The cult of the author.

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The recession can be blamed for almost every negative aspect of contemporary Australian life, so it is difficult to know whether it is responsible for the safety that marks current publishing of Australian literary criticism, or whether this kind of publishing has always been limited in its range. The parameters of such publishing are only too obvious -- a tiny group of potential buyers, a tinier group of publishers dominated by multinational interests, and a group of potential authors aware that they must write with the other two groups in mind, in order to be published at all.

Here, the public educational sphere and the private commercial one become interdependent, forced to adjust their different goals for mutual survival. It is anomalous that academic writers must rely on market-oriented commercial publishers when the market conditions are so unattractive, but most university presses left the field years ago. As a result, publishers, with their eye to accountancy returns, direct the careers of academics, who declare themselves interested in the pursuit of a knowledge untainted by the marketplace. To be published, a literary critic must compromise with the needs of an educational market, which is dominated by secondary school curricula. The frequent charge that criticism of Australian literature is conservative and untheoretical emerges from this situation -- where the literary critic who wants to publish a book must aim to reach a general public in order to have a viable market at all. The chances of having a risky, cutting-edge book of literary criticism published in Australia seem minimal. Given this situation, we should be grateful that commercial publishers bother with literary critical books at all, let alone that these books manage to offer something to a postgraduate reader.

Shouldn't the Australian Research Council take a hint from the Literature Board's publishing program and institute a subsidy for publishers producing important non-commercial academic books in the humanities? Particularly in literary criticism, the 'state of the art' work is likely to be less expensive to produce than it is to publish, so the Research Council's current policy of funding research does not address the real area of need in the humanities. Once again, policies created to suit expensive science research are being applied to the very different circumstances of the arts. In the universities, humanities academics are being encouraged to mount large research projects regardless of the publication opportunities for the results of this research. A subsidy system might rectify this imbalance between research and publication -- at present, the Literature Board's publishing scheme costs less than $350,000 a year.

Given the difficulties of literary critical publication, it can be no surprise that only two kinds of critical books are currently appearing -- the collections of essays by many hands such as those surveyed by Ken Stewart in the previous issue of Australian Literary Studies, and the author-centred works under survey here.[1] Where the many-hand collections differ very little from the publication of essays in journals such as ALS, the author-centred books probably provide more accurate evidence of the state of publishing and criticism.

One way in which these market constraints on publishing distort the critical debate is by favouring books based on the premise that the Australian author is not merely alive, but verging on the immortal, a romantic figure, apart from mere readers, and gifted with special insight and divine talent. All of these books tend (in various degrees) to emphasise the relationship between the author's life and work, at the expense of the relationship between the author's work and other cultural formations. The notion of literature as part of a wider culture, placed in literary history and a marketplace, is sacrificed to the cult of the personality. Indeed, the market for Australian fiction is so strained that the promotion of individual writers is an essential part of its survival. The 'star' system ensures some media attention and sales for writers, and literary criticism must ride on the backs of 'star' authors.

Karen Lamb's little book on Peter Carey, The Genesis of Fame, unashamedly takes the reputation and promotion of the writer as the centre of its discussion. Lamb gives an outline of Carey's career, describing the various critical responses to his work at each stage and the predictable tendency of critics to align his fiction with his life -- son of a businessman, science dropout, advertising copywriter. It is a success story, though, with the life and art flourishing together. There may be a subversive counter-argument going on here, but Lamb is not explicit about the ways in which fame may feed fiction, and even create demands for a certain kind of fiction.

You'll get more insight into this by reading the Peter Carey section of Sue Woolfe and Kate Grenville's Making Stories: How ten Australian

novels were written. Here Carey explains the way he expanded his drafts as he wrote Oscar and Lucinda, so that each initial sentence became a paragraph, the paragraphs became chapters and so on. In this way, a concise, tautly-written set of ideas became the rather prolix novel which won the Booker prize. If he wasn't so rich and famous, the reader might pity Carey as he discusses his besetting doubts and the numerous drafts needed for each book.

