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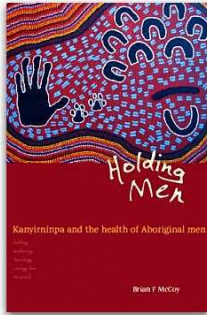
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Sharing of wisdom under the Boab tree

BOOK FORUM

Chris Laming



McCoy, Brian, *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal Men*, Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, RRP \$34.95. ISBN: 978 0 85575 658 1

In *Holding Men*, McCoy explores issues central to the Indigenous men of the Western Desert region. Issues of masculinity, of grief, of illness, and how these relate to *kanyirninpa* (holding, nurturing, teaching, growing-up, respect). Though specifically about that region, *Holding Men* has crucial implications for the whole of Australia.

For nearly forty years Brian McCoy has lived and worked with Indigenous communities, mostly in the Western Desert and from this depth of experience and from his PhD research into the health and well-being of Aboriginal men, comes this extraordinary book.

It is a book about an ancient culture and its people, trying in their own way, to survive in 21st century Australia. Rigorously researched yet simply written, it challenges us with human stories of heart-breaking enormity whilst reflecting a quiet hope in resilience and healing of *kanyirninpa*.

There are many profound insights in this book, which come from years of respectful relationships and deep reflection. *Kanyirninpa* points a way forward, a way out of the nightmarish day-to-day tragedies of disease and ill-health among Indigenous Australians, because it involves 'a proper looking after'.

The Indigenous artwork adds to these insights. It is riveting, confronting and evocative, with many paintings graphically illustrating the stories of young Aboriginal men and the spaces they find themselves in.

Three chapters in particular, situate serious current issues for Indigenous communities, particularly men, within the embrace of *kanyirninpa*: 'Petrol sniffing: More than a risk'; 'Football: More than a game'; 'Prison: more than a holiday'. As McCoy puts it: 'From the perspective of *kanyirninpa* these socially significant spaces (petrol sniffing, Australian Rules and prison) can offer men both healthy outcomes and unhealthy risks'. My own meaning making around those 'spaces' was deeply challenged and enriched with constructive alternatives.

The key *Puntu* (Aboriginal) values, of *ngarra* (land), *walytja* (family) and *tjukurrpa* (ancestral dreaming) are represented as 'continually dynamic and inter-relating' and *kanyirninpa* provides the balance for creative tension between relatedness and autonomy on the

one hand and nurturance and authority on the other. McCoy manages to maintain a similar balance in his book.

Juxtaposed with his deeply sensitive, respectful, inculturated research—in the tradition of de Nobili or Matteo Ricci—are McCoy's empathy and compassion for those affected by the personal tragedies associated with petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, a prison sentence or premature death.

McCoy's insights are profound and he is able to articulate them in a very clear way. His rolling narrative at times has the feel of a foreign correspondent in a battle zone. This is a silent 'battle zone', and arguably the most important moral battle ground in Australia today.

Holding Men is also a challenging resource for policy makers in the area of Indigenous health and well-being, precisely because it is the antithesis of armchair philosophising and moralising. It is deeply respectful and mindful (and heartfelt) of traditional values and customs (for example, 'Sorry Business') and offers a key to understanding the links between life and death, mourning and celebration, health and disease, for Western Desert Indigenous people.

McCoy manages to move through this difficult terrain with the sure-footedness of an ancient Aboriginal tracker and a confidence founded on years of sitting, listening, observing and quietly healing. Reading the book is at times, like sitting in on a conversation under a boab tree. Brian McCoy is a healer who carries his wisdom quietly. The ethical dilemmas and questions are addressed with integrity, humanity, respect and truthfulness, with no attempt at glib answers.

This is an important book, written in a lucid thoughtful way that leads us step by step through what is, for most of us, foreign land on Australian soil. In particular *Holding Men* lets us feel the plight of Indigenous boys and young men, no longer being held by the land, by their elders, more and more autonomous and in physical and psychological peril, adrift from their traditions, lands and culture.

Holding Men is about being wounded. It is also about being resilient, and it offers the possibility or hope of building that resilience in others, both individually and in community, through *kanyirninpa* .

The Spirit of Christmas is fully alive and well in *Holding Men* .

The human cost of ideology

THEOLOGY

Andrew Hamilton

Many economists have proclaimed that the ideology of neoliberalism is dead. The collapse of the markets has done for it what the fall of the Berlin Wall did for Marxism.



Although true believers remain, they will be able to persuade few people that, left to themselves, markets will work efficiently, that they can be trusted to regulate themselves, or that high executive salaries are a reward for competence rather than greed.

The unmasking of a once regnant ideology and of the damage that its followers did to the common good is good news. But it might make us also ask how we can recognise ideologies that have gone sour. For Christians this is a pressing task, because religions are often regarded as harmful ideologies.

Some critics, including theologians, see ideologies as always harmful. They are by definition bad views of the world. I prefer to describe them more neutrally. Ideologies are theories about the human world that command practical human responses. By this description, religions are ideologies because they offer a set of beliefs about the world that lead people, for example, to pray, to gather and to give alms. Marxism, National Socialism and Neoliberalism are also ideologies. The latter offers a view of human economic activity which dictates that government officials refrain from regulating it.

Because ideologies are based on beliefs about the human world, they necessarily include assumptions about what makes for human welfare and happiness and so about how we can expect people to act. Neoliberalism assumes that in the market the actors are individuals, not communities, and that they seek to increase their wealth. Wealth expands the life choices individuals can make, and so their happiness. Therefore they should be allowed to engage in the market free from constraint.

Ideologies are interesting as long as they are self-critical and are pushed to justify their presuppositions. They turn sour when they cease to reflect on the truth of the assumptions they make about human life. Their advocates will then regard these large questions as idle. They will focus on technical questions about how to organise and administer financial structures in ways that reflect the unconsidered assumptions they make about human life. The ideology is then vulnerable to whatever fantasies vitiate its assumptions. Marxism collapsed because the centralisation of power in the party, dictated by theory, contributed neither to human prosperity nor freedom. It fostered unhappiness .

Neoliberalism failed to take account of the importance of relationships in human activity. It ignored particularly the importance of trust and of the conditions that nurture it. It therefore disregarded the power of greed to destroy the trust that is essential if markets are to work. Its assumptions about human life were jejune.

There are a few signs that indicate when ideologies are losing contact with their human centre. The light flashes red when any ideology claims to be a science. Certainly, all accounts of human activity will use mathematical and scientific analysis to develop their view of the world and the behaviour that it mandates. It is appropriate to use elaborate mathematical models to reflect on economic policy. But the complexity of such modelling can lend its conclusions a spurious authority that distracts from the doubtful assumptions made about human values.

An associated sign that ideologies are becoming sour is that they are associated with centres of power in government or society. As ideologies pretend to scientific status, they require great resources to sustain them. The more resources are made available, the more the ideology will be subtly shaped to reflect and further the interests of those who make them available. As ideologies become useful to the powerful, they entrench themselves in the media and in the intellectual formation of those who enter their disciplines. Their assumptions remain unquestioned.

The sign that an ideology has gone rancid is that its advocates conceive conversation about its inadequacies as irrational, and respond to criticism with abuse and misrepresentation. The human poverty of their assumptions then becomes evident in the behaviour of their followers.

All ideologies, including religions, can rot. They can neglect the view of the human world on which they are based and focus simply on implementing the consequences of their ideas. They can ally themselves with centres of power that distracts them from the vital conversation about human life.

When this happens the costs in human misery are great. But it doesn't have to be this way. If we insist that conversation should turn to what is important, to what matters to human beings, theories can be nurtured and disciplined so they are not easily corrupted.

A Gen X view of Obama as fiction

POLITICS

Bronwyn Lay



When I first saw Obama on the Internet I wiped away my tears and thanked God no one was in the room. Why did I cry? Perhaps I was so bereft of optimism that the smallest amount moved me. I was hungry for hope and his words felt like cool water pouring over a parched world.

One of the reasons Obama's rhetoric sparked my attention was because of the experiences of my generation, Gen X.

For some, if not all of us, world affairs affect our soul in ways we are not always aware of. This is where epic literature springs from—the connections and disconnections between the inner life and the polis. Many in my generation were born to optimistic parents who survived or instigated the social revolution of the 1960s. The disconnect between what our parents told us was possible and the 'reality' that blasted from the media and in our daily life was like daily shock therapy and from an early age we were immediately suspicious of anyone who told us it was a wonderful world.

The possibility of nuclear winters loomed over our birth and youth. Then Reagan and Thatcher came along and there was no-one to hang our youthful hopes upon. In adolescence the Berlin Wall fell—an ecstatic, even hopeful historical event—but imagine the confusion when our left wing parents cry with joy as each brick is passed down the line. That was it. But the hard left was dead and its fans were completely, and understandably, relieved. There were no good guys and bad guys anymore.

