

Short changing working mothers	
<i>Jen Vuk</i>	<u>1</u>
Quick shift required in foreign policy	
<i>Tony Kevin</i>	<u>4</u>
The 'me first' election	
<i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>7</u>
Good music becomes great business	
<i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>8</u>
The ears have it for Maxine	
<i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>10</u>
Meeting the moral cost of recreational travel	
<i>Sophie Rudolph</i>	<u>12</u>
Bare-chested footballer Cousins and well-dressed thief Pratt	
<i>Braham Dabscheck</i>	<u>15</u>
Al-Jazeera suffers both US and Arab hostility	
<i>Michael Mehr</i>	<u>18</u>
War on terror fosters US anti-immigrant hysteria	
<i>David Rosen</i>	<u>21</u>
The hard life of Christians in Bethlehem	
<i>Abe Ata</i>	<u>24</u>
Bangladesh climate under the weather	
<i>Ben Fraser</i>	<u>26</u>
'Best' essays merit book title's reckless superlative	
<i>Alexandra Coghlan</i>	<u>29</u>
Young and full of juice	
<i>Rochelle Siemienowicz</i>	<u>32</u>
Two people in a garage	
<i>Debbie Lustig</i>	<u>34</u>

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Short changing working mothers

POLITICS

By Jen Vuk



The headlines said it all. 'Mums delayed births to boost bonus'. 'Baby bonus a health risk, say doctors'. And this from *Herald Sun* columnist and mother of two Robyn Riley: 'Dollars but no sense'.

According to a report released this month 'hundreds' of mothers delayed giving birth last year to be eligible for the government's higher baby bonus (\$4133, up from \$3166). And expect much of the same next July when it's bumped up to \$5000.

The subtext was palpable. 'Selfish' women taking advantage of the system. The fact they were pregnant just made it worse. They put their and, more importantly, their child's health at risk. And for what? Less than \$1000.

But rather than coming across scores of heavily pregnant Australian women across Australia with their legs firmly crossed, the University of Melbourne report 'Born (Again) On the First of July' found that only '687 births were moved from June 2006 to July 2006, representing about seven per cent of births'.

It also found that the delay was 'most probably' due to the 'timing of planned caesarean section and inducement procedures', both already widely practised by women seeking to fit the birth of their babies in and around a vacancy in their obstetrician's diary.

One thing the report didn't explore was why the women held off past their due dates in the first place. Here's a theory: paid maternity leave. Or, more to the point, a lack thereof.

Currently, working women are entitled to 52 weeks of unpaid leave (shared between both parents) after 12 months continuous service with one employer.

What this breeds (sorry) is anxiety. A survey of 165 women, also released by the University of Melbourne, found that women with no access to maternity leave were more 'worried, depressed and irritable'.

'Working conditions have an impact on women's psychological and emotional wellbeing during pregnancy,' said the report's author Amanda Cooklin. 'In particular, the worry about financial security and ongoing employment after the birth

leaves women feeling very vulnerable during such a crucial phase of their lives.'

Any wonder they felt compelled to hold out for an extra \$1000? (Or \$967 to be exact which, take it from me, buys a decent number of nappies. Or a new pram, cot, change table or any other 'necessary' accoutrement for baby.)

More worrying is the Australian Institute of Family Studies report that found that even those with access to paid maternity leave weren't taking advantage of it, or being encouraged to do so. Last year, only four per cent of working women relied on paid maternity leave, with the majority relying on a combination of paid and unpaid leave.

During last month's election race, the time was ripe for the introduction of a government-sponsored paid maternity leave scheme. And most of us will never know how close we came.

The Coalition appeared all set to offer women working in small- to medium-sized businesses a scheme that promised new mothers a government-sponsored minimum wage for between 12 and 14 weeks. With its 'me-too-isms', it's not unfeasible that our current government would have followed suit.

It was certainly doable and, compared to recent spending, relatively inexpensive. Approximately \$350 to \$597 million a year, according to the last HREOC report. Contrast this with around \$780 million paid out in baby bonuses last year.

But while Mr Howard and Mr Rudd both tried to woo working mothers with plenty of family-friendly pledges, there was no mention of the scheme. Instead, their promises of more child care and tax breaks for private school fees were simply icing on a non-existent cake. Funny, how it still left a bad taste in the mouth.

As Eva Cox, chair of the Women's Electoral Lobby and a pro maternity leave campaigner, tells it, a society that doesn't provide a paid maternity, or paternity, scheme 'disrespects women in paid jobs by denying them, and men, paid leave for time spent in parenting a new baby'.

While the baby bonus is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the family purse, it's just that — a bonus. A 'generous' package filled not only with promise but problems. What it gives with one hand it takes away with the other, thus ignoring the social and economic worth and relevance of working women.

Take the wrapping away and what you're left with is a pretty flimsy policy. To blame the women for taking advantage of this is akin to shooting the messenger, not to mention a blow to common sense.

Too posh to push (on time)? Forget that. Calculating money grabbers? Give me a break. These women weren't holding off for any real capital gain, but would it really

matter if they did? Call it righting some wrongs, because as things currently stand working mothers continue to be short changed.

Quick shift required in foreign policy

POLITICS

By Tony Kevin

Kevin Rudd takes office at a dangerous but exciting moment of fundamental challenges to the traditional national sovereignty-based international agenda.



Foreign policy is about prioritisation of effort, assigning scarce Australian policy-making and diplomatic-practice resources to the highest priority needs. Three urgent issues require deft and speedy footwork by the new Labor government to bring Australian foreign policy into line with reality, after 12 years of misdirection under John Howard.

First, the scientific consensus on damaging climate change is at last being recognised by the international political community. The UN Secretary-General is rightly warning that December's Bali review meeting on the Kyoto treaty must be a defining moment for real global action by governments.

No less important, we now approach — or may have passed — the world's peak oil supply. The effects of this realisation on world energy markets will be progressively, dramatically destabilising, even within Rudd's first term and certainly in his second.

Third, there is the present danger of George Bush irrationally launching US air warfare on Iran. Old certainties and comfortable assumptions in Australian foreign policy are gone. Our great and powerful friend is no longer the steady pair of hands it used to be. There is a reckless mood afoot in parts of Bush's administration, from which Australia needs clearly to detach itself if we are not to be sucked into another Iraq-invasion style disaster.

Fortunately, our change of government will of itself increase diplomatic distance between Canberra and Washington. Rudd could emulate Gordon Brown in signalling, on acceding to power in London, that the cosy Bush-Blair personal relationship was over. Brown insisted on his first visit to the US that the leaders meet formally in suits, not in shirtsleeves at the ranch.

