Thea Astley
Thea Astley, her husband and Rodney Hall, at Bermagui, NSW, 1999, by Ruth Maddison. Printed with permission from the National Library of Australia.
Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds

Edited by

Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni

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The idea for this collection was born in the wake of the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) held at the University of Sydney in July 2004. The Conference featured a session devoted to Thea Astley’s writing. Astley, a life-member of the Association, was unfortunately prevented from attending by ill health.

There was an understanding in the aftermath of the Conference that Astley had very likely published her last fiction. She was approaching her 80th birthday, and although she retained her spirited disposition she was plagued by failing eyesight. The editors therefore decided that it was an appropriate time to compile a collection that represented the breadth of critical responses to her considerable body of fiction. Unfortunately, Astley passed away in August 2004, as the planning for this volume commenced.

Editing these papers has provided a stimulating opportunity to encounter the full range of critical responses to Astley’s fiction. Although—as observed in several papers in this collection—her work has not received the same amount of critical attention as afforded to some of her contemporaries, the interest in her writing has nonetheless been serious, engaged and ongoing. Indeed critical interest in Astley appears to be growing if one can accept the evidence of a crude empirical assessment. The “Bibliography of Works By and About Thea Astley” that is included as an Appendix to this volume, reveals that only two journal articles or book chapters (by J. M. Couper and Brian Matthews and both included herein) were published about Astley prior to 1980. A further ten appeared in the 1980s, seventeen in the 1990s, and eleven between 2000 and 2005. This current volume is the first book to be dedicated to Astley’s work, and a major biography is in preparation.

This would therefore seem a very appropriate time to make available a collection of previously published critical responses to Astley’s work, a number of which have appeared in difficult to obtain journals. Believing that not only should the critics have their say, but that the author needs to be heard, we have included three essays by, and an interview with, Astley. In each of these pieces she reflects with characteristic astuteness on various aspects of her craft. The collection concludes with three previously unpublished essays. Two of these are contributed by the editors and are based on papers delivered to the 2004 ASAL conference mentioned above. The third is from novelist Kate Grenville, and is
the text of the inaugural Thea Astley Lecture delivered to the Byron Bay Writers Festival in 2005.

We have chosen to present the critical essays in chronological order, believing that this will assist the reader in gaining a sense of the evolving discussion of Astley’s work. The introduction includes a brief thematic guide to the essays for those readers who may wish to take a more selective approach.

We would like to thank all those copyright holders who gave permission to reprint articles. In one case where the author is deceased it has not been possible to trace a copyright holder despite considerable effort. The original publication details of reprinted articles are included in the “Bibliography of Works by and About Thea Astley” that appears as an appendix. All page number references to Astley’s novels are to the first Australian editions and full details are also found in the accompanying bibliography.

We would particularly like to acknowledge Anita Ross, Peggy Willbanks, Kate Grenville and Anne Clarke for their cooperation, freely given in the spirit of this project, and we are indebted for the assistance provided by Ed Gregson and Elaine Lindsay. The Faculty of Social Sciences at Flinders University and the Faculty of Media, Society and Culture at Curtin University of Technology gave financial assistance to the project, and Kristen Phillips provided invaluable assistance in digitizing the text.

Typographical and other obvious errors that appeared in some of the originals of the articles have been corrected. Several articles have also been amended in order to omit redundant material, and these alterations have been made with the authors’ agreement. We have also added some additional footnotes in order to explain references to Australian persons or matters for the benefit of international readers when the reference in the text was not sufficiently clear. These added footnotes are indicated by the reference (eds) to distinguish them from author footnotes. We have not attempted to standardise(-ize) spelling, believing that this retains an important component of the original without unduly taxing readers. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editors.
INTRODUCTION

I

Thea Astley AO was one of the outstanding Australian fiction writers of the 20th century. Four of her novels won the Miles Franklin prize, Australia’s most prestigious award for fiction, and she was awarded numerous literary, academic and civic honours during her lifetime. The widest and longest-lasting appeal of her work is the mordant irony of her gaze on Australian society, her sharp yet compassionate portrayal of social outsiders. She can be wildly, anarchically funny, or wildly, savagely serious. She is never solemn. She is a satirist, and a writer who loves to play with language—her puns are legendary.

Born in Brisbane in 1925, Astley was the daughter and granddaughter of journalists. She always wrote poems and stories—although claiming that she would have preferred a talent for music, which she loved. She was educated at All Hallows Convent and the University of Queensland, which she attended as an evening student while undertaking teacher training. It was during this time that she was introduced by Clem Christesen, a colleague of her father at the Brisbane Courier-Mail and founder of the literary journal Meanjin, to the ‘Barjai’ group of young writers. Her first teaching appointment came in 1944, and for the next five years she taught in rural Queensland, including Townsville in the far North, the setting for her first novel, Girl with a Monkey (1958). After her marriage to Jack Gregson the couple moved to Sydney in 1949, where their son Edmund (Ed) was born in 1955.

