EUREKA STREET

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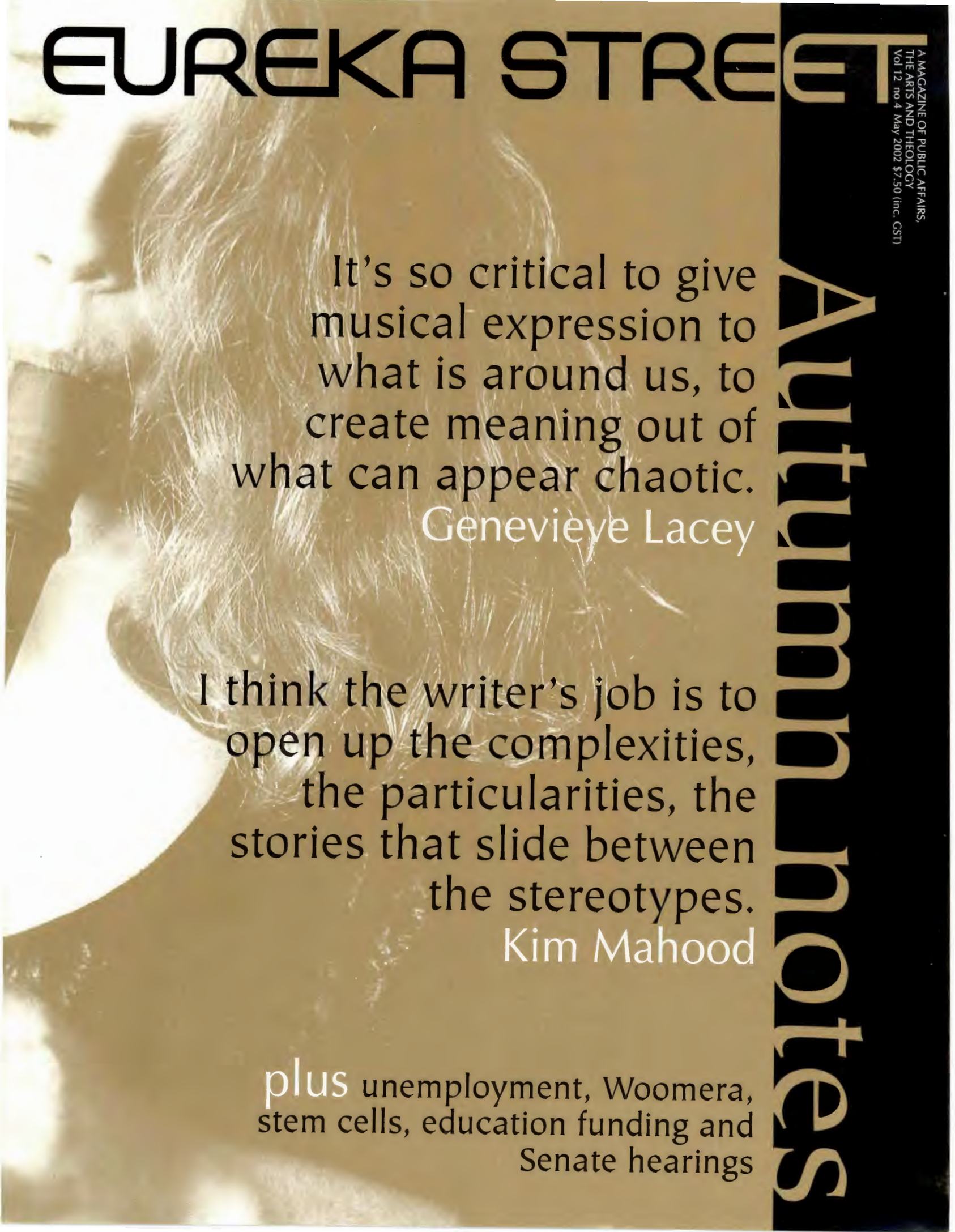
Autumnotes



It's so critical to give musical expression to what is around us, to create meaning out of what can appear chaotic.
Genevieve Lacey

I think the writer's job is to open up the complexities, the particularities, the stories that slide between the stereotypes.
Kim Mahood

plus unemployment, Woomera, stem cells, education funding and Senate hearings

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The writing on the wall

Frank Jackson argues that another review of universities won't solve the basic problem of underfunding.

RUPERT MURDOCH said it first. Then John Schubert said it. Now Ian Macfarlane is saying it. Our universities are in serious trouble and this is bad news for the future of this country. Our universities need a lot more money.

We are used to hearing lobby groups calling for more money and understandably treat such calls with caution. Of course the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and the National Training and Education Union will think our universities are under-funded. But when a media magnate, the president of the Business Council of Australia and the Federal Reserve Bank Governor all say the same thing, we must worry.

The reason universities are in trouble is that their funds have remained roughly the same at a time when unavoidable costs, especially salary costs, have risen sharply.

This is why the government's refusal to respond positively—the minister Brendan Nelson has effectively said there will be no more money for universities in the budget—is so puzzling. The government likes to claim that the funding for universities has remained the same in real terms over the last five or so years (sometimes, it says that it has actually gone up). Give or take the odd quibble, this is true but misses the point. Has the funding for hospitals, parliament or defence remained roughly the same in real terms over the last five years? Of course not; in each case there has been a large increase in real terms. There are many reasons for these increases, some of which are local to hospitals, parliament and defence, but there is one reason that applies across the board. Average weekly earnings have risen sharply in real terms over the last five years—at well over double the cost adjustment factor the government has been applying to university grants. And you cannot run a good hospital, parliament, army or university without paying good people—and good people cost. The reason universities are in trouble is that their funds have remained roughly the same at a time when unavoidable costs, especially salary costs, have risen sharply. In his address on 'The Higher Education Financing Debate' to the National Press Club in October last year, Professor Bruce Chapman of the Australian National University's Centre for Economic Policy Research put the shortfall resulting from not using average weekly earnings to adjust university grants at $500 million a year, in 2001 dollars.

The minister has announced a review of the way our universities are funded. He has also said that he would like to see more concentration of funding for research and has talked of the importance of Australia's having one or two universities that figure among the best in the world. Unless there is more money in the system, the only way this can happen is by robbing Peter to pay Paul. And if there are to be one or two, the smart money is on the one or two coming from the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University. It will be interesting to hear the reactions of the rest of the system, the parents who are planning to send their children to, say, the University of Western Australia or Charles Sturt University, the premiers of Queensland and South Australia, and politicians whose electorates include universities outside the one or two.

The review the minister is heralding must find some way of increasing the funds available to our universities. That way we can concentrate our research efforts—but please in more than one or two universities, Australia is a vast country—without damaging the rest of the system. ■

Frank Jackson was Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University from 1998 to 2001. He is currently Professor of Philosophy in the Research School of Social Sciences.

Dear Minister

Frank Brennan was in the Woomera Detention Centre on Good Friday. Afterwards, he wrote to the Immigration Minister in these terms.

I WAS CONDUCTING a church service for Good Friday in the Oscar compound when the 'break-out, break-in' occurred. I then spent the next couple of hours in company with Christians and Sabean Mendeans from other compounds who were unable to return to their accommodation.

No doubt, there will be many reviews and complaints about the actions of all the various actors on either side of the fence that night. I am prepared to assume and to state publicly that all authorities, including Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), the Australian Protective Service (APS) and the South Australian police, were acting as well as they could and in good faith. Throughout the week I was impressed by the professionalism and commitment of the senior ACM and DIMIA management. But no matter what the professionalism and commitment of senior management, I think the regime at Woomera is fraught with ongoing problems that are insuperable and that are wreaking havoc not only on detainees but also on those charged with the supervision of their detention and processing.

I spent two hours with men, women and children who had come from church and who were unable to return to their accommodation and unable to find sanctuary in an alternative compound, because they were threatened by another detainee disturbed by their religious practices. That detainee was finally apprehended by half a dozen ACM officers in full riot gear, backed by a water-cannon truck that had been moved into position. Meanwhile, two other detainees were on the roof threatening to harm themselves, exacerbating a situation of mass hysteria. Children in my vicinity were highly traumatised. One child remonstrated with his mother, saying he should attack an ACM officer because that is the only way that you get a visa!

Yesterday I learnt that these churchgoers had suffered the same fate as other detainees, having their clothing and property strewn about by ACM officers presumably searching for contraband, and being held in the compound mess overnight with no possibility of sleep. I understand one five-year-old child was abandoned in one compound that night, as the mother and other siblings had escaped. Yesterday, I met a mother with her seven-year-old son. She had been adamant that she would not attempt escape on the Friday evening, but she had wanted to exercise her rights and show the protesters and the media that there were women and young children being held behind razor wire. The little boy carries bruises on his left knee and right ankle from the baton blow he received last Friday. Children whose parents had no interest in escaping were hit by tear gas and witnessed scenes of extraordinary violence.

In such a situation, ACM is expected to apply all force necessary to detain those intent on escape while respecting the rights and dignity of those, including children, who are patiently awaiting migration decisions from DIMIA officers in Canberra.

This is an impossible task.

Let me highlight some of the structural problems that are insuperable—no matter what the training and cultural sensitivity of ACM staff. These problems are further exacerbated by your remarks about the South Australian police.

At times such as last Friday night, the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC) is like a Commonwealth privatised prison. In the past the Commonwealth has not been in the business of running prisons. The detainees, including the children, are entitled to a range of services that in Australia are usually provided only by state governments and not by the Commonwealth. You will recall the Commonwealth stand-off with Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen in 1978 over the management of the Aboriginal reserves in Cape York. In the end, Prime Minister Fraser was stymied because the Commonwealth was unable to deliver the basic community services such as police, health, education, local government and child protection. An institution such as the Woomera IRPC cannot be conducted with due regard for the rights and dignity of detainees unless there is co-ordinated service delivery by Commonwealth *and* state officials. Having imputed political

The detention regime at Woomera is no longer, if it ever was, designed primarily to facilitate the processing of migration claims and the removal or deportation of people from Australia. Last Friday night, it had all the hallmarks of a prison.

motivations to the South Australian police and their superiors when APS was caught flat-footed, you have jeopardised the prospect of non-partisan co-operation in the delivery of welfare and security services to detainees in a remote part of South Australia.

The detention regime at Woomera is no longer, if it ever was, designed primarily to facilitate the processing of migration claims and the removal or deportation of people from Australia. Last Friday night, it had all the hallmarks of a prison. The treatment of all detainees since then, with the withdrawal of privileges and the punitive and indiscriminate soiling of clothes and other possessions, highlights the problem. In an ordinary prison, you can institute a regime of rewards and punishments. At Woomera, you cannot: people's eligibility for a visa and the length of their detention is completely unrelated to their good or bad behaviour in detention. But the bad behaviour of a minority of detainees is sure to test the patience and judgment of ACM officers, especially at times of great tension and sleep deprivation.

My three hours in the detention centre on the evening of Good Friday convinced me that it was time to put the message to you very plainly despite its public unpopularity and despite your government's immunity to moral outrage: 'Minister, this is no place for kids.'

You are now running a detention centre with a remnant caseload of detainees who understandably are getting more restless. Last year, there were up to 1500 detainees in Woomera. Numbers are now closer to 300. As you have rightly pointed out, all but one of those who escaped and have not returned to detention were people who had already been rejected as refugees. Because of the post-September 11 situation, you have an increasing caseload of rejected applicants who remain in indeterminate detention because you cannot move them to any other country and you cannot send them home. Of course these people will get restless and take any opportunity to escape. And of course they will become more of a disciplinary problem in your detention centre. They have nothing to lose and nothing to gain. And, as I have written previously, there are good grounds for thinking that their detention without judicial warrant or supervision is unconstitutional. It is worth noting that the unreturned escapees are in no way representative of the large remaining Afghan and Iraqi caseload, almost half of whom are yet to receive a primary decision after more than seven months detention.

I had several meetings this past week with the three Palestinians who have now written to you again. In the last month, they have become more restless because each of them has family, including children, in the Gaza Strip. Your officials can offer them no advice or assistance except for the assurance that they will be released from detention when they can be taken to another country. Meanwhile, in detention in Woomera they are completely isolated and unable to help their families. Over some days, I assisted them in the preparation of their letter to you, part of which reads as follows:

> Are we to presume (given the present situation in Palestine and the predicament of stateless Palestinians elsewhere seeking a place to live) that we are to stay in Australian detention without a court order or review for the term of our natural lives? Can you give us any indication when we might be allowed to go free? Even criminals have the right to know. Please help us. We are desperate to leave Woomera. Each of us has family members living in the Gaza Strip where the situation is presently very dangerous. We want to be released quickly so we can help our families, especially our children, who are living in war conditions at this time. While your government keeps us locked up and tells us there is no solution for us, our children are at risk. Let us go free so we can perform our duties as parents.

During this past week, I have come to appreciate more the enormous strain under which ACM staff and your own officers are working at Woomera. Your policy has now resulted in tear gas and batons being used, even if it be unwittingly, on children as young as five years. The 'state' being their protector and their warder, this is now properly classified as institutional child abuse. Your policy is also resulting in oppressive work conditions for staff. The legal federal framework for maintaining law and order and for delivering basic services in the centre is as flimsy as the security fences that were breached on Good Friday. As the detention population at Woomera declines, the mix of disaffected 'rejectees' and patient applicants awaiting a decision becomes more volatile. And your recent comments regarding the South Australian police will not improve federal–state relations about the delivery of services, especially when your policy is resulting in proven child abuse. The discrimination suffered by the 50 or more Sabean Mendeans will increase unchecked.

My three hours in the detention centre on the evening of Good Friday convinced me that it was time to put the message to you very plainly despite its public unpopularity and despite your government's immunity to moral outrage: 'Minister, this is no place for kids.' When children end up in the sterile zone against the razor wire with tear gas and batons around them in Australia, it is time for all parties, including the Commonwealth government, to stop blaming others and to effect policy changes so that it can never happen again. ■

Frank Brennan SJ is a lawyer, social justice advocate and Associate Director of Uniya, the Jesuit Social Justice Centre.

Capital Letter

Jack Waterford

Age shall not wither

We usually complain about how short-term the thinking of politicians is and how they fail to plan ahead. But when politicians start talking about 20 and 40 years from now, one should be wary. John Howard and Peter Costello have been going on for some time about how we should prepare for an ageing population; so, in a somewhat different way, have Simon Crean, Jenny Macklin and others. Even people in other sectors—most recently Sir Arvi Parbo and Baillieu Myer—have been talking about the need for long-term planning for a rapidly ageing population.

On the face of it, there is a long-term issue, and one we should be thinking about now. The Australian population *is* shifting into middle age, with the few popping off at one end not being replaced at anything like the same rate by children. We will reach a stage where the number of elderly people needing help with incontinence will exceed the number of infants needing nappy changes. It is quite easy to sketch horrendous pictures of the enormous burden on the public pensions system and the health and welfare sectors, and of far too few people of working age supporting far too many of the elderly.

But, as John Maynard Keynes said, in the long run we are all dead. Dealing with an ageing population represents a public-policy challenge, but not, in fact, the most important one around. There is also a very good chance that almost every projection—demographic, actuarial or economic—being made about the shape of our community 30 or 50 years from now will be wrong. The worst-case scenarios paint a picture of an Australia pretty much the same as Europe has been these past 50 years and, somehow, Europe seems to have muddled through. Many of the gloomy forecasts, including, no doubt, the ones to be issued by Treasury when Peter Costello hands down his Budget—are based on assumptions that are highly doubtful.

By far the greater proportion of the elderly of 2031, for example, will be active economic contributors and consumers, not people occupying nursing-home beds. Most will not be working in the ordinary sense of the word, but the idea that they will be dependent on those who are in the workforce, or on the state via the pension system, is absolute nonsense. So is the idea that an ever-increasing number of people will be relying on an ever-decreasing number of labour-force participants. Indeed, even if the overwhelming number of aged people were not still active, it seems unlikely that average dependency ratios would change much at all. It is true that a large proportion of the baby-boomer generation will go into old age without enough superannuation to fund their retirement, but this does not necessarily mean that government aged-pension expenditure will go through the roof. (Though it could: that generation is remarkable for its capacity to divert public expenditure to itself.)

The public-policy challenge is not, in fact, primarily about the cost of funding pensions and income security. It's more about funding health- and aged-care resources. But even given that, an ageing population is only a part of the problem. Just as significant is the fact that health-care and medical technology is, as it becomes better, growing more and more expensive. Hip-replacement surgery, once almost unknown, is now common and makes a great deal of difference to personal independence. Imaging and diagnostic machines are more and more effective, but not cheap. Treatments and medications are more effective but place an increasing burden on our pharmaceutical benefits scheme. Almost all of the blowout in health-care costs is coming from drugs and treatments not available 20 years ago, and most of the financial burden of this is being carried by the public purse.

The real concern the average cynic ought to have is that fears about the coming oldie epidemic will now be used to justify a continuing disinvestment in health infrastructure, rather than a deliberate but incremental shift in public resources. Forget 2021 or 2031—hospitals and the health-care system are in trouble now. Even the person looking to the medium or long term might be pardoned for thinking that the best investment we can make for our old age is to be healthy now.

It is not entirely true that hospital and health-care expenditure is falling. And in a federal system of shared responsibilities, it pays to be agnostic about whether it is primarily the fault of the federal or the state governments that service levels are declining and, for that matter, about what relative levels of public and private funding ought to apply. But reinvestment, including reinvestment in the medical and health professional workforce, is lagging well behind demand. As other priorities—wars against terrorism for example, or the cost of university education—compete, health care has been noticeably losing its share of the dollar. That is something which affects more than a baby-boomer hump.

Pretending to be visionary, and looking 30 years ahead while confecting a sense of crisis about a social-security bill, can be just a way of distracting attention from the things we are not doing right now. It may be short-term thinking we need, not long-term planning. ■

Jack Waterford is editor-in-chief of the *Canberra Times*.

Gather them in

The United Faculty of Theology (UFT) is trying to become more united. It wishes to establish an alumni association. But because its mind has long been fixed on less temporal matters, it currently lacks a database of students who went through prior to 1992. It is also bemused by the mobility of its graduates—have theology degree must travel, it seems.

So now, like other organisations with less creditable intentions, it is trying to tie its alumni down—or up, as the case may be. If you would like to be part of the proposed UFT Alumni Association, and/or if you are a UFT graduate who has recently changed your address, ring (03) 9347 5700, fax (03) 9347 0146 or email uft@uft.unimelb.edu.au with the relevant details. You are also encouraged to encourage your fellows—in the nicest possible spirit.

Lost in translation

Hot on the heels of the promulgation of the third Latin edition of the Roman Missal came the announcement on Holy Thursday that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has withheld its approval of the new English translation of the existing Missal. This is disturbing news. The process of preparing the new English edition was begun in 1982 at the behest of the board of bishops who govern the body known as the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), which was established after Vatican II to prepare translations into the vernacular of the new liturgical texts and rituals. The first stage in the revision process was a consultation of all the world's English-speaking bishops' conferences on the presider's prayers at Mass, and was followed in 1986 by a similar consultation on the full Order of Mass.

Each stage of the revision process began with a widespread consultation that reached every bishop in the English-speaking world, and was followed by fresh drafts of texts composed or revised in the light of the consultation responses. When discrete sections of the new English translation were ready, they were then submitted to each bishops' conference for voting. Eight such segments were prepared for voting in this manner. After voting on the final segment, and with the work of translation now complete, each conference then took a final vote on the finished work. Every English-speaking conference gave the new translation its approval and, as required by church law, submitted the text to the Roman Congregation for its confirmation.

It is this confirmation which has now been withheld, with the approval of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference—unrecognised, along with all the other bishops' conferences, in the Roman letter withholding confirmation—counting for nought.

On the edge

Melbourne's Monash University is launching a centre for post-colonial writing in late May. Nice timing—just as Australia negotiates its way in and out of relationships with our Pacific neighbours (mustn't call them dependencies, let alone colonies) post-*Tampa*. Plenty of raw material in that little exercise.

The centre's staff, including Chandani Lokuge, Clive Probyn and Robin Gerster, bridge academic and writerly worlds in their own work. The centre's *raison d'être* is aptly captured by the quotation on its prospectus, from Salman Rushdie's *Fury*: 'The imaginary tale ... This was what we brought with us on the journey across oceans, beyond frontiers, through life: our little storehouse of anecdote and what-happened-next, our private once-upon-a-time. We were our stories, and when we died, if we were lucky, our immortality would be in another such tale.' One can only hope.

Sincere flattery

Members of the clergy were horrified recently to hear that an Episcopalian minister in Michigan had been suspended for plagiarism. Having discovered other ministers' sermons on a paid website, he reproduced them without acknowledgment in his parish bulletin.

The criminalisation of clerical plagiarism overturns honoured practice. The vast collections of sermons that were published in the 19th century were not a monument to vanity but were for use in the pulpit by other preachers of inferior talent.

'Plagiarism', derived from the Greek word for kidnapping, seems too purposive a word for the ministerial misdemeanour of coveting and taking other men's or women's sermons. We are reminded less of the mugging of Joseph than of Adam's seduction to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Traditionally, Protestant ministers were less afraid of the charge of plagiarism than of Pelagianism—relying on good works rather than on God's grace. (In Catholic circles, where this was often seen as a theoretical sin but as a practical virtue, preachers walked more boldly.) Pelagianism was named after Pelagius, a fourth-century lay preacher from the British isles. He was rehabilitated early last century by English scholars who recognised in him the English national virtues of self-reliance, moral earnestness and pragmatism. His rehabilitation was interrupted when other scholars pointed out that he probably came from Ireland.

Be that as it may, the new practice of clerical plagiarism would certainly have appealed to early Jesuit theologians who tried to resolve the conflict between divine grace and human freedom. How better simultaneously to display trust in the beneficent God of the internet, and decisive initiative in appropriating His gifts?

THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

Democracy?

AT THE SENATE

It's midway through the morning of the fourth day of the Senate inquiry into the children overboard affair, and facing each other across the timber-panelled, high-ceilinged committee room are representatives of two very different cultures within Australia's body politic.

On one side of the room sits Rear Admiral Geoffrey Smith, Maritime Commander of Australia, an impassive and attentive witness, answering questions from Senator Andrew Bartlett. Behind the admiral, also dressed entirely in white, are two male naval officers, and a female officer whose job seems to be to run errands, quickly and discreetly, for her colleagues. On the other side of the room is a distracted, shifting population of committee members. The inquiry chair, Peter Cook, is having an animated conversation with the committee's secretary, Brenton Holmes. The three Liberal members are in a noisy huddle. Senator John Faulkner is in the corridor (closer to the action, admittedly, than Senator Shane Murphy, who has been detained in China). Of all the members, only Jacinta Collins, a Labor senator from Victoria, is listening to Senator Bartlett and Admiral Smith.