Then, as young adults, the media told us we were pathetic, apathetic, cynical, spoiled and apolitical. They branded us a whinging generation who harboured poisonous resentments and were not liable to contribute to the wider social discourse. This doesn't make you confident your small voice will ripple through the polis with authority.

Some of us marched off to University thinking that's where the action was; only to be told that there would be no more discourse because the great ideological battles had been fought and won. History was finished. Capitalism had triumphed and there was no bit of revolutionary activity or new thought that would stop its reign. Fukuyama told us that from here on in there were only 'events', not history and this was confirmed by the rest of the curriculum. Everything was post: post-feminism, post-modernism, post-Marxism, as if new thought had to be tacked onto its predecessors to give it any credit.

After the hard right, the bland triumphed. It felt like a certain kind of capitalism, a certain

kind of man, a certain kind of ideology (that pretends it's not an ideology) had prevailed and was permanent so we might as well take up bats and balls and exit from world history. No wonder our inner life felt depleted and starved.

And it got worse. Along came Howard and Bush; countries and worlds were divided. Wars that felt intuitively wrong were launched on the basis of 'foolproof intelligence'. We tried to march against it: join the masses and let our voice be heard.

What happened? What was once centrist became a horror show. The binaries were back, with Muslims the new ghoul. 'Events' like Guantanamo Bay, detention camps and Abu Ghraib flashed on our screens nightly. It seemed nothing would stop this world from descending into a Hobbesian mess; life seemed solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

But the bitterness obviously hadn't hardened because an event came up on the horizon, lead by Oprah Winfrey and good old-fashioned American values—Obama - delivered by TV screens and Youtube.

Obama talked about faulty intelligence, dependence on oil, renewable energy, grassroots consultations, and how politics had become small and bitter. He talked about the power of diplomacy, and education and health care in a way that made me listen and believe he might just do something about it.

Obama says nothing new. Half of it is regurgitated from my parents' generation and it still feels like spin; but he knows that the world, not just America, is thirsty for words like change and hope. In true 'post' style I found reasons not to like Obama, to distrust him and to reject the sentimentalism that often marks US rhetorical style. But I still hoped like hell that justice, including a mature comprehension of its nebulous difficulties, was central to his ambition and that my cynicism would be proven wrong.

David Foster Wallace wrote about the act of reading fiction: 'This is nourishing: redemptive, we become less alone inside'. I dare not speculate on what he would have thought about an Obama victory. But on the day Obama was elected many of us felt nourished, redeemed and less alone.

Raised by television my generation learnt to distrust semiotics, so naturally I'm waiting to be told that Obama is a mirage. It's all too good to be true, we say. Good men don't get into power. How sad that our hope is contained; experience shows that a marketing horror show always lurks in the backstory. Obama's term will be tested like none other in our lifetime. Declining American global power, an economy in tailspin, giant debts, global warming, a healthcare system in its death throes and overextended military commitments lie before him like a nightmare. A healthy democracy keeps its leaders on their toes, but I fear Obama faces insurmountable hurdles.

But for now it's celebration time. I never would have thought I'd see a man with a name like Barack Hussein Obama become president of the United States. Following Fukuyama's theory, the election of Obama may only be an 'event', rather than being central to the great clash of ideas: but it feels like history. If you see some Generation Xs out there in the street, smiling like drunk cats, forgive them their madness—it's been a long time coming. We are letting our inner lives blend with the polis—all the way from a small village in Kenya to the biggest cities of America. We know it might all be fiction but like fiction; it makes us feel less alone inside.

Obama's victory for the art of the possible

POLITICS

Jim McDermott

On Tuesday night here in the USA, Senator Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan economist and a white American anthropologist, was elected the 44th President of the United States. In every way, from fund raising to strategy to message, his campaign has defied expectations and torn down walls. He is the first African American to be elected president, an unparalleled achievement for this country that, much like Australia, has long struggled to move beyond its history of racism and prejudice. And Obama did it without ever making the election a referendum on race.



He also scoffed at the conventional wisdom that to win an election, one 'microtargets' specific states and districts within states, placing all one of one's campaign efforts there. While Clinton and McCain both ran such campaigns, Obama ran a 50 state strategy, travelling and committing resources not only to places he might be able to win but places where Democrats had not set foot in a generation. His rationale, as his campaign strategist David Axelrod put it early in the evening, was that 'Sen. Obama wanted to be president of all 50 states, even those who disagree with him.'

So in his speech Obama extended his hand to his those who did not support him, saying, 'I may not have won your vote tonight, but I hear your voices. I need your help. And I will be your president, too.' In the light of the last eight years, in which one party fundamentally dismissed not only the concerns but the voices of the other, a truly remarkable statement.

Also in the face of the Clinton/McCain, baby boomer generation of politicians who tend to speak in terms of an 'us' battling a 'them' and in some cases use fear as a motivator, Obama spoke to what Abraham Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature,' his main themes social reconciliation, self-sacrifice and the shining 'audacity of hope'. Few of the politicians or pundits of the Clinton/McCain generation seem to appreciate or respect even now the deep reservoirs of yearning Obama's words have tapped into. As someone here said to me recently, 'I'm so tired of war. The war in Iraq, the war on terror, the culture wars — enough with wars.' Lacking that sense of the electorate's frustration with division and nastiness, both the massive Clinton political machine and the McCain campaign foundered.

Obama's campaign ran an astonishing 21 months, some 670 days. 45 debates were held in that time, and \$2.5 billion combined was spent by his campaign and all others. In his win he looks to have become the first Democrat to win at least 50% of the popular vote in over 30 years, and the first in even longer to win while his party also gained seats in the House of Representatives. (Estimates suggest the House Democrats will gain upwards of 25 seats, and

the Senate Democrats somewhere between 5 and 7.)

Now 2:30am, a few hours after the official announcement and Obama's acceptance speech, the occasional hoot of joy can still be heard on the streets. From the moment the final call was made the streets were filled with people, many of them young, wandering around with broad dazed smiles on their faces and cheering. In Times Square, at the White House and elsewhere around the country thousands of clapping, screaming, roaring people spontaneously poured in. The sense of relief and liberation, of chains being cast off, is palpable. When Obama spoke, all cheered. Some also wept.

It's been terribly hard these last eight years. It's the sense of powerlessness, not simply at world events, but of having been caught in a system that is doing terrible damage to the States, the world and our common future, and seeming to have no power to make it stop. Of watching American ideals abandoned, attacked as naïve, and replaced with a cold, cynical, dehumanising calculus. From a religious perspective, we've been living Good Friday, all our faith and dreams utterly compromised, and we left with nothing we can hope in. We were wrong; it can't get any better than this. Now just shut up and deal with it.

Standing amidst the euphoric crowds in Times Square, it was like we were all in a fairy tale, waking from a horrible dream. The witch is finally dead, the winter freeze is thawing and the world is slowly coming back to life again. Finally, a resurrection.

That's not to say the problems our world faces are no less large or scary because of who was elected president of the United States. But we've been reminded that more is possible than that which meets the eye; that we each can make a difference, and make this world a better place for everyone. Maybe that's the heart of the American dream — as Sen. Obama likes to say, 'Yes, we can.' And that dream is meant for all. As Barack Obama said tonight, speaking explicitly to the world community, 'Though our stories are singular, our destiny is shared.'

America electing a transformational president

POLITICS

Tony Kevin



'In just one week, you can give this country the change we need. You can do that ... all of us have to come together as one nation ... we must shed our fears and our doubts, we must choose hope over fear ... together we will change this country, and we will change the world.' —from Obama's '[closing arguments](#)' speech in Ohio one week ago, 27 October 2008.

Retrospective wisdom is that the plummeting US economy has made an Obama victory inevitable. But his lead over McCain remained puzzlingly narrow until into the final month, when it [solidified](#) to 5–8 per cent nationally.

So much could have gone wrong: the unquantifiable Bradley race factor; suspicions of Obama's exotic background, his youth, his radicalism; the incompetence and bias of some vote-counting systems in key states; the presumed stupidity and selfishness of much of the US electorate.

Obama campaigned tirelessly to overcome his strangeness, to make himself known and trustworthy to voters. Hilary Clinton's formidable challenge in primaries steeled him.

Obama's likely win will radicalise the American national agenda. To listen to his magnificent half-hour closing [oration](#) in Ohio is to encounter a politician in the Lincoln, Roosevelt and Kennedy class. After America's worst president, Obama may prove its greatest.

He calls for nothing less than a change in the American ethos: from self-love to caring for one another; from divisiveness to unity; from short-term consumerism to taking responsibility for the world of one's children and grandchildren.

