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2020 Summit leaves marginalised youth cold

AUSTRALIA

Saeed Saeed



The Federal Government's Australia 2020 Youth Summit is touted to bring young people to the table to discuss imperative national issues such as strengthening communities and social inclusion. Sadly, judging by the recently announced summit delegates, it is destined to be a chinwag of the 'haves' while the 'have-nots' are again left in the cold.

When applying, successful candidates needed to demonstrate a history of community engagement and achievements. This automatically excluded marginalised youth whose struggle on society's fringes is precisely due to governments' lack of consultative-based action.

If survival against adversity and other character strengths are not duly recognised by gatekeepers to a national forum, how can real social inclusion of the marginalised ever be achieved?

Unfortunately, this exclusion from the summit is indicative of a broader status quo experienced by this proportion of the nation's youth, many of whom harbour desires to contribute but are crippled by lack of community resources and the wider society's refusal to understand their basic needs.

A clear example of this communication breakdown can be found in our recent discourse surrounding ways to curb the spiralling rates of youth-related violence.

Decreasing the plentiful supply of alcohol and weapons seem to be politicians' preferred remedies, while police are lobbying state governments to rush in extra anti-assembly powers to limit opportunities for teens to congregate in public spaces.

These reactive solutions only reinforce the vicious cycle many angry youth are involved in. Youth prone to joining gangs already have a catalogue of places barring them entry, such as schools, shopping centres, swimming pools and public courtyards. Extra restrictions would only fuel their desire to join fellow disaffected youth in a show of force and solidarity.

In a 2006 study of Ethnic Youth Gangs by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, researchers found that the underlying causes for young people joining 'groups' or 'gangs' are their lack of social opportunities and their need 'for social belonging (such as friendship, support and protection)'.

Similar sentiments drove 'Tony', an illiterate 17-year-old, to join a well-known youth gang

in Melbourne's northern suburbs. He described to me how fellow members 'have a lot in common. There is a lot of respect, a lot of multiculturalism and there is no racism.'

Tony's gang initiation had him lying face down in a pool of blood after a savage beating by fellow 'brothers'. He was then ordered to stand unassisted in order to prove he has the 'balls' necessary for membership. The severity of such methods demonstrates the lengths some young people are willing to go to in order to find the acceptance and respect they desperately seek.

These problems cannot be solved solely through controlling alcohol consumption and tightening restrictions. Realistic solutions can only be achieved through employing holistic community approaches that incorporate all sectors of Australian society.

This means police officers must be trained and equipped with the communication skills and cultural awareness necessary to engage with ethnic communities and marginalised youth. The current practice of delegating such duties to boutique teams such as the Multicultural Liaison Unit and Youth Resource Officers is increasingly regarded by community groups as tokenistic.

A new spirit of collaboration needs to sweep through the welfare sector in order to reverse its debilitating culture of mutual distrust between grassroots and mainstream organisations. State and federal governments need to alter their current funding schemes to require authentic community partnerships, coupled with durable, practical outcomes, as key prerequisites for funding allocation. The current heavily bureaucratised emphasis on short-term statistical outcomes has failed to reverse the marginalisation of youth most at risk.

An example of a model initiative is the 2007 Brave program run by Moreland City Council, Victorian Arabic Social Services and Life Saving Victoria. Under the stewardship of youth workers, 12 youth participants designed a program linking them with training and employment opportunities as pool lifeguards. Their current employment at local pools immediately decreased risks of youth tensions as their multi-ethnic peers widely acknowledged them as role models.

The success of this cost-effective program lay in it facilitating marginalised youth to take leadership in addressing their social concerns — something the Australia 2020 Youth Summit fails to do.

Unless marginalised youth are invited as equal partners in discussions promoting social inclusion, such events will be nothing more than a *façade*, and excluded youth will run the risk of searching for acceptance in wrong directions.

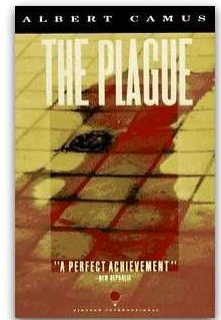
The truth behind our heat plague

ENVIRONMENT

Brian Matthews

'The unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194- at Oran.' So begins Albert Camus' famous 1948 novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*). Allowing for a couple of small adjustments — '2008' for '194-' and 'Adelaide' for 'Oran' — a similar chronicle might unfold for most of the month of March.

The first signs were small and too familiar to be taken as precursors of anything unusual. February had been hot and relentlessly dry, but that's not unusual in these parts. Combined with the continuing drought, the long, bright, burning days bleeding their gusty northerlies and smouldering sunsets into early March made a mockery of the crisp, leaf-turning autumns of other years. On 3 March the temperature in Adelaide rose to 35.4; on the following day, Tuesday, to 35.7 and on the Wednesday to 37.9. This bland yet faintly sinister progression was like the dead rat that Camus' Dr Bernard Rieux notices in the hallway of his apartment one ordinary morning: uncommon yet not wholly abnormal. And surely not indicative of a plague.



On the Thursday and Friday, as Adelaide Festival Writers' Week crowds — the biggest ever recorded — gamely flocked to the tents in the Pioneer Women's Garden, the huge blue overarch of the sky whitened with heat and the thermometer went through 38 and 39, just missed 40 on Saturday, but made it on Sunday and stuck there on Monday, the eighth successive day over 35 degrees.

In the city, light streaked like tracer fire off shiny cars and the air shimmered round diesel-clunking buses. Cold draughts fell out of the doorways of shops and department stores, footpaths baked, older cars boiled, supermarkets had air conditioning so low their trolley-shoving customers were threatened with cryogenic suspension. Caught in the open, raked by the fire-throated northerly, pedestrians sought even the slim shade of a lamp post while they waited for the green light.

Further north, as the weather forecasters say, our normal routine of watering the plants in the heat became converted into a Dunkirk effort to save them from extinction. Salty bore water, 26 buckets and long snaking hoses were the preoccupations of our days and the monsters of our dreams in the hot, moony nights. Lorikeets balanced on the sprinklers to drink from the flick-flick of spray while magisterial magpies, too dignified for such display, harvested the droplets on blades of grass and leaves.

As the heat ground on, the kangaroos came to scare the birds away from trickling water,

and the hand-clapping, whistling and shouted obscenities which usually scared them off, now, in the thick clamminess of the incandescent evenings and with the heat wave ten days old, simply moved them to look up briefly, as if vaguely wondering who it was that was trespassing on their land.

Saplings sagged, leaves took on a brown insignia around their edges, the lemon-scented gums fought bravely on, leaning with the hot wind, smartening up as the sun sank at last and water arrived in buckets to puddle around their roots. Unless watched vigilantly and duly rescued, tomatoes, chillies and pomegranates burned and blistered like fair skin.

Whether in city or countryside, we were prisoners of the heat: it dictated our movements, made fitful our sleeping, clamped on our thoughts, withering them. Between the desire and the action fell not the shadow but the sunburst from the furnace.