Rudd should not follow the naïve course of incoming French President Sarkozy

in trying to ingratiate himself with the Bush Administration in its final dangerous year. The immediate focus of Australian policy towards the Bush administration should be to work with sensible like-minded UN member countries, certainly the UK and Germany but also more controversially China and Russia, in dissuading any US unilateral air strikes against Iran.

This would be a delicate new diplomacy, moving away from Australia's mindless camp-followership of the past 12 years. It will require Rudd's close personal attention to convey the true messages — that Australia is acting as a good US friend and ally, as well as a responsible international citizen.

The fact is that any unilateral US air strike on Iran, however it were spin-doctored, would be a disaster for global security. The time for Australia to join in responsible international dissuasion of such brinkmanship is now, not later.

Similarly with Kyoto, there is urgent repair work to be done. Labor must use Bali to register the fact of real policy rethinking in Australia. It would send an appropriate signal for Rudd to lead the Australian delegation to Bali, and to apologise for Australia's past bad faith in negotiating Kyoto, in first pressing for watered-down Australian commitments, then renegeing on joining the treaty. The statistics of Australia's per capita CO2 emissions are now so damning that it will take a dramatic new public diplomacy to repair Australia's badly tarnished international reputation.

On peak oil, Australia is, like the rest of the world, at the mercy of iron laws of supply and demand in international energy markets. Peak oil's market impact will drive oil prices sharply upwards. This will fuel inflationary pressure in the global and therefore Australian economy.

This emphasises the urgent need for rapid reforms in Australian energy production and exports, to encourage the fastest affordable transition to a renewable energy-based economy. Australia's domestic and international energy policies will need to be mutually consistent and supportive. These are uncharted waters for Australian foreign policy. Ross Garnaut needs to offer Rudd interim policy guidance, now.

These three challenges — climate change, peak oil and US-Iran — actually manifest the same underlying challenge to Australia's traditional foreign policy vision. How can Australia move from our historic narrow concept of national interest, which has over-emphasised US bilateralism in international security and the obsessive pursuit of maximum resources-export dollars? How do we recover the larger vision, that both Whitlam and Evans pursued, of Australia as an active good international citizen, from which true national security flows?

Will Australia 'hang together' with the world community, or will we 'hang

separately' with a self-centred and internationally irresponsible US? Will Rudd's Australia work towards a cooperating world that plans together to meet the huge shared challenges of global warming and non-renewable energy supply depletion, or will we take part in decay towards an anarchic *Mad Max* world of battle over depleting resources of water, arable land and fossil fuels?

These are not challenges on which the Rudd government can determine good policy balances overnight. They will require a serious longer-term national policy planning effort over several years. But the policy signalling must start now. A proper scepticism towards a great deal of what passed for 'consensus' in Australian foreign policy under John Howard is called for.

In sum, both the Bali Kyoto meeting and the Iran war risk scenario require immediate foreign policy attention. The new Rudd administration cannot afford to let itself be positioned in a similar public frame as its predecessor. It needs to signal real policy shifts. This needs Rudd's personal involvement, to get the balances right and to set directions for future work.

Foreign policy was a sleeper issue in the election. It cannot remain so now.

The 'me first' election

THEOLOGY

By Andrew Hamilton



Some theologians claim that all philosophical and political issues are ultimately theological. This is the kind of lavish ambit claim that the powerless of this world, like theologians, often make. But certainly complex theological discussions can sometimes throw light on thoroughly secular questions.

Take elections, for example. In them the people exercise their sovereign choice. In the recent election the people withdrew support from a government whose formulation of national sovereignty had sometimes been brutal. It is caught in Mr Howard's martial policy launch at a previous election, 'We decide who comes here and the circumstances in which they come here'.

Although you may cynically think that elections and theology have only tedium in common, the theology of election does bear on issues of choice and sovereignty that resonate in political life.

The Christian theology of election has to do with God's choice. It begins with God's choosing the people of Israel from all the nations. It becomes more complicated when it deals with the split of the Christian church from Israel. It must say whether God has cancelled the original choice or has affirmed and refined it.

But for the most part the Christian theology of election has focused, not on the macro level where God chooses nations, but at the micro level where God chooses individuals. St Augustine was insistent that if individuals are saved, it is because God chooses to save them. It is not because they choose to obey God. Augustine's position can be crystallised in the statement that God's choice is sovereign and unconditioned.

The unqualified emphasis on God's choice becomes problematic when we turn our attention to people who are not saved. If those who are saved owe their happiness totally to God's sovereign and unconditioned choice, then logically it would seem that those who are damned must also owe their misery to God's choice.

This conclusion struck many of Augustine's contemporaries, as it might strike us, as unjust. Significantly in his response Augustine felt the need to defend God's justice.

In doing so, he conceded that sovereign choice is not simply a matter of the power to do what you like. Even God's choice must be reasonable and just.

In Christian theology God's reason for choosing nations and individuals is love. When we love we respond to the value that we see in other people. Our love is free in the sense that it is not controlled or forced by the person whom we love. We might even speak grandiloquently of our sovereign choice to love. But neither in God nor in human beings is it an arbitrary exercise of power.

And so back to elections. In the election campaign the choice and sovereignty of the people often seemed to be defined simply as an arbitrary power to choose, with self-interest the only motivation. In the first week of the campaign, tax cuts trumped tax cuts. There was little expectation that the sovereign choice would be influenced by reason and value. This is a dispiriting view of choice because even self-interest demands an ordered and predictable world in which we can live profitably. Even pickpockets can't function without crowd control.

The Christian theology of election also intimates that the sovereignty of the people, as exercised in elections, demands a form of love. Individuals must look beyond their narrow interests to those of the nation to which they belong. They must wish their fellow citizens well and take them into account in making their choice. Without some commitment to the common good the sovereign choice of individuals on behalf of the nation could never ground coherent policy.

The same is true of national sovereignty. If it is not governed by reason and by values, but only expresses the power to do as the government wills, then international commitments, respect for the rights of smaller nations and international aid would be vacuous rhetoric. Hitler's invasion of Austria and Czechoslovakia, for example, would be an unexceptionable exercise of sovereign power. National sovereignty is a dangerous concept unless it is set within a broader vision of a just international order in which all nations have an obligation to the flourishing of humanity.

Election and sovereignty, both divine and national, become monstrous without love.

Good music becomes great business

MUSIC

By Tim Kroenert

It seems the height of cynicism when artists abandon their roots in pursuit of the almighty dollar. In the world of popular music the transition from intimate theatre or festival gigs to stadium rock shows defines the move from an authentic emphasis on great music, to 'music as spectacle' or a commercial exercise.

At least, that's the reaction I've been bracing for this year. And it's a viewpoint I sympathise with. In the past I've been one of its most fervent proponents. But this year I've had to take pause. One of my favourite musicians has made exactly that transition.



