SUSAN LEVER
REAL RELATIONS
AUSTRALIAN FICTION
Realism, Feminism and Form
REAL RELATIONS

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RELATIONS:
THE FEMINIST POLITICS OF FORM
IN AUSTRALIAN FICTION

Susan Lever

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The ideas behind this book began to take shape during a study leave at Cornell University in 1990 when I had the opportunity to learn from Mary Jacobus and Molly Hite, and their students. In the School of English, University College, the University of New South Wales (Australian Defence Force Academy), Jeff Doyle introduced me to some of the theories, and Patricia Barton, Catherine Pratt, Anne Pender and Elizabeth Morrison shared their work on women writers with me. Elizabeth Webby, Delys Bird, Laurie Hergenhan, Katherine McKernan, Susan Sheridan and Ken Goodwin have all read parts of the manuscript and offered good advice on it. In its later stages, Susan Cowan read through the whole manuscript. None of them are responsible for its faults.

I'm particularly grateful to my friends in ASAL and their continuing commitment to the discussion of Australian literature. Delys Bird and Robert Dixon have been wonderfully supportive and hard-working colleagues in setting up ASAL’s literary critical series. I owe a particular debt to Robert Dixon who gave me the benefit of his shrewd judgement and vast knowledge of Australian literary history as editor for this book.

Earlier versions of some chapters have appeared in literary journals: Joseph Furphy (Southerly), Katharine Susannah Prichard (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada), Christina Stead (SPAN), and Patrick White (Australian Literary Studies). A version of the interlude on David Foster and Sam Watson appeared in Irmtraud Peterssen and Martin Duwell (eds.) “And What Books Do You Read?” New Studies in Australian Literature (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1996).

The School of English, University College, the University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, has contributed to the publication of this book.
Feminist writing and reading are political activities, and, like all artistic activities committed to political change, they must presume a relationship between art and life. A feminism which does not direct itself to questions about the material conditions under which women live can hardly be called political. Yet, we know that art cannot offer any unmediated reflection of life; indeed, the very division between “art” and “life” suggests a dichotomy where art is somehow apart from life, and life operates on a different plane where reality can be known. Literary art is part of life experience in that it participates in the language structures which create our understanding of what it means to live—particularly to live as a woman or a man. Poststructuralist literary theory has emphasised the metaphoric nature of language, and dispelled any lingering illusion that texts offer direct access to women and their experiences. Indeed, feminist versions of these theories argue that the very conventions of language may render women as absence, so that the attempt to find “woman” in a text faces intractable difficulties.

This book considers these questions about the relationship between literary art and feminist politics in the context of Australian fiction. It reads a selection of Australian fiction in the light of feminist critical debates of the past twenty years, from the New Woman novels of Ada Cambridge, published at the end of the last century, to a range of fiction by women and men published up to the 1990s. All of these fictions address gender politics in some way, and the book explores the relationship between form and politics. Although the book began with an interest in applying some ideas about form from feminist poststructuralist theory to Australian writing, it has come to focus more particularly on realist fiction and the ways in which fiction attempts to represent women’s experiences. It seems to me that theories of écriture féminine have devalued realist writing in favour of more avant garde and experimental writing. Sometimes critics influenced by poststructuralism depict realist conventions themselves as the expression of a conservative patriarchy. I want to challenge this depiction by reading a series of novels that complicate the relationship between realist conventions and gender politics.

Realist fiction, then, presents particular problems for feminist readers be-
cause, while it seems to offer a link between "life" and "art", it does so by implying that art can function as a direct reflection of a knowable reality, and it relies on conventions of representation which, it has been argued, maintain the structures of masculine power.

The "classic realist text" has been identified as the literary manifestation of liberal humanism and the capitalist economic system which accompanies it in Western democracies. Such texts depend on the notion of the free individual or "autonomous subject" who can choose a series of actions in order to achieve a narrative goal. This, of course, is the principle by which individual citizens in a democracy are presumed responsible for their own success or failure. The conventions by which individualised characters act in a chronological fictional narrative may be seen to reassert the assumptions of a society in which difference and inequality—indeed, the divided and multiple nature of experience—are invisible. Women writers of realist fiction risk endorsing a liberal humanist value system which may be inherently patriarchal in its assumption that all individuals have the same potential for free action. In addition, the claim to represent the real, may, in itself, constitute a claim for authority, even when realist fictions depict characters struggling against inequality. In this way, the very conventions of realist writing may be read as antithetical to the goals of feminism.

In Australia, the writings of the French poststructuralist feminist theorists, particularly Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have been mediated for many readers by the work of Elizabeth Grosz who has argued for an anti-humanist feminism. Such a feminism valorises avant garde and modernist writing over realist modes of fiction on the grounds that realism expresses humanist values. It argues that feminist writing must challenge formal conventions and seek out what is repressed in language structures. The feminist writer, then, must struggle to express that which is absent from the language order; she must challenge not only the world represented in fiction, but the very means of expression of that world. This theoretical idea allies artistic experiment with radical politics. It is a political aesthetics which encourages writers to take risks, to seek to express the unspoken and interior aspects of women’s experience, and to find new literary forms. It declares that such risk taking forms part of the political program of feminism.

While Grosz and other feminist philosophers have promoted an anti-humanist feminism, a feminism of difference rather than equality, Australian feminist literary historians have continued to give their attention to women writers, particularly researching the work of writers who have been overlooked in the establishment of a radical nationalist tradition. Writers once dismissed as "lady novelists", such as Rosa Praed and "Tasma" (Jessie Couvreur), or simply forgotten, such as Mary Gaunt and Mary Fortune, have been rediscovered, their work reprinted and discussed.

The recognition that many women have been excluded from the nationalist canon has led critics to find new ways to read women’s writing. If women have
been dismissed as "romance" writers and associated with popular culture, then feminist critics have reread popular romance and found ways to accommodate such popular modes as the gothic to feminism; genres such as utopian fiction and the crime novel have become areas of feminist study. Important books, such as the group histories of women's writing, Debra Adelaide's *A Bright and Fiery Troop* (1988) and Kay Ferres's *The Time to Write* (1993) have fleshed out the details of work which has received only brief mention in larger surveys of Australian literature. Others, such as those by Drusilla Modjeska and Patricia Clarke, have given a biographical context to writing by Australian women. There have been collections of critical essays edited by Shirley Walker, Carole Ferrier and others. Several other books have examined the work of individual women writers, Susan Sheridan on Stead and Catherine Pratt on Richardson, for example, with a view to establishing their importance in both feminist and aesthetic terms. In addition, there has been an ongoing argument about the masculine radical nationalist tradition which has dominated accounts of Australian literature, and the proposal of an alternative women's tradition in books by Kay Schaffer, Dale Spender, Susan Sheridan and Joy Hooton, and articles by many others.

This literary historical project has broadened our understanding of the Australian literary heritage, and the role of women in it, but it sometimes seems to continue without reference to the kind of feminist theories which question that sort of activity as merely the adding of women to the liberal humanist list of achievements. While a number of Australian critics, such as Anne Cranny-Francis and Terry Threadgold, have become interested in the formal questions raised by poststructuralist theory, relatively few of them have applied such theory to the heritage of Australian writing. When literary critics do undertake such a task, they tend to seek out women's writing which offers clear genre challenges to the mainstream—to write about women's romance, for example, as part of a popular culture challenge to high art. For this reason, it sometimes seems that, for feminists, Rosa Praed is a more important writer than Henry Handel Richardson.

Since the 1980s it has become evident that many Australian women writers have been influenced by feminist theories, and their work more readily conforms to the ideas about form promoted by such theories. A range of feminist writers and critics has explored this accord between fictional writing and theory, by and large celebrating the experimental and non-realist nature of contemporary Australian women's fiction. In this way, *écriture féminine* has contributed a feminist version of the view that radical form and radical politics belong together. In Australia, non-realist or experimental writing has been privileged as the vehicle of a surprising range of marginal political positions, from Aboriginal and migrant voices to a masculine left radicalism.

In the final chapter of this book, I will address the way some contemporary fiction writers have responded to feminist theoretical concerns since the late 1980s. Few of these writers appear ready to accept theoretical impositions on their work, and their fictions attempt to find new ways to negotiate the relationship
between feminist theory and fictional practice. Novels by Finola Moorhead, Mary Fallon, Marion Campbell, and Drusilla Modjeska provide some examples of the way that fiction can intervene quite consciously in feminist debates about form.

These writers may satisfy the contemporary feminist critic’s desire to locate feminism in experimental form. However, the difficulty for a feminist historian of Australian literature who wishes to pursue such ideas is that, up to thirty years ago, most fiction writers, both men and women, have practised forms of realism. Australian writers resisted modernism during its emergence in the 1920s and 1930s, and those with radical sympathies saw realism as the appropriate expression of their political commitment. The feminist poststructuralist theorist may find women’s contemporary writing satisfies her interests, but the literary historian of women’s writing must confront the implications of a predominantly realist heritage. Realist novels by women represent some of the finest artistic achievements in Australian literature, and cannot be dismissed as the misguided expressions of an unenlightened past. To do so would be to deny women’s aspirations to aesthetic achievement.

So the inspirational feminist theories emerging in the wake of poststructuralism present difficulties for feminist critics interested in the strong English heritage of realist writing. For this heritage, at least on the surface, would seem to conform with conventions marked as humanist and, therefore, bound up with an unquestioning patriarchy. The privileging of forms of modernism places pre-modernist texts by women in the position of being merely the portents of a later, more politically pleasing art. Nineteenth-century realist texts by women, in particular, are often measured by the standards of a more “enlightened”, and sometimes self-congratulatory, present.

This situation must disturb any feminist reader who wants to consider realist writing seriously. Indeed, a number of feminists, including Penny Boumelha, Rita Felski and Laura Marcus, have addressed the problem. Felski, in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics (1989), has argued for a feminist re-evaluation of contemporary autobiographical writing, seeing the representation of experience as a crucial part of the feminist project. More recently, Marcus has reviewed the perceived dichotomy between experimental writing and realist writing, between modernism and realism. Marcus takes issue with Felski, teasing out the possibility of an experimental writing which nevertheless attempts to encompass women’s experience, so that realism, as a non-empiricist philosophical position, might coexist with non-realist literary forms.¹¹

I believe that such a position may coexist with realist forms, as well. As Marcus suggests, the dichotomy of realism and modernism, of experience and experiment proves untenable when we read specific works of fiction; Joyce’s Ulysses (1922) poses an obvious challenge to it.

At the same time, I do not wish to argue that realist literary modes in themselves offer political potential for feminism; rather, I want to ensure that fiction written in realist styles is not dismissed as, by definition, inimical to it. In
this book, I will return to some of the women writers who were once seen as central to the development of Australian fiction—Ada Cambridge, Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Christina Stead—seeking ways to read their novels as part of a feminist reclaiming of the possibilities of realism. Most of these writers have been attacked at some time by feminist critics for failing to meet the standards of a more recent feminist consciousness, and their choice of realist forms makes their work vulnerable to charges of reinscribing masculine assumptions. These writers were realists of one kind or another but, I will argue, they can be read as realist experimenters, trying to adapt traditional realism to the demands of their subjects.

In the course of this argument, I want to explore some of the other possibilities raised by critics in the wake of poststructuralist theories. For example, poststructuralism recognises the power of language to order the world and repress elements of reality by denying them a place in the language. Rereadings of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, particularly by Jacques Lacan, have associated this power and repression with the relative positions of social language (the Symbolic Order) and the language of the repressed unconscious. Lacan has reinterpreted Freud’s Oedipal complex as a crisis of language and gender, by proposing that at the Oedipal moment the infant enters the Symbolic Order and that this establishes the infant’s gender. Freud’s observation of a male infant playing a game in which a cotton reel is thrown away and retrieved, accompanied by the words “fort-da” suggested to him that the words acted as consolation for the absent mother. Lacan proposes that verbal language forms a crucial element of the male infant’s separation from the mother and establishment of identity. This identity rejects the Mother and attaches itself to the Law of the Father, represented by the Symbolic Order. Lacan identifies language as phallocentrism, where the phallus serves as a metaphor for the male establishment of identity through language. Consequently, the relationship of females to language may be seen as one of exclusion or repression.

This theory may seem to lead to the same outcome as Dale Spender’s less complex argument in Man Made Language that men control language by making up the words, and setting the rules of grammar and syntax by which language operates. Some feminist poststructuralist language theorists, however, have pursued the psychoanalytic implications of Lacan’s theories to stake out as feminine that which is repressed in language—the unconscious and Lacan’s pre-linguistic Imaginary. Unlike Spender’s proposition of a male language conspiracy in which men consciously strive to oppress women through words, these theorists see language as a structure which makes us men or women. The best known of them—Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous—offer different models for writing which challenges the Symbolic Order. Kristeva rejects the association of the Imaginary with the feminine, but proposes an ungendered pre-linguistic Semiotic in opposition to the Symbolic. Irigaray argues that feminists must create a female Symbolic, which makes a space for women, while Cixous suggests that
feminists adopt an *écriture féminine* which celebrates the Imaginary and its relationship with the physical body.

While these strategies have been most often aligned with modernism, and sometimes with earlier non-realist approaches to fiction, they share the impetus behind realist fiction. Attempts to seek out that which is repressed in language, to uncover Kristeva's "inner discourse of the mother", to write the body or to challenge the Symbolic Order with the repressed Imaginary or the Semiotic, call for the writer to grapple with the failure (indeed, the impossibility) of language and literary convention to encapsulate experience. Poststructuralist feminist theory calls for the writer to struggle to represent the multiple, diverse nature of women's lives; it is a struggle which recognises the limitations of literary form. Yet realist novels—even those published a hundred years ago—can be found to recognise those limitations, and to adapt the conventions of realism to reveal new understandings of human experience. While it is often assumed that realist writing trusts in the power of language to represent reality, that assumption implies a naivety which is not evident on reading novels by Richardson or Stead, for example. Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980) has been influential in adapting Althusser to pose the idea that the "classic realist text", by definition, encodes patriarchal endorsement of unified character and orderly narrative. Many individual realist texts challenge that assumption.

The renewed critical interest in form, stimulated by structuralism and poststructuralism, has led to the opening of other possibilities for rereading realist texts.

Some critics, such as Margaret Homans and Barbara Johnson, have demonstrated reading methods which find in women's writing a resistance to the figural, and they argue that women writers constantly attempt to reach an unmediated representation. These insights are obviously relevant to the work of women writing in realist modes.

Other critics have returned to the naturalist novel to examine its portrayal of women and to reveal its hidden conventions. Narrative theorists, such as Ross Chambers and Peter Brooks, have shown that stories themselves form part of the dominant pattern of a culture and so suggest the possibilities for reading narrative as subversive of convention. All of these critics demonstrate ways to read the formal qualities of fiction even when those formal qualities seem to be disguised in "transparent" representations.

In the readings which follow, I have adapted ideas from such theorists where I think they illuminate the text under discussion, but the novels I have chosen also demand some consideration of areas overlooked by theorists. One of the most obvious absences in feminist theory is the lack of attention to comic and satiric modes of writing. In particular, theorists have neglected the strong English-language tradition of ironic writing, practised so often by women writers who appear to subscribe to conventional realist techniques. Richardson and Stead are particularly ironic writers, and Ada Cambridge, the most obviously conventional
woman writer discussed in this book, also adopts an ironic narrative voice most consistently. This tends to undermine her ostensible commitments so that the author's position may slip out of the reader's grasp. Indeed, her comic sense makes some of the ideological issues she discusses into the subjects of play. Richardson and Stead favour a more subtle irony, often placing contradictory elements before the reader without comment, though Stead can also write with the excessive gusto and black comic sense of the satirist.

One of the strongest elements emerging from a consideration of these novelists is their attempt to resist claiming authority. Cambridge, Richardson and Stead use a range of tactics to open the authorial voice to question. Their irony serves to undercut any clear moral or political position. This suggests that they want to hand interpretive power to the reader. By contrast, Prichard and Vance Palmer use the novel to argue clear ideological positions and demand that their authorial voices be taken seriously. This is, perhaps, one of the most significant findings of this study—that there is room for the realist novelist to resist or embrace the authority offered by the genre.

By examining the formal techniques which lie behind fictions by Cambridge, Richardson, Prichard, Stead and others, I will argue that they consciously engage in debates about art and gender politics. My version of these authors favours the freely choosing artist of liberal humanist tradition, in that I see each novel as negotiating formal conventions rather than being determined by those conventions. Nevertheless, I recognise that there are limitations—particularly historical and contextual limitations—on art. My readings depend on the possibility that an individual artist may decide to conform or not with prevailing styles, and that the artist is not completely confined by formal conventions or the dominant aesthetic context of her time. But this possibility also lies behind the practice of contemporary écriture féminine. Even anti-humanist feminisms must maintain the possibility for individual action to achieve change.

The novels I have chosen to discuss provide a selective history of Australian fiction over the past hundred years, from the publication of Cambridge's serials. They also provide a kind of alternative history of fiction in English to the mainstream history taught in university classrooms throughout the world. The history of the novel—a genre always ready to borrow elements from every other genre—cannot be monolithic. There have always been multiple possibilities available to the new novelist, and the novels discussed in this book provide some evidence of the way writers outside the British "canon" have used these multiple possibilities. Richardson, for example, made the shift from naturalism to modernism, towards a more psychological and interior writing, at the same time as Joyce—with results that more obviously mimic nineteenth-century styles. Stead, influenced by Joyce and Lawrence and aware of the political ideals of socialist realism, developed a more extroverted and dramatic style. Reading these fictions by novelists who have been forgotten in the international canons of the novel provides some indication of its multiple heritage.
Of course, the works of Richardson and Stead, like those of Joseph Furphy and Patrick White, form part of an Australian canon where, despite the obvious differences between them, they are often criticised for upholding some tradition of conservative aesthetics—whether nationalist or “metaphysical”. In fact, these fictions resist such simplicities; if they have emerged as the most discussed, studied and praised of Australian fictions, it may be because they offer so many possibilities for reading. Reading a group of novels which share only their authors’ Australian birth or residence (White and Cambridge were born in England, Richardson and Stead lived most of their lives overseas) provides a certain randomness as a representation of twentieth-century fiction. These novels cannot form a tradition in themselves, but have been written within a complex history of the English novel.

Rather than forming a tradition of women’s writing or Australian writing where subjects and modes of fiction are passed from generation to generation, the novels under discussion come from three broad historical periods when both the role of women and the role of fiction were under particularly intense debate. The first of these is the turn of the last century when the movement for women’s suffrage was gathering momentum. In Australia, political debates about the place of women became entangled in the movement towards Federation; writers and critics argued too about the appropriate kind of writing for a new nation. In order to demonstrate the ways in which the debate about realism or romance was bound up with ideas of masculinity, femininity and nationhood, I have chosen to discuss two novels by Ada Cambridge, the Australian woman writer most overtly interested in the Woman Question, alongside Furphy’s attempt to remake the realist novel in Such is Life (1903). Henry Handel Richardson’s Maurice Guest (1908) provides a further perspective on turn of the century sexual relations, Australian relations with Europe, and the realist debate.

The second set of novels belongs to the mid-century international political crisis, culminating in depression and war, when writers attempted to contribute to the political debate through fiction. In the critical argument about the place of experimental writing, left writers endorsed realism as the appropriate fictional mode for the socialist; communists eventually provided realism with a set of official rules and the title “socialist realism”. In the 1920s and 1930s modernism flourished in the art of Europe and America, while many Australian writers, including some women, rejected it as elitist, individualist or reactionary. Katharine Susannah Prichard and Christina Stead both had close links with the Communist Party. Both writers adopted realist practices in their fiction but, as I will argue, their modifications of realist techniques provide the keys to more complex political readings. Prichard’s Coonardoo predates the official doctrine of “socialist realism” and can be read as a committed writer’s attempt to find an appropriate form for her beliefs; Stead’s novels apparently reject any official left wing models as she develops her own approach to realism and political commitment. The publication dates of the novels by Cambridge (1888–90), Richardson (1908) and Prichard
(1929) provide neat twenty year markers but *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986), published more than thirty years after it was first drafted, provides a particularly poignant example of the way art cannot be bound by precise chronological history.

The final section of the book reads fiction published since the 1980s in the light of contemporary feminist debates about writing. Many of the women writers of this period are versed in feminist theory and their fictions can be read as attempts to practise this theory or to argue with it. The writings of Helen Garner and Sally Morgan demonstrate a commitment to representation and realist modes; their work may be contrasted with the more formally self-conscious writing of Marion Campbell, Drusilla Modjeska, Mary Fallon, Finola Moorhead and others. By necessity, my discussion makes no attempt to encompass the full range of women writers, who have published in unprecedented numbers during the 1980s and 1990s. It does, however, attempt to explain some of the controversies which have emerged over Morgan's and Garner's writing, and to account for different feminist approaches to the politics of representation.

All of the novels under discussion position their treatment of gender issues within the perspective of public social conditions. In each case, the relations between men and women become part of concerns about democracy, nationhood or the state of the society. To my mind this makes the fiction particularly fascinating, and confirms the proposition that debates about gender, and women's rights, have always functioned within a wider concern for the possibilities for individual freedom and equality. While contemporary fictions tend to fit current feminist theoretical paradigms much more closely than the work of novelists such as Cambridge, Richardson or Pritchard, few of them encompass broad social issues as fully. It is one of my concerns that these three novelists, in particular, have been criticised for their failure to meet the standards of contemporary feminism; the critical tendency to apologise for or to dismiss the writing of the past can suggest that feminism functions primarily as a mode of policing, rather than a way to open up new reading possibilities.

In Australia, the emphasis of feminist literary activity on retrieving the lost contribution of women as writers has had the unfortunate effect of dismissing the masculine "mainstream" literature from close or sympathetic feminist examination, though sometimes feminists have enjoyed deriding the sexism in men's writing. It has also led to the phenomena of separate chapters on women's writing in literary histories, and separate sessions at conferences where women deliver papers about women's writing to an audience depleted of its male delegates. Feminism sometimes appears to be a mode of reading only applicable to women's writing, rather than a challenge to writing of all kinds, by all kinds of writers.

However, the influence and interplay between men's and women's texts may be substantial. Women sometimes write in response to the work of male contemporaries, and women's writing—and debates about gender—may influence the shape of men's writing. By considering fiction by men alongside the main focus
on women's writing I hope to increase the sense of context for the fiction, and to
demonstrate that debates about gender and literary form have not been the
exclusive concern of women writers. I hope, too, to open some of the possibilities
for a feminist sensibility in elucidating fiction by men.

This book is mainly a series of readings of individual novels by Australian
women writers, interrupted at four points by discussions of fiction by men. These
interludes widen the context of the debate about form and gender. Furphy's
obsession with the misleading nature of realist and romance conventions con-
trasts with Cambridge or Richardson writing on similar subjects. Vance Palmer's
championing of a democratic nationalist tradition offers a standard by which
Prichard's Coonardoo and Stead's more idiosyncratic fictions can be measured.
Patrick White's position as Australia's leading modernist makes his fiction an
important bridge between earlier debates about modernism and contemporary
fictional practice. David Foster disrupts literary conventions through his idiosyn-
cratic style—and claims this style as masculine. His writing posits the possibility
that subversion may be masculine, or even masculinist, rather than feminist.
With Sam Watson's The Kadaicha Sung (1990), Foster's Mates of Mars raises from
decidedly masculine perspectives questions which develop or challenge the posi-
tions of women writers.

All of these men writers have been accused of antifeminist or misogynist
attitudes; at least in the case of Furphy and Foster, their work directly challenges
what they propose as the prevailing feminist approach to literature. While I chose
these novels by men because they so obviously struggle with gender and form, I
was surprised to find that they all constructed masculinity as intrinsically bound
up with Australianness and a relationship to the land. This suggests a complex
and contradictory relation between the masculine and the status of white Austral-
ians as appropriaters of the land. It is an issue which deserves greater attention.

In this book I read fiction as a series of negotiations with conventional forms.
The novelists chosen display an active interest in gender issues, and most of them
address the difficulties of women's lives. Indeed, novelists as diverse as Ada
Cambridge, Joseph Furphy, Mary Fallon and David Foster may be seen to use the
novel as a means of entering the debate about writing and gender. Several of the
writers, most notably Henry Handel Richardson and Christina Stead, display a
conscious awareness of the implications of the realist techniques they employ. My
argument is that these writers, in particular, are realist experimenters, not bound
by the rigid ideological implications of genre.

Questions about the social role of women, the place of romance, and the
nature of sex, race and politics in women's lives, recur in the novels as matters
chosen for attention by authors. It is not only that the novels of Stead and
Richardson, for example, modify conventional realist practices in ways which
may be read as oppositional to them, they also consciously address issues central
to feminism in their portrayal of their characters. It is not always necessary to
read "across the grain" in order to see feminist possibilities.
The central issue, though, is the political dimension of fictional form, especially realist literary modes. A major impetus in Australian writing has been the urge to encapsulate in fiction a new experience of a new country; a similar impetus often incites the woman writer to break her silence, in order to speak of her different experience to the experience of men. This urge to write, to represent a hitherto unacknowledged reality, has a radical political aspect as the unknown or silenced voice becomes articulate.

However realism hides its techniques, and critics may think that readers sometimes mistake realist fictions for an uncomplicated mimicking of reality. Consequently the realist novel has been accused of complying with the powerful conservative structures which insist that the world may be viewed only according to their patterns. I argue that these Australian novels challenge such a notion of realism and develop new formal possibilities for fiction.
In 1880 no woman in the world had the right to vote or to stand for election to a governing body of state. Yet by 1894 women in South Australia and New Zealand had the right to vote, and in 1901 the federation of the Australian states gave suffrage to adult women in the new nation of Australia. Recent histories of women’s suffrage in Australia have laid to rest the long-held assumption that women did not have to struggle for this right—that they were given it as an act of chivalry by the men designing the government of the new nation. But the period of the organised struggle seems remarkably short in Australia; the first societies calling for women’s suffrage were formed in the 1880s, and the first woman’s suffrage bill was introduced in an Australian parliament (Victoria) in 1888. Within fifteen years adult woman suffrage was law.

John Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869) provided Australian women with the rationally stated, liberal argument they needed as a base for their claims for suffrage. But the debate over the role of women had already become one of the recurrent concerns of the novel. The domestic social novel in the early part of the century often examined the difficulties of women who were forced to be dependent on men or left to struggle for a livelihood in a circumscribed range of occupations—Catherine Helen Spence’s Clara Morison (1854) and Mary Theresa Vidal’s Bengal (1860) offer early Australian examples. While women were denied access to public office and even to public platforms, the novel became an accepted way for women to enter the debate about social change and women’s rights. It is sometimes surprising to find how many women in the late nineteenth century used fiction as a medium for speculation about the possibilities for a more liberated future. Even Henrietta Dugdale, best remembered for initiating the first woman’s suffrage society in Victoria, presented her views on an ideal society in a utopian novel called A Few Hours in a Far Off Age (1883).
Beverley Kingston’s volume of *The Oxford History of Australia*, subtitled “Glad, Confident Morning”, gives a sense of the vibrant nature of Australian society—particularly in Melbourne—from the goldrushes to the end of the century. In the 1880s, material prosperity had brought a flourishing of the arts, and a rise in the participation of both women and men in education. The city centre of Melbourne today stands as a monument to the idealism and energy of its citizens of the last century; the Public Library, the Parliament House, the Exhibition Building, the churches, the theatre and buildings at the upper end of Collins Street belong to a time when Melbourne was one of the great cities of the Victorian world. By the 1880s, Australia was one of the most literate societies in the world with remarkably swift access to the latest books from Europe and America. Indeed, Kingston notes Graeme Davison’s lament that the rise of the Bush Legend, the image of Australians as rough and masculine promoted by Sydney journalists and writers during the 1890s, has obscured the vitality of the more cosmopolitan Melbourne culture of ten years before.

An immediate sense of that vitality can be found in Ada Cambridge’s novels of the 1880s and 1890s. In *The Three Miss Kings* (1883) her narrator “blows” about the musical appreciation of Melburnians: “we are a people peculiarly ready to recognise whatever is good that comes to us, and to acknowledge and appreciate it with ungrudging generosity”, and she provides full descriptions of such activities as the 1880 Melbourne Cup. Elizabeth Morrison’s excellent edition of *A Woman’s Friendship* verifies all the delights that Cambridge’s characters enjoy during the Centennial Exhibition of 1888, including Wagner concerts, contemporary plays, and visits to the Public Library. In Cambridge’s stories, Melbourne takes its place as an international city, where men and women read the latest works from London or Chicago and discuss ideas. These ideas include social equality, religious doubt and the active role of women in future society. In the 1880s—and in Cambridge’s novels—people looked to the possibility that liberal ideals might be put to practical action in Australia.

It is by now a commonplace that the Bush Legend and the Australian nationalist tradition, represented by the work of Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy in particular, supplanted the writing of women like Cambridge in the nation’s literary history. In the 1880s Cambridge, Jessie Couvreur (“Tasma”) and Rosa Praed (Mrs Campbell Praed), were acclaimed as major figures in Australian writing, but in the next generations their work was so thoroughly ignored that they were almost unknown by the 1960s. These novelists had little to offer a literary tradition intent on establishing distinctive national qualities, including an egalitarian attitude. Ada Cambridge is distinguished among these women writers in that, although her works have been out of print for long periods, her name has never been quite forgotten and she has been acknowledged, by at least a few sentences, in most Australian literary histories.

In many respects, Cambridge would seem the ideal writer for feminists to seek out in their desire to reclaim a women’s tradition. She was a prolific and popular
writer in her own lifetime, publishing both poetry and novels. She was well informed on current political and feminist debates, and her sophisticated novels about domestic and social behaviour have clearly been passed over in favour of the “Bush tradition” of Rolf Boldrewood, Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy, which sometimes includes Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin. Her reputation seems to offer the archetypal example of the way in which the search for a distinctive Australian identity through literature had cast aside and devalued writing about the cities, social life and the close relationship which many Australians felt with Britain. Many feminists have pointed out that this eagerly-sought Australian identity has been masculine, with women playing the minor roles of stoic companions to the male pioneering task or hysterical victims of a terrible and relentless land.6

Cambridge has been the subject of two recent biographies, and one of her autobiographies and A Marked Man, Sisters, The Three Miss Kings, A Woman’s Friendship and Fidelis, have been brought back into print (if briefly) since the growth of feminist interest in the 1980s.7 Yet feminist enthusiasm does not seem to have penetrated the mainstream of literary history, so that as recently as 1986 Ken Goodwin could dismiss her writing as “unable to break from the confines of the romance plot”—a considerably lower assessment of her work than that of H.M. Green or Adrian Mitchell in earlier histories.8 While Patricia Barton has written a sympathetic account of Cambridge’s achievements, feminist interest has often been less than wholehearted, exemplified, perhaps, in Dale Spender’s backhanded compliment: “While she may appear inconsistent—even shallow—to many men, her exploration of women’s fate and fortunes can still speak powerfully to many contemporary women.”9

Often, a reader’s view of Cambridge will depend on which fictions he or she stumbles upon first. Her biographers, Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling describe how they were crestfallen after reading A Humble Enterprise: “The novel seemed no more than a sentimental romance”.10 But they found a wider reading of her work revealed a greater complexity. Cambridge published at least twenty-eight newspaper serials and novels in the period from 1875 to 1914; not all of these can be expected to express her highest literary capabilities. All of her stories and novels are amusing and competently written, but the reader who first encounters “A Girl’s Ideal” (1881–82) or “A Sweet Day” (1897) will find Cambridge a more comforting writer than the reader who starts with “The Perversity of Human Nature” (1887) or A Woman’s Friendship.11

Despite the various quality of Cambridge’s work, Susan Sheridan, one of the first critics to draw attention to its neglect, has continued to insist that she was a romance novelist.12 This conforms with a feminist approach that categorises the domestic romance as feminine, and argues that the whole genre has been devalued because of its association with women.

Marilyn Lake’s influential article, “The Politics of Respectability” takes up the idea that women’s nineteenth-century writing has also suffered critically
because it forms part of popular rather than high culture. On the other hand, Robert Dixon notes that, for the wider British reading world, popular turn of the century adventure romance was a masculine genre, part of a conscious campaign against the feminising of literature with its emphasis on realism and decadence, especially associated with domestic life and sexuality. This latter kind of fiction was also associated with European writers, such as Zola and Flaubert, and, thereby, decidedly unBritish. Dixon explains that, in Australia, this became complicated by the nationalist claiming of realism as a masculine style in the 1890s. The divisions between high and low culture, between realism and romance, were in the process of formulation, and the gendering of literature was a matter of intense debate.

Cambridge was a popular writer, in that she needed to please her audience of newspaper readers and she began her career writing romances invoking the exoticism of an Australian setting. In her later career, though, she favoured the traditional realist concern with social politics, particularly the role of the New Woman and the possibilities for social freedom. She clearly aspired to be considered with the writers she admired—George Meredith, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Henry James—as a serious artist. Like many writers of her time, Cambridge incorporated elements from both romance and realist traditions. Her best work, however, offers itself as within the traditions of the domestic realist novel. Several of her novels deserve to be placed alongside the fiction of Furphy and Lawson, in an Australian realist tradition.

Her attitude to women and reform is more complex than a contemporary feminist might expect. Cambridge wrote to strict genre conventions for the newspaper market. She wrote continually about the Woman Question—about the education of girls, the choice of husbands, the nature of female moral behaviour, about restrictions on the careers and political power of women. So, in Cambridge, the critic faces a writer overtly concerned with feminist issues but dealing with them within existing conventions, in a manner palatable to an educated general public. The frequent implication of this has been to read Cambridge’s arguments for radical reform (her private opinion) as being compromised by the demands of market forces—the infamous Victorian conventionalism—so that she achieves no more than “a little rattling of the orthodoxies”, in Adrian Mitchell's phrase.

Her propensity for comedy and satire creates further difficulties for some readers. She likes to undermine her idealists, including those most ardent for suffrage and reform. She often establishes stronger sympathy for her men characters than for her women, and some feminists looking for a clear support for women find this baffling. Indeed, in many of Cambridge’s novels, women are mocked and criticised, and in her two most sustained satires, *Materfamilias* (1898) and *A Woman’s Friendship*, women are the central victims of her wit. Critics reading Cambridge’s novels for evidence of appropriate feminist commitments are enthused by her trenchant comments on women’s place in Victorian
society, and by her characters who challenge the norms of female behaviour, but they become apologetic when she settles her rebel heroines into conventional marriages, or conveniently allows problem characters to die.\textsuperscript{17}

Her radical sympathies, when they appear, are with the great liberal humanist reformers, such as John Stuart Mill. Furthermore, her satire and comedy rely on the interplay between rational and irrational forces, with the detached rational narrative voice deriding the irrational behaviour it observes. From a liberal feminist viewpoint Cambridge’s work may disappoint because it resists following through the reformist ideals she sometimes applauds; from a more radical feminist view, it may be seen to conform so thoroughly with liberal humanist literary forms that it offers no challenge to the dominant ideology at all.

Biographical evidence confirms Cambridge’s commitment to liberal humanist philosophy and politics. Her political guides were John Stuart Mill, John Morley, and other liberals such as Henry Thoreau. When she set her political opinions into fiction, however, she was taking part in a discussion which could not be reduced to simple demonstrations of political theory. Her literary guides, freely referenced in the novels, were George Meredith, George Eliot, William Thackeray, Henry James—the novelists of manners. Her artistic temperament (which tends towards comedy and satire) threw false trails and complications across whatever the political opinions Cambridge claimed in life. She does not conform to the liberal model of the reforming feminist any more than she conforms, in her most impressive works, with the conventions of an ideologically conservative realist novel. These novels refute the attempt to categorise her as a popular romance novelist, too.

In my opinion, the two novels published as serials in *The Age* (Melbourne) between July 1888 and October 1889, *A Marked Man* and *A Woman’s Friendship*, represent Cambridge’s writing at its most penetrating. They demonstrate two different aspects of Cambridge’s writing—*A Marked Man* being a long and ambitious exploration of marriage in England and Australia covering a time span of nearly thirty years, *A Woman’s Friendship* being a short satire with a small cast, its action limited to the year of the Centennial Exhibition of 1888. The publication dates suggest that they were written in immediate succession, and it seems likely that the comedy of the short novel may have given the novelist a kind of holiday after the long hours undoubtedly committed to writing *A Marked Man*. *A Woman’s Friendship* may also be read as a critique of certain attitudes represented in *A Marked Man*.

**A Marked Man**

In broad outline, the narrative of *A Marked Man* explores the possibility of a liberal future, without class or religious division. The main character is a man, Richard Delavel, which has struck some readers as a sign of her endorsement of female dependence on men, especially given the unsympathetic portrayal of Richard’s wife, Annie.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, Richard is an aristocrat who behaves
according to his own idealistic and romantic principles to the end. For some feminist readers, the complementary character and representative of free women—Richard and Annie’s daughter, Sue—compromises herself by marrying Noel Rutledge and accepting motherhood at the end of the novel.

Yet such a reading is possible only if we read the novel primarily as a “representation of women”. Clearly, through the characters of Annie, Rhody and Lady Susan, the novel depicts women as snobbish, social climbing, selfish or lacking in intellectual perception and integrity. The novel does not represent women as naturally good, nor in active struggle against their oppression—though the desire to marry “up” may suggest such a struggle.

The whole first part of the novel delineates and derides the complexities of the British class system. In its first pages the narrator gives an ironic account of the social strata of Dunstanborough, “the ideal English village”:

The lower classes knew their place and kept it, dropping the loyal curtsey to their lord and lady and the young sirs and misses, not only in the street but in the church—out of which none would have ventured to budge when divine service was over until the Delavel pew was empty; and the great people looked well after the health and welfare, moral and physical of their vassals—examining the children in needlework and the catechism at the national school, comforting the sick and aged with port wine and flannel petticoats, and distributing the best advice to young and old for their guidance in the small difficulties of their unimportant lives. (p.2)

The novel goes on to show the way class snobbery pervades every one of the lives of the village. The “reigning Delavel” regards his wife, Lady Susan, as beneath him because, though she is the daughter of an earl, her grandfather was in “trade”. Lady Susan upsets Annie and Mrs Morrison by refusing to see their social superiority to Rhody Appleton, the coastguardsman’s daughter. Though the principal beneficiaries of this class system are the men in the great house and Max Delavel-Pole, the incumbent of the parsonage, the dependent roles of women make them most acutely aware of class barriers and propieties. For them, too, there is the slight hope of marriage above their class.

In the Australian second part, Richard quotes John Stuart Mill on the “ideal English village” describing it as an ideal never historically realised, and concluding: “All privileged and powerful classes, as such, have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness” (p.153). It is a sentiment which the English part of the novel endorses by ironic and comic play on the rituals and rules of Dunstanborough.

Cambridge does not leave the problem at that. The crisis of the novel comes about because Richard Delavel defies the class system in the heroic and romantic act of marrying the farmer’s daughter, Annie Morrison. Richard’s own snobbery is so much a part of his upbringing that, like his mother, he cannot understand the complex social sensitivities of the “lower orders” and he fails to take into account Annie’s class sensibilities and her desire to improve her own social status. Though the novel is sympathetic to Richard because his predicament stems from a gener-
ous nature, it acutely criticises his ignorance and social assumptions. Cambridge suggests that the individual cannot slough off class patterns by a simple rational decision; they are much too ingrained and complex for that.

In the English section of the novel, class is the principal focus, and questions about religious belief are aligned with class attitudes. Delavel-Pole uses his superior position and power to bully the old villagers into High Church religious rituals. Richard rejects the Church because of its resistance to challenge and its cruelty to dissenting positions. Annie’s religion is idealistic, aesthetic and romantic, and the depiction of her lying in bed at her morning religious exercises while the rest of the farm is at work, mixes sympathy and direct criticism:

As she lay, absorbed in her devotional exercises, her mother bustled to and fro between kitchen and dairy over the rough pavement under the window, and all sorts of busy sounds rose upon the soft, fresh air—the clatter of milk-pails and hob-nailed shoes, the clear ring of Eliza’s pattens on the bricks, the cluck and scuffle of feeding fowls, the grunt of hungry pigs in the farmyard, the consequential coo of pigeons and their flapping wings. The Marthas of the world were at work, distributing breakfasts and preparing for to-days and to-morrows; but she, who had been to boarding-school and was one of the elect in grace, was exempt from that homely service. They had to think of others; she needed only to think of herself. Hers was the good part, no doubt; it was likewise the easiest. (pp.46–47)

Thus, the lives of women in the novel are controlled by a range of conventions, particularly of class and religion. Cambridge’s interest in class may seem to direct her attention away from the struggles of individual women, but it recognises that women may not be the freely operating individuals of the liberal order.

The first part of the novel, though, goes further than this in breaking with assumptions that it offers itself as a “transparent” representation of “reality” which conforms to the liberal premises of the “classic realist” text. For it may be read as a commentary on George Meredith’s best-known novel The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (1859). Cambridge’s admiration of Meredith is well documented, and she can be seen to take the story of Richard Delavel’s elopement with a farmer’s daughter from Richard Feverel’s similar escapade with Lucy Desborough (the names give an obvious indication that Cambridge intended readers to note the similarities). A Marked Man offers a critique of Meredith’s novel, in its insistence on the pervasive nature of class division. Where Meredith used the marriage of aristocratic son and farmer’s daughter to examine the egoism of a father and the ignorant romanticism of a son, Cambridge, (a farmer’s daughter herself) makes it the centre of class complexity. Like Richard Feverel, Richard Delavel meets his future wife in a natural, idyllic setting and weaves romantic and heroic fantasies around her. But Delavel’s ignorance is social—he does not understand the class sensibilities of his social inferiors—while Richard Feverel’s ignorance is emotional and sexual. Richard Feverel’s Lucy represents all the generous qualities a man should seek in a wife; Delavel’s Annie reveals herself as narrow-minded and self-seeking. Cambridge seems to be suggesting that
Meredith's understanding of the nature of class barriers (and women) is faulty.

