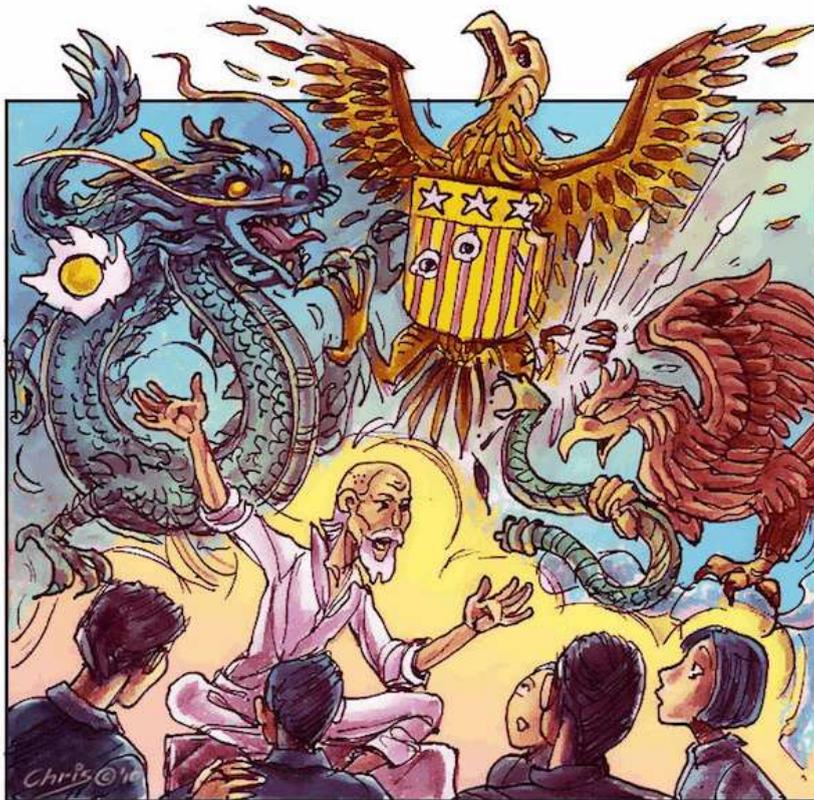


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## Rabbi takes on Religious Right

VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

This interview with leading American Jewish social activist and writer, Rabbi Michael Lerner, continues the series recorded for *Eureka Street* at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne in December 2009. It is sponsored by the [Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue](#) at the Australian Catholic University.

He speaks about the importance of interfaith forums like the Parliament, and the [Network of Spiritual Progressives](#) which he founded in 2005. He co-chairs the Network with Benedictine [Sister Joan Chittister](#) and Professor of Religion at Princeton University, Cornel West.

Lerner is perhaps the most controversial Jewish activist in the US. (Continues below)

He's been attacked from the right — even to the extent of receiving death threats — for his outspoken advocacy for the rights of Palestinians in Israel, and from the left for his critique of the anti-religious and anti-spiritual stance of secular progressives.

One of his central causes is to convince American progressives that they shouldn't let conservatives take the running on religion. They need to address a crisis of meaning, a national spiritual crisis, as well as the material needs of the population.

Lerner was born and brought up in New Jersey on the US east coast. After school, he studied simultaneously at New York's Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He graduated from Columbia with an Arts degree in English Literature and Philosophy, but he left the seminary after realising it was not in tune with his attraction to social engagement and Jewish mysticism.

In the mid-1960s he went to the west coast and started post-graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, earning his PhD in philosophy in 1972. In 1974, he started another doctorate at the Wright Institute of Psychology, also in Berkeley, and in 1977 received a PhD in Clinical and Social Psychology.

In California, Lerner became involved in student politics and the peace movement. He gained prominence as leader and spokesman for a number of student groups, and in 1968 helped organise an anti-war demonstration that became one of the biggest ever seen in Seattle. When it turned violent, he was arrested, along with a number of other leaders, and ended up spending several months in prison.

He was described by J. Edgar Hoover at that time as 'one of the most dangerous criminals in America'.

Lerner has lectured in a philosophy and psychology at a number of universities and colleges around the US, but has become best known as editor of [Tikkun](#) magazine which he founded with his wife in 1986. It's described on its cover as 'a bi-monthly Jewish critique of Politics, Culture and Society'. The Hebrew word *tikkun* refers 'to healing, restoring and transforming the world'.

The magazine aims to promote discussion and debate, and Lerner has never shied away from publishing strong views and opinion.

In turn this has provoked strong reaction and criticism, for instance, from US Jewish commentator Alan Dershowitz. In one of his pieces Dershowitz [argued](#) that '*Tikkun* is quickly becoming the most virulently anti-Israel screed ever published under Jewish auspices', and that 'support for *Tikkun* is support for the enemies of Israel'.

Over the years, the supporters of *Tikkun* have taken up a number of causes, and formed several groups associated with its aim and ideals. In 1995, Lerner was ordained as a rabbi, formed the [Beyt Tikkun Synagogue](#) in Berkeley, and became its spiritual leader.

Ten years later he founded the inter-religious Network of Spiritual Progressives which describes itself as 'a community of people who support each other and pursue the highest vision of a world healed and transformed'.

He is a prolific author, having written books on a range of social and spiritual issues, from how to bring about social transformation, to anti-Semitism, relations between Jews and African Americans, and reconciliation between Israel and Palestine. His latest, published in 2006, is *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*.

## The crucifixion of Christine Nixon

POLITICS

Moira Rayner



'In Australia, a lone woman  
is being crucified by the Press  
at any given moment.'

— *Les Murray, A Deployment of Fashion, 1997*

John Brumby, as Victorian Premier, wants it both ways: rejecting calls for Christine Nixon's removal as chief executive of the Black Saturday reconstruction authority, yet agreeing with vitriolic remarks about her 'mistakes' on 7 February 2009. This is unworthy of him.

What did then-Commissioner Nixon do? On a day she was not rostered for duty she went in to the emergency centre to contribute to fire-fighting management, worked in her office for a bit over an hour, returned to the centre, made arrangements for some briefings to ministers, and nicked off for tea.

For reasons best known to counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Nixon was cross-examined on her 'need' to leave at 6.00pm — before the insanely out-of-control firestorm status was known — and replied she had no such need. Hostile questioning from journalists after the public hearing had her admit the terrible truth: she hadn't cooked tea at home but slipped into a nearby pub with her husband and two friends for about an hour.

Did (dog-whistle: overweight and middle-aged) Commissioner Nixon get pissed? No. Did she party? Evidently not: the meal took about an hour. Did she take rest of the night off? No: she kept in touch from home. Had she shrugged off responsibility as police commissioner for responding to the firestorm? Well, no.

Should she have waited another hour to listen to the ministerial briefing, knowing by that stage that deaths were likely? Why? What benefit, even in hindsight, would it have been to hang about looking concerned, when there was nothing more she could possibly do? The full horror was not to be known until light on the following day.

The Royal Commission can't even begin to pin blame on Nixon for the widespread failure to predict the savagery of the firestorms, to save more people, or create or mend failed radio/telecommunications — all of this was in others' hands.

Nixon's only 'mistake' was to say that she 'could have done better' on Black Saturday. Everyone could have.

