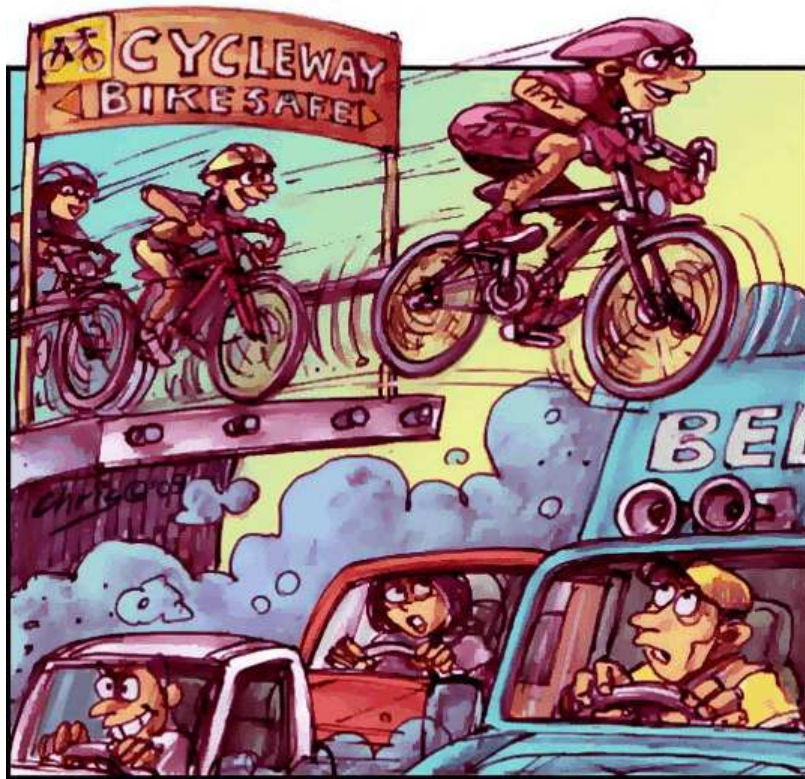


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Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Requests for permission to reprint material from the website and this edition should be addressed to the Editor.

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Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

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## In praise of slow TV

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*



I want to write in praise of [SlowTV](#), the online video hub which is part of [The Monthly](#)'s website.

The name makes obvious reference to the slow movement that began with 'Slow Food' in Italy in the late 1980s. This started with protests against the opening of a McDonald's fast food restaurant in the historic centre of Rome. Led by activist Carlo Petrini, the slow food movement broadened to fight for the preservation of regional cuisines and associated traditional food plants, domestic animals and farming techniques.

It now has chapters in many countries around the world, and has broadened beyond food to a general 'slow' movement, which seeks to promote a sense of connection within local cultures and communities in opposition to the alienation many experience in a globalised, homogenised, lowest-common-denominator world.

SlowTV expresses this philosophy through very plain no-frills coverage of important public events around Australia. On its homepage it says it is 'a free internet TV channel delivering interviews, debates, conversations and public lectures about Australia's key political, social and cultural issues'.

The video featured here is a good example of the extensive offerings on SlowTV. It's Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan's closing address at this year's Sydney Writers' Festival in May, an impassioned plea against proposed changes to copyright laws that would allow the parallel importation of books into Australia. (The *Eureka Street* editorial on 20 July also offered an [interesting perspective](#) on this issue.)

Flanagan is not a writer isolated in his garret. He is engaged in his local community, and has become a prominent environmental activist, speaking out, for instance, against the proposed pulp mill in northern Tasmania.

Near the beginning of this address, he makes an eloquent reference to William Tyndale's 1525 translation of the Bible, the first rendering of the holy book into English. This allowed ordinary people in England to read the sacred scriptures and interpret their own spirituality for the first time in their own language.

In the same vein, Flanagan argues the copyright changes would diminish access to 'our own stories in our own voice', and a strong local literary culture allows us to 'discover ourselves in our own vernacular'.

*The Monthly's* SlowTV portal is just one outlet for this pared down TV genre. Public broadcasters are also a natural home for this sort of television, an example

being the ABC's [Fora](#) made in partnership with American web based [Fora TV](#) . Religious websites are also beginning to feature 'slow TV'. For instance, Sydney's Centre for Public Christianity offers an extensive range of excellent interviews and talks on [its website](#) .

For those who value serious content over sensationalism and glitz, who want media meat rather than fairyfloss and cake, both the internet television channel, SlowTV, and the genre of slow TV are welcome parts of the new media explosion on the internet.

## Human egg trade exploits women

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Kevin McGovern*

The call by law professor Loane Skene (writing in *The Age* on 13 July) for women to sell their eggs for embryonic stem cell research ignores the medical evidence of the real harm done to women who allow their eggs to be harvested, and international evidence that the legalisation of the sale of eggs leads to exploitation of women.



Harvesting eggs is a complicated process. There are drugs to stop the menstrual cycle, daily hormone injections for up to six weeks to stimulate the development of multiple eggs, frequent blood tests to check when the eggs are ready, a general anaesthetic and surgery to retrieve the eggs using a needle inserted into the ovaries.

Because of the powerful drugs, one of the main dangers for the woman is Ovarian Hyper-Stimulation Syndrome (OHSS), which has mild, moderate and severe forms and which affects up to ten per cent of women.

Mild symptoms of OHSS include hot flushes, bloating, moodiness, headaches, weight gain and tiredness. Severe health threats include kidney failure, stroke, future infertility and even death.

In 2005, a number of young Romanian women were paid to sell their eggs to fertility clinics in the UK. One of them was Alina Netedu, who worked at a mattress factory in Bucharest and wanted money for her wedding. She was paid about AUD\$300 for 20 of her eggs. Shortly after the harvest, she developed OHSS and was hospitalised for 14 days. Her doctor said she would have died if she had not sought immediate help.

In August 2006, a 37-year-old British woman named Nita Solanki did die after her eggs were retrieved for IVF. The cause of her death was internal bleeding and kidney failure.

Nine years ago in the United States, 22-year-old Stanford University student Calla Papademos agreed to sell her eggs to pay for her college tuition. She suffered a stroke and, while she eventually recovered, was in and out of a coma for eight weeks.

If trade in human eggs is legalised in Australia, there will inevitably be some women who suffer these serious consequences. No one should take these risks simply for a few thousand dollars.

When the plight of the young Romanian women came to light, the European Parliament recognised this as exploitation of vulnerable women. Therefore, on 10 March 2005, they overwhelmingly adopted a resolution to ban trade in human egg cells in the European Union.

The resolution notes the fundamental principle that the human body and its parts 'should not be a source of financial gain'. It cautions that 'the harvesting of egg cells poses a high medical risk to the life and health of women'. And it insists that 'particular attention should be paid to vulnerable individuals'.

European Commissioner for Health Markos Kyprianou warned that 'paying substantial fees to obtain human egg cells ... could open the door to a trade where people in need could be drawn into acts that should instead be motivated by altruistic principles'.

The same danger for exploitation exists in Australia, especially during this Global Financial Crisis. If someone has just lost their job, and is at risk of losing their house, and they're offered \$5000 to sell their eggs, they might not really be free to say no.

University of Pennsylvania ethicist Arthur Caplan commented, 'The market in eggs tries to incentivise women to do something they otherwise would not do. Egg sales are not the ethical way to go.'

Blood donors and people who give their organs and tissues for transplant demonstrate that we can freely give parts of ourselves as a generous act of love.

But if we start to sell parts of ourselves, we demean ourselves and lose something of our humanity. We are body as much as we are mind or spirit. If we sell parts of our body, we are selling ourselves. And selling ourselves is incompatible with human dignity.

Trade in human egg cells is an assault on the dignity of women. This is why both the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine include a 'prohibition on making the human body and its parts as such a source of financial gain'.

This is also the main reason why trade in human eggs is not allowed in any State or Territory of Australia.

Australia's stem cells laws come up for review next year, and it is clear that the advocates of embryonic stem cell research will try to legalise trade in human eggs.

Perhaps their passionate advocacy of this cause blinds them to the facts that this will harm the dignity of women, and expose Australian women to exploitation and serious damage to their health.

## Disunity in the Year of the Priest

### RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*



Like many other organisations, the Vatican gives names to years. This year has been the Year of St Paul; next year is the Year of the Priest. It coincides with the 150th anniversary of the death of John Vianney, a simple French parish priest who spent much of his life in post-Revolutionary France hearing confessions.

Vianney, known popularly as the Cure of Ars, was a compassionate man, and in a rural France where religious practice was part of society, communities were tight-knit and wounds festered, a confessor who made tangible the love of God was much in demand. His priestly ministry, with its focus on individual confession, was part of a credible pastoral strategy.

Australian society differs greatly from that of rural France. So does the challenge facing church ministers, including Catholic priests. The Year of the Priest offers an opportunity to muse on the questions faced by Catholic priests today.

