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## Modern parents' toy trouble

### COMMUNITY

*Daniel Donahoo and Tania Andrusiak*



Last night, our six-year-old son had a nightmare. Despite reassurance and a cuddle in mum and dad's bed, his eyes were open and his brain was switched on. He had decided he wasn't going back to sleep. So, at five in the morning, we found ourselves in the peacefulness of the pre-dawn, drinking hot chocolates and musing on the important topics of our world.

Like most parents, we're concerned about what it means to be raising children in this modern world. So concerned that we've turned to researching and writing to help ourselves and others make sense of the cavalcade of images and ideas our children are exposed to. Media violence, advertising and commercialisation are topics discussed regularly at our dinner table. We try to break the issues down into concepts and words our children understand.

But over that hot chocolate conversation we got a glimpse of what it is we're trying to achieve. In between sips, our son told us he was going to save up his money to buy a Ninja Turtle: one of those small, green karate machines which, along with Pokemon, Bratz and Shrek, represent all that we tried to flee by tree-changing to a more self-sufficient lifestyle in rural Victoria.

And while we've managed to keep most of that stuff out of our household up to now, when our six-year-old told us he wanted to buy one, we just smiled.

We smiled because our son has been indoctrinated. Long before he could speak, he has heard us rant about advertising and commercialisation. He can't watch commercial TV or enter a retail zone without us deconstructing the ads — or deconstructing them himself. He talks about how he feels when other kids engage in violent play, and we have long had a 'no gunplay' rule in our house.

Despite all this, his statement that he'd like a Ninja Turtle demonstrates two things.

The first is that our children are not our children. They, like all of us, live in a world saturated in brands, commercialism and all manner of hyped-up toys. Completely denying that means living some sort of reclusive lifestyle that can cut people off from more than just popular culture: believe us — we know.

The second is that in expressing his wish, we've experienced a greater parenting triumph than if he never asked at all. It shows that he feels enough security and autonomy to tell us he'd like to buy a Ninja Turtle, even if it's something he knows we might not like.

How he will interact with his heart's desire will depend on how well he's been supported to be a good player. Is fighting all Ninja Turtles do? Hell no! Depending on the day, they may be park rangers, restaurateurs, funky dancers or loving daddies.

They may earn different names, or be dressed in original garments he cuts out from fabric scraps. Our kids are not limited by the imaginations of middle-aged, money-hungry toy creators — but, of course, it helps that they have never seen the show.

Parenting is a dynamic process. We constantly reconsider and re-assess what's most important to us, and our children. In asking those questions, we find better ways to support our children to grow into the most contented, well-adjusted humans they can be. It's easy to get hung up on the details of a toy here or a slight difference in value there. It's harder to look beyond the hype and see the opportunities in childhood experiences.

We all realise that good food, water, shelter, safety, warmth and a basic education are critically important. But beyond that, children need other things to feed their minds and spirits. Put simply, these things are belonging (strong relationships rooted in family and community), meaning (purpose and reasons for doing what they do and being who they are) and independence (a strong sense of self and an ability to make their own choices).

If we make these our parenting focus, we might find that our children have the capacity to look beyond the trappings of commercialism. They may dive into it from time to time, but they will recognise the superficial nature of bargain-basement belonging, meaning and independence built solely around the spending of money on shiny, new toys.

Children who derive enough belonging, independence and meaning from family, friends and a strong community will not place nearly as much emphasis on consumer goods, or try to fill a hole with the empty promises of advertisers. No plastic reptile will ever provide the joy of a visit to his Grandma — and our son knows it.

So, we're not too concerned that he wants a Ninja Turtle. Sure, it presents us with a new range of challenges, but we know that the core values we've been teaching him will hold. He knows that we will always enjoy animated conversations about the dilemmas of living in the modern world. He expresses concern that our values may not concur, and learns that people can hold different beliefs, yet still honour one another deeply.

He demonstrates respect towards his mum's dislike of violence. And yet, he feels safe enough to challenge what his parents say, and has the autonomy to make independent decisions about what he likes and wants to play with. He hears that we trust his ability to think for himself.

And he does this all at our kitchen table, before sunrise, where we couldn't feel more at home.



## Israeli history's 'definitive' rewrite

### BOOK FORUM

*Philip Mendes*

**Morris, Benny; 1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War. Yale University Press, 2008. RRP \$32.50. ISBN 9780300126969**

Benny Morris is Israel's best-known revisionist historian. His history of the Palestinian refugee problem, first published in the late 1980s, became widely accepted as the definitive account of the Palestinian refugee tragedy.

He demolished both the traditional Israeli and Palestinian versions of the exodus; the former suggesting that the Palestinians left voluntarily at the behest of their leaders, and the latter that the Palestinians were forcibly driven from their homes by organised and premeditated Israeli violence.

Instead, Morris substituted a middle-ground explanation which defined the Palestinian refugee exodus as a by-product of war, rather than of 'design, Jewish or Arab'.

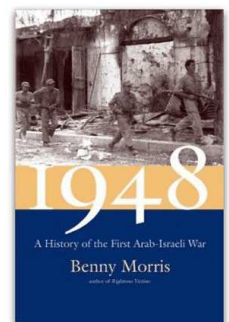
His findings significantly influenced both Israeli historiography and education, and public attitudes to Palestinian national claims. As a result, more and more Israelis and Diaspora Jews began to accept the legitimacy of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

However, more recently, Morris has changed his spots. The failure of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000, Palestinian demands for a right of return to Green Line Israel, and the violence of the second Palestinian intifada have convinced him that the Palestinians have returned to what he considers the impractical extremism and rejectionism of the 1947/48 period.

Morris now believes it is unlikely that the Palestinians will ever accept a two-state compromise with Israel.

Morris's new book returns us to the foundational war of the Israeli-Arab conflict. He divides his narrative into five discrete chronological periods: the historical background from the 1880s to the 1940s, the United Nations debate and vote for partition in 1947, the civil war between the Jews and Arabs inside Palestine from November 1947 to May 1948, the conventional war between the Jews and the invading Arab states from May 1948 to January 1949, and the armistice agreements negotiated from January to July 1949.

Morris argues from the beginning that the 1948 war was the inevitable outcome of the long-term Jewish-Arab conflict. He discusses the early Zionist settlers of the 1880s and their



belief in the legitimacy and morality of a Jewish return to the ancient land. He cites their negative attitudes to the native Arabs, and their determination to take control of the country.

In response, he notes the quick emergence of Arab hostility including recurring outbreaks of violence which would eventually culminate in the full-scale uprising of 1936. He argues that much of this violence was driven by religious symbols and rhetoric as well as by modern nationalist agendas, and that this jihad or holy war component contributed then and now to the intractability of the conflict.

Morris covers the detail of the key historical events: the unsuccessful 1937 Peel partition plan, the 1939 British White Paper which severely restricted Jewish immigration on the eve of the Holocaust, the emerging pro-Zionist attitudes within the wartime US Government, the post-war Zionist revolt against British rule including the various acts of terrorism by the Irgun and the Stern Gang, and the famous Exodus Affair.

He discusses in great detail the UN deliberations including the pressure and outright bribery applied to some member countries. But he argues that the key deciding factor was the strength of the humanitarian argument advanced by the Zionists in favour of a Jewish state as a fair response to centuries of Jewish suffering culminating in the Holocaust.

The Zionists also displayed flexibility in accepting the compromise partition proposal. In contrast, the Arab delegates adopted an extremist approach. They refused to consider any solutions which recognised Jewish national rights in Palestine, and regularly threatened war as a response to partition. There were associated anti-Jewish riots throughout the Arab world.

The civil war began on 30 November 1947, and consisted of two stages. The first stage which lasted till the end of March 1948 involved mostly local small-scale battles during which the Palestinians largely held the initiative, and the Jews were struggling to hold onto the territory allocated to their state.

In the second stage from early April, the Jews went onto the military offensive, and crushed the Palestinians. This offensive was based on the famous Plan Dalet which emphasised securing the borders of the Jewish state, and protecting them against a potential external invasion.

By mid-May 1948, the Palestinians had largely been marginalised not only as a military, but also as a political factor. Many had fled or been driven out of the country.

According to Morris, the Palestinians enjoyed some numerical and geographical advantage, but the eventual Jewish victory was not surprising given their better preparation for war, more advanced training, more organised central command and control, and higher proportion of army-age males. Most of the young Palestinian men living outside the immediate war zone simply failed to participate in the war.

Five Arab states invaded Israel in May 1948. But this was an invasion driven mainly by the

pressure of public opinion, and lacking in serious preparation, strategic coordination or a unified command structure.

To be sure, the Arabs enjoyed significant initial advantages in manpower and weaponry. But the Jews had superior training and command structures, and enormous motivation to protect their homes and lives. Moreover they were able during the course of the war to significantly increase both their manpower. They also increased their weaponry via exports from Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia.

Morris devotes discrete space to each invading army: firstly the British-trained Jordanian Arab Legion who posed the most serious military threat, then the Egyptians, the Iraqis, the Syrians, and the Lebanese. He also discusses the specific air and naval wars.

He argues that by the time of the first truce, which was to last from 11 June until 8 July, it was evident that the Israelis had won, given that the invaders had failed to conquer any significant territory.

Later the Israelis went on the offensive, and managed to seize control of the Galilee and the Negev. The eventual armistice talks would conclude with recognition of Israel's control of significant territory beyond the borders of the original UN partition plan. But the Arabs refused to negotiate peace treaties.

Morris reiterates his earlier explanation of the Palestinian refugee tragedy as multi-layered, complex and closely linked to the particular stages of the war.

During the first stage of the civil war, about 100,000 Palestinians fled or were displaced. Many were wealthy and middle-class families from mixed cities who left to avoid conflict and violence. Others were women and children who were evacuated at the suggestion of local and regional leaders.

There were virtually no direct Jewish expulsions at this time. In contrast, the implementation of Plan Dalet in April 1948 saw the expulsion of Palestinians from hostile villages that came under Israeli control. However, Morris rejects charges by some pro-Palestinian historians that Plan Dalet was a blueprint for the expulsion of the Arab population.

During the conventional war, the Israelis systematically expelled Arabs from conquered territories. Others simply fled as the invading Arab armies retreated. Most probably hoped to return within a short time either via military or political intervention.

