

EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS,
THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY
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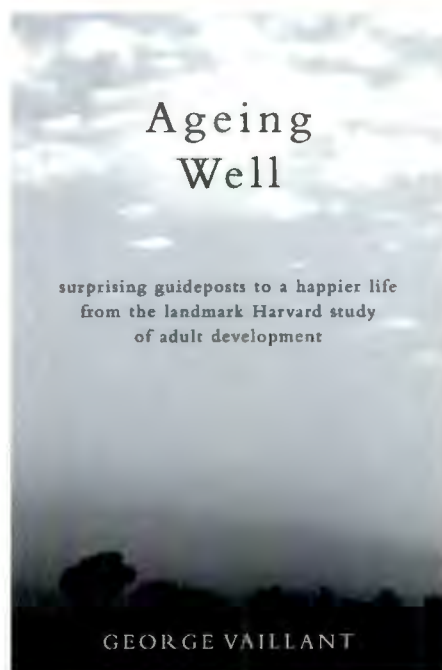
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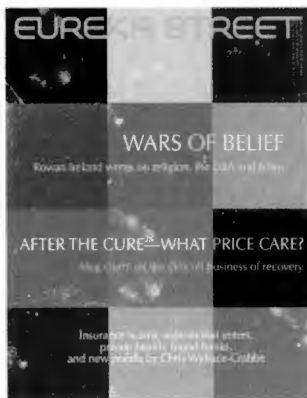
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EUREKA STREET

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COMMENT

- 4 *Amin Saikal* Risky signals
- 5 *Andrew Hamilton* Wrong policy
- 6 *Francis Sullivan* Debating the rebate

LETTERS

- 8 *Gavan Breen, Keith Carlon, Renato Zecchin*

THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

- 10 *Juliette Hughes* Only insure
- 11 *Michael Hogan* In a word
- 13 *Anthony Ham* Street life
- 14 *Juliette Hughes* Margaret Rose
- 14 *Kym Holthouse* Seeing white

COLUMNS

- 7 **Capital Letter**
Jack Waterford Boats, leaks, loyalties, lies
- 12 **Archimedes**
Tim Thwaites Mobile groans
- 15 **Summa Theologiae**
Andrew Hamilton About marriage
- 21 **By the Way**
Brian Matthews Suddenly last summer
- 46 **Watching Brief**
Juliette Hughes Philosophical drift

FEATURES

- 16 **Policy at the end of the line**
Moira Rayner on the chroming controversy.
- 18 **Recovery**
Meg Gurry tracks the fraught transition from serious illness to well-being.
- 29 **Blood matters**
Matthew Klugman reports on the history and the politics of donating blood.

POETRY

- 28 *Chris Wallace-Crabbe* Old Friend, At Sixes and Sevens, A Language of the Eye.



COVER STORY

- 22 **Religion, September 11 and the war against terrorism**
Rowan Ireland ties them all together.

BOOKS

- 34 **The short list**
Reviews of *Dominican Spirituality*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Lord of the Rings* (CD), *The Picador Book of African Stories* and *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Catholicism*.
- 35 **The one that got away with it**
Peter Mares reviews *Suharto: A Political Biography* by R.E. Elson.
- 37 **The candid pen**
Philip Harvey reads *Gwen Harwood's Selected Letters*.
- 38 **Talk about us**
Andrew Hamilton's take on the Deakin, Barton and Boyer lectures.
- 40 **Lyric realist**
Peter Craven reviews *Bernhard Schlink's Flights of Love*.
- 41 **All in order**
Paul Tankard analyses *Louis Nowra's Abaza: A Modern Encyclopedia*.

THEATRE

- 42 **Fine weariness of the flesh**
Peter Craven reviews *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

FLASH IN THE PAN

- 44 **Reviews of the films** *Intimacy*, *The Shipping News*, *Iris*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Hearts in Atlantis* and *Lumumba*.

SPECIFIC LEVITY

- 47 *Joan Nowotny* Cryptic crossword

Risky signals

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH'S branding of Iran, Iraq and North Korea, in his State of the Union address on 30 January, as parts of an 'axis of evil' was simplistic and out of focus. It confused terrorism with weapons of mass destruction, and indicated that the State Department is being upstaged by the military in running American foreign policy. It can only undermine the position of reformists in Iran, the process of

the decision of his judicial supporters by pardoning and releasing a reformist member of the parliament who had been jailed for being outspoken against the hardliners. This was not necessarily a major victory for the reformists, but it does signal that the reformists' strategy for peaceful and incremental change in Iran is moving forward. The alternative to this strategy is violence and bloodshed—something which President Khatami wants to avoid.

President Bush's description of Iran as a terrorist state, despite the country's opposition to the Taliban and al Qaeda ... could easily play into the hands of the hardliners.

President Bush's description of Iran as a terrorist state, despite the country's opposition to the Taliban and al Qaeda and its acquiescence to America's campaign against terror in Afghanistan, could easily play into the hands of the hardliners, prompting many reformists to support the hardliners' call for national unity against the US threat. It could also put America's allies, most of which (including Australia) have lucrative trade with Iran, in the embarrassing position of having to defy Washington, as many of them have already done.

dialogue between the two Koreas and the political taming of the North Korean regime. It could also help the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, to tighten further his hold on Iraq.

President Bush ignored the political complexities of these states and the differences between them. It is true that a small, uncleceted hardline faction has more influence than it deserves in the Iranian power structure. The group, with which Iran's supreme political-religious leader Ayatollah Khamanei is identified, has managed to maintain its original control of a number of state power instrumentalities, especially the armed and security forces, as well as the judiciary. And it has remained most vocal in its stand against the United States.

Similarly, President Bush's labelling is unlikely to help the cause of reconciliation between the North and South Koreans, or create an atmosphere whereby Seoul and Washington could build on the gains made by the Clinton administration on the diplomatic front. While the North Korean regime is tyrannical, it is also well armed, with a possible nuclear capability. To isolate it further could have two important consequences. One is to close off diplomacy as a proffered option in dealing with such a regime and changing it.

However, equally true is the fact that the country is also in the grip of a reform fever. The reformist movement, headed by the popularly elected President Mohammed Khatami and supported by an overwhelming majority of Iranian voters, has been working hard to generate an 'Islamic civil society' with a democratic system of government and a foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence and dialogue of civilisations. This faction, which controls the presidency and National Assembly, has strongly desired a normalisation of relations with the US at an appropriate time. Despite serious challenges by their factional opponents, they have succeeded in shifting Iranian politics to the extent that today there is far more political and social relaxation than there has been in the country since the Iranian revolution 23 years ago. The factional power struggle has reached a point where, two weeks ago, Ayatollah Khamanei finally found himself with no choice but to overrule

Coming next month ...

Meet *Eureka Street's* two new Friends of *Eureka Street* (FEST) writing fellows, Tracey Rigney and John Harding.

Tracey is from the Wotjobaluk and Ngarrindjeri people; John is a descendent of the Ku-Ku tribe and the Meriam people of Darnley Island in the Torres Strait. Both are playwrights and have just completed a season, 'Blak Inside', at the Melbourne Playbox Theatre. They will be writing for *Eureka Street* throughout the year.

Another is to send it into such desperation as to make it engage in unwanted acts of aggression against South Korea or Japan. In either case, the US might find itself in a more difficult position than it may have calculated.

With regard to Iraq, it would be in the long-term interest of the Iraqi people and the region if Saddam Hussein's regime were replaced with a democratic one. But the problem is the lack of a viable alternative. There is no credible opposition from either within Iraq or outside the country from the ranks of Iraqi exiles. The London-based opposition group remains as divided as ever. Repeated American threats against the regime have so far only helped Saddam Hussein to strengthen his rule and remain defiant. One of the casualties of this development is the UN, which has

not been able to get its weapons inspectors back into Iraq. Presently, there is also little support for the removal of the Iraqi regime in the region, given the Arabs' anger over Washington's support of Israel's suppression of the Palestinians and Iran's apprehension about US intentions.

President Bush's State of the Union address may have been designed to maintain his domestic popularity and to send a powerful signal to America's foes abroad. But his targeting of Iraq, Iran and North Korea as terrorist enemies of the US will do little to generate a stable world order. ■

Amin Saikal is Professor of Political Science and director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University.

COMMENT: 2
ANDREW HAMILTON

Wrong policy

THE YEAR 2002 has so far been the Year of Children (in Detention). The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has begun hearing submissions on the detention of children seeking asylum. Children joined protests against the conditions endured by asylum seekers in Woomera and the other detention centres. And Neville Roach, the Chairman of the Council for Multicultural Australia, resigned partly in protest against the damage done to Australia by its refugee policy. His resignation was inevitably read in the light of the disturbance at Woomera.

While the imprisonment of children has focused attention on detention, it could also divert it to the consequences and not the root of evil policy. Four things need to be said.

First, any enquiry into the imprisonment of children should be unnecessary. There are no decent arguments that can support the imprisonment of children simply on the grounds that they have arrived in Australia without visas. We may listen out of civility or morbid curiosity to people who justify the practice, but their arguments are unsupportable.

Second, those who try to impale us on the dilemma of choosing between the imprisonment of children and the separation of children from families, are to be resisted. Neither option is morally justifiable; neither is necessary. There are no decent arguments to support either the imprisonment of children or their separation from their families simply

on the grounds that they have no valid visas. Families must be allowed to live in the community, with appropriate reporting requirements.

There are no decent arguments to support either the imprisonment of children or their separation from their families simply on the grounds that they have no valid visas.

Third, the detention of children is not a special case. It simply makes most clearly evident the evil of Australia's policy of detention. The protests at the detention centres reflect the abuse of human dignity that is involved in all prolonged, mandatory detention.

Fourth, while Woomera is a dreadful place in which to be incarcerated, so are all detention centres. Any replacement built to accommodate Australia's existing policy will inflict the same damage in the long run. The evil does not lie in location but in detention itself.

Although obtaining bridging visas for children, improving the facilities of detention centres and closing remote centres will mitigate the suffering of some asylum seekers, their human dignity will be respected only when the practice of prolonged detention, in Australia or in our colonial dependencies, is brought to an end. ■

Andrew Hamilton SJ is *Eureka Street's* publisher.

Debating the rebate

NO SOONER HAD Medibank Private called for a 13 per cent premium hike, than the prime minister damned the claim as 'a bit rich'.

The media and politicians flamed the outrage, but few industry observers were surprised. The government's 30 per cent insurance rebate is popular, but it will need to be redirected if the expenditure is to be justified in the future.

Medibank's predicament is symptomatic of what ails the health insurance industry generally. Even with the government's 30 per cent subsidy, most funds struggle to manage the volume of members' claims. Members contributed an extra 30 per cent in revenue last year. But their claims rose by 24 per cent. This represents only a slight improvement on the situation

The essence of health care is service, not a commercial transaction driven by return on investment. Markets can fail, so governments must plan to ensure essential care is available.

prior to the introduction of the 30 per cent rebate. Before the rebate was introduced, some funds were nearly insolvent—close to every dollar of contribution being returned to members in benefits. The prospect for their financial viability was bleak, with reserves below statutory levels and younger, healthier people not joining. Given the existence of free public hospital access, the price of insurance and the plethora of extra specialists' fees, private health care was poor value for money.

The rebate has not stopped an escalation in health-care costs. Neither has it increased fund membership. In public or private hospitals costs are driven by the volume of work, the age of patients and the sophistication of technology. In private health care, costs are rising by at least five per cent a year. Financial relief is needed to counter this inflation directly.

People are using private hospitals in greater volume. Last year an extra 600,000 treatments were performed. This does not include the influx of new fund members who are only now eligible to claim benefits. So the growth in hospital use will continue.

The government chose to subsidise the insurance industry rather than allow it to rejuvenate through consolidation. Timely mergers and takeovers could have reduced administrative overheads, improved management efficiency and instilled a more acute customer focus. Now, the relatively marginal improvement in fund viability is hardly the return

the government anticipated from its \$2 billion annual rebate investment. Little wonder it has remained silent over the proposed merger between AXA and MBF. The merger is a rational and necessary response to a competitive market.

It is also a course upon which hospitals themselves have already embarked. Private hospitals have either merged or formed into networks when confronted by reduced revenue and poor investment returns. They have responded to loss of market share with takeovers. As a consequence, share prices have improved and bottom lines are healthier. This turnaround occurred without government subsidies; the hospitals simply had to adjust.

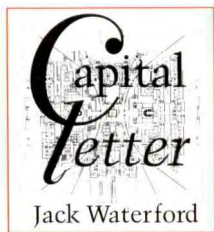
Now is the time for the funds to follow suit and become efficient.

But the government can't rely solely on market forces. The essence of health care is service, not a commercial transaction driven by return on investment. Markets can fail, so governments must plan to ensure essential care is available. Public subsidies need to be directed at improving access to services, not become a mechanism to bolster investor returns. At the moment, investor-owned hospitals actively seek to capture the lucrative segment of the patient market, which usually lies in surgical procedures. Here, return on investment is more predictable and there is less commercial risk associated with patient care. However, the elderly and chronically ill often need private health care for extended medical care. In this area, patient care is more complicated, less predictable and often too costly for the funds to reimburse fully. The risk is that some essential medical services, like oncology and psychiatry, will become too expensive to remain in the private sector.

This would be counter-productive. The aim of the rebate was to shift people from public to private hospitals, not vice versa. Unless the government redirects the rebate to be paid when people receive a service rather than when they buy insurance, these essential services will not remain in the private sector.

The insurance lobby may squeal, but the facts are that to date the rebate has not delivered the desired results. Moreover, if left untouched it will benefit the big-business health companies rather than place a safety net under those services that provide certainty and security for the frail and sick. ■

Francis Sullivan is chief executive officer of Catholic Health Australia.



Boats, leaks, loyalties, lies

IN FEBRUARY 1983, John Howard, Treasurer in the Fraser government, was given a document he did not want to see. John Stone, Secretary of the Treasury, told him that the 1982 Budget had completely blown out. The deficit at the end of June would be about four times the forecast of six months before. The start-up deficit for the year ahead was approximately \$10 billion—about the size of the ‘black hole’ John Howard was to pretend to discover on his coming into the prime ministership 13 years later.

It was a week before an election that Howard had privately given away. There was already speculation about a blow-out in the deficit. Howard and Fraser decided to sit on the document, which could only damage them. They agreed on a script for obfuscation without actually telling a lie. Neither had any confidence that John Stone would protect them if they lied.

John Howard has had a lot of problems with unpleasant news since then. But he has learnt some techniques of not exposing himself to the risks of 1983. Micro-manage, by all means. Even be a control freak. But keep at least one step away from the action, and train one’s staff not to mention things it would be better not to know.

The release of documents showing that politicians were lying about children being thrown overboard from the *Tampa* is never going to prove that Howard knew the facts. He had set himself up not to know. There was no accident, no failure of the system, and no culpable negligence on the part of a public servant wittingly or unwittingly failing to pass messages up the line. The system worked the way it was supposed to work.

John Howard was running his war from within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. His war office contained, usually, only one defence officer and, usually, not even a defence bureaucrat. More often than not, the defence representative was not even as well-informed as the PM&C officer who was chairing the show. There was no doubt about the pecking order. The PM&C officer did not hesitate to ring line officers to get information or give orders. She was not a politico, but she was, like most (then) PM&C officers, intuitive about politics and able to give the elected government of the day what it wanted—with not too much in the way of written records, briefing notes going to the prime minister or other potentially embarrassing materials either. Most of the reporting was oral and very little was directly to Howard.

The issue, then, is not how or whether Howard ‘stole’ the election. It’s more about a developing pattern of using the public administration as a very personal toy, as though it were held on freehold, rather than on leasehold.

To do that, of course, one has to trust the public servants who are in the loop, something that is hard for quite a few of

the ministers. Even John Howard, rather more relaxed about the essential professionalism and loyalty of public servants than some of his colleagues, does not actually trust them very much.

This story did not leak, or at least not from Howard’s war office. Neither out nor up. Nonetheless, the idea that a key piece of the government’s rhetoric was founded on a lie came out all right. The captain of the HMAS *Adelaide* chatted over a radio telephone to a journalist. He was reprimanded. Some sailors boasted about their exploits, then discovered these were being misrepresented back in Canberra and voiced concerns. Five different ways of telling the Minister for Defence that he was, at the least, misinformed, were tried, but the minister made it clear that he was not listening.

AT A TIME WHEN HIS public servants were keeping mum about a blatant hijacking of the defence forces, it might seem especially curious that Howard and his ministers would be planning fresh laws to punish leaks—even ones having nothing to do with national security—and to punish journalists who publish them. Ostensibly, it is a mere tidy-up of old legislation, always on the books, with no fresh elements added. In fact, enactment of the proposals will make the law much more draconian.

The existing law was passed 40 years ago, when almost any conversation between a journalist and a public servant was a prima facie breach of the Crimes Act. Since then, freedom of information and other administrative reforms have given public servants a positive duty to give out information, except in certain specified cases. The High Court has made it clear that information cannot be protected simply because disclosure would promote public debate or embarrass government.

But changes to the legislation, even under the guise of tidying up, would now be read by the courts as involving a conscious decision to keep public interest defences out. And in the right case—say a leak giving chapter and verse about the way political, as opposed to policy, considerations are now consuming much decision-making—one could be sure that the government would be at the courts to throw the book at the offender.

There’s a problem with this, though. As ever, most of the leaking is being done by ministers, particularly senior ministers, or by their own personal staff—often as part of a strategy of media management.

Heaven help us if a leak inquiry actually identified a leaker and it proved not to be a disloyal public servant but a disloyal minister. Still, one could be sure that John Howard’s fingerprints would not be on any documents. ■

Jack Waterford is editor of the *Canberra Times*.

Defining terms

There are some words that seem to have one meaning when used in connection with abortion and another in all other contexts. One is 'viable'. Another is 'potential'.

Tony Coady's review essay, 'Catholic Identity and the Abortion Debate' (*Eureka Street*, January–February 2002), illustrates the use of the latter. He refers to its use by anti-abortionists, although I had always thought of it as a tool of the pro-abortionists, as he uses it. He acknowledges its negativity—a potential person is not a person—but he does not say what this potential person is. To say that 'X is a potential A' does not just imply that 'X is not now an A' but also implies that 'X is now a B', where B, being a something that could develop into an A, must be something in the same semantic field.

Thus, for example, if I say, 'that young man is a potential prime minister', you could reasonably ask me, 'what is he now?' and expect an answer like 'he's a brilliant student' or 'he's a lawyer' or 'he's a union organiser' or even 'he's the current Junior Mayor of Birdsville'. It would not be appropriate (except perhaps in extraordinary circumstances) to answer 'he's an Anglican' or 'he's a pole-vaulter' or even 'he's a Liberal'.

One aspect of the misuse of the word 'potential' is the fact that it is used when 'future' is the appropriate term. You would



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not say 'that boy (being the Prince of Wales) is a potential king', because he is a future king. It is a matter of destiny, not of potential, and can be prevented only by some sort of disaster. A boy is not a potential man, he is a future man. A (human) foetus, if not already a person, is a future person, not a potential person. 'Potential' is appropriate only when the possible future state referred to is just one of many alternatives.

As a Catholic, I suppose I acquired my attitude to abortion as part of my learning of the implications of the Ten Commandments. However, I try to justify my view without using religion. I also avoid the use of the term 'person', except as a short way of saying 'human being'. I believe that if the category 'person' does not apply to all human beings then it is an arbitrary category, indeterminate in practice, and so is trivial as far as the assignment of fundamental rights is concerned.

I will avoid the term 'baby' too; it is a term for human beings during a certain

stage of life, just as are 'embryo' and 'foetus' and 'child' and so on. (The boundaries of some of these categories may not be clear-cut, of course.)

Professor Coady says that most contemporary scientists in the relevant areas are unimpressed with the placing of 'ensoulment' at the beginning of foetal life. Well, maybe so, but they can't deny that a human being is there at the beginning of foetal life. The genetic and physical facts are clear; the foetus is genetically different from and so not a part of the mother, it is obviously a being, and it couldn't be other than human. Maybe for a while there is doubt over whether it is one being, or two or more, but it would be bizarre to suggest that because it might be two people and not one it's ~~OK~~ to kill it.

I believe that an unborn human being is a member of the same species as I am, and so entitled to be treated by me in the same way as is any other member of my species (insofar as this is practicable). I believe that my obligations to other members of my species take precedence over my obligations to members of other species, and, to borrow Professor Coady's words, 'if this is "speciesism", then so be it'. I deny the right of any other member or members of my species to decide that some other member or members don't have the same rights.

If you euthanase someone you are depriving a person of probably well under one per cent of his or her life (and that



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presumably unwanted). If you killed me you would be depriving me of, maybe, a quarter of my life. If you killed one of my children you would be depriving him of well over half of his life. If you abort a foetus you deprive it of virtually 100 per cent of its life. And so I think of abortion as incomparably more evil than euthanasia (voluntary or not) and, by this reasoning at least (disregarding extenuating or aggravating circumstances), the worst kind of murder—the kind that causes its victim to lose more than any other kind. (OK, I'm using the concept 'potential' here, but I'm not misusing it.)

Dr Elaine Thompson, speaking in one of the Barton Lectures in 2001, observed that at the time of federation and for a substantial part of the 20th century, those people who were the most democratic, most radical, most progressive in other areas were also the most racist, the most supportive of the White Australia policy. Perhaps in another century a speaker will look back to our days and observe that those who are the most democratic, most radical, most progressive in other areas are the most opposed to the rights of the unborn.

Gavan Breen
Alice Springs, NT

Seen and believed

Chris Geraghty's personal account of his years in the seminary at Springwood was described in *Snapshot (Eureka Street, December 2001)* as 'chill and arctic', particularly as contrasted with the sunnier memories of Gerard Windsor, Michael McGirr and Peter Brock. Surprise was also expressed at 'the rawness of the pain still carried by Judge Geraghty'. And forthcoming memoirs of his time at Manly were also expected to be arctic.