Astley taught in primary and secondary schools for twenty years. In 1967 she was appointed to teach creative writing at Macquarie University, near her home in the northern Sydney suburb of Epping. It was one of the earliest such appointments in an Australian university. Until 1980 she carried on a dual career, as both teacher and writer, producing a steady stream of novels and short stories. As she herself said, “what else was there for an adult female Arts graduate just post-war to do but teach?” (Astley 1970, 4). Yet she is the only major Australian writer of her generation, male or female, to have combined school teaching and writing so consistently. She liked to say that the one balanced the other: “Perhaps writing became escape from time-tables, chalk, playground duty, glazed 2F and smart-alec 5A”. And then adds, in one of her few comments on the triple role she carried as a wife and mother as well: “And the eternal triangle of meals – brown, green, white” (Astley 1970, 4).

On ‘retirement’, she and her husband moved first to Kuranda, near Cairns in North Queensland and later to the coast south of Sydney. The 1980s are often seen as a high point in women’s writing in Australia and the critical reception of
her work began to be revised in this new context. She had appointments as Writer in Residence, including at several United States universities. Astley also continued to publish highly praised novels throughout this final 20-year phase of her writing life. Her last novel, *Drylands* (1999) was also her final Miles Franklin success. After her husband died in 2003 she moved north again, near the Queensland border where her son and daughter in law lived. Only weeks before her death in August 2004, she had entertained a wildly appreciative audience with a reading at the Byron Bay Writers Festival. That Festival now features an annual lecture in her honour.

II

Thea Astley was the only Australian woman novelist of her generation to have won early success and published consistently throughout the 1960s and 70s, when the literary world was heavily male dominated. Entering the fiction lists in the late 1950s, at the time when Patrick White was achieving recognition as an extraordinary talent, could have been somewhat intimidating for a new writer, especially a young woman. Astley admired White immensely, and they were friends for a time during the early 1960s. She was also a friend of the other great prose stylist of this period, Hal Porter, and later with Tom Keneally with whom she shared jokes (as she told Suzanne Walker in 1974). By and large, however, she kept her distance from the literary world during this time, although undertaking the editorship of Angus and Robertson’s annual short story collection, *Coast to Coast*, in 1970. As a fiction writer she had few female contemporaries until the 1980s, when women once again came to the fore in Australian fiction—as they had done in the 1930s.

When Astley’s first manuscript was commended in the *Sydney Morning Herald* competition for an unpublished novel it was taken up by the formidable Beatrice Davis, editor at Angus and Robertson. At the time Angus and Robertson was one of the very few local Australian publishing houses and had a strong commitment to publishing Australian poetry and fiction. Astley came to trust Davis, survived a few early knock-backs and commenced publishing a new work every two or three years, as she would do throughout her career. Her third book, *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962), was awarded the Miles Franklin Prize, as was the next, *The Slow Natives* (1965) and also her sixth, *The Acolyte* (1972).

*The Acolyte* was often described by Astley as her favourite novel and the one she wrote most easily, which is intriguing because it displays her stylistic pyrotechnics most brilliantly. It is a key work in another respect, too: as a study of the acolyte, not the artist whom he served, it brings a new dimension to her fascination with outsiders, misfits and failures. “I was getting sick of great men”,
she remarked to Ray Willbanks (Astley 1991, 33), as usual looking askance at the male-dominated Australian tradition of lauding explorers and pioneers.

During the 1970s Astley struck out in several new directions. *A Kindness Cup* (1974) was the first of her novels to take an historical perspective on settler-Aboriginal relations, and *Hunting the Wild Pineapple and Other Related Stories* (1979) was her first book of connected stories, a technique of ‘discontinuous narrative’ that she later refined and used frequently. In the 1980s these two innovations came together in *It’s Raining in Mango: Pictures from the Family Album* (1987) resulting in perhaps her most successful single work, where she attempted a less densely metaphoric style together with a narrative form that gave her the opportunity to revisit favourite characters without having to construct elaborate plot lines.

Astley thought highly of the short story form, and its great practitioners, such as Raymond Carver, John Cheever, Mavis Gallant and Carson McCullers, are foremost among the writers she admired. It’s an intense and succinct art form that leaves a writer vulnerable, she believed, while “the novel has more charity, it covers a multitude of sins because of its length”. Yet “novels tend to get untidy around the edges and need their hems taking up” (Astley 1986a, 37). In this interview with Candida Baker, Astley confessed that for her, the novella was actually the most satisfying form – though of course its length gives publishers a headache. Astley got over this problem brilliantly with the two linked novellas that make up *Vanishing Points* (1992), the book that perhaps earned her the privilege of having a novella published in book form with *Coda*, in 1994.

Along with Astley’s adaptation of short stories to the discontinuous narrative form, the other major development in her art during the 1980s was the invention of a female narrator. After *Girl with a Monkey* she habitually used a male narrative perspective, believing that no one would read her novels if she wrote from a female point of view. Then she said she found herself with a female narrator in *An Item from the Late News* (1982), and realized that “I didn’t know how women thought” (Astley 1986b, 57). She went so far as to say that “I’ve been neutered by society so I write as a neuter” (Astley 1986a, 43). More than one critic has questioned this claim—is it possible to be “neuter”? Isn’t the default position to “write like a man?” (Milnes 1994). Certainly, Astley’s novels from 1982 onwards often feature females among their multiple narrators, and with Belle in *Reaching Tin River* (1990) and the elderly Kathleen in *Coda* she achieves a recognisably female narrative position.

