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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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Philosophy professor's cavalier interventions

EDUCATION

Brian Matthews

It was January 1968. In those summer days before the start of my first term as a university lecturer, I'd arrive early in the morning, go into my room and more or less skulk there. I didn't even go to morning tea. I knew two people in the whole School of Language and Literature at Flinders University and they were both on leave.

After about two weeks of my reclusive behaviour, I was startled one morning when there was what sounded like not a knock but a kick on my door, which then burst open before I could speak, and in walked Brian Medlin, inaugural professor of philosophy.

'Look, mate,' he said, 'if you've taken a vow of silence for some reason, then of course I'll respect it. As a matter of fact, there are a few people round here I wish would emulate you. But if that's not the case, why don't you come and have a cup of tea and meet some of your colleagues, for what that might turn out to be worth.'

So I did, of course, and my life at Flinders changed radically for the better under what became a stern, no bullshit but straightforwardly affectionate mentorship.

Though in general, like most of us, Brian loathed meetings and committees, the committee room was one of the many stages on which he gave some of his more memorable performances. I would often sit with him at the meetings and so had a privileged view of the theatre that frequently followed his entry into a debate.

At one meeting, while Brian was speaking I could see that on the opposite side of the table a self-proclaimed Medlin antagonist was becoming quietly enraged and the moment he had an opportunity he launched into an extraordinary tirade. When the chairman offered Medlin the right of reply, he said, 'Mr Chairman, I did not say what I said with the express intention of driving our colleague opposite into an apoplectic fit. That this has in fact happened I can only regard as a bonus.'

At another characteristically tumultuous meeting, the head of the discipline of fine arts handed round a printed page headed 'Propositions'. There were 11 propositions but as it turned out not enough of the sheets to go round. When one of them reached me I put it between us and we both read it. Brian, having studied it intently for a few minutes, passed the page on for those who still might not have seen it.

When the item came up for discussion there was a quarter hour of the usual swapping of opinion, outrage, assent and objection. Then Medlin entered the fray. Still without a copy in front of him, he said something like this: 'If proposition 4 is

true then propositions 8 and 10 can't be; if propositions 8 and 10 are in doubt then proposition 6 becomes redundant, if we scrap Proposition 6 then Proposition 1 becomes ...' and so on.

It was an extraordinary performance and the question of whether or not there was any flaw in his analysis — though no one pointed any out at the time — became secondary to the sheer cavalier daring of his intervention.

Medlin expected such daring of others. In May 1988, having heard that I was going to Sydney, Brian asked me why and I told him it was because I'd won the NSW Premier's Literary Award. He was genuinely delighted to hear this and asked me if I would have to give a speech. I told him I would but had no idea what to say.

'The Elder Cato', Brian said, 'ended every speech to the Roman Senate with the words, "And furthermore Carthage must be destroyed — *Carthago delenda est.*" You should end like that,' he said as if nothing could be more obvious.

Well, with difficulty and severe contortions of sequence and logic, but with the ameliorating help of a judicious amount of alcohol, I actually did contrive to end my short acceptance speech with *Carthago delenda est.*

During the drinks afterwards I met Ed Campion, an old friend, Jesuit educated, a fine writer and a priest.

'What did you think of my Latin conclusion?' I said incautiously.

'*Delenda est Carthago* would have been more elegant,' he said.

I reported to Brian on my return and quoted Campion's amendment.

'Fucking Jesuits,' he said.

Brian Medlin, on his own admission, left the publication of his life's work to his last few years, but the passions, gifts and lyricism of this poet, essayist, philosopher, naturalist and storyteller were set free in an extraordinary correspondence he conducted with British novelist Iris Murdoch.

Now published as *Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie*, edited by Graham Nerlich and Gillian Dooley, their letters cover more than two decades and, with love, wit, subtlety, argument and insight, address an inspiring range of subjects until, with both writers terminally ill, Murdoch's last letter tapers off tragically, movingly:

'How much time has passed ... Much love dearest Brian, do write —

Iris.

Also; love, mortality and the meaning of life.'

High Court backs ministerial power over asylum seekers

AUSTRALIA

Kerry Murphy



Over the last few years the High Court has made several decisions which found the Government wanting when making decisions regarding asylum seekers. Inevitably the cases are decided on the basis of whether a power was correctly applied or interpreted. Sometimes the results favoured applicants and asylum seekers, sometimes they upheld the position of the Government.

Two decisions which had a major impact in this area were the M61 Case in 2010 and the M70 case in 2011. M61 essentially found that when asylum seekers are detained and the Government is considering whether to allow them to apply for refugee status onshore, the Government must comply with the provisions of the Migration Act and the relevant decisions of the Courts.

In M61 the Government unsuccessfully argued that the process of considering whether to allow a refugee application to be made was not reviewable in the courts. The result was that many cases had to be reconsidered, and a significant number of asylum seekers were successful on remittal when a closer attention to the rule of law was applied.

In M70, the High Court ruled on the interpretations of the old s198A, the power to direct the transfer of people to a third country such as Malaysia. The Labor Government had entered an agreement with Malaysia to transfer 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia in return for the resettlement of 4000 refugees from Malaysia over four years. The Court held that this agreement failed in built-in protections to assess the adherence to human rights principles that were found in s198A — a section inserted during the time of the Howard Government in 2001.

The solution for the Government was to repeal s198A and insert a new provision, s198AB, which effectively only required the minister to think it is in the national interest to send asylum seekers to the third country, and for that country to provide assurances they will not refoule (force back) the asylum seekers to their home country and will consider a refugee claim.

On 18 June 2014, in M156 v MIBP, the High Court held that this was a much simpler test to meet.

The plaintiff in M156 was an Iranian who arrived at Christmas Island on 23 July 2013. This was only four days after the new joint policy with Papua New Guinea of reinstalled Prime Minister Rudd was announced. In that policy, Australia declared PNG to be the country where it would send asylum seekers who arrived from 19 July, PNG agreed to assess cases and, later, agreed to limited resettlement.

The plaintiff argued that s198AB and related sections were constitutionally

invalid and that the ministerial designation of PNG as a regional processing country was also invalid. They argued there had to be an element of proportionality in interpreting the validity of the laws.

The plaintiffs lost on all their arguments and, in what was a short 15-page judgment, the High Court upheld the validity of the relevant sections and the ministerial declaration.

The effect of the decision is that the Iranian asylum seeker on Manus Island must rely on the PNG process in order to gain the protection he is claiming. This protection has been under further scrutiny in recent Senate Estimates hearings where a number of those making submissions and appearing before the committee argued that the effective care, supervision and control of the asylum seekers was by Australia, not PNG.

The High Court avoided entry into this debate in the judgement, but the responsibility, and potential liability of the Australian Government when it effectively seeks to subcontract its international obligations to poor neighbours, is a far from settled debate. The unsuitability of Manus Island as a regional processing centre has been argued not just by refugee advocates and specialist academics, but by the UNHCR.

A significant concern raised by UNHCR in its several reports on visits to Manus Island is that there is a 'return-orientated environment' rather than one with a focus on 'identifying and protecting refugees and other persons in need of international protection'.

While the protection of refugees and the provision of timely and adequate solutions for them should be among our primary aims, we know that this requires strong political will and leadership. The debates and court cases will continue, but, sadly for the plaintiff in this case, uncertainty and indifference is what we have to offer.

Bishop's aid crusade must heed the poor

AUSTRALIA

Paul O'Callaghan

Sometimes an unexpected coincidence occurs, such as Pope Francis and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop both speaking — with passion, and within days of each other this week — about how to address poverty in the world's poorest countries.

At a conference in Rome on so-called 'Impact Investing' to promote economic and social change in poor countries, Francis called for actions which are designed to have a positive impact on people's lives and which promote an economy of inclusion, rather than exclusion of the marginalised.

The Pope urged investment from wealthy countries like Australia into organisations and companies that are likely to achieve positive and measureable impacts on poor communities and the environment.

On the following day in Canberra, Bishop launched her new Australian aid and development policy and performance framework. Its main thrust is to 'leverage private sector investment and domestic finance' in promoting economic growth and reducing poverty.