All of the writers in Making Stories talk about their writing and rewriting, their doubts and small moments of satisfaction in a way which is, I suspect, designed to put off any aspiring writer from joining their ranks. As each of the writers attest, writing a novel requires years of unrelenting persistence, a kind of compulsion which is more like a mental sickness than a form of romantic inspiration. The book provides insights into individual foibles and devices. Thomas Keneally's drafts prove that far from being a one-draft writer he works over his material many times; it's just that the later drafts don't seem to improve much on the first one. Helen Garner's collected fragments of conversation and description read just as well as her final formation of them into the novel, The Children's Bach. In the case of Jessica Anderson, David Ireland and Finola Moorhead, the method of creation seems to contain within it all the excellences and failings of the different novels they published. Patrick White manages a posthumous subversion, though, by leaving behind a phony first draft of Memoirs of Many in One to mock the whole enterprise of seeking the source.

Making Stories is a fascinating book. Its interviews, because directed at the task rather than at the life, reveal more about the processes of writing, reading and criticism than any of the more biographical interviews on the market. Clearly, it hopes to gain the attention of creative writing classes and high school teachers -- some rather difficult exercises are appended in the Teachers' notes. But I suspect it will prove more interesting to literary critics and readers. The book does suggest, though, that most of these Australian writers are haphazard artists, collecting bits and pieces, then working away until a novel emerges. Does this explain the demise of the narrative in Australian fiction? Perhaps students of creative writing should not be encouraged to follow these masters too closely.

Where Making Stories displays the romantic artist at the grindstone, Andrew Sant's Toads also subverts its apparent aim of linking art and life, by demonstrating that writers are the most ordinary of people. This book serves more as an account of the social and economic conditions for postwar baby boomers than a document of the relationship of writing to other forms of work. Like other middle-class children of their generation, most of the writers here acquired tertiary education and had no difficulty finding the unskilled, casual jobs which their children are undoubtedly finding hard to cadge. What an easy time we all had! Like Marion Halligan, Kate Jennings, John Forbes and James McQueen able to walk into an office, factory or department store and be given temporary work, always knowing that we were the educated class who would be able to move on, while our less-educated workmates might suffer a lifetime of repetitive labour.

Most of these contributions amount to little more than stories of the middle-class life, told with varying degrees of skill and insight. Despite Marion Halligan's protest that middle-class women must be allowed to write about the experiences of middle-class women, Toads suggests that such women continue to be denied the wider class experience available to men in Australia. John Forbes tells his removalist's yarns in order to show that there is no relationship between his life and his art, and Gillian Rubinstein and James McQueen struck me as interesting people. David Foster picks up the irrelevance of the work question when he says, 'If you have a motorcycle licence and no criminal record, there's probably a job as a postal worker waiting for you too.'

But don't look here for evidence that the experience of work has made the writers sensitive to the conditions of life for their fellow Australians. The general impression (with a few exceptions) is that these writers -- caught as they are in the cult of personality -- are far too interested in themselves and not enough in other people. They all know that most people experience work as a soul-destroying, demoralising necessity, but this makes their escape from daily tasks into the life of art even sweeter. Elizabeth Jolley and David Foster feel a remorseful sympathy for the workmates they left behind in hospitals and post offices, but the other writers seem happy to categorise the work experience as 'just material'.

Toads reinforces the impression that fiction and poetry are the pleasures of an educated middle class in Australia. Few of these writers (Jolley and Foster, again) feel any responsibility to their former workmates and none pretend that these workmates will ever read their books. Perhaps we can do nothing but accept literature as a minority

passion created by artists who prefer to look inward rather than out.

All this is interesting, in a way, but it's not Criticism. To find that we must turn to the more traditional books, each part of a publishers' series -- Elaine Barry on Jessica Anderson, Margaret Williams on Dorothy Hewett, Imre Salusinszky on Gerald Murnane and Ivor Indyk on David Malouf. To take the women first -- and Australian criticism seems to be dividing into a fifties' party with all the men around the keg and all the women in the lounge room -- both of these books offer detailed, solid introductions to the work of the author.

