoming from European salesmen on the benefits, few farmers (under five per cent according to one estimate) chose to fertilise their soil. Output continued to climb, but this was the result of good rains and increasingly hard-working farmers as much anything else.

When Niger became an associate of the European Common Market in 1965 it lost its price guarantees, although the French made up the shortfall through a decreasing system of subsidies. Between 1967 and 1969, the price paid to farmers fell by 22 per cent. Many farmers went into debt, so much so that by 1968, more than half of all loans by farmers in the Zinder region were in default.

**O**BLIVIOUS TO THE HIDDEN COSTS associated with peanut farming and drawn by the combination of high yields and artificial inducements, more and more farmers chose to plant peanuts. The peanut is a thirsty crop and the new seeds required an even shorter growing cycle. Fallow periods, which for centuries had been used to let the land regenerate, were dispensed with. Without fertilisers, the soil was becoming exhausted. The rising quartz content prevented the anchoring of topsoil, causing erosion.

With more farmers to accommodate, the boundaries of agricultural land moved northwards, bringing farmers into confrontation with pastoralists all along the Sahara's southern fringe. The often-strained relationship between the nomads of the north and the south, between those of the Sahara and those of the Sahel, degenerated into conflict.

Pastoral nomadism had once sustained an environmental balance of resources, representing an effective use of land that was not suitable for agriculture, and enabling regeneration of the soil. Now the southern village reserves, which Tuareg nomads and Fulani herders had used for grazing and pasture in the

months between their treks north and south, were given over to the peanut. Short-term gains were outweighed by the loss of natural fertilisers left behind by cattle and camels.

The Niger government, with an eye on exports, was complicit in extending farmlands to cover the pastures and grazing lands that had provided refuge for the northern nomads during dry years; they were no longer welcome in the south. At the same time, advances in animal husbandry—vaccination programs and better understanding of animal health—led to increased herd sizes. With demand for cattle growing across international markets, large cattle farms, with European backing, fenced off large tracts of land for commercial cattle breeding. These farms benefited a landowning élite at the expense of grazing land available to traditional pastoralists.

**A**NOTHER GRAND, APPARENTLY well-intentioned scheme, with European and International Monetary Fund backing, was the construction of wells and watering points along the traditional migration routes. But there were no pastures to feed the increasing numbers of stock using the routes. The landscape became denuded of vegetation with no prospect of regeneration. Without ground cover, the soil was scorched by the sun and scoured by the wind. Domestic but hardy desert goats, a main-

Reports began to emerge from Tuareg areas that people were forced to eat animal feed, of men abandoning women and children in the desert.

One eyewitness account of the time reported that:

Dazed Tuareg men gather in the towns and cities to seek jobs and they gaze glumly at a noisy, bustling world they would never inhabit willingly. Families huddle in relief camps there existing on the grain and powdered milk that is airlifted in. Some Tuareg have committed suicide, some have gone mad.

The proud Tuareg were reduced to an existence described by Mohamed Aoutchiki Criska:

I have seen these proud men, my brothers, clustered around food distribution centres. Obligated, like beggars, to receive food ladled out to them by strangers who could not even guess the extent to which these nomads were forsaking their dignity as men.

Others died of starvation because they waited too late to seek assistance; in traditional nomadic society, it is considered ill-mannered to admit an absence of self-control, to admit suffering. From the beginning, those with the power to rectify the situation and halt the land's decline failed to understand that destroyed land is as much a cause of drought as a consequence of it. They ignored the reality that over-

grazing by the herding and pastoralist people of the north was a symptom, not the fundamental cause of the destruction. All the while, they wilfully turned a blind eye to the evidence that massive ecological damage had been wrought for the sake of what remained a colonial economy benefiting international business and African élites.

By 1974, there was little that could be done beyond calculating the devastation. By one reckoning more than 60 per cent of the country's livestock—cows, goats, sheep, camels—was lost, including two million head of cattle from 1972 to 1973 alone. At the height of the drought, a USAID study revealed that hundreds of thousands of square kilometres had been added to the southern Sahara, which was said to be moving south at 50km a year in some places. Previously arable land was forever lost. The quietly dispersed populations of villages and shifting nomadic encampments slowly emptied from the land, joining Africa's disastrous migration into the cities. In less than a generation, the ecology of West Africa changed irreversibly.

Six years after the first famine came a second. Those trees that were left, the last barriers to desert encroachment, were cut down by the Tuareg and

Fulani desperate for fodder and firewood. Conflict was by now almost endemic between once interdependent sedentary and nomadic communities. Hundreds of thousands died between 1980 and 1985 as the rains again failed and the world did nothing.

These are the real causes of Niger's 2005 famine, just as they were in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. They will also be the causes of the Niger famines of the future, for they will surely come. ■

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stay of the nomadic subsistence, ate what little cover remained, even the thorns that had bound the soil, protecting the roots. With nothing to bind it, the earth turned to sand. Patches of desert began to form around villages and watering holes, then spread to merge with the desert. Soil was picked up by the wind and lifted high into the atmosphere as dust, blocking the sun: the perfect conditions for drought.

In 1968—some say a year later—the rains failed to arrive and did not return until after 1974. By then, Niger was probably the worst-hit of all Sahelian countries. Entire herds disappeared.

# The book or the world?

*The book or the world?* is the longer of two essays Sarah Kanowski submitted to win the inaugural \$2000 Margaret Dooley Young Writers' Award. Entrants were asked to submit two essays, one of 2000 words and the other of 700 words. Second place was shared by Kirsty Sangster and Meaghan Paul, whose work will appear in forthcoming issues of *Eureka Street*.

*Book, let me go.  
I don't want to walk dressed  
In a volume ...  
let me walk on the roads  
with dust in my shoes  
and without mythology:  
return to your library,  
I'm going out into the streets.*

SO ANNOUNCED PABLO NERUDA in *Ode to the Book (I)*, championing his political activism over the writing to which he had devoted a lifetime's equal energy. Unfavourable comparison between the real world and the library has a long tradition mostly expressed, ironically enough, in books.

In Neruda's poem, devotion to books is imagined as a retreat from the moral claims of daily life. But where does such a division leave the books written about real people? Ever since humans have been making stories we've been drawn to telling the complex mass of actual human life and, in their modern guise of biography and memoir, stories about real lives are more popular than ever.

In our fascination with other lives we seek the solaces of gossip—titillation, diversion and reassurance—but not only that, we also look for guidance: one of the central purposes of biography throughout its long life has been instruction. The biographies of divinities and sages are a central means of teaching in all of the world's religions. In Christianity, for example, there is the tradition of 'spiritual autobiographies' and 'saints' lives' (beginning in 993 with Aelfrics's *Lives of the Saints* and continuing up to the marvellously lurid *60 Saints for Girls* I received as a first communion gift); indeed, the Gospels themselves can be considered biographies. The

Greeks and Romans bequeathed a secular tradition of moral exemplars to the West, with Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* presenting a model of civic and military prowess that became widely influential in Europe with Sir Thomas North's 1579 translation. The tradition of the Great Man biography reached its apotheosis with the Victorians, where the vivid intimacy of Johnson's and Boswell's 18th-century innovations were replaced with pious reverence: reticence on everything but rectitude was the order of the day.

This vast edifice of Victorian hagiography was punctured in 1918 with the publication of Lytton Strachey's slim satiric volume *Eminent Victorians*, which parodied the notions of civic good and spiritual heroism upon which the Victorian tradition was founded. Strachey's reaction against the didactic purpose of biography has become a hallmark of the modern form. Victoria Glendinning, the award-winning biographer of Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Bowen, Edith Sitwell, Vita Sackville-West and Rebecca West, expresses the opinion of many contemporary biographers when she comments, 'It is questionable whether moral judgments have any place at all in biography.'

The widespread aversion to judging biographical subjects or instructing readers does not mean, however, that life-writing has forgone issues of morality. Rather, modern approaches to biography have both reflected and shaped the changing ways in which our culture understands life and goodness. Most significantly, 'truth' has replaced 'virtue' as the yardstick of the age. From therapy groups to television talk shows to intimate relationships, truth-telling is seen as our primary responsibility, especially when the truth told is of transgression.

J. A. Froude's frank writings on the magisterial social prophet Thomas Carlyle caused uproar in the 1880s because of their intimations of impotency and marital discord. In his defence Froude provided what would become the central justification for biography's treatment of private life: the biographer's first duty is to truth, not propriety. Froude argued that without consideration of Carlyle's faults 'his character cannot be understood' and that as 'the truest of men' Carlyle would himself have demanded a true portrait. Clearly not all biographical subjects feel likewise, but it is what readers now demand. The impetus is not solely scandal mongering, however: like Froude, the biographer can be motivated by sympathy or admiration. This is clearly the case with the pioneer of modern self-reflexive biography, Richard Holmes. In the exploration of his biographical methods, *Sidetracks*, Holmes writes: 'Biography is a human exchange, what I have called a "handshake across time". It is an act of human solidarity, and in its own way an act of recognition and of love.'

We look now, as Holmes puts it, for solidarity—and thus for shared foibles rather than for moral exemplars: we want to know that 'the poet' Coleridge suffered terribly from constipation and that 'the president' Kennedy was a philanderer. Our search for figures we can 'relate to' rather than respect is connected to the refiguring of how we understand good and evil. The binary approach to ethics—the idea that there is a stable set of laws differentiating what is right from what is wrong and to which humans must simply adhere—has largely disappeared from the modern West, among both the religious and the secular. In its place is a more fluid understanding, which pictures life as irreducibly complex and where morality can



shift and turn according to the situation. In his reflections on writing the lives of the Romantic poets, Holmes contends that, instead of drawing moral conclusions about its subjects, biography rightly 'sees a more complicated and subtle pattern. Even out of worldly "failure" and personal suffering (indeed perhaps especially from these) it finds creative force and human nobility.' This approach resonates with that of Nicholas Mosley, who has written biographies of his father Oswald, leader of the British Union of Fascists during World War II. 'One of the points of this book—biography or autobiography,' Mosley comments, 'has been the attempt to create an attitude by which darkness in people (there is always darkness) might be made to be seen not so much as evil as somewhat ridiculous: evil may thus be exorcised: ridiculousness becomes life-giving.' In this approach to ethical questions, self-consciousness is central and Mosley (whose autobiography is tellingly titled *Efforts at Truth*) uses the degree of his father's self-awareness, rather than his actions themselves, as the measure for moral evaluation.

These new approaches to the relationship between ethics and life-writing bring their own set of concerns, however. Contemporary discussion of biographical practice is interested primarily in the representation of literary figures, and the extent to which the methods and values commonly employed in literary biography can function in the biographies of civic figures is debatable. Although the distinction between different kinds of subjects is necessarily fluid—authors and politicians are not autonomous categories—there are significant differences in writing a biography of a novelist (even one with a taste for publicity) and of a politician whose character and career determine the condition of nations. Holmes and Mosley have chosen very different kinds of men, and in writing about a political leader the latter is obliged to consider his subject in the light of historical realities. European fascism constitutes a watershed in how we today conceive of morality, and writing about figures in that context does heighten the danger of reducing events and individuals to what Primo Levi has called a Manichean view of history. But awareness of this risk does not deny the reality of moral difference nor the necessity of moral accountability. As Levi

states bluntly about his experience of Auschwitz: 'I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer.'

Furthermore, regardless of subject, the assertion of truth is not as simple as some biographers make it appear: do we still imagine ourselves to possess some kind of defining truth? And when there are conflicting interpretations, who has the authority to decide the truth told? The critical question has shifted from Froude's defence of truth-telling to the much knottier one of what constitutes truth. It seems that often when we talk about truth in life-writing what we really mean is explicitness—the demand to know what had been hidden—but the biographer's art cannot be reduced to the amassing of details, and an exact portrait may not be a true one. To get to the truth of a person requires interpretation and omission and a recognition that life is much more opaque and untidy than it is usually presented in books. It could be that what is required is a new form: in 1918 Lytton Strachey dismissed 'standard biographies' as inadequate to the experience of life, yet the mammoth, multi-volumed, indexed 'Life' remains dominant. Holmes is one biographer experimenting with new styles to get at a truth flattened by the traditional approach, using travelogue, radio plays, and fiction (including the wonderfully evocative *Dr Johnson's First Cat*). Amid these debates about representation and reality, perhaps the central truth to consider is that of the subject's own sense of self. As the historian of fascism Richard Griffiths has noted, 'Nobody holds opinions which they feel to be wrong; one must therefore attempt to see things through these people's eyes, to assess what they felt to be right and why.' In order for biography to consider the moral claims made on it by history, therefore, it must first strive to see its subjects as they saw themselves.

Grappling with these issues is a kind of ethical practice for writers and readers alike; one that, intentionally or not, provides a new form of moral instruction to replace the didacticism of previous generations. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera has made a moral critique of the very genre of biography as by definition reducing an individual's life to the interpretation of another. Kundera aligns biography with what he calls the 'trial regime' under which much of Europe lived in the 20th

century: like biography, this trial's province was private life as well as public, judging not an isolated act but rather 'the character of the accused in its entirety'. But I think the reverse is true, that biography can bring us understanding and illumination rather than judgment. At its best, biography shows us the complexity of the figures we presume to judge, working in an *opposite* direction to Kundera's trial regime. It is in this that biographers most resemble novelists. In 'Against Dryness', her famous 1961 essay on what literature offers that philosophy does not, Iris Murdoch argues for the moral value of the 19th-century realist novels which were not concerned with 'the human condition' in the abstract but 'with real various individuals struggling in society'. She argues that the other-realities conveyed in such works break into our self-centred fantasies and in doing so perform a moral function: 'Through literature we can rediscover a sense of the density of our lives.' The same can be said of great biographies: they invite us to inhabit minds and bodies other than our own, and this is moral work.

Examining how we read biography necessitates that we ask how we read generally and demands we re-examine the ethics of that process. It reminds us in these fiscally obsessed times that reading is not simply the private act of a leisured class but a moral practice: stories are how we tell and understand what life is, and the stories we make about real human lives are the most important of all. That sly old poet Neruda wrote a second poem about the relationship between writing and living, and this *Ode to the Book (II)* celebrates precisely that kind of reading. The two categories with which we began are not, it seems, separated by 'or' but linked by 'and':

*What was our victory?  
a book,  
a book full  
of human touches.  
of shirts,  
a book  
without loneliness, with men  
and tools,  
a book  
is victory.* ■

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# Guatemala's unforgiven

As the government apologises to victims' families for state-sanctioned atrocities during the civil war, the perpetrators remain free

**B**Y 8AM ON 12 AUGUST 2005, the Sacapulas Municipal Hall is filled with residents of surrounding villages, dressed in traditional *traje* and speaking quietly in Quiché, the local indigenous language. Representatives of the Guatemalan government, weary from the five-hour drive to the small highland town, and looking uncomfortable in their stiff suits, begin to take their seats on the stage. Despite the heat and the crowd, in the early light the hall has the reverent hush of a chapel.

Domingo, Agustín and Juan sit silently in the first row, their faces revealing a sadness which the events about to take place will do little to ease. They are preparing to hear government officials publicly accept state responsibility for the 1990 murder of their mother, María Mejía, a respected community leader and outspoken critic of the army. They will offer formal apologies, and seek her family's forgiveness.

The banner suspended above the officials' heads, bearing a photo of María and printed with stark black lettering, expresses succinctly the response they can expect: *No hay perdón sin justicia*—No forgiveness without justice.

Fifteen years after her brutal assassination in front of her husband and children by members of the military who still live in their village, no investigations have taken place, no one has been charged, and the case remains, like thousands like it, in absolute impunity.

Guatemala is still coming to terms with peace a decade after a 36-year civil war ended with the signing of peace accords. Among the challenges it faces is how to address the profound damage caused by decades of conflict and state repression, which included atrocities such as the massacre of hundreds of indigenous villages, tens of thousands of 'disappearances' and widespread torture.

As in other countries undergoing post-conflict transitions, Guatemala established a truth commission as part of its reconciliation process. In 1999, the

Historical Clarification Commission (CEH, for its initials in Spanish) published its report, *Guatemala—Memory of Silence*, which concluded that the civil war had claimed more than 200,000 victims, 83 per cent of whom were indigenous Mayans. The report found that the state was responsible for 93 per cent of the human rights violations committed, which included genocide.

The CEH's recommendations, in addition to stressing the importance of the peace accords, sought to specifically address victims' needs. These recommendations included measures for dignifying the memory of victims, a wide-ranging reparations program, and, importantly, justice.

**O**VER THE PAST SIX YEARS Guatemalan governments have implemented some of these recommendations, most notably via the creation of a National Reparation Program, which includes material restitution (such as building roads), economic compensation, psychological rehabilitation, and measures to dignify victims (such as monuments and the renaming of buildings). Little has been done, however, to bring those responsible for human rights crimes to justice.

In contrast to other societies undergoing post-conflict transitions, Guatemala did not pass sweeping amnesty laws as part of its reconciliation process.

The 1996 National Reconciliation Law, which provides for the limited exemption of responsibility in some cases, specifically excludes crimes against humanity—in particular genocide, forced disappearance and torture—committed during the internal armed conflict. The CEH recommended that those responsible for such crimes be prosecuted, tried and punished.

This means there is no legal barrier to proceeding against human rights violators. On the contrary, the government has strong political, legal and moral obligations to bring those responsible to justice. Politically, it

committed itself to fight impunity in the Global Agreement on Human Rights, one of the principal peace accords signed in 1994. In addition, the nation's constitution and a range of international human rights treaties impose a legal duty to investigate, try, and punish human rights violators. The moral imperative is confirmed by the proliferation of victims' organisations since the signing of the peace accords and their persistent demand that justice is the only path to real reconciliation.

Despite this, impunity remains a fact for almost 100 per cent of human rights abuses committed during Guatemala's civil war.

There are many reasons for this, the primary one being a lack of political will: the political spectrum remains dominated by right-wing parties whose members and supporters among the armed forces might well be the focus of criminal investigations.

Lack of political will is compounded by the systemic weaknesses of the justice system. The institutions responsible for carrying out criminal investigations are under-resourced, staffed by inadequately trained and inadequately experienced personnel, and show little interest in initiating the investigations as they are required to do by law. The court system is renowned for its inefficiency, inconsistency and corruption.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Defense is unco-operative with criminal investigations indicating military involvement in human rights crimes. It has classified much of the information held by the armed forces as 'state secrets', in order to prevent its release. When cases do come to trial, the army defends its own by paying lawyers who employ obstructionist legal tactics aimed at delaying proceedings and exhausting victims' resolve.