His campaign oratory takes Americans back to barely remembered communal values, to a gentler nation, to the America of Steinbeck and Arthur Miller. The question he posed: could the US citizenry — labelled by many foreign observers as the most greedy, self-satisfied people in the world — embrace this radically challenging new vision of themselves?

Today, under pressure of frightening economic recession, Americans seem certain to have the grace and wisdom to do so.

Obama offers policy solutions that the Republicans could not. His message is that a major Roosevelt-style rebuilding of America's decayed infrastructure and hollowed-out economy is needed, a federally-funded transformation to a self-reliant, renewable-energy based economy that will cut greenhouse gas emissions and end dependence on Middle East oil.

He promises to use the tax system and Keynesian deficit funding boldly to restore public

health and education, to reward American entrepreneurship, to create new 'green' jobs in America, to penalise companies that export jobs, and thereby to rebuild public confidence and demand. He rejects the corporate-led globalisation model that has both taken too much of the world's wealth and also demoralised and impoverished the American working class.

This will be a presidency that puts the American people first, as did Roosevelt's during the great Depression.

It is a Christian vision, imbued with a sense of compassion and common purpose. Obama understands the need to rebuild world confidence in America, but knows that only by putting its own house in order on an ethical basis of loving one's neighbour, can America again inspire the world.

So now the hard work of change will begin: as President from January, can Obama wean Americans away from the bankrupt public values of the Bush years? And how much of his visionary program might be achievable? There will be powerful losers who will fight reform. Obama will need all his resolve and communicative skills to maintain credibility and momentum.

Despite obligatory pre-election national security tough language, I believe he will tread prudently in the Middle East. Moderating the national security culture's headkicking style, as taught by Rumsfeld and Cheney, will challenge Obama. He will need the support of clearheaded strategic contrarians, like Andrew Bacevich and Chalmers Johnson, to challenge entrenched unilateralist security doctrines.

We know he will not stake American lives in combat unless the national interest is supreme. He won't play risky wargames, and will wind back Bush's discredited war on terror. I predict he will be responsible on greenhouse gas emissions, but next year's climate conference in Copenhagen will test his administration's priorities and negotiating style.

To press health, education, infrastructure and renewable energy transformations, he will build pragmatic coalitions with efficient US state governors and responsible corporate leaders. The economic crisis opens the way to radical Keynesian deficit public spending.

For Australians as responsible international citizens, the victory is good and exciting. But in terms of traditional diplomatic currencies of national security and national interest, less so. For Obama has no reason to be particularly impressed by Australia.

We carry baggage. Howard strove for 11 years to lock Australia in as a dutifully dependent tributary state in Bush's aggressive American world order, and Rudd has not yet clearly distinguished his Australia from Howard's.

Australia's recent international agenda — pursuit of global free trade, pressing for US military-strategic engagement in Asia, an indecent enthusiasm to join Bush's worst military adventures abroad, aggressively promoting our coal, a tricky negotiating stance at Kyoto,

cruelty to boat refugees and terror suspects (Detainee 002 at Guantanamo isn't forgotten) — sit poorly with Obama's agenda and values.

We now pay for what Howard wrought. I fear that for Obama, Australia may still look much like the selfish conservative go-it-alone America which he wants to leave behind.

Obama's foreign policy will be more American-hemispheric, concerned to strengthen the Democratic power base through reaching out to Caribbean and Latino immigrant communities. World leaders wishing to engage Obama in their agendas will have to earn their place. Being Australian won't give Rudd a privileged status in dialogue. So it is good that Rudd has China connections to build on, because Australia will experience looser US links for a time.

Is Rudd smart and nimble enough to see that Obama's election should be an agenda-changing signal for Australia too? It's surely time for Rudd to get out from under Howard's policy shadow, to find his own ethical voice, better to share Obama's vision of a kinder, more decent world.

Ode to the white cuppa

NON-FICTION

Frank O'Shea

It started when she gave up sugar in her tea. They had been hearing for years that Australians eat too many sweet things and that sugar was bad for you and they should cut down on it. She didn't just cut down; she gave it up completely.



There was no suggestion that he should do the same, but his well-cultivated Catholic sense of guilt nagged him: he shouldn't be enjoying things while his wife was silently and uncomplainingly doing without. So he followed suit, and after a while — a long while — he didn't really notice.

Then came fat-free milk. She decided that was healthier, while he stubbornly stuck to the old-fashioned kind with hairs in it. Again there was no insinuation that he should follow the good example so unselfishly set, but the guilt and the daily reproach of drinking tea with someone who was cutting out all those triglycerides got to him and he, too, changed to the fat-free milk. It was only then he found out that it was dearer than the proper stuff.

Then she gave up milk in her tea altogether — probably after watching television footage of staggering cows in Britain or maybe it was something she read about anti-oxidants being destroyed by milk. He drew the line there, although he tried the occasional black cuppa while she wasn't looking: it tasted terrible.

Finally, she came back from the dentist and declared that she was giving up tea altogether. The dentist! He told her that all the tea she was drinking was colouring her teeth and if she didn't cut down, then nothing less than twice-daily rinsing with Domestos would get the white back. He also told her it was a diuretic (the tea, not the Domestos), and removed water from the system. So she gave up tea completely and now drinks only water.

Tea is one of the great contributions made to civilisation by the English race. It is true that they don't grow the stuff, and that tea drinking has almost liturgical significance in parts of the Eastern world, but as the rest of us understand it, tea-drinking, small finger delicately raised, is a quintessentially English habit.

That great English bore Samuel Johnson drank it in vast quantities, as recorded by his faithful Boswell who called it by sweet names, 'that elegant and popular beverage' or 'the infusion of that fragrant leaf' being two of his terms of endearment.

And you may recall Alexander Pope in the well-known couplet:

Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey

Dost sometimes counsel take — and sometimes tea.

(That, by the way, is a rhyming couplet, which excuses the poetic Irish for pronouncing it tay.)

The latest thing is that we are told the caffeine in tea is bad for us because it is addictive. After all, the argument goes, if they have decaffeinated coffee (which is little more than cleverly packaged turf dust) why not get scientists to make decaffeinated tea.

You know how science is going about it? They are taking down its genes and interfering with them — replacing one of the existing genes with something else, perhaps fish scales or tomato skins.

There is a puritan streak in today's society which insists that many of the little luxuries that sustained our grandparents to healthy old age are shortening our lives. It is all part of the narcissistic culture of gyms and dieting and celebrity cooks.

For myself, I insist on tea so strong that the mythic restaurant fly wouldn't need the breast stroke but could walk across it. And it must have proper milk. I may not be the most refined of restaurant companions, but it will be cold day in Hades before I allow a dentist to tell me what to drink.

The Lawson long shot

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews



On the first Tuesday in November 1964, a sublime intuition guided me to favour Polo Prince but, worrying that Elkayel might be a threat, I covered my back with an each way bet. Logic suggested a Polo Prince/Elkayel quinella, but the Flemington crowds were daunting so I didn't bother. Needless to say, Polo Prince scored, just holding off Elkayel.

Some Melbourne Cup days are like that, etched into the memory for one reason or another. Tuesday 5 November 1996 was one of those for me. I was working at London University, saddling up (sorry!) to give the annual Sir Robert Menzies Lecture. Through the mists of the years it all comes back to me.

On the preceding Thursday, at morning tea I mention to an English colleague that I'm giving a lecture on Tuesday, 5 November, in London University's Chancellors Hall. The ensuing conversation is dispiriting.

'The lecture's on Henry Lawson and Manning Clark', I tell him in answer to his polite enquiry.

'Henry Law — I'm afraid I —'

'No, you wouldn't have heard of him. Great Australian writer.'

'And Manfred —?'

'Manning,' I tell him patiently. 'It's Manning Clark. Famous historian.'

'I don't think I —'

'Monumental six volume history of Australia. The lecture's on Melbourne Cup Day. Could be an omen.'

'Melbourne Cup?'

'I'm backing Grey Shot', I flounder on desperately. 'English horse. Foreign raider as they say at home. Front runner. They send the English horses over Business Class on British Airways. Don't worry about it.'

Brooding on this demoralising conversation the following day, I start to fret. What if everybody's like my colleague? Suddenly I realise that, apart from a few stray Aussies, no one will know anything — anything — about Lawson or Clark. The lecture will be a disaster.

Meanwhile, Grey Shot blows out to 50s and my Melbourne collaborator prepares to move.

On Saturday, I'm up at 5.00am to help my wife set off to a conference in Amsterdam. This leaves me an uninterrupted weekend to prune and tune the lecture. I begin with a large breakfast heavy on egg, fatty and greasy items that my wife does not normally consider essential to starting the day. Then a purposeful stroll, thinking always of Lawson and Clark, brings me to the Pantton street cinema where I take in *Fargo*.

After *Fargo*, a brisk walk punctuated by a swift pint gets me back in front of the TV to catch up on the day's scores. I think about Lawson and Clark but it's been a long day and my concentration soon wavers. I've still got Sunday, after all.