These are the reactions of someone who has apparently had a reasonably enlightened formation, who has had no experience of the sort of life led by the (young) boys and men who went through Springwood under the regime of Monsignor Charles Dunne. They are like the reactions of humane and intelligent but ultimately uncomprehending observers of the Soviet system under Stalin, who could not imagine that a system which proclaimed its commitment to improving the lot of

Letter from Pakistan

In February, Renato Zecchin, who has lived for years in Pakistan, travelled through Afghanistan and Pakistan with colleagues, Peter Balleis and Andrea Lari, to investigate the best place to set up a branch of the Jesuit Refugee Service. This is part of Renato's email to friends in Australia.

On Sunday I returned from a tour of Kabul in Afghanistan and Quetta in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. Peter and Andrea had come to do a humanitarian assessment of the needs of Afghan refugees. It's been a busy, interesting two weeks—an opportunity to understand a little more about the situation of the Afghan people.

To get into Kabul we had to take a UN flight from Islamabad—less than an hour's travel. Kabul is surrounded by mountains and the weather there is cold, minus seven degrees at night. The city itself is a ramshackle place after many years of war. We visited the part that was destroyed in the fighting between the different mujahedin groups in 1994. These days Kabul is occupied by Northern Alliance and international forces. Andrea spoke with some Italian soldiers on the street.

Kabul is very poor but people are trying to get on with their lives in this uncertain and unstable time. There are many beggars in the streets. The security situation is reasonable but there is still lawlessness—thefts and murders. Outside of Kabul it is still unsafe to travel, especially for foreigners.

We met up with three Little Sisters of Jesus and celebrated Eucharist with them. They have been in Kabul for the past 40 years. They told stories of hardship in the city and the fear that is still prevalent. On top of the current situation the long drought has made life very difficult for the people who are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.

I visited one group of urban refugees who were being given relief aid—blankets and eating utensils. Their life and that of the many in the camps along the Pakistani border is pretty tough and uncertain. Right now they do not want to go back into Afghanistan because of the insecurity and general instability, and because of the drought.

From here I have been following events with the detainees in Woomera. Where is the politics of compassion? It is very clear to me from my knowledge and experience of the situation here that life inside Afghanistan is far from stable and secure. The Australian government and the media are not presenting the true picture in Afghanistan if they say that it is safe for people to return.

Take care,
Renato

humankind could behave so abominably to so many of its own people.

Regarding Springwood, the implication of the comment in *Snapshot* is that Chris Geraghty was either over-sensitive, or was exaggerating. He was neither. The amazing thing is that he is so sane—with his Christian commitment intact. The same cannot be said of many of his contemporaries. Chris has done the church a service by

revealing (some of) the harm done by some of its psychopathic functionaries. And his story is not ultimately negative. As one of the few humane characters in Geraghty's *Springwood* much later unforgettably said, in a homily on the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to Thomas: 'Blessed are they who have seen ... and still believe.'

Keith Carlon
Belgium



THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

Only insure

DAMNED INDEMNITY

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

—From 'Dover Beach',
Matthew Arnold, 1867

DAREBIN PARKLANDS Olive Festival has been cancelled. On the other side of the world from CAT 48 (as the insurance industry has coded the events of September 11), but very much on the same side of the world as HIH, Darebin's olive trees, planted by a farming settler a century ago beside fertile river banks in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, bear abundant small fruit that crush down into a very special extra-virgin oil. A small vintage, a community effort, a sense of bonding. But it can't get public liability insurance for the event.

This is happening all over Australia as adventure tourism starts to crumble, councils cancel events, people cancel street parties, and amateur sports and pony clubs wonder if they must close. The problem isn't confined to organisations: individuals are going to find work and leisure curtailed as these become uninsurable.

Sculptors, midwives, volunteer workers, carpet cleaners—all are going to find it harder to carry on because this year their public liability insurance will increase dramatically—for some, unaffordably. The sculptor will be personally liable for any injuries or damage incurred during the erection of the piece in a municipal park (after construction, the council takes responsibility). The home-birth midwife's professional liability policy has disappeared; her record as a practitioner and lack of claims on her policy avail her nothing—the company does not 'do' that sort of insurance any more. Volunteer workers have long been a problem, unprotected as they are by workers' compensation. But now

events and organisations that rely on volunteers face such massive increases in liability premiums that they may as well be employing people for money.

A massive culture change is upon us, seemingly precipitated by the extraordinary events of 2001. But even the most cursory analysis will show that the changes have been gathering momentum for a very long time. As Enron goes into meltdown, Wall Street is preparing for long downturns as investors ask themselves if other large



companies have been as artistic in their account-keeping. Australian investors at time of writing were still confident, but as the black comedy unfolds that is the Royal Commission into the shenanigans preceding the HIH collapse, some must be asking if there are others who are still engaged in fiddling balance sheets. There will be shake-downs as some insurance companies go to the wall, and this will again in turn affect many other aspects of the economy. Have policy-holders been paying the right premiums? Has the prosperity of the last 20 years been a kind of tulip-madness?

Sandie Watson, of the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA), says that the 'key drivers of the crisis' have been identified, and that these are the HIH collapse and September 11, but adds that there was already a rise in public liability claims before then. 'The insurance industry is not trying to blame people or lawyers,' she says, 'but we recognise that other key drivers include society's changed attitudes to litigation.' Watson says that the insurance industry has asked for a national inquiry into itself, that it wants to work with all the stakeholders. The ICA wants the government to look at tort reform; according to Watson, Deloitte's says that

Australia is now the world's second most litigious country. This is repeated in the November 2001 online edition of *Australian Special Events Association News*, where Ken Killen, of AON Risk Management, is reported as saying: 'There has been an escalation in litigation taking place in Australia and particularly in NSW. NSW now ranks second behind California as the most litigious state in the world. Israel is the third most litigious state.'

Killen also points out that in recent years insurance has ceased to be profitable. Ian Dunn, CEO of the Law Institute of Victoria, says that there are four main reasons for this: insurance companies have been increasingly strapped by chronic underpricing of premiums, particularly in the last few years when HIH was 'driving the market down'; the collapse of HIH; September 11; and the historically low interest rates that mean their asset bases give little comfort. In the past, insurance companies could compete for custom by writing lower and lower premiums, which they would then invest at high interest rates to turn a profit. Now shareholders are demanding better returns; in 2000 the insurance industry as a whole paid only two-and-a-half per cent (the banks averaged around 13).

The effects of insurance collapse and terrorism are now being felt in people's lives, but our vulnerability to these effects has been increased by the lessening of government involvement in citizens' lives. At time of writing, nearly everyone wanted a conference about the crisis. Premier Bob Carr blamed litigiousness (as well he might, given NSW's silver medal for it) in a press conference on 4 February:

This must be a conference where the Commonwealth government has got proposals to put on the table. Now one of the proposals they might revisit is that advanced by Joe Hockey. I would strongly recommend they go back and look at Hockey's proposal and give it a fair assessment. If they reject it, as they seemed to do a couple of weeks ago, they ought to have something else that's constructive ... If it becomes an exercise where the States go there and put forward a range of proposals and nothing's agreed, we're wasting everyone's time. And this crippling increase in insurance rates is going to go on, driven by

the litigious culture that has taken over in this country.

The *Australian* editorial on 4 February named a 'culture of blame' and deplored the rise in small liability claims: 'Just as many Australians are more prepared to get out of their financial problems by declaring themselves bankrupt, so more people are eager to seek financial redress against others for their misfortunes.' The editorial went on to criticise 'the legal profession and the courts' for doing business 'with those wanting to put the blame on to others'. It praised Assistant Treasurer Senator Helen Coonan, for having 'given the cold shoulder to the idea of a national rehabilitation and compensation scheme as floated by Small Business Minister Joe Hockey'. Citing New Zealand's experience with such a scheme, it warned of 'bureaucratic, financial and managerial dangers'. Dangers such as these are already quite familiar to the private industry, as a glance at the HIH Royal Commission website shows.

The insurance industry has been for years the beneficiary of high interest rates and low scrutiny, in a climate where 'user pays' has become the mantra. The 'trickle-down effect' of privatisation, low taxation and small government never happened: instead, a siphon effect sucked trillions from public infrastructures and social capital all over the world. In such an environment, the public liability claims explosion is a creature of fear and insecurity: the less a person can rely on wider society for support, the more that person will need to grab and hold for self.

And Warren Buffet, the world's most successful investor, isn't complaining. His canny steering of his company Berkshire Hathaway's asset base means that it can withstand the US\$3 billion it expects to lose in the rubble of the World Trade Center. According to the HIH Royal Commission, it was Berkshire Hathaway's reinsurance company that had for a substantial fee in 1998 enabled a complicated and unconventional 30 June deal with Rodney Adler's ailing FAI that massaged an A\$20 million loss into an A\$8.6 million pre-tax profit. With this

new coat of paint FAI was then acquired by a teetering HIH, and the auditors overseeing the adoption did not notice the cracks in FAI's maquillage. Berkshire Hathaway was FAI's second port of call, since Swiss Re would only consider the deal if it were run past the pesky regulator. But Mr Buffet will be putting up premiums soon. He has always warned about the dangers of pricing them down. Some will survive the shake-out.

In the meantime gold went up by \$9 an ounce.
—Juliette Hughes

In a word

ASPIRATIONAL DESPERATIONAL

THE DEFEAT OF Kim Beazley's Labor Party in last November's federal election has produced the customary crowing by the victors and soul-searching by the losers. In this instance, one of the main explanations offered for the bad performance of Labor, especially in the outer regions of the Sydney metropolitan area and the NSW central coast, has been that Labor has lost touch with 'aspirational' voters in what were once regarded as working-class districts. As with most shorthand explanations, there is something there, but this new term is not a new

concept, nor is it something that is a problem only for Labor. And in some respects the word itself is misleading.

The old reality described by the new word 'aspirational' is that people who see themselves as upwardly mobile, who own or are buying their own homes, and who are struggling with difficult economic conditions, do not have an automatic allegiance to any political party. If anything, they have tended towards conservative politics, except when the conservatives themselves lose touch. Certainly, the Labor Party has had to confront this reality from its very beginning in the 1890s. Here's what a *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent had to say before the 1894 NSW election, when the new electorate of Annandale was hived off from Glebe, which had elected a Labor member in 1891:

Still, the local men, who ought to know, do not consider that the labour vote will be very strong in this new district. Most of the working men who live here, they point out, have bought their own allotments of land, and with the aid of the building societies have built their own little cottages. And every student of political economy knows what this means. The worker, by this simple process, becomes converted into a capitalist, a man who has, rather than a man who has not.

Moreover, the *Herald* journalist was quite right. For many years after that, inner-city Annandale, with a high proportion of home ownership, chose conservative MPs and local councils, while neighbouring Glebe, with a population overwhelmingly renting and lodging, moved inexorably towards becoming a rock-solid Labor area.

Labor strategists have always known that they cannot rely upon support from the middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. They have also known that they cannot win elections without them. The same has been true of the Liberal Party. So fickle have been some of these districts that even the old Country Party (remember them?) thought they had a chance of snapping up such electorates by changing their name to National Party. In Queensland,





Mobile groans

IT'S CERTAINLY A CONTENDER for the most annoying noise in the world—the insistent ring of a mobile phone during a dramatic silence at the theatre or a vital point at the tennis. There's the woman pushing the supermarket trolley who feels obliged to ring her partner before making a momentous decision on the peas. Or the passenger in the bus loudly providing unwanted insight into modern relationships.

The mobile phone has barged intrusively into our lives. Like automobiles and computers, the technology is shaping society around it—sometimes in unpredictable ways. Research in the Melbourne University Department of Information Systems shows that mobile phones are a 'lifestyle organiser' for many 16- to 22-year-olds. They don't make plans for Friday nights, they simply stay in touch by phone, and gather at the coolest venue. No mobile phone, no friends.

We've read about the Englishman lost in Western Australia who phoned his father at the local pub in Britain. And the man on one of the hijacked planes on September 11 who organised resistance after learning the fate of the others from his wife.

And recent research suggests that the distraction of even hands-free mobile phones in cars leads to reaction times on a par with drivers over the alcohol limit. Mobile phone use makes accidents about four times more likely.

This pervasive technology even affects global politics. Some argue that mobile phones prolonged the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The element tantalum is used to manufacture capacitors in handsets and the world's largest reserves of tantalite ore are in the Republic in an area controlled by rebels. So, the argument runs, the proceeds from tantalite mining helped the rebels continue the war.

Many developing nations hope to leapfrog wire and cable communications, moving instead directly to wireless systems. The infrastructure is nowhere near as expensive or time-consuming as stringing wires across the landscape. In Latin America, it's predicted there will be as many wireless connections as landlines by 2006, and the wireless network will provide the internet for more than half the population by 2010.

The huge impact of mobile phones can only increase. Were we prepared for all this? Did we plan it? How are we adjusting? Are we going to suffer?

The British government has announced studies worth more than A\$12 million into the health risks of the technology. By contrast, the Australian government has pulled A\$170 million from the money available through the Australian Research Council for the social sciences and humanities. Since answers to the problems of adjustment are likely to be found in these areas, this withdrawal of funding seems perverse.

The mobile phone has enormous potential for social change and social dislocation, but government money is currently being spent generating new, marketable technologies instead of investigating or integrating the current ones. ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer who does not yet own a mobile phone.

in fact, they had considerable success in places like the Gold Coast. For the Labor Party, Whitlam, Hawke, and even Keating were more successful than their Liberal opponents in making the appropriate electoral appeal.

Perhaps the term popular in the 1970s and 1980s—'hip-pocket nerve'—was closer to the outer-suburban reality than 'aspirational'. That term was often misused to suggest that voters could be bought with a bag full of promised tax cuts or other goodies such as first-home grants. Voters like to believe that they will be better off with one party rather than another, but they tend to be much more attentive to general economic conditions than to inducements that they know are not necessarily core promises. It is a truism in electoral commentary that it is very difficult to unseat any government when the economy is going well. Yet there is more to John Howard's use of the word 'aspirational' than economic security or hope of financial gain.

The new factor that has joined the 'hip-pocket nerve', but is not obviously 'aspirational', is the Pauline Hanson agenda of racial intolerance, law and order, and rejection of market-driven policies. No party has yet been able to displace One Nation completely in this appeal. John Howard's Liberals successfully latched on to the first two items, but clung firmly to the principles of a market economy. In NSW, Bob Carr's Labor government has sought favour by giving a central place to tough law-and-order rhetoric, while back-peddling on the market economy and flirting with the politics of race. The National Party, at both state and Commonwealth levels, finds itself in the crossfire between its constituents and the realities of a coalition agreement with the market-driven Liberals.

Certainly, the Hanson phenomenon has changed Australian politics by bringing these issues to the forefront of political debate. Yet 'aspirational' is hardly the appropriate word to describe the voters being seduced. The appeal is not so much to upwardly mobile folk who hope to become comfortably middle class. Rather, it resonates with the fundamental insecurities of many people in the mortgage belt who are fearful of unemployment for themselves or their children, and see foreign newcomers threatening their jobs. In this sense, Howard's success was accomplished by scratching the emotional scabs of 'desperational' voters. Perhaps Labor's task is to rediscover what genuinely 'aspirational' voters want. —Michael Hogan

Street life

OUAGADOUGOU,
BURKINA FASO

IT IS ALWAYS A discovery to me in West and Central Africa that I am not alone in feeling foreign. Most of the people I meet in Niamey, in Douala, or here in Ouagadougou, have migrated in search of opportunity.

The question 'Where do you come from?' defines who you are. In Africa it is invariably the starting point of conversation, a predeterminant of what relationships we may have, what position we occupy in the

Everywhere I come across people waiting, always waiting, as if for the world to end. It is as though their dream, the city, has been a mistake, a reckless roll of the dice that stole their only thing of value—connection to land, soil, a community. Now they resemble Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—people with no right to dream.

The city can be a cul-de-sac in which people die quietly, without protest. Many cannot return to the land of their ancestors to find comfort growing old surrounded by the spirit world that has sustained their people for generations. The burden of expectation is now too powerful to renounce. They have all heard the stories of success:

to a sentry box. The box is inhabited by a young soldier, a mere boy. He has a maddening obsession with minutiae. Every detail, every single letter, is scrutinised, whether for a sign of misdemeanour or the very meaning of existence—who can tell?

In the absence of a thriving economy, formalities attain their own meaning; bureaucracy is the dynamic that defeats boredom and meaninglessness. An old man in Cameroon once told me that in many African schools, children are taught and tested entirely through rote learning, as if they are being trained as actors to memorise a script. In this land where the average annual income is US\$240, memorising the



Street stall in local market, Avenue Kwame Nkrumah, Ouagadougou. Photograph by Anthony Ham.

hierarchy. I am Yak from Bobo-Dioulasso and I am of the Mossi people; my mother was born in Mali but my people came from the River Niger to the east. I am Alphonse of the Lobi people and I am from Gaoua where the land is green.

The street life of African cities is characterised by this understanding of one's roots and the knowledge that one has been severed from them. There is a permanent disjunction between ancient tribes and the new nation states that now confine them, in shallow soil.

the musician who now lives in Paris, the young man with a government job, proud to wear a tie. To return home without such a tale is a tacit admission of failure.

But in Africa there is, always, another story. For the man or woman who must survive, meaning resides in the moment, in the specific usefulness of an encounter or a transaction or an object.

I begin to learn this again—it's the outsider's repeated rite of passage—in the stiflingly hot airport arrivals shed with its single rotating fan. A queue forms, leading

script, following procedures which have become an end in themselves, may mean promotion or—more likely—a day's food for a family. The worker must do his tasks assiduously lest they appear too easy. Were that to happen, he may just find himself out of a job, surplus to requirements. As borders come down across the world and efficiency becomes the new mantra for measuring achievement, Africa stands firm, insisting on its paperwork, depending upon its procedures as though they are essential pillars of meaning.

When I first walk through the streets of Ouagadougou, the corrugated iron stalls that line every sandy roadside barely register. Later, when I look closely, I see that from each hang spark plugs and soccer balls, music cassettes and strips of fabric, medicines and bananas. To people who live determinedly day by day, these signify an opportunity to be again on the move, a chance to make a child happy, a reason for celebration, some clothing to come, the promise of health or an affordable way to stave off hunger.

In such a world, survival is itself a victory. A day's income is a wonderful thing. Two days' income is cause for an impromptu party to which all are welcome. A seat in the shade is a gift, a conversation an occasion. The chance to voice an opinion makes one feel important. A song or a beat to dance to makes the world a wider place.

These triumphs, small daily reminders of life's fragile immediacy, can draw forth a flashing smile or an eruption of laughter to match the vibrant colours worn by the resilient and resourceful women of the place.

Thus Ouaga, this overgrown, low-slung village-city of the uprooted, surviving against the odds, smiling, getting about its business whether the rest of the world cares or not. It is at once the end of the road and the centre of its own universe.

—Anthony Ham

Margaret Rose

IN MEMORIAM

PRINCESS MARGARET was the queen of princesses. People older than 40 will remember an exquisite head that was made for tiaras, a small, graceful figure totally at home in the tiny-waisted satin crinolines of the 1950s. The boxy shifts of the '60s were less kind to her, but she always had the perfect carriage of a dancer. Ballet was a passion of hers. One of the most moving images of her was to see her embracing Margot Fonteyn, not long before the prima ballerina assoluta died. The two were not unlike: petite, erect, daintily aquiline and dark-haired.

At 71, she died young for a female Windsor, her last few years dogged by poor health. The ABC's headline on the internet ran 'Queen's Sister Led Life Marred by Heartbreak, Scandal, Illness'. Interviewed 20 years ago, she said quite frankly that there had been problems in her 'sentimental life'. That telling phrase harks back to a time

when a life could be successfully sectioned, without denial, into manageable compartments. She was philosophical about the tabloids' persistent intrusions into and distortions of her life, her supposed fondness for a drink and her love life being deplored by that bastion of sobriety and chastity, the Fleet Street press. Her nephew, Prince Charles, called her a 'vital, free spirit' who 'sang like an angel', and who was loved by her children and her family. With her death passes a shared experience: someone we all knew, or thought we knew something about, is now part of our past.

—Juliette Hughes

Seeing white

INDONESIA PERCEIVES AUSTRALIA

I HAVE SPENT FOUR of the past seven years overseas and am currently living and working in Jakarta. Until the past few months, I never felt the slightest shame in telling people I'm Australian. The word 'Australian' was for me synonymous with fairness, compassion and generosity. I recognised the shameful mistakes of our past, but believed we were slowly, however imperfectly, moving towards a more humane, just society. I believed we were becoming sufficiently confident in ourselves to be generous with others.

No longer.

I now find myself in Jakarta at a time when, to many Indonesians, Australia seems to be withdrawing into an old vision of itself. It seems increasingly unaware, or unconcerned, at the alarm this is causing among its neighbours. The turning away of the *Tampa* refugees was seen here as mean-spirited, irresponsible, manipulative and petty. By the time the refugees arrived in Nauru it had become farcical.

People could not understand why Australia was so reluctant to offer refuge to people fleeing tyrannical regimes that Australia had condemned and, more recently, gone to war against. The defence—that the asylum seekers were not legitimate refugees and were therefore 'queue jumpers'—was considered to be as leaky as the vessel on which they arrived. Their refugee status could not be decided before their cases had been heard. The fact that they were willing to risk their lives and their children's lives to escape their homeland in unseaworthy vessels made it all the more likely that they had legitimate cause to seek refuge. The irony is that while politicians here believed

that their 'tough stance' made Australia look strong and assertive, the view from Indonesia was of a nervous nation, increasingly unsure of itself and its neighbours.

In 1996 author, academic and sinologist, Pierre Ryckmans, in his ABC Boyer Lectures, dealt with the issue of otherness and multiculturalism. He stated:

For a society to thrive, its system of values should be able to attract a constant inflow of outsiders and should be powerful enough to make these newcomers desirous of adopting these values and determined to preserve them. A civilisation is strong in proportion to its capacity to tolerate what is foreign to itself. Once it loses its bold confidence in the natural resilience of its own values, once it feels the defensive need to surround itself with walls in order to keep the outside world at bay, its very existence becomes problematic.

Assuming for the moment that we agree with Ryckmans, how strong is our society now? The Australian system of values attracts, and has always attracted, outsiders, but our resilience, our confidence that outsiders will adopt our values, seems shaken. The overwhelming perception in Asia is that the *Tampa* refugees were rejected because of who they were and where they came from.

