
Scratch Pad 17

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *brg* No. 15, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the April 1996 ANZAPA (Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) mailing.

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1 BOOKS READ SINCE AUGUST 1995 by Bruce Gillespie

Books read since August 1995

** = Books highly recommended.

* = Books recommended.

☞ = Not recommended.

* *Shadow Alley: Nine Crime Stories*

edited by Lucy Sussex (1995; Omnibus; 214 pp.)

Some satisfying stories, especially David McRobbie's 'Squat', but on the whole I was too aware of reading a book meant for Young Adults. The punches are ever so slightly pulled. Even the Garry Disher story 'Where the Bodies Are Buried' seems a bit flat.

☞ *The Little Lady of the Big House*

Jack London (1933; Cassell; 315 pp.)

During his career Jack London had his moments. This is one of his bad moments. I gave up after 20 pages.

* *Burning Daylight*

by Jack London (1910; Arco; 304 pp.)

Odd mixture of brilliant writing (descriptions of surviving in London's beloved Alaska), adequate writing (brave adventurer's attempts to adapt to tepid ordinary life after moving from Alaska to California) and Jack-London ghodawful (Heinleinian puffery of his schoolboyish hero).

** *The Panic Hand*

by Jonathan Carroll (1995; HarperCollins; 240 pp.)

Some brilliant, unsettling Carroll stories ('Uh-Oh City', 'The Sadness of Detail', 'Mr Fiddlehead' and 'A Wheel in the Desert, the Moon on Some Swings') and some limp stories that show that Carroll's forte is the novel. Many of the smaller stories were incorporated into novels.

** *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*

by Simon Callow (1995; Jonathan Cape; 640 pp.)

When he's not dying spectacularly on screen (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) Simon Callow is a fine writer of biographies of well-built actors (I've also read his book on Charles Laughton). The strength of Callow's biography of Welles (compared with at least three others) is that he concentrates on Welles before he made *Citizen Kane*. He pieces together a picture of what

Welles's stage and radio productions were actually like, and concludes that in gaining a film-maker America lost perhaps its greatest stage producer. Except, of course, that it was Welles who wanted to go to Hollywood, deserting the stage. Warts-and-all biography, but Welles's warts prove more interesting than anybody else's.

** *She's Fantastical*

edited by Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich (1995; Sybylla; 260 pp.)

Reviewed later under the heading of 'Favourite Short Stories of 1995'. Four-star stories are 'Widow Wilberforce and the Lyrebird' (Nadia Wheatley), 'Angel Thing' (Petrina Smith), 'Possum Lover' (Yvonne Rousseau), 'A Sky Full of Ravens' (Sue Isle), and 'Not With Love' (Philippa C. Maddern). Thanks to the editors for pointing me towards M. Barnard Eldershaw's classic Australian novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by including a short extract from it.

** *From Potter's Field*

by Patricia Cornwell (1995; Little Brown; 340 pp.)

I've seen quite persnickety reviews of this book, but I didn't notice any of the faults noted by the reviewers. However, this novel doesn't stick in the memory the way the other Cornwell books do. She's substituted a tale of a corny super-criminal for her usual careful accounts of forensic detection. Running out of ideas? Waiting for a movie offer?

** *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*

by M. Barnard Eldershaw (1947; Virago Modern Classics; 456 pp.)

She's Fantastical pointed me towards this novel, which I've had on the shelf ever since Virago published the first complete edition in 1983. Not that it's easy to work out exactly what the original edition was. (Thanks to Yvonne Rousseau for sending me the full story of the variant editions.) The 1942 edition was badly cut by Australian censors; the final, 1947 version by Mary Barnard and Kate Eldershaw had some benefit of hindsight. The book tells the story of a working-class

family during the Depression and through the early War, then extrapolates an Australian revolution during the last days of the War. A framing story tells of an attempted revolution in a far-future 'utopia' that eerily prefigures the mindless Menzies years of the late fifties and early sixties. Sombre, careful writing, but with a story of enormous, accumulating power. One of the great Australian novels, it is still pretty much unknown here or elsewhere.

** *A Confederacy of Dunces*

by John Kennedy Toole (1980; King Penguin; 338 pp.)

I can't believe all the rhubarb that proclaimed this as the first novel by an unknown writer who killed himself because no publisher would accept it. It reads like the work of a highly professional comedy writer, someone who had (at least) worked for movies. Walker Percy introduces the book; surely Walker Percy wrote it. The problem with *A Confederacy of Dunces* is its professionalism; it just doesn't have the quality of naïveté that might have endeared me to it. But it's very entertaining.