One reason the government senators can afford to miss important parts of Admiral Smith's testimony is that their strategy on the committee seems very simple—to bury the single sequence of events at the centre of the inquiry in a fog of detail from 11 other incidents involving naval vessels and asylum seekers. At earlier sittings they have laboriously led witnesses through ships' signals and witness statements in an attempt to build up a picture of hostile, violent 'boat people' clashing with the Australian Navy.

The subtext is not subtle: even if the children weren't thrown overboard on 7 October, it says, these other incidents show that asylum seekers were in the business of moral blackmail. The government strategy has already proved effective in moulding media coverage of the hearings, so later in the morning they'll do it all again with Admiral Smith.

Heading the government team is George Brandis from Queensland, a combative former barrister who was appointed to the Senate when Warwick Parer resigned two years ago. Although he hasn't made much of a national impact during his short parliamentary career, Senator Brandis appears to be a shrewd and effective tactician. No doubt his forensic skills have served him well in the upper reaches of the Queensland Liberal Party, where power and influence revolve around two personality-based factions locked in permanent battle.

When he's not questioning Admiral Smith, Senator Brandis is often absent from the committee room. Returning, he pauses to gaze around the room, throws himself into his chair and sighs deeply. Then, swivelling to and fro, he adopts an air of amused detachment which suggests that his opponents' questions are tiresome and misguided. Questioning witnesses, Brandis can be aggressive—especially if he's interrupted during questioning—and impatient with qualified responses.

Next to Senator Brandis is Brett Mason, also a Queenslander, a former barrister and a relative newcomer to the Senate. Elected at the 1998 election, Senator Mason is functioning a bit like a junior counsel to Senator Brandis' Queen's Counsel, taking over during the routine parts of the examination of the witness. Making up the trio is former farm manager and insurance consultant Alan Ferguson, a long-serving senator whose contributions to the inquiry are less frequent but equally focused—it's his job, it seems, to challenge every sympathetic reference to the boat people from the Labor and Democrat members.

For the non-government parties, John Faulkner is the most seasoned committee-room cross-examiner, and the Hansard transcripts reveal several long, effective passages of examination during the earlier days' hearings. Today, though, it's the Democrats' Andrew Bartlett—a less lively performer—who takes up much of the morning, with Jacinta Collins squeezing in a few questions of clarification.

Although it seems to be running to plan, the government's strategy took a little time to set up. Paul Calvert, Alan Ferguson and Marise Payne, a party moderate, were the government's original appointees to the committee. But in late February all three stood aside to allow Brandis, Mason and Bill Heffernan to take their places. Not long after, Heffernan had to be dumped, and Ferguson was back. Then, in mid-March,

the government moved to widen the inquiry beyond the 'children overboard' incident to include 'operational procedures observed by the Royal Australian Navy and by relevant Commonwealth agencies to ensure the safety of asylum seekers ...' The pretext was a series of questions posed by the former Australian diplomat, Tony Kevin, which appeared to link the navy to the deaths of 353 asylum seekers when a vessel sank 80 kilometres south of Java last October. The behaviour of the navy was being questioned, and on that basis the committee agreed to the change. But the effect was to allow the government members to bring in other seaborne encounters conducted under the post-*Tampa* policy.

As hearings continue in late April and early May—after *Eureka Street* goes to press—the other committee members will be attempting to swing the inquiry back to focus on what happened in the upper levels of the public service and inside ministers' offices to stop the real story coming out during the election campaign.

Whether the committee has the power to compel the former defence minister, Peter Reith, or any ministerial staffers to appear is a question that has been debated, from their respective offices, by the clerks of the two houses of parliament, Ian Harris from the Reps and the feisty Harry Evans from the Senate. Harris advises the committee that neither former ministers nor ministerial staff can be compelled to appear; Evans, in a combative rejoinder, says more or less the opposite. But even if the committee accepts Evans' advice, it doesn't seem likely that they'll push the point if the missing witnesses decline to co-operate.

There's one helpful exception, however. According to evidence to the committee, Reith's former military adviser, Mike Scrafton, initiated a conversation about the affair with Brigadier Mike Silverstone in February this year—after he'd moved across from a ministerial to a public-service position. The content and significance of that conversation, in which Scrafton is alleged to have queried Silverstone's account of events, is clearly something he can be compelled to discuss with the committee.

In the meantime, Senators Brandis and Mason continue working their way through the reports, to increasingly frequent interjections from the Labor members. As the hostility intensifies to the point where Peter Cook 'names' Senator Brandis, the navy contingent watches impassively.

—Peter Browne

The risk-taker

A KIDNAPPING HITS HOME

I FIRST MET HER in Canberra. She was about 40 years old, with long hair and a gentle manner. Her English had a soft Spanish accent. Ingrid Betancourt, the Green presidential candidate in Colombia, was one of the most inspiring speakers at the 2001 Global Greens conference, which had representatives from over 70 nations.

But it wasn't just that she was an inspiring speaker. Here was someone who was living what she preached. The leader of the 'Green Oxygen Party' in Colombia, she has been her country's most prominent voice for a negotiated settlement as the only solution to the armed conflict. She was a well-known critic of both the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and of the corruption and drug-dealing that riddles both of them. She stood for peace, social justice, the environment, and grassroots democracy.

She received numerous death threats, and had taken the step of removing her children, Melanie and Lorenzo, from Colombia altogether. Day by day she faced her own mortality. It gave her words a crystal clarity.

At the conference you could have heard a pin drop when Ingrid Betancourt spoke:

> If the great people of history defeated adversity, if those who changed the course of events did so although they were predicted to fail, if it is true that faith moves mountains and that David conquered Goliath, then our fight should be victorious. To defend the right to live, today as in the past, implies heroism, temper and courage. Let us not deceive ourselves. To be Green in this millennium, we have to take on the uniform of the new samurai, to defend our values, our principles, our ideals, above everything, even above our own life, because without those values, without those principles, without those ideals, life becomes a condemnation.
>
> We should understand the essence of what we are outlining to the world. The salvation of the planet, the right to live, is nothing else than a fight for values. These values are ones that we human beings all share, regardless of the colour of our skin or of the name that we give to our God. And because they are essential values, they are not negotiable. To outline a new economic order, a new social pact, is not a utopia. It is simply the basic thing, the minimum thing to continue working as societies in a globalised world. I say this with force and with anguish because I feel that we cannot waste any more time.

Ten months after the conference, in the early hours of the morning, I switched on the radio—hoping, I confess, to get a cricket score. I tuned to the BBC. In my comfortable suburban bedroom, I heard a radio voice whisper from across the world that a Colombian presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt, had been kidnapped. I did not go back to sleep.

At 3pm on Saturday, 23 February 2002, Betancourt was travelling south from Bogotá

with her campaign director, Clara Rojas, a photographer from the French magazine *Marie Claire*, and two other campaign officials.

She was trying to reach the town of San Vicente del Caguán, which had recently elected a Green mayor. The town was in an area where the FARC were active. The government had just broken off dialogue with the FARC. The townspeople, who had supported the Greens, were now dangerously exposed given that the government was now washing its hands of the area. Betancourt had promised to stand by the people of San Vicente 'for good or for ill'. Only by going there personally, thereby exposing herself to risk, could she make good her pledge and call on national and international authorities to protect these civilians.

The government denied her air transport to San Vicente. On an isolated spot on the road, the vehicle she was using was

stopped by armed men from the FARC. Betancourt was ordered into another car. Clara Rojas, her campaign director, was placed in a separate car. The remaining three were driven to a remote location and released several hours later. They walked for a time before being picked up by a truck, which took them to Florencia.

Later, FARC representatives said that Ingrid Betancourt and Clara Rojas were alive and in good health, but would not be freed until 200 FARC prisoners held by the government were released. The government rejected their demand. FARC currently holds over 800 hostages.

International reaction was swift. Green groups around the world lit 'candles for freedom'. Betancourt's kidnapping was denounced by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the European Union, French President Jacques Chirac, and Green federations of the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australia. The powerful Workers Party in Brazil has also called for her immediate release.

Delegations seeking Betancourt's freedom have been sent to Colombia from the European parliament and from the Green parties of Peru, Mexico and Brazil.

In Melbourne, a radio program was devoted to Ingrid Betancourt's plight. Representatives of the FARC in Australia contacted those involved after the program and insisted that sympathy for her was misplaced. She was, they claimed, a right-wing reactionary.

Betancourt remains a candidate in the Colombian presidential election on 26 May this year. But she is not free to speak, travel or campaign, or to share her dream of peace, ecological wisdom and democracy for her war-torn land. Her fate remains uncertain.

—Brian Walters

E-mystery

IT'S IN THE EXAM

From the depths of the national capital comes an extraordinary story with elements from two seemingly unrelated worlds, the centuries-old Catholic Church and the 21st-century world of e-reality.

Paul Collins was first alerted that things were awry when his old friend Bishop Pat Power rang to ask if he was feeling all right, clearly alluding to his mental state.

Collins is a well-known broadcaster and controversial resigned priest. He has fronted ABC documentaries about the environment

Culture and abuse

An old Jesuit friend had a simple historical explanation for what he saw as the Catholic preoccupation with sin. Morbidity began with St Paul, he thought, and St Augustine hammered the nail into the coffin.

His diagnosis would strike most theologians as a bit too simple, but it does represent a popular view of the matter. If Augustine is remembered, it is for going on for pages about the boyish theft of a few pears and for tearing strips off himself for adolescent sexual experimentation. His account of sin emphasises its evil and awfulness, its decisive separating from God, and our lack of freedom to live virtuously.

No wonder that later writers preferred to focus less on sinfulness than on sinful actions, which could be repented of and forgiven. Or that spiritual writers have recently stressed the goodness of human beings, and seen sin as immaturity or incompleteness. In this perspective, which also reflects popular cultural attitudes, sinners need encouragement rather than forgiveness or transformation.

But now Augustine seems less outdated. For culture has returned to sin, and has placed it within the church—in abuse of power, and particularly in sexual abuse of children.

Augustine's reflection on his early years provided him with a language calibrated to human evil. His rhetoric does not seem excessive when measured against the abuse of power and trust and the suffocation of any hunger for the transcendent entailed in clerical sexual abuse. His psychological analysis of the twisting knots of human motivation, and of the darkness and lack of freedom that mark the human condition, also illuminates the contrast between the insouciance of human actions and their horrific effects. It shows as trivial an analysis that sees sins simply as single events that can be repented of and set right. We have learned that, for the abused, an act of abuse is not a single event, but one that roots and metastasises in the human spirit to cause lasting damage. Augustine's scorn for a simple reliance on self-help and his insistence that effective healing is a surprising gift also matches the experience of those scarred by abuse of power, whether they are children sexually abused by ministers of the church or asylum seekers administratively abused by ministers of the government.

But if Augustine's account of sin is serious enough to articulate the hurt and despair of those affected by abuse, it may also offer a better way to relate to abusers than the simple exclusions and rejections that our culture dictates. In Augustine's framework, lack of inner freedom and the need for healing are universal. So are gift and grace. We are not to demonise abusers, because we share what seems demonic in them. And like us, they are always in play, always pursued by God's love which is ultimately more powerful than sin.

Augustine could look unflinchingly at sin because he had come to experience his humanity and goodness as a gift. For the church to deal with abuse, it may be that no less radical a conversion will suffice. ■

Andrew Hamilton sj teaches at the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne.

Private practices

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS OF THE MONEY provided worldwide for research now comes from private sources. In the year 2000, for instance, the world's largest pharmaceutical company, Pfizer Warner Lambert, spent some A$9 billion on R&D, about twice the amount provided by the Australian government. While many would view such commercialisation of research as unquestionably good and a wise non-use of taxpayers' money, Archimedes is not entirely convinced.

Apart from placing a much heavier emphasis on short-term applied projects, at the expense of longer-term 'blue-sky' science, the privatisation of science and medicine raises questions about the control of information. Private investors seek to maximise the return on their investment. In the case of research they do this by owning intellectual property—the results of the studies they have financed. They restrict access to the information or charge for its use—hence patents, royalties and licence agreements. In the past, the regulation of intellectual property was mostly restricted to consumer products such as cars and televisions, and even drugs and medical equipment. But as the reach of the private sector extends further into the world of science, things are becoming more complicated.

In the US, once you have worked out the DNA sequence of a gene, you can own the rights to all uses of the information, effectively patenting the gene. Nearly a third of the US medical laboratories that were testing for the easily treatable and common genetic disease of iron overload known as haemochromatosis have now stopped doing so. The gene involved in the test has been patented, and the company that owns the rights can force the testing laboratories to pay royalties.

Science magazine has just published the gene sequence of rice, a crop upon which about half the world's population depends. The important backup data of the DNA sequences from which the gene sequence has been drawn have not been made public at the same time, however, because they are the property of the Swiss company Syngenta which undertook the work of unravelling them. Without access to such DNA sequences much genetic research which could be done to improve rice crops will not be possible. As this goes to press, the company is deciding how it will make its information available.

In another instance of privatised information, agrochemical company Aventis is taking the UK government to court to prevent it from releasing information about the environmental safety of a herbicide. Aventis says the data, which it collected to show the safety of its chemical, is commercially sensitive. In effect, the company is arguing that the public should trust it and the authorities to which it has shown the data to make the right decision on safety.

Archimedes suspects these few examples are the tip of a very large privately owned iceberg. Whether or not it will sink out of public reach altogether depends on how well we negotiate and regulate access. ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer.

and has advocated reforms to the church. In 1997 he published *Papal Power*, calling for a radical assessment of power structures in Rome. The book provoked the ire of the Roman Curia, more particularly the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

In March 2001, after pressure from the CDF (led by Cardinal Josef Ratzinger) and in a move designed to take the heat off the head of his congregation, Collins resigned from active ministry as a member of his order, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. He has, however, remained as busy and as controversial as ever. In his new role as a layman who knows the Catholic Church intimately, he is often called on by the media to discuss the church and is in demand as a speaker.

Last year he was approached by a small group, Australian Reforming Catholics, who were organising a conference for this coming October. Various emails were sent back and forth between Barbara Campbell, one of the main organisers, and Collins.

Collins had switched from a small, local email server to Telstra's BigPond in the middle of last year, but because he was still receiving emails at the old address he had maintained his connection to his old server, a relationship he still hadn't got around to severing.

At Christmas 2001 Collins and Campbell were engaged in an email dialogue about the upcoming conference. Campbell sent Collins an email to his old server, which he never received.

'Within about an hour-and-a-half one had been sent back to her, from a different email address, from someone purporting to be me,' said Collins.

The email declined the invitation to participate in the conference. But it said more:

> I have what I suspect will be some very surprising news for you. The weekend before last I spent in retreat at the usual place. During this time I had somewhat of a revelation and now strongly feel that I need to renew my vows and make amends with those whom I have offended in the Church. To this end I have made my first real confession for some time now and have written to the CDF recanting all of those ideas that were contentious ...

Bad enough that an email originally intended for him had been intercepted and then responded to by an impersonator. Bad became farcical when another email was also sent that afternoon by the same person, claiming that Collins was now married

with three children. Both were signed 'P. Collins'—an appellation Paul Collins never uses.

The story—that Paul Collins had done a radical about-face—spread like wildfire.

'It was at this point that people who knew me started to smell a rat. But by now the rumour was popping up everywhere that I had knuckled under and was submitting to Rome. It was when Bishop Power heard it that he rang to check that I hadn't lost my marbles,' said Collins.

The whole incident could be dismissed as a bad joke, except that Collins, understandably, finds the implications of the diversion of the original email addressed to him very disturbing. 'The fact that someone had been able to penetrate my email correspondence was bad enough. But this was compounded by the fact that emails were now being sent out in my name.'

Collins attempted to contact his small service provider but by that time they had gone out of business, so he contacted Telstra to get help, because the address of the bogus emails was a Telstra one. He reports that a man there was able to tell him that the bogus email seemed to come from Queensland. But whatever the case, he was advised to send an email to abuse@bigpond.com.au, alerting them to the problem.

'I sent an email on 28 December 2001, letting them know that fraudulent emails had been sent out in my name, but I've never received a reply,' he said.

A spokesman for BigPond, Stuart Gray, admitted to *Eureka Street* that the delay in dealing with the email wouldn't surprise him as the relevant department has a backlog of queries to respond to. 'Telstra is aware of the situation and has put steps in place to manage it,' he said.

Collins also contacted his local police. They said pursuing the matter would be complicated if it involved dealing with another state, so Collins did not take it any further. He also contacted the office of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, who told him that the complaint had nothing to do with them.

'In fact, the person dealing with my inquiry was positively rude,' Collins said.

When *Eureka Street* contacted Kerryn Garner, the Ombudsman's media liaison officer, the response was much more obliging. (Maybe the media has more clout than a mere individual.) Garner said that, with enough information, the Ombudsman could pass a complaint on to the police. In addition, she said that the slowness of BigPond's response to the complaint does not meet a high enough standard. For a complaint of this nature, which she described as a 'level 1', she said it would be reasonable to expect the internet service provider to contact the complainant within 24 hours, at least to acknowledge the complaint.

However, Garner added that this type of complaint is very rare. The most common complaints are about inaccurate billing, followed by poor customer service,

including difficulty getting through, slowness in changing email addresses and slow internet site download speeds.

'The type of complaint you're referring to we'd log under privacy issues. Privacy issues make up only 1.3 per cent of our complaints and only a small proportion of those would involve the sort of case you've described,' she said.

Peter Coroneos, a spokesman for the Internet Industry Association, agreed that even though possible, this type of incident is not widespread. 'And from the consumer's point of view, spam [unsolicited commercial mail] is a much bigger problem.'

Glenn Uidam, a security/network consultant with the computer network consultants IT+E, explained that even though the incident is unusual, it could happen to anybody using email. When the incident was described to Uidam he had a plausible explanation—it could be the work of a 'packet sniffer'. As emails are sent from one computer to another, they pass through several routers, or 'hops' as they are known in the industry. An email message that has gone across continents might have gone through 15, while one between offices in the same city might have gone through ten.

A packet sniffer is able to intercept any one of these routers, 'listening', downloading and redirecting messages that attract his or her attention. Usually, the purpose is fraud for commercial gain, but there are no limits to what might attract a hacker's attention. 'The higher the profile of the person, the more likely it is that they could be a target,' Uidam said.

But it seems too much of a coincidence that a random hacker anywhere in the world would get into Paul Collins' email system and then produce such an elaborate email response. Is it possible Campbell sent the email to the wrong address and the recipient replied as a joke?

Collins believes that a prank and an incident involving a packet sniffer are both very unlikely, and it is easy to see why. 'The language used is the rhetoric of a conservative Catholic. It would be quite hard to mimic if you didn't have some understanding of it,' he observed. In addition, the bogus emails revealed too much personal knowledge of Collins and his recent public dialogues simply to be a joking response to a stray email that lobbed his way.

It was Paul Wallbank of PC Rescue, a small business IT consultant and a regular commentator for ABC radio, who had the most likely—and the scariest—explanation.

He said it sounded as though someone has discovered Paul Collins' email password. Every internet user has an internet password. Our computer programs are often designed so that the password dials up automatically and we don't even realise we've got one. It is very easy for a hacker to access a password and they can do so from their own computers.

Misappropriation of passwords is a problem that tends to be played down by the internet industry, Wallbank said. 'Some people have internet passwords that are just too obvious, leaving themselves extremely vulnerable to someone who wants to "steal" it and once someone has your internet password, if they have your email address it's very easy to access your email files and tamper with them.'

To add insult to injury, because it's the victim's email system that has been tampered with, the mischief is charged to the victim's account.

One of the worst cases Wallbank knows of involves an internet stalker who read all his victim's emails, sent bogus emails from her computer to her friends and colleagues and contacted her email service provider to change her password—leaving her locked out of her own email service.

He said it causes a common problem for businesses. Ex-employees who know their

old workplace's password can sign in and then spend up over their old business' internet accounts. 'We know of one customer who had to deal with a $4000 bill logged up by an ex-employee and the police wouldn't touch it,' Wallbank said.

He added that the police are often not interested in dealing with these cases because they have a poor grasp of their implications and of computers generally.

'A determined hacker can work through thousands of password possibilities very quickly and if they start off by taking an educated guess, they can get there very quickly indeed. It's been well-demonstrated that if someone goes into an organisation knowing the names of the staff, their spouses, their children and their dogs, they've got a good chance of cracking 95 per cent of its passwords,' he said.

His advice was to change the password, something Paul Collins said he will do immediately—'If only someone had given me this advice—and earlier!'

Meanwhile, Collins says he has not recanted his position and will continue his critique of church practices—no matter what extraordinary obstacles are placed in his way. **—Margaret Rice**

In a word

ON DOT

COMPUTER NERDS are instantly recognisable for their dog's-breakfast English, yet they prove again the sense of that cardinal rule—never use a longer word when a shorter one does the job. 'Period com period ch-you', or 'full-stop com full-stop ch-you' simply won't stand against 'dot'. Sweet, cute, sharp, short and arguably the word with the greatest resurgent usage, 'dot' enjoys an elliptical history.

Shakespeare would have known it as a word for lump, clot, boil or other blemish, but not as the roundish mark made with a pen, a meaning that enters the language in the 18th century. No-one ever told Shakespeare to dot his i's. It was his contemporary, Galileo, who altered forever our sense of largeness. The star charts of the 17th century initiated the perspective that we are a dot in the universe, rather than its bounteous centre. Or, just a dot, as some remark dolefully.

Learning our place in the scheme of things might have been hard, but for many today the view each night of a million Earths in adjacent galaxies can be strangely soothing. Especially marvellous too when we consider that they can only be contemplated. Entities that cannot be exploited and about which there is no full-stop. More than a few have gone dotty in the effort, of course, though dotty in this sense does not mean seeing stars before one's eyes, but comes from a Scots word meaning unbalanced. It is easier to imagine ourselves out there in space than in here where we actually live and suffer.

It was a group of Greek philosophers called atomists who painted a pointillist picture of the universe as long ago as whenever, but though they maintained that all dots were created equal, they did not see that some dots have more gravity than other dots. This dot-matrix theory of matter depended on the idea that the smallest particles in the universe are unbreakable and unchangeable, a confidence that we cannot share with them, sadly. Atoms shift about in massive order, ready to be split without a thought. The Californian computerates have rewritten the addresses of the world, in the process rewriting Sellar and Yeatman's oracular conclusion (in *1066 and All That*) that 'America was thus clearly top nation, and History came to a .' Not, though, that that could ever be the end of it.

