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Arnhem Land vision for sanity in the city

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

2006

Published 11-Dec-2006

Jonathan Hill, 25, of Turrumurra NSW, submitted two essays to win the 2006 Margaret Dooley Young Writers Award. His essays—"Reclaiming our imagination" and "Why reconciliation matters"—are published below. In a [statement](#) released last week, the Eureka Street publishers said they were very pleased to present the \$2000 prize to Jonathan, who has spent the past two years travelling between Darwin and Sydney, working with Aboriginal kids and volunteering with homeless people.

The runners-up—Christine Kearney and Angelica Hannan—will have their essays published in Eureka Street next month. Further details of the award are at: www.margaretdooleyaward.com

Long essay: Reclaiming our imagination



Visiting Arnhem Land changes a person's life. The land is rich with spirit, the rivers tell stories from centuries past, the birds fly with unrestrained grace, and the sunsets powerfully whisper the promise of peace.

Earlier this year I had the privilege of spending a week in Ngukurr—a remote Aboriginal community in southeast Arnhem Land situated beside the spectacular Roper River. My friend had been appointed acting principal of the local school, and I decided to visit him as well as get a brief insight into community life.

Several months have passed since my visit but the images from that week are fresh and vibrant in my mind: the innocence and enthusiasm that shone in the eyes of the year four class I helped teach; the melancholic confusion from the movements of teenagers who wandered the streets; the compassion, love and respect of older members in the community; dilapidated houses, weary roads, abused cars and a football field void of grass.

The central image however that still haunts me is that of a grieving woman who began to smash a brick against her head during a ceremony for the return of the body of a deceased young man. Her helplessness, sadness and despair entered me as I watched her wail and mourn.

Shortly after my stay in Ngukurr I found myself back in Sydney trying to get on with life. Returning to such a spiritually destructive place was highly traumatic. I had been removed from one world and placed in another. My new reality was a man made environment consisting of cars, pollution, advertising, skyscrapers and mobile phones. There was no sense of community, as all the people walked to the oppressive rhythm of selfishness and fear.

My experiences in these contrasting milieus revealed a poignant truth: Australia exists on Aboriginal land, and all Australians must embrace Aboriginality if they are to have any sense of who they are and where they belong. All Aboriginal Australians deserve the same chance at life as anyone else. The oppression they endure is a burden carried by the whole nation. Their salvation is directly intertwined with ours.

This essay will comprise three parts. Part one will entail my recollection of the ceremony at Ngukurr. Part two will entail my reaction to returning to Sydney. Part three will expand on the significance of these events in relation to Australia's desperate need to address Aboriginal disadvantage, and rediscover its intrinsic Aboriginality. By connecting with our past we will restore some much needed vigour to our imagination, and thereby rediscover the beauty and sacredness of life.

Part One: Ceremony at Ngukurr

Body in boat

brought back home.

Tears. Fury. Confusion. Pain.

Woman takes a brick to her head.

Young man kicks an innocent dog.

Watching. We are watching.

Intensely private. Infinitely personal.

Arcs of layered emotion fill the sacred space.

The men are strong in their movements.

The women painfully sincere in their grief.

Each person knows their place.

Every action unfolds to the strict rhythm of the traditional way.

The sadness enters me.

*I suddenly don't know who I am
or why I am here.*

My heart hurts.

It is swollen with sorrow.

I'm on the verge of tears but I don't cry.

I shrink inside myself.

I want nothing but silence.

No words. No thoughts.

The world is but a lifeless shadow.

The moon has turned away... |

The boat carrying the body arrived at midday. The sun's rays were hot, dry and soothing. A gentle wind dishevelled the red dirt and contemptuously tossed discarded

litter into the bush.

The coffin was transported from the boat ramp to the house in the back of a four-wheel drive. In front of the car the male relatives marched in a scattered formation whilst moving to the penetrating sounds of the didgeridoo and clap sticks. Further behind were members of the community who wanted to pay their respects.

Once at the house the female relatives were seated cross-legged on the ground, beside a mattress on which the coffin would be placed. They wore differently coloured clothes and were painted with markings on their faces and legs.

Opposite the women on the other side of the yard were more men and boys. They were huddled together rehearsing movements and ceremonial rhythms. Their legs and faces were also painted, but with a different pattern to that of the women.

As the car pulled into the driveway a cloud of grief descended upon the space. In unison the women burst into tears. Their cries were loud and painful and increased with intensity as the body was removed from the car and placed before them.

The strongest men carried the coffin. They moved slowly and respectfully, while the other men chanted and danced to the insistent rhythm of the didgeridoo and clap sticks.

They were truly captivating as they shattered society's fabricated stereotype of an Aboriginal male. Usually we are confronted with images of hopeless alcoholics and low-life lazy criminals. Before me though I saw no such people. These men moved with pride and conviction. They stamped the ground with authority. They knew their place. Each movement exuded confidence and grace. Their eyes were alive with passion and their bodies were governed by a tradition that was in place many centuries before colonisation.

Whilst these dances and chants continued at sporadic intervals, the women sat cross-legged by the body and wept. Never in my life had I heard such anguish. It seemed as if their grief would never end. A symphony of sadness was unfolding before my eyes as these women stayed together and moaned in the merciless heat of the midday sun.



It was at this point that one woman sprung from the ground and grabbed a stray brick and started smashing it into her head. She was soon stopped and controlled by two other women. They tried to comfort her, all three still shedding a constant stream of tears.

Before long the body was then placed inside the back of the car and taken to the morgue. Again the car was led by a small group of men. All relatives followed amidst a haze of lingering grief.

Part Two: Returning to Sydney

*A barrage of artificial images
clogs my arteries and suffocates my soul.
My worried face is led by nervous footsteps.
An unforgiving wind goes through me.
The concrete has given birth to more cars.*

*Faces and faces: expressionless and robotic.
No empathy. No love.
Am in the center of sadness,
Consumed by darkness.
The pollution infects me,
sucking all passion from my veins.
Nature has been defeated.
Winter's leaves are strewn across the pavement.
Amidst the scattered insincerity of abused butts and bottles
they lie helpless weeping tears
of regret and pain... |*

It was like some sick nightmare. The moment I got off the plane, I was struck by confused and chaotic energy. My senses were assaulted by the noise, the fumes, the advertising, the unnatural speed at which everything and everyone moved. I was thrown into a severe sense of solitude as I struggled to find understanding in anyone's eyes. Even my loving family and girlfriend could offer little support because they had not seen what I had seen. They had not heard the cries from the mourning women. Their soul had not been touched by the penetrating perfection of the didgeridoo.

Days turned into weeks and slowly I settled back in. The whole time however my mind was filled with Ngukurr: the wide and wonder-filled eyes of the children at school, the creature-like mountains and escarpments that rested upon the horizon, the languages other than English that were spoken at will and the serene silence that accompanied each breath.

Sydney had none of this. It had replaced nature with the manifestations of its mind. These included loveless freeways, spiritless skyscrapers and a toxic brown haze that hovered above the insanity of city life.

Part Three: Creating a new dreaming

Time has passed and the contrasting nature of these experiences still stirs turmoil in my veins. How is it fair that the people who were here first are sentenced to lives of poverty and despair? Should such a situation exist when Australia's economy has never been so strong? How on earth did our imagination give birth to such a fatally unjust world?

The fundamental factor that will instil a sense of sanity upon these shores is a renewed spirituality that enlivens our moral imagination thereby uniting us as one. No matter how convincing the media is in insisting that we find self-definition in the endless acquisition of material goods, the truth is that we are all spiritual beings who are connected by the land. With this in mind one begins to realise that all people have an obligation to each other, as well as the natural environment to ensure that justice is served.

A radical change in consciousness is desperately needed as the situation seemingly spirals out of control. All Australians must shoulder the responsibility to break free from the constraints of a society that worships power, and places money high on a pedestal

above the inexpressible beauty of nature's song. We must reclaim our imagination and create a new dreaming that is based on a deep respect for the land, all its people and its eternal rhythms that have been suppressed for far too long.

The women in Ngukurr were not grieving solely for the death of the young man. They were mourning the constant cloud of death that envelops all Aboriginal families nationwide. They were crying for the pain and suffering endured by all Aboriginal cultures since First Settlement. They were wailing for the continued rape and destruction of their sacred land. Each one of their tears was a distilled expression of fear that the death of this young man was one step closer to the extinction of their race.

Sydney's spiritless environment is a direct manifestation of the distorted imagination that lives in the minds of its citizens. It is fatally ignorant to assume that progress can be measured by the extent to which a group of people can destroy the land but this is Sydney's reality and shame. For years upon years the senses of its citizens have been starved as they have been markedly disconnected from nature. This has led to a foolish acceptance of mediocrity along with the erosion of any moral sense of what is sacred.

If Australia can create a new dreaming by reconnecting with its Aboriginal past, then it will shape a new generation whose legacy will be an insatiable hunger for justice and fervent desire for peace. Most of us don't know it but, as a nation, we are only one step away from greatness. We can be the nation who admitted it was wrong. We can be the nation who learnt from its mistakes. We can be the nation who ensured justice for all its citizens and transformed its ways to tread lightly upon the earth.