In *The Plague*, as the crisis grows, the people of Oran are imprisoned: the town gates are shut and locked. In Adelaide and the South Australian countryside the plague of heat was just as confining. The nation looked on as the implacable weather of the driest state became the running news story and an impermeable dome of temperature sealed off the land of the Croweaters.

People wilted too. 'Sandy', arriving with 2000 gallons of town water for our domestic tank, was philosophical. 'People're getting very touchy,' he said with a sardonic smile, once the water was pumping. Among his many tasks and ventures, Sandy drives the school bus and does a shuttle service for tourists and locals visiting wineries, especially those needing a designated driver. 'Saw a bloke the other day getting abused from arsehole to breakfast time by his missus outside the pub. Very entertaining there for a while. But I reckon it was the heat that got to them, y'see.'

That same day, I saw a minor problem about a label erupt into a spectacular row at the supermarket check-out. I reckon it was the heat that got to them, too.

Fifteen days it lasted, ending with a flourish of 39 and then 40.5. A plague of heat. Camus' plague was a metaphor for the Second World War German occupation of France. Our plague is no metaphor; it's a truth — the truth of the planet's advancing impatience with its reckless colonisers.

Revelations of a responsible literary citizen

STORY

Brian Doyle



While rummaging in my car the other day I discovered Eudora Welty and James Herriot pressed together intimately in the trunk, which I bet is a sentence never written before. My first thought after finding them face to face was who would win a fist fight between Eudora Welty and James Herriot's wife Joan. My next was to wonder if anyone other than me carries books in their cars in case of reading emergencies and unforeseen opportunities. So I took it upon myself to ask, being a responsible literary citizen. Interestingly, the answer turns out to be pretty much universally yes.

Also interesting is the vast range of books themselves. They included dictionaries, novels, atlases, cookbooks, phone directories, comic books, histories, biographies, audio books, manuals of all sorts, bibles, wine-tasting notes, books of knitting patterns, books of sheet music, books about breastfeeding, and a handbook on vipassana meditative practice.

A naturalist in Hawaii had two notebooks of her own research into how one in five albatrosses is gay and only female frigate birds are thieves. A novelist had Evelyn Waugh and *The Rules of Golf*.

A dentist had books about railroads and circuses. A doctor had only books by doctors. A chancellor had comic books.

A publisher had 20 copies of one of the books he had published. A great novelist had 20 kg of string quartet music. A woman in Alaska had every single book she owned because she was moving from one apartment to another. A winery owner had wine-tasting notes which he noticed were all garbled at the end. A baseball maniac had David Shield's oddly hilarious *Baseball is Just Baseball*, the gnomic sayings of Mariners' outfielder Ichiro Suzuki.

A friend in Australia had *The Story of the Melbourne Cricket Ground*. Another Australian had the wild American jazz poet Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*. The greatest travel writer in the world, Jan Morris, had dictionaries in French, Spanish, German, and Italian. One woman in London had books about Margaret Thatcher and rats and another had *Baby's First Catholic Bible* and *Salmon Fishing on the Yemen*. One priest carried a manual on how to preside over last rites and another books about how to preside over weddings and how to grow camellias.

A Canadian friend had books about tractors and sake. Another friend in Canada had Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. A friend in Belize had a novel in Belizean English, as he said, which began with a man being tied to a pole on the beach.

A great poet had *Junior the Spoiled Cat* and *Teddy Bear of Bumpkin Hollow*, maybe for her grandchildren but maybe not. A young father of triplets had three copies of *Pat the Bunny* by Dorothy Kunhardt, which has sold six million copies since it was first published in 1940. A historian in Texas had a book on the history of zero and another book about the square root of negative-one, which makes you wonder about historians and Texas.

One friend has *Backpacking with Mule or Burro*, which he said he liked especially because it had a chapter on how to persuade your wife to backpack with a mule or burro. Another had Doctor Seuss and a book about dismembering deer. One woman had Batman comics and *Hiking with Jesus*, and one had a copy of *The Encyclopedia of U.S. Army Patches, Flashes, and Ovals* – ‘Don’t even ask,’ she said, so I didn’t.

Pretty much every other person I talked to had overdue library books (one man had more than 60), and pretty much everyone with overdue library books thanked me for making them remember their overdue library books, which they were absolutely going to return post-haste (I bet they didn’t).

Eleven people had Bibles of various translations, one man had a Gideon Bible he claimed to have borrowed from a motel, one woman had a Tao Te Ching, and one man, not a priest, carried an Italian-language Catholic missal.

Interestingly not one person had a *Book of Mormon*, which Mark Twain, bless his testy heart, memorably called pretentious, sleepy, insipid, tedious, a mess, a mongrel, and chloroform in print, among other compliments. But then no one had a Qur’an either, or a psalm book.

Among the authors represented in cars are the greats (Borges, Chekhov, Agatha Christie, Beverly Cleary, Don DeLillo, Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Maugham, Thurber, Yeats), the very goods (Richard Flanagan, Joseph Mitchell, Philip Roth, J. K. Rowling, George Saunders, Colm Toibin, and the late Kurt Vonnegut), the goods (Eggers, Kerouac, Kingsolver, Lamott, Quindlen), and many whom I am not qualified to qualify, like Margaret Mitchell and Brian Jacques and Julia Child and Georges Simenon. You could get into endless roaring pub arguments about these categories.

In the end the single best-represented author in cars was Theodor Seuss Geisel, whose books far outnumbered those of any other author in my survey. To be honest most of the people I spoke to were parents who either had kids young enough to relish the good Doctor, or parents who had never actually cleaned the Doctor Seuss books out of the car after their kids went off to college or to join the circus in Samoa.

It cheers me up to think of all those Doctor Seuss books in all those cars; somehow the world doesn’t seem quite so bruised and brooding once you know that in a reading emergency you can reach under your seat and pull out David Donald Doo or the Katzes from Blooie to Prooie, not to mention Sally Spingel Spungel Sporn.

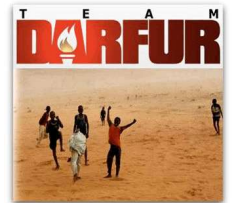
And right there, with the wild music of one of the greatest of writers in our ears, let us drive on into the rest of the day.

Conscientious athletes need support, not gag

SPORT

Tony Smith

In autumn Australians emerged from charges of poor sportsmanship by national cricketers into the simpler area of immature off-field behaviour by football heroes. But any respite has been brief because Olympians are now embroiled in political controversy. The Australian Olympic Committee has decided to include a clause in athletes' contracts that will limit their capacity for public comment during the Beijing games.



While the Committee denies the clause is a gag, the rule enabling management to veto comments not strictly related to an athlete's event could be used to prevent individual competitors commenting about the human rights situation in China.

China is attracting criticism over its suppression of protests about Tibetan autonomy. There are ongoing concerns about persecution of Falun Gong and the sale of the organs of executed people. Amnesty lists as human rights concerns 'the death penalty, torture, unfair trials, the freedom of people who defend their own and others' human rights, and specifically in the lead-up to the Olympic Games ... media and internet repression'.