My 2007 started with a live music binge. I'm a Missy Higgins fan, and was thrilled to see her perform live on four occasions. First up was the Point Nepean music festival. Next came two gigs on consecutive nights at St Kilda's Palais Theatre. Then there was Live Earth, where she performed alongside a socially-aware supergroup comprising Kev Carmody, Paul Kelly and John Butler, before returning later for a hit-heavy solo set.

After two albums, Higgins deserves to be remembered as one of our great singer-songwriters. Her melodic ocker tones issue with great power from her deceptively diminutive frame. Her persona is open and engaging — she could be anyone's little sister. Her lyrics lack poetry, but shimmer with truth and insight. Her melodies soar.

It seems little wonder Australians have taken Higgins to heart. She is a celebrity with substance. Regardless of her fame, she's always maintained contact with her roots. This, after all, is the girl who invites her father and brother to perform on stage with her when she plays her home city of Melbourne.

But since the release of her second album, *On A Clear Night*, 2007 has become the Year of Missy. Her TV appearances rank alongside Kevin Rudd's in frequency. She's graced the covers of numerous music and pop culture magazines. Her singles 'Steer' and 'Where I Stood' have saturated radio play lists.

Talk about overload. Who could blame some former fans for accusing her of selling out? To top it off, she's about to set sail on her second national tour of 2007,

performing bulky, indoor stadium shows.

That's right: stadium shows. This last point gives rise to speculation that Higgins' celebrity persona may have outgrown her artistic integrity. The shows are billed as being in 'intimate theatre mode', but unless you managed to score tickets in the first couple of rows, the word 'intimate' simply does not apply to the Sydney Entertainment Centre or Melbourne's Rod Laver Arena. Despite my joyful binge earlier this year, I wasn't convinced. I could not bring myself to invest in a ticket to see her perform on such a vast and impersonal scale.

But perhaps it's unfair to write the big stadium tour off as a cynical, commercially-driven exercise. It's possible the move to bigger venues could simply represent a genuine attempt on Higgins' part to reach as much of her growing fan base as possible.

After all, being popular doesn't necessarily make one a sell-out. A musician can be a commercial success and still maintain artistic integrity (Crowded House front man and songwriter extraordinaire Neil Finn is one example of this). And while it is cynical for an artist to abandon that integrity in pursuit of a dollar, it is equally cynical for fans to abandon the bandwagon just because it's getting crowded.

Higgins has proven throughout every step of her career that she will never be a mere slave to the machine of commerciality. Her TV spots and magazine photo shoots have been offset by appearances at Live Earth and the Walk Against Warming, as well as 2006's Rock for Rights concert. She has also been a champion of indigenous rights, having lent her voice to *Cannot Buy My Soul*, a tribute album celebrating indigenous songwriter Kev Carmody, and her face to the Too Big A Story indigenous rights ad campaign.

Her recent embrace of her ambiguous (in her words, 'fluid') sexuality is further indicative of a young woman determined to be herself, no matter how much the public or her record label might think they own her. In declaring to lesbian lifestyle magazine *Cherrie* that she is indeed a 'not-so-straight girl', she may well find herself representing gay rights as well.

The lyric of 'Steer' is a cheesy but determined declaration of Higgins' intention to control her destiny. If she can remain committed not only to writing great songs, but also to using her profile to promote important, humane issues, then that destiny will be worthwhile. And the Missy Higgins band wagon will never get too crowded.

The ears have it for Maxine

EDITORIAL

By Michael Mullins



Maxine McKew knows that the best TV and radio interviewers are those with the greatest ability to listen to their guest. Being able to talk without pausing for breath is often a liability. It fills air time, but does not necessarily engage and win over an audience.

Listening was her winning strategy in Saturday's election. She believed in listening, and was open and honest about its role in the political process. Writing in *The Monthly*, political commentator Judith Brett [described](#) McKew's style as 'the politics of courteous listening and polite persuasion'.

After Saturday's result, we know it works.

McKew was right when she said: 'The campaign is about a prime minister who has stopped listening.'

It seems that the 'he who has the best handshake' style of grassroots campaigning is about as popular as Workchoices, and as effective as all the expensive promises that were made.

Maxine McKew knows that the experience of being heard empowers people, and that it is also likely to secure their vote. Leaders who truly listen will know what the people actually need, and will therefore be best equipped to deliver accordingly. It is also decidedly more clever economically than carpet-bombing the electorate with expensive promises.

The longing to be listened to is especially true in the case of migrant populations such as that of Bannockburn. Invariably migrants and refugees are long-suffering, and have stories to tell. Many of these people have lived in totalitarian countries where they could be imprisoned for telling their story. What they seek in Australia is the freedom to speak, and the courtesy and generosity of spirit with which it goes hand in hand.

Writing three months before the election, Judith Brett was skeptical that a strategy as passive as McKew's would work, especially as it was also evident in Kevin Rudd's approach.

She said Paul Keating and Bob Hawke 'thrived on conflict, and they made conflict work for them', while the 'smiling and calm Rudd has been repeating his messages that the government is tired, sneaky and out of ideas'.

At that stage, it remained to be seen whether that approach would work. Now that the electorate has spoken, we can say definitively that it does.

Meeting the moral cost of recreational travel

TRAVEL

By Sophie Rudolph

This is the second of two essays submitted by Sophie Rudolph, [winner](#) of Eureka Street's Margaret Dooley Award for young writers.

These reflections occur at the dusk of a 20-month journey spanning three continents and including incredible hospitality, sadness and joys, much learning and much contemplation on the inequalities of the world and the ethics of travel.



One of the most pressing questions regarding travel today is what impact the increasing transportation of people across the world is having on our environment. This requires an essay to itself, however, and I will therefore leave it for another time. Instead I will focus my reflections on social and economic implications and some of the related questions of privilege, inequality, difference, exchange, diversity and understanding.

My position as a 'Western', middle-class Australian has enabled me to travel to other parts of the world and see different ways of living and relating with relative ease. This opportunity, however, is not available to all and a product of the inherent inequalities which characterise our world, underpinned by historical injustices and exploitation.

The development of unequal economic relationships between various countries has also resulted in the currency of wealthy countries being of incredible value in many travel destinations. Not only have economically disadvantaged countries often been (and continue to be) mistreated by economically stronger countries but many residents of those wealthier countries have greater access to travel and greater spending power while travelling.

Travel is seen as beneficial to increase our understanding of the world and each other but what does this mean for those whose movement is restricted by their place and position of birth? Why should some people be allowed to access this opportunity for growth and awareness and others not? How can this situation be challenged or changed? And can those of us bestowed with this privilege use it ethically and to the benefit of others?