The dot as monument to minimalism would mean nothing to the artists of the Balgo Hills, the Western Desert and other parts of this continent. Tentative study of Australian Indigenous mythic expression has revised our definition of 'dot' entirely, dot being, it would seem, the foundation of the creative act and the activity of creation itself. In Cape York, the dot means the effect of light on clear water, necessary means for new life. Warlpiri painters use the dot for walking and movement, each colour significant of dreaming stories and ritual. The potency of these markings, both singularly and in sometimes superabundant plurality, speaks the language of the group and eludes outside definition. But even fringe observers of this art, not party to its restricted information, sense the representation of William Blake's grain of sand, a new world coming out of ceremonial culture, its point of departure right where we stand. **—Philip Harvey**

East Timor

RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE

SOMETIMES AN OLD infected wound needs to be reopened and looked at, cleaned and treated, so that it might finally heal properly. In East Timor we need to remember for a little while, open up the wounds, so that they can be healed and we can move on, carrying the scars but not the infection.

It is painful and often stressful to remember a horrendous past. For some people, it may seem better to leave the past untouched. But the past does not go away and, if untreated, may eat away at these people and maybe even destroy them. Remembering is not easy, but forgetting may be impossible, as some of our people have said.

I have been privileged to come into contact with a range of survivors, victims from 1974 until 1999, among them widows, orphans, former political prisoners, and women who had been raped. Many of them claim that it is better just to forget and go on because it is too painful to dig up the past. Others want to know the why, where, who and how. Why were their loved ones killed? Where are their bodies? Who ordered the killing? How did it happen? Did they leave any messages? Is there any information about the way they were executed?

Those who have experienced such atrocities have found a range of emotional and psychological survival tactics. Some chose to forget; others—like the widows and their families with whom I spoke and kept regular contact—were clear that only by remembering could they be helped to recover. Most wanted to learn every detail about what happened and who was responsible for the disappearance or death of their husbands, parents, siblings, friends and colleagues. They wanted to bring these people to justice and so be able to begin to put the past behind them. 'We don't seek revenge but justice,' they said, 'and the perpetrators have to be responsible for their acts.' They want reconciliation, but reconciliation with justice.

One cannot come to justice until the truth comes out. One cannot come to reconciliation through bypassing justice—we learned that from El Salvador. Then in Rwanda we learned that one cannot begin to inquire into the truth of what happened until the mourning is finished. And mourning does not end until the bodies are properly

buried and the spirits of the dead are able to rest at peace. Now in East Timor we have passed an initial time of mourning, though the mourning naturally continues. Some refugees need to bring home the bodies of their dead to the traditional places. Some need to come home and visit the graves of their ancestors. But as the time for mourning is passing, in the calm that follows, it becomes more possible to learn what really happened. Then a judgment must be made on the basis of the facts—the truth as far as it can be established—and decisions about reconciliation can be made more thoroughly.


Isabel Amaral-Guterres

The East Timorese Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation has been established for this very purpose. It is an independent national institution that will inquire into human rights violations committed on all sides between April 1974 and October 1999, and facilitate community reconciliation for those who committed less serious offences.

A commission was initially proposed by CNRT (National Council of Resistance for East Timor), which is now dissolved. CNRT's proposal was then developed by a committee comprising representative groups. This committee travelled to all the districts to listen to public opinion. Since then, the regulation that established the commission has become law in East Timor.

Seven National Commissioners, two women and five men, have been nominated and elected. We come from different fields of work and from different groupings in the country. There are two priests, one Protestant, the other Catholic. There is a former pro-independence political prisoner and a former pro-autonomy political prisoner. The other three members are a lawyer, a businesswoman and a nurse (me). We were sworn in on 21 January 2002, and started work formally in February. We have a two-year mandate that can be extended for a further six months.

The commission has three main functions:

✦ *Truth Telling*. It will seek the truth regarding human-rights violations that occurred in East Timor between 25 April 1974 and October 1999, and undertake special investigations and historical research, as well as a nationwide statement-taking process. To assist in establishing the truth, the commission will have powers to order people to give evidence before it.

✦ *Community Reconciliation*. The commission is based on the principle that genuine reconciliation requires knowledge of the truth. Then comes justice, with individuals accepting responsibility for their actions. People who committed less serious crimes during 1999 and before this can approach the commission and ask that these acts be dealt with by the commission. A panel of local leaders, chaired by the Regional Commissioner, will call together a meeting of the perpetrator, victims and local community members. They will discuss the crimes, and propose an agreement whereby the perpetrator could do community work, make a repayment or public apology or undertake other acts of reconciliation. These may include traditional ways of resolution. If this process is completed, the District Court will make an order that those acts cannot be prosecuted in the future.

✦ *Report and Recommendations*. At the end of this work, the commission will produce a report to the government that will function as an important historical record of the extent, causes and accounting of human-rights violations. It will also indicate to the government the legal and institutional reforms needed to safeguard human rights in the future and to promote reconciliation.

The commission will not be able to deal, through its community reconciliation process, with serious crimes such as killings, rape or the organising of violence. However, it may hear testimonies or receive statements from victims, perpetrators and witnesses in relation to serious crimes through its truth-telling function. Evidence of serious crimes that arises during the commission's work will be referred to the courts.

The commission has the word 'reception' in its title. This is because the commission offers East Timorese who have returned from West Timor or who are still there an orderly and peaceful way of being received back into their communities.

My specific portfolio on the commission is to handle matters relating to reception. My previous work (with the Jesuit Refugee Service) was to prepare communities within the area to which the refugees would return to welcome them back at transit centres. I also had responsibility for facilitating communication for families divided between East and West Timor.

Reception is an integral part of healing. People first need to feel welcome and feel connected to the people and society in which they live. This is a universal need, and is recognised in the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor. It also offers a challenge to Australians—both at a policy level (for example in policies relating to detention centres) and at an individual level (in the way we provide care). If people do not feel welcome, they become isolated, alienated, feel they cannot participate. They feel powerless and the wounds do not heal. In the long run, society benefits if people feel welcome.

For centuries, local people have crossed back and forth over the border between East and West Timor. Borders are often created by politics, fear, hostility and ignorance. Borders can exclude and deny. While the East and West Timor border is officially recognised by East Timor and Indonesia and is protected by PKF (the UN Peace Keeping Force) on the east side and TNI (the Indonesian military) on the west side, the commission is working to dismantle the borders created in people's hearts and minds, borders that create division among them.

I came to Australia as a refugee, even though officially I was taken in under a special humanitarian program. I didn't know anyone when I came here. I was welcomed into the homes of Australian people, to their tables and ultimately into their lives. These former strangers are now my best friends and adopted families. I was trained as a nurse in Australia. It was often very difficult for me, as English was my fourth language, and I appreciate the support of friends who helped me. Now I am back in East Timor to offer my expertise from what I've learned here in Australia and to help my fellow countrywomen and men in need as we rebuild our country.

—Isabel Amaral-Guterres

This month's contributors: **Peter Browne** works in the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University; **Brian Walters** is a barrister and conservation activist; **Margaret Rice** is a freelance journalist; **Philip Harvey** is a poet and librarian at the Joint Theological Library, Melbourne; **Isabel Amaral-Guterres** is a member of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor.

MORAG FRASER

Genevieve Lacey is one of Australia's outstanding performers, a virtuoso recorder player and a formidable musician. Lately she has also taken up the artistic directorship of the Melbourne Autumn Music Festival, a venerable institution that has its roots in the 20th-century modernist revival and celebration of early music. More iconoclast than institution herself, Lacey is an adventurous choice as artistic director: this will not be a festival that genuflects before tradition.

The player

Lacey spoke to *Eureka Street* during the final weeks of preparation for a fortnight of music that will include viols, voices, computer-generated installations, and the music of contemporary composers.

IT WASN'T HARD to find the right house. Even over the traffic noise and a percussion accompaniment from the builders next door, the sound of the recorder—warm and elemental—arced its way on to the street.

Genevieve Lacey is leading, for a time, a double life. She is both musician and director of a large festival. But on this Friday morning she was home practising—the indispensable routine. As we walked through the music room I couldn't help but notice the array of recorders, from delicate blond tubes to dark old giants, laid in ranks on a cloth the way oiled tools are spread out by a meticulous carpenter.

The recorder is an unusual instrument of choice for a serious musician. But it sits so naturally under Lacey's skittering, disciplined fingers that you figure there must be reason behind her choice. Reason or instinct. Has it to do with the elemental quality, that sound that evokes myths about the origins of music, wind as it blows across reeds?

That elemental quality is part of it, she says. But more: 'It's the simplicity of it. That fact that the recorder is a pipe, just a simple pipe. I love the sound it makes but I also love the physical feeling of playing it because it is so unmediated. There are no keys, there are no reeds, there is nothing in the way of what you've got to say and the sound that pours out. It takes the same breath that it does to speak.'

Lacey is clearly no stranger to such questions. Playing the recorder and living, mostly, in Australia—it's not the standard career progression for an ambitious virtuoso instrumentalist. But her answers are so assured, not practised but frank and articulate, that you realise she has thought long about, and had to justify, the choice she has made.

'There must have been a part of me that always knew, because I have played the recorder since I was very little. I played other instruments as well—I was quite a serious pianist at school and went through the conservatorium as an oboist. But those instruments always frustrated me. The piano drove me crazy—this huge piece of furniture sitting in front of me that I was hitting. It didn't work. And the oboe used to drive me crazy because of that reed, always getting in the way. I thought, why do I need to go through that?'

The recorder passes one other test: it has always been the instrument that Genevieve Lacey has picked up when she's been distressed, when she's 'really had something that I needed to play out of me'. But forget any notion of music as emotional therapy: there is something much more fundamental, more technical, more *professional* going on here. Lacey embodies sound, and quite deliberately. Watching her perform is like watching a dancer giving physical extension to sound. It's not mannerism—there are no extraneous moves—but there certainly is embodiment. Her whole form becomes the sounding board. Again, she has analysed the process.

'A singer would be conscious of trying to use the resonances in the whole body and I think it's similar.'

The embodied style marks Lacey out from many of her peers, and makes her playing distinctive. But being distinctive in the world of early music performance is not the way to win easy acceptance. She plays at the outer edges of convention. And knows it. As we talk, there is a pondered determination behind her replies.

'You are unusual, aren't you,' I ask, 'in this commitment to embodiment in your music?'

'Yes, I am a bit unusual.'

'Have you always been like that?'

'Yes, I think I probably have. But I think it's probably getting stronger. I don't really know where it comes from.'

'Has it got you into trouble over the years?'

'Oh yes. I guess I play in an extreme sort of way so people either think it's amazing or they absolutely hate it. There is rarely any middle ground. I have just learned that that's the way it is—which is not always very easy. I have had strong resistance, particularly within this world of academic early music.'

I ask what the 'world of academic early music' thinks she is about.

'They sometimes think that I am being arrogant and disrespectful. In this world there is the very strong belief that as a musician you should be the vessel through which the music speaks, and the music is represented by the composer and that great can of worms called "the composer's intentions", which is a signifier for truth and God basically.

'So if I get in the way of that, if they are aware of the fact I, Genevieve Lacey, happen to be in the room, happen to be playing, and am of this time and this place, and have ideas and a body, then that can be quite disturbing. So yes, I've copped a lot of flak and a lot of questions because what I do, for some people and on some level, is quite disturbing.'

Disturb on, I think. There is a place for musicians who 'disturb' just as there is a place for musicians who confirm what has gone before, musicians who soothe.

But Lacey is not looking for reassurance. This is familiar territory for her—the intellectual battleground, as it were, of her art. She will go on disturbing because, as she says, 'I can't not.' It's an individual imperative, not a prescription for other musicians: 'I am not saying that others have to do what I do at all. It's a question of integrity. So, as long as I feel, when I am listening, that the musicians playing are speaking as themselves, whatever that means, then that is amazing, that's what matters.'

Behind this very determined musician there is a line of teachers, as she is the first to acknowledge. It is a familiar story, though not a universal one in these days when music is the exception rather than the rule in school curricula. Lacey began, as so many musicians have, in a convent, at Loreto in Ballarat, with teachers she calls formative. And then at university: 'I had a fantastic teacher, Ruth Wilkinson, who was just the most nurturing, enabling person.'

That is the theme—challenging, enabling teachers. 'I think that's been my greatest strength. I have been surrounded by the kind of people who have said, whoever you are, that's okay. That's such a gift. It means you can take the kinds of risks that I am taking because you know that someone will catch you.'

Later, in the ritual move for Australian instrumentalists, Lacey went to Europe, but not to one of the predictable schools for a recorder player (the oboe and its pesky reed were by now past history). She sought out recorder virtuoso, Dan Laurin, in Denmark. Why him?

'Because he's a really extraordinary character. He plays in a very idiosyncratic personal way. That's why I chose him to teach me rather than going to a more conventional school or place. He and I are different in what we are trying to do but he was very good at getting me to intensify what I was on about.'

Different in what way?

'The reason that I went to him was because the first time I heard him play I was just completely seduced by the sound he made. It was the most unbelievably warm, expressive sound, a sound that could wrap itself around you. I had never heard a recorder player trying to do that before. And that was what I had been trying to do.'

'It's the simplicity of it. That fact that the recorder is a pipe, just a simple pipe. I love the sound it makes but I also love the physical feeling of playing it because it is so unmediated. There are no keys, there are no reeds, there is nothing in the way of what you've got to say and the sound that pours out. It takes the same breath that it does to speak.'

Sound. It's the recurring motif in Lacey's talk. You might expect it from a cellist, a pursuit of luscious sound. But from a recorder player? The general feeling, or at least the popular prejudice, about the recorder is that it is an apprentice instrument, just a head pipe that will yield under a certain display of finger pyrotechnics and good breath control, but basically that's it.

Lacey has been here before, many times. 'Yes, the recorder is either seen as an educational tool—something that takes you to a real instrument—or yes, it is seen as something that is fairly disembodied, an instrument that is high, clear and pretty, and can be very precise. Which intrigues me and which is my constant battle I guess.'

The battle is to do, again, with the issue of embodiment. And with music politics: 'Certainly within the world of early music, the whole reconstruction and renewal of interest in early music in the 20th century has been predicated a lot on ideas of music as an objective, academic pursuit, and that's something that I am deeply uncomfortable with. I read; I believe that it is enlightening and illuminating to do a lot of research in early music. But I don't think it stops there. To me that is background. When you play, what you do becomes a synthesis of all those things. It is about sound, and to me sound is the essential thing.'

For Lacey, early music fits with her passion for the unmediated voice. 'I love a great deal of the repertoire that we call early music—love the sound if it. But that's too simple. My taste in music basically steers clear of the 19th century and the latter part of the 18th and some of the early 20th century. There is something about that middle period—its overblownness—that I can't really get a handle on. Certainly if I am sitting in the middle of an orchestra playing, it is completely intoxicating. But as a listener I am much more attracted to things that are more intimate, more eloquent in quite a spare sort of way. A single voice, speaking with eloquence and utter conviction, can be devastating. It can get right inside you and shift something—can really break your heart.'

The Melbourne Autumn Music Festival will give many people the chance to listen to (and watch) Genevieve Lacey's ideas take flesh. It's a brave program (the word needs to be rescued from Sir Humphrey), including as it does many grand staples of early music, the sounds of Seville's golden age, a 400th-anniversary celebration of the work of William Lawes, plenty of Bach, Buxtehude, John Bolton's re-imagined medieval passion play and soprano Merlyn Quaife in sequences of 20th-century song. And, of course, Genevieve Lacey, on recorder, with harpsichordist and chamber organist Linda Kent in a recital of baroque and new music called, somewhat disingenuously, 'Breathless'.

Why would a young virtuoso instrumentalist with a concert schedule looming (Lacey goes on the road with the Australian Chamber Orchestra immediately after the festival) take on a job as artistic director? What does it mean at this stage in her career?

'It means a lot of things. Certainly high stress levels—it's an enormous challenge to try to hold my own space, my own practice time, and get through my work for the festival. But it also means that I can help to create, nurture and sustain a project that's much bigger than me and my little recorders.

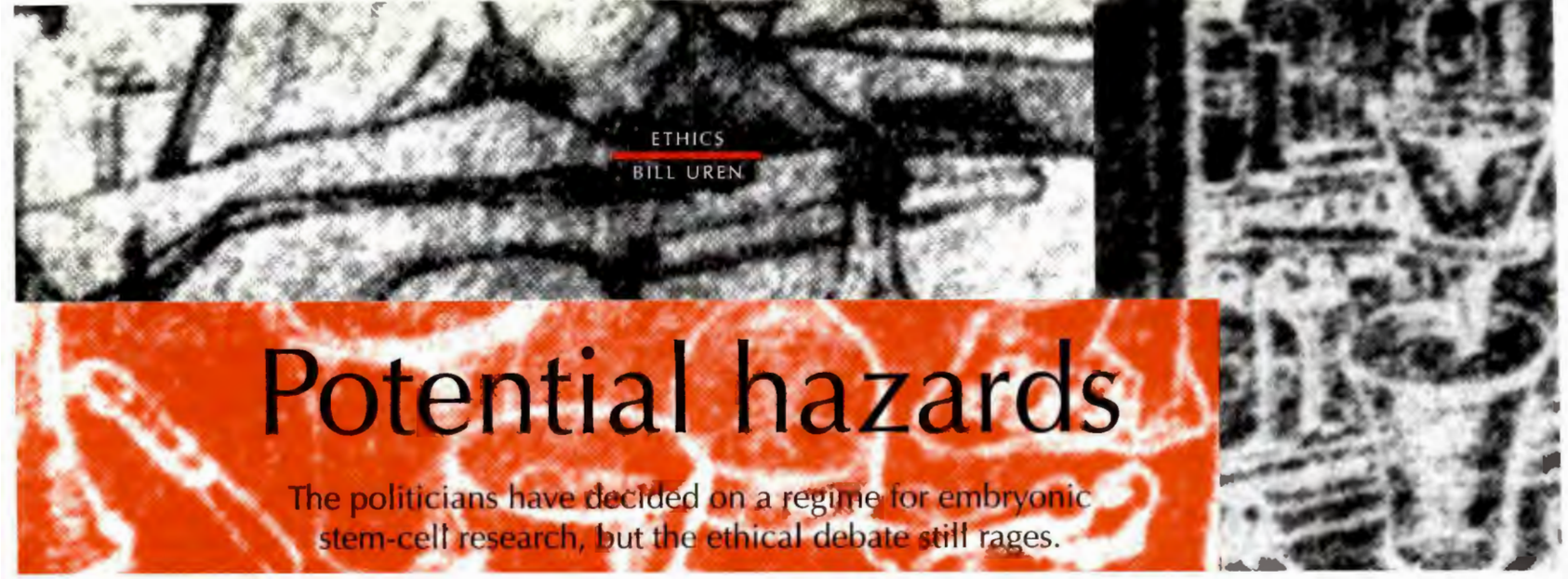
'To me what is important is trying to create a community. For all those people who do very specialised, incredibly risky freelance things, it means creating a space and a place where they feel acknowledged. I have the greatest respect for what they do and will create the environment in which people can hear it. To achieve that I am prepared to answer a lot of phone calls and read a lot of emails.'

And the last word: 'It is so critical to give some sort of expression, musical expression, to what is around us, to create meaning out of what can appear chaotic. So critical—for all of us. If I can support other people, use an institution like this festival to do that, and enable them to create that meaning, then—that's amazing.'

Morag Fraser is editor of *Eureka Street*.

The Melbourne Autumn Music Festival runs from Friday 26 April through Sunday 5 May in a range of inner-Melbourne venues. Telephone bookings: (03) 9685 5111.

Genevieve Lacey's most recent recordings are on the ABC Classics label.



ETHICS

BILL UREN

Potential hazards

The politicians have decided on a regime for embryonic stem-cell research, but the ethical debate still rages.

Professor Alan Trounson, a Director of the Monash Institute of Reproduction and Development, is Australia's leading proponent of human embryonic stem-cell research. This research will involve dissecting and destroying at the blastocyst stage some of the 60,000 embryos that have been proliferated surplus to IVF needs in laboratories around Australia.

Professor Trounson has been an advocate of destructive experimentation on human embryos for over 20 years. First, it was in the cause of improving the comparatively low success rates of IVF. Then it was to test the toxicity of certain drugs on the human embryo. This time, it is in the hope that the stem cells cultured subsequent to the dissecting of the embryo may then be directed to repair traumatised cells and cure diseases like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, motor neurone disease, diabetes, spinal injuries and heart failure.

One of the virtues of Professor Trounson's arguments is that he does not shirk the logic of his conclusions. The present debate has raged over the morality of using only those embryos that are surplus to IVF needs. However, Professor Trounson and ethicist Julian Savulescu were reported in *The Australian* on 27 March as further advocating that there should be no ban or moratorium on what is euphemistically called 'therapeutic cloning', that is, creating cloned embryos out of the body cells of a patient and donated enucleated eggs and then dissecting these customised embryos to generate the stem cells specific to the patient.

Trounson and Savulescu are being quite consistent in suggesting that 'therapeutic' cloning is part and parcel of the central argument for destructive embryonic stem-cell research. After all, if we do not cavil at destroying embryos surplus to IVF needs, which are in many ways unsuitable for stem-cell research and its projected benefits, why should we cavil at creating and then destroying cloned embryos which are manifestly much more adapted to realising the desired cures? If these cures are the only ethical object at issue—development-blinkered Premiers Carr, Beattie and Bracks seem to be convinced—surely we should develop those embryos that are best suited to the research and cures in question?

That Trounson and Savulescu should have advocated this further argument at this point in the debate may seem more than a little surprising. Indeed, it beggars belief that a scientist of Trounson's international reputation has only belatedly come to realise that the current methods of culturing stem cells from surplus embryos and the existing embryonic stem-cell lines—some of which he was responsible for developing from donated surplus human embryos in Singapore—are unsuitable for use in experiments involving projected cures for human diseases. This is because they have been grown on mouse tissue, and there is therefore a risk of transmitting animal viruses to humans. One would have thought that a primer on xenotransplantation might have indicated this long ago. But it is perhaps an index of how much stem-cell research is still in its swaddling clothes that it is this that has been hailed by Trounson as a reason for renouncing his former view that the existing 78 embryonic stem-cell lines were sufficient for research needs.

However, this is not the only reason that stem-cell lines derived by using human embryos surplus to IVF needs are likely to be unsuitable. In the first instance these embryos have become 'surplus' to IVF needs precisely because they are 'second best'. Precisely because of some irregularity in their texture, shape, or the way in which they have divided, they were not the embryos of choice when the IVF specialist came to select the first three or four embryos for implantation in the maternal uterus. For similar reasons they are not likely to be first choice for embryonic stem-cell research. Further, they have been frozen and stored, some for an extended period, and they will need to be thawed before being dissected—all of which are compromising experiences. Finally and most importantly, there is the immunological barrier to be surmounted. These are *donated* embryos, and as such are of a different genetic type to the likely

recipients of the cells and tissues generated from the stem cells to cure disease.

