

Australian literature and the missing body

The general editor of a major new anthology describes its genesis and scope

by Nicholas Jose

The physiotherapist I saw for a pinched nerve in my back not long ago turned out to be an avid reader of fiction. She would work her way through the Booker shortlist each year. But she wouldn't read Australian novels. As she pummelled my knotted flesh, I wondered if this was the right moment to admit that I was a person who wrote such things. She explained that, having moved to Australia from South Korea as a twelve-year-old, she had been made to write essays at school about a book called *A Fortunate Life* that she found as painful as I was finding her pressure on my spine.

A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, published in 1981, was the success story of Australian publishing a generation ago, with sales for Penguin Australia of more than half a million copies. The memoir of a Western Australian boy who went to work at the age of eight, survived Gallipoli and came home to a struggling life as farmer and unionist was iconic of an ordinary sort of fortune plainly told. But its lesson was aversion therapy for this smart young Korean Australian finding her way through high-school English in a Sydney suburb. I urged her to try something different, recommending last year's Booker winner, *The White Tiger*, by Aravind Adiga, as another kind of Australian literature. The author finished his high school at James Ruse, Parramatta, and his biography acknowledges Australia as one of his domiciles. She liked that one.

The encounter perfectly illustrates what I call the 'disconnect' between dynamic contemporary reading and writing in Australia – evident in book clubs, festivals, creative writing courses, and prize lists here and abroad – and the version of Australian literature represented by *A Fortunate Life*, a book that I also value. I didn't dare tell my physiotherapist that for the last six years I have been working on a major new anthology of Australian literature designed to bridge that disconnect. When I tell people about the project, they often respond with

embarrassment that they find Australian literature boring, depressing, disappointing. Some ask with genuine curiosity who the authors are. And what *is* Australian literature anyway?

The impetus for the anthology arose in an atmosphere of crisis in relation to literacy, the teaching of English in schools, the study of literature – especially Australian literature – in universities, and the conditions of Australian publishing, all of which continue to be matters of community concern, media interest and political intervention. As the white-hot debate about abolition of territorial copyright shows – the latest instalment in the long fight for Australian culture – people do care. 'What nation can advance with its tongue torn out?' as Richard Flanagan graphically expresses it. But it requires some digging to explain our simultaneous cherishing and neglect of our own culture. Let me instead, by way of a case study, mention the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, to be published next month. (Part of the material in the volume appeared last year, in a different configuration, as the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, edited by Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, which Jaya Savige reviewed in the May 2008 issue of *ABR*.)

The 'PEN' in the title stands for Poets and Playwrights, Essayists and Editors, and Novelists, the acronym of the world association of writers and supporters of writing that advocates freedom of expression, including access to literary heritage, both through the means to read and write and the availability of what is written. PEN started in Australia in 1931; members have included Judith Wright, Patrick White, Dorothy Hewett and editor Beatrice Davis, among many others. As a literary community, PEN people, concerned for the continuum of Australian literary creativity – creativity that in urging our society's best potential is often critical, as it also connects us with issues beyond these shores – felt that Australian literature itself was in danger of

becoming unavailable to today's Australians in certain ways, partly because much of it was out of print. They decided to do something about it.

In the November 2005 issue of *ABR*, I published an essay called 'A Shelf of Our Own' in which I put the arguments for an anthology of Australian literature along the lines of the influential *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, and indicated the obstacles. In a world of competing interests, it did not look easy. But support rallied. Allen & Unwin came in early as the publishers, as did Macquarie University, securing a Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council and establishing a research Centre for the project. With support from other tertiary institutions and philanthropic foundations, and major funding from the Australia Council, a book has come into being, plus a teaching guide and DVD. Time, and sales figures, will tell if it has the long life that is hoped for.