A group of US athletes known as 'Team Darfur' is urging Western governments to place greater pressure on China over its support for the dictatorial regime in Sudan. When an Australian joined that movement, she stated publicly her belief that she did not have to consult the Australian IOC, because they 'have been very clear in saying we do have freedom of speech and freedom of opinion, and that's fantastic'. Something has changed.

It is easy to adopt a cynical view of the 'gag'. The Committee sponsors athletes by giving them official endorsement and financial support and so might claim the power to discipline them. It is possible for anyone who objects to the clause to withdraw from the team but this is neither practical nor desirable. Although it may seem unnatural for elite sportspeople to tailor their lives according to a distant goal, many of them would not remember a time before they began training for Beijing 2008. To make unpredictable new demands upon them within weeks of competition is tantamount to holding them to ransom for years of dedication.

Athletes with serious concerns about any incident witnessed in China would feel conscience-bound to report it. We Australians know that the freedom to participate in a sport of our choice is a result of having a free society in which governments serve the people and not vice-versa. Without human rights there is no such freedom and it would be illogical to abandon concern for rights in favour of apparent sporting opportunities.

The great hope for the Beijing Olympics was that it would make China a more open society and persuade its government that human rights protection is good diplomacy and good business. The power of persuasion would be lost if the Chinese authorities believed visiting athletes would not speak about any evil they see or hear.

Article 6 of the Olympic Charter insists that competitions are held between individuals, not between nations or states. Friendship and good will are personified by the competitors, not by governments. Despite the chauvinistic compilation of lists of medallists, the ideals of Olympism reside in all participants, not just the medallists. Many champions become millionaires because they satisfy the hopes of businesses, but many are dubious role models for young aspirants.

The Games have often been politicised and host countries have dreaded protests, boycotts and bans. Moscow (1980) was badly affected when Western governments persuaded many athletes to stay away because of the USSR invasion of Afghanistan. Los Angeles (1984) was boycotted by the eastern bloc in retaliation. China has ordered its athletes not to compete alongside those from Taiwan.

Some countries have cited human rights issues in attempting to have third parties excluded. New Zealand for example, came under pressure over a rugby tour to South Africa during the peak of the anti-apartheid movement. The IOC banned South Africa but not New Zealand and 22 countries stayed away from Montreal in protest in 1976.

As with most major sports, the biggest threat to the Olympics is from the compromise forced by the vested interests which profit most from the Games. The marketing of the television rights, for example, is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and firms bidding for a toehold know that China is swiftly becoming the world's second-largest advertising market.

Athletes are the public face of the Olympic Games. Many resisted the Fraser Government's suggestion that they boycott Moscow, because they detected the hypocrisy in a situation where neither government nor business was prepared to suffer. In 2008, athletes are caught between a host government that ignores world opinion and their own governments who seem to care more about the fortunes of business than about the conscientious dilemmas faced by their elite athletes.

The broader international community has the responsibility to ensure the survival of the Olympic spirit in Beijing. If Australian athletes need to express their conscientious concerns about human rights in China, they should not be restricted but should be encouraged to do so.

Top cop confronts underbelly of corruption

THEOLOGY

Kylie Crabbe



When you think of what Easter is about, you don't think first of cops but of the people, like Jesus, they arrest. But in the lead-up to this Easter, I've been thinking of Victoria Police's Chief Commissioner, Christine Nixon.

Who'd take on the top cop job? Nixon has been having quite the time of it of late. Sure, she was always in a bit of a tight spot. She started on the beat in Sydney, and rose through the ranks to Assistant Commissioner in New South Wales. So she was something of an outsider when she was appointed to Victoria Police's top spot in 2001.

Since then she's faced (with considerable pizzazz and a certain indefatigable perseverance) some of Victoria's thorniest policing issues — from Melbourne's organised crime 'underbelly', to reforming the drug squad. But just recently she's hit a higher-order snag within her own organisation: alleged corruption and systematic undermining from very senior officers.

And it really hit the fan, and the papers. It was one of those 'damned if you do or don't' kind of dilemmas. As soon as she followed the protocol and stood people aside, outraged voices piped up that she must be incompetent if there's such alleged corruption within her ranks. But keeping things quiet would hardly be welcomed as a more appropriate response from a betrayed Chief Commissioner.

So what's Nixon actually done wrong? Hard to know, but in part it looks as if she was fast-tracked to unpopularity by trying to be a thoughtful, discerning leader. She's taken on some cultural change in Victoria Police, aimed at improving its effectiveness. And she's tried to do the whole thing with integrity. But the media coverage of bitterness from those she's locked horns with is testament to the danger of reforming a powerful institution.

To go against the grain inevitably means being held to a higher standard. Sometimes ludicrously so. Being bombarded with questions. Constantly watched for the slightest mistake. Some would argue that this is the fate of any woman in a powerful position, especially if she's in a male-dominated area.

It's hardly news that reformers are unpopular within the systems they undertake to improve. That's where the trials of Christine Nixon might throw light on the death of Jesus that is the core of Easter. It is easy to imagine Jesus died because he was in dispute with members of a different religious group. But that's not the case. He and his opponents were members of the same religious group he was trying to reform. He tried to lead them to engage

faithfully with God and to base their religious practices on this engagement.

So how did it go for him? He got up people's noses. He uncovered ways in which religious practices had been distorted to exclude people. Like the prophets before him, he pointed out the dangers of following the external trappings of discipleship but not allowing the prayer, fasting and almsgiving to transform how one engages with others and with God. Eventually the leaders of his own people colluded and had him killed.

We know unveiling corruption is pretty unpopular. Who wants to be confronted by misuse of power, or challenges to traditional ways of doing things that no longer meet their objectives?

But there were plenty with whom Jesus' reform was extremely popular. Those who had been excluded, who needed healing, who were brought back into social and religious connection by his radical reform program. Therein lies the motivation for reform — it's not about how those who wield power react, but how it affects those who are not powerful.

Back in Victoria, negative reaction to Christine Nixon seems pretty focused within her own mob. In stark contrast, she enjoys unprecedented popularity with the average punter. She's seen as talking good sense and providing an approachable human face to help us understand a powerful, historically inscrutable, institution in our society.

Of course, no-one's suggesting Christine Nixon is Jesus. But there is a similarity in the human reaction to reform. It's a different kind of tall poppy thing. One of our knee-jerk reactions is to cut down leaders who try to change us. But we sorely need leadership which tries to speak the truth about change where it is needed. It might set the cat among the pigeons, but it makes us better people..

Honour killings an expression of immigrant alienation

INTERNATIONAL

David Rosen

The United Nations estimates that 5,000 honour killings occur annually. They take place in Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and Uganda. In countries not reporting to the UN, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and the Palestinian territories, the situation seems even worse.



Honour killing is rooted in age-old patriarchal cultural traditions. It has a long history in developing countries of the Muslim Middle East and Hindi South Asia, but also in Catholic countries, including Italy and in Latin American, and even in the UK and Canada. These killings are a rebellion against modernity. They are attempts to stop or contain social development, to hold onto older traditional values especially concerning social relations and sexuality.