No man would have said this. Linguistics Professor Deborah Tannen's research into the communication patterns of women and men (*Talking From 9 to 5*) proved that even at work men communicate as they have been socialised as boys, to build up status and social credit in the hierarchy they learned in the playground. Women aim to establish relationships and commonalities, an approach that they, too, learned among their peers.

Interrogated by a woman, even a tough, sometimes ruthless manager of operational police officers could slip into a reflective acknowledgment of fallibility.

Perhaps Nixon was unnecessarily honest, too, in telling a journo where she had eaten that night, because women leaders' vulnerabilities make airborne news, and politicians who sniff the wind (better than the CFA did that horror night) will run before it.

The tongue is a little instrument, Commissioner, which does much harm. The Secretary of the Police Association — at war with the first woman Chief Commissioner of Police and first Commissioner who would neither accept nor turn a blind eye to bullying — was quick to strike more matches. Opposition politicians in an election year struck poses and opened their mouths to add more fuel. Blame splashed around, but not from all of the bushfire-affected survivors (notably, not from Kinglake). Yet she is burning, burning.

Let us put it out. No firestorm of blame would be raging in Victorian papers or in Canberra nor would Christine Nixon herself be scorched by it, were she not a woman, a decent woman, a strong woman, a prominent woman and an ethically sound woman of an age and with the experience to possess a raging integrity of her own and, by her very being, to offer ruthless men a soft target.

Julia Baird wrote in *Media Tarts*, her book about press treatment of women politicians:

'[W]hat drives a lot of the ... coverage ... is a questioning of their humanity. Those with right-wing views, who are not seen as particularly compassionate, are portrayed as almost subhuman monsters, with grotesque features ripe for satire or caricature ... Those seen as honest, decent and warm-hearted are canonised and showered with praise for being human, real, and like the rest of us ... They are cheered for representing the politics of change.

'But then, when they show emotion, make mistakes or behave like the men in playing political hardball, they are fiercely castigated ... if they crack under the pressure, the ensuing criticism makes it clear we actually want them to be superhuman.'

Anyone who, as Christine Nixon did, takes the lead in the war zone of policing is in exactly the same position.

Let us admit our own mistakes. One would be to blame 'the media' for it all, and I don't. Our attitudes to strong women are grievously at fault. The other would be to fail to acknowledge that even saints are fully, humanly fallible. Christine Nixon's flaw is a noble one: the learned law of all women, to accept personal responsibility.

## The mutant homeless

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

***Micmacs* (MA). Running time: 105 minutes. Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Starring: Danny Boon, André Dussollier, Nicolas Marié, Julie Ferrier, Dominique Pinon, Michel Crémadès, Marie-Julie Baup**

In her 2008 book *Superheroes: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*, British cultural commentator Roz Kaveney argues a case for the ‘liminality’ of superheroes. Superheroes, she writes, ‘are uncanny and exist at the threshold between states — it is the threshold that is important rather than the states it lies between’.



Superheroes, she continues, can be ‘socially dead, though alive, through the loss of their original family’, ‘exist as figures of the twilight’, or take on ‘the nature of alchemical elements, while remaining essentially human’. Some are ‘morally liminal, good and evil at once’; most are vigilantes, working outside, although ostensibly on the same side as, the law.

*Micmacs* is the new film from Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the visionary French director of *Delicatessen* (1991) and *Amélie* (2001). It shares the fantastical whimsy, demented humour and serious subtext that are the trademarks of those idiosyncratic classics. But it is also helpful, if not entirely accurate, to think of *Micmacs* as a superhero film. That’s especially true when armed with Kaveney’s concept of ‘liminality’.

Its protagonist, Bazil (Boon), lost his parents at a young age. His soldier father was killed by a landmine during a routine military operation. His mother’s subsequent mental breakdown and institutionalisation meant Bazil was effectively orphaned. Orphanhood is a superhero trope — think of Batman and Superman, for starters.

As an adult, Bazil is afflicted by a further crisis: he is accidentally shot in the head during a drive-by shooting. The bullet lodges in his brain but doesn’t kill him. By the flip of a coin, the surgeon on duty opts not to operate and so to risk causing devastating brain damage. Instead he leaves the bullet where it is, although with the proviso that Bazil could still drop dead at any moment. That said, he is lucky to be alive at all.

This is the kind of extraordinary, traumatic event that in superhero lore takes a ‘normal’ person to another plane. It’s Spider-Man’s radioactive spider bite, or the technological crises that afflict and transform the Hulk and the Fantastic Four. Bazil loses his job and his home and takes to the street. His ever-imminent death gives him a new outlook on life. In appearance a vagrant, really he’s just living freely, knowing each day could be his last.

In the Marvel comics' universe, the X-Men, whose superhuman gifts cause them to be labelled as mutants and make them the target of bigotry, function as a metaphor for marginalised or persecuted minorities — in particular homosexuals, but also ethnic and other social minorities. In the same way, Bazil, ostracised from his 'normal' life, finds himself on the margins of society, and adopted by a family of homeless eccentrics.

Here is another superhero trope: social 'others' united in their marginalisation by a bond that is not biological but is nonetheless familial. Comic book precedents for this include not just the X-Men, but also the Avengers and the Justice League of America. The members of Bazil's new family include a human cannonball (Pinon), a contortionist (Ferrier), an improbably strong gadgetry wizard (CrÃ©madÃ©s) and a human calculator (Baup).

*Micmacs* is a superhero film with two supervillains. They are rival arms manufacturers Fenouillet (Dussollier) and Marconi (MariÃ©). One was responsible for the land mine that killed Bazil's father; the other, the bullet that is Bazil's cross to bear. Upon discovering the destructive role these men have played in his life, Bazil decides to exact revenge.

Revenge, surely, is not the most heroic of motives, but these villains are so unequivocally evil (one, a collector of esoteric celebrity artifacts, is in the market for Mussolini's eyeball) that here vengeance substitutes neatly for justice. Bazil and his team of vigilantes employ a series of elaborate schemes to defeat his nemeses. Their imaginative, overly complicated, virtually Rube Goldberg-like offensives are the key set-pieces of the film and, in the hands of a cast of gifted physical comedians, the source of much of its humour and energy.

The film's full title in French is *Micmacs Ã  tire-larigot*, a colloquialism that translates into something like *Non-stop shenanigans*. Jeunet does handle the subject matter with a light touch, but it is worth remembering that the film is billed as a satire on the arms trade. In the deception and humiliation of its diabolical antagonists, *Micmacs* offers catharsis to those of us who question the morality of those who profit from the making of weapons.

It's not true of all superhero sagas but, in *Micmacs* at least, the goodies emerge victorious, while the baddies get their just desserts.

## Choosing the sex of your child

### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

*Kevin McGovern*



In recent weeks, several reports have appeared in the media that Australia's ban on couples using IVF to choose the sex of their children for social reasons or to balance their families might soon be lifted.

Most stories quoted 'IVF pioneer' Professor Gab Kovacs, who is said to be 'leading the charge' or 'leading the lobby'. A number of other fertility doctors are also involved.

This seems to be a pre-emptive attempt to sway public opinion. The inquiry has not yet commenced. And supporters of this view know that many of us are not comfortable about parents choosing the sex of their children. So ahead of time, they're trying to change our minds.