The reflection may be sharpened by the fact that three out of the four priests ordained for the Sydney Archdiocese celebrated their first Mass in Latin. Given the place of the first Mass as a symbolic statement of how a priest views his ministry, this majority choice is of some significance. The concerted choice of Latin suggests that many young priests share a distinctive vision of the Church, of priesthood and of pastoral priorities that older priests would not share.

It would be easy to pass judgment, either to approve or to condemn, on such decisions and on the pastoral strategies that they reflect. But it may be more helpful to reflect on their significance within all the complex relationships that constitute priesthood within the Catholic Church.

Priests are defined by their relationships. They exist within a church, which in turn is defined by its relationship to God through Jesus Christ. So they are disciples of Jesus within the Catholic Church. Their ordination as priests defines further their complex relationships to other Catholics, including bishops and other priests.

In the Catholic view, the relationship between the bishop and the clergy of his diocese is of particular symbolic significance. The image of the clergy gathered around their bishop expresses the unity of the local church. In the same way, the image of the bishops gathered around the Pope expresses the unity of the universal Church.

Images and symbols tend to be taken for granted until the reality they represent is put under pressure. It seems inevitable that the unity of priests under the local bishop will be put under pressure if there are substantial divisions

between them about the desirable form of worship, the pastoral needs of their people, their ways of relating to Catholics and the broader society, and about what it means in practice to be a priest. When they gathered around their bishop they would be facing in opposite directions, just as they might do when celebrating the Eucharist.

Of course the image of the clergy gathered around the bishop of the area never fully reflects the reality of any church. Catholics who belong to the Ukrainian or Maronite communities, for example, may well have their own bishop in the same city. Clergy in many religious congregations, too, have a more complex relationship with the local bishop. In the Anglican communion, the clergy and congregations that do not accept women's ordination may be placed with a bishop who works across the territory of many local bishops.

But the co-existence in the same church of priests who have a radically different outlook and preference for forms of worship would pose a more radical challenge to the relationships that define what it means to be a priest. It would affect particularly the critical relationship between priests and the people they are ordained to serve.

Will congregations be subjected to the conflicting styles and preferences of priests who succeed one another? Will there be a settlement by which individual congregations are reserved to Latinophile or Anglophile priests? Will Catholics be encouraged to shop around to find priests and congregations that offer congenial brands of Catholic life and worship?

Such questions illustrate the potential for fracturing the traditional image of the clergy gathered around the bishop as a symbol of church unity. They also distract from the central relationship that gives meaning to priesthood — the relationship to Jesus Christ and to the spreading of the Gospel.

Where there are divisions their effects are rarely effectively addressed by ignoring them. It may be better to name 2009 the year of priests, not the Year of the Priest, thus recognising the divergent approaches to priesthood within the Catholic Church.

The year would then be less concerned to unite priests around a single definition of priesthood than to invite priests to speak to one another of where they find energy and life in the different relationships that being a priest involves.

They can then be invited to test these articulations by the reality of Christ found in the Gospel and in the world. That would embody the encouraging conversational style of ministry commended by John Vianney.



## Race riots and the multiplex

### FILMS

*Sarah Ayoub*

This week, Aussie film *Cedar Boys* will hit the big screen. It is the second film in just a few months that will portray the lives of Lebanese boys in South-Western Sydney. Caught between the usual dilemmas of youth, they must also grapple with issues of crime and culture in what they feel is an already hostile world.



A few months ago, *The Combination* graced Australian cinemas. It shook social foundations both on and off the screen until it was banned for inciting patron violence. Days later it was reinstated, albeit with an anti-violence message from the producer somehow wedged into its introduction. The question remained whether it had achieved all that it was meant to.

The past 12 months have showcased the above films, as well as the play *From Lebanon With Love II* and the Cronulla Riots-based drama *Stories of Love and Hate*. So the boys of Lebanon and the Middle East have a lot to answer for. They have found a niche in the Aussie pop cultural sphere, at least in drama and film, and within an academic analytical framework.

The success of these productions implies that the stories of identity, crime, revenge and belonging that they represent are striking a chord somewhere.

In March this year, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that *The Combination* averaged \$17,744 in the NSW metropolitan area in its first three days — despite the fact that four Greater Union Cinemas had banned it. In the context of last year's top box office earner, *The Dark Knight*, which had averaged \$24,957, this was a huge success.

But why? In their own way, these productions all deal with Arab-Australians as the 'other', examining the extent of their assimilation, the codes that they live by, and their functions in a society in which issues of tolerance have reigned important for almost a decade.

In the aftermath of September 11 and the infamous gang-rapes, it seems easy to say why this is so. Easy to argue that 'we' ought undoubtedly to have questioned what codes these 'others' lived by, and whether or not these codes constituted 'Australianness'.

In fact all the right-thinking people necessary to ensure a moral panic about the Middle Eastern community did question the support by the 'others' of our 'fair go' Australian values. Religious leaders, politicians, and all-round high-ranking Aussies were among those who weren't entirely sure what these 'others' represented. And in Cronulla, whether or not they belonged.

These films show that the 'others' themselves were grappling with the same

question.

An industry insider told me of the response his mate received when applying some years ago for an acting job in an Australian film. This fellow had studied with the best of them at NIDA, was a Lebanese Catholic whose terrorism know-how was about as limited as Bush's skills in dealing with it, and who had made considerable progress in developing his talent as he sought to further his drama dream. Following his audition he received a rejection letter with the simple message that they'd be in touch when they had a part for a 'caf -bomber'.

Such stories make me question my own determination to shake the representations of those of Middle Eastern background, and my desire to prove that they do have a valuable contribution to make to this society. I refuse to give up my long-held hope that they can find the space in the middle. I hope they will be able to mesh their ethnic background with that of the tenants of 'Australianness' that I myself hold dear and admire.

But it's possible that I should abandon my hopes. For even though the 'others' have not found the middle space I dreamed of, they are obviously quite comfortable in being 'other'. These productions seem to show that certain notions of 'otherness' and of the war between 'us and them' have become such a part of the Australian way of life that our film industry is lapping it up, loving it, and working with this niche.

In doing so, however, they might only further the divide. These productions are quite different to the 'ethnic Australia' films of years past. Sure, they all have protagonists who are grappling with their identity, but the similarity ends there.

So while Josephine Alibrandi searched for acceptance and wog boy Nick Giannopoulos humorously challenged his representation, the cedar boys embrace it. They accept their pigeon-holing and cash in on its limitations.

This was evident in the promotional features of *The Combination*. The film invited viewers to 'come and see the real Australia', but instead took them back to the streets of western Sydney, where the haircuts alone could suggest a parallel universe. So is the real Australia more divided than we think?

If these films, their contribution to the Australian film industry, and their success are anything to go by, this might really be the case. By embracing their difference, and in a sense rejecting their ability and willingness to assimilate, they have ironically made the 'others' become so very interestingly Australian.

## Aggro Abbott vs Hockey the bear

### POLITICS

*John Warhurst*



Following his tumble in the latest [Newspoll survey](#), it's time to compare the Liberal leadership aspirants behind Malcolm Turnbull.

Joe Hockey and Tony Abbott, the two Jesuit-educated Sydneysiders, are the frontrunners should the embattled Turnbull fall before the next federal election. They and retirement-bound Peter Costello are featuring in surveys by NewsPoll to find the best Liberal leader. In the most recent poll the rank order was Costello 36 per cent, Hockey 20 per cent, Turnbull 16 per cent and Abbott 10 per cent.

MPs take a range of factors into consideration when choosing a leader. The most important, given the relatively equivalent capacity and experience of Abbott and Hockey, are potential to win the next election, policy positions and factional alliances.

The stage of the electoral cycle makes a difference too. After the November 2007 election Brendan Nelson prevailed because Turnbull's electoral appeal was discounted by enough right-wingers who were willing to back Nelson on policy grounds. By the second contest last year, with Nelson struggling in the polls, Turnbull triumphed because the next election was getting closer and success now seemed more important.

There are some similarities between Abbott and Hockey, including parliamentary and ministerial experience. Abbott entered parliament in 1994 and Hockey is part of the much trumpeted Class of '96. They both became ministers in the Howard government after the 1998 elections.

Abbott moved upwards more quickly than Hockey for a while, and served as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and then Minister for Health. But Hockey eventually ended up being chosen to sell WorkChoices as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. He has done better in Opposition, while Abbott's star has waned. Hockey, the Shadow Treasurer, is now Abbott's political senior.

There are two important areas of difference. One is electoral appeal. Hockey is more popular in the electorate. Hockey, co-star with Kevin Rudd on the Channel 7 *Sunrise Program* until it was cancelled because his party colleagues thought the friendship was unbecoming, has an outgoing manner that appeals to the public. The big friendly bear of a man is attractive to both sides of politics.