Jusuf Wanandi of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, a long-time friend of Australia, drew attention and criticism when he wrote in the *Jakarta Post* (15 November 2001) that Howard's re-election reflected the immaturity and fear of a large number of Australians. 'This brings some serious disillusionment for someone like myself, who thought that Australia could inject some civilised values and democratic ideals to the region', Mr Wanandi wrote. He concluded by questioning whether Australia really belonged to East Asia at present and added that he hoped his friends in Australia would understand this disillusionment and regret.

Australians who have not lived in Asia may be shocked to realise how much our 'whites only' history still affects people's ideas about Australia. Despite our annual intake of thousands of refugees and other immigrants, many from Asia, the image lingers of a white-peopled country, insular by nature and uncomfortable with difference. The fact that our cities are home to people from 160 countries, of many races and religions, does not register with people who have never been to Australia, and whose images of Australians come from the white,

male, predominantly Christian leaders who represent us overseas.

Some of my students, future Indonesian diplomats and possibly ambassadors, hope to go to Australia this year on AusAID scholarships to begin postgraduate study at Australian universities. They are extremely grateful for the opportunity provided, but have admitted several times to being anxious about how they will be received, not just as Muslims (not all *are* Muslim), but as Indonesians, as Asians. Several have friends in Australia who have received racist taunts and abuse.

Just a PR problem? I think not. Perhaps Australia's multiculturalism does not come across because not enough of us really see it as a strength of our society. What is it we are seeking to protect when our collective experience is overwhelmingly an immigrant one that has demonstrably been one of the country's great strengths? How long will it take before we acknowledge our geographic position in the world, our comparative wealth and our capacity to increase, rather than reduce, our assistance to less fortunate peoples? Critically, why do we lack faith in our society's ability to make newcomers embrace what is best about the place?

In looking for examples of racial and religious intolerance we could talk about attacks on mosques and Muslim school buses in Australia, and then we could point to threats against foreigners in Indonesia. But all come from a tiny section of each community. The vast majority in both countries consider such actions unacceptable. Of far more concern to Australians should be our growing indifference to other people's suffering, crumbling confidence in our society's ability to unite different people and a childlike fear of the outside world.

Clearly, a percentage of Australians are content with our current direction. The question for the rest of us is, how much effort are we prepared to make to ensure that a dissenting voice is heard? Silence, I believe, is no longer an option.

—Kym Holthouse

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About marriage

IN JANUARY, A ROUTINE papal speech to chancery officials made headlines. The speech was said to have discouraged Catholic lawyers from involvement in divorce proceedings. While Vaticanologists read the tea leaves to see if there was a storm in the cup, most observers saw nothing new in the speech. Its media appeal lay in public schadenfreude at seeing lawyers warned off a lucrative area of practice, and public surmise that the lawyers would yet again wriggle out of their predicament.

The most intriguing point about the speech was not that Pope John Paul spoke about lawyers and marriage, but that he spoke to church lawyers about marriage. For on any reading of the New Testament, Jesus' emphasis on radical fidelity seems to have undercut Jewish marriage law, and to have discomfited the lawyers who were interested in a workable jurisprudence.

The role of the church in marriage was initially to bless marriages celebrated according to local customs, while preaching Jesus' emphasis on fidelity. In the West, the church became involved in law when it became the principal source of social stability in a fractured world. Because marriages involved the transfer of property, the legality and stability of marriages had consequences for royal dynasties. So bishops were asked to judge the validity of unwanted marriages. Later, church law required marriages to be celebrated in church before witnesses, for clandestine marriages had become an effective form of asset-stripping. The church now defended the permanence of marriage as a good for society, not only as a sign of God's unfailing love for humanity.

When you must make decisions about marriages, you are obliged to be consistent and principled. Welcome to the world of courts, lawyers and bodies of precedent, in which definitions must be clear and minimal. Marriage was seen primarily as a contract, and its conditions were codified. The jurisdiction of church courts over marriage has been broad. Generally, church courts do not dissolve marriages, but annul them by declaring that no genuine marriage took place. Common grounds are the lack of freedom or maturity in agreeing to marry. But marriages have also been dissolved: those unconsummated, and those between non-Christians, one of whom later becomes Christian.

The challenge for churches in dealing with marriage is both to proclaim the radical faithfulness which shocked Jesus' contemporaries, and to care for the increasing number of people who are separated and remarried.

The development of marriage tribunals has been central in the Catholic response. But it has costs. In an age of transient relationships, pastoral concern for people inevitably leads to more requests for annulment, and a jurisprudence that recognises more grounds for annulment. The papal warnings against compromise with a 'divorce mentality' need to be set within this context.

On the other hand, the Christian understanding of faithfulness in marriage as a richly symbolic gift also becomes eroded when marriage is seen predominantly in legal terms. Within the church, as in society at large, to speak first to lawyers about marriage may bring associated costs. ■

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Policy at the end of the line

Recent controversy over chroming and the care of children raises questions about how and why welfare policy is made.

IN LATE JANUARY, a *Herald Sun* journalist read the Victorian Parliamentary Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee's discussion paper on the inhalation of volatile substances. The Committee had been working for seven months on the problem caused by people who inhale 'volatile substances': mostly kids sniffing glue, petrol, butane or paint but with a nod, too, to dentists and midwives partying with nitrous oxide, and clubgoers with 'poppers'. The committee was to report on how well existing strategies were working, and to make 'best practice' recommendations to reduce the incidence of inhalation and prevent first-time use.

The result was a shock-horror media storm about Berry Street Victoria, a Melbourne end-of-the-line residential service for very damaged children, 'condoning chroming'. Berry Street had a policy that permitted workers to monitor the safety of severely alienated children by letting them sniff paint fumes on the premises.

Premier Steve Bracks reacted authoritatively: stop it. Apparently, he didn't consult the parliamentary committee first. Berry Street pointed out that its policy was part of a harm-minimisation strategy known to the government. Christine Campbell, the Community Services Minister at the time, demanded to know why her department hadn't informed her. It had.

Berry Street had received a departmental 'best practice' award in May 2001, in a program launched by Campbell. Berry Street Director Sandie de Wolf had discussed the 'monitoring chroming' part of its policy on Virginia Trioli's 774 ABC Melbourne Drive radio program. There had been no public or governmental

reaction. Moreover, Campbell's office had received at least one letter complaining about 'monitored' chroming. Her staff had referred it to the Health Minister.

The Opposition scented its first ministerial blood. The Premier threatened to cease Berry Street's departmental funding if the policy wasn't dumped at once. As a consequence, two children had to be evicted. That very day they got high, got into a car and were hurt in a serious traffic accident, exactly as Berry Street predicted.

Quickly, the truth emerged. Virtually all Victorian agencies 'supervise' chroming, as a last resort, to minimise harm and as part of their duty of care to severely damaged children. All relevant ministers knew something about this, and so, it is obvious, must their political predecessors have known.

The policy panic had another immediate effect. Children who had previously 'chromed' on the premises now did it on the street. One neighbour ran up and down outside a children's home (she hadn't known it was one) after seeing a youngster on the street with his head in a plastic bag. 'Do something!' she shouted. 'For God's sake, someone do something!'

But what?

Every politician's media adviser seems to agree that it would be good to make sniffing illegal. The experts and children's workers don't. Ironically, the parliamentary committee's discussion paper highlighted the media's propensity to exaggerate, misrepresent and inaccurately report solvent abuse.

Most people believe that experimental solvent abuse causes immediate, severe brain damage; that the first use creates immediate, serious addiction; and that it

makes young people uncontrollable, dangerous or violent.

The facts are these. 'Chroming' is just one kind of inhalant substance abuse: spraying paint into a plastic bag and inhaling the fumes. Officially, 'sniffing'



prevalence overall is relatively low—3.9 per cent of children aged 14 or over, according to the 1998 Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey. However, 18–19 per cent of all students aged 12–16, surveyed in 1996, said they had used inhalants in the previous year, and 26 per cent had tried it at least once (Australian School Students Alcohol and Drugs (ASSAD) Survey). There is anecdotal evidence of a recent rise in usage (for example: Victorian drug treatment agencies worked with 61 clients in 1999, 134 in 2001; ambulances have treated hundreds of solvent abuse cases in Melbourne alone between 1998–2001).

Most sniffers are probably aged 10–16, with use peaking between 12 and 14 (Year 7 kids are nine times more likely than Year 12 students to report having used in the last month). Usage drops off with age, perhaps when they get access to

alcohol or cannabis, or just mature. (See the Victorian 1999 School Students and Drug Use Survey and the ASSAD Survey.)

Usage tends to be in groups and in public. Poor kids are more likely to use, as are adults from troubled backgrounds, but there is no evidence that Victorian Aboriginal kids misuse inhalants more than others (data about petrol sniffing in other parts of Australia are irrelevant). Most children who sniff experiment for a short time, then stop completely.

Kids in care are much more likely to use. Victoria has about 3500 children in care, about 400 of whom have substance abuse problems in general (not chroming in particular). About seven of Berry Street's looked-after children chrome: almost all chronic chromers are state wards, out of education, without family ties and very damaged. The Department of Human Services funds services for

sexually and otherwise exploited.

Chroming is not addictive, public perception notwithstanding. Nor are Australian researchers convinced by 'controversial' claims that solvent abuse per se causes immediate and serious or irreversible brain or neurological damage. Some solvents do more harm to tissue and organs because of components, such as lead in petrol.

Why do children 'chrome'? Most are just experimenting. Chronic users tend to have the usual problems of unhappy children: rotten family environments, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts and educational failure. Chroming may be 'to rebel', to dull emotional pain, or just to relieve boredom. There is no necessary link between chroming and offending or antisocial behaviour. For some children, chroming is part of a repertoire of drug usage and an angry, detached, risk-taking

substances. Some areas, such as Western Australia and Victoria's City of Wyndham, have tried a collaborative approach, engaging with distributors and traders to limit the sale of abusable products to children voluntarily. However, these programs suffer from lack of consistency and suspicions that they just 'move the problem along'.

Scheduling and labelling dangerous products is also not likely to be enough: some children would be delighted to read, if they could read (chronic users are likely to be illiterate), that they are confronting death (for example, inhaling butane). Asking manufacturers to change the products so a high is unobtainable is probably also quite useless, as the kids move on to another. There will always be another.

The answer seems to be prevention—which means helping to create resilient children—and taking our duty of care seriously. Berry Street and other end-of-the-line agencies aim to contain the problem by reducing supply, demand and harm. They provide clear messages about disapproval and risk. They remove opportunity. And, at the end of the line, if they cannot stop children 'chroming', they reduce the dangers by seeing that they use less hazardous substances, in less dangerous places, and in 'safer' ways (for example, not spraying directly into the face, or smoking cigarettes at the same time).

People who work with these children say they do not need prohibition or moralising. The workers need a therapeutic capacity to hold and help self-harming kids beyond Victoria's eight secure beds for 21 days. There is no need for new crimes, police crackdowns or adult-oriented drug, detox and psychiatric services. Every child needs a different answer, but each answer requires the time for intensive work to build relationships and save lives long enough for the children to work through some of their issues. Sandie de Wolf says that the critical part is keeping the connections open. 'The best way is to keep them close to us, not push them away.'

The first human right of a child is to life. Media advisers should not be writing this policy, nor should political parties be using it to discredit 'the other side'. ■

Moira Rayner is a barrister and journalist.

such children. These are end-of-the-line services, with only criminal options if they fail. There are virtually no therapeutic secure facilities for unsentenced boys and girls: just eight secure beds in Victoria, for just 21 days. Those beds are not appropriate for chronic chromers; nor are standard drug or detox facilities.

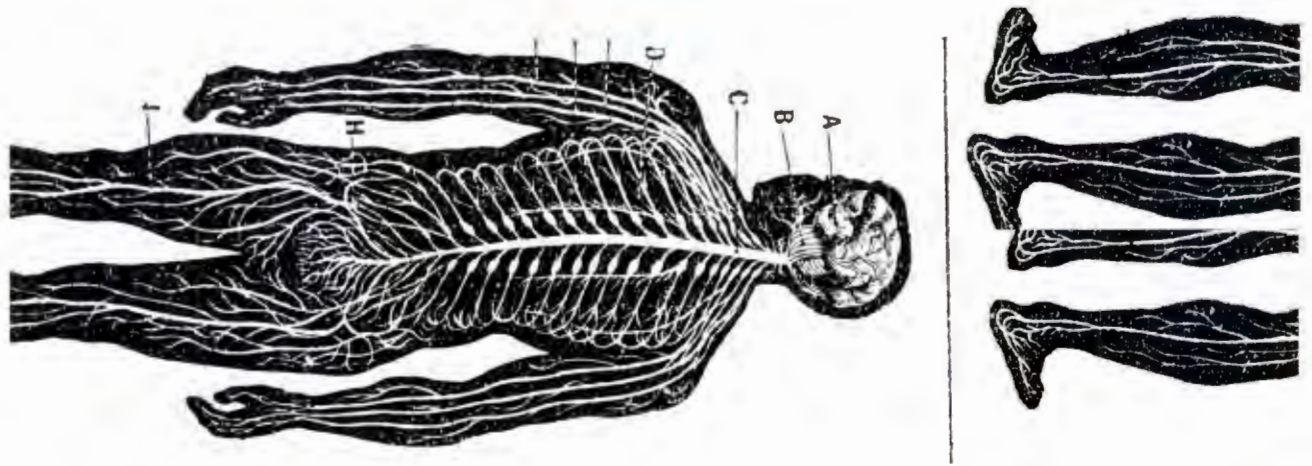
'Chroming' and other inhalant products are cheap and readily available and interchangeable. The high lasts from five to 45 minutes. Inhalant substances are toxic and may cause 'sudden sniffing death' through cardiac arrhythmia or 'freezing' of the throat or larynx. People also die from accidents when they're high and acting irrationally. Yet Victoria had just 44 inhalant-related deaths between 1991 and 2000: 17 were suicides; 13 were 'toxicity' deaths mostly from butane, not paint; the rest were mostly accidents. Intoxicated kids are also likely to be

way of life. For such children, harm-minimisation is essential: they may survive to change, through relationships with reliable, caring adults.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO? Most volatile substances inhaled are 'legal'. We already have laws dealing with intoxication-related offences, child welfare, labelling and restricting the sale of dangerous substances. Misusing them is a child welfare, not criminal, concern. Virtually all those who work with these sad kids don't want a new 'inhaling offence'. Many chroming children already use illegal substances such as cannabis, so adding another won't change much. Criminalising chroming would ensure children wouldn't seek medical help and would burden them with a criminal record.

Legally restricting supplies and distribution, as in the UK, has resulted in children simply sniffing other





Recovery

In the April 2001 edition of *Eureka Street*, **Meg Gurry** wrote about her experience of serious illness following open-heart surgery. The reaction to the article was overwhelming. During the course of the year, she received many calls, letters and emails from people—some of whom she knew, others complete strangers—for whom her thoughts had clearly resonated.

This is her response.

ANY EXTREME EXPERIENCE, as Stephanie Dowrick describes so well, ‘must be hauled in, like a flailing fish at the end of a long line, so that it can be stowed away and eventually integrated’ (*Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*). What I’ve come to see in the past year is that to integrate the experience of serious illness is a challenge, one which many people struggle to achieve. It is also a process for which many patients would like their doctors to take more responsibility—yet a recurring theme throughout my correspondence was dissatisfaction with the system that patients encounter. Is there an irreconcilable gap, I wondered, between what patients seek, and what their doctors can deliver?

For me, the process of recovery so far has taken well over a year. I have been constantly puzzled: if I was ‘better’ and ‘cured’, then why wasn’t I feeling stronger? After all, the heart surgery had been a success, and the incapacitating post-operative infection had long gone. Yet my recovery was slow, new problems kept emerging, and I had lost my emotional balance.

Five months after the surgery, when I was supposedly ‘well’ again, I recognised that I was, if not

depressed, then certainly suffering from an uncharacteristic and persistent melancholy. In *An Unquiet Mind*, a superb book on her own experiences of depression, American professor of psychiatry Kay Redfield Jamison explains how ‘we all build internal sea walls to keep at bay the sadnesses of life and the often overwhelming forces within our minds’. We build these walls ‘stone by stone over a lifetime’. What I felt was that my internal sea walls, the ones around my inner emotional core, had been breached. The metaphorical and the literal began to blur. It was as if the heart surgeon, to reach my mitral valve, had pulled down the ‘stones’ around my heart, but had forgotten to put them back. I felt undefended and exposed. I couldn’t separate myself from pain—my own, other people’s, the world’s—and I had inadequate resources, it seemed, to face each new day with equanimity.

In his novel, *Starting Out in the Evening*, American author Brian Morton ponders the meaning of heart surgery. It takes so long to recover from, he suggests, because it is such a violating assault on the body *and* the spirit. Following the experience of the heart-lung bypass machine, he writes, the body ‘believes it

has died', and is 'in mourning for itself'. Is there something about heart surgery, I wondered, that is intrinsically profound and spiritually unsettling, regardless of outcome? Is it more than a human being can deal with alone, to know that her chest has been sawn open, and her heart—with all of its emotional significance—has literally been stopped from beating; that it has been cut and stitched by strangers?

All these disquieting thoughts troubled my waking hours for months. Whether there is a physiological basis to post-heart-surgery problems, or whether the anxiety operates on another level altogether, is a fascinating area for research. Whatever the explanation, it's now clear to me that the issues needed to be brought out in the open. But, at the time, my thoughts seemed indulgently introspective, and I kept them well buried.

The intensity of that mood did pass but it was disturbing while it lasted, and very preoccupying. I assume I was not very good company during this time. I was then struck down with a number of physical problems. I first had to return to surgery to have my unhealthy gall bladder removed—a consequence, I believe, of my not eating properly for six months. However, the most unsettling problem was that I suffered—in fact still do—from chronic light-headedness. My doctor called it disequilibrium, a good word I thought. I felt often as if I was about to faint; I couldn't walk 100 metres, or eat at a table, without losing my balance. I suffered from tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and frequent migraines. I was constantly tired. Why, I wondered, could I just not 'get over it'?

If I'm honest, I will also acknowledge that being ill brings some advantages, which can be another stumbling block to recovery. Perhaps, at some level, being moderately ill is even addictive. In the early months following my surgery and infection, I worried that I was staying unwell—developing gall-bladder disease, high blood pressure—to sustain a way of being to which I had become used, and, yes, in part was enjoying. Being ill provided a ready justification for moodiness, dependence and inertia—for not doing those things I didn't want to do. It also created a space for more honest, direct engagement with those around me, in ways that were, frankly, very satisfying.

Australian physician Tony Moore has an interesting insight on this point. In a provocative reflection on illness and its aftermath, he argues that the 'selfishness of sickness is a matter of survival'. His memoir, *Cry of the Damaged Man*, is a moving account of his recovery from injuries in an appalling car accident. Physical improvement, he writes, can often be a 'mirage', because it does not always mirror what's happening on the inside. In fact, he says, accident victims can quite consciously 'hold back signs of physical improvement so they match the shorter strides of emotional repair'. I knew my self-absorption was unhealthy—a sign of just how dislocated I had

become—and ultimately self-defeating. Nevertheless, finding the emotional strength to resist its appeal became yet another dimension in the difficult challenge of returning to good health.

I NOW BELIEVE—a year-and-a-half down the track—that the impact of major surgery and illness is taken far too lightly. Many patients, I'm sure, have unrealistic expectations of recovery time, thinking in terms of weeks, instead of months or even years. One of the problems, I believe, is that while acutely ill patients require acute care, and in our medical system usually get it, once the crisis is over, there is an expectation that recovery will automatically follow. It doesn't happen this way. As many of the people who contacted me identified, the crux is the difference between cure and healing.

We are more than the sum total of our bones, tissues, organs and blood. Repairing them is only part of the journey. The mind, the psyche, the soul, the spirit—call it what you will—also has to be returned to some sort of equilibrium. Rediscovering that balance is what recovery and healing, as distinct from cure, are all about. But should we expect people to do this on their own? Put another way, it seems that too many patients—who are either recovering from major illness, or dealing with chronic health concerns—are having to reinvent the ways that others discovered long ago. But it is not until one arrives at that 'other' place, the place Susan Sontag insightfully identified as 'the kingdom of the sick' (*Illness as Metaphor*), that there is a need to learn how to negotiate its pathways. How best, then, to impart this knowledge to those who find themselves at the gates?

Doctors and nurses are, I believe, by their training and experience uniquely well placed to do this. As profound as serious illness may be, it is not an unfathomably complex psychological process. Dealing with it does not call for a new branch of health care. Nor, normally, does it call for the involvement of psychiatrists or psychotherapists, although, if not confronted, it may well do so in the future. What patients—and that includes recovering patients, the chronically and acutely ill—want from their medical staff is actually quite straightforward: they seek communication, empathy and kindness.

First, they want communication that conveys information about their illness, their treatment and



their recovery prospects, in language they can understand, and at a level of detail that is appropriate to their needs at that time. Second, they want an empathetic awareness of the disempowering dimensions of illness, and a sense that the staff around them understand their fear and alienation. Third—and this, I believe, is the most important point, even if it does sound a little mawkish—they want kindness. ‘It is the history of our kindnesses that alone makes this world tolerable’, wrote Robert Louis Stevenson. If this is true even in the world of the well, in the world of the sick the words have even greater resonance.

Is all this too much to ask? I believe not. All patients are different, and each illness is different, but there are, I think, ‘words that work’ for most patients,

lectures on how many things might kill you post-operatively is not good communication. It’s better use of time that is needed, not more of it.

The baby boomers have turned 50. As they age and face more illness—their own and that of their elderly parents—they will deal with their health issues as they have dealt with the other major milestones of their lives: by talking, reflecting and writing about them. And they will demand better communication from their doctors—this is particularly true of baby-boomer women, who have for decades been in the vanguard of changing our culture to one where health concerns and changing bodies are openly discussed. They will not be prepared to suffer in silence and ask no questions, as their more accepting parents did.