Many couples with one child would prefer another child of the opposite sex. However, studies show that very few people would take deliberate steps to guarantee that this happens. To the contrary, many people feel intuitively that there's something not quite right about doing this.

Following its usual practice, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is soon to review its 2004 Ethical Guidelines on the Use of Assisted Reproductive Technology in Clinical Practice and Research.

These Guidelines permit sex selection in Australia for medical reasons in those cases where parents could pass on a genetic disease to children of one or the other sex. However, they do not permit sex selection for non-medical reasons. They state that 'sex selection (by whatever means) must not be undertaken except to reduce the risk of transmission of a serious genetic condition'.

These guidelines apply to all fertility clinics and fertility doctors around Australia. It seems that some of them are not happy about having to conform to community standards.

This is about in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). IVF uses sperm and ova to make multiple embryos outside the body. PGD tests one cell from each developing embryo — in this case, to identify which are male and which are female. Only embryos of the sex which will not develop a particular genetic disease are then implanted into the woman's body.

All this is very expensive. The cost of a single cycle of IVF is between \$5—8000; the cost of PGD is between \$10—15,000. Some of the supporters of sex selection for non-medical reasons

are fertility doctors who would receive these large payments. I wonder if this financial incentive has helped to shape their views.

The NHMRC identifies at least three concerns about sex selection for non-medical reasons. Above all, it believes that 'admission to life should not be conditional upon a child being a particular sex'. It adds that 'sex selection is incompatible with the parent-child relationship being one that involves unconditional acceptance'. And it warns that 'sex selection may be an expression of sexual prejudice, in particular against girls'.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission reviewed Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) in 2007. It identified these same three concerns. Arguing that 'the purpose of ART is to help people who cannot otherwise have children', it added that 'sex selection for non-medical reasons does not fit within this criterion'.

Does sex selection for non-medical reasons take us down a 'slippery slope' which will eventually lead to some people also wanting to select embryos based on their intelligence, sporting ability, or even hair and eye colour? The Commission also noted this disturbing concern.

For all these reasons, the Victorian Law Reform Commission concluded that 'the current legislative ban on sex selection for non-medical reasons should remain in force'.

The Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Act 2008 prohibits sex selection in IVF unless it is necessary to prevent a genetic abnormality or disease. In Western Australia, the Reproductive Technology Council prohibits sex selection unless it is to prevent a gender-based disorder. Similarly, the South Australian Reproductive Technology (Clinical Practices) Act 1988 forbids sex selection in IVF unless it is to prevent the transmission of a genetic defect.

In November 2003, a public consultation by Britain's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) found that 80 per cent of people did not want sex selection techniques to be available for non-medical reasons. HFEA Chair Suzi Leather said, 'We are not persuaded that the likely benefits of permitting sex selection for social reasons are strong enough to outweigh the possible harm that might be done.'

In the United Kingdom, sex selection is only allowed for medical reasons. Sex selection for non-medical reasons continues to be prohibited. This is also the situation in Canada and in New Zealand.

In 2008, the Catholic Church also spoke against couples 'using artificial means of procreation in order to engage in genetic selection of their offspring'.

These many different reports, statements, guidelines and laws reflect general community concern about couples choosing the sex of their children for non-medical reasons.

The current debate looks like reaching the same conclusion. Already, Dr Sandra Hacker,

chair of the NHMRC's Australian Health Ethics Committee, has said that previous consultations have found the 'majority of Australians' opposed to this possibility. Sex selection for reasons other than genetic abnormalities has a 'general disaffection within the general population'.

The Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon also emphasised that 'the government has not set down this path because we wish to make any changes'. She added, 'And, at a personal level, I am very uncomfortable about the suggestions that such a change might be made.'

Despite the efforts of its opponents, it does not seem likely that Australia's rule against sex selection for non-medical reasons is about to be changed.

## Why Ali fled Afghanistan

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

*Frank Brennan*

On Monday night's Q&A, Tony Abbott was asked about the recent wave of boat people, including Hazaras fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan. My ears pricked up, as I had recently been in Indonesia discussing the issue with the Jesuit Refugee Service there. At the end of one meeting, a 15-year-old Hazara named Ali (pictured) came and told me his heart wrenching story.



Ali's father was taken by the Taliban, never to be seen again, and his mother has fled into Afghanistan with her children. Ali decided to flee, seeking security not just for himself but eventually for his mother and his siblings. He is presently stranded in Indonesia having spent all his money, hoping one day to reach Australia. Indonesia offers no solution to his plight.

Tony Abbott spoke of people like Ali in these terms:

'... if they are fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution, the first country they get to has a duty to offer them refuge. But ... nearly all of the people who come to Australia have come through other countries first. They've come through Pakistan, where they presumably don't suffer the same fear of persecution. They've come through Indonesia, where they certainly are at no risk of persecution. So the risk of persecution ceases well before they come to Australia.

'Australia is a very desirable destination, let's face it, which is why they don't stay in Pakistan or in Indonesia.'

Australia is a long time signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol. It is one of the few countries in the region to be a signatory. Indonesia is not.

Under the Convention, Australia has a key obligation 'not to impose for illegal entry or unauthorised presence in their country any penalty on refugees coming directly from a territory where they are threatened, provided only that the refugees present themselves without delay and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence'.

Prior to 2001, the Australian government took the view that refugees fleeing even faraway countries via Indonesia were 'coming directly' and were thus not to be penalised for their illegal entry or unauthorised presence in Australian territory or waters.

That presumption was abandoned in 2001 with the increased influx of boat people from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. The Australian Government (of which Tony Abbott was a member) decided to penalise boat people arriving without a visa by imposing mandatory detention and by replacing the permanent protection visa with the temporary protection visa.

The government also decided to reduce the access for these persons to judicial review of their status determination decisions.

The Government took the view that these people were no longer engaged in direct flight from persecution. Rather they had fled persecution, found a modicum of protection in another country, then decided to engage in secondary movement seeking a more benign migration outcome.

The Rudd Government improved timelines for mandatory detention, saying detention was only for the purposes of identity, health and security checks. Detention was to last as long as the refugee determination process took, with the assurance that it would usually be complete within 90 days. This has blown out to 104 days on average.

The permanent visa was restored. Boat people intercepted before arrival on the Australian mainland are processed on Christmas Island without access to the courts for the usual raft of appeal procedures. Government officials conduct the assessments and there is a review of unsuccessful claims by a panel of retired professionals.

A successful non-statutory refugee status assessment (RSA) results in the Minister considering that it is in the public interest that he permit the successful asylum seeker to apply for a visa. There might still be some recourse to the courts were government officials purporting to make decisions consistent with the Refugee Convention but without following due process.

The Government claims that the RSA process 'builds in common law requirements of procedural fairness throughout the process'. Its intent is to do whatever it can to create conditions in Indonesia such that the Australian public will be convinced that any asylum seeker landing in Indonesia will be assured humane accommodation and transparent processing of their claim in compliance with UNHCR standards. That is why the Australian Government has been channelling significant funds to IOM (International Organisation for Migration).

But for Indonesia to be rightly characterised as an adequate country for asylum, proven refugees need also to be extended the usual rights of refugees, including work, health, education and social welfare. This is especially true given that Indonesia refuses to provide local integration as a durable solution and the waiting list for resettlement is so long that it takes years for a refugee like Ali to find a new home.