The gaunt-looking Abbott, on the other hand, suffers from his aggressive, adversarial stance and his image as an ideologically conservative Catholic unwilling to compromise. He is a divisive rather than inclusive figure.

The second difference is that Hockey is a member of the Liberal Left and Abbott is part of the Liberal Right. In some ways a contest between them would be a repeat of the Turnbull/Nelson clashes, with the Left backing Hockey and the Right backing Abbott. But the ideological gap between the two may be bigger. Abbott is probably to the right of Nelson and Hockey is arguably to the left of Turnbull.

Abbott is a pragmatist and thinks strategically, as shown by his current support for passing the government's emissions trading scheme in order to avoid a double dissolution election. But at heart he is conservative. His conservatism is primarily social, on issues like abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

His proposal, in his new book *Battlelines*, to reintroduce fault into divorce law for those couples who choose to do so, is unlikely to appeal to voters in the middle of the political spectrum.

Hockey, on the other hand, is a liberal Catholic. When Cardinal Pell took issue with Catholic MPs in the NSW Parliament over embryonic stem cell research, Hockey, who had supported embryonic stem cell research in the Federal Parliament, responded that while he didn't object to the Cardinal expressing his opinion, he did object to the suggestion that there could be consequences for a parliamentarian's standing within the church.

Like Turnbull, Hockey is pro-choice. When he entered Parliament he joined the John Stuart Mill Society, a grouping of progressive Liberals, rather than the conservative Lyons Forum. That was a brave statement. Hockey, like Turnbull, would be unacceptable to many conservative Liberals.

There is more to both men than can be conveyed in a few words. The leadership contest would be fascinating were it to come about. Should the opportunity arise Hockey, the younger man, may even decline what he would see as a poisoned chalice. But Abbott wouldn't. He would grab his chance and a boots-and-all election would certainly follow because Abbott, unlike Hockey, is outspoken in his personal criticisms of the Prime Minister.

## Ghosts of sisters present

NON-FICTION

*Prue Gibson*

When we were small and shared a room, my sister and I used to wake from the same nightmare. Sweating, we would prop ourselves up on pillows and recount our versions into the dark, shocked by the similarities.



Nowadays my sister, as doppelganger, looks back at me when I catch a reflection in a shop window or a bathroom mirror in passing. And yet in reality we are so different. She handles her loved ones with slow tender movements. I treat mine with tight squeezes and hundreds of rough kisses.

Often it is our differences that confront me and cause unease. This is more than the anxiety of a younger sister; it is a wish to close the gap and tighten the connection to the way it was when we were children.

Our mother's relationship with her sister is the same. My aunt lived on the land, five hours west of Sydney. What I craved when I visited her as a child was the similarity of my aunt to my mother, coupled with her difference. While the patterns of daily life were alike — breakfast tasted the same, dinner too — it was changed. Some rules varied, the jokes were earthy and the moody silences more pronounced.

My aunt's home was a masculine place. She had three sons and there were always other workmen talking at the gate, driving past on a tractor or urging cattle with a horse. This was a world where mud-caked boots lined the outside verandah and thick khaki work shirts scooped a pattern around the Hills Hoist. The men were gruff: spitting, hitching pants or stamping out boots. So foreign, and yet my aunt made every moment familiar.

But in accordance with the idea of a spirit-double, the similarities were also an illusion. An unexpected sharp word from my aunt would send me staggering.

My sister and I used to nudge each other when our aunt arrived to stay from the country, wearing the same coloured lipstick, the same Peter Pan collars and the same tartan pants as our mother. Little did we realise we would become the same too: mistaken for each other at parties and in the street, sisters who have come to look more alike as the years duck and dance behind us.

While courage and a feeling of wellbeing can be drawn from this sisterly connection, there are pitfalls. Husbands can get jealous, siblings can take offence and sisters-in-law can feel excluded. This hazard of exclusion turned and faced me recently when my smallest child asked to watch an old family movie she'd found in a drawer.

The movie was Christmas day at my mother's house: white damask tablecloth, the good silver, salmon pink blinds and heavy side-swept curtains. My sister and I were seated together, our shoulders turned inwards. Two crescents. We were talking in low voices, with intermittent bursts of laughter. We were separate from the others, intimate in our co-dependence.

For a few moments I was cheered by the sight, assured that our sistership was strong as ever. But, as the camera pulled back, I saw beside me the figure of my sister-in-law. She sat alone and I recognised for the first time the exclusivity of our relationship. I felt ashamed. So, does that mean that an intimate, intuitive ghostlike connection between sisters requires the sacrifice of other relationships? I don't want to believe it's true.

In some ways, the similarities between my sister and I, and between my mother and my aunt, are a trick. Because like a ghost, the twin image I see in the window or mirror is soon gone. Even if we were twins rather than close siblings, in time the likeness would become a magical sleight of hand.

Then again perhaps our entanglement is more prosaic than I think. Our mother used to sew our clothes: sweet elastic-waisted skirts in floral cotton and little A-line dresses. She made them to match. One in pink and one in blue. Maybe the connection was driven by seeing each other across the bedroom in the same garb so early on. Or was it determined by our little matching beds, one with a blue mohair rug and one with a pink mohair rug.

What I do know is that when we were children, my sister had an imaginary friend who lived in our bedroom light, but I didn't need one. I had my doppelganger.

## **Prick and it'll bleed**

POETRY

*Chris Andrews*

### **My life without you**

I've glimpsed what it might have been like on my trips  
to places that weren't even disappointing,  
just real and so almost utterly foreign  
to flimsy, film-set imaginings. The real  
with its detail filled in far beyond the call  
of duty set up peephole installations:  
a kind man's flat into which nothing useless  
and beautiful had been brought for a long time;  
a window display of high-heeled work boots; keys  
but not mine, a pink sapphire ring and false teeth  
in a lost-property box; something half-dead  
floating in the eyes of a man who turned out  
to be not only a cold fish but a shark.

Next year it will be twenty years already.

You've probably forgotten most of the times  
you made all the difference (if you ever knew)  
by not being otherwise than as you are:

a perfect stranger to dinginess. You were  
the barefoot breeze all along the branching path,  
the breathable light and the ocean-washed air.

It was you. I knew it. I had no idea.

### **This way up**

I can walk backwards but it makes my neck hurt.  
When I was a kid the right knee of my pants  
usually tore first, but I can only sneer  
on the left. In a gravitational field,

my body goes this way up for sixteen hours  
then should be laid flat in the dark. If I said  
it wasn't ticklish, how obvious was that?  
Prick and it'll bleed, so careful with that Ouch!  
Failing a lotus with a puff of ether  
in it at the centre of this opaque space,  
small sorts of flora and fauna multiply:  
it's the tropical, Hindu sort of temple.  
The sight of a workstation makes my back hurt.  
Some bodies are happy sitting at the still  
centre of a drive-thru tarscape. Not this one.  
Sometimes after a sunny lunch I forget  
the whole universe doesn't have to take arms  
to knock it flat. A drop of liquid will do.  
Pretty good the way it keeps bouncing back though,  
so far, slower than it did at first, but still.  
Reading this over I think: How smug is that?

**Envoy**

Plenty of bottles have sunk to the sea floor  
messages slowly dissolving inside them,  
others have washed up a short walk down the beach  
or far away but a century too late  
for the sender, though not for the retiree  
archiving items of exotic flotsam.  
How many super-durable monuments  
are settling on the windscreens of cars in Rome  
as I put this together from lines drafted  
with a finger in beach sand or a texta  
on a tile by anon? This gappy lattice  
suddenly crystallising from a slowly



enriched solution of possibilities  
would have to be further up itself than Oz-  
ymandias to pose as a monument,  
but it's brazen enough to hope that someone  
might take a piece for another mosaic,  
as you might pick up a sanded glass pebble,  
a piece of this perishable instrument  
in two hundred and thirty one syllables.  
So get out, little poem, go on, get lost.

## **'Poverty porn' and the politics of representation**

MEDIA

*Tulsi Bisht*



The attacks on Indian students have had two intriguing outcomes. First, the Indian community in Australia, which includes the established community and the more recently arrived students, seems to be divided. Second, the Indian media is relentlessly portraying Australia as a racist country, and Australia is having to try to clear itself of a racist image. Both of these outcomes bear deeper probing.

Australia's Indian-born population has grown sizably over the past few decades. There is a well-established Indian community in most Australian cities. In the past few years there has been a rapid increase in the Indian student population as well: an estimated 90,000 Indian students are currently in Australia.

For a long time the Indian community mixed easily with the wider Australian community. But with the large-scale arrival of Indian students, the Indian community has emerged as a visible ethnic 'other'.

The entrenched Indian community, perhaps already uncomfortable with the increasing number of students, is now in a confrontational mood. They see the vocal student protests following the attacks in Melbourne and Sydney, and the portrayal of Australia as racist by the Indian media, as having the potential to harm the relationship that the Indian community has nurtured over the years with the wider community.