A series of honour killings in Europe and Canada over the last few years illustrates this disturbing phenomenon in the 'civilised' West. Most upsetting, in 2006 in Southport, on the Gold Coast, a violent domestic dispute involving the murder of a mother, Yasmine Hussain, was initially reported as an honour killing, the first reported case in Australia since 9/11. When the smoke cleared, the daughter, Kaihana (pictured), was charged with killing her mother in a fit of rage over her boyfriend. She remains in prison awaiting trial.

Last year in Britain, Bachan Athwal, a 70-year-old grandmother was convicted for the murder of her daughter-in-law, Surjit Athwal; Mahmod Mahmod, 52, and his brother, Ari Agha Mahmod, 51, were convicted of the murder of their 20-year-old sister, Banaz Mahmod.

In Berlin in 2005, Hatan Surucu, a 23-year-old German woman of Turkish background, was shot and killed by her three brothers for breaking with family values. According to Seyran Ates, a Turkish civil rights lawyer living in Germany, 'Such killings reflect the widely held view in Islam that the honour of a man lies between the legs of a woman.'

In Holland, the number of reported honour-related violent incidents in the Rotterdam region has increased significantly. According to the regional health authorities, the number of such reports more than doubled during the first half of 2007 to 70, up from 30 for all of 2006. As the report's author noted, 'This is just the tip of the iceberg.'

In Canada, a couple of years ago a 14-year-old female rape victim was strangled to death by her father and brother because she had supposedly tarnished the family name. In a second case, a man killed his wife and daughter after finding out his brother had molested them. And

a teenage girl from a Turkish background was murdered by her father after he learned that she had a Christian boyfriend.

Honour killings most often involve young women attempting to break from the pre-modern cultural traditions of their immigrant families — families plunged into the maelstrom of increasingly post-modern secular society. (The occasional male victims tend to be accused of adultery and homosexuality as well as rape, exhibitionism and pedophilia.) In most cases, perpetrators of honour killings appear motivated by deeply held moral convictions and seek to restrict the influence of Western values, especially involving dress, socialisation and sexuality.

These killings are not isolated events, but have become part of the tapestry of immigrant alienation, which finds varied expressions. One need only recall the riots in France in 2005 when immigrant youths burned cars, buses and buildings. Similar, but smaller, disturbances flared up in Berlin (in Neu K  lln and Kreuzberg) over school integration problems. And then there were the Danish riots in February 2006 over the publication of cartoons depicting Mohammed.

Traditionally-oriented immigrants confront many challenges adapting to life in the secular West. Language difficulties, residential segregation, limited job opportunities and poverty often make immigrants, especially young people, feel like losers.

Immigration in Australia was a hot issue in the recent election. John Howard championed his standard get-tough position, including introducing citizenship tests. Kevin Rudd, while moving quickly to sign the Kyoto protocol and setting a date for troops to leave Iraq, insists on maintaining current immigration policies, but to do so on a more humane basis.

‘Compassion lies in how you execute your responsibilities under the [immigration] convention and making sure that it is done both in the spirit and letter of the convention,’ he opined shortly after his election.

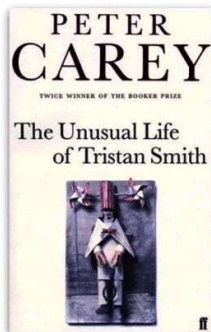
Immigration has long been a thorny issue in Australia. Since the end of World War II, nearly six million immigrants have remade the country. During this period, Australia’s population has changed from one in which over 90 per cent was of Anglo origin to the current status in which about 30 per cent are from non-Anglo backgrounds. This tendency will only increase in the coming decades.

Failure to address the human issues associated with Australia’s changing population mix can contribute to increased social tension. At one extreme this could lead to the kind of violence against Muslims and Arabs demonstrated in the 2005 Cronulla riots. At another extreme, it could fuel deeper feelings of alienation among immigrants, especially among more traditionally-minded immigrants, that could result in honour killings. Either would represent a failure of social policy to adapt to the changing nature of what it means to be an Australian.

Carey's 'unusual' novel exposes politics of disability

ES CLASSIC

Gillian Fulcher



The politics of gender and race are now so well recognised that these subtexts in novels rarely escape reviewers' notice. But narratives about disability are another matter. Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, for example. Its central figure is someone of very short stature, of distressing appearance, unable to walk, of incomprehensible speech, with aspirations to act.

Throughout the novel Carey uses language which could offend people with disabilities. Neither Australian nor British reviewers of *The Unusual Life*, which was published in 1994, appeared to ponder these matters. It was not, said the *London Review of Books*, a novel about disability. Maybe not, but disability is the vehicle for something else ...

[It is] a most engaging if uncomfortable tale. But a closer reading reveals Carey as social critic. While themes of colonialism, migration, and identity are clear beneath the narrative, disability enters more subtly. The literary devices Carey uses to point to these meanings are mainly parody and farce. The hilarious footnotes are a clue: they mimic the academy, and the academy is implicated in Carey's critique. This is a profane book with a profound message.

The novel begins with Tristan recalling his birth. I gasped at Tristan's description of himself, when his mother, acting a Witch in *Hamlet*, takes her newborn on stage and shows him for the first time:

ENTER TRISTAN SMITH — a gruesome little thing, slippery and sweating from his long enclosure in that rubber cloak, so truly horrible to look at that the audience can see the Witches must struggle to control their feelings of revulsion. He is small, not small like a baby, smaller, more like one of those wrinkled furless dogs they show on television talk shows ...

Tristan calls himself a dwarf, his 'lipless mouth drools', his speech is unintelligible to most people, and he moves around on his knees. Here is an archetype. My eyes widened: what was Carey up to? By page 69, his intent began to emerge.

When Tristan rejects his acting teacher ... his stressed but loving maman screams that he is a child with Special Needs and that if he doesn't stay with Madame Chen she will send him to a Special School. Tristan recalls the incident as 'that truly dreadful night which gave birth to the fearful notion of Special Needs'.

The term Special Needs comes from officialdom, from negotiations between governments, people with disabilities, and academics; it permeates government policy in both Australia and Britain. Was Carey casting stones at shibboleths? How familiar was he with contentious debates about disability? Extraordinarily so, it seems.

In this dramatic moment between Tristan and Felicity, a postcard arrives from Bill Millefleur, suggesting Felicity let Tristan act a character, namely the Hairy Man. Tristan sees the postcard as 'a ray from God on high', as rescuing him from the Special School; however, the footnotes tell us that in the animistic culture of the Native People of Voorstand, the Hairy Man is the 'bogey-man', and in Christian theology, he is Satan, and that both these meanings exist in Efrican culture.

So the rescue also means relegation as a feared outsider. This is Carey not as pessimist, but as ironic observer. Here too, Carey encapsulates a lengthy debate on disability and its cultural contradictions in a few sentences. There are many such instances.

Another shibboleth tumbles on page 172 in Felicity's answer to Tristan's assertion that he will learn to talk better so that audiences can understand him. 'Maybe there are some things you won't be able to do ... The problem with diction is physical, darling, you know that.' 'I'll ... learn,' he insists.