The book will be published internationally later this year by W.W. Norton, New York, joining their showcase of anthologies as *The Literature of Australia*. This honours the legacy of Norton's founder and his wife, William Warder Norton and Margaret Daws Herter. Norton first visited Australia in 1916–17 on business. When he became a publisher in 1924, he was keen to develop an Australian list. He corresponded with Vance and Nettie Palmer and published American editions of Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard and others. He wrote to Nettie Palmer how he had 'grown to love' Australia and perhaps, out of that love, he was answering Palmer's hope for Australian authors to take their place in the world.

The first people to write in English in Australia groped for words to account for the experience of an environment and society without precedent. When they wrote home, their language carried the marks of dislocation, as well as the shine of a new start. That same language was adopted perforce by the colonised Aboriginal people for negotiation and struggle. Such displacement, transference and political purpose have continued up to the present, in language forged for new conditions, even to extremes, as existing modes break down, boundaries are crossed and hybrid forms come into being; as documentation turns into imagination. Reflecting its distinctive circumstances, some of the best Australian writing is thus found away from conventional poetry, fiction and drama. Anna Morgan's 'Under the Black Flag' (1934), for example, moves us with its theme of exile in a way that makes it literature.

When a white man is charged with a crime, he is taken to court and judged. If innocent, he is allowed to go home to his family, and there the matter ends. A black man is expelled from the mission – the land reserved for him and his people – and can never go back to his own people again. Perhaps the family, unwilling to be sepa-

rated from him, shares his exile until it please the mighty 'Protectors' of the Aborigines, or their managers, to give them a gracious pardon, and allow them to return home again. My husband and I have been expelled for all time.

Morgan's *Unfortunate Life* demands justice.

In editing the anthology, we have defined 'Australian' as flexibly as possible, to include work by anyone born or living in Australia, or writing about Australia. We juxtapose writers who give voice to different possibilities of being Australian over time (not excluding being un-Australian). Indigenous writing and, overlapping with it, the writing of the late twentieth century, only now being mapped, receive special attention. We order the anthology chronologically so that larger patterns of Australian history, including generational changes, are read through the literary works selected.

Expert editors made the initial cut, with Anita Heiss and Peter Minter collaborating on the fifteen per cent of the material that would be Aboriginal writing, Elizabeth Webby selecting writing up to 1900, Nicole Moore working on the period 1900–50, Kerryn Goldsworthy as editor for drama and fiction from 1950 to the present, and David McCooney, as deputy general editor, selecting the poetry and non-fiction from the same period. There was then an extensive process of consultation among the editorial team, responding to feedback from national and international advisors. The contents, including introductory essays and contextual material, were shaken down to 600,000 words, with many a tug of war over space. The pointy end of inclusion and exclusion comes when there is no space left and something has to go. The different editors' various emphases remain as currents through the whole, giving a dialogic quality to a collocation of texts that aims to be open and indicative rather than exhaustive. There are more than 500 pieces by more than 300 authors: multiple stories, rather than one.

The most common resistance to the project came with the fear that it would dictate a canon and do so in a conservatively nationalistic way, with a coercive simplification of Australian identity. There was anxiety about hierarchy and ordering, and the co-option of culture for other agendas. Part of the appeal of Australian writing is the way it escapes classification, proving outlandish or evasive of standard measures. Ours is a society that works by crude rankings and measures, where the victories of track and field, and once upon a time the stock market, provide the template for achievement in all other areas. Literature is supposed to be different. Yet we live by bestseller lists, even when all the titles are imports. In relation to home-grown literature, canon phobia has been so resistant to any holistic examination that the corpus has been left until it is almost terminal.

A stronger resistance is to find new ways of thinking about the body of Australian literary achievement, revealing each writer and work and their relationships – influences, continuities and ruptures – within a community of participating readers, changing over time in their needs and preferences, not automatically bound to canon or nation.