Having dissected the English class system, and having rewritten one of the English novels which preserve the lineaments of that system, Cambridge takes her readers to Australia twenty-five years later to observe the outcome of the Delavel marriage. Here social status is dependent on money, and Richard has managed to earn enough in the shipping business to provide his wife and daughter with more comforts than they could have found in the old family home. His romanticism, though, continues in his idealistic political readings and in his frequent returns to natural surroundings at the Camp on Sydney's North Shore.

It is in this second part of the novel that Cambridge may be called an experimenter, for she clearly resists some of the options that the conventional social novel offers her. One obvious possibility would have been the return of Richard and Annie to their inheritance at Dunstanborough, or the claiming of this inheritance by a son. Instead, she gives them a daughter, and when Sue marries gives her a daughter, blocking off any such possibility. Another option would have been to follow Richard through his noble ordeal as the husband of a wife he cannot love, but Cambridge, rather cavalierly, disposes of the wife and gives Richard the opportunity to marry again. Mill becomes the touchstone for the second part of the novel—his opinions are endorsed by Richard and Sue, and Richard cites Mill's relationship and marriage with Harriet Taylor as a model for his own relationship with Constance.

One might be tempted to read this part of the novel as a total endorsement of Mill, a kind of demonstration of the virtues of liberal humanism in action. The Australian section, however, becomes a discussion of the moral implications of liberal attitudes to religion, love, money and marriage. The novel is no longer the firmly controlled ironic comedy of its first section, but a speculative and inconclusive exploration of the competing claims of nature and society, romantic idealism and individual responsibility, spiritual aspiration and materialism.

Richard Delavel has rejected the Church and the class snobbery which destroyed his youth, and he criticises the bondage of marriage. Nevertheless, he has sacrificed himself to marriage, and expended his energy on becoming wealthy. While Cambridge expresses sympathy for him there are moments when her ambivalence towards his achievements is unavoidable, and his continued self-projection as a romantic hero is openly criticised. The narrative voice is much more comfortable with Sue's idealism and Noel Rutledge's practical liberalism.

Though Sue's passionate beliefs in social reform are often undercut by the comments of her men, and Cambridge, ever aware of the economic basis of society, displays them as the views of a woman who has never been required to work, they clearly serve as a commentary on the first section of the novel, in which reverence for wealth and class position dominates a whole society. Furthermore, Richard Delavel finally does not measure up against Sue's social ideals or Constance's doctrine of "Take all, but pay". Before her death Constance passes the responsibility for Richard's omissions to Sue: "You will have to pay back for
him as well as yourself... be his steward and deputy, and discharge them in his name” (p.330). This expresses a peculiarly capitalist ethic of the individual as accountable for financial wealth in terms of social good deeds. Ostensibly, Cambridge offers readers, through Constance, a concise summary of the liberal ethic.

As well, Cambridge makes clear her rejection of Annie’s social values. In the Australian section, the narrative voice consistently dismisses Annie as unworthy of consideration, and the description of her death verges on the callous. Cambridge does not rely only on her characters and actions to reveal Annie’s failure; she finds it necessary to intervene with a commentary. For Annie is, in terms of the social world in which she lives, a thoroughly good and worthy woman. She is also, as the narrator tells us, a supreme example of the Victorian mother—one of the institutions of hypocrisy:

This to the general reader will prove, not that Annie was in fault, but that she had a bad husband and a bad child; and indeed no excuse is offered for them, except that they are here set down as they really were, and not as they appeared or as they ought to have been—which is a cruel process to which we are never subjected in the world of real life, and which therefore does them a certain injustice. In the world of real life a legal mother who conforms to rule is never allowed to be judged on her intrinsic merits, never required to reap what she has sown like the poor folks who are not hedged with the divinity of a like status. (p.330)

This passage, emphasising the way in which Annie’s mantle of motherhood and respectability has allowed her to evade her responsibilities as a loving human being, suggests that Cambridge knows how unconventional her presentation of Annie has been. Cambridge insists that the reader share her view of Richard and Sue as “our two poor friends”, but she also claims the right of the novelist to be more probing than any real life observer.

Cambridge’s liberalism, and her questioning of religion and the social institutions which disguise irresponsibility and foster inequalities, appear to be based on some notion of the “natural” as guidance for moral behaviour. Here, perhaps, we may discern the influence of Thoreau, and the notion that social institutions inhibit the individual’s ability to make free decisions. At one point in the novel, the narrator refers to nature as “that mystery of comfort to which we give the name God” (p.265). Nature is not posited as an opposing force to reason, but as a source of true feelings and right judgement. It is an order of being which may be distorted by the impositions of religion, social status and government.

Yet Richard’s romantic attitude to nature has led to his quixotic and unhappy marriage. Annie first appears in his life stranded on a sandbank as the tide rises, and he heroically swims out to rescue her; in his youthful enthusiasm, he mistakes Annie’s timidity for an association with the natural world. Sue, by contrast with her mother, can swim, and regularly bathes in their harbour pool “protected from sharks by an iron grating, through which they occasionally peered longingly at her” (p.206). By confidently rowing across the Harbour to visit the Camp she demonstrates an attitude to nature which is as practical as it is
romantic. The love scenes in both sections of the novel are played out in natural settings, but the narrative voice takes a superior position of tolerant amusement in both cases; romantic ideals, it seems, disguise the physical imperatives of nature. We find Sue, in the spirit of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”, watching the effects of a gale and imagining her lover “awake as she was to the voices of the night” (p.292), while we are assured that he is comfortably snoring in his sleep. Noel cannot play the romantic hero like Richard, and if he could not have the woman he loved “would have managed to do without” (p.290).

A Marked Man promotes a liberalism which values work and merit, not money and social position. Yet it also worries about the conflicting demands of personal feeling and social responsibility. It is critical of both religious devotion which ignores human suffering, and romantic love which cuts itself off from any duty to others. Noel gives up a religion which he finds inhibiting and uncharitable, but he must make his way as a man in an office (as Richard does), a member of the capitalist middle class.

One might assume that the anti-romantic elements in Cambridge’s comic vision, and her seeming endorsement of the ethic “Take all, but pay”, would preclude any sympathy for Richard’s self-indulgent codding of Constance at the end of the novel. This is not the case, however, and the novel ends in sympathetic recognition of Richard’s resistance to his fate. The narrator tells us that “in the moral as in the physical world, thwarted nature was but another name for disease” (p.345) and, in this case, has prevented Richard from acting out the liberal principles of “paying back”. Such principles, it seems, depend on the free exercise of nature, and Cambridge demonstrates repeatedly that her characters are not free.

In true liberal spirit, Richard stands firm against the consolations of religion and the hope of an afterlife, but his final words can only resent the personal fate of the loss of true love. The novel ends abruptly with an image of the extinguishing of the camp lantern, as if nothing more can be said about a death which is accepted as the end of individual existence. In following through a liberal atheist position even the narrative voice must end in silence. Cambridge denies us a conventional last chapter to delineate the future of Sue and her family as they look to “the next development” (p.288).

Readings of A Marked Man which concentrate on the depiction of women may overlook the class preoccupations of the novel, and its speculation about a new “classless” order (in the Australian part) which is based on money rather than birth. Cambridge recognises the impossibility of liberal free agency for women where their status relies on birth or wealth. Many men, too, like Richard Delavel, cannot operate as free agents in a world hemmed in by obligations to wife and family. So, even when read in the relatively straightforward way which its “realism” seems to demand, A Marked Man sounds some of the limits of liberalism.

The narrative intrusions in A Marked Man, as in Cambridge’s other novels, remind readers that this is not an account of a reality, but an imaginative creation
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which plays off other texts and constructions of reality, and negotiates a new path between them. So, this apparent celebration of liberalism takes liberties with narrative expectations by shifting from satire and comedy to a more tragic mode. The narrator’s increasing intrusions in the second section to direct readers’ sympathies or to comment on the differences between novel and life, could be read as a sign that Cambridge has lost the control so evident in the first section. It seems more just, though, to see them as attempts to write beyond the predictable and satisfying conventions of “classic realism”. When Cambridge pushes liberal humanism (in this case, an atheist humanism) to its conclusion, she cannot achieve a conventional optimistic settling of accounts.

Given that A Marked Man conforms to the very strict genre requirements of a newspaper serial directed at a large readership, Cambridge’s achievements in questioning and modifying genre expectations are considerable.

The society of the future, to which Sue looks, may indeed be liberating; a society where all the assumptions about wealth, religion, marriage and duty will be challenged. But for Cambridge, it will remain a society in which practical problems—marriage as “tables and chairs, and butcher’s meat and bonnets and gowns” (p.176)—must also come into account. Her novel cannot be reduced to a straightforward argument for individual agency over all other considerations, and her idealism must confront economic realities. In this novel, the romance is one of liberal idealism and Cambridge constantly confuses its hopes by raising the practical complexities of material experience. For some readers, this appears to render her a defeated liberal, but it might be read as the speculations of a liberal who can see the limits of its myth of freedom.

A Woman’s Friendship

If we read John Stuart Mill as the partial inspiration for A Marked Man, then we must confront the evidence that Cambridge was prepared to satirise his followers in her next serial, A Woman’s Friendship. This novel was nothing if not topical—it is set in the year before its serialisation, and most of its action takes place in and around the Great Exhibition of 1888. The narrator continually invites her readers to recall aspects of the Exhibition, or familiar parts of Melbourne: “Apart from its great attractions, the music, and the pictures, our Centennial Exhibition was a very good place in which to enjoy the society of your special friend, as must be well known to a great many of my readers.”19 Its subject—feminist reform, and the difficulty of the “purely intellectual friendship” between a man and woman—were matters of the keenest interest in Victoria at the time, with the first women’s suffrage bill going before the Victorian parliament in the course of the serial’s run.20

Two novels in which a man intervened in the friendship of two women had been published in 1886, and were the subject of discussion in the Melbourne press—William Dean Howells’s Indian Summer and Henry James’s The Bostonians.21 In the first novel, a middle-aged American man, holidaying in Florence, proposes
to a young woman in the care of his old friend, a widow of his own age, thus destroying the women’s relationship; in the second, a man woos the young woman who has been a speaker for his female cousin’s campaign for women’s rights.

Just as the names in A Marked Man indicate that Meredith’s The Ordeal of Richard Feverel should be kept in mind by readers, Cambridge turns Henry James into a joke in A Woman’s Friendship; Teddy Kinnaird writes from the country to his wife that, while Bret Harte is lame, his brother Jim has:

been riding Henry James Junior with a skirt, for he’s growing a beauty now he’s got his spring coat, with lots of fire but a temperament like milk, and you shall have him if you like him. Jim says he’d suit you down to the ground, and I think so too, when we have tamed him a little more. (p.59)

It is not too far-fetched, I think, to read A Woman’s Friendship as a taming of Henry James.

In The Bostonians James creates an educated, intellectual and wealthy woman in her late twenties whose seriousness and sense of responsibility lead her to take up causes, particularly that of women’s suffrage. As a counterpoint, he provides Olive Chancellor with a poor protegée, Verena Tarrant, a gifted speaker who relies on Olive for guidance and education. James disturbs the relationship between these two campaigning women by the entrance of Basil Ransom, a handsome Southern gentleman who woos and wins Verena. James portrays the war between men and women as a battle between the public and private worlds. Ransom insists that women belong to the private world of domesticity, sexuality and love, and James allows him to win—though, it should be noted that the final paragraph of the novel suggests that this is a mixed result for Verena Tarrant.

James, and Cambridge after him, demonstrate an awareness of the complexities of class, education and history behind the battle for sexual equality. In James’s novel, Basil Ransom is a member of a defeated class—the Civil War has deprived him of his inheritance and he represents the values of a plantation society outmoded by the industrial development of the north.

In A Woman’s Friendship Cambridge joins issue with James by setting up a similar cast of characters. Margaret Clive takes Olive Chancellor’s role of educated, intellectual reformer, Patty Kinnaird takes the Verena Tarrant role of impressionable disciple. Seaton Macdonald performs the part of the sexually attractive man who intervenes in their crusade. But Cambridge’s women are married; Margaret is the suburban wife of a newspaper editor and mother of two girls, Patty is a squatter’s wife who has suffered miscarriages which have endangered her chances of successful childbearing.

Their idealism emerges from overwhelmingly ordinary situations. Not only are these women a long way from what they see as the centre of intellectual discussion (whether it be Boston, London or Florence) but their lives have already been absorbed into the duties of adult womanhood and marriage. Cambridge provides us with all the necessary details to place Margaret financially
and socially—she lives in a rented single storey bungalow in East Melbourne, does most of her own housework and depends on a husband who goes to work every day and some nights. Patty Kinnaird is socially better-off as the mistress of a large property near the Murray, but she cooks her husband’s meals and is responsible for the poultry and beekeeping on the farm.

Though these women are not the lesured ladies of English or American novels of the type, they do not work for money and are aware their status relies on their husbands. Cambridge ends one of their conversations about liberation of women with the note that “with all their modern notions, they were still quite conventionally punctilious in their regard for the convenience of their husbands” (p.23). Each is reminded of the ideological unsoundness of her aspirations by her husband—Margaret secretly longs to own a fashionable house in London’s Bedford Park, Patty dreams of wearing diamonds to a Government House ball.

Mrs Clive and Mrs Kinnaird, then, are faulty feminists. They have human failings of vanity, and material desire. They are cushioned from the struggles of unmarried, poor and uneducated women, and never lose sight of their responsibilities as ladies. Cambridge presents Margaret’s feminism as snobbish and exclusive, devoid of any understanding of sexuality, and authoritarian in its demand for inhuman standards of social behaviour. These criticisms of middle class feminism may be familiar to readers today.

When the two women discuss the fraught problem of freedom with men, Patty reverts to a division of men into the “common” kind and others:

I have only known common men . . . Dear, kind, good fellows—I like them—I have always liked men, even when they were common, and liked to know them well and be nice to them; but somehow one can never let one’s self go, so to speak. They would make love at once—they would hold one cheap. There is always a line you know—with common men. (p.41)

The humour of the novel rests on the comedy of sex, and Cambridge examines the way in which class and wealth play a part in male sexual attractiveness. “Common” men make sexual advances at every opportunity, but they are also “common” in financial and social terms. The women mistake Seaton Macdonald’s class advantages for sexual restraint—Patty against her own better judgement. He is a rich, educated man and presents himself to them as a romantic, melancholy figure. The novel suggests that the women are attracted by his wealth as well as his gentlemanly manner and insinuating ways. Once among the luxurious and tasteful furnishings of his country estate, they immediately drop their principles of equality and forgive him his exceptional wealth and numerous servants.

At the crisis of the novel, sexual rules and proprieties encroach on Patty’s earnest desire to follow Margaret. When, at her Melbourne hotel, Macdonald finally finds his opportunity with Patty it is the “commonness” of his actions which alerts her to his true intent:
It was an emotional moment, and the kind, grave, handsome face was not like the face of a "common man", and she did not sufficiently weigh the meaning of his words. And so the next thing was that she found herself tenderly enfolded in her companion's arms.

I am also sorry to record that for a few seconds she reposed therein, with her tearful face resting on his shoulder, not exactly comprehending what the gentle process of development had brought them to; it was only when he stooped to kiss her, and murmured "My darling!" in the unmistakeably "common" fashion, that the shock of enlightenment caused her to rebound from his embrace. (p.106)

Any reader protesting that this makes women look bad, must do so through laughter. Reform and equality for women are all very well in theory, Cambridge suggests, but they must acknowledge the incorrigible sexual natures of men and women—with the man who will pursue women sexually by whatever means because, like Seaton Macdonald "he can't help it" (p.116), the flirt like Patty Kinnaird, and the romantic dreamer like Margaret Clive, who will be his likely victims.

While the novel might have deplored the sexual opportunism of Macdonald and the frivolity of Patty Kinnaird, and pleased readers looking for a model of feminist behaviour, A Woman's Friendship refuses to be a mouthpiece for standard liberal opinion. As in A Marked Man, Cambridge sets up a frame of liberal ideas, then creates characters to qualify and contest them. In A Woman's Friendship Cambridge has given her own admiration for John Stuart Mill and the music of Wagner to Margaret Clive, and her eye for a good horse and its handler to Patty Kinnaird. Like most good satirists, she mocks what is dear to her. There is even an element of parody of A Marked Man in A Woman's Friendship: Richard Delavel's readings of Mill are the touchstone for his life and actions, while Margaret Clive's readings of the same author trigger her exaggerated enthusiasms.

The tight structure of A Woman's Friendship would seem to resist any attempts to argue that this novel experiments with the realist genre. Cambridge's narrator pretends that the novel is an account of "life", reminding readers of the various attractions at the Exhibition, and providing a mass of authenticating details about Melbourne at the time. This may be seen as a fundamental ploy of the satirist who builds a series of exaggerated scenarios on the basis of concrete detail. Satire, itself, operates to undermine the conventions of realism, and might be said to be an unconventional convention. It is a genre, however, which is often aligned with conservative attitudes and it has not gained much attention or approval from feminist theorists—though its possibilities as a subversive mode are obvious. The intrusiveness of Cambridge's narrative voice is perhaps the most obvious sign that her realism can never be taken as "transparent" representation. In A Woman's Friendship, this narrative voice performs almost as mistress of ceremonies, introducing each character and commenting on events.

These novels cannot be dismissed simply as illustrations of Mill's liberal principles. Instead, they explore the problems with which such principles contend, as her characters attempt to put them into action. Cambridge shifts from one
position to another in a way which evades attempts to label her as “liberal”, “conservative” or “radical”. It is this shiftingness, this difficulty in classifying Cambridge’s best work, which disappoints some readers even while it entices further readings and considerations. This shifting of ground and multiplicity of viewpoints are the source of much of the reading pleasure in the novels. Cambridge’s habitual irony, her unwillingness to leave a statement to stand as authoritative without modifying it or offering some critique, her very playfulness in her best work, ensure that she offers contemporary feminists more than the document of nineteenth-century feminist consciousness some seem to want from her.

When, in 1922, Cambridge attempted to publish a revised version of A Woman’s Friendship she must have felt that she was writing for a new country and a new society. Astonishing changes in the rights of Australian women had come about in the intervening years. They had received the vote with Federation in 1901, and the Great War had ushered in the dress reforms and some of the sexual freedoms which tempt Margaret Clive and Patty Kinnaird. The class divisions which the women so carefully respect in the novel were no longer so clear cut, and Cambridge felt the need to explain even the divisions between first class and second class rail travel. Margaret’s declaration that she would be in her grave before the time of the great rebellion had proved not only self dramatising but mistaken.

Cambridge’s story of reform gone wrong reverberates beyond her lifetime. One hundred years later, women wonder about the limitations of a liberal reform which allows women equality only in so far as they behave like men. The disappointment that women’s suffrage did not bring much improvement in the position and status of women is anticipated in Cambridge’s novels; her feminism demands some recognition of the games, dreams and aspirations of characters whose attempts to conform to the ideals of liberalism founder on personal weakness and a desire for romance.
Interlude

JOSEPH FURPHY AND THE AUTHORESSES

While Ada Cambridge was travelling back and forth from Beechworth to enjoy the 1888 Centennial Exhibition, 150 kilometres away in Shepparton Joseph Furphy faced difficulties with his wife and family over his friendship with the schoolteacher, Kate Baker. Furphy planned to go to Melbourne to promote his brother’s farm machinery at the Exhibition, but an emotional letter from Baker meant that his relatives intervened to stop him. He was encountering the very aspect of Victorian society which Cambridge’s Margaret Clive so deplored—the inconceivability of a “purely intellectual friendship” between a man and a woman.

In 1888, Furphy was merely a learned foundry worker and unpublished writer; his only novel published in his lifetime, Such is Life, did not appear until 1903. Despite being Ada Cambridge’s almost exact contemporary (Furphy was born 1843, Cambridge in 1844), his work belongs with the Bush Legend writers of the next generation. In retrospect, it is surprising to consider that with a single idiosyncratic novel Furphy could eclipse the reputation of a writer who was pre-eminent at the turn of the century.

For the Bush tradition’s masculine grip on the history of Australian literature is in no small part due to readings of Joseph Furphy. Such is Life attacks all its romantic predecessors, from the Australian novels of Henry Kingsley, Marcus Clarke and Rolf Boldrewood, to the British Empire romances of R.L. Stevenson, Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling. As Robert Dixon argues in Writing the Colonial Adventure, these novels reclaimed the romance as a masculine form in a conscious effort to shore up male commitment to the ideology of the British Empire at a time of crisis. Furphy shrewdly identified these adventure romances as a form of British propaganda, and his novel claims realism as the appropriate form for an Australian writer of independent mind.

While he was critical of masculine romance, Furphy gives particular attention
to romance writing by women. At the beginning of Chapter IV his narrator, Tom Collins, is found perusing a novel by the prolific English romance writer, “Ouida”. Collins’s subsequent misinterpretations in the chapter stem from the influence of “Ouida” and “the sweet, spicy, piquant thing it must be to be lured to destruction by a tawny-haired tigress with slumbrous dark eyes”. In Chapter VI, he has fun with the idea of “the whole galaxy of Australian authoresses and pen-women” writing up an Agricultural Show without referring to the inevitable dust and grime:

Each would write her catalogue of aristocratic visitors, her unfavourable impressions re quality of refreshments, her sarcastic notice of other women’s attire and her fragmentary observation on the floral exhibits; but not one would wind-up her memoir with an account of the tubbing she gave herself in the seclusion of her lodgings when the turmoil was over. (pp.207–08)

Furphy’s dismissal of the authoress is even more explicit in the short extract from the original manuscript of Such is Life, later published as “Rigby and the Authoress” in The Buln Buln and the Brogla, and Other Stories. Here, Mrs Falkland-Pritchard, the credulous wife of the congenital liar Fred Falkland-Pritchard, gives Rigby a manuscript novel she has written, called “The Saracen Maid”. Furphy presents us with some seven pages of this novel, a romance of the Crusades in which the characters speak in an ersatz medieval English: “Nay, thou art of Paynim race, damosel. What weetest thou of yon far city where clerkly Henry, the Conqueror’s son beareth sway o’er Saxon churls?” (p.113). Walter Scott may be blamed for inspiring the fashion for such novels, but Furphy suggests that women are particularly inclined to write such works, and particularly enthusiastic readers of them.

Furphy finds the woman reader complicit in the romanticism of both men and women writers. In another fragment from the manuscript, The Buln Buln and the Brogla, he pits the romantic lies of Fred Falkland-Pritchard against the yarning of Barefoot Bob, the uncivilised stockman. Mrs Pritchard hangs on Fred’s every word, though his tales place him at the centre of incredible adventures such as hand to hand combat with pirates, or riding dispatches for the French Emperor during the Franco-German war. Bob’s stories, on the other hand, involve “dispersals” of Aborigines, including Bob’s mercy killing of a lubra, and Mrs Pritchard finds them distasteful. Clearly, there are some stories (particularly the history of Aboriginal massacres in Australia) which cannot be told to ladies. Tom Collins concludes that woman “is a thing of credulity, and a hero-worshipper for ever; and there is not enough heroism in the earth born he-feller to keep her going, unless his store of that ingredient is continually supplemented from the laboratory of the imagination” (p.103).

While some of these comments may be dismissed as an unwillingness to pass over a good joke or even outright sexism, Furphy’s criticisms have some point. The insistence of some contemporary feminists on the subversive elements in romance cannot counterbalance the conservative attitudes of many nineteenth-
century novels by women, nor the apparent passivity in women's continued reading of popular romance. As Collins complains, these writers seem to promote a hierarchy not only of social status, but of sexual power, with the beautiful woman as counterpart to the aristocratic man. We might note, too, the political implications of a social decorum that denied women knowledge of the brutal aspects of their society—the history of white killing of Aborigines is not a story for "ladies". Mrs Falkland-Pritchard complies with this decorum; her behaviour suggests that women readers actively refuse knowledge and so endorse, or even demand, the hypocrisy of silence.

Furphy portrays the authoress as a conservative, an upholder of a caste system which enables the romantic heroine to live at ease while the lower classes continue to struggle for subsistence. In his view, the authoress averts her eyes from the real conditions of men and women around her, in order to escape into the titillations of the gothic or the aristocratic novel of manners. While feminist critics now read some of these novels as subversive accounts of the body—a kind of écriture féminine—Furphy's objection that they create an alluring imaginary world apart from class struggle still has some force.

Yet, Ada Cambridge's novels, at their best, cannot be accused of turning away from class realities. Her habit of undermining idealism and romance with the irony of a realist, makes her an appropriate comparison with Furphy, though critics have preferred to consider him with Henry Lawson, or contrast him with that bête noire of the national tradition, Henry Kingsley. The proximity of these two writers in country Victoria is tantalising. In the 1890s Kate Baker was a parishioner in George Cross's Williamstown parish where Ada Cambridge was writing her later novels including Fidelis (1895) and Materfamilias (1898) but, though Furphy visited the Baker family there, the two writers never met. At the time, Furphy may well have been too "common" to mix with the successful novelist.

Since A Marked Man (1888–89) and A Woman's Friendship (1889–90) were serialised in a newspaper with a circulation of eighty thousand copies in Victoria alone, it seems likely that Furphy had the opportunity to read them. Nevertheless, Furphy's surviving letters mention Cambridge only once—listing her (in inverted commas) alongside Ethel Turner and Mrs Praed as of lesser power than Miles Franklin. Kate Baker, however, admired Cambridge, and Furphy may be alluding to this admiration in a letter (probably 1902) in which he recommends My Brilliant Career over the "pseudo-Australian authors, whom you have been taking as your guides".4

After reading Furphy's letters—where his own reading consistently appears to be of a scientific, philosophical or historical kind—it is possible to conclude that he did not bother to read Cambridge's novels. She is not a specific target of derision in Such is Life, and it is difficult to see how a writer who shared so many of Furphy's concerns could be dismissed for any other charges than a lack of nationalist fervour and a more middle class social perspective. If we look closely
at that central location of *Such is Life*, Runnymede station, with its elaborate social strata and customs, we find another perspective on the peripheral locations of *A Woman’s Friendship*—the Kinnaird station on the Murray, Warandara, and Seaton Macdonald’s more salubrious estate outside Melbourne, Yarrock. Furphy’s account of the relations between owner’s wife, housekeeper, kitchen girl and owner, narangies and stockmen, matches Patty Kinnaird’s account of Warandara society in her letters to her husband. Like the Montgomerys, the Kinnairds must deal with difficulties among the men and impudence from the serving girl, not to mention flirtations between them. Patty’s letter to her husband (pp.56–59) dismisses the possibility of Margaret Clive’s kind of equality operating on an efficient station, confirming Furphy’s view that “Social status, apart from all consideration of mind, manners, or even money, is more accurately weighed on a right-thinking Australian station than anywhere else in the world” (p.204).

Cambridge’s account may come from a different direction than Furphy’s but the ironic and critical considerations are similar. Margaret Clive disapproves of Macdonald as an absentee owner, living a life of luxury in Melbourne and Europe while managers govern his stations, but she is sufficiently vulnerable to his romantic, aesthetic and aristocratic attractions to overlook this. Furphy would ascribe a weakness for such characteristics to the feminine passion for romantic novels—in *Such is Life* Mrs Beaudesart’s enthusiasm for Tom Collins increases once she hears stories of his aristocratic background and career as a rake.

While Furphy emerged as a writer under the encouragement of A.G. Stephens and the *Bulletin* school, Cambridge had established herself twenty years before as a Victorian serial novelist, published in the more conservative newspaper press. Cambridge shares many of Furphy’s preoccupations (and his capacity for self-mocking irony) though no reader can overlook the impossibility of her ever casting a workingman as romantic hero (let alone a noseless woman as heroine). Furphy’s deliberate concentration on uneducated characters suffering the hardships of the bush contrasts with Cambridge’s choice of the middle class living on the station and in the city. Yet Furphy, too, deserves to be read in terms of feminist concerns; his novels proclaim an interest in gender and representation, gendered writing and reading.⁵

Furphy claims as masculine the rational standards of the satirist. The identification of his narrator, Tom Collins, with a logical and scientific approach to writing might even be seen in Lacanian terms, as an identification with a masculine Symbolic Order. Joseph Furphy saw himself as a masculine writer—he even diagnosed the failures of Henry Lawson in terms of Lawson’s femininity.⁶ His narrator, Tom Collins, posits a number of masculine accomplishments which may be balanced against those found in women—men are mathematical, practical, scientific, while women are intuitive, romantic, and incompetent in logical thought. In *Such is Life*, Tom’s discussion with Nosey Alf mounts a case for the different literary and musical tastes of men and women. Alf likes Oliver Wendell Holmes, whom Tom dismisses for his failure to take a stand on the slavery question
(p.245); Alf, being a lady, finds Zola a corrupting influence, while Tom thinks he’s at least honest. Tom asserts that men are superior poets to women (pp. 256–57) but allows that women poets have a quality of sincerity not found in men. When Alf gives herself up to songs of her own choice she chooses love songs—songs of a “chaste, supersensual, but purely human and exclusive love” (p.258)—where Tom looks for nationalistic hopes, concern for the oppressed or some broader political sympathies. One may read this discussion simply as a series of clues to Nosey Alf’s sex, and a clear guide to her status as a “lady” worthy to be the romantic heroine of the novel, but it also confirms the set of feminine tastes which counter Tom Collins’s (and his creator’s) tastes and talents. The novel suggests that the danger with women, even educated women, is that they prefer the personal to the political, and they choose the romantic and beautiful over the realistic and sometimes harsh conditions of general existence.

Most critics accept that Such is Life expresses a dissatisfaction with the novel form which Furphy had inherited. While it is a dissatisfaction emerging from his protest at the neglect of “ordinary life” in the novel, it also has implications for the feminist critique of the “classic realist” nineteenth-century novel. Furphy’s radicalism in the face of conservative romance fiction goes beyond even Ada Cambridge’s adjustments to the classic form. When he writes, his ethic of equality cannot rest with a conventional realist novel of ordered narrative and stable character. So, Such is Life adopts realist techniques at the same time that it questions their validity.

Julian Croft argues that Furphy’s technique rests on the interplay between a series of oppositions—determinism/free will, Calvinism/Catholicism, realism/romanticism, masculine/feminine—and he suggests that these can be paralleled in Such is Life to the differences between the narrator Tom Collins and the author Joseph Furphy. He notes that while Tom Collins’s text sets up a rigidly masculine view of the world, Joseph Furphy undermines this text by various formal strategies. This list is likely to remind a feminist reader of Cixous’s list of the divide between the masculine and the feminine, where head/heart, sun/moon, culture/nature and so on are associated with the two sexes.

Yet Furphy’s divisions are not so clear cut as they may appear at first. To begin, Furphy and Collins cannot be clearly delineated from each other, particularly when Collins has embarked on one of his lengthy digressions on socialism or the future of Australia. Collins is sometimes revealed to the reader as a total fool, at other times his opinions are left unqualified by irony. Similarly, the balance between determinism and free will moves back and forth in the novel, and romance and realism are not always feminine and masculine traits—Rory O’Halloran’s Catholicism is linked to his romantic failure to grasp the limitations of his reality, while Rory’s wife demonstrates a practicality allied to her Calvinism.

The most significant blurring occurs in Tom Collins’s identification of sexual characteristics. The sexual stereotypes on which the novel seems to operate are proven time and again to be unreliable guides to the physical identity of charac-
ters. During his naked odyssey in chapter III Tom is tormented by the very fact that he has a sex, and therefore without trousers must be shunned and spurned by his fellow creatures. His attempt to disrobe a passing rider leads him to believe he’s encountered a “De Lacy Evans”, a woman dressed as a man, while he fully expects Jim Quartermain to be a young man rather than a young woman. All around him the sexual appetites of youth battle with the modesty of Victorianism as he encounters lovers returning from the Sunday School picnic. Sexuality, it seems, may be a burden, necessary to identity, but equally necessary, given Victorian hypocrisy, to be screened from view. In Chapter VI Tom concludes that Nosey Alf is a “Sydney-sider, and had been in some way connected with the drapery-business” (p.258) though he mistook the draper’s assistant in Chapter III for a woman. The scene where Nosey Alf plays her violin with an emotional intensity, while Tom Collins anatomises the scientific effects of music and philosophises on its psychological and moral qualities, exemplifies the difference Furphy postulates between female and male capabilities. For all his information and analytic empirical approach, Collins cannot tell “Home Sweet Home” from “The Last Rose of Summer” (nor, in this scene, can he recognise a woman when she is dressed as a man).

Most critics who have given attention to Furphy’s presentation of women in *Such is Life* find it problematic. The women characters—Mrs. O’Halloran, Helena Vivian, Jemima Quartermain, Mrs Beaudesart, Ida, Nosey Alf and a range of picnickers on the banks of the Murray in Chapter III—present various examples of the “mammiferous vertebrates” as Tom dismissively calls women. This determination to class women scientifically denies them sympathy as full characters in the novel. It is one of Tom’s most obvious failures as a narrator, yet it is a technique which Tom employs regularly in his efforts to find some scientific truth from his encounters with other human beings.

So the stern and embittered Mrs O’Halloran may be compared to the lackadaisical, sexually available Mrs Vivian as examples of boundary riders’ wives. Tom’s idealisation of Jemima Quartermain may be compared with Alf Morris’s memories of his lost Molly, as well as with the reconstructed Molly in Nosey Alf. In Chapter VI Mrs. Beaudesart, the lady of family, contrasts and confronts Ida, the plain “white trash”, and both are used to measure Nosey Alf, whose life and prospects have been destroyed with her beauty.

The depiction of Ida’s ugliness offers most confusion to readers, many of whom find this simply cruel. If we read Chapter VI as Furphy’s meditation on social status and relative power (at Runnymede!), we can see that Ida represents the lowest status woman and, like the other characters at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Toby the half caste and Priestley the docile bullock driver) she is given a scene in which she expresses her pride and rebellion against her supposed superiors. Runnymede may present the ordered hierarchy of the well-run Australian station, but the hierarchy must tolerate the protests of the socially oppressed. Furphy appears to be attempting to give a voice to even the lowliest characters,
and recognises that these include women (just as the top of the hierarchy includes women).

Nevertheless, *Such is Life* raises questions about its own methods, and the absences in the novel speak as loudly as its presences. This is not only in the often-remarked way in which the realistic surface of the novel is undermined by its hidden romantic structure. Furphy’s fictions are bounded by what cannot be said, what cannot be written, and *Such is Life*’s masculine narrator looks out in puzzlement at the world beyond the reach of his systematic positivism. That world is indicated as the domain of the feminine.

Furphy’s rejection of the conventional nineteenth-century novel with its reliable narrator, chronological narrative and resolved ending gestures towards modernism as it does towards the eighteenth-century novel. Yet, nowadays, it may be seen as having more in common with postmodernist techniques of intertextuality and parody. Tom Collins wants his novel to be a logical construction gathered together from bits of experience, to demonstrate the formlessness of life, the structureless nature of lived experience. He criticises the popular novelists for the incredibility of their plots, the implausibility of their characterisation and for their obsession with the lives of the wealthy. However, in Tom Collins’s very denial and failure to understand the irrational and intuitive, Joseph Furphy acknowledges their importance to any understanding of human motivation and desire. Tom’s incompetence in the feminine areas, his much-vaulted masculinity, is the source of his misunderstanding and failure. On another level, taking Furphy into account as Tom Collins’s creator, the novel’s failure to address the “other half” of human experience is put before the reader as a failure of all fiction.

The questions which *Such is Life* asks about fiction may be applied more closely to the concerns of feminist critics. If the “classic realist” novel may be seen as an endorsement of the liberal belief in a unified consciousness and an ordered humanity, then *Such is Life* proposes such beliefs only to undermine them. In this novel, there is no settled reality, even no clearly-defined sexuality. In the final scene Tom Collins appears as an almost surreal figure, dressed in a top hat, frock coat and clouded glasses as he evades identification by Tom Armstrong and Andrew Glover, and prepares to play that fictional role—the aristocratic man with a “past”—for Mrs Beaudesart. Our narrator slips away while offering us the consolation that we are all “fellow-mummers” not conducive to being fully known at all.

*Such is Life* makes representation a highly questionable activity, and the representation of gender, in particular, a matter of mistaken stereotyping and assumption. It demonstrates the limitations of a “masculine” mind capable of deduction and reasonable hypothesis, and a “feminine” sensibility prone to romantic fancy. Collins’s genres—the chronicle and the romance—both fail to represent “life”. *Such is Life* is a democratic novel, not only in its subject matter, but in its refusal to give authority to the novelist. This democratic impulse makes room for feminist positions by mocking the masculine interpretation which Collins gives to “life”. The narrative not only asks “who is she?” but “what makes a woman?” and “how
can one know a woman?” Tom Collins finds that Victorian hypocrisy has con-
structed a system of gender representation which can reduce a naked man to the
level of a pig. Men turn out to be women, women men, and the narrator himself is
not merely unreliable but an unstable identity.

Furphy’s sensitivity to the relationship between class and sexuality deserves
comparison to that of Ada Cambridge in A Marked Man. Cambridge’s novel
would immediately appear more conventionally realist and thereby less radical in
poststructuralist feminist terms. Both novelists appear to have been chafing at
the limitations of the social and the literary conventions of the late nineteenth
century. While Cambridge works within existing structures—and she was limited,
after all, by the requirements of the newspaper serial—Furphy takes the freedom
of the writer without an audience to adapt conventions as he pleases.

Nevertheless, the rise of an interest in “distinctively Australian” literary quali-
ties in the middle of this century meant that Furphy’s peculiar novel has re-
mained central to Australian literary history, while Cambridge’s more accessible
novels have found few supporters. Indeed, Furphy’s masculinity has become a
banner under which the Australian tradition has assembled, while his contempla-
tion of the unknowable feminine has been conveniently neglected. Furphy’s
influence as the critic of authoresses has been long lasting in that his derisive
classification of them as romantics encouraged subsequent critics to sweep them
all aside in favour of a masculine 1890s tradition. While a few critics have tried to
accommodate Furphy’s interests to feminism, the formal structure of Such is Life
might be seen as resisting the phallocentric authority of the conventional realist
text, and placing questions of gender representation at the centre of attention.
In Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* the human body must be covered, and its sex must be read through a series of external, though unreliable, signals such as clothing and names. Furphy’s novel asks how we can grasp reality through literature when, like the clothing on a body, writing consists of cultural signs. He attacks romance, in particular, for deliberately falsifying these signs, though he also remains suspicious of realism’s claim to transparency. His novel suggests, however, that romance continues to offer narratives with a mysterious appeal to readers, and many of his characters act (usually irrationally) in response to romantic ideas at some point.

The late nineteenth-century romance novel, which Furphy attacks, invites feminist attention because it depends on the response of readers to the erotic impulse in narrative. The romantic novel makes the woman’s body the focus for narrative desire, and it creates stories from the pursuit of erotic satisfaction. While, as Furphy argues, such novels falsify the possible relations between men and women, they also make sexuality central—not only sexuality as it relates to the physical body but also as “the complex of phantasies and symbolizations which largely determine identity”, as Peter Brooks puts it. The romance novel exploits the dominant sexual fantasies of its society. The enigmatic women and aloof men at the centre of its stories may have no counterparts in “real life” but they represent aspects of the imaginations and desires of those who read them.

As the novels by Cambridge and Furphy suggest, there was a crisis in forms of representation as the nineteenth-century became the twentieth; novelists debated the boundaries of realist genres at a time when the social and cultural roles of men and women were also under debate. Fiction played an important part in
promoting new ideas about gender behaviour, particularly given the anticipated changes of the new century and the movement for women’s suffrage. In the final decades of the century, a form of “scientific” realism, known as naturalism, had gained a following, particularly in Europe. The French novelist, Émile Zola, led a group of naturalist writers who claimed to offer a mimetic art that operated to scientific principles of observation and objectivity. So, at the same time that the popular romance flourished, realism reached new levels of enquiry into the possibilities of presenting life through art. It is important to realise that these experiments with realism were quite conscious; writers pursuing naturalist styles knew that they were developing a fictional technique. In the case of naturalism, though, the technique aimed to provide a kind of documentary account of life. As David Baguley notes in Naturalist Fiction, while Zola claimed that naturalism was a method, in practice it usually emerged as a subject—life in the city slums, alcoholism, and sexual depravity (p.44).

Henry Handel Richardson’s first novel, Maurice Guest (1908), was published five years after Such is Life, and twenty years after the first appearance of Cambridge’s A Marked Man. In the 1870s and 1880s all three writers lived in Victoria, moving between neighbouring country towns and Melbourne, without any documented contact with each other’s work. In her autobiography Richardson tells us that she was a voracious reader who spent the year after she left school—1887 to 1888—devouring every piece of fiction and poetry which came her way.² It is difficult to imagine such a reader ignoring the Cambridge serials in the Melbourne Age, but Richardson does not mention Cambridge in her autobiography, and the family set sail for Europe before A Marked Man had reached its conclusion. The strongest evidence that Richardson was familiar with Cambridge’s work lies in the similarities between A Marked Man and The Fortunes of Richard Mahony.³

Though the conflicting claims of romance and realism are central to her fiction as they are in Furphy and Cambridge, Richardson’s first work declares her more modern interest in the psychological lives of her characters. Maurice Guest explores the internal lives of its characters—the kind of exploration which James Joyce and other writers would develop into a full-blown modernist style. Joyce’s work provides an appropriate reference point for Richardson’s fiction because his first book, Dubliners (1914) developed, like her earliest work, from a naturalist impulse; and his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) has similarities with The Getting of Wisdom (1910) which she was pleased to see noted by critics.⁴ In her work we see an alternative path from the late nineteenth-century novel.

Joyce’s commitment to exploring his characters’ internal narrative and his language experiments have meant that his work provides one of the central texts for the theories of the French feminists. Kristeva uses Joyce’s novels as examples of the polyphonic novel, and the way the Semiotic can erupt into the Symbolic Order; Cixous sees them as the base for psychoanalytic readings.⁵ Richardson has sometimes been portrayed as a woman writer who was prepared to follow masculine models of fiction,⁶ and her work, though generally admired in Australia, has
been relatively neglected by feminists. Yet her fiction offers a crucial link in the movement from nineteenth-century naturalist conventions towards modernism. She retained a commitment to providing realistic detail throughout her career, but such external detail often provides an ironic counter to the interior narratives of her characters.