The birth of each new day is a chance for us to discover the intrinsic Aboriginality that connects us. We must reclaim our imagination and ensure that justice is served because the fate of future generations depends solely on how we currently choose to live. The spirits of this land are alive in each heart. Their stories and histories are the uniting medium that will lead to our salvation.

If you listen carefully the cries of the women in Ngukurr can be heard on the wings of summer's wind. It is time to listen to the heartbeat of our common soul and liberate humanity from these doldrums of despair.

Short essay: Why reconciliation matters

Without doubt, the most important issue facing contemporary Australian society is the continued oppression of our Indigenous peoples. The divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is shamefully expanding at an unacceptable rate. As our economy goes from strength to strength, Aboriginal communities nationwide sink further into the soul-shattering cycle of poverty and despair.



Reconciliation is the cornerstone of our existence. We must move past the systems of assimilation and have the humility and wisdom to learn from these different cultures, so that we can integrate their perception of the world into ours.

If this complicated and delicate issue is addressed adequately, then it will finally give us our long sought-after self-identity, as well as restore a strong sense of morality to our withering national social conscience. If Australia can summon the courage to ensure justice for the people who lived here before colonisation, then it will enter the hallowed hallways of greatness and stand as a shining example to the rest of the world as to how a democracy should function.

At the heart of the issue is the implacable necessity for all Australians to reconnect with the history of this land: rediscovering the rich spirituality that unites us as one.

Imperative in this journey is the unpleasant acknowledgement of past relations. First Settlement Aborigines have never been given a fair go. We brought the foreign diseases, we slaughtered them as if they were pests, we made them work for free, we hid whole tribes in remote locations, we introduced the addictive horrors of alcohol and other drugs, we let our allies experiment with atomic bombs, and we continue to mine their sacred land for profit.

Despite all of this they are still here, desperately clinging to the fragments of culture that remain, and living behind a veil of oppression that mainstream society chooses to ignore.

Indigenous disadvantage should not exist in a nation as wealthy as ours, and therein lies the problem.

Australians are becoming hungrier for wealth and material possessions. The legacy of 'a fair go for all' has been pushed into the dark recesses of all minds. A consequence is that we now crave financial security above all else, and thus we tolerate the social injustices occurring on our shores and overseas.

We foolishly kid ourselves into thinking that we own the land and that we can do with it as we please. This common misperception is proving fatal as we bear witness to an environmental catastrophe unfold before our eyes. It is painfully clear that our 'modern' way of life is the problem. We are living frightfully beyond our means as we stupidly and greedily produce more than we can consume.

A return to simplicity is desperately needed. The fate of future generations depends solely on how we choose to live.



And this is why we must achieve reconciliation with all Australian Aborigines. They lived with a practicality and deep spirituality that puts our society to shame. They lived here for thousands of years at one with the land. We have lived here for 218 years, and caused irreversible damage.

We must connect with their land, their belief systems and above all else, their spirituality.

The solution to this problem lies in the hands of the Australian public and their willingness to instigate practical pathways to peaceful resolution. It entails a dramatic and radical shift in our national mindset, with a strong focus on connecting with Aboriginal cultures and the land, rather than strengthening the economy and generating more capital. At the very least we should equip all Indigenous peoples with sufficient education, healthcare and housing—but this is only a beginning, for once these resources are in place the real work can begin.

The priests and brothers during my school years spoke of the necessity to be a man for others, forever offering one's energy and compassion to the least advantaged in society. Only in the past few years has the profundity of this message made sense, because finally it is clear to me that as spiritual beings, we are bound by an invisible yet indivisible moral imagination.

As a nation we must link hands and walk with pride into the light of justice with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. Their liberation is directly bound up with ours. No matter how prosperous or powerful we think we are, we can only move forward once reconciliation is achieved.

Our dysfunctional relationship with the earth

EDITORIAL

Published 11-Dec-2006

The *Sydney Morning Herald* website's most viewed story last week concerned the fate of 35-year-old US [technology journalist James Kim](#). He perished in the snowdrifts of the Oregon wilderness while trying to save his wife and two daughters.

The *Herald* explained that the cyber-savvy Kim's most likely mistake was that he had put his faith in electronic mapping: "Despite its impassable snowdrifts and single lane, Bear Camp Road is offered as the preferred route on some websites and on-board-directions software available on some new cars."

This is an error most of us make every day, at least on a more general scale. In the words of our Margaret Dooley Young Writers Award winner—25-year-old Jonathan Hill—we "replace nature with manifestations of [our] mind". We have lost the art of listening to the land. The Aboriginal tracker is regarded as a curious relic of the past, redundant in the age of GPS (global positioning) technology. But more broadly, we are transfixed by a virtual reality. Our relationship with the natural environment is dysfunctional.



In this issue of *Eureka Street*, we publish Hill's winning entry. He documents his life-changing visit to the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr, in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, earlier this year. More significantly, he describes his experience of Sydney when he returns home: "A barrage of artificial images [that] clogs my arteries and suffocates my soul."

He concludes: "It is fatally ignorant to assume that progress can be measured by the extent to which a group of people can destroy the land, but this is Sydney's reality and shame. For years upon years the senses of its citizens have been starved as they have been markedly disconnected from nature."

As we make the transition to the new year, it would do us no harm to let ourselves be haunted by the disarming "last laugh" of actor David Gulpillil, in Rolf De Heer's 2002 film [The Tracker](#).



The baby Jesus and the business of welfare

OPINION

Published 11-Dec-2006

When God became Man more than 2000 years ago, Christians believe, God broke through time, place and space to become one of us. The *seen* and the *unseen* were reunited in that act of grace.

The one-ness of God, combined with the distinctly Catholic message of inclusion of all, are two notions which ought never be separated. The emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of the deity can be skewed to promote an authoritarian notion of God. Yet the poignant story of the poor baby born in a stable reminds Christians that *God-with-us* means God for every last one of us.



Yet it is becoming apparent that God's *caritas*—which Catholics express in acts of care for the old, the sick, the prisoners and the poor—is being appropriated and manipulated for the political convenience of the State. Further, the State appears to be intentionally creating a two-tiered system, with very different outcomes for different sections of society.

Last month's discussion paper from Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA—formerly Catholic Welfare Australia)—*A Job Network for Job Seekers*—rightly complains that onerous government requirements of service providers will make the provision of the Job Network financially unviable. The report says that the costs of service provision are increasing, and not being met by compensating fee adjustments or indexation.

"The choice is simple. Does the Australian taxpayer want Job Network providers to be focused on 'playing the system' as a means of business survival, or on providing real assistance aimed at re-establishing unemployed job seekers in the workforce permanently with an accompanying reduction of public expenditure on allowances?" CSSA fears that if it is to act in accord with its Christian principles, the 'system' will ensure CSSA goes broke.

Should Catholic charity be beholden to the State?

Concern that Catholic charity easily slides into 'welfarism' is widespread. Conservative commentators such as Samuel Gregg see government subsidy of Catholic charity as inevitably an attack on Catholic identity: "The ability of church welfare groups to express religious commitment has been muzzled by contract and neutered by subsidy," Gregg writes.

An example of this occurred in 2005, when Melbourne's Archbishop Denis Hart issued a memo to all staff directing them not to comment on the introduction of the new IR laws. Archbishop Hart's action was a clear example of Gregg's point: Centacare Melbourne alone receives 36 per cent of its revenues from government. Catholic schools in Victoria receive approximately \$1 billion annually from state and federal sources. Even the now

dubious Job Network is to deliver \$1.3 million over the next three years, and a new Disability Employment Network, \$4.2 million over a similar period.



But money is not the only issue. It is hard not to contemplate the possibility that some Catholic leaders may be compliant with the divisive intentions of the Howard Government.

In 2004, the publicly-funded University of Notre Dame Australia announced that it would not admit students on the basis of marks alone. It is surprising that no public commentator has reflected on a new medical faculty boasting that it will admit medical students based on something other than academic merit.

This is Catholic triumphalism, as is denying non-Catholic students places in Catholic schools. Acting as if Catholic identity is an ultimate value denies God's original act of grace in becoming one of us through Jesus. Jesus is Emmanuel, the poor Jewish preacher who loved the sinners, the unclean, and the women. Would Jesus suffer to impose a departmental 'star' rating on job seekers? Would Jesus refuse an education to a child who needed and wanted it, because that child was not of the tribe of Levi? Would Jesus choose an inferior student to gain entry to a medical faculty, because such a person had signed up to the "No Therapeutic Cloning" manifesto?

Samuel Gregg and others imagine that Catholic agencies are offered governmental responsibilities in social welfare because government is (necessarily) inferior in service delivery, ethics, 'formation', and true charity. Therefore, Gregg argues, Catholic agencies should show a bit of backbone and make demands.

The error Gregg makes is in failing to appreciate government's real purpose. Market-driven governments are happy to create social divisions, and sanguine about reducing the opportunities and outcomes for some. People who need social welfare are 'losers'. Governments will continue to strip benefits from such people, and squeeze agencies that deliver them, because these days it is the agency which will bear the opprobrium. Government has distanced itself from what should be governmental responsibilities. Catholics, struggling with a disconnected faithful and an absence of relevance, have rushed to embrace that burden.