There is a prevailing idea that learning can banish any incapacity and this idea, too, is part of government educational policies. The consistency of Carey's stoning seemed astonishing. These transgressions demanded closer examination, for Carey is far too intelligent a writer, far too sensitive to language and to social trends, to warrant a judgment of being mindlessly offensive ...

By writing the central character as disabled, the broader world is starkly shown as increasingly oppressive of those whom Tristan, as archetype, represents. But as archetype he also represents the increasing scrutiny we are all under. This world exacerbates earlier oppressions of conformity, appearance, image, and performance.

In this revelation, *The Unusual Life* is fundamentally nondisabilist, but if read superficially, it can be dismissed as offensive. Its complex narrative contains arguments which occur both in and outside the academy about how we should understand and portray disability. The voice and experience of Tristan, in all its conflicting humanness, is always present, as are the words and actions of those who, in life's paradoxes, sometimes oppress and sometimes nurture him. Listening to the voice of oppressed people, once a policy priority, is no simple remedy ...

In using disability to expose corporate oppressions, and in mocking the language and principles which emanate from government, the academy and people with disabilities, *The Unusual Life* becomes a book that offends what Frank Moorhouse calls Official Culture ... Perhaps it is the perception, rather than ignorance, of these politics which underlies the silence on the most subtle of the political meanings which inhabit *The Unusual Life*. And, as

Moorhouse notes, literary prizes go to books believed to be officially acceptable; these books then dominate public discussion.

Whatever the reason for the silence surrounding *The Unusual Life*, it is inexcusable, for this is a tract in the Orwellian tradition, a passionate work where imagination soars and invites the reader to rethink the world ...

East Timor reparations both symbolic and material

INTERNATIONAL

Lia Kent

As a close observer of justice and reconciliation issues in East Timor, I have watched with great interest as the debates on 'acknowledging the past' unfold in Australia.

In many ways the two nations could not be more different. East Timor, colonised for more than 400 years, is now one of the world's newest nations. Australia, a settler society, is one of its oldest democracies.



Yet Australia could learn much from East Timor about the importance — and limitations — of acknowledging a painful past. In particular, East Timor's experience suggests the significance of both symbolic forms of acknowledgement and material reparations to those who have experienced past injustices.

After independence, the East Timorese leadership emphasised the need to 'move on'. They shied away from demanding reparations for abuses committed during the Indonesian occupation, partly for reasons of pragmatic international relations. Then President Xanana Gusmao suggested the population was best served by a focus on practical issues: poverty reduction, electricity, decent housing and medical care.

In Australia, the Howard Government also expressed a preference for 'practical' forms of assistance to indigenous communities, and a focus on the future, rather than the past.

Against these 'pragmatic' responses have come moves to ensure that both East Timorese victims of violence and indigenous Australians receive some form of official, public acknowledgement of their experiences.

From 2002, a number of East Timorese survivors were able to participate in an independent Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR). While many welcomed the opportunity to tell their stories to the nation, there were widespread expectations that justice and economic compensation would follow. Following the release of the CAVR's final report in 2005, the political debate in Timor is now turning toward the question of victims' reparations.

Within Australia, Prime Minister Rudd's recent apology is a first step towards acknowledging the wrongs committed against members of the Stolen Generations. We should not be surprised if the issue of compensation now also emerges as an important focus for many indigenous Australians.

It is helpful to view questions of compensation within a framework of 'reparations' for past

wrongs. Reparations can encompass material as well as symbolic measures, and measures directed to both individuals and communities.

Material reparations may take the form of compensation, including payments of cash or service packages, and provisions for health, education or housing.

Symbolic reparations may include official apologies, the change of names of public spaces, the establishment of days of commemoration, and the creation of museums and parks dedicated to victims.

There is a strong relationship between reparations and 'justice'. The political theorist Axel Honneth suggests that at the heart of demands for justice is a craving for official recognition of experiences of harm.

The idea of justice as recognition suggests that acknowledgement of wrongdoing, in both symbolic and material ways, is central to the restoration of victims' dignity and to the establishment of relations based on equality and respect. It is on the basis of acknowledgement that a new process of relationship-building between the state and victims can begin. In this sense, the Rudd apology, the CAVR, and future discussions on other forms of reparation such as compensation, can be seen as aspects of a commitment to justice.

Like apologies, material reparations are important for the recognition they provide to victims. In very practical ways, they recognise the ongoing consequences of injustice in victims' everyday lives. While reparations can never bring back the dead, or restore lost opportunities, they can symbolise the official acknowledgement of victims' suffering and their inclusion as equal citizens in a new political community. In this sense, reparations are oriented towards the building of a truly shared future.

Viewing reparations as a form of recognition also means we should be wary of attempts to substitute reparations for broader development programs. Development and welfare programs do not offer the same form of recognition to those who have been harmed, and therefore are often perceived, quite rightly, as programs that distribute goods which victims have rights to as citizens and not necessarily as victims.

East Timor and Australia face similar challenges in acknowledging and responding to past injustices in order to build inclusive communities. In both cases this process will be a long one. What the East Timor experience suggests is that for acknowledgement to have continuing resonance it must act as an opening for new conversations about reparations. Let us hope that both the Rudd and Gusmao governments are open to where these conversations may lead.

Nonconformist Aussie anticipates traditional Greek Easter

THEOLOGY

Gillian Bouras



In Kalamata the streets are alive with miniature Zorros, Spider-Men, fairy princesses and clowns. My vote goes to a tiny Charlie Chaplin, possibly two years old and possibly a girl, who is complete in every comic detail, even down to the pencilled moustache. Bunting is strung everywhere, paper streamers fly through the air: Carnival is here, and so is Lent.

Western and Orthodox Easters are separated by more than four weeks this year, with the latter falling on 27 April. Easter is the Feast of Feasts in the Orthodox Church, and even in an increasingly irreligious age, Lent is accorded great significance. It is still a fairly strict period of austerity, which is one reason for Carnival: traditional societies have long understood that let-your-hair-down sessions of high spirits are needed before and after difficult times. They are also undisturbed by the blurring of the sacred and the secular.

Clean Monday (last Monday) begins seven weeks of meatless days: well, that's the theory. Fish, eggs, cheese and olive oil are given up in turn. Coming as I did from an Australian Nonconformist background, my first experience of this day was something of a surprise, to say the least. Nothing much happened during Lent for us in Oz way back then. As we were teetotal, that line of sacrifice was out; there was an occasional mention of giving up cigarettes and/or sugar, and to this day I have a friend who gives up chocolate for the duration.

My first experience of Clean Monday was in 1981, when we visited the monastery of St John the Baptist, near Dimitsana, a very old structure built into the side of a gorge. It required a few deep breaths and an act of faith to venture out on to the wooden balconies. Opposite was a minute church, apparently unconnected to the world by paths or tracks, while far below a stream moved so slowly that it looked like a frozen blue ribbon.

Inside the building lay the mortal remains of St Athanasios. The sight of brown bones peeping through rich lace, and a row of teeth surrounded by gold, rubies and pearls repelled me immediately. But my Greek sister-in-law was overcome, and did not want to leave. This sighting of a holy relic on a holy day was a sacred, significant moment for her, and as I watched her light a candle and cross herself reverently, I felt a sharp pang of regret that I could not share the moment, that I was forever barred from a world which values such things.