** *Artificial Things*

by Karen Joy Fowler (1986; Bantam Spectra; 218 pp.)

I cover this when talking about my favourite short stories for 1995. If (like me) you didn't quite come to terms with *Sarah Canary*, read this collection to find a very good writer discovering her wings, then spreading them and flying. Four-star stories are 'The War of the Roses', 'Recalling Cinderella' and 'The Gate of Ghosts'.

☞ *Sarah Canary*

by Karen Joy Fowler (1991; Zebra; 381 pp.)

'Well written.' Sorry; that's a putdown. Like me, you might not find any point to the proceedings. If so, give up at the halfway mark, or even before. (There might be some illuminating reviews of this book, but if so, I haven't seen them/it.)

** *The Time Ships*

by Stephen Baxter (1995; HarperCollins Voyager; 630 pp.)

In deference to H. G Wells, to whose *The Time Machine* this is a sequel, Stephen Baxter might well have made *The Time Ships* slightly shorter. But given that this does go on and on, I found myself romping through it with a peculiar leaping speed. The quality of Baxter's prose does not emulate that of Wells, but Baxter has an extraordinary ability to visualise the alternate futures and pasts that he borrows from Wells and others. Reading this book is like leafing through a book of ultra-realist paintings: everything is clear, yet everything feels distorted because of the clarity.

* *Books, Deaths and Taxes*

edited by Dinny O'Hearn (1995; Penguin; 170 pp.)

I've already written about this book in *TMR* 22/23. Not much of an anthology, and a totally inadequate memorial to Dinny O'Hearn's work, it includes an obituary by Andrea Stretton that is worth the price of the book. She captures on paper the essence of the man. Now all we need is a collection of Dinny's best writing.

** *A Slipping-down Life*

by Anne Tyler (1969; Hamlyn; 157 pp.)

Somebody (Terry Morris?) wrote somewhere in the mailings that this is a novel meant for teenagers rather being about them. This was a new idea to me. It certainly seemed the most pessimistic novel I've read, because it's one of the truest. Not spectacularly true;

just modestly observed, perfectly observed. A girl wants to Be Someone; she attaches herself to a boy who keeps thinking he's going to be a successful rock performer, but of course he won't be. A slight story, but if I live to a hundred I couldn't write anything as well as any one of Tyler's paragraphs. (If I read only one Tyler novel a year, it's because I'm spinning them out.)

* *Dark House*

by Gary Crew (1995; Mammoth/Reed; 264 pp.)

A very similar collection, in intention and achievement, to Lucy Sussex's *Shadow Alley*. The weak stories stick too closely to the conventions of the horror or young adult genres. Only Arnold Zable's 'Beyond Night' escapes the limitations altogether; it's a major Australian short story. Other four-star stories are David McRobbie's 'Album', Jenny Pausacker's 'The Princess in the Tower', Carmel Bird's 'The Conservatory' and Isobelle Carmody's 'A Splinter of Darkness'.

** *The Education of Young Donald*

by Donald Horne (1967; Angus & Robertson; 331 pp.)

I'd put off reading this book for many years because it is hallowed as a Work of Fine Australian Writing (usually a longhand way of saying 'dull'). It turns out to be a surprising book in every way, quickly moving from conventional autobiography into a fractured, impressionistic prose that makes it different from other Australian books of the 1960s. During the last third of the book Horne forsakes the attempt to tell us what he *did* at university; instead he tries to show what he was *thinking*, and why. He shows a post-War era of Australian intellectual life that very few people have recorded; a world in which the pre-War certainties of Left and Right had disintegrated, and harbingers of the 1960s could be sighted on the horizon. Nothing is more difficult than to recall what one thought at a particular time, or why those thoughts were different from one's current thoughts. Horne succeeds in this task.

** *Things Happen*

by Philip Hodgins (1995; Angus & Robertson; 65 pp.)

This book appeared after the little piece I wrote about Philip Hodgins in *TMR* 22/23. This is Hodgins's last book of new verse, and it contains some of his finest work (my favourite is 'Midday Horizon'). Look out for a 'Collected Poems', promised for 1997.

* *Simisola*

by Ruth Rendell (1994; Hutchinson; 323 pp.)