The role of the Indian media has been significant. The incidents in Australia have been widely and prominently reported. But the reporting clearly overstates the degree of racism in Australian society.

So much so that the Australian Government arranged for Indian journalists to tour Australia, and for an educational delegation to visit India, in order to allay fears of racist violence in Australia. The delegation also addressed media conferences in an attempt to persuade the media to take a more informed and balanced approach.

These efforts could be seen as economically motivated — after all, the overseas student industry has emerged as an important sector of the Australian economy. But they also reflect a concern to preserve Australia's reputation as a multicultural society. This could be undermined if Australia were represented as 'racist'.

Representation plays a crucial role in creating 'otherness'. India has dealt with its own issues of representation during the era of colonisation. In post-colonial times any depreciatory depiction of the country is seen as a continuation of the colonial mentality. From travelogues to feature films, all come under the scanner

of the educated Indian middle-class, a vociferous critic of this representational mentality.

For example, although the international recognition of Indian artists involved with the Oscar winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* was cause for celebration, the film itself was fiercely criticised for depicting India in a derogatory, uni-dimensional way. Some critics claimed it reflected a Western fascination with 'poverty porn'.

More severely critiqued by this Indian middle-class, are Indians themselves who produce representational works for Western consumption. Last year's Booker prize winning book *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga elicited a strong reaction for its representation of India. In the past, filmmaker Satyajit Ray, authors V S Naipaul, Arundhati Roy and others had to go through the same kind of scrutiny.

The rapidly growing Indian middle-class of today is educated, entrepreneurial and informed. It takes pride not only in the economic rise of India, but also in its robust democratic system that has withstood a number of challenges over the last six decades. Moreover, this generation does not share the burden of the collective memory of being colonised. Hence, there is a desire for equity and equitable treatment.

A large section of the Indian media comes from this middle-class background. The incidents in Australia have not only provided them with juicy stories, but have allowed them to play the 'politics of representation' in challenging the equitable, democratic claims of Australian society.

But in the process of representing Australia as racist, the Indian media seems to have forgotten that it engages in the same enterprise that it intends to oppose. It loses sight of the power of representation and of the hurt it can cause.

The effects of representation can be seen both at the community and the government level, and the cordial relationship between two countries now needs to be reaffirmed.

## Alice's addiction in Cyberland

MEDIA

*Adam McKenna*

In the BBC [documentary](#) *Wonderland: Virtual Adultery and Cyberspace Love*, a 37-year-old American housewife almost forgets her husband and four children exist as she pursues an online relationship in the virtual world of [Second Life](#). Her online persona is a scantily-clad, raven-haired beauty; her in-game beau impossibly muscle-bound and brandishing twin Uzi sub-machineguns.



It seems inconceivable, but while for many users, virtual worlds — or 'metaverses' — are merely something to dip their toes into, others fall in head first, to the extent that it pervades their waking thoughts even when they are not logged in.

Often touted as a glimpse at the possible 3D future of the web, *Second Life*, which celebrated its sixth anniversary in June, is a 'sandbox' experience in which gameplay is open-ended and driven by user-created content.

It is often described as an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game), but I prefer the moniker MUSH (Multi-user Shared Hallucination) — a journey down the rabbit hole in which deep vein thrombosis is not the only travail that may await the unwary.

The avatar itself, a 3D wire frame swathed in textures and invariably younger than the person behind it, is a kind of projection into the ether with which the virtual realm is experienced.

The word 'avatar' has its origins in Sanskrit and can be taken to mean the 'descent of the god' to earth. This is fitting, due to the manner in which individuals seek to edit and control what happens in their game experience — a potted life that can be micro-managed like a bonsai, right down to the ability to edit the day/night cycle.

*Second Life* allows that the interior world of the individual to be rendered in a public space in an anonymous and relatively risk-free manner — indeed I have heard enthusiasts refer to it as the 'inside world of people'. (I can't help but think of Marianne Moore's line about 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'.)

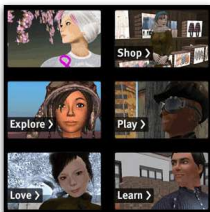
Devotees distinguish between the virtual world and 'meatspace' — ordinary life — a distinction that presupposes that something is wrong with reality. As with many hidden worlds of the internet, it's a parable of belonging and adulation, with interest group titles displayed above avatar heads, and profiles — which can be accessed by clicking on the avatar's name — detailing their in-world 'friends', 'fathers', 'mothers' and even 'children'.

With no specific site to deal with addiction to this phenomenon, the afflicted googled themselves to The Elliptic Blog's [Second Life Addiction](#) thread. The result is a frightening catalogue of neglect and self-neglect, of disintegrating families, foreclosures, relationships ruined, and businesses going belly up as a result of individuals diving too deeply into this online realm.

A teen bemoans the fact that both parents are too busy 'managing' their virtual club to give her any attention. Spouses speak of strangers that were once intimates, lost to an illusion of life. A distraught wife relates how her husband hoards happy snaps of his online romances, prizing them over real ones.

Greek thinkers like Leucippus and Democritus, who first posited the notion of a world composed of atoms, would marvel at people willing to exchange it for one of pixels. Yet the fact that so many adults find themselves lost in here is perhaps more testimony to the power of the human mind, than the medium itself — after all, although in some ways it is an extraordinary creative platform, *Second Life* is only a kind of advanced 3D chat.

*Second Life* merely reflects forces at work in the wider developed world — the corporeal one, of flesh and bone, where time ravages our envelope of flesh, and society worships the unravaged. The tweaking of the avatar is cosmetic surgery. The lack of standard game elements such as level progression or any guiding principle becomes a void in which endless consumption becomes the goal — virtual items paid for with real money — mirroring the endless dissatisfaction coded into us by a culture predicated on instant gratification.



In the course of my own investigations — and like a cop infiltrating a bikie gang, at times I wasn't sure if I was investigating or participating — I encountered a circle of avatars dancing in synch beside a blazing pixel fire at a simulated beach on an actual weekend, expressing their dismay that their teenage children were addicted to *World of Warcraft* (another, and even more popular MMO game).

'My son suffers from an affliction called WOW,' said one, apparently a mother. 'Oh my ... so does mine!' exclaimed another. 'Is he OK?'

The irony was perhaps lost on them.

As we continue to become 'tools of our tools', as Henry David Thoreau warned long ago, we risk mistaking online social networking for social capital (real 'meatspace' connections between people and groups of people). If this phenomenon is widespread it's because humans are essentially social animals, and technology has changed the way we live, interact and seek to interact. It manipulates us, as much as we manipulate it.

Richard Dawkins has pointed out that Moore's Law, which dictates that computer processing power effectively doubles every 18 months, means it is

almost inevitable that coming virtual worlds will contain avatars that look like real people. This does not bode well for the future.

And in the present, sharp increases in user hours and economic activity in the first quarter of 2009 (up 42 per cent and 65 per cent respectively over the corresponding quarter last year) perhaps indicate an influx of cyber refugees, sheltering in imaginary worlds from economic storms.

The concept of a digital life is indeed troubling, but there may be a positive side to all of this in that people seem prepared to bare their souls, safely hidden behind a pixel doll. Even if they do wear a mask, to some extent this creates an atmosphere ripe for reasoning about how to live. 'You level-up when you quit the game', a European legal professional and resident told me in-game, 'by realising what you have to fix in your real life.'

Intriguingly, virtual worlds may be a means of reasoning about what is worth doing, by doing something that is perhaps not. Even so, in other cases Alice may need some help in finding her way back from Cyberland.

## Thorpe moving mountain of Indigenous disadvantage

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Olympic swimming champions know how to move mountains. Especially Ian Thorpe. That's why it's particularly significant that Thorpe has spoken so passionately and insightfully about his resolve to help turn around Australia's grim record on health care for its Indigenous citizens.



Last week, Crikey [published](#) his monumental speech to the [Beyond Sport Summit](#) in London earlier this month.

'In 20 remote Australian communities and with thousands of Aboriginal children I know life will have some extra opportunities if I commit to work hard on this. I do intend to work hard at this for the rest of my life.'

Thorpe has spent time visiting Indigenous communities, where he was shocked by Third World health standards in the middle of a country that boasts some of the highest living standards of any nation on earth.

'Malnourished mothers are giving birth to babies that are seriously underweight and this only gets worse throughout a life born into poverty. Here diabetes affects one in every two adults. Kidney disease is in epidemic proportions in communities where living conditions, primary healthcare and infrastructure are truly appalling.'

Thorpe may have been super-human in his ability to perform in the pool. But he was just like us in being slow to comprehend the huge gap in health and education outcomes, and the differences of life expectancy.

'I, as many had, made an assumption; Australia is a rich country, don't we throw a lot of money at that problem? It disgusts me to speak those words now but that was what I thought.'