Bishop rightly pointed out that Australia's aid program can make a significant difference by creating opportunities for poor people to develop and use their skills and to get productive work. There are undoubtedly more innovative ways in which this objective can be pursued by both government, the churches and the broader NGO sector in coming years.

However, in shifting the basis of Australia's official aid program towards private sector investment, we need to tune in to the clear and recent messages from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. All favour maximising the role of local private sector entrepreneurs, but also insist that social inclusion, justice and fairness must be central to aid planning.

In simple terms, the 1960s trickle-down theory of economic development is rejected by these institutions, all of which give emphasis to enabling the participation of poor and marginalised communities in planning aid work. In March this year in Sydney, IMF Managing Director, Christine Lagarde, explained why we need to adopt a thoughtful policy balance in promoting economic growth:

Today, we are more keenly aware of the damage done by inequality. A severely skewed income distribution harms the pace and sustainability of growth over the longer term. It leads to an economy of exclusion, and a wasteland of discarded potential.

It is a great reflection on Australia's successive governments since Robert Menzies that our official aid program has achieved a balance in its program design,

as recommended by Lagarde. This has certainly won Australia plaudits over those decades, including a glowing OECD peer review report only 12 months ago.

As Bishop launched a framework of new performance benchmarks, not unlike that of former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in 1997, it was interesting to consider the balance between national interest and poverty reduction through the aid program.

Her desire to improve accountability and transparency in this program is to be commended, as is her recognition that the nature of Australia's strategic relationships with PNG, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Solomon Islands mean that we will not withdraw support from them even where we have significant concerns about high level governance and other matters in those countries.

In the midst of the increased focus on accountability, Francis spoke about ensuring that the voices of the poor and marginalised are heard. I hope that the new accountability framework ensures that such voices are central to our performance measurement of our own Australian aid program interventions.

Inside the head of a mentally ill genius

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

Frank (M). Director: Lenny Abrahamson. Starring: Michael Fassbender, Scoot McNairy, Maggie Gyllenhaal. 95 minutes

Mental illness is no laughing matter. Except when it is.

At the centre of this offbeat comedy by Irish filmmaker Abrahamson is Frank (Fassbender), an avant-garde musician who spends his entire life with his face concealed inside a comically oversized head. The film milks the slapstick potential of this inherently absurd affectation; we're invited to laugh at Frank snaking a straw up inside his mask in order to consume his liquid meals, or showering with a plastic bag tied over his gargantuan cranium.

But Frank is clearly mentally ill. If the 'security blanket' of the ever-present fake head is not evidence enough, the endlessly talented Fassbender's studious physical performance leaves no doubt. He is all slouched shoulders and shuffling feet, as he conjoins crippling neuroses to personable charm and on-stage charisma, all from within the confines of the character's inscrutable prosthetic visage.

Frank is the lead singer of an eccentric pop band, whose unpronounceable name — Soronprfbs — echoes its painstakingly obscure music. He is regarded as a genius by his bandmates, notably by troubled manager Don (McNairy) and by Frank's fiery-tempered muse, Clara (Gyllenhaal). Also by the band's newest member, starry-eyed keyboard player and would-be songwriter Jon (Gleeson), who is also the film's protagonist and narrator.

The boyish Jon can see that Frank is ill, but regards him with an almost flippant sense of awe. He has lived a sheltered life (he is 30 and still lives with his parents), and his naivety seems endless. Early in the film we see him sitting on a beach, trying to twist mundane observations into melodious pop lyrics. When he sits down at his keyboard later to cement the music he hears in his head, he realises that he's ripping off a Madness song.

His creative inertia is in direct contrast to the idiosyncratic but [oddly infectious](#) sounds produced by Soronprfbs. This causes Jon to explicitly envy the mental illness experienced by Frank and Don, and the creative horizons that this seems to have opened up for them. This is heinously glib; a fact that hits home when a member of the ensemble commits suicide during the recording of the band's debut album, at an isolated lakeside cabin.

The film undergoes a tonal shift at this point, from quirky to bleak. Jon's naivety borders on narcissism; he is oblivious to the repercussions of his actions on those around him. He has been posting videos from the recording sessions online and is

under the impression that tens of thousands of YouTube views represents some kind of juggernaut. He persuades Frank to take part in a music festival, where he believes fame awaits.

He claims it's about putting Frank in the spotlight where he belongs, but it's obvious he's mostly interested in riding the genius' coattails. He ignores warnings from Clara that the festival is a bad idea, and realises too late that her vicious protectiveness of Frank stems from a better understanding of his illness. Needless to say, the gig goes badly. Things get decidedly ugly, and the blame falls squarely — and fairly — with Jon.

The film does not quite sustain the tonal shift, its tragic final act sitting uneasily with the lighter slapstick tone of the first two thirds. That being said, its sober denouement, in which we finally see Frank unmasked, is heartbreaking; certainly Jon is left with a deeper, wiser understanding of both the fragility and strength of human beings, and of the perennial but assailable traumas experienced by those who live with mental illness.

No, Mr Hockey, the Budget is not fair

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

Many Australians, myself included, believed that the Federal Budget was unfair. So Treasurer Joe Hockey's [recent speech](#) in defence of its fairness offers a welcome challenge. His argument deserves reflection,

It rests on his understanding of the role of government in society, and so in shaping the budget. In his view the tasks of government are to provide equality of opportunity, to provide a safety net to the most vulnerable, and to encourage individuals to take personal responsibility for their own lives and welfare. These tasks are increasingly compromised today by unsustainably growing costs of education, health and particularly welfare. So the Government needed to address this in the Budget by establishing a framework for cutting costs.

In Hockey's judgment the fairness of the Budget is not to be judged by whether people benefit equally from its provisions but by whether it safeguards equality of opportunity and promotes individual responsibility for all. Those who criticise it for unfairness demand equality of outcome. But this result would itself be unfair. It would entail some people being forced to pay taxes in order that others might retain benefits they do not need.

The Budget provisions most criticised for unfairness, such as changes to youth allowances, co-payment for medical expenses and higher costs for education were fair because all were designed to promote and enshrine individual responsibility.

Although I agree with Hockey's view that the way in which the Government gathers and spends revenue must be reviewed, I am not persuaded by Hockey's argument that the Budget is fair. It rests on too thin a view of the role of government in society.

Governments have a broader responsibility to order society in such a way that the human dignity of each person is respected and the economy serves the good of all. This flows from the mutual dependence of people in society and their consequent responsibility to one another. Taxation and the regulation of institutions that conduce to human flourishing are expressions of government responsibility.

From this perspective the tasks that Hockey ascribes to government are not a complete list. They simply name some aspects of the Government's oversight. A more complete list would include the responsibility to ensure that people enjoy the freedom to develop their life and projects, have access to food, shelter, medical care, education and to work, and are encouraged to take responsibility for their lives.

Because the Government has a responsibility to all its citizens to ensure these

things, it has a special responsibility to the vulnerable who cannot secure them unaided. It must also encourage the fraternity that leads all citizens, including the wealthy and corporations, to contribute to the needs of the disadvantaged.

In this view of government the fairness of the Budget must be measured by whether it effectively promotes the flourishing of all citizens in society. Such measures as co-payment for visits to the doctor and the restrictions on benefits for young people are unfair because, despite their goal of promoting personal responsibility, they disrespect and do not promote human dignity. They show no understanding of the condition of the disadvantaged and so will be counterproductive.

Those living in financial stringency will not visit doctors if they have to pay, with the result that their health will suffer. Unemployed young people will have obligations imposed on them, will be deprived of the financial resources needed to meet them, will lose their precarious self-respect and will be less able to exercise personal responsibility for their lives. So the Budget is unfair in its details.

The Budget also raises broader questions of fairness. Hockey claims rightly that fairness does not demand equality of financial outcome. But it does demand that burdens are proportionately borne. To ensure that they are, the Government must consider together the benefits available through welfare and those available through other provisions, and adjust them equitably.