Despite the fact that Astley spent most of her adult life in New South Wales she always set her fiction in the tropics, mostly her heartland of north Queensland. Some of its special significance for her is captured in the essay, “Being a Queenslander” (Astley, 1976). Yet while she embraced the ‘regional’ identity of Queensland, her people and their dilemmas transcend that
particularity. Nor are her stories exactly rural tales. The people she places in these settings are very often urban dwellers, and she satirizes their attempts to escape from their failings in the isolation of small inland towns or the far north coast—or even, in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968) and *Beachmasters* (1985), on small Pacific islands. Most of her main characters are expatriates of one kind or another. As she came to include Aboriginal characters in her stories, they too shared this characteristic of being out of place—displaced in their own country, and from their own land, by colonialism.

### III

In a writing career of forty years Thea Astley produced a significant body of work, which now more than ever demands the sustained attention of literary scholars. Although, as we have seen, her books have always received the serious attention of reviewers and prize judges, they have not received anything like the critical attention that Patrick White, David Malouf, Peter Carey and other masters of Australia fiction have received. The collection of essays presented here will, we hope, set this process of critical recognition in motion, as well as winning new readers for her work.

We begin with three essays by Astley herself, on aspects of her writing. In later years she gave numerous interviews with her characteristic generosity, and from this wealth of material we have chosen her conversation with Ray Willbanks, an American admirer.

Perhaps the best general introduction to the pleasures of Astley’s style is Kerryn Goldsworthy’s essay, “Thea Astley’s Writing: Magnetic North”. In a later discussion Bruce Clunies Ross unravels some of the complexities of language in her work up to 1979, by following up Astley’s love of music. Robert Ross, one of her American fans and critics, has written several essays that focus on her inimitable style, one of which we have included here, “Thea Astley: Writing the Parish and Extending the Metaphor”.

Astley’s feeling for language and the concentrated intensity of her narratives have, since her first books appeared, meant that she was grouped with Patrick White and other modernist writers of the postwar years. J.M. Couper’s insightful essay on her first four novels, the first serious assessment to be published, illustrates this approach. At first critics saw her as being, like her male peers, preoccupied with metaphysical questions through her creation of outsider characters. Brian Matthews’ “Life in the Eye of the Hurricane” was the most substantial and sustained of these readings and set the framework for many later interpretations. In retrospect it can be seen that even in Astley’s early novels, her approach to social and moral issues was more direct than that favoured by White.
Astley was one of the first Australian novelists to tackle post-colonial race relations in all their cruelty and violence, and her 1974 novel, *A Kindness Cup*, tackles the sorry legacy of white oppression of Aboriginal people. Despite its demanding narrative structure this book is still widely read in schools, for the power with which Astley deals with this difficult theme. Since then, she has produced a series of powerful post-colonial fictions, sometimes integrated with feminist and other anti-nationalist themes, as in the widely-praised *It’s Raining in Mango*, which might be seen as her contribution to the Bicentennial-fest of 1988. Out of a host of interesting discussions of this aspect of her work we have chosen Paul Sharrad’s study of *Beachmasters*, “The Well-Dressed Pacific Explorer” and Leigh Dale’s challenge to some of his perspectives in her analysis of *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, “Colonial History and Post-Colonial Fiction”.

The recurrence of cruelty and violence in Astley’s novels, from the first to the last, continues to present readers with a challenge. The most original attempt to understand both the racial and the sexual violence of her fiction is found in Elizabeth Perkins’ essays, beginning in 1986 with “‘A life of its own”: A Deconstructive Reading of *A Kindness Cup*”, and represented in this collection with an analysis of *Vanishing Points*: “Hacking at Tropical Undergrowth: Exploration in Astley’s North Queensland”. Susan Sheridan’s discussion of violence and narrative voice takes up some of these insights and focuses them on the final novel, *Drylands*.

Several of the essays in this collection touch upon aspects of the lingering influence of Astley’s Catholic upbringing. For although Astley ceased to be a practicing Catholic she remained deeply attracted to the forms of authority she had experienced in the Pre-Vatican II church and in several interviews she also expressed her attachment to the notion of some form of ‘God’ (Astley 1986b: Astley 1991). Susan Lever’s analysis of Astley’s negative representations of female bodies and sexuality links her preoccupation with violence with her Catholicism; and Elaine Lindsay, taking a different approach to Astley’s Catholic sensibility, presents her as a prophet of the new post-Christian feminism. Imagery derived from gardens, and the Garden of Eden in particular, is pervasive in Astley’s fictions, and Paul Genoni links her use of the trope to both her Catholicism and her experience of landscape.

Most critics agree that the advent of feminism in the 1970s brought a turning point in Astley’s work, as it did in the wider culture. Brian Matthews ponders on this change in his provocative essay, “Before Feminism . . . After Feminism”, finding that an intensified focus on sexual politics in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* left her women characters neurotic, trapped and desperate. He argues that a feminist view of ameliorating social change is incompatible with Astley’s position. Elizabeth Perkins’ deconstructive readings (see above) sought
the feminine in apparently masculine texts. Such a focus on the text rather than the authorial figure is complemented by Debra Adelaide’s approach to the question of feminism. She argues that the major impact of feminism on Astley’s writing is not fully registered in her writing until *It’s Raining in Mango* (1988), and that it significantly affected Astley’s reception and literary reputation.