It's not uncommon for sports and other celebrities to get involved in charity work. But this speech suggests Thorpe is far ahead of the pack. Not only is he aware of the magnitude of the problem of Indigenous disadvantage, but he has a realistic understanding of his own ability to make a difference through a combination of his values and the power of celebrity.

'It is a bit disappointing that a teenager's opinion garnered more attention than those who had been working on their chosen causes before I was even born ... When I was 18 I established my charity, [Fountain for Youth](#) . I didn't realise at the time that this may be my biggest accomplishment. An achievement not in the sense of doing something right, rather a stepping stone where my values that I had gained from sport could be transferred to something that is bigger than sport and in my opinion far more important.'

## Parenthood as religion

### PARENTING

*Sarah Kanowski*



For a girl raised a Catholic, even in the 1970s and '80s, there was always the possibility that one would 'get the call'. Although my dear aunty was a nun, being tapped on the shoulder by God to take up holy orders elicited fear rather than longing in me. A life of service (not to mention a life without boys) was not the future I wanted.

But in my 20s, as my religious affiliation shifted towards Zen Buddhism, the monastery began to hold new appeal. Life there would be calm and ordered, I thought. And, surely, more authentically religious. This assumption, like so many others, has been undone by becoming a parent.

What has been the most important moment of your life? When were you happiest? Those of us who have children often answer that it was when first holding our newborns.

There is a great rush of love and relief in those moments, but that's not all. Bringing forth a baby is a dizzying exposure to the deep core of our being, and in that most mysterious of mathematical equations — when amid sweat and cries one suddenly becomes two — the meaning of our lives is flung open with an intensity I doubt is often achieved by hours of silent meditation or theological study.

In the last few weeks I have been blessed to experience this with my newborn son. Gazing into his eyes I wonder when life entered those dreamy globes. We are born fully human but who can say exactly when we became so? And what kind of consciousness are we at first? One without language or memory, but also fully present and complete. My son stares back at me, alert to the sound of water, the touch of his father's hand, the need for milk.

Ah, milk and more milk. The whole messy anarchy of newborns is inextricably linked to their miraculousness. These tiny missives from eternity come swaddled in equal parts love and shit and grace and sick. Caring for a newborn I am astonished we ever let ourselves be tricked into a false reverence for transcendence: here at the foundation of all our lives is a deeply immanent experience of the sacred. Where then is the boundary between the holy and profane?

The parameters of this experience are not confined to the nursery. In loving her child a parent forms a new kind of relationship with the world itself. These early weeks bring an emotional rawness, a kind of quivering sensitivity which extends to all beings. Violence seems even more unacceptable, war an abomination. It is not only the sanctity of life which impresses, but the sheer dogged effort required to



sustain it.

After my first child was born I was overwhelmed by an entirely new appreciation for the years of work required to grow a single human being. Going to buy groceries or walking to the bus I would be awe-struck by imagining all the hours of care, the relentless round of feeding, washing, and soothing which were responsible for every person I saw. It is an enormity of labour which of course begins on day one. History's catalogue of achievements now mean little to me. Man Walks on Moon? Big deal. Each day the headlines should shout, Woman Gives Birth!

In the early weeks of parenthood it is clear that the lay life is, in fact, profoundly religious. Properly perceived, what happens every day in our suburban homes and neighbourhood parks is as sacramental and as grace-filled as the ceremonies held in the loftiest cathedrals or remotest mountain monasteries.

That parenthood, this most earthy and ordinary of tasks, is also the most direct experience many of us have of the spiritual and sublime. It demands we rethink what those categories actually mean. The great religious traditions have paid scant attention to the experience of parenting; a tragic loss for their understanding of divinity. Christianity, of course, celebrates The Holy Family, but what can it learn from the experience of an ordinary, everyday, secular one?

Caring for babies is over in such a brief instant (even if it feels like an eternity at 3am). Hours spent marvelling at our newborns' perfection are rapidly replaced by ferrying children to soccer practice, earning a living, growing old. So parents need religion to help us embody the revelations which the love for our children brings.

Equally, religion needs the knowledge of mothers and fathers to appreciate the miraculous ground from which we all emerge, and to share in the questions raised when staring into a newborns' eyes.

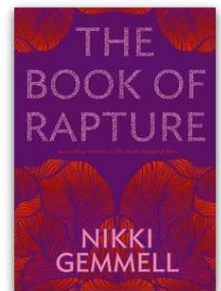
## Agnostic in bed with science and religion

### BOOKS

Jen Vuk

**Nikki Gemmell: *The Book of Rapture*. HarperCollins, 2009. ISBN: 9780732289249. [Online](#)**

London-based Australian writer Nikki Gemmell has become synonymous with her R-rated best-seller, *The Bride Stripped Bare*. The joke is that she penned it anonymously. There's no such diffidence with the release of her new novel, *The Book of Rapture*. In fact, Gemmell's name sits boldly on the cover. Could it be because this time the uneasy bedfellows are science, religion and family?



Initially *Rapture* appears to borrow directly from its predecessor. A mysterious manuscript finds its way, through several channels, to the public domain. We are told that the book 'is a historical enigma. Its author, provenance and audience are unknown to us ... Near the beginning, and at the end, is the haunting statement, "Now is the time when what you believe is put to the test".'

Under the microscope is the sanctity of marriage and family. It looms large as both testament of love and as ball and chain for the three young children at the heart of the book. We learn that it's their mother — fearless and ferocious in her love for them — whose deadly ambition has put their lives in danger.

Details are revealed slowly. The children have been drugged and taken to a safe house. They are alone because their parents are fugitives, having broken away from the nefarious Project Indigo, a government-sponsored eradication scheme, which only their mother, a scientist, can put into action. Their father, Motl, is absent; their mother, nameless, somehow nearby, but inexorably cut off.

'So. They are in there. Your children,' the narrative opens. 'Close but you cannot reach them, talk to them.' Such is the heart-quickenning urgency created by Gemmell's twitchy staccato. I read that the book was inspired by her fierce reaction to the London bombings in July 2005. So it's no wonder she pulls out all stops in breathing life into these impish souls, delighting in each detail, nuance and rivalry of the sibling dynamic.

This rendering makes the force that shadows the children's every move all the more invidious. Gemmell sure knows how to get the hairs on the back of the neck to bristle: 'Rain whipped. Sky pressing into the land, pummelling it; wet hammering the windows like a giant flinging pebbles; as if heaven itself was stopping anyone listening in.'

At the core of the threat is the doctrine: 'Do unto them now as they shall do to

us tomorrow.’ Clearly biblical in origin, but twisted into something other; it’s a ‘slogan of the people’, conversely — and perversely — divested of all humanity.

‘People who completely deny spirituality are missing what it is to be fully human,’ Motl tells his wife as she steadily grows more Promethean in her aspirations. ‘With all its fallibility and mess and stupidity, yes, but all its glory ... and beauty.’

Earlier the ‘biologist in him ruminated once that religion is about enduring, in a survival-of-the-fittest sense. “Maybe it gives you strength. Maybe we’re programmed by evolution to have belief. Maybe it’s in our genes.”’

Watching her trapped children grapple like lab rats forces a change of mind, heart and, most importantly, spirit. The scientist/sceptic must die in order for the mother to be reborn. Her family’s survival depends upon it.

Does Gemmell take us along on a journey? For the most part, yes. Certainly, she is a master moodist, and almost every word shimmers with intent, even if the meaning is, at times, ambiguous; e.g. ‘All the cosiness in their room vanished like a candle blown out. Your heart *pebbles* with it’ (my italics).

Gemmell ends each chapter with pithy quotations taken from the Bible, the Koran and Confucius, among other texts (although is it really necessary to have them italicised and underlined?).

But the narrator raises larger questions. Whose voice is it? Is it the mother? If so, then how can she see and know everything? Is she a ghost, and therefore omniscient? Perhaps, but this just throws in yet another never-to-be-explained curveball. Also where does the mother end and the author begin?

That said, this is undeniably a brave book. Gemmell, an agnostic, isn’t afraid to confront uncomfortable themes in order to glean a glimmer of understanding. Religion and science may not have the selling power of sex, but each have indelibly shaped individuals as well as history. Add family to the intriguing mix, as *Rapture* does, and you have a complex, confronting novel that aims well above the belt.

## Stupid men in a brutal land

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*



Australia, 1902. One year since Federation. The nation is a sickly child, as yet unaware of its weakness. It looks at the fertile land in the south and the east and sees a playground for adventure and prosperity. It is deceived.

Such is the pessimistic historical vision offered by filmmaker Kriv Stenders in his new film, a psychological thriller cum Australian western, *Lucky Country*.

'A lot of middle class people upped stumps from their city lives to do these tree changes, and thought they could farm the land', says Stenders. 'It was one of the tragedies [screenwriter] Andy Cox discovered ... these people coming out to this harsh place thinking they could tame it or control it, when in fact it was controlling them.'