All her novels examine her characters’ ideals and fantasies, but they must also confront social and economic realities which refuse or destroy such ideals. Romance or idealism may be internal obsessions of Richardson’s characters but material realities continually prevent them achieving their desires. In The Getting of Wisdom this conflict takes a comic and satiric form; in The Fortunes of Richard Mahony the results are tragic. In Maurice Guest an external romance is created from the fantasies of its characters.

Despite its central love story, this novel insists that material conditions impinge on the erotic fantasies which turn relations between a man and a woman into sexual romance. The novel examines the way romantic narratives make bodies into the objects of erotic desire and, in doing so, it questions the roles designated for women and men in the construction of human sexuality. In this chapter, I will argue that Richardson’s most romantic novel offers a shrewd analysis of the cultural myths surrounding sexual behaviour, and that her dissection of romance reveals the relationship between such myths and social power.

True to both romance and naturalist models, Richardson sets Maurice Guest in a city of Europe, the accepted location for erotic adventure. For English or Australian readers of the novels of “Ouida” and her cohort, Europe was the appropriate setting for the kind of sexual adventure which could not be sanctioned or credited among the practical, upstanding citizens of their own nations. There, Maurice Guest, a young English provincial, could become infatuated with an Australian woman and be drawn into a hopeless love affair which ends in his suicide. On the surface, the plot has elements of the popular romance, with Maurice suffering the “piquant fate” of seduction to death by one of Furphy’s “tigresses with slumbrous dark eyes”; but it is much more surely placed within the naturalist novel tradition with its commentary on the underside of urban society—the world threatened by poverty, sexual temptation and death.

The novel asks: “What is love?” and answers by examining the way in which a range of characters create erotic narratives for themselves. At the same time, it demonstrates that these narratives are not simply “natural” givens of human sexuality, nor the result of individual fantasies, but part of the culture in which Richardson’s characters live. The novel criticises gender stereotypes, social hypocrisy and aesthetic pretence. Yet it operates through conventions which several feminist critics have rejected as promoting simple notions of gender identity.

Dorothy Kelly and Naomi Schor, for example, have examined the nineteenth-century realist novel, in particular the great naturalist novels of Flaubert and Zola, to find in them a “veiling” of woman, and a reinscribing of gender distinctions which are important to the male order. Schor asserts that:
Feminist criticism has amply demonstrated the remarkable consistency with which representational fiction has from its origins figured the particularly inexorable repression to which female desire is subject under bourgeois patriarchy.\textsuperscript{10}

Kelly comments that “gender identity can be problematized on a literal level only in nonrealist texts” because the realist text understands language to “represent reality, to denote reality in an immediate way”.\textsuperscript{11} In their various ways, these feminists conclude that the realist novel offers woman only as a reflection of man, as a projection of his desires, or even as a kind of castrated version of man.

Essential to such feminist readings of realist fiction is the notion of woman as culturally constructed and defined in relationship to man. In a sense, the realist novel stands accused of doing precisely what Maurice Guest does to Louise Dufrairy—that is, of creating the sexual woman as an object of male fantasy and erotic desire and, in doing so, covering any possibility of “knowing” woman with a weight of symbolisations. In particular, the naturalist novel, with its attempts to achieve an “objective” or scientific realism, may be seen as refusing even the classic realist novel’s acknowledgement that its world is ordered in accordance with accepted social moralities. In my view, Maurice Guest demonstrates that such assumptions about realist forms need not follow inevitably; a writer such as Richardson shows herself to be perfectly aware that fiction does not denote reality in any immediate way.

Richardson’s husband, J.G. Robertson, claimed that Maurice Guest is “the greatest English naturalistic novel, the end and summary of the movement of which it is a part. It is the last link in the chain which practically began with Madame Bovary in 1856”.\textsuperscript{12} Though this may seem a large claim, undoubtedly intended to affirm the significance of a neglected and misunderstood novel, it has led to further diminishings of Richardson’s achievement. For some critics have proceeded to see the novel as a kind of imitation of the master-texts of European realism, and, at a time when naturalism has been rejected by a range of critical positions, including both Marxism and feminism, acclamation as “the greatest English naturalistic novel” may be faint praise.\textsuperscript{13}

Robertson’s references to European naturalism seem intended to explain Maurice Guest’s apparent amorality, a baffling quality to readers used to the novels of George Eliot and Charles Dickens. The difference between a nineteenth-century “realist” novel proper and a “naturalist” novel may be seen in terms of the naturalist novelist’s determination to approach subjects outside the range of the middle-class realist novel, and to deal with those subjects objectively rather than to cast them into a morally ordered narrative. This often led to charges of sensationalism (and to censorship) as naturalist novels explored the sordid and extreme aspects of contemporary life, while the realist novel attempted a more balanced and whole picture of society.

While Maurice Guest may be seen as the summation of one realist tradition, it might more accurately be regarded as the inheritor of several traditions. The novel plays these traditions against each other, so that, for example, Maurice’s
romanticism encounters a more sordid “naturalist” experience. Similarly, the musical enthusiasms of the characters in the novel suggest multiple traditions in confusion and conflict. The High Romanticism of Wagner’s music matches Schilsky’s self image; Krafft devotes himself to Chopin; Louise becomes entranced by the vulgarities of Bizet’s Carmen. It is important to recognise this multiple heritage, because Richardson’s examination of romance in Maurice Guest does not confine itself to a refined aesthetic notion but acknowledges the popular power of romantic ideas of love. Mrs Cayhill, reading yellow back novels from the lending library, is as much a part of the world of the novel as Schilsky writing settings for Thus Spake Zarathustra. Maurice Guest and Avery Hill, suiciding for love, are members of the same society as the servant girl at the country inn who nurses a broken heart, and the music teacher, Schwarz, who is having an affair with his maid. Richardson is not only observing the intellectual and artistic exaltation of romance, she is noting its effects on behaviour at every level of the social world.

Maurice Guest begins in conventional realist style with a description of Leipzig which carries a sense of authenticity through its detailed information about the geography of the city and its surrounds. The woods, the river, the Gewandhaus and the Conservatorium represent identifiable landmarks which assert the mimetic credentials of the novel. Furthermore, though the novel is set at some vague point in the 1890s, a considerable amount of information serves to place it historically and culturally. It is the period of devotion to Wagner, but also in the immediate wake of Ibsen’s controversial challenges to sexual convention, particularly Ghosts (1881), and Olive Shreiner’s Story of an African Farm (1887); these are among the many texts, operas and musical compositions explicitly referred to in the novel. It is a time in which the conservative musical establishment of the Leipzig Conservatorium is under attack from more radical musical theories, and when the issue of women’s political rights is being publicly discussed.

Thus, in familiar realist terms, the novel asserts itself as a representation of the experience of Leipzig in the 1890s, and a reader might guess that it is based on the author’s own time there. But within the first few pages we learn that the newcomer, Maurice Guest, is an “active-brained dreamer” inclined to dissatisfaction with the world before his gaze.

Maurice wants the landscape to answer his own ambitious, romantic mood; he wants snow-tipped mountains rather than clumps of trees, a picturesque street rather than the evidence of daily commerce. The novel is ironic at Maurice’s expense. The narrator comments on Maurice’s vision of himself, conducting an orchestra, “overcome by a tremulous compassion with himself at the idea of wielding such power over an unknown multitude, at the latent nobility of mind and aim this power implied”. At this stage of the novel Maurice’s aspirations and impatience with the immediate world make him a sympathetically comic figure, though his dream at the end of the first chapter prefigures the way that the object of his quest may be his destruction.
REAL RELATIONS

In falling in love with Louise, Maurice displays the same willingness to imbue the physical world, in this case a woman's body, with romantic and even spiritual significance. He also gives himself a noble role in the love affair, waiting in the early stages of passion with an absurd faithfulness opposite her door, then offering himself as a patient and serving friend when Louise is cast aside by Schilsky. When, on the day of their introduction, Maurice walks home from the opera with Louise, he offers her his self-dramatising vision of his own suffering, which she quite reasonably treats with derision.

Maurice forces all the evidence about Louise into his own romantic conception of her:

He heaped on her all the spiritual perfections that answered to her appearance. And he did not, for a time, observe anything to make him waver in his faith that she was whiter, stiller, and more unapproachable—of a different clay, in short, from other women. (p.46)

In order to account for her devotion to Schilsky, Maurice must work on his own conception of Louise until he can conclude that:

most often the best and fairest women loved men who were unworthy of them. Was it not a weakness and a strength of her sex to see good where no good was?—a kind of divine frailty, a wilful blindness, a sweet inability to discern. (p.48)

In this way, a realist novel, offering a representation of a young man in love, directs our attention to the ways in which that young man projects himself onto the world in which he lives—whether that be landscape, or woman. Maurice does not see a woman in Louise, but a projection of his own romantic ideas of woman, and the construction of Louise as object of desire owes a great deal to Maurice’s reading and the attitudes which he has acquired merely by living in his culture. Maurice creates an erotic narrative with Louise as object, and himself as suffering lover. In Maurice’s eyes it is a romantic narrative, though it is placed within a naturalist/realist novel.

According to Baguley the archetypal naturalist novel charts the decline of a woman. It focuses on the woman adulterer and typically ends in her catastrophic or banal death. The recurrent male figure in such novels is a disenchanted intellectual, so that fallen woman and disenchanted man constitute the anti-romantic naturalist pairing. Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina (1875-78), Zola’s Nana (1880) and Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891) all offer male visions of the fallen woman. Maurice Guest, as its title suggests, charts the fall of a man, and Richardson reverses the expectations of the naturalist schema: Louise, the fallen woman, survives the affair while Maurice, the misguided intellectual, suicides. Although naturalist novels about the decline of men are not unknown, Richardson presents the rare case of a woman novelist creating a male protagonist to suffer the indignities of illicit sexual love.

Furthermore, Maurice seems to regard himself as being inside a romantic, rather than a naturalist novel, and is determined to represent his love to himself
as the highest and noblest of emotions. He must create images of woman which transform the body of Louise into the centre of a spiritual rather than merely erotic quest. Yet the novel is no simple reversal of sex roles in order to demonstrate the way in which men project their own image onto woman under the guise of love. Richardson’s sympathies for her protagonist suggest that such projection is part of a common construction of woman in late nineteenth-century society, and Maurice can hardly stand alone against the weight of cultural practices around him. Richardson asks how obsessive sexual desire can arise from the mere observation of a body, and concludes that this desire depends on prevailing forms of the imagination.

Marian Arkin has suggested that Maurice fails because he behaves in a feminine way, preferring love to career success, and that the novel’s feminism may be found in its sympathy for him. This sympathy is undeniable, and Maurice fails in the public terms which Louise, at least, looks to men to fulfil. However, Maurice’s devotion to Louise has a masculine artistic quality to it, in that he creates Louise for himself. He fails as a musician, but Krafft insists that his love for Louise may save him—Krafft’s direction of Maurice to the gunshop suggests that Krafft believes he should act out his chosen role to the end. From this point of view, at least, it is Maurice’s love for Louise which transforms him from an ordinary, provincial Englishman into something like an artist—even if it is only as an actor in his own romantic narrative. Maurice’s art parallels that of the novelist. Like other male artists, however, his imagination operates to render the woman object into something she is not, something more appealing to his sense of self.

Once he becomes her physical lover, however, Maurice’s imagination fails, and he falls back on the mundane, even commonplace attitudes of his upbringing. Despite the way in which their affair has operated outside convention, Maurice eventually announces to Louise that

A man who loves a woman as I love you . . . has only one wish—can have only one. I shall never rest or be thoroughly happy till you consent to marry me. (pp.394–95)

Though Maurice’s devotion began, like his musical career, as a quest for a life beyond the bounds of a dull and ordinary domestic life, such a life is the only future he can envisage with Louise.

Ultimately, Maurice adopts a masculine possessive role towards her, and he calls to his aid the institutionalised morality of English society. By the end of the novel, Maurice, who has given up all pretence of respectability in order to love Louise, can be found berating her for her affairs with Schilsky and Krafft. She has proved not to be the innately noble woman he invented, and his response to this discovery is violent. Maurice’s suicide, though, may be seen as a final gesture of commitment to his romantic, transcendent vision of love. Like a true romantic artist, he refuses a return to the commonplace society which bred him.

Louise Dufrayer represents so striking a departure from the conventional femme fatale or victimised woman of nineteenth-century fiction that she is likely to
overshadow Maurice in any feminist reading. It is here, perhaps, that Richardson most radically questions the literary and cultural construction of woman. If Maurice offers us a masculine way of structuring the world around him, Louise may be seen as representing an essentially feminine response to it. So, at first glance, Richardson might be seen as endorsing certain stereotypes about femininity through Louise; indeed her notes indicate that she saw Louise as “the sexual woman” and Madeleine Wade as “the instinctive woman”. She is passive, dependent, uninterested in the “pale brain thing” of creative work, and she finds her own identity reflected in the love of men. When Madeleine confronts Louise with the folly of her continued devotion to Schilsky, Louise attacks Madeleine’s “cold, narrow, egotistic nature” and asserts the importance of self-forgetting love, a love which breaks down the boundaries between the self and the world beyond it. This love may be seen as the opposite of Maurice’s love, which projects the self onto the beloved. Louise’s notion of love is the complete surrender of self.

Louise is a body, not only in the eyes of the men who gaze upon her, but as a woman whose self definition is dependent on the body. Through Louise, Richardson examines what it means to be completely feminine, to take the body and its senses as the central preoccupation of life. Louise knows that it is on the basis of her physical appearance that men, such as Maurice, commit themselves to her, and she refuses any intellectual or self conscious engagement with the world around her. In her pure femininity she seeks direct sensual experience.

We are told many times about Louise’s capacity to absorb herself in the world of the senses. On the day when Maurice first sees her he observes her totally absorbed in Schilsky’s music, with (in his typically moral image) “the raptness of a painted saint” (p.30). At the ball where she wears a clinging, figure-revealing dress, Louise dances almost “like a professional”, giving herself up to the music and forgetful of the opinions of those around her. In one of the most extraordinary moments of the novel, she gazes at the sunset as she tries to solve her problems with Maurice:

She did not think or feel: she became one, by looking, with the sight before her. As she stood there, nothing of her existed but her two widely opened eyes; she was a miracle wrought by the sunset; she was the sunset—in one of those vacancies of mind, which all intense gazers know. (p.357)

Louise’s solution to her problem is a physical one—to become Maurice’s lover—and her surrender to him is “wordless, unthinking” (p.374). Though she has moments of doubt, she trusts her body to respond to the approach of a man, and, even through the depths of her distaste for Maurice, he notes that she never refuses a caress from him.

Louise is variously described as knowing the arts of the body, as being like a “wild beast” or “an animal” and so on. She is also described as childlike, and towards the end of the novel when her relationship with Maurice is a source of despair, she can find a child’s pleasure looking through the windows of a jeweller’s shop. Though her Australian nationality seems largely irrelevant to the novel,
Louise’s memories of her childhood in the bush suggest that she has retained a child’s directness of response to the natural world (pp.419–20). Richardson seems to use her own memories of her father’s funeral for this passage.

Louise’s relationship with the sensual world is not mediated by the kind of metaphoric turn of mind which, in Maurice, imbues social and moral meanings. Margaret Homans argues that a comparison of women’s and men’s writing of the nineteenth-century shows the efforts of women to seek out this unmediated relationship with nature and the world of sensual experience. Men writers, she claims, take the natural world as an object to be made into metaphors and filled with meanings determined by them.

Richardson’s creation of Maurice and Louise aligns with Homans’s theory about masculine and feminine ways of seeing, in that Maurice’s imagination tries to control and claim the world around him, while Louise seeks to lose herself in it. Nevertheless, Richardson does not suggest that Louise represents all women, any more than Maurice represents men. Rather, she creates them to act out certain aspects of accepted masculine and feminine roles.

At times, Louise sees Maurice as unmasculine in his lack of self assertion, and, on the discovery of her affair with Krafft, Maurice condemns Louise as having a “fleeting, manlike desire for the piquancy of change” (p.539), so that the masculine and feminine boundaries overlap. While Louise enacts feminine principles in her desire to surrender her ego, respectable society has no way to accept her, for her surrender requires complete disregard for the sexual regulation of marriage and all the standards of conventional female morality. Louise’s integrity lies in her commitment to her own inner life regardless of the opinions of others. Indeed, Richardson pits Louise’s inner life against the life of words articulated by Maurice, as if prefiguring contemporary feminist interest in the inexpressible inner discourse, the order of the prelinguistic Imaginary as opposed to the Symbolic. As Maurice lectures Louise on her health, she resists silently: “All the words that had ever been said could not alter a jot of what she felt of her intense inward experience” (pp.454–55).

If Louise operates according to her own feminine erotic narrative, then it is a narrative which seeks sensual experience, self forgetting and a contact with inarticulate emotions. While this narrative may not construct men as the objects of desire, it nevertheless invites (and even requires) lovers to be forceful, demanding and egocentric, like Schilsky. While Maurice’s narrative is masculine, it also conflicts with Louise’s erotic narrative because it elevates Louise rather than demanding her submission.

Maurice Guest is not didactic about appropriate sexual behaviour; indeed, its refusal to punish the sexually promiscuous, amoral woman reflects on the whole tradition of literature (and opera) about sexual women. Richardson de-moralises events which, in conventional fiction, would be clearly marked as lessons, and critics looking for a moral must struggle to accommodate Maurice’s death as a punishment for his failure in art and love. Towards the end of the novel, Maurice is
allowed to make explicit the moral positions of the two lovers: "he knew that she was not too good for him, nor he for her, nor either of them for the world they lived in" (p.515).

A focus on Maurice and Louise as examples of masculine and feminine attitudes to love may risk overlooking the novel’s careful representation of “the world they lived in”. This includes an account of the challenge to the conservative teaching of music in Leipzig, and occasional remarks on the attitudes of the ordinary German families which serve as landlords and neighbours to the main characters. There is also an unobtrusive insistence on the economic underpinnings of the affair. Louise, unlike most of the student characters in the novel, has inherited an income which enables her to treat money with contempt, but Maurice is living on his parent’s generosity and must calculate every love gift. For him, romantic love is a luxury. The popular romance novel, as Furphy reminds his readers, relies on aristocratic or bourgeois wealth—the idle rich at Monte Carlo or the landed gentry of England. One of Maurice’s fantasies is that he can love Louise in conventional romantic style, with holidays in the country and gifts of flowers, but he is continually humiliated by evidence that Louise is more capable of providing such treats than he is. His only solution to their affair—marriage and a return to England—represents such a rejection of romance that, in moments of clarity, he can see its impossibility. Through this reversal of traditional male/female financial relations Richardson suggests that the romantic love convention also works within conventions of female economic subservience to male power.

The roles and duties of men and women are a constant source of discussion among other characters in the novel. Frau Fürst, mistreated by her talented son, believes that women can only reproduce the art of men; Miss Jensen, the female emancipist, deplores the condition of the German wife; Dove tells Madeleine that it’s a man’s duty not to feel too deeply. Krafft, however, expatiates most often about the relations between the sexes, quoting Nietzsche on the whip to a shocked Maurice, and offering Madeleine the following argument about the role of women in art:

“What does any beautiful woman want with a soul, or brains, or morals, or whatever you choose to call it? Let her give thanks, night and day, that she is what she is: one of the few perfect things on this imperfect earth. Let her care for her beauty, and treasure it, and serve it. Time enough when it is gone, to cultivate the soul—if, indeed, she doesn’t bury herself alive, as it’s her duty to do, instead of decaying publicly. Madam! do you know a more disgusting, more humiliating sight than the sagging of the skin on a neck that was once like marble?—than a mouth visibly losing its form? . . . No, no! As long as she has her beauty, a woman is under no necessity to bolster up her conscience, or to be reasonable, or to think.—Think? God forbid! There are plain women enough for that . . . Believe me, there is more thought, more eloquence, in the corners of a beautiful mouth—the upward look of two dark eyes—than in all women have said or done from Sappho down. Spring, colour, light, music, perfume: they are all to be found in the curves of a perfect throat or arm.” (pp.500–01)

The narrative comments that “Madeleine’s silence bristled with irony”.

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Madeleine, of course, represents an alternative way of being woman to Louise. She is independent, determined, well organised and kind, rejecting Louise’s attitude as irrational and submissive. As an intelligent woman who is not deceived by the nature of Victorian conventions, Madeleine offers wry judgements on the activities of others. She accepts many of the liberal tenets endorsed so often by writers such as Ada Cambridge; she is humane and tolerant, and aware of the nature of sexual behaviour, whether it be Krafft’s homosexuality or Louise’s disregard for propriety. Nevertheless, Madeleine holds herself aloof from the passions which direct so many of those around her. Krafft sees her as the epitome of Englishness, of the purely “practical genius” of the English:

“And it follows, as a matter of course, that, being the extreme individualists you are, you should question the right of others to their particular mode of existence. For individualism of this type implies a training, a culture, a grand style, which it has taken centuries to attain—we have still centuries to go, before we get there,—If we ever do! For we are the artists among nations—waxed temperaments, formed to take on impressions, to be moulded this way and that, by our age, our epoch. You are the moralists, we are the . . .”

“Immoralists.”

“If you like. In your vocabulary, that’s a synonym for Künstler.” (p.497)

Madeleine, like Dove and Maurice, has an English concern for correct behaviour, a concern which Krafft sees as a direct consequence of her tolerant and humane liberalism. In Krafft’s view, art lies outside morality, and Maurice’s crisis might be interpreted as a battle between his English individualistic morality and his “artistic” willingness to take on the impressions of his age. Though Richardson does not endorse Krafft’s opinions, usually presenting them in an ironic frame as overstatements or calculated insults, the limitations imposed by morality, even a humane and rational morality like Madeleine’s, are under question in the novel. Madeleine’s allegiance to liberal humanism forms part of her resistance to the romantic excess which destroys Maurice and is the central interest of Louise’s life. Madeleine takes the liberal feminist position while Louise maintains a commitment to her own inner life and sexuality.

Richardson’s technique of commenting by means of ironic juxtapositions forces readers to see the parallels between other characters in the novel. Ephie Cayhill and her sister Johanna, for example, serve as further parodic versions of Louise and Madeleine. Like Louise, Ephie relies on her body for the attention of men, and, like Louise, she makes no pretence of serious study of music. Ephie, however, is enshrined in the hypocrisy of Victorian respectability, able to play with male sexual desire so long as she does not acknowledge its existence and implications.

After Maurice brings Ephie to meet Louise, forcing her to acknowledge the nature of her relations with Schilsky, Ephie escapes onto the streets and wanders alone for the first time in her life. In her eyes, Schilsky and she were engaged, and marriage is the only possible end of relations between a man and a woman. We
last see Ephie climbing the stairs of her hotel crying "Mummy, mummy" like a child. In her case, the feminine alliance with childlikeness, the body and sensual delight has become a source of evasion of responsibility, of falseness and deceit.

Johanna, too, enacts a respectable and "good" role of bluestocking protector of her sister, only to reveal herself as self seeking and ungenerous when Ephie's activities are uncovered. Perhaps, Johanna's anti-semitism and narrow literary taste are early signs that readers should question the bluestocking stereotype she represents.

So, while Richardson avoids the moral ordering and sense of containing a whole society of the classic realist novel, and disciplines authorial intrusions in the narrative, her juxtaposition of characters and events forms a commentary—a "superior irony" as Robertson put it. No single character can be seen as the mouthpiece for Richardson's own views, and no single character is condemned unequivocally. Ephie and Dove clearly find little discord with the prevailing values of a conformist society, and pass quickly out of attention, but the major characters—Maurice and Louise, Madeleine and Krafft, are allowed to voice the logic of their different philosophical positions.

In so far as Maurice Guest is a novel concerned about the status of women in Victorian society, with their exclusion from art, their powerlessness in the social and intellectual world, and their dependence on physical attraction for the attention of men, it "transparently" deals with the oppression of women. The central place of the love affair, however, and the presence of Maurice as protagonist suggests that this would be a false emphasis. Through the love affair, the novel comes to the heart of sexual power relations between men and women, and develops its understanding that sexual narratives are not "given" in some prelinguistic way, but are created culturally.

From Maurice's first sight of Louise sitting at the piano like "a rare, hothouse flower; some scentless tropical flower, with stiff, waxy petals" (p.28) to his final recognition of her distorted reflection in the prostitute, Luise, it is Louise's physicality which inspires and torments him. Towards the end of the novel, Maurice himself acknowledges the irrational way in which he has invested Louise's body with a meaning far beyond physical substance. He watches her as she sleeps and considers the effect of her face upon him:

Strange, that so small a thing, hardly bigger than one's two closed fists, should be able to exert such an influence over one! . . . This then was love?—this morbid possession by a woman's face. (p.545)

Maurice thinks about the implications of the power of Louise's face in more general terms, as the possibility that for each human being there may be some slight physical feature in another which would produce such a response:

But what a meaningless thing was life, when the way a lid drooped, or an eyebrow grew on a forehead, could make such havoc of your nerves! And more especially when, in the brain or soul that lay behind, no spiritual trait answered to the physical. (p.546)
The physical setting of Louise’s eyes instills a passionate excitement which can be quelled only by Maurice’s eventual suicide. Yet, as these passages suggest, Maurice is driven not by a simple physical response to Louise’s beauty (though sexual desire is part of it) but by a more profound spiritual force. Maurice invests Louise’s physical substance with a spiritual importance, and he makes Louise into an object, not only of sexual desire, but of a spiritual longing for completeness.

Earlier in the same chapter—which ends with Maurice’s violent beating of Louise—Richardson creates a stock scene of the naturalist novel, a visit to the morgue. There, the two lovers view the body of Avery Hill, who has suicided after being abandoned by Krafft. As the woman laying out the body tells them, she is beautiful in death and the barber will dress her hair in the latest fashion before burial. The novel comments that this is a face “intended for death—intended, that is, to lie waxen and immobile, to show to best advantage” (p.517). The woman in the morgue grotesquely emphasises the point by saying “It’s a pleasure to handle such a pretty corpse”. This, perhaps, is the ultimate romantic role for the woman’s body—to be a beautiful corpse. Certainly, it is the logical end of Krafft’s theories about the artistic purpose of the beautiful woman. Shortly after, Maurice himself will take the step which Krafft has suggested to him, and walk into the woods with a gun.

Richardson, however, counters the romantically envisioned woman’s body with a further anti-romantic figure. On the opposite shelf of the morgue is the body of a workingman who has chosen a less aesthetic form of death than drowning—poisoning by carbolic acid. Despite a warning that the man is ugly, Louise insists on looking at his face and “hairy black breast” (p.517) before escaping from the room. While the dead woman remains an object of aesthetic interest, the dead man demands a recognition that death means a disgusting process of physical decay. Once again, the romantic imagination must confront the real.

Baguley’s study of naturalist fiction argues that, while it appears to be a continuation of realist traditions, the naturalist novel ultimately undermines the orderly world of the realist novel. While a naturalist novel typically begins by offering itself as a reflection of a familiar reality, it depicts a process of disruption, “the disintegrating order of mimesis itself”, and inevitably ends as “a poetics of disintegration, dissipation, death” (pp.191, 222). So, the emphasis in the realist novel on human free will and individual action becomes, in the naturalist novel, a vision of a human existence ultimately determined by the laws of nature. These laws are, of course, most often figured in terms of the female sexual body which challenges the rational social world.

In Maurice Guest Louise Dufrayer’s body survives, at least to the close of the novel. But Avery Hill’s corpse and that of the unnamed man confront both lovers with the inevitable end of their relationship, and Maurice can no longer convince himself that his love represents a higher ideal. Richardson’s reversal of the naturalist order offers one of the many signals in the novel that she is perfectly
conscious of the dominant fictional conventions at hand. Versions of romance are everywhere in it; realist challenges to the fantasies of art are constantly under discussion.

The final questions left by the novel concern the role of art itself. Schilsky’s art is confirmed by public acclaim, but the art of other characters—Kraft, Louise, Maurice—remains part of their own imaginative lives. Richardson, writing her first novel, works in an art form which cannot stand aside from social and cultural politics. She confronts the prejudices voiced by various of her characters—that a woman can only perform the art of others, or by tending her own beauty offer herself for the aesthetic appreciation of men. The novel undermines the conventions which would reduce women to mere ciphers of masculine art, but it also resists the kind of moral ordering of the world that represses the irrational desire associated with the feminine.

For, despite her dissection of the egotism, irrationality, and even sexism that accompany the art-making of her characters, Richardson’s sympathies are with the artists. Their capacity to fantasise and to dream allows these characters to transcend the mundane world in which they live, while the practical characters, such as Madeleine and Dove, can never know the passion of art. In a sense, Richardson answers Furphy’s challenge to romance by insisting that the irrational, imaginative capacity—including the capacity for love and sexual fantasy—are the foundations for art. But she acknowledges that such passion has dangerous and sometimes brutal consequences for women and for men.

In Maurice Guest, romance is not the simple escapist dream of the popular novels derided by Furphy; it is also the source of great art. As a woman artist, Richardson must have felt keenly the ambivalent nature of a transcendent art which seemed to demand the submission of women; her first novel exposes the contradictory elements in contemporary ideas of the creative process. Indeed, she makes her own art from such contradictions.
REALISM AND SOCIALISM:
KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD’S
COONARDOO

In the novels of Henry Handel Richardson we can see some of the psychological interests of modernism appearing in fiction whose style, nevertheless, remains within the parameters of realism. For writers living in Australia during the 1920s and 1930s realism also retained its formal dominance, though the influence of some modernist interests, particularly an interest in psychology, can be found in a range of Australian novels of the period. By the 1930s, writers on the left, in particular, had begun to promote realism as an appropriate form to express socialist commitment, and by the end of the decade Marxists formulated it as an official genre, socialist realism.

During the 1930s in Australia, the perceived need to represent the realities of a new nation at a time when an economic crisis challenged the dream of equality gave new vigour to realism as a literary technique. The alliance between liberal political ideals and realist literary approaches is evident in the choices made by Australian writers from the 1920s through to Patrick White’s innovations of the 1950s. The roll call of realist writers from this period includes Vance Palmer, Frank Dalby Davison, Leonard Mann, Xavier Herbert, John Morrison, Kylie Tennant, Eleanore Dark, Jean Devanny, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Dymphna Cusack and Henry Handel Richardson, who published the final volume of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony in 1929. Julian Croft has noted the modernist influences in novels by Richardson, Chester Cobb and Eleanor Dark, and in Patrick White’s early novel Happy Valley (1939) but he comments that even in these moderately experimental works “the material and the real were foregrounded”.

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Most of the prominent writers of the 1930s and 1940s were women, and any speculation about the relative scarcity of men writers publishing at the time must consider the conditions of production in ways usually reserved for women. Just as feminine social roles and lack of access to audiences have confined women artists, social conditions during the Depression may have reduced the opportunities for men writers. The Australian men who did not publish during the 1930s might have been found on unemployment queues, or scraping a living for their families, or lying dead in France or the Middle East. Whatever the cause, the fiction of Vance Palmer, Leonard Mann and Frank Dalby Davison (all returned soldiers from the First World War) represents some of the relatively slight output of literary fiction by men in Australia during the period, though popular writers, like Ion Idriess, were prolific.  

While feminists appear to have given considerable attention to the women writers of this period, this attention has emphasised biography rather than the critical reading of texts. Rather than elucidating the feminist nature of the writing, feminists have written and edited a series of biographies, collections of letters and autobiographies of writers of the period. Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home*, which examines the careers of Nettie Palmer and her women correspondents—particularly Miles Franklin, Eleanor Dark, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Marjorie Barnard and Dymphna Cusack—seems to have sparked a growing interest in these writers. Carole Ferrier has edited a volume of the correspondence of the members of this group with Jean Devanny and Flora Eldershaw. Susan Sheridan's chapter in the *Penguin New Literary History* also makes the period central to her discussion of women's writing.  

The wealth of biographical material undoubtedly attracts scholars; Nettie Palmer's and Miles Franklin's collections of correspondence provide exceptional insights into the experiences of these women as they struggled to become and remain writers at a time of political turmoil. The nature of that political world, too, offers a clearer alliance of women writers with radical political movements than other periods of Australian history. Devanny and Prichard were communists; Barnard, Dark, Cusack and others were prominent left liberals and socialists.  

By the 1930s the developing idea of an Australian nationalist literary tradition, with origins in the work of Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy, could encompass the fiction of Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Kylie Tennant without demur. A.A. Phillips in his 1950s essay on "The Democratic Theme" listed Prichard, Dark, Barnard Eldershaw and Tennant as among its contemporary practitioners. So the disjunction between a radical national male literary tradition and a conservative Anglophile or Eurocentric female one, apparent in discussions of nineteenth-century writing, could be said to have disappeared by the late 1930s, particularly in fiction by writers living in Australia. Yet this reconciliation appears to have come about more by the movement of women writers to address the concerns, and adopt the styles, of the male tradition than
by any opening of that tradition to encompass female concerns and styles. The underlying contradictions remained between women writers’ concern for the experiences of women, and a national writing tradition which “is never, or very rarely, written from the eyrie of a detached observer, well above the crowd, but from some point in the working community” in the idiom “of the man on the job, with his slang and his colloquial rhythms”. Several examinations of Miles Franklin’s My Brilliant Career have noted the irreconcilable nature of her feminist commitment and her celebration of the Australian bush hero—in essence, the clash between her feminism and her nationalism—a conflict which recurs not only in Franklin’s fiction, but in the work of many of her younger contemporaries.

There are several strands of commitment at issue here. One is a nationalism which makes the representation of Australian experience in fiction a priority. The second is a political commitment that attempts through literature to change a political order wherein working people are at the mercy of economic depression and war, and which sees the rise of fascism as an imminent threat to individual freedom. The third is a concern for the conditions of life for women, which tries to achieve reform through the representation of that experience. Prichard, Cusack, Franklin, Barnard Eldershaw, Dark, Tennant and Devanny in different ways can be said to be committed to all three strands.

The novels by these writers, however, have difficulty reconciling their commitments to left politics and feminism. Although Drusilla Modjeska’s Exiles at Home focuses on contextual issues, she observes that the political crises of the thirties incited many women writers to extend their feminist preoccupation with injustice to wider social and political concerns, only to place themselves in political camps which were antipathetical to women’s interests:

The result was a separation between “politics” and “women’s issues” which was manifested in uneasy tensions in their fiction. There was a tendency to dismiss the frightening escalation of militarism and the brutality of technology as masculine and to fall back on commonsense and intuitive notions of humanity, femaleness, nurturance and freedom of expression. (p.13)

Although a wide range of novels published during this period deserves feminist examination, I have chosen Katharine Susannah Prichard’s early novel Coonardoo because it raises a number of issues important to feminist readings of literature and because feminist critics have struggled to reconcile its obvious commitment to the experiences of women, and to an Aboriginal woman in particular, with its endorsement of now discredited white attitudes to the land. This novel moves beyond consideration of male/female boundaries to examine the question of race, and it recognises race as not merely a physical difference but a difference of language and culture. It is the work of a communist who was attempting to find a form of realism which could engage with political questions; and it adopts some of the characteristics of the nationalist tradition in its choice of characters and setting, and in its style. With all this, Coonardoo continues to create critical controversy and a number of important political questions have been articulated.
in recent criticism about it. Finally, the novel, serialised in *The Bulletin* in 1928 and published as a book in 1929, marks a distance of twenty one years from the date of Richardson’s *Maurice Guest* (as *Maurice Guest* was published about twenty years after Cambridge’s two novels discussed earlier in this book), so that some sense of the development of realism in the service of women writers might be gauged.

My reading owes a considerable debt to Pat Buckridge’s reading of Prichard’s *Working Bullocks* (1926), in particular his examination of Prichard’s use of multiple styles and the resulting shift in her political standpoint through the novel. Buckridge suggests that an examination of Prichard’s writing on the two levels of literary convention and style may lead to an understanding of her politics being worked out in a non-deterministic way through the writing. This avoids the simple dismissals which equate Marxist commitment with a didactic literary realism, and inevitably find Prichard to be a writer whose gift is marred by the propaganda demands of her politics.

As Buckridge notes, it is important to realise that Prichard’s realist techniques were forged before the establishment of an official Communist Party doctrine of socialist realism. Prichard was a founding member of the Communist Party of Australia, and continued to take a central role in communist activities throughout her life, but her communism followed so closely on the Russian revolution of 1917 that she was forced to find her own way to interpret communist commitment in her writing. Socialist realism, by the late thirties, was being promulgated as a Party doctrine whereby writers were the “engineers of souls” and fiction would depict the working people in active struggle against the conditions of their oppression, with a view to assisting the future international socialist revolution. Prichard’s novels *Working Bullocks* and *Coonardoo* had been published well before this development. They represent a committed communist’s attempt to develop a technique for expressing political beliefs while responding to Australian material conditions. They are also undeniably the work of a woman whose perspective insists on an examination of the relations between men and women, and an understanding of women’s position in those relations.

Prichard’s political commitment and interest in the lives of women has never been in doubt, but recent literary discussion of *Coonardoo* reveals a rejection, or at least uncertainty, about the novel’s achievements as a consideration of race and gender questions. In his study of Aboriginal writing in Australia, Adam Shoemaker refers to the “sentimental idealism of Prichard” in *Coonardoo* and points to the relative insignificance in the development of public opinion of Prichard’s and Xavier Herbert’s sympathetic portrayals of Aborigines in comparison to the best-selling, thoroughly racist, books of Ion Idriess, Daisy Bates and others. In 1979 Kay Schaffer (Iseman) declared that “Katharine Susannah Prichard was not what would now be called a feminist”, arguing that the childhood influence of her father left Prichard bound to a dependent notion of female sexuality. Schaffer saw Prichard’s sympathy for the Aborigines as marred by her view of them as “the last remnants of a dying race” and her feminism as limited by her focus on male
characters as virile Australians. Later, Schaffer qualified the biographical focus of this reading, calling for a poststructuralist approach to Prichard’s work, which was not bound by ideas of the author as single individual. Later, she grouped Coonardoo with Richardson’s The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Dark’s The Timeless Land and Mary Durack’s Keep Him My Country as texts which “reiterate masculine constructions in their depiction of the feminine”.

In a series of articles, Susan Sheridan has suggested that Coonardoo, so far from being a novel calling for justice to Aborigines, represents a “justificatory myth” similar to the white boy/black boy friendships of liberal South African writing wherein wish-fulfilment about ideal interracial relationships serves to reinforce white claims to “own” the black land. This is a powerful and shocking argument, for it not only presents Prichard as Shoemaker’s sentimental idealist, but reads her novel as an apology for white imperialism.

Unsurprisingly, Prichard’s son, Ric Throssell found this argument offensive. He insisted that the relatively enlightened racial attitudes of recent years are dependent on the early work in challenging stereotypes of writers such as his mother. He also called on his own experience to support Coonardoo’s realism—he was with his mother at Turee Station while she researched the novel, he himself played with “Winnie”, the model for Coonardoo’s son, in the red dust of the station. For Throssell the novel represents a reality forgotten in the self congratulatory enlightenment of the present, and demands a reading in terms of the past from which it speaks.

Despite these reservations about its attitude to race, other critics see Coonardoo as the finest of Prichard’s novels because of “a metaphoric depth to its landscapes and human relationships” or the even-handedness of its characterisation. The contradictory judgements of Coonardoo—whether sentimental idealisation or sympathetic observation of the Aborigines, justificatory myth or critique of white imperialism, collusion with the patriarchy or feminist argument—need to be explored in terms of the novel. Readings which seek out only one aspect of the novel (feminism or racial attitudes) often deny the shifts and multiple levels on which it works. An approach more attentive to language and the tensions within the text might note the novel’s resistance to the conventions of a dominant order, as well as any collusion with it.

If we accept poststructuralist feminism’s argument that the Symbolic Order, the linguistic order which we enter on learning language, is male-dominated and that the conventions of language repress elements from the Imaginary associated with the feminine, then Coonardoo’s interest in language and culture might be seen as significant. In this reading, I want to stress the novel’s commentary on language, and its mix of literary conventions so that it is not seen as a unified, transparently representational work. The recording of conditions for Aborigines on outback stations, and the nature of sexual relations between white men and black women, may be seen in itself as a political act. But Coonardoo operates in literary ways which complicate any apparently simple mimetic function. The
novel’s implicit comments on the nature of writing, and on the use of language, challenge any reading which proposes that its meaning is single and easily identified, including those which see its identification of the land with the feminine as endorsement of the major dichotomies of a masculine Symbolic Order.

Modjeska has explained that the novel’s serialisation in *The Bulletin* in 1928 drew a massive protest from readers at its depiction of a white man’s sexual relations with a black woman. She speculates that Prichard wrote her foreword to the published book in response to these protests, and it seems that this foreword has created some of the critical problems. For here, the author insists on the factual basis of her novel and calls on several authorities to confirm the accuracy of her account. These authorities—the Chief Inspector of Aborigines for Western Australia and Basedow’s Darwinian anthropological assertion that the “Australian aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended”—are no longer likely to command the respect of readers. Even Prichard’s assertion that there had been improvements in the conditions for Aborigines might now be questioned. Yet, we can speculate that the foreword was written to subdue outrage at the subject of the novel, and to prevent it from being dismissed as an idle fiction written by an ignorant woman from Perth. Prichard was defending the novel’s seriousness as an account of social conditions, and was probably aware that its lyrical and romantic elements might well invite questions about its accuracy. Nevertheless, the foreword declares the novel to be a “document” of conditions, with the novelist as faithful recorder, and this is one of the genres in which the reader is asked to accept it.

Prichard begins by describing aspects of Aboriginal life and the day to day work on a northern Western Australian cattle station for urban readers. The accuracy of her account of tribal life may now be disputed, but, as Ric Throssell protested, Prichard researched this material as well as she could. It is here that she might best be described as a realist, carefully accruing detail about the interchange between the lives of the Aborigines in the camp and the whites at the house. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven celebrate the work of mustering on the station as a background to Hugh’s return with Jessica, and later the details of Mollie’s housecleaning and organising the kitchen form a base for the more melodramatic developments in the plot. We learn about the daily working life of the housegirls, and Mrs Bessie, as well as some of the broad patterns of tribal life, before the novel addresses the conventional demands of plot crisis and resolution.