Catholics should recommit to the genuinely Catholic idea of universality. They should find ways to make sure none of their works contribute to a two-tiered system—in education, in health, in aged care, and in welfare. Catholics can run distinctively Catholic entities. What they should never do is to accept separate funding arrangements for Catholic entities than exist for public entities. That way lies inequity and injustice.

An insider's view of Labor's sea change

OPINION

Published 11-Dec-2006

The election of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard as the new Labor leadership team represents a sea change in Australian politics. It is a bold move by the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party as it steps up its efforts to pitch to Australian voters in the 2007 election.

Prime Minister Howard will not be able to take any comfort from the change. Kim Beazley, who served the Labor Party with honour, departed with grace and dignity, having lost two loves in his life—his younger brother David, and the Labor leadership. Opinion polls and psephologists alike have been sounding an insistent drumbeat: Kim Beazley's legacy is a party that is within striking distance of government.

The vote for a leadership change reflected the pressure that Labor members are getting in their electorates from an increasingly embittered constituency. It is clear in the groundswell of opinion in communities across the country that the Coalition government is not on the side of working Australians.

Kevin Rudd's leadership needs to be sophisticated and incisive. He needs to identify the weaknesses that can be used to defeat the Howard government. He is not afraid to articulate his vision for Australia, a vision that recognises how life in this country has changed, and one that gives back to people the hope that this government has dashed.

The [Report of the Iraq Study Group](#), released in the US this week, has revealed that current strategies in Iraq are failing and the situation is deteriorating. Tony Blair is big enough to acknowledge this and has put in place a withdrawal strategy. John Howard stubbornly refuses to accept the validity of the report, or to act on its findings.

Australians are also disturbed by the government's abandonment of David Hicks, left to languish for five years in Guantanamo Bay. The Immigration Ombudsman this week revealed that ten Australian citizens have been locked up illegally in Australia, some of them traumatised children. As Kevin has stated, "compassion is not a dirty word ...| not a sign of weakness." It's part and parcel of the Australian belief in a 'fair go', and without it we're in a bad way.



For working families, two interest rate rises in close succession have had a crippling effect on their struggle to maintain their mortgage payments. The dream of owning the family home is becoming less and less achievable. For many Australian workers, since the Workchoices legislation was passed, day to day has become tougher. They have lost conditions, penalty rates, shift allowances and are coming to understand that the only 'choice' is for employers.

We as a nation don't want a one-way choice or a one-way society. Kevin Rudd and



Julia Gillard know at first hand how aspiring to a better life involves hard work and commitment, and they are firm in their conviction that success should be open to everyone, not the privileged few. They will aim to bring a new urgency and new energy to the task of defeating the Howard government.

In the next year the new leadership team will build up from Labor's core vote. Kevin Rudd says that the present government is contemptuous of dissenting voices, arrogant in its abuse of parliamentary processes and grossly negligent in its refusal to accept responsibility for the consequences of its actions. The new Labor team will set out to make these allegations stick, and in so doing, show Australians what a Labor government could offer as an alternative.

The Rudd Labor team will respond to the electoral lack of engagement. The electoral process has been bogged down in a kind of ennui that needs fierce combatting. The long years of opposition have taken their toll. Labor has only been able to 'say'—now they will attempt to 'do'.

In the coming months, I anticipate a growing commitment from Australians. They will listen to Kevin Rudd as he seeks to realise his ambition to defeat the Coalition government. To achieve that, both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard will be focusing not just on winning power, but on how to use it wisely to create a more compassionate and inclusive Australia.

Christmas takes us beyond 'family first'

COLUMNS

Summa Theologiae

Published 11-Dec-2006

At this time of the year, all roads lead to the family. Christmas is family time. It is also a time for politicians to practise their pitch in defence of decent Australian families, Australian working families, and family values. We even have a political party called Family First.

Family First says that it is not an explicitly Christian party. That is just as well, because the claim made in the name of the party could hardly be less Christian. In Mark's Gospel the greatest single obstacle to faith is to put family first. In the other Gospels, including the Christmas stories, the family is equally ambiguous.

When Jesus begins to preach, his family try to take him away because they think he has gone mad. When the crowd draws Jesus' attention to the presence of his mother and family, he says that his real family are those who hear God's word. Later, he says that anyone who does not hate mother, father, brothers and sisters for his sake cannot be his disciple. Strong words.

Very few ordinary family people appear in the Gospel stories. Peter must have been married because he had a mother-in-law. But like other people of interest in the Gospels, he walks with Jesus around the countryside, supported by a band of women. Neither a man's nor a woman's place, it seems, was in the home. The people who embody faith were often previously lacking in sexual morality, and their lives were regarded as scandalous.

In the stories of Jesus' infancy, the person who shows the most practical interest in guaranteeing the security of decent Palestinian families is Herod. He wants to remove the threat to their security posed by a baby king. And if we seek safe family norms, Joseph and Mary, who have to deal with an unexplained pregnancy, change residence overnight on the basis of dreams, deliver their baby in the fields, and leave Palestine as asylum seekers, are dangerous role models.



Dreams are the problem. Christian faith is about large dreams that expand your view of God and of your world, and lead you to follow Jesus' path of insecurity. By the time the Gospels were written, insecurity was no longer an abstraction. It could include rejection by family, exclusion by synagogue, and persecution by state. Putting family first would stop you following the wild dream born in Jesus.

Mark, of course, was not writing for our day. We know that if you are to follow wild dreams, you need the inner security that comes from being loved, cherished and taught to value generosity. That is normally found through families. They are therefore the focus of much Christian reflection. If politicians speak much about families, they reflect the public anxiety about pressures on family life. But



these pressures come from the economic individualism, endorsed by the same politicians, that is so corrosive both of families and of family values.

So Christmas is a good time to celebrate as families. But for Christians, it is also a time to think robustly about families. Happy family life is a gift and a seedbed, but the plants which it nurtures are not security and prosperity, but dreams of a surprising God and of a world that claims us. The stories of Christmas take us out of the private world of family and friends into the public—it makes shepherds, unwanted kings, angels and innkeepers part of our domestic scene. The dream is of a God whose passion is the wholeness of the world, and not only of our private lives.

Many of today's symbols of Christmas—hospital appeals, serving meals for the homeless, finding presents for poor children—hint at this wider dimension. Christmas is not family first.

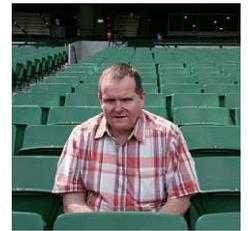
Blind cricket tourist who sees the point of sport COLUMNS

Simple Pleasures

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I first met Andy Gemmell in a cosy pub called the Compton Arms, which is in an Islington lane in north London. Like many in the pub, Andy was interested in sport; he could talk about it all night, or at least until the guv'nor called time.

Andy went to rock concerts or football matches like other patrons from the pub, only more often. He was a volunteer at the Islington branch of Britain's Labour Party. Besides having a bit more substance to his opinions than the other drinkers, the main difference between Andy and the rest was that Andy was blind.

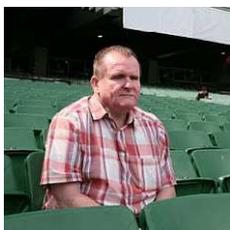


Andy, who is 54, is in Australia on a long holiday during which he's going to the cricket and the races, and catching up with friends he met through the Compton. He flew into town on the morning of the Melbourne Cup, and, after a quick spruce-up, was off to Flemington to see the race that stops an antipodean nation. It was his fourth trip to Flemington.

On the eve of the First Test, Andy flew from Melbourne to Brisbane. He went to four days of the Test and had a good time, even if the English team was disappointing, and the Queenslanders slightly coarse.

For the Second Test, Andy flew to Adelaide with a bunch of Melbourne friends, all of whom have connections that stretch back to the Compton. Andy loves Adelaide, and the Adelaide Test. He says the crowd at the Adelaide Oval is more intimate than other grounds, and much like Trent Bridge, in Nottingham.

Andy made his first Ashes jaunt to Australia in 1982—83, when he was a member of a tour group. In 1998—99 he completed his first full Ashes tour of Australia; that is, he went to every Test. He long ago stopped travelling to Australia as part of a tour group, but that's only because he feels safe.



His one problem in Australia is Melbourne trams careering down the middle of the street, which he never has to contend with in any other cricketing city. Nevertheless, Melbourne is his home base during the Ashes.

"I just feel at home here," he says. "It's comfortable; it's all right."

Andy says he's always been entranced by sport. His interest began during the English cricket team's tour of Australia in 1958—59, when he was six. The patter on BBC Radio's Test Match Special made him want more.

During the Australian team's tour of England in 1961, when Andy was eight, he became entranced by the descriptions of renowned broadcasters John Arlott and Alan McGilvray. Images formed in his head. He still has a vivid recollection of Richie Benaud's

performance in taking six wickets in an innings at Old Trafford.

His fanaticism for sport led him to lie in bed at boarding school—he went to a school for the blind—with his radio under the pillow, listening to broadcasts of title fights from the United States. He listened to the great fights of the 1960s between heavyweight champions Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali.