Deliberately, the Australian Government will not consider prompt, wholesale resettlement of proven refugees from Indonesia for fear of setting up a magnet effect. On average, Australia takes only about 50 transit refugees a year from Indonesia. There are 2509 refugees registered with UNHCR in Indonesia according to latest information from the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs. More than half of these are from Afghanistan.

Even if IOM were to provide appropriate accommodation for asylum seekers in Indonesia and even if the UNHCR processes were sufficiently expeditious and transparent for the determination of claims, proven refugees would still languish for years without the provision of basic refugee rights, and failed asylum seekers would still be armed with the knowledge that applicants reaching Christmas Island have a higher success rate.

Though Abbott might claim that these failed asylum seekers and proven refugees resident in Indonesia are not Australia's responsibility, it is in Australia's interests that their concerns be addressed. Otherwise they will end up in Australia, and Australia's responsibility. Many Australians want to extend their concern to these persons before they risk the treacherous sea voyage, in which case we would only avoid responsibility if they perished at sea.

You cannot tell Ali to go home and join the queue: there ain't one. If he makes it here by boat, we should give him full protection without penalty. Part of the price of protecting our borders is honouring our obligations under the Refugee Convention to boys like Ali.

## The joys and risks of reading in bed

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle



Which we have all done, idly or assiduously, thoroughly or haphazardly, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and may well do until death do us part from the teetering pile of novels we have been reading in bed since last summer, drooling on the pages as we fall asleep, propped on one arm, our glasses surfing down our noses, until the moment that we snap awake suddenly and for a split second wonder where exactly we are, why we are naked, and who drooled on Dostoyevsky.

But there are many happy hours when we are stark raving awake, and find ourselves reading happily in the broad beam of the bed — in the morning here and there, when no one is around to sound the sluggishness alarm; and in the afternoon sometimes, before a nap, for 20 delicious inky minutes; and occasionally in the evening, if cooking duties have been evaded successfully for religious reasons, and there is a parenthetical hour when you can curl up and knock off a hundred pages of, say, the endless tomes of W. L. S. Churchill, who apparently never had an unpublished thought, the poor mule.

Some books should be read in bed — Proust, for example, who seems to have spent most of his adult life writing in bed, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, which was composed in bed, and which eerily lends itself to being read there, and which has probably been read aloud by supine parents to their sleepy children more than any book in our language, except the stoner classic *Goodnight Moon*.

And some magazines, I notice, are best read in bed, for murky reasons: *The New Yorker*, for example, and *National Geographic*, maybe because they are small enough to handle easily and clean enough not to leave inky evidence in the bed, which is why we don't read the Sunday newspaper in bed anymore, having learned our lesson that time Blondie Bumstead's face was discovered imprinted on the pillow, boy, was that hard to explain.

Moving on, there are the simple pleasures of reading in bed, to wit being bare of foot and sans of trousers, and there are the logistical conundra, to wit getting the book propped securely amidships and persuading the reading lamp to stop nodding sleepily (band-aids are good, although I know of people who use gum and duct tape), and there is the ancient problem of glancing at the book that your bed companion is reading and getting absorbed in it surreptitiously over her shoulder and wishing she would turn the page faster dang it and then when she gets up to check on the children, quickly snatching it and zooming through a few pages and trying desperately to remember what page she was on before she comes back to bed and gives you that look you know all too well, the look that nearly killed the refrigerator

repairman that time, let's not bring that up again.

But these are small problems with which we are all familiar, whereas there are some larger challenges, such as what if you are reading Ian Frazier and you start laughing so hard there's an accident? and what if you are reading Ann Coulter and you lose your temper and your head flies off, would insurance pay for that? and what if you are reading something unbearably dull and you get the irrepressible urge to leap out the window and run down the street naked as Will Ferrell, will anyone visit you in jail?

In conclusion, reading in bed is a grim responsibility, I believe, and as a society we fail our children if we do not carefully remove our street clothes, don cotton pyjamas of any hue, and crawl into the boat of the bed with a sigh of delight, each and every night, there to voyage into the glory of story, UnKindled, BlackBerryless, PalmPilotless, with our spectacles sliding ever so gently down our probosces, our minds opening gently like steamer clams, hoping against hope that the Companion will brush her teeth for a really long time tonight so we can bump off the rest of her chapter, while trying to remember, with what is left of the soft ice cream of our minds, that she was on page 90. We hope.

## How to apologise for genocide

### POLITICS

*Binoy Kampmark*

French philosopher Jacques Derrida considered the value of the apology as proportionate to the nature of the challenge it was meant to overcome. The greater the challenge, with its varied obstacles, the greater the value for the apology given for that wrong.



Writers and moral philosophers have debated the possibility of forgiving the unforgivable — crimes against humanity for example. Their very inhumanity might be seen to militate against any act of apology. Such crimes, which include genocide, target the very essence of what it is to be human.

But a refusal to countenance apologies delivered by the highest authorities and from the most hated of historical enemies has its drawbacks. To place the victim definitively in a morally pre-eminent position may be a mistake. It forecloses ever considering a politics of apology. It cuts off the perpetrator from any avenue of genuine remorse and penance.

May it be better to let the perpetrator into the moral circle, to acknowledge the act and the human agency behind it, and to forgive? The [remarkable events](#) in the Serbian Parliament last week are telling for that very reason.

The apology issued is exceptional. An acknowledgment and apology condemning the massacre in 1995 of some 8000 Bosniaks that took place in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica must surely be recognised. 'The parliament of Serbia strongly condemns the crime committed against the Bosnian Muslim population of Srebrenica in July 1995, as determined by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling.'

The text also affirms the continued cooperation with the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia and the cardinal importance in 'the discovery and arrest of Ratko Mladic so that he might stand trial before the ICTY'. Mladic, the key military figure behind the operation, is still at large.

Sceptics are bound to challenge the sincerity of the motion. Mark Karadzic, Serbia's youthful Deputy Minister of Human and Minority Rights, is not discouraged.

'I can't speak on behalf of others,' explained the minister to the Netherlands' *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, 'but many people sincerely regret what happened.' Many matters and misperceptions need to be corrected. 'Serbs have been taught that half the world is against them and that the Yugoslavia tribunal is anti-Serbian.'

The nationalists were enraged. The debate lasted 13 hours and was often furious.

Opposition MPs called the text ‘shameful’. They believe that the declaration diminishes Bosnian Serbs’ own status as victims, ignoring atrocities committed on them by Bosniaks and Croats between 1992 and 1995.

Velimir Ilic, a member of the opposition camp, felt that a mark of Cain was being placed on the Serbs of the future. ‘Why do you want to put a mark on the future generations that they will never wash away?’

Some will also pick at weaknesses in this act. Survivors and their relatives will regret that the term genocide was not used. The massacre was an act of destruction against ethnicity as well as humanity. Such an omission might be seen as crippling and distorting. But the very fact that the apology was made at all must be seen as a remarkable step in purifying dark memories in the Balkans.

The apology also has greater resonance given the ongoing trial of Radovan Karadzic in The Hague. Posterity is a dark place that needs occasional lights of hope.