However, Prichard’s focus on the relationship between a white man and a black woman moves the novel away from the “documentary” realist convention towards romance as she seeks an appropriate genre to portray the “spiritual” nature of Coonardoo’s bond with Hugh. But this romance, and the conflicting cultural values surrounding it, remains within a material situation of white capitalism and white cultural power. The romantic elements of the novel may be seen to ameliorate the white man’s exploitation of the Aborigines, and to invoke a romantic primitivism which associates indigenous people with a “natural” sexual
responsiveness. At times, the novel appears conventionally and uncritically romantic, but it also offers an implicit critique of white structures of romance.

Despite its foundations in research, Coonardoo’s narrative emerges from the subjectivities of its characters, rather than from detached observations by its third person narrator. The novel begins by representing the point of view of the Aboriginal girl, Coonardoo. She appears singing a song about kangaroos in an Aboriginal language, sitting inside a natural world which is full of life and meaning, where only the windmills, symbols of the white world of technology, “struck hard lines against the sky” (p.1). From the outset Prichard declares that her major character does not think in the language of the novel and its readers; she not only sings in a language which needs to be translated for readers, but we are told that Youie, her white childhood companion, is going away “farther than Coonardoo could think” (p.2). That is, Prichard has set herself the ambitious task of writing a novel from the subjectivity of a character for whom the novel form and its language are alien. In the first chapter of the novel, she adopts a simple, childlike language to convey the limits of Coonardoo’s understanding of her world and the white family in it.

The implications of this insight for feminist approaches is significant. It indicates that the novel is aware that it is casting its Aboriginal characters within a Western language order and Western literary conventions. Coonardoo’s experience lies outside the Symbolic Order identified by feminists as phallocentric; it may be seen as belonging to the Imaginary, the order which cannot be expressed in the conventions of language. By recognising the division between Coonardoo’s language and the language of the novel, Prichard acknowledges that while her novel must adopt Western language conventions there is an inexpressible order which it cannot code. The novel declares its awareness that its literary forms are inadequate to the experience of its subject.

Simply because of its recognition of these limits, the novel cannot remain entirely within Coonardoo’s subjectivity. White readers will understand more than the Aboriginal girl about the negotiations of white society and the place of Wytaliba, the cattle station, in the world at large. But in these early chapters, Prichard carefully moves from the thoughts of Coonardoo, to those of Mrs Bessie or Sam Geary or Cock-Eyed Bob. It is through these characters—and their variously limited ways of seeing the world—that the history of Wytaliba station is built up. So Cock-Eyed Bob wonders while he looks at Mrs Bessie what “was there in saying good-bye to a small boy that should drive the light and living out of a woman’s eyes” (p.7) and it is appropriate to Bob’s sentimental interest in women throughout the novel. Mrs Bessie sees in Coonardoo “a suffering and endurance as great as her own” as well as “a shy, graceful little creature of more than usual intelligence” (p.7). Sam Geary’s thought that “Mrs Bessie had her head screwed on the right way” is offered us directly, and he speaks to the readers about Mrs Bessie’s husband (p.8). The narrative perspective moves from within the thoughts of these characters out to their position in a lyrically rendered
landscape, but it is careful to stay close to the language of its unreflective, uneducated or inarticulate characters.

In fact, the first twelve chapters of the novel rely on gentle shifts from the points of view of one character to another, as it details the pattern of life on the station and rises to the crisis of Mrs Bessie's death and Hugh's sexual consolation in Coonardoo. When Coonardoo's hymen is ruptured by the old men in the course of the pink-eye ceremony, we are with Coonardoo, exhausted and frightened (p.23), and then with Mrs Bessie struggling with her "white woman's prejudices" (p.24) about the Aboriginal ceremony. These shifting perspectives provide a complex picture of the different values and understanding of the situation on Wytaliba and, for the most part, the authorial voice refrains from explicit comment.

Furthermore, the speech of individual characters signals their degree of ease with English language conventions. As the novel progresses, Coonardoo's speech in English is reduced to an obliging "Eeh-mm" and the occasional "Boys a comin" when the mail arrives. When Coonardoo returns from the muster her account of her adventures to the camp children is written in indirect speech, because Prichard maintains the distance which language sets down—it is only when talking to Aborigines that Coonardoo can express herself. As white characters move to the centre of the novel, it records the limitations on their language as well. Hugh's response to the sight of his newborn son, Winni, can only be "Cripes" (p.79). Phyllis speaks in a jolly, superficial slang, which keeps her at a distance from emotion, so that she refers to her father as "parent bird" and so on.

The failure of everyday speech to express the emotional lives and understandings of the characters is marked at various points by their recourse to singing. Coonardoo enters the novel, and leaves it, singing her celebration of the kangaroos. At other times, the experiences of the Aborigines in the camp are conveyed only by their songs. As they take the typhoid-stricken Hugh to the coast Warieda and Chitali sing him their songs until he comes to associate these with the life of Wytaliba and his own subconscious life (p.71). While Hugh is away, the Aborigines are forced to fend for themselves during the summer, but Prichard gives them a scene in which they shelter from the willy-willy on the house verandah while Warieda makes up a song about the delights of watching the storm—like all the Aboriginal songs in the novel this is rendered in the original language, with translation.

But there are white songs, as well. Jessica, Hugh's potential bride, sits at the piano in the house and sings a sentimental song about love's roses gathering in the garden of today, which is taken up by Cock-Eyed Bob as an emblem of the white romance which his ugliness and poverty have denied him. Later, Billy Gale rides around the cattle singing "La donna e mobile" and "The Desert Love Song" for Phyllis's benefit. The formal language of these songs and their imagery, of rose-filled gardens and wavering plumes, suggests the wider European culture to which the whites owe their allegiance. These songs, with Hugh's devotion to _The Iliad_ and Sam Geary's continual citing of the Old Testament, may also be seen as
commentaries on the novel’s use of literary convention. The novel declares its own struggle to encode experience into literary form. While the Aboriginal songs suggest other ways of making meaning than the novel in hand, the white songs refer to forms even more stylised than Prichard’s own practice. The contrast between the two kinds of song—the Aborigines’ lyrical celebration of the immediate natural world and the European elevation of feeling into traditional cultivated metaphors—may be seen as references for the novel’s own movement between genres. Prichard’s lyrical descriptions of the land offer an approximation to the Aboriginal song styles, while she adopts various European forms to bring her novel to crisis and meaning.

As the novel progresses, Coonardoo’s point of view appears with less frequency and the white characters move into the novel’s foreground. Hugh’s viewpoint becomes central, and he habitually sees Coonardoo as “a force in the background of his life, silent and absolute. Something primitive, fundamental, nearer than he to the source of things: the well in the shadows” (p.109). In this way, the representation of Coonardoo as Other, which some feminists find so objectionable, is associated with the white man’s way of constructing reality. The difficulty arises because Prichard does not criticise or dissociate her narrative voice from these accounts of Hugh’s thoughts. In the long passage where he rationalises his attachment to Coonardoo (pp.108–09), she does not dissent from his view that the Aborigines worshipped sex as the life source, and the novel itself concurs with this notion of primitive sensuality when it describes Coonardoo’s sexual desire. On the other hand, the view of the Aborigines as the “remnants of a dying race” (p.100) comes from Hugh’s thoughts on the plight of coastal and southern Aborigines, not from the narrative voice.

Here, too, we find Hugh thinking about the bond between whites and Aborigines on Wyitaliba: “Generous, kindly their relationship had been, in an overlordship imposed, gradually and imperceptibly, until the blacks recognized and accepted it, by conditions of work for food and clothing” (p.100). It is difficult to understand how a committed communist could approve an “overlordship” in return for food and clothing, and one can speculate that, while such terms must resonate with any left reader, Prichard was treading cautiously with her wider public. When Hugh goes on, in this passage, to think about how he will keep faith with this bond, Prichard surely has some ironic distance from him as she sets him up for his own breach of faith.

With the prominence of the white characters comes a shift in the style of the novel, as it conforms more firmly to conventional fictional models. From Chapter 18, it moves from the slow accretion of detail of station life to a series of disruptive events which eventually lead to the demise of Coonardoo, Hugh and the community on Wyitaliba. Each of these events is liable to seem forced or clichéd as Saul and Mollie fight over attitudes to the Aborigines; Winni is bucked from a horse and Hugh’s distress signals his paternity; Mollie leaves, and Warieda dies as a result of a bone-pointing, leaving Hugh to take Coonardoo as his woman;
Phyllis returns and marries Billy Gale; Geary seduces Coonardoo, and Hugh pushes her into the fire in a rage. At crucial moments, the plot depends on Hugh's temporary insanity—first in his delirium after his mother's death as he makes love to Coonardoo, then in his discovery of her "infidelity" with Geary and his brutal response.

What Buckridge calls "magazine romance" dominates the novel in the later stages, particularly when Phyllis returns driving her car alone across the desert to act as the perfect tomboy companion for her father. Improbably, we learn of her affair with a millionaire and the success at Government House of Mollie, the former domestic servant. As Phyllis and Billy Gale fall in love the novel struggles to find a language to renew white romance images. For example, Prichard renders their sexual attraction, almost as if she is trying to adapt Aboriginal metaphors to white technology, as:

> It was that she felt through the earth, Phyllis knew, the force and tumult of him; his every nerve and instinct, wirelessing, had fastened and was feeding on her. (p.169)

But the real difficulties arise in orchestrating Coonardoo's fall. Here, the influence of the naturalist novel, with its fallen woman, is in evidence. Like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Coonardoo suffers for her sexuality, and is cast out by her high-minded lover. Coonardoo's subsequent suffering plumbs depths of degradation—disfigured by burns, she becomes the mistress of passing white men, contracts venereal and other diseases, and finally walks back to a deserted Wytaiba in a deranged state. Here *Coonardoo* appears to demonstrate Baguley's argument in *Naturalist Fiction* that the naturalist novel's intense examination of the "real" typically ends in disconnection and entropy, in the presentation of a world falling apart. The central female character is subsumed in the requirements of the genre to represent Sexual Woman, or unfettered Nature, so that her individual subjectivity is lost. In Prichard's novel the fall of Woman occurs swiftly, without lingering retribution, but it nevertheless conforms to the notion of a masking of woman, a denial of her individual presence. This contrasts with Richardson's overturning of the naturalist pattern in *Maurice Guest*.

Coonardoo's love for Hugh, and his sense that she and the land are one, and both his possessions, may be read as Sheridan suggests, as imaging white possession of the land in a metaphor of sexual love. Her demise may be read as the fall of a naturalist heroine, an image of woman created to reflect male fantasies only to be destroyed. But it remains the case that Hugh's middle class moralism and cruelty break his bond with her, the Aborigines and the land, and it is Hugh's subjectivity, not the narrative voice, which most often envisions Coonardoo as metaphor rather than person.

For its use of shifting perspectives and subjectivities, it is worth looking at the novel's depiction of Hugh's behaviour in the scene in which he pushes Coonardoo into the fire, and its changing perspectives in the scenes immediately following. Hugh's words to Coonardoo are not recorded directly, only given as: "The vilest
words, the harshest, most bitterly cruel flood of language poured in a torrent from Hugh as he stood there beside the fire” (p.186). Hugh rides away the next day, his face “hard and stiff, his eyes empty”: “He did not reproach himself. Could not feel ashamed; scarcely remembered the madness of the night before” (p.187). The silent boys watch Hugh with a fear and resentment which condemns him—Prichard returns to the perspective of those who cannot speak, in order to provide a judgement on events. At the same time, Hugh’s incapacity to regard Coonardoo as fully human is explicitly marked by the narrative’s account of his thoughts:

“No harm would come to her out in the ranges. Was she not part of the place and the life? But what a blank her being away made in life at the homestead where she had been! Could you believe it? Could anybody believe a man, a sane man, would feel like that about a gin?” (p.190)

There can be no doubt here that Prichard does not endorse Hugh’s refusal to recognise Coonardoo’s individual humanity. When Hugh tries to sing Coonardoo’s childhood song, in a kind of consoling nostalgia, Winni sings a more appropriate lament for his mother, one which speaks of her present physical needs. When Hugh is losing Wytaliba to the banks, he gives Winni a choice about his future, “confident that the boy would ask to remain with him”, only to receive the matter of fact reply, “Give me the fiver, You . . . I got to find Coonardoo” (p.201). This is the one point where money rather than love is the currency between Hugh and his son/worker; it marks a judgement of Hugh by the Aborigines which Prichard allows to be understated and unmoralmising. Where Hugh believes Coonardoo to be an essential, unchanging part of the land, Winni recognises her individual humanity.

During this episode the narrative voice refrains from explicit condemnation of Hugh, but it is impossible to see it as in any way approving the cruelty of his actions. The Aborigines do not moralise or protest, and the narrative perspective remains with their responses of distrust and shock at the irrational behaviour of the “reasoning” white man. Furthermore, we are told in the first pages that Hugh’s father, Ted Watt, was responsible for the death of Coonardoo’s mother whom he had kicked off the verandah in a drunken rage. If Coonardoo is read as symbolising the Aborigines and the land, then Hugh must represent the sudden insanity and violence of white men.

Perhaps the difficulty in Prichard’s position, which on the face of events in the novel is a condemnation of white misuse of power, lies in the areas where she does become explicitly moral. Sam Geary is manipulated into the role of villain by a series of crude devices. For example, although Coonardoo’s sexual values are depicted as being outside the conventions of white morality, each time Geary appears at Wytaliba homestead Coonardoo responds with resentment of his sexual interest in her. Geary’s open cohabitation with several Aboriginal women is presented to us through the “white woman’s prejudice” of Bessie Watt, though Geary clearly treats these women well, provides for their children and respects their intelligence. The foreword’s approval of the laws preventing white men from
REAL RELATIONS

taking Aboriginal women to hotels aligns Prichard, the novelist, with Bessie Watt, the character who expresses the rigid sexual morals, and racial distinctions of the puritanical white woman. But it is also a morality associated with the kind of novelistic conventions which Prichard is forced to employ to resolve her plot.

This kind of morality is also evident in the stereotypical depiction of the white women. Hugh’s fiancée Jessica represents white woman as the dependent, passive, “feminine” parasite on masculine vigour—in this case, with the conventional ambition of marrying for money. The novel presents Mollie, despite her lack of pretensions and her willingness to work, as a narrow-minded and complaining companion for Hugh. Though Mollie endures loneliness on the station, and the birth of five children, her inability to participate in the masculine outdoors life condemns her. On the other hand, Hugh’s mother Bessie and his daughter Phyllis share the masculine enthusiasm for horse riding and outdoor work, and, at least for the length of the novel, are unencumbered by the demands of maternity. Coonardoo’s talents as housekeeper and mother are matched, in time, by her abilities as a horsewoman and musterer, as she rides barefoot with the men. If the novel is idealising it is in this presentation of Coonardoo as perfect woman, both mother and companion, sexual and nurturing, with skills equally suited to indoors and outdoors.

When Coonardoo talks to Winni about the mystery of his birth, he looks at her “with the eyes of his aboriginal intuition, instinctive wisdom, his white man’s intelligence, reasoning” (p.133) so that Prichard appears to endorse the division of intelligence (evident also in Xavier Herbert’s Capricornia) whereby the Aborigine is granted intuition and the white European, rationality. This division is, of course, constituted in white society between women and men. Hugh, we are told, is rational, concerned for integrity, “heroic and absurd” in the eyes of his daughter (p.143), while Coonardoo, silently devoting herself to him, represents a full range of womanly virtues. The crisis comes through Hugh’s losses of rationality in the period after the death of his mother and, at the end of the novel, when he learns about Coonardoo’s night with Sam Geary. Coonardoo’s more intuitive and sexual nature responds to Geary’s interest as a result of her unsatisfied “primordial sex hunger” (p.184) for Hugh. The language here, of popular psychology, suggests that she also represents the repressed sexuality of Hugh. We are asked to sympathise with both positions, with Hugh’s high notions of correct behaviour to black women, and with Coonardoo’s longing for physical contact with him. Yet, while the intuitive woman consistently behaves according to natural responses, the rational man proves himself to contain the irrational—the instinctive sexual response which impregnates Coonardoo, and the brutal cruelty which shoves her into a fire then leaves her to her own devices.

So, Coonardoo is a work of mixed messages and shifting perspectives. Its strengths as an attempt to envision the world from the viewpoint of those excluded from the language and culture on which the novel depends, may be overlooked as it falls back on conventional forms and characterisations. It might
be concluded that its originality and ambitiousness founder on the very need to shape a "novel" from its material. Prichard gathers together the details of station life in the Northwest, and as much information as she can about the tribal life of the local Aborigines, and lays these as the basis for a "problem" novel study of black/white sexual relations. It is possible to imagine how socialist realist formulas would handle the subject, with Hugh Watt and Sam Geary cast as the exploiting capitalist class, and the Aborigines in the role of oppressed workers, perhaps learning to organise themselves to challenge the existing status quo. Similarly, some feminist formulas might depict Coonardoo and the white women uniting to liberate themselves from servitude to men. But, despite Prichard's political commitment, the novel does not conform to these formulas. Instead, its initial realistic detail is overlaid with a celebratory lyricism which mimics the Aboriginal song forms. Then, in response to the need for action and climax, it moves towards a conventional naturalist form mixed with elements of the magazine romance and melodrama. Along the way, Prichard falls into clichés about the relationships between men and women which seem to represent the very values she challenges in her representation of the Aborigines.

*Coonardoo* raises more issues than it seems to recognise in its denouement. Its initial acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the woman from another culture, race and language questions the cultural assumptions not only of the white characters, but of the ways in which novels (including this one) force particular moral orderings onto experience. The sexual attitudes at its core split novelistic conventions about sexual morality into fragments. Coonardoo is the "straight brown body" desired by the tribal men and the clean, bright girl of white convention. When Hugh makes love to her it is as if he is drawn by spiritual means into "the common source which was his life and Coonardoo's" (p.64), but Geary represents an equally natural force for physical sex: "her need for him was as great as the dry earth's for rain" (p.180). The novel presents the Aborigines' straightforward acceptance of the physical nature of sex, then reverts to elaborate European concepts about the spirituality of love. Similarly, it refuses to consider the physical parameters of the lives of white women, who are praised only for their ability to live the pioneering, outdoor life like men.

This novel is undeniably concerned to celebrate the land. If Hugh retains any of our sympathy, it is because of his commitment to Wyalilla and his sense of a spiritual bond to it, a bond he shares with Aborigines such as Coonardoo. Sam Geary's possession of the land, on the other hand, like his possession of women, is materialistic and exploitative. So, the novel earns its reputation as part of the national tradition of fiction about ordinary people in the Australian outback.

Whether or not it deserves to be read as a consolidation of national mythologies about masculinity and white dispossession of the Aborigines is another matter. The evidence suggests that it recognises the cultural parameters which inform white constructions of the Aborigines, the Feminine and the Land as Other. The white men—Hugh, Sam Geary and Hugh's father Ted—are all inad-
equate to the demands of the land and its people. Bessie, Phyllis and the other white women cannot renounce the moral codes which belong to urban notions of respectability and class. The whites, except Sam Geary, conform to a moral code which excludes and destroys those who do not understand it. If this code is that of the liberal democratic tradition then the novel offers serious criticisms of it.

I have argued that Furphy’s Such is Life is not the simple promotion of masculine myths which its place at the head of the democratic tradition might suggest. Prichard’s novel, too, deserves to be read for the multiple levels of meaning which the tensions between its styles and conventions suggest. It does conform to romance and naturalist conventions to a degree, but it also experiments with methods of rendering the perspectives of characters who are largely excluded from the Symbolic Order. Prichard’s attempt to convey the perceptions of Aboriginal characters by reference to Aboriginal literary forms produces a remarkable lyricism. The movement from this lyricism to more conventional forms may be seen to bring with it a cultural baggage of racism and sexism. The powerful way in which these conventions carry white European attitudes and swamp the Aboriginal styles, may be said to enact at a stylistic level the white power over blacks which is central to the action.

In this reading, the common depiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard as a political writer who was not a feminist seems irrelevant. Whatever her declared position, she wrote a novel of such insight into the limitations of Western linguistic patterns that it must be seen to challenge them. Certainly, Coonardoo does not overturn the Symbolic Order or replace the conventions of the European novel with a totally new technique. But by moving from Aboriginal songs to a variety of Western novel genres, it signals the limitations of their conventions, and the white male-centred attitudes which accompany them.
HOMO AUSTRALIENSIS: VANCE PALMER

FROM THE 1920s to the 1950s Australian writing was nurtured and promoted by a remarkable married couple, Vance and Nettie Palmer. They maintained contact with writers all over Australia, and insisted that Australia had a literary heritage worth valuing and preserving. Their tastes in literature were broad and sophisticated, and they worked to alert Australian readers to the importance of writing by a range of authors, including both the nationalist Joseph Furphy and more psychological writer, Henry Handel Richardson.

While Nettie Palmer wrote a massive amount of literary criticism of international as well as Australian writing, Vance Palmer wrote novels which tried to put into practice his vision of an Australian national literary tradition. Nettie is remembered for writing an important history of Australian literature, for the first study of Henry Handel Richardson, and for maintaining a voluminous correspondence with Australian writers—encouraging them and providing intelligent critical comment on their work. Vance wrote criticism and histories, but the novels stand most clearly as his independent achievement.

Though there have been some arguments about the nature of their collaboration and the degree to which Nettie’s work was overshadowed by her husband, Vivian Smith stresses that theirs was a genuine partnership, based on mutual support and a common devotion to Australian literary culture.¹

Given this long partnership between a man and a woman, it may be surprising to realise that Vance Palmer was one of the chief nurturers of the idea of an Australian democratic literary tradition that was emphatically masculine. In his The Legend of the Nineties (1954), he reviewed the 1890s with considerable criticism of its so-called radical politics and the legends that had grown around it. When it came to the writers of the 1890s, though, his enthusiasm was clear:
[Lawson] founded a tradition of democratic writing that has affected the work of nearly all who come after him. The feature of it is a natural acceptance of human equality, a tendency to look at life through the eyes of the swagman as well as the squatter, and to take for granted the values people act upon in life rather than those they might be persuaded to accept as novel-readers.²

In Palmer's view, Lawson, Furphy and other writers of the 1890s had created an Australian literary character, an Australian type, "a laconic but sociable fellow with his own idiom and his own way of looking at things" (p.168). This is the "Homo Australiensis", the representative Australian prophesied by Furphy in Such is Life, and invoked by later generations as a touchstone for their hopes for a socialist future. (Furphy actually refers to the "Coming Australian" with some irony, but the phrase, "Homo Australiensis", seems to be a Tom Collinsism invented by Meanjin writers in the 1940s; when Palmer died a collection of obituaries was published under the heading "Vance Palmer: Homo Australiensis").³

Palmer develops his ideas about the national literary figure in terms of men—swagmen and squatters and bullock-drivers—but it is important to note that when he names the writers who have continued the tradition he chooses women—Katharine Susannah Prichard, Kylie Tennant and Henry Handel Richardson. He comments on the introspective nature of Prichard's and Richardson's work, to argue that when Australian writing looks at the inner life of its characters, it is as likely to present the thoughts of the working man or woman, as it is the members of the middle class. At the same time, Palmer insisted that truly Australian writing also concerned itself as much with the "mass" as with the "individual": "The vigorous, confused voice of the community comes into most Australian novels with the effect of a chorus, often swampung the main theme" (p.171).

These views on Australian literature might have served as Palmer's own statement of purpose in his fiction. For his work encompasses both the individual and the mass, the interior voice and the communal world. Furthermore, while he admired Furphy's masculine wit and commitment to democracy, he saw A.G. Stephens's interest in lyricism and aesthetics as a necessary complement to Furphy's lack of interest in the imaginative. In The Legend of the Nineties, we can see that, far from trying to preserve a monolithic bush tradition, Palmer was trying to develop a more diverse one from a range of writers he valued. He wanted a tradition which included both the lyrical and the socially-concerned, that could embrace Richardson and Furphy, Christopher Brennan and Henry Lawson.

Palmer was "a liberal socialist of the broad left", according to Geoffrey Serle, and a writer with "a uniquely personal hold on the humanist vision of the world", according to Harry Heseltine.⁴ He believed that a realism which addressed the daily lives of ordinary Australians was the appropriate mode for an Australian writer, and his interests lay in the masculine concerns for work, family responsibility and decision making. In the perspective of his place in literary history, then, one would expect Palmer's fiction to demonstrate a firmly masculine, even patriarchal, view of the world through a commitment to realism—possibly a model of
the way in which liberal humanist values, masculinity and realist conventions come together.

Indeed, his fiction declares a masculine perspective on the Australian experience, suggested even by the titles of some his books—*The World of Men, The Man Hamilton, Men are Human, The Big Fellow*. For the most part, they are set in rural Australia with manual work as the central concern of the characters. *The Man Hamilton* (1928) and *Men are Human* (1930) share elements with Prichard's *Coonardoo*. Set in Western Queensland they examine the plight of men who have formed relationships with part-Aboriginal women. Hamilton’s enigmatic wife looks out impassively on the world beyond the homestead, as if bound to a life beyond his reach; in *Men are Human*, Boyd McCurdie sees Josie, as having “a mysterious essence linking her to a primitive race, and perhaps shadowing her mind with memories and instincts she did not fully understand.” In each novel, the white man appears to have been partly seduced, partly trapped by the Aboriginal woman, and must confront his fate as a result. The novels never give us access to the subjectivity of the Aboriginal women and they focus on the moral responsibility and will of their white protagonists. In each novel, too, a sharply intelligent white woman forms part of a triangle of desire, with the white man prevented from joining the white woman by his sense of duty to (rather than desire for) the black woman.

Here, the Aboriginal woman figures more fully as a symbol of the land than in *Coonardoo*, where, at least in the early stages of the novel, Prichard allows her Aboriginal woman to think and observe the world. Palmer’s interest lies not in the exploration of injustice to black women, but in celebrating the white man’s sense of duty and bond to the land, symbolised by these women. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine these novels being recuperated into Australian critical discussion; Palmer’s humanism so clearly obliterates the subjectivities of non-whites.

His 1930 novel, *The Passage*, however, avoids direct confrontation between white and Aboriginal characters, and shifts its central male character closer to the kind of direct bond with nature usually ascribed to Aboriginal characters. The novel offers a particularly clear example of Palmer’s desire to create masculine characters who respond to nature in the intuitive way usually associated with the feminine. Where Prichard’s novel gives an inarticulate affinity with nature to Coonardoo, the Aboriginal woman, Palmer gives such an affinity to Lew Callaway, the working man.

*The Passage* shifts Palmer’s focus from the outback, the traditional setting for such Australian novels, to the sea. Where the central men characters in Palmer’s earlier novels struggle to identify themselves with the land, Lew’s interior life, his source of strength, lies in his understanding and respect for the tidal patterns of sea, and the seasonal life along its shore.

The narrative of *The Passage* delineates the changes to Australian regional life in the 1920s under the guise of progress. The novel allies this progress with masculine energy, particularly through the character of Lew’s younger brother,
Hughie, who has a resilient enthusiasm for new projects, and for business. The fishing village on the Queensland coast where Lew lives with his family faces the prospect of a holiday resort expanding nearby. Sully’s Beach has been renamed Lavinia by the developer, and its growing population forces the Callaways to reassess their simple life of fishing and boating. Lew has been forced to take the role of breadwinner for his fatherless family. His mother places her hopes for a better life in the younger children, particularly Hughie, while relying on Lew to remain responsible and, like the sea, unchanging.

In the course of the novel Hughie rises from store messenger boy, to truckdriver, to the owner of a bus company in Brisbane, while, driven by the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, Lew buys another boat and becomes the major carrier of local orchard produce to Brisbane. Hughie is consistently associated with machinery. He has a talent for fixing engines and enjoys driving fast. At the height of his success, Hughie drives in a motor rally, a sign of his thorough-going commitment to the modern world of technology. But the city life and its grasping for material success undermines Hughie’s integrity. His partner swindles him and he resorts to arson in an attempt to regain his fortunes. Lew, on the other hand, feels most at ease on the sea, fishing and observing the patterns of the natural world. In the relationship between Lew and Hughie, Lew takes the nurturing, even the passive and feminine role. To compensate for this, Palmer must assert Lew’s masculinity from the beginning: Lew’s physical strength and courage cannot be doubted.

But Lew’s narrative is not that of a man of action, nor even a man of intellect. It is carried along by moments when he contemplates the sea, and identifies himself with its life:

He could sit there for hours, as quietly as a cowrie working in a hidden crevice on its enamelled shell, thinking of the mysteries of the reef that ran for over a thousand miles to the north, a few fathoms of water on one side of it and unplumbed depths on the other; trying to make out the orchards, small as thumbnails on the ranges fifteen miles away; letting his thoughts and sensations flow from one channel to another. The slanting sun streamed into his brown body. He was a gull skimming though the still air with spread wings; he was an anemone curled up waiting for the wash of the incoming tide; he was a carpet-shark drifting sluggishly along the forests of water-weed.⁶

Lew’s inner discourse tends to lose self in the natural world. He responds to nature as a surrender of individual identity, a tendency identified as feminine by critics such as Homans, and evident in characters such as Prichard’s Coonardoo and Richardson’s Louise Dufayer.⁷ The alliance of the feminine with such a state is, of course, only metaphorical and, through Lew, Palmer claims this alliance for his own ideal of masculinity. Here is no masculine struggle against nature, but an almost inarticulate harmony with it.

Palmer also insists that nature has a malignant as well as lyrical aspect. One sign of Lew’s masculinity is his willingness to confront the darker side of natural phenomena. In one of the most vivid passages in the novel, Lew takes his son,
Peter, out to sea to fish. The night before, Lew has discovered his wife’s affair and he feels overcome by “a savage, male feeling”. While at sea, the father and son see a whale being hounded by a pod of killer whales, and the merciless behaviour of the whales reflects Lew’s own emotional state. Peter, however, is shocked by Lew’s explanation of the whales’ behaviour; and this timidity in the face of predatory nature is identified by Lew as a barrier to Peter’s growth to manhood.

While Palmer emphasises this masculine relationship to nature, he portrays the women characters as drawing men away from it. Anna Callaway behaves as a controlling mother unwilling to relinquish her sons to their own lives; Lew’s wife, Lena, neglects her duties to her son and seeks excitement among the leisured people in Lavinia, and eventually in an affair with a former lover; Clem McNair, the restless intellectual and aspiring artist, struggles to learn Lew’s instinctive affinity for place. It is only Lew’s youngest sister, Dot, who shares Lew’s sense of relationship with the “home” in the Passage.

These women characters form a network around the central figure of Lew, drawing out the nature of his masculinity. This masculinity must reconcile his responsibility to provide for his family with his suspicion of progress and the damage it causes. He faces the contradictory masculine obligation of care for his mother and resistance to her control; he suppresses the savagery of his anger at Lena’s affair in order to recognise her own right to freedom. While Lew offers a stability to the restless Clem, she gives Lew access to an intellectual and artistic sensibility—for an intellectual and artist like Palmer could surely not move art and the intellect entirely beyond the reach of his Australian working man.

In constructing Lew as this particularly passive and responsible man, Palmer deprives him of some of the will and desire usually associated with masculinity. For example, Lew’s courtship of Lena occurs off stage, and our only anticipation of his interest occurs when he feels a “lilt in the blood” after she calls round for some mullet, and a “pulsing in the veins” when he glimpses her at the fair. It is difficult not to suspect that our sense of Lew’s masculinity, and even his intelligence, might have been undermined by details of a courtship where Lena seems to have been the active partner. The novel asks us to assume Lew’s willing participation in the marriage, yet it quickly moves to deny him any strong and continuing sexual desire. He becomes a kind of celibate father, as if active male sexuality might complicate Palmer’s vision of his intuitive masculine ideal.

Despite Lew’s affinity for the place where he was born, The Passage also carries a sense that such a bond with place must be struggled for. Behind its premise of a family with generations of history associated with a particular place, lies an uncomfortable acknowledgment that other, older claimants, have been displaced from it. Palmer overtly refers only once to the Aborigines who once fished at the Passage, but it is a significant reference. When Peter is lost in the paddymelon country he imagines that the grass-trees around him are Aborigines:

Blacks painted for a corroboree, their spears standing up in serried ranks, their dark eyes staring through rings of white! Rigid and terrible they stood, making no
sound, merely watching him with a fixed look that was awful in its intensity. . . .
There weren’t any more blacks: they had all died years ago when old Tom was a
boy. And they weren’t really frightening, he always said, just jolly and full of
tricks. It was only in pictures you saw them like that, with feathery things on
their heads and white paint round the eyes. Pictures couldn’t come alive! (p.235)

Jack Lindsay has noted that Palmer’s fiction always carries an awareness of the
displacement of the Aborigines by his white communities. In *The Passage* Palmer
presents Lew’s commitment to place as instinctively deep, almost indigenous.
Clearly, his ideal Australian belonged to the land as part of its natural life; yet, in
the passage quoted above, he hints that such belonging comes at the cost of
destruction of an earlier habitation. The absent Aborigines have disappeared only
in the generation since the Callaways arrived at the Passage.

Early in the novel, Lew demonstrates his masculine hubris and his physical
affinity with the sea by defeating a part Aboriginal contender in the long dive
competition. We might read this as a claim by Palmer that Lew has attained
something of the physical relationship with place of the absent Aborigines. But,
in this novel, Palmer does not confront the implications of such a claim. Perhaps
Palmer’s white men can never become reconciled to the ambiguities of their
relationship to the land, given their duties as its developers and exploiters.

Despite its elements of conventional realism, *The Passage* does not offer Lew as
an autonomous subject, making decisions about his life; rather he responds to the
demands of others, particularly his family. His position is curiously passive, and
this passivity is underlined by the parallel narrative of Hughie—who does offer us
the more usual realist narrative of the freely choosing protagonist. Hughie’s move
to the city may make him a more symbolic figure of the values Australian men
“act upon in life”, but his ambitions, as presented in the novel, appear common-
place and uninspiring.

By contrast, the lyricism of Palmer’s writing about the sea lifts the novel above
his mundane narratives in the outback genre. The novelist is clearly trying to
make a realist novel that is capable of encompassing a more interior and feminine
response, without giving up his allegiance to the working man, to masculinity and
to Australian nationalism.

The way the novel struggles to broaden the national literary tradition is
explicit in Palmer’s rewriting of Furphy in the section of the novel where Peter is
lost in the bush, and dies there. This is a version of the death of Mary O’Halloran
(another Coming Australian) told by Thompson in chapter V of *Such is Life*.
Palmer tells the story from Peter’s point of view, providing him with a similar
motivation for wandering away—the desire to collect Christmas bells for his
father’s return. But where Furphy allows the story to be told by a detached and
accomplished storyteller in the context of several “lost child” stories, Palmer
imagines the full horror of Peter’s experience among the paddymelons. He is
interested in the psychological experience of Peter’s alienation from the bush, a
plausible consequence of his unease with the natural world.
As well, Palmer observes the response of Lew and Lena to their son’s death more closely, and possibly with more pathos, than Furphy does that of the O’Hallorans—though Palmer’s debt is clear. Like the O’Hallorans, Lena and Lew are utterly estranged by the time of Peter’s death, and the father in each case claims his right to the child’s body. Where Furphy’s story gathers its emotional power from understatement, Palmer explicates the detail of Lew’s return to the Passage after Peter’s death, and the sequence of events leading to his burial of Peter’s body at sea. He demonstrates that emotion can be imagined without lapsing into sentimentality. Here Palmer seems to achieve his goal of expressing both Richardson’s kind of psychological depth and Furphy’s kind of commitment to the working man; Lew’s behaviour after Peter’s death is both moving and psychologically convincing.

In *The Passage*, Palmer reveals the paradoxes of his own commitment to an Australian literary character. The novel expresses his belief that Australians needed to find some continuing bond with the land in which they live, but it also recognises the striving for change and economic progress that is part of masculine interaction with it. While Lew’s masculinity embodies this kind of relationship with nature, his responsibilities as a man to family and community demand that he exploit nature; when the community at the Passage calls Lew home from his self-imposed exile at a mining camp, he plans to revive the village by rafting timber down from the hills. Palmer endorses Lew’s view that the holiday resort was an “artificial growth, a place that depended on a flow of life from outside” while businesses based on the milling of timber, or fishing, represent a natural development of the place, “like a plant with its roots in good soil” (p.276).

This may not convince readers that Palmer found a way for men to reconcile nature and commercial development, but this reconciliation remains problematic for white Australians. Vivian Smith has seen Palmer’s preoccupation with masculine will as limiting, and Adrian Mitchell criticises Palmer’s celebration of masculine virtues, and his depiction of men as having a “special privilege to be close to the earth, to live and work in harmony with the natural forces, and to find fulfilment in knowing he belongs to a place”, while women are left to find what fulfilment they can in men. Palmer’s obsession with masculinity cannot be ignored, but it is not quite the self-confident, aggressive masculinity that might be expected from the champion of the democratic literary tradition. In Lew, Palmer celebrates a self-sacrificing, even a self-effacing, manhood. Palmer’s ascription to Lew of feminine virtues, and a kind of indigenous relationship to the land, might be seen as a masculine strategy, typical of liberal humanism, to appropriate all virtue to the central male figure. Nevertheless, the novel’s weaknesses and strengths seem to emerge from the contradictions in Palmer’s creation of his “Homo Australiensis”.

Certainly, Palmer indicates little awareness of the contradictions in his ideal of the national character. His realism never calls attention to itself by irony, and he never invites the reader to question his authority as the creator of his fictional
world. In this way, he takes the position of the traditional realist, claiming the power to represent the real. His novel very obviously argues the case for Lew's kind of Australian virtue; it promotes Palmer's theory about the necessary qualities of the future Australian. Here we find the liberal humanist adopting an appropriately realist form to express a view about the social responsibility of the individual—that individual being, of course, a man. In its lack of irony and its unwavering commitment to narrative control, The Passage enacts the authority of realism.

It may be reading "across the grain" of The Passage to find that its ascription of feminine qualities to its central man, or its inability to quell reference to the original inhabitants of the Passage, undermines Palmer's schema. But the lyrical passages—so often noted by critics as the source of its strength as a novel—disrupt the predictable realist narrative. It is in these sections that Palmer most clearly leaves the orderly realist convention to seek to record the "inner discourse" of an almost inarticulate man. They allow us to see contradiction in Palmer's assertion of a masculine which encompasses a feminine or indigenous response to nature, and they create a more complex and interesting novel than a merely conventional celebration of white Australian masculinity.

Ivor Indyk comments that Palmer's sense of the social function of literature depended on the binding of Australians to the soil. He believed that any possibilities for the social world developed from such a bond. In The Passage we can see Palmer arguing that it is possible for Australian men of virtue to achieve such a bond, and in doing so to take responsibility for their communities. His Australian man takes over the relationship which the Aborigines once had with the land, and does so with a liberal humanist's sense of responsibility for its future.

Of course, the need to reconcile white people with the Australian land has been an obsession for Australian nationalist writers. In Capricornia (1938), Xavier Herbert went even further than Palmer, speculating that the half-caste, and not some acclimatised white man, represented the best prospects for "Homo Australiensis". Herbert's novel, however, offers another kind of masculine vision, less willing to conform with liberal humanist belief or conventional realist style.

In the 1930s, the novels of Herbert, Prichard and Palmer formed part of a wider preoccupation with the white relationship to Aboriginal Australia which included the Jindyworobak movement, and commentaries such as P.R. Stephensen's The Foundations of Culture in Australia (1936). In their way, these novels raised readers' awareness of the difficulties in white-black relations on the fringes of white settlement in Australia. We are more likely, now, to notice the evasion of history in Palmer's novels, and the assumption of white dominance. Herbert's novel, on the other hand, begins with a history of white destruction of Aborigines, and Brian Penton's Landtakers (1934) dared to dramatise a brutal massacre by whites. It was a woman, however—Eleanor Dark—who took on the task of writing a fictional history of white settlement as a displacement of Aborigines
from their land in her trilogy *The Timeless Land* (1941), *Storm of Time* (1948) and *No Barrier* (1953).

These books, with the work by Prichard and Palmer, provide evidence for Australian intellectuals’ preoccupation in the 1930s and 1940s with the white relationship to Aborigines and the validity of white possession of the land. I have chosen to discuss Palmer’s novels, because they conform most fully with a liberal humanist confidence in the central responsibility of the white man. Yet, in *The Passage*, even this confidence seems to be undermined by the novel’s formal commitment to expressing the intuitive harmony of the white man with nature.

Since his death, Palmer’s reputation has fallen so far that his novels now are rarely discussed, by comparison with his history and criticism. It seems too easy to identify him with the legend of the 1890s (despite his criticism of that legend) and categorise him as the critic and promoter of its masculine tradition. While there seems little question that in his novels he was attempting to put into practice his ideas about the Australian type, *The Passage*, at least, shows a level of formal uncertainty that undermines some of its insistent masculinity.
In the fiction of Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer we can see the influence of wider historical debates about writing. Both Maurice Guest and Coonardoo develop from the naturalist traditions of the nineteenth century novel, with Prichard clearly moving towards the socially-concerned realist writing which was to become political doctrine in socialist realism. Palmer’s fiction, too, attempts to find a realism that can convey his nationalist social ideals. Christina Stead’s fiction offers even more striking evidence of the mix of literary influences available to writers by the 1930s and 1940s. There is a tendency for periods of history to be associated with only one dominant fictional style—realism, or modernism, for example—when the heritage available to each writer is always multiple and mixed. Stead’s novels display this mixture of influences. She lived in constant contact and sympathy with Marxists and was perfectly familiar with socialist realism and its political rationale. Yet she refused to narrow the range of possible models for her fiction, admiring the work of Joyce and Lawrence as well as the naturalist writers of nineteenth century Europe. Stead’s fiction resists the kind of claim to authority evident in the writing of Australian nationalists, such as Prichard and Palmer.