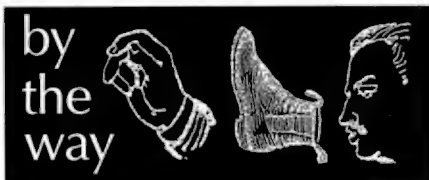
a style of language that could be taught to health professionals as a communication tool, a means of connecting with their patients in more meaningful, empathetic ways than currently occurs. Some three months after my illness, I met, socially, a post-trauma psychologist. I told her that I was having difficulty coming to terms with what had happened to me and was, I felt, unhealthily dislocated by the shock of it all. Her response was immediate: ‘Are you surprised with this?’ Another wise friend counselled me on the need for patience. Such simple responses, yet they helped clarify something fundamental: my journey of healing was predictable and would take time. It was extraordinary what a difference those attentive and straightforward words made.

I don’t believe that sensitive communication need take up any more time than our economically stretched system can currently accommodate. As I discovered after my heart surgery, empathy can be transmitted just as effectively non-verbally as verbally, through human touch or eye contact. Comfort, encouragement and information can be imparted in a few minutes; long and emotionally demanding sessions are not necessary, even if they were affordable. Judging how much information a patient needs is part of doctors’ and nurses’ jobs—long

The medical profession will need to adapt to this changing culture. To what extent they do so will depend on a number of variables. These may range from the boundaries of professional responsibility recognised by the individual practitioner to the priorities embedded in medical culture. Busy doctors with punishing workloads may justifiably be unhappy with the suggestion that their duty of care extends beyond the scientific or the physiological. But I know from my own experience that doctors and nurses have a key, non-scientific, role to play in the healing process. An empathetic, communicative doctor or nurse—and I luckily enjoyed both—can achieve recovery breakthroughs when even the technology seems to be failing.

But such empathy and communication is not universal; nor was it my only experience. It seems that many patients feel there is an unresolved tension between cure and healing—in other words, between science and empathy—in the culture of our medical system. Surely these complementary dimensions of health can co-exist in ways that suit both patients and practitioners? Without demanding that every doctor becomes another Patch Adams, we do need to work out how to do it better. ■

Meg Gurry is a freelance writer.



Suddenly last summer

I CAN'T SAY I'D ACTUALLY *planned* to watch the gymnastics semi-final between Auxerre and Brixe, but it wasn't an entirely random choice either. I think the whole murky business started—as do many fantasies and imbroglios in the southern part of this continent during January—on the beach.

When my already-tanned spouse (Spanish lineage no doubt influencing the bronzed finish) and I (Irish-pale grading towards translucence) took with alacrity to the beach on one of this southern summer's two hot days, we sensibly conceded to our increasing share of the thousand natural ills that flesh is heir to (including an oxymoronic condition called 'normal degeneration'). Accordingly, we were well equipped. Hats, towels, sun cream, books, spare clothes in a carry-bag in case of the predicted change, an Esky with vital reinforcements, and two of those cut-down chairs, the ones with no legs, that sit snugly on the soft sand right up the back near the dunes. And, of course, sunnies—in my case, a pair of thick-winged, chunky-rimmed black orbs whose unmatched tastelessness, I patiently pointed out, would not mitigate their effectiveness if the sun went nova.

Superior in beach craft, I carried the hats, towels, esky, books, sun cream, clothes bag and chairs. Striding on ahead, my adventurous consort found 'our spot' towards which I struggled like one of Burke's irritable, put-upon camels. From the vantage point thus staked out, we could, as they say in *On the Road*, dig the beach.

Two things immediately commanded my attention. The first was that the broad sweep of white shore curving away from us into a haze of surf and dazzle was covered with blue tents. These nifty little igloo-shaped structures assume their predestined form when given a nudge and a twist or two and then provide transitory entertainment for the kids who are actually allowed to pack large dollops of sand into the lower lining. This cunning use of available natural resources not only anchors the tent against unfriendly breezes but also, by actually legitimising the collection and distribution of sand in the close vicinity of adults, postpones for an hour or two that inevitable moment when the kids start chucking it at each other and anyone else within range.

Unlike the beach umbrella, which provides airy shade but no privacy, these dinky domes are dark and confining. They are for sun-haters, crusaders against the melanoma culture. It is a curiosity of these bulbous little boltholes that those who set them up, having admired their handiwork and seen that it is good, then sit outside them. It is only the aged, the newborn or, occasionally, young nubile and viriles tortured by beach-engendered tumescence, who inhabit the inner darkness. But what the igloo accomplishes above all—far more trenchantly than spread towels, esky fortifications, or even umbrellas—is

to announce territory. Australians regard their bit of beach with the same proprietorial seriousness as they once did the quarter-acre block.

The other phenomenon that caught my eye—an achievement in itself given the opacity of my glasses and the verandah-like reach of my hat brim—was that in the three or four nearby games of beach cricket, almost all of the diminutive bowlers were delivering leg breaks off a casual, half-walking run up. (Their fathers, to a man, favoured ripping in short-pitched ribburners until the burden of the years and fading memories of their glory days dictated a gentler trajectory—usually after about three balls. Knee-high little sisters, meanwhile, avenging decades of exile at deep fine leg, plied the sand-hugging, unhittable nemesis of New Zealand.)

THIS BENIGN SCENE—dominated at one end of the age spectrum by the latest in beach shelter design and at the other end by the larrikin genius of Shane Warne—would surely not turn savage, I idly mused, if a boatload of half-drowned refugees rounded the point and limped towards the shore? Hard to imagine, yet ...

Philosophic torpor became sleep and I dreamed a ramshackle dhow overladen with half-drowned refugees rounded the point and limped towards the shore, whereupon bathers, sun-worshippers, cricketers and igloo troglodytes lined up at the water's edge and, chanting 'Our land is girt by sea', waved the interlopers off their territory. The no doubt venal Captain of the dhow shouted, 'Rheady about' and the sad vessel turned away from the land of the fair go. On board, child terrorists who had never played beach cricket sobbed as the shore receded. And I woke from this nightmare—as we all wish we could—with a severe pain in the lower back engendered by my little chair and, surely, the lack of a dark retreat in which occasionally to stretch the spine.

That was how I came to be recumbent, stuffed with anti-inflammatories and watching the Eurosport semi-final of the gymnastics between Auxerre and Brixe, having tragically succumbed at a time when there was neither tennis nor cricket to be had on the box. Domestically, my plight attracted a stunning lack of sympathy, and I soon abandoned the couch of pain in favour of moping round the garden with the dog who knew only one emotion where I was concerned—unalloyed adoration.

Auxerre won, in case you're interested. According to the commentary, their gymnasts achieved 'good push' and 'bench spring' whereas the leapers and bouncers of Brixe 'lacked vault torque' at critical moments—as occasionally one does: there's no denying it. ■

Brian Matthews is a writer and academic.

RELIGION, 11, A AGAINST

THE WORLD
ROWAN IRELAND

EARLY IN OCTOBER, the *New York Times* reported a well-travelled Texas businessman complaining about continuing laxity at airports. 'They got Islamics out at the airport security check-ins, talking to each other in Arabic. Tell me the sense of that?'

The sense he made of September 11 and the new war was that the former was an attack by religious Islamic terrorists, of a kind easily identifiable because they spoke Arabic. And the war on terrorism was a religious war, at least in the sense that the enemy was Islamic—a real cause for dismay in the United States, given that the number of American Muslims, estimated at as high as six million, now outnumbers American Jews.

George W. Bush disagrees with his fellow Texan some of the time, and precisely on the latter point. The enemy is not Islam, he argued in his well-received address to Congress, but a secular distortion of it by terrorists who 'by abandoning every value except the will to power ... follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism'.

On the other hand, the war on terrorism has a religious character on *our* side, the president seems to be saying. 'Our war on terrorism has nothing to do with difference in faith', but 'freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war. And we know that God is not

neutral among them.' In other words, the US, with its allies, is fighting evil, with God on 'our' side.

A small minority of commentators has begged to differ with both Texans. In letters to the editor and articles in upper-band US newspapers, one line of commentary reduces the religious factor to mere rhetoric used to legitimate acts of war waged for non-religious ends, and to mobilise popular support for acts of war. Another line downgrades the importance of religion in accounts of the origins of conflict and the motivations of protagonists, without quite discounting it. In some accounts, September 11 and its aftermath become another chapter in the international politics of oil, in which the central theme is the realpolitik involved in maintaining the flow of Middle Eastern oil needed to satisfy America's 'oil glut-tony'. In others, the religious dynamics of the conflict are displaced in a grand narrative of economic, and to a lesser extent, cultural globalisation and its discontents.

Take out old and new conflicts between and within the Abrahamic religions, take away the particular religious motivations of the young men and ageing mullahs who wage jihad or crusade, and one can still expect suicide bombers and the barbarities of high-tech retaliation—that's what the reduce-religion-to-size

accounts suggest. And they have a point.

Consider the oil story, which can easily subsume the others. Start with the US, whose oil imports, mainly from the Middle East, cost US\$250 billion annually when federal subsidies and health and environmental costs are added to the money paid for the oil itself. That's the dollar value of an addiction that leads the US to consume 25 per cent of the world's annual oil production, though it has only four per cent of present effective reserves. In the name of ensuring regular supply at affordable prices, it underwrites corrupt Arab autocracies, including both the largest producers, like Saudi Arabia, and the non-producers with a key role in Middle Eastern politics, like Egypt. The economic policies, and indeed the economies, of those autocracies are different, but they have this in common: they produce increasingly large numbers of disaffected, often highly qualified young males who have nowhere to go in their home economies, and no institutional means of struggling for change. They become enforced cosmopolitans: many abroad as students or migrant workers; others at home, learning to think of their local plight in global terms.

At this point religion comes into the story, but as a secondary factor that is not necessary to the denouement. Our enforced cosmopolitans discover for

WAR

TERRORISM

themselves, or have pointed out to them, the full costs levied by McWorld. They must abandon their old-world Islamic values and identity without any guarantee of a secure place in the new world; they must endure permanent second-class citizenship, curiously akin to their status at home under regimes armed and defended by the US. Then, prepared by despair and anger in the face of the symbols of the West that is engulfing them, and perhaps some self-hatred for compromises already made, they discover meaning and a satisfying channel for formerly diffuse anger in an alternative cosmopolitanism—that of the transnational Islamic brotherhoods, including latterly the al Qaeda network, and their jihads. The minority who become militants fight variously for Palestinian statehood, the purification of deviant compromised Islamic governments defined as un-Islamic, or, with eyes fixed on its central symbol and guarantee in the US, against the oppressive and corrosive West. But as they engulf themselves in these struggles, they become ciphers of the cruel logics of war, and realpolitik, to the extent that the religious, Islamic middle of the story becomes irrelevant to the final outcome. As guerrillas or human bombs they become indistinguishable from the Black Tigers of Sri Lanka or the Japanese kamikazes of

World War II, whatever might be their residual, particular Islamic motivations.

The gist of this sort of story is quite secular. At beginning and end, secular processes and motivations, with perhaps a bit of religious combustible material thrown in, provide the explanations for inexplicable horror in New York and Washington. And a similar secular story is told about the ensuing war on terrorism, initiated by and directed from the US—a story about the forging of alliances, the choice of strategies, and the course of the war itself. That story leaves no room for President Bush's 'fighting evil with God on our side'. Rather, it locates September 11 as an escalation of a war in which transnational terrorism and the international US-dominated anarchy of the global market feed off one another.

BUT THE EXCLUSIVELY secular stories about September 11 and the war occlude too much—the religious roots of jihad and crusade, religion in the stories of the terrorists themselves, religion in the interpretations of September 11 and reactions to it, on all sides. The exclusively secular story leaves us puzzling about the driving passions so evident not only in the suicide murderers but also in those fighting the ensuing war and those supporting it. If we want to understand

September 11 and the war, the religious factor demands more attention than it gets in the purely secular stories.

This is so if only because for millions of Muslims (though certainly not for all) the war of attack, and now of resistance, against the US is a holy war, and Osama bin Laden and the suicide murderers are saints of Islam. Further, on the Islamic side, present events are construed as incidents in a long, at times warlike, struggle within Islam and about the very fate of Islam in the modern world. When bin Laden presents himself on videotapes as a holy man—successfully it seems—he is tapping into a minority Islamic tradition with a wide following and a deep history. There was, for example, Sayyid Qutb and his battle against General Nasser; and Qutb was wont to compare his struggle with Ibn Taymuyya's struggles against the Mongol barbarians centuries before. In that purported tradition, bin Laden is identifiable as a holy rebel fulfilling his Islamic duty by fighting against rulers (especially those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia) who have abandoned true Islam. These rulers, making their peace with the West, albeit in different ways and degrees, have opened the gates to the extinguishment of Islam by Western culture, which in its plural idolatries, moral licentiousness and secular governance, is the equivalent of

jahiliyya, the barbarism that existed before Islam and which always threatens to overcome it.

Leaders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (a splinter of which became the backbone of al Qaeda) and the Islamic Brotherhoods, and many of the mullahs in the mosques and madrasas of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, propagate and act in the name of this tradition. They have been able to preach a persuasive message to those who are poor and/or institutionally marginalised. The message is: Satan is doing this to you, and he is able to prevail here because our rulers are delivering us, culturally and economically (Egypt) or by military alliance (Saudi Arabia, especially during the Gulf War), to the rulers of Satan's Kingdom, America. Though far from poor, both the Egyptian Mohamed Atta (probably the only one of the suicide murderers to know exactly what was planned for September 11) and his Arabian mentor, Osama bin Laden, were formed in this variant of Islam and have become its latest heroes.

Their predecessor heroes over the last 20 years of political Islam have fought, and often died, in a series of attempts to dispose of Islamic rulers deemed to have turned infidel. Most famous was the success of the Shi'ite version of political Islam in the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979. The Saudi ruling family was challenged by the 1979 seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque by militants espousing the same Wahabi version of Sunni Islam that the royal family underwrites in mosques and madrasas around the world. Islamic militants helped in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1981. In 1993 Egyptian Islamic Jihad members attempted to assassinate first the Interior minister (using a suicide bomber) and then the prime minister (with a car bomb). And in 1995 a truck bomb was crashed into the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan.

These acts of war have all been prosecuted in countries in which Islam is in some sense the established religion but in which the conflicts at the heart of Islam cannot be addressed, let alone resolved openly through non-violent conflict. Elsewhere (including in India, which lays claim to the world's second largest Muslim population, and in the US) the conflicts are evident, and have been sharpened in the aftermath of

September 11, but are generally addressed non-violently. In the US, when Sheik Hanya Yussuf, a high-profile white convert to Islam, calls on American Muslims in the wake of September 11 to develop 'a new language that doesn't compromise the core truths, but at the same time doesn't incite more madness', he is challenging Muslims who speak the old language. When Dr Agha Saeed, chairman of the American Muslim Alliance, declares that September 11 just makes more urgent the quest 'to understand ourselves in America as Muslims', he is aware that there are some mosques that want to remain insulated from any engagement with the American way of life. These too are small indicators of a war within Islam—albeit war fought by other means—about modernity and citizenship in religiously pluralistic societies.

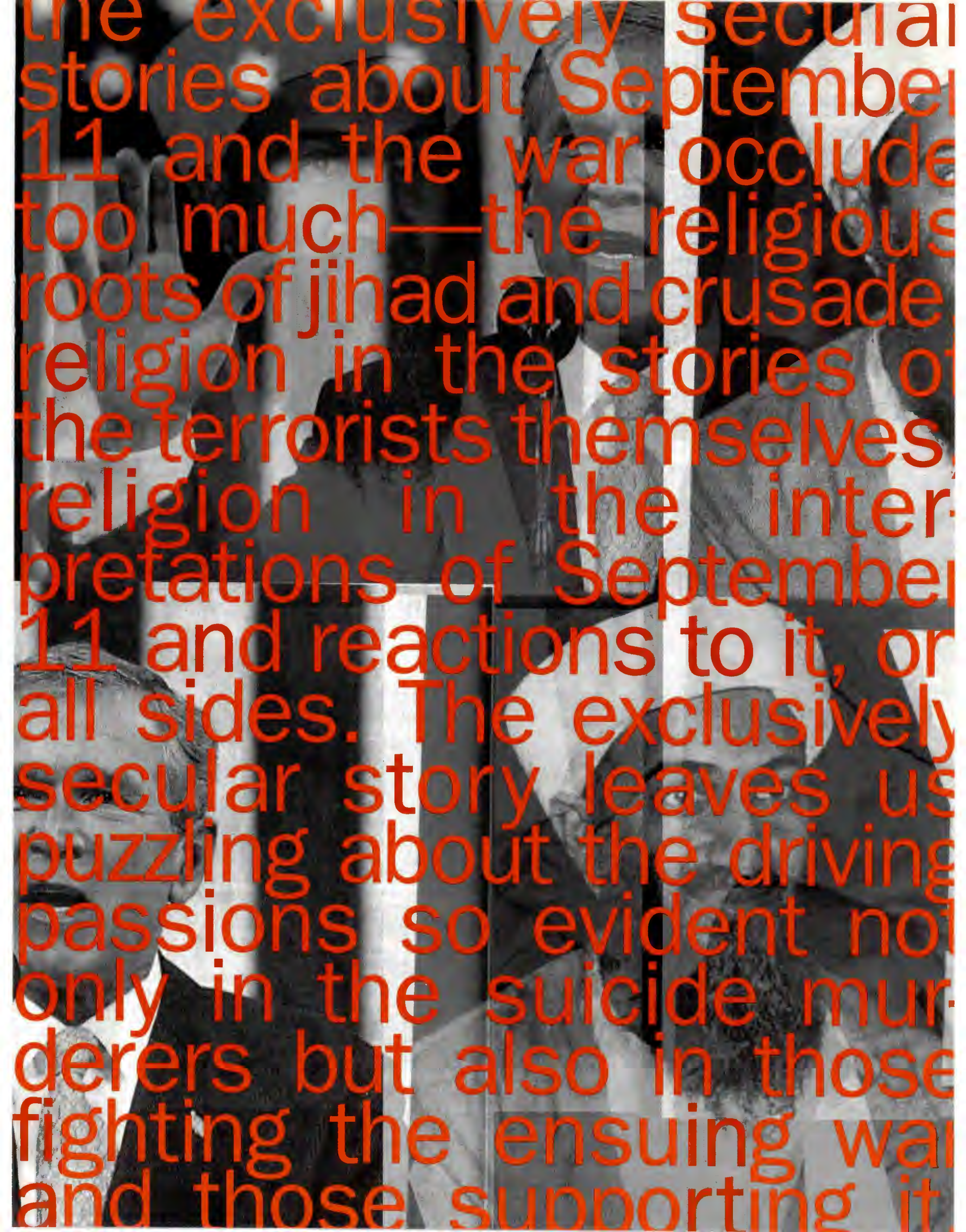
In some instances the trope of war may become sadly more apt as the wider conflict unfolds. Abdul Haqq Bakr, the chairman of the Brixton mosque and Islamic centre in London (once frequented by Abdel Rahim, who attempted to blow up a plane with explosives hidden in his shoes), tells a story of escalating tension between Islamic centres preaching and recruiting for political Islam and more moderate mosques like his own. 'They think we're not living in the real world, because the real world as far as they're concerned is terrorism in the name of Islam,' Mr Bakr told a reporter. 'They hate us with a vengeance. If you hear tomorrow that someone threw a firebomb into the Brixton mosque, non-Muslims should be the last people you should suspect.' (*New York Times*, 27 December 2001) For many Muslims in Britain, Germany and France, this is the real war that surrounds September 11, the war which gives that day its meaning in their lives.

Note that even as we put the religious factor back into the analysis of the Islamic 'side' of the conflict, we do not find some sort of pure spiritual Islam, operating in a hermetically sealed, timeless religious sphere. Islam figures in the September 11 story, as all religious traditions figure in history, conflicted internally and inflected by local culture and political-economic circumstance. That is not to concede, however, that the variant of radical, violent political Islam is a mutant form, a political distortion

parading as Islam for political ends. Some Muslim leaders, particularly in the US, have argued along these lines, rather as Catholic apologists have argued, with increasing implausibility, that anti-Semitism was not linked to the central myths and defining symbols of European Catholicism. Arguably, violent, fundamentalist, political Islam has been constructed in a space opened up by the Qur'anic revelation that Islam presupposes. And its home there, right in the conflicted heart of Islam, helps explain the motivating and mobilising power that political Islam has had for the last three decades in the Islamic world.

September 11, viewed from within that world, appears as an event in a long religious war within Islam—a defining moment, in that it takes the war into the heartland of the Great Satan. On the simple criterion that the character of an event or a whole war is in great part indicated by its meaning to its protagonists, then indeed on the Islamic side this is a religious war. If there is any doubt, it should be dispelled by a viewing of the recently released videotape of Osama bin Laden chatting with friends in Afghanistan. There is one moment in that record of banality that should alert us to the irreducibly religious dimension of September 11 for bin Laden himself, for those who think of him as a warrior saint, and even for those who define their Muslim identity in opposition to the fundamentalist political Islam he so dramatically represents.

It is only one moment in that rambling home video. Boasting about his part in mass murder, bin Laden could be just as President Bush depicted him, another secular totalitarian, ruthless in the pursuit of power for power's sake. Preening at the report of the 'very positive' reactions to September 11 in the mosques of Saudi Arabia, he is, like any leader who has ordered slaughter, anxious to be told that the faithful masses think he has done the right thing. The defining section comes after bin Laden's wandering domestic chatter turns to talk about dreams and visions and how they show that Allah is on side. Suddenly, boasting, anxious giggles and reports of the everyday are left aside as idle talk is transmuted in religious ritual. Murder, and the suffering of war on both sides, are reduced to irrelevance before the march of Islam.



the exclusively secular stories about September 11 and the war occlude too much—the religious roots of jihad and crusade religion in the stories of the terrorists themselves, religion in the interpretations of September 11 and reactions to it, on all sides. The exclusively secular story leaves us puzzling about the driving passions so evident not only in the suicide murderers but also in those fighting the ensuing war and those supporting it.

Osama bin Laden, and all who are with him, become sanctified in history. 'I was ordered to fight the people until they say there is no God but Allah and his prophet Muhammed,' bin Laden intones. At that moment, he writes himself and his war into holy writ.