*Lucky Country* centres on one such misguided tree-changer, Nat (Aden Young). Nat is a widower, and sole parent to his teenage daughter Sarah (Hanna Mangan Lawrence) and young son Tom (Toby Wallace). He is increasingly desperate, and questionably sane amid the unforgiving landscape.

This is not just a period drama. It's a fable for our modern times. 'Really, nothing's changed', says Stenders. 'You only have to look at the floods and the bushfires of recent times to realise the landscape controls us, we don't control it. Our presence on this land is tenuous — it has been and it still is.'

*Lucky Country* seems a bleak assessment of human nature. The arrival of three strangers (Pip Miller, Neil Pigot and Eamon Farren) tests the mettle and the loyalties of all three family members. Especially when they learn one of the men has discovered gold. Gold fever tinges characters' eyes. Greed and self-interest reign.

'I wouldn't say it's bleak', says Stenders. 'It's realistic. The film is a morality tale. It's about the evil men are capable of. We set out to make something entertaining and engaging, with a lot of betrayal and subterfuge and psychological cat and mouse games. That requires a certain aggressive tone and a certain darkness.'

The film is dark, but it is also far more lush and epic than Stenders' previous, low-budget drama [Boxing Day](#).

'We shot it outside of Adelaide at Mt Bold. I was looking for somewhere where I could hide the camera crew, hide the trucks, and shoot in any direction, using the methodology we used on *Boxing Day*, which was putting the camera into that world and following the characters inside that world rather than looking at them

from a distance.

'Westerns are timeless, and it's great to make an Australian one. We have the history and the landscape for them. We didn't want a small Australian film, we wanted a big, bold, epic film.'

*Boxing Day* was in part a meditation on the displacement of Indigenous Australians, so it seems incongruous that *Lucky Country*, set during the difficult dawn of the Australian nation, contains no Indigenous characters. It was a deliberate exclusion, says Stenders.

'They weren't pertinent to the story', he says. 'If you put them in they would have been token, and forced. It was very much about white Australia and these stupid men in this beautifully harsh and brutal landscape, and the madness and drama that comes out of that juxtaposition of male human folly in this environment.'

Here, the Indigenous story would of course have been very different. Respect for and understanding of the power and possibilities of the land are central to Indigenous culture.

'Exactly', says Stenders. 'Nat thinks he can hear the land, thinks he's in control of it, but he's a complete fool. And the other men are all driven by much more base, much more primal, instincts.'

Just as Nat tries to turn a piece of untamed countryside to his farming purposes, Stenders has taken a piece of Australian bush and turned it into a film set. This wasn't without its logistical difficulties but, as Stenders says, 'everything that was difficult we turned to our advantage'.

'It's great when it's difficult because it forces everyone to work much harder, and that energy and effort in some way is up there on screen, imbued in the film. That's what you want to give an audience ... a sense that you've worked hard for something, not done it leisurely and easily. Difficulty is a good thing.'

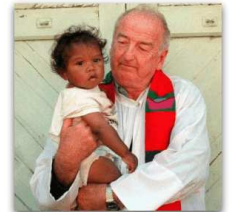
If that's true, then *Lucky Country*, perhaps inadvertently, is not only a bleak parody of the struggles of Australia's pioneers, but is also a tribute to them.

## The marginalisation of Ted Kennedy

### APPLICATION

*Andrew Hamilton*

Idealism often leads people who belong to idealistic groups to live and work among the marginalised. In time they often feel marginalised and are seen as marginalised within the organisations to which they belong. They are said to 'go native'.



This is often seen as an event to be avoided and as a problem to be solved. Wiser counsel suggests it is a fact to be accepted. If you live at the margins, you will be marginalised, if you work at the boundaries you will be seen to be outside the main game, if you dwell beyond the frontiers you will lose your citizenship. That is what happens. The real question is: how do you handle this fact of life?

Edmond Campion's [stimulating new book](#) describes the process of marginalisation, and suggests lines of reflection on it. He tells the story of Ted Kennedy, a notable Sydney priest whose desire for an engaging form of ministry led him to Redfern in the 1970s. There he found and was found by the Aboriginal community. He opened his church and his house to people as he found them — which often meant drunk, dirty and abusive — and stayed with them for 25 years. In his language, he found Christ in them.

He also felt and was seen as marginalised. Acting as if nothing mattered more than to respect and be with his people soon brought him into conflict with police and landowners. It also alienated him from some of his parishioners and brought him into tension with church authorities whom he believed to have only a perfunctory interest in Indigenous Australians.

He came to see the world and church through the eyes of Aboriginals. This perspective inevitably diverged more and more sharply from that of officers of church and government who saw them only in relationship to their own institutions and their own kind of people.

This is a common experience and fact of marginalisation. Its logic is to alienate people from the group in which they found the inspiration to live at its edges. That is a pity because it cuts off a basically well-disposed group from the bridge that could be made to the marginalised community. How then can people handle the fact of marginalisation in such a way that they can feed back their experience to their broader community?

The structure of Jesuit thinking may be helpful here. Recent Jesuit rhetoric has picked up the commitment of their founder Ignatius Loyola to work at the frontiers of race, religion, culture and ideology that ordinary church organisation cannot easily reach.

Ignatius addressed the fact of marginalisation by supposing that Jesuit missions to the frontiers came from the symbolic centre of the Catholic Church, the Pope. He also suggested actions that would help to resist alienation: praising devotional practices like long prayers and devotions, refraining from criticism of prelates and so on.

But underlying these practices and this imaginative vision lay the bonds that linked Jesuits to one another. They were expressed in the letters from distant missions, reports from dangerous postings and so on.

These ways of imagining and acting in the world will seem prissy and self-protective when they are adopted as a slogan by those who live and work among Catholics. They will be used to suggest that marginalisation is a problem, not a fact, and ultimately discount any kind of life at the margins. But when they are embodied in a life lived at the edge they will have a robust, often rebarbative, shape.

As Ed Campion shows, the way in which flesh and blood human beings like Ted Kennedy creatively handle being marginalised is messy. Ted handled it with rage followed by request for forgiveness, with indictment of Catholic pastoral priorities and safer understandings of what it meant to be a priest, with large expectations of himself and others, a simple faith, and with a gift for friendship and good conversation.

He was a priest in a world without walls. He was blown by the winds that raged through his world. He often raged at those who lived a more sheltered life, and faithfulness became native to him. There are other ways of being Catholic and being a priest, but as a margin dweller he was exemplary: subversive of settlements that trimmed the Gospel, a human being among human beings, and faithful to his calling.

## Blind anxiety

NON-FICTION

*Brendan Forde*



Anxiety! How does it work? I really don't know! But sometimes it feels like I've been anxious forever.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don't recall ever being asked about my attributes, my interests, my aspirations. The program for a blind life was dictated to me. Through all this I kept silent, not knowing how I was going to cope. I was 13.

That's when it really began; the anxiety.

Adults were very encouraging, telling me I was brave. It was a sharp turn from being considered an impish little smart arse.

I learnt to sprout a diatribe that would get me through when I was cornered. Pressed for answers: 'How did you go blind?' How do I answer that? There are times when I just don't want to drag myself through all those painful emotions. The coma, the shock. Just too painful.

Blindness and anxiety isn't a great cocktail. Once I got the two confused. Nowadays it's easier; I know how to separate them. Blindness I can manage but I admit that anxiety can screw me up. It's then that I need time on my own. Time to rebuild self esteem. I can be comfortably blind by myself and do all the usual blind-isms: systematic searching with my hands, stopping when I'm disorientated, thinking my way out of it.

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At school, anxiety gave way to abandonment. No one's fault.

People rallied. Everyone was compassionate but they had their able-bodied adolescence to be busy with. As teenagers they were evolving capacities of physical mobility, whereas I had to learn about idleness and how to be still. Slowly adjusting to the lower revs of blindness. My body was programmed for running and jumping and didn't want stillness. When movement failed me I took to repetitive, obsessive behaviour — counting the keys on my braille, even chewing the inside of my mouth. Anything but stillness.

Guys ran past in the playground, yelling out to each other. Then gone. I called out to a fella. He stopped and said, 'What?'

I had nothing to say.

Calling out was instinctive, but he was off to play a game I was no longer part of. I just felt I could no longer count on friendship.



Inside I ached for it.

Me; the lame creature; the person who had the misfortune to be blinded.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's not a complaint; I do enjoy my life.

I don't want to complain, but I do want to be honest with myself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Then I'll gag emotionally in social situations. Anxious again. The visual cues that mediate conversation are gone, so halfway through a sentence confidence evaporates. I'm convinced they're not interested, or I think I hear them stifling a yawn. Why did I ever start to talk?