To round off the collection, we are proud to be able to include sister novelist Kate Grenville’s “Saying the Unsayable”, a powerful tribute to Astley’s trademark verbal and political shock tactics. Grenville’s paper, published here for the first time, was delivered at the 2005 Byron Bay Writers Festival as the inaugural Thea Astley Lecture.

**IV**

The vagaries of literary fashion, both popular and critical, are notoriously difficult to predict. Many best-selling and prizewinning authors of years past are now all but forgotten, while others who were largely ignored in their time are now considered to be central to the literary tradition.

In the wake of Thea Astley’s still recent death her reputation will inevitably be subject to reappraisal. It is obvious that there will be no more new novels in the bookshops or libraries; no more reviews in the national newspapers; and no more awards to be won, that will serve to remind the reading public of her presence. In part her ongoing profile will be determined by the capacity of publishers to keep her fiction in print and the capricious nature of school and university curricula.

Astley’s reputation will also continue to be shaped by the academic critics such as those whose work largely comprises the contents of this volume. Critical trends can also be unpredictable and changing, however, as theoretical fashions move on, as new orthodoxies prevail, and as national and international events shift attention to emerging subject matter.

There are, however, reasons to be optimistic about Astley’s ongoing—and very likely, enhanced—place in the Australian literary canon. At the very least she should continue to be embraced as a consummate stylist, somebody who is consistently readable and entertaining, and who writes with a clarity and wit that inform her fiction with an enduringly robust appeal. Just as importantly, it should be increasingly apparent that her skills were used in the exploration of issues that are likely to remain central to Australia’s future identity—issues that swirl around the complex matter of post-coloniality—but which she addressed in a manner which reflects a very particular and acute view of the world.

Astley’s appeal reaches, however, beyond a national audience. Since quite early in her career she attracted readers outside her home country, justifying her belief that characters such as her ‘outsiders’ must exist in other places (Astley
1970). In a globalised world, where the post-colonial condition is widely experienced, her sharp analysis of power will continue to find new and appreciative readers; and her insight into the psychological and physical violence involved in the relations between races, sexes and generations will remain universally relevant. Matters of character, community, obligation, fidelity and good faith are raised time and again in her fiction; and they are issues that transcend geographic boundaries as effortlessly as they transcend time.

It is our hope that *Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds* will serve to further the interest in Astley’s work by making available a collection of essays that honour the nature and importance of her achievement.
CHAPTER ONE
WHY I WRITE
THEA ASTLEY

Throughout all my writing years I have been aware of one intention only, I suppose, and that is to try to recapture for myself certain moments, incidents, events that have at the time acted as some kind of emotional impetus. Writing about them seemed to give a permanence. Others might read what I had seen or felt and be affected too. This is what I hoped. But primarily writing is a form of self-indulgence. I admit readily that as I wrote, the shape or outline of the captive moment changed. There's the pity! Never was I able to recapture in its first innocence that primary stimulus. The very nature of fiction writing affected whatever I touched. Other characters intruded. Dialogue sharpened or blunted what had appeared to me as entire in itself.

I have always been interested in the misfit, the outsider, the less than successful. That is why several of my novels or stories deal with blacks or half-castes, with adolescents or ‘failures’ in the world’s sense of the term. When I was writing Beachmasters about the Jimmy Stevens¹ revolution in Santo, the most northern island of the then New Hebrides, I was moved more by Stevens’ failure to secede than the plight of ‘colour’ inside the stuffy rituals of white colonialism. When I wrote about the blacks of north Queensland in Hunting the Wild Pineapple and It's Raining in Mango I drew on those whom I had known living in the tiny settlement across the river from our house. But what the non-writer cannot seem to understand is that my stories were not photographs of people as I knew them in deadly accuracy, but sketches of an aggregate of what I had read of local history, of what I saw and what I heard: writing is an exercise in photography—but the developing fluid is feeling.

¹ In May 1980 Jimmy Stevens led a French supported revolution on the island of Santo, declaring it independent of Vanuatu and announcing the new nation of Venerama. The revolution eventually collapsed and Stevens was arrested. (eds)
CHAPTER TWO

THE IDIOT QUESTION

THEA ASTLEY

Discussing my own attitudes to writing is something I have never done—or never wanted to do anyway, for there have been dreary radio and magazine interviews where the same questions are asked over and over: why do you write? how do you plan? where do you write? do you use real people? and slyly-coyly—does it affect your domestic life? And I have endured these questions while answering as briefly as possible, for I find it so personal and so embarrassing, it is something I’d prefer to avoid at all costs. If the questions were dissociated from me and I could quietly discuss techniques over a coffee and privately into the bargain, as I am lucky enough to be able to do with one of my work colleagues, then that is a different matter. But about twelve pages of typescript, the man says! This is really extended exposure.