The Israelis later made a firm political decision to prevent the refugees returning on the grounds that they would potentially constitute a fifth column, and would also be a demographic and political threat to the stability of the new state.

The Arab states refused to absorb or permanently resettle the refugees partly for

propaganda purposes, but also because the refugees themselves argued that they had a right to return to their former homes.

Morris argues somewhat contentiously that the expulsion of the Palestinians was justified because the Arabs may have planned to do far worse to the Jews if they had won the war. He cites numerous statements by Palestinian and Arab leaders calling for the expulsion of most of the Jewish population prior to the war, and also refers to the complete expulsion of Jews from the small number of settlements or neighborhoods conquered during the war.

But this conclusion seems in the absence of any firm evidence on Arab plans to erroneously equate political rhetoric with firm military intentions.

Morris is on firmer ground in noting that the war also indirectly created a second major refugee problem with over 500,000 to 600,000 Arab Jews fleeing or being expelled from their homes. Most migrated to Israel, but others resettled in western countries. Many later experienced discrimination from the largely European-dominated Israeli leadership, but ironically became fervent right-wing voters and opponents of compromise with the Palestinians due to their experiences of persecution in the Arab world.

The key message from Morris's book is the continuing and passionate divide between the conflicting Israeli and Palestinian narratives over responsibility for the 1948 war.

For the Israelis, the key contemporary factor was the still-recent Holocaust and the realistic fear that the Palestinians and/or the Arab States could perpetrate a similar massacre in the Middle East. Although they were successful in the war, they suffered 5700 dead (constituting one per cent of the Jewish population) and over 12,000 seriously wounded.

The Israeli consensus was that the Palestinians became refugees only because of the war they and their Arab allies had initiated, and therefore the blame lay with those who had caused the conflict.

For the Palestinians, the principal and understandable concern was that the creation of a Jewish State would lead to their dispossession and exile. They saw the war as an act of self-defence to protect their national inheritance. But the war resulted in the destruction of their society and the exile of much of their population. They continue to see the events of 1948 as an injustice that requires some form of reparation.

Overall, this is a beautifully written and comprehensively researched book. There are a few minor omissions in the bibliography. For example, Morris does not directly respond to the contentious 'ethnic cleansing' thesis advanced by the anti-Zionist Israeli author Ilan Pappé in his two recent books. Nor does he cite the key works by Israeli historians Moshe Gat and Maurice Roumani on the respective Jewish exoduses from Iraq and Libya.

And surprisingly he makes no reference to local author Chanan Reich's book *Australia and Israel* in discussing the Australian approach to the 1947 UN vote.

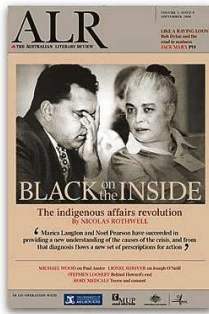


But these caveats aside, this dispassionate and nuanced history is likely to be widely accepted as the definitive account of the 1948 war.

## The new Indigenous affairs orthodoxy

INDIGENOUS

Myrna Tonkinson



There is a new orthodoxy in Indigenous affairs, and woe betide anyone daring to diverge from it.

Nicholas Rothwell is one of the chief enforcers of this orthodoxy. In this month's *Australian Literary Review* he pours scorn on the recalcitrants, singling out Jon Altman (whose sins include issuing a 'rebuke' to Rothwell about a story he had written) as representative, while heaping praise on Marcia Langton, Noel Pearson and others to whose views he accords his stamp of approval.

Masterful as the arguments Rothwell elects to champion are, they do not adequately account for what exists, nor do they provide definitive prescriptions for change.

For example, it is highly contentious to proclaim that alcohol is the 'cause, not mere attendant symptom' of the 'present-day Indigenous crisis' and that drinking and drug-taking are 'best conceptualised as self-perpetuating diseases, rather than symptoms of social ills'.

The rights model of the 1970s and '80s with its emphasis on self-determination has proven to be seriously flawed, but it is only the latest in a succession of flawed ideas and poorly implemented policies devised by generations of policy-makers, bureaucrats and people on the ground.

The advocates of this approach were attempting to correct earlier mistakes. They were no less passionate about improving the condition of Indigenous Australians, and no more corrupt than their current detractors.

Before the people Rothwell describes as deluded or cynical 'leftists', 'academics' and 'ventriloquists' had their influence, there were those who wished to 'smooth the dying pillow', to assimilate, integrate, and educate Aboriginal people. Usually, these reformers were filled with zeal and confident they knew what was best.

Throughout the sorry history of relations between the state and its agents and the Indigenous population, there have been degrees of neglect, and a blind assumption that good intentions would suffice. We need not be mired in the past to acknowledge its impact and its enduring effects.

After all, Indigenous Australians' inequality, poverty and enforced dependency long predated the provision of welfare payments and the right to drink, even if the extension of these rights has exacerbated the problems.

It is surely no coincidence that the levels of sickness, violence, substance misuse, child abuse and neglect found in many Indigenous aggregations have similarities with what can be observed in sites of civil war and social upheaval in other parts of the world. These are among many factors that require something more than the Manichaeian simplicity of Rothwell's argument.

Despite his tone of certainty, however, Rothwell does not spell out what is to become of the places such as Maningrida (which he labels 'zoo-like' and implies only advocates of 'victimhood' support) and their inhabitants.

Many of these places were created to exclude Aboriginal people from the 'mainstream'. With some notable exceptions, those in charge assumed the 'inmates' to be incapable of education and full citizenship. To a great extent, the inhabitants had to devise ways of surviving and coping, some of which have proved maladaptive.

Later, the removal of paternalistic order occurred with no preparation for the 'self-management' that replaced it. The situation that now prevails is, at least in part, a legacy of past conditions.

Once again, recipes for salvation are being prescribed for Indigenous people, often with little or no reference to the views or desires of the intended subjects. A little humility might be in order on the part of the current ascendancy, since their recipe is no more guaranteed to deliver the desired results than that of any of their predecessors.

Few people would disagree that there are conditions of both chronic and acute crisis afflicting many Indigenous communities, and that innovative ideas and models must be tried. But let us not pretend that some magic formula has been discovered. Abolishing welfare, imposing alcohol bans, and moving people out of unviable communities, may be partial solutions, but even if they are, such measures will have unintended consequences, at least in the short-term, and they must be accompanied by radical innovation of a more positive nature.

The creation of 50,000 jobs in two years is one such proposal, but its achievement is by no means assured just because influential people wish it to be. Change of such magnitude requires great care, and a willingness to be proved wrong. At least one lesson should have been learned from past failures: that change, once set in motion, will engender an unpredictable chain of events for which its advocates and its subjects must be prepared, to the degree that is possible.

Rothwell fires a parting shot at those who mention 'race', which he considers no longer relevant. Convenient as this may be, racism cannot be simply willed away. Race has been used in Australia from the beginning to define, regulate and exclude Indigenous people. The definition of Indigenous Australians as the inferior 'other' needing to be controlled, has been part of this nation's history and still prevails, albeit in new guises.

Most recently 'race' was invoked to identify which people in the Northern Territory would be subject to the Emergency Intervention, irrespective of the particular circumstances of individuals.

Many commentators, in Australia and elsewhere, wish us to be over 'race'; would that it were such a simple matter of choice, but that genie is not so easily returned to its bottle. Like other unpleasant facts of Australia's history it remains a factor in the world view and lived experience of many people, Indigenous and otherwise.

## Film implicates audience in acts of cruelty

FILM FORUM

*Tim Kroenert*

***Funny Games*: 112 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Michael Haneke. Starring: Naomi Watts, Michael Pitt, Tim Roth, Brady Corbet, Devon Gearhart**

The opening sequence of Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke's first English-language film is ominously soothing. A wealthy family on vacation plays aural guessing games with the classical music lilting through the car stereo.

The melodiousness of their present existence is reinforced visually: an aerial shot reveals the road line markings and median strip as the five-line staff used for music transcript. They cruise the highway with gentle legato.

It's not so much the calm before the storm as a state of Zen before a nervous breakdown. Abruptly the sounds of demented death-metal blast across the film's soundtrack, coinciding with an interior shot of the smiling, cherubic family. They are en route to terror and chaos: we know it, even if they don't.

So from the outset, *Funny Games*, a shot-by-shot remake of Haneke's eponymous 1997 Austrian thriller, is executed masterfully. Portents continue to abound. A neighbour responds nervously when Anna (Watts) and George (Roth) slow down and greet him as they near their destination. Soon after, said neighbour visits them at their lakeside abode, and he's accompanied by a mysterious and eerily polite stranger (Pitt). The family dog barks uncontrollably.

Further innocuous moments assume an air of foreboding. Anna, on the phone to a friend, comments that her kitchen clock isn't working. Her young son Georgie (Gearhart), who's been helping his father launch their sailing boat down at the dock, comes to the kitchen in search of a sharp knife. By the time a second young stranger arrives at the house, ostensibly in search of eggs, the film is swathed in a sense of impending doom.

*Funny Games* is conventional, but self-reflexively so. It doesn't take a genius to work out that the two white-clad strangers, Paul (Pitt) and Peter (Corbet), have menace on their minds. Sure enough, before long George, Anna and Georgie find themselves besieged by these merciless, motiveless sadists.

During the ensuing hours they are emotionally and physically tortured by their assailants, ever conscious of Paul's promise that by morning, they will be dead. It's no relief that the vast majority of the violence in Haneke's film takes place out-of-frame. This is harrowing, bleak subject matter; a brutal assault upon a living, breathing, feeling portrait of the American





Dream.

A post-modern flourish adds an academic distance to the proceedings. It's a kind of directorial wink to the audience that there's something more on Haneke's mind than simply thrills and kills. In the midst of threatening violence, the character Paul turns to camera and addresses the audience.

At this point, those familiar with Haneke's work will start to cotton on. Haneke has long been interested in the relationship between violence and media. *Benny's Video* (1992), for example, portrays an adolescent boy who repeatedly views footage of a pig being slaughtered, then mimics the brutal act by murdering a young girl.

The implications of that film were sweeping. It was not simply about blaming violent media for provoking violent acts. Rather Haneke theorised that, in a society saturated by media, individuals can become distanced or disconnected from reality. Hence Benny commits his crime in order to 'learn what it feels like'.