Stem cells from cloned embryos, on the other hand, will not suffer from this genetic difference and immunological rejection. They will be 'customised', and are not in any sense 'second best'. Admittedly, as the experience with Dolly the sheep shows, it may be difficult to generate these cloned embryos. But since clinical applications even using the immediately available surplus embryos are likely to be a decade away, time at least is on their side once we have agreed in principle that destructive experimentation on embryos is justified in the cause of curing disease.

It will be better, then, as Trounson and Savulescu would argue, from the point of view of efficiency and likely scientific success, to use the cloned, customised embryos adapted to the purposes of stem-cell research than the undifferentiated 'second best' surplus embryos we presently have stored in our IVF laboratories. If we accept the one (destroying *surplus* embryos), then it is only a matter of time and logic before we accept the other (creating and destroying *cloned* embryos).

But perhaps we should press Professors Trounson and Savulescu a little further. Professor Trounson at least is on record as rejecting 'human reproductive cloning', that is, the developing by natural maternal support of a cloned embryo into a human person more or less genetically identical with the donor of the original body cell. There have been solemn assertions and breast-beatings by all manner of scientists who, even though they support in principle the destruction of embryos, both surplus and cloned, for stem-cell research to cure disease, say that this reproductive cloning is not an option. While I do not presume to question their sincerity, may I suggest once again that we should examine the logic of the argument. If we can destroy embryos to cure disease in an existing human person, why can't we not only create cloned embryos but then also allow them to develop to 'replace' a human person who has been killed by that same disease? Admittedly, replacement will not bring the loved one back, but it would definitely be a more or less genetically identical good 'second best'. Ask any parents who have lost a deeply loved only child, and whose subsequent efforts to conceive have proved fruitless. If curing disease is all that matters, why do we cavil at reproductive cloning?

Does anyone really doubt, then, that, if in the first instance we permit surplus embryos to be destroyed in the cause of stem-cell research to cure disease, it will be anything more than a matter of time before we are cloning embryos for the same purpose? And then, if we are cloning embryos, does anyone really doubt that it is anything more than a matter of time before one of these cloned human embryos is allowed to develop into a fully-fledged human person? We have seen surrogacy condoned on altruistic grounds. Why does anyone think altruistic cloning is any less likely—not now, not even in ten years (the scientific problems associated with cloning and stem-cell research are immense), but ultimately?

WE ARE FACED, THEN, with the Rubicon in ethical discernment. On the one hand we have the logic of the Trounson-Savulescu program: destructive experimentation on human embryos *surplus* to IVF needs, leading to destructive experimentation on *cloned* embryos ('therapeutic cloning'), leading to the cloning of human persons ('reproductive cloning'). The ethical trump card in this utilitarian program is the possible cure of some human diseases some ten to 20 years hence (an estimate by Professor Bob Williamson, Director of the Murdoch Institute). The associated benefits are scientific prestige and very considerable financial gains—for those who have invested heavily in an Australian licence for destructive embryonic stem-cell research. There are also potential financial gains for some state governments. The Queensland premier, Peter Beattie, for example, has recently commissioned a new $77.5 million Institute of Molecular Bioscience at the University of Queensland. It could be a white elephant if embryo experimentation is not permitted; it could easily become an also-ran in the intensely competitive interstate biotechnology industry if drug-company funds are not forthcoming

for this type of research (see *The Australian*, 1 April 2002, p19).

On the other hand, we have the program espoused most recently by the majority of church leaders and a number of prominent scientists, ethicists and community leaders. They point to our common humanity with the embryos stored in IVF laboratories. We were all embryos once, however small and vulnerable. They say that we should respect the embryo because it is nascent and developing human life. The embryo is valued both for what it is and what it will become. An embryo does not become any less an embryo by a mere stroke of a pen. It does not change its nature or its potential by being denominated by some scientist or state premier as 'surplus', or 'destined for destructive experimentation', as opposed to 'selected for implantation'. This does not transform it into 'laboratory material' in contrast to its implanted sibling. It possesses the same intrinsic capacity to become a human person and should be respected as such. It is not only the actual possession of certain features (in this case, the morally significant characteristics of personhood) that entitle a human subject to respect. Morality is also about respecting capacities. That is why we accord special respect to children. Our moral obligations regard not merely present actualities but also future actualities, and therefore present potentialities—in this case the potentiality of these human embryos.

Nor should the fact that we have 60,000 embryos languishing in storage distract us from this fact. Rather it should invite us to question the motivation of those who have been responsible for bringing about this situation. To suggest, then, that we can 'redeem' this situation by destroying the 'surplus' embryos in the cause of stem-cell research and curing disease is highly dubious. We have connived at the proliferation of these embryos, we have deprived them of their proper environment, we have denied them the opportunity to develop into mature members of the human race, and we have frozen, thawed and commodified them in a variety of ways. Now we are proposing to make 'a virtue out of necessity' by arbitrarily selecting some of them to experiment on to their destruction, and this for uncertain ends and distant goals for which alternative non-destructive protocols with adult stem cells are already being developed.

This is not redeeming the situation or making a virtue out of necessity. Rather, it is adding insult to injury. Instead of exposing them to this final indignity might we not redeem our own humanity by allowing them to succumb unviolated? We once had the common decency to walk away from the potentially valuable medical and scientific results of Nazi experiments on concentration camp prisoners. Shall we have the common humanity to do the same today, and argue for legislation to ensure that the obscenity of 60,000 human embryos in storage does not recur? Or shall we cross the ethical Rubicon and pursue the path that leads inevitably to the cloning of fully-fledged human beings in the not very distant future? Let no-one be led astray by the asseverations of scientists and state premiers. Just think of Alan Trounson's recent change of heart on the adequacy of existing cultures and stem-cell lines. Once one has crossed the Rubicon, Rome, paradoxically, is the only possible journey's end. ■

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IAN HENDERSON

Complacency rules, OK?

We haven't solved unemployment, we've merely swept it under the carpet.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, half a million jobseekers out of work represented a national crisis. Yet, when John Howard and Kim Beazley fought out the 2001 federal election, there were more than 660,000 unemployed people unsuccessfully looking for work. And a total of around two million people said they wanted a job—or even more paid hours of work—but were unable to find it. Yet neither Labor nor the Coalition were worried enough to put policies to reduce the number out of work on the election campaign agenda.

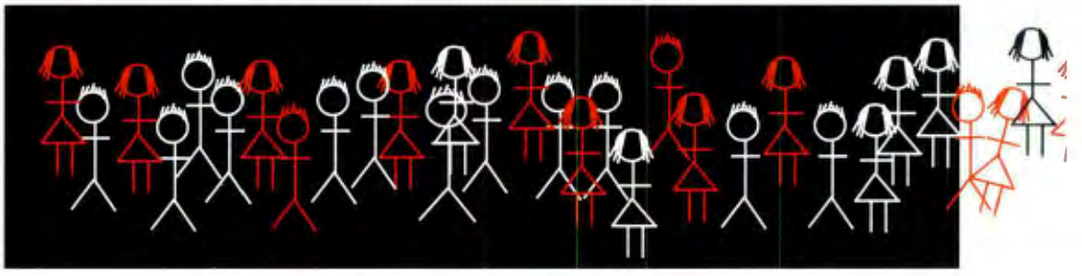
Unemployment is a high priority for voters: Newspoll has consistently found voters rating unemployment among the top three issues they say government should do something about. But politicians are able, with apparent impunity, to ignore it.

Labor listed jobs as one of its key campaign issues, but failed to set itself even the modest target of driving the unemployment rate down from its current seven per cent figure to five per cent—a target Beazley had set himself at the 1998 federal poll. Howard went no further than to promise unspecified benefits to the labour market from his government's plans for further labour-market liberalisation.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite a decade of virtually uninterrupted economic growth, the length of the jobless queue remains a national disgrace—but that no-one in authority finds that too distressing. Complacency rules?

Well, it does and it does not.

If Howard's and Beazley's evident priorities late last year were any guide, politicians are under no public pressure to do anything serious to ease the social and economic cost of high unemployment—because that is what a shortfall between supply and demand of two million jobs actually represents: high unemployment.



Oddly enough, it is professional economists who are still leading the campaign for further steps towards fixing the jobs crisis.

Jeff Borland, professor of economics at the University of Melbourne—and one of Australia's most expert analysts of the labour market—warned recently that the problem of unemployment is not about to go away (see 'Unemployment' in *Reshaping Australia's Economy*, John Nieuwenhuysen, Peter Lloyd and Margaret Mead, Cambridge University Press, 2001). And that was when the official jobless figure was a little over six per cent.

But more worrying, Borland added, is the popular perception that there are no solutions to the problem, because that perception is incorrect. Borland wrote:

> The main difficulty in dealing with unemployment is not that we do not know what to do in order to reduce unemployment, but it is extremely difficult to implement policies—such as maintaining high rates of output growth—over a sustained period of time. This is the real challenge for policy-makers.

His package of unemployment-lowering measures would include: high rates of economic growth maintained for long periods of time and the avoidance of recessions; moderate rates of aggregate wage inflation; and policies to improve the efficiency of the labour market, such as labour-market programs to aid the unemployed in their preparation for and search for work.

Borland's solution would be widely—though not universally—accepted among economists. Part of the reason why we continue to live with an unacceptably high level of unemployment is that there is a lack of unanimity, and that some 'solutions' are little more than the expression of anti-union prejudice.

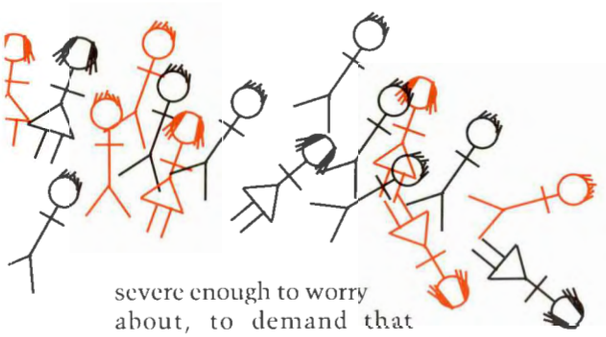
Addressing a conference at the Australian National University in September 2001—a month before the federal election was called—Treasury secretary Ken Henry went very close to getting the story right. Recalling the provocative comments of his predecessor Ted Evans in October 1993 that 'in one sense, we can choose the level of unemployment which we are willing to bear', Henry noted that in the intervening eight years, the unemployment rate had fallen from around 11 per cent to about seven per cent.

'A seven per cent unemployment rate provides no grounds for complacency ...

but it is a substantial improvement on 11 per cent,' Henry said.

His own comments would have been more telling had he turned that sentence on its head. How would it have sounded if the federal government's top economic policy adviser, nine weeks before polling day, had said this: 'A seven per cent unemployment rate is a substantial improvement on eleven per cent, but it provides no grounds for complacency'?

For that message would have pointed unequivocally to what, it can be argued, is one of the main (if not the main) stumbling blocks to policy action to solve the major crisis in our society: complacency. Australians have become used to living with high unemployment, and are unconvinced the current situation is



severe enough to worry about, to demand that policy-makers make getting the number of jobless down their top priority.

TALK OF 'CRISIS' can be cheap and misleading. But that description is indeed justified when it comes to unemployment. And the fact that political leaders were able to avoid making detailed promises to deal with that issue during last year's federal election campaign is a symptom of the very crisis they are failing to address fully.

It is not as though, in unguarded moments, some—even from the Coalition side—are completely insensitive to the problem. In an unreported speech in Adelaide in April 2001, Amanda Vanstone opened her heart in public to the people who are still falling through the welfare safety net. 'We want to make sure that in Australia's new-found prosperity, those with less are not left behind,' she said. With others in the Howard government proudly trumpeting the merits of individuals doing things for themselves, Vanstone said, 'The smugness of success is particularly unattractive. Sadly, some people attribute this material success almost entirely to their own ability and work. They don't give enough recognition to the ever-present factor of luck. They give the impression that those with less just haven't worked hard enough. A recognition of the degree to which sheer luck has helped the materially successful might get rid of that smugness and induce a little sense of humility.'

There was more, in much the same vein. But Vanstone's message was clear: some people find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities made available by a growing economy.

Three months later, Tony Abbott was willing to canvass—offering at least tacit approval for the idea being on the policy agenda—the suggestion put forward by five prominent Australian economists just after the 1998 federal election, that one way out of unemployment for some people was to overhaul the welfare system. Their idea (which gained the overnight support of Abbott, until it was rejected by the prime minister) was to ease the financial disincentives associated with moving from social security to paid work; to reduce the high 'effective marginal tax rates' on withdrawal from social security that result from the interaction of the tax system and the highly targeted welfare system; to make paid work more attractive for those on the brink of deciding whether or not to take up a job.

Since then, Abbott—still Howard's Employment Minister—has returned to union-bashing and to other pursuits that are marginal for anyone interested in boosting employment and easing the unemployment burden, while continuing to express genuine concern for the disadvantaged.

Last September—just a week before John Howard called the 2001 election—Ted Evans, five months into his retirement from the Treasury secretaryship, foreshadowed a slowing of the pace of economic growth in the medium term, as population growth continues to slow. That projected future, Evans said, demanded further liberalisation of the labour market to ensure that whatever increasingly limited additions to labour supply were available were directed to the most productive uses. It also, he said, warranted more effort to reduce the disincentives to work that are currently imposed by tax and social security arrangements. (Ted Evans, 'The Shann Memorial Lecture', University of Western Australia, 25 September 2001)

Evans argued that Australia's economic performance during the 1990s was 'about as good as it gets', and that it owed much to a wide range of policy actions: tariff reform, fiscal policy reform (fiscal consolidation in times of growth), improvements in the conduct of monetary policy, and, of course, labour-market reform.

Fine. But it is the contention here that the result of all that reform is no less nor more than sustained economic growth—valuable, but hardly any comfort to the 660,000–2,000,000 (take your pick) currently wanting paid work. Until those in public life find a way to deliver jobs to those now out of employment, the economic policy reform task will have been only partly completed. ■

Ian Henderson is economics correspondent for the ABC.

Bearing witness

What does the writer, from the privacy of her room, have to say to the public at large about matters of national import? Plenty. **Kim Mahood** demonstrated as much when she addressed a capacity crowd at the 2002 Adelaide Writers' Festival.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD AT BOARDING SCHOOL I became aware of the gulf between the city and the bush. Each side held all sorts of derogatory assumptions about the other. The city was a stinking, crowded, polluted hotbed of ill-informed left-wing intellectuals, politicians and conservationists. It was a place of crime, corruption and distrust, where neighbours didn't speak to one another and you couldn't let your kids play in the streets. City people were swayed by the fickle winds of media opinion, out of touch with practical realities and addicted to material excess and soft living.

The country, on the other hand, was an intellectual desert full of bigots, racists and rednecks who bulldozed the last existing stands of ancient forest through pure bloody-mindedness. If they no longer organised hunting parties to shoot down Aborigines, they still thought it was a good idea. The macho ideals of manhood ruled supreme, shored up by alcohol and violence. Country people were ill-informed, unsophisticated, attached to a romanticised notion of rugged individualism and resistant to change and new ideas.

There was an additional element in the urban view of the country. At a certain point it ceased to be the country and became the Outback, a mythical zone of spiritual possibilities and marvellous landscape. It harboured primordial secrets, and it cast a curious grace on all those who lived in it or passed through it.

It took me a long time to shed the attitudes of my own childhood. I discovered that I loved cities, the bigger the better. I even enjoyed the company of left-wing intellectuals. My own attitudes and values were challenged continually, and while I did not abandon them I modified them radically. And yet there was something missing in the assessment my city friends made of the country. There was little understanding of a dignity, an integrity, a stoic perseverance that seemed to me admirable even when it was attached to opinions I no longer shared. And there was a romanticism, a sentimentality in relation to the landscape and the Aborigines, which also sat uncomfortably, and which had nothing to do with the reality of what I remembered.

As long as I stay away from the country I grew up in, I can manage these contradictions. When I come back to it I feel like an imposter. The people of the world to which I once belonged treat me as if I am one of them, assume that I understand the intricacies and difficulties of their lives as no outsider can. And of course I do. I am sucked back into the world which shaped me, with its harsh imperatives, its black humour and subtle understandings. It reclaims me, and the divisions no longer exist outside me but are inside, laying equal claim on my allegiances.

THE ABOVE EXCERPT from my book *Craft for a Dry Lake* provides a context for the place from which I have chosen to bear witness. I want to try to speak across the divide, as someone who has lived for a long time with a foot in both camps, and has acquired a complex set of loyalties along the way. I still have very strong connections to rural and outback Australia. Three generations of my family live on a cattle station in Central Queensland, and I spend a good deal of time in Central Australia and the Tanami region.

I don't write as an apologist for the culture I grew up in, which was involved in one way or another with the pastoral industry. It has many flaws, plenty of which I absorbed and took for granted well into my adult life. On the other hand, it always seemed to me that it was represented and interpreted simplistically, loaded with stereotypes and positive and negative mythologies. Much of the literature about it was anecdotal, humorous or romanticised. The canvas on which the stories are inscribed is in itself fabulous—a hard, miraculous landscape which lends itself to mythologising.

I wanted to present a more complex picture, which acknowledged the particular ways in which the land has influenced and shaped the people, but at the same time showed people struggling with the ordinary difficulties that occur between human beings.

So I've chosen to bear witness for a particular piece of country in a remote part of Australia, and for the lives it has shaped, both past and present. The place and its story encapsulate many issues facing Australians today.

The country I'm speaking about was originally the home of small nomadic groups of Warlpiri people, at the north-western extent of their traditional country. It was surveyed in 1900 by a geologist whose brief was to fill in the gaps on the map, and to explore for traces of mineral wealth. Small deposits of alluvial gold were found, and a brief and unsuccessful gold rush occurred in the early 1930s. In the 1960s my family took up a pastoral lease over the area and established a cattle station. Around 1980, the property was bought as a going concern by the Aboriginal Central Land Council, deeded back to the Aboriginal owners and run as a cattle station, usually employing a white manager. A rich gold mine was also discovered, providing royalty payments to the handful of Warlpiri people with continuing traditional links to the country. When I returned to the country in 1992, history had overtaken the place in which I had grown up. The central issues of race and land and law had become visible in a way which does not occur with such focus in other parts of the country. I could no longer take for granted my right to return, an irony of which I was perfectly aware.

It is country that is still located in the mythologised zone. It is coded into our sense of identity in multiple ways, yet most Australians will never go to places like this. One of the prevailing ironies in Australia is that although many of the most pressing cultural issues we face are to do with land, most of us live in cities. Opinions are frequently based on received ideas, stereotypes and projections, unmediated by first-hand experience.

Up close the simplifications don't hold. Decent people behave decently even in difficult circumstances. Cultures in crisis throw up predators of all kinds, and exploitative behaviour is not culture-specific. Ordinary people do the best they can in the circumstances.

I'm fully aware that to venture into the terrain of white and Aboriginal relationships to country is to step into a minefield located somewhere between the high moral ground and the siege mentality, and that one risks drawing fire from both sides.

When I returned to the country in which I had grown up I didn't know what I would find or how I would feel about it. So I attempted to write as clearly and honestly as I could, without concealing my own ambivalence and discomfort. It is here that perhaps I can bear witness for Australians who are not convinced by the simplifications of either the high moral ground or the siege mentality, and who are prepared to excavate the layers of their own discomfort, baggage and prejudices in order to get at what feels like a truth.

Writing allows for this sort of excavation. Every writer knows the process of worrying away at something until suddenly you find yourself in a place you didn't expect to be, with words on the page you didn't know you had in you.

And they are the words that matter, because you have pulled them out of something bigger than yourself. That same jolt of recognition the writer feels is also felt by the reader. These are the words which can have an effect.

WHICH BRINGS ME to the notion of the writer's responsibility to bear witness for others. I doubt that many books get written from that motive alone. To feel passionately enough about something to put in the hard years of work a good book requires generally means there's something you need to sort out for yourself, some recalcitrant obsession that fuels the need to write this particular story. Certainly I wrote first and foremost to clarify something for myself, although I was aware that the material I was exploring straddled some of the big issues of the time.

A book written as a polemic, to prove a point, often undermines itself with its own stridency. In my view, the writers' job is to approach their material with curiosity and trepidation, with as much nerve and honesty as they can muster, and to stay the distance. So I have tried to write about what it is like on the ground, out where the faultline is impossible to ignore, and where the faultlines in your own nature are as difficult to negotiate as the cultural ones.

I am curious, for instance, to explore the ways in which Aboriginal culture has had an impact on white Australia. Evidence of the impact of white on black is clear. The reverse is much more subtle, but equally profound.

Because I grew up with Aboriginal people around me all the time it is impossible for me to romanticise the culture. Up close it is confronting, uncomfortable and full of contradictions. It is also dynamic, remarkable and resilient.

My own observations over the years, and particularly my exposure to pre-contact people who spent their early years in the bush and didn't meet whites until they were in their teens, has led me to wonder whether the country itself is a form of consciousness. Watching the old painters at work day after day, it is apparent that while painting they are revisiting and reanimating their country, brushmark by brushmark, empowering the ancestors, keeping the country strong. The country they paint is so thoroughly internalised it can be expressed in a series of shared symbols which simultaneously represent place, ancestral events and daily activities.

Taking people out to hunt or get firewood or just to visit country, paying attention to the incremental shifts in my own perception, the notion grew on me that consciousness might exist externally as well as internally, that when a place becomes so thoroughly mapped into the psyche, to visit that place might be like encountering the structures of one's own mind as a physical reality, to participate literally in shared ancestral psychological events. This satisfies me much more than the conventional interpretations of spirituality, which come laden with the trappings of Western thought.

It gives a different, more pragmatic way of understanding the chaos wrought by white settlement. We blindly settled in the consciousness of a people, thinking it was only geography, and we are being remade by it.

The country where I grew up is stronger than the people. I suspect that for some white Australians, who have lived a long time close to the land, there are contours and hollows in the mind which have come to resemble the shapes of the country they inhabit. It is an inarticulate place, lacking the symbolic language necessary to describe it. And meanwhile the ancestral consciousness forces its way into the fissures and flaws of white consciousness, and is slowly finding its way along the faultlines out to the urban fringes. This is what we are dealing with today. It's a painful and uncomfortable process, and there is no way back from it. It makes us resentful, ingratiating, uneasy, apologetic, angry, sentimental and hypocritical. It has created a gap between the public conversation and the private conversation which leaves us in a curiously divided state. This may be the most volatile faultline we straddle.