The answers to these questions cannot be adequately explored in the limits of this essay but one way I have tried to respond is by recognising and being consciously aware that in each place I visit I am entering an exchange. I should never be in a place to solely take, or take advantage of, the ease and privilege of my being there. I should always endeavour to give back and enter a conversation with those whose land I walk.

And through these exchanges in many different countries I have learnt a great deal about humanity, had my preconceptions challenged, and confirmed that no matter how poor or wealthy, most of us are interested in differences and similarities, we all hold prejudices and we all respond to our own situations in different ways. It is very difficult to generalise about anything or anyone. We need to see the multiplicity.

I will finish with a poem, a meditation created on a bus from Cape Town to Pretoria one January evening while passing grape picking shack communities and trying to understand my experiences in that complex, beautiful land. There are many possibilities to this story ... here are two:

1.
he sits in suit and tie
and sips the ruby coloured liquid
enjoying the
'rich woody depth and subtle
cinnamon undertones'
in the amber glow
of the sleek city bar
he contemplates the hecticcy of life
the stress and pressure, the striving
for a goal he is no longer sure of
he hopes a few more glasses
will aid an escape
from the reality for a while
while a long way away
the hands that picked the grapes

hold a pipe which he puffs gently
as he takes in the last gasp of
evening light from beneath his corrugated
veranda. he will move inside soon
and light the candles and paraffin stove
he enjoys his daily routine
the chance to breathe the fresh air
and work beside the giant, sturdy form
of the mountain. he does, however,
look forward to the day when he can
exchange the candles and paraffin for light switch and oven door.

2.

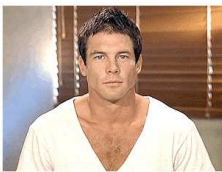
he sits in suit and tie
and sips the ruby coloured liquid
enjoying the
'rich woody depth and subtle
cinnamon undertones'
in the amber glow
of the sleek city bar
he reflects on his day
and is glad he has found a job
he finds challenging and rewarding
and that a glass of wine, by himself
at the end of the day
doesn't feel lonely
while a long way away
the hands that picked the grapes

hold a pipe which he puffs gently
as he takes in the last gasp of
evening light from beneath his corrugated
veranda. he will move inside soon
and light the candles and paraffin stove
he hopes one day he will escape
this reality, be released from the trap
of struggle. he longs to leave
the monotony of his work, the
isolation of his existence and
seek something greater, more exciting
and perhaps easier.

Bare-chested footballer Cousins and well-dressed thief Pratt

SPORT

Braham Dabscheck



November 2007 has been an interesting month for the Australian Football League. A player who has not been found guilty of any illegal activity has been suspended for 12 months for bringing the game into disrepute. On the other hand, no action has been taken against a chairman of a club who admitted and was found guilty of the most serious price fixing case ever heard under the Trade Practices Act 1974.

The story of the player is well known. In mid-October 2007, Ben Cousins, a star player of the West Coast Eagles, was arrested and charged for the alleged possession of prohibited recreational drugs and for refusing to submit to a drug test. We were regaled with television footage of him bare chested, being led away by police. Cousins was subsequently sacked by the Eagles.

The day after his sacking, the police dropped the charge of possessing prohibited drugs. They subsequently dropped the second charge of refusing to take a drug test on a technicality, and Cousins received compensation from the police for his 'wrongful' arrest.

Cousins travelled to Los Angeles to undergo a program of drug rehabilitation. It was reported that he had gone on a five-day cocaine bender, which resulted in his hospitalisation. He returned to Australia in early November.

The AFL Commission subsequently announced that Cousins had been charged with bringing the game into disrepute. A hearing was scheduled for 19 November. Even though police had dropped their charges against him, the AFL Commission suspended Cousins from playing in the AFL for 12 months. Moreover, any potential reinstatement at the end of this period was dependent on proof of rehabilitation.

Andrew Demetriou, the AFL's CEO, said if a player 'wasn't appreciative of the privilege [and] opportunities' of being associated with the league, and 'if you're willing to transgress or behave in a manner that is going to bring disrepute to our game, the Commission will have no hesitation in dealing with it'.

But the AFL, it seems, has a double standard when it comes to its treatment of players and club executives. At approximately the same time as the Commission announced its charge against Cousins, the Federal Court of Australia handed down a

decision concerning a price fixing by Amcor and Visy. They controlled more than 90 per cent of the estimated \$1.8 to \$2 billion per annum market in Australia.

The head of Visy is Richard Pratt, one of Australia's richest men, with a fortune estimated at \$5 billion. He is also president of the Carlton Football Club. He joined the Carlton board in February 2007 and helped turn the club around from a loss of \$3.2 million to a profit of \$3 million.

The parties involved in this case admitted their guilt. Justice Heerey fined Visy \$36 million and two operatives of the company a combined total of \$2 million. He said 'this must be, by far, the most serious cartel case to come before the court in the 30-plus years in which price fixing has been precluded by statute ... There cannot be any doubt that Mr Pratt also knew that the cartel, to which he gave his approval, and in which he admitted to being knowingly concerned was seriously unlawful.'

It has been estimated that losses from the operation of this cartel are in the order of \$700 million.

Graeme Samuel, the chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Samuel, said 'cartels are theft – usually by well dressed thieves'. He advocated jail terms for those convicted of price fixing: 'Nothing', he said, 'concentrates the mind of an executive contemplating creating or participating in a cartel more than the prospect of a criminal conviction or a stretch in jail.'

Yet Carlton has sought to distinguish Richard Pratt's involvement with the club from the adverse findings of the Federal Court. CEO Greg Swann said this matter 'relates to issues that took place and ended well before Richard was invited to join the Carlton Board'. Such a stance has a hollow ring. The fact that Pratt had obtained income from participating in a price fixing cartel provided him with the wherewithal to be generous to Carlton.

The AFL is very conscious of its image and the behaviour of those that are part of its family. Andrew Demetriou said the AFL would not hesitate to take action in dealing with threats to its reputation. Consequently the league has barred Cousins from playing in the AFL for a year, despite the fact he has not been convicted of any wrongdoing.

Yet the AFL has taken no action with respect to the conviction of Richard Pratt, who has been found guilty of participating in the most egregious example of price fixing since the passage of the Trade Practices Act 1974. How can the latter example be said to not diminish or tarnishes the reputation of the game?

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the AFL is operating a double standard in its different responses to the bare-chested footballer and the well-dressed thief.

Al-Jazeera suffers both US and Arab hostility

MEDIA

By Michael Mehr

The story of al-Jazeera, from its humble beginnings in the tiny Gulf state of Qatar in 1996 to today's global network that is required viewing for major policy makers, is a reminder of the incredible power the media can have to influence international politics.