In light of these obstacles, only a handful of cases have been adequately investigated and tried, and even fewer have resulted in appropriate sanctions being imposed. These

few exceptions have been achieved thanks to Herculean efforts by the victims (usually supported by church or human rights networks), who have maintained constant pressure on the justice system to complete criminal trials, often at considerable risk to their own safety.

Over recent years, victims' associations, human rights activists, prosecutors, lawyers and judges involved in such trials have suffered continual harassment in connection with their work. This has included physical attacks, death threats, intimidation, surveillance,



break-ins and telephone intervention, as well as robbery and the destruction of key information. It is believed that the perpetrators of these acts are clandestine groups associated with military regimes of the past.

In summary, while governments have made progress in implementing some of the truth commission's recommendations, impunity for past human rights crimes remains systemic and widespread.

The persistence of impunity is having a profoundly limiting effect on Guatemala's consolidation of democracy and the establishment of the rule of law.

Government indifference to impunity is an open wound for thousands of families who suffered state brutality during the war. In many rural communities victims and victimisers continue to live side by side (such as in María Mejía's case), which has a destructive influence on such communities and continues to retard reconciliation at all levels.

In addition, the failure of the justice system to try to punish those responsible for even the most heinous of crimes—



Survivors of massacres in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, march to honour the memory of the dead. They are carrying a quilt created from hundreds of smaller pieces, each naming a victim and giving details of when and where they died. Photos: Lucy Turner

genocide, for example—communicates a message to Guatemalan society as a whole about the irrelevance of the rule of law.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Judicial Independence, Param Coomaraswamy, made the following observation in his 2000 report on Guatemala: '... impunity is a cancer; if not arrested and excised it will slowly but surely destabilise society. Disenchanted citizens will lose confidence, if they have not already, in the government, and resort to taking justice into their own hands.'

**T**HE INCREASING LEVELS of conflict and violence in Guatemala today, and the emergence in recent years of lynching as a popular response to crime, bears out the prediction of Coomaraswamy.

Government indifference to citizens' demands for justice has led many to file petitions with the Inter-American Human Rights System. Via these cases, petitioners seek the mediation of their demands with the Guatemalan state, and in the event that the state fails to comply with the recommendations of the Inter-American Commission or the terms of a settlement, the case may be referred to the Inter-American Human Rights Court.

To date, this court has handed down ten judgments against the state of Guatemala, the majority of which involve forced disappearances, extrajudicial

executions, torture, and, for the first time in 2004, one of the hundreds of massacres committed against the Mayan people.

While former governments have been reluctant to co-operate with the Inter-American Commission, and have actively denied responsibility before the court, since assuming power in January 2004, President Óscar Berger Perdomo has implemented a more progressive approach. This includes recognising state responsibility for human rights crimes committed by the armed forces during the war and signing 'friendly settlements' with families of victims, the terms of which typically include a commitment to begin criminal investigations, compensation, public apologies and measures to dignify the memory of the victim. It was in compliance with one such 'friendly settlement' with the family of María Mejía that the event at Sacapulas took place in August.

The ability of the Berger government to tackle the complex phenomenon of impunity in order to comply with its commitments in these agreements—and its obligations to Guatemalan society as a whole—remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the banner with the stark black lettering continues to reflect the sentiments felt by thousands of Guatemalans today. ■

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# Through a prism darkly

The politics of crisis is undermining the rights of indigenous Australians

**O**N THE WEEKEND OF 11 and 12 June 2005 *The Weekend Australian* reported that the family of Northern Territory indigenous leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu had been divided by conflict over the proceeds of mining royalties. The central injustice that the paper trumpeted was that fact that 'many of his own clan ... live in squalid and impoverished conditions while Mr Yunupingu has the use of a helicopter, four houses and a fleet of cars, including a Range Rover'.

*The Australian's* 'exposé' of inequality highlights the manner in which indigenous issues in Australia are filtered or understood through the prism of crisis. The notion that indigenous Australia is at a crucial point, that the clock stands at five to midnight, and that failure to act to remedy the most basic of social and health inequalities will lead to the irreversible destruction of cultures, has spurred the creation of much government policy in Australia since the abandonment of assimilation in the 1970s. The politics of crisis, however, has frequently succeeded in exacerbating existing power disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and has often failed to acknowledge the intellectual and ideological complexity associated with recognising the rights of the first Australians.

In the eyes of *The Australian's* journalist, Jennifer Sexton, Mr Yunupingu's wealth was inappropriate and immoral when placed in the context of the difficult living conditions suffered by those of his clan. While little mention is ever made of the obligations of wealthy non-indigenous mining magnates to their less wealthy families, let alone their extended clans or communities, the behaviour of indigenous leaders is scrutinised through the prism of present disadvantage or crisis. Dubious administrative decisions that in the normal course of public life would at most be put down to self-interest or institutional malpractice are, when made by indigenous leaders such as former ATSIC Commissioner Geoff Clark, condemned

as a betrayal of an entire people. Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone, for example, condemned ATSIC's decision to fund a legal challenge opposed to Geoff Clark's sacking as 'hav[ing] no benefit whatsoever for disadvantaged indigenous Australians' and 'a waste of taxpayers' money'.



Galarrwuy Yunupingu

A fundamental contradiction lies at the heart of the treatment by the media and the Government of leaders such as Clark and Yunupingu. While non-indigenous criticism of their actions frequently emphasises their alleged failure to serve their people, the white legal and political system in Australia continues to inadequately recognise collective rights. It is probable that the view taken by Australian courts, from *Mabo no. 2* onwards—that demonstrating the continuity of cultural identity or practice is crucial to establishing a common-law right to native title—has contributed to the public political habit of viewing indigenous issues through the prism of culture. An essentialist view of culture that sees tradition as largely incapable of adaptation to the external pressures of colonisation has been adopted by the courts as they have frequently found that native-title rights have been 'washed away by the

tides of history'. The inadequacies of the courts' views on the common-law notion of native title, recently criticised by Noel Pearson, have been exacerbated by a Government which, through its amendments to the Native Title Act in 1998, has watered down the content of native title to nothing more than a right to negotiate. Notably the 1998 Wik amendments made the requirement of cultural continuance harder for indigenous groups to meet by toughening the requirements for registering a native-title claim and applying standard rules of civil evidence to native-title cases.

**T**HE 1998 WIK AMENDMENTS are symptomatic of the broader failure of the political and legal system in Australia to distinguish between substantive and procedural equality and to recognise the importance of this distinction to the protection of collective indigenous rights. The Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975, for example, only acknowledges that the development of economic and social equality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians requires differential treatment, by providing a 'special measures exemption'. Collective measures—such as alcohol restrictions within indigenous communities—are viewed as an exception to the individual focused rights norm and require the issuing of a certificate by the Racial Discrimination Commissioner. The failure of the Australian legal system to protect the substantive rights of indigenous Australians enshrined in international legal documents was further highlighted by the High Court's 1998 ruling on the Hindmarsh Island Bridge case in which Justices Gummow and Hayne adopted the view that section 52(xxvi) of the Australian Constitution (the 'race' power) could be used to justify legislation that worked to the detriment of indigenous Australians.

The latest manifestation of the politics of crisis in indigenous affairs, the Government's push for 'mutual-

obligation' programs, has continued the trend of focusing on procedural rather than substantive equality. Notably, while claiming that mutual-obligation agreements do not require indigenous Australians to fulfil any greater obligations to enjoy citizenship rights than other Australians, the Government's current policy obsession has seen the language of crisis deployed in order to justify withholding basic infrastructure features from remote communities until specified obligations have been fulfilled. Communities, for example, have had to organise child-hygiene initiatives before being rewarded with petrol bowsers that other Australian communities take for granted.

While the language of mutual obligation suggests that indigenous Australians are merely having their welfare benefits made conditional like any other Australian welfare recipient, the reality that the delivery of basic services to indigenous Australians is being micro-managed by the Government has been covered up by the political fog of crisis. Minister Vanstone, for example, has spoken of the 'quiet revolution in indigenous affairs', boasted that the targeted number of shared responsibility agreements has been exceeded, and talked of the need for struggling communities to get 'more bang for their buck'. While other Australians fulfil punitive welfare obligations at an individual level, indigenous communities, faced with crisis, are asked to respond with 'quiet revolution' by formulating collective goals in order to obtain basic services. This policy is imposed upon indigenous communities despite the fact that the pivotal collective right of native title is not adequately recognised by the Australian political and legal system.

**T**HE DEPLOYMENT OF THE language of mutual obligation, in particular, highlights the extent to which the Government is content to formulate indigenous policy with both eyes on the aspirational classes of the mortgage belt, where political debate infrequently moves beyond the first principle that all monetary payments should be earned through individual effort. Eminent QC and activist Hal Wootten highlights the nexus between current indigenous policy and the politics of lower-middle class aspirational envy when he notes that 'the developing conservative narrative

posits that Aboriginals must simply forget about culture and identity, which are irrelevant in the modern globalised world, and become individual market-driven consumers and entrepreneurs, like all other sensible people'. The Minister's talk of a 'new way of doing business' with indigenous communities certainly supports this observation.

While the political and legal system in Australia continues to inadequately recognise substantive indigenous rights, such as the right to an elected representative voice, the Government has combined the rhetoric of mutual obligation and crisis to justify current policy stances in indigenous affairs. The blending of mutual obligation policies with a broader community and public policy awareness that indigenous communities face significant challenges has enabled the Government to justify the winding back of the rights of indigenous Australians. The drastic step has been taken of abolishing directly elected indigenous representative bodies and making the enjoyment of basic aspects of life (such as access to a community pool) conditional upon the fulfilment of micro-managed obligations. While the

politics of crisis and mutual obligation in indigenous affairs is at the root of the national campaigns of criticism against indigenous leaders such as Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Geoff Clark, the confusions and contradictions of this political discourse do provide a source of hope. The way remains open for all concerned and active citizens to highlight that it is illogical to talk of indigenous obligations to community without giving effect to substantive collective rights that, as yet, are only meaningfully acknowledged by the body of international law. Whether the recognition of such collective rights in Australia will entail the development of a more substantial and useful content to native title is one of the many issues that should be placed in the hands of indigenous communities. ■

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# Tired of the injustice

Fifty years ago Rosa Parks inspired African Americans by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, and her example is still inspiring Aboriginal people today

**O**N 1 DECEMBER 1955, a Thursday night in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, 42, boarded a bus to head home. It had been a long hard day and she was tired. She and three other African Americans sat in the fifth row, the farthest forward they were allowed. After a few stops the first four rows were filled with whites and a white man was still standing. By law in Alabama black and white could not share the same row. The other three stood. She refused.

The bus driver threatened to call the police. Everyone else stood up except her. 'Go ahead and call them,' she said, 'I'm not moving.' The police came; she was arrested and later charged. This was not the first time an African American had protested against racial discrimination or refused to give up their seat on a public bus. But this time was to prove different.

Rosa was a committed Christian who belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She had worked with Dexter Nixon, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and enjoyed considerable respect in her own community. When she later said, 'Our mistreatment was just not right, and I was tired of it,' she gave voice to a feeling many others could share. This time, facing a driver who had refused her once before because she would not enter the bus by the rear door, she realised she had taken an important step. She was found guilty and fined \$14.

Her charge, violating a city segregation code, provided the opportunity for a legal test case in the United States Supreme Court. However, the result of that challenge remained more than a year away. Her arrest touched and encouraged others to act, and within three days a boycott of Montgomery buses had been called. On the evening before the boycott, a young Baptist minister stood up and spoke to a



Photo: AAP/AP/Jeff Kowalsky



Rosa Parks, at the time of the bus boycott, and left, in a 2001 photograph.

large assembled church gathering. 'There comes a time,' he reminded them, 'when people get tired.' He added: 'We are tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression.' The speaker was 26-year-old Martin Luther King. Ordained a Baptist minister at 19, Nobel Peace Prize recipient at 35, assassinated at 39.

Later that night the enormity of the challenge was revealed. Any protest, the assembled group realised, would need to stand up against the violence that continued to be expressed by white people and institutions towards them. And, as if that wasn't enough to contend with, the protesters also had to consider possible retaliation by their own people. In many cases they were the ones most directly affected by the hardship of a bus boycott.

As the imminent danger and risks dawned upon them, King would later recall, 'The clock on the wall read almost midnight, but the clock in our souls revealed that it was daybreak.' Whatever his oratory that night, and whatever the skills and energy others brought to that meeting, it was Rosa Parks who provided the moment others could identify with and support. She was not the only one who was tired.

The Montgomery bus boycott went for 381 days and proved a success. In many ways it launched a significant but painful chapter in the journey to achieve American civil rights. In the following decade there was King's letter from Birmingham Jail ('there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over'), his 'I have a dream' speech ('In spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream'), and the 250,000 people who gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear him that day in August 1963. There was the 'bloody Sunday' demonstration in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965, the hundreds of school children and teachers who protested and who were arrested that same year. There were the many young university students who were spat upon, abused and assaulted as they protested non-violently against racial inequality and injustice.

Three of those students were Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney. They were only in their early twenties when they entered Mississippi in January 1964 to support the right of people there to register to vote. 'Nowhere in the world is the idea of white supremacy more firmly entrenched, or more cancerous, than in Mississippi,' Schwerner said.

In June 1964, after returning to visit a community whose church had been burned down by the Ku Klux Klan, these young men, including one African American, were stopped by the police for speeding, jailed for a few hours, and then released. In a plot between the local deputy sheriff and the Ku Klux Klan the three were later ambushed, beaten, shot and buried in an earthen dam.

Edgar Ray Killen was involved in

violence that so often prevented the possibility of achieving that society.

It was not just the violence of injustice that he and others faced; it was the temptation to respond in kind. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus. Facing the violence of others, and allowing those moments of resistance to potentially transform the one who continues to be violent, proved significant examples of the power of non-violence in those long years of struggle.

Some may think it's a long way from Rosa Parks to Australia, 50 years later. Maybe not. In late 2004, a group of Aboriginal footballers from the Australian Football League visited Broome, Western Australia. There they listened to Pat and Mick Dodson talking about the history of struggle for civil and political

and traditional lands. Not surprisingly, he once responded with anger to the Prime Minister's dismissal of the need for an apology for the Stolen Generations. He lives and embodies some of the consequences, the pain and frustration of that separation history.

In December 2004, Long walked from Melbourne to Canberra to meet the Prime Minister, John Howard. 'We need action,' he said. 'We can't wait. People are dying.' Like many others, he was tired of the rhetoric and frustrated by the denial and the lack of attention to Aboriginal rights and needs. He wanted old, and often forgotten, issues affecting Aboriginal people to be put back on the political agenda. He was hoping Australians might unite around health, education and employment for Aboriginal people. He, like Rosa Parks, was tired. He wanted to let other Australians know he was tired. He particularly wanted to let the Prime Minister know.

The winds that blew those hopeful



## The Montgomery bus boycott went for 381 days and launched a significant but painful chapter in American civil rights

organising the Klan around those deaths.

On 22 June 2005, 41

years to the day after the deaths of the three young men, a jury found him guilty of manslaughter. After having been arrested with 19 others in 1964, he was released in 1967 after a jury was not able to come to a verdict. Three young students had been tired of living with an injustice that violated the rights of African Americans and, like Martin Luther King, had paid the highest price for seeking justice. The American legal system, after 40 years, might also seem to have tired of avoiding the truth and denying the racial violence of its past.

**M**ARTIN LUTHER KING'S death in 1968, and the deaths and sacrifices of many others, have served as a reminder that the costs of achieving civil freedoms and justice can be very high. As King had once said to Rosa Parks, shortly after the bus protest began: 'If a man doesn't have something that he'll die for, he isn't fit to live.' King gave people reason to hope for a better society, but he also provided a challenge against the personal and institutional

rights by Aboriginal people in this country. Someone dared to ask: 'How can we make a difference?' Pat told them the story of Rosa Parks. Her single act, her courage to take a stand on injustice, proved the catalyst for an enormous shift in civil rights consciousness and action. It also encouraged others to act. Michael Long happened to be at that meeting in Broome.

Long was not yet born when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955. His own journey from the Northern Territory to the AFL was as a footballer who played in two winning Grand Final teams for Essendon. Then, as now, he has enjoyed the respect of many within the sporting and larger community. He is remembered for confronting Damian Monkhurst in 1995 and taking a stand against racial vilification. Other Aboriginal players would later say that his stand that day made it easier for them to play in the AFL.

But like many other Aboriginal people Long lives another story. He was born in the north of Australia to parents who were both taken away from their families

sails of reconciliation in 2000 have now become quieter and less powerful. The million or so Australians who walked for reconciliation that year appear to have become weary of body and spirit. Yet the social and justice challenges for Aboriginal people remain. Rosa Parks sat, Michael Long walked. At the heart of their decision to act was their tiredness. They were tired of what they had experienced and what had not been achieved for their people. Tired of politicians and leaders who promised words but offered little action. Not tired enough to give up, but tired enough to draw a line and take a stand.

Michael Long hopes to walk again on Sunday, December 4, 50 years after a bus ride that led to a nation's discovery of something new and hopeful about itself. Who knows what might happen, especially when people are tired? ■

**Brian F. McCoy** SJ is a Fellow at the Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne.

# Outside the comfort zone

As she slowly became a participant in this rural Mexican culture, Cate Kennedy was reminded of what her own culture has forgotten



**W**HEN CATE KENNEDY returned to Australia in 1999 after working in rural Mexico for two and a half years as an Australian volunteer, she wondered what to do with all her memories of a people and a way of life that had captivated her.

First came the photo exhibition *La Vida en la Cara (The Life in the Face)* organised with the assistance of Australian Volunteers International (AVI). It was a collection of photographs that Kennedy and her then partner, Phil Larwill, had taken in Mexico.

Back in Australia, images of their Mexican friends and community went on display in Sydney, Melbourne and Daylesford. (They were also recently on exhibition at the Benalla Regional Art Gallery.)