IT IS A LITTLE harder to argue for the religious character of the West's war on terrorism. The Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was soundly repudiated by Western religious and political leaders when, sounding like a Christian version of an Islamic fundamentalist mullah, he urged Europe to 'reconstitute itself on the basis of its Christian roots' as it went into war. Returning to those roots, according

If we want to understand September 11 and the war, the religious factor demands more attention than it gets in the purely secular stories.

to Berlusconi, involved trust in the supremacy of Christian values which had brought prosperity and respect for human rights, and an acknowledgment that the West was bound by its essential Christianity to 'occidentalise and conquer'.

Retractions of the kind that Berlusconi was forced to make were also forced on Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, well-known leaders of the American religious right, when they went public with a rather different Christian take on the challenge of September 11. On Pat Robertson's TV show, *The 700 Club*, two days after September 11, Falwell declared:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians ... the ACLU [the American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularise America—I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'

And Pat Robertson concurred, enthusiastically. The subsequent retractions and qualifications, demanded not only by political leaders of secular, pluralistic states but by prominent religious leaders as well, might suggest that neither September 11 nor the war on terrorism have much in the way of religious meaning in the West. But there is considerable evidence to the contrary, at

least in the US. Despite retractions by Falwell and Robertson, the 'dominion theology' that they, and millions of signed-up followers of the 'Robertsonised Right', subscribe to provides ready interpretations and justifications for the war.

On the domestic scene, that theology, grounded in Genesis 1:27, calls for power in Washington to pass from the ungodly to those who have the right and the obligation to power because they are God's people. The latter should 'take dominion' over all the major institutions and run them until Christ comes again. Pat Robertson, in his book *The New World Order: It Will Change the Way You Live*, declares: 'There never will be peace until God's house and God's people

are given their rightful place of leadership at the top of the world.' Thus it has been easy to pass from Washington to the

whole world and add political Islamists and sympathisers to the line-up of those who are presently on top and should be removed. The list is long, and specific: 'drunkards, communists, atheists, New Age worshippers of Satan, secular humanists, oppressive dictators, greedy moneychangers, revolutionary assassins, adulterers and homosexuals.'

Robertson has just retired as leader of the Christian Coalition, but he retires as the most influential kingmaker in the Republican Party over the last 20 years, and perhaps the most important religious shaper of the American political agenda ever. It would be a mistake to conclude that the meaning most Americans give to September 11 could be read out of 'dominion theology'; but it would also be a mistake to ignore evidence that the war is invested with a wide range of religious meanings in the US. To those who locate acts of war in New York, Washington and Afghanistan in the longer war for the dominion of the righteous, add those who see signs therein of impending Apocalypse (happy booksellers count them in the hundreds of thousands). To those who have been thronging churches, synagogues and mosques seeking comfort and assurance, add those who debate the religious ethics of the war, its religious character and its implications for religious pluralism on campuses and in

internet exchanges (www.sojo.net has been an important and extraordinarily crowded site).

Nobody knows what the numbers are. But there is no doubting that millions of Americans frame September 11 and the war in religious terms—that is, as a war against Islamic fundamentalists. They have had their religious beliefs and identities activated and placed on the line since September 11, and have chosen to express and cope with their tribulation in religious rituals. They have been stirred to review, for themselves and for others, the ambiguities involved in being citizens of a particular religious persuasion in a religiously plural, secular republic.

These various ways in which the war is perceived and experienced point to one central religious issue for Americans in the war: what is the right relationship between the private life of citizens in everyday life, their religious beliefs and practices, and their government?

Andrew Sullivan, in a much-quoted article (*New York Times Magazine*, 10 October 2001), argued that the war is a religious war against fundamentalist Islam, that it is a war for religious freedom and in defence of the American Constitution's separation of politics and religion: 'We are fighting for the universal principles of our Constitution—and the possibility of free religious faith it guarantees. We are fighting for religion against one of the deepest strains in religion there is' (that is, the strain of the demand for the absolute certainty of truth and the demand that all worthy citizens must believe and practise that truth). That deepest strain was exemplified in the Taliban government which, in the name of a Sunni version of absolute Qur'anic truth, required and policed uniform belief and practice. It is further exemplified in al Qaeda, which would abolish religious freedom and substitute theocracy for secular democracy around the world.

We can agree with Sullivan, but go further. Where he sees that religious freedom and its guarantees are at issue between Americans on one side and al Qaeda and the Taliban on the other, we can see them newly at issue since September 11 in America itself. Over the last four months we have seen a sort of liberal American orthodoxy about

religion, the private citizen and government, invoked against not only Taliban theocracy but also its milder version in American dominion theology. (These liberals were already mobilised before September 11, taking issue with the Bush administration's push to hand over the administration of federally funded social services to religious agencies.) In the classical American liberal tradition, religious freedom can be guaranteed in the modern world only when there is strict separation of church and state, when the state itself is secular and does not intervene in the religious sphere, and when religious belief and practice are as privatised as possible, with minimal incursions into the public realm.

In the name of the latter provision, some liberals have criticised leaders of various mainstream churches (for example, Boston's Cardinal, Bernard Law) for making public statements expressing positions on the war. The attacks on the leaders have been not so much against the positions taken as against ecclesiastical trespass into the realm of public policy. But the major antagonists of the classical liberals have been fundamentalists of Christian, Jewish or Muslim provenance. To them, classical liberals impute manipulation of state agencies or, conversely, denial of the legitimacy of elected governments, in the pursuit of confessional ends.

September 11 has contributed to the very public re-emergence of yet another contested position about religious freedom and its guarantees in the US. Ranged against both fundamentalist and classical liberal positions is the point of view that religious freedom, and American democracy itself, is best nurtured and guaranteed when Americans of very different religious persuasions engage in public debate, not only about their religious differences, but about public policy and its moral dimensions. This is the position for public religion. Its proponents see it working at two moments, which may be separated only for heuristic purposes. In the first, religiously committed citizens, empowered by the confidence of their faiths but eschewing the closure of absolute certainty, seek understanding through their lifetimes in public conversations with the religious and non-religious other. In the second, the public space opened up by religious

conversations becomes space for the exercise of pluralistic democracy. In those spaces, pilgrim believers become 'pilgrim citizens ... connected critics ... persons committed to the fundamental ideals of democracy, yet able to see the shortcomings of any particular democratic regime' (Ronald F. Thiemann, 'Public Religion: Bane or Blessing for Democracy', in Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Democracies*, p85).

Public religion is not to be confused with what is called American civil religion. Indeed, in the present conflict, pilgrim citizens have found themselves at odds with fervent civil religionists who invest American institutions, including the presidency and the armed forces, with an aura of sacred light. For civil religionists, support for president and country comes before public debate in time of war.

IF THERE IS ANY good news for watchers of American democracy since September 11, it lies in the profuse evidence, displayed in the quality media, that many Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders have been preaching and practising this public religion—in some instances well before the terrible day (for example, in the Industrial Areas Foundation network). (See www.tresser.com/IAF.htm, and Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2001.) The practice of public religion in the US continues a long tradition in which grassroots religious associations and federations help to revitalise American democracy—a tradition forever at odds with its contrary, the generation in local religious communities of profoundly antidemocratic organisations like the Ku Klux Klan.

The point for now, though, is not to establish connections between public religion and American democracy. It is rather to note two things. First, that contested views and practices relating to the triad of religion, citizenship and the state are core concerns for many Americans. And second, that these core concerns have been activated by September 11 and the war. In this way, to quote Andrew Sullivan, 'the religious dimension of this conflict is central to

its meaning'—but not only to Islamic combatants on one side, and American political society as a whole on the other, as Sullivan argues. Rather, within America, the religious dimension of the conflict is central to those Americans already contesting what it is to be at once a person of particular religious faith in a religiously plural society, and an engaged citizen of a secular democracy. For those Americans espousing public religion, or a variant of theocracy, or a religiously inflected version of classical liberalism, the meaning of the war is found by locating it in American conflicts of long standing.

So, on the American as on the Islamic 'side', the war invokes internal religious conflicts, adding depth and some validation to the claim that this is a religious war. But establishing that religious meanings are given to the war and constituent conflicts, provides no basis for the claim that September 11 and the Afghanistan campaign are acts in what is *only* a religious war. Indeed the detail and dynamics of the religious conflicts noted here can only be understood on the basis of an acknowledgment that religious belief and practice and conflict are always incarnate, enmeshed in political, social, economic and psychological aspects of human reality.

There is a messy dialectics in which the big players in the political economy of oil make plausible the messages of religious hate taught in mosques and madrasas in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, France and Germany. Religious motivations on all sides are submerged in realpolitik and the cruel logic of war, but at the same time the energies and grand strategies for politics and warfare appear to grow out of considerations of sacred history and sacred place. Just as weaponry and rival modes of organisation and communication appear to be decisive factors in a secular war, so the religious character of the war, within and between the 'sides', becomes more salient, and terms of comparative advantage fluctuate.

Until we decipher such riddles in open and public discussion, in Islam and in the West, there can be no peace. ■

Rowan Ireland was on overseas research leave at Harvard on September 11. He has just returned to the sociology and anthropology program at La Trobe University.

Old Friend

i.m. Graham Little

Virgilian, Dantesque,
down through this languorous heat
the first platoon of yellow leaves
are drifting from laggard English elms
into the very street
where we last walked.

You were the wonderful talker,
famous for your measured rhythms
and curiously gentle diagonals
(inaudible from the table's wrong end)
but your starry voice has fallen
into the long quiet.

Autumn's hot doorstep
tripped you up, even though at table,
and party tables all over thinky Melbourne
are going to miss from now on
the stayer, the sociable analyst:
our deeply original voice.

Interested in everything,
imbued with both Belfast and Hampstead,
you once met Denis Compton.
You lived above any cliché,
could see our leaders as human
and lucidly tell us why.

Tolerance and indignation,
you knew, could stroll together:
'The water in the glass is muddy,
but is not mud,' you agreed,
at home in the loving world
of all who will miss you now.

At Sixes and Sevens

What lies under the lid
of that much-dented saucepan
on top of the stove?
Old risotto gone beige, meanwhile
restless quinces rock in a bowl
and those belated bananas
go soft,
back on the quintessential table
with crumbs and one lonely spoon.

Where on earth
did the primal stories go
and who ate the past?

Neither chilli powder, salt
nor the bright yellow quinces
will tell us at all:
on this agreeable planet, food
must own another language altogether
without clauses

but now we have a visitor
bringing a sturdy bag of lemons.

A Language of the Eye

We gaze and wonder what colours mean,
apricot, amber, cool aquamarine.

Pleasing, they will not point a moral:
vermilion, violet, royalblue, coral.

From these you fashion whatever you can,
bronze, turquoise, tangerine, tan.

Sunrise may tell us roughly what's to come,
primrose, saffron, rust and plum,

blushing like the soft cheek of a girl
in rose madder, crimson, honey, pearl.

And I might offer, in tune with love,
cornflower, lavender, jade and mauve;

then evening tucks our hopes away,
amethyst, burnt sienna ... grey.

I can't resolve what our perceptions mean:
olive, cinnabar, ginger, green.

Blood matters

We have always responded powerfully to blood, whether in a literal or symbolic sense—think of blood brothers, menstrual blood and ‘blue’ blood. This response runs deep, even when the extraction and transfer of blood has become a routine part of modern bio-medical practice. Little wonder then, that blood donation in the era of HIV/AIDS should be so complicated.

ONE OF THE MANY paradoxes of last year’s federal election was that the most powerful speech of the campaign was Kim Beazley’s concession on the night of 10 November, in which he set out a vision for a generous Australia:

Like any nation there are bleak angels in our nature, but there are also good angels as well. And the task and challenge for those of us in politics is to bring out the soul of the ordinary Australia—that generosity of heart, so that we as a nation turn to each other in the circumstances which we face ... [And] there’s no doubt at all that a sense of generosity and security, the sense of generosity in the hearts of an average citizen, often starts with a sense of security at home. And if they do not feel a sense of security, then their capacity to feel generosity is often marred. (*The Age*, 12 November 2001)

Listening to this speech was in one sense profoundly disappointing. It showed there had been an opportunity—or rather an opportunity lost—for an election campaign that spoke to our potential for generosity as well as for bleaker possibilities. Yet it was also fascinating, because it revealed the rationale behind Beazley’s stance on refugees and behind his campaign strategies more generally: that our capacity for generosity is often dependent upon feeling secure, the implication being that security concerns should precede generosity.

Security and generosity are surely interrelated, but does generosity need to come out of a sense of security? Thinking about this in the post-election days, I turned to Richard Titmuss, the English sociologist who passionately argued the reverse case—that our capacity for security is often dependent upon generosity. Titmuss’ most famous case study was of blood banking, a sector closely associated with the

generosity of voluntary blood donors and with recent disease threats to the safety, and thus security, of the blood supply.

Titmuss believed that the generosity of voluntary donors secured the safety of the blood supply (as much as was possible) and led to further acts of generosity. This has been generally true for Australia; Australian blood banks have developed both a meritorious record of blood safety (they were first in the world to screen all donated blood for hepatitis B) and a culture of passing the generosity of blood donors on to recipients and back to donors. But this culture of generosity has been challenged in recent years by the crises associated with the threat of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C (among others) to the safety of the blood supply.

The response of Australia’s blood banks to these crises is noteworthy for two reasons. First, their response sheds light on the possibilities for generosity in the face of a crisis, and what might ground such generosity. Second, Australian blood banking is at a crossroads, in need of a viable vision for the future.

AT SUCH TIMES it is useful to look at the history. The recent Review of the Australian Blood Banking and Plasma Product Sector, chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen, attempted to provide a vision for the future, but its recommendations say little about the



long-standing culture of generosity within Australia's blood banks, nor does it provide clear directions for decision-making in time of crisis.

Since their beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s, the Australian blood banks have structured themselves around the giving—the gift—of blood. They called it 'sharing life's best gift' (a statement that might trouble some theologians). The blood banks were dependent on the generosity of local volunteers,

and grew into strongly autonomous institutions resembling professional charities, frequently marked by the character of their directors (as Mark Cortiula shows in his comprehensive history of the NSW Blood Bank, *Banking on Blood: A History of the New South Wales Transfusion Service*).

When Richard Titmuss argued that the voluntary gift of blood made blood banking special, part of a 'moral economy' that encouraged people to be generous to strangers in need (see *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, 1970), he was articulating what Australian blood banks had always believed—that voluntary donations lent blood banking an additional moral dimension. His book was celebrated by policy-makers and the public alike. (See box opposite for more on Titmuss.)

For Australia's blood banks this moral dimension was reflected in their expressions of gratitude to donors, in their provision of free transfusions of blood to those in need, and in their obsession with the health and safety of recipients and donors. The gift of blood was thus the foundation stone for Australia's blood banks. It took the advent of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s to reveal, publicly, the vulnerability of this structure.

Like all new disease threats, HIV/AIDS initially caused uncertainty. It was unclear what it was, what measures should be taken to limit its spread through the blood supply, or what measures were needed to care for potentially infected donors and recipients. The traditional, autonomous responses of Australian blood banks to such uncertainty—that is, largely independent policy development by autonomous organisations—failed, in the eyes of many, to safeguard the blood supply effectively against HIV/AIDS. Different blood banks responded at different times and in differing ways. On a national level it was unclear who had final responsibility for policy development and implementation, and how such policies were to be developed.

Despite the fact that Australian blood banks had been among the first in the world to initiate HIV-screening for all donations and to request that those at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS defer donating

blood, their viability was at risk. 'AIDS in the blood supply' became front-page news. Public confidence in the safety of the Australian blood supply was shattered, donor numbers fell and some infected recipients initiated litigation.

In order to survive, Australia's blood banks, together with the Commonwealth government, turned to pharmaceutical models of risk management. The manufacture of blood products became nationally regulated under the Therapeutic Goods Administration Act (which governs the manufacture and licensing of pharmaceutical products). All possible risks were identified and quantified, and appropriate management strategies were developed.

With unsafe donations threatening their existence, the blood banks remodelled themselves. From being professional charity organisations they became something more akin to pharmaceutical companies, and the gift of blood, now seen by some as a high-risk product, was regulated as if it were a commodity.

Where did this crisis leave the long-standing culture of generosity that had built up around Australia's voluntary blood donors? The answer can be found in the response of Australia's blood banks and governments to the threat of hepatitis C.

THE DISCOVERY OF HEPATITIS C—a blood-borne virus that can lead to serious liver disease—and the development of screening tests at the end of the 1980s presented Australia's blood banks with the chance to test their new risk-management practices and see whether they could avert the loss of confidence in the blood supply and the kind of litigation associated with HIV/AIDS.

Because of HIV/AIDS, the health of transfusion recipients had become linked to the institutional and functional viability of the Australian blood banks. In the business-oriented language of risk management, the health of recipients could be seen as a 'key performance indicator' of blood banks. If recipients became infected, public confidence in the blood supply might fall and recipients might initiate litigation. Blood banks and governments were therefore keen to develop a testing strategy that minimised the risks of hepatitis C infection to recipients as much as was practicable. They therefore 'deferred' all donors with indeterminate results (that is, results that were neither clearly positive nor negative), even when it became clear subsequently that many individuals with indeterminate results were unlikely to be infected with hepatitis C.

This policy development was much more uniform than policy had been for HIV/AIDS. A joint meeting of blood-bank officials and federal and state/territory government representatives took clear responsibility for securing the safety of the Australian blood supply against the threat of hepatitis C. Policy



was developed in line with risk-management philosophy and its attendant caution and risk aversion. As a result of such national agreement, in early 1990 Australia became just the second country to screen all blood donations for hepatitis C. Confusion still remained, however, over who was to develop policy regarding the care of potentially infected donors and recipients, and how this policy should be developed.

No extra government resources were available for the management of these donors. But blood banks were concerned—and enterprising. The Victorian Blood Bank formed a link with hepatitis experts at St Vincent's Hospital and other local medical institutions. Potentially infected donors were assessed and cared for by a range of local experts in gastroenterology, epidemiology and virology. Through this process the Victorian Blood Bank was able to ensure that 'deferred' donors could be confident in the interpretation of their test results and would receive expert care and treatment if need be. In addition, gastroenterologists and,

later, virologists and epidemiologists, were able to develop further knowledge of hepatitis C and the new test—expertise that laid a foundation for the development of a Victorian and national hepatitis C strategy.

Australian blood banks were also concerned about the health of infected recipients. They felt a moral obligation to try to locate transfusion recipients known to have received blood potentially infected with hepatitis C. Experience of similar programs with HIV/AIDS suggested that a so-called 'lookback' program for hepatitis C would be expensive and inefficient (tracing blood transfusions involved working through mountains of paperwork; also, a large proportion of recipients were likely to have died from unrelated causes before they were located). There were not the resources to fund such large-scale programs and a National Health and Medical Research Council sub-committee decided that the costs would outweigh the benefits. It was not until 1994 that the federal government, under intense media scrutiny, reversed this decision, and announced that extending

Richard Titmuss

Known as the 'high priest of the welfare state', Richard M. Titmuss was born in 1907 into a family of farmers. An imaginative autodidact, he finished his formal education at 14 and became a qualified bookkeeper. But he was able to educate himself further through public libraries—an experience that led him to believe that public institutions could help people overcome the disadvantages of birth and circumstances and fostered a passion for making such opportunities available to all.

Animated by the social and political interests of his wife, Kathleen Caston Miller, Titmuss began writing. In 1938 he published his first book, *Poverty and Population*. He soon began focusing on health care and was commissioned to write the official World War II history of the Ministry of Health (published as *Problems of Social Policy*, 1950).

Titmuss' genius was to link the ethical impulse with safety, making the compelling argument that generous practices led to healthier societies. His comparisons of the health-care establishments of America and Britain solidified his views (*Commitment to Welfare*, 1968), making him an ardent supporter of the 'welfare state' and leading him towards the Fabian wing of the Labour Party.

His interest in blood banking arose in the 1960s, when members of London's Institute for Economic Affairs campaigned for the introduction of donor payments and competition between blood services. For Titmuss, blood banking was the greatest exemplar of his thesis—that an institution based on the generosity of gifts of blood was safer than blood banks that relied on paying individuals to donate their blood. He initially responded in a 1966 Fabian Lecture where he used blood banking as a case study to demonstrate that medical care should not be for sale. In turn, in 1968, two members of the Institute, Michael Cooper and Anthony Culyer, published a book promoting the commercialisation of blood banking. Titmuss' rejoinder, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, struck a public nerve in America. There, exposés of illicit commercial blood collection practices had led many to question their country's blood system. As a result, Titmuss was co-opted on to a Presidential Review where he helped the Nixon administration develop a new set of guidelines for American blood banking.

He died in 1973.



Richard Titmuss (standing, right) with fellow firewatchers at St Paul's Cathedral, London, during the war.

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hepatitis C lookback was an ethical necessity even though the cost implications were considerable.

In the face of the threat hepatitis C presented to the security of Australian blood supply, the Australian blood banks had still followed their 'moral duty' to ensure that potentially infected donors and recipients were provided with the best possible care. In other words, they continued to pass on the generosity of voluntary donors to recipients and back again to donors in need.

Here then is an alternative to Kim Beazley's assertion that security should precede generosity. Blood banks, grounded in the day-to-day gifts of volunteers, maintained their culture of generosity while working to maintain the security of the blood supply.

This culture of generosity was threatened by the reluctance of Australia's governments to provide resources for the management of potentially infected donors or for lookback programs that aimed to locate transfusion recipients infected with hepatitis C. In the aftermath of HIV/AIDS there was a national commitment to implementing risk-management policies to ensure the safety and security of the blood supply, but there has been no such national commitment to developing policies that are philosophically and ethically informed by the generosity of voluntary blood donors.

FURTHER WORK NEEDS to be done to provide a clear articulation of the future development of blood policy. The decision-making structures of the Australian blood-banking sector have been clarified since the early 1990s—the Australian Red Cross has formed a National Blood Service, while the federal government strengthened the national co-ordination of blood policy by establishing a blood policy body under the auspices of the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Committee. Uncertainty remains, however, over who has the final responsibility for blood policy development in the face of a crisis, or what rationale will guide the development of such policy.