The other frequent objection to the project was that a book was no longer the way to go. Putting the material online instead, it was suggested, would allow readers to create their own anthologies, in the way that teachers commonly compile their own course readers using photocopied or downloaded material. Behind this objection lies the utopian alternative of an infinitely expandable and multiple space from which nothing is excluded. Such hopes are being realised in the expanding domain of databases and other digital resources, such as AustLit, which provide support for scholars and researchers. But for those who are new to the field and need guidance, a well-managed book, which offers not only a contextualising overview but the actual works of literature themselves, may still offer the best form of transaction. The utopian version is limited by issues of access, particularly to copyright material, which includes most of Australian literature. It only becomes available when an appropriate commercial arrangement is made that then allows readers to explore the writing directly for themselves. Which is why comprehensive anthologies of this kind are few and far between.

As a metaphor for a set of texts, ‘body’ and the Latinism ‘corpus’ came into use in eighteenth-century England, when authorship and publishing were being systematised. We speak of the body of the text, and, in quite physical terms, of the body of a book, hanging off its spine. ‘As imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name’: thus Shakespeare on creative writing. In literary criticism, bodily language appears in terms like muscular prose, sinewy syntax, nervous energy, flatulent verbiage or worse. In poetry, we sense the shapes on the tongue and the sounds in the ear, tin or otherwise. Literature is corporeal.

Yet in Australia we inhabit the land of the missing body, the unremembered grave, a country unsettled by absences, both literal and metaphorical: ‘rebellious, buried, pitiful, / Something below pushed up a knob of skull, / Feeling its way to air’, as Kenneth Slessor saw in ‘South Country’ (1939). What would it mean if the body of our literature was lost, too, through indifference or estrangement? Corpus or corpse?

A body of literature differs from the unread accumulation of mere writing by being revisited by different people for different purposes, over time, ingested, debated, disputed. Like the Magic Pudding, it keeps on reconstituting itself, somehow knowing, however

much its shape changes, where it has come from and what its various parts are. Its nerve endings connect externally with history, society and a broader culture. Readers, teachers and scholars help us to understand and appreciate that changing body, in parts but also as a whole. One form it takes is that of a book, to be held, given, passed down.

One of the confusions of current debates is that Australian literature must serve so many purposes. The *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* recognises the field as an academic discipline, but reframes scholarly work for the purposes of educators for whom Australian texts form part of the distinct subject area of school English. Through its funding partners, the 1500-page book acknowledges that Australian literature has cultural and institutional status, a shared heritage that feeds activity and enterprise in the present, identifying such continuation and development as a civic good. In that spirit, enacting a double process of laying out foundations and traditions while reconfiguring them in the light of contemporary questions, the book is for general readers, too, for edification and pleasure, for all Australians.

And for non-Australians, I hope. To consider Australian literature as if from outside is to see it afresh, its contours sharper in the comparative process. In that transnational context, the body of Australian literature enters new zones of meaning.

Against this background the framing document for the proposed National English Curriculum, considering ‘the place of literature and Australian literature’, holds that ‘knowledge’ of ‘the English language and literary traditions of Australia, in their historical context, as they currently stand, and in their ongoing relevance to this country ... should form part of what young Australians know about English and about being Australian’. While that language leaves plenty of room for debate, making it too early to say where the National English Curriculum will go, it offers an opportunity that comes once in a generation to rethink the way Australian literature exists for us, to put the body of Australian literature into new hands, so they can make it theirs.

The time feels right. Inspecting a first home buyer unit up for auction in Sydney’s overheated Eastern Suburbs the other day, I couldn’t help smiling when I saw the book placed on the bedside table to add value to the offering. It was Patrick White’s novel *Riders in the Chariot*, surely a difficult text for the times, but here, in the surfside sunshine of Maroubra, a surprising leading indicator. Ride that wave. ■

Nicholas Jose is a novelist and essayist. He takes up a Harvard Chair of Australian Studies for 2009–10. This commentary is a revised version of his inaugural lecture as Chair in Writing in the Writing and Society Research Group, University of Western Sydney, given in April 2009.