Then, in 2001, Kennedy's book of poems *Signs of Other Fires* was published by Five Islands Press. 'There are poems about Mexico, about longing and about place,' says Kennedy.

But still the Mexican experience was bubbling away inside her.

'I realised I'd have to write or go nuts,' she says with a wry smile.

And so with a couple of visual diaries she had made in Mexico, as well as a stack of letters and photos, Kennedy set to work on her first full-length non-fiction work.

The result, *Sing, and Don't Cry: A Mexican Journal*, was launched in August at the Melbourne Writers' Festival, where it was the fourth-best-selling book. Not that Kennedy would ever reduce the value of a book to numbers sold or profit.

An integral part of *Sing, and Don't Cry* is the notion that each culture has its own currency: what it truly values. And living in rural Mexico, working on a microcredit project for the Regional Union for the Support of Peasant Farmers (URAC), run along the same principles as the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, Kennedy begins to question her own

cultural values and to ponder '... what is truly essential, and who is truly poor'.

Michael McGirr says of *Sing, and Don't Cry* on the book's back cover: 'It says a lot about Mexico but even more about Australia.'

In many ways Mexico was a surprise to the author. The idea of living in Latin America had not occurred to Kennedy and Larwill when they first approached AVI about work overseas.

Yet a short time after AVI first suggested working in Mexico, and a one-month intensive Spanish language course later, Kennedy's Mexican immersion began in Queretaro, rural Mexico.

During her first day working on URAC's microcredit project, Kennedy discovers the five common criteria for which *campesinos*, peasant farmers, can borrow: for medicine, home improvements (such as wire for fencing, cement blocks or roofing), education, fiestas, or a *peregrinación*, a pilgrimage.

'These are the five things considered essential for life and worth getting into debt for ... I am newly arrived, so I don't see how a fiesta could be as crucial as education, or a pilgrimage as necessary as medicine,' she comments in her introduction.

**J**UST AS THESE FIVE criteria for lending form the backbone of community life in



Cate Kennedy with children of URAC members. Photo: Manuel Rabassa

rural Mexico, so they provide the narrative structure of *Sing, and Don't Cry*. And some chapters contain more than we might expect.

For example, in the chapter titled 'Medicina' we find that a fiesta may be medicinal, and that International Monetary Fund and World Bank austerity measures force not only *campesinos*, but the country as a whole, to swallow bitter medicine. Under 'Educación' there's a wonderful scene with Kennedy, Larwill, a police officer and a refusal to pay a bribe.

Kennedy finds herself in a culture that intrigues, excites and often exhausts her. Forced to express herself in simple Spanish—at first, she jokes, she can only exist in the present tense—there is much to learn. The writer is an outsider, an observer.

In the short-story writing in which Kennedy has made her mark—winning the Scarlet Stiletto, HQ and Age (twice) short story awards—she creates the





A member of the microcredit co-operative in Queretaro, and village children. Photos: Cate Kennedy

world and the characters she breathes so much life into. But in the first chapter of *Sing, and Don't Cry* the author writes: 'It's hard not to feel a bit like an amateur anthropologist, observing these vast cultural eccentricities.'

Yet it is her observations, her reflections on Mexican culture and her comparisons with Australian culture, her dry humour, her poetic and at times earthy Australian expression that make *Sing, and Don't Cry* such a refreshing read.

At one point she refers to an Oxfam study in which people from URAC microcredit project were asked to rate themselves in a wealth-ranking exercise.

The context is rural Mexico, only a few years after the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and in spite of all the promises, poverty for the majority of *campesinos* has increased. On the questionnaire URAC respondents invented three categories in which they identified their financial insecurity, and placed themselves in one of them: those who've got it, the ground-down and the bugged.

Kennedy writes:

There's a few families around who've 'got it'—usually those who have relatives in the States sending them money. If you've 'got it' you're not exactly sipping cocktails by the pool, of course. It means you have a stove you run on gas, a house with a few rooms, and indoor plumbing. There's an OK ratio in your family of workers to dependents.

Most people, to use the blunt but unsentimental terms of the respondents, are ground down and bugged.

You get the picture—vividly. But this is only part of the story. It is the resilience of the people that inspires Kennedy, and

the way they continue to celebrate life.

At a community fiesta, Kennedy asks a woman why they 'squander' money on fireworks, 'instead of putting it aside for next year's crop, or saving it for emergencies?'

'Well, just for the beauty of it.'

'But it's all over in five minutes,' Kennedy says, 'all gone.'

'Yes,' the woman replies, 'but you're here, aren't you?'

'These people survive on so little, and yet they create a whole life, a whole world, with it.' And this is what causes Kennedy to reflect on the currency of her culture, one in which economics and profit have a higher priority than community, participation and relationships.

The scenes and the whole way of life described in *Sing, and Don't Cry*—the town square, tortillas, conflict, community meetings, dancing, cactus, celebrations and fiestas, stray dogs, the children, as well as the complexity of social and economic woes—bring Mexico richly to life on the page, particularly as the author moves from outsider to participant.

Perhaps it is because Kennedy so admires this vibrant 'developing world' culture, one that reminds her 'of what our culture had but has forgotten', that returning home to Australia has, at times, been such hard work.

Kennedy has so many stories to tell, and such a hearty laugh to accompany the telling, that you suspect the book could have been twice the size.

Here's a story that isn't in the book. It's December. Kennedy has been working six months in Mexico. She's told, in such rapid-fire language that she grasps only a couple of key words, to make an *anuncio de nacimiento*. She figures that's a birth announcement to be hung in the office. 'But

who's had the baby?' she asks a co-worker. 'José, María y Jesus,' she's told. 'Which community are they from?' Her colleague stares at her as if she's crazy. 'From Bethlehem, of course!'

While Kennedy admits how difficult returning to Australia has been, she also stresses that the whole Mexican sojourn and the time after it back in Australia opened up a precious space—for reflection, for imagining, for writing.

It certainly has provided fertile ground for her literary creativity, and when I ask why, Kennedy responds: 'I think to be a writer or any kind of artist, you need to be outside your comfort zone, to see things with fresh eyes. And most of us are much too comfortable to do this voluntarily. People often tell me they started to write after a crisis in their life ... They had to write to make sense of it. I'd never felt this before. But after Mexico ... I had so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to share, no audience with whom to share it.'

When Barry Scott—of Transit Lounge Publishing, a small independent publisher specialising in 'creative works that give voice to Australian connections to the wider world'—asked if Kennedy had anything to suit, she responded positively.

Scott said that what drew him to Kennedy's work was the way she writes so beautifully with respect, honesty, and humour; that this book engages with the wider world, and challenges our priorities.

*Sing, and Don't Cry* is a book with spine, a delightful read that will leave you with something to think about. ■

**Sing, and Don't Cry: A Mexican Journal**, Cate Kennedy. Transit Lounge, 2005. ISBN 0 975 02281 4, RRP \$29.95.

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# The dance goes on

Forty years after she first saw the film *Zorba the Greek*, an Australian in Greece takes a second look and finds herself deeply shocked

**F**ORTY YEARS ON FROM 1965, well parted are those who gathered to sit and watch the film *Zorba the Greek* through a haze of cigarette smoke in a venue known colloquially in Melbourne as the Carlton Bug-House. The film, based on the 1946 first novel by the great Nikos Kazantzakis, and directed by the almost equally great Michaelis Cacoyiannis, was made in 1964, seven years after Kazantzakis's death. Cretan genius Mikis Theodorakis wrote the music, and a stellar cast made the whole work as nearly perfect as a film can be. The foreign leads—Alan Bates, Anthony Quinn and Lily Kedrova—are now all dead, although the Greek actors Irene Pappas and George Foundas are still alive.

In 1965, when *Zorba* reached Australia, I was 20, in my third year of university, and living in a college community where trends were inevitably quick to catch on. The young of today would not have a hope of understanding the impact of this film, but it quite simply bowled most of us over. The wonder is that we passed our exams, because we trekked wherever we had to in order to see the film yet again, and our record players worked overtime as we listened to the sound track for hours: the music of the santouri and the bouzouki, instruments none of us had ever heard before, made a strange contrast to the learning of lines of Donne and Shakespeare, and to whatever subject matter budding scientists and doctors had to revise.

Like most young people, we absorbed what we liked and left the rest. Very few of us had ever been out of Australia, and had certainly never been to Greece, let alone Crete. Our world was restricted enough, but it was still difficult to believe in one in which custom compelled most women to wear black and where men sported luxuriant moustaches and knee-boots, while spending their days in a monotonous herding of goats in order to make a precarious living. What really got us in,



and what we clung to, was the request, made by a tortured but somehow liberated Alan Bates at the end of the film: *Teach me to dance.*

In a sense this request and Alan Bates himself, who bore a marked resemblance to my father, sealed my fate. One night in the Park Drive, Parkville, of 1966, a Greek who was also dark and handsome taught me and a few of my friends to dance the way Zorba did, right there in the street. At midnight. Three years later I married the dance instructor and entered the world of Greece in Melbourne. In 1980 I found myself, somewhat bemusedly, an immigrant to the Peloponnese, where in fact Kazantzakis had worked with the person on whom he based the character of Zorba. For various reasons, including the significant one that he himself was Cretan, he transferred the plot to Crete.

**I**N THE FIRST FLUSH OF new-chum enthusiasm, I determined to read the novel in modern Greek. Alas, my first attempt at reading *The Life and Chequered Career of Alexis Zorbas* met with ignominious failure: my grasp of modern Greek, tenuous to say the least at that stage, was just not up to it. Five years later, I tried again, with pencil in one hand, dictionary at the ready, and the resolution to read ten pages a day no matter what. And I managed it, while thrilling to the evocations of landscape and gasping at the sheer violence depicted: the novel is much more given to violence than the film, which is saying something. I still regard reaching the final

page as one of the significant achievements of my life, for which I received no praise, Kazantzakis being widely regarded as an atheist communist maverick whose great delight it had been to tamper endlessly with the modern Greek language, challenge the Orthodox Church, and do the image of Greece irreparable harm.

The film, I thought, had receded to the back of my mind, but in 1987 I travelled to Heraklion, where Kazantzakis had been born in 1883 into a Crete that was still Turkish. Once there, I made a special journey to the city walls in order to view his grave. When Kazantzakis died, the Orthodox Church refused him burial in a churchyard, but his friends and supporters, defiantly holding copies of his books aloft, bore him to his last resting place above the city that had seen and endured so much, including a 22-year siege before the Turks finally triumphed in 1669. A simple cross towers over the grave, and the epitaph inspires: *I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.*

In 1991, the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Crete, in which Australian and New Zealand troops had been heavily involved, I visited Crete again, and saw the dress version of the peasant garb that so attracted me in the film: the Cretan veterans were all blue baggy breeches, elaborate waistcoats, polished boots and black crocheted headbands. Early one afternoon, some of them were sitting in a taverna, and so was I, when Mikis Theodorakis, wanting lunch, made his entrance. A hush fell, and was followed by a subdued but excited buzz. He is like a statue, old

Mikis, and built on a grand scale, as so many Cretans are. Either a statue or a god. Looking at that shaggy leonine head, I for one felt that he could easily have flown in from Olympus just for the occasion.

**I**N 1980 THERE WERE NO such things as video shops in nearby Kalamata, now

anyone viewing the *Zorba* film in maturity would be bound to agree. Crete's form 'is austere. Furrowed by struggles and pain.' Now the quite terrifying struggles and pain are what I take from the film, which could only have been shot in black and white: God forbid any attempt at a remake of any sort; colour would be unthinkable.

Forty years on I know that the crop

*Zorba* announces that *life is trouble; only death is not. A man needs a little madness; else, how is he ever going to break the thread that binds him, and be free!* And he asks what Isaac Bashevis Singer called 'the eternal questions'. *Why must we suffer? Why must we die?* And the viewer can almost feel the constriction of Alan Bates's throat as he replies, *I don't*



there are several. And so it came to pass that I recently watched the *Zorba* film again. This time I was not bowled over, at least not in the same way; instead, I was deeply shocked. There were all sorts of reasons for my shock, not the least of which was the sobering reminder of the protected, heedless girl I had been way back then, at the time of my first viewing. But over my long Greek years, of course, I had been forced to accept that the world I had once found so hard to believe in had actually existed.

Although Kazantzakis's harsh Crete is a world or even a galaxy away from the Crete of the 21st century, with its glitzy tourist beaches and its overpoweringly opulent hotels, it still exists in remote corners. Only a few years ago, a half-Greek friend of mine, a woman travelling on her own in Crete and well off the beaten tourist track, stopped for a drink at a *kafeneion* in a mountain village, and soon fell into conversation with two old men. Predictably, they wanted to know her life story, so she obliged with the potted version: Greek mother who had met father when he was in the British army and thus in Greece during the war; subsequent marriage, followed by the establishment of a family in London.

'We are glad and relieved to learn that you are Greek,' said the more communicative of the two. 'Because if you were a *Turka*, we should have to rape you.'

Kazantzakis wrote his novel, and nearly ten years later was interviewed on Parisian radio. 'I don't see Crete as a picturesque, smiling place,' he said, and

area of Crete is a mere three-eighths of its total area, and I have learned that there is nothing at all romantic or ennobling about poverty: in the film the village simpleton is the only person to keen over the body of the widow (Irene Pappas), a woman who was tender, generous and alone, and who was killed for her pride, for her rejection of an importunate local suitor who eventually suicided, and for choosing Alan Bates instead. After her murder outside the church, the rest of the village turned away in a kind of strategic indifference, the indifference of those who have obeyed the implacable rules applying to the vengeful concepts of honour and shame, and who then slope away in order to avoid whatever consequences might be in store.

**A**LSO SHOCKING, I THINK, is the examination of the inexorable power of desire: in the yearning of the widow, in the pathetic flirtatiousness of the faded coquette, Madame Hortense, in the amoral but somehow inspiring wretch that is Zorba himself. Kazantzakis was deeply interested in the conflict between mind and body; thus it was a master stroke to give the Alan Bates character an English upbringing but a Greek mother. This might seem a simple dichotomy, but there is rarely anything simplistic in Kazantzakis, and so the liberation of the bookish Englishman exacts a dreadful due.

I was not shocked, merely very surprised to discover how much of the dialogue echoed within the ageing brain.

know. Inevitably, Zorba cannot let this highly unsatisfactory answer pass.

*What use are all your damned books then, if they don't tell you this? What do they tell you?* All Alan Bates can say is, *They tell me of the agony of men who cannot answer your questions.*

Despite the harshness, suffering and savagery, there is still always the dancing, the method by which Zorba comes to terms with both death and life. To a Greek, dancing is both catharsis and celebration. Each part of Greece has its own traditional dances; here in the Peloponnese, men dance a slow solo *zembekiko*, in which arm movements combine with steps to achieve a kind of stately, formalised shedding of inhibition. It is a brave woman who tries it, although she may do so in the company of her husband.

In his writings and in his philosophy Kazantzakis reduced the Ten Commandments to one: that of harmony, with self, with family and fellow humans, and with the natural world. In the film *Zorba the Greek*, dancing and the music of Zorba's instrument, the *santouri*, are ways of achieving this. But then there is the question of supplication; in the film more harmony is achieved via symmetry. When the film opens in the weather-bound *kafeneion* in Piraeus, Zorba says to the tentative writer: *Take me with you*. At the end of the film, it is the writer who is the supplicant: *Teach me to dance.* ■

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# A history that gives hope

Under different leadership, in different times, changes in attitudes towards asylum seekers have been profound and swift

**I**N THE LAST YEAR, public sentiment and government policy regarding our country's treatment of asylum seekers have undergone perceptible shifts. The public grilling and critical media attention that Amanda Vanstone received from her appearance before the Senate committee on detention policy, the exposure of the wrongful detention of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez Solon, and John Howard's capitulation to much of what Petro Giorgiou and his rebellious colleagues fought for, all represent real change since Tampa and the 2001 election.

But the debate about refugee migration in Australia has a much longer history. Placing these recent shifts in a historic context gives cause for optimism. That history shows us that the gains that have been made in the current debate have occurred under extremely difficult circumstances. And, it shows us that with strong political leadership, Australians have in the past shown tremendous compassion to those seeking asylum in our country.

*While it had  
humanitarian outcomes...  
Australia's DP migration program  
was a pragmatic  
last resort*

Our story begins at the close of World War II, from which Australia emerged facing two perceived challenges. First, it saw itself as a vulnerable, thinly populated, Western outpost needing to defend itself in a probable World War III. Second, Prime Minister Ben Chifley planned to start a large-scale, post-war building program, but Australia had full employment and a

labour shortage. A bigger population provided a resolution to both problems. With birth rates already booming, Chifley—with Arthur Calwell as Australia's first Minister for Immigration by his side—announced a mass migration program. As Opposition leader, Robert Menzies endorsed the proposal. Within a generation, Australia was a different place.

The mass migration program gave birth to the multicultural Australia of which most are now so proud. This was not, however, what was intended.

Initially, the migrants were to be British. But it became quickly apparent that British migration wasn't going to fix Australia's policy problems. For one thing, there just weren't enough of them.

Further, to resolve its labour shortage, Australia needed particular kinds of migrants. The scale of the projects planned, such as the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, required a workforce that was mobile and ready to engage in physical labour. Many of the early British arrivals did not meet these criteria. Full employment meant a discerning workforce, and too many Brits settled in cities when labour shortages were most severe in the bush. British migrants often came with families, when Australia needed working men.

So while the British remained a priority, and eligible for special migration assistance until 1973, the government reluctantly turned to another source to fulfil the aims of its program: the Displaced Person (DP) camps of Europe.

And so they arrived: Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Croatians, Russians, Estonians. Between 1947 and 1955, tens of thousands of DPs made new lives in Australia.

While it had humanitarian outcomes in providing refugees with a home in which to rebuild their lives, Australia's

DP migration program was a pragmatic last resort. Individuals were generally selected for migration only if they were a 'migration gain'. Young, fit men and women were priorities, with only 30 dependents accepted for every 70 workers. Single mothers, the disabled, frail and elderly were generally refused.

The DPs that were accepted arrived in Australia with an undertaking to spend two years working wherever the government chose, on threat of deportation. They were directed to wherever labour was unavailable. Full employment meant DPs usually worked in jobs Australians were unwilling to do, or in areas where Australians were unwilling to live. Many were housed in camps, families were separated and ethnic groups dispersed.