The Review of the Australian Blood Banking and Plasma Product Sector was ideally placed to provide a clear vision for blood policy development. Established in 1999, it had two years to come up with a new framework that could successfully carry Australian blood banking into the new century. The Review's 2001 report provides some excellent recommendations on the need to improve the clinical use of blood, but it fails to say who should be responsible for responding to a policy crisis. In addition, its vague rationale for policy development neglects the part that reliance on voluntary donors may play in any such development.

The Review's central recommendation is the establishment of an independent National Blood Authority to develop advice on blood matters. The concept of a national authority seems to promise

clarity, but the status of the proposed Authority's advice is unclear. The Review report states that:

National blood policy should continue to be developed by the Commonwealth in collaboration with States and Territories. In developing national policies, Australian Health Ministers should draw on advice from the National Blood Authority and from existing health system structures and arrangements.

Here it would seem that the Australian health ministers, rather than the Blood Authority, would be responsible for the final blood policy decisions. But the Health Ministers Committee is advisory only, and in the face of alternative policy proposals, it is unclear on whose advice the health ministers would base their decisions. Plainly, an overarching body such as the proposed National Blood Authority should work with existing advisory bodies when their interests intersect. However, further clarification is needed of who is responsible for the final decision, how opposing policy recommendations would be assessed, and how policy development would be translated into action by Australia's blood banks. (For example, would blood banks have to wait for the Authority to ratify the recommendations of existing advisory bodies, or would they have to wait for the health ministers, and what would they do in the face of opposing policy recommendations?)

A continued reliance on voluntary donors was one of the terms of reference when the Review was established in 1999. Yet the Review's report does not explore how this reliance might inform the development of future blood policy. Instead, it suggests, rather vaguely, that advice on blood matters be developed in the 'context of national public health and risk management applicable to Australia's circumstances'. There is no doubt that the national regulation of the Australian blood supply and the concurrent development of risk-management strategies has been successful in making it one of the safest blood supplies in the world. However, it is worrying that there is little place in the Review's recommendations for the reciprocal generosity of blood policy that has characterised Australian blood banks.

To commit to a system of reliance on voluntary donors without also committing to obligations that follow from this reliance is to trivialise the role voluntary donors play in blood banking. Moreover, much creative and innovative policy has been developed by blood banks as they attempt to meet their moral obligations. As already noted, the link between the Victorian Blood Bank and local hepatitis C experts led to the development of knowledge and policy that extended far beyond the realms of blood matters, and formed the basis of Australia-wide hepatitis C-test interpretative strategies.

Sir Ninian Stephen, in submitting the Review of the Australian Blood Banking and Plasma Product Sector report to the federal government, noted

Australia's enviable record of providing safe, high-quality blood transfusion services: 'Australian volunteer donors have played an important part in this achievement; continuing support of donors in the future is essential.' Some 30 years earlier, Richard Titmuss twinned the safety and quality of the blood supply with the sense of moral responsibility among voluntary blood donors. The Review had the opportunity to develop a new framework that brought together the necessary reforms of the past two decades with the moral legacy of the voluntary donations that continue to sustain and enrich the Australian blood supply. The merger is not yet complete.

Blood evokes powerful and complicated responses, including the desire to keep the blood supply as safe as possible. This is clearly a vital issue. However, the history of Australian blood banks, and their reliance on voluntary donors, shows the importance of a policy framework that extends beyond security concerns and risk minimisation to meet the generosity of donors who give their blood to strangers in need. The challenge for blood banking and public policy in general, is to create a vision that holds the two together, ensuring support for both; a vision that, like blood banking, is grounded in daily acts of kindness to strangers. ■

Matthew Klugman is a freelance writer currently working on the history of the Australian Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service—Victoria.

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THE SHORTLIST

DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY

Reviewed by Timothy Radcliffe OP

Dominican Spirituality, Erik Borgman, Continuum, 2001. ISBN 0 826 45684 7, RRP \$32.95

As any Jesuit would, I hesitated before pronouncing judgment on a book about Dominican spirituality, particularly as my appreciative conclusions would have shocked many of our respective forebears who felt obliged to be at odds. In this account of Dominican spirituality, I found a lively and attractive description of the core of Ignatian spirituality: the encounter of God in all of human experience, with the central conviction being that God is to be found in the human heart. The quality of the writing, by a Dutch member of the Dominican third order, also reassures any who might need reassurance that not all went wrong with the post-conciliar Dutch church.

The convergence of spiritualities perhaps reflects the fact that Borgman is a layman. Lay interpreters necessarily seek translations of spiritual insights that fit everyday living; they describe the skeletal structure of a spirituality while paying less attention to the refinements of the tradition. Borgman's aphorism is pertinent to all spiritualities with legs: Dominican spirituality is about 'a life in search of order, not an Order in search of life'.

—Andrew Hamilton SJ

Rabbit-Proof Fence, Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, UQP, first published 1996, film edition 2001. ISBN 0 702 23281 5, RRP \$18.95

This book, now a successful film, is almost unbearable to read, and yet is still compulsive. Doris Pilkington (whose Indigenous name is Nugi Garimara) is a writer of many skills, and here uses them to tell the extraordinary story of her mother, Molly. But first Pilkington/Garimara propels you through the history of her family, going back to the bewilderment and dispossession of her tribe when white settlers came and fenced off their food sources and their sacred sites, then punished them for 'stealing' stock and 'trespassing' on land they had lived on for 40,000 years. This is history written by survivors, if not winners. When the inevitable half-European children were born, the various authorities sought to detach them from their families. Pilkington's account of the grief felt at this is almost clinically dispassionate, and all the more effective for that. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* tells how Molly guided her two sisters back home after they were stolen, 1600 kilometres along the rabbit-proof fence. Such heroism, such tenacity, deserves its record, but the ultimate outcomes were not an unmixed triumph, unless it be for the fact that some of these children knew freedom for a while.

—Juliette Hughes



The Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien, BBC radio collection, 1981 (re-release 2001). 4 cds, also available on cassette. RRP \$195 (CDs), \$165 (cassettes)

At a time when all of New Zealand (and significant fractions of the rest of the world) is consumed with *Lord of the Rings* fever it's worth noting that the BBC has recently re-released their radio version as a spoken-word recording on CD and cassettes. Dating from 1981, it's one of the most powerfully imagined things the Beeb ever did. You don't have to be a Middle Earth fanatic to gasp at the grandeur of Michael Hordern (a

distinguished Prospero in his time) as Gandalf or to think that Ian Holm makes an ideal Frodo, rustic but strong at the same time. With John le Mesurier as old Bilbo Baggins and Robert Stephens as Aragorn, this is a dream dramatisation of *The Lord of the Rings* and somehow the fact that it is all done through words and auditory suggestion makes this 13-hour version of the whole of *The Lord of the Rings* more enchanting than any visual translation is ever likely to be. Because of the film, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (which runs for four hours and 35 minutes) is available separately. This is a version of *The Lord of the Rings* which will please every hobbit in sight but is also dramatic and thrilling enough to captivate all comers.

—Peter Craven

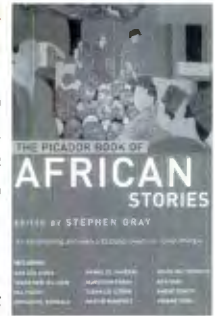
The Picador Book of African Stories, Stephen Gray (ed.), Picador, 2001. ISBN 0 330 36989 X, RRP \$21

These subtle stories were deliberately chosen to give a varied perspective on Africa. From all over the continent, women and men describe the bizarre relationship of the individual to history. Some pieces were written in English; many others were translated from French, Portuguese, Arabic and Afrikaans. In his introduction, Stephen Gray shows a great web of overlapping identities and associations. For instance, African writing in Arabic is understood in terms of both African literature as a whole and the international Arabic literary canon.

It's a lively collection, coherent and sophisticated, sometimes disconcertingly alien—the stories are written on their own terms. There are Malawis in Zimbabwe, Indians in Tanzania, Moroccans in France. There are moments of hilarity, sarcasm, anger and joy, pettiness and sensuality. And intense suffering, mitigated only by the possibility of transcendence, 'because none of us ever learned our lesson, or loved enough to learn from our pain, or took the great scream of history seriously enough'.

Many migrants and refugees come from countries we know nothing about, which would be reason enough to read this book. But it's also a great pleasure, suffused as it is with talent and hope and 'a faint irony of flowers'.

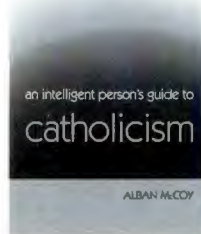
—Susannah Buckley



An Intelligent Person's Guide to Catholicism, Alban McCoy, Continuum, 2001. ISBN 0 826 45609 X, RRP \$39.95

Alban McCoy is chaplain at Cambridge University, and this book came out of lunchtime talks to students there. The first section, on questions people ask, is in the form of traditional apologetics. In its written form, it moves so quickly that it demands of its readers not only intelligence but a good background in apologetics. McCoy does not shirk the hard issues; neither does he give an inch, with his concessions to contemporary sensibility minimal. He would provoke spirited conversation. In the later sections on the commandments and the seven deadly sins, McCoy loosens up and is able to enter the imaginative world of today's students. He led me to wonder why it is so much easier to write gracefully and graciously about the challenges of Christian life than about the coherence of Christian faith. McCoy reads widely and writes well, and even if I would not hire him as a guide, I would enjoy his company for a day's travel.

—A.H



The one that got away with it

Suharto: A Political Biography, R.E. Elson,
Cambridge University Press, 2001. ISBN 0 521 77326 1, RRP \$59.95

SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS it looked as if Suharto might be about to breathe his last. The 80-year-old was struggling with pneumonia and his hold on life was so tenuous that the children kept vigil at the hospital. Even the recently recaptured Tommy (Hutomo Mandala Putra, Suharto's youngest son) was briefly escorted from his prison cell to the patriarch's bedside to pay his respects. In the event, with the best medical care that money can buy, Suharto pulled through and was able to return home. The episode confirmed that the former dictator would never be brought to account for his crimes. After such a public exhibition of frailty, it is unimaginable that the old man will be made to stand in the dock and confront his past.

This represents a great setback in the struggle to build a more democratic Indonesia. It is not that revenge is important—though watching Suharto suffer the discomfort of a prison cell would no doubt be a source of great satisfaction to his many victims. Rather, it means an opportunity lost to discredit permanently the regime and its mechanics of power. The humiliating spectacle of a public trial could have finally shredded the cloak of authority with which Suharto surrounded himself in office and helped to build momentum for a more decisive push against the remnants of his New Order regime. The danger now is that the brutal reality of Suharto's enforced stability will be disguised by the patina of age, making it appear ever more attractive when compared with the ugly inadequacies of contemporary civilian rule.

The remarkable economic growth achieved under Suharto will also add a rosy glow to the Suharto legacy. When he manoeuvred Sukarno out of office in 1967, the country was an economic shambles, unable to produce enough food for its people or attract productive investment. Under Suharto's leadership Indonesia became self-sufficient in rice and industry overtook

agriculture as the prime source of economic output. Suharto was greatly assisted by the long years of the oil boom, which gave him the cash to buy loyalty and disguised the impact of corruption on the economy.

In the end, corruption played a significant role in bringing Suharto down, but for three decades it was fundamental to the power structure of the New Order regime.

IN THIS DETAILED and chronological biography, R.E. Elson (professor in the School of Asian and International Studies at Griffith University) reveals the early roots of Suharto's extraordinary capacity to mix business and politics to advance his own position and that of those around him. He documents a young Suharto's use of military vehicles to set up a transport business for soldiers demobilised at the end of the revolution against the Dutch. Suharto's commercial alliance with the now-jailed Sino-Indonesian timber tycoon, Mohamad 'Bob' Hasan also began in the 1950s, partly as a way of feeding the troops under his command. In direct contravention of government regulations prohibiting barter, Suharto appropriated sugar from factories in Central Java and swapped it for rice from Thailand and Singapore. Such off-budget financing of the armed forces became a characteristic feature of the New Order. Elson quotes one telling instance: in the 1980s, the estimated amount of money diverted to the armed forces from the state oil company, Pertamina, and other enterprises was equivalent to more than one third of the official defence budget, funding the purchase of weapons and equipment.

Military enterprise began as an understandable, and perhaps necessary, form of 'foraging', to feed a rag-tag revolutionary army, but it soon became entrenched as a key source of funding. With commanding officers lining their pockets along the way, there was no interest in calling a halt to such activities. These practices continue to





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fuel social unrest and violence in Indonesia today. In Aceh and Ambon, soldiers make extra money by selling weapons to the forces they are supposed to be fighting, or by setting up 'security' checkpoints along major roads, where the primary purpose is to extract a toll payment from all who pass by. Just as the military cashed in on the coffee, marble and sandalwood businesses in East Timor, so too do they have a commercial interest in logging and mining in other parts of the archipelago today.

According to Elson, Suharto was concerned about corruption, but only in so far as it could damage his regime:

He had nothing to say ... about those who were already wealthy seeking to enlarge themselves at the public expense or through private kickbacks and commissions—provided that they continued to perform their duties well and did not embarrass the government—and his silence can only be taken to mean that he saw no moral problem in social leaders disposing of public goods for their own benefit if the generality of their activities led to the greater good of the whole community, that is, the process of development. (p196)

Suharto's ability to manipulate and guide such processes helps in no small way to explain his rise to power. As Elson points out, there was nothing predetermined about Suharto's dominant role in Indonesian history: 'The powerful lens of hindsight tends to focus on Suharto as a man of power and destiny, moving irresistibly towards the apex of power. The real story is both more complex and more fascinating.' (p120)

Without the extraordinary events of 30 September 1965, when six army generals were murdered in an apparent coup attempt, Suharto 'might have served out his days in efficiently executed but mundane obscurity' (p119). The events of 30 September propelled Suharto into a position of unprecedented authority, although Elson argues that his initial position was far from secure. He outlines how Suharto moved tentatively and cautiously to explore the new political terrain before asserting himself at the very centre of power. It was almost a year before Suharto finally decided that Sukarno had to be replaced as president, and even then, according to Elson, he did not automatically assume that he would take the post himself.

The fact that Suharto was not among the generals killed on the night of 30 September has fuelled conspiracy theories that portray him as the mastermind of the whole

affair, manoeuvring to dispose of rival military commanders, weaken Sukarno and outflank the Indonesian communist party all in one go. Elson argues convincingly that such a daring plan does not accord with Suharto's innate and well-documented caution. There was far too great a potential for things to go awry for Suharto to have dreamt up such an enterprise or even lent his name to it.

Alongside corruption and an enormous capacity for calculated brutality, caution was a hallmark of Suharto's career. But in stressing Suharto's caution, Elson presents us with an unresolved contradiction. If Suharto was so cautious then why did he allow his children to wreak such economic havoc? If his attitude to corruption was truly utilitarian—allowing only those activities that did not damage his regime—then why such a blind spot for the rampant rent-seeking of Tommy and his siblings? Elson offers a few explanations. Perhaps it was fatherly indulgence born of the fact that Suharto had little to do with his own natural parents. Perhaps it was his attempt to create a dynasty, knowing that the political fortunes of his children would depend more on money than military muscle. In the end, the answers do not satisfy and this in part reflects Elson's caution towards his subject. This is, as the subtitle proclaims, a 'political' biography. Elson meticulously documents Suharto's public career—and the detail of military commands and the welter of names can be a little overwhelming—but he eschews any attempt to psychologise him. Elson draws almost exclusively on written sources, and is at times perhaps a little too inclined to accept some of Suharto's self-serving comments at face value.

As a journalist I longed for Elson to interview those who had been close to Suharto. No doubt many cronies and allies would still refuse to speak candidly, but others, dropped along the way as their usefulness waned, would now feel free to speak out. They could perhaps provide some additional insight into Suharto's capacity for violence, his attitude to his children and the extent of his personal avarice, elements that are absent from Elson's account. This would have required Elson to abandon some of his own caution, to depart from the clinical approach to biography and engage in a degree of speculation about the man and his motives. ■

Peter Mares presents *Asia Pacific* at 8pm each weeknight on Radio Australia and Radio National.

The candid pen

A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen Harwood 1943–1995,
Gregory Kratzmann (ed.), University of Queensland Press, 2001. ISBN 0 702 23257 2, RRP \$40

IN GWEN HARWOOD'S first letter to her future editor Greg Kratzmann, she pleads, 'As for my life, there's little to tell.' This *faux-naïf*, some would even say housewifely, denial is followed with, 'I've never climbed higher than 1270 metres or been out of Australia or divorced or psychoanalysed or [been] pursued by a bear.' (28 February 1991) Suggestive and flirtatious, Harwood's contrasting qualification is a game her readers recognise instantly. It is the talent of a poet with the skill to excite her reader into wanting to know more. In this brick of a book we get to know much more than we bargained for. If 'there's little to tell', Harwood finds a hundred-and-one ways of spinning it magically into full-scale display.

Harwood's is a tale of two cities, Brisbane and Hobart. Brisbane is childhood and youth, the paradisaical garden, the blessed city Jerusalem, made still more glorious by her as it becomes further distant in time and space. Hobart is adulthood, a much more vexed proposition, at times surprising, more often a place of stoical endurance, even horror. 'I would like to get out of Tasmania for ever; I loathe the place in spite of its beauty' (10 April 1970) she spits, not for the first time, but though she threatens to go and live in such exotic places as Rome or Melbourne, she stayed in the pendant isle all her married life. The mythic use of these two places is familiar from the poetry, and the letters only confirm the view that Gwen Harwood was not using the contrast purely for artistic ends.

Coleridge's 'friendship is a sheltering tree' is quoted as a motif for the collection, steadfast friendship being from first till last the prime motive for her correspondence. News is never just newsy, but opportunity for entertainment or reflection. Her lifelong correspondence with Thomas 'Tony' Riddell in particular takes up half the book, an outpouring of candour, concision and sheer joy with life that amply supports her assertion that 'our friendship will always "flow on into the living"'. The extended presentation of the letters to special correspondents like Riddell, Edwin Tanner, Ann Jennings and others, with very rare elisions, broadens appreciation of her devotion as well as her



Gwen Foster (Harwood), Brisbane, 1939

dynamic involvement in the world. 'The span of time grows shorter', she writes to Riddell (1 May 1967), 'but that means nothing in terms of the inner life where depth alone counts.'

Letters were another extension of Gwen Harwood's ability to amuse. Those published here are preoccupied with domestic life, social life and literary life. Little more. Politics barely registers on the Richter Scale. Issues of the day, if mentioned at all, seem incidental to the writer's glee in making her friends laugh. Her program will always include space for a *divertimento*. She learnt early too the skill of keeping consolations brief and practical as possible.

Fifty years move at their gradual, irresistible pace. Home life and family take precedence at all times. Everything is interrupted by the need to get the kids to school or the dinner on the table. Descriptions of boating, gardening, jam-making ('enough for the Chinese army') break through everywhere. As well as a true portrait of home life, the letters are a mini-history of 20th-century Australian gastronomy. 'I had seafood pie and salad and an alarmingly decorated pavlova pudding which supported such a weight of whipped cream, bananas &

strawberries that I thought it would go down like the walls of Jericho. [We] ordered a dessert called "Knickerbocker glory", a real old-fashioned icecream, butterscotch fudge, chocolate sauce, nuts, wafers and alps of whipped cream.' And that's a brief report. Harwood's greedy observations of meals and spreads fill entire pages. Likewise her observation of society, where she is a cunning cross between Jane Austen and Edna Everage.

Those in search of a nascent feminist before her time will find instead a woman recording the trials and joys of motherhood, a poet up against an accepted hierarchy of gentlemen poets, a secretary very much at the mercy of her employer's daily moods. Just occasionally she will write to a female correspondent: 'I dream of a world in which there is no insoluble choice for women; not in our lifetime, I fear, but it will come if enough of us refuse ... the male interpretation.' (2 February 1961) At the same time, she seems openly resistant to activism when the movement takes root in the 1970s.

A neglected area in Harwood criticism is her religion and here we are given an expanded sense of the reasons for her subscription to High Church Anglicanism. Clearly she goes to church 'for the music there', acting as organist in different places, but her theological interests are hinted at and her need for an ordered liturgy is vital. She is quite familiar with Jesus and talks about him in every manner from the childishness of her 'Jonquil Jesus' in folding yellow robes, through to the deeply reverential, then to the blasé and ribald, a characteristic of churchgoers that non-churchgoers find perplexing, if they are aware of it at all. Her favourite festival is Corpus Christi. Jesus gets more time than Wittgenstein but is not listed in the index. At the same time as being a regular and dedicated worshipper, though, Harwood confesses seeing no point in organised religion, making her perhaps more typical of many Australian churchgoers than is generally acknowledged. Alternatives are never suggested.

The letters are a cornucopia of mischievous, irresistible and erudite English, the timing impeccable. Her skill with a running

gag is equal to her skill with irregular feet. Poetry came early and these letters confirm that writing verse was simply something she knew she was good at. It was enlivening. For this reason she bemoans 'the fate of many a poem', her own included, 'becoming an object of study, not of artistic enjoyment' (14 January 1971). Hence her fascination with forms, how they work, how to make something original with them. Such pleasure in the making of poetry inevitably came into trouble, though, when she decided to engage with the literary world.

Harwood catalogues rejection slips, misplaced manuscripts, ignorant editors—all the details of a poet's life that don't change—grinding her teeth at the thankless vocation of poet. 'It is to me a hateful talent. I cannot bury it. *I would rather have been happy*', she confides to Vincent Buckley (30 August 1961). Elsewhere she writes: 'It's assumed that poetry in Australia is a substance of no commercial value that can be produced anywhere in odd moments.' (9 May 1967) Meanwhile her own creative life continues with energetic playfulness. The letters contain many marvellous poems dashed off on the spur of the moment. This acrostic sonnet to Tony Riddell (20 July 1960), for example, in response to *Meanjin* editor Clem Christesen's rejection of her highly structured work in favour of a poem of dwindling returns and eminent laxness entitled 'Goods Train':

ON A SECOND READING OF 'GOODS TRAIN'

When I consider how I used to write
Rhythmical verse, and keep my meaning wed
Ever to form; and see the rubbish spread
Carelessly through *Meanjin*: all the spite,
Knavishness, nastiness, readiness to fight
That mar my lovely nature, make their bed
Here. I resign poetic maidenhead.
A-whoring I shall go, this very night.