It is evident that the burden of this Budget will [fall most heavily](#) on less well-off Australians. It is also clear that those who framed the Budget chose not to touch benefits available disproportionately to wealthier Australians through such things as superannuation, negative gearing, paid maternity leave and the absence of death duties. The failure to do so suggests that the Budget is unfair in its design.

Finally, the Treasurer's speech raises more general questions. Hockey is right to insist that fairness can co-exist with gradations of wealth within society. But fairness is incompatible with gross disparity of wealth because the concentration of wealth in the hands of few people and corporations destroys equality of opportunity.

When individuals, banks and businesses are too big to fail, too well resourced to take to the courts, have too many media resources to resist, and form the natural group in which government leaders socialise and choose advisers, they have a privileged access to power denied to others. Governments will have a natural bias to favour their interests without even recognising that they are doing so. Budgets and the regulatory framework will then generate and promote unfairness.

Aspects of the Budget do suggest this generative unfairness. The loss of funding, combining, weakening and suppression of many regulatory and monitoring bodies will limit individuals' access to information and to remedies. They will naturally further the concentration of wealth and power and diminish equality of opportunity.

I am not persuaded by the Treasurer's arguments that the Budget is fair. I believe that it is unfair in some of its details and in its design. I am also concerned that it may be generatively unfair in encouraging further gross inequality and so undermining the equality of opportunity on which Hockey has built his defence.

Law disorder in Campbell Newman's Queensland

AUSTRALIA

Frank Brennan

All is not well in the Sunshine State. Campbell Newman's government is running a strong 'law and order' line, and there's nothing new in that. Governments often find political advantage in being tough on crime.

In the process, they sometimes think something is to be gained by having a go at the judges for being out of touch and for being soft on crime, and by taking practical steps to toughen them up. Judges are well used to this sort of commentary and political bravado, getting on with their job of sentencing offenders, ensuring that the sentence matches the crime and the circumstances of the criminal.

Fortunately, we Australians live under constitutional arrangements which guarantee, more or less, that executive government is popularly elected, with the ministry being drawn from the party or parties enjoying a majority in the lower house of parliament (or in Queensland, the only house of parliament). Our judges are not elected and they enjoy independence from the executive government once appointed, in that they can be dismissed only by vote of the parliament determining proven misbehaviour.

The risky part is the judicial appointment process.

The appointment of High Court judges sometimes excites strong political interest because those seven constitutional luminaries have the final say interpreting the division of powers between the Commonwealth and the states. The appointment of state judges rarely excites strong political interest, though often accompanied by lots of speculation and interest from within the legal profession. Even the appointment of a state chief justice is usually a matter of only passing interest for the public.

When Jim Spigelman decided to retire as chief justice of New South Wales in 2011, a routine set of consultations with the legal profession took place, with the state Attorney-General Greg Smith then issuing a mundane press release announcing the appointment of Tom Bathurst and appending a matter-of-fact CV of the appointee's legal expertise and experience.

In February, Newman made the long awaited announcement that Paul de Jersey, the long serving chief justice of Queensland, would be the next governor of the state. Newman said he would take time to appoint a new chief justice, in line with a promise to be more consultative: 'We will be consulting with senior members of the legal profession in Queensland. Obviously I will also be asking his honour for his opinion and we'll make an announcement when we've undertaken that process. But we're going to listen and we're going to consult.'

Last Thursday, with great fanfare, Newman appeared at the Supreme Court flanked by Chief Justice de Jersey and his Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie to announce the appointment of Tim Carmody as Queensland's new chief justice. There is no rule to say that one should just do these things in an understated way by media release as they did in Sydney with the appointment of the eminently qualified and suitable Bathurst. Usually an appointment should just speak for itself.

The appearance of the premier, the future governor and the proposed chief justice together at the Supreme Court was novel, providing a picture in stark contrast to the usual separation of powers.

Carmody spoke and affirmed that he would be independent as a chief justice: 'I am fiercely independent. If my views happen to coincide with the Government's that is pure coincidence.' By this stage alarm bells were ringing. This was the equivalent of a new archbishop holding a press conference in the cathedral with the papal nuncio and proclaiming his faith in Jesus Christ. True, but why the need to say it?

Over the next 24 hours, things started to unravel.

Unlike Bathurst, Carmody is not your usual prospective appointee as chief justice. Except for his close relationship with the Attorney-General and his expressed coincidence of viewpoint with government about law and order issues, there is no way that he would be in the mix for consideration.

Despite some of the more shrill observations by his critics (and he has many in the legal profession), this closeness and coincidence of views would not necessarily rule him out of consideration if he had the requisite prudence, experience and learning in the law. But he does not.

He took to the airwaves to defend himself and his appointment. This is unheard of in the Australian system. But worse, he revealed on air that not one of the 26 serving Supreme Court judges had congratulated him, and that he would have to knock on the door of each of them to determine if they were friend or foe.

Imagine a new chairman of a major corporation like BHP Billiton announcing to the public that he had not been congratulated by any serving board member and that he would now have to take soundings, presumably building alliances and dividing his board into camps. The shareholders would demand he walk, doubting his prudence and that of those who nominated him.

As for Newman's promised consultation, we will never know if he consulted de Jersey and what was said, and neither should we. This is what made de Jersey's presence at the press conference in his own court building so problematic, given that Newman and Carmody used the press conference to make such self-serving remarks.

Peter Davis, the President of the Bar representing the barristers of the State,

was devastated that either the Attorney-General or one of his staff had leaked details of their confidential discussions to others including Carmody even before the decision had been made to appoint him. Davis wrote to all the barristers saying, 'The Bar Association ought to be involved in the process of appointment of judges. That is done through the President. As I have no faith in the integrity of the process, I cannot engage further in it.

'I have concluded, with great regret and sadness, that I ought not continue to hold the office of President.'

It turned out that a junior barrister, Ryan Haddrick, who was close to both Carmody and the Attorney-General (having been his chief of staff) had expressed displeasure at the Bar Council's view on who should or should not be appointed as Chief Justice.

Haddrick thought the Bar needed to accept the fait accompli that Carmody would be appointed, and arrogantly and high-handedly wrote to a member of the Bar Council saying, 'Common sense needs to prevail. There are two more Supreme Court appointments, three District appointments and about five Magistrates to go this term. I want some of them to be barristers!! and not solicitors!!!'.

The president of the Law Society wrote to all the solicitors saying:

The matters raised by Peter Davis QC are of singular concern as they go to the process of judicial appointment which, if tainted, runs the very great risk of undermining the confidence of the profession and the community in individual appointments which then flows onto the larger institution of the courts. Such an outcome cannot be contemplated. The issues raised must be addressed if we are to preserve confidence in our system of justice.

Queensland is in for a very hard time with the community's confidence in the courts being tested while politicians beat the 'law and order' drum, unless of course the Attorney-General has the good sense to resign and Carmody the wisdom to decline appointment before his scheduled swearing-in next month.

Bathurst in October last year observed:

Because the judiciary has neither 'the might of the sword or of the purse', as the old saying goes, the institutional strength of the courts necessary for judicial independence itself largely relies on community confidence. It is, at least in part, the community's confidence and support for the judiciary that serves to protect the courts from incursions by other arms of government. In other words, community confidence in the judiciary is both a goal, and an important element in maintaining, the separation of powers.

Newman and his Attorney have trashed this community confidence for dubious short-term political gain.

When opening the new Supreme Court building in Brisbane two years ago, de

Jersey rightly praised the splendid architecture of the building which reflected the transparency and openness of the judicial process. His vision has turned to ashes as he departs for Government House.

The weight and wonder of a brother's last words

CREATIVE

Brian Doyle

'The answer is in the questioning.'

That was the very last thing my brother Kevin said before he died. He died on the first day of summer two years ago. Six words, after millions of words spoken and read and taught and typed over 60 years. He had been a college professor. We give great weight to last words, the words spoken on the precipice. Most of the time I would guess that those words are about love. I would guess that many of those words have something to do with light. I would guess that some of those final words are shrieks or gasps or utterances of astonishment.

The answer is in the questioning.