In Fabricating the Self: the fictions of Jessica Anderson, Elaine Barry begins with a brief author biography, looking to Anderson's experience and reading for confirmation of her theory that Anderson's preoccupation is with identity, both individual and social. She then reads each of Anderson's published novels in turn, emphasising their formal strategies and their relationship to the questions about social structures and individual repression which she argues are central to them. Barry's approach continually draws attention to Anderson's control of her material, and her 'scrupulous sense of form'. Finally, the book reveals its direction at a secondary school market by providing two appendices, including a copy of 'The Lady of Shalott', presumably for schoolteachers without access to a decent poetry anthology.

Anderson's resistance to the image-makers and promoters of individualism seems totally in accord with the nature of her writing; she emerges from this book, and Making Stories, as a thoughtful and intelligent individual (so she cannot escape the cult of the author in the end). It is interesting to compare Barry's account of the writing of The Commandant with Anderson's version in Making Stories, for the way the writer's imagination responds to a single detail -Logan's long stride marks -- among the bulk of historical records. Barry feels some duty to place Anderson's work within a feminist frame but is content with a biographical emphasis on the woman hemmed in by domestic responsibilities and lack of confidence -- the author as woman -- rather than a sustained analysis of the novels in feminist terms.

Margaret Williams, on the other hand, subtitles her book on Dorothy Hewett The Feminine as Subversion, inviting an expectation that a feminist reading is about to occur. In practice, her book is as traditional and reliable as Barry's. Again, we find a brief author biography and discussion of the main features of the author's career, followed by a reading of the plays, grouped thematically rather than chronologically. Williams, however, must provide short descriptions of each of these plays and some performance history for them -- the chances that her readers will have seen more than one of the plays are minimal. This leads to some reflection on the difficulties for production of Australian plays in Australia, and the ways in which plays may disappear from public view as a result of a poor or misguided production. On the one hand, Dorothy Hewett seems to have done better than most other women playwrights of her generation in gaining professional production; on the other, these productions have not given her the public status of any of the men playwrights who emerged in the late sixties.

Williams's descriptions, surveys of the critical reception, and her own analysis of the plays suggest that the plays themselves, not merely the productions of them, contain the seeds of this failure. Williams comments on the difficulty of understanding Hewett's plays in the theatre, and the frequent response that they are plays for reading rather than for acting. Jim Sharman's observation about Pandora's Cross, for example, that it is a poem rather than a play, leads Williams to speculate on the need for a play to address time in some way.

Yet Williams never allows such criticisms to deflect from the main task of the book, which necessarily must justify its own publication by establishing the reputation of its author. All through the book feminist questions niggle, sometimes demanding attention as with the violent feminist reaction to a performance of Bon Bons and Roses for Dolly. Williams keeps them under control, swiftly moving on whenever they threaten to take over her book until, in the last chapter, a student tells her about Helene Cixous and she finds a way out for Hewett. Of course. Why didn't we see it all along? Hewett's seemingly random, poorly constructed, erratic plays are ecriture feminine.

Placing Jessica Anderson and Dorothy Hewett side by side in this way, puts these afterthoughts about feminism under some strain. It would be difficult to imagine two writers so different in talent and personality -- the one reticent, private, producing carefully-crafted fictions which consider the social and economic implications of individual behaviour, the other self-promoting, openly writing from her own experience, denying social responsibility in a welter of romantic individualism. Feminist theories, both liberal and poststructuralist, may throw some light on both writers but their application here raises thorny

questions. If Hewett's 'chaotic and confusing structures' are feminist, does this mean that Anderson's lucid, careful craftmanship cannot be feminist? Can both kinds of writer be accommodated to a single feminist theory? Barry doesn't try, beyond noting Anderson's sex and the nature of her experiences. Williams cannot convince us because her recourse to feminist theory comes as an evasion of the problems she has been raising in her discussion, not as a confrontation of them.

Masculinity and sexuality become prominent in the two books in the Oxford University Press series, too, with Ivor Indyk exploring the sexual undercurrents of David Malouf's novels and Imre Salusinszky acknowledging the masculine premises behind Gerald Murnane's fiction. While these books are shorter than the women's books, they allow their authors greater freedom to make an argument about their subjects, to write real criticism rather than explication and summary. Certainly, they are not inclusive like the UQP and Currency books, and they will not provide the supportive material for a schoolteacher trying to prepare classes, but they are speculative and theoretical in their approaches.