In our times the political apology has assumed freight and relevance, whether it be Rudd’s act of contrition to the Stolen Generations in Australia, or the resolution passed last year by the US Senate apologising for slavery. As the lead sponsor of the resolution on slavery, Democrat Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa explained, ‘It is important to have a collective response to a collective injustice.’ Few would disagree with that sentiment.

## **Not-quite-right freedom from hunger**

POETRY

*Anthony Lynch*

### **The vexing**

How dark he was.

He walked with his back hunched,  
his lowered head inches above his toes.

As if he feared cavities  
or his own anonymity.

That black dog  
stopping at every fence post.

He twitched. He was languid. At night  
his bed clothes grew perturbed.

We sensed his not-quite-right  
freedom from hunger.

As if he preferred worms  
or no-name soup. A watery grave.

He let his pen do the squirming.  
But the paper grew wider,  
more empty than the sea.

Much better like this.  
Eating focaccia and waving  
our mothers an acquiescent goodbye.  
The past exits the back door

where pot plants do their time.

Next door a television

talks to the walls.

## **Elegy**

### **1.**

murmurings of war —

in an unmarked sky a jet

dreams new script

\*

on the powerline

crows collecting like small deaths

and then a wingbeat

\*

already wearing black

two million office workers

preparing themselves

\*

rumours from the city —

we check the basement, our phones

and still no answer

\*

something upon us  
the spotlight of terror  
a new kind of love

\*

empty house  
the leaves, the man with his past  
the earth rushing up

\*

blue lights, sirens  
the urban constellations  
of alarm

\*

frame by frame  
nights stretched out on plasma  
flowers on footpaths

\*

last night on TV  
he said, *we will find them*  
*we will find them*

2.

turning from her desk  
a doctor opens her hands  
and the clocks change hour

\*

all through summer  
vans with lights on during day  
ferry the silent

\*

the return home —  
after filling up our cars  
we count boxes

\*

a short speech of road  
where the blackbird strings up worms  
plaques buttoning earth

\*

and these found objects —  
a toothbrush, a gas bill  
the neat bed

\*

in today's paper  
ringed with coffee stains  
this receipt of you

## Easter's image of compassion for abused and abusers

### RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*



Easter is often celebrated in difficult times. In the Catholic Church this year shame and sadness at the disclosures of sexual abuse in the European churches are part of the background to Easter. It would be easy to see the former as a distraction from Easter. But a central meditation of St Ignatius Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises* suggests that the two need to be held together.

Ignatius invites retreatants imaginatively to join the three Persons of the Trinity as they look down on the earth at the panorama of people sinning and going to hell, and discuss how to rescue humanity.

This meditation asks for a realistic and unflinching view of the world, and of ourselves in it, which focuses on the selfishness so often characteristic of human relationships in commerce, war, family and politics, and on its lethal consequences. The prayer is not intended to evoke self-disgust or despair at such a flawed world. Our gaze is to mirror God's gaze, which is not detached but compassionate, devising rescue for both the perpetrators and the victims of sin.

To understand what Christians celebrate at Easter we need this kind of perspective. A sensibility that softens the reality of sin, affirms human goodness in an unqualified way, and sees God as simply indulgent, cannot do justice to the stories of Easter. They include harrowing images of sin, of its murderous consequences, and surprising images of life and freedom won through death.

The calculation of those who wanted to kill Jesus, Judas' betrayal, Pilate's cowardice, the failure of the disciples to stand by Jesus, the casual brutality of the soldiers, and a death by crucifixion that was designed to dehumanise the condemned and to mock their pretensions, provide what seems to be a definitive demonstration of the power of sin over humanity.

The miracle of Easter is that the demonstration turns out not to be definitive, but is interrupted by Jesus' rising. Precisely the events that prove the power of sin turn out to be the source of life. God's gaze, and so the Christian's, takes in together the devastation made by sin of Jesus' life and the seeds of life that burst through sin.

This conjunction of sin and of life suggests that the stories of sexual abuse throughout the Catholic world are not a distraction from Easter. If we are to enter this Easter it is appropriate to attend in a sustained way to the complex patterns of sin that are involved in abuse and in its consequences. This kind of gaze resists the temptations to deny or to minimise the extent of sexual abuse and the harm done by it. Because the gaze also attends to the viewer's own

sinfulness, it resists the group self-interest that removes from scrutiny church practices like clerical celibacy and the rituals of power and obedience.

God's gaze is also compassionate. In Christian faith, Easter is the culmination of God's plan to rescue humanity by sharing it and entering fully into the vulnerability and pain of our condition as both sinners and victims of sin. To look through God's eyes on abuse means looking compassionately on the victims of abuse, and seeing the way in which the harm they suffered has affected their lives for many years after.

To look at the world through God's eyes also, challengingly but inescapably, means looking with compassion also on those who have abused people, without lessening our condemnation of what they have done. God sees us all, not as abusers, victims or bystanders, but as people who have abused, people who have suffered abuse and people who stand by. And God sees all of us as sinners for whom Christ died.

Easter is the triumph of God's compassionate gaze over the harsh judgments we instinctively make when we look long and clearly at the horror of the world. The systematic crushing of Jesus' humanity and of his vision speak of defeat and of scorched earth. But his rising from the dead says that humanity can never be crushed, that life comes through the most terrible death, and that the last word is not of a scorched earth but of seeds growing.

This Easter our gaze on the dreadful things, like abuse and its covering up, which speak of death in the church, also uncovers the compassion of God for sinners, including ourselves, and the possibility of freedom and of life.

## Hitting back at the men who hate women

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (MA). Running time: 153 minutes. Director: Niels Arden Oplev. Starring: Michael Nyqvist, Noomi Rapace, Sven-Bertil Taube**

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is based on the first book in late Swedish crime novelist Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*. It is revealing to note that the novel's original title is *Männ som hatar kvinnor* — *Men Who Hate Women*; the film, like the book, is not simply a procedural. Its protagonist, youthful hacker Lisbeth Sallander (Rapace), is capable of great violence. But her violence is a response to that which is and has been inflicted upon her.



Lisbeth's body is marked with the insignia referred to in the film's title. It could be seen equally as a badge of honour and a permanent bruise received after surviving past abuses. But the 'dragon tattoo' is more than simply ink on skin. Metaphorically, it is also a ferocious rhythm that beats within her. For Lisbeth, the best defense is a monstrous offense; attacked by four brutish male aggressors at a train station, this slight, antisocial woman's counter-attack is, by necessity, even more aggressive.

Lisbeth's 'dark passenger' proves to be an important ally. Made a ward of the state due to some mysterious past crime (as it turns out, another, formative incident of violence and counter-violence), Lisbeth finds herself victimised by a horrifically abusive guardian. These scenes are so intense that the shocking revenge Lisbeth metes upon her abuser is comparatively cathartic for the viewer. For Lisbeth, however, it is simply necessary.

She is an intriguing character, damaged but stronger for her appropriation of that damage as a weapon. So central is her arc that the film is not only named for her, it also spends an inordinate amount of time on this kind of gruesome character development. To such an extent that the murder mystery that drives the film's plot seems almost arbitrary.