More than ten years after the Qatari Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, scrapped his country's censorious Information Ministry and commissioned a radically different Arab media outlet, al-Jazeera persists with its frank political reporting and taboo-breaking, live-to-air debates. The satellite broadcaster has unleashed a ripple effect among its pan-Arab competitors, who are now attempting to emulate its brash, free-wheeling style. The region's state broadcasters know their traditional news fare — staid reports chronicling the national leader's daily activities — no longer appeals to the masses.

While [al-Jazeera English](#) struggles to reach audiences (a year after its inception the station has yet to find a US cable carrier and in Australia the only provider offering the channel is the niche UBI World TV), its Arabic component is intent on expanding its influence, with a pan-Arab newspaper set for launch in late 2007. This would further chip away at Saudi Arabia's domination of the pan-Arab media establishment.

To the chagrin of the government in Riyadh, al-Jazeera provides a regular platform for exiled Saudi dissidents to take potshots at the monarchy. In response, Saudi Arabia's vast economic clout has effectively coalesced to boycott the channel.

Not that finances are a problem. Although al-Jazeera features some advertising, the bulk of funding flows from the Emir, who contributes a reported US\$30 million per year. The channel 'won't be financially independent in the near future', says Ezzeddine Abdelmoula, of the al-Jazeera International and Media Relations department.

The station's management claims state funding comes without editorial interference. The common explanation is that al-Jazeera's own headline-making reputation suits Qatari ambitions for the tiny emirate to punch above its weight in the

region. Any attempts by the leadership to rein in the feisty broadcaster would backfire.

But for many Arab governments al-Jazeera remains a nuisance. At the broadcaster's Doha newsroom, staff sit at open-plan desks in front of multiple flat-screens. Above them an electronic ticker scrolls by in Arabic script with the phrase 'al-ra'y wal-ra'y al-akhar', reminding employees that the channel has a duty to show 'the opinion and the opposite opinion'. This commitment to showing a multitude of views has exposed many rifts within Arab politics and unravelled concocted notions of national unity. Within the Palestinian Territories, al-Jazeera was highlighting Hamas opposition figures long before the group stunned policy makers with its electoral victory last year.

Arab governments are not amused. During its decade of broadcasting, al-Jazeera journalists have been arrested or forced to close their bureaus in Jordan, Algeria, Kuwait, Egypt and post-Saddam Iraq. Bahrain, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia have been off-limits from the start.

States' attempts to combat the lively broadcaster have become legendary. In 1999 Algeria is said to have timed a power cut to interrupt an al-Jazeera talk show featuring one of its government representatives facing off with an exiled critic.

For all the talk of the new English-language channel bringing a non-Western-centric perspective to audiences, the spin-off broadcaster is, perhaps strangely, a slightly tamer version of the Arabic trailblazer.

There are clear differences between the two. While priding itself on following modern journalistic ethics of impartiality, the original al-Jazeera is unashamedly an Arab station. And this is most apparent in one distinguishing editorial policy: every Palestinian killed by Israeli troops is called *shaheed*, a martyr.

It's a cultural thing, says Ayman Gaballah, Deputy Chief Editor of al-Jazeera, explaining how the 'Palestinian issue' gets such an emotional response in the region. 'It's in the heart of every Arab,' he says. 'It is the common denominator.'

Al-Jazeera's relationship with the US government has had its ups and downs. It was once hailed as a hopeful sign of emerging democracy in the Arab world, but the American approach to the station soured when al-Jazeera started receiving and airing tapes of Osama bin Laden after October 2001. As the bin Laden clips were broadcast around the world, with the al-Jazeera logo conspicuous in the corner of the screen, it is not surprising that the messenger and the message were often conflated in popular perception.

Al-Jazeera English marketers also had to contend with a widely-believed myth about their network — that it has broadcast footage of hostages being beheaded. The

persistent rumour was given credibility in 2005 when then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld espoused it at a security conference in Singapore. The repeated surfacing of the myth has some al-Jazeera insiders wondering if it is part of an orchestrated smear campaign.

A US missile destroyed the empty al-Jazeera office in Kabul in November 2001. An al-Jazeera correspondent in Iraq, Tariq Ayoub, was killed in April 2003 when the Baghdad bureau was bombed by US forces. In both instances, the US government denied targeting the sites. Al-Jazeera employees are reluctant to argue differently without proof, but many see a pattern of intimidation against the Arab world's freest media outlet.

'The Americans have practised what all the other Arab regimes have tried before, using pressure and sometimes more than pressure,' says Gaballah. 'In the end, they discovered it doesn't work.'

War on terror fosters US anti-immigrant hysteria

INTERNATIONAL

By Peter Rosen



A recent series of raids by the US Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) service signals a new era of anti-immigrant hysteria in America.

In September in the New York City suburb of Nassau County, ICE undertook a massive raid to capture gang members. It declared the raids a success, claiming that of the 186 arrested, 157 were gang members or associates.

However, county executive Thomas Suozzi denounced the raid, insisting that only 'eight were active gang members and one is a gang associate'. He added, 'The result was that many wrong residential addresses were raided, and in one instance, ICE sought a 28-year-old defendant using a photograph taken when he was [a] seven-year-old boy.'

Not only were American citizens and legal residents picked up, but in one case, a house was searched for a man who had moved out in 2003. The family living there were US citizens, except for a child who was a legal resident awaiting naturalisation. Suozzi, joined by county police commissioner Lawrence Mulvey, is calling for a federal investigation of the raid.

This raid was but the latest in a series of ICE anti-immigrant actions taking place throughout the US during the last couple of months. Federal agents picked up 51 workers at an Iowa egg farm. In Reno, Nevada, upwards of 100 suspected illegal workers were arrested in raids at McDonald's restaurants. Agents raided meatpacking plants, egg farms and a leather factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. And in the San Francisco area, ICE agents were spotted prowling for undocumented immigrants at East Bay supermarkets, day-labourer sites, Home Depot and Wal-Mart outlets and even public libraries and schools.

Even more disturbing, in New Haven, Connecticut, two days after the city approved ID cards for undocumented residents, an ICE raid resulted in the arrest of at least 29 workers. Although denied by ICE, many residents insist the raid was as a punitive action — a reprisal for the city's commitment to civil liberties.

Estimates vary as to the size of the undocumented immigrant population in America. Extrapolating from US Census Bureau data, the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that as of 2006 there were 11.5 to 12 million non-documented foreigners residing in the country, two-thirds of whom have been in the US for ten years or less. Pew estimates 7 million of these immigrants were employed, making up five per cent of the US civilian labour force, and that immigrant workers make up a significant share of some key industries, including farming (24 per cent), cleaning services (17 per cent), construction (14 per cent) and food preparation (12 per cent).