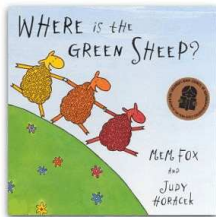
The same fiction-reality disconnect is evident in *Funny Games*, although the implications here are more specific. By taking the audience into his confidence, the killer makes each viewer an accomplice. We are complicit, for without an audience, these characters don't exist. We long for an end to the cruelty, yet we keep watching. The film is a critique of 'violence as entertainment', and every audience member is implicated.

The problem with 'postmodern flourishes' is that they can be gimmicky. In *Funny Games* they occur infrequently but with increasing intensity, and while in the decade-old original they are clever and surprising, in this modern-day remake they border on trite. But Haneke's thesis is carried off efficiently. To paraphrase the director, it's a film that if you don't need it, you'll look away. Chances are, you won't.

## Mem Fox and the parable of the green sheep

### COMMUNITY

Sarah Kanowski



*Here is the blue sheep. And here is the red sheep. Here is the bath sheep. And here is the bed sheep. But where is the green sheep?*

Its lilting refrain, and the dream-like logic of sheep in the bath, riding a train, sunbaking, shooting from a canon, have made Mem Fox's *Where is the Green Sheep?* one of my daughter's most beloved books.

So often have my husband and I raised the surreal but somehow profound question — 'Where is the green sheep?' — while admiring Judy Horacek's delightful drawings of unexpected sheep activity, that its rhythm has permeated deep into our subconscious.

Looking for any lost shoe, or toy, or set of keys in the chaos a 16-month-old brings is now accompanied by a pleading chorus of, 'Where *is* that green sheep?'

Fox knows how to speak to children, but what about their parents? A week ago this author of wildly popular picture books (her *Possum Magic* is Australia's highest selling children's book ever) was reported as condemning long daycare for young babies. Newspapers and television stations across the nation funnelled her critique into the headline, 'Mem Fox Blasts Childcare', and the predictable storm followed.

Working mothers 'offended' and 'disgusted' by Mem's comments were quickly located and photographed. There was much complaint about mortgage stress and even some talk of destroying books.

On the other side of the 'mummy wars' fence, the ritual warriors assumed their customary postures, berating 'selfish mothers' and a society so sick with affluenza it put mortgages above maternal love.

But there was one word missing word from all of this brouhaha — 'fathers'.

As seems always to be the case, discussion on childcare becomes a dispute over maternal responsibility and maternal guilt. Even Mem Fox, a self-described 'ageing, raging 60s feminist', began her critique of long daycare for young babies with 'parents', but soon slid into the more comfortable 'mothers'.

But the decision to place a young baby into full-time care is most often made by two parents — a mother and a father. This is a shared responsibility. And not only that, but the alternative — staying home with your child, full- or part-time — must also be a choice both parents can make.

The feminist revolution has profoundly altered the way men and women have relationships. For women of my generation it was taken for granted that we would study, travel, and work. When love happened it was marked by the same equality and independence. What woman now abandons her career simply because she marries, as most of our mothers did?

But as many of us discover, motherhood magically transports us back to the 1950s — dad goes off to work, mum stays at home. Or, if baby goes into care, then it is mum's fault for going back to work, not dad's.

There is nothing inevitable about this. As a society we make it so. If many women find it challenging, under current legislation, to negotiate maternity leave and job flexibility when returning to work then how much more difficult for men to take parental leave of any meaningful length or to job-share so that they can be at home with their child?

In our family, I wanted to be at home during the first year of our daughter's life, and the reality of breastfeeding meant the easier option was for me to be the at-home parent. But in her second year, when I was interested in returning to work part-time and my husband was keen to share the day-to-day parenting, his employer refused.

Fox has [defended](#) her comments as arising from a concern for the best interests of babies. This is an important reorientation, and follows on from arguments made by Anne Manne and other maternal feminists. But as the example from our family reminds, the decisions parents make about childcare do not happen in a social or economic vacuum.

I am not arguing that mothers and fathers are the same, let alone that all families are the same. But as a society we still have an extraordinarily long way to go before men can translate all the changes that have happened in their relationships with women into their relationships with children.

A conversation about childcare and its consequences for children is one we need to be having. Thankfully this is something the government seems finally to be taking responsibility for with the Productivity Commission's current inquiry into paid parental leave, and the work being done by Maxine McKew as Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare.

But we need to turn this into a conversation about 'children' and 'parents', not merely 'children' and 'mothers'.

The way we care for our children is a shared responsibility as well as a shared joy. Changing the terms of discussion, and the legislation for leave arrangements, to better reflect this will help us escape the 'mummy wars' into something much more meaningful.

Otherwise our national debate is in danger of remaining like the green sheep, finally found at the end of the story, 'fast asleep'.

## Learning to teach Aboriginal kids

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD - Essay, Second Place

*Jonathan Hill*

### **A pedagogy of liberation**

Teaching in a remote Aboriginal community alerts one's senses to the true nature of injustice that is hidden beneath our nation's facade of 'a fair go for all'.

The indicators leap out with alarming clarity: weeping sores on the arms and legs of students, dilapidated houses that frown on the side of the unkempt roads and an overarching sense of neglect that pulses in complete contrast to the natural beauty that abounds.

Apart from the failure to provide adequate housing and health care, the delivery of substandard, culturally insensitive education to the children of these remote schools is a major concern that urgently needs to be addressed.

This essay is a critique of current educational practices in isolated Aboriginal communities as well as a manifesto for positive change. Having taught in such a community I have experienced first hand the daunting challenge of uniting two vastly different cultures. After offering a detailed analysis of the inappropriate framework currently in place I will outline a series of suggestions that may improve the situation.

What will surface is the necessity to collaborate with individual communities to create an educational framework that thoroughly incorporates the distinctive cultures of different regions. Providing comprehensive and culturally relevant education to these remote schools is a central way to combat the cyclical oppression that has become the horrific norm.

Australia has an obligation to right this grave wrong because of the intrinsic humanity that binds all its citizens. The development of a collaborative approach to remote education may in fact plant the seeds for revolution so that finally Australia might embody the ideals it shouts so loud.

The Prime Minister's historic apology and last year's 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum has sparked public interest and goodwill towards the plight of Aboriginal Australians.

However it seems the majority of citizens are unable to realise the relationship between Aboriginal disadvantage and their everyday lives. The endemic oppression of Aborigines reflects the spiritual oppression of society at large, thereby degrading the ideal of democracy and sentencing citizens to exist in a vacuum of social injustice.



The policies of paternalism remain entrenched because it is believed Aborigines can only contribute to society if they assimilate. This well-worn ideology has failed all Australians who cling to the dream of a reconciled continent.

The time has come to invert this warped viewpoint. We must have the humility to learn from the first people of this land.

The paternalistic provision of education to remote schools is a pivotal link in the chain of oppression that ensnares communities. If we use the example of the Top End, the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework is a mainstream scaffold by which all Territory schools must abide. This is seriously restrictive to the educational aspirations of students in remote locations because it doesn't cater to their unique and diverse needs.

The current pedagogy imposes Western ideology upon the students, suppressing their cultural identity that in turn diminishes their sense of self. It fails to accommodate the richness and rigidity of Aboriginal culture and this is why most students are disinterested from the outset. They find it impossible to relate to the material presented to them because it has no immediate relevance to their lives.

Along with the syllabus content there is also the problem of selecting appropriate teachers. From my observations there is a general reluctance for the teachers to actively integrate into the local society by either learning the local language or associating with community members outside the school environment.

It seems that a lot of teachers are lured to these remote schools by the lucrative salary and low expenses. There is an abnormally high turnover of teachers that may exit for a variety of reasons: safety concerns, emotional immaturity, inability to cope with the isolation or finding the cultural interface too confronting. The constant exodus wreaks havoc with the rhythms of the school, disrupting and fracturing the learning process.

The role of Aboriginal teacher aides has been pacified to a point where they are merely assistants at the beck and call of their superiors. They are not given an active responsibility in managing the direction of learning as they blend into the scenery of the classroom carrying out the menial tasks they are assigned.

These issues make up the core problem that is the insufficient delivery of quality education to remote schools. They must be addressed so as to empower students and communities to assert control over their lives.

Rather than adhering to the mainstream syllabus, those at the top of the hierarchy, education administrators, must have the foresight to bend the curriculum to cater to the needs of individual communities.

To do this they must consult respected and influential community elders about ways in which the school can nurture the traditional culture while also incorporating the highly



important literacy and numeracy skills that are integral to the development of all children.

Students should not have to suppress their unique cultural identity in order to obtain an education other Australians take for granted. They have the right to live a bicultural existence because they were here first.

Bending the curriculum may comprise a spectrum of initiatives including: the use of native languages when delivering instruction, holding certain classes outside (perhaps in locations of cultural significance where knowledge may have been passed down in previous generations), comprehensive analysis of bush tucker in the region, reinforcement of totems and skin groupings, and ceremony workshops where students learn about traditional songs, dances and rhythms on the yidaki.

Reinforcing these vital strands of culture in the classroom validates Aboriginality, putting it on an equal footing with the dominant culture thus restoring a much-needed sense of dignity among the locals.

A radical shift in the attitude and approach of teachers is also desperately needed to tackle the social injustice of lacklustre education. As mentioned earlier a high number of teachers are currently drawn out bush by the generous salary. If this is the sole motivation then it is a recipe for disaster as there are several factors that prospective teachers must consider.

The education authority in the respective states or territories has an obligation to adequately inform teachers about what teaching in a remote community entails. Teachers must undergo a comprehensive inter-cultural course so as to understand the dynamics of the community, and most importantly, their place in it.

Such a course may comprise an intense study of the local language, the skin name system, any cultural taboos and teacher expectations.

Despite their best intentions it must be made clear that they represent a long line of teachers who have flown in and out of communities for years. The only thing that will separate them from their predecessors is their ability to listen and learn from the people whose land they now live on.

Prospective teachers should also be alerted to the hardships of living in isolation; perhaps they could hear some first-hand accounts from teachers who have had similar placements. By honestly informing teachers about the nature of teaching in remote regions it gives them the best chance to make a decision about whether or not it is for them.

No longer can remote schools afford to lose so many teachers so regularly. The high turnover severely disrupts the learning process and fractures the already fragile rapport between the community and anyone who comes in to help.