Lisbeth finds herself investigating a decades-old missing person case, at the side of disgraced investigative journalist turned private sleuth Mikael Blomkvist (Nykvist). Mikael has been enlisted by aging industrialist Henrik Vanger (Taube) to try belatedly to discover what happened to his niece, who as a teenager disappeared without a trace. The Vanger family tree is broad and factious; some of its branches have Nazi connections. Not all family members are pleased about the reopening of this old, cold case.

A prodigious and astute computer hacker, Lisbeth at first assists Mikael anonymously, remotely solving riddles and piecing together clues that she finds among the files on his hard drive. When their paths finally merge she becomes the goth-girl Watson to his world-weary

Holmes. Together they uncover a string of unsolved gory, ritualistic murders that are somehow linked to the missing girl. The girl's fate is not the most disturbing secret haunting this family's closet.

A modern-day investigation of an old case presents possibilities for combing old and new technologies in interesting ways. Scenes where Mikael employs new photographic enhancement techniques to examine decades old negatives will appeal to criminal investigation and techno-buffs. That said, viewers who speak fluent *Law and Order* might regret the dearth of intense interview and interrogation scenes.

Ultimately none of this is as interesting as the film's exploration of its two idiosyncratic gumshoes. The first time we encounter someone for whom Lisbeth has been a willing sexual partner, that person is a woman. In the context of her mistreatment at the hands of some men, Lisbeth's homosexual behaviour may be taken as a sign of generalised distrust of all men.

If that is true, the fact that she later becomes Mikael's lover as well as his sidekick testifies to the trust he has earned simply by not asking anything of her; a significant kindness to one who is accustomed to being used.

While the culmination of their investigation of the Vanger case is almost laughably over the top, it provides an interesting resolution to Lisbeth's character arc. It is a mirror for Lisbeth in which, if she chooses to, she can examine the sickly state of her own humanity. We have already seen her capacity for violence; the film's climax tests her capacity for mercy. Lisbeth is a sympathetic character, but her dragon tattoo never fades.

## Scenes from a Chinese milk bar

NON-FICTION

*Vin Maskell*



The milk bar man is going back to China. His wife is frail and, says Peter, needs traditional Chinese medicine. More than she can get here in Australia. She needs a carer too, he explains to me in halting English while I pay for three two-litre bottles of milk.

The Chinese couple had kept the shop going for ten years at a time when milk bars, like public telephones, were disappearing off the map. In my two decades in this suburb about eight corner shops have closed. And in the past three years Peter's milk bar, like his wife, was just hanging on.

Mary was down to skin and bone underneath her sagging cardigan and plain pants. She wore a poorly fitted black wig. She would shuffle to the counter, her slippers hardly lifting from the lino floor. Her eyes, behind large spectacles, barely acknowledged you. Her thin lips remained impassive. A customer needed to be patient.

I would say hello and thank you but never expected Mary to return the compliments. It was enough for her hands to be able to take my coins and place them beside the cash register before she shuffled away.

The business appeared to be winding down. But there were still milk and newspapers. Ice creams. Smokes. A few magazines covered in cleavage, the women's eyes shining, their botox lips open wide.

Sometimes I bought my milk elsewhere, rather than just pop 300 m around the corner. From the green-grocer near the supermarket. From the 'convenience store' near the train station. From one of the other four milk bars in the suburb, all of them about a kilometre away.

But it was always a guilty purchase. One day, I thought, Peter and Mary might just shut up shop, like the milk bars in Wilkins St and Yarra St and Albert St. In Douglas Parade. Along the Esplanade. In Osborne St.

When Peter told me he and Mary were going back to China I presumed the milk bar would be closing. No, he said, a younger person is taking over.

'I am almost old enough to retire,' he said as I placed my milk in my back pack. 'But I think I will get some part-time work.' He had been a ball-bearing engineer.

Peter explained that in China the government will be able to provide a part-time carer for Mary. And there will be extended family too. His daughter, his only immediate family, has decided to return to the United States to work in IT.

I only had a few more weeks of Peter's company. We had not built a close friendship over the ten years but we had a rapport, a shared understanding within the simple act of buying and selling milk.

My first memory of meeting Peter was witnessing a moment of selfish opportunism, possibly based on racism. Peter had just taken over and the previous owner, Andy, was showing him the ropes.

I placed my milk on the counter and stood beside a man looking furtively at the milk bar copy of the Melway. Seeing Peter and Andy distracted, the man began to tear a page from the street directory. I placed my hand on the page, met the man's eyes and asked him what street he was trying to find. I gave him some basic directions, told him where to go, so to speak, and the man left.

Andy introduced me to Peter, whose optimism contrasted with Andy's world-weariness.

Mary was not always frail but she was never overtly cheerful like Peter. I could talk to Peter – or attempt to, through our language barriers – but I could only make a milk and coin transaction with Mary.

I wanted to ask Peter about China but having never travelled I didn't know where to start. My only real reference point was a favourite children's book called *Digging to China*, by Australian illustrator Donna Rawlins.

In the 30-page picture book a girl called Alexis fulfils a dream of her neighbour Marj to visit China. Alexis simply starts digging underneath her fig tree until she gets to the other side of the world. No maps, no street directories. Just a spade and a torch and a trail of ribbons tying Alexis to the fig tree.

There is no mention of milk bars in this charming book but it is easy to imagine Alexis and Marj walking to the corner together to buy ice-creams on a hot day.

On Peter's last day of business I gave him a present which he tried not to accept. 'No, no, no!' he said, smiling and shaking his head. He held his hands aloft but I held out the gift-wrapped book until he took it. Then he placed it under the counter and introduced me to Jasmine, a young Chinese woman.

I shook hands with the new owner, paid her for my milk and said farewell to Peter.

The book was not the Donna Rawlins book but a small collection of illustrated stories and anecdotes about our suburb, including a story about two of its milk bars. It was, it could be said, a street directory of sorts.

Jasmine is sprucing up the shop. More ice-creams. More sweets. More magazines. Tradies are hammering and sawing, and pulling up the lino. One night, just before closing time, two men were jack-hammering inside the shop. Jasmine smiled amid the noise. I didn't ask why

the two men were drilling into the concrete but heading back down the street I imagined they were digging, digging to China, all the way to Peter and Mary's new home.

Postscript: Peter, Jasmine told me recently, found work in China. Mary died a month after returning home.

## Why 'welcome to country' is more than formality

### INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

*Tony Smith*

Conservative politicians periodically question the practice of beginning public gatherings by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land. The most recent expressions of these opinions met with condemnation that was pretty general, but far from strong enough. An acknowledgment of the traditional owners and ownership of an area where we have the privilege of residing or visiting costs us nothing but strengthens our integrity.



The arguments of these conservative politicians suggest a flippancy bordering on hypocrisy. Supposed yearnings for a similar acknowledgement of a Christian God are hardly to be taken seriously.

They use the same *reductio ad absurdum* tactic when seeking to decry any form of affirmative action. They generally reject the notion that social disadvantage of any group is attributable to denial of opportunity through discrimination, preferring the view that the poor and marginalised really are inferior.

For several reasons, specific religious recognition at public meetings cannot have the same importance as an acknowledgement of country. First, not all Australians claim allegiance to a Christian deity. Indeed, the analogy is relevant only because Australia's Indigenous peoples have a genuinely spiritual association with the land. By recognising this link, all Australians can all be united in a non-denominational spirituality that fosters our spirits.