What I could share was the food at midday: a sumptuous repast rather than a mere meal, which that day we ate in the refectory. There was not too much austerity or sacrifice evident on the festive board, which fairly groaned under the weight of prawns, halva, countless flat

loaves of fresh unleavened bread, succulent squid, lettuce and spring onion salad, pickled peppers, taramasalata, and the odd gallon or two of retsina. It seemed to be a case of stocking up in order to endure the weeks of sacrifice ahead. In traditional families, and there are still many of them, very little has changed: this is still the template for the beginning of Lent.

Church services, of course, become more frequent: there is a special sung one every Friday until Easter. But the secular continues to receive its due at least over the long weekend, with Carnival floats and dancing. Then there are the bonfires, and the custom of fire-leaping favoured by the young men; in some villages an effigy of Judas is burned on those same fires.

I've observed all these customs so often that the novelty has worn off: a Nonconformist Easter in Australia would probably have the shock of the new for me now. But one local custom still charms me, so after lunch last Monday I was on the promenade along the beach, watching children, young and old, fly their kites: colourful but fragile symbols of freedom and happiness floating above this small world, which still manages, because of tradition, to feel quite secure.

Protection mechanisms for climate change victims

GUEST EDITORIAL

Maryanne Loughry

The conflict in Darfur is often referred to as an ethnic conflict. But UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has said that, amid the diverse political and social causes, it 'began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from [drought-induced] climate change'.



His unpacking of the complexity in Darfur compares with explanations surrounding the conflict in Rwanda, which shifted from a narrative of ethnic conflict to one centring on colonial powers and access to resources, education and political power.

The refugees in Darfur 'fit' within the classic international framework of forced migration because their situation has evolved from drought and lack of access to traditional grazing land to conflict, displacement and encampment.

Anke Strauss of the International Organisation for Migration predicts that the world will see an additional 50 million 'environmental migrants' by 2010. She defines the term as those who, 'because of sudden or progressive changes in the environment affecting adversely their livelihoods, have to move from their habitual homes to temporary or durable new homes, either within their country or abroad'.

At present this population falls outside the criteria of the two principle tools for providing international protection to the forcibly displaced — the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Guiding Principles for the Internally Displaced.

In fact, those moving because of climate change and environmental degradation are outside of the mandate of any of the present internationally recognised instruments and mechanisms for protection and assistance. Furthermore there is no United Nations agency dedicated to their protection.

Recently UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres wrote of the international community being seemingly ill equipped to deal with these movements. He acknowledged that discussions are taking place, but urged civil society, the media, and the private sector to engage in advocacy on behalf of these peoples.

Last year, Dr Jane McAdam of the University of New South Wales said that it was only when hundreds of thousands of people were displaced after the Bolshevik revolution that the protection mechanisms I have highlighted began to be developed.

It seems that the international community reacts rather than anticipates.

In October 2007, I visited Kiribati. It has a population of 92,000, and is one of the nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The country's President, Anote Tong, has said that many forms of climate adaptation are possibly too late, and it is time to be talking about the ultimate form of adaptation — migration.

It is important that we anticipate the needs of people who are already experiencing the effects of climate change. Australia is well placed to play a leading role in developing new international responses to those displaced by climate change.

Parents model responsible drinking

AUSTRALIA

Margaret Rice



Prime Minister Kevin Rudd plans to spend \$53 million on the problem of binge drinking, including \$19.1 million to target underage drinkers. As the mother of three daughters, aged 21, 19 and 18, I feel I have a good insight into the dynamics fuelling the binge drinking crisis.

I want to be scandalised by under-age drinking, but I'm not. I started drinking at parties when I was 14 (don't tell Mum!). But it felt different back then, and less problematic. Yes, there were drunks at our parties. But most seemed sober compared to the teenagers at parties these days.

But were we really any different? Since 1984 the Health Department of Victoria has tracked drinking habits every three years in large populations of teenagers. Geoff Munro, Director of the Community Alcohol Action Network, says the studies show the number of 16-17-year-old drinkers — those who had at least one drink in the last seven days — has been stable, hovering around 50% since the study began. The number of 12 to 15-year-old drinkers in the same category has dropped, from 31% to 23%. This reflects US trends going back to the 1970s.

But the next layer of the story is disturbing. Numbers of teenage boys and girls who drank at a hazardous level have increased dramatically — 16 to 17-year-olds from 29.5% to 43.5%, 12 to 15-year-olds from 11% to 22%. Increases among girls were the biggest.

Today, drinking habits are aided by advertising, as they were back then. But Sparkling Porphyry Pearl and Cold Duck were not advertised as sex aids. Compare this with the James Boag beer ad, recently scrapped for breaching the alcohol industry's advertising code because it linked drinking to sexual success. The ad shows a woman clutching a beer as she stares seductively at a man. A previous James Boag ad survived. In this one a woman sits with her legs spread, holding a beer and wearing only a coat and her underwear.

My generation's under-age drinking choices were also more limited. Today, spirits are pre-mixed with rich, colourful syrups that disguise the alcohol flavour so effectively that in a recent study by consumer group CHOICE, 24% of the 18 to 19-year-olds tested thought there was no alcohol in the drinks at all.

Munro says some of these drinks, dubbed 'alcopops', carry as much alcohol as 2.7 standard drinks.

'They are the fastest growing drinks on the market. Wine sales grow at one per cent per

year, beer sales are stable and these ['alcopop'] sales are rising by nine per cent each year,' he said.

An Australian Division of General Practice study shows who's buying them — 12 to 17-year-olds, particularly girls. With their bright colours, sweet flavours and easy accessibility, these drinks are the perfect introduction for a young palate to alcohol. By the time girls get to 18 they are old hands at consuming these drinks.

In my experience, the girls don't buy them themselves. Usually the culprit is — wait for it — their own mother.

Over the eight years my daughters attended high school, the zeitgeist changed. When my eldest daughter was under 18, not many parents bought alcohol for their children to take to parties. By the time the youngest reached the same age, most did, including me.

There are three likely explanations. One is that mothers desire to appear 'cool'. There is also a belief that drunkenness in teenagers is normal. Thirdly — and this was my reasoning — is the belief that buying alcohol for your teenagers is an exercise in harm minimisation.

Since all my daughters' peers drank, and drank earnestly, I thought real-politick was required and that by purchasing their alcohol I could control their consumption. But Munro says this approach is as naive as the others. It sends a signal that it's okay to drink.

My daughters' school took advice on the problem. The advisors didn't mince words. It was not just the girls who needed educating about safe alcohol consumption but their parents. It was all about modelling. It's hard to tell your teenager not to drink as you reach into the fridge to grab yet another sauv blanc.

Somewhere following their early, demure alcohol consumption, my peers had shifted up a gear or three, carried along by increasingly high-quality wines, greater ranges of boutique beers and better prices.