I have thought about those six words for two years now, since I first heard them. It turns out you can ponder them from every conceivable angle and never get to the bottom of what they mean.

He spoke them with authority, says his wife, who was there. He spoke them with a sort of amazement, as if he had finally realised something crucial, says his friend the deacon, who was there. Did he mean that if you ask a question, the answer is inside it somewhere? Did he mean that everything we have always been desperate to know is alive inside our curiosity? Was he talking about what we mean when we use the word god?

He was not a man to use words lightly. He was not much for small talk. He was not much for airy remarks or banter. If you asked him a question he would be silent for a moment, thinking, and then silent for another moment, composing his answer, and then he would answer, succinctly. In his early years he could be curt and terse and tart and rude but in his later years he was never any of those things that I remember.

One of the things I loved about him was that if he did not know the answer to a question he would say (after pondering for a moment) *I do not know*, four lovely words when ordered in that fashion. Many of us issue answers with unwarranted confidence, sometimes when we know full well that we do not know. Or we think before we speak, or issue opinion rather than answer, or issue someone else's opinion, or issue opinions so ossified by years of neglect that you could stand them in the corner with the umbrellas and the walking sticks.

The answer is in the questioning. Did he mean we are verbs and not nouns? Did he mean that as long as we quest we are answered? Did he mean that curiosity, the itch to know, the urge to inquire, the eager opening of doors and windows each to each, the desire to know a new intricacy of the maze, another level of the mystery, another revelation of the relentless miracle, is the answer to every

question, is why we are here? Could it be that every answer we yearn for is answered already? Could that be what we mean when we talk about god?

He died in his house on a little hill. His house was once the only house for miles around, when it was a farmhouse. From his window he could see a sugar maple and a fir tree and crows and a tatter of the smiling sky. He spoke his last six words in the morning and he died in the afternoon. *The answer is in the questioning.* He had been a brilliant mathematician and he told me once that mathematics was a sort of language and literature and music all at once. You could almost sing it, sometimes, he said.

He died around four in the afternoon, just about the time the sun would have swung in the window to his left. For many thousands of years the sun is what we meant when we spoke of god. The sun was the answer to all questions. Perhaps the last thing my brother felt in this world was the sun on his face. Light is a language too, when you think about it. You can ask questions in it and the answers always seem to be yes.

What's eating Syria and Iraq

AUSTRALIA

Kerry Murphy

The capture of Iraq's second largest city Mosul by the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS/ISIL) group is a major concern not just for Iraq but for the whole Middle East. ISIS, or *ad-Dawlat al-Islamiyya fi'l-'Iraq wa'sh-Sham*, is probably more extreme in its Sunni Islamic jurisprudence and theology than Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda reportedly cut off ties to ISIL in February after a power struggle between the two groups.

ISIL has been fighting the Asaad regime in Syria but has also been extending its territory for the establishment of their 'Caliphate' into western and northern Iraq. They claim to be setting up a Caliphate over Iraq and Syria.

ISIL has its origins in Islamist groups led by the Jordanian former gangster Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi was known for his kidnappings, torture and brutal beheading videos in Iraq. He was viewed as the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was responsible for the bombing on 22 February 2006 at the Shia shrine of Samarra in the ancient Abbasid capital, near Baghdad, which sparked a brutal religious war in Iraq.

Although Zarqawi was killed by the US in 2007, AQI continued. In towns where it had control or influence, it demanded mafia-style protection payments which helped fund its operations in Iraq and more recently in Syria. An Iraqi from Mosul told me how his relative was shot in front of his house for refusing to pay the 'tax'.

Mosul is near a Christian enclave in Dohuk. It is also near the border of the Kurdish Regional area. It has a Sunni majority population, with Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Turkman and Kurdish populations as well. It is near the ancient Babylonian city of Nineveh. An Iraqi told me how a famous tomb of the 'Jewish saint' and Old Testament Prophet Jonah is still revered nearby.

The loss of Mosul to ISIL is a major concern as ISIL continue their drive south 'liberating' towns and villages, and causing a mass movement of around 500,000 people. ISIL especially targets Shia, whom they view as 'un-Islamic' and therefore legitimate targets. Christians have also been targeted.

Jesuit Fr Frans van der Lugt was reportedly executed on 7 April 2014 by someone from the al Nusra front in Syria, a group formerly linked to ISIL. Frans led a group in Homs encouraging better relations between Christians and Muslims and helping the disabled. He was widely respected in the Muslim community. This did not protect him: he was shot outside his home, only a few weeks before Homs was re-occupied by Asaad's forces.

While Christians will be genuinely afraid of rule by ISIL, it is the Shia and the Kurds who will mobilise against them. Already Iran has offered to help the Iraqi

Government and there are reports that possibly limited Iranian forces have entered Iraq to defend the Shia shrines. This will only inspire ISIL propaganda directed at Sunni tribes in Iraq to join them against the perceived threat from the Shia.

The leading Shia Ayatollah, Ali Al-Sisitani, called on the Shia to mobilise against the threat of ISIL, and thousands of Shia are joining militias to defend their cities and the many Shia shrines spread around Iraq. Significantly, Al-Sistani had previously called for calm from the Shia when the Shia shrine in Samarra was destroyed in 2006, but this time he sees a clear threat from ISIL. The renewed Sunni/Shia religious war sparked by the revival of ISIL will make peace a distant dream for the long suffering people of Iraq and Syria.

Already Lebanese Hezbollah fighters are involved in Syria supporting Asaad against ISIL, al Nusra and other less fundamentalist nationalist groups. Fighting has spilled over the Lebanese border and there is increased risk of Turkish involvement as the entire staff and consul for the Turkish consulate in Mosul were captured by ISIL.

Turkey's involvement could spark NATO involvement, as Turkey is a member of NATO, and even the thought of US forces returning to Iraq is a new headache for President Obama. This risk of the conflict spreading wider in the Middle East is a genuine international concern and there are no simple or attractive remedies available. Economic sanctions will not affect ISIL.

An Iraqi told me that a relative in a town recently captured by ISIL reported that ISIL were destroying schools, because they teach 'un-Islamic courses' and that women were forced to marry mujahedeen fighters for Jihad al Nikah, a form of sexual slavery.

Some Sunnis are supporting ISIL because they believe the Shia controlled Iraqi Government of al Maliki discriminated against and persecuted Sunnis. There are accounts of former Ba'athists and Sunni militias joining ISIL in the fight. Moderate Sunnis are fearful of the extremist sharia interpretations of ISIL, but also are angered at perceived discrimination by the Shia dominated Iraqi government.

Sunni tribes stopped supporting ISI in about 2006 due to ISI extremism and lack of respect for tribal elders. Time will tell if the tribes again turn against the extremists.

Whether the embattled Iraqi Government of al-Maliki can regroup to contain and defeat ISIL is yet to be seen. The rout of Iraqi forces in Mosul by the significantly smaller ISIL forces must be a worry to the Iraqi authorities and the US and Western countries that expended so many lives and have invested so much in the new post Saddam Iraq. Current signs are the conflict will become more sectarian and more brutal, and will be prolonged.

In October 2013 van der Lugt wrote about the suffering of the people of Homs

in Syria besieged by Syrian Government forces on one side, and fearful of Islamist extremists in the opposition: 'we do not generally allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by sadness and despair. Yet we feel these sentiments are generally waiting at our door. Despite these difficulties, we keep grasping onto hope. Knowing we share our suffering with all Syrians, we must help each other get through this period. Mutual solidarity will help us to find hope in new horizons.'

Tragically van der Lugt did not live to experience the new horizons. Even more tragically many Iraqis and Syrians have only hope and many will die before the brutal conflict ends.