The final measure that must be implemented to improve the provision of education to the

remote schools is strengthening the involvement of Aboriginal teaching aides and other local staff in the formulation and delivery of information.

It is positive that so many members of the community are already working at the school but they can make a greater contribution if given a chance.

In the same way that community elders will have helped bend the curriculum, aides and assistants must consult with teachers to plan and prepare classes that engage the students. Also they must be seen to have an equal standing as the class teacher as this portrays a sense of equality.

It is imperative that the aides and assistants are given greater responsibility and are more actively involved as they are the positive role models whose behaviour the students should be encouraged to absorb.

Ultimately, we paint the portrait of the world we want to own. It is time to rise above the haze of mediocrity that has settled upon this nation's soul and deliver justice to the first people of this land by providing them with an education that embraces their unique cultures and equips them with the skills to navigate modernity's motorways.

By collaborating with communities to create integrated educational frameworks a pedagogy of liberation may emerge, empowering students and communities to reclaim their rightful place in society by living a bicultural existence and shattering the shackles of oppression which have enslaved them for far too long.

## Existence warms my skin

POETRY

*Peter Coghill*

### **Sunday**

I've bitten a soft apple of a morning  
when blood and mood  
jigger the radio of my mind, turning  
it in and out of the band  
of unaccountable happiness.  
What have I forgotten that I can stand  
to smile when greyness drips from the lank trees,  
dampens the walls  
of apartment blocks, and breathes  
through the air — when everyone's defeat,  
my own as well,  
hums unheard in channels down the street?  
Then, though nothing apparent has changed,  
the day is now graceful  
as a salmon gum, the curling mist arranged  
in an elegant suit, and the content of all  
that myriad  
of frequencies is ignored for my small,  
present task of walking to church and smiling.  
As the parrots call out,  
full of their song, I fight this simplifying,  
but find its renunciation more true  
for a Sunday morning,

like turning off the TV news. At my pew

I kneel, slide in and join the congregation,  
cold rocks in the stream,  
black planets in the far constellation  
of a blazing blue star. A shudder in its iron core  
then supernova.

For that great light, no time's required to soar  
any distance to where we wait beneath  
our ambiguous symbol —  
life, yes and death;  
love, yes and hate in the nails.

We take communion,  
a litany of faces, and each unveils  
new need and mystery in upturned eyes.

'Body of Christ',  
'Amen', and I turn to go back down the aisle  
and through the door, thinking of that vast flash  
of pure extent:  
how in timelessness it steps the length of space,  
how existence in so other a mode  
warms my skin  
as I walk back along the foggy road,  
bathing me closer than my clothes. The light,  
sourceless; the sun,  
known only by the fact of sight.

## Paying the climate change piper

### ENVIRONMENT

Tony Kevin



Ross Garnaut's important public [statement](#) on Friday was largely overwhelmed by the welter of federal and state political news. It was a world away from his impassioned, ethically challenging, first public [report](#) on 4 July.

Quietly, government has narrowed the goalposts back to a safe world of can-do politics, of short-term realism at the expense of long-term responsibility. Unnerved by the hostile reaction of powerful stakeholders to the July report, it now seeks a conventional balance between the demands of a worried population, and a decision-making elite uniting corporate and trade unions in high-emitting industries and sympathisers in parliament.

Garnaut's sombre, low-key second report recommends a narrow range of possibilities for greenhouse gas emissions limitations by Australia to 2020, likely to have minimal impacts on the Australian economy. It won cautious decision-makers' approval. It is politically achievable, despite disappointed green lobbies.

Unlike epic debates over industry protectionism in the 1970s—1980s, we do not have a visionary Keating and Button driving necessary change. I see no comparable passion in Rudd or Wong.

Now, Australia's decision-making elite believe deep down — if indeed they think it through, and I suspect many are instinctive climate change denialists at bottom — that Australia is rich enough to insulate itself against climate change.

They live on higher ground in the green coastal zone. Food and utility costs are a small part of their budgets. If it gets too hot, they will turn up the air conditioning.

For these status-quo people, the issues that matter are macroeconomic — dividends, high salaries, superannuation earnings. They want to keep the economy we have now. The desertification of the Murray-Darling and the dying of the Barrier Reef do not affect them directly, and they lack imagination to conceive of polar icemelt sufficient in their lifetimes to inundate fertile populated coastal areas of Australia. *Après nous, le deluge.*

Garnaut says Australia should establish its emissions reduction framework within an agreed global target to stabilise atmospheric carbon at between 450 and 550 parts per million (ppm): the present level is 387 ppm.

Australia should advocate international agreement to stabilise atmospheric carbon at



450ppm, but one set at 550 ppm is more likely initially. A world of 550 ppm atmospheric carbon is, according to informed scientific consensus, a horror scenario in which global warming already underway would cause irreversible polar icemelt and major inundations of global human settlements.

Garnaut defends his lowered expectations. There is no point in Australia doing more now if the world does not follow. A country of high immigration, Australia needs special latitude. I doubt this argument will win us credit at the next global climate meeting in Copenhagen.

Lost is Garnaut's firm July advocacy that developed countries must set the example even if major developing countries China and India do not immediately follow. We are back in the realist world where nobody moves much unless everybody moves.

Garnaut defends his proposed 'first stage' aim of stabilising atmospheric carbon at 550 ppm: it was his 'reluctant conclusion that a more ambitious international agreement is not possible at this time ... My aim is to nurture the slender chance that humanity can get its act together.'

His sadness bespeaks a man overcome by the selfish myopia of political realism. Scientific truth and a sense of society's accountability to future generations have been overwhelmed. (For example consider Paul Kelly's triumphant view on Sunday's ABC [Insiders](#) that the debate in Australia is now over, and that anyone seeking an Australian emissions reduction target higher than 5 per cent or 10 per cent lives in a fantasy world.)

I believe Garnaut now modestly seeks two things: getting an Australian carbon trading system into operation and accustoming industry to it, while waiting for mounting scientific evidence of destructive climate change to penetrate the resistance of decision-makers. As Gwynne Dyer recently [observed](#), drowning polar bears and disappearing polar icecaps will not suffice:

'The regrettable reality is there will not be a critical mass of people willing to act decisively on cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the developed countries where most of the cuts must be made until some really big natural disaster kills a lot of people in one of those countries.'

Nor, I might add, will the slow death of the Murray-Darling Basin and the human settlements depending on its water supply. I'll be criticised for saying this, but we may need such a disaster as a Class 5 tropical cyclone slamming into Brisbane to jolt us into decisive action. Meanwhile, our decision-makers live on in a bland limbo-land of short-term complacency. They do not even react when the chairman of the Coleambally Irrigation Co operative suggests selling off this whole Riverina town and its water rights for \$3.5 billion, so the people can decently relocate!

I'm strongly reminded of the cautionary fable of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. A greedy town council, faced with terrible threat, tries to buy a solution on the cheap, refusing to pay a fair

price for what needs to be done. It is not until they lose their children that they realise, too late, the cost of their greed and stupidity.

I pray that Garnaut's second report, by keeping the carbon trading ball in play and keeping Australia however imperfectly in the international debate, will protect the Australian people from the short-sighted 'realism' of our decision-making classes.

## The real money's on humanities

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Following Friday's news that Nathan Rees is the new premier of NSW, media reports highlighted his background as a garbage collector for Parramatta Council. But they neglected to mention the more significant aspect that he was doing this to fund his honours degree in English Literature at Sydney University.



The qualifications of Rees' deputy Carmel Tebbutt fit the political mould more easily. She has a bachelor's degree in economics and industrial relations. But it's likely that Rees' studies of the humanities prepared him for the creative thinking required to have a go at fixing the state's neglected infrastructure with few funds at his disposal.

His abilities in this direction impressed some who worked closely with him while he was Water Utilities Minister in the Iemma Government. University of NSW water expert Professor Richard Kingsford said he has the ability to 'listen for a long time and to come in with politically incisive and technically incisive questions'.

Meanwhile study of the humanities received another rare boost last week in the form of a National Press Club [address](#) by Federal Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Kim Carr. This was prompted by the [Review of the National Innovation System](#), which he received last month.

Carr argued: 'The creative arts — and the humanities and the social sciences — make a terrible mistake when they claim support on the basis of their commercial value.'

He was reflecting what could be an important change in the official attitude to support for study of the humanities. This follows years of official shunning of arts and other non career specific degrees. Funding policies were inspired by economic rationalism, the [view](#) that 'commercial activity ... represents a sphere of activity in which moral considerations, beyond the rule of business probity dictated by enlightened self-interest, have no role to play'.

The minister suggested that many 'real-world' challenges facing Australia are so complex that they require us to harness insights and methods of a variety of disciplines.

'We can't improve indigenous health without understanding the social and cultural circumstances of the people involved.'

He said that the humanities, arts and social sciences 'give a voice to people who might otherwise be silent [and] defend the rights of people whose rights might otherwise be denied'.

He cited his own recent consumption of cultural materials, including Peter Temple's novel

*The Broken Shore*, and the Bell Shakespeare Company's production of *Hamlet*.

'The first showed me a world similar enough to my own to feel familiar, but different enough to make me look at my own world with fresh eyes. The second reminded me where a great deal of our language comes from, and left me with a strong sense of the continuity between past and present.'

He said that while he hoped these cultural products made a profit and contributed to the nation's bottom line, 'it is their intrinsic value we should treasure them for', and that 'we should support these disciplines because they give us pleasure, knowledge, meaning, and inspiration'.

The ultimate worth of the Rudd Government will be judged on its ability to carry forth such vision and enact it in legislation in the parliament. The wealth that arises from pursuit of the humanities and social sciences will be more long lasting than the current prosperity associated with selling minerals to China.

## The right not to kill

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

*Frank Brennan*



Medicare-funded abortion is readily available to women in all Australian jurisdictions. In some states, the criminal law on abortion has been developed by the judges. It is known as common law. The majority of Australian parliaments have now changed or at least clarified the common law, ensuring the legality of widespread abortion practices.

Victoria is about to follow this trend, debating the Abortion Law Reform Bill this week. But the pro-abortion lobby has decided to take things three steps further than other jurisdictions like Western Australia, the ACT and the Northern Territory have in recent years. It is quite a try on, under cover of the claim that the Victorian bill 'acknowledges and reflects community attitudes and current clinical practice'.