More than once, teachers sidled up to him the next morning to inquire about the result.

When asked whether his blindness frustrated him as a child, Andy says yes, of course it did. He had to learn to accept it. Part of his acceptance was promising himself he would live life to the full. “You’ve just got to do it,” he says. “You don’t get a second chance.”

Thrifty saving and the occasional punting windfall have enabled him to travel the world going to sporting events. A recent inheritance has enabled him to stay at a comfortable hotel overlooking the Flagstaff Gardens during this Ashes tour. The view from his 10th-floor room is lovely, or so Andy’s been told.



I pick Andy up for this interview at his hotel, and take him to the MCG for the last day of a game between Victoria and Queensland. At the MCG, we go to a desk to arrange a reciprocal pass through Andy’s membership at Lord’s. The woman behind the desk addresses me rather than Andy. It’s something I’ve noticed with service people over the years: Andy talks, and the reply is addressed to me.

In the event that people respond to Andy directly, looking at him while they talk to him, they raise their voices as if he’s deaf as well as blind. Everyone can be assured that Andy’s hearing is fine. He’s often sat at the MCG and passed on whether a batsman has nicked the ball before technology has provided an answer.

It’s strange doing an interview in between giving descriptions of every ball. But then I indulge myself. I contrast Queensland bowler Mitchell Johnson’s fluidity with the bustling action of teammate Ashley Noffke. Andy says he’s seen Noffke play for Middlesex at Lord’s. He often says he’s seen such and such a sportsman or sporting contest. When I aver that he hasn’t seen them, he harrumphs. My claim is a petty quirk of language. He’s hardly going to say he’s heard a sporting contest, or sensed it.

“That’s stupid,” he says.

After Queensland have wrapped up the match, we go just past Andy’s temporary abode and head into the Royal Standard Hotel in West Melbourne. A picture of former Australian boxing champion Lionel Rose on the wall sparks a boxing conversation with Wagga Bob, the publican.



Andy describes his routine when a title fight is to be broadcast on the BBC. He opens a bottle of malt whiskey and savours the battle of fists and wits. In 1974, he went to London’s Hammersmith Odeon at 3 o’clock in the morning. There he listened to the heavyweight title fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in the central African city of Kinshasa.

The “Rumble in the Jungle” was held when Andy was 22. More than three decades later, he’s still excited when describing the atmosphere in that London cinema as Ali confounded the world. “I couldn’t believe what Ali was doing,” he says.

It's this complete involvement in the atmosphere, which brings sport alive for Andy. His reason for venturing across the world to follow an Ashes series that he cannot see makes complete sense.

"It's just to be part of it," he says.

Only books for politicians at Christmas

COLUMNS

In Transit

Published 11-Dec-2006

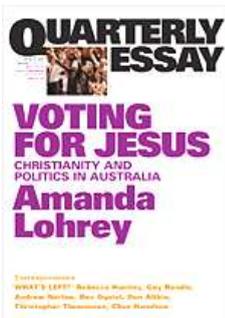
In the ideal world where I am Santa Claus, my gesture for world peace will be to fill the stockings of politicians with books.

Just books I'm afraid. I'm liberal as to subject matter but a puritan about object matter. No bottles of single malt. No Tom Waits triple CD (alas). Only books. Blame my family. For years my beloved father-in-law used to disappear into his bedroom at about 11am on Christmas morning to emerge with a Penguin Classic for each one of us. My husband got the same book three times in one decade. But you can't have too many copies of *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, particularly if you are an agnostic philosopher whose first approach to the woman who will eventually become your wife is to sell her a copy of *The Freethinker*.



With one exception (read to end), I haven't specified which politician should get which book. But I have appended a loosely devised "degree of difficulty" so you can decide whether you want to read the book yourself or give it to Great Uncle Alistair (I have one lined up specially for G.U.A, but use your own discretion).

And yes, I am being devious. Yes, I do want you to read some of the books yourself because they are what I would unembarrassedly call, signs of the times. At the very least, stand up or sit down in your favourite bookshop and browse through them. Be tempted. I discovered quite a few of my best books that way. In one American university bookshop that boasted squishy armchairs, I read half of Lewis Lapham (of him more anon), and a few toxic chapters of Ann Coulter (more of her too). I subsequently paid good money for Lapham but put Coulter back, all pristine, on the "new releases" table (she's the kind of author one should read wearing white gloves lest the bile rub off) and resisted the temptation to cover her with a copy of Bob Woodward's *State of Denial*.



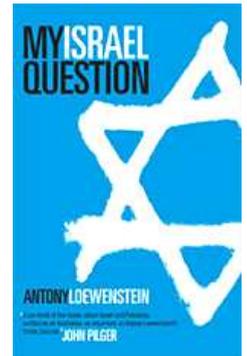
Okay, here's the little list.

Start with Amanda Lohrey's lucid and generous *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 22 (Black Inc), "Voting for Jesus, Christianity and Politics in Australia". If you are worried about the rise and rise of fundamentalism in Australia this is the (slim) volume for you. And if you are anxious about a blurring of the line between church and state, then it's also for you. Note particularly the way Lohrey can blend charity and logic. And make sure you read the correspondence in Issue 23. *Short, a pleasure to read.*

Contrast Lohrey with America's Ann Coulter (*TIME* magazine's "Ms Right") and her most recent book, *Godless, The Church and Liberalism*, just so you know how tough they play the religion and politics game in the US. If you don't want to boost her sales just check out her style via Google. *Definitely not for Great Uncle Alistair.*

Kevin Rudd is not Ann Coulter's kind of politician. His two essays, "Faith in Politics" and "Howard's Brutopia", in *The Monthly* (October and November 2006) would probably bring her out in hives. The essays are remarkable not just because Rudd wrote them himself but because they restate, with some passion, old-fashioned Catholic social justice imperatives. They also respect the intelligence of their audience. *Intellectual? Yes (should that be a bad thing?). Accessible? Definitely.*

Antony Loewenstein is in all kinds of trouble over his brave book *My Israel Question* (MUP, 2006). If you want to know why, read his views on the Israel-Palestine conflict and the role played in it by the Jewish diaspora in Australia. *Illuminating and bound to offend.*



Paul Collins, religious commentator and author, has offended most authorities in his time, but his collection of interviews with famous Catholic dissidents, *From Inquisition to Freedom* (Simon and Schuster, 2001) is a showcase of grace under pressure. The book doesn't fudge the theological controversies that led to the delation of Rome and silencing of many of the interviewees (Hans KÃ¼ng, Lavinia Byrne and Tissa Balasuriya among them). But the persistence of hope is more remarkable than the abuse of power, and these brave people are great exemplars. Read Charles Curran on community. He's wonderful. *Ecumenical enough even for Great Uncle Alistair.*

He (G.U.A.) might, however, prefer Lewis Lapham's *Pretensions to Empire, Notes on the Criminal Folly of the Bush Administration, A Case for Impeachment* (The New Press, 2006). After that title I hardly need tell you what the book is about, but I do recommend it for the high rhetoric and righteous indignation that has been Lapham's hallmark throughout his long years as editor of *Harper's Magazine*. It is also formidably detailed—a case to answer. *Easy to read but heartburn if you are a Republican.*

After Lapham's verbal extravaganza, Shaun Tan's wordless *The Arrival* (Lothian Books, 2006) is an oasis. No writing, just eloquent drawings that take you inside the world of people displaced, people who have to leave one home and find another. But still your bleeding heart and marvel instead at the surreal invention of this talented young man. *Suitable for six-year-olds. Suitable for 60-year-olds.*



Finally, and less frivolous than you might suppose: two cookbooks. Could one resist a culinary long march through China with a woman named Fuchsia Dunlop? *Sichuan Cookery* I bought on the recommendation of a broadminded Cantonese gourmet. *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook, Recipes from Hunan Province* (Ebury Press, 2006) is its equally enticing sequel. Dunlop put in a rigorous apprenticeship in China and writes so well you could forget her recipes and just take the book to bed—that's if you absolutely must prepare for a barium-meal test next day. *For chilli lovers and China watchers.* And for Kevin Rudd, from his loyal deputy. Julia can go to work on his hair, while he teaches her to cook—in Mandarin.

I recommend Chairman Mao's Red-Braised Pork. For the succulence, not the politics. For Christmas perhaps. And may yours be blessed.

A wide Brown land shaking off its collective memory

COLUMNS

By the way

Published 11-Dec-2006

At about the time George W. Bush was assuring us the war in Iraq was going swimmingly, and that the Democrats would pose him no problem in the mid-term elections, mayors all over South Australia were facing their own moment of truth. In our part of the mayoral world, what had looked like being a straightforward return of the old guard became a genuine race when a second candidate—let's call him Brown—entered the field.

Brown, who only ever campaigned as a surname, swamped the district with his publicity. "Brown" appeared on rural posts and fences, while in the township "Brown" flowered everywhere like spring bulbs. "Brown" caught your eye on a fence as you entered the northern end of the town and then, in case you'd missed the point, an old grey horse that habitually dreamed in a town paddock suddenly began wearing a blanket on which was emblazoned the word "Brown". When someone stole the sign on the fence, it was replaced with another, reading, "Who stole our sign?—Brown."