In 1947, 90 per cent of Australia's population was of British descent and resistant to change. Getting support for such a large migration program was never going to be easy. But it was in the government's interest to get the public behind a policy of such national importance and it worked hard to do so.

**T**HE ARGUMENT FOR A bigger population was persuasive. And for those unswayed by logic, fear provided a powerful tool. John Howard may have learnt a few lessons in his youth on the exploitation of electoral anxiety from Calwell, who, in Parliament on 2 August 1945, said the mass migration campaign was 'urgent and imperative if we are to survive', and alluded to a third world war in which Australia might not be able to protect itself. 'We cannot afford to fail,' he said. 'There is so much dependent on



the success of our population policy that failure will spell national disaster.'

The manner in which the DPs were settled proved important. Assimilation was the goal and the program was promoted on the basis that, in a short time, the New Australians would be the same as everyone else. The Department of Immigration developed services to assist in settlement and citizenship. English classes and welfare support were provided to migrants. Regular newsletters supporting the New Australians were funded, along with ethnic tolerance programs. Good Neighbour Councils were established, which brought together churches and voluntary organisations to assist migrants in understanding Australian life—from essentials such as banking and health care to helping find child care, integration into the local community and friendship.

**D**ESPITE THE COMMON sense of the program and the almost universal view that the population should be much bigger, despite bipartisan support, government programs and a belief that the migrants would assimilate, there was still significant racism against the New Australians.

But could we really have expected more? Until the migration program began in earnest, Australia was one of the least diverse, most monocultural countries in the world. As is well documented, Australia had prided itself and built its national identity on the notion of a White Australia. While most of the DPs were fair-skinned, they were not racially Anglo-Saxon and their migration thus ran counter to that policy.

Despite the incredible change that the immigration program brought, there were no insurrections, no massive protests, no rise of powerful, anti-immigration political parties. On the whole, the fact that the mass migration program was broadly supported is something we can be proud of.

Doubtless, post-WWII refugee migration laid the groundwork for Australia's acceptance of large numbers of Vietnamese refugees after the unification of Vietnam. The first boatload of Indo-Chinese refugees arrived in 1976 and they continued in a steady flow, reaching a zenith in late 1977 when boats arrived almost daily.

In contrast to the post-WWII campaign, this was a refugee program with genuine humanitarian aims. Australia had

no labour shortages, a different defence strategy and a bigger population. It was the nation's first test after the White Australia years, and it passed.

Many Australians felt trepidation towards these boat people. But with strong leadership and a history of providing a home for refugees, most Vietnamese refugees were allowed to stay and are now an integral part of the Australian community.

**S**O WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM this history? The post-war migration program, in addition to showing us that dramatic change in public opinion about refugees is possible in a short period of time, also demonstrates the challenges we face in the current debate.

Support of the government was crucial. Contrast the historic campaign to assist refugee settlement with the actions of the Howard Government, which has incited fear by lying about 'children overboard', which places proven refugees on temporary visas to prevent full participation in the Australian community, which leaves people in detention indefinitely, which detains babies and small children and runs election campaigns on the theme of 'we'll decide who comes into our country and the circumstances in which they come'. While the Government encourages and validates fear and uncertainty towards asylum seekers, any shift in favour of this cause represents the overcoming of a challenge not faced before in the history of refugee migration in Australia.

Political bipartisanship has been a strong feature of the refugee debate. Both the post-WWII and Vietnamese refugee migration programs had broad support from the oppositions of the day. Malcolm Fraser has noted that, had parties tried to 'make politics' over Vietnamese refugee migration, it probably would not have been supported by the Australian public.

A further challenge is that the pragmatic arguments for accepting today's refugees, as for the Vietnamese, are

complex. Post-war refugee migration was a tool for bringing much-needed labour to Australia.

Today, we don't have full employment or labour shortages. The jobs in which new migrants might have traditionally worked are the very jobs that are disappearing. The public is being asked to support a program that is truly humanitarian.

The history is, however, optimistic. In recognising the challenges, we acknowledge that public opinion in support of asylum seekers since Tampa has been gained under difficult circumstances.

Any such gains illustrate the strong potential for openness and compassion under different circumstances. Because under different leadership, in different times, changes in attitudes towards asylum seekers have been profound and swift. This is reason for hope. ■

**Clare O'Neil** is a councillor in the City of Greater Dandenong, which settles more refugees than any other municipality in Victoria. She is also a history student at Monash University.

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# The voice of the Vatican

**T**HE VATICAN PLAYS a leading role in global debates about violence and war, economic development for poorer countries, and the distribution of resources. To make its views better known, in 2004 the Vatican published a compilation of Church statements, many of which oppose key policies of the Bush administration, especially on the war in Iraq, the role of social justice, and the need for greater equity in the world economy.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* cannot be conveniently dismissed as the work of trendy lefties in the Church. It is the most considered and comprehensive publication on such a range of issues ever issued on the authority of a pope. Pope John Paul II instructed the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace to prepare the 525-page document, and it was revised carefully by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Despite its diplomatic language, this collection of papal and other church statements is a very strong criticism of US unilateralism and its imperial tendencies. The Church favours international co-operation, and insists repeatedly that freedom must be secured on the basis of social justice, equity and respect for human rights.

Significantly, the *Compendium* opposes ethical relativism that reduces moral principle to self-interest or the imposition of force. The Church is renewing its claim to be a key custodian of the just-war tradition, but extends this commentary into the entire realm of social justice in the international economy.

The *Compendium* does not seek to bind Catholics in conscience to accept its views as if they were doctrinal statements central to faith. Although the Church affirms strongly its moral principles, judgments about social, economic and political matters of their nature are less definitive. Such judgments do not depend solely on the authority of the Church, but more on the force of the arguments themselves in changing circumstances. Hence there may be room for debate or changes of position.

However, the Church takes very seriously Christ's words to feed the hungry, care for the sick, the homeless and people in distress, and so considers concern about war, poverty, hunger and injustice as part of its core business. It engages in efforts to improve the human condition, not primarily by invoking superior insight into technical matters but by

engaging in earnest conversation about human needs and encouraging the search for more adequate solutions.

What then does the *Compendium* tell us about the burning issues of war and peacemaking?

Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger vigorously contested the moral legitimacy of the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Britain and Australia. They were not alone, of course. The major Catholic bishops' conferences around the world endorsed the Vatican views, and many leaders of other mainstream churches also challenged whether the war was just.

President Bush relied particularly on the political support of right-wing evangelical Christians in the US, and has not

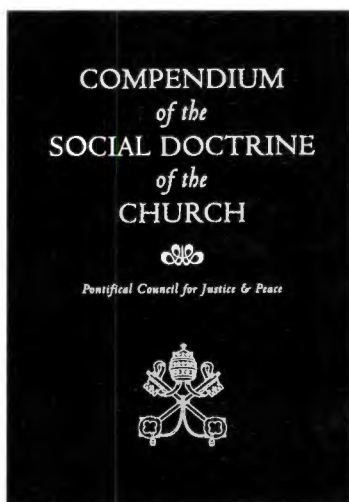
been slow to depict himself in a religious light, as leading a new crusade in defence of Christian values and civilisation against Islamic terrorists. This attempt to co-opt religious language and symbols is not just a cynical manipulation of moral traditions, but has very worrying implications if allowed to pass unchallenged.

With the invasion of Iraq clearly in mind, the *Compendium* states that according to the UN Charter, war is legitimate only in self-defence or when authorised by the Security Council to maintain peace. 'Therefore, engaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions.' It warns against allowing military might to determine right, declaring that 'international law must ensure that the law of the more powerful does not prevail'.

**I**N CONTRAST WITH EARLIER traditions that considered righting an injustice legitimate grounds for war, the *Compendium* calls on the international community to 'reject definitively the idea that justice can be sought through recourse to war ... Not only does the Charter of the United Nations ban recourse to force, but it rejects even the threat to use force.'

On the morality of war, there is some unresolved tension in the texts quoted. On one hand, the *Compendium* strongly condemns war: 'It is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era, war could be used as an instrument of justice.' War is a 'scourge' and is never an appropriate way to resolve problems that arise between nations because it creates new and more complicated conflicts. 'In the end, war is ... always a defeat for humanity.'

The document quotes John Paul II, that 'violence is evil' and 'destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings'. It commends 'the witness of unarmed prophets, who are often the objects of ridicule'



but who renounce violence to safeguard human rights.

On the other hand, the *Compendium* is not pacifist. 'A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral', and states have the duty of defence, 'even using the force of arms'. Quoting the *Catechism*, it adduces the standard 'strict conditions' for licit use of force: an aggressor is inflicting great and lasting damage; all other means of averting war have proved ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; and the outcome must not produce an even worse result than not fighting. Yet, incomprehensibly, the *Compendium* repeats a phrase from the *Catechism* that was used by prominent Catholic apologists for the invasion of Iraq to argue that the moral decision for war belonged to governments: 'The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good.' These apologists used this sentence to claim that decisions of government overruled the moral views of the churches against the legitimacy of the invasion. As Cardinal Ratzinger later indicated, the misleading sentence should be withdrawn from the *Catechism*.

The *Compendium* recognises that defence forces 'make an authentic contribution to peace', and especially those serving on humanitarian or peace-keeping missions promoted by the United Nations. This duty of humanitarian intervention even overrides the principle of national sovereignty. To enforce the provisions of international law and punish human rights abuses, the Church strongly supports the International Criminal Court.

The Church also calls for a 'general, balanced and controlled disarmament' and banning all weapons of mass destruction, including ending nuclear testing. The document supports the ban on child soldiers and anti-personnel mines, and urges stricter controls over the production and sale of small arms and light weapons.

In addition, 'Every member of the armed forces is morally obliged to resist orders that call for perpetuating crimes against the law of nations and the universal principles of this law.' Nor can violations of human rights be justified by claiming obedience to superior orders. The document also supports the right of conscientious objectors to military

service in principle, or to a particular war, but adds they 'must be open to accepting alternative forms of service'. Further, the *Compendium* recognises the right of resistance to unjust authorities, even to the point of violent resistance in extreme cases, although it prefers passive resistance as being more conformable to moral principle.

**T**HE SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAQ, which took a huge death toll on civilians—perhaps 500,000 or more were children—pose an immense moral question for our Western nations, and possibly amount to a great crime against humanity. The Vatican repeatedly opposed such draconian sanctions, but the Western powers today wish the whole issue to disappear. In contrast to the intense scrutiny over the UN administration of the sanctions regime, there has been almost total silence in our media about the morality of the sanctions themselves and responsibility for the catastrophic death toll.

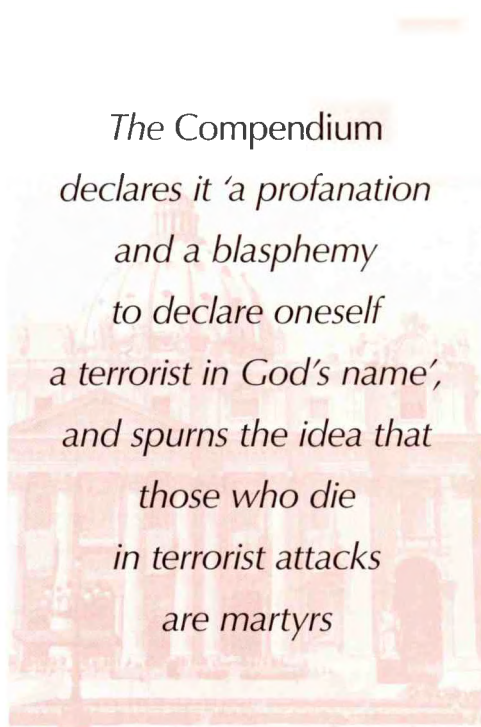
The *Compendium* declares that sanctions must 'never be used as a means for the direct punishment of an entire population: it is not licit that entire populations, and above all their most vulnerable members, be made to suffer because of such sanctions ... An economic embargo must be of limited duration and cannot be justified when the resulting effects are indiscriminate'.

Terrorism too is to be condemned as 'one of the most brutal forms of violence', sowing 'hatred, death, and an urge for revenge and reprisal.' But the *Compendium* insists that the causes of terrorism must not be overlooked. 'The fight against terrorism presupposes the moral duty to help create those conditions that will prevent it from arising or developing.'

The *Compendium* declares it 'a profanation and a blasphemy to declare oneself a terrorist in God's name', and spurns the idea that those who die in terrorist attacks are martyrs. 'No religion may tolerate terrorism and much less preach it. Rather, religions must work together to remove the causes of terrorism and promote friendship among peoples'.

One cannot help lamenting the failures of the US government and military to live up to their finest ideals as the *Compendium* continues: 'The struggle against terrorists must be carried out

with respect for human rights and for the principles of a state ruled by law.' 'It is essential that the use of force, even when necessary, be accompanied by a courageous and lucid analysis of the reasons behind terrorist attacks', since terrorists are more easily recruited when rights have long been trampled.



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The document also quotes Pope John Paul II as saying that nothing can justify torture. Far from simply endorsing a US-led war against terrorism, the *Compendium* puts the issues of war and violence in the context of economic justice, social equity and international development, including the plight of the poorest countries struggling under impossible debts.

Pope John Paul II stated on World Day of Peace, 2000: 'At the beginning of the New Millennium, the poverty of billions of men and women is "the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences"'. Indeed, 'another name for peace is development', as Pope Benedict XVI has since indicated with his support for the United Nations and its Millennium Development Goals. ■

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# Fair go, Prime Minister

Scrapping unfair dismissal laws will leave most Australian workers vulnerable.  
The effect on society could be profound.

**S**OON AFTER THE LAST federal election a banner was draped, briefly, from Sydney Harbour Bridge. It proclaimed: 'Australians have voted to live in an economy, not in a society.' Within days, the Howard Government announced it would introduce industrial relations changes in Parliament once it had obtained the majority in the Senate. One of these changes would be to exempt from unfair dismissal laws companies with fewer than 20 employees, a number that was later extended to 100. It is just one of many changes the Government intends to make, but the detail of the new legislation is yet to be seen.

The Government says removing unfair dismissal laws will lead to greater workplace flexibility, and has won praise for its plans from the International Monetary Fund. Of course, the downside of such flexibility is that it will remove protection against unfair dismissal for up to 95 per cent of Australian employees. Although the Government's plans directly affect only those employees covered by federal legislation, it is to be assumed the new laws will override state legislation.

In the main, the existing system provides a relatively speedy, cost-effective and simple process for resolving disputes between employers and employees. Those employees covered by the federal Workplace Relations Act 1996 come under the jurisdiction of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. Employees not covered by federal legislation are covered by state legislation, and each state has its own Industrial Relations Commission. Once a claim for unfair dismissal has been lodged in the commission, the matter is listed for a conciliation conference that explores whether it can be resolved by negotiation. If not, the applicant can proceed to arbitration. The commission's 2003-04 annual report says 75 per cent of cases are resolved at the conciliation stage. Of the remaining cases, 16 per cent are settled post-conciliation, six per cent are abandoned and just three per cent actually proceed to arbitration.

In a nutshell, most unfair dismissal cases concern two main questions: whether the employer has a valid reason for terminating the employee's employment; and whether the employee was accorded procedural fairness in all the circumstances of the case.

Where the employer can demonstrate there has been 'serious misconduct' (such as theft, fraud, assault, or being intoxicated at work), there is no need to show that the employee has been warned or counselled; such conduct, if established, warrants summary dismissal. Section 170 CA (2) of the Act provides the principal object is 'to ensure that, in consideration of an application in respect of termination of employment, a "fair go all round" is accorded to both the employer and employee concerned'.

The Government says one reason for changing the system is the cost. Prime Minister John Howard and the Minister for Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews, say they have received anecdotal evidence from employers complaining about the expense of having to defend against spurious unfair dismissal claims that proceed to arbitration. It should be noted that the number of unfair dismissal applications filed with the commission dropped from 8109 in 2000-01 to 7044 in 2003-04. In spite of these figures, the Government argues businesses should not have to bear the economic costs involved in defending against unfair dismissal claims at all, so the laws should be scrapped. It is clear the Government has listened closely to the concerns and opinions of employers and business groups; it is also apparent they have not listened to, nor taken account of, the concerns and opinions of the vast majority of Australian workers whose legal rights will be diminished by the changes.

**P**ROponents of the proposed industrial relations changes will no doubt insist that employees will still have rights, both at common law and under state and federal anti-discrimination laws, to challenge their termination in circumstances where they allege the termination was unlawful, discriminatory, and/or they were not provided with reasonable notice. Scrapping unfair dismissal laws is certain to lead to an increase in litigation under the state and federal anti-discrimination laws and common law, but the scope of protection afforded to all employees under the current laws will be significantly reduced. Not all employees who have been unfairly dismissed under existing arrangements can bring proceedings



under common law, or state or federal anti-discrimination laws.

By way of example, to proceed with a common-law claim for reasonable notice an employee will have to show the notice provided on termination was not reasonable in all the circumstances, taking into account such factors as the length of employment, seniority or pay level. Employees claiming discrimination will have to demonstrate they are being sacked because of their age, impairment, parental status or status as a carer. It will be much harder for the majority of Australian workers to seek legal redress. I would also argue that the litigation process through the respective courts and tribunals will be far more time-consuming, costly and protracted.

Howard insists that ending unfair dismissal will not cause 'the skies to fall in' or 'the walls to come crashing down'; that it will have a fairly minimal effect on ordinary Australian workers, but will benefit Australian employers and employees by promoting greater workplace flexibility and employment opportunities. Whether that actually happens is yet to be seen. What is clear is that the changes will remove a central plank of protection for ordinary

Australian workers. For them workplace flexibility will mean job insecurity.

**T**HE KEY BENEFIT OF the existing laws is that they protect workers from being dismissed in a 'harsh, unjust or unreasonable' way. Employers who act in this way are held accountable before the law, affording workers a modicum of protection from an unscrupulous employer. Simply by their existence, the laws protect the vast majority of employees: employers know that if they act capriciously they could face a claim for unfair dismissal. This gives the vast majority of Australian workers much needed protection and a certain measure of job security.

The clear winners under the Government's proposed changes will be employers who run businesses with fewer than 100 employees, although even they may well find they were better off under the existing laws, which in the main provided a relatively speedy, cost effective and efficient way of resolving claims.