On Sunday morning, after heavy overnight rain, nine hundred thousand tons of autumn leaves in Mecklenburg square have acquired a banana peel slipperiness which is visibly sapping the sabbatarian resolve of the churchgoers whom I am distractedly watching from my upstairs window while reflecting on Lawson, Clark, Grey Shot and, appropriately enough as I watch the procession of the faithful, Sainly, that year's Cox Plate winner looming dangerously in the betting. He couldn't get the double though. Could he?

Today, I resolve to knock the lecture over but after several unproductive hours opt for some channel surfing and fluke the end of *Gunfight at OK Corral*. The Clantons lose again. Why does everybody in London know who Wyatt Earp was and no one knows about Lawson or Clark?

My wife rings from Amsterdam. She is pleased to hear I've had a good working weekend and that the lecture's ready to go. I'm pleased to hear this too, if it comes to that. In fact I'm stunned.

By Monday, Grey Shot has tightened to 33s but still represents excellent value. Lawson and Clark, on the other hand, have blown out to 500/1 as they move up to the Menzies Memorial Lecture starting gates in my aching head. My man in Melbourne, however, is losing heart. The money's on but he fears disaster. He fancies Sky Beau. Still, the lecture's looking better by Monday night when my wife returns and we revert to healthy eating.

On the Tuesday in Melbourne, Grey Shot hits the front from the stalls and leads the field into the straight. He's still in the money with 150 m to go but is overrun in a crowded finish. Seventh. 'A luckless conveyance' as the caller remarks. Sainly salutes, with Count Chivas and Sky Beau taking the minors.

In London, conversely, my lecture is, according to all the punters, a winner. As we leave the Hall, someone next to me remarks, 'I must admit I hadn't really heard of Lawson and Clark before tonight'. I smile enigmatically. 'And Sir Robert Menzies,' he goes on, 'wasn't he — ?'

'Prime Minister', I explain helpfully. 'Of Australia. You know? Australia? Veer left at Singapore ...'

China, with apologies to Ginsberg

POETRY

Andrew Burke

12th step meeting

after tales of
wasted years
and reclamation
Yamatji girl said
'when I had a feeling
I had a drink'
and I laughed
softly
so as not to
offend anybody
she said
'no wonder ya larfed.
you're whitefella'

This Land In Time *'How quietly time collapses in a poem.'*

— *Yannis Ritsos*

the land lies silent
under foot under hoof
under wheel
this land scarred
by English terms
of management
barbed-wire fences
rugged roads

open-cut mines
its people lost
in a culture so
foreign

Taibai Mountain poem

for Jen

I saw a shining moon last night
through leafy poplars and pines
on Taibai Mountain
and thought of you awake
amid the lowing of Brahman bulls.

I thought of Li Bai
spilling ink down the mountain
leaving black stains
and wondered whose Dreaming
spilt red on The Kimberley?

More rain today

Late Summer, Linfen

More rain today than fell last year. Pollution
coats the buildings as rain falls perpendicular.
Linfen's drainage system overflows
and baby-faced police huddle in muddy vans
while the townsfolk welcome the wash:
a little soap in the alleys' armpits,
sunny deodorant with dawn perhaps.
Inside, street vendors huddle, stretching
yesterday's Yuans like old inner tubes.

The gatekeeper pulls a grey sheet over
his knobby knees on his roadside cot.
Beyond Linfen city, farmers wave as
roads run with mud and crops drink deep.
Tomorrow shines like sunflowers in their eyes.
China (*with apologies to Ginsberg*)
China, I am packing up little pieces of you
ready to leave your sures and doubts,
ready to look over my shoulder with
a postscript wave and wonder.
China, it is dark under this tree and the moon
cannot penetrate your greedy industrial smoke.
I'm waiting to see how much poetry is in
the Dragon Boat Festival — Does it always
have to be about food, China? It's Qu Yuan's
death that's important, yesterday and today.
Can we learn from history, Big Panda?
If you go out on a weak limb, it will break.
China, too much America is not good for you.
Follow your own Confucius-Marx mix.
China, where's your Green Card?
Where's your Green Party?
Let them learn Mandarin, China —
you have enough people to swing it.
Don't let them seduce you with their beads
and mirrors. You're worth more than that.
I buy your trinkets and Good Luck charms

but I don't buy your Western ways.
This world is a hall of mirrors,
keep your eyes peeled.
It's not just currency that's counterfeit.

Australian superwomen left holding the poison

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

When I was a younger woman I determined to be a lawyer — ‘Not a very feminine career choice, dear,’ as my careers mistress told me — at a time when female university graduates were so rare as to be celebrated in gold leaf on school honours boards.

It is no longer so. Women have, since the 1970s, been graduating with first class honours in what were once men-only disciplines (engineering, astrophysics, law, medicine, business administration) and starting out in a career which, we were told, would over time be rewarded through the ‘pipeline’ principle.



One of the hardest lessons for women to learn is that merit and hard work will not be rewarded like that.

The [latest report](#) from the EOWA, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency’s 2008 Australian Census of Women in Leadership discloses a lamentable truth. Over the past two years the proportion of women in leadership roles has gone backwards faster than any ‘shrinkage’ of leadership opportunities.

Just 2 per cent are chairs of the boards of ASX 200 companies. There has been a drop from 3 per cent to 2 per cent of women CEOs, and a drop of 0.4 per cent in the numbers of women board members to 8.3 per cent.

Even the ‘pipeline’ has been scoured. Women executive managers (that is, managers who report directly to their CEO) make just 10.7 per cent — 182 women out of a total of 1700 — which is an inadequate representation of powerful, smart, savvy and committed women.

These companies make policy decisions that affect investors, business operators, employees, customers and consumers, without the input of women. They include our major financial institutions (and just look where they have taken us).

The facts speak. The proportion of companies with no female executive managers has risen over two years from 39.5 per cent to 45.5 per cent.

Anna McPhee, the chief executive of EOWA, attributed the flop in women’s progress to outdated workplace practices, hostile environments and fewer opportunities for women.

Other commentators have predicted, with the economic crisis, that women who have recently taken advantage of ‘diversity’ and leadership programs will be the first, and worst, affected by cutbacks and safe practices in firms and other institutions falling back on the tried-and-true experienced male managers among their colleagues.

Some women assert that they have never experienced discrimination, and that the poor representation of women in the heights is because they don't want the burdens that come with front-line leadership. But the diminution of women on Australian boards, at the pointy end of top ASX companies and in that pipeline is far greater than the shrinkage of executive teams. Something more is going on.

Part of it is that those with power don't want to share or relinquish it. Australian female political leaders, with the notable exception of former NT Chief Minister Clare Martin, have been handed their premiership roles when problems lie ahead. Men are then willing to relinquish the vessel with the pestle (apologies to Danny Kaye in *The Court Jester*) to women like Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner, and stand by as the potion proves untrue.

Another factor in Australia's slide may be, as McPhee suggests, that its leadership environment is primed with preoccupation with hierarchy and status, deal-doing, understandings, intrigue and backbiting. Women may feel it is hard to enjoy the amity of colleagues.

Yet another factor may be the ongoing failure to understand and overcome our unconscious rejection of difference. 'Team players' have to fit. But different 'team players' generate uncomfortable new views.

US linguistics Professor Deborah Tannen's research into how men and women communicate at work concluded that patterns of relationship-formation, communicating and coalescence began in pre-adolescent play, and in adulthood remain so fundamentally different that men and women might be speaking different languages. This, too, is why men on boards appoint women whom they know and with whose discourse they are comfortable.

Katie Lahey, chief executive of the [Business Council of Australia](#), has responded to the census figures by calling for quotas for women in leadership.

That will help, but the solution also requires women who are prepared to be women, even in hand-to-hand combat. Women who seek to succeed as 'honorary men' will not last long. So long as women mould themselves on a block designed by those whose language, expectations and patterns of relationships were formed in the schoolyard, there will be no change. 'Merit' is in the eye of the beholder.

The women and men of Australia need proof that business can adapt. Those that cannot evolve to survive in a catastrophically changing climate will be little but carbon deposits in the tar-pools of future economic history.

Amrozi execution gets Rudd's gloat

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



The execution of the Bali bombers is imminent.

Because Australians suffered from their actions more than any other nation, the world will be watching to see how we react.

We can choose to cheer from a distance, applauding the indignity they suffer as they get what the Indonesian justice system believes they deserve. Or we can either protest, or help to neutralise the symbolism of the execution by remaining silent.

In *Eureka Street* last month, Frank Brennan [regretted](#) that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had already encouraged Australians to have the 'last gloat'. Rudd [said](#): 'The Bali bombers are cowards and murderers pure and simple, and frankly they can make whatever threats they like. They deserve the justice that we delivered to them.'