The message shot home when a friend's teenage daughter was involved in a serious car accident late one night. It was difficult for all the parents to get to the hospital quickly — most were too drunk to drive.

I managed to ignore this message and its implications for a while. But then recently my husband and I cut out drinking at home. We noticed an interesting change — the girls did the same.

They will still drink but at least for now we have hit the pause button.

Glamour returns to post-war Australia

HISTORY

Maryanne Hamilton

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the first showing of a full-scale collection by fashion designer Christian Dior outside France — not in London or New York as might be expected, but in Sydney, Australia.

In July 1948, David Jones presented 50 Dior designs at a gala dinner at its Sydney store. Only a year earlier Dior had introduced the Corolle line — a collection that would re-establish Paris as the centre of international style after the disruptions of World War II. Dior's revolutionary design, characterised by a below-mid-calf length full-skirt, low neckline and small waist, was quickly termed the New Look by the American fashion media.



The New Look's emphasis on busts and waists was received rapturously. After nearly a decade of shoulder pads and short straight skirts, women around the world were hungry for the glamour and feminine luxury of Dior's fashions. (Having enjoyed years of uninterrupted gazing at women's legs, men were decidedly more ambivalent about the descending hemlines.) Given the international fascination with the New Look in 1948, David Jones performed a remarkable coup indeed.

Following its Sydney debut, the New Look became rapidly popular in Australia, where French high fashion had been held in the highest esteem for decades. According to fashion historian Danielle Whitfield, many Australian women maintained a belief, fostered by local magazines such as the *Australian Women's Weekly*, 'in the importance of Paris as the centre of style'.

Dior's designs provided a definitive break from the austerity of World War II. The war had severely disrupted the international and local fashion industries. Occupied Europe was forced to discontinue its fashion exports, while rationing and regulations restricted the availability of fabric locally. The shortage of material for dressmaking due to government restrictions meant most Australian women spent the war attired in the 'austerity suit' — a short, straight skirt, and a jacket with no more than two pockets and four buttons.

The drop in output by the European fashion industry and local austerity measures led in turn to a drastic reduction in advertising in Australia. Paper shortages also meant women's and fashion magazines were forced to reduce their number of pages and to print on paper of inferior quality.

As paper, fabric, and colour film became gradually available after the war, the new French

styles became a point of focus for thousands of Australian women. Their desire to both peruse and dress themselves in glamorous attire could be finally realised after so many years of restraint.

The popularity of the New Look was also a continuation of the emphasis on women's sexuality in fashion, film and magazines during the war. Government figures, military leaders and members of the clergy railed against the spread of venereal disease and women's supposed lax sexual morality. At the same time, however, a surfeit of images and articles encouraged women to maintain their sexual allure in order to boost the morale of serving men.

Indeed, the sexualisation of media images and women's investment in beauty culture seemingly reached a zenith during World War II, ironically a period when the accoutrements of glamour were in short supply. Women sought desperately to maintain their femininity with whatever accessories, cosmetics, and attire they could acquire. Some experts opined that cosmetics boosted the morale and productivity of female war workers, and lipstick became a particular symbol of the necessity of protecting feminine beauty.

The success of Dior's collections in the post-war period was a reflection of Australian women's undiminished yearnings for beauty after years of material restraints.

With its focus on waists and busts, the New Look required a specific kind of body management, including the donning of 'waspies' (waist-specific girdles), which evoked 19th-century corseting. June Dally-Watkins, who modelled in the 1948 David Jones parade, recalls having to perform endlessly repetitive exercises to achieve the 18-inch waist required for the Dior gowns.

While the New Look was physically restrictive, its sensual characteristics offered many wearers feelings of power. In her memoir of 1950s American suburban life, Margaret Halsey recalled trying on 'a silk print which, worn with very high heels and my hair in French roll, makes me look properly carnal ... as if I had my mind on lower things'.

The swinging, swirling skirts were a radical departure from the wartime 'austerity suit'. The tactility and beauty of the garments provoked emotional responses in many wearers. The New Look offered Australian women a fresh and glorious way of expressing their individuality and sensuality through fashion.

An antidote to blokish certainties on religion

BOOK REVIEW

Andrena Jamieson

***Does God Live in the Suburbs? What ordinary people believe.* Myer Bloom, Indra Publishing, Briar Hill, RRP \$34.95**



When I think of people talking about religions, I see blokes in dark suits – Bishops of various persuasions, or more informal blokes like Dawkins or Hitchens. They may be for religion in general, or against all religions, or for their own religion and against others. But they are all dead earnest, and succeed in making religions seem both strange and incomprehensible to us amateurs. No wonder that when telly soapies home in on religion, they go for creepy spaces and tortured faces.

So this unpretentious collection of interviews is welcome in its simplicity and artlessness. The editor arranged to have adherents of many religious groups interviewed. They were asked to reply to simple questions about their beliefs, their religious practices and symbols, their ethical framework and their attitude to contemporary Australian society. They are amiable and leisurely in their replies.

The question posed in the title of this book – whether God lives in the burbs – remains hanging. But the language in which God is spoken of is definitely suburban. The participants, whether from mainline Churches, Eastern religious traditions or more modern beliefs, are articulate but use words that find common ground with readers unfamiliar with their beliefs. They invite others into a world in which their distinctive beliefs and practices are everyday, not strange. They do a much better job of communicating than most of the professionals in their groups.

Their descriptions are also ordinary and understated. As you read, you begin to understand how people can spend a hard day making money behind the office computer while living a life that contains seven times of prayer, 600 religious laws, a belief in the second coming and so on. The beliefs and practices of personal life and of the workplace are part of a single world.

These stories of ordinary believers are striking for two apparently conflicting reasons. First, they hang together. People's faith, religious symbols and daily lives appear to be part of a coherent whole. Whether or not their religious leaders would agree with the large picture they present, they find it persuasive and workable.

Perhaps this coherence explains why critics assume that derive all their convictions and attitudes from the authority of their sacred books or their religious leaders. But most striking

in most of the accounts is that they are open-ended and contain happily unresolved questions. These believers take their faith seriously, but wrestle with how they are to live in a world where their convictions are a minority taste. Almost all of them are positive in the way they see people with different convictions. They recognise that they drift in the same boat.

Many of them, however, share a distaste for aspects of secular society. They see it as unhelpful in different ways — in its representation of sexual identity, its fluidity of family roles and models, and its sexualised representation of women. Since many of the believers interviewed had come as migrants to Australia, the antipathy to today's Western culture reflects its contrast with their own inherited values. Their religious beliefs have enabled them to establish continuity with their own cultural traditions in a world of change.

But the stories are also striking because they so often try to make points of contact between religious practice and Western culture. Some, for example, reflect that the fasting from meat prescribed by their religion reflected traditional wisdom about countering cholesterol. This is only a simple example of a broader attempt to find coherence between their faith and their cultural environment.

Although the people interviewed in this book certainly come across as religious people, they appeal more strongly as people you might like to have living next door. They are ordinary people in whose life religious faith and practice seem to be helpful. They also appear to be good and even nice people, if niceness suggests that their goodness is ordinary.