The clear losers will be the 95 per cent of Australian workers protected by the existing laws, particularly those who will not have any legal avenues of redress either at common law or under state or federal anti-discrimination laws. In the main they will be relatively unskilled or low-paid workers who have limited tenure with their current employer. Unscrupulous employers will be able to hire, for example, unskilled younger or older workers or recently arrived refugees, pay them the minimum wage, and get rid of them when they like without providing a reason.

Howard says the effect of the new laws will not be felt immediately. He is probably right. The most vulnerable workers may well find that, over time, their position will become more precarious; and

that under the new 'flexibility', being repeatedly hired and laid off makes it extremely difficult for them to obtain the necessary finance to buy a house. That would widen the divide in our society between the relatively well off and the marginalised. The impact this will have on social cohesion is difficult to predict but one would imagine it could only make things worse.

The costs of the Howard Government's new legislation to scrap unfair dismissal laws will take some time to become apparent. As the current Act says, its principal object is to ensure that all parties, employers and employees, are given 'a fair go all round'. The new laws will extinguish the fair go for employees seeking legal redress. Where this leads our society, no one can say.

One can say, however, given the way successive Australian governments have consistently denied outsiders such as asylum seekers and refugees a 'fair go all round', it was only a matter of time before the Howard Government decided it could treat insiders the same way. ■

**Nicholas Dunstan** is a lawyer specialising in employment law at Galbally & O'Bryan in Melbourne. He worked as a legal officer for the Jesuit Refugee Service in Sydney (1992), Bangkok (1997), and Phnom Penh (2000).



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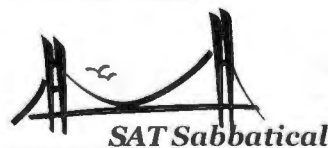
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# Balancing heart and spleen

Crossing the border to better understand 'the other' can help not just them, but us as well

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that struck Merlinda Bobis when she arrived from the Philippines to do her PhD at the University of Wollongong was how much Australians eat.

'You go to a restaurant and you have a whole fish,' says the poet and author, 'but in the Philippines, even if we're in the middle class, we would share that fish. It would not be for one person.'

It's not surprising that food is the central metaphor in Bobis's novel *Banana Heart Summer*.

When Nenita, the 12-year-old central character, accidentally burns the 'weary looking, passed-over carp' that was meant to feed her family of eight, including her five siblings, mother and recently unemployed father, her mother beats her and then throws the wok with the burnt fish and oil at her, scalding her foot.

So desperate is Nenita for her mother's love that she does not complain but, rather, offers a little prayer later: 'I only want to cook good, I only want to eat good, I only want to be good.'

Poverty, hunger and the violent rage of a mother whose dignity has been destroyed by her inability to feed her family are the bitter spleen of this novel whose pages are imbued with the smells, tastes and flavours of the Philippines. But as its title implies, it also has a heart, a huge heart at the centre of which lie love and compassion.

'A lot of the issues in the book are the same as those of the Philippines,' says Bobis, who is currently on sabbatical from the University of Wollongong to work on a new novel as a visiting fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra. 'They include child labour, poverty, hunger and domestic helpers going abroad.'

'Each time I go home my mother says the poverty is worse and we're very lucky we're now middle class. But you cannot close your eyes. You can be thankful, but you see the poverty. We have people knocking at the doors asking for

food, money for food, and even in the village you will have a pot of rice being stolen. It tells you a lot about hunger. And apparently now in the Philippines there is a business where people get leftovers from restaurants. And then they heat it and it's sold. I was shocked. That is really the pits.'

**B**ANANA HEART SUMMER is an extraordinarily moving book. At a forum on child labour, hunger, food and mother love hosted in Melbourne in August by the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition, Sharan Burrow, president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, said that she could not remember 'reading anything that's touched me so much in a long time'.

*Banana Heart Summer* recalls a summer in the childhood of Nenita on Remedios Street, in a small Philippines village with a Catholic church at one end and an active volcano at the other. These two powerful presences compete for Nenita's, and the villagers', attention as they struggle constantly for love, for acceptance and for nourishment—of body and soul.

Nenita, forced by necessity to take a job as a live-in maid with the street's wealthiest family, wants nothing more than to be a good daughter. Her hunger, and that of her family, is both real and metaphorical, and it is when these two interconnect—as when Nenita, on one of her many 'neighbouring' excursions, takes leftovers from her wealthy employers to her impoverished family—that the reader feels Nenita's pain. That, says Bobis, was her intent.

'If it evokes for you your old hunger, maybe you can feel a kinship for the hunger of others,' she says. 'Even if it doesn't mean working for the Third World it means that you are more feeling for your neighbour. You actually have compassion. That's the



Merlinda Bobis



reason why I write.

'I wanted to write the divide between those who love to love and eat and those who long to love and eat. And I wanted the book to evoke, for anyone from

any culture or any place, tender things: the love of the mother, the hunger for that love, the hunger for food. If it does evoke that for you, maybe it will enable you to leap that great divide and think of your lesser brothers and sisters.'

At one level *Banana Heart Summer* can be read as a joyful celebration of food. Readers are introduced to dozens of mouth-watering dishes such as aromatic chicken in bay leaf soy sauce, smoky coconut chicken in green papayas, jackfruit paper rolls, and *pan graciosa*, the bread of graciousness.

Most of the short chapters introduce a new dish, and describe its preparation and significance in the lives of the residents of Remedios Street, Nenita's 'street of wishful sweets and spices'.

We are introduced on the first page to Nana Dora, 'the chef of all the sweet snacks that flavoured our street every afternoon, except Sundays'. Nana Dora 'parked her wok at two in the afternoon. By three, the hungry queue began'.

Nenita's story starts with Nana Dora, who taught the 12-year-old the lesson about the banana heart: 'Close to midnight, when the heart bows from its stem,

wait for its first dew. It will drop like a gem. Catch it with your tongue. When you eat the heart of the matter, you'll never grow hungry again.'

All of the characters who inhabit Remedios Street are suffering from their own hungers. Some of them are drawn together by their mutual hunger, others are torn apart; some survive their hardships, others don't.

In the opening paragraph of the novel, the adult Nenita is looking back at that summer when she was 12:

When we laid my baby sister in a shoe-box, when all the banana hearts in our street were stolen, when Tiyo Anding stepped out of a window perhaps to fly, when I saw guavas pecking from Manolito's shorts and felt I'd die of shame, when Roy Orbison went as crazy as Patsy Cline and lovers cloped, sparking a scandal so fiery that even the volcano erupted and, as a consequence, my siblings tasted their first American corned beef, then Mother looked at me again, that was the summer I ate the heart of the matter.

There is so much in that paragraph, from pathos and tragedy to humour and redemption, that is laid out on a platter to whet the appetite of the reader for the details, the recipes, the mix of language and food and human nature that make up this dish.

Remedios Street is a microcosm of a world in which hunger and want coexist with wealth, in which the promise of the church is never far removed from the threat of the volcano. Though it is about a small street in the Philippines, it is also, as Sharan Burrow said, about larger 'communities of hunger'.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans has shown us that the balance between wealth and want, between haves and have-nots, can tip precariously, and sometimes catastrophically, in unexpected places.

After Katrina, which brought a Third World flood to the First, it was the compassion of ordinary humans that ultimately surfaced, highlighting the muddy reality of officialdom's inability to cope with basic human needs in a time of crisis.

'We are living in an era in which compassion is no longer a part of the discourse,' Bobis says. 'It's all hard-line foreign policy in how we treat each other, impregnable demarcation lines, the border of the other and us.'

'I thought you could talk about very basic things: food, hunger, mother love. The enemy feels the same hunger, and maybe if we can find a connection, then we can put ourselves in the shoes of the other.'

At heart, says Bobis, *Banana Heart Summer* is 'a book about forgiveness, a book about compassion for the mother, compassion for even someone who has hurt you.'

'In a way it is an act of neighbouring with the enemy, it's crossing the border. And in that way you're doing yourself a favour because you're balancing your heart and spleen.'

**Banana Heart Summer**, Merlinda Bobis. Murdoch Books Australia/Pier 9, 2005. ISBN 1 740 45590 8, RRP 29.95.

**Robert Hefner** is the acting editor of *Eureka Street*.

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## Standing ovation for the letter M

You could say the world's a cradle that rocks either side of the equator,  
a swing of sound controlled by maternal pushing, a continual cooing.  
When I was small, the letter 'em' changed profile all the time.  
M begins with 'e' when your mouth first opens: 'eh-m'  
and slips to mi, 'm-ee', then Mic-kee. Later I added Mouse.  
In a word, Mummy, was my first true mouth shape.  
Simplicity ticks inside the classics of anyone's language,  
my universe of literacy, an irreversible minefield.

An accent brings a word to stumpy knees.  
Listen!  
*Martyr*, many hindsights after, may be confused with Mater,  
Mater, with matter. This mattered to me because I could not hear.

A leaf before dying has weight: it rustles, whirls, frisks, cracks and floats,  
& lands like a curve, a circle, or the dash, or sometimes a question mark.  
Words like grab-bag, half caste innovations, engorge the language stream.  
Add *a* to M, lip sync the result before or after the fact. Ma or Am.

The lists grows with any combination you may ruminate upon.  
Could that be rum-inate? A question. Does rum rhyme with run or room?  
Practice perfects, and the text reinforces all stories to the deaf.  
Believe me!

Here, my mea culpa to the world: mou; mai; mao & mea  
clothed in mouth, maid, maui and moat, mean much more.  
More is more, not less, when the cohorts are called up.  
Then, a leaf whispers visibly like a haunt with a secret to tell,  
secrets even I can hear.  
In a tiny crevice of perception a mellifluous sound  
lies trapped,  
a stealth soul tucked inside my ear.

Do not listen to red herrings; they distract.  
A squad of nineteen consonants shoves terrestrials into flesh suits  
but words will meander. Mellow, mercury and metric expand and flex.  
Play detective, as I do, with lips.

I want to hear the leaf that floats.  
Excuse me, would you repeat that last spiky word with the round ending;  
Hah! *microphone*. Delete telephone, Cote de Rhone and I'm afraid to be alone.

Confusion configures a mastery to unravel.

The bone I pick with slippery words concerns me only.  
Tussling for clarity means everything to Me.  
M! Let's hear applause for your perfect shape.  
You, who rise out of mouths and tell yourself to Me.

Then, only then, are you mine alone.

# Sundays in Stornoway

Locals might find it boring, but this visitor to the Outer Hebrides found more than enough to make the sabbath special

**T**HE LANDLADY AT MY B&B had given me the low-down on everything I shouldn't do. Quite a list, including some things I'd have thought were necessary to life. A pub that would open mid-afternoon for 'lunch' was a recent innovation. Otherwise no shopping, no sport, no music, no work not of 'necessity and mercy', no being outdoors for no good reason. No canoodling either. This was Stornoway, soul of the Outer Hebrides, and Sundays were not to be trifled with.

Saturday night had not been wild, but a few rowdy drunks had milled around the town's latest-opening bar. In contrast, everyone I met the next morning was well dressed and carrying a Bible. They smiled at each other and at me. I made my way to the local Free Church, as recommended by my landlady. I was half-expecting a tirade on social issues. But although the tone of the sermon was admonishing, and we learned that 'even the smallest sin is worth a crucifixion', the minister was calm and poetic. His words drew out effortlessly in the respectful silence, filling a plain but elegant wooden nave.

Looking about the congregation I was surprised how many were women on their own. I was later told they were a mix of singles and ladies whose partners were not churchgoers. I was more surprised at the number of people asleep, especially on the upper floor, heads on the back of pews, mouths agape. When the minister began to sing, in a sonorous vibrato, they awoke with a rush.

Immediately after the service the socialising began in earnest. The minister laughed and joked with the parishioners he'd been admonishing moments earlier. The single women mingled. For people from outlying villages, this was the social event of the week.

A fortnight before, a friend in Edinburgh had warned me that even 'going for a walk' might be frowned on, at least if I did it 'ostentatiously'. My landlady scoffed

at this and I wasn't sure how to ostentatiously go for a walk anyway. It would be some hours before food became available so I thought I might get in my hire car and find some 'rambling' territory.

Roads on the Isle of Lewis are generally one-and-a-bit lanes wide. Pile-ups are prevented by 'passing places'. I followed the custom of waving when someone pulled into one to let me through. You can tell how tired a person is by the extent of their wave. A driver who has come up the long ribbon road from South Uist will barely raise the pinkie. I'd learned to appreciate this roadway connection though today there were only a few cars ferrying people home from church. The traditionalism of the Outer Hebrides is sometimes ridiculed on the Scottish mainland but at least on Sundays Hebrideans are years ahead in car-pooling. Most were packed to the roof and I enjoyed the communal sense this gave to the day.

**A**NOTHER FEATURE OF island life is the almost unnerving imprint of early humans. I'd spent much time searching for neolithic sites, buying books on neolithic sites, and photographing neolithic sites. When I turned into a gravel lane and stopped, ready to ramble, I wondered if I'd find more.

A farmer was standing outside his gate. With instant 'I've never lived in London' friendliness, he asked if he might accompany me. As it happened, he was an expert on neolithic sites. It felt like a documentary, where local historians materialise whenever the presenter asks a rhetorical question.

He showed me some recently uncovered graves on the beach behind his croft. 'No one except the archaeologists knows about them yet,' he confided. I didn't tell him I worked for a 24-hour news channel.

I asked him what he thought of Sundays. 'Dull. You can't do anything. I used to work in the fields but the neighbours gave me a hard time about it.' He'd



stopped going to church years ago. One neighbour continued to give him a hard time about that.

We drove to some standing stones, picking up along the way two of his friends, who were also bored. They confessed that they had been walking along the road in the hope of meeting someone. The farmer admitted he had been standing outside his gate for the same reason. 'Bloody Sundays. Must be hard for a tourist?'

When I returned to Stornoway I felt the observation of the sabbath had been attraction enough in itself. The next day the shops would be open again, the traffic would be more than it should be for a town of 6000 and rowdy drunks would spill from the late-opening bar.

My landlady, who had spent the day weaving a tapestry, welcomed me into the sitting room. How did she feel about Sunday? 'Without it, there'd be no *difference*. Every day would be the same.' Did she feel that obedience to the rules was waning? 'Yes, but it will be a shame if it goes altogether. You've got six days to do everything. Surely you can have one day off.' I thought I could drink to that. ■

**Martin Elliott** is a freelance writer living in Melbourne.



# The nurturing instinct

**Motherhood: How should we care for our children?** Anne Manne. Allen & Unwin, 2005. ISBN 1 741 14379 9, RRP \$29.95

IT'S A RARE BOOK THAT combines intellect with sensibility, that acknowledges emotion but doesn't rely on it to make its points. I can't help admiring Anne Manne for treating motherhood as seriously as it deserves, for delving into every angle—personal and political—with remarkable intelligence and thoroughness. Manne writes about the downside of mothering as well as its joys, its social dimensions as well as its most personal, loving aspects.

If how we shape society through caring for our children is an important subject, arguably *the* most important, it is also one of the most contentious. Almost everyone's in favour of motherhood, but who really knows what it means? Certainly not those fortunate enough to have experienced it, for with every new person entering the world it's a seat-of-the-pants business all the way. Children are different, parents are different, situations vary. But every parent who reads this book will thank Manne for reminding us that being a 'good-enough' mother is the best kind to be. We all make mistakes, we all lose it now and then. What matters is the love we give our children, the love that will see them through all the vicissitudes that life has in store for them.

We might not thank Manne so readily for reinforcing the view that only a mother can give this love, or rather, conversely, that without it for lengthy periods of the day a child will be at risk.

I choose my words carefully here. Nowhere in the book does Manne actually say this; in fact, she says the reverse—that the 'primary carer' need not be a mother,

and that fathers and grandparents and even child-care workers have significant roles to play. She is, in fact, scrupulously fair. Though for infants her preference is for longer parental leave and more generous 'actively neutral' allowances, she does support the kind of small-group, parent-controlled care we fought for back in the seventies.

Brave woman that she is, she even revisits the work of John Bowlby, the pioneer of attachment theory and once *bête noire* to feminists like myself. Yet to me, Manne's recounting of his story forms one of the book's most interesting and illuminating chapters. It seems that Bowlby had been misrepresented by both sides—those who in ignorance took hold of

his theories to oppose child care and those of us who, knowing they'd been distorted, chose to vilify him nonetheless.

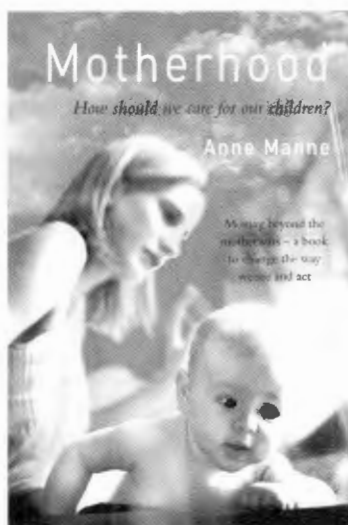
The trouble is that every book has a context. Indeed, without it the odds are that it won't get published. The burning issue today is that there won't be enough people in this country to support our ageing population, a problem that could be solved a number of ways other than encouraging women to reproduce and stay at home with their children, although this is what appears to be happening. A related concern is the complaint of many older, childless women that feminists pressured them to delay bearing children until after their education was finished and their careers were established, and now, having followed this advice, they feel betrayed, finding they'd left it too late. Though I don't think the claim stands up, I can believe that this is the way feminism

came to be understood—that it was all about individual women 'succeeding'.

Like all social movements, feminism is a varied proposition, and what we who were involved in setting up a children's services program wanted was a genuine choice for women and the best of care for children. Most of us were mothers and the program was developed at a time when, apart from resistance from family and preschool lobbies, such an objective was feasible. But times have changed radically since then, government support for all kinds of services has contracted, and children and women have suffered. Nothing could have been further from our minds than handing over taxpayers' money to commercial centres, which were on the whole lamentable places even then.

MOTHERHOOD'S SPLENDID antepenultimate chapter deals with what Manne calls the McDonaldisation of childhood. It is one of the strongest, most persuasive critiques of the market-driven society I have read anywhere, but as far as I know it hasn't got the airing it should. The coverage has tended to favour Manne's lyrical descriptions of motherhood instead. Naturally, these are the more printable bits, but it's disquieting that this is so, for it has restricted the parameters of the debate.