It is clear that Stead recognised and valued her own idiosyncracy as a writer. In 1942 she wrote about it to her father’s third wife, Thistle Harris Stead:

Every work of art should give utterance, or indicate, the dreadful blind strength and the cruelty of the creative impulse, that is why they must all have what are called errors, both of taste and style: in this it is like a love-affair (a book, I mean.) A love affair is not delicate or clean: but it is an eye-opener! The sensuality, delicacy of literature does not exist for me; only the passion, energy and struggle, the night of which no one speaks, the creative act: some people like to see the creative act banished from the book—it should be put behind one and
a neatly-groomed little boy in sailor-collar introduced. This is perhaps quite right. But for me it is not right: I like each book to have not only the little boy, not very neat, but also the preceding creative act: then it is only, that it gives me full satisfaction.1

Here is an author quite conscious of the imperfect, disunified nature of her art. Stead shows a rather postmodern determination to expose the act of creation in the work of art. This is how life and art come together: the text acts as a record of the author’s living struggle to create it. How apt, too, that Stead chooses a female sexual metaphor rather than the cliché of the artist as male—impregnating or “sowing the seed” of the art work then allowing it to make its own way in the world. Art, like sex and childbirth, cannot be clean unless some kind of sanitisation has taken place—“the creative act banished from the book” and “a neatly-groomed little boy in a sailor-collar introduced”. In her good-humoured and unpretentious way, Stead elaborates a metaphor which has become central to feminist theory since the 1970s in the idea of “writing the body” exemplified in Kristeva’s image of the “inner discourse” of female sexuality, and in Cixous’s preference for “texts written close to the origin of the gesture of writing”.2 Stead’s (it seems, quite conscious) recognition of the undermining of form as a mimicking of female sexuality also prefigures current arguments that feminism lies not so much in the representation of women’s struggles but in the formal disruption of a literary order which inscribes masculine power.

Stead’s art in her later novels, however, can hardly be called an “inner discourse”. She experimented with the techniques of modernism in her early novel, Seven Poor Men of Sydney (1934), but her later work moves steadily outwards to a more dramatic and exterior presentation of her characters. When she disrupts the literary order it is with an excessive realism, one which constantly allows her characters to perform themselves. Rather than explore the slippage between what can be experienced and what can be said in texts, Stead’s later texts say too much. They push the boundaries of literary order outwards by refusing any conventional literary tact. In her novels, the conventions of the Symbolic Order seem to be exploded rather than undermined.

In this chapter, I want to explore both the nature of Stead’s realism and the political implications of her technique, particularly with respect to feminism. While a number of other critics, notably Terry Sturm, Diana Brydon, Michael Wilding and Susan Sheridan, have examined Stead’s formal experiments in terms of her politics, further explication seems warranted given Stead’s peculiar expression of a range of twentieth-century ideological and artistic currents.3

My main contribution is to draw attention to the way Stead’s writing constantly refers to its own status as literature, and the relationship of this status to the recurrent discussion of sexual power and political allegiance in its subject matter. Stead’s novels struggle to represent a reality which is multiple and disordered, and dependent on further levels of representational practice. Her representation of experience emphasises the ways in which different perceptions of reality
may be in conflict through the differing perceptions of her characters. While *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) is central to this argument, I will also consider two relatively neglected later novels, *Cotters’ England* (1967) and *I’m Dying Laughing* (posthumously published in 1986), in which characters with Marxist allegiances are observed.4

Stead’s biographers, Hazel Rowley and Chris Williams, have explained that while she may never have been a Communist Party member, she was in intimate contact with communists from her arrival in London at the end of the 1920s. She may have been the lover of Ralph Fox, the communist literary critic, and she lived with (and later married) William Blake (Blech), a communist economist and novelist, from 1929 till his death in 1968. While the revelation of her communist activity, writing for *New Masses* and other Party journals, has excited concern about her representation of communist characters in the later novels, I think it is most important as a confirmation of critical interest in Stead’s politics. The biographical information makes it certain that Stead was aware of communist debates about the function of literature in the 1930s and 1940s—if her depiction of Emily Wilkes’s experiences in *I’m Dying Laughing* were not sufficient evidence. While we may read Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* as the work of a communist writer who had not yet been exposed to the dogmas of socialist realism, we must come to terms with the fact that *The Man Who Loved Children* was written by a woman who had been exposed to such dogmas. That is, Stead must be considered as a writer of the Left, whose work is a conscious negotiation of politics in the broad sense, rather than the individualist humanist proposed by her critics in the 1960s and 1970s.7

We know, however, that Stead used one of the least prescriptive of all the socialist realist critical essays in English at the time, Ralph Fox’s *The Novel and the People* (1937) as a teaching text at New York University in 1943. Fox sees character as central to the novel and stresses that the novelist must observe both the individual and the typical qualities of fictional characters. At one point he comments:

> It will be easily understood from what I have said so far of the Marxian view of realism that it does not at all correspond with the popular illusion concerning revolutionary, or proletarian, literature, that such literature is little more than a scarcely disguised political tract.8

Stead’s choice of Fox’s book suggests that she shared his view that the popular notion of the socialist realist novel—the depiction of the working class in active struggle against its oppression under capitalism—was propaganda rather than art. In *I’m Dying Laughing*, Emily Wilkes complains about the dearness of the approved proletarian novel and the artistic limitations of party line socialist realism, where the writer is “like a child who has to hit every railing with a stick” (p.382). Stead, no doubt, endorsed Fox’s idea that the “social type” (or the “typical”) should not dominate the individual character in literature. Marxism, in these terms, did not set up a required range of social types and subjects, but a
broad pattern which enabled the writer to place individual characters in the social and economic world.

The Marxist influence on Stead may be most clearly evident in the way in which her characters act within complex material and historical worlds. Their obsessions and blindesses participate in a social pattern of poverty and wealth, war and depression, power and powerlessness. It seems reasonable, then, to see her writing as politically committed though it does not conform to the rigid socialist realist paradigm.

Biographical information about Stead can skew readings of her work, and I would not want to see it only as the art of a socialist, or simple evidence for her political commitments during her lifetime. Similarly, accounts of Stead’s suspicion of feminism, her dislike of lesbians, her preference for the company of men rather than women, and her devotion to William Blake, do not disqualify Stead’s work from sympathetic feminist reading. Late in her life Stead objected to being labelled a feminist, dismissing feminism in interviews and an article as a middle class, mainly lesbian separatist movement, which has cut itself off from the class struggle. Susan Sheridan has commented on the contradiction between this dismissal and the consistent explication of female points of view in the novels, yet a woman in her seventies might have been forgiven for perceiving public feminism as narrow in its sympathies and incapable of addressing class issues.

Marxism’s reluctance to address the inequities of power between men and women has proved frustrating to feminists, but the success of liberal feminism may be seen by Marxists as merely extending the capitalist ethic to more fully include middle class women, while more radical feminisms have difficulty in developing any broad political strategy. In terms of literary theory, the socialist realism propounded by communists in mid-century was notoriously rigid and reliant on nineteenth-century conventions of realism. At least up till the end of the 1970s, feminist criticism and literary practice tended to mimic socialist realism by stressing the depiction of women’s (as opposed to workers’) oppression and women (as opposed to the working class) in active resistance to this oppression. This kind of Marxism and feminism had in common an insistence on realism as an approved technique and the idea that real conditions might be changed by the narration of possibilities for change. Christina Stead’s work offers both a Marxist interest in the economic basis of capitalist society and an insistence on the meaning of that basis for domestic life (the more usual focus of feminism), and, while emerging from realist traditions, it also demonstrates a familiarity with modernism and a refusal of the conventional unities of the realist novel.

In interviews, Stead sometimes referred to herself as a “naturalist”, observing the world with the objectivity of the scientist who declines to make moral judgements about it. Though this notion of “naturalism” clearly has common elements with the literary technique of naturalism, Stead does not seem to be implying a link with Zolaesque subjects and approaches to them. Indeed, Stead’s
choices of subject seem to owe little debt to earlier literary models. She claimed to write from life and, the biographies suggest, used her friends and her own experience as the foundation for fiction. Her choice of subjects—the machinations of the financial world, studies of sexually predatory women and men, dissections of the family and so on—is so original that it is difficult to place her work within genre traditions or expectations.

Yet Stead’s claim to an unmediated observation of the world was, of course, a simplification. For when we look at the subjects of her novels, and in particular their characterisation, we find that there is a recurring interest in character as self creation. Often, Stead’s central characters are writers of some kind—Emily Wilkes writes popular novels and scripts for Hollywood, Nellie Cook is a journalist, Miss Herbert writes pulp novels, Louie Pollit writes plays—but even those characters who are not writers adopt a range of existing conventions in order to represent themselves to the world. The narrative voice in Stead’s novels may be reluctant to cast characters according to convention but the characters themselves continually define themselves in terms of existing rhetorical patterns, sometimes literary, sometimes more broadly ideological. Stead’s characters are storytellers, structuring their experiences into narratives which provide their lives with meaning.

**The Man Who Loved Children**

*The Man Who Loved Children* offers a clear example of this. It is in some ways the most conventionally structured of Stead’s novels—its crisis resolved by Henny’s death and Louie’s striding out into the world. Unlike most of Stead’s other work this novel takes place within a confined period of time—the first four chapters dramatise two days in the life of the Pollit family at Tohoga Place culminating in the presumed conception of the youngest child, while the final two chapters focus on a few days in the family’s life at Spa House, echoing some of the events in the earlier chapters and culminating in Henny’s death. The intervening chapters provide a wider view of the family’s social position and decline in fortunes, with accounts of Louie’s and Henny’s maternal families and Sam’s experiences in Malaya. Taking up Sturm’s observation that Stead’s novels expose a “drama of the person”, we might see the novel as a three-act drama in which the complexity of family relationships is played out in specific domestic situations, such as “Sunday funday” or the Pollits’ party to welcome Sam home. But the characters in the drama move beyond the mere acting out of family conflicts; they each indicate the way in which the drama is structured in their own imaginations.

The beginning of the novel, in particular, uses the responses of the children to emphasise the way in which adults act within their own narratives. Henny comes home to tell the children one of her wonderful yarns about the gallery of grotesques she encountered in town:

There were men and women, old acquaintances of hers, or friends of Sam who presumed to know her, to whom she would give the go-by, or the cold shoulder, or a distant bow, or a polite good day, or a black look, or a look black as thunder,
and there were silly old roosters, creatures like a dying duck in a thunderstorm, filthy old pavers, and YMCA sick chickens, and women thin as a rail and men fat as a pork barrel, and women with blouses so puffed out that she wanted to stick pins in, and men like coalheavers, and women like boiled owls and women who had fallen into a flour barrel; and all these wonderful creatures, who swarmed in the streets, stores and restaurants of Washington, ogling, leering, pulling, pushing, stinking over-scented, screaming and boasting, turning pale at a black look from Henny, ducking and diving, dodging and returning, were the only creatures that Henny ever saw. (pp.46–47)

The children accept that these are stories, a revelation of Henny’s habitual way of seeing and creating the world, and they enjoy them without objecting that they have little relationship to the world they would see on a trip to town. The children take similar pleasure from Sam’s accounts of his heroic rise from poverty to the frontiers of science. Sam’s friend, Saul Pilgrim tells Sam: “when you talk, you know you create a world. I live in a wonderful illusion: especially when we take walks at night, I can hardly believe in the workaday world!” (p.325). Other adults, too, operate within subjective visions which they tell themselves are objective truth—Jo Pollit believes that she has never committed a sin in her life and that the world is full of shiftless, horrible people with which she, the sinless, must deal. If the children have a greater grasp on reality it is because they recognise these stories as stories, and enjoy them for their insight into the secret worlds beyond their own immediate experience. When visitors come:

the children would line up on this bench and hang entranced on the visitor’s life story. Visitors looked awkward there, arrayed in the accidents of life’s put-together and rough-and-tumble, laughing uncouthly, unexpectedly at imbecile jokes, giving tongue to crackpot idioms; yet they thought themselves important, and it appeared that as they ran about the streets things happened to them. They had knots of relations with whom they argued and sweethearts to whom they cooed; they had false teeth, eyeglasses, and operations. (p.47)

For the children, adults are storytellers creating fascinating worlds from relatively mundane experiences. They register these accounts of personal experience as being of the same imaginative order as the fairytales which Louie invents for them at night—“this world of tragic faery in which all their adult friends lived” (p.48). The children, too, have habitual modes of self dramatisation. Louie sees herself in terms of tragic poetry and Nietzschean acts of will. Ernie operates in a world of financial calculation where to possess money is to triumph; Evie reverts to more traditional little girl’s dreams of motherhood and babies, with herself at the centre of the child’s world (including marriage to Daddy).

Though Stead may present the external world of her characters as a kind of evidence for the everyday, when they speak they invoke other worlds where heroic events occur, horrible secrets are hidden and grotesque possibilities lie in wait. The children’s interest in fairytales, particularly the gothic horror stories Louie makes up for them, rests on an acceptance that these stories provide insight into the world in which they live.

Readers may feel that, like the children, they are eavesdropping on the per-
sonal narratives of the adult characters. But these narratives are not merely idiosyncratic, an expression of human individualism; they have ideological implications. The contrast between Henny’s “treasure cave” of sensual, secretive experience and Sam’s “museum” of scientific fact represents a clash of ideologies as well as personalities.

Several critics have explicited Henny’s role as the representative of feminine subversion of the masculine patriarchal order represented by Sam. Joy Hooten, for example, has applied Dorothy Dinnerstein’s archetypes of the Mermaid and the Minotaur to Henny and Sam, arguing forcefully that these two characters conform to the monstrous interdependence of the dark and magical female world and the greedy, devouring male power.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, the Lacanian association of the Law of the Father with the masculine and the natural law with the feminine is stated explicitly: “their father was the tables of the law, but their mother was the natural law; Sam was household czar by divine right, but Henny was the czar’s everlasting adversary, household anarchist by divine right” (p.71). The novel may be seen as operating on a mythological level above its realism, in which the battle between masculine and feminine forces is played out in the unhappy family presided over by Sam and Henny.

It is not difficult to argue that Sam’s world view—innocent, idealistic and oppressive—is pulled apart by Henny’s vision of a corrupt, dirty, secretive existence. There can be no doubt either that Henny’s vision is a feminine one fed by “the natural outlawry of women” dragged by their sexual bodies into the mysteries of birth, death and disease. Henny, the keeper of poisons, medicines and treasures, challenges the rational daylight world of Sam. Sam carries a mixture of ideas with him—he is a Roosevelt man, a “vague eclectic” state socialist, a Darwinist, a believer in science, an admirer of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and he is named after Mark Twain. He is also a man who says “If I were a Stalin or a Hitler” (the novel was published in 1940) and suggests the world might be run by a council of scientists who create “a type of eugenic concentration camp” to dispose of the unfit (p.380). Sam sees himself as “Uncle Sam” the voice of American home values—“the home, the hearth, the family and fatherhood” (p.479). When he has lost his job and is desperately poor he is still able to retain his “glorious, messianic belief in himself, the world and other people” (p.324), complete with its impossibly ideal notion of a family with himself at its head, his children “forever children” and a happy wife.

While Sam’s view of himself as patriarch depends on the Western liberal culture in which he lives, the patent inconsistency of his opinions prevents him from serving as a representative of that culture. Sam simply takes from it what he needs at any time to maintain power over his wife and children, and to reinforce his self belief. Nevertheless, Sam belongs to the public world while his wife and children remain imprisoned in the domestic. The two central chapters, which may seem irrelevant to the immediate family drama, reinforce the division between public and private by observing Henny on her visit to her mother, and Sam
on his government scientific expedition to Singapore. Within the walls of the old house, Monocacy, Henny, her mother and sister discuss pregnancy, suicide, cancer, adultery—the secrets of the body. In Malaya, Sam declares to his Indian secretary his belief in the brotherhood of man, announcing “You are but an ebonized Aryan, Naden, and I am the bleached one that is fashionable at present” (p.242). So while Henny and the women are submerged in the sordid underworld of female sexuality, Sam demonstrates, with unconscious racism, an ideal of world unity which denies difference. Sam’s notion of equality—“My system, which I invented myself, might be called Monoman or Mankind” (p.85)—rests on the belief that all men are “the same man at heart”, that is, Sam himself. “Monomania”, responds Louie.

In Sam’s addled theories, scientific positivism, liberal humanism, American individualism and democracy all contribute to the power of a father over his family, and the power of white men over women, children, and those of other races. The setting of the novel in 1937, in Washington, Singapore, and then in sight of the warships at Annapolis, quietly reminds us that a war is about to erupt (though the novel was published before the fall of Singapore). Sam’s arguments for eugenics and a brave new world, which on one level serve to create his character as a grown-up child, on the broader level signal the dangers of misuse of power on a world scale.

*The Man Who Loved Children* is so rich in details of this kind that one could go on elaborating the ways in which Sam is placed within an ideology of patriarchy while his enemy, Henny, expresses a desperate feminine piracy. Other critics, such as Hooton, Sheridan and Kegan Gardiner, have done much to explicate these oppositions and to develop feminist readings of the novel which see it as an enactment of feminist myth, or an attack on patriarchal power.12 Sheridan and Elizabeth Lawson have emphasised Louie’s role as the woman artist emerging from the battleground of male power and female subversion.13 The novel aligns so strongly with the frames provided by feminists from Cixous to Dinnerstein, that its credentials as a feminist novel seem indisputable.

Yet feminist enthusiasm might imply that it is so firmly controlled, so unified in its direction, as to deny Randall Jarrell’s insistence on its imperfections, or the author’s own declared belief in the importance of errors of taste and style.14 Paradoxically, the more the novel is construed as containing a single feminist meaning, the more it may be seen as a voice of authority—sharing, if you like, in Sam’s habit of seeing the world as a unity.

The conflict of narratives within *The Man Who Loved Children* may be seen as more important to feminist readings than the resolution offered by a single feminist narrative. Though it displays more authorial intrusion and direction than most of Stead’s novels, it nevertheless allows its characters to develop their own narratives, and their own meanings. In the cases of Henny and Sam the conflict between the two narratives serves to criticise and undermine them.

Henny’s narrative of rotten luck, female physical decline, the petted daughter
of a rich man cast out to grub her way through life as the wife of a child, matches Sam’s narrative of the poor boy who rose by his own efforts to government office and head of a family. The novel’s relatively simple and sparse narrative of a family moving from a tenuous hold in the lower middle class to poverty, at a time of depression and imminent war, frames these narratives in a wider, more political and social vision. As a whole, though, the novel collects a range of different narratives as each character speaks. Louie, Bonnie, Jo, Ernie, Evie and other more minor, transient characters are allowed their own peculiar visions of reality.

Just as the novel diverges from the classic realist model in its presentation of multiple narratives, it confirms this divergence by the “crackpot idioms”, the idiosyncratic language, in which its characters speak. While the conventional realist novel usually gives its protagonist an unmarked speech, preserving the illusion of a language bond between character and reader, _The Man Who Loved Children_ allows none of its characters this privilege. Sam, in particular, adopts a range of language styles—the rhetoric of a public speaker when he embarks on one of his speculations about the future, a slangy babyspeak when leading the children, or Artemus Ward impersonations to mock their resistance to him. Henny habitually exaggerates, or calls upon cynical dismissals and proverbial phrases to resist Sam’s reality. Peculiar language expressions—including rhymes, songs and slang—form the essence of shared family culture.

But even this shared culture serves to oppress members of the family. Sam, with his made-up words and puns (“female hanni-miles”, “slightly”, “munch-time” and dozens of others), his nicknames for every acquaintance, his rhymes and silly sayings (“As she walks, she wobbles”), his proverbs and clichés, not only amuses the children and excites their imaginations; he also dominates and directs their responses to experience. He appropriates childishness from his children.

On Sam’s birthday Louie turns the tables on this language-domination by writing a play in Choctaw, a language of her own making. At the surface realist level, this simply represents a child’s delight in the exotic, and her innocent emulation of classic foreign plays. But it also protects the play from Sam’s mocking wordgames, and serves as a challenge to the language which he so clearly owns. It is difficult to imagine a clearer literary example of resistance to language as the Law of the Father. At the same time, of course, the play rewrites Euripides’s _Medea_ to enact the devouring of a daughter by her Snake-man father. Both the subject of the play and its language challenge Sam’s power as father and keeper of the language.

Louie is the character most likely to refer to literature for affirmation of her own perception of the world, and she cites a series of classic works in which families are torn apart—_King Lear, Medea, Great Expectations_—but literary culture of more popular kinds permeates the Pollit family. In general, the novel does not follow the conventional pattern of gaining authority by reference to great works, but its literary allusions operate, at a further remove, to show how literature may be read and interpreted in contradictory ways. The novel’s characters are the
readers and interpreters of literature, and they build their own narratives from these readings. So Sam can quote Longfellow as part of his own egotistic belief in a shared unity of ideas—that is, that the great minds merely reflect his own. Dickens’s *Great Expectations* may reverberate with meaning when placed against Stead’s depiction of the children’s vision of the corrupt world of adults, but within the novel it appears as a favourite text of Pollitry. Grandfather Pollit performs Wemmick and the Aged P. as a grotesquely humorous entertainment for the family. This is not Dickens the social critic but the sentimentalised Dickens of quaint accents and homely truths—a vehicle for “the shocking perpetual youth of Grandfather” (p. 293).

Stead’s very use of the term Pollitry for the culture of Sam’s family recalls Dickens’ Podsnappery in *Our Mutual Friend*, though once again there is an ironic reversal—against the stolid materialism of the Podsnaps, Stead places the excessive vitality of the Pollits. The clash of family cultures, and different ways of perceiving experience, is demonstrated forcefully at the welcome home party for Sam. The Pollits perform their revelries—Grandfather’s Wemmick, Jo’s sentimental poem, their songs and rhymes—to the disgust of Louie, who quotes bits of Shelley and Confucius in return. While the pregnant Henny bridles with impatience, the clan performs its snake dance into lunch then argues about the claret cup. At the same time, Stead inserts a brief account of the children’s view of the dispute, implying that the children have their own fairytale way of watching the behaviour of adults.

Under the cheerful mask of Pollitry, various resentments simmer. The party goes on to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus”, “Funiculi, Funicula” and the “The Music Goes Round” with further performances by Grandfather, as Henny’s labour begins. For the Pollits, poetry and music can all be absorbed into their energetic optimism; human suffering, human difference, can be smoothed over in a round of community singing. At the end of this scene, news arrives of the death of Henny’s father and she is in the throes of childbirth, but Sam expresses his feelings in a poetic rhetoric which denies her personal suffering:

“The great glory of man, the great glory of the flaming forth of new stars, the glory of the expanding universe, which are all expressed in our lives by the mystery, wonder, and tragedy of birth have always thrilled me beyond expression.” (p. 298)

Stead makes it clear that literary culture is not a monolithic, uplifting “good”. It informs different lives in different ways. For a reader like Sam, literature merely feeds the “wonderful illusion” of his own life. For Louie, it confirms that monstrous relations between husband and wife, parents and children, have been part of other human experience. For the other children, the paradigm of the fairytale informs their sense of their own powerlessness. For the Pollits, songs and stories provide a communal source of sentiment or jolly good humour which can never disrupt their optimistic view of the world.

Stead’s acknowledgement of multiple meanings and her desire to reveal the
struggle of the creative act, is more important as a model for feminist writing than her elucidation of the battle between the feminine and the masculine. For, in *The Man Who Loved Children*, she has developed a method by which experience may be represented without submitting it to conventions which reinforce a prevailing authority. *The Man Who Loved Children* is rich with meaning, but it is meaning dependent on the conjunction and contrast of a range of interpretations offered by many characters. The novel does not project itself outside the frame of a realist narrative in the self conscious postmodern manner, but it insists on the possibility of infinite versions of every event by demonstrating the interpretative powers of its characters. In this way, the novelist tries to play fair with her readers. Her critique of patriarchal power does not insert a new power—the power of the author—but demonstrates, through numerous examples, the way prevailing patterns of thought influence an individual’s understanding of “reality”.

**Cotters’ England**

Stead’s further attempts to achieve a balance between a sense of the random, multiple nature of experience and satisfying fiction, may be seen in her later novels, several of which have puzzled readers, and awaited publication for years. In *Cotters’ England* she allows her characters to talk their way through the novel while readers must respond without much in the way of authorial guidance. When Nellie Cook embarks on one of her speeches about the nature of the working class, the reader can only listen and look to the responses of other listeners—characters such as Camilla, Tom or Caroline—for confirmation that Nellie is misguided, excessive and overwhelming. From time to time, we see Nellie’s eccentric appearance through the eyes of one of these characters, or follow their thoughts as they try to place Nellie and her passions, but no one character stands in place of the author to direct our judgement and command our sympathies.

*Cotters’ England* offers an even stronger contrast than in *The Man Who Loved Children* between the mundane events which take place at the surface of the novel and the mysterious, tension-filled, frightening, important events which Stead’s characters see taking place. Nellie Cook does little more than sit in the kitchen smoking and drinking tea while she tells her stream of visitors about her own heroic role in the socialist cause, identifying evil around her and advising others to see as she does. Her brother Tom is as great a storyteller as she, consciously picking up strange elements of experience to retail to willing listeners. Like Sam Pollit these characters claim to have a premium on the understanding of reality. During a discussion of the appropriate material for journalism and fiction, Nellie offers Caroline bits and pieces of socialist realist theory:

“Writing’s not just a case of self-expression or conscience clearing . . . Now we want something constructive. You see, sweetheart, just to photograph a refuse yard with its rats, that wouldn’t help the workers one tiny little bit. It would only be glorifying your own emotions.” (p.37)

Then she goes on to say “I always knew reality”(p.38). Nellie’s belief in her
own knowledge of reality depends on her credentials as a working class Northerner committed to the labour movement, and gives her the confidence to impose her views on other people. Later in the novel Eliza comments: "Nellie's a thrilling woman! She can make you see things her way, though you know it wasn't so" (p.145). This, of course, is the power of the fiction maker, the novelist, who claims to be presenting "reality". While Nellie offers her listeners one reality, Stead offers another by framing that reality in a place, a historical time, and by characterising the fiction-maker and her listeners. In Nellie, Stead mirrors the role of the novelist and warns about the distortions of fiction.

This novel may be compared to other depictions of working class postwar Britain, for example, Jack Lindsay's Betrayed Spring (1953) in which the demise of the socialist dream is traced through the experiences of a working class family. Stead's approach to the subject is both bolder and more idiosyncratic, as she chooses a socialist working class woman as the centre of her novel, only to explore that woman's exploitation of socialist ideals for her own power. Terry Sturm has commented that a subtitle to Cotters' England might have been “Why England hasn't had a revolution” (Afterword, p.353). Stead's refusal of the sentimental socialist realist vision of the working class as good-hearted victims could not be expressed more clearly than in her study of Nellie Cook, a woman who invokes this sentimental vision in order to manipulate others.

So, for all her Marxist sympathies, Stead can depict the manipulative behaviour of a declared working-class socialist, and, so far from expressing feminist solidarity, she can write about the way a woman preys upon other women and men, even to the extent of sexual cruelty. As I have suggested, Stead's novels recognise that the rigid paradigms of socialist realism do not challenge the conservative proprietorship of "reality"; they merely offer a new ownership of it. While, as a realist novelist, she may be accused of claiming such an authority for herself, she removes herself from such a position of authority by presenting other storytellers, other claimants to knowledge of "reality", as the central figures in her narratives. Nellie is not a "typical", representative Marxist, but an individualist adopting Marxist jargon to obtain her egotistic ends. Feminism, too, becomes merely a means for Nellie to control other people; when Caroline expresses her desire to be reunited with her husband, Nellie uses feminist platitudes to accuse her of betraying her sex. Stead demonstrates how these ideological languages may provide a grab-bag of phrases which contribute to personal power rather than broad political change.

Yet even, this account suggests a clearer moral order than Cotters' England actually presents to readers. In For Love Alone and The Man Who Loved Children, Stead criticises her characters—particularly those apparently modelled on figures known in her youth, such as Jonathan Crow and Sam Pollit. But in Cotters' England she also enjoys and celebrates Nellie Cook. Stead seems to love the vitality of her excessive personalities, even when they are self deceivers or outright criminals.
I’m Dying Laughing

In her greatest novel, I’m Dying Laughing (1986), the central character’s almost manic energy is matched by the excessive nature of the novel itself. I’m Dying Laughing has more “errors” than usual in a Stead novel. Ron Geering explains in his preface to the first edition that, after Stead’s death, he was left with a manuscript in various stages of development which he had to piece together. The published novel does not explain several incidents, nor follow through the lives of certain characters as one expects in a conventional novel, certainly not when the author is alive and ready to revise. If there is a sense of randomness in Stead’s other writing, then this sense is more obvious in I’m Dying Laughing, but, almost as if to prove Stead’s point about the importance of errors, this seems to increase the novel’s cumulative power.

Here, Stead goes even further in displaying her characters by detailed dramatisation of their conversations and arguments. For example, she devotes nearly fifty pages to the night in 1945 of a Hollywood dinner party, in which Emily Wilkes and her husband, Stephen Howard, are “straightened out” by their communist comrades, then go home to argue and console each other about their lives. Yet excess is also the source of the communists’ objections to Emily. Her excessiveness constantly breaks the bounds of communist ideology. Furthermore, the communists associate Emily’s political failings with her unfitness as a mother:

“Emily, in her intolerant, wild, irresistible self-obsession, in her near-manic states of excitement and depression . . . in her struggle and in her cries of dismay or shrieks of pleasure in the various currents which at one time and another bear her off in all directions without compass and without destination—cannot possibly guide the destinies of children.” (p.106)

Emily is a successful popular writer, producing humorous sketches and formula stories about American family life. She is proud of her few “serious” books in which she has expressed her communist commitment. But her Party colleagues disapprove of these books because they deviate from the Party paradigm of representing the worker as good, and free, in particular, from sexual failings. We can guess that Stead would have been sensitive to these criticisms in relation to her own work.

The dinner party scene in this novel can be read as offering Stead’s own critique of the Marxist literary paradigms of the forties, though she could never be called a popular writer like Emily. Immediately after Emily scorns her friends for their Party puritanism, the host begins a long story about how he “tested” his relationship with his wife by picking up a young woman as he travelled in Europe, as if to demonstrate his hypocrisy (and the mechanical nature of these people’s attitude to sex). One of the guests outlines the host’s new novel in which a Party intellectual finds his way to serve his country as a fireman, on the very day of Pearl Harbor. The discussion of the significance of the war in drawing communists into the mainstream of American society and the united front with the Russians against fascism, takes place while a Japanese servant brings food and
drink. The guests, eating good food and drinking whisky in the splendid Hollywood house, manage to talk about their relationship to the poor and the workers. Vera even tells Emily, "Here we've got a mass of working writers who are unionised, work for big bosses, just like factory workers" (p.89).

In this scene, Stead's sympathy for Emily and Stephen is expressed by these ironies and juxtapositions, and by the rational sense of Emily's argument about the failure of a working class political movement in the USA. Nevertheless, the main attack by the Party on Emily and Stephen concentrates on their family life and Emily's personality. Stead's excessive characters, like Emily, cannot conform to the limits of the Party line or even the standards of ordinary American decency (what Emily calls the "bathroom culture of America" (p.427)). The political and the domestic become one, with Stead's individuals unable to keep within the limits of either kind of conventional code.

In I'm Dying Laughing, Stead's vision insists not only on the conjunction of the domestic and public worlds but on the way the body itself functions within these spheres. Emily's body, not simply her personality or domestic behaviour, becomes a focus of excess. Her laughter emerges uncontrollably from a body which grows larger as the novel progresses. After the Howards move to the East coast, Emily becomes obsessed by her body, taking injections to prolong her life. This obsession, we are told, begins with the birth of her son, Giles, and Emily's first encounter with the "disease-infatuated world of women":

She swallowed down all the new woman's world of aching, haunting fantasy and concern with the loins, the bowels, the digestion. She saw, for the first time, the brain as a wet, slippery, red palpitation animal inside her "thick peasant-shaped skull" and she had suddenly appreciated the difficulty of living, breathing, surviving, the infinite possibilities of death. (p.133)

Before they leave for Europe, Emily finds herself pregnant again but convinces herself that an abortion is right:

And when this operation was over, she and Stephen had a discussion about the inconveniences and embarrassment of her being a woman. She refused to have a hysterectomy, quite a fashionable operation then. She said, "Without my sex and womb, I'm not a woman, my character would change. I'd be nothing and I wouldn't want to live. I'm a woman all ways. I like it; and I won't have that" . . . "I know where my feelings spring from, not only the brain, but from everywhere, I am myself everywhere." (p.187)

Led by her body, Emily throws herself into ridiculous infatuations which Stephen understands to be part of her personality and creativity. Emily's politics, her writing, her relationships and her body function inseparably. Emily's female-ness permeates every aspect of self.

Emily's female body grows larger, just as her personality exceeds the limits of any decorum. The second part of the novel details meal after meal, as Emily enjoys the luxuries of post-war France while the French poor suffer shortages. Stead lists the menus in restaurants as well as the home-cooked food she consumes, so that the reader feels the grossness of Emily's appetite. When Emily
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recalls her childhood as a fat girl, her enormous body trembles with laughter at the brutality of the fat jokes against herself. Considering the possibility of actually dying of laughter, she says, “the body gets up like an immense giant and grabs me and balances me over the cliff, threatening to toss me over. Oh, heigh-ho, nothing in my life compares with my physical feelings” (p.305).

By the end of the novel, Emily can hardly move because of the size of her body. She doesn’t bother to dress or wash, and spends her life in the basement of the house taking drugs to keep up her energy and writing a novel (about that other female symbol of decadent excess, Marie Antionette) which she refers to as the Monster. Her voracious appetite for life eventually consumes all around her, until she is found, alone and deranged, in the Roman Forum.

The novel shares Emily’s energy and excessiveness. Stead gives us the outlines of many of Emily’s films, stories and novels, together with her ideas, her fancies and her dreams. The Howards’ move from the West coast to East coast of the USA and then to France means that the novel covers the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In Hollywood, the Howards are ostracised for their refusal to toe the Communist Party line; in New York, they are threatened by McCarthy investigations for their Communist Party membership. In Paris, they learn about the underside of the Resistance movement, and the compromises behind the noble heroism of Occupied France. As in Stead’s earlier novels, every character has a story to tell and she allows each the space to tell it. In its account of various experiences—from Emily’s mid-West childhood to those of Nazi collaborators—the novel is encyclopedic.

Stead’s characters voice the unspeakable. They step forward to undermine accepted versions of history and to strip away the sanitised versions of it which offer a consoling, heroic past. In a few pages (pp.282–83), survivors of the Second World War explain to Emily at a Paris party that every Resistance worker alive after the war represents “a human blood bank” whose life has been preserved at the expense of many others. In this novel, history has no clear moral polarities, and it seems that survival and corruption are interdependent. The novel is explicit in linking the immediate aftermath of the war with the days of the French Revolution and the decline of the Roman Empire. Emily takes Danton and Cicero as her heroes—both brilliant men who fell victims to corruption. Towards the end of the novel, Emily recognises the USA as the contemporary Empire, with the Howards as its representatives:

“we’ve been struck by the goddamnedest thing in history. Just when we’re getting our pinfeathers and beginning to fly around and dominate the world and becoming a democratic monopolistic empire with every death-dealing weapon in the world, the world is sick of empires and monopolies and says, Down with empires and all that crap. And there we are, the young giant whose lightnings are burning a hole in his hand. Oh, I’m dying laughing at us; but it makes me sick, too. I feel so faint-hearted, when I think of it, all that power and gone wrong.” (p.379)

Emily—like the novel itself—is obsessed by history and by money. The novel’s
place and time remind us in uncomfortable terms how fragile the postwar peace has been, and how many compromises have been made to maintain it. *I’m Dying Laughing* is the most overtly political novel Stead wrote, and the most panoramic in scope. Yet, it also manages to tell the story of a woman. As one of its characters remarks, “Every human being is a sort of monster, if you get to know them” (p.395). Emily’s femaleness is part of her monstrosity, but it is a monstrosity placed in a particular political world.

In its focus on the relationship between a woman’s body and all other aspects of her life—the domestic, political, social and historical—*I’m Dying Laughing* insists on the continuity between the most intimate, physical experience and a historical, political world. Yet this extraordinary linking of the individual, sexed physical life and a vast political universe is not achieved by the techniques of modernism, proposed by some feminists as the source of understanding of the body and the feminine unconscious. There are no internal monologues, no language which operates on the borders of accepted structures. Stead’s characters act out their dramas by long speeches and extravagant storytelling. The narrative observes them and records their words, and at times appears to be almost gossiping about the interesting or peculiar aspects of their lives. This is not an “inner discourse” but an external and social one.

Anne Pender has argued that Stead is primarily a satirist, and that her American novels (*Letty Fox, A Little Tea A Little Chat, The People With the Dogs,* and *I’m Dying Laughing*) can be read as a satirical history of the USA in the years of the Second World War and its aftermath. As Pender notes, Stead often referred to herself as a satirist, and she associates Emily with national symbols—the Statue of Liberty at the beginning of the novel, Marie Antoinette and Versailles, and the Roman Forum at its end. The very external nature of the writing supports Pender’s argument, in that (as I have argued in the case of Cambridge’s satire *A Woman’s Friendship*) satire uses a mass of plausible realistic detail as a base for its more exaggerated speculations. Emily and Stephen often identify themselves as representatives of the American Empire, so that they bear a kind of satirical weight as consuming Americans.

But if the realist writer is likely to be called a political conservative, then the satirist is often assumed to be so, by definition. Feminist theory, in particular, has little to say about satire, perhaps because satire prefers to mock political idealists rather than provide answers to political problems. The political idealists in *I’m Dying Laughing* are corrupted by the very qualities which make them sympathetic characters at the beginning of the novel; their energy and inability to conform descend into a greedy decadence and loss of direction. Personal corruption undermines public political ideals.

Any great novel challenges literary theory. For such a novel cannot serve merely as an enactment of some theoretical proposition—whether Marxist, feminist or liberal humanist. Stead’s novels resist enlistment as evidence for any clear theoretical program. While a theorist such as Kristeva offers speculations about
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Menippean discourse and the polyphonic novel, or the nature of the abject, which clearly can be related to Stead’s fiction, they seem pale by comparison to Stead’s energetic determination to present us with stories that we would prefer not to know about. She is one of the novelists who presents her own theory of fiction by writing it. In her notes on the “Uses of the Many-charactered Novel” she advocates the “novel of strife” where “the reader must draw his own conclusions from the diverse material, as from life itself”. I’m Dying Laughing enacts this strife by reference to a particular history of strife—the catastrophic nature of the Second World War and its aftermath. Stead’s refusal to produce “neatly-groomed little boys in sailor-collars”, in place of her rambling, seemingly random and erratic novels, recognises that art which offers perfection operates to impose an authority, and a unifying order on experience. Her novels can be seen to resist such an authority and order, as part of an exploration of experience with all its contradictory mix of idealism and corruption.

Stead’s novels force the critic to run behind, trying to understand them, rather than providing the luxury of neat conformity with some cherished critical theory. But this quality of resistance, this very idiosyncracy, offers new perspectives for feminist approaches to her fiction. Stead’s commitment to an art that reveals its own struggle for existence, and to a multiple reality which breaks the bounds of art, exemplifies the feminist desire for an art close to physical life, free from the impositions of restrictive formal paradigms. Her commitment to a political and historical world—a real living history—confronts feminists with the crucial importance of placing their concerns about gender within the multiple, strife-ridden narrative of public power.
Readers concerned about the representation of women in fiction often find a clear misogyny in the novels of Patrick White. His contemporary novels (White is kinder to the women he sets in an historical past) parade a line of fleshy, smothering, superficial and materialistic women—from Fanny Goodman in The Aunt’s Story (1948) and Amy Parker in The Tree of Man (1955) to Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot (1961). The women characters he endorses tend, like Theodora Goodman, to be described in masculine terms or, like the good Riders, to be presented as almost ethereal and bodyless. David Tacey’s Patrick White and His Fiction (1988) applies a Jungian analysis to the novels in order to explicate White’s expression of a deep-seated hatred and fear of the mother figure. But even the most casual reader of the novels cannot fail to find there a distaste for the female body, and a resistance to the smothering power of the maternal. Reading White’s A Fringe of Leaves in 1976, Christina Stead thought he had “some odd ideas about women” and could not bring herself to like his work. For his part, White generously recognised Stead’s genius, regretting that he was only to meet her as an old alcoholic who came to his luncheon party with a bag of empty bottles for his garbage bin.

White often projects his obsession with the failings and corruption of the physical body onto the female characters in his novels, and so participates in a long tradition of Western art. This links his fiction with that of the nineteenth-century naturalists, such as Zola, where moral corruption is displaced onto the female body, whose demise serves as sacrificial purification. As we have seen, Richardson, Prichard and Stead all engaged with this literary model of the female
body in some way—rewriting it, endorsing it, or exploring the possibilities of female excess. These writers, though, have most often been classified as realists, privileging observed experience over the invented or literary—and sometimes charged with a lack of the literary imagination to create without observation.

White, on the other hand, is the Australian exemplar of the inventive literary genius. He scorned the documentary realist forms prevalent in 1950s Australia, and the idea that literature depends on experience rather than imagination. White’s novels offer themselves as “literary” in that his readers can never forget that what they read has been mediated by the work of an artist, but they also engage with realist conventions. His novels plunder a range of literary styles, including forms of realism, and they often shift from one tradition to another.

In much of White’s writing formal innovation may be seen to project a masculine view of woman, as his novels create women as the bearers of physical and moral decay. In his late novel, The Twyborn Affair (1979), however, White liberates himself from the conventions of gender representation. This novel examines both the process of gendering in the novel and the cultural limiting of sex roles in life. For this reason, it offers more possibilities for feminist reading than a novel such as A Fringe of Leaves (1976) where White makes some effort to treat a woman character sympathetically.