Against this onslaught, Brown's opponent—let's call her Mary Jones—seemed unable to make any headway. As the incumbent she no doubt had an advantage, but the scarcity of Jonesian signage suggested a dangerous smugness, a certain complacency.

I have to admit that I was more interested in George W.'s fortunes than the struggle between Mary Jones and Brown, but something about the man we knew only as a surname nagged at my memory and a bit of quick research in back issues of the local paper soon reminded me. It was all to do with John Ainsworth Horrocks.

Horrocks arrived in the colony on his birthday, 22 March 1839. His mentor and adviser was the explorer Edward John Eyre and, though he took Eyre's advice to become a pastoralist, establishing himself in the mid-north at Penwortham, Horrocks was also a keen explorer. He quickly made a reputation as a well organised, intrepid and commanding figure, mapping the sparsely occupied north of the state. He was an innovator too: among several ground breaking distinctions, he was the first man to use camels as part of his exploration team.

In July 1846, the "King of the North", as he had become known, took a party of explorers that included the artist S.T. Gill on a search for grazing land beyond the limits of the existing settlements. The expedition was only a month or so old when Horrocks was accidentally wounded unpacking a loaded gun. He was taken back to his home at Penwortham and died there on 23 September 1846, aged 28. Several features in the district carry his name, such as Mount Horrocks and Horrocks Pass (pictured), and his exploits are memorialised in present day Penwortham.

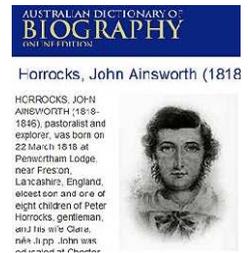
A group interested in local history, however, proposed to one of the last meetings of the pre-election council, of which Brown was a member and Mary Jones the Mayoress, that "Main North Road", the arterial road from south to north that runs through every town in the district, be renamed Horrocks Highway. Not only would this further honour the explorer, it would also roughly trace his tracks as he headed north on that last, fatal journey.

Brown strongly opposed this on the grounds that he would never remember the new name, and he reckoned his own amnesiac problems with nomenclature were probably representative of people generally. The proposal was defeated and the history group retired, hoping to renew their approach to the incoming council.

Well, it wasn't quite the same as invading Iraq on the strength of dodgy intelligence, but Brown lost me there and then. Country towns all over Australia bristle with North and South Roads, High Streets, Victoria Streets, Main Streets, King and Queen Streets and other brainstorming spasms of the tired, unwilling or needlessly stodgy imagination. Conversely, every European hamlet, no matter how small, dusty and inert, has its Plaza of The Failed Revolution of 10 November or its Avenue of a Hundred Coups, or its Hill of the Extruded Fingernails, or some equivalent—history, custom and legend crowd at every corner by virtue of naming that is also an act of remembering, celebrating, recording.

In a country which periodically agonises its way through debates about its history and frets every decade or so about the quality of history teaching, it is remarkable how resistant we are to embedding notes and pointers on our past in the urban and rural landscapes.

George W. got rolled, as we know, and the world awaits the aftershocks. But up here in the mid-North the history group can forget about having another shot at Horrocks Highway. Brown's in charge and his memory, like the memories of so many of his local, state and federal political colleagues, is shot to pieces.



There's no bacon in Adjumani

INTERNATIONAL

Published 11-Dec-2006



I recently left Darfur to work in Northern Uganda. I looked forward to finding bacon and wine there. Neither was important, but both were forbidden in Darfur because of Sharia. This was a violation of the Comprehensive Peace Accord 2005, which exempted non-Muslims. But when the penalty was a public flogging, a civil rights stand seemed inadvisable.

But in Uganda, surely it would be possible to enjoy wine with the evening meal, and the occasional rasher of bacon for Sunday brunch. It was not as if I was dreaming the impossible dream of being able to take a hot shower (even just during the winter months).

The Jesuit Refugee Site (JRS) in Adjumani, where I am based, is a new complex of small buildings (tukus). Constructed by Australian sisters working for JRS, the accommodation compound is only three years old. Located on land owned by a local congregation of sisters, the compound is neat and orderly, although it is showing signs of wear and a lack of maintenance which is quite common in this environment. But this is to be expected, as it is easier to raise funds for construction, which takes a long lead time, than to access funds for maintenance.

On the outskirts of Adjumani town, the compound is on a high ridge line above the south bank of the White Nile. The Nile actually borders us on three sides, as we are in a major loop of the river before it enters Sudan. To drive to the river from our compound is a 30-minute journey on an unsealed road that is well maintained. Originally the town and hinterland was lightly populated by African standards. But when the war in South Sudan became more serious in the late '80s, thousands fled the fighting and crossed into Uganda. Overnight the small town of Adjumani saw a population explosion. In the Moyo/Adjumani area there are still over 85,000 refugees, there are more refugees than Ugandans in these districts. Being a landlocked country there is no concept of an offshore solution, or the hardness of heart in detaining people fleeing for their lives.

The rapid growth of Adjumani led to an economic boom. Both because of the increase in population and the arrival of the international community (UN and NGOs). In addition to the Sudanese refugees, there are a few Congolese and some refugees from Rwanda. On top of this are an estimated thirty thousand internally displaced persons. These are Ugandans who have fled from the terror which is the

LRA. The district forms a natural conduit for the Lord's Resistance Army to move into and out of Uganda and Sudan. In the past, the LRA operated in southern Sudan and received arms and support from the Sudanese government. The government of Sudan used the LRA as a proxy against both the people of south Sudan and Uganda. This was part of the realpolitik of Africa. One country arms the rebels of another nation. That nation then retaliates by arming the rebels in the first nation.

LRA raids and massacres in northern Uganda displaced many outlying villages and small hamlets. In 2005, the LRA raided the school next door to the JRS compound. Five young girls were abducted from the sisters' school. Three later managed to escape, but two have not been heard from since.



Serious negotiations are now under way in Juba (capital of southern Sudan) between the LRA and the Ugandan government. Mediation by the south Sudanese government has led to a ceasefire being negotiated. A ceasefire which has held for nearly four months now, bringing a peace not experienced in the last 20 years. This peace has encouraged the people of the region. Many are now talking about returning to their traditional lands and resuming a normal life.

My own timing was impeccable. I arrived in Adjumani during the outbreak of swine fever. I saw the slaughter of the pigs and the failure of the bacon supply. As I took up the role of project director, there was a cholera outbreak. In a time of cholera the swine population can not be restocked because of its taste for wallowing in wet detritus.

So for the moment my hopes for a bacon sandwich and glass of wine have been dashed. Only boxed South African wine tempers my disappointment. But yesterday I crossed the river to go to a meeting in Moyo and saw a small sow rutting in the bushes. This may show that the production of pork is in full swing and that I will soon see rashes of bacon on the table.

Lavapies – where old Europe meets new

INTERNATIONAL

Immigration

Published 11-Dec-2006



Tumbling down the hill from the elegant facades and manicured squares of central Madrid, Lavapies is a parallel world to one Europe's most sophisticated capital cities. Its narrow lanes are lined with the shabby symbols of modern multiculturalism: shopfronts offering money transfers to Africa and cheap phone calls to South America; grocery stores selling the produce of China or Bangladesh; groups of Moroccans passing the day with watchful eyes. Elderly Spanish residents lean out the windows and call across the street to their neighbours.

Lavapies has always been peopled with immigrants; first Spaniards from elsewhere in the country drawn to the capital in search of opportunity, then foreigners called by Spain's economic miracle that has transformed the country into Europe's largest recipient of immigrants.

This marriage of tradition and diversity in Lavapies has special importance on a continent made suddenly uneasy by conflicts with its burgeoning immigrant populations. Debates are being dominated less by the numbers gathered on Europe's doorstep, than by how to live in harmony with those who are already here.

By 2050, 40 per cent of Europe's population will be recent immigrants or their offspring. "European cities will not be recognisable within 40 years," argues American sociologist Saskia Sassen. "They will become truly global places. They will become global cities."

So it is that Lavapies, this deprived inner-city suburb surrounded by the continent's wealth, and peopled with Spain's most multicultural population, has become a testing ground of Europe's future.

For much of the 20th century, Spain was a country of emigrants. It was not until 1991 that more people came to live in Spain than left it. In 2000, there were 900,000 foreigners living in Spain, less than 2 per cent of the population. That figure now stands at four million.

The response among ordinary Spaniards to Spain's new status as an immigrant country has been a study in contradictions.

Since 1999 there have been isolated anti-immigrant protests in towns across Spain, and a recent government poll found that 60 per cent of Spaniards believe that there are too many immigrants in the country. With unprecedented numbers of illegal immigrants arriving on the shores of Spain's Canary Islands—27,000 arrived by boat in the first nine months of this year—another poll in August found that 64 per cent of the population believes that immigration is the most pressing issue facing Spain, ahead of terrorism and unemployment.

Yet a different government survey in early September revealed that two-thirds of Spaniards say that they are in favour of people from different nationalities living in Spain, and that immigrants should have unfettered access to public education and free health care. An amnesty which granted temporary legal residence to more than 700,000 formerly illegal immigrants in 2005 barely registered as an electoral issue, and the government's popularity remains high.