Writing is incredibly hard work and I’m naturally lazy. Perhaps that’s why, if given a choice of talents, I would plump for a musical one, an ability to play jazz piano. For there, as you play, instant orgasm. The ideas for a novel may come with the same spasm of recognition, but getting them down can take a year or more. Consequently, having no improvisatory streak pianistically, I’ve had to face the cold fact that years spent on Heller studies, Clementi sonatinas and Beethoven sonatas, have left me with nothing more than the faintest ability to adumbrate the notation in front of me, a lush reaction to the Romantics, a strangling urge to sing lieder with no voice and the deepest adulating envy of performers like Richter and Vince Guiraldi.1

There was no coin-tossing in this business with ‘heads’ it’s mucking up opus 111 and ‘tails’ it’s messing about with words. I don’t know why I write. And it’s little enough that I do write—”a meagre output”, as one academic reviewer from a wheatlands belt described it. There are other things that need attention. The first time I received a Commonwealth Literary Fellowship, Hal Porter asked

“What will you do? Cut and run?” Then, “No. I suppose you can’t”. I have a son. And you cannot, do not want to neglect your favourite production. Then there’s the job. I suppose I regard myself as a teacher first. What else was there for an adult female Arts graduate just post-war to do but teach? You teach. You suffer. You develop little disciplinary tricks. Finally, a husk of a human, you become quite good at it. You are skilled enough at the technicalities of the job to allow yourself time both to know and like the students. Sometimes they like you; and sometimes they learn something from you and equally you learn masses of relevant and irrelevant things about people from them. This time-gulping occupation is thus not necessarily barren of creative stimulus, but it takes great munches out of those moments you might use for writing. Perhaps then writing became escape from time-tables, chalk, playground duty, glazed 2F and smart-alec 5A. And the eternal triangle of meals—brown, green, white.

When Dorothy Canfield wrote that all humans have moments of heightened emotional response and that these moments produce an overpowering urge in the receiver to capture, claim and reproduce these moments, mostly for oneself and partly for others, she gave, I think, a definite clue as to why the creative process begins to function. I’ve always been enormously responsive to scenery, landscapes with or without figures: my dad singing shanties in the sea-rotted houses we used to rent along the Queensland coast when I was a small girl; one particular green valley, yellow with light, in the Tweed, my head stuck out of a bus window draining it in and thinking “I must keep this one”. I was thirteen then and I’ve still kept it: a still pre-storm late afternoon in the Mary Valley, bruised purple over pine forest as I walked off from my last degree paper—economics—the script decorated with cream stains from the cake my supervisor’s wife brought me for afternoon tea. These moments are neither cerebral nor academic, but I offer them as reasons why now I still want to write about the Queensland littoral.

I did what most of us did as children—wrote crummy little poems for school magazines and had essays (occasionally) read out in class and at eighteen—my thanks to Clem Christesen who worked on the same newspaper as my father—was put in touch with a group of embryonic writers in Brisbane, a group the same age as myself. I suppose it was then, lazy as I am, that it seemed easier to turn to playing about with words rather than notes. After all, no one commended my Albumblatt, my nocturne, my mazurka. No one said “I insist you play that Haydn rondo again!” An exercise book, a beautifully fluid biro and thousands of words that could be arranged in endless attractive permutions made the overhead idiotically cheap and the possibility entirely seductive. To play the piano one really should sit up, but you can always write lying down. It was then

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2 Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958) United States novelist. (eds)
I gave up struggling with the twenty-fourth Chopin prelude and became content to hear it played by an expert; and out of the emotional wallow of listening, I levered myself with phrases that tried to describe what I felt and heard.

Enough of that. Do people really care why other people write? Wouldn’t, couldn’t it be just as enchanting to know why someone audits or house-paints, runs a garbage truck or plumbs? Pan-in at this point on A.B.C. in-depth interviewer then shift to garboman cock-a-hoop as they come. “Tell me-er-Fred, what made you take to garbage disposal? What is your-um-philosophy about this? Does it express something you are trying to say, get across as it were?”

Crass, isn’t it?

I mean I might have wanted to be a dab at Pavlovas.³

Do I have aims? Only to describe people, but then that is only as I see them, which invalidates the whole process maybe. The outsider interests me enormously—not self-conscious phoney arty outsiders, but bums and old ladies and people who are lonely, seedy and unsuccessful. I haven’t travelled but I assume—is this presumptuous?—that there must also be Upper Mongolian and North Vietnamese Mrs Everages and Sandy Stones.⁴ There have to be. Otherwise the whole point in the fiction operation is lost. I am not, as the monsignor (I forgive you, monsignor) of the parish in which I live, but of which I am not a member, said, “out to destroy the church”. Forgive the syntax too and I won’t alter a word of it. Twelve years of convent school life is a lot of time, a lot of figures in the landscape. I describe what I have heard, seen, deduced. That’s all. I’ve always been staggered when critics charge my novels with cruelty. “Strikes again” was one barbarous phrase! I swear it must come out wrong, for in books like The Slow Natives and A Boatload of Home Folk I was trying to wring those trachyte reviewing hearts with my sympathy for the misfits. It’s opus 111 all over again coming out like the flushing of Liszt cisterns. I shall have to try harder, if ever I try again, for the critics, academic and otherwise, seize on the wart on the nose, the snaggle tooth, the broken finger-nail forsooth, and damn the whole body. Monetarily unsuccessful (who cares!) I sob, literally, all the way to the money-lenders.