I suppose that it would be too much to hope that soapies might use these interviews rather than *The da Vinci Code* as the basis for their scripts on religion in the burbs. The suburbs, after all, are already denized by *Desperate Housewives*. But this book is a good antidote to blokish certainties on religion.

The quirks and cares of Lars' dummy love

FILM REVIEW

Tim Kroenert

***Lars and the Real Girl*: 106 minutes. Rated: PG. Director: Craig Gillespie. Starring: Ryan Gosling, Emily Mortimer, Paul Schneider, Kelli Garner, Patricia Clarkson.**



'Quirky' is an overused word that nonetheless perfectly captures the sense of indefinable, endearing strangeness to which it refers. It is certainly a perfect fit when describing a run of offbeat indie comedies that have come out of the US in recent years — think *Punch Drunk Love*, *Thumbsucker*, and *Little Miss Sunshine*.

What these films have in common is an ability to wring humour and pathos from uncomfortably strange or even downright absurd scenarios. It's a balancing act between playing up characters' idiosyncrasies for laughs, and also celebrating their essential humanity.

Lars and the Real Girl fits the quirky camp, although a casual summary could seem to align it with bawdier fare. The title character (Gosling) is a socially awkward — possibly mentally ill — young man who orders an artificial girlfriend (think anatomically correct mannequin) over the internet.

But *Lars and the Real Girl* rarely shoots for lowbrow laughs. It's very sweet. Lars is the proverbial innocent. He lives in a converted garage behind the house where his brother, Gus (Schneider) and sister-in-law, Karin (Mortimer) live. His childlike manner makes it unthinkable that anything tawdry might take place between him and his (ahem) companion.

While long-suffering Gus has long since written Lars off as an irredeemable misfit, the big-hearted Karin has always done her best to involve him in their family life. Needless to say, both are taken aback by the arrival of 'Bianca'. More so, as they discover the extent of Lars' delusion — he truly believes Bianca is real.

Things take a further turn toward the absurd, when Lars' doctor, Dagmar (Clarkson), recommends Karin and Gus humour Lars' delusion, thus helping him address whatever emotional issues his subconscious might be processing. They are reluctant, but their concern for Lars' wellbeing outweighs their scepticism. They play along.

Lars is a memorable character, but it's the way those in his community respond to him that really makes the film. Gus and Karin, paragons of patience, must maintain the sympathetic charade even within the confines of their home. And while the locals are initially puzzled, to the point of restrained derision, by the arrival of Bianca in their midst, they eventually rally

behind the much loved and misunderstood Lars.

This means not simply playing along with his delusion, but integrating Bianca into community life — she is invited to parties (sometimes without Lars) and even given a job. The comic edge keeps nauseating sentimentality at bay.

On paper the whole scenario sounds far-fetched. But the actors play it straight-faced, and with enough heart that you can't help but be drawn along. Gosling, Mortimer and Garner (who plays Lars' eccentric and infatuated coworker Margo) are nothing short of adorable.

More importantly, Nancy Oliver's compassionate screenplay and Gillespie's sensitive direction find the humour in an essentially sad situation. Frequently they present their audience with a choice between laughing and crying, such is the nature of the incidents portrayed. More often than not they gently prod you towards laughter.

Power Point can make it zing

POETRY

Chris Andrews

The Presentation

A field enclosed by tumbledown dry stone walls
like a roofless room where the dust comes and goes,
 floor lifting in one corner towards the hills,
looks empty but you've seen the documentaries:
(crouching) 'Here too the struggle for survival ...'
On-ramp. Strips of truck tyre. Cockatoo feathers.
Off-ramp. Back way. Smokers on the fire escape:
 'You've got to be able to have a laugh too.'
Then the presentation. What I have to say
is boring but Power Point can make it zing:
– doing extra work creates more extra work;
 – getting on top of it is not an option;
– will enough cheap energy solve everything?
You are all champions in your own way but
 quality people means people who produce
 a satisfactory quantity of results.
Sometimes it also means those who are prepared
 to make the non-statutory sacrifices
(who cracks first and agrees to take the minutes?)
We are all unique individuals but
 there aren't that many positions in the field.

Kitchen in Transit

My mother was knitting up a ravelled sleeve.
Everyone else in the flat was fast asleep
like dinghies in a creak-and-slop marina.
Small wet footprints shone on the kitchen lino.
A new view. Below: the casualty entrance,
the neon-lit triage nurse at her counter.
Beyond: black hills wearing necklaces of fire.
It was the twentieth century somewhere
between Merriweather by the Pacific
and One, Paradise Avenue, Mount Pleasant.
Elvis was entering his jumpsuit era.
A newspaper in a half-unpacked tea chest
showed an undrinkable boot-print on the moon.
Having made peace with the dust we depend on
for judging the relative distance of hills
or pointing at stars with powerful spotlights,
my mother was stepping through a proof, but then
she paused to doodle what were still considered
mathematical monsters: fern, cloud, coastline
— self-similar wonderforms inspiralling —
the night her three-dimensional dry-point print.

Fallen leaves toll for the life that's gone

POETRY

Peter Matheson

Autumn Passion

Bright autumn Christ,

The silver birch,

The bell-bird's call,

The vibrant light,

The glory through

The pain.

Sharp autumn Christ

The fallen leaves,

The slanting sun,

The hint of frost,

Toll for the life

That's gone.

Dark autumn Christ

The broken branch,

The weeping tree,

The whole sad

Earth gasps

Piteously.

High autumn Christ

The teacher gagged,

The friend betrayed,

The healer hung,

The saviour

Torn.

Rich autumn Christ

The hill is climbed,

The hate disarmed,

The fear is gone,

The battle

Won.

Sweet autumn Christ,

The rose-red blood,

The rowan tree,

God's heaven aflame

In love

For me.

Light

Oriole, fanned shafts of light,

Arrows receding hills.

Mists gather, caressing gaunt

Gullies, trees, the razored ridge.

Radiance, yes, but curiously subdued,

Glowering, though not in anger,

Lighting and shadowing

Cloaking. while disclosing.

Indubitably, the day's done in,

The sun beyond recall, sunk down.

So why no litany of grief

No tolling shipwreck bell?

Oriole, harvest, time to sleep.
No regrets, nor remorse,
Deep draught of breath replete,
This endless inch of time complete.

The Language of the Trees

the manukas heaved a sigh
as the old guy in trainers
bestrode the black tarmac;
gave me a baleful eye;
waters gleamed in Blueskin Bay
we've yet to learn
the language of the trees,
in patient gesture bowed,
rooted in time and place,
fringing our world
poplars shoot straight up
ram rod parade ground stiff
until, quite near the top,
they flex, wave, swing,
and susurrate
while cabbage trees (what a misnomer!)
hint at a past in hiding,
skeletal, ominous,
semaphore contempt
for fence and field.
residual bush clings close,

totara and rimu court the sky,
no lofty towers, though, no tidy lines,
no incandescent show,
no fling of hubris.
we taste the self-same sun and rain,
glue ears and glaikit eyes
poor tools to decipher
as soil and time erode
such subtle texts