Elsewhere, anti-immigrant activity has been largely confined to the burgeoning, high-rise suburbs that have begun to encircle Madrid like clones of the deprived and militant outer suburbs of French cities. Villaverde is one such place, a high-rise ghetto whose inhabitants earn Madrid's lowest incomes and suffer from the Spanish capital's highest unemployment. In May 2005, low-scale demonstrations rocked Villaverde after a Spanish youth was murdered by a South American gang. Although one leading centrist newspaper described the unrest as the "neighbourhood rebellion against the immigrants", incidents such as these have been rare.

Unlike Villaverde, whose immigrant population is predominantly South American, Lavapies has the highest proportion of different ethnic groups per square metre in Madrid.

"There are 146 different nationalities living in Lavapies," says Juan, a long-standing resident of Lavapies. "No group is too strong, no group is dominant. What happened in Villaverde could never happen in Lavapies."

For all its apparent racial harmony, Lavapies does suffer from many of the problems associated with immigrant-dominated, working-class districts the world over. A recent report in Spain's leading daily *El Pas* described the barrio as being "where multiculturalism coexists with a darker reality, that of petty crime, drug dealing and homelessness."

But the residents of Lavapies tell a different story, and point to the famed working-class solidarity of Lavapies that cuts across the lines of racial or religious identity.

"We get very bad press from the newspapers and TV," Pilar, the owner of a trendy bar in the heart of the barrio, told me. "People are afraid to come down the

hill to Lavapies because of what they say about us. We've never had any problems or felt unsafe. Everyone knows everyone. It's a real community here."

Lavapies is already dealing with the complexities of Europe's immigrant future, by providing, as it always has, a rite of passage for those with dreams of sharing in Europe's wealth and by offering a sense of belonging through its blend of tradition, newly-arrived communities and solidarity across racial lines. But bigger questions about how to refine the Lavapies model, and apply it on a national scale, will ultimately be the work of the Spanish government, as it struggles to avoid the pitfalls of—and decide between—the multicultural model of the Netherlands, and the policies of assimilationist France.

For now, the people of Lavapies are doing the government's preliminary work, revelling in the deep roots of their diversity and struggling with all the contradictions that this diversity creates.

Studying spiders as medicinal venom factories

AUSTRALIA

Published 11-Dec-2006



On the North coast of Arnhem Land is an indigenous community called Maningrida. An hour's drive from Maningrida is an outstation called Kolorbidahdah, nearby a river called Cadell, and standing in this river is Dr Robert Raven, an arachnologist with the Queensland Museum.

He is surrounded by a group of local Maningrida high school science students, explaining that around him could be up to 300 species of spiders, never before studied. The excitement in Dr Raven's face is contagious. He has devoted his life to the study of spiders, despite being chronically arachnophobic.

His pupils charge off into the bush under instructions to gather as many species as possible. "Careful guys, we want them intact," calls Dr Raven.

The Maningrida Community Education Centre has invited Raven and his lizard-catching associate, Dr Andrew Amey, to assist the senior boys with their high school science project. It's all part of the Year 12 Contemporary Issues in Science subject, in which students are studying the diversity and abundance of spiders in burnt and bush environments.

The connection between Dr Raven and Maningrida began in 2005, when the school created a science class for senior students. With no science facilities or resources, teacher Mason Scholes decided to use what was at hand—the outdoors, and the boys' natural inclination to collect creepy-crawlies.

Despite previous jobs in the National Parks system, Scholes didn't know a lot about spiders, so he called the Brisbane-based Dr Raven. Excited by a school that was finally encouraging the study of things that can kill you, the good doctor furnished him with details of how to catch and keep samples, and offered to identify the genus, gender and attributes of what they found.

Months later, the astonished Dr Raven was informing the boys they had discovered 18 new species of spider.

He remembers the moment clearly. "It was so exciting, I couldn't believe it ... This is a new world here. These guys are real discoverers. This is like exploring; we're breaking new ground. Where has this spider fauna come from? Is it Asian? Is it Australian? Is it a



mixture of both? Our pet ideas could go out the window in a flash.”

So little has been collected from this area that just about everything Dr Raven and the boys find is, in some way, new. He is intrigued by the process of drawing out the story of the land, through the kind of common spiders and the geographic separations within species.

He slowly begins to assemble this story during the days he spends with the boys scouring tree trunks, bird nests, caves and ground cover for the hairy, eight-legged nasties that excite and terrify him. Dr Raven’s theories cover redback spiders (they’re not native), geological history, social theory, agriculture and weather prediction (watch out for floods in Brisbane if funnel-webs migrate).

Spiders are older than dinosaurs and usually very territorial, so their presence signals a deep connection with that place and other areas it may also inhabit. It can prove or disprove the theories of geologists, physicists and palaeontologists, and lead to new ways of thinking about when and how our planet developed.

“See, look at this,” calls Raven, as he dives into a small cave. “This is a strange kind of water spider. It doesn’t necessarily associate itself with the water and it builds a web, but ...| yeah, it’s a water spider,” he says, with the sparkling eyes of an obsessive.

We’ve reached the river and the doctor continues. “ See here, we have one kind of wolf spider in these bushes, as we get closer on the rocks we have a different kind and down on the water’s edge we have these little ones with slightly different markings. As scientists we ask about what happens to these little ones and the ones up higher when the water rises. How do they find each other to mate?...



Within minutes the boys are calling to him from everywhere and he’s scurrying back and forth, filling sample jars and explaining what’s been found. He holds up another mighty rough-looking beastie by its thorax, its legs and fangs jutting out trying to mask what must be a slightly humiliating circumstance, with all the aggressive bravado it can muster. “Be careful with this one boys, it can produce coronary ... errr ... issues.”

He places it in a plastic bag, which the spider promptly bites through, its fangs clearly visible, stuck in the bottom of its plastic cave. Dr Raven appears a little taken aback for a second. “Wow, that’s pretty impressive ”

It is generally believed within arachnology that the 3000 known species of spider are about a third of what’s out there. The importance of the study by Mason Scholes’ Year 12 class could be incredible.

“People can get really creeped out by the idea of having 6000 species of unidentified spiders, but you gotta realise these guys are venom factories and every species has a different venom,” Dr Raven says.

“Venom can be a very constructive thing in the pharmaceutical industry in a variety of ways and can be used as insecticide. Venom molecules are like origami, it has lots of strange twists, bumps and turns. They look at shape of the molecules from organisms that cause problems. If they can get the drug to map onto the molecules of venom, it makes the drugs much cheaper and more effective. Venoms can be used on an amazing number of things,... he adds.

To reap the rewards of discovery will require intense and methodical laboratory work. Luckily a lot of this work will mostly involve a bunch of young blokes aged 18 to 60, stalking around the Arnhem Land bush chasing creepy-crawlies. Sometimes, curiosity and good science can be enough.

All photographs courtesy of Jake Nowakowski.

The selling of Islamic martyrdom and why some buy it

ESSAYS

International

Published 11-Dec-2006

"Nothing is easier than to denounce the evil-doer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him."

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

An Islamic martyr (*shahid*) is a Muslim who died *fi sabil Allah* (in the cause of Allah). Martyrs are imbued with special status and reverence among Muslims. Islamic elites have (re)constructed martyrdom in response to their political ambitions and prevailing situational factors.

Broadly speaking, there are three types of Islamic martyrdom: battlefield martyrdom, non-violent (spiritual) martyrdom and contemporary martyrdom operations. Contemporary martyrdom operations are the most contentious form.

Radical Islamists believe that Islam sanctions the use of martyrdom operations under certain circumstances. While these claims can be rebutted, the question of why these radical messages resonate with some Muslim communities, such as the Palestinians, must be examined.

The Qur'an sanctions the use of violence against enemy combatants, and under conditions of oppression and injustice. It is beyond the scope of this piece to examine the Islamic doctrine of war and peace, suffice to say that the conditions under which violence can be used are strictly sanctioned by Islamic jurisprudence.

Martyrs are revered and rewarded in the physical world and in the afterlife. The veracity of the benefits bestowed upon a martyr of course cannot be proven. Nonetheless, these benefits are promoted by Islamic elites (scholars and activists) through a constructed culture of martyrdom, whereby the martyr gains presence and reverence in the community.

The martyr's deeds are ritualised in performances and processions that recall and re-enact the struggle for the cause of Allah. Islamic martyrdom has been bestowed for diverse acts and, importantly, constructed by Islamic elites to legitimise their advocacy of diverse political and religious "causes of Allah".





In the Qur'an, the term *shahid* means to "witness" and not "martyr". Some early Islamic scholars had likely broadened the meaning of *shahid* to martyrdom, not because of Islamic jurisprudence or belief, rather the Christian connection of witnessing and martyrdom reflected in antique Christian linguistic usage.

The Qur'an places less emphasis on what constitutes a martyr, and more on the rewards for martyrs in Paradise: "Do not say of those slain in Allah's way that they are dead; they are living, only you do not perceive... (Q. 2:154). Thus, what constitutes a "martyr" is constructed and contested by Islamic elites.