Take the issue of part-time work, which forms a basis for Manne's proposals. There was a huge demand for it in the sixties and seventies as the workforce participation rates of married women with children increased. Even those who disapproved of mothers working tended to grudgingly accept it if the work was part-time. But part-time employment is exceedingly problematic. The kind of job you might share with someone with equal qualifications is usually to be found in white-collar industries or among the



self-employed. The establishment of pro rata wages and conditions, moreover, has been limited largely to the public sector, and even there the incidence isn't widespread. And because part-time employment is often dead-end, even with pro rata entitlements in place, back in the seventies our preference was for a shorter working week.

Needless to say, we were pushing against the tide. As a consequence of economic rationalism and the anti-human policies that Manne quite rightly deplores, those in full-time work are working longer hours than ever, with the rest condemned to casualisation, to which non-professionals particularly are at risk. Yet Manne doesn't state just what she means by part-time work, or allude to the difficulties attached to it.

This is odd, given *Motherhood's* scope. Indeed, that scope is one of its real strengths. Just when you think, ah, but what about *this*, a discussion of that very topic will appear. But perhaps it's a weakness too. In covering all the angles, she's not as rigorous in some places as she is in others. The place where she's most exacting is in her review of recent studies

into stress levels in very young children attending child-care centres. The findings of these studies are disturbing, and more disturbing still is how they've been rejected out of hand. Yet even here there are interpretations of the data other than the one put forward. The aggressiveness and lack of social skills at school linked with early child-care attendance, for instance, can be attributed as much to poor infant-school teaching as it can to early child care, especially when the advanced cognitive development reported in these kids is taken into account. Often the most obstreperous child, in my experience, is a child who is bored.

So while Manne acknowledges that high-quality group care should be available to those who need it (and there will always be those who will), the overwhelming thrust of her thesis supports other options. Obviously a range of options is needed, but in the hard world of policymaking it's too often either-or. The funds directed to one option will be siphoned off another, and that is exactly what has occurred.

These points are raised not because I don't attach weight to Manne's ideas

but because I do. A decade ago I wrote a book myself to express the love I had for a baby and the wonderful life I had when he was young; how through his companionship, as other women have written, I harnessed my own creativity. It was a novel, but was based, as novels often are, on an incident that happened in real life, when my youngest child, the baby I had after I left the Public Service, contracted giardia in part-time care. It was an awful business, and I learned from the experience that there's a world of difference between the rarefied atmosphere of policymaking and what happens on the ground. Manne is right when she says that the love we have for our children is something to be enjoyed and treasured. But what is equally true is that it's one thing to have an idea, quite another to make it work. ■

**Sara Dowse** is a novelist and essayist. Under her leadership the first women's affairs section of the Prime Minister's Department, established in 1974, became the Office of Women's Affairs, now the Office of the Status of Women. She lives in Sydney.



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# A short history of Islam

**Islam: The Straight Path (Revised Third Edition)**, John L. Esposito. Oxford University Press, 2005. ISBN 0 195 18266 9, RRP \$65

**T**HE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF 11 September 2001 led to an upheaval in the West's relations with the Muslim world. Many came to interpret these events as signs of a clash between Islam and Western civilisation. Explosive headlines led many to understand Islam as the cause of global terrorism. John Esposito's book seeks to put these fears to rest by making a clear distinction between mainstream Islam and the kind of Islam espoused by extremists. But this is to over-simplify the issues. His claim that such extremists can be found in every religion tends to dismiss these attacks as the actions of a fanatical minority that does not need to be taken very seriously. Esposito's book disregards Muslim voices calling for a critical investigation into the causes of terrorism and into the American response. It also disregards the serious questions non-Muslims are asking about the identity and purpose of Islam in the modern world.

Anyone with some personal experience of the Muslim world would be willing to admit that the word Islam itself is misleading. For there are as many Islams as there are communities of Muslims in the world. Specific historical, cultural and geographical factors have led each Muslim community to give its own peculiar stamp to the movement initiated by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. There is no one, monolithic version of Islam, just as there is no single authority

to authenticate the teachings or beliefs of Islam. Instead, Islam is a dynamic project within history, a project that is not yet finished. Esposito's title, *Islam: The Straight Path*, describes Islam in the past rather than as an evolving movement in the present. His book gives the impression that Islam is simply there waiting to be understood as a phenomenon in history.

**E**XCEPT TO DISCUSS several issues relevant to violence and terrorism briefly in the epilogue, Esposito's book remains what its earlier editions were, namely (in the author's own words), 'essential coverage of the origins, spread, and development of Islam and its roles in Muslim societies'. As such, it is a readable and useful introduction to Islam. But the preface promises the reader that it will address 'the key issues necessary to understand the influence of Osama bin Laden and the continued growth of extremism, questions about

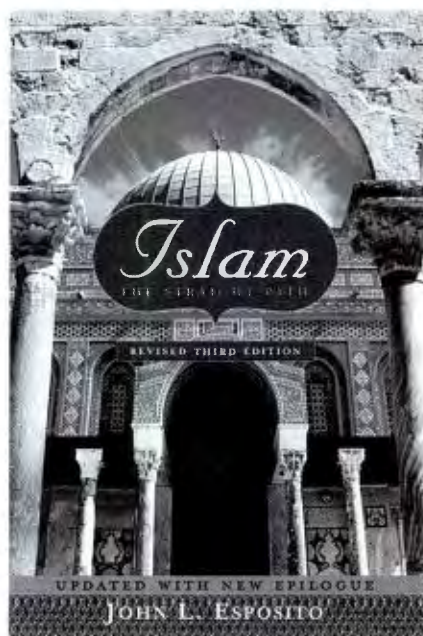
the relationship of Islam to violence and terrorism, the meaning of *jihad*, the origins of a global *jihad* ideology, the role of suicide bombing, and the influence of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Islam'. These important issues are treated rather too summarily in the epilogue, however, and the reader is left dissatisfied. Since Esposito fails to analyse these complex issues at any depth, he cannot claim that his book deals with Islam as a modern phenomenon. It is

essentially a history of Islam up to the events of 9/11.

The book describes the reforms that have taken place in the Muslim world during the 19th and 20th centuries in response to Western colonialism and imperialism. Since the author himself admits in his preface to the revised third edition, however, that the events of 9/11 'proved a tragic turning point and setback that has challenged and in many cases undermined the progress of the recent past', it would have been more helpful if he had explained how these modern events have undermined what he described as 'progress in the Muslim world'. Such an analysis would have helped the reader to make more sense of these events and to place them in the broader perspective of Islamic history. Even though contemporary Muslim thinkers are, in fact, reflecting on these issues, Esposito has not included their investigations in his revised edition.

On the last page of his book, Esposito mentions three of the ways in which contemporary efforts at reform have to face opposition from within Muslim society. But he fails to take note of the pervasive Western demonisation of Islam as an additional factor working against change and reform within Islam. Anyone aware of the frustrations felt by Muslims in the face of Western hegemony will feel disappointed that the book did not do more to articulate these Muslim sentiments. For the book makes little attempt to give a sympathetic ear to those voices speaking on behalf of marginalised groups of Muslims who are suffering various forms of oppression because of Western arrogance and greed.

**T**HE BOOK IS WEAKEST in its portrayal of reformist tendencies that have emerged in the Muslim world since 9/11. Esposito





mentions only a few of the most important reformers in passing, failing to recognise several other significant Muslim leaders who have emerged more recently. For example, there is no mention in Esposito's bibliography of a remarkable collection of essays written by a group of progressive Muslim authors (*Progressive Muslims, on Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi, Oxford, Oneworld, 2004). First published in 2003, these essays were, according to the editor, a response to the events of 9/11 and would have contributed to an analysis of the basic issue Esposito himself describes in the preface of his own book (revised two years later, in 2005) as 'a new clash in the 21st century between Islam and Western civilisation'. Awareness of the thinking of these progressive Muslims would have brought

Esposito's book up to date. Bereft of these reflections, the book tends to over-simplify Muslim attitudes to change, reducing them to four categories, namely: 'secularist, conservative, neotraditionalist (or neofundamentalist), and reformist (neomodernist)'. This classification no longer caters for the diverse approaches to reform in Islam that are emerging in the modern world, especially in response to the events of 9/11.

**I**NSTEAD OF DELVING into the more recent efforts at reform in Islam, the author tends to repeat summaries of earlier Muslim reformers. For example, he sums up a prevalent attitude that prefers to remain satisfied with past formulations as a 'taqlid mentality'. The phrase becomes a repetitive cliché when it is used again and again

without further elaboration. Similarly, with regard to the status of non-Muslim minorities, he refers to their 'protected status', resorting to the standard phrase used in most introductions to Islam rather than exploring some of the more recent Muslim views on the issue. Esposito may rightly counter by saying that his book is simply a short history of Islam. I have hinted at some of the oversimplifications and inadequacies of such a short history. The book remains useful as a balanced introduction to the generally accepted fundamentals of what is commonly known as Islam. ■

**Herman Roborgh** SJ is engaged at Aligarh Muslim University, India, in research for a PhD in Islamic studies on a modern commentary on the *Qur'an*.



# British smiles

*Queenan Country*, Joe Queenan. Picador, 2005. ISBN 0 330 43943 X, RRP \$30  
*Still Spitting at Sixty*, Roger Law. HarperCollins, 2005. ISBN 0 007 18166 3, RRP 49.95

**I**N A FLURRY OF SELF-CONGRATULATION built on Carnaby Street and the Beatles, Britain christened itself home of the 'Swinging Sixties'. This old civilisation became a modish place for sociological study then as well, notably with Anthony Sampson's *Anatomy of Britain*. There were few dissenting voices in this season of optimism, save the resonant 'non' from the president of France across the Channel.

Neither the American journalist and aficionado of arcane rock groups, Joe Queenan, nor the cartoonist and inventor of the *Spitting Image* puppets, Roger Law, has too solemn an ambition in his account of Britain (and in Law's case Australia, where he seems to have settled). *Queenan Country*—an irresistible pun that his surname gifted him, is clumsily subtitled *A Reluctant Anglophile's Pilgrimage to the Mother Country*. Long married to an English wife, Queenan has often been to Britain, but not for

decades on his own. Now, indulging whim and disdaining duties to relatives, he charts an eccentric, private course.

Roger Law's *Still Spitting at Sixty* is more concerned to chart a journey in time. His subtitle explains: *From the '60s to My Sixties, a Sort of Autobiography*. Both books are stories of long marriages and tolerant spouses. Each is written with a keen eye for the idiosyncrasies of British society, but also with a sympathy for how people accommodate to, and flourish within, them. Queenan, for example, confesses that on first reading Lewis Carroll he encountered 'a phantasmagoric society populated by lunatics', only gradually realising that the author was describing Britain rather than Wonderland. Law reflects ruefully of

his *Spitting Image* puppets that he had at least cornered 'the international market in grotesques'.

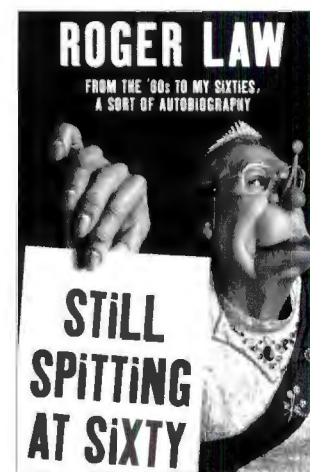
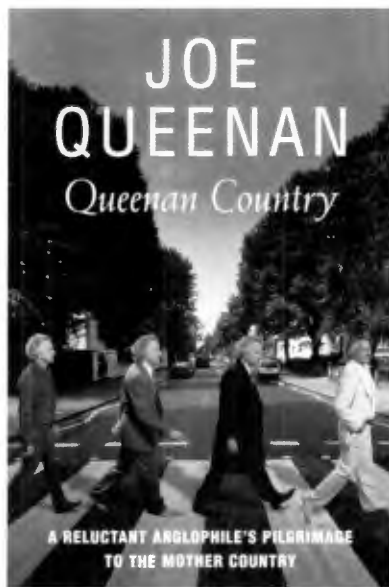
His book begins in a similar tone, with the reflection that 'Eternal Youth simply buckled under the weight of my expectations'. Soon he is back at

the beginning, with his birth in 1941 in the secluded Fen country of eastern England. Law found his way to Art School in Cambridge at the time of the flamboyant entries into public life of Peter Cook and David Frost. By the 1960s he was in the capital, though of the contrary opinion that 'Swinging London, so revered in retrospect, was very slow getting into its stride'. Employed as a cartoonist by *The Observer*, Law found plentiful freelance work as well. Moving to the *Sunday Times* led him to judge that its mid-sixties period 'was the most creative phase

in newspapers since the war'. It remained to mark when the decline began.

**L**AW IS INFORMATIVE and incisive about journalism in London at this time, not least of the contributions of so many expatriate Australians. Eventually he and Peter Fluck (hence Luck and Flaw) hit on the idea of *Spitting Image*, which ran from 1984–86. The technical difficulties of modelling are intriguingly described, as are the financial anxieties of the enterprise. Perhaps the series went too long. Law concedes that when Thatcher and Reagan 'departed high office a bright light of motivation went out of our lives'. *Spitting Image*, despite its longevity, never translated as happily to Australia as some other British comedies, although Law faced a worldwide demand for puppets for spin-off shows in Russia, Portugal and elsewhere.

The last third of this genial memoir is set in Australia, but happy as he pronounces himself to be, this seems the latest site of Law's restlessness. Certainly the commitment has not sapped his powers as a draftsman, which *Still Spitting at Sixty* amply illustrates. It has also summoned the



book that he had in him, the good-humoured but serious survey of a working life.

Setting off on a journey that will take him to Liverpool and a taxi-driver for whom John Lennon may have acted as best man, to Wales for a week, to the castle where Edward II met the red-hot poker, Queenan thinks of his project as 'a cross between a valentine and a writ of execution, an affectionate jeremiad'. Confessing that 'the Brits have always puzzled me', Queenan is in good company. As Barry McKenzie put it more demotically, 'I'll never get to the bottom of the Poms.'

For one thing, Britain has 'entirely too much history'. And pseudo-history: Glastonbury teems with 'hippies, warlocks, neo-Druids, and people looking for Merlin so they can buy drugs off him'. Travelling to a place of recent historical importance, the home of the Beatles, Queenan promises 'No Mersey'. London is much less manageable, 'a tourist's Golgotha' (better to be spectator than participant), 'intractable, insuperable, inexhaustible'.

Queenan visits Madame Tussaud's, which he finds insufficiently absurd, and mentally reviews English literature. Of the modern variety he prefers books where nobody has been to Cambridge. His musical adventures range from a private performance in Oxford of Bach played on Handel's harpsichord, to an Eagles tribute band concert in Stroud. Listing ten, 'make that twenty', things he hates about Britain, Queenan begins with 'the twit', not only invented, 'but reluctantly beatified' in that country. He disparages the Pre-Raphaelites—'those self-absorbed poltroons had the nerve to demean the Renaissance'—along with bad hair and 'rehearsed civility'.

*Queenan Country* is jovially enraged, delighting in being presented with so many targets for the author's ebullient scorn. The book is often very funny, but Queenan overstays his welcome. At times, too, the mask slips to reveal genuine contempt for some of what he observes. In the end, perhaps, this amusing and perceptive work is unavoidably captive to Queenan's ambivalence. ■

**Peter Pierce** is Professor of Australian literature at James Cook University, Cairns.

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# Who was Harold Holt?

*The Life and Death of Harold Holt*, Tom Frame. Allen & Unwin, 2005. ISBN 1 741 14672 0, RRP \$35

**L**IKE MOST READERS, I turned first to the death scenes. The details are assembled in workmanlike fashion. Harold Holt spends the weekend before Christmas 1967 at his Portsea holiday house. There are dinners and paperwork. On the morning in question the one blemish is a phone argument with Billy McMahon, his Treasurer, a figure who only gets murkier with time. (How would a biography of McMahon read?)

Around midday Holt is with friends on the back beach when he is inspired to go for a swim. Where were the minders? The bodyguards? The common sense? Dame Zara Holt's first question was whether he was wearing sandals or flippers. As it happened, sandals. The surf was high, the water treacherous, Holt had little control over his movements. It did not take long for him to disappear below the surface, never to re-emerge.

Tom Frame rejects motives like suicide, and elegantly scuttles the Chinese submarine theories. For him, the prime minister's death is one of accidental drowning, a common mishap at Australian beaches, and only uncommon here because we are talking about the prime minister. A very recent coronial inquiry agrees with Frame. He concludes that if there are other reasons, we probably will never know them, and gives murky explanations too for why the sea does not give up its dead.

The headlines of that summer left Australians with a strange feeling that still lingers.

Here was a national leader who did not vanish after an election defeat, was not assassinated or forced to retire; he simply disappeared. Holt's disappearance became the identifying moment in national memory, the start of the discussion: who was Harold Holt?

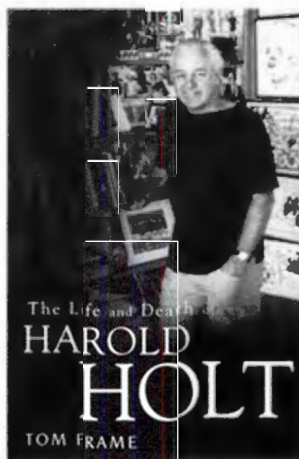
In an age when politicians have biographies written before they even become prime minister, what do we make of the first life of Holt coming out 38 years after his death? One of the most surprising facts is that he had the longest wait of any

parliamentarian, 30 years, before becoming PM, a record the current member for Higgins wouldn't equate with 'being there for the long haul'.

Although he was Menzies' favoured protégé, Holt was far from being Menzies' epigone. They had worked together since the 1930s and could be seen as co-founders of the Liberal Party, two great survivors. He was an enthusiast, a man who took to portfolios with smooth and energetic purpose: Supply and Development, Trade and Customs, Labour and National Service, Air and Civil Aviation, Treasurer. He was good friends ('mates' would be a risky word to use) with many in the union movement, his motivation being productivity, his foes being the Reds.