There'll be no peace for Editors who take
Things like 'Goods Train'. I'll prostitute my art.
(Reserved exclusively for CBC
Are several 'translations', each a fake.)
I'll tout myself all round, a lyric tart.
No one will know who is or isn't

G

G did indeed have high poetic standards, quoting approvingly James Merrill's 'stiff rhythms, gorgeous rhymes'. Even this squib has echoes of John Donne. The letters reinforce what we already know about Harwood's handful of prosodic tenets: the poem must have form, must entertain at some level, must convince, must achieve creative tension. She had no time for poetry

that seemed to have been written by a typewriter. Like many poets, she envied the purity and immediacy of musical expression and, unlike many poets, she had great musical ability. Harwood did very little if any reviewing in her life (her comments about critics, editors and academics are the hitchiest in the book; and her publisher is 'Anguish & Robbery'), so these letters are our first real exposure to her critical thought. She 'always enjoyed' what Bruce Beaver said, but found 'his style porridgy'. Buckley's *Arcady @ Other Places* is 'quite simply ... the best book of Australian poetry in existence'. Francis Webb is 'unmatched, but there's a kind of mad privacy that defeats me'.

A collected Harwood letters would swell to Boswellian proportions. At the same time, the craving for more will not abate. The thematic collection is one solution. We see glimpses of her passion for German

Romanticism, especially in the maddeningly delightful letters to Norman Talbot, that could be expanded to a volume. Glimpses too of her philosophic amour Ludwig Wittgenstein, source of her other religion, 'the language-game'. A collection of the epistolary verse would be a treat. Or individual correspondences could be a solution. A collection of the letters between Harwood and Buckley or Harwood and her musical collaborator Larry Sitsky would be entertaining portraits of friendships and the focus of special conversations on *vita brevis, ars longa* that we only guess at with the present selection. It must be said, envy is the sin that besets a reader, thinking of the editor with ready access to ten times more correspondence raging above the same signature. ■

Philip Harvey is a poet and librarian at the Joint Theological Library, Melbourne.

BOOKS: 3

ANDREW HAMILTON

Talk about us

The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Ideas for the Future of a Civil Society, ABC Books, 2001. ISBN 0 733 31053 2, RRP \$29.95. **The Barton Lectures. Unity and Diversity: A National Conversation**, Helen Irving (ed.), ABC Books, 2001. ISBN 0 733 31031 1, RRP \$22.95. **Boyer Lectures 2001. This Land is all Horizons: Australian Fears and Visions**, Geoffrey Blainey, ABC Books, 2001. ISBN 0 733 31035 4, RRP \$19.95

THE CENTENARY OF Australian Federation appears now to belong to another generation. After *Tampa* and September 11, its celebration seems as remote as Adam and Eve's Garden of Eden holiday snaps after the Fall.

It is not the fault of the writers that it is difficult to enter these admirable collections of lectures on the past and future of Australia, for the talks were conceived and mostly given before September. Nor is it the fault of the ABC, whose importance in Australian national life lies not simply in broadcasting but in encouraging and recording intelligent conversation about Australia.

Geoffrey Blainey's Boyer lectures offer a historical perspective on contemporary Australian concerns about ecology, development, the rural experience and equality. Blainey is an engaging guide, and generally stresses the continuity between the present and the past. He argues repeatedly with those who claim

moral superiority over the practices and attitudes of earlier Australians.

The Barton lectures examine Australian lines of tension today. Although federation forms the point of reference, historical reflection is more muted than in Blainey's lectures, and is introduced mainly in order to illuminate the Australia of our own day. The lectures deal with relationships—between city and country, between classes, between Indigenous and colonisers, between states and Commonwealth. By referring to the origins of the myths that colour the way we speak about these relationships, they test the myths.

The Alfred Deakin lectures offer the largest and most disparate treatment of Australia under many headings. Speakers discuss Australia's place in Asia, the image we have of Australia, immigration, race, globalisation, sport, the information network, science, water and urban design. The

lecturers address future development in these various areas. Most are practical in orientation, with some notable theoretical accounts to which I shall return later. The merit of the collection is its demonstration of the complexity of Australian national life.

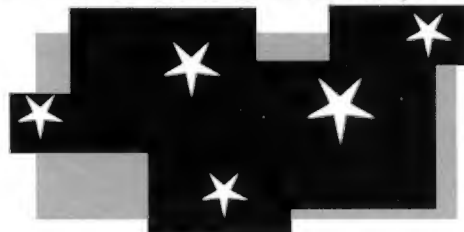
Readers who seek from these lectures illumination about the future of Australia will inevitably come with questions drawn from more recent events. They will ask what kind of Australia our children will inherit in the face both of a unilaterally imposed world order and of a diminished public respect for human dignity inherent in recent Australian abuse of asylum seekers. These events provide the context for defining Australian society.

From this perspective, I found the sceptical and probing contributions to the series to be of more interest than those that were celebratory and treated of surfaces. The crises of the second half of 2001 suggest that admirable Australian practices and attitudes need more than evocation and serendipity for their sustaining. They demonstrate how even Australian qualities like egalitarianism and mateship can be manipulated to encourage acquiescence in their erosion.

Read within this context, Blainey's lectures are genial and are helpful in pointing out the mixture of insight and obtuseness, of moral courage and moral cowardice that prevail in any time, including our own. One of his most interesting early books dealt with 'the tyranny of distance'. The image allowed Blainey to deploy in illuminating ways his extraordinarily strong sense of locality. He has always been sensitive to the impact that place has on social life and relations, on perceptions and judgments of the world. In showing how our lives are shaped by place and distance, Blainey also emphasises the importance of our place in time. He concludes that we should not quickly judge the achievements and shortcomings of past generations. While their response may have been different from that of our time, we both display the same mingled generosity and self-interest. Both their achievements and their weaknesses should be recorded faithfully.

For that reason, Blainey is opposed to 'black armband' history.

Blainey is worth reading for his sense of the importance of particular places and times. I find lacking in his work, however, a strong moral vision, a sense of human dignity that transcends place and time and leads to outrage at the abuse of human dignity in any time or place. That vision demands a concomitant sense of evil, not in



the sense that there were once evil human beings whose evil we can contemplate confident of our own superiority, but in the sense that when human beings of any generation pursue their own interests, they can act in a fashion whose evil is demonstrated by the suffering inflicted on others. For all the differences between places and times, the common claim that humanity makes on us demands that we be open to judge and to be judged in respect of what we do.

Blainey is not alone in lacking a universal moral framework. The easy celebration of difference is generally characteristic of the Australia represented in these collections. Some writers lament the absence of a larger moral narrative; others celebrate it; all regard it as inevitable. But its corollaries are recognised: the loss of an egalitarian society, the absence of an agreed vision for Australia, and frequent complaints about the absence of leadership that favours national decency or generosity.

The contributions that I found most illuminating in the collections were often by visiting scholars or by children of immigrants. They own a strong ethical sense which enables them to accept conflict about public values and at the same time to take strong positions.

Edward Said, born in Palestine and resident in the United States, describes exactly the way that in modern democra-

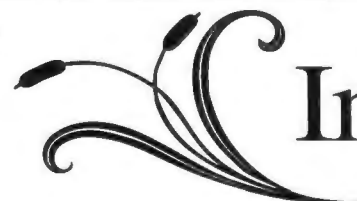
cies, moral considerations are forcibly excluded from public discussion. Because Said sees history from the perspective of those whose humanity is abused, he accepts the intellectual's responsibility to describe faithfully the processes and conflicts of interest that lead to people being crushed: 'The intellectual's role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity, who tend to work in terms of falsified unities, the manipulation of demonised or distorted representations of undesirable and/or excluded populations, and the propagation of heroic anthems sung in order to sweep all before them.' His astringent general reflections illuminate more precisely than most local comment the condition of Australia after Woomera.

In his treatment of globalisation, too, Amartya Sen, Indian-born and now at Cambridge, finds a path between rejection of globalisation and enthusiastic or weary acceptance of its necessity. He is sceptical, insisting that we ask in whose benefit particular forms of global arrangements are, and how inequalities and asymmetries in power can be addressed. He asserts that if the market is a good, it is good for the market that as many people as possible can function equally within it. The present inequalities and asymmetries prevent the proper flourishing of the market. In this essay he establishes a proper place for government regulation in the interests of globalisation.

Robert Manne's account of his own history, too, has a moral centre that owes much to his being the son of Jewish refugees. It is understandable that in his scholarship he has taken a consistent interest in questions of justice and exclusion. He celebrates the rich Australian tradition of hospitality to human beings in need, and trenchantly criticises the cultural and political movements that threaten that hospitality.

Finally, notable and a little disturbing is the absence of any discussion of religious faith or of the churches in these collections. Notable, because the moral and spiritual

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values to which so many writers allude have historically been given institutional form and commended by churches and motivated by Christian faith. Even if the phenomenon is seen as disagreeable, it merits attention. Disturbing, because the values of many Australians, including particularly those of immigrant Australians, are still shaped by religious beliefs and practices. One may well believe that religious faith provides a false basis for public values. But at least conversation about this basis provokes discussion about the way in which we ground Australian

values. In the absence of such conversation, we are left with an unarticulated hope that conventional Australian values will endure. When the techniques that led to Woomera are set loose against other groups of Australians, and legislative support for human rights is further eroded in the name of security against terrorism, that hope may prove naive. ■

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away from them all. There's another story of a man who's doing dangerous good works in an unstable country because he's haunted by his betrayal of his son and there's a story about a man who hungers to run away from his wife and is confronted with the opportunity when a chance encounter in America dovetails—or doesn't—with a long-nurtured dream or fantasy.

There's also a story about a German graduate student with a girlfriend from a New York Orthodox Jewish family which nibbles round the question of German guilt and the possibility of Jewish moral hysteria.

This last belongs with the longer stories in this volume but is probably the least successful of them because the central datum here (which is to do with circumcision) just doesn't work.

It reads well but the ending has a factitious conclusiveness that leaves us nowhere and points to the thinness of the characterisation and its closeness to stereotype. This is one of Schlink's quizzical 'German' stories, refusing all monopolies on justice, but the very fact that it toys with the prejudices of a social ambience that is certainly not 'correct' somehow doesn't rescue it from its own confusions.

Sometimes Bernhard Schlink is a little bit too wise and deep politically for his own good. Sometimes he is just a bit slick as he worries the moral dilemmas of societies that have forgotten their history by clinging to some dogma about it. Sometimes, too, his thriller writing experience (and perhaps his forensic legerdemain) shows in the nearly contemptuous skill with which he twists and turns his plots in small compass.

But the firmness of line, the non-chalance and the lack of nonsense make the best of these stories very satisfying miniatures that disclose real worlds, through whatever force of imagination or reconfiguring of experience.

Schlink is a shirtsleeves realist of the rare old-fashioned kind who does not waste words, who is not interested in the adornments of language or the piling up of effects and who can tell a story, full of drama and feeling, where another writer would be likely to pad it to five times the length with something that passes for literature but is actually literary scenery.

Hence the affinity with Dostoevsky and Camus. If he lacks the sleek, scalpel-like sensuousness of Camus, he does have his own fragment of Dostoevsky's rare uncanny skill of making art out of what is almost the language of journalism or of old-fashioned magazine fiction.

BOOKS:4

PETER CRAVEN

Lyric realist

Flights of Love, Bernhard Schlink, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2001.

ISBN 0 297 82903 3, RRP \$29.95

BERNHARD SCHLINK came to prominence just a few years ago with the publication of *The Reader*, which was the kind of moral fable we hadn't seen since the heyday of Camus. Ruth Rendell compared it—without reason—to Dostoevsky, and it seemed, with its complexities and its latent symbolic insinuations, like a more telling take on the Holocaust (which becomes its eventual subject) than most. On the surface, and for most of its first movement, it's the bare, beautifully observed story of a young boy who has an affair with an older woman. Then the nightmare of the death camps suddenly overtakes the book in such a way as to cast an enigmatic light back on the life we have witnessed.

It's a riveting story. The politics and the morality are there, implicit but unparaphraseable. As a piece of fiction it is best read 'blind', without foreknowledge. If, like me, you fail to twig to the central datum of the plot, it will work all the more masterfully like that lost form of magic, the popular novel that is also a work of art. In terms of the symbolism that clouds the book like a smog but never diminishes the power of its light or darkness, the notion of reading is central. It is an object lesson—though not a simple one—on how to read the Holocaust. It is also a fable of moral illiteracy originating in the German language and couched in a lean and hungry idiom that is nonetheless alive to German *Gemütlichkeit* and German sensuality.



Bernhard Schlink's new book, *Flights of Love*, is a suite of stories drifting towards novella length in which the matter of Germany is rehearsed, sifted and used as the locus for a set of civilised discontents and their fallout.

A young boy is puzzled by the picture of what he hears referred to as the 'Jewish girl' on his parents' wall and continues to be haunted by it long after his father loses his job as a judge. A West Berliner becomes friendly with a chubby, affable intellectual from the East and his intense Christian wife and discovers, after a sexual encounter, that everything in the past was shadowed by the Stasi. But the culprit retains—characteristically for Schlink—a fragile air of innocence, and the lineaments of what is human and understandable.

In another story, a widowed man discovers his wife has written to another man and goes through the bizarre procedure of writing to him in her name and of meeting the smooth loser he has been obsessed by. In another an amiable lover of pleasure, long-suppressed, becomes involved with two women other than his wife and then, under the weight of this pressure, runs

It may be that what we get in *Flights of Love* are almost the scenarios for discarded novels, of which the author grew too impatient to give the skeletons flesh. Certainly nothing in it is as 'written' as in *The Reader*, though there is plenty to keep every kind of reader turning the pages and it will leave some of them wondering, at least sometimes, how such wisdom has been got out of such flat words.

Bernhard Schlink is a modern dramatic master for whom fiction just happens to be

the medium. He takes it as his brief and when he catches fire with it we seem—against the odds—to be in the presence of a storyteller (alive to every kind of moral and psychological complexity) who can give fiction the kind of unambiguous narrative authority it has in the Victorian novel or that linked images have in a film by John Ford. ■

Peter Craven is the editor of *Quarterly Essay*, the ongoing series of political essays published by Black Inc.

BOOKS: 5
PAUL TANKARD

All in order

Abaza: A Modern Encyclopedia,
Louis Nowra, Picador, 2001. ISBN 0 330 36310 7, RRP \$21

AT LEAST THREE contemporary trends converge in this new novel by Australian writer Louis Nowra: an interest in fictitious countries, an interest in encyclopedias, and novels which assume some other literary form.

To take the last of these first. We have recently had novels which are presented as, or overlap with: a recipe book (John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure*, and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*); a philosophical treatise (Alain de Botton's *On Love*); a psychological case history (Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*); a lecture at a symposium (Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*); or more to the point, Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*.

Readers, apparently, have become cynical about the conceits of fiction, the 'this is what happened' style of narration. 'Says who?' we have been taught to ask by nihilistic literary theorists, suspicious of anything that resembles meaning. And unlike the first readers of, say, *Robinson Crusoe*, we are used to the genre: we know that novels are a pretence. How better to subvert this suspicion than by pretending that your pretence is something other than a novel?

Pavic's novel is not, in fact, organised like a dictionary, but seems nonetheless to have been of some inspiration to Louis Nowra's *Abaza*. In both books we have a purported series of documents—in this case, short, topical and alphabetically organised—concerning a fictitious people—in this case, the recent history of a fictitious South Pacific island nation, Abaza.

What then makes it a novel? It's not a narrative, but it is a fiction and it has a story. A great deal of detail is built up before a story emerges—a history, with a number of main players, some of whom are also the five contributors to the encyclopedia. The history of Abaza is given therefore from a number of angles, all deeply engaged, eschewing the traditional encyclopedia's sense of both anonymity and objectivity.

The collection of documents that constitute the encyclopedia, all written on scraps of paper in an Abazian prison by enemies of the present regime, have come into the hands of an Abazian exile working at the Cairns campus of the James Cook University. It's no more unlikely than many other stories presented as diaries, such as *Wuthering Heights*, or dreams.

Abaza is in a terminal state of political corruption, and we meet all of the main players. The whole population seems sex-crazed and drug-addled. Sexual deviance and promiscuity are mentioned in just about every entry, until they become tiresome.

Other obsessive subjects are children and deformity. There is Abaza's recently discovered prehistoric race, who were midgets. The vicious and brutal rebel, General Dugi, leads an army of feral children, and in the last days before the overthrow of the capital of Abaza the city is infested by gangs of Odis—child cripples and amputees.

The preoccupation with children and deformity is also evident in the central character of the book, the aged and malicious dwarf, Aba. He has been the long-term

adviser to the first two presidents of Abaza. In the present of the book's narrative, when the book is assembled at James Cook University, Aba has fled the regime of General Dugi.

Aba has been Svengali to the tyrannical and loony 'Eternal' President Nadi and his lazy and self-indulgent successor Sangana, who was devoted to jazz music and making movies. Aba knows more than anyone else about what really happened in Abaza, and he is living out his days in a luxury men-only resort in Queensland.

Suspense is created despite what seems to be an arbitrary method of organisation. But it is a novel, to be read in sequence, and Nowra postpones the appearance of particular snippets of the history by carefully assigning the proper nouns of his subjects to the latter letters of the alphabet. Increasingly, as we reach (*Max*) Rodley, (*Rowan*) Young, *Vampire Days*, *Vao* and finally *Zot*, the connections with Australia become more apparent, and the more personal drama concerning the still-living characters comes to its conclusion.

But what is the intention? The resemblance to satires like *Gulliver's Travels* and *1984* makes one suspect a particularly specific, perhaps political, subtext. There are amusing suggestions, but they don't add up to much. The geographical coordinates given for Abaza are exactly those of Cairns. The Abazian capital, Pazo, in being 'laid out by an American planner and his wife in a grid of boulevards and avenues surrounded by ever increasing circles of streets', sounds like Canberra. The whole of the country shuts down daily for the narcotic *pitu*, reminding one of the Yemeni addiction to *qat*, which visitors describe in similar terms. An Australian Foreign Minister who is briefly mentioned seems very familiar. The structure would allow intriguing details to be added endlessly, and Nowra has stopped not a moment too soon.

Abaza is a dark and artful tale, inventive, suspenseful and funny, if in an icky sort of way. (It is in some ways a political version of the increasingly worrying comedy *The League of Gentlemen* on ABC TV.) There are no heroes, no-one to admire or even identify with—just varying degrees of villainy. Nowra convinces us that something powerful is happening, that there is some key or revelation or resolution just around the corner, but it never comes. ■

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Fine weariness of the flesh

Sweet Bird of Youth, Tennessee Williams. The Melbourne Theatre Company.
Directed by Kate Cherry. With Guy Pearce, Wendy Hughes, John Stanton.

IT HAS BEEN obvious for some time now that if our theatre companies are going to give the public what they want and so ensure their box office, they are going to have to give them the stars from Australian, and now international, cinema. This is not necessarily a ticket to salvation but it's a good bet along the way because the people who arrange these matters have never been particularly good at casting plays with the best actors available, regardless of whether fame or suitability was the criterion.

When did you ever see Nicole Kidman on an Australian, as opposed to a British, stage? Or Russell Crowe and Mel Gibson for that matter? Judy Davis occasionally acts in live theatre here, and Geoffrey Rush made his pre-Oscar name doing so, but there is not much similarity between the vastly popular world of film (and the residual cultural nationalism that trails along with it as we barrack for 'our Cate' or whomever) and the vague world of the theatre, which so often gets that first-base thing—the casting—wrong from the start. One good reason for using film actors (apart from their range of experience) is that they are not likely to act for relative peanuts in order to make fools of themselves in unsuitable roles and they are also likely to be given the kind of cast that will complement them and allow them to look as if they are on a stage with their peers.

So I think it was a good idea to get Guy Pearce to play Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, with Wendy Hughes as the ageing movie star Alexandra del Largo and John Stanton as the swinish Boss Finley.

Tennessee Williams is the great American playwright of the postwar period who gets beneath our skin most of all. It's not that his work is better than the O'Neill of *Long Day's Journey into Night* or the Miller of *Death of a Salesman* or the Albee of *Virginia Woolf*, but there's more of it, it's more ranging and vibrant, more Shakespearean, and it's more consistent across the major works from *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to *The Night of the Iguana* (1962).

It's also a theatre that's in our blood, a theatre whose idiom we'll never lose because



it was filmed so early and so well. It helps to have the Brando *Streetcar Named Desire* directed by Elia Kazan with Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois. And it also helps to have that whole gamut of screen performances from Katharine Hepburn's in *Suddenly Last Summer* to those of Elizabeth Taylor and Burl Ives and Judith Anderson in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. At the height of American cultural optimism, coinciding with the Cold War, Williams provided a theatre of scarifying psychological intensity which inverted the '50s myth of happy families and showed its scarred underbelly. It was American theatre as adult as a body blow, a theatre which could look the best of Hollywood in the eye without flinching—the Hollywood, say, of Billy Wilder and Hitchcock and John Ford—but could also transfigure it in the process.

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH could scarcely be more appropriate as the vehicle for a boy from Geelong who's made a name for himself in Hollywood. The play is, pretty

patently, the work of a Tennessee Williams who had himself experienced Hollywood. Chance Wayne, the gigolo with dreams of stardom and youth slipping through his hands, is a Hollywood wannabe just as Alexandra del Largo seems, for most of the action, a Hollywood has-been.

And, of course, there's more to this steamy storm of a play with its blood broth and horrors of mutilation, spiritual and literal, than this mirroring and self-reflexiveness might suggest. *Sweet Bird of Youth* is a play about a young man longing for the girl he has 'infected', who has been desecrated both by him and by her society. The way in which the girl, Heavenly, is done hovers, brilliantly and ambiguously, round the spectres of abortion and unsexing and it's part of the brilliance of Tennessee Williams' atmospherics that fashion and familiarity don't diminish the power or the credibility of the melodrama here.