15 Wisdom Street

CREATIVE

John Ellison Davies

15 Wisdom Street

the woman next door
is not talking to her husband
she rakes a garden argument
punishes leaves, brawls with flowers
frustrated by the strength of weeds
kneels on a stone and swears
inside the house
her husband smokes
and reads the paper, turns
each urgent page amazed
that he is not news
he wonders who writes
true histories of pain, of hate
newsprint stains
his fingers like guilt

The sphinx at your door

at this pebbled frontier
steps a lame man
singing heads I win
tails I win
free of the leaping herd's
nostalgia for the precipice
lost
in the dusty interval
between the bubble sun

and bubble moon
(those liars)
all that is outside
him torrents in him
but he sings
I am a porous man
heads I win
tails I win

Little Oxford Street

old men sleep
in the back
of abandoned cars
warm in muscat
dreams under dirty
overcoats
plastic garbage bags
torn by dogs reveal
tin smiles, ash,
rotted fruit, letters
not worth keeping,
small bones
old men wake like Thomas
who had to touch to believe

Everyday masterpiece

enthroned
on their cool verandah
the old ones
connoisseurs
of light and shade
resolve

all problems
of proportion
each fragile gesture
a brush-stroke
in a self-portrait
nearing completion

My intersex wake-up call

AUSTRALIA

Barry Gittins

Friends of mine had their first child recently and my first, 'obvious' question — 'Is it a boy or a girl?' — was answered by a jubilant, sleep-deprived father: 'It's a girl!'

Life is complex, however, and our all-too-human desires for normalcy and 'simplicity' (embodied in my automatic query) are sometimes revealed to gleam in the light of unintended prejudice. The reality for some Australians is that my question isn't always as easily answered.

A while back I joined social workers, chaplains and clergy in an educational seminar facilitated by Tony Briffa, vice president of Intersex International (Australia) Ltd. The gig was prompted by the growing awareness and acceptance of diverse sexuality and gender, and the changing legal landscape: on 1 August 2013, Australia became the first country to offer legal protection against discrimination to the intersex community.

Tony served as the world's first intersex mayor (of Hobson's Bay in Melbourne's south-western suburbs), and has been a public face for the intersex community, having 'come out' as an intersex person on the Nine Network's *60 Minutes* program in 2005, and appearing last year on the ABC's *7.30 Report*.

She provided a dignified introduction to the issues faced by intersex persons. Her story is similar to that of others in the intersex community, and resonates with other misunderstood minorities in our society. How we respond to the wellbeing and human dignity of intersex individual mirrors our society's health writ large.

Tony was born as Antoinette, with Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, and underwent numerous procedures and operations as a child. Oestrogen treatment, from 11 onwards, was later followed with testosterone treatment at 30 when she experimented with living as a man (she worked for a time for the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Federal Police, often seen as 'male'-dominated sectors).

She shared that according to Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, one in 280 children are born with biological intersex variations; other figures suggest that one in 1000 Australians are born intersex.

Categorising or counting the intersex population is a difficult process, further complicated by the reality that some parents choose to abort children who may be born intersex. In Victoria alone, 165 fetuses were terminated between 1989-1998 because they were intersex.

Intersexuality is not strange or abnormal; when we treat people as aberrant, by enforcing a culture of heteronormativity, we do them and ourselves a grave

disservice.

Sadly, Tony's openness and honesty, her generosity of spirit, has not always been reciprocated. There have been instances when cultural and religious fundamentalists have disrespected and rejected her because she didn't conform to their expectations.

Tony knows full well that the intersex community is 'still fighting social stigma and raising awareness of difference ... I would love governments, churches and NGOs to understand we are people, just like them. We are made this way.

'Being intersex is not easy for the intersex person, or our parents. I regret the shame, secrecy and lies that were told to us, and the way my parents were treated. The medicos should have just told us, "You have a healthy, normal girl who's got some boy parts as well."

'Nature made me part male and part female, and I'm comfortable with that. I am biologically both; my experiences and my biology does not limit or define me. I'm considered by some to have a major defect, but I am a happy, fulfilled person.'

Tony now lives openly with her spouse (they married in New Zealand) as an intersex person. 'I am sometimes listed as an indeterminate,' she laughs, 'but I know who I am. Intersex people want the same as other people — they want loving relationships, and to be able to adopt and have families.'

Do you recall my friends and their newborn baby, and my first question to them? Tony says she has learnt that her first response is, 'Is the baby healthy?' followed by 'How's Mum doing?'

Life, and love, can escape cages of cultural proscription and prejudice.

I caught myself recently about to blurt out my normal question to a work acquaintance with some good news. Instead, I asked Tony's questions. I've learnt — rather, I'm learning — that gender and biology do not conform to pre-judged expectations. We are more complex creatures; as some hoary old wisdom suggests, we are 'amazingly and miraculously made' (psalm 139:14).

Why 71% of Australians want boats pushed back

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

In the lead up to [Refugee Week](#) the attitudes of Australians to people who come by boat to seek protection made sober reading. According to a Lowy poll [71 per cent of Australians](#) believed Australia should turn back asylum seeker boats. That figure was far higher even than the Prime Minister's disapproval rating.

People drew different conclusions about its significance. Some would say that 71 per cent of Australians can't be wrong. At *Eureka Street* we have never been persuaded that majorities always have truth on their side. In this case there are solid reasons, frequently rehearsed here, for believing that they are wrong.

It has also been suggested that the poll figures reflect increasing levels of xenophobia and racism in Australia. The accounts given by many sports persons and immigrants of their own experiences of racist prejudice and the opinions expressed in social media might support this argument. But it ignores other evidence for increasing rejection of racism, and the surprisingly high support in the poll for processing asylum seekers in Australia.

Although most xenophobic and racist people might be expected to support turning back the boats, it would be unjustifiable to conclude that most people who want to turn back the boats are racist.

The poll figures almost certainly reflect the bipartisan practice of describing people who come by boat to seek protection in pejorative terms as a problem. They have been described as illegals, as queue jumpers, and as the willing pawns of people smugglers.

This rhetoric and the brutal treatment of asylum seekers on arrival have certainly intensified public anxiety and resentment. But they did not create these responses. Whenever people have come by boat to seek asylum they have aroused popular fear. Politicians have only fed and fed on public rancour.

But the political response to asylum seekers certainly persuaded people that Australia faced a vast problem to which pushing asylum seekers back and installing all the horrors of Manus Island and Nauru were the only solution. Part of the significance of the poll figures lies in the strength of that popular judgment.

For those who believe that offering protection to people who come to us in flight from persecution is ethically binding and the mark of a humane society, the poll figures indict their failure to persuade their fellow Australians. It is the latest of a history of failures: to repeal mandatory detention, to abandon the Pacific Solution and to commend a better way.

Some will see this due to a failure to endorse and cooperate with less draconian policies while they were on the table; others will see it as a failure to which any

principled defence of the weak in strident times is liable.

The deeper significance of the poll figures, however, is that they point to a simple human reality that has failed to engage the imagination of Australians.

They have not met people who seek protection and shared their food; they have not known of the gifts they bring and could share for our benefit; they have not seen shoulders straight and eyes bright shortly after completing the most momentous and dangerous journeys, and the same eyes opaque and body slack with depression after years in detention; they have never held photographs of the women and children in ruined villages and camps, whom their husband and father may never hold or help again; they have never sat with young men in community detention in fear of their 18th birthday when they are liable to be sent back into detention centres; they have not tasted the terrors of Manus Island.

If we saw, heard and tasted these things in the lives of our families and friends, they would surely keep us awake at night. Documented and transmuted into art by a Solzhenitsyn these things might tell a cautionary tale of a society gone awry. That as a nation we simply move on is a marker, not of our wickedness or of our necessities, but of a failure of our imagination.

The heart of Refugee Week lies in welcoming refugees into our imagination.

School leavers' class wars

EDUCATION

Ellena Savage

Year 12 tertiary entrance exams: turning 17-year-olds into nervous wrecks since the 1830s. They divide the smart from the dumb, the hopefuls from the no-hopers, and, what it boils down to more often than not, the privately educated from the state educated. But what if there was another way, a way that properly acknowledged the impact high schools have on their students' access to university admission?

A recent study released by Great Britain's Department of Education [radically advises](#) that universities adopt different entrance requirements for students from government schools than those from independent schools. The research points to the fact that year 12 results correlate more with what school the student went to than they do with future academic performance at university. Students from lower-performing schools who do make it into university outperform students with equivalent high school grades from high-performing schools.