The Bill seeks to break new ground by: permitting abortion, regardless of the interests of the foetus, up to 24 weeks; dispensing with the need for informed consent provisions which would give all women the opportunity to consider their decision, and which would protect vulnerable young women being pressured into having an abortion by relatives or those who have abused them; requiring health professionals with a conscientious objection to abortion to participate in abortion in some circumstances, and requiring doctors with a conscientious objection always to refer a woman seeking an abortion to another doctor known not to have a conscientious objection.

This third and most novel item of the trifecta is to be enacted in the flash new rights jurisdiction of Victoria with its Charter of Rights and Freedoms which boasts that 'A person must not be coerced in a way that limits his or her freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.'

I will offer a comment on each item of the Victorian trifecta.

### **Late-term abortions**

The Victorian Government's Department of Human Services publishes a detailed manual for dealing with road trauma. When emergency staff are dealing with a pregnant woman in a traffic accident, they have to consider if the foetus is viable. The manual advises: 'Foetus is not viable pre-22 weeks (probably 24 weeks). If the foetus is beyond 24 weeks gestation, obstetric backup at a Major Trauma Service is mandatory.'

It is now commonplace for 23-week foetuses to be born and nurtured in Melbourne hospitals. Peter Costello is not alone in his weekend quandary: 'I can't believe that there is a proposal to make abortion legal as a matter of course up to 24 weeks, when babies are born at

less than 24 weeks. We will have a situation in this country when in one part of a hospital babies will be in humidicribs being kept alive and in some other part it will be legal to be aborting them.'

Deregulated abortion services which have no regard for the interest of the foetus should be restricted once the foetus is viable.

### **Informed consent**

In Western Australia, informed consent is defined by statute for the good of the woman and for the good of the doctor, requiring that 'a medical practitioner has properly, appropriately and adequately provided her with counselling about the medical risk of termination of pregnancy and of carrying a pregnancy to term'; 'a medical practitioner has offered her the opportunity of referral to appropriate and adequate counselling about matters relating to termination of pregnancy and carrying a pregnancy to term'; and 'a medical practitioner has informed her that appropriate and adequate counselling will be available to her should she wish it upon termination of pregnancy or after carrying the pregnancy to term.'

The Victorian Law Reform Commission saw no need for such provisions, viewing abortion as if it were simply an elective surgical procedure.

### **Conscientious objection**

The ACT is the Australian jurisdiction with laws most like those being proposed in Victoria. The ACT amendments were carried in 2002 with a majority of only one vote after various safeguards for health professionals were written in to the Medical Practitioners (Maternal Health) Amendment Act.

Those safeguards are maintained in the ACT Health Act, including provisions that 'No-one is under a duty (by contract or by statutory or other legal requirement) to carry out or assist in carrying out an abortion'; and 'A person is entitled to refuse to assist in carrying out an abortion.'

One would have thought the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the Victorian Charter of Rights and Freedoms would have counted for something when the legislators were considering the plight of those doctors and nurses who in good faith regard the abortion of a viable foetus as the moral equivalent of murder.

Ms Maxine Morand, the Victorian Minister for Women's Affairs, has taken the view that all Charter rights and freedoms of all individuals are irrelevant when it comes to abortion because s.48 provides: 'Nothing in this Charter affects any law applicable to abortion or child destruction'.

Presumably the Victorian Parliament could also pass a law prohibiting discussion about abortion if it so wished, without need for any assessment of the freedom of expression, given



that such a prohibition would be contained in a law applicable to abortion. This makes a mockery of the Charter.

Hopefully the novel Victorian trifecta will be struck down by Victorian legislators regardless of their views on the liberty of women to exercise an untrammelled prerogative to terminate the life of a non-viable foetus with the cooperation of health professionals whose consciences are untroubled.

In a pluralistic democratic society, the law should still have some work to do in protecting vulnerable women, concerned, conscientious health professionals and viable unborn children.

## England writ grotesque

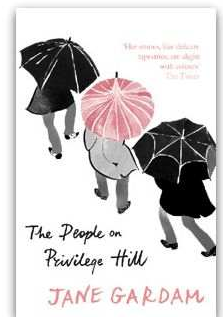
### BOOK FORUM

*Paddy O'Reilly*

**Gardam, Jane; *The People on Privilege Hill*. Abacus, 2008, rrp \$24.99. ISBN 9780701177997**

It's said that mathematicians reach their peak in their 20s and if they haven't made their big breakthrough by 30, it's unlikely that they ever will. How much better for writers then, as many don't even start writing till after their 20s and may peak decades after that.

Jane Gardam is a case in point, an author who began writing in her 30s and since then has produced prolifically and successfully, winning many awards on the way. At 76 she published her most popular book to date, *Old Filth*.



Now Gardam has released a new collection of short stories, *The People of Privilege Hill*. The title story features Edward Feathers, the crotchety old retired lawyer of an earlier story and the central character of *Old Filth*, the 2008 runner-up in the world's richest short story award, the English National Short Story prize.

In the new story about Feathers he is 'far into his eighties' and more crotchety than ever as he staggers across frozen English fields with a black malacca handled umbrella to lunch with a neighbour. The guest of honour, a monk rumoured to be a Jesuit, does not turn up and as a result of several misunderstandings five umbrellas are delivered to Garm Street, the Jesuit headquarters in London.

The stories in *The People on Privilege Hill* rub class against class, age against youth, the past against the present. Whether it is Edward Feathers trying to keep his dignity at a luncheon where the guest of honour evaporates, or a farm woman waiting for a black bishop the villagers didn't want to put up, each story inhabits an England where morality is an overarching concern. Wrong may win out, as in 'The Latter Days of Mr Jones' when a simple lonely man is destroyed by a false accusation, but this is clearly not the natural order of things in Gardam's world.

Despite some weighty themes, Gardam's sly wit and eye for the arresting detail of everyday life lift each and every story. The collection is imbued with an old-fashioned English charm made sharp by a postcolonial awareness of what damage old-fashioned England once wrought.

Gardam recently said in an interview, 'I try to write about real Englishness not export-Englishness.' In 'The Flight Path' a young man travels to London during the blitz and

spends an evening in a shelter with a collection of people clinging bizarrely to their social rituals; here 'Englishness' is grotesquely exaggerated. The four elderly women returning to their old school in 'The Last Reunion' are met with the new England, so different from their schooldays and yet still so familiar.

*The People on Privilege Hill* is a delightful collection — warm, acute, funny. Classic Gardam.

## Kids or criminals

### COMMUNITY

Liz Curran



A 14-year-old boy in a country town has his first gulp of beer in a street. A passing police officer charges him. How is it that the first resort in many cases in Australia is to immerse the child in the criminal justice system? What other interventions are there?

Recent research presents confronting data on the connection between kids who are not in school and criminal offending. In Victoria, for example, of the 86 Children's Court cases observed 42 per cent of the children or young offenders were not in some form of school or training at the time of offending.

This figure is startling. There is a definite link between children not being in school and criminal offending. Accordingly, having children in school is one method for early intervention and prevention

Significant effort should go into preventing a child from coming into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place. Domestic and international research has found that the further a child is immersed into the criminal justice system, the more likely they are to have increased involvement with it.

For this reason it is important that we explore other approaches to charging of children and bringing them before the courts. In my view, this is a traditional approach which has not worked. It uses criminal prosecution as the first resort and places the offender at risk of immersion into the criminal justice system.

In Australia we have been too reticent to explore other alternatives that are more likely to connect young people to the community, address problems and behaviour, and hence reduce recidivism.

In most states and territories in Australia, we have a concept *doli incapax*. This is a common law presumption that until the age of 14 a child offender is not criminally capable for criminal acts unless the prosecution can provide evidence that they understood the wrongdoing.

Australian legislation governing children and youth offenders does recognise the need to take into account the vulnerability of young people, their developmental progression and the need for family and connection to schooling. It is important such legislation has the support of both government and opposition.

It is long-accepted that children have stages of development and can only respond to learning according to the stage they are at. Lacking adult experience, children may also not

make logical connections between behaviour and consequences. This process can be impaired by sustained drug abuse, alcohol consumption or chronic.

A body of psychological studies highlight the importance of role models, consistent parenting, adult guidance, teaching and schooling in ensuring that children develop understanding. In many cases, the children and young people have all or some of these elements missing in their lives.

So keeping kids in school will only work if these other supports are in place. Research reveals that the absence of experience and guidance can limit cognitive development and impact on behaviour. In view of this, charge and arrest might not be a logical response.

There are alternative approaches including the restorative justice approach in Canada, the United States, Britain, South America, New Zealand and Australia. The emphasis in this approach is on dialogue and negotiation between all players with a focus on problem-solving.

More effort can be made to use restorative models to retain students in schools. Teaching approaches can be adopted that are not homogenous and that recognise difference. There are diversionary community options that can be used before criminal charges are invoked.

The restorative justice model places the victim and offender and their families at the centre of the process. The aim is for the offender to understand the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility for them. This makes it possible for the offender to make amends and for the victim to have an opportunity to outline the impact of the crime on them and their lives.

This is something that the court process often fails to do. Due to delay and the disconnection created by the legal process, the child is often seen as peripheral to the case. The aim of restorative models is for healing rather than for exacting punishment in adversarial contexts, which often creates childhood alienation or anger.

Australia needs to re-examine whether charging as we do is the right way to go. There is no evidence that it is. We should be striving to prevent re-offending by solving the problems which lead to it, such as poverty, lack of familial and social support

Many child and youth offenders had been let down time and time again by both family and the system. It is time for us as a society to demand a better approach..

## Abbott's complex Aboriginal odyssey

INDIGENOUS

*Brian McCoy*

The news that Tony Abbott would spend three weeks in a remote Aboriginal community came as a bit of a surprise to me and I expect to many others. But it was a somewhat pleasing surprise.

We don't often hear of politicians getting down and dirty with their constituents. It is hard to imagine those involved in political decisions regarding prisons 'doing time' in custody, or those shaping policies concerning the homeless spending time on the streets.

While we don't have to experience literally another's world in order to be open, respectful and attentive to their needs, it is always important to enter into their world as much as we can. And this involves a risk that can prove transformative, even life-changing.