The raids are part of an intensified anti-immigrant upsurge spreading throughout the US. The anti-immigrant sentiment is rationalised by a false association of undocumented immigrants with the war on terror. In the wake of September 11, the Bush administration has waved the flag of terror to justify invading Iraq, suspend habeas corpus and engage in unwarranted eavesdropping.

The anti-immigrant upsurge finds its voice in a growing chorus of inflammatory commentators not only in newspaper columns and conservative websites, but also on the Fox News channel and, most notably, CNN's prime time program, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. The rising anti-immigrant sentiment comes on the heels of Congress' failed efforts to pass Bush-administration backed legislation to address immigration — and the earlier mass mobilisations that took place throughout the country in opposition to the anti-immigrant bills.

Nevertheless, the raids raised considerable concern throughout the country. David Leopold, a member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association's task force on ICE raids, railed against them. 'This new policy of immigration reform by law enforcement is going to wreak havoc on our communities [and] our economy,' he said. Others warn that ICE agents illegally detain, search and harass Latin-looking people due to their appearance, thus violating various US Constitutional rights.

Many others, including representatives from organised labour, immigrant-rights groups, antiwar organisations, African-American, Latino and religious groups have called for an end to these raids.

One of the little-discussed consequences of ICE raids is their economic implications. For example, in the wake of the raids at meatpacking plants, James Mintert, an agricultural economist at Kansas State University, warned 'continued massive immigration raids would cut cattle prices paid to cattle feeders and cattle producers while raising the cost of beef for consumers'.

Similarly, farmers in upstate New York blame a growing immigrant farm labour shortage on a dramatic rise in immigration enforcement. What happens to meatpacking and agriculture will likely happen to other labour-intensive industries, like the hotel industry, the construction industry and the food-services industry.

Change to Win, a coalition of seven unions representing six million organised workers, condemned ICE actions. Responding to a raid on the homes of workers at a North Carolina meatpacking plant, it declared: 'It becomes clearer every day that the Bush administration has decided that pleasing its base with acts of political theater is more important than finding a real solution on immigration. And the human cost of that decision becomes clearer every day as well.'

ICE raids of alleged undocumented immigrants are likely to increase as the country readies for the election. These raids will serve two purposes. One is legal, to apprehend undocumented foreigners. The other, however, is far more questionable. Under Bush-administration direction, these raids will serve the political purpose of inflaming anti-immigrant xenophobia. Whether such a nationalistic, anti-immigrant fear campaign will be strong enough to affect the election outcome remains to be seen.

The hard life of Christians in Bethlehem

INTERNATIONAL

By Abe Ata

I was born in Bethlehem from a Christian family. My dad hails from a Lebanese-Syrian Maronite (Eastern Catholic) family.



After his father's death my dad took over as a church organist and played at the Lutheran church and Saint George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem for 45 years. He also taught English at the Vatican-funded Bethlehem University and played the violin — a rare talent among the wild unruly Middle Eastern societies.

At night my dad read Shakespeare and Wordsworth. He was the first Palestinian (though Lebanese at heart) to ever visit the Holocaust Museum in West Jerusalem. We are told he shed tears on that day.

That emotion must have been unparalleled for a Christian living in Bethlehem in 1969. Bethlehem was then, as is today, under Israeli military occupation. It must have been pathological to shed tears for Jewish victims of the Holocaust at a time when he was a victim of an Israeli military occupation.

Living as part of a Christian minority in a predominately Middle Eastern Muslim society was not any easier. This double bind spelt doom for 400,000 other Palestinian Christians and forced 80 per cent of them to leave the land of their ancestors during the past 40 years.

Ongoing apathy by a majority of American evangelical Christians has also indirectly contributed to the Palestinian Christian exodus.

In 1968 there were no credible universities in Bethlehem, so I left for the American University in Beirut. I was issued a temporary ID by the Israeli military authorities as permit to leave and re-enter the occupied West Bank within 12 months. I was not able to do so opting instead to complete a BA in Psychology. This proved semi-fatal. My permit was declared null and void and my right of return was abolished with a stroke of a pen.

Subsequently, my dad wrote a letter to Senator Symington in Washington DC. He pleaded with him to intervene on my behalf with the military authorities. He argued:

'Why is it easier for American Jews to migrate to Israel, but my son, who was born in Bethlehem as were his mother's ancestors, is not allowed to set foot there?'

Four weeks later my dad received a reply assuring him I was able to return to Bethlehem any time he desired. I was given 'permission' to see my parents, but only for four weeks. Disappointed I returned to AUB, completed my degree and left for Australia.

Two months before my dad died in 1994 I travelled on my Australian passport to Amman in Jordan on the way to visit my parents in the occupied West Bank. I have several aunts and uncles from my mother's family who live in Amman. Like most other Palestinian Christians they have been affiliated with Greek Orthodoxy since the fourth century.

Being identified as Bethlehem-born on my passport did not help at the Israeli crossing at the river Jordan. Like most other Western passport holding Palestinians, I had to strip naked as a condition of being granted a visiting visa. Wearing a cross around my neck made no difference, and why should it! My toothpaste, medication, shampoo and other toiletries were confiscated with an explanation that they could not be verified as such.

Five hours later I was allowed to travel to Bethlehem to see my dying father. His cancer was too advanced then. Lacking courage I returned to Australia. He died six weeks later.

My mother is now living on her own in a rented flat with my older sister in Bethlehem. She is 85 and getting frailer by the day. She complains on the phone that the other Christian families living in the same four-storey building have left for South America.

She tells me that of the 40 families she used to visit only two are left behind. Curfews, local religious fanatics, terrorists and Israeli military check points make her feel like a trapped mouse. There is no safety, no protection and no certainty. Anyone, she says, can walk to your house at night and take you away, and no-one will care.

Bethlehem is now fenced off from the rest of the world, so my mother can't even visit her daughter in Jerusalem. It takes from six to eight weeks to get a permit from the military to be allowed to go to Jerusalem, even though Jerusalem is only seven kilometres away.

Two months ago they found skin cancer on my mother's leg. She can't go to Israeli hospitals because she is not a Jew and does not have government insurance.

'Everyone has little energy left to fight,' my mother says. 'Do you know anyone who lived under occupation for 40 years and stayed sane?'

Bangladesh climate under the weather

INTERNATIONAL

By Ben Fraser



Death tolls are commonly used to measure the human impact of disasters unfolding on foreign shores. To some extent they also shape the likely humanitarian response. When cyclone Sidr tore apart the deltaic south of Bangladesh two weeks ago it was the numbers that bombarded the headlines. The area had just emerged from the seasonal phenomena of Bonna (large flooding) which claimed over 1000 lives. Sidr is thought to have left at least 3500 dead and a much greater number displaced or destitute.