Second, justice demands that we make this acknowledgement. Over the last fifty years, dating from at least the 1967 referenda that removed discriminatory mentions of Indigenous people from the Constitution, we have struggled to find appropriate ways of acknowledging the forced alienation of the land. Judicial decisions, legislative responses and administrative programs have been mostly sincere, but clearly imperfect, attempts to redress the wrongs inflicted on the Indigenous peoples. Despite the conservative suspicion of symbolic actions such as treaties and apologies, these are far from being mere tokens. Symbolic actions have the advantage of avoiding legalistic impediments and they express a genuine aspiration for a fairer Australia.

Third, Indigenous stewardship of the land sets an important example for environmental sustainability. Although Europeans have occupied Australia for some 230 years, Aboriginal occupancy stretches back 40,000 years. As a nation, we have much to learn from the special relationship between the people and the land, provided we care to listen. For most Australians, hearing an acknowledgement of country might be one of the few times we are

prompted to think about Aboriginal issues. Indigenous people are under-represented in parliament and the media and in socio-economic elites. It is all too easy for those with reactionary views to present them as 'other', and even as a pampered minority favoured by political correctness.

Most baby-boomers remember standing for the English national anthem at the cinema. As a consequence of national maturity, Australia has abandoned that practice. It is also a sign of maturity that we value the reconciliation process. When Indigenous peoples travelled through the lands of neighbours, they understood that it was customary to acknowledge the people of those lands. When we show that we are learning from the traditional custodians of our land, it is important evidence that Australian society has a commitment to becoming more civilised. We should proudly maintain acknowledgement of country as a simple expression of a desire to live with integrity in this physically and socially unique land.

## Abbott, Santamaria and Catholic Liberals

### POLITICS

*John Warhurst*



Tony Abbott is the most prominent current Australian political leader with ties to the Labor Split of the 1950s, through his personal association with B. A. Santamaria, the leader of the Catholic Social Studies Movement.

The Movement was central to the politics of that Split. It produced the Democratic Labor Party which was not only anti-Communist and socially conservative but was also traditional Labor in its economic policies.

Other current politicians have connections through their parents and through its residue in party and union politics. But no one else has ties as deep as Abbott, who stresses the closeness of his association with Santamaria, his personal inspiration and mentor from school days onwards.

Abbott joined the Sydney University Democratic Club, supported by Santamaria's National Civic Council, before he moved on to the Liberals. Abbott often reflects on the consequences of this period, including the rise of Catholic Liberals. He has been known to observe enigmatically that the DLP is alive and well within his party.

Abbott has personified church ties with politics through his relationship with the man he has called his confessor, Cardinal George Pell. In the past the relationship of Catholics with their church authorities has contributed to Protestant distrust. And the Liberal Party has been deeply Protestant in its composition and beliefs.

As Malcolm Fraser recalls in his recent memoirs, when he asked his parents what was wrong with Catholics he was told 'Well, they are different. They are not Australians; they owe their loyalty to the Pope.'

The transfer of Catholic allegiance from Labor to the Liberals at the parliamentary level has been the most dramatic shift in Australian politics over the past 50 years. The astounding numbers have attracted attention, but many questions have been left unanswered about the impact of their arrival on the party. Has the transfer shaped the Liberals, matters of life-and-death morality like euthanasia and abortion aside?

Abbott himself explored this question in his Sir Philip Lynch Memorial Lecture in 2004. He argued that the influx had 'broadened the Liberals' social and economic base' and made the party less starchy and more eclectic. It had changed Liberal culture by providing more feel for the underdog and making it less wowserish. But he concluded that there had been no really major distinctive Catholic contribution to party policy debates.

His analysis may be right but it neglects the more sensitive area of policy. Now Paul Kelly, the national political commentator in *The Australian* newspaper, has opened up a rich vein of speculation. In regards to Abbott's parental leave scheme, funded by a tax on big business, Kelly reckons he sees a distinctive Catholic Liberal approach, or at least an Abbott-Catholic Liberal approach.

In particular he recognises a Catholic social tradition as espoused by Santamaria, a tradition suspicious of the market and of big business. Kelly goes so far as to argue that this new policy 'shows Abbott's emotional preference for Santamaria over Howard'.

He argues that Abbott represents a departure from the Liberal mainstream. He makes him sound like the Independent Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine, another with deep roots on the Santamaria side of the Split and a commitment to Catholic social teaching.

Kelly needs a lot more evidence and more examples before his proposition holds that Abbott is deeply indebted to Santamaria in his policy stances. But he raises two fascinating questions. First, is Abbott drawing on some instincts deeply lodged in Catholic social teaching? The evidence is slight. Certainly if he is then it is just one strand in church thinking.

The second question is whether Abbott is a one-off or represents a larger group of Catholic Liberals. There are certainly enough other senior Catholic Liberals, like Joe Hockey, Kevin Andrews and Andrew Robb, to make a difference if they constitute a distinctive and coherent group. But in fact there are as many different types of Catholic Liberals as there are Labor sub-factions. They are on all sides of the party.

Nevertheless you can't change the demographics of a political party as much as the Liberals have changed without ultimately questioning aspects of party philosophy.

## **A bishop's first education**

POETRY

*Brian Doyle*

### **The Song that Ena Zizi Sang**

As usual one story will have to serve for one million stories.  
That is the way of stories. You might think that a lone story  
Cannot possibly do that, and you would be right and wrong.  
So here is Ena Zizi. She is seventy years old. The house fell  
Down on her when an earthquake hammered Port-au-Prince.  
She was there in the dark for a week, her leg and hip broken.

In the beginning she talked to a man who was buried nearby.  
He was a priest, he said. After two days he fell silent so Ena  
Talked only to God, she said. After a week, she was rescued  
By a team called the Gophers. They slid her out on plywood.  
Ena sang all the way out of the rubble: she had begun to sing  
When she heard the scabbling of the Mexicans' search dogs.  
No one can remember if there were any words in the singing,  
But everyone remembers the lady singing. Ena says she does  
Not remember what song she was singing. I was very thirsty,  
She says. I sang and sang. Everyone there wept, and clapped,  
And they went back to work. But Ena is still singing the song.  
That's what I wanted to tell you. You can't not hear her song.  
I think perhaps that's a song that once it gets born never ends.  
I think maybe there are more songs floating than we can hear.  
I think we all know that and we all get a little tired and forget,  
But look, there's Ena rising from the dead again, and singing!

**Near Fig Tree Road, in Sydney, Australia**

Once upon a time I was at dinner with a lean priest named Michael. This was on a long muscle of soil called Hunters Hill by the harbour. There was a Catholic school nearby in a sprawling field and around the field were Mark and John and Paul and James and Mary streets. What, no Luke and Matthew? I asked. He grinned. Jupiter and Mars Streets are south a bit, he said. We like to cover all the bases, as you say in your country. And aptly our broadest street here is Augustine. Wondrous lesson, that man, but he has been imprisoned by theology. *Grant me chastity but not yet*, everyone knows that hilarious remark, But we perhaps do not remember that he was African, and had a son, And a steady girlfriend for many years before his epiphanic moment, Which occurred under a fig tree not unlike, perhaps, one of our trees. You will remember that Guatama also achieved light under a fig tree.