The news of Tony Abbott's going to Coen encouraged me to listen to him on the ABC's Radio National. He was talking with Fran Kelly about his experiences in this small Aboriginal community north of Cairns. I then went online to read his [blog](#). I was immediately struck by his introductory sentence: 'here are three examples of the complexity of Aboriginal life, especially in remote locations'.

Complexity is not a word one often hears from politicians.

His first example concerned an employer who came to the community seeking workers for his mobile abattoir. He arrived during a funeral and was not able to see all the men who might have been interested. He had to return again, a five-hour road trip each way.

Then there was the man who was being released from jail after serving a sentence for domestic assault. His partner and children, in fear and in order to stay away from him, felt no option but to leave the community and go to Cairns, away from their close family networks and supports.

His final example was the school and its initiative to support full attendance. It used a public noticeboard to highlight current and past rates of attendance, including the names of those whose attendance was 100 per cent in the preceding term. However, he noted, there was nothing currently on this board as there was disagreement about the meaning of 'non-attendance'.

I found Tony Abbott's use of the word complexity quite engaging and encouraging. It suggested some reflection and a desire to deepen the experience. The information he gave about each of his examples was enough to suggest that remote community life is not as





predictable and simple as it sounds.

There are a range of reasons, for example, why funerals continue to play a large part in the family and social life of most Aboriginal communities. How does one resolve the tension between a child's attendance at a funeral and attendance at school?

As he suggested in his blog, there remain a number of complexities for everyone living in remote Aboriginal communities. And it would seem reasonable to hope that we might have politicians who are quite comfortable around naming and knowing them.

What then followed in the blog came as a surprise. 'It is possible to change some things quickly but substantially improving the key indicators of Aboriginal disadvantage is more likely to take a few decades than a few years. The key is getting Aboriginal people into real jobs.'

In admitting that substantial change will take time, he was also admitting that this involved some complexity in understanding the particular social and historical context. Such complexity does not suggest one 'key' but a number, and perhaps a range of quite different sized and shaped keys.

Being able to hold together the various tensions that lie beneath the complexity of this remote community would seem to offer a valuable and important way forward.

What I liked about Tony Abbott going to Coen was that he gave himself a chance to learn. He stayed for three weeks based in the local school, and ended up with the hope that 'this kind of stay could be an annual event'. I sense he has a genuine interest in the lives of the people. His reflections left me with a hope and a response.

He stated at the outset that he perceived 'complexity' in remote community Aboriginal life. I hope he continues to retain some comfort in the use of that term. For not only is there complexity within remote Aboriginal communities, but also in our urban worlds. The proposed Government suspension of parents' welfare payments if their children miss too much school would seem to be one example of this.

How encouraging it would be to hear more politicians comfortable in the use of the word complexity.

## 'Freaks' on film

### FILM FORUM

Tim Kroenert



Todd Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* makes a fascinating companion piece to the feature documentary *The Last American Freak Show*.

The former is a cult horror film set in the world of circus sideshow performers — people with physical deformities that see them displayed as 'freaks'. The latter, currently screening as part of The Other Film Festival (Australia's only film festival by and about people with disabilities), is a documentary about a modern-day revival of such 'freak shows', and its rambling cross-country tour.

Although *Freaks* is ostensibly a morality play that aims to return dignity to these social outcasts, it arguably has the reverse effect, by seeking to unsettle the audience with its characters' 'otherness'.

Rather than 'otherness', *The Last American Freak Show* emphasises humanity. UK filmmaker Richard Butchins is conscious of the implicit irony in the well-intended show. His nagging question throughout is whether it amounts to exploitation, or if it restores dignity to the performers by letting them take ownership of their deformities.

The longest film (85 minutes) on a bill of mostly short films (60 minutes or less), its emphasis on humanity is typical of the festival program. These are not pity pieces, and there's no trite, condescending 'disabled people are people too' moral to be found. They are simply quality films, which shed light on the human experience, as impacted upon by various types of disability.

The Australian film *Yolk* (director Stephen Lance) is a bittersweet coming-of-age story about a young adolescent girl named Lena — her first acts of teenage rebellion and, more importantly, her budding sexuality. The communication gulf between Lena and her mother is exacerbated by Lena's Down Syndrome, yet it could reflect the experiences of any parent watching their child enter the difficult transition towards adulthood.

Set in the early 1940s, *The Hunger House* (UK, director Justin Edgar) is a dramatic sucker-punch; a twist on *Of Mice and Men*, in which a sharp-witted epileptic man and his mentally disabled friend endure a horrific encounter with the Nazis' eugenics program.

Perhaps the most harrowing film on the bill is the drama *A Cosy Place for the Fish* (Iran, director Nasser Zamiri), in which a short-statured couple prepare for the arrival of their first, long-awaited child. The threats to the couple's dignity are numerous, and ultimately impinge upon their lives via a most horrific turn of events.

Such films use fiction to explore the place of people with a disability in their immediate and the broader community. Many documentaries — *The Last American Freak Show* among them — seek to share more personal or real-life accounts of people living with a disability, or of those who work with them.

In the US doco *Phoenix Dance*, director Karina Epperlein trains her camera upon Homer Avila, a professional dancer who lost his right leg at the hip to cancer. The 17-minute film is light on narrative, but lingering shots of Avila's monopedal dancing — showcasing his strength, grace and strength of will — make for powerful viewing.

*The Italian Doctor* (Denmark, director Esben Hansen) documents the work of Dr Alberto Cairo, who operates a Red Cross clinic that fits prosthetic limbs for mine victims in Afghanistan. The documentary is enlivened by Cairo's dualities. He is a proud man, who at times berates or outright condescends to clinic staff or victims' family members. Yet for 15 years he has been restoring dignity to mine victims. Perhaps the ends justify the means.

*In Look At Me* (Germany), Niko von Glasgow assembles other thalidomide-affected people to pose nude for a photo exhibition. From this moving premise, the documentary oversteps the line between the personal and the self-indulgent, as Glasgow shifts focus from his models, their fears and life experiences, to a lingering examination of his own.

Canadian Paul Nadler takes a visually stylish, narrative approach to his self-examination in *Braindamadj'd... Take 2*. The television director beat the odds to return to filmmaking after acquiring a traumatic brain injury, which impaired his mobility, short-term memory and social skills. He packs *Braindamadj'd* with self-deprecating humour.

'The secret is finally out,' says festival patron Adam Elliot. 'Disability is everywhere and this festival celebrates that fact like no other.' The organisers' mantra is that disabled people are not second rate, so a 'disabled' film festival should not feature second-rate cinema. The Other Film Festival certainly accomplishes that.

*The Other Film Festival is on in Melbourne until 7 September. [www.otherfilmfestival.com](http://www.otherfilmfestival.com)*

## Zimbabwe youth survive jungle of doubt

### COMMUNITY

*Peter Hodge*

Zimbabwean names often reflect the mood or reaction of a family to the arrival of the new member. At a rural mission school in Matabeleland I taught Blessing, Immaculate, Charity and Unique Faith. But Penniless Ngwenya was the best and brightest of my students, the one most likely to graduate from university and lead her family from the teeming townships of Bulawayo to the relative comforts of a middle-class suburb.



I once played the Billy Joel song, 'River of Dreams', to my senior students. It seemed to capture all of the hopes, doubts and anxiety of a generation determined to take advantage of their window of opportunity. After all, barely a decade ago, Zimbabwe was flying.

Sure, thanks in part to the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program, there was a mounting debt problem, and Robert Mugabe seemed welded to his presidential palace, even then. But, superficially at least, there were numerous positive signs.

The state-run press media had lost its monopoly, and independent newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail*, were thriving. With tremendous natural assets like Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe had become a tourist mecca. It was safe and had infrastructure the envy of the rest of the continent.

Investment dollars were pouring in and a stock exchange had opened. Optimism that, in tandem with the newly liberated 'rainbow nation' to the south, Zimbabwe could drive development for southern Africa, seemed justified.

Penniless achieved a strong A-Level score and was offered a place in the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare. It wasn't what she wanted, but a passport to a better life nevertheless. Penny wrote to me before going to university and included a poem she had composed in her second year of high school. The final verse:

*Lonely, desperate, hungry,  
Angry and in sorrow  
Hoping for a better tomorrow  
The poor man's daughter  
She clutches her sack of books  
Makes her way to the classroom*

*There, it all disappears*

*The loneliness, desperation, hunger and anger*

*The wise words are uttered*

*Her troubled mind is dismissed*

*With it all the poor man's daughter will be as good as any.*

For me, the saddest aspect of Zimbabwe's disintegration is the shattered aspirations of Zimbabwe's youth, for whom the 'valley of fear' must seem endless, the 'jungle of doubt' impenetrable. There are few jobs waiting for them, even if they do graduate. In the age of hyperinflation many of those who have jobs find that the cost of getting to work exceeds their meagre salary.

Survival is the imperative for all but the well-connected. Given the recent anti-immigrant riots in South Africa, even an illegal and often dangerous border crossing (a route already taken by hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans) seems less of an option.

Zimbabwe's youth have been abandoned by the majority of their leaders, by their African brothers and sisters and the broader international community. They are more likely to be brutalised in one of Mugabe's notorious youth camps than find their way to university.

Western nations will not intervene — there is no pressing interest — and the ideals expressed in the Constitutive Act of the African Union are mere window dressing. It would be rank hypocrisy for most African leaders to press Mugabe to hold free and fair elections. Sadly, Mugabe is right. In Africa the gun is mightier than the pen.

We cannot comprehend the collapse of countries like Zimbabwe because too few of us in the first world remember a past that continues to reverberate in the present.

Too few of us understand the bilateral and multilateral (World Bank, IMF, WTO) forces that, far from reducing poverty in Africa, have quite often ensured that poverty would not be alleviated, that healthy civil societies and democracies would not flourish, that familiar power structures within countries and between African countries and the West would be preserved.

Similarly, too few of us remember that Mugabe has always been a thug. Perhaps because Zimbabwe was an important frontline state in the struggle against apartheid, we forgot the atrocities in Matabeleland in the mid 80s, and rarely did we explore the rumours that have always surrounded Mugabe's rise to power in ZANU.

All this forgetfulness contributed to the disproportionate media focus on the plight of white farmers when the first land invasions took place in 2000. This was always an alarming sideshow. The main game for Mugabe then, as now, was staying in power. The president's main enemy then, as now, was the growing number of Zimbabwean people willing to vote

him out of office.