While it seems to record aspects of White’s homosexual experience, the novel also plays with a range of literary styles and it questions the social and cultural conventions of gender identity. The Twyborn Affair appears to break free from any need to conform to a single genre or a unified protagonist. In its fascination with the idea of the self construction of identity, in its many parodies of other literary texts, and in its movement between the social and historical world and the confined space of its central figure’s sexual and imaginative life, the novel embraces the postmodern more than any earlier White novel. Yet it is also idiosyncratically referential to a particular social and historical world—that of Europe and Australia in the first half of the twentieth century.

White’s biographer, David Marr, provides a mass of evidence that White did experience many of the characters and events presented in his novels. Marr reads The Twyborn Affair as an exploration of White’s homosexuality:

The quest for purity left White free to explore without self-pity or special pleading the difficulties of his life as a homosexual: the long guilt of childhood, the innocent blunders of his family, the difficulties of self-acceptance, his determination to “come to terms with his largely irrational nature”, the ambivalence that cut him off from the ordinary world of men, his sense of being a walking deception always more convincing to others than himself, and the extraordinary release of his thwarted sensuality found in landscape.

The novel, of course, does mark White’s liberation from a public secrecy about his sexuality, but it seems unduly limiting to read the novel only as an exploration of homosexuality when it so clearly questions the stability of any sexual identification. Marr also confirms by research that Eddie Twyborn’s life on the Monaro
depends on White’s experiences as a jackeroo there in the early thirties and, to some extent, Eddie’s relationship with his parents mirrors White’s own family situation.

The biographer’s interest in the relationship between the experiences of the novelist and his novels reads *The Twyborn Affair* as a form of autobiography, but this reading tends to diminish the novel’s self reflexive insistence on its own literary rather than “real life” sources. Marr, nevertheless, provides support for the literariness of the novel by telling us about the literary interests behind White’s visit to Europe in 1976, including his attempts to see Edith Wharton’s house on the Riviera, and to meet Martin Boyd in Rome. He specifically mentions White’s enthusiasm for Katherine Mansfield’s letters and explains that elements of her last days on the Riviera with John Middleton Murry are incorporated into Part I of *The Twyborn Affair*.

The novel itself offers numerous literary allusions and signposts. Joanie Golson returns to the English Lending Library in quest of a novel by Edith Wharton; Eddie Twyborn reads La Rochefoucauld on the ship home from Europe; and his childhood collection of books includes Kipling and Swinburne, as well as three standards of traditional masculine reading which are also accounts of isolation and imprisonment—*Robinson Crusoe*, *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Don Prowse, the station manager at Bogong, tells Eddie “you missed something if you never read *Headlong Hall* or *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*”, indicating that his own imaginary world might be closer to the more stylised scenes of the final section of the novel, and at one point Eddie even contemplates naming his horse “Ouida”. (White seems to have shared some of the literary interests of Ada Cambridge and Joseph Furphy.)

*The Twyborn Affair* has many of the stock elements of conventional nineteenth century and early twentieth-century popular fiction—the New World rich on the Riviera, the outback adventure, the English country house weekend, and so on. When Eddie Twyborn drops his D.S.O. into a drain, White parodies a long tradition of literary heroes—from Dominic Langton flinging his D.S.O. into the dam at the end of Martin Boyd’s *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962), through Robert Graves’s version of Siegfried Sassoon throwing his medal into the mouth of the Mersey River in *Goodbye to All That* (1957), to Sassoon’s own *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1931).

In his article on “Eddie and the Bogomils”, Andrew Riemer elucidates the novel’s witty series of references to the Byzantine empire and the cult of the Bogomils. Nicholas Birns also has argued that in this novel White deliberately invokes marginal literary traditions—particularly Byzantine literature—in order to move across the lines of conventional divisions between Australia and Europe, as well as those between male and female.

At times, this awareness of a literary past creates a claustrophobic atmosphere in the novel, which is only made more obvious by the references to historical events such as the two World Wars. It does, however, move from identifiable
REFERENCES—life on the Monaro, for example—to almost completely artificial and constructed settings such as the brothel in London. In its movement between the representation of experience and the re-presentation of other literary representation, the novel questions the relationship of fiction to reality, in particular the relationship of the sexual imagination to the physical, sexed body.

In his article, Riemer maintains that The Twyborn Affair is “dedicated to the notion that the body, the flesh and the senses are utterly worthless” (p.26). His explication of its recondite jokes about the Manichean heresy of the Bogomils suggests that the disjunctive, playful form of the novel expresses a rejection of the possibility of the kind of transcendent meaning sought in White’s earlier novels. In these earlier novels “the body” and “the flesh” often were figured in the woman characters, and White’s striving for the transcendent led to such devices as the servant girl Rose (in Voss [1957]) giving birth to the “baby” of Voss and Laura, so that Laura’s spiritual status could be preserved. In these novels, women sometimes attained spiritual enlightenment, but they did so at the expense of “femininity” or physical engagement in sex (Theodora Goodman in The Aunt’s Story, Miss Hare in Riders in the Chariot).9

The Twyborn Affair appears to be a more democratic novel than its predecessors in that it explores the possibility of sexual rather than spiritual freedom, in the context of a wider social freedom. As Riemer suggests, it seems to abandon the possibility of transcendent meaning and turns its attention to the limits of the material world, in particular the expression of self through the body. In this way, its interest in freedom comes close to the gender concerns of feminism. In particular, the novel seems to demonstrate or modify some of the ideas of poststructuralist feminism about the relationship of gender to language, and the elusive nature of sexual identity and desire.

Where some feminisms argue that the experience of woman cannot be expressed in a language which is by definition an encoding of masculine understanding, White’s novel refuses the possibility that a sexed body can “contain” or express the multiple elements of his protagonist. Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith (E.) Twyborn’s body may be seen as participating in a binary language structure, where it must be either male or female and where both elements cannot be expressed at the same time. In this way, the novel addresses the problem of embodiment on two levels: E.’s several changes of sexual identity insist that E.’s body can never fully represent E. while the novel’s self reflexive strategies suggest that reality slips away from language.

The Twyborn Affair links the process of fiction writing and reading with sexuality and the construction of gender. Through E. Twyborn’s changing gender identifications, the novel explores the contradictions between sexual desire and the experience of living inside a body. It sets up a pattern of voyeurism and the projection of sexual desire by one character onto another, regardless of anatomical sex, and White uses this sexual projection as an analogy for the creation of fictions through language. Gender becomes a language, a language of the body,
which may be read and misread, and which may confine the expression of human individualism as much as verbal language.

E. Twyborn retains a male body throughout *The Twyborn Affair*, though White changes the personal pronoun according to the clothes and identification of E. in each part. E.’s male body becomes the object of desire for both men and women in the course of the novel. In each part, a man and a woman focus their unfulfilled longings on E. In Part I, Angelo Vatatzes and Joanie Golson find in Eudoxia a mirror of their own different desires, in Part II Marcia Lushington and Don Prowse seek a puzzled physical satisfaction from Eddie, and in Part III Rod Gravenor, Lord Bellasis, pursues Eadith before E. finally responds to his mother’s desire for “a daughter”.

In each case, desire comes from viewing E.—from the ways in which E. answers to already existing ideas of what is desirable. Joanie Golson, for example, is entranced by her vision of Eudoxia in the garden of the faded French villa and associates his beauty with a soft and glowing, flower-filled garden (p.14). On her second visit to the house, Joanie’s spying on Eudoxia and Angelos at the piano provokes a romantic longing for escape from her sexual self:

As she stood by the wall watching the scene through the open window, the tears were streaming down her cheeks, for joy, from the music she was hearing, and out of frustration from the life she had led and, it seemed would always lead, except for the brief unsatisfactory sorties she made into that other life with Eadie Twyborn; probably never again, since Eadie had been aged by her tragedy. (p.18)

This is a reference to Joanie’s sexual relationship with E.’s mother—a suggestion that Joanie, too, is imprisoned in her sex role of feminine woman and doting wife. Later, when E. dives into the sea, in a gesture towards suicide, he is observed by Monsieur Pelletier, who runs the beach kiosk, and who, like other characters in the novel, finds “the landscape a spiritual refuge” (p.72) from the conventional familial and sexual roles required of him. Monsieur Pelletier cannot determine the sex of the swimmer, but finds the vision a “wordless poem”, eventually masturbating at the sight (p.74). In each case, sexual desire forms part of a longing which goes beyond physical gratification, and certainly beyond the limits of clearly delineated sex roles. E. represents escape from the mundane divisions of sexed existence.

The pattern of voyeurism continues in Part II where Eddie finds himself watching the embraces of his mother and Joanie Golson by means of the mirror in the Twyborns’ hall in Sydney. On the Monaro it is Don Prowse’s glimpse of Eddie diving into the river which incites him to rape. But the climax of this voyeurism is the moment when Eddie is driven to put on Marcia Lushington’s clothing in order to view himself in the role of woman. Here the text emphasises clothing as an extension of the body, and the dual possibilities of E.:

He fumbled with his own crude moleskins, the bargain shirt from the Chinaman’s store. The laces of his wrinkled boots, stinking of rancid mutton fat, lashed at him as he got them off. He stood shivering in what now passed for his
actual body, muscular instead of sinuous, hairier than formerly, less subtle but more experienced. He needed no guidance in entering the labyrinth of gold thread and sable, the sombre, yet glowing, brocaded tribute to one of Marcia’s less neutral selves. And still was not satisfied by the image Marcia’s glass presented.

He stormed at the dressing-table, roughing up his hair, dabbling with the beige puff in armpits from which the heavy brocaded sleeves fell back, outstaring himself feverishly, then working on the mouth till it glistened like the pale coral trap of some great tremulous sea anemone.

He fell back on Marcia’s bed.

And the footsteps began advancing with a male assurance which had been his own till recently. Eudoxia Vatatzes lay palpitating, if contradictorily erect, awaiting the ravishment of male thighs. (p.282)

This is no woman in a man’s body, but a self creating (as a novelist does) possibilities of both sexes for narcissistic pleasure.

Part III begins with the Bellasis sisters watching the comings and goings in Beckwith Street through their parted curtains, and imagining the activities inside, so the pattern of voyeurism, with its implication of the watcher as creator of what is seen, is extended so that the fictional nature of sexuality cannot be avoided. E.’s “common peep-hole” (p.329) through which he, as Eadith, observes the activities of prostitutes and clients is called his “omniscient eye”. Eadith becomes not only the major voyeur of this section, but the creator of the world inside the brothel. White comments explicitly on Eadith’s awareness of his own place in a self-created fiction, even to the extent of acknowledging another novelist at work:

on high occasions she went so far as to stick a grain de beauté on her left cheekbone, a punctuation mark in the novelette she enjoyed living as much as the one Evadne Schumacher, the cook-novelist at the house across the sreet, was obsessed to write. Perhaps it was Evadne who had conceived the additional conceit of the violet cachou Eadith took to chewing when got up in her purple drag. (p.310)

E. constructs himself as a pseudo-woman, Eadith, in order to play out a literary role—that of the madam of a high class brothel, sexually unattainable, and paradoxically pure, tasteful, aristocratic, ladylike. It is Eadith who chooses the roles for the prostitutes to play, who dresses them, and who decorates the house as an appropriate scene for the sexual play acting which takes place there. At one point, the reader becomes the voyeur as we see Eadith, fully clothed, reclining among the naked women who work for him.

White plays with the layers of fictional and sexual role playing. Sexual roles, like the novel itself, operate on several levels of constructedness, so that questions are raised about the nature of sexual desire. Desire forms a narrative dependent on the display of certain external signs—the wearing of particular clothes, for example—so that sexuality becomes a form of play acting. The psychic nature of desire, the way it operates through certain kinds of languages, becomes a central issue for the novel.
While this interest in the fictional nature of sexuality may appear a major concern of the novel, White, as usual in his novels, emphasises certain overt messages in *The Twyborn Affair*. He offers an explanation for E. Twyborn’s condition—his sense of rejection by his father, and his mother’s inability to love him—and the novel reaches a kind of resolution by means of E.’s total acceptance by his mother. Along the way White makes a series of significant statements to be underlined by the attentive reader, among them the suggestion that E. has a “woman’s psyche” in a man’s body, and that the most important part of a human being is the “woman in man, and the man in woman”, and so on. The overt narrative of the novel might be read as a study of a man whose rejection by his parents has left him in an “abnormal” state, alienating him from love and “normal” sexual and social relations, until, finally, his mother’s acceptance of him in whatever sexual garb enables him to come to terms with both aspects of his nature. Yet the novel offers a much deeper and more problematic exploration of sexuality than this glib, and possibly more conscious, offering.

Though E. may be a man playing a woman making love to a woman, White never takes the liberty of crossing E. over into a woman’s body (as the title character does in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* [1928] and Jeanette Winterson’s protagonist does in *Sexing the Cherry* [1989]). He is always imprisoned in the body of a man. But this imprisonment does not quite amount to a desire to be a woman. Instead, there is a dissatisfaction with both physical forms, with the inevitable and ineluctable fact that in order to be, each of us must be in a body of one sex or the other.

In this sense, *The Twyborn Affair* can be linked with White’s early novels, and their obsession with embodiment. In *Voss*, for example, the explorer resists the limitations of his body, and is repelled by the grossness, vulgarity, and basic material needs of all bodies—and, inevitably, their death and decay. *Voss* seeks out a spiritualism which will transcend the body and its weaknesses. In *The Twyborn Affair* the problem of embodiment is not so much the bond to a material existence, in conflict with transcendent spiritualism, but the requirement that each body take the form of one sex or the other. E., his mother Eadie, Joanie Golson, even Don Prowse and Greg Lushington feel themselves at odds with this sexing.

In Lacanian terms, we might read this as exemplifying the gap between the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order might be found in the characters’ roles as men and women (particularly in the social roles of husbands, wives, fathers and mothers) and the Imaginary in those inexpressible desires experienced by Joanie as connected with her relationship to Eadie Twyborn, or found by Monsieur Pelletier and Eddie in the landscape. *The Twyborn Affair* does seem to offer a simple Freudian rationale for E. Twyborn, in his search for fathers and constant mental return to the few moments in his childhood at which his father offered intimacy. White seems to endorse to some degree Freud’s idea that homosexuality results from a kind of failed Oedipus complex, and that E.’s sexual
indeterminacy is somehow the fault of his parents. But this simplicity, like the overt statements about women in men, and men in women, is countered by more complex elements in the novel.

In Lacan's reading of Freud, the Oedipal moment is the moment of entry into language, and it is the crisis of gender. The infant establishes a relationship to language which is a gender relation—either to identify himself with the Symbolic Order which is phallocentric or to see herself at odds with that order, and excluded from it. The idea of the unspeakable Imaginary, the order outside language, provides a helpful frame for reading White, who has always been fascinated by what cannot be said in words, and what is suppressed in the social order. The metaphoric idea of the Phallus as the signifier, and masculinity as the means of entry into the Law of the Father, might be applied to E. Twyborn's resistance to exclusive gender roles—and we should note that his father is Judge Twyborn.

While Lacanians write about the phallogocentric order using gender as a metaphor for the relationships of individuals to power through language, White writes here about the gendered body as an imprisoning necessity. One must have a body, and therefore a sex, just as in order to take part in the social world, one must enter the Symbolic Order, and be forever gendered by language. In The Twyborn Affair the male body constricts the human by forcing a range of duties, inhibitions, emotional repression and attachment to the social order. The female body, in the person of characters such as Joanie Golson, also imposes an imprisonment in a social world of wifeliness, or motherliness (though White seems to find these roles more fun).

In The Twyborn Affair the Imaginary Order does not appear to be feminine in binary opposition to the masculine Symbolic Order—as it is in the theories of Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous—but ungendered (as in the theories of Julia Kristeva). The longing of E.—and other characters such as Don Prowse and Joanie Golson—seems to be for a freedom from gender, a recognition of an order outside “the human hierarchy of men and women” (p.426), as Rod Gravenor puts it in his final letter to Eadith. Just as Monsieur Pelletier, in Part I, finds relief from the burden of gender in the landscape, so in Part II, Eddie Twyborn is most liberated in his encounters with the landscape of the Monaro. The elusive object of desire seems not to be man or woman, but the “wordless poem” found in direct encounters with nature. Once again White associates the dichotomies of gender with the constrictions of words. Like the wordless poem, the ultimate object of the sexual quest lies outside the tension between men and women.

Gravenor, however, refers to a “hierarchy” of men and women, recognising that the elaborate play of gender does not imply equality. E. plays the part of a woman without suffering the full physical implications of womanhood. White creates a range of woman characters whose bodies bear such implications—Marcia Lushington giving birth to boy children who die in infancy, Peggy Tyrell, toothless mother of seventeen and expert at laying out the dead, the ulcers and
fallen wombs of Pelletier’s women, the menstruation and abortions of the prostitutes. Everywhere in the novel, women are associated with traditional images of flowers (usually pink or gold), with animals (Eddie’s dogs, Marcia’s horses), with the countryside and nature in general, including death and aging. It is perhaps a further self reflexive comment on the way the novel emphasises its own incestuous fiction making that the only successful childbearing within it results from the incestuous relationship between the rabbiter and his daughter.

In the final paragraphs of the novel Eadie Twyborn imagines a scene of perfect harmony in which she is sitting in a garden with her daughter E. drying their hair together. This vision of harmony is one of mother–daughter unity, free from Oedipal crisis and the rupture of masculinity. Indeed, Eadie thinks of E. as a lost fragment of her self which has been returned to her, while the reader knows that E. lies dead in the London street, literally fragmented by an exploding bomb. The desired garden in which masculinity and femininity are reconciled eludes physical existence and, in the last sentence, a bulbul shakes “his little velvet jester’s cap” as if to mock all human desires.

So the novel finally does suggest that the desired and unspeakable Imaginary (the wordless poem) has some associations with the feminine, in that unmediated experience of nature is linked with the female characters. Even here, White carefully distinguishes between women playing their sexual roles and women in their relationship to the natural world—Marcia Lushington’s social selves as against her identification with the Monaro. Joanie Golson is, perhaps, the most important indicator that women must construct their sexuality as much as men; she is a self creator almost equal to E. Indeed, E.’s anxiety to avoid Joanie suggests that her powers as a fictionist may threaten him, and it is only when Joanie has declined into near blindness that E. can risk speaking to her.

Marr and Riemer have pointed to the way in which E.’s quest as Eadith seems to be for a kind of purity of being through sexual excess. This excess relies not on clear divisions between men and women, between homosexuality and heterosexuality, but in a loss of self in a fluid sexuality. The novel, itself, resists any clearly defined heterosexual narrative of resolution. Its model for alternative fictional accounts of sexuality is not the least of its interests for feminism.

Yet The Twyborn Affair also links its exploration of an imprisoning sexual stability with more conventional notions of freedom, particularly in its Australian section. This part of the novel, where E. must act the role of a man, gives White the opportunity to parody Australian masculinity and ideals of egalitarianism. Eddie goes to Bogong to work as a jackeroo as part of his search for freedom, but it is not only the masculine sexual role which limits him. White’s description of the relationships between the Lushingtons and their workers recalls Furphy’s account of social status on the “right-thinking Australian station” in Such is Life; the stockmen leap to Greg’s slightest need and “in the Twentieth Century did the sort of thing that has always been expected of serfs” (p.198). When Eddie is invited to dinner in the homestead he enters a “holy of holies” equivalent to entry into
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Furphy's Runnymede homestead. Only a jackeroo like Eddie, educated and known to the family, gains the status to dine with the owners while the kitchen servants watch through the hatch.

White could well be parodying Palmer's kind of "Homo Australiensis" in Part II. Eddie shares some of Lew Callaway's sense of affinity with the land; like Lew, he turns to the natural world as a source of consolation and understanding. The feminine aspects of such a recourse to nature, suppressed in *The Passage*, are clear in White's novel, and he challenges the masculinity of the Australian type, promoted by writers like Palmer. It's almost as if White has deliberately set out to challenge the timid sexuality of Palmer's men.

E. flees Europe to find a simpler life, close to nature, but he discovers the natural world to be a bleak Monaro landscape, not the harmonious countryside of a literary pastoral. This section of the novel observes a particular Australian landscape with the kind of detail associated with the realist novel. White knows about the activities of a sheep station, from sheep-dagging to pouring blue metal in the creek beds, and he convinces us that his account is close to the experience. On the Monaro E. becomes more aware of his physical body with its growing muscularity, its pain after a day's work, its scabs and broken fingernails. At the same time, Eddie's experiences not only convince him that he is a fraud in the role of the typical Australian, they also demonstrate that the egalitarian freedom of the national myth is illusory. White offers a satirical view of the limitations of Australian democracy—Furphy and Palmer, and the other writers of the national tradition are under challenge.

Like Stead at the end of *I'm Dying Laughing*, White leaves us with images of a decadent European civilisation, with the Second World War as the cataclysmic event. The novel itself appears to enact this decadence, as it exposes a romantic pre-Great War attitude to sex, the hypocrisy of a realist democratic Australian vision, and the artificiality of London society as the bombs fall. Just as civilisation appears to fall apart at the novel's end, the writing reveals itself as made up of many styles, of multiplicity and fragmentation.

Of course, White cannot be called a feminist writer on the basis of this reading, but his late novel responds to at least some feminist concerns about gender and literary form. In *The Twyborn Affair* White exposes his role as novelist, as the one who dresses his characters in one sex or the other, as the voyeur who watches them suffer, or the brothel keeper who creates roles for them to play. Despite his claims to transsexual understanding, White's vision remains masculine, but in this novel he allows his readers to recognise his role as the master of his characters' sex and sexuality.
At the end of the 1960s a resurgent feminism pushed the debate about the place of women in Western society back into public attention. The leading voices in this new wave recognised that literary writing was central to understanding the role of women; feminists such as Germaine Greer and Kate Millett drew on their educations in literature to analyse the inherent sexism in contemporary society, and to call for change.¹ Since then, women have published so much fiction that they represent a major voice in Australian literary life. Yet the arguments about what constitutes feminist writing continue. There is, undoubtedly, a difference between women’s writing and feminist writing. But, despite its portrayal in the popular press as an authoritarian doctrine, feminism has no organised hierarchy with the power to authorise the “correct” feminist line. Fortunately, feminist issues must be debated text by text, with both fiction writers and readers contributing new insights.

In the 1970s, feminist critics tended to look to fiction for representations of women’s experience, but in recent years critics influenced by poststructuralism have favoured a more experimental writing—looking to radical form as an expression of radical politics. Of course, this generalisation must be qualified by an awareness that “women’s writing” remains a staple of university courses, and that “women’s writing” most often forms the basis for the study of feminism. In this final section of the book, I want to consider two sides of contemporary feminist writing broadly representative of the attempt to “write experience” on the one hand, and the desire to experiment on the other. As we shall see, the division between “experience” and “experiment” is not distinct—but it does provide a starting point to consider contemporary feminist debates about literature. In this
chapter, I will consider women’s writing from the “writing experience” end of the spectrum, leaving a discussion of more experimental writing to the last chapter.

Here, as the basis for my discussion I have chosen two books that are important in the recent history of Australian publishing—Helen Garner’s novel, *Monkey Grip* (1977), and Sally Morgan’s family history, *My Place* (1987). Despite their difference in genre, these books have in common an acknowledged reliance on their authors’ experiences of Australian life. Garner based her novel on her diary, circulating the manuscript before publication among the friends who might recognise themselves in it.² Morgan’s book is a non-fiction account of her family; it belongs overtly to the genre of lifewriting.

Sometimes an enthusiasm for *écriture féminine* leads feminist critics to undervalue more public writing and to underestimate the power of narrative to change public attitudes. Rita Felski has attacked the poststructuralist feminist promotion of experimental fiction over the autobiographical for its denial of the public political world in which fiction is published and read. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* she argues that a number of autobiographical fictions by women have had a greater impact on readers and on public attitudes than the less accessible writing favoured by poststructuralists. *Monkey Grip* and *My Place* add weight to this argument. The use of realist modes to present new aspects of reality to readers may be seen as a reformist political role rather than an act of revolution, yet its political importance in the broad community is more obvious than work which will be read only by a like-minded and educated coterie of readers.

The publication histories and the formal strategies of these books provide interesting matter for this debate. Both have been politically influential, significantly changing the possibilities for publication and reading in Australia. Garner’s novel marked a change in the publishing of women’s writing, and Morgan’s book alerted readers to the hidden experience of Aborigines, particularly Aboriginal women.

Garner delivered her novice drafts to Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble in 1976, and *Monkey Grip* became one of the first novels published by the new publishing house of McPhee Gribble.³ Though the critical reception was mixed, it received the National Book Council award in 1978, with endorsements by Patrick White, and it quickly gained a popular audience.⁴ A film was produced in 1982.

Before the publication of *Monkey Grip* there were several prominent women fiction writers in Australia, most notably Thea Astley, but Kerryn Goldsworthy in *Australian Writers: Helen Garner* refers to the pre-1977 period as a “harsh climate” for women’s writing, finding a lack of sympathy in the public world of publishing and criticism (pp.12–16). Differences can be found not only in the conditions for writing but in the nature of women’s writing itself, in that there was a kind of polite decorum in women’s fiction before Garner demonstrated that the messy struggle of a woman’s domestic and sexual life could form the basis for fiction. One need only read a pre-1977 Astley novel, such as *The Slow Natives* (1965), alongside a later novel such as her *It’s Raining in Mango* (1987), or Olga Masters’s
work on a similar subject, *A Long Time Dying* (1985), to feel a greater freedom in the later writing. It seems as if women felt the need to be “ladylike” and controlled in order to win respect—in writing as well as sexual behaviour. Women writers from Thea Astley to Carmel Bird acknowledge that Garner’s novel made a difference, not just in publishers’ interest but in the possibilities for their own writing.⁵

*My Place* marks a similar progression. In the mid-1980s Sally Morgan tentatively took her family history to Fremantle Arts Centre Press where she received sympathetic editorial advice and support.⁶ The final account of her family’s experiences as Aborigines in twentieth-century Western Australia has not only become a bestseller, but opened the way for the publication of other autobiographies and accounts of Aboriginal life. The book has influenced politics in a direct way by alerting tens of thousands of white Australians to the history of Aboriginal displacement and its meaning for individuals. It also demonstrated new writing possibilities for other Aborigines, particularly women.

Before the book’s publication, Aboriginal writing in Australia was dominated by men, such as Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) and Kevin Gilbert, who favoured “literary” forms, particularly the novel and the poem. Despite the prominence of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) as a poet, Aboriginal women had been relatively silent. *My Place* showed that it was possible to write about Aboriginal life in a less overtly literary or political mode. Aboriginal women have found that the autobiography offers a genre where the writer need not claim any authority but experience in order to speak. Books by Ruby Langford Ginibi, Glenda Ward, Mabel Edmund and others followed Morgan’s, providing widening evidence of neglected aspects of Australian life.⁷

**Monkey Grip**

*Monkey Grip* appeared at a moment of particular importance in the history of Australian writing. In the 1940s and 1950s many women writers with socialist sympathies, from Katharine Susannah Prichard to Dymphna Cusack, Kylie Tennant and Eleanor Dark, had adapted the realist models of the nationalist tradition in various ways for their fiction. In the 1960s, however, the nationalist tradition fell into disrepute in the wake of Patrick White’s dazzling experiments with form. Thea Astley emerged as the most prominent woman writer in Australia at this time, and her work clearly attempted to follow the imagistic and self-consciously literary styles of White and Hal Porter.

By the early seventies a younger generation had begun to publish fiction. For these writers the artistic polarities of realism and modernism did not imply the respective polarities of left and right politics, and they began to experiment in a range of styles. While most of these new fictions were anti-realist in their impulse, one writer at least—Frank Moorhouse—worked to revitalise realism as a fictional style. By portraying experience as a series of fragmented insights, Moorhouse demonstrated that realism does not necessarily imply a conventional narrative
structure, with a single character at its centre. Of course, Christina Stead had already shown these possibilities, but her novels (principally For Love Alone and The Man Who Loved Children) were not republished and rediscovered in Australia until after 1965. Where Stead built her realism through an excess of detail and an insistence on the complexity of experience, Moorhouse favoured short stories which acknowledge the incompleteness of their record of life.

With other writers like Michael Wilding, Moorhouse deliberately wrote about sexual subjects in order to challenge the restrictive Australian censorship laws of the time. If Australian women’s writing before the 1970s strikes us now as rather decorous, then that is a further marker of the way in which public contexts can influence art. Until the early 1970s, restrictions on imports of books meant that a range of significant novels—from Ulysses to Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Lolita—could not be legally obtained in Australia. Even Christina Stead’s Letty Fox was banned on the grounds that it “over-emphasises matters of sex”. It is difficult now to gauge how much this public limitation on the subject matter of writing constrained writers imaginatively and inhibited their work.

The writers who flouted censorship laws in the early 1970s may be seen as taking on the traditional naturalist’s task of presenting for the public gaze subjects previously denied by the prevailing culture. But, despite their achievements in breaking down a puritanical legal system, these fictions by men offer a perspective and restructuring of their own—one which proclaims itself as white, middle-class, urban and male. Like the poets who were self-consciously proclaiming themselves as radical artists at the time, these fiction writers promoted a masculine world view in which women subjects remained as subservient to artist figures as they had been in the nineteenth century.

Garner’s Monkey Grip broke into this masculine project with a woman’s version of the contemporary world of urban counterculture. Garner’s women characters share with the urban characters in Moorhouse’s short stories a commitment to questioning prevalent sexual attitudes, but the sexual revolution makes more complex demands on them because sex cannot be disentangled from its implications for the female body, including maternity, abortion, and menstruation. Where Moorhouse’s or Wilding’s accounts of sex retained some of the masculine hubris of conventional pornography, Garner managed to recreate the vulnerability of a female sexual perspective. Her account of a year in a young woman’s life, in which she is involved in a hopeless heterosexual love affair, declared that the personal, emotional life deserved as much attention as any political or spiritual fiction. It also demonstrated that there was another way to write about sex—carefully and explicitly, weighing the act’s emotional significance from a woman’s point of view.

The novel asks questions about contemporary feminism and the possibilities for any radical change to domestic life. Garner’s women have managed to avoid enclosure in the isolation of the suburbs; her narrator, Nora, has found ways to care for her child without relying on a male protector, or being bound to a lonely
routine of childcare. But the difficulty of this achievement is evident in the lives of her friends, such as Rita, and even Nora, deliberately adopting a pattern of casual sex with men, cannot escape the desire for exclusive, romantic love. Through the examination of this case study of the 1970s—a period which now may seem to be a rare one in history when reliable contraception and a relative absence of disease enabled women to be almost as sexually free as men—Garner identifies the psychic limitations on women.

*Monkey Grip* was written "close to origin of the gesture of writing" as Cixous puts it. That is, the act of writing the novel comes close to the act of living the novel—or, to use Christina Stead's phrase, "the creative act" is present in the writing. The novel appears to provide an account of experience which is as unmediated as possible; it is written in first person diary form, with little ironic distance from its narrator. Garner openly admits that its episodic progress mimicked the piecemeal accounts of her own journal entries. Early reviewers of the novel criticised it precisely for this sense of "unmediated" experience—"Garner has published her private journal rather than written a novel" (Peter Corris). The dismissal of the novel by men critics as lacking in inventive skill, has led to a defensiveness about it among women critics including Goldsworthy, and Garner herself.

In retrospect, however, this very closeness to the experience of writing makes it particularly interesting for feminist readers. The novel appears to cast aside the restrictions and artificiality of literary style, in order to capture directly the experience of a woman. This attempt to write unencumbered by self conscious notions of art may be read as a defiance of literary convention. It accords with Margaret Homans's argument (based on nineteenth century writing) that women's art struggles to capture an immediate response in opposition to the self conscious metaphorical imposition of men's art.

As Goldsworthy notes, despite its apparent "artlessness", *Monkey Grip* 's account of experience is influenced by its author's, and its narrator's, immersion in literary reading. Goldsworthy offers a list of works cited in the novel and two of these, in particular—Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr McKenzie*—offer models for Garner's attempt to document the nature of sexual experience for contemporary women. *The Golden Notebook* (1962) through its detailed, multiple versions of a woman's experience asks questions about the construction of novels and lives through narrative. While Lessing's treatment of the subject builds up an encyclopedic, multifaceted account of love, sex and politics in postwar Europe, Garner offers a more modest vision of a single struggle. Perhaps Jean Rhys's stories are even more important to Garner's technique in *Monkey Grip* in that Rhys insists on allowing the usually silent and objectified sexual woman to speak. Her best stories offer fragmentary insights into the intelligence and pain of a sexual woman.

In the context of this book, *Monkey Grip* relates in interesting ways to the literary heritage of naturalism, particularly by comparison to Richardson's *Maurice*.
Guest. In the tradition of the nineteenth-century naturalist novel, *Monkey Grip* portrays lives in an urban bohemia of artists and intellectuals. The naturalist pattern of heterosexual love obsession is central, though Garner offers yet another variation: here, the woman takes the active role of obsessive lover while the male love object is self-destructive. Like Maurice Guest, Nora devotes herself to a love object who is preoccupied with his own obsession, in this case heroin, and she refuses to see the evidence of Javo’s preoccupation. She clings to the idea that her love is “special” while presenting the reader with indications that this specialness is entirely self-constructed. Javo’s drug addiction represents a form of self-absorption which parallels Nora’s own absorption in self-constructed romance.

Of course, the nineteenth-century naturalist novel was expansive where *Monkey Grip* focuses on one character. Richardson’s dissection of romance forces the reader to share every moment of her lovers’ passion and disgust, and she places her increasingly self-enclosing affair within the third person, panoramic perspective typical of nineteenth-century fiction. Garner, too, submits the reader to an itemised, repetitive account of lovesickness, but her first person technique manages a claustrophobic effect without more than passing acknowledgment of society beyond the immediate circle of the two lovers. Nora’s middle class family appears only in a few minor scenes, signalling the more conventional world from which she came. Garner’s ideological interests are not economic or class based, but sexual; *Monkey Grip*’s particular moment in history places it not in grand politics, but the politics of sexual liberation.

Nevertheless, the struggle between the ideal and the real, between romance and reality, lays the ground for *Monkey Grip*, just as it does for Richardson’s novel. Here, the ideal is the goal of sexual freedom—the determination of women to live outside the restrictions of the bourgeois family. Nora and her women friends have made conscious decisions to take lovers and bear children without submitting to the mutual ownership of marriage. In seeking this freedom, they resist the submissive roles of the stereotypical female love object, but they must contend with their own romantic aspirations and the expectations of an unreformed society. Some of the men take advantage of the women’s idealism, but most problems emerge from the women’s own culture of romantic individual love. They suffer from jealousy and the desire for stability. Meanwhile, their men drift in and out, more interested in drugs or music.

There is a romantic idealism in the dream of unpossessive love, sexual relations without restrictive ties, and the possibility of communal living. Drug culture itself represents a romantic escape from the mundane. Garner’s style constantly balances the romantic and the real. She becomes lyrical about the traditional subjects of love and nature, but her art is disciplined. She has learnt the lessons of imagist poetry, finding the resonant small image rather than any elaborate literary metaphors to convey emotional states. Her commitment to romance—not merely the love romance of Nora and Javo, but the romance of sexual liberation, drugs and communal living—is expressed here in a tactful poetic language.
For example, on the night Nora and Javo spend at the motel in Swansea, Javo goes out (presumably looking for a fix) while Nora wanders around the grounds. In the driveway she sees a frightened fieldmouse which scampers away as she approaches. Later, when Javo returns Nora sucks him off, and he immediately goes to sleep leaving Nora “stranded, somehow.” Without any direct reminder, the image of the mouse remains with us as an objective correlative for Nora’s emotional state.

Garner’s discipline, the determination to keep close to the experience she describes, prevents her from “romanticising” romance—though she treats Nora’s obsession perfectly seriously. This means that the novel continually juxtaposes its moments of sexual bliss with deflating revelations of its realistic underside. For example, late in the novel Nora and Javo experience what appears to be perfect sexual communion:

Whenever he touched my cunt, my clitoris seemed to be in the exact spot where he first came in contact with my flesh: I was ready for him before we started, as if hastening all my processes to be there for him. I took his cock and put it inside me, and looked down at his wrecked and beautiful face, how it melted and turned gentle and even the blue eyes blurred, up that close. I seemed to start coming almost immediately; he saw it and smiled with joy, and we came together effortlessly, smiling and smiling into each other’s faces. We lay together without speaking for a little while, half-laughing with happiness and astonishment. (p.210)

but on the next page, Javo is vomiting in Nora’s bed:

As I watched a paroxysm of vomiting caught him unawares: he was lying on his back and a few drops of the watery yellow vomit flew into the air and splashed on to my cheek. I turned him over so he hung over the bucket and he spewed weakly. (p.211)

While Nora takes such reversals stoically, revelling in the dual role of lover and mother, the overall effect of such recurrent juxtapositions ensures an ambivalent representation of sexual romance. Javo is occasionally described in the terms of the conventional hero of women’s romance, but Garner’s discipline of observation provides us with a reverse image of Javo with styes covering his eyes, or comically immersed in calamine lotion as he suffers from infected pimples. The cruel, potentially dangerous, lover from the romance tradition, is also the helpless, suffering child who provides the woman with an opportunity to show her own strength (like Mr Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*). The relationship detailed so carefully by Garner fits an archetypal pattern, wherein the female lover gains her power through both maternal and sexual ministrations, and the male lover resists this power through absorption in himself or the promiscuous pursuit of other women. Such patterns are everywhere in women’s stories of romance, from the Brontes to Jean Rhys and Elizabeth Smart.

*Monkey Grip* acknowledges that experience does not conform to the theoretical models of feminism or sexual liberation, any more than it follows the patterns of conventional narrative. The novel reaches no resolution or moral conclusion, and
ends with Nora simply facing the prospect of a continuing, arbitrary future. It works by the cumulative effect of its observations rather than by the logical progression of the conventional realist novel. But beneath the “realism” of its collection of moments in the life of a woman very like Helen Garner, it also reveals the narrative in the way such a woman constructs her experience to satisfy the demands of a romantic love story. The document of experience becomes a document of self construction, an uncovering of a pattern, which may be identified as common to women’s ideas of themselves—regardless of their participation in a “liberated” or puritanical society.

Helen Garner has become a controversial figure since the publication of her non-fiction book on a sexual harassment case, The First Stone (1995), with some feminists accusing her of deserting the feminist position she held in the 1970s. Her career is more comprehensible if we recognise that Garner’s approaches to writing have always had an element of contradiction within them. In Making Stories, she explains how she always works from observation of the people around her, and she constructs her stories on the basis of these observations. Honour and Other People’s Children (1980), though presented as fiction, apparently upset a number of people who recognised themselves in the stories. Even Garner’s film, The Last Days of Chez Nous, has a scene in which two characters discuss the way the central writer/character has written down their words, and whether they would appear as themselves in any film she wrote.

Despite this recurring documentary aspect of her fiction, Garner always seems to be reaching for another level of experience beyond the mundane level of external appearances. In Monkey Grip, Nora sees sexual transcendence and romance in what others might see as the sordid routines of drug addiction and promiscuous sex. In Cosmo Cosmolino (1992) Garner breaks through the restrictions of her own realist discipline to release her characters into a world where an element of magic or the spiritual intervenes. For all her devoted observation of the world, Garner writes fiction to find more than the apparent reality, not to reduce it. She never approaches material with the cynical, rational eye of the comic writer or satirist. This is as clear in Monkey Grip as it is in Cosmo Cosmolino.

In The First Stone, however, the material which she invests with the intuitive creativity of the fiction writer involves a public matter—a court case brought by two women university students against the master of the college where they lived. Garner transforms identifiable people into interesting characters—the master becomes a man with “a strong feminine side to his nature” (p.50) and one of the young women, is introduced as a woman “in the full glory of her youth, as joyful as a goddess, elated by her own careless authority and power” (p.59). Garner writes a detective narrative, with herself as the bicycle riding, middle-aged woman detective. But the victims remain silent, and the case can never be solved. Garner falls back on personal anecdotes about sexual harassment and women’s ambivalence about it to finish the book.

So The First Stone projects the techniques of the novelist onto actual people —
some of whom cannot or will not speak for themselves. “Colin Shepherd”, “Nicole Stewart” and “Elizabeth Rosen” become characters acting out Garner’s narrative rather than their own. In this way, non-fiction allows the writer to claim authority for a narrative which is largely fiction.

It may well be argued that all documentary writing, particularly feature journalism, adapts fictional techniques to “real” subject matter, and that this is legitimate. Garner’s own defence is that the book is reportage, except for the splitting of one person into several characters, adopted on legal advice as a strategy to prevent defamation charges. While reportage appears to be the appropriate mode for an account of a public court case, Garner retains her personal style; she distinguishes her own position from that of the journalists outside the courtroom whom she describes as “cruising like sharks for meat” (p.19). The sexual harassment case, too, pushes the personal into the public domain, so that Garner’s use of personal observation and point of view as well as more public evidence might be seen as peculiarly appropriate to the case. The First Stone breaches the boundaries between fiction and reportage, just as its subject matter invites questions about the relationship between personal behaviour and the law.

Some of the reactions by feminists to The First Stone, especially some of the essays in Bodyjamming, appear to me to be immoderate, but it does raise serious questions about the relationship between public and domestic narratives, and the power of the writer. While some feminists criticised The First Stone as a betrayal of feminism, many readers (including some feminists) welcomed it as an exposé of the puritanical and vengeful nature of extremist feminisms. Once in court, the case became part of a public narrative to be tested according to the rules of legal evidence. Garner, however, writes a more personal narrative about human weakness. She insists that the case should have remained in the realm of the personal and domestic that she knows so well, but the personal narrative she writes cannot resolve the issues any more than the public court case can.

While those involved in the case understandably rail against The First Stone’s misrepresentation of them, the book’s weaknesses may be seen as failures of form, in that Garner’s personal approach to the situation reveals no more than the inconclusive public court case. The recourse to anecdote suggests that Garner feels more comfortable with the observation of people and their behaviour than in speculation about more abstract notions of justice. She admits herself that her interests are more metaphysical than political.