“Do you have trouble with your plots?” a very famous Australian novelist once asked me. I do indeed. Que faire? You take the story told you by the man sitting next to you on the plane to Isa or what really happened at a pub in the Curry or the school near the filter-beds or the cane-farm at Mirani and you use them whole or combine or take bits leaving out the tree in the left-hand corner and the drunk staggering in stage-right and you hope to God you’ve come up with something that has proportion and rhythm and reality. Real people? Well of

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³ A dessert said to have been invented in Australia. (eds)
⁴ Characters created by Australian comedian Barry Humphries. (eds)
course. What else is there to use? But generally balloted personae will come up as collages. Habits, physical characteristics and so on might be taken from two or three different people you have known, so that in the end there is never a ‘life’ portrait, both for that reason and the reason that the delineation is what you and not necessarily others have seen. Maps have a terrible nostalgia. After you’ve listened and observed, after you’ve done or seen done, the enchanting scaled drawings of a government draughtsman plus an out-of-focus snapshot or two can revive the lot. The memory glands start to secrete, the flat plan produces the pot-holes and skidding bitumen, the hills grow up from paper, trees walk in across fields and later colours, even smells, quicken the whole.

Names? One writer I know favoured obituary notices, for reasons partly practical, I imagine. I’ve leant heavily on schoolrolls, unable like Dickens or Waugh, to endow characters with names that seem to have grown from them and that at the same time emphasize those special qualities I’m trying to net. It’s the genuine name that appeals. But the risk! Take, say, Mud Gomersall, a character who ran the electricity plant in a two-cow township in Queensland. I’ve always liked that name but have not had the courage to use. Still, I’ve used it now. Something’s satisfied, and even while I write I see the shack he lived in on the west road out of town, the bridge across the creek just beyond that point and a score of things (abstract, some of them) it pains me to recall and would bore you to hear. Many writers do use the genuine name during the writing process in order to keep the ‘feel’, then make quick substitutions just before the work goes into galleys. There is always the delicious hazard that an unchanged piece of nomenclature might slip through. It has happened.

Re-reading I can see this is all far too flippant and anti-intellectual for a literary magazine. I am incapable of playing the game of the writer-taking-himself-seriously seriously. Flippancy is my defence. What’s yours? I don’t really want to expose myself or say why how where. First take three eggs and separate the whites from... it’s much the same thing.

How did I manage to achieve that “meagre output”? (Yes. That did hurt. Unjust, she says.) A chance phrase about someone I had never met, never did meet, gave me the whole of The Slow Natives. Of course personal experiences were used again and again, but the idea, germ, whatever it is, came with a stray remark during a high-school recess. Descant and Boatload grew out of similar beginnings. Whether I value Slow Natives most, I’m not certain. It certainly earned me the most money, the dear little whore. So what? I wasn’t putting it out to earn. Perhaps its meaningfulness to me lies in the fact that it’s the one novel I least remember writing. It came easiest. I cannot recall much sweat. And like
Hal Porter,5 I never, but never, re-read. Once the book is published, an inexplicable—no, correction: too explicable—sense of shame floods this writer’s being. See its jacket on a shelf in a strange house—and this is true—there is no eager rush forward of recognition (MY child!) but an overpowering embarrassment. You avert your eyes. I have only one copy of each of my novels, and this is purely a sentimental preservation.

Impossible—as now—to write much at a stretch. Three, four hundred words. Five on a good night. The method is to plan in such detail the novel may be begun at any point that appeals—this so that I get the tone of what I am doing. During the rewrites come linkings and discardings and balancing out of rhythm patterns. Between bouts, I read a deal of poetry for it stimulates the metaphors. And perhaps that is where I go wrong, for I know I do go wrong. But if only if only those academics would not point it out so acidulously. The American short story school has had me captive a long time, for the incision of writers like Cheever, Gallant, Benson, Gellhorn (one Mrs Hemingway who did indeed write the pants off him!) sets a standard I’d like to come within shouting distance of but which will never hear even the harmonics of my faint cries of distress.

I accept my mediocrity (that is not fake modesty—and nor is that) and accepting it I am prepared to answer those most banal of questions where, when and how: at night; in longhand, and later again and yet again on a saddened Hermes portable on a white formica-topped table with absolutely no sense that I’ve even cracked it this time.

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CHAPTER THREE

BEING A QUEENSLANDER: A FORM OF LITERARY AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONCEIT

The Sixth Herbert Blaiklock Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of Sydney on 23 June 1976.

THEA ASTLEY

There is a saying in Queensland that the real Australia doesn’t begin until you are north of Rockhampton; and as a Queenslander and a passionately arrogant one—but not defensive—I place this statement beside those pejorative remarks that have accumulated over the years—Queensland the home of cockroaches, white-ants, bananas—the slick offences from that part of my childhood spent in Melbourne. My father has gummed to his sub-editor’s desk in the Courier-Mail a verse that greatly amused him. He had cut it out of the Melbourne University magazine:

The people of Melbourne
Are frightfully well-born.
Of much the same kidney
Is the beau monde of Sydney.
But in Queensland the people insult yer
And don’t ‘ardly know they’ve been rude
They’re that ignorant common and crude.
It’s hardly worth
Mentioning Perth.