It became important to me to learn how Penny was coping in the current crisis. Internet search engines are amazing things. I discovered that Penny graduated from UZ with Honours and was recruited by the Cotton Company of Zimbabwe. She was promoted and her wedding was reported in the company newsletter.

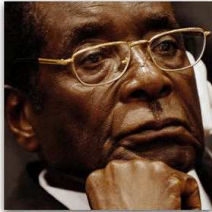
Soon after she left the company and there the trail goes cold. I would like to think she moved on to better things, fully cognisant that few people in Zimbabwe have moved on to better things.



## 'Stalinist' Mugabe won't go without a fight

### POLITICS

*Peter Roebuck*



Retirement, illness, death, coups, flight, defeat — all have been mooted as causes of Robert Mugabe's imminent departure and all have been wrong. Some optimists even convince themselves that he will withdraw voluntarily. But the old rogue is not going anywhere except in a box or at the end of a gun.

He dare not because he has much blood on his hands and cannot trust anyone. Also he has an unabated lust for power. In his eyes elections are a charade put on to appease the West, to be ignored when the results are inconvenient. He will leave only when convinced it is his last remaining option.

Even the talks are fake. Mugabe is playing for time while trying to placate African leaders whose support is waning. He is just going through the motions. Meanwhile he has opened Parliament; outlined policies, attacked the West, added to his vast wealth and perchance built another spectacularly tasteless retirement home.

Not bad for a leader so discredited it took his vote riggers two months to get his tally up to 43 per cent.

But still Zimbabweans cling to hope. And audacity is rising. Far and away the most startling development in recent weeks has been the jeering of Mugabe amid all the pomp and ceremony of the opening of Parliament. Emboldened by the election the previous day of their candidate for the Speaker's chair, opposition loyalists heckled as Mugabe delivered his absurd address.

It made him seem a shrunken figure ripe for the satire of a latter-day Chaplin. He had arrived in a vintage Rolls Royce.

A million Zimbabweans driven from their hopes by thugs, despair or hunger watched from distant shacks and cheered. But they know his cunning. Already the loathed dictator has tried to restore his majority by persuading Arthur Matambara, the quisling leader of a breakaway MDC faction, to take his side.

Matambara signed a deal that gave him importance but not power, but it was overturned by principled members of his faction. Morgan Tsvangarai was not so easily swayed.

Undeterred, the government has arrested several opposition MPs on trumped up charges. Soon a by-election must be held and already the constituency has been declared a no-go area. The fix is in.

Encouragingly, this devious demagogue has lost his grip on the continent he once dominated. African trades unions have staged protests, workers have refused to unload ships bearing Chinese arms, legitimately elected presidents from Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia have broken ranks to condemn him.

The mighty President of Liberia voiced her concerns and pointed out that 'Africa is not poor, merely poorly managed'. Moreover Thabo Mbeki has been ousted as leader of the ANC, and his replacement is much less accommodating. Yet the booing took the matter further for the insult was direct.

Mugabe will fight to the bitter end, and is prepared to take an entire nation down with him. Already Zimbabwe has paid a terrible price for his clinging to office. When his position has been under threat he has always been vile and violent.

For a few years, between the Zapu massacre and the suppression of the MDC, he was unchallenged and able to masquerade as a caring leader. He was protected by security forces who were enriched with diamonds from a war in the Congo fought for that very purpose. He did not need to snarl or rig.

But the oppressor remained within. A friendless bookworm as a child, he has always been full of hate ...

Mugabe is not to be underestimated. He is adept at dictating the terms of every argument and at shifting blame to others. In the past it has been the colonialists and now it is his last cabinet.

But he is worried because Africa is deserting him. Eventually local intellectuals and genuine liberators realised that he was malign. His own people detested him. The white man's foe was no friend of the common man. He is a force of destruction unleashed upon a tolerant nation

Not that it is over. Dictators do not leave with a shrug. Sensing isolation, scared of being humiliated, and still uttering vapid rhetoric about 'insidious foreign hands' hell-bent on destroying 'my Zimbabwe', he has lowered himself to talking to his opponents. Optimists say everything has been agreed except the distribution of power. But that was the only serious issue.

Mugabe will not concede anything until he has been cornered. He has always been the same: cunning, callous, spiteful, dictatorial, ugly.

Everything is a tactic. Mugabe complains about 'counter-revolutionaries', protests about supposed sanctions, condemns the opposition party as a stooge of anti-colonial forces and raises the land issue in a last ditch attempt to appeal to African sentiment. He wants to distract attention from the suffering he has caused. He knows people are starving but does not care.

It is all a lie. Zimbabwe has become a feudal country by government decree. Despite his rhetoric Mugabe is not a liberator but a Stalinist sustained by a lust for power. He believes not in country but in State, cares not about his people but himself.

He knew the farm invasions would cause shortages and knew also that international agencies would rush in with aid. Ministers laughed about it. Food could be used as a weapon in elections, a weapon almost as valuable as the duped and drugged youths paid to torture opponents.

No good will come of the talks. Any agreement will be broken. Zanu has been consumed by Mugabe's evil. It is not sensible to trust a snake, let alone an entire den of vipers.

## **A taste for sainted meat**

POETRY

*Grant Fraser*

### **Four poems about Francis of Assisi**

#### **1. Sistered by Death**

For some there are vanities that rise up as rags,  
And declare their holy poverty to the world;  
For others, language is a dazzling vestment  
Worn close to the skin;  
But you, Francis, kept your words and your poverty  
At a sacred distance, so that in each dawn,  
You could rise like a swimmer  
And breach the water afresh,  
Hair bubbling with curls.  
And thus, in the time that you made your own,  
You could seek the light of life in a swaying viper's eyes,  
Know that in the curving of a thorn  
Begins the poem of the rose,  
And hear amongst the best of birdsong  
A small motet of crows.  
In all that you astounded, so you confounded,  
Until, at the end, you lay down upon the earth,  
And, sistered by death, simply shed your life,  
Lay inert,  
Espoused to dust,  
As quiet as lightning.

#### **2. St Francis and the Leper's kiss**

And oh the Leper waits within the silence of a child;  
The dulled edges of his universe are like a balm of air:  
he is unstung by any frost, indifferent to all crackling fire.  
And Francis comes, a pale faced young man,  
Head roughly shaved, down at heel.  
He bears a Demon on his back  
which breathes a fog into Francis' eyes,  
Burdens him,  
Hobbles his knees, stoops his heart.  
The Demon has the face of a saint.  
The Leper reaches for his bell,  
But as the young man approaches  
A great sigh comes from him,  
And, rising up from his stooped demeanour,  
He flings the Demon from his back  
And sheds the shining carapace  
Which falls like a cloak to the ground.  
And Francis, older than he first appeared,  
His pale face coursed by time, leans to the Leper,  
And reaching his arm about the shoulders of the Leper,  
Pauses to look closely into his face,  
Then kisses his proffered cheek,  
Its grey meticulous skin.

### **3. The Falling**

When you fell from the grace of the world  
You were lost to its cool linens,  
Its glamour of steel,

Its ancestries of faith and hope,  
And its promises of death made comfortable  
In ossuaries of patterned bones.  
When you fell, at the first, you were undone:  
You were a moth inside a bell  
Soundlessly dusting the bronze,  
A worm on stone  
Yawning convulsions to the sun.  
Then you fell into  
The yield of your life  
And began to bell the sounds  
Of all those stranger words  
That shimmer within the grammar of Christ:  
To love beyond reckoning,  
To forgive audaciously,  
To make of poverty an act of grace.

#### **4. Saint Francis and the Wolves**

Saint Francis had a particular affection for wolves,  
Even though the wolves themselves would sometimes meet  
To plot his savage demise.  
But catching him unaware was difficult,  
For even when his back was turned,  
He could hear the faintest footfall of a wolf,  
Even in snow.  
They knew that could not snare him in his sleep,  
For an angel lay by his side when Francis was in repose,  
And, even though the angel, too, appeared to sleep,



There was a faintness about his wings that made them tremble.

They named the Angel Doomspike.

So, the wolves called a meeting with the Saint,

And, the Saint came alone and stood, deep within a forest,

Amongst a whole convocation of wolves.

Francis was mild even as the wolves encircled him,

Their yellow eyes bulging.

He had guessed their intent, 'I am poor meat for such proud wolves'

'You'll do!' said the head wolf;

'To kill is a sin' said the Saint;

'Not for us.' said the head wolf 'For us it's a living!'

'Have you tried fruit?' said Francis.

'Nothing to it that crackles and tears in the jaw!' said the head wolf.

'I will bake you bread.' Said the Saint

'We have smelt bread' said the head wolf

'It is nothing but air warmed and crusted,

Entirely wrong for wolves.' And the thronged wolves

Began to close on the Saint.

But one young wolf spoke up

'I'd like to try the fruit and bread'

— for he admired the fact the Saint had come alone

Without knotted cudgels and firebrands

And not a whiff of Doomspike —

The head wolf, who was truly developing a taste for sainted meat,

Turned on the young wolf, leapt upon him,

And tore the throat from his living body.

The Saint said nothing, but moved slowly forward,

Bent down, and laid the tips of his fingers across  
The head of the dead wolf.  
A ferocious snarl rose among the wolves,  
But even as they snarled they began to look, one to the other,  
And slowly, in piecemeal fashion,  
All of them fell silent,  
And they turned and skulked off, round-shouldered,  
Heads down, tails dragging like lead behind them.

## Unequal pay favours 'white-collar chums'

### COMMUNITY

*Robert Salter*

It's widely believed that well-educated people in responsible positions should be paid more. But pay inequality, as the major cause of general inequality, generates significant social costs. It is vital to understand these costs and to scrutinise justifications for inequality.



Let's consider costs first. Pay inequality often means low-income people cannot afford necessities like housing, education and healthcare. It can prevent them from developing their talents, and means their children are also worse off. It reduces spending power, and thus economic prosperity, in their communities. This is clearly unjust.

It's also inefficient. Money allocated to low-income earners usually makes more of a difference and thus produces more wellbeing and happiness. It stimulates economies because it's more likely to be spent. Conversely, poor pay for the lower-paid can adversely affect whole economies — witness the American sub-prime mortgage crisis.

Furthermore, pay inequality combines with and reinforces social and political inequality. The wealthy, with more education, more influence, and more media and lobbying power, use this to advance their economic interests. This in turn increases their political and social power. The cycle of inequality expands.