I think the writer's job is to open up the complexities, the particularities, the stories that slide between the stereotypes, to create an imaginative space in which the perspective can suddenly shift and reveal different possibilities.

This is the voice I seek in my own writing. I write as an ordinary individual who feels responsible towards the country I live in and love. I lack the certainties of an activist and the intellectual discipline of a historian, or the quick-wittedness for public debate. What I do have is a passion for the precise and subtle nature of language, its capacity to open spaces in which the unsayable can make itself heard. If this reaches a few people, makes them pause and reconsider, think a little more deeply, then writing can achieve something. ■

Kim Mahood is the author of *Craft for a Dry Lake*.

Summed up

WHAT A MONTH IT'S been for the economy. In the elegant argot of the financial commentators, the economy's 'going gangbusters'. It's 'steaming'. There's some danger that it might even be overheating. By and large, those descriptions remind me of the motor of my old Landcruiser, but I know that these are technical terms for outcomes (there are no 'results', no 'consequences'—just outcomes) that only economists understand and about which they make invariably wrong predictions. But given all this economic hyperbole, I eagerly accepted a commission to interview The Economy for *Eureka Street*.

I don't know what I expected. Last year, I interviewed The Dollar. It was on its deathbed at the time—one of its characteristic postures—and not particularly forthcoming. On the strength of that encounter, I vainly attempted a serious discussion with The Market. But he turned out to be a rampaging, philistine megalomaniac, drunk on a cocktail of testosterone and rescue remedy. So when it came to The Economy, anything seemed possible—perhaps I would meet a sort of financial vampire, a fiscal Dracula?

But—on the contrary. The Economy was a shock. She was, to begin with, rather stunning. She had a beautiful set of numbers which I will not be so sexist, or in the language of another age, so ungallant, to enumerate, but you can take it from me that these numbers described arcs, undulations and enfoldments considerably more interesting than the statistical normal curve.

I realised that I should have foreseen this. The Economy is, after all, on everyone's lips, which means that everyone's lips must be on her. It dawned on me that a female interviewer in my position would see before her not the seductive siren I was viewing but an Adonis, a male miracle of proportion and allurement. The Economy, you see, is all things to all men and all women. The Economy is an androgyne, a chameleon, assuming this or that guise according to need. This is one of the reasons why, incidentally, she so fascinates politicians, whose efforts to be multi-faced, to be all things to all people, are puny by comparison but no less determined for all that.

For the interview, I travelled to her house—a mansion in the country, architecturally neoclassical at first glance but revealing on closer scrutiny modernist tendencies. On the front gate, ornately inscribed like a scroll, were the words *In the long run we are all dead*.

When I was ushered in to her presence, I found her reclining—or perhaps draped would be the *mot juste*—on a long couch with a ballast of cushions wherever the lines of her body threatened to press too harshly on the upholstery. And I saw that this chaise longue was called Soft Landing. Around her were five or six economists—her students in the most literal sense. They were arguing vigorously in rasping whispers, managing the difficult feat of sounding in the one sibilant moment both aggressive and reverential.

'We can have confidence in her,' said one, nodding towards The Economy, 'because though her implications are inexact, we know her from experience and introspection.'

'Be buggered,' said another, resorting to what I assume was technical jargon, 'if we understand her by introspection, she can't be accessible to empirical study.'

'By paying attention only to her most significant determinants, we can know her fully and precisely,' said a third, unable to keep a lascivious undertone from his voice.

Shouldering aside these arguing acolytes, I asked The Economy if she minded being talked about as if she were not present. She replied, 'I am never present and always present. I was there at genesis, in the story of Adam Smith and Eve. Before The Market was, I am. There is no such thing as society, there is only me. There are no nations, only economies. I am all economies and no economy. I am, on the same day and in different places, both meltdown and rock solid, I am going gangbusters and I am sluggish—'

'And steaming? Overheating?' I asked, anxious to impress with my technical knowledge. But she had turned away to consider a peach proffered by one of the acolytes. And I saw that the peach was called Fine Tuning.

INCONCLUSIVE THOUGH THE interview was, it profoundly influenced me. I was much taken with the idea that there is only the economy and nothing else. How simplifying. How neat. I realised this made me a supporter of the Republic of the Economy of Australia, that I lived in the Economy of Little River in the Economy of Victoria, that I barracked for the Economy of St Kilda. The latter insight alone was worth all the rest, cauterising as it did the pain, anxiety, defeat and despair that were part of following the actual St Kilda football team—a much more complex proposition. This, I saw, was the great gift of the economists and politicians. Once you understand you are an economic unit living in an economy not a society, it takes all the angst out of being human; it takes the human out of being human.

Shylock, a canny *oeconomist* of Venice, asked, 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' Well, no mate—not in an economy. The best you can hope for is a sanguinary outcome. ■

Brian Matthews is a writer and academic.

THE WORLD

TREVOR HAY

The red shoebox

Part 2 of the quest for a device to think with, in which the author empties the contents of a shoebox, discerns a curiously postmodern sort of map and follows its signs and portents from Australia to China and back again.

THIS IS A STORY OF LONG AGO, as J.R.R. Tolkien once said of the famous little adventure he titled, alternatively, 'There and Back Again'. Tolkien also reminded us that the language and letters of long ago were quite different from ours of today, and so it is that the Old Ones do not comprehend the baffling tongue of postmodernism, especially in its written form, which contains a preponderance of symbols for that which is eclectic, ephemeral, iconic, incoherent, disposable, collectable or suitable for publication in a modern university handbook.

So it is too that the potent relics of an epic struggle of long ago and far away, of China's Cultural Revolution, have been set adrift from their times (decontextualised) and have begun to wash up in the op shop of contemporary popular culture and fashion, where they are seized upon by gleeful collectors, who prize them for their strangely fashionable dagginess, or by those who go in for interactive art, disposable simulacra and urban anthropology. They may turn up in a place like the Museum of Modern Oddities, now itself vanished from its suitably ephemeral home in an old hardware shop in Johnston Street in Collingwood, Melbourne. They may appear suddenly, out of nowhere, at the tip or in a garage sale, or, like the Monkey's Paw, they may be passed on reluctantly by someone who has a healthy respect for their power, and they may even come with a dire warning. They are also sometimes handled carelessly, trifled with, and even laughed at. But these fragments have the power to take you back 30 years, if only you can remember a certain trick of the Old Ones, in which you read for structure and meaning, an antique device in widespread use before the New Ones came and taught us to look beyond the crudity of meaning into the interrogation of alterity.

Personally, I have taken to keeping fragments in shoeboxes. I can't quite bring myself to call these fragments anything postmodern, since they seem to be trying to tell me something, but maybe the hobbits can help out with the word 'mathom', denoting anything you have no immediate use for but are reluctant to throw away. I have kept my most recent mathoms in a red shoebox which I now discover may be construed in a certain fashion, not as 'a random swirl of empty signals' or an 'evacuation of authenticity' as I read in my dictionary of literary terms, but as a sort of Thror's map, in Tolkien's tale, helping us to find the way through fabled lands and back again.

First, from a newspaper article about ephemeral street art, there is a picture of the Republic Tower, corner of Queen and La Trobe streets in Melbourne, in February this year, adorned with a giant image

called *Trigger Happy*, a work by the Chinese-Australian artist Guo Jian. The image, from an exhibition called 'Mama's Tripping', depicts a heavily lipsticked woman in People's Liberation Army uniform holding a microphone with a number of leering, laughing Chinese soldiers in the background. In the box I also find the catalogue for this exhibition, with an introduction by Nicholas Jose and notes of an interview with the artist conducted by Linda Jaivin of *Eat Me* and *Rock 'n' Roll Babes from Outer Space* fame. The Canberra Contemporary Art Space, in September–October 2000, exhibited Guo Jian's works, including *Wet Dream*, *Double Happiness*, *New Long March*, and a series, from which the Melbourne piece is taken, in which one of the revolutionary ballets of Jiang Qing (Madame Mao), *The Red Detachment of Women*, is the principal motif. As Nicholas Jose puts it in his introduction:

> It's a collage method that allows him to draw in an eclectic crowd of figures and tokens. Too much is not enough. Visual elements from Chinese folklore and religion, Communist political culture and the newly burgeoning commercial culture are reworked in lurid, manic travesty. Images that were used to sell a society to its people are revealed for the mindfucking drugs they are.

Then there is this item, from one of the Sunday magazines, about a restaurant called Mao's, in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne:

> Mao's feels like a location for a Jim Jarmusch movie. Designed by Six Degrees, it's hip but dreamy, buzzing but gritty. Matt Morrow's propagandist mural of Mao Zedong dominates the entrance, then gives way to the 'wallpaper'—large-scale Tony Knox photographs of Hunan province (the restaurant's specialty cuisine) ... Well-wrought specialities include the rice-flour pancakes and fish with red basil.

I have frequented a few of these places myself, in Melbourne, Canberra, Singapore, and even China. It seems now, in the town of Yangshuo, there is a twin restaurant called Mickey and Minnie Mao's. Perhaps it is owned by Rex Hunt. Then I find a photograph I took in Canton (Guangzhou) last year, in which Mao's face appears on a porcelain plate, sitting on a rug in a street stall among lacquer boxes, cloisonné vases, three-coloured Tang horses, fat-bellied laughing Buddhas and cans of Sprite.

Another newspaper article, this one by Matthew Sweet in *The Weekend Australian* two years ago, reminds me that he said something interesting about Soviet and Chinese paraphernalia:

> It's a demonstration of how thoroughly postmodernism has evacuated meaning from some of the world's most powerful totalitarian symbols. The hammer and sickle, for example, once stood for the inviolable solidarity of industrial and agricultural workers, for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the overthrow of the privileged classes. Now it's a nifty decal for a T-shirt, like the Nike tick or the hemp leaf.

Sweet is puzzled about why Maoist and Soviet iconography appears 'cute' while the paraphernalia of Nazism gets an altogether different reaction. He observes that collectors of Nazi memorabilia have to 'skulk' around on the internet, while Soviet memorabilia can be found at flea markets everywhere, and puts this down to the fact that Nazi images rely heavily on hatred. I don't personally think the hatred business is that simple. Hate is a many-splendoured thing, to borrow Han Suyin's felicitous phrase.

In the shoebox is a postcard from my visit to Paris last year, a postcard of Sacré Cœur, returned to me by a friend for a souvenir. (A number of my friends have the disconcerting habit of returning my postcards.) I have written on the back:

> June 4, Falungong demo here. I wonder if they're making some link between the anniversary of Tiananmen massacre and The Paris Commune which became such a model of people power in the early Cultural Revolution and then attacked as ultra-leftism etc.? This is where the Communards were massacred, before the cathedral was built. I seem to remember Marx or Engels saying something very striking, very moving about the unbelievable violence.

I have since found the reference—Marx's 1871 pamphlet, *The Civil War in France*. He was apparently stunned by the ferocity with which the bourgeois republicans crushed the proletariat in a bloodbath in 1848, and then again in 1871:

> It was the first time that the bourgeoisie showed to what insane cruelties of revenge it will be goaded the moment the proletariat dares to take its stand against the bourgeoisie as a separate class with its own interests and demands, And yet it was only child's play compared with the frenzy of the bourgeoisie in 1871.

Say what you like about Madame Mao's revolutionary modern operas and ballets, *The Red Lantern* and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* at least made the business of who was fighting who much clearer than the musical *Les Misérables*, judging by the number of people who think the latter is about the French Revolution. And the necessity to identify hero and villain with class imprint, of membership of proletariat and bourgeoisie, was crystal clear to audiences, regardless of their lack of sophistication in matters of Marxism-Leninism. As incomprehensible as it may seem to us in Australia today, the Cultural Revolution was about manipulation of the masses by a political elite, in order to harness the power of fear and hatred of a cultural elite, and cultural outsiders, in the interests of a political faction.

Maoist mythology and the Nazi variety have an aesthetic of hate in common, but the Nazi mythology derives its primary symbolism not from class but from the timeless romance of blood and race, located in a heroic tale of origin. The Chinese proletarian myth is by no means free from matters of blood and race, but its emphasis on historical materialism and class struggle may well look quaint by comparison, an unrealised dream, or fairy tale perhaps, of something preposterously 'real' to do with workers, soldiers and peasants. Is the postmodern representation of Chinese Cultural Revolution mythology just a kind of grown-up, half-cynical, half-bored way of looking at this strenuous Marxist-Leninist attempt at meaning?

As the Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye once put it, the revolutionary is essentially a 'bad critic' who mistakes a 'myth of freedom' for a 'historically realisable goal'. If that's the case, the Cultural Revolution was no place for revolutionaries. The 1949 Communist victory may well be seen as both a myth of freedom and a historically realised goal, and perhaps the idealistic are always bad critics to some extent, but the mythology of the Cultural Revolution called for a different sort of critic. It was, as the Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton has said of myth in general, a 'device to think with', enabling people to see how they should act in order to be mistaken for revolutionaries. Such people were actually quite good critics, who saw—early—that the way to demonstrate one's revolutionary status in real life was to demonstrate fervent hatred of class enemies in a way that mimicked what was happening on stage in the revolutionary modern theatre.

Basically the trick was to demonstrate that you were a bona fide member of the revolutionary class, by identifying so strongly with those on stage who were suffering outrageous injustice at the hands of the class enemy that you were moved to inflict outrageous injustice on real class enemies, who could easily be identified by the fact that they were hated by a phoney revolutionary. You could learn to perform this manoeuvre very economically, by watching five operas, two ballets and a symphony. They did not have talkback radio in those days.

As it happens, my little red shoebox of postmodern Cultural Revolution bits and pieces contains half a dozen or so articles about Australia and the treatment of 'illegals', shock-jock attacks on pinko intellectuals, *Herald Sun* phone polls, George W. Bush, the Axis of Evil, and Senator Bill Heffernan. What do these foolish things have in common? I am thinking of my own revolutionary modern operas, in which, in keeping with the true spirit of the Cultural Revolution, protagonists and settings are modernised, characterisation simplified and themes strengthened. The first is called 'Asylum Seekers My Arse' and portrays ordinary decent Australians showing compassion and generosity for true refugees who haven't made it here yet by hating the phoneys, whom we can easily recognise by their ratbag supporters (chardonnay-swilling, chattering class, elite maggots) and the fact that they are here in the first place instead of being in a queue, or dead. The title for a second is eluding me ('Transaction Costs' doesn't quite do it for me) but it's inspired by the example of social commentators like John Stone and Wolfgang Kasper who have drawn attention to the differences between racial prejudice and cultural incompatibility and helped us to distinguish clearly between good positive contempt for rotten, despicable, backward, sub-human cultures and its polar opposite—nasty, negative, un-Australian racism.

Eyes burning with indomitable hatred for the class enemy. A scene from the revolutionary modern ballet, *The White-haired Girl* (1971).

The picture above is an example of the aesthetic of hatred shining through, in a scene from the very popular revolutionary modern ballet, *The White-haired Girl*, in which an indomitable peasant girl triumphs over adversity and exile during the Anti-Japanese War. In this close-up from the filmed version of the ballet, the heroine shows the burning hatred she feels for the wicked landlord and his flunkey who murdered her father and took her into slavery, from which she escaped to live by her wits in the wild, her hair turning white from privation until at last she is reclaimed by the People's Liberation Army, who show her how to put hatred and the desire for revenge to good use in the struggle for Liberation. This was perhaps the best-loved of the revolutionary modern Chinese theatre and is still occasionally shown abroad,

as it was a few years ago in Melbourne. Among survivors of the Cultural Revolution you will often hear the tale that a portrait of the heroine, furtively cut from a magazine extolling the 'model' works, was often secreted in the wallets of young men. They just loved her when she got mad. And they were also wild about her costume, although the part they liked best is not featured in this shot. Not only did the heroine survive the ordeal of the Anti-Japanese and Civil Wars but the more private longings of young men survived the Cultural Revolution, it seems. As a colleague said to me recently when I told her this during a conference on modern Chinese culture, 'Aren't people wonderful?'

In other works—modern revolutionary Beijing operas such as *On the Docks*, *Raid on White Tiger Regiment* and *The Red Lantern*—the power of raw, ungoverned hatred is harnessed and the burning desire for revenge is channelled into a disciplined and irresistible collective force for the defeat of slavering, man-eating Japanese wolves, American running-dog imperialists and reactionary Chinese ox-demons and snake-spirits.

These things once had great power and meaning. But nowadays for young Chinese themselves, who seem to have little understanding of the recent past, the Mao iconography is not about hate and exclusion, or even some ironic use of commercial symbolism. Instead it constitutes a kind of hip, dreamy, gritty, buzzing international pop culture. In general, what is left of the Cultural Revolution for Chinese and foreigners alike would seem to be a kind of disembodied, bourgeois myth, a kind of 'de-politicised speech', as Roland Barthes said in the 1950s of a mythology that included Greta Garbo, Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, wrestling matches and soap-powder advertisements. There is no shortage of this kind of thing in China now, and you can hardly go anywhere without seeing something to do with the strangely de-mythologised modern film version of *Titanic*.

TOWARDS THE BOTTOM of my shoebox there are some photos from a trip to China in November 1999, taken outside the Meridian Gate in the Forbidden City. I had been walking through the Imperial Palace, accompanied almost every step of the way by importunate souvenir sellers, many of whom wanted to sell paraphernalia relating not to the palace, but to Mao—a fascinating process of association in itself. I was taken with one item, which might richly merit the description 'high kitsch', or even 'high camp', but still, quite literally, emitted an interesting aura—a cigarette lighter emblazoned with the face of Mao, radiating spokes of sunlight from a red background, just as it used to on the jacket of *The Little Red Book* (also on sale, at high prices, in markets). I mentioned this to colleagues in the arts, who were captivated by the image and the idea, although I think we were looking at different things.

I am a sucker for meaning. What they saw was the immediate irony of a god-like figure reduced to commercial object; and what I saw, as an integral part of the irony, was the preservation of the essential idea of Mao. This was not just the usual souvenir reproduction, with image unrelated to medium (like pictures of the British royal family stamped incongruously on tea towels and other domestic items unlikely to figure large in their daily lives), but a reproduction of *meaning*: Mao still giving us a light, Mao the red sun in our pockets, if not in our hearts, and ready to break into a bar or two of *The East is Red* at the flick of a thumb—the neatest, coolest and most ironic thing I've seen since *White Elephant* furniture or *Great Leap Forward* floor polish.

The face of Mao is truly a source of power and protection, a talisman for taxi-drivers, who hang his image over their rear-view mirrors, and in the markets you can buy plasticised magazine pictures of the young Mao among the clouds at Anyuan, or the aging Mao at the zenith of his power saluting the Red Guards in Tiananmen in 1966. He is not yet, like the Great Wall or the giant panda, reproduced indiscriminately, or reduced to a brand name, other than for the Communist Party itself. His image is still connected with symbol and sign, although there are some who see his portrait above the Tiananmen of today, minus the mention of his name, as an indication, not that he holds an unassailable place among the symbols of revolutionary history, but that the Party does not quite know where else they might safely put him for the moment.

I carried the thought of the cigarette lighter with me in Beijing, Tianjin and Hong Kong, where I found a considerable amount of official image-peddling going on. The 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China provided an opportunity for another 'verdict' on the past, by means of a series of iconic exhibitions, displays, events and publications rather like the kind of thing that was once used to teach loyal subjects about the British Empire. The Cultural Revolution, to the extent that it figures in this at all (and it is evident that the display is intended to celebrate the halcyon days of the Party before the onset of Mao's radicalism), is clearly reduced to the role of an ill-conceived and faction-driven attack on revisionism, in which the Great Helmsman loses control of the wheel in his dotage and the motherland is plunged into ten years of disaster before Deng Xiaoping takes over.

The revolutionary modern works, stripped of their association with Jiang Qing, were there among the commemorative paraphernalia. In fact, they have survived in 'historic' garb as special commemorative, remastered collections of audio cassettes, CDs of Shanghai radio productions and now video CDs of film versions. All the major works seem to have been reproduced in this medium, including some of the lesser-known ones, and there are even composites,

containing a selection of the works—not to mention bizarre karaoke versions, in which, for example, languorous women warriors of the PLA (which these days freely encourages heavy make-up and casually arranged tunics, it seems) moon about beneath lush palms, in a manner reminiscent more of Rodgers and Hammerstein than Jiang Qing. *Red Detachment of Women* meets *South Pacific*. The lyrics, 'Forward along a path crimson with the blood of martyrs', seem a little out of keeping with the rather more accommodating looks on the faces of the women.

All of this, and further observations in late 2001 (including many hours spent in a Cultural Revolution collectables store in Singapore, and in bookstores and music shops in Canton) makes me wonder if the works will have contemporary meaning only if we think of them either as something to do with the history of theatre or in some vaguely postmodern sense as 'classics' of nostalgia, ephemera, part of a collage like the works of Guo Jian. Will they continue to be converted into curious fragments of their era and made 'collectable' like posters and advertisements, in order to salvage contemporary artistic significance and diversion from the remains of impossibly crude ideology or impossibly complex politics?

So I have added to my collection an article by Shaun Carney in *The Age*, 23 February 2002, 'The Sinking of an Honourable Man', in which I have highlighted the striking introduction: 'In Howard's Liberal Party, the idea that asylum seekers deserve to have the truth told about them seems utterly alien.' That's it. Carney has hit the nail on the head. That's the meaning of everything in the red shoebox. These are not postmodern 'evacuations' at all. Neither the Cultural Revolution nor contemporary Australian politics is about truth, or even the perception of truth—it is about who *deserves* to have the truth told about them. It's only an arrogant minority who just don't get it—un-Australian wankers, losers, poofters, ivory-tower academics, Howard-haters and raghead-lovers. They don't deserve to have the truth told about them either. It's the masses, the silent majority who silently express themselves on talkback radio, and are silently monitored by Rehame, who count. This land is our land, this land is made for you and me but not them, and from Tony Abbott to Sam Newman, Peter Reith, Bill Heffernan and Alan Jones, we are rich with voices of the people who are not afraid to be heard, who stand ready to defy bourgeois academic authorities who would oppose the brilliant new radical conservative proletarian Australian operas.

These fragments have the power to take you back 30 years, if only you can remember a certain trick of the Old Ones, in which you read for structure and meaning, an antique device in widespread use before the New Ones came and taught us to look beyond the crudity of meaning into the interrogation of alterity.

Smashing the class enemy landlord tyrants. From the final act of *The White-haired Girl*.

Back in Australia, back in my shoebox, I continue to accumulate evidence of impossibly crude politics, of a fart that has been turned into an opera, as the Chinese say. The fart of unauthorised arrival has been turned into the opera of border protection. As I watched a performance of this at Woomera Stadium on television this Easter, I was confronted not only by the image of razor wire, but by the image of Balzac's 'razor of justice', that protects the sleep of the rich from the sleeplessness of the poor. In this country, Ruddock's Razor protects the sleep of the ordinary, decent, fair-minded Australian from the sleeplessness of the ungrateful, insolent, and barbaric asylum seekers.