This Wexford mystery made me think that Ruth Rendell is running out of steam (until I read *The Brimstone Wedding*; see below). Kingsmarkham is not the sort of place where one expects to find a murdered black girl; in the end it boils down to finding which member of which rich local family might have done it. Apart from a brilliant account of a garden party held at the house of one of the rich families, this is a plod.

** *Court Room*

by Quentin Reynolds (1951; Gollancz; 396 pp.)

If you've visited Café Bohemio in Collingwood, you will remember that it has a library along one wall. Read a book while eating cake and drinking coffee; if you take a book, replace it with another. That's where I found this book, in the original edition. (Of course, if I avoided the cakes and coffee altogether, my waist line would have benefited.) I don't know whether *Court Room* has ever been reprinted, but pick it up if you see it. It's the only account I've seen of what a working

criminal lawyer actually does, and why. Samuel Leibowitz lost only one case during his career of the late 1920s through to the 1940s, but his methods were not based on the flashy gimmickry exhibited by defence lawyers on television. In this low-key documentary, Reynolds shows how a defence lawyer builds and presents a case, and why it is essential to American, British and Australian law that the accused is presumed innocent until proven guilty. As a by-product of his main argument, Reynolds also shows the extent to which the poor are discriminated against in our system.

* ***Port Vila Blues***

by Garry Disher (1995; Allen & Unwin; 228 pp.)

Garry Disher is Australia's most skilful crime writer, but you get the feeling in parts of this, the fifth of the Wyatt books, that he's going through the motions of maintaining a series. A pity, since I'd like to get know Wyatt when he isn't in dire danger. As the title suggests, Disher sends Wyatt off to Vanuatu, offering some elegant writing about places I've never seen. Unputdownable, but disappointing.

** ***Sandstone***

by Andrew Taylor (1995; University of Queensland Press; 85 pp.)

Andrew Taylor is an Australian poet whose work I like nearly as much as I like that of Philip Hodgins. Taylor does not have quite Hodgins' quality of sudden gallows humour, but like Hodgins he uses words with simplicity and ease to give haiku-like compression to unlikely subject matter. The main poem 'Sandstone' gives a series of perceptions based on scenes from Western Australia's dry sandstone coast; sand is crushed rock and shells but it is also porous, continually changing; sandstone is ancient rock but lifelike in the way it changes constantly.

** ***Emerald Blue***

by Gerald Murnane (1995; McPhee Gribble; 216 pp.)

Still essential reading, like all of Murnane's books, but I'm worried by the little peculiarities that have crept into Murnane's work during the last few years. The practice, for instance, of substituting four- and five-word descriptions of characters for people's names makes many of the stories seem bulky and fussy. Compression is at the heart of the good short story; surely the need to reduce a story to the smallest number of

words is why most writers use people's names or 'I' and 'you'? One of these stories appears in my Favourite Short Stories list.

* ***Moonlight Becomes You: A Crimes for Summer Anthology*** edited by Jean Bedford (1995; Allen & Unwin; 153 pp.)

These collections, which began as Stephen Knight's 'Crimes for a Summer Christmas' series, have held up well until now. The quality of the series dips alarmingly with this one. Except for a Garry Disher story called 'Stalking Moon', most of the stories are so slight as to slip out of the memory as soon as they've entered it. I'm sure Knight, now living in England, could edit a better collection of Australian stories than the ones that appear here.

** ***The Brimstone Wedding***

by Barbara Vine (1996; Vintage; 312 pp.)

I'd given up hope that 'Barbara Vine' (Ruth Rendell's more interesting self) would produce another novel as compelling as the first three or four, but *The Brimstone Wedding* is a spectacular return to form. A naïve younger woman attends a sprightly older woman who is dying of cancer in a nursing home. The younger woman's problems seem somehow echoed in the memories of the older woman, but only the events of the novel can persuade the older woman to reveal the strange story of why she has kept a house locked and unlive-in for more than thirty years. A wonderful interweaving of dark stories, with some fine examples of Vine's vivid descriptions of the English countryside during summer and autumn.

* ***The Dark Room***

by Minette Walters (1995; Allen & Unwin; 398 pp.)

The Scold's Bridle might have been very enjoyable, and so, up to a point, is *The Dark Room*. Beyond that, it's a mess. It has a great beginning idea; a woman wakes up in hospital without memories of the last few weeks; events seem to show that she attempted suicide, but she knows that she is not the sort of person who ever would; two other people are dead. Complicated stuff is worked thoroughly up to a point, then thrown away at the end. This could have been such a good book.

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