Despite the expansion of the types of martyrdom, only those who fought with the proper intention may qualify for the reward of "martyr". Only Muslims who died *fi sabil Allah* are considered martyrs. Those who fought for physical rewards or with ostentatious bravery did not die *fi sabil Allah*.

The influence and interference of Western nations led to the (re)construction of martyrdom by Islamic elites. They promoted as "martyrs" those who died defending the state, rather than those who died spreading and defending the Islamic civilisation.

In this way, 19th- and 20th-century anti-colonial struggles were viewed by modern Islamic organisations (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) as defending Islam and Muslims against colonialism.

Some moderates such as Sir Sayyid Khan have sought to counter the Western orientalist view that Islam was a religion of violence spread by battlefield martyrs. He argued that Islam is the legitimate state religion of Islamic or Muslim states and is not used to promote violence.

Martyrdom operations re-emerged from the post-colonial struggles of the 20th-century (for example, in the Palestinian Occupied Territories). Radical Islamists criticise the quietism of Islamic moderates, such as Khan, which they believe led to the subjugation of Muslims by a coalition of Western and apostate governments in the Muslim world.

Radical Islamic ideologues, such as Sayyid Qutb, have sought to return Islam to the "straight path" by reinterpreting and revitalising Islamic doctrines. In Qutb's seminal book *Milestones*, he argued that the path to freedom must be hewn by the sword (*jihad bil saif*). Those who supported Qutb's claims cited the Qur'anic verse, "oppression is worse than killing... (2:217).

Moderate Muslims believe that Islamic doctrine prohibits martyrdom operations on three accounts. Islam clearly prohibits suicide. The Qur'an states "do not kill yourself, for God is indeed merciful to you" and "do not throw yourself into destruction with your own hands". Second, Islam prohibits the killing of innocent civilians. Finally, Islam affords protection to people of the book—Jews and

Christians.

Radical Islamists believe that these three prohibitions are not applicable to Muslims who live under oppressed conditions (e.g. Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories). They argue that martyrdom is based on the Islamic doctrines of *Istishad* (martyrdom) meaning self-sacrifice in the name of Allah. The radical Islamist perspective is exemplified by the late Sheikh Yassin, the former spiritual leader of Hamas, and Sheikh al-Qaradawi, a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, both of whom sanctioned “martyrdom operations” as a legitimate form of resistance.

Sheikh al-Qaradawi argued that Israel is a military society, because men and women serve and are conscripted into the military. According to this view, the casualties caused by martyr operatives are not innocent Israeli citizens because they live in a militarised society.



Some assert that radical Islamists believe Jews and Christians are protected under Islam only when they live under Muslim rule. Moreover, radical Islamists believe that because Jews have usurped Muslim land, such as Palestine before the state of Israel, they have forfeited any protection afforded in the Qur’an.

The above arguments by radical Islamists lack legitimacy because martyrdom operations explicitly target and kill innocent civilians. Furthermore, martyr operatives do not die for or in the service of Allah. Rather, they die for their political cause—for example, the liberation of Palestine. Radical Islamists’ claims that they have the right to explicitly target innocent civilians in the service of their cause is erroneous.

The martyrdom construct is not created in a vacuum. Radical Islamists’ legitimisation of contemporary martyrdom operations is based on their radical interpretations of the Qur’an and their empathy with the plight of oppressed Muslim communities, such as the Palestinians.

I would argue that the Qur’an does not sanction the use of martyrdom operations, and it is unethical for radical Islamists to espouse an Islamic justification. Nonetheless, the question must be asked—why do these radical interpretations of the Qur’an resonate with some Muslim communities?

The answer to this question is the topic for another essay. It is clear, however, that the conditions experienced by some Muslim communities may offer a starting point. Religious leaders who appeal to a monotheistic God, Allah or Yahweh for legitimacy should understand that all their followers believe in the same higher being, and are members of the same humanity. Thus, religious believers are united by their devotion to this higher being, which is surely a compelling and uniting force towards mutual respect, benevolence and peace.

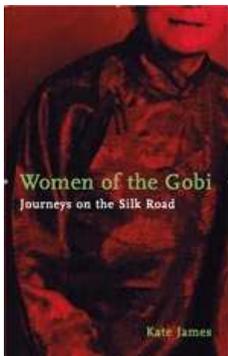
To read the full version of this essay, [click here](#).

Personal odyssey in the steps of three Gobi women

BOOK REVIEW

Published 11-Dec-2006

***Women of the Gobi*, by Kate James. Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2006. RRP \$29.95, ISBN 1864033 290, [website](#) .**



Kate James' *Women of the Gobi* is a wonderful, personal journey along the Silk Road. James, a *Lonely Planet* editor, grew up in an evangelical family. Originally from Melbourne, she spent seven years in India with her family as a child. Upon returning to India, years later, she came across the writings of three women; Francesca and Eva French, and Mildred Cable.

The three women, known as the Trio, traveled the length of the Silk Road, traversing it five times between 1923 and 1936. Along the way, they founded numerous Christian communities, adopted a deaf Mongolian girl and established refuges for the wives of opium addicts.

Upon discovering the books by the Trio, James found a purpose—she resolved to follow in their footsteps, in the hope of giving some purpose to her own aimless wanderlust.

The novel ranges over her reflections on what life must have been like for three women, on donkeys, in a part of China still barely known to the west; James' own experiences in modern day China, and her small victories and defeats as she makes her way from town to town, meeting helpful and unhelpful people along the way; and finally, the novel also addresses, with a great deal of sensitivity, James coming to terms with her own experience of evangelical Christianity.

The success of this novel is that it manages to mix and cross genres with ease. The narrative breaks from James' ruminations on the experiences of the Trio, to her own personal trials and tribulations on the road, to her thoughts on her own life, all with an easy style.

The movement from one subject to the next serves to invigorate the novel, and keep the reader turning the pages. Just as one becomes fascinated by the struggles Chinese Christians faced at the turn of the 20th century in the time of the Trio, she will leap to a description of the conditions faced by Jesuits in China 400 years ago, and then on to the troubles faced by Christians in modern China.

The lives of the rarely mentioned Uyghur Muslims in modern day China are also

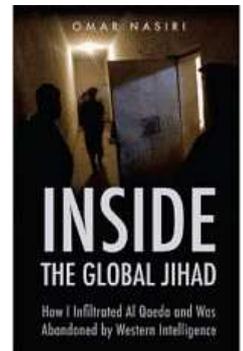
discussed—the central government in modern China has oppressed this former majority in much the same way as Tibetans have been oppressed, though with much less press coverage.

James' novel is a lovely, personable, informed book. The author's own persona in the book is not intrusive—if anything, she is too humble in describing herself, and always ready to see things while "standing in someone else's shoes". Highly recommended, especially for those with an urge to take a road less traveled.

***Inside the Global Jihad*, by Omar Nasiri. Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2006. RRP \$32.95, ISBN 1921215 097, [website](#) .**

Omar Nasiri's book is significant for a number of reasons. A vast range of ideas have emerged amid the torrent of books published post-September 11, seeking to analyse the 'terrorist threat' faced by the west.

Speaking broadly, these ideas can be divided into two camps. The first is the 'Clash of Civilisations' camp—those commentators and analysts who fall in behind Samuel Huntington's idea which posit an inevitability to the current 'War on Terrorism', due to Islam's 'bloody' nature. The second camp is the 'root causes' camp. Commentators of this persuasion do not see the world as divided along 'The West and the Rest' lines, but rather assume a more relativist position, which also takes into account such things as the after-effects of colonialism, the injunctions of various branches of Islam, and the peaceful nature of the vast majority of the world's Muslims.



Nasiri's book undoubtedly sits in the second camp. While commentators and journalists such as Jason Burke and John Simpson have spent long periods of time in the far reaches of Afghanistan, Iran and other so-called 'Wild Zones', what Nasiri manages, and what they could never manage, is an insider's account of life as a *mujihadin*.

Nasiri starts by describing his early life in Morocco, his family's move to Belgium, his subsequent schooling as a Muslim in a Catholic boarding school, and his return to Morocco, where for a number of years he drifted, dealing drugs to tourists.

The return of a devout older brother to Morocco, who brings Nasiri back to Belgium with him, is the catalyst for an amazing series of events. Nasiri's older brother has fallen in with higher-ups in the GIA (Groupe Islamic Armee), and the infamous *Al-Ansar* is being printed in his mother's house. Nasiri enters this world thinking he can play these extremists to his own financial advantage, but he falls foul of the DGSE (France's equivalent to ASIS) and is soon forced to inform on the extremists.

Inevitably, things unravel, and Nasiri winds up in Afghanistan, training to be a

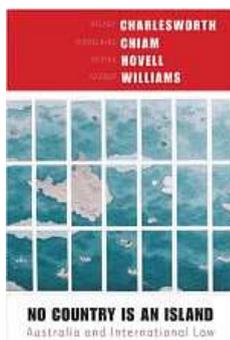
mujahid whilst technically still in the employ of the French. The account of life among *mujihadinis* fascinating. His eventual return to the west, when he moves to London and works for MI6 and the DGSE, is equally fascinating.