As I put my things back in their box, I rediscover Nicholas Jose's catalogue notes for the Guo Jian works and I notice something else I just didn't get before:

> Guo Jian re-stages Australia as a theme park, a pleasure resort with a sky of Australian blue where anything goes, where people are perpetually high, where excess turns beauty into ugliness and ugliness into endless play.

Guo Jian's setting for the myth of freedom is not China at all, but Australia. ■

Trevor Hay is a Melbourne academic, author and Port Adelaide supporter.

MOIRA RAYNER

Uncommon law

Proposed new laws in Western Australia revive some of the iniquities of the Star Chamber.

Late in 2001, a retired ex-detective and his unlucky racing-identity mate were killed by a car bomb in the ex-detective's Perth home driveway.

Investigating police were not baffled, but they could not prove that it was a hit by the outlaw bikie gang with a grudge against the former top detective, Don Hancock.

A year earlier, one of the Gypsy Joker bikie gang had been shot dead by a sniper shortly after being ejected from Hancock's Goldfields pub. The killer had never been identified. Hancock had refused to give any statement to police investigators—an odd act from one who devoted his career to the relentless pursuit of villains and their conviction. Persons unknown dynamited his pub not long afterwards.

Police, claiming that bikies were involved in organised crime and that their 'code of silence' had frustrated police investigations, demanded and were promised sweeping new investigative powers. It is rumoured that one of the drafters of the resulting bill protested about being briefed to recreate the Star Chamber.

That term, 'Star Chamber', has become a byword for judicial procedures that grossly violate standards of due process. The epithet was used of the McCarthy era's House Un-American Activities Committee which, among other things, used its subpoena power to intimidate citizens by demanding that they answer unconstitutional questions about their political beliefs and associations, and charging them with contempt of Congress if they refused to do so. It has been used more recently to describe President Bush's special military tribunals set up to try foreigners charged with terrorism, post-September 11.

Given the exhumation of the old, absolute powers, and the loss of civil liberties at the direction of world leaders engaged in the 'war against terrorism', now is a very good time to examine what it was about the Star Chamber that was repellent. Could the proposed WA organised-crime legislation target not just the 'enemies of society', but society itself?

The WA bill would give police new powers, of which the most remarkable is a formal inquisition. Sitting or retired judges would be appointed as 'special commissioners' who, at the request of a police officer, could order someone reasonably suspected of possessing evidence about 'organised crime' to produce documents—even documents given to a lawyer by a client, which are normally covered by legal professional privilege—and to attend a secret hearing. The person would be required to answer unspecified questions, under oath, about unparticularised matters, in a process closed to the public and, if necessary in the commissioner's view, without legal representation. Any disclosure of receipt of the special commissioner's notice to appear, any refusal to answer questions (even where the answers would self-incriminate) or produce documents, would be punishable by imprisonment for contempt. The burden of proof of innocence would be placed upon the person charged. The special commissioner's acts and procedures would be completely unchallengeable, would not be accessible under FOI, by the Ombudsman or even by the courts in any circumstances whatever, including the Supreme Court in the exercise of the Royal Prerogative.

This amazing procedure could be initiated by a police officer who satisfied the special commissioner that he reasonably suspected that there might be evidence relating to the activities of two or more people involved in substantial planning to commit one or more crimes. 'Crimes' are defined so broadly that they could, potentially, include a couple of teenagers planning to sell home-grown pot to their friends, or to burn down a haystack or a hedge. Though the special commissioner would have to be satisfied that such evidence might exist and that the use of such powers would be in the public interest, that term—'the public interest'—is not defined. It would be left to the commissioner—not to a court—to decide what was in the public interest. The legal profession, including the Chief Justice, opposes many aspects of this special procedure. The government presses on.

The Star Chamber was an English court developed in the late 15th century, and held in a room at Westminster Palace with stars painted on the ceiling. It was designed for the king to entertain applications for redress from ordinary citizens, personally. It was quite separate from the developing common-law system of courts and justices, and originally focused

on keeping the peace. It quickly developed into a very special court.

By 1529 the Star Chamber court was seen as performing necessary and valuable work in punishing powerful offenders who could not be reached by the ordinary courts of law. Its procedure was quick and simple: proceedings were begun by written information, which bypassed the need to persuade a grand jury that an offence might have been committed. It could enforce written answers, inflict torture and other punishments. It was very efficient.

But over time its efficiency came to be oppressive. Its jurisdiction sprawled to include censorship—used to punish 'seditious libel' (or dissent)—and fundraising (fines were paid direct to the king). It was also used to persecute unpopular religionists. Ordinary citizens were encouraged to bypass the common-law courts by using it as well. It was so seductively simple. There were no witnesses. All evidence was produced in writing and read out. The proceedings were inquisitorial. There was no jury and none of the procedural inhibitions of common-law courts. The Star Chamber could initiate a coercive process on the basis of rumour; and it could force people to incriminate themselves or, reversing the burden of proof, to establish their innocence or else be punished. It even summoned juries before it for having produced verdicts disagreeable to the government. As Edgar Lee Master wrote, in 'The New Star Chamber', his 1904 essay on the rights of workers to organise: 'It began by interfering, through the king himself, with the administration of the law by the regularly constituted courts. It began weak. It grew strong by silent and gradual encroachment.'

The original Star Chamber was abolished by parliament in 1641, but its infamy lives on. It had an original, worthy purpose, but its conveniently speedy and informal process, and its confusion of judicial and executive power, was the recipe for abuse. It was used to terrorise and intimidate opponents of the powerful, without the restraint of law.

A MODERN REPRESENTATIVE democracy moderates the use of power. In 21st-century Australia it is understood that a 'fair' trial requires a formal investigation process in which one may decline to self-incriminate or participate without fearless, competent legal representation. It is also a basic principle that judges are not like other government officials. Elected parliamentarians make laws; the 'executive'—ministers and public servants, as well as the police—administer them, and judges make sure they do it properly. The Australian constitution explicitly separates the judicial function from the other two, as even the WA constitution does, and there is (since Joh Bjelke-Petersen's day) at least a basic political understanding that the roles must not be conflated. Law and order cannot be preserved at the cost of the rule of law.

WA's 'organised crime' bill breaks down the proper distinction between the administrators of justice, and the investigators putting together a prosecution case. It sets up an unusual and—on the face of it—unnecessary, powerful, unreviewable secret investigation office veneered with 'judiciality', but without any guarantee that its powers would not be misused.

Is the bill necessary? Just before Easter an ex-bikie quietly confessed to the car-bombing and turned super-grass on the Gypsy Jokers. The bill was not dropped. There are, after all, many other bikie gangs and much 'organised crime' to be eradicated.

A parliamentary committee has recommended changes to the bill. While they ponder, politicians would do well to remember their history.

> The need for a strong central court directly inspired by the king, which could administer justice without respect of persons, was so great that the constitutional danger of establishing an autocratic judicial committee untrammelled by the ordinary rules of law, passed notice at the time it was established. It was not until much later that the nation came to look upon the Star Chamber as the special engine of royal tyranny and to loathe its name. —*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911 ■

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JOHN CHESTERMAN & SALLY CLOKE

Woomera file

There are discrepancies between the political and media hype and the testimony of protesters who were eyewitnesses to the incidents at Woomera.

EVERY SO OFTEN a government policy strikes a significant minority of the population as so abhorrent that ballot-box tolerance—that is, tolerance until the next opportunity to cast a vote—seems manifestly inadequate. Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was one such policy, and the hardline government (and opposition) stance on asylum seekers promises to be another generationally defining issue.

Indeed, this seems to be one of those issues when parents are confronted with the question: what will you tell your children that you did in response to the mandatory detention of (illegally arriving) asylum seekers?

It was that question that drove my partner and me to take our three young children to Woomera at Easter, and despite the adverse reactions of many to the protests, I am glad that we did it.

There are a variety of reasons why many people support the government's mandatory detention policy. Some fear that terrorists may lurk among the refugees, though on all reasonable accounts that is unlikely. Some fear the economic impact of unskilled immigrants, though many asylum seekers are skilled, and in any case there exist strong economic arguments about the benefits of increased immigration. Some, more generally, simply want to exert Australia's sovereignty ('we will decide who comes to this country'). In light of the legitimate questions raised by Indigenous people over prior exertions of Australian sovereignty, one could easily theorise about why now—ten years after the Mabo decision—people might wish for sovereignty to be vigorously reasserted, but that is another issue.

One factor, however, tends to unify those who, from a wide range of political positions, support the hardline stance: a fundamental inability to imagine themselves in the position of those seeking asylum. This made Easter, in a 'do unto others' sense, seem like the right time to be making the trip to Woomera.

The inability of hardliners to imagine themselves as asylum seekers manifests itself in a number of self-serving myths that attempt to render noble the ignoble. The asylum seekers are queue-jumpers (where are the queues in Iraq and Afghanistan?). They aren't refugees if they can afford to pay people-smugglers (who, in the asylum seekers' position, would not scrounge whatever money they could find to pay to remove themselves and their families from persecution?). Most of the 'boat people' are just illegal immigrants and are not real refugees (are not the vast majority—above 70 per cent, even in conservative estimates, some from the Immigration department itself—destined to be deemed refugees?). Australia can't be seen as 'a soft touch' or the hordes will descend (this is a well-worn fear that used to be argued in relation to Indo-Chinese refugees in the 1970s, and can anyone seriously say that Australia is worse off as a result of accepting these refugees into Australian society?).

Supporters of the hardline stance argue that in a democracy like ours, governments are entitled to pursue policies with which a majority of people agree. Given the central place played by the issue in the last federal election, few could argue that the asylum-seeker policies do not have majority support. The 'majority rules' argument is convincing when we are talking about workplace reform, or about overhauling the health system, re-ordering educational priorities, or even drastically changing the taxation system. But it falls down when we are talking about the most basic of human rights, the right of refugees to be free from persecution. Even if most people want the government to override this human right, that hardly makes it acceptable. The 'tyranny of the majority' should on occasion be held at bay. As James Madison, one of the authors of the American Constitution, wrote in 1787, oftentimes in conflicts 'the public good is disregarded' and 'measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority'.

That is why we have jurisprudential concepts such as due process and the separation of powers, doctrines that seem increasingly to be under threat in Australia.

Taking these thoughts to Woomera, I was struck by the general agreement among those present about the need to protest non-violently over the treatment of those people behind the perimeter fence. Certainly there were some members of the more than 1000 campers who were driven by the thrill of a possible confrontation with police, and this opportunity presented itself on Good Friday, when up to 50 detainees (with absurd ease, it must be said) managed to flee the detention centre and come into the camp.

But those protesters who itched for violent confrontation were in a tiny minority. The typical protesters were our neighbours, Michael and Sue, who were in their 50s and had driven up from Melbourne with their 13-year-old son. They did not seek a violent confrontation with police, and nor did they want to help the detainees break out of the centre (something that most of us thought would probably not be in their long-term interests). Michael and Sue, like us, simply wanted to make a political statement by being at the camp. A more difficult conundrum was presented when it came to the question of assisting those who had escaped, but that is something on which good conscience had to dictate.

When the South Australian police did check our tents for detainees, they were polite, even amicable. They chatted to the children, and went about their unenviable task with praiseworthy reluctance. It was as if their involvement with the mandatory detention policy had made them unwilling enforcers.

I still feel a frustrating sense of powerlessness over a seemingly intractable government position and an all but silent opposition. But at least my six-year-old son knows why we spent so long in the car at Easter. Sure, he might simply be repeating his parents' party line, but I can't imagine that he'll ever regret saying, 'We went to Woomera because the refugees were locked up, and we don't think the refugees should be locked up.' ■

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WOOMERA, GOOD FRIDAY. Riot police line up across the road; a group of mounted police ride towards our campsite. In the gathering darkness, a refugee woman hides inside a tent, surrounded by a human shield of protesters—in their turn encircled by a dozen or so more police.

We had marched to the fence to wave and shout our support to the detainees;

suddenly, unbelievably they are among us, 'detainees' no more. Unprepared, protest leaders argue over what should happen next. Get Ruddock out here? Call the UN? Chartering a helicopter is one of the more fanciful—or desperate—suggestions. Tension and uncertainties swirl through the camp like the desert wind.

Then, in a quiet moment, a woman starts softly singing. I don't catch the words, but the tune is 'Amazing Grace'.

I went to Woomera because I could think of no better place to spend Easter. I went in solidarity with the pain and suffering of Good Friday, to put up with a few days of discomfort and isolation in support of those experiencing much greater hardship. I came back having experienced the unexpected hope and resurrection of Sunday morning.

Christians at Easter celebrate a tomb breaking open and a man walking out into new life. At Woomera, men, women and children who had been entombed in the desert—at least one of whom said he would 'rather die than go back'—walked out, walked free. Some only for a few hours. Some, perhaps, to new life.

That it happened on Friday not Sunday was a mere detail: after all, some people had been entombed there for three years rather than three days.

Most people I have spoken to since returning home have been supportive of my being part of the protest and of its outcome. But no doubt many would condemn it, taking Christ's words that we should 'render unto Caesar' to mean obeying the laws of the land even when we believe they're unjust.

Yet when Jesus saw that moneylenders had set up shop in God's temple to exploit those who came to worship, he had no hesitation in throwing over their tables. Is it such a big leap from this to pushing over fences that should not be there?

A radical suggestion? Perhaps, and I'm certainly no radical, and nor were most of my fellow protesters. One of the government's most malignant achievements is the 'demonisation of dissent'—anyone who disagrees with their policies is by definition a ratbag. There were many people at Woomera on their first protest, ordinary people of all ages, backgrounds and beliefs driven by anger and frustration at the way our 'boundless plains to share' had shrunk to a few hundred square metres of desert behind razor wire.

Not that most—or probably even many—people at the protest were motivated by formal religious beliefs of any flavour, although I did meet one or two others. But there was a spirituality there, one born of the desire to build community and connection, to overcome boundaries and prejudices, to affirm our humanity in the face of inhumane policies. You could see it in the sharing of food and of tents, and especially in the way some protesters exchanged clothes with the 'ex-detainees' to make them look more like 'one of us'—which, of course, they were.

By the end of our stay, after no showers, days of punishing heat and the red dust that got into everything, we probably looked and smelt rather like Jesus did. I think—I hope—we acted like him too.

In the Easter story, three women go to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body, not knowing that he is already risen. On the way, they wonder: who will roll away the stone? Sometimes the answer is—us. ■

Sally Cloke is a Melbourne writer who works for the Anglican Church.

Photographs

Page 35: Protesters outside the Woomera centre, Easter 2002. Far right: the only queue in sight—for the portable toilets. *This page:* Bending the rules. *Photographs by Sally Cloke*

Storykeepers, Marion Halligan (ed.). Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001. ISBN 1 876 63110 4, RRP $25

This book fascinates, pleases, enlightens, and it sent me scurrying to read other books. Marion Halligan organised 18 authors to make a literary response to a deceased Australian writer who inspired them or to books of the past which had a significant impact on them. The *Batavia*, the *Bounty* and Bligh's open-boat epic to Timor, Truganini's Tasmania, are contemplated with flair and intensity, as are writers as disparate as Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Barbara Baynton and Kenneth Slessor.

Tom Griffiths honours the splendid *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* (1938) by Francis Ratcliffe, a scientist and pioneer of the Australian conservation movement. Rodney Hall winningly bewails the enigma that Joseph Furphy's unique masterpiece *Such is Life* (1903) has been largely shunned. Henry Reynolds discusses G.W. Rusden and his *History of Australia* (1883). Beverley Farmer reacts movingly to Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929). Brian Matthews intrigues by juxtaposing Henry Lawson and Pauline Hanson. *Storykeepers* may help inform scholars and readers that a great hunk of our best literature was penned in the 50 years before World War II, yet most readers ignore it. **—John Sendy**

The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics, Joseph F. Kelly. Michael Glazier/The Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0 814 65104 6, RRP $43.95

Any theological textbook whose last chapter bears an epigraph from the *X-Files* has something going for it. Joseph Kelly does not make much of this popular cultural reference, but in his survey of the Western treatment of evil, he trawls beyond the usual shallows of philosophical and theological analysis. He recognises the importance of literary works for the formation of cultural attitudes, and includes these within his treatment. His survey is objective and discursive, and will be excellent for undergraduate students.

But surveys have their limitations. They give a map of the area, but insight into the nature of evil usually follows passionate involvement. The educational rhetoric of summaries and outlines is useful, but ultimately does not touch the sources of our curiosity. **—Andrew Hamilton SJ**

Body Symbolism in the Bible, Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli. Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2001. ISBN 0 814 65954 3, RRP $99.95

Learned studies of animals and other details of the biblical stories flourished luxuriantly in the 19th century. My favourite was an exhaustive study of the camel in the Bible, which contained a mass of pictures, considerably more text than I wanted to read, and was clearly the fruit of someone's lifelong fascination.

Body Symbolism in the Bible recalls these works, but its preoccupation with bodily symbolism is characteristic of even earlier Christian scholars, less interested in nature than in hidden meanings. It displays a characteristically modern anthropological perspective, liveliness in the writing, and the great advantages that rich colour reproductions bring to the contemporary book. From its schematic Hebrew illustration of the body—in which the function of the nose is for snorting and getting angry—to a Zimbabwean illustration of the wedge-shaped Spirit hovering over the heads of the Apostles, the book is a lively and well-informed presentation of biblical imagery. **—A.H.**

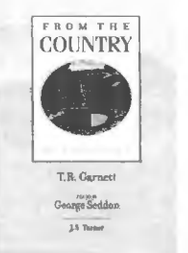
So Vast the Prison, Assia Djebar, trans. Betsy Wing. Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002. ISBN 1 876 63138 4, RRP $20.95

So Vast the Prison is a slow, unstoppable explosion of Arab feminism. After so much silence, this communication comes as a shock. Djebar has the self-conscious power of the politically and socially aware, and the voiceless power of the ancient rhythms of life—always remembering the generations of women behind her.

The main character, Isma, is Algerian, and through her the author presents an Arab and a European perspective simultaneously, seeing every shade of culture from within and without, until the unfamiliar seems merely forgotten. Djebar explores the history of Algeria, in particular the widespread loss of the Berber language, French colonisation and independence's bloodshed.

Human emotions are described so honestly that the reader feels exposed. Djebar writes as a woman, specifically and unapologetically, but also freely as a human subject, not an object, defined by herself. Her protagonist, Isma, becomes a filmmaker and takes on the responsibility of subjecthood, the 'unflinching gaze' of one who interprets reality.

So Vast the Prison moves from mountains to prison cells, from tiny, stifling houses to the soaring freedom of the sky. Amy Tan comes to mind, so does Naguib Mahfouz. This book demands an intense intellectual engagement, while speaking directly to the heart, like poetry. **—Susannah Buckley**



From the Country: An Anthology, T.R. Garnett, George Seddon (ed.), original illustrations by J.S. Turner. Bloomings Books, 2001. ISBN 1 876 47332 0, RRP $29.95

In the 1980s and 1990s many gardeners, conservationists and lovers of elegant writing keenly awaited T.R. Garnett's weekly column in *The Age*. Always substantial, the articles combined good sense, suggestions, criticisms of attitudes and responsible authorities, with a healthy sense of humour. Gardening, botanical information and environmental discussion were peppered with history, philosophy, anecdotes and poems, never lobbed in like a poor return to the wicket but deftly placed over the bails of advice, amplification and entertainment. Former editor, Creighton Burns, once remarked that each week the best writing in *The Age* was mostly in Garnett's column.

George Seddon, well-known academic and writer on landscape, architecture and environmental concerns, stylishly introduces this anthology of Garnett's writing. J.S. Turner was Professor of Botany at the University of Melbourne for 35 years, and his score of countryside illustrations contribute much to the book's appeal. Garnett was Headmaster of Geelong Grammar (1961–73) and creator of the popular Garden of St Erth near Blackwood. All three, through their teaching, articles, books and activities, have played notable parts in broadening public perceptions of our natural world and the need for its protection. This splendid book is yet another credit to them. **—J.S.**

PETER MARES

The unlikely leader

Abdurrahman Wahid: Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President, Greg Barton.
UNSW Press, 2002. ISBN 0 868 40405 5, RRP $39.95
No Regrets: Reflections of a Presidential Spokesman, Wimar Witoelar. Equinox Publishing, 2002.
ISBN 9 799 58984 3, RRP $22.25 (distributed in Australia by Nusantara Indonesia bookshop, info@nusantara.com.au)

It would be an understatement to say that Abdurrahman Wahid got bad press as Indonesian president. The initial flush of media optimism and enthusiasm following his election in October 1999 quickly subsided and within months he was under attack for a multitude of sins. Abdurrahman, or Gus Dur as he is universally known, was accused of being unpredictable, ambiguous and impetuous. He was scolded for travelling abroad too much and for neglecting the domestic economy. The adjectives 'frail' and 'blind' were almost always attached to his name, implying that he was unfit for office, and there were even suggestions that he was of unsound mind. Finally, Gus Dur was implicated in two corruption scandals. There was never any suggestion that he lined his own pockets or diverted money to his family, and he was cleared of any wrongdoing in the eyes of the law. Nevertheless, in July 2001, Indonesia's supreme parliament dismissed Gus Dur, and installed Megawati Sukarnoputri in his place.

Abdurrahman Wahid checks the time on the talking watch given to him by Megawati Sukarnoputri, who is at his side (Presidential Archive).

Looking back at the media coverage, it is easy to view those 20 months as a chaotic and directionless interlude in Indonesian politics, where the great momentum for democratic change after the fall of Suharto was squandered. These two books offer an alternative view. They portray Abdurrahman Wahid as an enthusiastic, energetic and principled reformer who met resistance from entrenched interests at every turn; a liberal-minded democrat who was actively undermined by military hardliners, corrupt business figures and opportunistic parliamentarians.

Australian academic Greg Barton began work on his biography long before Gus Dur took office—and like most observers he never believed that Gus Dur could become president, even after Gus Dur had made clear his determination to win the position. Barton expected him to emerge from the political scrum with a consolation prize, such as the post of parliamentary speaker, but as he says in his prologue, it is 'generally unwise to underestimate' the man. Barton's interest in Gus Dur's life and thoughts grew out of his doctoral research into liberal Islam and developed into a deep affection for both Abdurrahman and his immediate family. For this Barton will no doubt be criticised. His account of Gus Dur's presidency is a sympathetic one, and some will accuse him of being too close to his subject. In Indonesia, the book is marketed as 'the authorised biography of Abdurrahman Wahid', but it is far from hagiography and to dismiss Barton's work because he is a close friend of the family would be to miss the point. It was because of Barton's closeness to the family that he was able to be by Abdurrahman Wahid's side 'throughout his political campaign after the fall of Suharto and throughout his presidency', putting him in a unique position to give 'a view from the inside'.