The 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' sense of justice behind this statement recalls that of President George W. Bush's resolve in his [Address to the Nation](#) on September 11, 2001: 'The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice.'

The Muslim world in particular will interpret our gloating at the deaths of Amrozi, Mukhlas and Imam Samudra, as Australia's endorsement of the Bush Doctrine in its dying days.

President Bush and American foreign policy were guided by the pessimistic and arguably misguided thinking of individuals such as Samuel P. Huntington, who is best known for his influential *Foreign Affairs* journal article '[The Clash of Civilisations](#)'.

This attitude was fueled by officially-sanctioned fear, which is conceivably responsible for putting the human and financial fortunes of America into a downward spiral.

Periods of increased anxiety prompt hopeful human beings to search for answers, and make them open to hearing good news. If there's one of the two presidential candidates with genuinely good news, it has to be Barack Obama. Last week he [defined](#) hope in his Closing Argument Speech in Canton, Ohio:

'Hope is — that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better is waiting around the bend.'

Getting ahead is not about knocking the perceived enemy on the head and gloating. Rather it's thinking things through while believing in the art of the possible. Reducing crime is best accomplished not through harsh legislation, but rather working at expanding health and other social services for low-income earners while leading them to the realisation that crime does not pay.

The capture of Bin Laden, or the shooting dead of a top Al Quada operative, is not the good news that America needs, just as the execution of the Bali bombers is hardly good news for Australia. Instead the verifiable fact that the vast majority of the world's Muslims have no hostile intent towards the rest of us *is* the good news that we must hear from our leaders.

The skeleton dance

COMMUNITY

Margaret Cody

As the commemoration of All Souls and All Saints approaches I observe local children preparing for Halloween and the usual 'trick and treating'.

What an impoverished tradition we have here, derived from the USA. In Australia, young children dress up in anything they can find, often unrelated to Halloween: black tights, witches' hats, horror masks, Superman vests, Batman capes, and then visit their neighbours for sweets. They do not sing, dance or perform, and there is not much sense of what it means, or a prevailing image.



In contrast there are other traditions in which the darkness and mystery of death are celebrated with more dramatic rituals. Death is embraced with relish and macabre hilarity, reminiscent of the Middle Ages, when death was physically much closer. Illness and plagues brought death regularly home.

Customs have changed today, as death is sanitised and dead bodies are quickly moved to morgues. It is rare to bring a body home and for the family to gather for its own domestic ritual of farewell. The physicality of death is concealed.

In Mexico, the *Día de los Muertos*, Day of the Dead, is a holiday, and preparations begin early in October for the celebrations of 1 and 2 November, All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Crackers explode and fireworks go off in great bursts during the night. The dominant image is the skeleton.

There are skeletons everywhere in Oaxaca right now (a town in south-west Mexico). After the first jolt of surprise I became intrigued by the skulls and skeletons in every doorway, shop window, hotel foyer, restaurant and courtyard. They grinned, bobbed in the breeze and sometimes fell over, only to be carefully picked up and put back on their chairs.

The Day of the Dead is not a gloomy celebration but rather a recognition of death as part of life. The skeletons are decorated and dressed with hats, feathers and flowers. Some of the skulls are painted or illuminated, and the effect is astonishing: smiling skulls and dancing skeletons invite laughter and acknowledgement of the intimate relationship between death and life.

Grotesque? Yes, but vividly and hilariously so. Each display shows imagination and variety, from rows of skulls in a window to whole skeleton families holding hands.

This is Mexico where all of life is there on the cobbled street in front of you. Hardship and death also seem closer. Students and tourists walk past indigenous women on the street,

begging, with babies wrapped across their chests. A blind man further along the same street sits with a begging bowl, every day in the same place, waiting for a few pesos.

In the entrance of a magnificent baroque church, an emaciated, elderly man beams when he is given a couple of dollars, revealing his blackened stumps of teeth.

On the next corner a group of country women have set up a stand where they are making fresh tortillas with beans and sauce, and selling them to a queue of workers. Further on fresh fruit salad is being put into plastic bags and offered for sale.

The poverty and the wealth are side by side: beggars, food vendors, small entrepreneurs and smart restaurants in every street. And starving dogs, with their ribs showing through the skin.

It is like a dance of death, as skeletons lean precariously out of every doorway and window, smiling, bejewelled and ready for the party.

A Mexican I questioned about the origins of the tradition said the Day of the Dead festivities in Mexico can be traced back to indigenous peoples thousands of years ago.

The festival once fell in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar, in August, and was celebrated for the whole month. Festivities were devoted to the goddess Mictecacihuatl, known as the 'Lady of the Dead', who corresponds to the modern 'Santa Catrina' — one of the powerful images presented everywhere, and printed on merchandise.

Jose Guadalupe Posada originally created a famous print of this figure, as a parody of a Mexican upper-class female. Today his image of the costumed female with a skeleton face is associated with the Day of the Dead. She is one of the skeletons smiling from windows.

My Mexican friend commented, 'We inject humour into the thing we fear most. There is also a hint of Mexican machismo — I stick out my chest like a brave man and stand up to death!'

In Mexico, sugar skulls are prepared, along with *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), and candied pumpkin. These food offerings are placed on small altars in houses and most businesses, together with marigolds, photographs of the dead people they wish to 'make present', a cross and an image of the Blessed Virgin.

Another custom is for people to return to their villages to be with their families, visit cemeteries and decorate the graves. Everywhere, paper decorations featuring skulls and skeletons decorate the neighbourhood. The Day of the Dead is a rich example of enculturation, in which the living remember the dead and their ancestral heritage.

Obama masks and New York monks

POLITICS

Alexandra Collier



'I wanna be Obama,' whines a 12-year-old girl, as she stretches a rubbery grinning mask of the would-be president over her fingers like a puppet. 'Ugh, no, you won't be able to breathe in that thing,' her mother snaps, and goes back to her mobile phone conversation.

Bulging plastic-wrapped sexy bo-peep outfits, scythes, wands and Joker masks buffer me as people push past in the aisle of Ricky's, the first stop for Halloween costumes in New York City. It is that time again. Each year there is a massive parade in the West Village, and the city descends into temporary madness, as a strange mixture of gothic images (white faced Grim Reapers, skeletons, grinning pumpkin heads) and pop cultural favourites (Batmans, Steve Irwins with sting-rays and scantily clad nurses) collide.

When it's all over, wannabe Anna Nicole Smiths and McCains stumble drunk past packed tourist trap restaurants in the Village and the atmosphere goes from revelry to rehab in the blink of a blood-spattered eye ball.

But this year, a different kind of dangerously drunk anticipation hangs over this overpopulated island. There is a ghoulish atmosphere of unrest and uncertainty in the wake of what is simply referred to as 'What's been happening lately' or in shorthand, 'Wall Street'.

Not to mention that little election that's coming up, which is giving everyone the jitters. Campaigners canvass outside subway stations and street vendors trying to make a buck are on every corner hocking political pins and Che Guevara-style Barack Obama t-shirts.

I found a crudely made Obama badge, with glitter around the edges, and hung it from its safety pin, like a thought bubble, on my bedroom wall. I wonder what it will come to represent in years to be. Perhaps a relic of a time that never came, a would-be president filed away for political anecdote. Maybe it will take on a different meaning? Hope in politics, even when instated by someone new and revered, can quickly turn to disappointment.

Walking through the West Village, before the parade takes over, I notice the homeless people have popped up — they are dotted along the steps and dents where the sidewalk hits the buildings. They all sit in a prayer-like C-curve, supplicating to the wealthy. Wearing hoods, faces burrowed, they are our New York monks.

They hold cardboard signs in front of them: 'Out of luck, need a buck.'

It is cold today, the wind is whipping down 14th Street like the Roaring Forties, and no one

is willing to stop. These homeless people are like repressed thoughts floating at the edge of our subconscious. If you blink, you might miss them. But they scare us nonetheless.

My friends, and friends of their friends, artists made of grit and will and determination, are turning jobless. They're the kind who work two jobs, temping during the day, waitering at night, and rehearsing for a play in between or finishing their novel in a mouse-infested sublet in Brooklyn. One friend's gmail status message reads like a cardboard sign: 'Ben needs a job'.

And so, Wall Street has become like the epicentre of an earthquake that is rippling out across the city and further still around the world. It seems like the smallest people are jobless, the ones without health insurance or benefits. And although some of it may be hysteria, it feels like we are all a whisker away from losing whatever job we have, from taking pen to cardboard.

But in reality, it is not the artists who will be homeless — many of them are well-schooled, middle-class kids who have ridden into the city on trust funds. Instead, it is that strata of New York earth that the city walks upon — the cab drivers, the kitchen hands, the delivery guys on their bicycles, the many illegal immigrants — who will feel the trickle-down effect and the cold biting at their fingers.