A few years ago, I witnessed a bit of critical sparring between Indyk and Salusinszky after Indyk had given a paper exploring the relationship between the pastoral mode and homoeroticism in Malouf's An Imaginary Life -- an early version of this essay. On that occasion, both critics argued passionately for their different views. Fortunately, they are able to translate this passion to the page. You don't have to agree with them, but their books offer ideas which should stimulate debate and some reassessment of the status of the texts they consider.

To summarise, Indyk argues that a primitivism underlies Malouf's use of the pastoral in fiction and poetry, providing it with emblems and recurrent tropes. While Johnno presented a socially and historically specific world, Malouf's subsequent work tends to seek the pastoral, a world released from social structures. It is here that masculine relationships can flourish, and forms of masculine succession, apart from the feminine, can be established. Indyk draws out the similarities between Malouf's poetic technique and his art as a novelist, and emphasises the role of ritual and the ecstatic moment in his fiction. Indyk concludes that Malouf's skill lies with the passive and lyrical, not the social or epic forms, a plausible explanation of my own reservations about some of the fiction. More than this, I found Indyk's comments about the prominence of the primitive as opposed to the social and historical in Australian writing to be a useful way to review the differences between Dorothy Hewett's and Jessica Anderson's art. Anderson may be seen as the social writer, interested in narrative structures and comfortable with irony, while Hewett prefers the primitive and sexual.

Imre Salusinszky's essay on Gerald Murnane bubbles with an enthusiasm which almost convinced me that I have underestimated the writer. He reads Murnane as a philosophical writer, placing him in a tradition stretching from Dostoevski through Sartre and Beckett to Robbe-Grillet and Paul Auster. Undaunted by the resonance of big names, Salusinszky goes on to link Murnane's name with a range of philosophers, focussing principally on Derrida. Murnane's fiction is 'an adventure of consciousness', an exploration of human isolation in the face of a reality composed of ultimately unknowable structures.

Salusinszky's delight in Murnane's writing is part of a shared sense of masculinity. He praises the writer's honesty in declaring his position as male, and in exposing the conditioning which pushes males towards violence and a confused pursuit of sexual desires which constantly shift beyond the possibilities of real women. Salusinszky is confident that he has the key to Murnane's fiction when he finds parallels between the writing and Derrida's theories; for him, there is an almost miraculous match between Derrida and Murnane's character, Adrian Sherd. One could imagine Murnane wanting to invent a critic like Salusinszky, to romp in the ambiguities of his texts. It's just that Salusinszky's writing strikes me at times as more alive than his chosen author's. Why does Murnane establish the reader as enemy? Wanting to be convinced by Salusinszky, I find myself still struggling with my own female perspective and Murnane's positioning of the reader as she who should be suffocated and silenced. As Salusinszky acknowledges before poststructuralist theory carries him away, Murnane's writing participates in a social and historical world, and to my mind its critique of male Catholicism contains a fair chunk of celebration. Nevertheless, the critic's confidence in his convictions may drag me back to the novels for another try.

Perhaps the significant element here is that Murnane is not a star (at least not outside Melbourne) in the same way that Malouf or Anderson are stars, nor is he a personality larger than his art, like Hewett. Salusinszky cannot rely on a willing readership, anymore than he can rest on the reputation of his chosen author, so that he may be working a bit harder to claim our

attention. At any rate, his book and Indyk's demonstrate that, even with a star system, there is still a small place for critical risk-taking and debate.

1 Lamb, Karen. Peter Carey: The Genesis of Fame. Sydney: Collins A&R, 1992. Paper, $8.95; Grenville, Kate and Sue Woolfe. Making Stories: How ten Australian novels were written. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993. Paper, $9.95; Andrew Sant, ed. Toads. Australian Writers: Other Work, Other Lives. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992. Paper, $16.95; Barry, Elaine. Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson. St. Lucia: UQP, 1992. Paper, $29.95; Williams, Margaret. Dorothy Hewett: The Feminine as Subversion. Sydney: Currency P, 1992. Paper, $19.95; Indyk, Ivor. David Malouf. Melbourne: OUP, 1993. Paper, $14.95; Salusinszky, Imre. Gerald Murnane. Melbourne: OUP, 1993. Paper, $14.95.