So one lesson we could draw for the church today would be more fig trees on general principles, a fig being perhaps the very tree of Eden. The Prophet Mohammed, God bless him and grant him peace, dearly loved figs, and they are mentioned everywhere in his Book and ours. Now, we might draw the lesson from Augustine that all bishops must have a child and a steady girlfriend as a first education in God's love, But that is... unlikely, in my lifetime and probably yours, so I suggest we begin with figs, which would not only foment epiphany, but offer meanwhile a most delicious fruit. Should we ask for a plate of them?

### **The Richmond Tigers: a Note**

Last year when I was in Melbourne waiting for a tram,  
This was the 112, from Fitzroy Street to Regent Street,  
I got to talking to a boy who claimed he was age seven

Although he didn't look a day past six and a half to me,  
And near the end of our chat about football and accents  
He said what if in another life you were my Yank uncle,  
Wouldn't that be interesting? So then he and his mother  
Continued home, they had swum all day in the museum,  
But I've kept chewing on what he said. I mean, what if?  
Sometimes it seems as if the lines between the countries  
We are and the countries we might have been or may be  
Are written in pencil, you know what I mean? You walk  
Along a street and you smell something and you *know* it,  
Or there's a certain cast of light you remember real well,  
Or you get into a conversation and someone laughs hard  
And time loses its jacket for a second — not long enough  
To see the tram map clearly, but enough so you see there  
Are lots of connecting lines, which is scary but excellent.  
I mean, things expand wonderfully when we contemplate  
A new nephew who is utterly and totally a Richmond fan,  
The poor child. Our Tigers will be *premiers*, he says, and  
I believe him. Maybe they're always the best, somewhere.

## Super size fees lead to retirement poverty

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Most people in the workforce are preoccupied with making ends meet in the here and now. Home mortgage, food, running a car, school fees, and much more. They don't have time to think about their retirement, and how they might fund the cost of living once salary payments stop going into their bank account.



Banks have recently reduced some of their charges for personal banking products following the campaigns of consumer organisations such as Choice. But they continue to hit consumers with high fees for superannuation accounts because most people don't worry about super until they near retirement.

Last week the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority released its superannuation league tables. Crikey's Bernard Keane [pointed out](#) that the banks' in-house staff superannuation funds performed roughly twice as well as their *retail* funds, which are used by the public.

Keane suggests the difference reflects the impact of fees and commissions charged by banks for the retail funds. The in-house funds, on the other hand, are careful not to impose significant fees or charges. It's likely that this is the case partly because bank employees are more financially literate and therefore harder to exploit than members of the public. Over many years, such an impost mounts up to the extent that it is likely to have a significant material affect on the quality of life that workers are able to enjoy once they reach retirement.

The Edmund Rice Centre's *Good Business* ethics newsletter [says](#) that the Federal Government's Review into the Superannuation System has shown that there are no less than ten different types of fees that need to be taken into account when making informed investment decisions. There are many available options, but most consumers take the default and often more expensive option, because it is genuinely too difficult to read and understand Product Disclosure Statements, Annual Statements and many other documents.

To add to the confusion, there is pressure from governments and consumer advocates for the imposition of fees for some financial services which until now have been provided free of charge. If there's such a thing, these fees are 'good fees', as they are designed to keep financial advisers honest. Such professionals often work for commission from banks and other institutions, and are therefore likely to favour the interests of the banks before those of the people they are advising. Therefore a ban on commissions from banks, and replacing them with fees for the consumer, is likely to give people a clearer idea of what financial product is going to provide best for their future.

Unfortunately the message to consumers is that there's little point in putting too much of their hard earned salary into super if they can't manage to work out how to choose the best options for their particular needs. We hope that the [Super System Review](#) , which is due to hand down its report on 30 June, will encourage the government to put in place a mechanism that will motivate and help consumers to take control of funding their retirement. A MySuper website perhaps. It could mean the difference between poverty in retirement, or being able to afford luxuries that enhance their quality of life such as books and travel.

## Beyond the global storytelling crisis

NON-FICTION

*Colm McNaughton*



It was while reading Gwyne Dyer's *Climate Wars* a couple of years ago that I started to accept that, as a species, we are probably not going to avert cataclysmic forms of climate change.

As this disturbing fact has come to settle within me, it has been less a source of despair and despondency (though I do have my moments!), than a form of liberation. It has allowed me to see the world with fresh eyes.

I can see that the forms of denial of what is happening both within and around us in regards to climate change is a layered and deeply structural process. This dynamic is informed by, and in turn contributes to, the continuing, unfolding crises within the financial architecture of 'Pax Americana', the cornerstone of the United States Empire.

We are not merely living through a crisis in economic or technological control, but something much deeper, a crisis in civilisation. The foundational Greek and Hebraic imaginaries, and the deep mythical narratives that frame western civilisation, can no longer contain, inform, explain and extend, the parameters of what we experience. We are living in a crisis in storytelling.

Our relationship to our own and other species, to the past, present and future, to land, culture, science and Empire are framed and informed by many layers of stories. These have been told and retold in different guises, which are rooted in the Greek and Hebraic imaginations.

Although there are many different cultures, in the last century the hydra-headed process known as capitalist globalisation, led in the last five decades by the US Empire, has colonised the globe. The fate of the planet is the fate of the US led imperial project known as civilisation.

If we are to understand and counter the roots of the self-destructive processes that civilisation has unleashed upon the bodies, psyches and ecosystems of the earth, then we need to become 'archeologists of memory'. We must look backwards and inwards, so uncovering, deciphering or inventing new stories that will help us deal with the enormity of what we are facing. We need new stories for a new time.

Key to this reflection is the recognition that something deep within our fractured and alienated beings is the source of this profound dis-ease. As such it is also potentially the wellspring of other, less destructive possibilities. Socrates' dictum 'know thyself' takes on a new urgent moral force.

Up till now there has been very little discussion, let alone action, directed to the social implications of climate change. What happens to a group of people who have been suckled on the glitz and speed of consumerism when their ability to consume is taken away from them? What fills this spiritual void? Why are we not probing and discussing this change together?

I recently visited Guatemala and Mexico for four months to immerse myself in another culture, to make [documentaries](#) for Radio National's 360documentaries program, and to witness first-hand the social experimentation underway in the underbelly of the US Empire.

Guatemala and Mexico have unique, intensely colourful and powerful landscapes, histories and societies. The contradictions they now face have much to do with their proximity to the US Empire, which is at many levels in a period of decline.

I learnt from visiting Central America that the US Empire is not going to unleash fascism to deal with its various crises. Fascism, in all of its guises, was the response of the nation-state, which has been superseded by the market state.

So what the US Empire has in store for us — and the research and development continues in Mexico and Colombia, as well as places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan — is a new social formation that we do not even have a word for yet. It is part-narco, part-corporate, part-private military-corporation, and all nasty!

It moves and morphs at will, feeds off financial flows, emerges from the grey areas between the legal and illegal, national and international laws, has global aspirations and is taking terror to hitherto unimagined levels. Welcome to the Future!

This new monster is part of the armoury of how the US Empire in decline is preparing to deal with the crisis in civilisation. At present we do not even have the imaginary space to understand, let alone counter what is emerging on the horizon.

We desperately need new stories.