Nasiri's reflections on *jihad* make fascinating reading. His loathing of the west is matched by his loathing of extremists in Algeria. This is a man who, besides receiving weapons training in Afghanistan, also received a comprehensive theological training. Nasiri's theological musings on the "rightness" of various "freedom fights/terrorist operations" are the most interesting aspect of the book.

As he reflects, the Taliban are 'innovators', and therefore not real Islamists. Iran is an abomination, as the Shiite are innovators too. Shah Mahmood, the assassinated Northern Alliance general, is a hero, though on the opposite side. The GIA, perpetrators of civilian massacres, far exceeded their mandate. The *mujahidin*, whom he loves, and to whom he belongs, in his heart, even as he serves the west, are hypocrites, because they fight with the weapon—the Uzi—of the most-hated, most reviled Israel.

Nasiri's account is a complex and worthy book. Nasiri is a very clever man, and an individualist. He is an African Muslim, brought up in Belgium, with traits and values derived from both cultures. Between a sense of community and of individualism, Nasiri vacillates, at home in either culture, but unhappy with both. Not excellent literature, but an excellent story, and an important narrative.

***No Country is an Island*, by Hilary Charlesworth, Madelaine Chiam, Devika Hovell & George Williams. University of NSW Press, 2006. RRP \$34.95, ISBN 0868409 065.**



No Country is an Island is a book that anyone with an interest in international politics should read. Written by four university lecturers, the book addresses how Australia's Federal Government engages with the treaties, protocols and practices of the international political system.

Spanning the influence that international law has on trade, human rights and the environment, to name but three important issues, the book examines contemporary issues as case studies. The treatment of Australia's entry into the 2003 Iraq war is particularly interesting.

The authors outline the prevarication at the time by John Howard and Alexander Downer, as they first claimed to need another UN resolution before the war commenced, then claimed that one was not needed, and then claimed that since Iraq remained in material breach of resolution of 1441, this was all that was needed to act in accordance with UN law.

More damning still is the cack-handed response by Labor. Kim Beazley comes across as genuinely having no idea what to think, vacillating between more

positions than it is possible to enumerate here. Kevin Rudd hews closely to the strictures of international law, and in so doing was (at least) consistent in believing the war to be 'illegal' by these lights. With so much obfuscation at the time, it is fascinating to look back, now that the smoke has cleared, and assess the various players' positions, and their merits.

The efforts to secure a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States also make fascinating reading. The authors highlight the personal efforts required of the members of the Coalition Cabinet to ensure that the agreement was signed. The FTA would not have been signed were it not for this personal intervention. For the authors of *No Country is an Island*, this is indicative of the major weakness in the way in which the Federal Government engages in international law.

While there is much to recommend the 'personal touch' in diplomatic situations, the problem is seen to be a lack of accountability, and visibility, in operating, as the saying goes, 'behind closed doors'.

The authors of *No Country is an Island* have produced a very worthy book. Whether it is to everyone's liking is another matter. For those interested in the way in which international law guides, and does not guide, the hand of the Australian Government, this is well worth reading. For those starting out, and wanting to know more, this is required reading. The casual reader, however, may struggle to engage with this book, as it is dry, and heavy on the detail. From a western humanist perspective, the advances attempted by the creation of a body of international law are vital to creating a fairer, more equitable world.

The highs and lows of substance addiction

FILM REVIEW

Science Fiction

Published 11-Dec-2006

A Scanner Darkly, 100 minutes. Rating: M. Directors: Richard Linklater. Starring: Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, Robert Downey Jr, Woody Harrelson and Rory Cochran. [Website](#) .

Efforts to translate seminal 20th-century author Philip K. Dick's cerebral sci-fi to the big screen have traditionally had mixed results.

Blade Runner (1982), based on Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, effectively fused big-screen bravura with heady philosophy. Later, the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *Total Recall*, Spielberg/Cruise blockbuster *Minority Report*, and John Woo's lamentable *Paycheck* tended to be big on brawn but low on intellect.



Cut to 2006, and enter maverick screenwriter/director Linklater to adapt one of Dick's most personal and small-scale works. The novel *A Scanner Darkly* examines some of Dick's favourite topics—identity, paranoia, addiction. In Linklater's film, America's war on drugs also emerges as a reflection of the real-world War on Terror, where government forces rage against a demonised and largely faceless enemy.

Be warned: this is a film that delves so deep into the muddled headspace of drug addiction you'd be forgiven if you forget which way is up. It is perhaps the least accessible of the film adaptations of Dick's work, but the truest to his unconventional sensibilities.

Appropriately, stoner icon Reeves fills the central role of Bob Arctor, an undercover cop masquerading as a drug dealer ...| or is it the other way around? Your guess is as good as his. The film's set in the not-too-distant future US and Arctor's so hooked on the nation's latest drug of choice, the mythical Substance D, that he's no longer sure where one alter-ego ends and the other begins.

Substance D, in the form of an innocuous red pill, represents the antithesis of the truth-giving red pill Reeves famously swallowed in *The Matrix*: the more he takes the less he knows for sure.



When Arctor finds himself assigned to sift through hours of surveillance footage from hidden cameras in his own home, what emerges is a narcissistic perversion of Orwellian paranoia—“Big Brother... watching himself through a microscope. It’s absurd, but again reflects the climate of overwrought fear and paranoia that seems so prevalent in our world since 9/11.

Linklater, meanwhile, utilises the same animation technique (interpolated rotoscoping, which involves tracing live-action film) that augmented his heady 2001 feature *Waking Life*, to help keep his viewers as disoriented as his protagonist.

Appropriate as he may be for the role, Reeves’ acting tends to be a bit wooden. Which, in the case of *A Scanner Darkly*, leaves him wide open to being upstaged by both Downey (especially) and Harrelson—who channel their own well-publicised scrapes with illicit substances to turn in sublimely funny performances as Arctor’s drug-addled housemates—and Ryder, as Arctor’s flaky, addicted, sort-of girlfriend.

Dark, challenging and very funny—after 100 minutes immersed in the disconcertingly cartoonish unreality of *A Scanner Darkly*, you’ll resurface feeling both dazed and confused (to name-drop one of Linklater’s earlier films); you’ll also have earned some insights into both the chaotic highs and the tragic lows of substance addiction.

The joker in the pack—top ten limericks **POETRY**

Published 11-Dec-2006

Poetry Editor Philip Harvey writes-

Walter de la Mare invented a form he called the double limerick. The basic expectations of a limerick are: naughtiness, concision, maybe a touch of taboo, being in on the joke, and the joke resulting in a blast of laughter, a chuckle, or at least a smile.

Many entrants took on serious current affairs issues, with poems that end up moralising. With the limerick, the message goes with a lightness of touch. The drought was a popular theme with the poets and it is observable how the funny ones got the message across much better. Perhaps the limerick just is the most frivolous and brittle of English forms, the joker in the pack. Whatever, the judges' expectations were met more often when wit or playfulness capped off the effects.

Congratulations to our winner, Ursula Stephens, who will receive a case of wine from [Sevenhill Cellars](#) .

On a Human Rights Note

In a cage in Guantanamo bay
David Hicks sees his life slip away.
Here's my chance (in a poem)
To plead "Bring him home",
Cry Howard and Ruddock, "No way!...

Ursula Stephens, NSW

The bane of the bush called El Nino
Is the talk over hot cappucino
Will it rain? Farmers bet
It's a rural roulette
Now city folk join 'em in the casino.

Paul Osbourne, QLD

A keen whale-watcher called Margaret

Scored two blues as soon as she started
She saw minke galore
Killer whales by the score
But her sperm count was way below target.

Gavan Breen, NT

Abandoned

In drought the farmers prayed for rain
Instead got a pollie in a plane
He promised aid
And more again
They're expert with that old refrain.

Tony Smith, NSW

Our energy future

The carbon cycle can no longer be relied on 'cause it's warming up the planet
we reside on.

To be saved by nuclear fission
is our noble leader's mission.

But rogue reactors are the places we'll be fried on!

Mike Foale, QLD

In the great, old town of Sydney
There was a young girl named Mindy
Who walked the streets singing
And with her wide hips swinging
She knocked out a kid in Kindy.

Baini, NSW

What if Christ was one of us?
A nature-bashing, human-hating, plain old evil anarchist,
He would travel the world plundering and pillaging,

Wishing and hoping that God is forgiving ...
Because after all, there's a little Christ in all of us.

Hugues de Robillard, VIC

Drought breaking

In Australia where it hardly rains
They tip the wine glut down the drains
A thaumaturge oughta
Turn Riesling to water
Sure! We'd make him a god for his pains.

Tony Smith, NSW

Bias

If the lifting of spirits a little higher
Through ordination you should desire
It is not virtue

That befits you

But a male appendage that you require.

Tony Smith, NSW

There was a young lady from Melbourne
Whose friends thought was extremely well born
But one day she let fly
With words fit to die
Which convinced those friends she was Hell borne.

Helen Edmonds, VIC

When sipping a fine red one day,
A veteran imbiber did say,
"I have searched the world over,
from Tassie to Dover,
but Clare Valley's the one place to stay"

Kevin Crotty, VIC

A red-headed rhymer from Rome

For bad verses was tossed out of home.

Having no moral fibre,

He jumped in the Tiber,

And floated away on the foam.

Anne Benjamin, NSW