Or my nervous enthusiasm squeezes out a raving, an impatience to connect. I'm not sure where to stop and start sentences. Simply can't stop talking. Enthusiasm and anxiety pumps my larynx and I just rave on, then get so bloody embarrassed I walk away and cringe.

I still go through phases of blabbering.

Few people understand blindness; my blindness. I manoeuvre through a conversation, trying to remain true to myself, while not undermining their assumptions and stereotypes. They love to hear of blind people doing amazing things. The super-crip. The legend. But that's not me. I'm not all that amazing and can overwhelm myself with the pressure to perform.

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I'm never comfortable with anger, but it happens.

I'm anxious enough already in environments I don't control: the neighbourhood or someone else's house. So if I go crashing into a carelessly parked car or a half open door, it can wind me right up.

I've learnt to talk myself through it. I keep telling myself, 'Most people do care, most people are thoughtful, most people get it'.

\*\*\*\*\*

Anxiety is the Grapes of Depression.

Stealthily, sadness and anxiety rot away my self-belief and the ability to trust my senses and act on visceral impulses. Gradually I lose the intangible awareness of which way to choose. It gnaws away at my sense of self and renders me immobile. The thread that links day to day evaporates. I can't string a few wins together. Time weighs heavily on me. I learn to dread the future.

Then the emotional turbine slowly winds up into nervousness, mild mania, frustration and a sense of futility, and finally, fatally, the descent into depression.

Everything gets confused. One thing dribbles and spills into the other. It slowly surges out of my belly: all the repressed anger and injustice, the nightmare of it all. It full-on hits me like a wrecking ball. Instant karma. I'm staggered every time.

How the hell did I get back here?

I lock up feelings inside. I know no other way. Sadness rises and falls in me on most days of my life and I have this unhealthy habit of beating up on myself for not being able to predict situations and avoid the humiliation of losing my temper.

Or of crying in public.

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Anxiety!

Is it chronic pain, lack of sleep, loneliness? Is it being pushed to my limit? Is it the cone of silence that forbids speaking about sadness?

Or is it this ghost that resides in me? A ghost of myself. Hanging out in my muscles and bones. Something that can't die. A passenger. Frustrated. Trying to get out when I'm sleeping, trying to fly, trying to escape its mortal entrapment.

Something that takes me over when I am weak and full of yearning. It can't speak; but it stirs when I'm demanding to be heard. Inexplicable flashes of visual imagery: a tantalising colour or the flowing Dandenong Ranges.

The past becomes the anxious present. Constantly reminding me that it once controlled this organism ...

... and may do so again ...

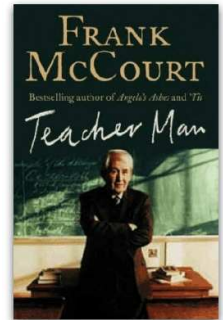
## Forgiving Frank McCourt

### EULOGY

Frank O'Shea

For a while back there, he was in his own words 'the mick of the moment', a celebrity feted wherever he went except his native Limerick, where they wanted to strangle him. In those times, you would have been hard pressed to find someone who had not read *Angela's Ashes*.

Then he wrote the follow-up, *'Tis*, and left you with the feeling that it was all a bit of a jape, a stirring of an Irish stew of misery, conflict, blarney, sex and redemption. And when someone with a clever agent wrote a story based on an imagined love affair between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, we forgot all about Frank McCourt.



Of course we shouldn't have, because McCourt's last book *Teacher Man* was his best. I will come back to that, but first there is the question of what it was about *Angela's Ashes* that struck such an immediate chord. Was it, I wonder, that Limerick in the '30s and '40s was little different from many of the suburbs of more fashionable cities in Britain and America and Australia? However much the world gasped at the bleakness of the back lanes of Limerick, were there elements in that poverty that were familiar?

Or was it the freshness of the writing, the cheeky almost offhand style, without whinging or self-pity? The voice was that of a storyteller, not a historian or a memoirist. The characters — vicious teachers, manipulative priests, the garrulous sentimental father and Woodbine-smoking mother — seemed as much like creations for a story as flesh and blood people.

Even his adolescent sexual self-discovery was a matter for a joke. 'I'm worn out from being the worst sinner in Limerick. I want to get rid of this sin and have rashers and eggs and no guilt, no torment ... but how can any priest give absolution to someone like me who delivers telegrams and ends up in a state of excitement on a green sofa with a girl dying of the galloping consumption?'

In *'Tis*, he followed up with the story of his family in New York, and it is not surprising that the book does not reach the heights of the first one.

Perhaps it is the teacher in me that regards *Teacher Man* as his best book. Okay, the bits of smart aleckry are still there and the occasional exaggeration and the clever turns of phrase, but there is too a humility, an admission of frailty and fallibility.

This is not the teacher as hero; he is not afraid to say that there were days when 'I don't want to see or hear them. I have squandered my best years in the

company of squawking adolescents. I'm not in the mood.'

But, then there were the times when 'I'm desperate to get into the classroom. I wait impatiently in the hallway. I paw the ground. Come on, Mr Ritterman. Hurry up. Finish your damn math lesson. There are things I want to say to this class.' Only a teacher would know those swings.

McCourt's first appointment was in a vocational school in Staten Island, teaching young people who would grow up to service the city's needs and never bother any college professor. Society would expend no more money schooling them. McCourt had to teach them English grammar: subject, predicate and object, participles and infinitives, and if there was time they might get on to things like topic sentences and paragraph structure.

There is nothing heroic or self-congratulatory about the way he writes of those early days, just a daily grind to enthuse his students and himself, falling back on his brogue and his singing or storytelling, anything to survive.

He tells you what most good teachers will admit, that the best lessons, the ones you remember and your students remember, are less a matter of preparation and planning than spur-of-the moment inspiration, as likely to be brought on by desperation as by advice from a colleague or text book.

*Teacher Man* is better than a dozen treatises on teaching, than a hundred official reports, than a bagful of letters to newspapers bemoaning the neglect of the basics. This is what it is really like to be the lonely figure with only cunning and a stick of chalk to protect you from disaster. First you must survive, then you try to make a difference. 'They may like you, they may even love you', he writes, 'but they are young and it is the business of the young to push the old off the planet.'

Limerick has forgiven Frank McCourt. For the rest of us, when we read a memoir, we find it hard to avoid asking ourselves 'Is it as good as *Angela's Ashes*?'

Frank McCourt died a week shy of his 79th birthday.

## **Darkened Irish church**

POETRY

*Libby Hart*

### **North wind**

It shook me about at Mullaghmore.  
The Atlantic reminding my southern body  
of all the unruly things that exist here.  
And my love for its uncontrollable self  
grew into veneration at Ballyconnell  
as we watched each wave strike at black rock.  
The moment being great commotion  
even while the sun shone like biblical etching.  
We sat without words  
as your car rocked a mad lullaby.  
Later you'd build a turf fire  
and the scent of it beckoned earth  
so fully inside the room,  
so fully that all my thoughts flew to Bricklieve.  
And in my mind's eye  
I travelled with velocity and turbulence,  
I travelled with the north wind.  
Because it's where I gather strength.  
It's where I exist in full fathom,  
even when I'm shaken and shaking.

### **Priest**

What becomes of you when you lose this grip on life?  
Am I to rise up and over rooftops  
and become misty-breathed?  
Will the sky hold my weight across its shoulders?  
And what will become of my thoughts

when I look down, as if a hawk over garden or meadow?  
What ploughed fields will take my fancy?  
What walker will have his best foot forward?  
Will my eyes be my very own now, across the failing light?  
And if I were to rise, would I feel more or less sure of a destination?  
Is there will? Or insistence, even?  
Is there a need to return and wake in my shadow?  
Thinner and thinner I'll become, I am sure of it  
Until the sigh of the day is heard,  
each shadow merging to alter angelic breath.  
A wing beat becoming the pulse of lost thoughts letting go.

### **Killarney**

Inside this darkened church there are whispers,  
flame-lit candles stand like priest-smooth souls.  
There are unknown angels bowing their heads,  
a clutter of saints who cross themselves in stony silence.  
Time and time again, Christ's palms do not heal.

### **A blessing of rain**

The rain came like a blessing  
making the world a softer vision,  
and if I had the opportunity  
to control such things  
I would include rainfall  
at certain parts of every day —  
midafternoon especially,  
when the light is cool-grey and ancient.  
And always in darkness,  
to allow for roof sonatas.  
So that we may sleep  
inside a dreamscape of possibility.

## End of the road for Sydney cyclists

SPORT

*Margaret Rice*



We passed them on a recent Sunday: a huddle of confused cyclists. They had powered their way up Sydney's King Street bike path, opened in May this year. It is a protected haven between the footpath and the cars that honk their way across the city.

And then, presto! The cycleway suddenly disappears. Only two short streets away are the intersections described in 2007 by Danish town planner Jan Gehl as part of one of the most car congested city centres he has ever seen.