'On average, someone who gains BBB at a school where the average A-level score is CCC will do better in higher education than someone who gains BBB at a school where the average is AAA,' the report states.

Are students from lower-performing high schools brighter than private school students? Well, no. I don't know that school results, or even university results, can truly capture how bright or promising a student really is, as they can never account for what a student thinks they are getting out of school, or what their commitments are outside the classroom.

The literature is divided on what makes a student perform well, some studies indicating that socioeconomic status is the main factor. This makes sense in that middle- and upper-class students are usually less obliged to work for money to help with household expenses, and less obliged to care for relatives.

But that logic is distorted by the fact that selective state schools and Catholic schools tend to share a class-base with state schools, while garnering better leaving results. It seems to be that schools themselves predict what kind of university, if any university, a student will be accepted to.

Another angle: leaving results are arbitrary and should be done away with.

While we can probably all agree that school's a great idea, especially for nerds like me who lapped up the work as a way of escaping the monotony of school itself, of living in crappy suburbs, of working at McDonald's and never having any cash; a ticket into an imagined future. But the format of high school education is not right for many, if not most, students.

That's true even of the formalities of assessment — I remember writing a

'practice' short essay every night of the week throughout year 12, attempting to emulate an A+ Literature/History/Philosophy paper. The desired tenor of the ideal paper was always clean (read: boring), the permitted arguments were sound but usually on the safe side, the execution, of course, rapid. While this may be a fair way of assessing students — marking directly against criteria — is it really a great education?

I took that clean style that had nothing to do with me to university, and didn't understand why I wasn't rewarded for it in the same way I had been at school. It wasn't until I learned — by trial and error — that I had been faking it; that I wasn't very convincing writing in clean, dry, Aristotelian prose; and that using language as a subsidiary of my personality actually enlivened my ideas, that I began doing well.

Which brings me to Bard College, an elite New York liberal arts college. They've done away with traditional test scores and falsified 'volunteer' CVs as admission documents, and replaced them with an admission that comprises [four essays](#) . If you score a B+ or higher on all three, you are admitted.

The procedure is designed to select students who like learning, but perhaps, in the words of their admissions director, 'couldn't be bothered with what they saw as the 'busy work' of high school, and instead invested themselves in things not perceived as 'academic' ... like music or the arts — or just reading on their own'.

Education can either bolster class divisions, or erode them. I'm not sure I like the preening aspirations I see in Australia: the right for everyone to buy an elevated place in a heinous class system through consuming everything from café food to education. And it depresses me that 13 years of reading and writing and playing and building friendships is accumulated into a single score that can determine an adult's future, especially when that score is so defined by markers of class that precede a person's birth.

We can't dismantle the inequalities of secondary education in Australia: we are too emotionally invested in creating a caste-based society for that. We can, however, change how this affects young adults' futures.

Chronicle of an asylum seeker's death foretold

AUSTRALIA

Fatima Measham

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez' novella, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, a man with 'his father's Arab eyelids and hair' was murdered in broad daylight, knifed several times against his mother's door, a breath from sanctuary.

I keep being reminded of *Chronicle* as I take in the submissions presented so far at the [Senate inquiry](#) into the February incidents at the Manus Island detention camps. In the novella, nearly the entire town knew of Santiago Nasar's impending death; his assassins had made a point of divulging their intent to everyone they met over the course of the day. A few, mostly women, sought to stop them but their efforts proved futile.

The prevailing impression from the Senate inquiry is one of similar inevitability and complicity. The former G4S guards who have appeared before the committee have been consistent in their assessment of the factors that facilitated the violence which left more than 70 injured and one man dead. It was not random; it was no secret.

In the press conference announcing the release of the Government-commissioned [Cornall review](#) last month, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison said, 'There would have been no incident that night had there been no protests.' It is a shrunken statement against the horrific might of Reza Barati's death. Kicked repeatedly by several individuals, a large rock was then dropped on his head as he lay on the ground, cracking his skull.

Perhaps somewhere in an alternate dimension, Reza is sitting on a Melbourne train, starting another work day with a thankful prayer for the generosity of the country that had adopted him.

The tendrils of this tragedy are hopelessly entangled with the things that came before it: Kevin Rudd's decision to close all settlement options for seaborne asylum seekers, the Coalition expediting transfers to Manus Island, which pushed facilities beyond their capacity to provide humane conditions, the severe lack of security training, the requests for resource expansion that weren't met, the growing resentments against mostly Muslim detainees harboured by impoverished, mostly Christian, Papua New Guineans whose cultural identity is bound up with the land that Australia had subverted for its own politically expedient purpose, repeated G4S warnings about sharpening tensions, a meeting in which Australian and third-country settlement were confirmed non-viable.

Inevitability. Complicity. Yet the onus of the violence was placed only on detainees, with Morrison initially giving the impression that the 17 February melee occurred outside the compound. This was untrue. He also employed the language often adopted when subhuman conditions give rise to uncivil behaviour: 'This

Government will not be intimidated into closing this centre [or] walking away from policies that are stopping the boats.' As Martin Mackenzie-Murray [remarked](#) recently in *The Saturday Paper*: 'This is what success looks like'.

Can we really live with it? If we have not yet gone too far with the death of an innocent man at a facility which our Government has outsourced, then where is our limit? Is there one?

Our senators must grapple with these questions beyond scrutinising incident details, procedures, communications and cross-agency conduct. What are they to make of the abrogation of Australia's duty of care obligations and responsibilities when it so perfectly serves the bipartisan policy of preventing boat arrivals?

If witness reports gathered by the media in the weeks after 18 February are sustained by testimonies to the inquiry, then some reckoning is due.

I can only pray that they not make a hash of the obvious conclusions, as had the priest who got pressed into performing the autopsy on Nasar's body in *Chronicle*. The pathologist was away and they thought at first to keep the corpse until his return. But there was no refrigerator to be found and the dogs were persistent in the heat.

Father Carmen Amador remembers many years later, 'it was as if we killed him all over again'.

Understanding the climate change battle of attitudes

ENVIRONMENT

Andrew Hamilton

[World Environment Day](#) this year was celebrated in the shadow of policies crossing in the mail. As the United States President took steps to deal with carbon emissions, the Australian Prime Minister walked away from them. Beneath the complex political considerations in these responses to the natural environment stir deep passions. Disputes about the environment and climate change are not simply about facts but touch something deeper, almost religious, in character.

The depth at which attitudes to the environment are rooted is suggested also by the coherence between the attitudes people take to the environment and those they take to government spending on the disadvantaged, to the response to crime and to asylum seekers. These attitudes are also passionately felt and held.

They disclose the stance we take towards the world, how we imagine our own position and that of other human beings in the world and in society.

Many of those who are sceptical about human contribution to climate change and who oppose environmental regulation see human beings primarily as individuals responsible for their own lives and advancement. They see human beings as in control over their world, and entitled to freedom; they are deeply suspicious of restrictions imposed to protect society, the environment or future generations. And they believe that human prosperity and wellbeing will be best advanced by giving full play to individual initiative and action.

From this perspective we human beings are masters of the world, and the natural environment is the theatre of our action. Any damage that our play does to the natural world can be remedied by further planning and remedial activity.

The passion that those who deny global warming express in debate is not inspired simply by the perceived factual wrongness of their opponents, but also by the fatal affront that they cause to the idea of the autonomous and entrepreneurial self. They represent human beings as dependent on their environment, their individual freedom and agency shackled.

Those who accept the claims of climate change generally see human beings as constituted by a complex set of relationships to other peoples and to the natural world. They imagine our individual freedom as directed to the common good and to the flourishing of all these relationships.

It follows that we stand within our social and natural environment and not over it. So our actions will be judged by the effect they have on other relationships, and particularly on the most disadvantaged of people and the most distressed points of our environment. They see the damage done by autonomous and unthinking proprietorial action as serious and not susceptible to technological remedies.

From this perspective individual human beings are bound into a network of relationships. So they are responsible to society and to the environment. The passion that fuels them in debate about the environment comes from what they see as their adversaries' wanton disregard of the relationships on which human wellbeing rests and by their denial of responsibility for the natural environment and for society. They act like people sawing off the branch on which they sit.