Many people have speculated on suffering as being an impetus to the creative instinct. Similar to being a Catholic perhaps, with Catholicism’s early emphases on the nature of guilt, damnation, eternal punishment, the beauty of suffering (not involuntarily but voluntarily), being a Queenslander in Australia provides much in the nature of achieving possible apotheosis.
Originally it was the isolation of the place, the monstrous distances, the very genuine suspicions of political neglect and expedience by a federal government located two thousand miles away. And when I say two thousand, I am referring, of course, to those areas where the real Australia begins. When I was a teacher in Townsville, during the Punic Wars as Albee might say, I always remarked silently and amusedly the manner in which the locals referred to southerners—and they didn’t mean the people of New South Wales or Victoria—or even Tasmania (where is it?); they meant Brisbane.

Queensland separated from N.S.W. in 1859 when it received self-government. What is there that is different? What causes the listener who has been told “I come from Queensland” to repeat the words always with rising inflection and ever so slight italics?—“You come from Queensland?” After all our origins were much the same as Sydney’s—convicts, brutality. We killed the local inhabitants with as much brio. This is only a suggestion but I think it goes back to something far more basic than this. The human race places great store on the outward trappings of conventional behaviour—or conformist behaviour. Almost from the first, Queenslanders made no attempt to reduplicate the architecture of their southern neighbours. Houses perched on stilts like teetering swamp birds, held stiff skirts all round, pulled a hat brim low over the eyes; and with the inroads of white-ants not only teetered but eventually flew away. And then, we tend to build houses so that we can live underneath them. Perhaps those stilts made southerners think of us as bayside-dwelling Papuans. Our dress, too, has always been more casual. Our manners indifferent, laconic, in temperatures that can run at over ninety for weeks on end.

Growing up in Brisbane in the thirties and forties meant alignment with a shabby town, a sprawling timber settlement on a lazy river; meant heat and dust and the benefits of the sub-tropics brighter trees, tougher sunlight, slower-moving people and a delicious tendency to procrastinate. I think it was the weather. These virtues were raised to the nth power north of Rocky. Our school readers, apart from standard classics, promulgated those writers we learnt to associate with Queensland influences, if not Queensland birth. Brunton Stephens, Essex Evans and Ernest Favenc we took jealously as part of our culture; add to this that writers like Zora Cross, Steele Rudd, A. G. Stephens, William Baylebridge and Vance Palmer were actually born there and these names became pennants we waved.

I have an idea that Queenslanders were not early conscious of a kind of federal racism directed at them until late in the war and after. The scandalous implications of the Brisbane Line which still brings a rush of blood to the necks

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1 The “Brisbane Line” refers to the widely held belief during World War II that only Brisbane and the 1000 miles of coastline south to Melbourne would be defended against invasion by the Japanese, and that the north, west and south of the continent would be
of old-timers were perhaps what first directed the Queenslander’s realization that he was disregarded, a joke, a butt, to the attempt to compete and prove cultural worth. Queensland had already produced two artists who received national recognition—Lahey and Hilder—and after the American rape Brisbane’s little cultural parterres blossomed in galleries, theatre and literary magazines. *Meanjin* had its birthpangs on the sub-editor’s table of the *Courier-Mail* where Clem Christesen was working. A few young students from Brisbane High conceived the idea of a youth magazine called *Barjai* which ran for at least five years and was the nurturing ground of writers like Barrie Reid, Laurence Collinson, Vida Smith, Charles Osborne and myself. Later again the Brisbane Art Gallery received a much needed injection when it was directed by Laurie Thomas. (Memories here of a childhood trailing the brown paintings the directors previously had so loved—my paternal grandfather in those days had a landscape hung—and we would religiously stand before it in those gloomy rooms before taking a breather under the cotton palms of the outside garden and eating stale scones and drinking scalding tea—very brown—at the kiosk.)

I don’t think my love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness until I came south to live. Maybe it was the resentment I felt when the Education Department appointed me on the status of “first year out”, negating at a pencil-stroke the five years in which I had been teaching in the north. Maybe it was the remark of a head teacher here who stated solemnly that Queensland had the lowest educational standards in the world. Those things, together with recollections of the grotesque black comedy of teaching conditions, the un-withheld warmth of people who had become dear to me, and in latter years, the monstrous bathetic quality of him I can only refer to as Our Leader—who is not indeed, a Queenslander, but as one of my colleagues says, “One of nature’s Queenslanders”.

Since the war there has been interested and active writing growth. When I was eighteen, I met Paul Grano who was on a Commonwealth Literary Grant and had just published a collection called *Poems Old and New*. Although Grano was born in Victoria, he had lived in Queensland since 1932. Many of Grano’s poems in this collection were the direct result of the Queensland environment, and if you will again forgive my levitas—I quote in full:

abandoned. This was never official policy, though it had been a recommended strategy. The “American rape” in the following sentence refers to the “invasion” of Brisbane by American troops during the Pacific war. (eds)

2 *Meanjin* is a literary journal, first published as *Meanjin Papers* in December 1940 and edited by Clem Christensen. ‘Meanjin’ is the Aboriginal word for Brisbane. (eds)

3 Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Premier of Queensland 1968-1987, was born in New Zealand in 1911. (eds)
Patriotism (After visiting the Rest Room at the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau).