Income produces positional, as well as material, benefits. This allows us to surpass the Joneses and feel superior. But the Joneses in turn may feel like failures and turn to drink, gambling, violence or crime.

A highly unequal society is a divided one. The poor resent the rich for their wealth, while the rich disparage the poor to rationalise their privilege. There's more crime, communities feel unsafe and cooperation is harder.

Finally, unequal societies must rely on permanently high economic growth to lift the poor out of poverty. However, such growth generates environmental costs from the ever-increasing consumption by the affluent.

What, then, are pay inequality's justifications?

Economic libertarians argue that people entering into legal and voluntary agreements are entitled to keep any income or wealth they gain. They say depriving them of it through taxation or wage regulation compromises this principle. This ignores advantages people may start with — talent, education, connections and family wealth. It also ignores imperatives to

save the planet and meet basic needs.

It's argued that people should be compensated for getting educated. Because education is more unpleasant than work? Hardly. Because education costs money and earnings are foregone? Calculated over a lifetime, incomes of the well-educated compensate them many times over for such costs. They often get substantial parental help with them anyway.

Some contend that people should be compensated for the stress of responsibility. However, studies show that lower paid workers have more stress and illness. Probably because their jobs are more boring, dirty, dangerous, arduous, low-status and powerless. Perhaps we should compensate them, rather than compensating managers and professionals for interesting, varied, high-status work.

Finally, it's argued that the best outcomes are achieved by leaving income levels 'to the market'. Supply comes to equal demand, incentives promote hard work and productivity, and the economic cake keeps expanding.

In this regard, there are two models Australia can follow: the market-driven American model, and Europe's 'social economy'.

Neoliberals portray Europe as an economic failure. They point to its high unemployment, slow growth, lower living standards, high taxes, bloated welfare systems and sclerotic bureaucracy.

But Europe has much more evenly distributed income and wealth than the US. It also has less poverty, higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality, better healthcare, a stronger social safety net, fewer homicides, less imprisonment, a far smaller ecological footprint, shorter working hours, longer holidays and more family-friendly working conditions.

Between 1950 and 2000 Europe's productivity grew about 70 per cent faster than America's. It is now almost on par (and higher in six countries). European unemployment is currently only 1 per cent higher than America's (which is artificially lowered by an enormous prison population: 2.2 million).

Europe's incomes are still only 72 per cent of America's, but three-quarters of this is attributable to shorter hours (a legitimate trade-off). Also, the US average masks huge income differences with stagnant incomes at lower levels.

So Europe is thriving, and many see this century as Europe's era, with success flowing from an educated, secure, fairly paid workforce.

Arguments for income inequality may just be rationalising a system in which well-paid people set pay levels favouring their white-collar chums. If so, it must be challenged.

## Pieces of Terry

### REFLECTION

David Bunn

*Terry Monagle, 12 August 1946 – 10 July 2008*



Terry emailed me from hospital to make sure I knew about the movie *Lacombe Lucien* because of a story I'm researching. Immediately I remembered Django Reinhardt's French jazz on the soundtrack and the Citroen 'traction avant' — the one with backward opening doors used by the Germans Occupiers in the movie.

When I said this Terry replied that he'd always liked the model although many regarded its engine with disdain. His knowledge of cars surprised me but not his interest in my project despite his own troubles. Now his voice will blend with Django as I read the Resistance.

Terry can't have long. He told me so himself a fortnight ago. It's only two months ago that Graham drove him from another hospital and John filled the table with Italian food, and the group talked about Virgil. Terry refers to the meal as the good old days — when he could eat and drink and read the *Aeneid*. He was in strife then even though they let him out for dinner with us.

Today Eileen, Terry's wife, let us know he's nearing the end. I bought coffee and joked with the waitress. Terry even then was entering his last hours, and I think of the day my daughter's mother closed silently on death while I quarrelled with the kid and did her hair and hurried her to see her mother.

When a group of friends met for a meal at the end of 2003 I was early and so was Terry. I told him about the book group — finished *Ulysses*, onto Proust — and how we aimed to read every great text before we died.

When everyone arrived Terry told us he had advanced cancer of the prostate. He was hoping to reach October 2004, ten months later, to see his first grandchild who would be born by then in Baltimore. He was interested in joining the group which had three volumes of Proust to go. It seemed like it would be a close run thing.

Terry's first group gathering was for *Sodom and Gomorrah* and I read a passage aloud which still has a marker in it: '[F]rom the black storm through which we seem to have passed (but we do not even say we) we emerge lying prostrate, without any thoughts.'

Earlier Proust imagines waking as a caveman and putting himself together little by little and this quote connects to that theme. But wait — how are we lying when we emerge from

sleep? Prostate of course; not 'prostrate', no.

When Terry woke at three in the morning in the air-conditioner hiss did he piece himself together little by little or did he wake at once knowing instantly that he was the bloke with cancer racing through him? Outside his hospital window Parkville spread out like a toy town and the easements for the night soil men are leafy laneways. He should be out there in silent air, even with a bucket of shit on his shoulder; that would fucking do.

By the end of 2004 we had finished Proust. Terry's grand-daughter had arrived and he'd been to America and back and we talked about Cervantes. That was the night I convinced myself that the novel is fundamentally humanist and took off on a flight of eloquence. If the Blessed Virgin had appeared to Sancho Panza in a grotto in La Mancha Cervantes would have rendered it with the same corrosive earthiness that he uses for everything.

Terry put up with my atheism with kind forbearance; as though he thought my beliefs entirely natural — for me.

Rosanne, who's my wife, imagines a competition in which the prize is dinner with anyone you chose. Dylan or Peter Cundell I thought — but no I want to talk and eat and drink till all hours around the kitchen table in Umbria with the blokes from the book group and our wives; comparing Homer with Virgil and stacking them both against Proust.

Terry may have other business — at his book launch I realised that for all our intimacy with him the book group was a mere fraction of his world.

As he faces death in his book *Claws of Fire* he explores a relationship with a bloke like Christ and there is also nature mysticism, often about the country near Taradale where he and Eileen have a place. In one piece Terry walks into the Garden at Gethsemane where Jesus is praying alone. The disciples are asleep on the ground but Terry watches with him and prays and is then sent off to his own Calvary.

Christ said to his disciples — can you not watch with me? But they slept; like the night I slept at home while Susanne struggled for her life in hospital because I had the kids to look after. And now I try not to make the same mistake with Terry. I keep him in mind and remember my father going — his matter-of-fact silent submission to what must happen; and imagine Terry in the midst of that same task.

Years before the book group got started Terry wrote 'what would it be like to see the world without faith?' and I responded:

*Once you felt that tearing off your shirt / would be enough to let transcendence in, / but wherever glory ends, it starts from you. / Air touches skin and radiance ensues.*

## Economic logic will protect Fairfax quality

MEDIA

*Chris McGillion*

When Fairfax Media announced the latest round of job cuts across its mastheads last week it was inevitable that howls of protest would go up about the threat to quality journalism in Australia.

Some of those making the most noise, of course, were Fairfax journalists. Last Thursday they voted to go on strike because, as Chris Warren from the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance — the journalists' union — explained, they felt that job cuts were a knee-jerk reaction by management to falling revenues.

But Warren added that Fairfax staff also felt a 'deep frustration at the failure of the company to clearly articulate the strategy it has to continue to produce quality newspapers, magazines and websites with significantly fewer staff'.

While journalists by and large do take their profession seriously — as they should — there is at least an element of self-interest in this. What better way to wrest concessions from your employer in redundancy negotiations than to cloak your case in public virtue?

And who better to define for the public where virtue lies than journalists?

Other alarms about the future of quality journalism have been expressed by readers of Fairfax publications. But these same people have been complaining about falling standards at newspapers such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* for at least as long as I can remember — and I started working there in 1983.

The cumulative effect of the drip, drip of Chinese water torture should not be taken for granted. But as someone who has accessed newspapers from around the world on a regular basis for years, I still regard our daily broadsheets as among the very best in terms of that old adage that a good metropolitan paper is a city talking to itself.

If our communal conversation has deteriorated over the years, why blame our newspapers?

None of that is to dismiss out of hand the concerns about this latest twist in Fairfax's fortunes. But before we all get carried away by prophecies of doom and gloom a few realities should inform the discussion.

First, the days of individual proprietors with deep pockets funding newspapers as a hobby-horse are long gone. Aside from the ABC, all media organisations in Australia are commercial operations and that means they have to be able to survive commercially. Even Rupert Murdoch has to answer to his shareholders.





Second, and inexorably tied to the first, is the fact that newspaper circulation is falling and, more importantly, advertising revenue is in sharp decline as other, more effective, ways are being found to separate consumers from their money.

Third, technological advances have created new opportunities for economies of scale in newspaper production. Fairfax, for instance, has a swag of suburban newspapers each with its own individual subs desks: in an age when copy can be sent across town (or across the world) almost instantaneously, doesn't it make more sense to rationalise subbing and lay-out functions in a smaller, centralised and more work-intensive pool?

I believe that 'quality journalism' will still be a defining characteristic of Fairfax publications not only 12 months from now but 12 years — and several more redundancies — from now.

Why? Because the very same commercial imperatives that require periodic adjustments to market realities also demand that corporate managers do not trash the 'brand'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Financial Review* are respected brands because they contain quality reporters and commentators. Get rid of them and you cut off your nose to spite your face. Or, in the vernacular of the trade, you lose your market edge.

But in the new commercial environment of free internet news, mobile phone downloads on demand, and 'interactive news' (or what is grandly called 'citizen journalism'), those of us who desire more quality coverage from learned and experienced journalists will have to get used to paying a realistic cover price for the production costs. (Suggest that to all those readers who complain about falling standards and you will learn what a howl of protest can truly mean!)

Part of this, and part of the harsh reality of the current commercial imperatives, means that there will be more scope for niche publications such as *Eureka Street*. Is that a bad thing?

But beyond this, Fairfax's latest decision to cut jobs means that, more than ever, the standard in investigative and in-depth reporting — the test of the 'brand' — must be set by the one mass, non-commercial operator. This is the ABC.

And that, in turn, means that we as taxpayers must accept — indeed demand — adequate Federal funding for the ABC combined with guarantees of its editorial independence.