The same visceral debate and underlying attitudes have been evident in the response to the Budget. Some argue that it does not go far enough to support individual responsibility by cutting costs spent on those who do not contribute to society. Others argue that it disregards the responsibility of wealthy individuals and companies to support their fellow, less advantaged, human beings, and weakens the relationships that are the measure of a good society.

In this debate the values defended by each side matter greatly. The responsibility of each human being for their life, the place of human initiative, creativity and the capacity to learn from experience, and the duty to develop the world, are real. We are not passive before the world we live in. Nor can we be if we are to address the effects of climate change.

The network of relationships between human beings and to the natural world, which precede the life of individuals and form the boundaries within which they can rightly act, are also real. As are our shared responsibility to the disadvantaged and to the natural environment which follows from our mutual dependence. We are not autonomous in our relationships to other human beings and to our environment.

The critical question is how to hold these values together. In my judgment human flourishing requires that we recognise the interdependence of human beings and our common interdependence with the environment. That recognition marks out the boundaries of the field within which our autonomy and initiative should play.

Cancer teens in love and death

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***The Fault in Our Stars* (M). Director: Josh Boone. Starring: Shailene Woodley, Ansel Elgort, Willem Dafoe. 126 minutes**

I'm a big believer that categorisations such as 'young adult fiction' are largely arbitrary; that a good story is a good story, regardless of the medium. Yet sometimes you can't escape the feeling that you are simply the wrong demographic for the film that you are watching. I got the distinct impression that among the audience at the screening of *The Fault in Our Stars* that I attended were many fans of John Green's YA novel on which it was based. They laughed and cried with equal vigour. I did not share their enthusiasm.

That was certainly true of my responses to the film's hero, Augustus Waters (Elgort). He is a cancer sufferer, and the film revolves around his romance with the story's narrator, fellow sufferer Hazel (Woodley). There was much giggling among many of my fellow cinemagoers any time he opened his mouth, even if what he said was not discernably a joke. This suggests that the on-screen portrayal resonated with their fond impressions of the character on the page. Clearly he is intended to be cherubic, confident and 'deep'. To me he seemed obnoxious.

This is a persistent problem in the film. The characters are *types*, and the film relies on the audience to recognise and respond easily to them as such, when often the evidence suggests that they are something other than how they are being presented.

For example, a major subplot involves Augustus and Hazel travelling to Amsterdam to meet Hazel's hero, reclusive author Peter Van Houten (Dafoe). He wrote a novel about a cancer sufferer, which Hazel adores but which ends too abruptly for her tastes. When she plies him with questions about 'what happens next' to the novel's characters, he brutally responds that 'nothing happens to them — it's fiction'. It's supposed to make him seem villainous, but really it just seems like common sense.

This cognitive dissonance makes it difficult to engage with the characters in any meaningful way. And without that level of engagement, everything else — the comic and tragic flourishes of what is an inherently sad story — fall flat. For me, at least; the cinemagoer who openly, loudly wailed during the tearjerker finale might disagree.

It's unfortunate, because the film is refreshingly frank about questions of life and death, especially for a story aimed at young people. The characters are pragmatic about their mortality. They have conversations about God and the afterlife, and find little comfort. A scene where two characters deliver eulogies to

their still-living friend would be profoundly sad if the characters were more substantial. Even Hazel's head-scratchingly naive questions to Van Houten reveal an unspoken anxiety about what will happen to her loved ones after she dies

Less palatable is a scene where the characters' lives are pointedly paralleled with the experiences of Anne Frank, during a visit to her house. No one would begrudge a young person, cancer or no, drawing inspiration from Anne's upbeat worldview in the face of the horrors that confronted her. But the experience of cancer is an individual horror that does not bear comparison to the vast collective horror of the Holocaust. For the film to make of this a thematic lynchpin for its characters comes off as exploitative in the extreme.

The glibness of this scene — which ends in a kiss between Hazel and Augustus in Anne Frank's bedroom that draws a round of applause from fellow tourists — is the nadir of this well-intentioned but poorly judged film.

Anatomy of a 'deconversion'

EUREKA STREET TV

Peter Kirkwood

A major challenge facing contemporary Christian institutions, at least in Western countries, is dwindling membership. It's not so much that people no longer have spiritual or religious beliefs, but increasingly these are pursued and expressed outside the confines of traditional religion.

A leading expert in researching and analyzing this phenomenon is American academic [Thomas Beaudoin](#) who is featured in this interview on Eureka Street TV.

Beaudoin was born into a committed Catholic household. As a child he was an altar boy in his local parish where his father, a former Jesuit priest, worked as an ordained deacon. He also assisted his father in prison ministry, and as an activist for a range of social justice issues.

After school and university he worked as a high school history teacher, then began post-graduate study of theology. He gained a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, and his PhD in Religion and Education at Boston College.

His first academic appointment was as Assistant Professor of Theology at the Jesuits' Santa Clara University in California. He is now Associate Professor of Theology, lecturing at the Graduate School of Religion at Fordham University, also run by the Jesuits, in New York City.

He is in demand as a speaker internationally and around the USA, and has contributed scores of articles and chapters to a range of publications. He is also an accomplished rock musician, playing electric bass in bands wherever he has lived. Currently he is in two bands, The Raina and The Particulars.

His books include *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy*, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Postmodern Theologian*, and most recently in 2013 *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*.

In the interview Beaudoin talks about contemporary ways of being religious, what he calls 'deconversion' (how and why people move away from conventional religion), the sexual abuse crisis in Christian churches, and whether Pope Francis might revitalise Catholicism and draw people back to the Church.

Super's evil empire on shaky ground

ECONOMICS

Brian Toohey

Many companies pay good money for their executives to attend conferences where at least one speaker can usually be relied upon to say, 'Change is the one constant in the modern world'. Change is the last thing those who run Australia's superannuation industry want to embrace.

And little wonder. They inhabit a cosseted world in which the money pours in each day, thanks to a combination of government compulsion, massively costly tax concessions and the misguided backing of key Labor and union leaders. The upshot of this assistance — far greater than the car industry enjoyed — is that Australia now has the world's fourth biggest funds management industry, yet only the 12th largest economy.

But the foundations of this empire are coming under a growing attack. Most criticism focuses on how the tax concessions create an expensive form of upper class welfare, while being of little value to most other people. The harmful effect of compulsory super's artificial expansion of the finance sector is also attracting attention.

The Abbott Government shows scant concern about either aspect. Its terms of reference even stopped the Commission of Audit from including the concessions in its long list of recommended cuts to direct spending on welfare, education, science and many other areas.

However, the Commission's chair Tony Shepherd, who formerly headed the Business Council of Australia, says these concessions should be cut. So does former Coalition leader John Hewson, some business economists, financial planners and other beneficiaries of the existing system. Treasury head Martin Parkinson recently expressed concern about who gains most from the system. Parkinson, who is being forced to resign by Abbott in December, asked, 'If it's a wealth creation tool, who is ultimately benefiting from this?'

Fairfax Media gave a clear answer on 22 May when it reported a tax lawyer as saying, 'These are people with \$10 million to \$20 million in self-managed super. They've funded their retirement several times over. They don't need concessions.' Another adviser said, 'There are probably 30 different strategies motivated by tax minimisation rather than a desire to self-fund one's retirement.'

The Fairfax report said that almost 9200 self-managed super funds have a balance of more than \$5 million, a rise of 76 per cent in the past three years. Some have over \$100 million. Given that 92 per cent of SMSFs have only one or two members, many could easily have an income from super of \$500,000 a year or more, from age 60 when no tax applies.

Before then, the standard tax rate on super is a flat 15 per cent. For someone on a salary and other non-super income of \$250,000, for example, this compares to a marginal rate of 49 per cent following the Budget's new temporary levy. In a twist that tips the whole purpose of means testing on its head, those who pay no tax on other income below \$18,200 pay the 15 per cent on their compulsory super contributions and earnings.