In Brooklyn, the more affordable borough where I live, all the houses are decorated: aside from the usual American flag stickers, and signs, fences are draped with cottony spider webs, and the stoops feature grinning pumpkins and scarecrows. Kids trick or treating will soon be swarming down the streets dressed as witches and wolverines, and consumerism and the childhood, sugary sweet elements of Halloween will prevail.

A man in California recently attracted attention and condemnation for a less tame Halloween display. His house sported a life-sized doll resembling Sarah Palin, which was hanging by a noose, and an effigy of John McCain that looked to be emerging from the chimney, engulfed in paper flames. Self-expression is alive and well, even in these uncertain times.

In Brooklyn, politics and the autumnal celebration of All Hallow's Eve also overlap. On one house orangey leaves swirl around a 'Vote McCain' sign which abuts another, declaring, 'Haunted House'. My mind wanders over the possibility of a dead president and being haunted by an inexperienced Vice for years to come.

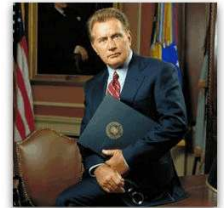
But only one thing is for sure, after Halloween, after 4 November, in New York City winter is coming and then hopefully after that, spring will too.

Why Aussie polities are crumby speakers

POLITICS

Sarah Kanowski

At the end of one episode of the US drama series *The West Wing*, which chronicled the fictional presidency of Josiah 'Jed' Bartlett (Martin Sheen, pictured), the key characters sit on a stoop sharing a beer. Their efforts to increase Democrat numbers in the Congress have failed but as the music swells and the screen fades they raise a toast: 'God Bless America'.



These public servants are cynical about many things, but never their country.

Australian liberals were drawn to the program's political vision, and the integrity of its hero, leader of the Democratic Administration President Josiah Bartlett. But *The West Wing* exposed stark national differences. To Australian viewers the patriotic idealism was unbearably corny. But wasn't there something magnificent there too?

We Australians don't do magnificence. The American vision excels at the grand scale, while our monuments, our fiction, and our food portions are of a humbler nature. The publisher Ivor Indyk has identified it as a kind of national 'shyness'. That shyness is nowhere clearer than in our political rhetoric.

In November last year Australians voted for a new government, hoping, it seemed, for the kind of change Jed Bartlett was committed to bringing to his country. But recall Rudd's acceptance speech and it's clear what different worlds Jed and Kevin belong to. The crowd greeting him at Brisbane's Suncorp Stadium was ecstatic but the new Prime Minister seemed determined to keep a lid on things.

He began with a sobering, 'Okay guys', and with the measured tones of a diligent scout master, plodded through a list of platitudes.

Not surprisingly, there is a greater resonance between Bartlett and presidential candidate, Barack Obama — the obvious intelligence, the liberal progressiveness and, above all, the sweeping oratory. The creator of *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin, even wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* imagining [Bartlett visiting Obama](#) to give advice.

But even in his wildest flights of lyrical idealism, Sorkin never came up with the kind of language Obama has been wooing the world with. Take this from the speech he delivered after Hilary Clinton's win at the New Hampshire Primary in January:

Yes we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights. Yes we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness. Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organised; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land.

Yes we can to justice and equality. Yes we can to opportunity and prosperity. Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world. Yes we can.

This is a speech so immediately emotive and musical that it has been made into a song, one watched millions of times on our age's version of Speaker's Corner, [YouTube](#) .

Compare it to the moment in Rudd's speech which garnered the biggest reaction:

You can have a strong cup of tea if you want in the meantime.

Even an Iced Vo Vo on the way through.

But the celebration should stop there.

We have a job of work to do.

There are pundits who wonder if Obama's visionary language and oratorical passion will backfire. Many Americans, they warn, are uncomfortable with exceptionalism. They want a leader who reassures them 'I'm just like you — I pray like you, I hunt like you, and I talk like you'.

And it is doubtful whether Obama's rhetorical grandeur would work here. Veteran Labor speechwriter Graham Freudenberg has been praising Rudd's natural approach, lamenting that 'Everyone wants to write a Gettysburg Address these days'.

Even in fiction we prefer to leave the serious drama of politics to the Americans — our own recent exploration down the corridors of ministerial power happened with satire in *The Hollowmen*.

For many Australians these differences in national imagination are something to be grateful for. I'm happy, for example, that despite the best efforts of Brendan Nelson (when he was Education Minister), devotion to the flag has never become a national religion here the way it is in the US.

But would an Australian Gettysburg Address be such a bad thing? Describing the world in a different way allows us to imagine it afresh. Few of us would want to swap political cultures with the empire across the Pacific, but we can enjoy their idealism vicariously — in the

sometimes magic world of television, and in the imagined magic of an Obama Presidency. Yes we can.

Hunger, pain

FILM FORUM

Tim Kroenert

Hunger: 96 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Steve McQueen. Starring: Michael Fassbender, Liam Cunningham



An assessment of *Hunger*, Steve McQueen's film about Irish republican prisoners of the British government, is illuminated by consideration of another artist, Australian expat singer songwriter Nick Cave.

In life and art Cave has been drawn to the potent, sticky territory where the sacred meets the profane. His essay [An introduction to the Gospel of Mark](#) includes a startling recollection that, as a young man with a 'burgeoning interest in violent literature, coupled with an unnamed sense of the divinity in things', Cave was led to the Old Testament, which 'spoke to that part of me that railed and hissed and spat at the world'.

Later he discovered the New Testament, via Mark's 'breathless' gospel, which he describes as:

... a clatter of bones, so raw, neroy and lean on information that the narrative aches with the melancholy of absence. Scenes of deep tragedy are treated with such a matter of factness and raw economy they become almost palpable in their unprotected sorrowfulness.

The dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, evoked so vividly by Cave, is useful for reflecting upon *Hunger*. At times this is a harrowing, downright disturbing film. Yet it is also beautiful, even magnetic, not just in its imagery (first-time filmmaker McQueen is a visual artist), but also in its positing of something in humanity that transcends cruel, physical reality.

While Cave has a love of narrative, *Hunger* is a work of image and theme with only the barest of stories to frame it. It is an account of the final days of IRA activist Bobby Sands (Fassbender), during the notorious 'blanket' and 'no wash' protests of 1981, and the subsequent 'hunger' protest during which Sands lost his life.

The republican prisoners were attempting to obtain political status from an unsympathetic Thatcher government. Thus the 'blanket' and 'no wash' protests were characterised by a refusal to wear the uniform of criminals, or to bathe or shave, and the prisoners wore only coarse blankets for modesty and warmth.

Cinematically, one result of this is that the characters remain virtually faceless, concealed behind masks of beard and grime, and undistinguishable in their near-nakedness. They are symbols in McQueen's portrait of violently held ideologies and desperately pursued political

ends.

And yet they are recognisably human, their physical vulnerability literally exposed. The brutality they suffer at the hands of the prison guards is visceral and graphic. The first, and most sustained portion of the film deals with these experiences during the 'blanket' and 'no wash' protests. McQueen provides no detail regarding the prisoners' specific crimes, a fact that either exposes his own sympathies, or suggests that he considers the prisoners' history of violence to be a *fait accompli*.

The second act provides respite both from the violence and the tortuous near-silence (at least verbally) of the first. Yet in its own way, it is just as striking. In it, Sands and a republican priest (Cunningham) debate the morality and political efficacy of Sands' planned hunger strike.

Sands believes that if executed systematically, with one prisoner striking at a time, and a second taking his place upon the death of the first, then the statement will be too powerful not to be heeded.

The priest not only doubts the morality of what is tantamount to suicide, he also believes the strike will be political suicide, as the prisoners would seem to devalue their own lives in the face of a government that already considers them to be expendable. That's not to mention Sands' wife and child — what will become of them?

The debate between the two men is captivating. The camera lingers, with long takes and few cuts, reinforcing the viewer's own inability to look away from this charged exchange of ideas. The scene is McQueen's thematic centrepiece, elucidating what has come before and preparing the viewer for the final horrors to come.

Horror, yes, for the final act chronicles Sands' hunger strike. His slow, agonising act of violence against his own body is far more harrowing than the abrupt and intense brutality that characterise the first part of the film. He performs it with zen-like conviction; it's a small outcry that will echo in the halls of history.

Sands' son visits him during this time. It's unclear what the boy sees as he watches his father's gradual degradation — as his flesh wastes, and his undernourished skin splits with raw, taut soreness. No doubt Sands sees not the son who will be left to grieve his dead father, but the next generation of Irish who, he hopes, will benefit from the stand he and his kind have taken.

The dearth of narrative and character development makes this an alienating film. Likewise the graphic nature of its portrayal of violence.