These figures could have been frighteningly higher. In 1991, a cyclone of similar scale and intensity killed 138,000 Bangladeshis, an astonishing toll even within a population now topping 150 million. What counted most for a large share of the population during the onset of cyclone Sidr was the actualisation of a model for disaster risk reduction. This is becoming a crucial framework for protecting lives and livelihoods in the midst of environmental disasters.

Seventy-two hours prior to landfall, the Bangladesh Government initiated a cyclone warning through its Comprehensive Disaster Management Program. Based on improved satellite imaging and meteorological modelling which pointed to the location, time and intensity of the cyclone, the government was able to relay this message through its disaster management department and the local Red Crescent. This message was then delivered to the 15 districts directly under threat.

Following this 40,000 trained volunteers, police, coastguard and health workers were mobilised to disseminate the warning to the 10 million coastal inhabitants potentially exposed to the cyclone.

Simple but well-executed disaster response procedures enabled thousands of families in remote rural areas to find refuge in purpose-built storm shelters, undoubtedly curbing what could have been another spiralling death toll during the storm surge. The widespread use of megaphones by volunteers to announce the danger was credited with saving thousands of lives alone.

This model of preparedness is crucial in a country so frequently at odds with

nature. Bangladesh is perhaps the most disaster prone country on earth, with seasonal monsoons and cyclones among its most destructive phenomena. More than 200 rivers and waterways snake across the country to the turbulent Bay of Bengal. Most of the country is less than 10 metres above sea level.

The delta region, a fertile area for the agriculture and fishing-based economy, is highly susceptible to water sourced disasters. The results of these are saltwater intrusion into fresh water supplies, waterlogging, land erosion and devastation of economically disadvantaged farmers and fisherfolk. It is saddening but hardly surprising that many of the dead from cyclone Sidr were fishermen ignoring the cyclone warning in search of a plentiful catch.

Climate change may also prove an underlying factor in the intensity of these disaster impacts. The Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has already noted that the accelerated melting of Himalayan ice caps and even incremental rises in sea levels would likely increase the severity of flooding in the short-term during the Bonna season and greatly magnify the impact of tidal storm surges during the cyclone season.

The cyclical nature of these disasters has led the Bangladesh Government to pursue a more holistic approach to disaster management, which addresses the risks, vulnerabilities and hazards associated with these recurrent events. This rationale contends that a better-prepared government and disaster 'resilient' communities will mitigate the impact of natural disasters, ensuring affected communities are reached during the critical survival phase of the response and reducing onerous financial aid and recovery commitments.

This would also strategically address what the International Monetary Fund has referred to as 'Samaritan's Dilemma' whereby governments and decision-makers defer responsibility for investments in risk reduction, relying instead on the immediacy of aid delivered by foreign donors.

Bangladesh has taken significant strides towards what the government describes as 'a paradigm shift in disaster management from conventional response to a more comprehensive risk reduction culture'. As demonstrated through the Sidr response, the Bangladesh government has invested heavily to remodel its disaster management systems at the central and district levels within a longer-term development context, recognising, for example, that entrenched poverty is a key determinant of disaster vulnerability.

At the community level, a range of initiatives has been piloted to protect lives and mitigate disaster impacts. Numerous village-level disaster management committees have been established and have conducted mock evacuation drills targeting high risk groups including children and the elderly.

Preparedness measures include raising homes and water points above flood zones, pre-positioning food rations and first aid equipment, and better management of environmental resources through soil conservation and tree planting. Despite some problems the weight of evidence suggests that well-honed public knowledge, more resilient mitigation measures and clear response procedures have reduced and will continue to reduce exposure to risk. They will also lead to better-managed disaster responses.

Within disaster-prone communities, local knowledge and experience of extreme weather events including disaster patterns form a very human resource that needs to sit equally with broader stratagems and modelling for disaster risk reduction and response within developing countries. Both investments should inform a recognised process for ensuring a safer and more viable existence for the Bangladesh population in the midst of climatic uncertainty.

With the eventuality of future disasters, this reaches hopefully towards a new measure recognising lives saved as opposed to lives lost.

'Best' essays merit book title's reckless superlative

BOOK REVIEW

Alexandra Coghlan

Drusilla Modjeska (Ed.), *The Best Australian Essays 2007*. Black Inc., 2007, ISBN 9781863954198, RRP \$35.00, [website](#)

'The Turning Tide', title of Judith Brett's contribution to this year's *The Best Australian Essays*, might usefully be taken as a subtitle for the collection as a whole. Implicit throughout many of the pieces, and highlighted explicitly in Modjeska's editorial introduction, is an awareness of a world, and more particularly a nation, at a fragile moment of social and political flux.

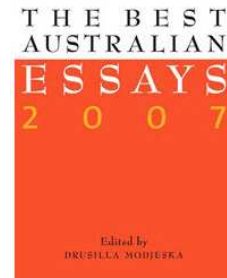
In a curious case of synchronicity I find myself writing quite literally on the eve of transition for Australia and her politics; within the next 12 hours the results of Australia's election will be known and a new political era will begin, testing or confirming the concerns and hopes expressed in these essays.

With pieces drawn not merely from authors and essayists, but more broadly from politicians, performers and sociologists, the collection juxtaposes explorations into literary, cultural and personal preoccupations of the past year.

Discussions range from Eros (in John Armstrong's elegant meditations on the darker side of desire) to Thanatos (in Nicholas Rothwell's thoughts on the role of the war correspondent) by way of Carthusian monks, pornography and Hitler.

Personal memoirs, travel-writing, political manifestos, and reviews all share the space, united in rare fashion in literature's generic chameleon: the essay. The form and function of the genre itself is challenged and interrogated, but the exploratory spirit of Montaigne's original 'Essais' — with its etymological origin crucially in 'essayer' — is maintained in the questioning and delicately nuanced approach of pieces such as Gert Reifarth's discussion of the impact of the GDR in fiction and in fact, and Susan Hampton's intensely personal account of the intersection of art and faith.

To seek a cumulative 'statement' therefore about the social and cultural condition



of contemporary Australia from this collection is fundamentally to misunderstand the essay form itself. Rather this book gives the impression of undertaking, as Modjeska puts it, a 'vigorous conversation' on the subject, ultimately leaving to readers the task of assembling the conceptual pieces as they choose.

Inevitably in a collection of writings that share a single temporal and cultural moment there are particular seams of thought that run through multiple essays, repeatedly forcing their way to the surface where they reappear at different and unexpected angles. It is these moments of shared substance and overlap that generate the most interesting dialogue, with essays serving to counter or gloss their companions.