Bicycle NSW and Bicycle Victoria have called on their members to support the development of the King Street cycleway with its phased lighting, arguing that the cycleway has national significance because it is bi-directional.

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore has promised \$70 million more worth of cycleways through the city, so maybe Sydney cycling will get safer. But cycleway proposals in Sydney seem to upset people. Surprisingly even Royal Prince Alfred Hospital has objected to one planned to pass beside its perimeter.

These days it's serious business riding to work in Sydney. To my endless admiration my sister and brother-in-law cycle in and out several times a week. They have regaled us with stories of Sydney cycleways that suddenly finish. At those points, as they turn to car drivers to plead for their lives, they face snarled teeth. And recently, when one of their sons was hit by a car while cycling, instead of getting out to check on his injuries, the driver got out and roundly abused him.

You can understand the response of Sydney cyclists: to ride in protective bunches, dress in lycra and wear space-age helmets and Darth Vader sunglasses. This garb helps to shear the wind but it seems also to be a subconscious effort to say to drivers, 'Don't mess with us' — a message as outsized as their vulnerability.

In Sydney the car completely dominates.

For all Moore's creativity, she cannot escape the consequences of the state government's inertia in developing public transport. Whatever it does, the City of Sydney is eventually hamstrung by the historic lack of government investment in public transport and by the current government's lack of vision and budgetary provisions.

Ride through any suburb in Sydney, such as Willoughby. It has 'cycleways' but these usually leave the road to cars, and squeeze cyclists into the kerbside lane that they must share with parked cars.

Melbourne is luckier. The city's new Eastlink cycleway, built at a cost of \$26

million and completed in June 2008, covers 35 km of terrain stretching from Donvale to Dandenong South, through a series of connected bike tracks. Overall, the response has been positive, although a recent Bicycle Victoria forum reported that of 34 riders who offered feedback, only five thought it was perfect and 15 thought it could be better.

Eastlink combines pedestrians and riders, not always a safe and happy mix. Critics have focused on wooden bridges that are slippery and dangerous when wet, and a series of corners that are too sharp for cyclists, especially when they occur on steep sections. Cyclists must also cross several roads.

Although one blogger wondered whether any of the cycleway designers had ever ridden a bike, others were happy that at least this cycleway now makes a substantial contribution to riding through Melbourne.

This year, too, Melbourne trialled a bike rental scheme, a foretaste of the much more extensive one planned for 2010. It brought the city a little closer to the brave decision of Paris, to ban cars altogether and introduce low-rent bicycles for anyone who wants to traverse the city.

Even some car-obsessed American cities have managed to become bike friendly. In every part of the city of Oregon, for example, bicycle routes are planned. Laws have also been passed ensuring that all state roads, including freeways, are open to bicycles. When cyclists would be at risk, they must be provided with a reasonable detour. Cycles, not cars, have the right of way and when a cycleway is to end, notice must be given 800 m in advance.

And in Copenhagen, home town of Jan Gehl, where 36 per cent of people ride to work by bicycle, residents are demanding that bike paths be widened to ease congestion.

The car does not everywhere dominate as it does in Sydney. And if we were to introduce the Oregon system, we would have signposts warning that the King Street cycleway was to finish, 600 m before it had even started.



## Book copyright debate ignores the future

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Discussion of territorial copyright for authors and book publishers is heated and emotive. Tim Wilson of the Institute of Public Affairs [writes](#) that it's all about greedy authors protecting their turf, while *The Age's* editorial writer [says](#) it represents the abandonment of the guardians of our literary culture.



The debate surrounds last week's Productivity Commission [recommendations](#) for the removal of parallel import restrictions. The restrictions currently in place are said to allow local writers, publishers, and small book shops to earn a living in exchange for higher book prices for the public. The proposed change could reverse this situation.

Both sides have a point, but the argument itself may be irrelevant.

Like newspapers, it's certain that books will move from print to an electronic form within the next 20 years. Rupert Murdoch [told](#) the Fox Business Network earlier this year that newspapers will be converting relatively soon:

'I think it's two or three years away before they get introduced in a big way and then it will probably take 10 years or 15 years for the public to swing over.'

Books will not be far behind.

There will only be a future for authors, publishers and booksellers who embrace the new medium. In the United States, Amazon is focused on the uptake of its Kindle e-book reading technology. In Australia, Dymocks is testing the market with a European device called the [Iliad](#) (pictured), together with an increasing range of e-book titles in its catalogue.

Writers are also [taking up](#) the challenge to experiment. The formula for success is uncertain, and aspiring US author Matt Stewart is using Twitter to [serialise](#) his novel in 140 character installments.

The point is that Australian writers and publishers would do better to focus their efforts on making the future rather than preserving the past.

The Federal Government will soon decide whether to accept or reject the Productivity Commission recommendations. However whatever legislation is put or left in place could be largely irrelevant in as little as five years time. The experience of the music industry has shown that copyright provisions do not readily transfer from traditional forms of production and distribution, to the internet.

New rules will be necessary because things are done differently online. This is where Australia's writers, publishers and booksellers should be.

## Myopic media's Indonesia 'jihad'

### RELIGION

Herman Roborgh



It would be easy to label last week's bombings in Jakarta as the work of jihad. Certainly, the media is reporting it under this headline. But even supposing that Islamic militants detonated those bombs in Jakarta, does this prove that jihad must be violent?

Much writing about Islam today supports the view that Islam and the Qur'an allow and even urge violence. For example, in the Sydney Catholic magazine, *Annals Australasia*, the writer states:

'Islamic literature is full of bellicose terms ... especially when describing Jihads. It has persisted down to today - with consequences like September 11, 2001, and continuing radical Islamist terror against the much-mocked 'People of the Book', on the grounds of their alleged faithlessness and polytheism. There is an all-out war declared on 'unbelievers', and this term includes Christians and Jews.'

However, when we examine verses such as those mentioned by this author in the light of their proper historical context, we find that this 'all-out war declared on 'unbelievers' is not directed to Jews and Christians at all.

This call to jihad was revealed in relation to a specific group of people, the idolaters of Mecca, and within a specific context, a context of persecution and the driving of Muslims from their homes in Mecca because of their religion.

Although some verses from the Qur'an do speak of 'fighting in the way of God', they also urge believers not to transgress the 'limits'. Islamic sources give many examples of the nature of these 'limits'.

In his well-known commentary on the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad says that the fundamental condition, which alone justifies physical warfare, is a defence of the faith and of freedom. In other words, when 'those who are bent on denying the truth' try to deprive the Muslims of their social and political liberty, thereby making it impossible for them to live in accordance with the principles of their faith, a just war (jihad) becomes permissible and even a duty.

However, the first jihad in Islam was not martial and had nothing to do with violence. The Muslims were encouraged 'to strive' (or to do jihad) against unbelievers by preaching the message of the Qur'an, but under no circumstances were they permitted to compel people to accept the message of Islam.

Many early commentaries refer to the fact that jihad is to be understood as a means to protect and preserve 'monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques' (to quote a phrase from the Qur'an). The call to jihad was not for the destruction of faiths other than Islam but rather for the preservation of places of

worship belonging to the monotheistic faiths, protecting them against those polytheists — in this case, the idolaters of Mecca — who might endanger them.

It is clear that verses from the Qur'an that advocate jihad cannot be used to apply to fighting all polytheists in the modern world or in the West in general. The sole purpose of all such jihad is to secure freedom for the Muslims to practice their religion.

Some Islamic militants do use verses from the Qur'an to justify open warfare against the West and to inspire Muslims to fight America and her allies who threaten the Muslim lands in particular. However, these verses cannot be understood correctly without considering the conditions in which they were revealed. Such verses can only be understood by remembering that, even after the Prophet had made his migration to Medina, some Muslims remained in Mecca and were not free to practice their religion.

Besides, some of the Meccans were not free to convert and become Muslims because of fear of their fellow tribesmen. It is for these reasons that the Qur'an called the Muslims of Medina to a two-fold jihad: firstly, to free their brethren who were left behind in Mecca from religious oppression, and secondly, to give those Meccans who desired to become Muslims the ability to do so without fear of reprisals from the enemies of Islam.

None of the verses about jihad can be understood as a general invitation to fight oppression in every place and in every circumstance.

When we understand the verses of the Qur'an that advocate jihad in their proper historical context, we will notice how the Qur'an expresses acceptance and respect for non-Muslims. Since the early Islamic community was characterised not by militancy but primarily by moderation and restraint, those who find unqualified provocation to violence and war in the Qur'an have misread it.

The mistake made by those who find 'bellicose terms' in the Qur'an is the result of a failure to examine the specific historical context in which the verses of the Qur'an were revealed. Both the followers of Islamism and the many militant schools of Islamic jihad operating in the world today make this mistake. Much of the current language about jihad in the media also tends to make this mistake.