But it is unsettlingly beautiful, in particular, in its use of grotesque and hypnotic imagery: the earthy swirls of a shit-smearred cell wall; pools of piss that blossom from beneath cell doors into the prison corridor; later, the systematic process of eradicating the results of these

scatalogical acts of defiance, a task that is repetitious, tedious, but effective — how efficient is the imperial response to these desperate assertions of humanity.

Most captivating of all is Sands' conviction, and his pursuit of a cause that he sees as sacred, despite means that might more easily be characterised as profane.

Forty and feeling fine

NON-FICTION

Jen Vuk

It was, as the UK *Guardian* reported, a rebirth in all senses of the word. The artist known as Anastacia (pictured) told the newspaper that she [wasn't](#) born in 1974, as had been alleged since the 2000 release of her debut album, *Not That Kind*, but in 1968.



That would mean she's ... gasp ... 40. I'd hate to think what this makes her in pop-star years, but Anastacia certainly went up a notch or two in my estimation. Here was a woman (who could easily pass for 30) airing her real age when all pressure would have surely been to continue with the smokescreen.

I found Anastacia's honesty far more reaffirming than the chick-lit-inspired grrrls of the past decade. It might be galling to officially turn middle-aged, but do we really need to dress it up as the 'fabulous 40s'? Or turn 40 into the new 30 or (worse) 21?

The way I see it is that 40 is like any age — unless you're a woman.

In a few days I, too, will be slipping it on for size. Despite the birthday looming over me ever since I stumbled over my biological clock a few years back, I'm still unprepared. The truth is that despite having engaged in an energetic game of hide and seek, unlike Anastacia, I never actually expected 40 to jump out and shout 'Boo!'.

In the words of James Brown: 'I feel good', and just a little indifferent. I'm anxious and a little elated. I feel old yet young enough to remember that not so long ago 40 wasn't over the hill — it was over Mt Kilimanjaro.

But the view on the way down isn't so bad. Here's the thing: life at 39 and three-quarters is a lot calmer, and a lot less inconsistent and self-centred than it was 10 years ago, let alone 20.

That's not to say that the existential scars have healed completely. I've battled with God and lost (but live to fight another day). I've read books that have made me laugh, cry and buy airline tickets to far-away places. I've known what it is to leave behind a marriage and embark on another. As well as buy property, I've bought into the consumer culture only to have my 'precious' things a) lost, b) stolen, c) forgotten.

Whereas in the past I would have remained silent, I now shout — if mainly at the TV. Injustice, rather than embarrassment, raises my temperature. I have new respect for motherhood since hearing the pierce of my newborn's cry. Most of my close friendships have grown old and crusty (just how I like them). My love is now of the deep and measured variety, rather than the forceful kind easily mistaken for indigestion.

I can be silly and serious almost in the same breath, something I could never quite pull off on the right side of 30.

‘We do not grow absolutely, chronologically,’ wrote French writer Anais Nin. ‘We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly ... The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations.’

Is it any wonder then that at 40 those layers, cells and so on start to settle in places we’d rather they didn’t? If I were honest I’d say laziness, and not feminist pride, is behind my Botox face-off. Botox is the drug of choice for Anastacia, who credits her youthful looks to it and to the fact she’s no ‘partyer’. She’ll get no criticism from me — if I were forced to fend off the trifecta of Crohn’s disease, severe heart palpitations and breast cancer in as many years (which I haven’t and she has), I wouldn’t waste a minute debating the merits of a little cosmetic therapy.

It’s becoming clearer why Anastacia may have chosen her 40th year to come clean about her age. After what she’s survived (including leaving her record label), turning 40 starts to look much less like an ailment and more like an achievement.

‘A woman has the age she deserves,’ the late fashion doyen Coco Chanel once said. And I couldn’t agree more. So tell me again why a 40-year-old would want to be mistaken for 30? Are a few wrinkles less worth being short-changed a decade of experience?

Besides, as Anastacia will tell you, having to constantly subtract numbers in your head can, in fact, add years to your life.

The unreal news in detail about Britt Laphorne

MEDIA

Jill Sutton



In his essay about capital punishment, Orwell describes a man who is walking toward the gallows. He swerves to avoid a puddle.

This is but a minor exemplar in James Wood's startlingly brilliant, recently-published book *How Fiction Works*. Wood was highlighting what he calls 'the reality effect' of a writer's use of an apparently irrelevant detail. His analysis is helpful in understanding the media's repeated headlining of the story about Britt Laphorne's tragic death in Dubrovnik over the past few weeks.

How is it, when thousands of people are dying in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and millions are dying of hunger and preventable disease in Africa, and when all this is being exacerbated as the world's economic institutions go into free fall, with inevitable and massive loss of homes, jobs, health care, education and so on, that the headlines focus on one tragic tourist death?

It's heartbreaking to think of Laphorne's sudden and probably violent disappearance. Likewise, it's unfortunate that perhaps the local police were not as [forensically astute](#) as one might have hoped.

But how is it that we are more focused on a tragedy which befell a young girl who was out in the early hours of the morning in a foreign country, than we are about billionaire board directors and managers of financial institutions selling off the risky debts they tricked people into taking and bringing the infrastructure of the whole world to its knees? The subsequent suffering will be, if we are to believe what we read, incalculable.

As I write, my eye rests on a print on my wall: Breughel's portrayal of the fall of Icarus. I have read about how it was inspired, in its turn, by Ovid's verse. He tells us that a fisherman, a lonely shepherd and a ploughman were there at the time, and that they observed Icarus' watery death.

In Breughel's painting, it is they who are given star roles as the final disappearing leg of Icarus makes but a small splash on the surface of the ocean.

Does the presence of the fisherman, shepherd and ploughman make the Icarus tragedy more real? Does the commentary on the investigation of one particular death offer us some sense of our own reality as we try and conceive of a world in which all expectations of predictability might cease? Perhaps ...

But Wood also finds that novelists can employ details which are 'sparklingly opaque' and honed to 'deliberately mislead' the reader. Could it be that the details of one girl's death, anger at delays and so on, have been used in this way, to mislead the public, to distract them from reality?



In the midst of our burgeoning information technology, still it seems we are like putty in the hands of those who give us the details they choose about what is happening in the world. If we need them to make us feel real, as Wood discovers in his study of how fiction works, then we should focus on detail which is not likely to mislead us.

Or maybe we should attempt more to shape the detail. Helen Garner spoke recently about her disaffection with 'ideas' as a basis for her writing. She explained that she would rather 'shape the clutter' of her experience. As my sociologist friend Affrica Taylor observed to me recently, most of 'the clutter' is female and interior and it reminds her of Margaret Olley's paintings.

The film *Lemon Tree* demonstrates this effective use of detail from the feminine perspective. As we watch a Palestinian woman's lemons wither in the grove planted by her grandfather and now cordoned off for security reasons, we are shocked by the obscenity of a newly-built section of that massive concrete wall. We weep at the frailty of those lemon trees as they dry up and die, like people, for want of a drink.

Lemon Tree is a film that shows us how detail can work. As human beings we need to choose our detail carefully.

Life of a perpetual migrant

MULTICULTURALISM

Gillian Bouras



In a famous scene in English Literature, conventional Lockwood, the outsider unable to find his way home, is doubly displaced when he is forced to stay the night at Wuthering Heights, a house so strange as to be a foreign land. During the night he experiences a dream-haunting: Catherine, dead 20 years, comes to his broken window and begs and pleads to be let in. Lockwood, terrified, rubs her wrist to and fro upon the shards of glass.

Migrants are like Heathcliff's Cathy, tapping persistently at the window of the past. They realise they can never truly go home again, yet their hearts and spirits continue to yearn.

I ought to know, for I am a migrant, a foreigner wherever I go, having left Australia unexpectedly but permanently for the Peloponnese in 1980. Are you Greek now? people of all origins ask, a question that still causes me to stare in consternation before saying firmly, No, definitely not.

Yet my sons say I am not Australian any more, either. But if identity depends on maintaining continuity in the face of dislocation, then my Akubra hat, with its Anzac badge and sprouting of emu feathers, will soon be worn out. I feel Australian, but perhaps not solely Australian, for I suppose it is fair to say that layers have been added to whatever my composition consists of, and other layers have been worn away.

Nor am I sure what I see when I look at Australia. I don't know what my sons see when they look at me: probably just their mother.

These home-thoughts are prompted by the fact that I have returned to Australia, two and a half years after my last visit. How I long for these visits to be more regular, but for various practical reasons that cannot happen. Ah, the tyranny of distance. An Australian I once met in Paris, where he had been resident for many years, said simply: Once exchanged, forever estranged.

And he was right, at least to a certain extent. I know, for example, that I can never be restored to my original family in the same old way, for apart from the inevitable alterations that the passage of time and the incidence of death cause, experience is a great divider of persons. There is a huge gap in understanding between the nomads and the settlers of this world.