Modejska's sensitive editorial influence in ordering the works and dividing them into unobtrusively articulated groups assists such readings greatly. Such a structure makes this a book to read from cover to cover rather than dip into, if the essays are to benefit most from their juxtaposition and yield a properly cumulative impact.

The recurrence of the 'big' issues of politics, religion and sexuality is predictable enough, but particular trends within each do emerge. Questions of surveillance and of the individual's right to privacy dominate essays by Reifarth, Anna Funder, and Clive James. These are all the more flexible in their thoughts for being discussed at a historical and geographical remove from contemporary Australia.

Issues of cultural relativism relating particularly to sexuality and religion engage Don Walker in an evocative travel piece on his experiences in Shiraz, and Anne Manne, whose discussion of feminism and 'raunch culture' strikes a rare strident note in this collection.

Most interesting is the recurrence of the notion of humour, and of an awareness of absurdity in particular as an essential filter through which to think and write, most of all 'in the bleak times', as Modjeska has it.

This humour is exemplified in the 'hilariously transgressive moment' Luke Davies recounts from the austere anti-film *Into Great Silence*, where the silent order of monks 'ski' down a slope on their shoes, tumbling into a giggling heap at the bottom. It is also present in Gillian Mears' conception of her sufferings as 'Dr Seuss-style' nonsense, and Kim Mahood's approach to race-issues in Australia.

Humour is seen as a positive and enabling force in contemporary critical thinking, rather than being despised as mere levity. It is perhaps inevitably those essays within the collection that deny or suppress this crucial awareness of the absurd that stray into the realm of the dogmatic and self-important.

I must confess to experiencing an instinctive suspicion — the product of years of academic caution where superlatives are concerned — of the term 'best' as applied in

the title, *The Best Australian Essays 2007*, and it does still seem a designation that should provoke and challenge the reader.

Nevertheless I am reminded of the definition proposed in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* of what constitutes good society — 'The company of clever, well-informed people who have a great deal of conversation' — and of Mr Eliot's shrewd correction: 'That is not good company, that is the best.'

On such a principle, adopting Modjeska's own metaphor of the book as a literary conversation or conversationalist, the often unexpected arguments and wide-ranging subjects of these essays do indeed seem to merit the reckless superlative of the title.

Young and full of juice

FILM REVIEW

Rochelle Siemienowicz

Into The Wild: 148 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Sean Penn. Starring: Emile Hirsch, William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden, Jena Malone, Catherine Keener, Brian Dierker, Vince Vaughn, Hal Holbrook.



The bright eyes of youth often see clearly the things that are wrong with society. What soulful young person has not longed to escape the greed and hypocrisy, the endless treadmill of bourgeois accomplishment? But for young Christopher McCandless, these idealistic dreams of freedom were deadly serious. In 1990, at age 22, having just graduated from college, McCandless donated his life savings to Oxfam, severed all ties with family and friends, and set off on a two-year journey that would conclude in the isolated wilds of tooth-and-claw Alaska.

Director Sean Penn has adapted Jon Krakauer's best-selling book about this nonconforming wanderer, and turned it into a visually stunning and inspiring hymn to freedom. McCandless is played by Emile Hirsch (*Alpha Dog*), who brings to the role such charisma and purity of spirit that it's hard not to see him as an irresistible golden-skinned saint. The camera almost lustfully adores his lean muscles and unkempt curls, but the light that shines from within comes from his unwavering belief in the path he must follow. His beloved books (Tolstoy, London, Thoreau) inspire him with the thoughts of other men similarly possessed.

For a man pursuing solitude, McCandless seems to have had a gift for the quick-struck friendship, and this film's best moments focus on those connections that are made on the road. There is the big-hearted merry wheat farmer (Vince Vaughn); the troubled hippie couple (Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker); and the God-fearing old timer (Hal Holbrook) who wishes to adopt the lad as his grandson.

But family and community are at odds with McCandless's grand vision of self-sufficiency and solitude. The film works hard to sympathise with the singlemindedness of a man who can so cruelly cut ties with his typically imperfect parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden) and his much-loved sister (Jena

Malone).

Skilfully shot on location, traveling from the wheat fields of South Dakota to the rapids of the Colorado River on to the solemn icy woods of Alaska, the film is a visually epic journey that echoes the inner travels of its hero. Underscoring the adventure — serious but never melancholy — is a freewheeling soundtrack, enriched by songs composed and sung by Eddie Vedder.

Sometimes this over-long film stumbles in its attitude to its subject, unsure of whether to glorify this terribly young lost soul. But *Into the Wild* remains a film of great beauty and integrity; a reminder of what it was to be young and full of juice, and longing to be free.

Two people in a garage

POETRY

Debbie Lustig

Trenchcoat

I wore fine, grey
Katherine Hepburn trousers
but my cheekbones were apples —
I had to try harder. I joined the trail
of turpentine and cigarettes. My shoes
clicked on the wooden boards. Traces
of blood beaded on the glass.
I nearly drowned in fulfilment, surfacing
like a batfish gaping at scraps.
My first lover, we lay
without love while
overdubbed guitars spiralled into the air,
sad like op shop ladies
beautiful like the blues.
I watched how you did things, took
your chief weapon, strode
into a dark corner
and fell face down off my life.
Two weeks with you: a love affair

without love —
you, it
sensations that halt sensation.

Work

No words only our breathing — two people
in a garage. Workbenched, love-bolted.
Quiet flits like wood dust. Rough surfaces
catch small sounds. My father and me,
constructing memories. He glues,
mixing resins with medical art. I carve
aluminium, butter-soft, young.
My vice holds a Chinese pictogram
with a promise of luck. I urge my fretsaw
carefully through the maze.
The tools are a language
he will teach me to speak:
screwdriver-hammer-longnosepliers
unused like spices, twinned
to the wall, shadowing themselves.
I coast on a lull, the air sawdust-spattered.
Soon, I will lose the Chinese pendant
and he will finish building a boat.
He will leave me with a brass fob-watch that
has stopped then
turn his attention to a project with no name.

Autobiography in six lines

I walk down the street and get mugged by five punks
suddenly my legs fall off
and a brick falls from the sky and hits me on the head
and I go blind and I think
I don't like this street much and then I think
there's safety in numbers
so as long as I keep all my selves to myself
I'll never be alone
and I can always count on solitude and things
happening for a reason so
I knew you came along to remind me of something
some reason to lose my head and give in again
now people approach me and make comments
about my shoes; how they like them
where I got them and I say: that's not a shoe
that's a small dog down there
and more bricks fall but this time I move well aside
and nothing hits me and with my shoes
although legless, I walk away