It is an engaging narrative, rich in detail but not overwhelmed by it, with a handy glossary for readers unfamiliar with Indonesian terms and acronyms.

Barton begins by putting Abdurrahman Wahid in context. We are given a lively account of his childhood, including early evidence of his tendency to be 'reckless and impulsive', twice breaking his arm by falling out of trees. We also learn about the death of Abdurrahman's father in a car accident. Abdurrahman, just 12 years old, sat on the road beside his inert father for three hours before help arrived. His father died the next day in hospital. From that moment on, as the first-born son, he carried the hopes and ambitions of his family, which were nurtured by the strong influence of his mother, Solichah. Both Abdurrahman's grandfathers were respected *kiai* (religious scholars) who played key roles in the 1926 founding of Nahdlatul Ulama, the main organisation of traditionalist Islam in Indonesia. Both men were also active in the nationalist movement challenging Dutch colonial rule. His father, Wahid Hasyim, had followed in their footsteps, studying at religious boarding schools (*pesantren*) in East Java and becoming a prominent nationalist at a young age. After independence, Sukarno appointed Wahid Hasyim as Minister for Religious Affairs.

Growing up in this deeply religious family did not limit Abdurrahman Wahid's intellectual horizons. In fact, the intensely political nature of his upbringing meant that Gus Dur was exposed to a range of ideas from a very young age. One frequent visitor to his father's house in Japanese-occupied Jakarta was 'a strange man dressed in dark peasant garb' whom Abdurrahman was instructed to call 'Uncle Hussein'. Only years later did he realise that the mysterious visitor was Communist leader Tan Malaka. His father, Wahid Hasyim, saw no contradiction between leading the largest Islamic

organisation in the country and maintaining open dialogue and cordial relations with secular political actors from all walks of life. Indeed, he no doubt saw it as essential to the nationalist project. It is not surprising then that the young Abdurrahman was encouraged to debate ideas and issues and to read widely in his father's extensive library. As a teenager, he was not only well-versed in classical Islamic texts, but also grappled with the post-war writing of Arab thinkers who can be seen as the intellectual forebears of contemporary extremist movements. He read Aristotle, Plato, Marx and Lenin and devoured both great European novels and contemporary pulp fiction in binges of late-night reading. Abdurrahman was also an inveterate cinema-goer, an enthusiast of the traditional Javanese shadow-puppet theatre, *wayang kulit*, and a passionate football fan (even acting as a special commentator on national television in later life).

As a young man, Abdurrahman Wahid would often make personal pilgrimages to the tombs of Islamic scholars to spend a whole night praying beside their graves. This practice of *ziarah* is usually conducted in the hope of gaining particular insight or guidance. It is a popular and accepted practice in traditional Islam, which is strongly influenced by Sufism (Islamic mysticism), but would be frowned upon by modernist Muslims. Indonesia's modernists are grouped in Muhammadiyah, and their most prominent representative is Amien Rais, the speaker of Indonesia's supreme parliament, and a man instrumental both in Abdurrahman Wahid's rise to power and in his downfall. The distinction between the modernists and the traditionalists is central to an understanding of Gus Dur (and indeed of Indonesia). Generally, it can be said that modernist Islam is a largely urban phenomenon in Indonesia, while the traditionalists have their base in rural areas.

The followers of modernism tend to be educated, while the traditionalists are often peasant farmers. Islamic modernism emerged in the second half of the 19th century as an attempt to make traditional Islam more open to Western rationality. There was a view that Muslim societies had been easily conquered by European powers because they had closed themselves off to Western thought in science and technology. It endorsed a more modern approach to education, and so Muhammadiyah, like Nahdlatul Ulama, is closely associated in Indonesia with the development of educational institutions. Today, however, the key distinction between the modernists and the traditionalists is that the former take a more literal approach to the key religious texts, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For traditionalists, 'unless something is expressly proscribed in the Qur'an and the Sunnah then it is permissible' as long as it does not contradict the key principles and values laid down in those texts. For intellectuals from a modernist background, however, 'if something is not referred to in the Qur'an or the Sunnah, then it should be regarded with caution' (p67). Hence the modernists would be critical of practices such as *ziarah*, which suggest an ability to communicate with the dead and the existence of spiritual entities beyond God alone. Traditionalists, on the other hand, remain more open to pre-Islamic belief systems and more tolerant of a variety of forms of religious expression.

With his broad worldview and eclectic passions, Gus Dur is the leading representative of a liberal and tolerant Islam in Indonesia. When he was installed as president of the Republic, there were great hopes that he could instil his guiding principles in the political life of the nation, building a system of government that was accountable, transparent and just. Why then did he fail so spectacularly? Or did he? Wimar Witoelar, in *No Regrets: Reflections of a Presidential Spokesman*, argues that Gus Dur's achievements have been overlooked, and his mistakes magnified. The Indonesian media was never so free as under his leadership. No other Indonesian president was ever so accessible or so tolerant of critics. Abdurrahman Wahid pushed ahead with special tribunals to prosecute human-rights abuse in East Timor, forced suspected war criminal General Wiranto from his job as military commander and engaged separatist forces in Aceh and Papua in dialogue. He appointed a crusading and incorruptible lawyer, Baharuddin Lopa, to pursue Suharto-era cronies as attorney-general. Sino-Indonesians were once again free to hold public festivities to celebrate the lunar new year. For Wimar Witoelar, it was Indonesia's Prague Spring, 'almost two years of very heady-clean air, fresh air followed by return to a stuffy and malodorous reality' (p160).

The problem is that for every tick against Gus Dur's presidency there is also a cross. His openness and willingness to speak to the media sowed confusion rather than clarity. Gus Dur's penchant for jokes and ambiguity had served him well as a critic of the dictator Suharto, but as president it made him appear careless, inconsistent and vague. Despite his undoubted support for minority rights he was incapable of stopping religious and ethnic bloodshed in Maluku or Kalimantan. His efforts to promote dialogue with secessionist forces brought little tangible progress towards a lasting settlement. He failed to secure the prosecution of big fish from the Suharto era and in fact delayed investigations into key cronies like textile tycoon Marimutu Sinivasan and logging boss Prajogo Pangestu. As Barton notes, the president justified this decision by arguing that they were so central to the economy that their prosecution would stymie economic recovery—but the public impression was that certain business figures had the sympathetic ear of the president.

Of course, not all of this was Gus Dur's fault. His pursuit of cronies and human-rights abusers faltered when attorney-general Baharuddin Lopa died of a heart attack. Influential military commanders actively resisted his gentler approach in Papua and Aceh, and stuck to their established dirty war tactics (for example, by providing support to the extremist Laskar Jihad militia which helped to foment violence in Maluku). While many observers say 'everything went wrong because of Gus

Dur', Wimar Witoelar counters that they went wrong '*despite* Gus Dur' (p161).

No Regrets is a lively and entertaining account of Wimar Witoelar's ten months as Gus Dur's presidential spokesman. It is a rapidly produced book, rich in anecdote and humour. It identifies the forces that gathered to oust Gus Dur as corrupt politicians, generals and police officers who were threatened by his reform agenda. Much given to metaphor, Wimar describes Gus Dur as 'a spearhead without a spear'. He had the top job in the country, but lacked any real power. He could not rely on the moribund bureaucracy or the corrupt judiciary. His political base in East Java, heartland of Nahdlatul Ulama, was too small to be an engine of national change. The coalition that brought Gus Dur to office was an opportunistic alliance primarily motivated by the desire to keep Megawati out. Most of its members soon turned against him.

At times Wimar's tone becomes defensive, particularly when he writes about the media. He expresses surprise that the media preferred the dirty sniff of political scandal to worthy announcements about bilateral business deals struck during a presidential visit to Thailand, and he is obviously disappointed that Jakarta's liberal intellectuals, like poet and editor Goenawan Mohamad, failed to rally round the president in his hour of need.

However, *No Regrets* fails adequately to explain Abdurrahman Wahid's many spectacular lapses in judgment. For example, in justifying Gus Dur's refusal to submit to questioning by a parliamentary committee, Wimar takes the moral high ground, arguing that this would have been 'an irresponsible act of the president who is charged with upholding the constitution and the integrity of his office' (p107). But if he was so concerned about protecting the honour of the presidency, why did Gus Dur agree to a secret meeting with Tommy Suharto? This meeting took place after the former dictator's favourite son had been convicted of a real-estate scam (although before he had become a fugitive from justice). Gus Dur maintains that he resisted Tommy's entreaties to cut a deal for clemency, and insisted that he must do his time in jail, but no meeting could have been more likely to compromise his office. It tarnished Gus Dur's personal reputation and gave the impression of a presidency that was open to offers from the highest bidder. Similarly, why did Abdurrahman Wahid repeatedly make rude public comments about his 'friend' vice-president Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose support he needed above all others to stay in office and push through reforms?

Barton is more open in acknowledging Abdurrahman Wahid's contribution to his own downfall. He points, for example, to the president's refusal to accept his blindness, and his constant search for a cure, which encouraged him to make some otherwise unnecessary overseas trips. He admits that Gus Dur's management style was 'at best erratic and unconventional and at worst seriously wanting' (p373) and that he often failed to explain what he was doing. In some ways, he argues that Gus Dur was prisoner to his formative political experiences as democratic activist during the New Order:

> As he had learned to do under Soeharto, Abdurrahman, now president himself, dodged and weaved; his behaviour and statements were driven more by the ad hoc demands of tactical manoeuvring for short-term survival than by strategic planning for the long term. (p292)

Barton identifies a dozen problems that plagued Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency: inflated expectations; formidable opponents; weak civil society; a politically charged press; a lack of political capital; a divided reform movement; opposition from conservative Islamicists; the lack of a democratic constitution; a belligerent state apparatus; a dysfunctional legal system; an antagonistic military; and corrupt state organs in partnership with organised crime.

Any president would face enormous difficulty surmounting such hurdles and Megawati Sukarnoputri may offer Indonesia a more stable administration simply by choosing not to tackle the jumps that are too high. She may stumble less often, but she will not be propelled by the same idealism, or strive for the same reformist goals. Abdurrahman Wahid, meanwhile, will go down in history as a remarkable man and a flawed leader.

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BOOKS: 2

KATE LLEWELLYN

Reading the pattern

The Carpet Wars, Christopher Kremmer, HarperCollins, 2002. ISBN 0732268567, RRP $35

How astonishing to be writing a book on modern Afghanistan and its neighbours before September 11. What would you feel when the World Trade Center towers went down and you knew that your book, almost complete, would be changed forever?

Christopher Kremmer has written a series of essays based on his time in bazaars, souks and teahouses, his friendships with carpet-sellers and his reportage on the cultural and political life of Afghanistan and its regional neighbours.

Each essay is cleverly woven into the whole and yet is a discrete thing in itself, showing the life of the people, the writer's friends, warlords, soldiers, the role of the Taliban, the mujahedin, the United Nations, America, and every Tom, Dick and Harry who has a vested interest in bleeding Afghanistan and the surrounding countries dry.

The short history of each country is particularly interesting, helpful and hard to find elsewhere. Whenever the Western world shines a torch on a Third World country it means trouble afoot and so it has been for each of the places described Pakistan, Kashmir, Iraq, Iran, Uzbekistan, and so on. Central to the book is the way Muslims are humanised. The consequence is that our ignorance and fear can't be maintained. Christopher Kremmer says his aim was 'to write something enduring about the genius and tragedy of the Muslim situation today ... It's a literary portrait of Islamic societies in crisis.'

If you like carpets (and who doesn't?) this book lets you in on the trader's secrets—the way carpets are judged by the true experts. For instance, silk is not all *that* wonderful, one trader friend tells the author.

It's a bit overrated compared with wool—a secret that few know. There's a wonderful description of Khyber Bazaar, where carpets are treated to falsify their value:

> One man wielding a flamethrower was scorching Maimana and Senna kilims to remove the small, loose fibres which betray cheap, new production. After firing, the kilims were loaded into an industrial-size tumble dryer to remove the charred odour. After that, they were carried to several concrete vats, where they were doused in a solution of acetic acid which bleached new rugs, softening their vivid colours and producing a silky sheen. After soaking in this lye for forty-eight hours, the rugs were dumped on a concrete area where two men shampooed and rinsed them, pushing off the suds with long-handled squeegees and buckets of water. They were then hung out over the compound's brick walls to dry for a day or two, or left baking in the sun for a month or more, a process known as 'sun washing', which further faded them. Slumped over the walls were prematurely aged Baluchi, Kashan and Afghan rugs. Magentas had mellowed to plum, browns to wheatish tan, their pile remaining dark at the roots, like a bottle blonde's hair. The whole process—scorching, shaking, washing and drying—cost a dollar a metre and, by weakening the carpet's fibre, shortened its life. But it steeply increased the price a gullible buyer might pay.

To think of the way my heart was in my mouth when I put my best carpet in the bath to clean it! Other ways of ageing carpets include burial, scraping on rocks to make holes and rubbing with iron filings, dirt or coffee grounds. All this for the West's desire for antique carpets as there simply aren't enough to go around. The run-off from the washeries creates pollution on a grand scale and shows just another way the West unintentionally harms even when it thinks itself benevolent.

On the matter of child labour the author says that weaving can deform children and can stunt them intellectually if the work goes on too long. In *New Internationalist* magazine, I saw an advertisement for a Rugmark scheme for manufacturers in India, Nepal and Pakistan who agree not to employ children under 14 and to pay salaries that at least match the minimum wage. Before, there was little chance of consumers knowing how carpets had been made, and children as young as six have been hand-knotting carpets from dawn to dusk in hazardous crowded conditions and they still are. It is the smallness of their hands and the cheapness of their labour that so endears them to the manufacturers.

One of the most remarkable characters in Kremmer's cavalcade: Ahmad Shah Massoud, Tajik 'warlord' but also a potential leader of Afghanistan—once. Massoud, known as the 'Lion of Panjshir', was assassinated two days before September 11.

I was gripped by this book, intrigued and happy as I read, feeling that I was learning a lot about things I knew almost nothing about yet am interested in. For instance, when I was 30, a friend of mine had an affair with a man who worked in Kabul on agricultural projects for the UN. She came home with a blue silk burka that we all tried on. Shocking. Shocking. Shocking, we girls agreed. But now I am not so sure. Safe and invisible inside this tent-like garment many women have been quoted as saying that they feel secure and indeed it is *they* who watch the world of men, invisible and inscrutable themselves all the while in this shell of silk. As a result, some of them are unwilling to abandon the veil. In Afghanistan these women—called 'shuttlecocks' by some Westerners—have continued to wear the garment, even though the Taliban is largely defeated. It may well be that they are not convinced of the beneficence of the new regime or the uneasy peace. However, any woman who has travelled in a place where the women are veiled will recognise the relief from the staring, staring which seems to wear the body away, as water wears away stone. When you finally decide to buy a hijab and go out—peace and anonymity at last!

This is a book about men and that means an important silence about the role of women. There is no way that Christopher Kremmer could approach Muslim women, and one of the wonders and riches of the book is the way he made friends with Muslim men. Yet I hankered to know. The wife of the author is mentioned, once, living in Delhi, and that is all we hear. Other Muslim friends' wives are mentioned but the veil is firmly drawn and we are kept out. A convention of journalism has been that the author seems almost invisible and while Christopher Kremmer is an authoritative and experienced Australian journalist, I would at times have liked less of the polite self-effacement. For example, on one rare occasion we are told of his exhaustion, his lips covered in sores and a furious rage that overcomes him. He decides he needs a holiday. The holiday proves to be one from hell and if he didn't end up with more sores it is just a miracle.

THIS BOOK IS FULL of important implications for Australia about refugee policy. On page 184:

> Over a faltering telephone connection from Attock, Rasoul [Kremmer's friend] had told me harrowing tales of cousins killed or tortured and conveyed his anxiety over his mother and sisters, left behind [in Afghanistan] with no male relative to protect them. His brothers Yaqub and Yusuf were also in Pakistan but they had been shocked to find that the Taliban's long arm could grab them even there. A cousin, captured and tortured by the student army, had revealed their whereabouts, and Taliban sympathisers and plain clothes Pakistani police, who they suspected of being from Inter-Services Intelligence, began harassing them as part of a campaign to cleanse Peshawar of anti-Taliban elements.

The author goes to meet Rasoul:

> At the house, I was ushered into a courtyard where I removed my shoes in the Muslim manner and was shown through a curtained doorway into a sparse, spotless room, empty except for carpets and bolsters, a typical Afghan reception parlour. A wall calendar reminded the occupants that 'The heart

retains its scars longer than most parts of the body'.

Soon the curtains parted and Rasoul bustled in, smiling and apologising for the subterfuge.

'We have to be slightly careful,' he said, peeling off his jacket and shades. 'Who knows how long we will have to stay? I was washing some clothes the other day ... and I heard some shooting from outside. Would you believe that sound made me homesick? Our mother and sisters are in Mazar. Some Pashtuns are still keeping Hazaras safe, but the security is really only good for Pashtuns living there. There was much killing in the early days. The governor has changed since then; its quieter, but you never know.'

Kremmer is then introduced to Rasoul's half brother, Yaqub, who had been fighting the Taliban.

> After a lunch ... we discussed the possibility of the brothers finding asylum in a third country. But the timing could hardly have been worse. There were so many refugees, and so few countries willing to take them. Desperate Afghans and Iraqis were risking their lives and life's savings on hazardous sea journeys organised by 'people smugglers'. The black joke among the beleaguered staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was that in order to prove a well-founded fear of persecution, an Afghan needed to be dead already.

If anyone is in any doubt about many of these people's need to be given asylum, *The Carpet Wars* is likely to convince them, although recent experience suggests that certain set hearts will not be convinced. There are many reasons to buy this book—not least of them the very beautiful cover designed by Katie Mitchell and the carpet designs all through the text.

This is a book about many wars and yet it is also a book of subtlety. ■

Kate Llewellyn is a poet. Her most recent book is *Sofala and Other Poems*.

BOOKS: 3

PHILIP HARVEY

Verse and converse

Max is Missing, Peter Porter. Picador, 2001.
ISBN 0 330 48698 5, RRP $23

'CHAOS IS THE ideal of every pattern', it is said, though the 41 patterns in this latest collection by Peter Porter aspire dutifully to whatever order the poet desires. Purportedly 'a late work', there is here nothing late about the delivery, nor any overstaying the welcome, whether in the precision found in, say, his catalogue of misfit classics:

> *The Troiliad*, just as silly and twice as long,
> with lists of heroes, ships and towns,
> interfering gods on shortest fuses
> and magic implements and animals,
> its love-life platitudinous
> and epithets attached like luggage labels.
> —'Ex Libris Senator Pococurante'

Or in the brevity of a lyric like 'The Puppy of Heaven':

> Some sort of judgment comes to everyone—
> Mind overtaken by its metaphor
> May watch dismayed as in the evening sun
> The Baskerville-shaped shadows cross
> the floor.

(The publisher does not state if the book is set in Baskerville. It looks like Times Roman.)

Even to be warned of 'a late work' makes us pause. We expect a drift toward *timor mortis*, meditations on decay, or reveries about being the oldest person at the party. But contradiction is one of Porter's favourite ploys: life is all we have to fear, creation is breaking out all over, uncomfortably so, and the poet himself seems the liveliest if not the youngest person still standing. Even the elegy that names this collection plays delightedly with the mysterious disappearance of the cat Maximus: 'Should stars know Max is missing, would they guess / How little he must miss them where he is?' The half-rhyme of 'guess' with 'is' names the territory we have entered.

If there is an elegiac strain, it is a mournfulness we have heard often in Porter, the still-not-knowing although we know so much. He asks 'is this love— / This inconclusiveness which orbits us, / A spacious Swiftian teleology / Of backs being turned, and elsewheres to be at?', having just asserted 'Love is the inward journey of the soul.' ('A Lido for Lunaticks') He has some fearsome things to say about fame, in poems like 'Tasso's Oak', still taking a reality check as he ululates 'Rejoice that of their number, one was recognised.' The philosophic urge is native to this poet, to the degree that he can turn a proposition into an intense emotion or wreak Romantic havoc on a cliché. Small wonder a favourite poet is Robert Browning.

Commenting on his career in 'Streetside Poppies', is Porter bragging or lamenting?

> After fifty years of writing poetry
> I lust still for what is natural.
>
> My vernacular was always bookish;
> somehow I missed the right Americans,
>
> I couldn't meld the High and Low—
> even my jokes aspired to footnotes—
>
> but I am open to Wordsworthian signs.

He knows more than he's letting on. It is plain from this poetry that Porter has spent a lifetime studying 'naturalness'; the language is confident, chiding, reflective, wry, inviting, even if most of it is lost on a shepherd. One wonders who the 'right Americans' could be and whether in fact he ever had any inclination to dally along their pathways. He may borrow from the library, but the same Porter can observe critically, 'Poor Fellow, he's vomited the Dictionary.' Some would even say Porter has 'melded' cultural diversities quite skilfully over a lifetime of concentrated literalness. It is precisely his transatlantic humour and manner that is so attractive.

A more pressing question is, did he miss the 'right Australians', whoever they are? Australianness vexes Porter. Its brash experimentation and distinctive parlance

have been studiously avoided. He much prefers the comfort zones of English metre and tone. And in this collection we find plenty more on the Porter complex of belonging, a major strand throughout his oeuvre that brings to mind the door with the permanent brass plate on ocean liners: PORTER. In the sonnet 'Streamers', he writes:

To get away, to make your fortune, to
lose your virginity,
you hold one end of a coloured streamer
as R.M.S. *Otranto* snaps the paper
symmetry
of country, identity and all your loved
ephemera.

The repair work continues in paper form, poems about Sydney prickly pear, Brisbane picnics. And in the same poem, a tantalising meaning to his Italian romance:

Then the creeks once known to you as
spider defences
on the school's Cross Country Run,
become the babble
of a Tuscan stream, *torrente* to Serchio's
dry tenses.

An alternate land of summer's lease, Italy as a replacement Australia. You don't have to travel as far and there are more galleries.