Frame accentuates his successes in negotiation with all sides of industrial relations, but is honest about such disasters as Holt's handling of the waterside workers' strikes in the 1950s and economic reforms that almost lost them the 1961 election. Cheery moments intervene, like his pioneering of decimal currency. The book marks out the chronology well, though is remarkably uncritical of Holt's politics and unanalytical of his psychology.

**W**HEN PUSHED TO SAY what Holt stood for, the words that recur lack real definition: progress, stability, initiative, values, freedom, co-operation. Indeed, they come close to the virtues extolled in Holt's guiding creed, Rudyard Kipling's 'If'. There was never a comprehensive vision of change for Australia; it was always steady as she goes. Britain was still an ideal, and unbounded progress a euphemism for unquestioned capitalism. His infamous *faux pas* during the Vietnam nightmare, 'All the way with LBJ', betrayed the anxious



and shifting allegiances that remain cause for outrage and doubt to this day.

But another factor has to be considered. Why the Liberal Party? Menzies and Holt wanted a party that was over and against what it was not: not illiberal, not socialist, not crusty old Tory. Frame quotes Rohan Rivett from 1954: 'They represent the liberal, middle of the road section of the party and in most major matters of policy are more broad-

minded and progressive than the majority of the benches behind them.'

Australia was comfortable and relaxed with a government that was neither radical right-wing nor radical left. The book is a goldmine for historians of the parties and their changing character. Menzies and Holt would find alien the closed debate and amoral actions of the current Liberal Government.

What is also missing is much about Holt's family or personal life. Prudence sells, and perhaps Bishop Frame wishes to disappoint the headline editors, but he gives signs of a private world that wouldn't look out of place in Euripides. There are clearly personal dramas and secrets in Holt's life that help explain why he devoted all his time to politics. The inner emotional world of an extrovert would be the perfect subject for the next Holt biography. That, and the peculiar widespread view, well expressed in David Marr's *Barwick*, that Holt 'was nice to the point that his essential decency was viewed as weakness'.

'One of the most likeable of Australian Prime Ministers,' said the *Sydney Morning Herald* obituary. Likeable, nice? The final word on an Australian prime minister? Perhaps I've been reading too much Mark Latham. ■

Philip Harvey is a Melbourne poet and librarian.

# Curtin's greatest achievement

**Curtin's Gift: Reinterpreting Australia's Greatest Prime Minister, John Edwards.**  
Allen and Unwin, 2005. ISBN 1 865 08704 1, RRP \$35

**T**O MANY, JOHN CURTIN was Australia's greatest prime minister: a hero who was cheered as he walked through the streets of Melbourne and later farewelled by thousands. In many ways, he makes an odd choice of national champion, lacking as he did the grandeur of Whitlam, the wit of Menzies, the fabled common touch of Hawke. But what Curtin lacked in personal style he made up for in achievements, the kind of inarguable, towering accomplishments upon which history books were once based.

He brought Australian troops home in defiance of Churchill and Roosevelt, re-aligned Australian allegiances from the motherland to the new frontier of the United States and saved Australia from Japanese invasion. He was the reluctant hero, the saintly, self-sacrificing figure who safely guided the nation through its darkest, most sleepless night, all the while battling his own personal demons of alcoholism and depression.

Or so the story goes. *Curtin's Gift* argues that Curtin was indeed the greatest Australian leader, but that the accomplishments normally attributed to him have been confused or exaggerated and obscure his real legacy. The popular claim that he rescued the nation from Japanese invasion is seen here as an overblown and misleading one, as is the image of Curtin as some kind of Pacific warlord—he mainly deferred to the capable American general MacArthur. Nor was Curtin as opposed to Britain as legend would have it. It is often forgotten that he appointed the Duke of Gloucester to the position of Governor-General, contrary to Labor policy that an Australian should be appointed to the role.

Author John Edwards also argues that Curtin's intervention in bringing the 6th and 7th divisions home was not as crucial as popular belief would have it. It was a commonsense move and a popular one, he asserts, rather than an inspired and idiosyncratic one. The political machinations leading up to the move are chron-

icled here, though this section is not as clear or as convincing as other parts of Edwards's argument.

The notion of Curtin as reluctant leader is more convincingly overturned here. While Curtin was apparently prepared to walk away from politics if he lost his Fremantle seat, he was by no means timid about the prospects of becoming leader and pursued the post with vigour. A life-long convert to the Labor cause, he was a voracious reader and thought widely and critically about economic issues. As such, he came to the national leadership as the 'best prepared and trained leader of his generation'.

**I**N ADDITION TO THROWING light on some of the misconceptions about Curtin's prime ministership, the book is valuable in that it traces Curtin's development as an economic thinker. Born in 1885, Curtin experienced Depression-era poverty first-hand and it was formative in his thinking. Later, he became involved with the Victorian Socialist Party, where he absorbed the teachings of Tom Mann. Also crucial were his observations of the wide-ranging powers held by the government during World War I. Appointed editor of the *Westralian* aged just 25, he possessed what Edwards calls an 'easy familiarity with concepts and numbers'.

During Scullin's ill-fated leadership, Curtin distanced himself from the prevailing wisdom in the party on how to end the Depression, rejecting the conventional analysis, which was to cut wages, and supported the Keynesian notion that reducing spending would not end the Depression. When he became leader, he spoke of the urgent need for 'the reshaping, in fact, the revolutionising of the

Australian way of life quickly, efficiently and without question'. His government assumed control of income tax from the states, made key changes to social security, introduced modern central banking and strengthened Australian involvement in the global economy, participating in talks that eventually led to the nation's involvement in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. It was these developments, Edwards contends, that constitute both Curtin's greatest achievement and the foundations upon which Australian prosperity would once again flourish.

Edwards, formerly one of Paul Keating's economic advisers, holds a PhD in economics and is now chief economist at HSBC. As such, he brings considerable economic proficiency to the work, and some will no doubt find this aspect of the text dry and somewhat difficult. However, as a look at how economic policy is inextricably linked to social change, the book is invaluable. And as a study in how Curtin's hard work in establishing the framework for Australia's recovery was more significant than his more celebrated and dramatic moments, it's an incisive look at how politicians are perceived and remembered.

Edwards's work is by no means the definitive or exhaustive Curtin biography (David Day's tome still holds that title), but rather a convincing re-examination of some of the key strands of his life. We may revere Curtin, Edwards argues, but we have got him all wrong. For someone who got it right so crucially and so often, perhaps the least we can do is understand him and his precious gift. ■

**Daniel Herborn** is a freelance writer based in the Blue Mountains.



# Personal tragedy, wider injustice

**Rene Baker: File #28/E.D.P.**, Rene Powell & Bernadette Kennedy. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005. ISBN 1 920 73199 7, RRP \$24.95

**Peopling the Cleland Hills: Aboriginal History in Western Central Australia 1850–1980**, Michael Alexander Smith.

Aboriginal History Inc, 2005. ISBN 0 958 56378 0, RRP \$25

**A**LL TOO OFTEN OVER the course of Australian political history Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been stereotyped and dehumanised. ‘Aboriginal’ identity is often thought of, and depicted as, fulfilling a fixed criterion without appreciation for the multitude of tribal differences, the evolution of culture and religion over time, and individual personalities. Aboriginal people become blank canvases in the eyes of mainstream society, which then overlays its own prejudices and world views. However, both *Rene Baker: File #28/E.D.P* and *Peopling the Cleland Hills* in their own way break through this constrictive narrative of indigenous history and culture.

*Rene Baker* was written jointly by Rene Powell and Bernadette Kennedy. Powell recounts her life as a member of the Stolen Generations, and it is a moving story of injustice, sadness, strength and hope.

She came from Milyirritjarra country near Warburton, Western Australia. At the age of four, Powell was forcibly removed from her people. She writes about how, when she was taken away on the mission truck, her mother ‘started crying’ and ‘went into mourning’, while Powell was inconsolable. Remarkably, though, Powell’s removal is not as saddening an aspect of her story as is her own disconnectedness from both her traditional culture and mainstream society. She spent the rest of her childhood institutionalised, and upon returning to her family Powell found she had lost her language. Because of this there was an ‘empty space’ between her and her mother.

Meanwhile, she was not accepted by wider society. Powell was a dark-skinned girl raised in a white world, living in limbo. Through all of this, though, she manages to struggle her way through a world stacked against her, and thereby claim her identity.

Driven by her personal friendship with Powell, Kennedy situates her political analysis of the removal policy of the Western Australian government in the context of Powell’s life story. This makes Kennedy’s insights and research all the more powerful and poignant. In other words, Kennedy’s compassion motivates and sharpens her insights.

**T**HERE ARE TWO FUNDAMENTAL ideas running through Kennedy’s analysis. First, the Stolen Generations issue requires a shift in focus away from the rights of the victims towards addressing the injustice of the policy itself and the actions carried out to further it. Kennedy’s hypothesis is that a rights focus is too individualistic and adversarial, and is in part responsible for the Federal Government’s refusal to apologise for fear of being sued. Second, Kennedy challenges the idea that the Stolen Generations were a misfortune that occurred when well-meaning bureaucrats attempted to help Aboriginal peoples. She provides damning evidence that key WA government officials and politicians knew that from at least 1937 the practice of taking indigenous children from the parents and families was illegal. *Rene Baker* is a profound work in which the personal tragedy of Powell crystallises the wider injustice of the Stolen Generations. Furthermore, a book that celebrates the triumph of the human spirit in such adverse circumstances can hardly be dismissed as a ‘black-armed’ view of history.

On the other hand, Michael Smith takes a different approach to Aboriginal history in *Peopling the Cleland Hills*. His book is like a rich painting, its background being the Cleland Hills, a small cluster of hills located on the edge of the desert in

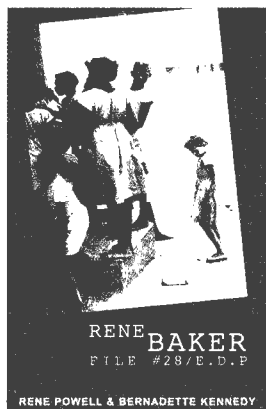
western Central Australia. While the Cleland Hills are not physically imposing, they were of central importance to the Kukatja people and their waterholes also attracted early Europeans.

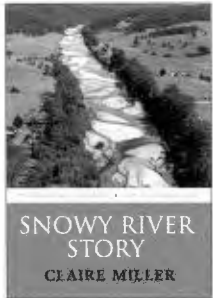
On this geographical bedrock Smith builds a picture of wider social, cultural and environmental trends ebbing and flowing over the Cleland Hills. From initial contact with Europeans, the subsequent diaspora of the Kukatja, the passing through of the Pintupi people from their exodus of the desert and their subsequent return to the desert. The Cleland Hills were in a sense a border between two worlds—the desert and the agricultural, the Aboriginal and the European.

If this were the extent of the book, it would be just another history of the colonial frontier. However, Smith adds an extra layer of complexity in that Aboriginal peoples are not depicted as an undifferentiated mass but rather as *individuals*. Using mission records, police reports, visitors’ journals and early media reports, Smith manages to build an account of the individual people who inhabited the region over the course of about 130 years. Among these are Malkunta Tjupurrula, a Kukatja man who was arrested for ‘larceny of beef’, and Tjintjiwarra, a Matuntara woman who was one of several Aboriginal witnesses to Constable Willshire’s shooting of two Aboriginal men in 1891.

This historiographical approach allows Smith to connect the land to its inhabitants, and as such his book is a combination of history, archaeology and anthropology. The many prints and photos included are also fascinating. Therefore, *Peopling the Cleland Hills* is a solid work that breaks new ground by presenting the Cleland Hills as an anchor point from which Smith narrates the lives of individual Aboriginal people during a period of disruption. ■

**Godfrey Moase** is studying law at the University of Melbourne.





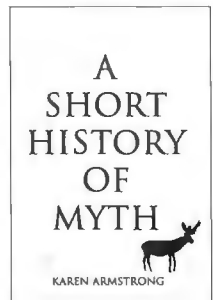
**Snowy River Story: The Grassroots Campaign to Save a National Icon**, Claire Miller. ABC Books, 2005. ISBN 0 733 31533 X, RRP \$35

In its real and mythological forms, the Snowy River is deeply bound up with the Australian story. It represents the strength and mystique of the Australian bush. It brought to bear the engineering and labour feats of Australians working on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. It gave us that icon of a fearless and sturdy Australian, the Man From Snowy River. Claire Miller offers readers another angle of the Snowy: a river deprived of its water flow, and the locals from Dalgety and Orbost who decided to fight for its environmental restoration.

Miller tells the story of those who stoked the fires of the campaign, including Craig Ingram's unlikely rise to political prominence as campaign figurehead. She recounts the constant struggle to engage state and federal governments and persuade them of the merits of a guaranteed 28 per cent flow. Her final chapter provides the personal perspectives of women and men who have lived on the Snowy, including an important indigenous perspective. It was they who first understood that the Snowy gives life.

At its core, Miller's book is about the potency of grassroots politics. It was because of the energy and stoicism of a few impassioned people that the campaign to save the Snowy reached the ears of Spring Street and Canberra.

—Emily Millane



**A Short History of Myth**, Karen Armstrong. Text, 2005. ISBN 1 920 88587 0, RRP \$22

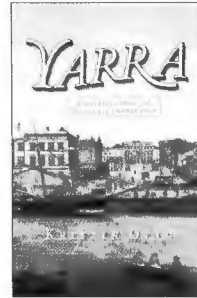
Many 'enlightened and rational' people today believe we no longer need myths. Karen Armstrong argues that they're wrong: humans are myth-making creatures, and myths are 'designed to help us cope with the problematic human predicament'. They are not simply fairy tales or ancient explanations for natural phenomena, but emotional and spiritual necessities for finding meaning in our

lives and in the world around us.

Her book traces the development of mythology and its ties to human history: paleolithic hunters and shamans gave way to neolithic farmers and artisans; ancient world civilisations eventually led to the Western transformation of the last few centuries. It also analyses the relationships between some of our most fundamental myths, from Babylonian culture through Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and on to modern myth creators such as Eliot, Joyce and Conrad.

Armstrong is a former Catholic nun who writes with authority, although the brief examples in this slender volume may leave a novice wanting something more comprehensive. Never mind the 'short history'; what's more intriguing are her musings on the nature and meaning of myths, and how they allow us to find the divine aspects in our mortal selves. She concludes that we need a return to myths to bring 'fresh insight to our lost and damaged world'. In today's times, even the rational and enlightened among us would have to agree.

—Ali Lemer



**Yarra: A Diverting History of Melbourne's Murky River**, Kristin Otto. Text, 2005. ISBN 1 920 88578 1, RRP \$32


The Yarra has always been, in my mind, a river too urbanised to be interesting, at least once it leaves its forest and wineries upstream. Kristin Otto's exploration of the past of the river that 'flows upside down', an ambitious popular history, swept me through the stories of the whole of the length and life of Melbourne's river.

Otto's slim book recounts the variety of life played out along the river's banks over the centuries, from its geological formation, and significance for the Wurundjeri people, to the crime, pollution and development since white settlement. In the process it dredges up old tales of sex and sport and industry. With her background in fine art, she writes best when she explores the art which the Yarra has inspired—particularly the work of the Heidelberg painters in the 1880s.

These past 170 years since John Batman's 'treaty' with Wurundjeri elders have seen constant efforts to control and straighten the river—and the cultural chaos and deviance which the Yarra, and Melbourne, have seen.

*Yarra* is in part a cautionary tale about the ways in which the authorities have sought to regulate and change a river, and the unhappy consequences for the health of the river and its culture. It is also an invitation to a journey through the stories of a great waterway.

—Joel Townsend



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flash in the pan



Scene from Joss Whedon's *Serenity*.

## Far from serene

*Serenity*, dir. Joss Whedon. Not many TV series that get cancelled before they even finish their first series get turned into big-budget (well, OK, medium-budget) feature films. But then most TV series don't spring from the mind of Joss Whedon. For those of you who don't already know, Whedon was the writer, producer, and sometimes director of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off, *Angel*. *Firefly* was to be his new baby—a sci-fi western set in a post-civil war galaxy where folks swear in Chinese and the Alliance (think Yankees) ruthlessly crushes any remnants of Browncoat (think Confederate) resistance.

As with Whedon's previous work, the series featured a quirky, genre-blending premise, his trademark snappy dialogue, gunfights, kung fu and comedy seamlessly woven with surprising moments of genuine pathos. It got cancelled 11 episodes into its first season, but the dedication of its fans (they paid for ads in *Variety* magazine lobbying for the series to be resumed) and the DVD sales of the unfinished series were enough to convince Universal to put up the cash for a feature-film version: *Serenity*.

The story follows ex-Browncoat Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) and his crew of smugglers as they unknowingly take on board some very dangerous cargo in River Tam (Summer Glau). River has escaped from some kind of experimental torture by the Alliance, which has turned her both psychic and schizophrenic—psychic enough to know secrets the Alliance wants kept secret, but too insane to know that she

knows them. The Alliance wants her back before she comes to her senses. Squeeze Mal and his crew between the Alliance and the Reavers (think cannibalistic zombie Hell's Angels) and the fun begins.

Whedon does a surprisingly good job of compacting the series-long story arcs, multifaceted ensemble performances and shifting character perspectives of *Firefly* into a two-hour feature without losing too much of the complexity of the series. (He even manages to tie up one of the story threads left dangling by the abrupt cancellation of the series—the origins of the mysterious Reavers.)

It may not have the most original of plots, but it manages to be funny, clever and full of action, with none of the turgid mysticism of the *Matrix* films or the bloated self-importance of the recent *Star Wars* instalments. You certainly don't need to have seen the series to enjoy it, but if you like the film, grab the series on DVD and keep on enjoying the fun.

—Allan James Thomas

## Spooky spoofy fun

*Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, dir. Steve Box and Nick Park. Inside the cinema are more adults than children—I suspect this is because parents would rather have their children outside on a warm spring day. The five-year-old sitting behind me laughs hysterically throughout, and gives us all a running commentary: 'Mummy, look at the funny man and his doggie! Mummy? Is the funny man all right? The dog's coming to save him, Mummy, look!' Some cinemagoers appreciate things like plot and story, others look for deft cinematography, or laughs, or originality—sometimes you get to review a film that has all these qualities.

*Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* is the latest full-length feature from Aardman Animations. After the disappointing *Chicken Run*, it's widely seen as a return to form for the Academy Award-winning animators.