And this is also a play about the miasma of Boss Finley's role in '50s Louisiana, where a black man can be emasculated with covert

approval. This Abelard-like fate hangs above the hero.

It's a hell of a big ask, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, because it requires a star actress capable of evoking her own fading without shadowing into campy and a male lead who can convey both sexual magnetism and the frailty that threads along with it like a destiny. Then there's the Boss, a figure of grotesquerie, cunning and ugliness, who never quite ceases to be humanly and politically credible.

The Melbourne Theatre Company production by Kate Cherry is not flawless but it does Tennessee Williams proud and goes some way towards suggesting the theatre we might have if we bothered to dream of it.

Cherry has none of the *faiblesse* and feyness that so often afflict Australian directors. She turns the playhouse stage into a jutting triangle, in order to get a more rounded effect, and the director of *Life After George* gets a red-blooded ensemble performance from a cast which (even in the minor parts) is a lot less footling than usual.

The leading roles of Chance Wayne and Alexandra del Largo were made famous, on Broadway but more particularly on film, by Paul Newman and Geraldine Page (though Liz Taylor also made a blowzy attempt at the Princess a decade or so ago on television). Chance, the dreamer on the verge of losing everything, is probably not, ideally, a Paul Newman role; it falls somewhere dead in the middle, between a Brando and a Montgomery Clift part. It's not hard to imagine that James Dean would have played it like an angel because it has a febrile Hamlet-like quality and a femininity that Newman was a bit stolid for. Among

contemporary actors Brad Pitt would be suited to it because Chance has a 'natural' sexual confidence and charm, as well as a softness, that sit alongside a boyish hopelessness.

Guy Pearce began uncertainly on opening night and his early scenes with Hughes as del Largo had him exhibiting a kind of pulled-back stiffness that was a step away from being wooden. It was not, however, remotely hammy or limp, and this sort of underacting—that may have been the consequence of the actor being 'wired' for the opening—is likely to loosen as the run continues. It certainly creates a kind of credible smouldering toughness for what Pearce subsequently attempts to do with the part. Bare-chested, hard-tanned and thin as a rake, he tightens the frailty and the presence of Chance into his body.

In the second half it uncoils and Pearce is much more obviously impressive as the, by turns, blustering and charming Chance, the Chance who sings and coos and suffers the desolation of watching himself sink under the horizon of a dream he cannot gainsay. This is not an ideal performance, but Guy Pearce is besotted enough and has a bleak, angular intensity that gives his Chance Wayne authenticity.

Wendy Hughes as Alexandra del Largo is more obviously on top of the role from the start, with a precision brought to bear on the poses and inadvertencies of the star on the skids. Hughes has the advantage of being beautiful while not looking young, and she manages to make her old Hollywood broad into a complex monument to frailty and authentic feeling, braggadocio and sharp, heartbreaking glimpses of recognition. It's a very fine performance, exactly


adjusted to Tennessee Williams' tragedy-comedy. This is a flesh-and-blood woman who suffers the weariness of the flesh. At one point Hughes effects a stately alcoholic walk, taking the greatest possible pains to embody the smallest possible thing. With perhaps an inch more pathos this would be as fine an Alexandra as one could imagine, though it's impressive that Hughes does not go over the top.

John Stanton, in the Ed Begley role of the local politician and all-consuming reptile Finley, begins with too broad a Southernness (the effect seems approximate and a bit caricatured) but the performance grows and we believe in the feeling for the dead wife as well as the enshrouding meanness and brutality. This is a razor-sharp performance with a lot of inner strength and the great—and horrifying—political speech (conveyed, like black-and-white TV, on video) is masterly in its rhetoric and its slashing will to power.

The rest of the cast vary and swerve as to intrinsic talent or suitability, but Cherry ensures that the characterisations are never conventional sketches.

This is a good production of Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* and it deserves the audience it will command. It is both a good move on the Melbourne Theatre Company's part and a justification of that move. It's not soaring or startling but it delivers, with all of its outlines delineated and enough of its depths plumbed, one of the significant plays of the 20th century. ■

Peter Craven is the editor of *Quarterly Essay*, the ongoing series of political essays published by Black Inc.



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FLASH IN THE PAN



Working closely

Intimacy, dir. Patrice Chéreau. This film won the award for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival where Kerry Fox also gained the award for Best Actress. So it is a sad comment on our times that to attract attention, the pre-release publicity for a film as raw and honest as *Intimacy* has had to emphasise the realism of the sex scenes.

It is true that we occasionally see a flaccid penis, pubic hair and breasts, but we have come a long way since the naked wrestle in *Women in Love* in the '60s—haven't we?

Based on short stories by Hanif Kureishi (*My Beautiful Laundrette*), the filmed story has little background. At first all we know is that a man and a woman meet once a week at the man's grotty unfurnished flat for noisy sex, but where barely a word is spoken. Clearly the regular physical release has become compulsive for both of them, a means of achieving communication, but at first neither seeks commitment from the other, except punctuality.

Although we are never told about the relationship's beginnings, the veil of mystery is lifted slightly when we find out more about Jay (Mark Rylance, above). He is a musician-turned-barman who has recently walked out on his wife and children. Only after Jay feels compelled to know more about his anonymous sexual partner do we learn what her name is (Claire—

played by Kerry Fox), where she lives and what she does. Inevitably she becomes more to Jay than an anonymous sexual partner. But the more Jay learns, the more the basic physical relationship between them is eroded.

Fox gives a memorable performance as the frustrated would-be actress, married to a loud, apparently insensitive, but supportive husband (Timothy Spall). Spall (*Secrets and Lies*) gives a powerful performance, expressing bewilderment with cruel accuracy. Mark Rylance plays Jay with so little sympathy that he fails to give his character any warmth.

The sex and nudity are never glamorous, the surroundings are always grotty and the characters seem trapped in the mundane. It is a remarkably honest movie.

—Gordon Lewis

Fishing for a line

The Shipping News, dir. Lasse Hallström. Though generally disappointing, *The Shipping News* manages to yield up one stunning sequence: a windswept line of black-clad men and women dragging a two-storey wooden frame house across an icy wasteland.

Unfortunately, the image might stand as a metaphor for this adaptation of E. Annie Proulx's celebrated bestseller. It looks like the usually adept Scandinavian director Hallström (*My Life as a Dog*) has had to pull

this cherished book to the screen against its will.

Quoyle (a hopelessly miscast Kevin Spacey) is a broken man. Undermined by a domineering father and battered by dead-end jobs, he travels back to the family home in Newfoundland with his Aunt Agnis (Judi Dench) and young daughter, Bunny (Lauren Gainer), after the death of his duplicitous and uncaring girlfriend, Petal (Cate Blanchett), sets his soul adrift.

In the small fishing village of his forebears Quoyle discovers an ice-bound version of *Sea Change's* Pearl Bay. The place is populated by endearing eccentrics who eat seal-flipper pie and brood darkly on the sea's malign nature. And when he surprises himself by finding a job on the local paper he starts to rebuild his life. It's an age-old and moving story: a sick man picks up his bed and walks.

But that's the problem. *The Shipping News* is choking on interesting stories. What accounts for the sadness of Aunt Agnis? What evils did Quoyle's family commit? Even the beautiful widower, Wavey Prowse (Julianne Moore), whom Quoyle courts in a tentative way, has a secret to keep. If Hallström had made a TV mini-series he might have found the right rhythm to do these stories justice, but in a feature he hasn't got the time to tell them properly.

As a neophyte journalist, Quoyle is taught to think in headlines and find 'the beating heart of the story'. Sadly, the beating heart of *The Shipping News* eludes Hallström. Director Thrown Overboard by Powerful Novel.

—Brett Evans

Flickering thought

Iris, dir. Richard Eyre. Work, particularly work that involves words and thought, is not a natural for film. You can shoot the construction of a railway line. Ditto for criminal exploits—work of a kind. Even exploited labour has its graphic moments (see Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*). But just try filming Bertrand Russell's ten-year stint with *Principia Mathematica*.

Richard Eyre does not solve the problem of getting Iris Murdoch's life as a philosopher and novelist on to film. A floor littered with screwed-up paper doth not a life of art make, any more than a snatch of warm-hearted lecture about love and caring for all creatures and even stones can convey the passion that animates philosophers.

But that said, what Eyre does do—with great finesse—is render one late corner of

Iris Murdoch's marriage to writer and academic John Bayley. He is aided by Jim Broadbent's mercurial performance as Bayley. Broadbent can run the full range of human emotions in a flicker of facial expression. He might look like the dithering professor but his every move explodes the stereotype. Judi Dench, as the ailing Iris, too nuggety to be wholly consumed by the Alzheimer's disease that takes away her control, is a good match for him. The young Iris, played by Kate Winslet, to Hugh Bonneville's young Bayley, is intriguing and attractive, but more given to swimming naked in Oxford's reedy rivers than to strenuous thought. A pity—Winslet and Bonneville are good, but their script is thin.

There is a touch too much homage in the film for my taste. Iris Murdoch was a flesh-and-blood strange woman, with jagged edges, a powerful intellect and even more formidable imagination. No film could contain her—what Eyre makes is finally more an honourable fiction than a biopic—but I'd have liked even the shadow play to have had more substance. —Morag Fraser

Abstract uncracked

Mulholland Drive, dir. David Lynch. I have yet to read a review of David Lynch's new film, *Mulholland Drive*, that doesn't use the word 'surreal'. The prevalence of this flaccid adjective suggests that it has become the descriptor of choice for any movie whose story can't be summarised in five sentences or less—as if the job of a reviewer were simply to condense the plot and work out how many thumbs up or down to give it. This process of 'pinning a film down', defining and categorising both its meaning and what a viewer's response to it should be, has always seemed to me like an act of interpretative violence, forcing the enigmatic, ephemeral and sensual experience of the cinema into an analytic straitjacket, pointing a gun at its head and saying 'make sense—or else'.

Of course, it's a natural response to an ambiguous or perplexing experience to try to master it by 'making sense' out of it, creating a coherent and consistent story to explain its mystery. One of the many marvellous things about *Mulholland Drive* and its sister film, *Lost Highway*, is that they both refuse our desire for interpretative mastery, taunting us with the unshakeable sense that it all adds up somehow, but only in ways that are impossible to articulate. The best description I've seen of *Mulholland*

Drive comes from Michael J. Anderson (the dancing dwarf from *Twin Peaks*, who also plays a sinister, full-sized, underworld boss with a disturbingly small head in Lynch's current film). 'David's work isn't consciously coherent,' he says, 'but its coherence on an unconscious level is inescapable—almost against your will.' The unremitting sense of violence and threat the film generates is at least partly a consequence of this power to evade the viewer's (and reviewer's) mastery, and to affect them in ways they can't explain and can't control.

Lynch himself describes the film as 'abstract', but its abstraction is not so much visual (though there are aspects of this in the film) as it is narrative. Like a modernist painter, Lynch fragments and disrupts the thing he represents (in his case, the narrative), in order to bring out its essence, the pure sensation of the thing, rather than its recognisable image. *Mulholland Drive*, in its focus on the idea of Los Angeles, of Hollywood and of cinema itself, is in many ways a reflection on (and of) the nature of the image, reflection or double itself. The 'essence' that Lynch abstracts out of his fragmented narrative is ultimately that of film noir—the darkness, threat and violence lurking beneath the everyday, beneath the surface of the image itself. In fact you could say that Lynch has founded a new genre of filmmaking in his oeuvre—'abstract noir'. However, the logical consequence of what I've been saying is that anything I say about this film is necessarily going to miss the point. So don't read this review. Go see the film. —Allan James Thomas

Hicks' shticks

Hearts in Atlantis, dir. Scott Hicks. This is a film adapted by Scott Hicks from a screenplay by William Goldman of a Stephen King short story, 'Low Men in Yellow Coats'. Goldman was the scriptwriter of *The Princess Bride*, a charming fairytale. Hicks is the successful director of *Shine*, though that may be small recommendation for some. The film plot runs thus: in the 1950s, a fatherless young boy, Bobby Garfield, is befriended by his cold, selfish mother's new lodger, Ted Brautigan. Ted is a psychic on the run from the FBI, which wants to use his powers against the Russians. Bobby finds out some nice stuff about his dead father, Ted is captured and Bobby goes on to be a successful photographer.

At its best, King's work has a unique flavour, a sense of the sharply observed

ordinary suffused with the Other, the dark monsters of the psyche that take tangible form. He is as sentimental as Dickens, more frightening than Poe, grottier than Roth, and far more intelligent than Thomas Harris.

Under the dead hand of Goldman and Hicks, who have removed all reference to the aliens that are an essential part of the plot, the world of *Hearts in Atlantis* has been turned into a kind of *Un-Happy Days*, a dismal sort of *Wonder Years*. Anachronisms abound: the children are given snappy New York Jewish one-liners; the mother wears a post-modern distressed bob that would have been considered very outré in the 1950s. And Ted Brautigan (Anthony Hopkins), the mysterious lodger, is being chased not by aliens but by the FBI. The disturbing resonance of his phrase 'low men' for his pursuers is dissipated in the banality of the new setting. His powers are no more than clairvoyance: a thin Cold-War-psychic-research scenario is tacked over the void left by the excision of King's entire Dark Tower universe.

Bobby is played by Anton Yelchin, an excellent young actor who will do better with better stuff. There is a tired bravura-monologue scene for Hopkins, some lip-trembling from the boy, a lot of small-town scenery and no suspense, no edge, no King-ismness at all.

—Juliette Hughes

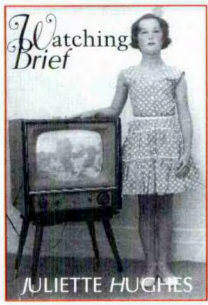
Congo murder

Lumumba, dir. Raoul Peck. In 1961 Patrice Lumumba was assassinated. He had, for two short months, been the first democratically elected prime minister of the newly independent Congo. The story of Patrice Lumumba is devastating, frustrating and important.

Peck obviously knows his stuff, having made an award-winning documentary on Lumumba back in 1992. With Eriq Ebouaney's strong lead performance, *Lumumba* should have been one out of the box, but as in so many biopics, the art of cinema lags a little behind the line-up of historical events.

The film opens with a series of confronting monochrome images of a brutal colonial past, intercut with a happy crowd of party-goers enjoying colourful hors d'oeuvres and sporting shady hats. This simple contrast is appropriately shocking and, as we later discover, horribly ironic.

—Siobhan Jackson



Philosophical drift

WE WERE WATCHING *On Happiness* during February on the ABC. It was part of a series on six Western philosophers, presented by Cambridge don Alain de Botton. Soon we realised that we were feeling a kind of uppityness, the feeling you get when you know that you know more about something than the learned person expounding. You see the flaw. You detect the gap. You realise that book-learning isn't everything. You start to get witty. *You* begin to expound, using phrases that include 'common sense' and 'real life'.

My spouse calls it 'that naughty-haughty Hughes pride' and I tell him that *he* never did Philosophy 1B either. None of my family ever did philosophy. Those who weren't warned off before they started (Mother Basil in Matric RE: 'Philosophy students Lose The Faith!') were terrified off by smug numerates (who claimed that you needed to know some maths).

However, feeling that I might need to find out something weighty to throw into the family discourse, I watched de Botton at first with, indeed, some humility. I learnt plenty listening to the historical stuff, which was quite fun. But de Botton's commentary, when it veered into your actual philosophy and away from your 'this happened' stuff, gave other commentators new shallows to conquer. There was more than a teents of self-reference, considerably more than a soupçon of oh-what-a-clever-boy-am-I. I should like to hear him say 'Proust'—he has written a very clever book on Proust. You see, if you are a dumb Anglo ignoramus you pronounce it 'Proost'. End of story. If you're a bit educated-like, you'll say a kind of franglais 'Pwoost', and you might even have read him. But if you're a real show-off you do the full frog 'Pghrrrrrhoost' that causes people to say 'bless you!' or edge away. I'm betting de Botton is a born Pghrrrrrhoostter, although if I'm wrong I do humbly apologise: blame my DNA.

It was naff of him to try to score a date with the dumped girl on the Schopenhauer episode, 'Love'. On the other hand, she didn't seem too fussed about her tragedy. She showed the Dear Joan letter from the escaped boyfriend with the air of someone showing you an annoyingly big phone bill. If truly lovelorn, her demeanour gave Stoics something to aim for. She beamed in a 'yes, isn't it extraordinary!' way as de Botton tutted over the harshness of such a letter. They agreed cordially that it had been really, *really* tough to deal with. Ariadne, Medea, Maria Callas, Miss Havisham, even Bridget Jones, she wasn't. Nothing to kill or die for here, and no religion too.

De Botton then mused on Schopenhauer's lack of success in love, with a gentle, wondering sympathy that seemed oblivious to the fact that he'd just revealed him as an arrogant deserter of the mother of his child in his youth. As an ugly old narcissist, he seemed to think he had a chance with young, pretty girls. Nietzsche's case was even more obvious: the man had a moustache like a dead bear. What girl would want to smooch a bloke who looked as though he hadn't finished swallowing a yeti? Peering over all that shrubbery, he would continually assert variations on your basic footy coach's theme of no-gain-no-pain. Except that for Nietzsche it seemed the pain was the gain.

DE BOTTON'S STYLE IS altogether too much him and not enough philosophy. He should watch David Attenborough, who's long realised that though he's a perfectly nice chap, the punters don't want to be looking at him all the time. They want to see the animals, the scenery, the interesting folk from other cultures. They do not want the presenter bobbing his head in front of the action, telling them what he thinks. All presenters should realise that there is a golden ratio of Presenter Close-Up to Documentary's Subject (1:50). Wildlife doco makers often forget this, imagining that we've never seen a helicopter take off before, *and* that we need to see the presenter in the passenger seat.

If your subject is philosophy your program runs a severe risk of becoming a tame-life doco if the narrative isn't sharp and deep. Or wide, for that matter. The de Botton series covers anger, love, self-esteem and self-confidence, hardship and happiness, without ever looking at poor people or the Third World. Its comfort zone is Britain's upper middle class: its prime image for an object of envy is at Cambridge undergraduate. Then he shows us the photo of himself in the graduating class. From Cambridge.

So thank God for the new *Absolutely Fabulous*. Edina and Patsy offer far more wisdom than de Botton. We need our satire: to stay up-to-date and Ab Fab has done this, slicing through every trend, refusing to be a historical piece. You see anger (Edina's constant rage), self-esteem (Patsy's Parralox!), hardship (poor Saffy) and yes, happiness (Edina's mum on the shopping channel). But you laugh so much that you really take it in. Humbly. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance writer.



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 101, March 2002

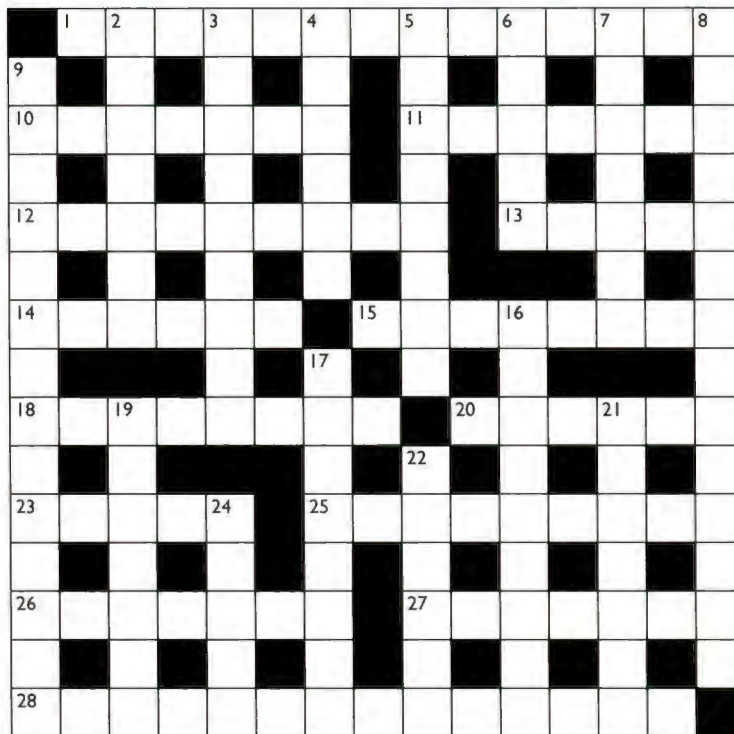
Devised by
Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

1. When podalic ablution takes place in the holy season—not on Monday! (6,8)
10. Appearance of a challenger right inside. (7)
11. Poor Ada, involved in Peru, somehow raised the French flag. (7)
12. No priest ever, initially, would come between the participants, say. (9)
13. Girl, for example, returns to mother. (5)
14. Lost some of her balance when taking this sort of organic remedy. (6)
15. Study thick book, say, and make a summary. (8)
18. A cake for the emperor! (8)
20. Unfortunately, I lapse in my task of secret observation. (6)
23. Quotes a reference on seeing the views, reportedly. (5)
25. A hedonistic philosopher? (9)
26. To have pie-mix with a weighty book to read is pleasure in its essence. (7)
27. Some ail, perhaps, when they do this and miss their objective. (7)
28. Being successful in getting into the top class, possibly. (6,3,5)

DOWN

2. It purifies and circulates the air, to a rear room, perhaps. (7)
3. Always succeed in life with Verna involved. (5,4)
4. Cowardly chicken! (6)
5. Spiny animal which likes to bag the best place beside the row of shrubs. (8)
6. Field of interest is a study of the royal domain. (5)
7. China largely destroyed in World War II. (7)
8. In our conversation, I express colloquially complete agreement and explain what's going on. (3'2,7,2)
9. Skin treatment for a disappearing elite. (9,5)
16. The one who pays when distressed S. Rubi's back in the red. (9)
17. It is quite consistent that firm should be present in the Northern Territory. (8)
19. Dad uses gimmick to celebrate his feast ... (7)
21. ... in the country he cleared of creeping things, so we're told. (7)
22. Little William is sometimes called silly, or is it his sister? (6)
24. Exhibition displayed on the north side. (5)



Solution to Crossword no. 100, January–February 2002



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