Porter's ventures into worlds of belief continue and beliefs, frequently someone else's, are his constant source of copy. The desire to believe what he cannot in all honesty believe, gives Porter a sure foundation, even a mighty fortress, on which to build his verbal towers. And he will drive this activity to the max if he can. He may protest 'I can visit churches only for the

Art,' but then tell us more than most church attenders about the Monophysites and Nestorians who would have it that 'our hearts, unreconciled, / Will hold our minds to ransom.' He praises a musician who believes 'Up Calvary my harpsichord must climb.' For every doctrine there is a heresy. Claim and counterclaim can sound equally plausible, and often plausibility is all Porter, or any of us, have to work with. Such atmospheres are pumped into his poems until they are fit to burst. Restless, or is that restive, energies are contained in these poems, form straining to hold things in. An opening line like 'The age demands that we invent the wheel' presages a massive move through time and space.

Relief from these heightened states comes in his one-liners. Porter's penchant for the perverb, or reconverted aphorism, has been there ever since he uttered the hard saying 'Once bitten, twice bitten.' In this collection they pop up in what he amiably defines as Lichtenbergers: 'E pur se muove, since all the instruments agree.' One clever betrayal of the Porter quandary, in a long line of betrayals, is 'The Unconscious finds Consciousness irrelevant.' Hardly the expression of a centred personality, but then Porter is an expert rhetorician.

Physically and temperamentally, Peter Porter's poetry speaks from the city of curates and queens but, like clockwork, psychologically he always winds up back in the city of popes and caesars. Nevertheless, his uneasy acceptance of high politics and the cruelties of existence only reminds us that, for Porter, the most important business of life is really maintenance of a civil conversation, a common respect for mystery. In one of the most conventional and indulgent poems here offered, 'Magica Sympathia', he virtually reverences the life of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (not to forget his brother, George). The last two verses say more than a little about Porter's 'late' reflections on his own life, here in the Wales of the mind:

O Sympathetic Magic,
Shy fortresses and weirs!
O Forests Green and Stygic,
The wit of Passing Stairs!

Lord Herbert gave his castle
Up to Cromwell's men,
He held himself a vassal
Only to song and pen. ■

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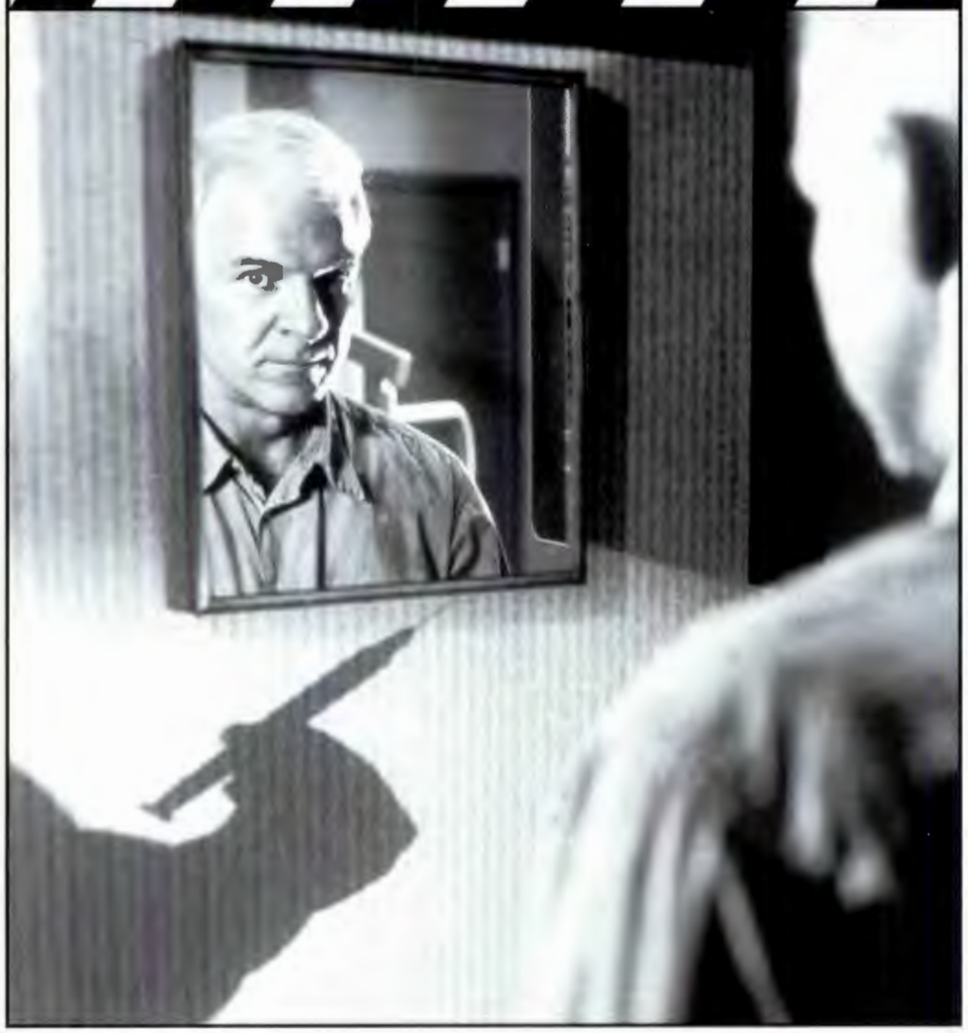
FLASH IN THE PAN



Temporary filling

Novocaine, dir. David Atkins. If the American Dream came up and introduced itself to you at a party, I guarantee you'd be knocked out by its dental hygiene. Coming from a family of teeth men, David Atkins (whose father and two brothers are all dentists) knows more than most when it comes to putting your best smile forward. He also knows how to twist shiny white perfection into dark savage irony—almost.

Frank (Steve Martin, above) is a successful dentist. He runs a lucrative practice, drives a beautiful Citroën, lives in a big house with clean surfaces and dates the whitest smile in California (Jean, played by Laura Dern). Too perfect by half. But don't worry, there is more than just floss in this dentist's surgery. Before long we discover Frank has a grubby, problem brother and a weakness for pouty patients with a penchant for the painkiller Novocaine. And quicker than you can say 'please spit in here', Frank's got troubles backed right up to his wisdom teeth.

Atkins plays merry with all sorts of genres in *Novocaine*. There are elements of noir, thriller, love tryst, spoof and plain old cops-and-robbers, but none of the plays at genre-twisting quite works. When it needs to be moody it is too light and when it needs to be sexy it is just a bit wan. *Novocaine* has a certain rickety charm, but it never settles into a satisfying rhythm. Little if anything surprises, and what you don't predict falls flat.

I wanted to be delighted by this daggy little film, particularly when the boom dropped into the top of shot, but instead I came away wishing the director well on his next project. **—Siobhan Jackson**

Veiled meaning

Kandahar, dir. Mohsen Makhmalbaf. *Kandahar* won a good number of awards last year, including the Ecumenical Jury Prize at Cannes, but is only available on one screen in Melbourne: more power, then, to the Lumière for showing it.

The story, loosely based on fact, is of a young woman, Nafas, whose family has fled Afghanistan a decade or so ago and settled in Canada. A sister has had to be left behind, because she lost both her legs to a landmine. Now, at the end of the 20th century, Nafas has discovered that her sister, who is living in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, intends to kill herself at the eclipse of the sun. She decides to go there in time to save her.

Nafas is played by Nelofer Pazira, who escaped Najibullah's regime in 1989, walking for ten days to get to Pakistan. In 1998 Pazira tried unsuccessfully to reach a friend under similar circumstances. In the film Nafas/Pazira experiences the depths to which Afghan society had plummeted in the waning days of the 20th century. At the Iranian border, homesick Afghans are tutored in the avoidance of landmines which are diabolically hidden under fluffy toys to kill children; women are warned to wear the burka in order not to attract the attention of the Taliban compliance patrols.

Yet the burka does not protect against intrusion: the Taliban squads are often accompanied by women whose job is to look under the burka's much-vaunted protection and betray their own kind. We see one woman arrested for carrying a book under her burka; another for carrying a musical instrument. Nafas is always throwing hers back whenever she gets a chance, and such is Makhmalbaf's craft that you are nervous until she resumes it. Her face, amazingly beautiful, shows a stony courage that goes beyond acting. Most of the film is improvised and most of the actors are amateur, but there is no awkwardness at all. The faces of the people haunt you; there are faces that could be Irish among them, and the eyes haunt like those of the young girl on the *National Geographic* cover that everyone remembers. Desperation is everywhere, but the film is saying life must be worth something, for people to cling to it so.

And the terrible raped land itself, under Makhmalbaf's harsh, brilliantly lit cinematography, is almost a character in the story. You come out asking yourself how anyone or anything could ever live here again, smashed, barren and incontinently mined as it is; and this was all before the Americans bombed it all over again. *Kandahar* is worth seeing for many reasons, not the least to understand why someone brave and still believing in hope would risk everything to get away from the place.

—Juliette Hughes

Bitter-sweet

The Son's Room, dir. Nanni Moretti. Nanni Moretti is one of Italy's best-loved filmmakers. Like Woody Allen, he writes, directs and stars in his own pictures, but unlike the overly prolific New Yorker, Moretti only makes a film when he has something to say.

Usually Moretti has something satirical to say about the state of Italian society (he is one of Berlusconi's sharpest critics), but for this film he has chosen to explore a personal story: the grief that comes with the death of a child.

When the teenage Andreas (Giuseppe Sanfelice) dies suddenly in an accident, his bourgeois family cracks up. In the lead-up to this event, Moretti studiously avoids developing any sense of impending doom. The death, which occurs offscreen, just happens; it could have been any member of this close-knit family.

Unable to cope with other people's problems, the father, Giovanni (Moretti), abandons his work as a psychoanalyst. The boy's mother, Paola (Laura Morante), begins to drift away from what was a loving marriage. Andreas' sister, Irene (Jasmine Trinca), is suspended from her basketball team after provoking an on-court brawl.

Moretti handles such details with economy and restraint, and just as it becomes unbearable he introduces something from Andreas' past that nudges these damaged people a little closer towards being healed. He shows us the three of them on a beach walking towards the sea that claimed their loved one, and though still separate—both physically and emotionally—they are linked now by a skerrick of hope.

By the time he or she is old enough to vote, the average teenager will see a million cinematic deaths, but from *Tom and Jerry* to next week's blockbuster they're all depressingly the same: they are deaths without consequences. *The Son's Room* is a beautiful, truthful film about family and mortality—take your kids to see it.

—Brett Evans

Star vehicle

The Monster's Ball, dir. Marc Forster. The late Ivan Hutchinson once leant across to me at a preview and commented that Halle Berry had 'great screen presence'—the film was *The Flintstones*! Some years later, Berry has won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role as Leticia in *Monster's Ball*. I have seen all the performances that earned nomination for Best Actress and Berry's performance makes Spacek, Kidman and co. look like hacks.

Monster's Ball is potentially an awkward movie that could have been an unsuitable vehicle for her talents. The plot is dependent on a coincidence at which even Thomas Hardy might have baulked and it involves a personal redemption that should strain credulity. Yet the film succeeds to awesome effect.

Hank (Billy Bob Thornton) and his boy, Sonny (Heath Ledger), are correctional officers in a penitentiary in Georgia, where electrocution is still the penalty for murder in the first degree.

Leticia's husband, Musgrove (Sean Combs), has been on death row for years, but now the appeal process has run out and he is to be electrocuted. Under the supervision of Hank, the scheduled execution is carefully planned and goes ahead without hitch. Leticia has long since ceased to care about her husband, but shortly after his death, both she and Hank are independently overtaken by personal tragedies, one of which brings them together.

Thanks to inspired performances by Thornton and Berry, somehow that shaky plot works. A major factor in its success is the willingness of director Marc Forster to allow them to remain flawed characters, a rare concession in the simplistic world of American filmmaking.

Oddly, although racism pervades the movie, it receives little recognition in the ultimate relationship between Hank and Leticia. They are presented simply as two emotionally wounded individuals for whom the need for mutual support is everything.

There is little room for anyone else. Normally, the supporting performance of Peter Boyle as Hank's contemptible father and Heath Ledger's sensitive portrayal of his loving son, would have warranted special praise. As it is, the impact of the characters created by Thornton and Berry dominates your emotions as you leave the cinema.

—Gordon Lewis

Tic shtick

Panic Room, dir. David Fincher. Something about Jodie Foster bothers me. I think it's a combination of her mouth and neck—they work like a water diviner's sticks, twitching in unison when they want your attention. Is it greedy to want more for my $12 than what most people can do after a night sleeping on a lumpy pillow? Fortunately for *Panic Room*, Foster's particular tic style of acting actually suited the role of recently divorced mother, Meg Altman, well enough.

But lots of things about this film did not work. One of *Panic Room*'s biggest problems was the eponymous room. The 'panic room' is an impenetrable room, filled with security cameras and speaker systems and other handy items in case of a 'home invasion' (that means a break-in for those of us who don't think a burglar necessarily constitutes an army). Once inside you can't be got. All of you who think this makes for a hole in the plot of a cat-and-mouse-style thriller give yourselves a pat on the back. Of course, Fincher tries to create tension by throwing in the odd twist, but his efforts all feel like desperate attempts to make the situation even vaguely worrying.

Besides the room itself, the film is lumbered with three villains (Jared Leto, Dwight Yoakam and Forest Whitaker) who are written with such little depth you couldn't dip even your little finger in them. They are given some funny lines, and for a moment you think the film might change for the better, but there's no commitment to the comedy and it just ebbs away.

Panic Room was shot by two cinematographers (Darius Khondji was replaced by Conrad Hall, because of artistic differences with Fincher) who have real skill, but ultimately are too clever by half. For those familiar with Fincher's previous films *Seven* and *Fight Club*, the camera's almost incessant exploration of tiny and seemingly inaccessible spaces will be nothing new. I enjoyed its unnerving qualities in his earlier films, but in *Panic Room* it just added a layer of alienation that made you care less, literally. When the camera seemingly travels through the handle of the coffeepot (courtesy of clever computer imaging) you just think 'none of it's real, no need to panic'.

—Siobhan Jackson

Strings attached

GUITAR-DREAMING HAS its own word: air guitar. There are even air-guitar competitions for the more accomplished and obsessive dreamers. Just as there is no more avid fan of golf than the 13-handicapper, so too can the decent guitar hobbyist also develop a powerful addiction. Guitar shops exist as much for the fantasists as the professional practitioners, and they know their market. The gleaming Stratocasters hang there promising, promising. The shop owners have their limits—the list of forbidden riffs, with 'Smoke on the Water' and 'Stairway to Heaven' at the top; the notice saying 'Ask for Assistance' next to the rack of glistening acoustic Matons. But they do allow the punters, particularly the middle-aged ones, to touch, oh yes. Because they know that much of their clientele lives on dreams, and dreams can become whims at the flash of a Visa card that has been plumped full by a work history in which guitar-playing didn't figure.

The ABC is stoking the fires of this madness with *The Guitar Show*, which began in mid-April. It is on very late every Thursday night (11.20pm) for 13 weeks. This is cruelty to adults, and many a protesting 14-year-old will be dragged into the lounge room to program the VCR in the coming weeks as desperate dads prod at unresponsive remotes. This show knows what to do: show us guitars, lots of them, being hugged, discussed, fiddled with, even played.

And that's the pros, folks; they are obsessed too, just like their audience. Steve Howe of Yes owns 110 of them, Richie Sambora owns 120. And whereas the percussionist in John Williams' rock band owns over 100 instruments, the difference between him and a guitarist is that *he plays them all*. Guitar-tragics need to gloat over their beloveds, keeping a small harem of playing-type instruments and a large convent of chaste beauties that fuel their lusts for the ones in their arms.

But what a strange and worthy object of desire it is, the guitar—descended from angel-harps to become the great Proteus of music, more diverse in its expression, styles and applications than any other instrument besides the human voice, which it can mimic.

Think of it, the grave inimitable serenity of Segovia playing Bach; the precise prance of John Williams' fingers in Albéniz and Schubert. The guitar is completely authentic in jazz as well: think of Joe Pass, Django Reinhardt, Al Di Meola. It is the mainstay of people-music: blues, folk, country, bluegrass, flamenco. And rock, ah rock. The country twang of Jimmy Rogers that, channelled through black blues into the pelvic throb of Elvis, became the rich, clean thump of the Beatles, the dirty grind of the Stones, the symphonic towering grandeur of Cream, the cunning artifice of Jimmy Page and, king of them all, the demon-god eagle-scream of Hendrix's white Strat at Woodstock as he strafed the feedback through amps too simple and primitive for today's schoolboys and gave young America the sounds of death in Vietnam.

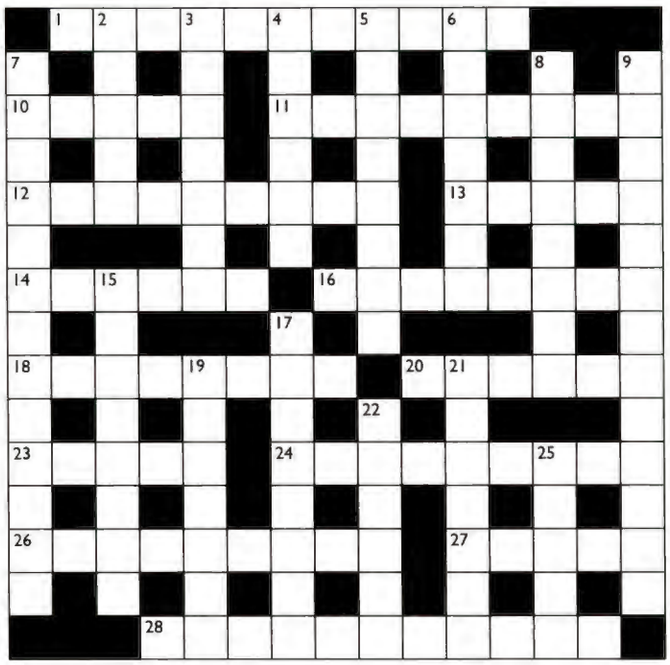
The other, related, program that the ABC is showing until early June is *Walk On By*, a history of popular song. It has been given the prime slot of 7.30pm Sundays and I hope it can hold it. It will be a boon to secondary-school music history curricula: I shouldn't be surprised if there's a run on the tapes. That said, it is sometimes annoying: too many talking heads and not enough music. When Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday get cut off in the middle of rare footage so that some turtle-necked wanker can pontificate about them, the urge to use the remote with extreme prejudice is strong. I suppose that there are licensing issues that apply if a performance is given in full. *Walk On By* certainly makes you yearn for the full version; let's hope there's a director's cut on the way that consists of the performances without the puffery.

ALL US COLUMNISTS AND Grub Street scribblers can start worrying again, because *Media Watch* is back, with David Marr in the driver's seat, and he's already shown it to be a heavy vehicle. He began by squashing a particularly greasy and nasty bug: the tendency of some commentators to distort the facts and even (shock horror, as if we didn't know it) make up elaborate little scenarios, pretending to know celebrities, particularly if they're titled. Having reduced one of these pathetic liars to roadkill, Marr turned the wheel on Channel Nine for massaging the news concerning the Packers, on the *Sydney Morning Herald* for inventing a reporter, 'Chris Aurora', to masquerade as a bona fide correspondent when they were running agency pieces from overseas, and on Channel 7 for pretending that a taped interview with a correspondent at Guantanamo was live. It seems that sub-editors can breathe easy unless they are newsworthily stupid, like the one who persisted in referring to the Queen Mother as Elizabeth I, which was about as accurate as some commentators' attempts in past weeks to smear her as being soft on Nazis in 1938. No, I think in Marr's hands, the honest and the only slightly ungrammatical can feel safe. But as for being stupid, or wrong, well, I suppose I feel about as safe as anyone else ... ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance reviewer.

Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 103, May 2002

Devised by
Joan Nowotny IBVM



ACROSS

1. Carried away on cloud nine? (11)
10. Scope in the menu for some lamb Italian chef liked to be included. (5)
11. Will topless swimmer chant while plunging in? (9)
12. English village where one is required to mind baton change in the game. (9)
13. Where water was changed into wine and left everyone amazed by the watercourse. (5)
14. One should keep one's silver at home—out of respect. (6)
16. It's time to bury communist theory, in short, in favour of a better means of communication? (8)
18. Taken aback, girl of the month sided somehow with different group. (8)
20. In Rome, possibly, the disheartened looked for a sign moving in the heavens. (6)
22. Up and ready to attend funeral? (5)
24. Disinclined to rant about clue taken, at first, to be difficult. (9)
26. Unexpectedly, verger, born back in France, remains always fresh and vital. (9)
27. Not grand but soft? (5)
28. I make a raid, sort of, on poetry books for verses to quote against my enemies. (11)

DOWN

2. For the ceremony, Deb or friend got up and dressed. (5)
3. Tonight, lose time and gain nought (nil) for a start. (7)
4. Being sharp, Tony worked with irrational number. (6)
5. A thinking cow? (8)
6. 'Ere! Rake it up for the audience or you'll have a painful organ. (7)
7. Cakes, sweets, glucose, for example, should be avoided when on a diet! (13)
8. Climb to the summit using a clean pin, perhaps as a piton? (8)
9. Silver log, possibly, given to me as share of indiscriminately formed collection. (13)
15. You're labouring under a misapprehension, Ken. A mist, swirling, cannot be used as an excuse! (8)
17. In stormy weather, can pier veer in the wind? We need a respite from such punishing conditions ... (8)
19. ... which gave Ned a fright and evened the score? (7)
21. He runs away and races headless ape, it seems. (7)
22. Surfaces suitable for jets. (6)
25. Set a lure, we hear, so that the tide of growth may diminish. (5)

Solution to Crossword no. 102, April 2002

E	A	S	T	E	R	M	O	N	D	A	Y	■	P
M	■	■	■	T	■	U	■	O	■	■	E	Y	E	S
B	I	L	G	E	■	T	E	M	P	T	S	■	■	H
E	■	A	■	R	■	T	■	A	■	R	■	C	■	A
R	O	B	I	N	G	O	O	D	F	E	L	L	O	W
D	■	O	■	A	■	N	■	■	■	A	■	E	■	■
A	P	R	I	L	■	F	O	O	L	S	D	A	Y	■
Y	■	P	■	W	■	A	■	I	■	U	■	N	■	I
■	V	A	R	I	E	T	A	L	■	R	I	S	E	N
■	■	R	■	S	■	■	■	B	■	E	■	K	■	S
D	A	T	E	D	M	A	N	U	S	C	R	I	P	T
A	■	Y	■	O	■	Q	■	R	■	H	■	N	■	A
U	■	■	I	M	P	U	G	N	■	E	A	S	E	L
N	E	S	T	■	■	I	■	E	■	S	■	■	■	L
T	■	■	S	T	E	P	B	R	O	T	H	E	R	S

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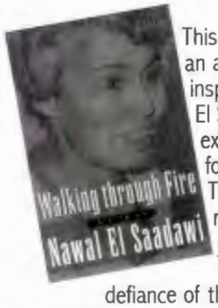

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