I suppose it is fair to say that I have become part of my small corner of Greece, and it has become part of me. Certainly, the experience of living there and raising cross-cultural children has made me use a part of myself I would not have used otherwise.

And despite the fact that the experience has often been tough, I am grateful for it. I have to hope that my children, who swing easily between their two worlds, are grateful for it, too.

And yet, the very familiarity of my part of Down Under never fails to move me. The sights: the spires of the churches, and the solidity of Flinders Street Railway Station. The sounds: the click and chime of trams, the screech of rainbow lorikeets, the roar of a football crowd. Those distinctive smells: the scent of the bush, the whiff of dust that always heralds a storm.

Then there's the comfort of the shorthand of conversation, which enables me to slip effortlessly back into the worn teddy-bear old-coat warmth of Australian English. I am more audible to myself, and somehow I feel more visible as well.

There was a time when, speaking of visibility, I viewed Australia through misted and rose-coloured spectacles. But I've grown up a little since then; I certainly needed to. Now I know that multi-focal lenses are the thing. Now I know that time makes migrants of everybody, and that we all die foreigners.

As David Malouf wrote, we are all exiles, even those of us who have never left home. St Peter and Lucifer are passport control officers sitting behind their own barred windows.

I know everything has changed. Australia has changed, the scenes of my youth have changed. And so have I, but how I remember the way we were.

Salvador Dali's moustache

POETRY

Isabella Fels

Ex-friends

You become elephants with your telephone trunks
tying up my brain into grey thumping feet

Lipstick

I don't wear lipstick much
'Isabella, wear lipstick!'
I could recite you every lipstick shade ever made
But still I wear no lipstick

Almadovar has always been jealous of me

Ever since I got the sex number 69 for Spanish in my HSC.

Wednesday

Wednesday I don't know if I love or hate you because you
Always cut my week in half

Doorways

Doorways
Leading the way towards warm rooms

Organising

Organising me is killing me
Organising me is filling me up too much
Organising me is pure hard work
How I hate hard work

Eyebrows

Straggly eyebrows
Unkempt eyebrows

Eyebrows that are shapeless

Get me down

The tram ride

The tram ride was as bumpy and temperamental as the people on it

T-shirt

Too baggy, feel sexless

Too tight feel too sexy

There is no happy medium with a t-shirt

There are two sides to every t-shirt

Crumbs

Crumbs tempt me

Breaking my conscience

Salvador Dali's moustache

I love the way you go from fat to thin

Straight to curly

Shadows

Shadows make me see my darker side

Plants

1. The pot stark black, cobalt, curvaceous

The flowers white, delicate embroidered by

Surrounding greenery

2. A plant spilling over its black holder

Like champagne bubbling over a new years day

3. The half dressed bamboo

Stands away from its harsh, dry mouthed owner

4. The green spidery leaves crawl out of the pot towards other victims

Out to Mars

Chocolate is my weakness. Dad today proved it was his strength
as he knocked the Mars Bar out of my hand and threw it out the car window
maybe out to Mars.

Guantanamo's hero of conscience

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

It's likely that the next US president will decide the fate of cases against five Guantanamo Bay detainees. The five had their charges [dropped](#) last week following an 'act of conscience' on the part of prosecutor Lieut-Colonel Darrel Vandeveld, who had resigned after accusing the military of suppressing evidence that could have helped clear them.



One of the cases involves an Afghan detainee accused of throwing a grenade at a US military jeep, injuring three people. Colonel Vandeveld said prosecutors knew that 24-year-old Mohammed Jawad might have been drugged before the attack, and that the Afghan interior ministry said two other men had confessed to the same crime.

It was early August, and Vandeveld was struggling with the order to prosecute the young detainee. The *Los Angeles Times* [described](#) Vandeveld as a 'hard-nosed lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, a self-described conformist praised by his superiors for his bravery in Iraq'. Vandeveld decided to send an email to well-known Jesuit peace activist John Dear, who visited Australia last year.

'I am beginning to have grave misgivings about what I am doing, and what we are doing as a country,' he wrote. 'I no longer want to participate in the system, but I lack the courage to quit. I am married, with four children, and not only will they suffer, I'll lose a lot of friends.'

Dear, who [described](#) the email as 'surprising and moving', dashed off a reply urging Vandeveld to quit.

He said: 'God does not want you to participate in any injustice, and GITMO is so bad, I hope and pray you will quietly, peacefully, prayerfully, just resign, and start your life over.'

Vandeveld resigned in September, telling his superiors: 'I seek more restorative or reparative justice, rather than the rote application of the law'.

John Dear [wrote](#) in his *National Catholic Reporter* column last week that Vandeveld's decision is a 'rare sign of hope in terrible times'.

He went on to suggest the lesson is to follow Vandeveld's example and 'withdraw our cooperation from US militarism, torture, injustice and war making', and to urge friends and families to quit or not to join the armed forces, including in civilian roles.

What does this mean for Australia? Well there is increasing pressure for us to increase our troop commitment in Afghanistan. So far prime minister Kevin Rudd has talked down such further entanglement in the US 'war machine'. He told the National Press Club this month that

‘we have no plans whatsoever to provide any additional troops to Afghanistan’.

But the hawks are circling, with officials, including new US Central Command chief, David Petraeus, known to be wanting further commitment from us.

Columnist Paul Kelly [wrote](#) in *The Australian* last Wednesday that an Obama presidency would ‘boost US troop levels [in Afghanistan] and seek greater contributions from allies’. As he says, Rudd’s most important immediate foreign policy goal is to forge a ‘trusting and collaborative relationship with Obama’. So if we are convinced that war is wrong, we will be under pressure to express our views strongly.

Obama could face race vote melt

POLITICS

Jim McDermott



In recent weeks Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama appears to have gained significantly in the polls, pulling ahead as far as ten points nationally over John McCain in some polls. With a week to go until the election, everyone's question seems to be, what effect will latent racism have on the actual vote?

In 1982 African-American Tom Bradley ran for governor of California. At the time of the election he was up by 12 points, according to Democratic polls. Yet somehow he lost by a half a per cent. The post-election analysis suggested that polled voters had not honestly expressed their preference, perhaps out of a discomfort that they would appear prejudiced, or because they had a prejudice they didn't want exposed.

Since then, analysts have spoken of the 'Bradley Effect' to describe the percentage point melt that occurs for African-American candidates on election day.

However, the data on this phenomenon remains inconclusive. A recent study of 133 elections held between 1989 and 2006 and involving African-American candidates found on average a Bradley Effect of three percentage points before 1996.

But since 1996, African-Americans running for office have performed on average three percentage points better than their polls predict. Could it be possible that Obama is doing even better than his poll numbers suggest?

Analysis suggests that racism may play a factor in the Catholic vote in certain parts of the country. A September front-page story in *The New York Times* featured a Catholic parish in Scranton, PA, hometown of Democratic vice presidential candidate Senator Joe Biden.

Of six Catholics interviewed who voted for Hillary Clinton, five said they would now support McCain, not Obama. While some said this was due to McCain's pro-life stance, one indicated quite directly his reason was race. Referring to the White House, he asked, 'Are they going to make it the Black House?'

A local political scientist affirmed that this working-class Catholic community 'is a tough area for Obama and some of it is race'. Though few are eager to express their bigotry, similar inclinations are suspected in other working class Catholic communities.

And the Republican Party has been keen to provide cover for such prejudice by playing upon other fears. Since Obama first became a candidate, the ardently conservative, Rupert Murdoch-owned FOX News has always referred to Obama by his full name, Barack Hussein

Obama, in a not-too-subtle attempt to link Obama to terrorism.

Likewise, as the McCain campaign has tanked and McCain himself casts wildly about for a foothold of any kind, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin has been whipping crowds into a frenzy by saying that Obama is 'palling around with terrorists' and that he 'is not a man who sees America the way you and I see America'.

Some of those interviewed leaving the rallies appear to genuinely believe Obama is a Muslim, an Arab and/or a terrorist sympathiser. At these rallies one hears people freely yelling racial epithets and crying 'Treason!', 'Terrorist!' and even 'Kill him!' So far the McCain campaign has done nothing to condemn these comments.

In the final analysis, I suspect the role of racism in the election will be significant in some areas, perhaps especially in some working class white communities. But, short of it being revealed that the Obamas have been sending their daughters to summer camp in the hills of Afghanistan, I think it is unlikely it will make the difference in the election. Far more serious issues press upon the country and the world.

And though the crowds at McCain's rallies appear large and motivated, by all estimates they constitute not swing voters but his true believers.

No, the real fear is not that racism will cause Obama to lose the election, but that as a black president he may face threats against his life. And the more Palin, FOX News et al. continue to stir their partisans into a violent, irrational fervor, the more that fear grows.