All wood here used is Queensland wood,
the blossoms pictured are of Queensland trees,
the table, too, is as it should be, a product of our factories,
we must agree are not so good
the paper flowers with wiry stem
but let it quite be understood
they’re Queensland flies that crawl on them.

I ignore totally the irony of Grano at this point and cite the poem only as a positive pronouncement on the aggressive patriotism of the Queenslander which he saw, understood and was amused by.

But his own nationalism was never in doubt. He says in “Quest”:

Should I set out for Seville,
(O orange-scented air!)
it’ll be in search of Gosford
and gold-pied orchards there.

In dim Westminster Abbey,
where memoried great men lie,
I’ll seek the long forgotten
graves where the teams went by.

On cold starlighted prairies,
where covered waggons pressed,
I’ll listen for the hooving
of cattle to our west.

O when I sail from Brisbane,
I’ll search each stranging way
to find the flaming visions
that home-blind eyes betray.

It was for me, anyway, quite remarkable to find that someone could draw his poetics from Samford and Cleveland and write in his semi-satiric poem “A New Shirt!” (Why? Grano wore dark green shirts only).

That day on Coot-tha
when we saw fall
from furnaced clouds
rain sifting down
like golden ash
on Brisbane town

–and it was about then that I realized the shabby areas of town and country
which I publicly demolished to my southern friends but privately adored could
be unashamedly declared as lyric argument. You see the nub of my paper is that
literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal. A
colleague, Manfred Mackenzie, says of me “You may think I’m parochial but
I’m really elemental”. Further to this point here is a comment from Grano’s
notes on Poems Old and New about a poem called “The Tree Planter”:

Written about 1938. I had in mind the case of a wife of a cane farmer in north
Queensland. He specialized in working up farms and then selling, so that the family
were frequently on the move. In some thirty years they had twenty-two different
homes! At each new place she would plant fruit trees hoping that at last the
wanderings were done with and the family finally settled. The trees had not matured
before the family shifted to another holding. The final shift was to a suburb of
Brisbane.

Here is the poem:

She so often planted trees,
tidy orange and cool-leaved custard-apple,
shrubby mulberry and dark-shadowed mango,
but ever her sorrow she saw no fruit;
if there for the blossoming
she had left ere the ripening
and others it was who ate of her labour
or greedy for caneland put axe to the roots
of the trees she had mind to grow old with.
And now she is old, with no orchard to walk in;
and her mouth, should it harshen with longing,
there is none of her fruit for its comfort
but only the cart-or the shop-bought!
Her sorrow it is
who planted so many trees.

Instantly there comes to mind the Victorian Bruce Dawe’s poem “Drifters”.
(Dawe now lives and works in Queensland.)

One day soon he’ll tell her it’s time to start packing,
And the kids will tell “Truly?” and get wildly excited for no reason,
and the brown kelpie pup will start dashing about, tripping everyone up,
and she’ll go out to the vegetable-patch and pick all the green tomatoes from the vines,
and notice how the oldest girl is close to tears because she was happy here,
and how the youngest girl is beaming because she wasn’t.
And the first thing she’ll put on the trailer will be the bottling-set she never unpacked from Grovedale,
and when the loaded ute bumps down the drive past the blackberry- canes with their last shrivelled fruit,
she won’t even ask why they’re leaving this time, or where they’re heading for
—she’ll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
“Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.”

I suppose Dawe’s poem is the better written. I think it is. But to support my statement that the parish is the heart of the world, I argue that the idea behind both poems is the same—each deals with the insensitivity and materialism of the male, and the more poetic ‘nesting’ sensibility of the female (not only in practical terms) and so each poem contains its own universality. Whether a writer takes his matter from an isolated hamlet in Patagonia or the lushest cities of Europe, the clichéd beauties of the English countryside or the salt-pans west of Isa, it is the manner in which these things are seen and interpreted that creates the truth and the poem—not the thing itself.

But one who has returned, his eyes blurred maps of landscapes still unmapped, gives this account:
‘The third day, cockatoos dropped dead in the air.
Then the crows turned back, the camels knelt down and stayed there,
and a skin-coloured surf of sandhills jumped the horizon
and swamped me. I was bushed for forty years.
And I came to a bloke all alone like a kurrajong tree.
And I said to him: “Mate—I don’t need to know your name—
Let me camp in your shade, let me sleep, till the sun goes down.”’

You see when Stow writes like that it is not intellectual magnificence that moves the heart. Only simplicity is truly moving—which explains why one weeps over Lawson’s Mrs Spicer but not over Laura Trevelyan’s Voss. Grandeur inspires awe and wonder. Rarely tears. And of course simplicity is the heart of the parish.

4 Stow is Randolph Stow, the West Australian writer (b. 1935). Mrs Spicer is the careworn bush woman in Henry Lawson’s short story, “Water Them Geraniums”, while “Laura Trevelyan’s Voss” refers to the lovers in Patrick White’s novel, Voss. (eds)