Wealthy beneficiaries often claim they are entitled to pay no tax because they paid some while working. But they still have a big income. Unless they pay tax on it, younger people will have to fund more of the growing cost of government services for retirees who are often better off financially. Many low and middle income employees would be better off if their compulsory contributions to super were instead paid out as higher take-home income when they are often struggling to bring up a family, pay off a mortgage, education fees and so on.

According to conservative Treasury projections, scrapping the concessions should increase revenue by over \$35 billion in 2016–17, rising each year. This money could be used to improve living standards for the workforce via tax cuts and improvements to health care, education and infrastructure. Moreover, reputable studies show that the cost of the concessions outweighs the likely savings on the age pension costs.

Compulsion has another bad result. It distorts the flow of resources away from more productive uses. It encourages fund managers to trade existing financial assets rather than help mobilise capital for productive new investment to boost growth in a country with an ageing population.

To its credit, Industry Super Australia, a group of funds run jointly by union and employer representatives, identified this problem in a report, *Finance and Capital Formation in Australia*, which it submitted to the current Murray inquiry into the financial sector. The report shows the sector overall is now nearly three times less efficient at utilising economic inputs to facilitate capital formation than before compulsorily super began.

Likewise, a recent Reserve Bank study shows super funds made no discernable contribution to funding new investment in Australia's mining boom between 2003 and 2012.

Despite the global financial crisis, the industry super report also notes that the finance sector grew faster than any other industry in Australia over the past 20 years, to 10 per cent of gross national product. Yet research by the Bank of International Settlements concludes that economic growth can suffer after a finance sector accounts for more than 6.5 percent of GDP.

The above concerns have not stopped Labor's Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen from promising not to change super for five years after the next election.

The boy who never stops

CREATIVE

Clare Locke

I'm training my eyes

I'm training my eyes to see moving pinpricks
Across the terrain of hair and freckles that
Mask the targets
My limbs a landscape hiding terrorist mites
That bite
My groin leaving red dots, like texta spots
And what, morbid curiosity demands
Other tiny beasts feed off me?

To wish for a king

There's an election coming
And I can't quite grasp at any of it
Slippery stuff, vaporous words
Images of stern men, rolled sleeves
A yearning
For courage, authenticity
To see the horizon and beyond
Noble face of the king
Takes great strides through sucking mud
Where leeches, toads and lurking monsters
Creatures of those shallow depths grasp
Shake them off, look ahead
When your legs ache
Remember your wings
Large, outstretched across broad shoulders
Shed the swamp life, putrid and heavy

Lift and blaze
Spectacular in morning radiance
And we will crown you
Praise you
Uncritical, loving
We elect you
Our leader

The ruined hill

the ruined hill
hot in the western sun
a receding fringe of gums
tall at the summit
once the hill sloped gracefully
green to lower ground
until machines tore it ragged
dusty brown and jagged
the quarry is closed
still truckers and diggers grind
shifting rock and stones
plateaus for future homes
the casual lift, explosive shatter
the endless drumming hammer
of rocks buried deeply
for longer than imagining
no subtle alteration
it's a crude operation
this strange dissection
through the belly of a ruined hill

The frame

In miniature, dawn reveals

The hilly suburb
Rail bridge, cars crawling
The view from my hospital window
Newly awoken
Inside, in here, stillness
Quiet momentarily
The distress of 3am newborns
Resolved and other mothers sleep
For now
I'm sitting on sturdy chair
Stretch cotton nightie
Baby to my breast in this pale light
My newest success
Memory has framed this view
Of life dawning
Love nestled quietly
In a sure footed chair
Years on, that honeyed perfection
The bliss of triumphant togetherness
Soothes the shock of his rage, his energy
The boy who never stops
For Bede

Atheist Clive James' hymn to God

REVIEWS

Philip Harvey

Rumours of his death are greatly exaggerated, but Clive James has since 2010 made a public art of dying. He has been suffering for some time an advanced stage of terminal leukemia and emphysema. Breathing is difficult and he saves his energy for his writing. Public appearances are rare. Faced with mortality in extremis the poet-critic stays in his adopted home of England, regretting he may never visit Australia again.

It is in this intense moment of re-evaluation of life, especially his own, that we read James' new translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Possibly no great poem is so immersed in the connections between our life here and now with life after death.

Dante lived an existence in Florentine politics and might today be little more than a historical footnote, but exiled in midlife to Ravenna, he transformed that trauma into a living testament about the worlds he knew: the worlds of action and contemplation, the classical and medieval worlds conjoined. James translates the opening:

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way
Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound
I still make shows how hard it is to say
How harsh and bitter that place felt to me ...

Some translators abandon all hope of getting perfect *terza rima* (an interlocking three-line rhyme scheme) in English, opting for non-rhyme or half-rhyme. It seems James decided to translate into quatrains back in the 1960s. This was a momentous decision because he was locked into doing the whole thing in four-line verses and could not go back. His determination is admirable, though his belief in the quatrain less so.

A commonplace about Dante is that the form he invented works to his advantage. *Terza rima* is propulsive, it creates its own energy because it is a permanently open system. The quatrain is not propulsive in this way. The energy exists within the box of four lines and for it to be successful in a long poem, virtually every post has to be a winner. It is a closed circuit, dependent for its effect on the end rhymes and the gist of the syntax.

Terza rima is a natural in Italian language because of the preponderance of vowel endings that cause lovely endless resoundings. Quatrains are perfect in English because of the massive variety of words available to make excellent

surprise endings.

The American Henry Wadsworth Longfellow began his translation of Dante to deal with the trauma of losing his wife in a house fire. James' earliest encounters with Dante are not recorded, but his wife is a Dante scholar at Cambridge. This goes some way to explain his close attention to Dante during their marriage. The translation is a conjugal love letter and undoubtedly a meeting of minds. She knows the stuff and he has the end-rhymes. The conversations must have been scintillating, both informative and entertaining, like Dante himself.

And Dante's big stage-show of characters, all with their own sins and graces, is simpatico to someone who ran TV shows where everyone was up for scrutiny, the target of witty one-liners. One of those late night shows was called *The Late Clive James*, itself a Dantesque joke, where a person who is alive presents himself as someone who is at the same time over there interviewing people on the other side.

Today we are blessed, unless we feel we are cursed, by more English versions of Dante than ever. The Irish poets Ciaran Carson and Seamus Heaney found in *Inferno* a code for describing the Troubles in the North. The Americans seem to deliver a fresh version every other year, of which the Hollander & Hollander is among the smoothest, as well as having the best commentary, detailed but restrained.

W.S. Merwin's version of *Purgatorio* is one of my favourites, with its subtle cadences and personal voice. Englishman C. H. Sisson's divides opinion, with its plain language. As does James', for other reasons.

A delight of Dante is how he says so much in so little. English speakers learn Italian today just to access Dante, with one of the rewards being his streamline flow. Heaney called it the 'bright container of the terza rima.' James' strangest decision was to include footnotes inside the text. Great literature often looks strange on first encounter and only time will tell if this device makes or breaks his version, but it certainly makes it anomalous.

Age brings reflection on our past and doubtless James today has brief time in which to consider his considerable experience and those who peopled it, whether alive or in books. Dante did the same and poured the results into a turbulent, entrancing poem. This translation serves as a landmark in his unique Audenesque poetic career and will become a clue as to how to read much of his other writing.

But two elements of the present situation could be seen as Dante-like contrapasso in real life. The first is the impression circulated in the media that James now lives estranged from the woman who inspired him to translate Dante in the first place. And the second, that an avowed atheist produces the best poetry in *Paradiso*. Others I have talked with say the same, the translation gets better as it goes, perhaps because he eventually hit his straps. As proof, and to conclude, here are the opening lines of *Paradiso*, the start of a hymn about God:

He moves all things. His glory penetrates
The universe, and here it shines the more
And there the less, and of these various states
The one where I was gets more light. I saw,
There in the Empyrean, things which he
Who comes back down from it has not the strength
Or knowledge to record, for memory
Can't follow intellect through the same length
Of journey, as it goes deep to come near
What it desires. But all I could retain
As treasure in my mind will now appear
In this song.