Whatever harm the book may have done to those involved in the case, it did draw attention to the continuing difficulty that sexual harassment presents for institutions and the law. The sexual harassment case is an area where private behaviour becomes a public matter, and guilt rests on fine points of definition and perception. Sexual harassment is an area so fraught with ambiguity that most institutions (and indeed most people) would prefer not to know about it. Yet its recurrence reminds feminists of the unequal power relations between men and
women, and some women and other women, and that these relations are most difficult at the interface between public and the private worlds. Garner is clearly more comfortable writing about the personal and domestic realms, the traditional subjects of the woman writer, than in negotiating more public aspects of power.

Both *Monkey Grip* and *The First Stone*, however, plunge straight to the place where heterosexual feminism is most vulnerable—the negotiation of sexual relations between men and women. Ada Cambridge handled women's weakness for sexual romance by satire and comedy in *A Woman’s Friendship*, risking the charge that she was satirising feminism itself. Garner's temperament is more romantic, less liberal rationalist and more willing to believe in the possibilities of transcendence. By comparison with Cambridge, Richardson, Prichard or Stead, though, she is also less aware of class issues and economic differences—her politics is narrower in range. In that she may well represent her generation of feminists most fully.

**My Place**

Undoubtedly, Garner speaks particularly to and for the rising class of women of her own generation—middle class women with access to educations denied their mothers and grandmothers. They have become one of the privileged groups in Australian society rather than a marginalised voice. This has been achieved partly because Garner and hundreds of other women writers have spoken publicly about the difficulties facing such women. The beginning of the penetration of such a group into the consciousness of a society may, indeed, be traced to the first publication of autobiographical writing by a member of the group. The claiming of a right to speak, the calling attention to a new subjectivity and perspective on the world, represents an empowerment.

This empowerment is even more evident in the speaking out of Aboriginal women writers since the publication of *My Place*. At the simplest level, the woman writer, and the Aboriginal writer, confronts the dominant literary culture with the statement: “My experience is different, and I can speak for myself.” In the years since 1987, Aboriginal women's autobiography has become so established a genre that it was the subject of a hoax in 1994, when Leon Carmen published *My Own Sweet Time* by “Wanda Koolmatrie”. Carmen’s fraud revealed that the Aboriginal woman's autobiography works by a set of conventions like any other literary genre, and so can be imitated. Whatever Carmen’s intentions in perpetrating this hoax, he drew attention to the need for an external confirmation of the authenticity of experience if the autobiography is to be given any historical and political credence. These issues are not unrelated to the complex tangle of the “actual” and “the literary” in a book like *The First Stone*.

Several critics, including Mudrooroo and Jackie Huggins, have attacked *My Place* on the grounds of “authenticity” and Morgan's lack of “authority” to speak for Aborigines. Mary Ann Hughes summarises these arguments and points out how much they limit reading of the book to questions of “identity politics”.

The arguments about the “authentic” voice of the Aborigine repeat those about the
possibility of a text expressing the authentic woman; we know that texts cannot contain some essential "woman" or "Aborigine". All texts use literary conventions of some kind, whether that be the chronological narrative structure of the family yarn or the more impressionistic accounts of *Monkey Grip*. Obviously, the discovery of Morgan's Aboriginal heritage is central to *My Place*, but the book does not present itself as representative of Aboriginal experience. On the contrary, I prefer to read the ignorance and enlightenment of Sally and her siblings as a kind of metaphor for white urban Australia's repression of its part in the mistreatment of Aborigines, forcing a recognition that Aboriginal problems are not "long ago and far away" but part of the present.

The debate about its authenticity has been partly prompted by the fact that *My Place* makes its narrative strategies obvious. Morgan deliberately places the stories of her uncle, mother and grandmother towards the end of the book where they will be most powerful in contrast to the familiar narrative of suburban postwar Australian life at the beginning. She wins the trust of her white readers by telling what is, for many of them, their own story, then leads them to confront disturbing facts about the history of white relations with Aborigines. She has been criticised for appealing to the values of white middle class readers, but she forces those readers to recognise the racist basis of their own society and to listen to the voices of those it has pushed aside.

The enclosing structure of the book carefully introduces the Milroy family as participants in working-class, suburban postwar Australian life. Sally's father, Bill, has returned from the Second World War suffering from mental instability. He represents one of the archetypal Australian figures of his generation, and Sally's account of childhood visits to the Repat hospital recalls the kind of establishment of national credentials in a novel such as George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964) and even at times Clive James's account of growing up in postwar Sydney, *Unreliable Memoirs* (1980). Family anecdotes about pet dogs or Mum falling through a seat at the pictures mix with familiar national stories such as Bill's war experience or Sally's own narrative of growth and education as part of the postwar generation. Sally, her brothers and sisters are Australians first, so by the time (on page 38) readers encounter their playground experience of being asked where they came from, and being driven to call themselves Indian, the irony cannot be missed. Readers identify with the narrator's predicament to the extent that many white readers do not feel implicated in the racism. When the fact of Aboriginality is raised directly in chapter fifteen, a series of details insists on the familiar and normal elements in the family's life: Sally feels the strap of her schoolbag on her shoulder as she watches her grandmother cry; she and Jill talk about being black while looking at a poster of John, Paul, George and Ringo; Sally looks up from an *Archie* comic to listen to her mother, and so on (pp.97-99). The culture of the Milroys, we are told, is as ordinary as that of the reader.

Many commentators have remarked on the "detective" fiction element in Morgan's structure in *My Place*, in that the frame of her own attempts to uncover
family history leads the reader, with the narrator, to follow the trail which culminates in the three stories of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy. Joan Newman has analysed the ways in which these three stories, too, conform to the patterns of oral storytelling, exemplified equally well in Albert Facey's bestselling *A Fortunate Life* (1981). But the recognition that these are constructions—that Sally and her family are making stories in order to make meaning of their lives—does not render them artificial or less worthy of attention.

In fact, *My Place* consistently manages to suggest that there are stories which cannot be told, that for all its own reliance on familiar narratives it cannot disclose the full nature of experience—especially Daisy's experience. There are stories which Australians have not allowed themselves to hear, and these include white stories such as Bill's experiences as a European prisoner of war and as an abusive, clinically depressed, returned soldier. Arthur's story alone accords with the patterns of battling success which have been endorsed by Australian society, though (as Newman notes) his Aboriginality complicates those patterns.

Gladys tells her story with a warmth and directness which places it within less public or literary conventions. She likes to talk about people she cares about, and dwells on the immediate details of the domestic world so that cameos of Miss Moore at Parkerville, or Richie who owned the florist shop, take precedence over public commentary on the war or the evil of institutionalising black children.

In fact, Gladys's interest in food—the children lying on their backs eating the peas on their way to visit her in hospital, her ready pursuit of any possible cakes and biscuits—provides a more vivid sense of the nature of institutional life than any more consciously public story could have done. She tells us Bill's story, and she does so with an eye to physical deprivation—the Yank liberator asks, "Any of you guys want some ginger cake and ice-cream?!" (p.289)—a detail which suggests that her own institutional experience has deepened her sympathy with Bill. Stephen Muecke, identifying this interest in food in Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl*, notes that it is possibly related to traditional Aboriginal narratives. It is more obviously a legacy of the domestic perspective of women—and of the experience of poverty and hunger. Gladys also makes her story meaningful through visions—a frequent element in the folk narratives of women. Once again, the woman's story appears to be closer to physical experience than more self-consciously literary work might be. Indeed, Gladys laughs at the readings of *Wuthering Heights* and Jane Austen in her high school classes; these literary texts offer no models for her own life.

Daisy's story, however, represents the crux of *My Place'*s challenge to white narratives. Daisy cannot transform her history of exploitation, slavery and sexual abuse into a tale of individual triumph over oppressive conditions. She resists Sally's probing, and cannot acquire the confidence which marks Arthur's self-approving account of his life. After she has finished telling her story, Sally notes:

Nan's voice had changed as she reminisced. She could speak perfect English when she wanted to, and usually did, only occasionally dropping the beginning
or ending of a word. But in talking about the past, her language had changed. It was like she was back there, reliving everything. It made me realise that at one stage in her life it must have been difficult for her to speak English, and therefore to express herself. (p.351)

The very language of the book is foreign to Daisy, and there are no narrative conventions which can validate her life as victim—except, perhaps, the family acceptance which Morgan and her mother offer. Daisy’s story of bearing a child by her own father is literally unspeakable. (Since the book’s publication, Morgan has discovered that her grandmother gave birth to at least six children.28) What narrative conventions could possibly provide a pattern through which she could speak? European conventions for portraying women as sexual victims always conclude with the punishment by death of the woman.

Daisy’s story offers an interesting perspective on Prichard’s *Coonardoo*. In Chapter Three, I argued that Prichard is forced to rely on the conventions of the late nineteenth-century naturalist novel in order to find a narrative conclusion—like Tess of the D’Urbevilles, Coonardoo suffers the fate of the fallen woman. If applied to *My Place*, these conventions would surely demand that Daisy should die, like Coonardoo, in some scene of isolated wilderness. Instead, she lives on to see her daughter and grandchildren grow to maturity, and to contribute to the domestic worlds in which they flourish. Thus, the failure of Western literary ordering is exposed by a confrontation with reality. Simply by living, Daisy challenges the oppression of conventional literary structuring. By remaining silent and resisting Sally’s interrogations, she expresses the distrust of the living for the impositions of art.

This is not to claim that *My Place* declines from its careful structuring into some kind of artless “real” as we approach Daisy’s story. Rather, the inability for any readymade pattern to present itself to Daisy, or Sally, by which to convey her adult experience, reinforces the denial of this kind of experience by the Symbolic Order, here, more simply, in the form of white culture and its narrative conventions. White Australia cannot consign the mistreatment of Aborigines to a regrettable, but finished, past because, as *My Place* insists, it lives among us in the present. In a similar way, the survival of Aborigines throughout Australia defies the romantic nineteenth-century conventions by which they were represented as noble but sadly doomed.

The stories collected in *My Place* comment on well-known Australian stories, just as they overlap and comment on each other. Arthur, of course, provides a new version of the Australian battler, and Bill’s story gives us another version of the war hero. Howden Drake-Brockman seems to confirm Prichard’s depiction of Hugh and his father in *Coonardoo* as white men who, for all their admirable courage and strength, abuse Aboriginal women. The book does not demand that we acknowledge its literal “truth” but relies on the corroborating effect of the stories it tells, and our knowledge (perhaps from reading *Coonardoo*) of other versions of its stories.
Alice Drake-Brockman's narrative in *My Place* is so short that her part in “authenticating” the other stories may easily be overlooked. In Chapter 26 she gives her version of Daisy’s life at Ivanhoe, proffering unchallenged some familiar white attitudes to Aborigines: “The natives never liked to work. You had to work with them if you wanted them to work. They always wanted to go walkabout” (p.168). As far as Daisy’s story is concerned, Alice shows herself to be ignorant both of the nature of Aboriginal family relationships and the personal relationships within her own household. When Daisy, lying in the dressing room off her own bedroom goes into labour, Alice declares that she had been “absolutely ignorant” of Daisy’s pregnancy, although her daughter, sixteen at the time, confirms that the situation was obvious.

Morgan need not comment on the reliability of Alice’s story. It has a confidence which is only too familiar in its placing of Aboriginal experience, the lives of “the natives”. In fact, it is Alice’s narrative which most clearly indict Howden Drake-Brockman as the father of Gladys and another of Daisy’s children, by providing evidence of a return trip to Corunna Downs. There is no need for commentary, as Alice’s story provides an ironic standard for the later stories of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy. Indeed, the moments when Alice’s story touches Daisy’s story have both the effect of corroboration and comic irony. Alice says: “I gave her quite a lot of furniture, brooms and things, that I could do without” (p.169). Daisy says: “All Alice ever gave me was a couple of odds and ends and an old broom. After all those years, that was all I got” (p.343).

In the light of its considerable achievements, the frequent criticisms of *My Place*—for not being the story of Aborigines living within an Aboriginal community, for being individualistic, for pandering to the expectations of white readers, for not acknowledging the white influences on Sally Morgan—can appear churlish. Many criticisms seem based on fairly simple readings of the book—Bain Attwood, in particular, misreads the book as a kind of Joycean “portrait of the artist” autobiography of Sally Morgan and thereby calls it “bourgeois individualism”, at the same time criticising it for not telling us about the personal life of Sally Morgan.29 Perhaps, the fact that *Historical Studies* published much of this criticism suggests that those who read *My Place* only as a historical document may miss its subtleties. Jackie Huggins has attacked the book even for its popularity among white readers:

*My Place* sold over 300,000 copies and there aren’t even that number of Aboriginals alive today, for heaven’s sake, so someone else’s got to be reading the book. It cannot be denied that among those who have read *My Place* are (usually patronising) whites who believe that they are no longer racist because they have read it.30

Huggins may believe that white Australians are beyond redemption when it comes to racism, and that Aborigines should write only for their own people. Whether or not white readers believe that they are no longer racist after reading the book, there is a slight chance that they might have increased their under-
standing of the situation of Aborigines in Australian society. We cannot know whether *My Place* has helped in the movement towards the Mabo decision and the land rights debate, but one can guess that some of the most strident opponents of Aboriginal land rights have not read it. It may be true that this book does not confront white society too aggressively, and accommodates some white expectations. At the same time, it demands that the sexual contact history of Europeans and Aborigines be acknowledged in the present (not simply in the past of *Coonardoo* and *Capricornia*). Since its appearance, the report of the Stolen Generation enquiry, *Bringing Them Home*, has forced an acknowledgment of how widespread, how recent and how individual similar experiences have been.

Huggins’s and Mudrooroo’s preference for other autobiographies by Aboriginal women, such as Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* and Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl*, as being more representative of contemporary Aboriginal experience, raises the question about “approved” experiences as well as approved accounts of them. Just as Daisy cannot find a narrative form for her own experiences—because these are too far outside any accepted narrative of success—there seems a danger that the experiences of an Aborigine brought up as white might be pushed aside as not conforming with approved narratives.

These debates about Aboriginal storytelling reflect back to women’s storytelling, in that part of the political importance of feminist writing is to tell stories which haven’t been told, and to find ways to tell them which challenge narrative conventions. Any direct comparison between *My Place* and *Monkey Grip* reveals immediately how experience has been rendered in each case by quite different realist techniques. *Monkey Grip* offers the individualistic voice and exploration of self; it prefers a loose narrative structure and relies on literary (as opposed to oral) techniques of image making to create meaning. *My Place* relies on careful narrative structuring, and attempts to replicate the voices of its different storytellers who mostly rely on techniques from oral tradition to make meaning.

The two books reach toward the limits of textual possibility in that they struggle to capture women’s experience in words. Their reception, too, indicates the importance of readers’ expectations about “art” or history. While, theoretically, women writers may be encouraged to break the boundaries of style and genre, it is clear that their books enter a political context that may object to such breaches of convention. These two books recognise that individuals construct their own experience into acceptable forms—that writing can express no “real”, but offers only a range of textual strategies commonly accepted as approximating the real. *Monkey Grip* pushes those strategies inward so that it seems to expose the emotional essence of its narrator. *My Place* reveals to us that there will always be experiences which lie beyond words.
A Masculine Crisis: David Foster’s Mates of Mars

In the 1980s, the increased activity of women writers and debates about feminism began to affect writing by Australian men. It was difficult for men novelists to ignore the challenge of feminist perceptions, and the frequent criticisms of their assumptions about women. There were complaints from writers when feminist critics pointed out these assumptions, and even suggestions that reviewers favoured women writers. Though it is difficult to point to direct influences, writing by men seemed to become more sensitive to feminist issues, and several writers began to examine the nature of masculinity as well.

When, in 1988, Helen Daniel published a critical study of the Australian “new fiction” writers of the 1970s generation, she included only one woman in her list: Peter Mathers, Peter Carey, David Ireland, David Foster, Murray Bail, Elizabeth Jolley, Gerald Murnane and Nicholas Hasluck. But Daniel was confining herself to writers who had moved away from conventional realism, and her choice suggested that innovation and experiment in art remained a masculine prerogative. The prominent women writers of the 1980s, such as Olga Masters, Jessica Anderson, Helen Garner, Beverley Farmer and even Jolley (in some modes) might be read as realists, so that it seemed as if choices about form might have clear gender divisions. If we equate formal experiment with radical politics, as critics such as Daniel and Don Anderson have done, then it would seem that the women were the conservatives. Yet it is not difficult to produce a list of novels of the 1970s and early 1980s by Australian men that “masked” or obliterated female subjectivity in some way; the identification of experimental writing with radicalism raised some awkward questions for feminism.

In particular, the postmodernist self consciousness which became fashionable
by the mid-1980s appeared to be complicit with traditional attitudes to women characters. Ken Gelder and Colleen Keane, for example, have drawn attention to the inscribing of Woman as Other in the postmodernist work of David Ireland, Gerald Murnane, David Brooks and Mark Henshaw. Even when men adapted this self-consciousness to historical subjects they tended to endorse rather conventional liberal views of race and gender issues. The group of historical novels published around the time of the First Fleet Bicentenary—Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, Rodney Hall’s *Yandilli* trilogy, David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*—for all their postmodern self awareness hardly ruffled the surface of accepted ideas in this respect. Indeed, this enthusiasm for the historical, or “neohistorical” novel, might be read as a preference for the safety of the past where the writer could examine racism and sexism without implicating himself in them.

In the past decade, the contemporary urban scene has been left to younger men and women, such as Andrew McGahan, Christos Tsiolkas, Justine Ettler and Fiona McGregor, for whom sexuality and relations between the sexes are more complex issues than they had been for men writers before the 1980s. The role of feminist literary activity in this is, of course, mere speculation and can hardly be claimed as any conscious trend. Nevertheless, with sexual discrimination and racial vilification laws, gender and race sensitivities had become central political issues for Australian society by the end of the 1980s.

In *Speaking of Gender*, one of the many feminist collections of essays on literature, the critic Peter Schwenger speculates about a “masculine mode” of writing. He uses novels by Yukio Mishima, Ernest Hemingway, James Dickey, Philip Roth, Alberto Moravia, Alfred Jarry and Lincoln Kirstein to draw up some possible features of ostentatiously masculine writing which might be contrasted with the feminist interest in writing the female body. He concludes that the masculine writer may struggle to maintain a reserved style, but has little reserve about subject matter. He is likely to focus on the physical, and be obsessed by the penis. When women appear in his novels, they are merely reflectors of masculine sexuality:

or they threaten it; or they only stand and wait, excluded from the male redemption in Hemingway’s fishing excursions and Dickey’s canoeing trips. Generally the male gauges his own masculinity not by women but by other men. Masculinity becomes reflexive, both perceiver and perceived.

Schwenger proposes that writing itself becomes a dangerous and self-annihilating act for the masculine writer. For masculinity requires action, not reflection; words endanger the masculine writer’s capacity to act.

If we can discuss the possibility of an *écriture féminine*, and attempts by women to write the female body, then surely a masculine writing of the body also must come into consideration. There has been a strong acceptance by feminist critics that mainstream writing is, by definition, masculine and patriarchal, and that it is women’s writing which is marked as “other” or marginal. The assumption that the masculine pattern is the norm suggests that the notion of a masculinist writing
might be an unnecessary replication. At the same time, it is clear that not all novels by men conform to mainstream literary conventions. While some feminists have attempted to accommodate experimental writing by men into feminist modes (Joyce, in particular), much of it is resistant. This writing by men seems to fulfil many of the feminist ambitions for women’s writing—it challenges the conventions of language and outrages them with an exuberant excess. Sometimes its impulses are carnivalesque and it confronts the physically abject—but it has no interest in the rights of women.

In Australia, two overtly masculinist novels were published in the wake of the Bicentenary—both defiantly anti-liberal and apparently anti-feminist—David Foster’s *Mates of Mars* (1991) and Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990). They both attack the complacency of the Australian celebrations of 200 years of settlement, but they also came at a time when feminism had become a strong feature of Australian society, and can be read as a reaction to it. Foster’s novel openly reflects on this:

Only going to war could be more manly than going to sea yet typically, in this bicentennial year, most trawlers employ a woman and some employ 2... . . .

... modern feminist determination knows no boundaries, and indeed what little driving force there is in contemporary Australian society, aside from sheer greed and there isn’t much, would appear to derive from women and the satisfaction they feel in doing what their mothers told them they never ought to.7

Sam Watson makes no overt reference to feminism but there is clearly no alliance between feminists and his urban Aboriginal men. The two novels could not provide a stronger contrast with the books discussed in the previous chapter—Helen Garner’s domestic realism in *Monkey Grip*, and Sally Morgan’s exploration of Aboriginal women’s experiences in *My Place*. Politically, Foster’s and Watson’s novels offend the humane values at the heart of Australian feminism, but they do not pursue a complacently partriarchal form. Formally, they are as far from the “classic realist” text as the most experimental novel by a woman.

These novels challenge any theory that politics may be read through form in a simple way, or that the mainstream is necessarily the “malestream”. It is possible to read a dominant liberal humanist ideology in the postmodernist writing of Carey or Malouf, for example, but Foster’s and Watson’s novels attack the liberal mainstream from an extremist, masculinist position. It is interesting to test them against Schwenger’s speculations.

*Mates of Mars* can hardly be described as “reserved” in the manner of Hemingway; on the contrary, it is excessive and satirical, intent on providing a mass of detail about the lives of its characters. Yet Schwenger proposes that the comic and the grotesque (features of *Mates of Mars*) provide the appropriate modes for the encounter with the male body—in that the penis is both comic and grotesque:

There is a force behind the grotesque which is inhuman, both stupid and vital at the same time. It is a force strongly bound up with the physical; it is a force that
goes to extremes. By virtue of its excesses it deforms proportion and classical contours. In this respect it is allied to caricature.\(^8\)

Schwenger also finds in this force a propensity for self annihilation.

There can hardly be a more appropriate text for this model than *Mates of Mars*. Its group of martial arts enthusiasts provides a set of caricatures of men in multicultural Australia—a working class Anglo-Celt (Steve), a full-blood Aborigine (Cyril), a Jewish academic (Bruce), a Chinese-Malay scientist (Vincent), and a Swedish-English male model (Sven). Foster adds an Anglo-Celtic woman self defence instructor (Jade) who represents an exaggerated version of female power in contemporary Australia, and whose presence serves mainly to contrast the masculine stupidity of the men. He parodies the typical Hemingway or Dickey narrative of a group of men travelling into the wilderness to test their masculinity by taking this group of martial artists to the Northern Territory for a grading session with the local Aborigines, but he replaces the "reserved" masculine style with an exaggerated and sometimes brutal comic pattern. Several of the mates suffer progressive physical annihilation—limbs amputated, tracheotomy, subcision of the penis, AIDS infection and death. Foster offers a part-serious, part-mocking account of the masculine relation to the body; his narrator tells us: "we all die and fighters often prefer to die in their prime" (p.118).

This narrative allows Foster to range over public issues such as Australia’s economic and cultural position with regard to Asia, the meaning of multiculturalism, the condition of Aborigines in the north of Australia, the economic power of the Japanese, and the impact of technology on individuals and the environment. It may be read primarily as a satire of the complacency and greed of Australian society, but its narrative asserts that the condition of Australian men holds the key to the state of the civilisation. The condition of its women is a secondary consideration, except that the relative strength of Australia’s women shows up the weaknesses of its men. If a civilisation depends on the condition of its warriors (as the novel proposes), then the group of warriors in the novel shows that Australia is in trouble. The national crisis is a masculine crisis. Of course, this assumption defines civilisation as a kind of controlled savagery, where warriors must find ways to maintain their skills in times of peace.

The novel declares its comic and satirical position from its first pages—from its epigraphs and introductory note—and the satirist draws attention to the act of writing simply by announcing that exaggeration and inversion of convention will be the means of proceeding. Satire is an unconventional convention that exaggerates representational modes and, in Foster’s writing, enlarges them to the point of distortion. Foster’s satire works both by providing an intensely, even excessively, particularised grounding in the real world—for example, the details of the nightclub doorman’s routine, or the order of procedure of the dojang in Singapore—and developing a series of exaggerated characters and events on this base.

Foster’s satires tend to set up a massively detailed “realistic” base then propel themselves into chaos. Once the warriors reach the Top End the orderly progress
of the novel disappears into turmoil as their plans for a grading are destroyed by the Wet. The mates are called upon actually to use their martial skills in combat and they are forced to flee the revenge of the Aborigines. This chaos moves beyond the traditional genre expectations of satire, but it also mimics the progression from rational to irrational underlying the masculine codes under review.

In his article “Modernity, Rationality and ‘the Masculine’”, Ross Poole argues that in the contemporary world “masculinity is constructed within the ideals of reason”. It is not so much that individual men are rational but that they identify themselves as men by means of aspiration to rationality. Poole claims that, as a result of the construction of feminine identity through the non-rational relationships of family, the home and the personal, masculine and feminine represent different moral structures in our society with the masculine associated with law and duty, the feminine with personal virtue. Poole argues that the construction of femininity operates as a symbiotic opposite to masculinity—the two cannot exist independently, though, paradoxically, the masculine appropriation of rationality relies on an irrational exclusion of the feminine.

Poole’s argument, using Weber, that the scientific aspiration to reach objective truth founders on the illogicality of its own exclusion of the feminine finds its echo in Foster’s novel. He insistently presents us with the irrational nature of rational thought and behaviour. In Mates of Mars there are two main elements to masculine aspiration: one is the passion for warrior ritual and codes of honour (law and duty), the other is science (rationality). The history of modern civilisation has seen the triumph of science and technology over tribal life, and the warrior codes of masculinity have been displaced by the rational logic of science. For all their martial arts discipline, the mates know that an automatic weapon defeats the most brilliant hand-to-hand fighter. Towards the end of the novel, they discuss the relationship of sex to war, and speculate on the possibility of human warfare without weapons. But to outlaw weaponry, or science, would be to “outlaw intelligence”. The two mates who are scientists—Bruce and Vincent—are, with Jade, the only ones to survive intact.

At Neverfuckinlose the mates encounter the supernatural as they share life with the Aborigines, but Vincent and Bruce retain their scientists’ rationality in the face of the irrational. To be a man seems to require the contradictory allegiance to both. In Mates of Mars, this irrational rationality creates the comic and satiric impetus, and also the nihilism behind the novel. Foster’s mates operate to public codes of masculinity, giving their allegiance to ceremony and ritual rather than the personal or domestic. As individuals, women are irrelevant to the novel and its male characters. For them, the feminine must be encoded into, or excluded from, masculine ritual—as in Sven’s code of courtly love or Cyril’s protection of martial practices from women’s knowledge.

Jade, the feminist, serves to question both the physical superiority of the male warriors and the rationality of their attitudes. She demonstrates that the strongest woman is stronger than the weakest man (in this case, Bruce) and her presence
consistently exposes the irrational basis for male attitudes, for example, in Steve’s attempt to include her in the male bonding by giving her a nickname. When Jade remonstrates with Sven for throwing rubbish over the side of the fishing trawler, the narrator even takes her side: “Laughter all round from the boys on the deck. Good one, Sven. Laugh as the world chokes through male shortsightedness and avarice” (p.303).

But it is through Sven, the womaniser, that Foster explores male sexuality and the dangers which the feminine represents to masculinity. Sven’s pursuit of women operates to rules and codes. He keeps a diary of encounters with women which he destroys on a 28 day cycle; he practises picking up unlikely women in order to hone his skills and even to suffer necessary humiliation. His devotion to female conquest consistently operates with a male audience, and his place among men, in mind. The “bunning” incident, where Sven has sex with a woman and another man, emphasises how close Sven’s seduction of women comes to seduction of men. Similarly, his obsession with Wolfgang Coogan, and his continual playing of a tape recording in which Wolfgang takes part in a serial coitus with a woman “on the block”, suggest that it is male sexuality rather than the female which fascinates him. Foster is unusually reticent in treating this material, but he seems to suggest that a number of male practices, performed as a public demonstration of heterosexuality, rest on fundamentally homosexual impulses.

Sven’s decision to follow the codes of medieval courtly love in wooing Jade is swiftly undercut by her willingness to have quick sex with him. Male notions of romantic love, the novel suggests, have nothing to do with living women. Courtly love, like the other codes endorsed by men in the novel—science, martial arts, football, mateship—rests on a logic which places men at the centre of the universe, and excludes consideration of other positions. In the place of personal, individualised communication, the masculine imposes ritual and ceremony. Mateship itself represents not a personal allegiance so much as an establishment of a bonding code, the code of the warrior. Sven’s conversion to courtly love is part of a spiritual progress which ends with his complete revoking of the body as an HIV-infected prison inmate. His obsession with sex conforms with a contradictory Western pattern by which spiritual insight is attained through physical degradation—though we have seen this, too, in The Twyborn Affair.

Foster also mounts a critique of the rational masculine allegiance—science. For all their passion for the martial arts, Vincent and Bruce think like scientists. The novel describes Vincent’s experiments on monkeys in some detail, exposing a method which favours the generic over the individual:

There was a great range of personality among these macaques and it sometimes troubled Vincent, pooling the results from all these monkey brains as though they were one and the same. Still, if they could do it in human psychology, and they did, all the time. (p.154)

Bruce clings to his rationality as the mates penetrate the spirit-pig country in their raid to retrieve Jade and Sven. He and Vincent discuss fear from a biochem-
ical point of view, but this does not prevent the subjective experience of it. Vincent, in particular, seems capable of both participating in the irrational and undertaking objective analysis of it; even as Cyril is dying from his mysterious disease, Vincent plans a scientific paper on the phenomenon.

The narrator continually comments on scientific theory and speculation, particularly in relation to human biology. The particular point at issue, for masculinists and feminists alike, is biological determinism. Vincent’s monkeys provide the narrator with an opportunity to speculate about human behaviour in relation to them: “Recent genetic studies have shown that human beings are actually apes. There is no missing link” (pp.137–38). But biological study looks to confirm theories that human behaviour is caused by the biochemical make up of the body. Science tends to reinforce the notion that individual behaviour is determined by physical factors, and that the possibility of individual resistance or divergence from these factors is limited. Foster worries away at the credibility of generalisations about human behaviour (as for monkeys, so for human beings) and the possibilities for individual disruption to that behaviour. He cannot resist satirising the possibility that male body chemistry may determine masculine behaviour: under the influence of a massive testosterone dose, the timid intellectual, Bruce, dives into a crocodile-infested river to rescue a can of beer.

Foster pits his novelist’s interest in subjective and individual behaviour against his scientific interest in the objective and generic. Many of his jokes mock the way racial and sexual stereotypes are seen to dominate individual behaviour. The liberal desire for individual, rational self control is confounded by the irrational biological imperative. But is human behaviour totally determined by biology? This surely would deny men the possibility of rationality at all.

The implications of biological determinism for race and sex stereotypes are immense, and often resisted by liberal-thinking intellectuals. Feminisms cannot afford to accept total biological determinism for fear that it would deny women any control over their destinies, but at the same time, many feminists have come to focus on “difference” and to explore the physicality of the female body. Poststructuralist feminism embraces the irrational as part of the feminine challenge to masculine rationality. Foster proposes a similar predicament for men, in that male irrationality might be explained by physical hormonal factors. But such an explanation would mean succumbing to the irrational—and the masculine must strive, as Poole suggests, towards the rational ideal.

Foster finds a literary style to match his subject matter. His narrator participates in the masculine enthusiasms of his characters, purveying information on taekwondo, rubber extraction in Malaysia, prawn trawling and so on. He shares both their fascination for the codes of the warrior and their allegiance to scientific objectivity. The novel prefers action over reflection, and the impersonal bond of mateship over the personal, intimate and domestic. Satire provides a formal mode which allows the interplay of the rational and irrational in this way. Yet, Foster does not offer us the mockery of clear targets (feminism notwithstanding)
normally associated with satire. Rather, *Mates of Mars* creates a satiric form where the interplay between the rational and the irrational can emerge in a comic and grotesque art. It is as if the novel formally mimics the masculine physicality which is its subject.

*Mates of Mars*, then, explodes the assumption that masculine art is orderly and conventional. Foster writes from a masculine viewpoint about male experiences and attitudes, with the traditional male interest in the public world rather than the personal. Nevertheless, the novel attacks the convention of the unified subject taking control of his own progress through time with a great deal more vehemence than many novels by women. Against the liberal humanist tendency to treat equality as sameness, Foster demands the recognition of differences between men and women, and people of different races. For feminists interested in exploring difference this work might be seen as complementary rather than oppositional.

Nevertheless, anti-liberal attitudes have political implications in the areas of both sex and race. Theories of racial and sexual difference have long justified the submission of women and non-white races to white male power; racial and sexual stereotypes have fed injustice in all areas of society. Liberalism's demand for equality between the sexes and races can smooth over the differences, but attacks on it are more likely to come from those believing that one sex or race is superior. Foster's writing, like the writing of many feminists, demands the recognition of difference but, as feminists know, the acceptance of both difference and equality requires a complex intellectual commitment. A commitment to equality is not the most obvious feature of Foster's fiction.

When *Mates of Mars* appeared it also enacted its masculine aspirations by taking risks, in that it set out deliberately to offend not only feminist sensitivities, but racial ones. The "Outback Radio" section of the novel—a brilliant comic exchange by an Aboriginal truck driver and his contacts over the C.B. radio—seems designed to make any white liberal uncomfortable and to invite attack. However, a few months before the novel's publication an Aboriginal writer, Sam Watson, published a novel that matched *Mates of Mars* in its images of male violence and Aboriginal tribalism. *The Kadaitcha Sung* insists on the tribal nature of Australian history, and the importances of warrior attitudes and codes. Like Foster's novel, it judges the state of civilisation in terms of warrior courage and virtue. *Mates of Mars*, with its good-humoured satire and comic gusto, could be read as a benign novel by comparison.

*The Kadaitcha Sung* offers a contemporary revenge narrative in which an Aboriginal warrior uses his spirit-powers to wreak havoc on his people's enemies. In its account of Australian history, the failure of Aboriginal tribes to adhere to their warrior codes has allowed an invasion by fair-skinned tribes. By adhering to warrior ideals, Tommy Gubba, the inheritor of kadaitcha powers, draws sufficient strength to destroy his enemies, and suffers the penalties of the white legal system. In this novel, black and white men are warriors to be judged only by
warrior standards, where courage and integrity are prized above kindness or fairness.

Needless to say, the moral standards presented by *The Kadaitcha Sung* are completely outside the feminine and its personal and domestic morality. There is no place for women here apart from their roles in a masculine warrior code. The abuse of women, for example, provides the motivation for warrior activity against rivals, but women themselves remain powerless. The main Aboriginal woman characters are habitually called “the black princess” or the “warrior woman”, providing them with almost medieval positions within the warrior codes, rather than allowing them status as individuals.

*The Kadaitcha Sung* refuses the liberal values which would grant equality to Aboriginals and whites, men and women—it is warrior status, not race that matters. Good and evil here depend on questions of legitimacy, particularly the passing of rights from father to son, and the courageous defence of those rights and protection of weaker members of the tribe. Throughout the novel, sexual acts serve warrior goals rather than representing any individual expression in themselves. When Tommy is forced to perform oral sex on his enemy Booka, it is a “vile abomination” and humiliation of his warrior status. On the other hand, Tommy’s various sexual encounters with women are acts of generosity in which he allows women contact with his superior physicality. For the warriors, homosexuality seems to operate as a form of subjection of men. Tommy’s fellow tribesman, Boonger, emerges from prison with an enthusiasm for anal intercourse with men, but he uses this sexuality to exert his power over them, including a university lecturer sympathetic to Aborigines. Again, this is far from any liberal tolerance of homosexuality as a form of sexual expression equivalent to heterosexual engagement. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is presented as part of the expression of masculine power over others, though it is interesting that this novel appears more anal than penile in its obsessions.

While the satirical mode allows Foster to offer outrageous, excessive and even offensive attitudes within a literary genre which traditionally operates through such excesses, *The Kadaitcha Sung* uses a mixture of mythological and realist styles. It takes elements from all kinds of sources—Aboriginal mythology to establish the relations of the warring tribes, social realism for some of its Brisbane court and pub scenes, gothic horror for its accounts of tortured Aboriginal women in subterranean cells, as well as bits of popular film genres and plots from Phantom comics (the staple of masculine reading on Foster’s prawn trawler). By the standards of serious conventional fiction, it is random, erratic and fantastic. Indeed, Stephen Muecke, one of the greatest critical supporters of Aboriginal writing, has criticised it for its evident lack of editorial intervention.¹⁰

It would be difficult to imagine a novel designed to stand in greater contrast to Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, or Glenyse Ward’s modest account of her youth in *Wandering Girl*. *The Kadaitcha Sung* might be called on to demonstrate that the difference between the attitudes and literary approaches of Aboriginal men and
women writers is greater than any difference between white and Aboriginal women writers, or white and Aboriginal men writers—though to do so might be to indulge in the generalisations criticised by Foster. Watson’s novel can hardly be seen as representative of contemporary Aboriginal writing, though it expresses attitudes that may well be common among his community.

Both *The Kadaitcha Sung* and *Mates of Mars* might be seen as embracing a masculine construction of reality and reasserting masculine codes in the face of growing feminist power in Australia. Feminist readers might well feel more comfortable ignoring their existence, or dismissing them as sexist and offensive. Yet, by demonstrating an anti-authoritarian masculinist style the novels challenge the feminist claim to radical form. Both novels represent and mimic masculine obsessions, and they demonstrate the nature of the masculine irrational. Foster, in particular, consciously pursues the paradoxes of the masculine body and mind. In his next novel, *The Glade Within the Grove* (1995), he created a group of men who moved even further towards self annihilation by castrating themselves in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

In many ways, the masculinist project of these novels complements the feminist project by exploring the chaotic elements in the masculine. They offer attitudes which are both irrational and unpalatable to many: neither novel could claim to speak for the dominant interests in Australian society. Yet they do raise questions about form and gender which invite a feminist response. Watson’s novel may be, as he has claimed, primarily an entertainment, typical of the action-packed violent narrative that men like to read. Critics may accommodate its mix of elements by drawing it into postcolonial frameworks. But its very refusal of logic and reflection suggests that it belongs to a world quite apart from women of any race.

*Mates of Mars*, on the other hand, consciously reflects on the masculine state, as it bats the rational and irrational back and forth. It demonstrates the possibilities of satire for tearing apart the comforts of stability. Potentially, satire appears to offer the feminist writer a form in which to experiment with “open-endedness, irresolution and chaos”. Yet, it is difficult to find any fictions by women which obviously could be called satire. Christina Stead’s later novels, especially *I’m Dying Laughing*, appear to meet some of its criteria, and Ada Cambridge’s *A Woman’s Friendship* offers a relatively gentle venture into the form. Could it be that satire somehow encapsulates peculiarly masculine aggressions and paradoxes? Foster himself claims that “satire is a uniquely masculine form”. If so, “writing the body” might produce quite different formal attacks on dominant literary conventions, depending on the sex of the writer.

In the meantime, many feminists, recognising his aggression, will not read Foster’s novels, let alone acknowledge that they offer a valid intellectual challenge to feminist theory. The writing of other men, particularly Andrew McGahan, also tests the nature of masculine physicality, but may be dismissed for the objectification of women necessary to its masculine pose, or its failure to offer
"transformative politics" as Vivienne Muller has argued. Perhaps, we can read these novels as evidence that feminist ideas have influenced men to reconsider their own relationship to their bodies. A feminist aesthetic that cannot accommodate Foster's novels must recognise the narrowness and irrelevance of its own parameters; his novels have a driving energy and inventiveness unequalled in contemporary Australia. But a feminist criticism which rejects any writing that endangers its more comforting beliefs must end in an anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism of its own.
FOR MORE THAN 200 years writing and literacy have given some women access to intellectual, political and cultural ideas in Western society. In Australia, widespread literacy has been a goal of liberal democratic governments since the mid-nineteenth century, and, while women in Australia were not granted suffrage until the beginning of the century, most had the opportunity at least to learn to read from the time of the educational reforms of the 1860s. By the time of Federation, Australia could boast one of the most literate populations in the world. Education, literacy in particular, is one of the cornerstones of democracy and of the liberal ideal of individual self direction; in response to such initiatives, Australian women have grasped reading and writing as sources of communication, expression and empowerment. The activity of Australian women writers from the mid-nineteenth century to the present has been well documented by now; we know that women readers in Australia have been active since white settlement.

The generations of women born during and since the Second World War, however, have gained access to education on an unprecedented scale. The expansion of the universities in the postwar years saw Australians reaching tertiary education in greater numbers than ever. The proportion of women among these students has increased since the 1960s to half the total, with a clear majority of women students in arts and humanities faculties. Many Australian women continue to choose textual studies as the major part of their university work, and, at every educational level, they read more books outside formal education, and more fiction in particular, than men.
One may speculate that Australian women find that fluency with language and texts offers quite different satisfactions to the promise of increased productivity, salaries and career success which politicians attach to literacy. Fiction forms only a part of such reading, but it has become a focus for feminist ideas. Through fictional stories, not only can writers address the personal, intimate issues often at the centre of women’s lives, they can also engage in public debate and aspire to artistic achievement. The novel, in particular, is such a flexible form that it allows the writer to address the full range of aspects of modern life; it does not require the authority of “expertise” so often claimed by the writers of historical, political, or scientific books. As well, the art of fiction does not require the elaborate equipment or structural support of other art forms, and so offers access to women without such support.

Women’s responses to the art of fiction may well be a source of an increasing sense of self determination and freedom. In Third World countries, where women suffer physical and intellectual deprivation on a scale unknown in the developed world, female literacy appears to be linked to self determination. For all the prevalent cynicism about the principles of nineteenth-century liberal democracy, literacy has proved itself an essential element in the advancement of freedom. Alongside the liberal principles of political equality, the liberal emphasis on the education of the individual has benefited many women in material ways.

Writing and reading lie at the heart of feminism; they are the means by which women can explore and communicate the deepest aspects of their condition. Fiction, in particular, allows women a voice in public discussion and provides an avenue for them to represent their experiences in art. For this reason, realist forms of art are likely to remain important to women writers and readers, despite concerns that realist conventions impose a patriarchal power. I have argued that some of the apparently conventional realist novels of Ada Cambridge, Henry Handel Richardson and others ultimately do not conform to a patriarchal order and that even the liberal convictions of a writer such as Cambridge are tested in the writing of her novels.