Bumbling, quixotic inventor Wallace and his taciturn genius-dog companion Gromit come alive in the appealing style with which British-based Aardman first caught major international attention, in their classic *The Wrong Trousers*. Sets, models and characters are handcrafted, giving a more solid feel to the action—utterly refreshing when compared with the high-definition machined graphics in *Shrek* and *Madagascar*. This movie took five years to make, and the careful artifice is visible: thumbprints on the characters give it a lovingly homemade feel. Even in the age of cutting-edge computer-animated features, it manages to surprise and delight.

Wallace and Gromit run Anti-Pesto, the village humane pest controllers, and are called upon to tackle a plague of vegetable-crazed bunnies and one mysterious, very large 'beast': the were-rabbit. Employing an eclectic array of Heath Robinson-style devices for capturing and subduing the irrepressibly cheeky rabbits, Wallace and Gromit are indispensable in the sleepy English village where the action takes place (keep an eye out for sight gags: bumper stickers, book titles and shop signs) which is preparing for the annual giant vegetable-growing competition. The contest consumes the village with an at times unholy lust for growing the plumpest pumpkins and producing the biggest marrows—the local vicar is taken over by veggie fever.

Lady Campanula 'Totty' Tottington (voiced by Helena Bonham Carter) is host of both the veggie competition and, unwittingly, the uneven contest



Wild times in *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.



between aristocratic hunter Lord Victor Quartermaine (spoken with vicious pomp by an almost unrecognisable Ralph Fiennes) and the well-meaning, humble Wallace for the affections of Lady Totty. The stakes are raised when Wallace is called to Tottington Hall to clear the grounds of bunny warrens before the big day.

'Nothing wrong with a little mind alteration, eh Gromit?' In an attempt to solve the rabbit problem in the village once and for all, Wallace attempts an experiment in brainwashing rabbits en masse into thinking that vegetables are bad with his 'Mind-Manipulation-O-Matic' device. Gromit watches nervously as Wallace opens up the laboratory to unleash the light of the full moon, harnessing the 'mind wave increasing' effects of lunar power on a bury of petrified rabbits.

*The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* is stacked with clever references to famous British movies (including due homage to the cheesy Hammer Horror flicks) and performs well on many levels: it is equal parts fun action movie, spooky satire, and engaging comedy. Animation fans have been waiting for this one. The humour is self-deprecating and British—just as punchy as any American animated movie on the market, and far more original. Kids, adults—come one, come all.

—Gil Maclean

## Tiny moments that make a life profound

*Me and You and Everyone We Know*, dir. Miranda July. A man pours lighter fluid on his hand and sets it blazing. He watches it with the curiosity of a man more pained by love lost than physical injury. Sounds bleak, but first-time writer/director Miranda July turns it into a wondrous sight full of strange possibilities and aching humanity.

Richard (John Hawkes) is a shoe salesman, recently separated, with two children. Christine (Miranda July) is a video artist who drives cabs for the elderly. And while the film weaves through a multitude of loosely connected characters and stories, Christine's and Richard's relationship is the film's central anchor. We watch them negotiate love and life with the sort of idiosyncratic

detail that makes you weep, grimace and take joy. In performance, writing and direction, July has conjured a world that is painfully true, visually acute and delightfully absurd. Any seasoned director would be praised for achieving that combination, but for a first-timer it is nothing short of breathtaking.

*Me and You and Everyone We Know* is a story about love, the art of shoe



Miranda July in *Me and You and Everyone We Know*.

sales, childhood curiosity, loneliness, video art, single parenthood and everything else we know. It's the perfect mix of grand themes and minute storytelling. Watching it unfold with such ease, you almost feel as though you're grazing on another person's thoughts. The writing invites you to ponder the tiny moments that make up a life—the events that settle on individuals and make an ordinary existence into something profoundly important and universal.

Besides the overall charm and wit of *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, it is brimming with wonderful performances. John Hawkes is perfectly awkward and hapless as the single father, portraying just the right mix of love and panic. Miranda July plays the impulsive romantic with a delight that is infectious. And Miles Thompson and Brandon Ratcliff, as Richard's two sons Peter and Robby, give two of the best child performances I've seen in years. Watching the seven-year-old, Robby, meet up on a park bench with a woman he's been courting on the internet is nothing short of inspired.

I envy anyone who has not yet seen this film. I would love to watch it again for the first time. It has been showered with awards, every one of which is deserved.

—Siobhan Jackson

## Saved by the wit

*The Magician*, dir. Scott Ryan. Seen *Man Bites Dog*? If the answer is yes, then you've seen the best parts of *The Magician*. If the answer is no, then I suggest you get it out on DVD and pop some corn in the comfort of your own home. That said, I'm inclined to like the film, but to say it's derivative would be an understatement.

Ray (Scott Ryan) is a hit man. Max (Massimiliano Andrightto) is a documentary film-maker. Tony (Ben Walker) is the hit. Droll wit is the saving grace.

*The Magician* is your classic low-budget mockumentary (shot over a handful of days, spread over a year, with a budget in the low thousands) following the trials and triggers of a Melbourne killer. Mixing interviews with Ray and on-the-job footage, the film depicts the matter-of-fact professional at work and play. Ray discusses subjects as varied as Wayne Cary's indiscretions, the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, film criticism and body disposal as he waves guns and blunt objects at his victims.

The interviewer, Max (just a voice and the occasional limb entering the frame), walks precariously between documentary maker and accomplice—a wavering line that the film plays out with a subtle intelligence. How guilty is he and when does his documenting become as immoral as the act it documents? *The Magician* is plainly aware of that salient issue.

Dirt and raindrops gracing the lens, some rickety camera operation by the director's father (Ryan showed him where the record button was) and a cameo from his brother all add to the madness of this rough but solid piece of black comedy. And while its content is insanely derivative, its energy and local flavour are very much its own.

Ryan's performance as the philosophising hit man is the film's highlight. Comic but restrained, Ryan never pushes for laughs, but instead lets understatement and situation do the work.

*The Magician* is a sound mix of tension and humour, and when bleak frankness is called for, the film doesn't shirk. With much Australian comedy bouncing between a wink and a quirky nudge, a bit of edge is something to admire.

Watching a man dig his own grave is hard to make funny and sad, but Ryan succeeds. For that I congratulate him.

—Siobhan Jackson



## Pass the remote

**'G**IVE ME THE REMOTE. You've made me miss *Myth-busters*, you young expletive!

'In a minute.'

'You are flicking between hip-hop hoecs and the ninth repeat of *Seinfeld*. Come on, be fair.'

'Well, what about the Osbournes marathon on MTV?'

'Only if you don't flick to *Family Guy* in the ads.'

'You're such a TV nazi, Mum.'

There just isn't enough angst in modern domestics. Aeschylus would have known how to put it. Dissension in the home was his thing. How might he have framed such conflict?

*Enter Clytemnestra, mightily fed up.*

*Clytemnestra: Orestes, by the Fates, where is the Zeus-damn remote?*

*Orestes: Chill out, Mum. I'm watching South Park.*

*Clytem: Not that crypto-fascist neo-con misogynistic bullshit again! By Hera, it must be the 17th repeat. And you've been swigging milk from the amphora again instead of using a goblet.*

*Orest: Aw, Mum, don't keep going on and on.*

*Clytem: Just wait till your father gets home. It's nearly time for Oprah. And have you been pinching my fags again?*

*Enter Agamemnon, pursued by a Fury.*

*Agamemnon: Gimme that remote, oh son of my loins. I want to watch The Footy Show.*

*Chorus: Oh rash words, Agamemnon! The house of Atreus needeth not footy, but Oprah, and possibly even Dr Phil in such perilous times. Restore to thy spouse her rightful remote for she doth get right narky about it.*

*Clytem: Shut up you lot. Oi, Fury—hand me that axe.*

Tastes differ: ask anyone you know what their favourite TV program is, and you will probably strain the relationship. No, you say, scandalised. You're not telling me you actually watch *The Apprentice*? Well, says your ex-friend, you did watch *Big Br*—

I know, I know. Gawd, do I ever have to live that one down! But surely there has to be a bottom line, a measure of quality that goes beyond brutal self-interest and solipsism. What have you really got in common with someone who prefers *The Don Lane Show* to *Four Corners* and scores Graham Kennedy's obscure, forgotten *Coast to Coast* higher than *Media Watch*? These were the measured judgments of the pundits at Nine who made a league table of Australia's 'best 50 programs' over the 50 years that TV has been in Australia. And as they carefully pointed out, it was not the current *Media Watch* that gained their accolade. No, indeed: they praised mightily the crudition of its past glories under Stuart Littlemore, that excellent pedant. With David Marr and Liz Jackson the program has been far more than the scourge of the slack subby. Those two splendid journalists have from time to time pulled down the mighty from their seats and made them

answer a few hard questions. Which is possibly why the powers at Nine who made the list felt more comfortable with the older, less spiky format.

There were some curious choices in Nine's honour roll of the 50 top Australian programs: it was done by some process that wasn't made plain to me.

It was not really a trip into nostalgia; the really old excerpts were far too short. There was real gold in the tiny snippets of B & W early programs—bits and pieces of *Pick-A Box*, *Bobby Limb's Sound of Music*, *Delo and Daly*. These didn't count in the list, but they left me wanting more: I missed *Swami Sarasvati*, *The Tarax Show*, *The Magic Circle Club*. I would have loved to see some original runs of *New Faces* just to show the *Australian Idol* fans that nothing is new.

They left out some really good programs: *Australia. You're Standing in it!* was intelligent, stylish, perceptive and utterly ignored. Alas, the ABC had dumped it long ago in favour of the more slapstick *D-Generation* that then made it into the 50 gems list as the wooden-spooner. Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed the *D-Generation* but was sad that its success came at the expense of *Australia. You're Standing in it!* The *D-Gen* cast became famous, developed and matured and went on to make wonderful programs and films (*Kath & Kim*; *Big Girls' Blouse*; *The Castle*; *Frontline*, to name a few). *The Comedy Company* didn't get a mention either; nor did *The Big Gig*, *Good News Week* or *Kingswood Country*. At least they mentioned *My Name's McGooley. What's Yours?* (it was 24th). But to put it ahead of *Norman Gunston* (27th) and *Mother and Son* (33rd) looked capricious to me.

And that was just in the comedy department: *Phoenix* and *Embassy* were omitted, as were *Changi* and *The Games*. They put *60 Minutes* (not really an Australian program, being based firmly on an American template) at number eight, while placing *Foreign Correspondent* at 48, just above *Playschool*. They left out *Humphrey B. Bear* and *The 7.30 Report*.

But what can you expect from the kind of mind that puts Paul Hogan at second place? I'm not knocking it; Hogan was great in the days when he still remembered his working-class roots, before he went all rich and facelifted. But league tables force you into this ridiculous hierarchical format, and paint you into meaningless corners where you say *Number 96* (ninth!) was better than *Blue Murder* (35th) or *Aunty Jack* (45th) or indeed, and it bears repeating, *Media Watch*, *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent*, or even *Neighbours* (43rd, 18th, 48th, 47th respectively).

And what won? Graham Kennedy's *IMT*, of course. Fair enough, it can be argued for respectably. But *Blankety Blanks* (20th!) higher than *Countdown*? (40th!!!) Come on. Pass the remote. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance writer.

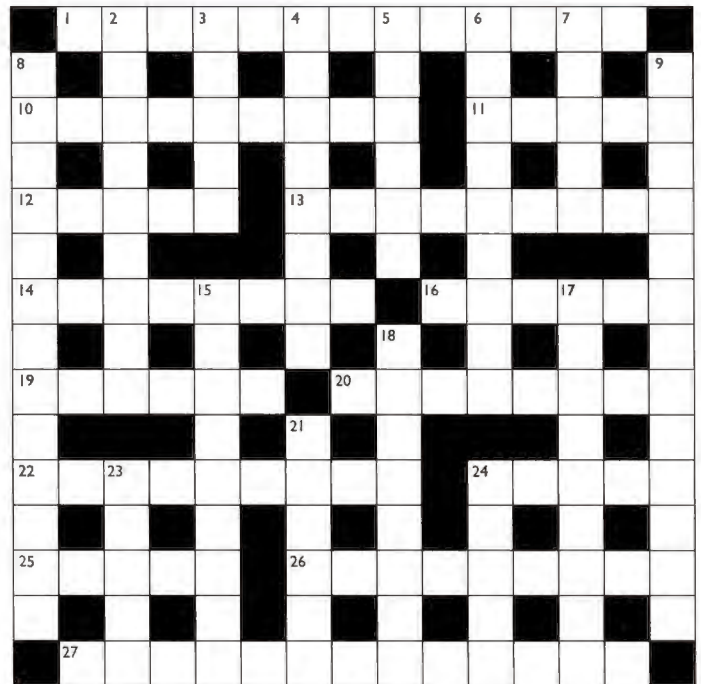


Devised by  
Joan Nowotny IBVM

Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 137, Nov-Dec 2005

ACROSS

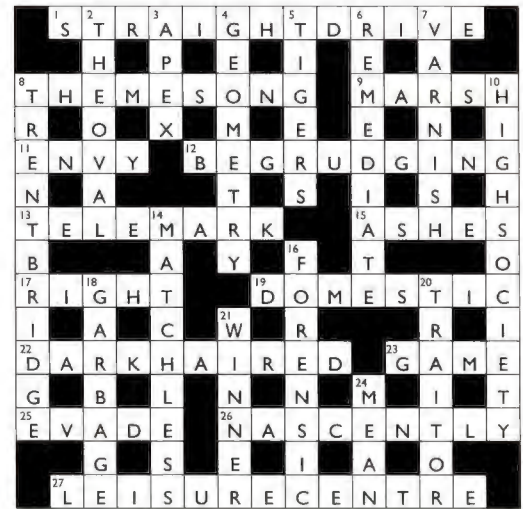
1. News of the tides for the regatta, perhaps. (7,6)
- 10 & 14. Holy poor man who could have said, possibly, 'A cross is stiff as I naturally, initially, know.' (2,7, 2,6)
11. Sort of duel 'e would prefer to dodge. (5)
12. No possible trace of missing mark indicator. (5)
13. Could be club with dark stain. Can be fun, though! (9)
14. See 10-across.
16. Pay-off included Moran's omission from the race. (6)
19. Come, let's have some breakfast. I like eggs. (6)
20. Message for Shane, we hear, to keep him on the *qui vive*? (8)
22. Essential for one's constitution is belonging, naturally. (9)
24. Was some animal taken to the island? (5)
25. Just a vestige of 12-across! (5)
26. Sort of roll everyone is likely to choose? (9)
27. Sergeant slips badly with record of everyone on board. (9,4)



DOWN

2. At the furniture warehouse, real poufs are to be auctioned. (2,3,4)
3. Severely criticise Sunday dinner, perhaps. (5)
4. Go to French Riviera city, following many directions for refinement! (8)
5. We regret some children's ignorance of the flag. (6)
6. It's not odd you French ate such food, it was bound to happen! (9)
7. Donald likes to outperform everyone, especially at cards. (5)
8. Though unusually shy, I spot clogs in the shops, she tells her Freudian advisers! (13)
9. Expressed opinion on friend—somewhat mawkishly. (13)
15. Samples of glasses, in short, I offer to people. (9)
17. Portable pistols for little limbs? (5-4)
18. Material evidence, for instance, not theoretical. (8)
21. Like a sea bird at the back. (6)
23. Headdress I wore on a hill in Ireland. (5)
24. Listen to me talking inside about the silver, for example. (5)

Solution to Crossword no. 136, Sept-Oct 2005



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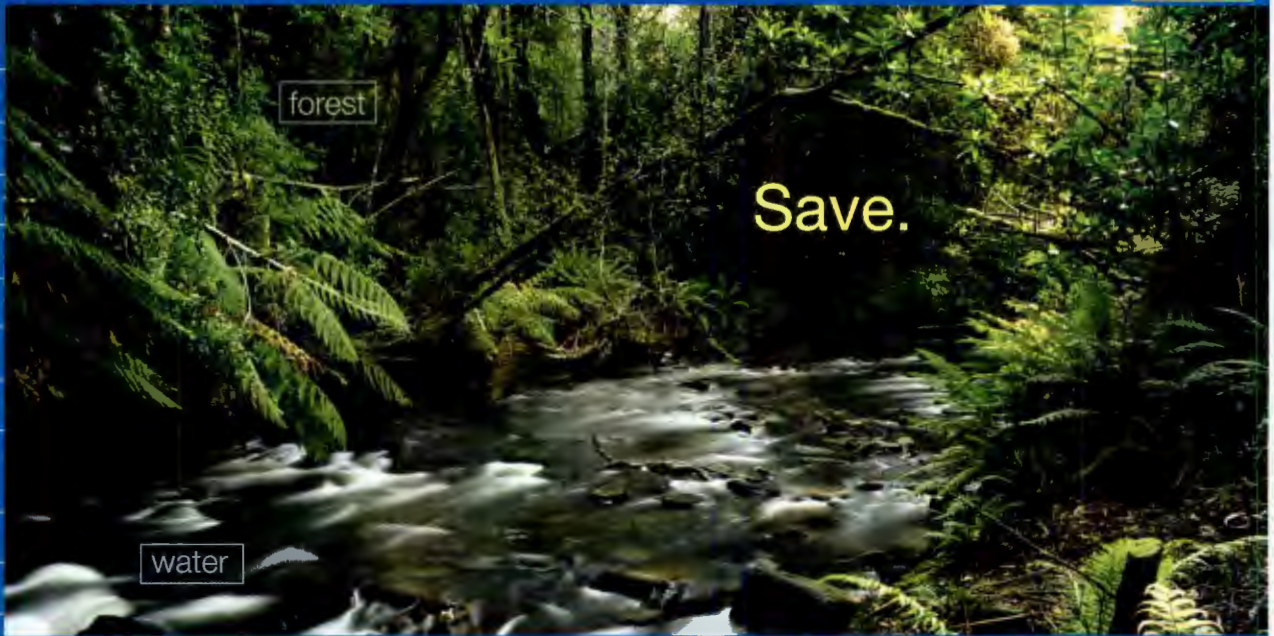
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Keoghs Creek, Tasmania. Photo: Philip Sloane

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