Since the 1970s, however, poststructuralist theory and postmodernist literary styles have challenged realism in the novel. In Australia, women writers have experimented with form in a variety of ways, and attempted to find new ways to express a feminist sensibility. On the whole, feminist literary experiments in the wake of poststructuralist theory have developed a modernist aesthetic. They operate within the broad goals of the modernist movement of the earlier part of this century which aimed to undermine the liberal humanist confidence of the late nineteenth century.

But there has been another radical form of artistic experiment emerging since the 1960s—postmodernism. Though its definitions are as vague as those for modernism, the term nevertheless marks a change in emphasis in experimental writing.

Brian McHale argues that the difference between modernist fiction and
postmodernist fiction can be formulated in terms of Roman Jakobsen’s "dominant"—the dominant of the modernist text is epistemological (it asks questions about what we know and how we know it), while the dominant of the postmodernist text is ontological (it asks questions about the world we’re in, who we are and how the world is constructed). Even McHale’s careful distinctions only become clear when he applies them to individual texts. Linda Hutcheon offers further possibilities; she sees postmodernist art as concerned to “de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ are in fact ‘cultural’.” The postmodernist work is always self-conscious, always aware of the basis for its own creation and its dependence on previous art. In its more extreme formulations, though, postmodernism may be seen as refusing any connection between art and reality. In this way, the category of “woman” in itself must be under challenge, and this poses difficulties for a feminism championing women.

In *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*, Patricia Waugh has argued that postmodernism is no more than a development of modernism, and that self-consciousness has always been apparent in modernist art, too. She sees feminism as a parallel development to postmodernism, with both emerging from the modernism of the 1950s and 1960s. Waugh examines the stand off between feminism and postmodernism, pointing out the many elements in common between the two—especially their critique of what she calls “Enlightened Modernity and its models of reason, justice and autonomous subjectivity”—by Enlightened Modernity she refers to what I have called liberal humanism (p.119).

In Australia, the writers most often cited as postmodernist experimenters have been men, and some feminists have deliberately distanced themselves from the term. There has been a number of reasons for this feminist resistance to literary postmodernism. Some critics have argued that the ironic attitude of the postmodernist text ultimately allows the reinscription of women as Other. As Linda Hutcheon argues, postmodernism offers a critique of forms of representation, but it can be, paradoxically, complicit with those forms. The man writer, declaring his masculinity and his claim as the creator of his fictional world, may proceed to project images in which that power is reflected and reinforced. The answer that the world he creates is not real does not prevent him from using the power of fiction to silence the multiple voices of others.

Yet there are other reasons for feminists to suspect postmodernism in its most extreme form. Postmodernism insists on the fragmentation of the world; it denies the possibility of overarching narratives, or any unifying political vision. While feminism has exposed some of these narratives (particularly liberal humanism) as constituting forms of oppression, feminism itself has political aims. There may be no single feminist political program; there are feminisms rather than a single feminist position. Nevertheless, feminist artists have an interest in the place of living women. They cannot refuse all connection between art and life, and to claim the title “feminist” they must have some common political interests—at the
very least, the acknowledgment of women’s participation in the social, cultural, economic and political world. As Patricia Waugh puts it: “women seek equality and recognition of a gendered identity which has been constructed through the very culture and ideological formations which feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle” (p.119). Feminism stands in a contradictory position. It shares with postmodernism an acute awareness of the way in which conservative artistic forms construct “woman” and “man” as unproblematic identities, and it joins in the postmodernist critique of this construction—but it also wants to change the living conditions of real women. To accept a completely unstable textual meaning would be to abandon feminism as a literary/political project.

The contemporary writer who wishes to engage with feminism faces considerable challenges. If she accepts the call to disrupt fictional conventions, she must recognise the possibility that her text may bear little relationship to the way women experience their lives, and she may find that her audience is limited to an elite of feminists familiar with theoretical concerns. Also, as Waugh comments, in feminist discussion “Analogy may be confused with causality in order to claim a massive political significance for formally innovative writing” (p.127). Formal experiment, no matter how hard won, may contribute relatively little to political change, especially when its only audience can be like-minded readers. On the other hand, more accessible modes of writing often rely on conventions which clearly stereotype women or deny them an active role. As earlier chapters of this book demonstrate, I believe that forms of realism continue to offer strong political possibilities for feminist writing—but feminist writers are likely to be self conscious in their use of realism.

Formulations of theory can mean little without reference to fictional practice. In this chapter, I want to consider some of the Australian contemporary feminist writers who have experimented with fiction under the influence of feminist theory. In creating their fictions, these writers explore the questions raised by poststructuralist and postmodernist theories. I will discuss four novels in detail, as exemplars of some of the ways that a conscious feminism has emerged in Australian women writers since the 1970s.

Indeed, the women writers born since the Second World War display a clear self consciousness in their efforts to engage with feminist theory and politics. Most of these writers, middle class and born to the postwar educational boom, have been highly educated, and have made an intellectual commitment to feminism. In their work, we can see the results of feminist experiments with fictional form, and some of the difficulties of the feminist encounter with postmodernism.

A list of such writers must include Janine Burke, Marion Campbell, Mary Fallon, Beverley Farmer, Kate Grenville, Amanda Lohrey, Drusilla Modjeska, and Finola Moorhead, though it might include a range of other writers of their generation and extend to all the women writers who are consciously adapting popular genre fiction to feminist ends (Jan McKemnish, Brenda Walker and Marelle Day). The growth of publishing by women writers has been such that
different critics may choose quite different texts to consider fictional responses to feminism. For example, in her *Jamming the Machinery* Alison Bartlett has examined the writing of Inez Baranay, Ania Walwicz, Margaret Coombs, Fiona Place, Sue Woolfe, Susan Hawthorne and Davida Allen in terms of *écriture féminine*; Susan Midalia has written about the use of the *bildungsroman* by Kate Grenville, Thea Astley, Marion Halligan and Marion Campbell; Colleen Keane adds Beth Yahp and Brenda Walker; Vivienne Muller includes Angelika Fremd and Rosie Scott.  

Here, I have chosen to address four novels that engage with the theoretical issues emerging from 1980s feminist discussion in various ways: Marion Campbell’s *Lines of Flight* (1985), Finola Moorhead’s *Remember the Tarantella* (1987), Mary Fallon’s *Working Hot* (1989), and Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy* (1990). They are all self-conscious about the relationship between feminism and representation, though they resist the undermining of connections between text and the “real” of full-blown postmodernism. Campbell and Modjeska have read a range of feminist theorists, and refer to them at certain points. Moorhead appears to work at a distance from academic intellectual theory as she struggles to develop her own theory of representation. Fallon’s novel enacts some of the demands of writing the female body. All of the novels attempt a form of realism, in that they are all committed to the task of representing women’s lives and speaking for their experiences. None, however, can be accused of naive attitudes to the rendering of women in art. In these fictions, the limits of theory are tested—and some directly challenge the accepted wisdoms of poststructuralist feminism.

Marion Campbell’s first novel, *Lines of Flight*, is so aware of its own theoretical positioning that its style approaches the self-consciousness of postmodernism. Its final chapter consists of a critic’s account of Rita Finnerty’s art installation RAMSHACKLE, in which elements of Rita’s experience are transformed into plastic and visual art. The critic is cynical and confused by the way the installation refuses explanation, or plays with formal limits—often borrowing from other artists. At several points, the installation relies on words, including a tape-recorded story of the child Rita being forced into sexual experiments with her cousin Cedric. The tape tells listeners that this story might have been “reworked in an infinity of figural postures” so that it proposes a relationship between narrative and figural art. But the critic cannot see the meaning, or the relationship, and the last lines of the novel comment: “But in this white passage, there were no markers. Once again it seemed, one was required to plot one’s own” (p.291).

The literary art which creates *Lines of Flight* tells more than the figural art of Rita Finnerty; words and narratives direct readers more explicitly to meaning. Yet Rita’s role as artist allows the novel to consider the claims on the woman artist of a range of poststructuralist theories.

In the first part of the novel, Rita lives as a student in Aix en Provence in 1975. In the years since the student rebellions of 1968, art theory has become considerably removed from political action. Rita and her student friends discuss Lacan,
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Freud, Saussure and Marx, but the narrative of the novel poses the theorists against the artist. Rita’s artistic creed puts the “rebel real against the geometric ideal”, and several other oppositions follow from this: the student against mentor, the woman against man, the daughter against the father, the Australian against the European, the artist against the critic. In practice the semioticians of the novel, Raymond the professor and Sébastien (Rita’s lover), use their theoretical credentials to overpower the less confident or less educated, and Campbell suggests that such power is invested in the theories themselves, either through their silencing or their simplification of resistant positions. The men in the novel, and some of the women, constantly use political rhetoric to manoeuvre other characters into positions of powerlessness. Raymond interprets Rita’s stealing of the sausages as a Freudian appropriation of the phallus; Sun Diatti uses Black Power rhetoric to silence Antonine; Sébastien recognises Berger in Rita’s defence of her painting: “Funny how you feminists have to resort to male intellectuals to support your claims” (p.249).

This novel does not reject poststructuralist theory—at its core is a recognition of the artist’s power to frame and order experience, and the political implications of this power. It does, however, insist on the role of art as a testing of theory. Campbell writes an écriture féminine, with the resonance of imagist poetry. Her writing constantly turns over the possibilities of language through a range of puns, poems and visual descriptions which deconstruct what is seen. Rita dismisses Gérad and sees him, with an artist’s eye, as a figure a centimetre tall; she categorises Madame Sérisier as a squatting hen, only to find she “escaped her caricature, slipped her frame” in fighting towards a courageous death (p.168). The subject may resist the artist’s power despite the claims of art. Campbell asks how an artist may both frame the subject and recognise the subject’s autonomy. The “rebel real”, it seems, must always resist itsencasement in art, in the “geometric ideal”.

If the artist claims power over a reality which can never be fully apprehended or fixed, then is there any possibility for political art? Art itself may be seen as an oppression (and repression) of the reality it seeks to order and control. When Gérad rebukes Rita for her romanticising of Thérèse instead of trying to grasp the “stinking reality” (p.235) of her life, the novel raises the possibility that art might merely “beautify” life. Feminist art, in particular, faces a dilemma when confronted with the need to acknowledge the material circumstances of women at the same time as it recognises the impossibility of fixing real women in art. Campbell clearly wants to write an art which does not become so devoted to theoretical and aesthetic niceties that it cannot give an account of the material powerlessness of real women (and men). While poststructuralist theories problematise representation in art, the turning away from representation may amount to a turning away from politics and a responsibility to record the injustice in the world. At the end of Lines of Flight, material conditions break into Rita’s ideal of romantic love; her fight with Sébastien ostensibly centres on Rita’s paying
of the rent, and she finds herself back in Australia with the very material acquisition of a baby girl.

*Lines of Flight* may be read as an autobiographical novel, and so within the tradition of conventional women's writing; the biographical information on the book's covers, with its dedication to the author's parents, tells us that Marion Campbell, like Rita, spent 1975 in Aix en Provence and that her father died when she was a young child. The novel's awareness of art as the "framing" of experience, however, offers a critique of the limitations of the autobiographical fiction and poses important questions about the possibilities for a feminist art. Perhaps the autobiography must always be the starting point for feminist fiction, because the experience of living as a woman is the source of feminist political perceptions. While art cannot know or encompass woman, the attempt to represent women's experience may become political in itself. Campbell warns, though, that even this representation may be beset by romanticism, or lyrical abstraction, or the desire to please.

Finola Moorhead's author's note to *Remember the Tarantella* expresses a different approach to similar questions:

Since 1974 I have been developing theories of the feminine aesthetic in literature. I had been hunting for an "everywoman" the free archetypal female, to underlie a possible Hamlet, Peer Gynt, Candid [sic] of my gender. I was sick of sorry women, in my own and others' stories, who were not in control of their own downfall. Fiction is a literary composition wherein the writer creates above, below and around the real world. Simply screening an accurate description of one's life with a facade of false names and places was not satisfying to me either as a writer or a reader. I could not squeeze this "everywoman" out of my mind. It was necessary to get to know a mob of women, all searching for their own freedom. "Everywoman" was women. The singular does not compute when one investigates the nature of the feminine.  

While the idea that fiction can ever be "simply screening an accurate description of one's life with a facade of false names" would by now be accepted by very few critics, Moorhead writes from an author's viewpoint and is, no doubt, referring to what a writer might think she is doing when writing autobiographical fiction (perhaps, Helen Garner's writing). This statement, in essence, rejects the project of writing the experience of an individual woman as a feminist activity, in particular the "woman as victim" stories which recount the oppression of individuals. Instead, Moorhead sets herself quite elaborate formal tasks in *Remember the Tarantella*. To avoid the convention of the individual protagonist she creates a series of women characters, each named according to a letter of the alphabet. In order to avoid a linear narrative, she devises a spiderweb configuration in which the characters meet and part, travelling over the world and finally come together in a ritual tarantella dance. The narrative is revealed by means of letters and diary entries as well as conventional third person narration.

Moorhead conceived her novel as a geometric construct, and she claims that one of the formal constraints was to write a novel with no men in it:
I proved my point about the female aesthetic, I can make a novel that does have very few men in it. I only had cut-out type men in it, without it being considered ugly. I wrote it too damn well for it to be dismissed.

In this interview recorded by Sue Woolfe and Kate Grenville in *Making Stories* (p.206), she reveals that the process of the writing was as experimental as the final novel itself. She began with a series of diagrams and maps, then worked through a long poem before starting on a prose draft. Perhaps, the most interesting part of this process was Moorhead’s decision to pass each draft to a selected group of twelve women readers—chosen for each of the star signs. This group met together one weekend and read parts of the drafted novel, then continued to read new chapters as they were written. These women acted as critics as well as readers, and Moorhead acknowledges their generosity in contributing to the novel. In this way, Moorhead addressed one of the major drawbacks of novels as a feminist art form—their dependence on individual artists who claim “authorship”. Such a concept of art, after all, promotes the idea of individual agency over communal activity. But she did not, in the end, give up all claims to being the individualist artist: when asked how she sifted out the various criticisms from readers, she told Woolfe and Grenville, “Well, I’m the boss, I’m the writer!” (p.218).

While Moorhead claims that fiction is written “above, below and around the real world”, the representational impulse remains evident in her novel. Indeed, the most engaging parts of it appear to be most autobiographical—for one can guess that the experiences of the philosopher taxidriver, Iona Flynn, and her family have some correspondences with Moorhead’s. Despite the novel’s attempt to encompass “everywoman” it indicates a consciousness that the women in the network, for all their far-flung travels, represent a small and privileged group, the “university sheilas” or “university-educated white feminists” so hated by the men who burn down their communal house in the Blue Mountains. Yet the novel stands as a testament to women. Iona thinks that “her generation of women must attempt to change civilization, or, as some of her friends maintain, the world will end.” Towards the novel’s end, Et theorises in a letter to Frances that lesbian sexuality offers an alternative pattern to the sexuality of men:

For men sex is a kind of death, they admit that. It is the completion of their biological role. They are, on a psychic level, ready for death. Look at the mess the planet’s in and the necrophilia that has embraced all our lives. But for women sex is a beginning. It is new life. Engendering, giving birth, nurturing. Our psyche is so different from what we live in, the threat of death; so, lesbian sexuality. It does engender a new identity. A new archetype. (p.339)

This is, of course, an argument from metaphor (of a kind similar to the French feminist theories about “writing the body”) but it at least presents an alternative pattern for narrative to the heterosexual pattern identified by Peter Brooks and others. Yet the heterosexual pattern of narrative is usually identified with “new life” as well as death, with the creation of a future, not merely a past. Et’s “lesbian sexuality” includes the ultimate goal of the heterosexual narrative—new birth—
as if that can be achieved in a totally separatist world. Moorhead ends her novel with a Summer Solstice dance occurring in 4553 B.C. in which twenty six women mourn the passing of an era and the destruction of the environment. The dance forms a narrative similar to that of sexual climax (or the narrative of childbirth) as the women reach ecstasy and celebrate their menstruation. The narrator, like Garner’s Maxine at the end of Cosmo Cosmolino rises from the earth in a spiritual flight: “On the distant orb of the earth I see the odd shape of the winged orobus” (p.350).

Ultimately, then, Remember the Tarantella expresses a nostalgia for a golden age of women’s contact with the earth and each other, an age before technology and the institutionalising of male power. As a novel, it attempts to forge a new genre in which a network of sexual contacts and friendships replaces the one-to-one romance of heterosexual convention, and in which a separatist female world can be constructed. Unsurprisingly, the novel’s progression appears rather forced, as Moorhead creates her twenty six characters and slips from one to the other, often refusing to continue a narrative which offers some interesting resolution. Yet the task Moorhead has set herself goes against the grain of reader’s expectations and writer’s instincts; there will be no satisfying “story” here.

Moorhead’s characters are deliberately unindividualised (not unlike the men in Foster’s Mates of Mars), and the patterning of the novel denies the mimicking of “real life” in conventional narrative. In the scene where her friends read Iona’s work at the university, the discussion centres on the issue of the individual artist and the community, with individualism being identified with masculine art, the communal with feminine. Francis declares that the writer cannot escape individualism: “The writer appropriates others’ lives” (p.193). Moorhead attempts to escape such appropriation. Can there be an “everywoman”? This very proposition suggests that woman might be a stable identity, and a generic being. Ultimately, the movement of the novel is for the many to become one, rather than the one to become many, sliding over the differences not only between women but within women.

Moorhead alludes to a number of philosophers and thinkers in the course of Remember the Tarantella, but she does not appear to subscribe to any of the theories of Cixous, Kristeva or Irigaray. Her experiment is idiosyncratic, created from her own theories of feminist narrative rather than influenced by more academic concerns. She resists the satisfactions of narrative resolution, though there are elements of the novel which may well excite readers’ desire for such resolution, such as Iona’s relationship with her mother and sister. While her writing might be interpreted as contributing to the idea that feminist writing must create its own symbolic order, it may be that cyclical forms of narrative merely highlight readers’ desire for the absent resolution, for the untold narratives of her various women characters. While Remember the Tarantella deliberately counters the formulas of heterosexual narrative, it must do so by adhering to its own mathematical pattern.
More importantly, though, the novel proposes a different way of thinking for women to the intuitive, instinctive and inward looking modes of writing suggested by écriture féminine. Moorhead’s novel is mathematical, outward looking, even at times mechanical, in its approach to art. She uses some of the intellectual tools which theories of difference have, once again, seen as rational and, therefore, masculine—in this way, she reclaims for women some of the modes which have been damned as patriarchal.

While Mary Fallon’s Working Hot has some similarities to Remember the Tarantella, particularly in its proposal of a lesbian pattern for fiction, Fallon clearly attempts to achieve a “writing of the body” by focusing on the sexual experience of the female body. Her disruption of conventional form goes further than Moorhead’s in that Working Hot presents not merely a network of women’s lives but a collage of letters, plays, a movie and an opera script, poetry, art exhibition catalogue notes, jokes, graffiti, quotes about women, scraps of conversations, and other fragments of women’s lives. A unifying narrative might be discerned in the story of Toto Caelo’s love affairs with Freda Peaches, who rejects her to find a man, then with Top Value, the Kings Cross prostitute, and the dying One Iota. But this narrative is little more than a line along which the fragments of the novel are pegged. A formal resolution of sorts is offered in the final paragraphs which follow some of the writings of the older “motherly” lesbian, One Iota, before her death:

and you want to know the last thing silly old One Iota said
before she kicked the bucket she said pass me
me lippy would ya love I must look something frightful
now can you credit it
and I walked for days until I reached that plateau of
thwarted desires and dead dreams called Maturity

Working Hot holds together through the sheer force of its energy, as Fallon tries one formal gambit after another, recording the language and sights of Sydney streets or the sordid, yet somehow silly, activities in Kings Cross bars and strip clubs. Its subject is the paradox of women’s bodies and their sexuality, and the threat of sexuality to our society. Misogynistic sayings, quotes and stories crowd the book. Fragments from popular culture include Abigail telling John Singleton about a man pissing on her feet in a nightclub, or Mike Todd and Paul Newman commenting on their filmstar wives’ performances in bed, as well as numerous graffiti clichés, rhymes and sayings common in Australian society. In the course of the book, men tell stories about the uselessness of old or ugly women, or of policemen raping and bashing women, or of unrepentant brutality against women:

She wasn’t a bad sort of woman for a tart a bit long in the tooth when I cracked onto her and a real dyed-in-the-wool whore by that stage but anyway it was an accident wasn’t it died out there she did ran over her in the truck one rainy night didn’t see her in the rear vision did I buried her myself where we’d camped no-one ever missed her. (p.186)
Fallon seems to be examining women’s genitals for some explanation of this fear and hatred, and she confronts the vagina explicitly:

| It is your cunt which is valuable (you can sell it) |
| despicable smelly revolting full of mucus |
| like your nose |
| it makes you what you are—object laughable hysterical (p.204) |

Through the explicit descriptions of lesbian sex, and a series of lesbian love poems she celebrates the bodily (as opposed to literary or idealised) responsiveness of women. Yet the desire for possession, for an all-consuming love, continues to afflic her women characters. The relationship between physical sexual acts and emotion remains problematic, even when these physical acts are dissected minutely and when the ideological and political implications of possession and conventional love are acknowledged. While the physical love of women for each other resists the commercial exchange of the brothels and the possessive prison of conventional heterosexuality it seems that it cannot evade the demands for faithfulness and mutual love. Implicit in this problem are the sado-masochistic elements in the sexuality of Fallon’s women characters, but the novel provides no political answers to the complex nature of women’s desires.

*Working Hot* attacks the decorum which has kept Australian women’s novels within the range of middle class, mostly heterosexual, experience. The explicit way in which it examines the female genitals and bodily response to sex comments, by contrast, on the evasions and artificiality of conventional pornography and its silencing of the active female. It mixes vernacular language with the intellectual terminology of gender discussion, treating serious subjects lightheartedly, and deliberately deflating some of the solemnity usually associated with sexuality and love. Perhaps, its most impudent achievements are the satires on men and their language, for example the poem on “Men’s drivel” which goes on for several pages, or the monologue by the prostitute’s impotent client:

| honestly I’m sorry honey look it’s not your fault you’ve done your best I’m a bit pissed tonight I’ll come back another night and really show you a good time I’ll give you your fifty bucks you’re worth every penny it’s not your fault I really enjoyed myself look lets give it one more burl . . . (pp.7–8) |

While some readers might have difficulty identifying such a collection of fragments as a novel, *Working Hot* may be seen as intent on representation of a kind. The quotes from reading and television, the observations in the streets and pubs, carry a kind of documentary authenticity about life in inner Sydney in the 1980s. As well, the novel tries to look at sexuality without encroaching romanticism or idealism. It attempts to uncover women’s experience of genital sex and to ponder its meaning. Though the end result may appear far from the traditional realist novel (much further than *Remember the Tarantella*, for example) the impulse and direction of this collage of texts is to record and explore the hitherto unrepresented.

At the same time, these scraps of recording, interwoven with the love poems
and plays, draw attention to the failure of writing to hold and unify experience. Fallon, as author, refuses to direct her collection of writings towards a final meaning. I have argued that Christina Stead’s novels also resist such authorial direction and often leave readers puzzled about her intentions. Fallon’s work suggests a much more complete breakdown of narrative as a mimicking of women’s sexuality. Like Stead’s later novels, too, Working Hot can be read as principally satirical and public in its achievements, rather than the serious, personal work often expected from the woman writer. In some ways, its comic and energetic enacting of female physicality mirrors the enacting of the masculine in Mates of Mars. In her review, Melissa Hardie identified it as a Menippean satire with direct links with Joyce’s Ulysses—the same literary provenance as Foster’s novels.8

Working Hot demands readers willing to forgo narrative direction and ready to endure explicit sexual description and sometimes brutal language. Perhaps, its open declaration of an experimental stance makes it a novelist’s novel, one which stretches the limits of possibilities so that others can learn.

Obviously, Campbell, Moorhead and Fallon are grappling with debates which have informed the earlier readings in this book. In particular, they are concerned with the difficulties of representing women’s experience in conventional fiction. Campbell disrupts a partly conventional narrative by a continual verbal self-consciousness which reminds us of the novel’s textual form. Moorhead experiments at the narrative level by moving away from a central protagonist. Fallon deliberately throws off even those elements of narrative form which Moorhead finds useful. Yet despite their self-consciousness about form, none of these writers offers fiction as a complete projection by the author, without reference to a real. Campbell enjoys some of the verbal game playing found in postmodernism, but clings to the relationship between art and life, no matter how difficult. Though Moorhead has discussed the patterning of her novel in other places, she does not include this discussion within it; while the very naming of the characters proclaims that the novel is a fiction, or even a fantasy, it does not go so far as to question its own status as an ordering of reality. Fallon’s novel might best be described as modernist, in its consistent attempts to break down narrative order and in its fragmentary depiction of experience. In this way, it can be read as a tour de force response to the feminist call to “write the body”.

In her later novel Not Being Miriam (1988) Campbell turned her attention from the theoretical problems of the artist to focus more firmly on the material problems of living women—on class and history, as well as a particular present in the Australia of Alan Bond and Lindy Chamberlain. Her novels try to explore the “real, material circumstances” of women within a literary style that plays with language and breaks at least some of its narrative structures. Paul Salzmann and Colleen Keane regard Not Being Miriam more highly than Lines of Flight for its movement from single protagonist to multiple women characters (closer to the technique of Remember the Tarantella) but it does not sustain the dazzling level of verbal inventiveness of the earlier novel. These novels make considerable
demands on readers, and their appeal has been mainly to academics and feminists eager to appreciate the testing of literary possibilities.

The phenomenal popular success, then, of Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* needs some consideration. For Modjeska claims a feminist inspiration for her work, with the German feminist writer Christa Wolf and the French theorist, Luce Irigaray, providing influential writing models for it. In the acknowledgements for the book, Modjeska tells us that *Poppy* began as a biography of her mother but became “a mixture of fact and fiction, biography and novel”. Modjeska explains that she began the book while working as an academic in literary studies, but once she had become immersed in the writing she found

I was no longer interested in the edifice of literary theory as it was deciphered in that faculty, or in an approach to writing that divorced words from the lives of those who wrote, and those who read them.  

Theory may well be a form of silencing and depoliticising, as it is in *Lines of Flight*. Modjeska considers Ursula Le Guin's proposition of a Father tongue (the language of public discourse) and a Mother tongue (the inaccurate, unclear, conversational language of the private) and declares her interest in finding a “third term”, a language which can accommodate “learning with blood and heart, father tongue perhaps with mother tongue” (p.152).

*Poppy* places a personal, individual (and fictionalised) experience inside a historical world of public events, such as the Second World War or the Suez crisis. The narrator's mother, Poppy, becomes not only an individual woman experiencing the crises of a domestic and private life, but a focus for all Western women of her generation. Similarly, the difficult relationship between the writing daughter, Lalage, and the written mother, Poppy, may be read as both representative of the intimate negotiations between all daughters and mothers and the generational negotiations between postwar feminist women and their mothers.

Poppy herself finds history to be too broad and abstract a way to record events and experiences. She objects to the idea of history as an external force sweeping individual lives up as it moves. Her focus is on individuals, intimacies and personal concerns. Yet, even her resistance to History may be seen historically as part of the domesticated focus of women of her generation, deliberately confined to the private sphere. The novel attempts to reclaim such experiences as part of history.

In this respect, the most significant event in Poppy's life (and that of Lalage and her sisters) is her confinement in a sanatorium for two years after her breakdown in 1959. With this crisis, the dream of the “happy” postwar family is swept away for Lalage and her sisters. While their adult relatives try to explain the breakdown in terms of exhaustion, or introspection or difficult children, the novel suggests that the problem lies in the concept of the family itself:

*Poppy* did make an ordinary family, a supremely, triumphantly, ordinary family. A family to be proud of. Her windows did open onto lupins and roses. The water in the jug on her table was always fresh. Outside children played happily. I know
this is so because I was there. And because I was there I find it hard to accept that there must have been cracks even then, hairline cracks, injuries none of us could see. The cures she took became the malady, and as she struggled with one, she succumbed to the other. Perhaps like the psychiatrist who advised Richard in 1959 that Poppy should be admitted just until she’s feeling herself again, we all mistook one thing for another, and not only the poison for the cure. All any of us saw was the family, cure and poison both. (p.9)

Lalage supports this diagnosis of the family as source of mental disorder with the wider evidence of the pressures on middle class women in the 1950s; the postwar period was one of “rampant pronatalism” (p.85) with public anxiety for the restoration of home life after the war, and psychological theories emphasising the mother’s central role in the mental and social health of her children. Lalage can cite literary examples of madness in the period, too—Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, Janet Frame. She proposes that Poppy’s madness is reasonable, given the historical conditions in which she lived, while other relatives (using the logic of the time) argue that her madness is particular, a direct result of her own mother’s failure to nurture.

Poppy’s life after her breakdown becomes a quest for both a private world of self understanding and a public role. In both areas, she achieves successes and failures. In fact, from this perspective, Poppy might be read as a conventional biographical quest novel, in which a woman attempts to reconcile her sexuality with the social roles available to her in her particular society. The extraordinary element in this novel, though, is the narrator’s role—both artist and daughter, seeking meaning from her own mother’s life. So that the novel functions as a double quest, both biography and autobiography.

This doubleness provides the strength of the novel as, rather like Germaine Greer in her Daddy we hardly knew you (1989), the narrator maps her own life against the sketchier evidence of her parents’ lives. It also threatens to romanticise them, as the mother is retrieved as idealist, intellectual, mystic and sexual being. Lalage conjures up a mother worthy of her own intellectual and spiritual strivings, so that Poppy’s breakdown becomes a sign of resistance—a sign of strength rather than weakness. Poppy’s search for meaning embraces literature, education, religion, including periods living in a utopian commune and travels through India. Her practical efforts to improve the world are directed to a halfway house for adolescent criminals—Poppy’s solution lies in a form of maternal love. Lalage restrains herself from commenting that Poppy’s boys are benefiting from a relationship she, her natural daughter, was denied. The pattern of maternal neglect, China of Poppy, Poppy of Lalage, is pushed away as Lalage seeks out a stronger, more admirable mother. Greer’s book presents a contrast here—as Greer reviews her parents’ failings remorselessly. Poppy, on the other hand, becomes an archetypal figure for her times, a woman fighting against the domestic imprisonment of postwar Western society, a woman any feminist daughter would be proud to claim.

While Poppy may be read as participating in the postmodernist breaking down
of the barrier between fiction and biography, especially in the way it inserts figures from the real, historical world into that of fiction, it does not fully acknowledge Lalage’s power as narrator.

The book’s dedication tells us that Modjeska’s own mother “never kept a diary”, and we are advised that much of it is fiction. Modjeska invents Lalage as a version of herself, and she also invents Poppy as a version of her mother. From one perspective, this blurring of fiction and biography may be seen to challenge the rigid divisions between fiction and non-fiction writing and to demand that the personal, private and intimate be given the same status as historical evidence as the public document and record. From another perspective, though, the book does not acknowledge that the creation of fiction may appropriate the subjectivity of the real person on which it is based. As Campbell’s novels propose, the artist may become the oppressor of those she creates. Power lies with the artist, as much as with the social ideals of a culture. Poppy might well have been a little more self conscious about its fiction making and its narrative position. Indeed, Modjeska’s later book, The Orchard, (1994) explicitly states that the narrator will preserve her own narrative from readers, while exposing the narratives of others.

These four novels, then, represent attempts to create art on the basis of the feminist theory emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s. But they are also interventions in theory, with no writer content merely to illustrate the elements of theory in her writing. Instead, they take up some of the ideas offered by various feminisms and demonstrate their possibilities and limitations. So, Campbell explores and challenges poststructuralist feminism in a tour de force of language; Moorhead writes a novel in which men don’t matter; Fallon throws herself into the inscription of the genital woman; and Modjeska moves across the boundaries of fiction and biography. Each text, too, offers some features associated with postmodernist writing—from the self consciousness of Lines of Flight, to the overt patterning of Remember the Tarantella, the fragmentation of Working Hot, and the intrusion of the real into the fictional in Poppy. Here, though, these techniques are in the service of a feminism which is overt about its politics. No matter how elusive the relationship between text and experience may be, the writers all seek to claim it. In this way, the representation of the real remains an aspiration of this textual art.

In retrospect, the five years (1985–1990) in which these four books appeared look like the high point of feminist experiment in Australia. It is interesting to recall that only Modjeska’s book was published by a mainstream commercial publisher on its first appearance. Modjeska has continued to work across the boundaries of autobiography and a more academic kind of non-fiction. Later books by the fiction writers have not appeared to be so innovative and political—Campbell’s Prowler (1999) uses the voices of two women to explore their relationship, Moorhead has moved to writing feminist detective novels, and Fallon has published no further novels to date.

Indeed, lesbian detective fiction, such as Dorothy Porter’s novel in verse, The Monkey’s Mask (1994), seems to have attracted most feminist attention in the
1990s—though I find its complicity in the demise of the heterosexual female victim troubling. Amanda Lohrey's *Camille's Bread* (1995) has been praised by some feminists, but it condemns its male protagonist by a series of crude devices (a knife under the bed) and finds resolution by recourse to nineteenth century narrative devices (a generous ex-husband who happens to be a merchant banker!). Justine Ettler's *River Ophelia* (1995) appears to create a post-feminist sexual fantasy. Perhaps, they are all playing—the experiment and political struggle is over, and it is time to indulge in romantic fantasy and detective suspense.

What, then, did these novels achieve? Modjeska's work appears to have been the most influential, in that other writers—Helen Garner, for example—have tried the kind of crossover between fiction and documentary which Modjeska first developed in *Poppy*. These books may be less satisfactory than fiction, in that the writer may perform a sleight of hand by seeming to present the “real” while protecting her own preoccupations and personal emotion from examination. On the other hand, Beverley Farmer's *A Body of Water* (1990) exposes the writer and her craft by exploring the interchange between recorded experience and fiction. By a process of self-consciousness it explores the sources of a woman's art.

Bronwen Levy and Gillian Whitlock have expressed concern that women's writing in Australia has become “mainstream”, read as docilely conveying a liberal ideology and canonised as the subject of women's writing courses in universities. This appears a peculiarly academic view of affairs, which gives an unwarranted political importance to academic criticism and teaching, and suggests that acceptance by “mainstream” critics automatically makes a novel compliant with the world view of those critics. This tends to close down the possibility of debate about individual novels and it assumes that the text itself has no power to speak. More concerning, this attitude appears to dismiss a woman writer's aspiration to aesthetic seriousness and intellectual engagement in that any recognition by serious critics becomes a sign of “selling out”. One result of such thinking may be that some feminist critics turn away from the supposed conservatism of high art to popular genres, and some women writers seem to be turning away from this aspiration, too.

In this book I have argued that texts should not be swept into genre categories on the premise that the identification of genre reveals everything about the text. Obviously, the formal structure of a text may be revealing, particularly about its relationships to the historical context of its writing. But these assumptions about genre—that the “classical realist” text is liberal, the autobiographical text “bourgeois individualist”, the “avante-garde” text politically radical and so on—curtail the reading process and deny the mixed nature of the novel, in particular. In the case of women's writing, the tendency to categorise any realist fiction as “liberal feminism” and any experimental fiction as “radical” denies the complexity of the negotiation in individual texts.

In my readings of earlier novels, particularly those by Cambridge and Richardson, I have tried to show how a text can make quite subtle adjustments to
genre expectations while apparently conforming to them. In contemporary Australia, novelists may be more self conscious about genre and its ideological baggage, but it is no doubt possible to write a fragmented, modernist text while subscribing to conservative ideals—and a realist one that is radical.

As the novels discussed in this chapter and in Chapter Five demonstrate, there is no clear division between feminist literary experiment and the representation of women's experiences; Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*, Marion Campbell's *Lines of Flight*, and *Mary Fallon's Working Hot* share the aspiration to express in textual form the way women physically experience the world. That is, the struggle to express and understand what it means to live as a woman remains the basis for feminist fiction—whether that fiction appears in the form of a realist novel, or a self conscious experimental work that breaks genre boundaries.

In this book, I have tried to open up readings of a series of novels, some of which have been classified as conservative because of their use of form. All of these fictions stand in some relationship to theories of art, and all of them engage in debates about the relationship between gender, art and the politics of freedom. Cambridge, in her way, is as self conscious about writing as Campbell or Modjeska.

I have been concerned that some recent critical assumptions about literary form have led to criticism based on categorising texts by genre, rather than reading them individually and listening to their contradictions and arguments. At the same time, theories about form and politics have their place in revealing the ways in which texts operate, and providing part of the intellectual context in which serious artists work. Certainly, I have no wish to dismiss theories, particularly those such as feminist poststructuralism that have been so inspirational to artists and critics. The emphasis of poststructuralist feminisms on form provides an important counter to the tendency to read fiction as biographical or sociological evidence rather than art. But I want to insist that theory is a tool for reading complexity, rather than a means of simplifying the process. A realist novel, therefore, may be as intrinsically worthy of feminist attention as the most recent cross-genre experiment.

Feminist fiction provides an important medium for women to participate in the intellectual and cultural conversation of our society, and to ensure that feminist issues become part of that conversation. The novel may explore the possibility of freedom for all of us.

In Cambridge's *A Marked Man*, in Furphy's *Such is Life*, in Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*, in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, in Mary Fallon's *Working Hot*, freedom and the limitations on it are central concerns of art.

The contradictions between a political commitment to women's equality and an artistic commitment to literary innovation, between feminism's ambitions for women and poststructuralism's denial of stable meaning, may never be resolved, and probably never can be. In the meantime, the sheer intransigence of question about gender and freedom has produced some of the most exciting literary art of the late twentieth century.
Introduction

1 See Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Methuen, 1980).
2 Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).


Chapter 1 — Ada Cambridge and the Woman Question


3 Kingston, n. 123, p.342.


10 Rattling the Orthodoxies, p.ix.


16 Mitchell, “Fiction”, p.66. Bradstock’s and Wakeling’s use of this as the title for their biography suggests they agree.

17 See, for example, Debra Adelaide’s introduction to Ada Cambridge, *A Marked Man* (London: Pandora, 1987). All page references are to this edition.

18 Debra Adelaide, introduction to *A Marked Man*, p.xiii.


22 Elizabeth Morrison’s notes to her edition of the novel document the accuracy of its depiction of the Exhibition, Melbourne hotels and streets, and so on.

23 *The Reform Club* is published as part of Elizabeth Morrison’s edition of *A Woman’s Friendship*, pp.143–68.

**Interlude —
Joseph Furphy and the Authoresses**


2 Joseph Furphy, *The Annotated Such is Life* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1999), p.130. All references are to this edition.


5 Responding to an earlier version of this chapter, Dawn Partington surveys criticism of Furphy along gender lines. See Dawn Partington, “Furphy and Women” in *Southerly*, 59.2, (1999), pp.165–76.


11 Michael Wilding argues that even in its language, *Such is Life* defies hierarchies. See Michael Wilding, “Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life*” in his *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction* (Sydney: Sydney Studies, Shoestring Press, 1997), pp.109–33.

12 Susan Martin takes an interesting approach in “Why Do All these Women have Moustaches? Gender, Boundary and Frontier in *Such is Life* and *Monsieur Caloche*”, *Southern Review*, 25.1 (1992), pp.68–77; and Francis Devlin Glass considers the feminine in “Furphy and the Land: the Feminine as Metaphor for Landscape”, *Westerly*, 36.4 (1991), pp.39–44.

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Chapter 2 — A Kind of Romance:
*Henry Handel Richardson’s Maurice Guest*


3 Susan Sheridan notes these in her *Along the Faultlines* (p.32). Catherine Pratt has also drawn my attention to similarities in the novels.


6 For example, in Schaffer’s *Women and the Bush*, pp.100–07.

7 Catherine Pratt has done much to redress this in her *Resisting Fiction: the Novels of Henry Handel Richardson* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999).


10 Schor, p.x.

11 Kelly, p.167.

12 “The Art of Henry Handel Richardson” in *Myself When Young*, p.163.

13 Catherine Pratt discusses the way that Australian critics have sought “influences” as the key to *Maurice Guest* in her *Resisting Fiction*, pp.12–15. Georg Lukacs puts a Marxist view of naturalism in his *Studies in European Realism* (London: Hillway Publishing, 1950), arguing that the great realist novels explored a total social reality, while the naturalists evaded such reality by concentrating on the particular.

14 Henry Handel Richardson, *Maurice Guest* (London: Virago, 1981), p.6. All references are to this text.


17 Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing*.

18 Robertson, “The Art of Henry Handel Richardson”, p.163.
Chapter 3 – Realism and Socialism:
Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Coonardoo


3 Recent examples are Barbara Brooks, with Judith Clark, Eleanor Dark: a writer’s life (Sydney: Macmillan, 1998), and Carole Ferrier, Jean Devanny: romantic revolutionary (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), as well as those cited below.


5 Jill Roe has edited two volumes of Franklin’s correspondence as My Congenials: Miles Franklin and friends in letters (Sydney: Angus and Robertson with State Library of New South Wales, 1993).


18 Page references are to Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975).

**Interlude —

*Homo Australiensis: Vance Palmer*


2 Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p.117.


7 Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word*.


Chapter 4 — Christina Stead’s Night of Struggle


NOTES

18 R.G. Geering and A. Segerberg, p.198.

Interlude — The Human Hierarchy of Men and Women: Patrick White’s The Twyborn Affair

2 Hazel Rowley, Christina Stead, p.517.
3 Rowley, p.554.
5 Marr, p.584.
6 Patrick White, The Twyborn Affair (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p.201. All references are to this edition.
8 Nicholas Birns, “Weird White: The Allusive Dynamics of Cultural History in The Twyborn Affair”, paper given to American Association for Australian Literary Studies, Austin, Texas, April, 1993

Chapter 5 — Life and Art: Helen Garner and Sally Morgan

1 Both Greer’s The Female Eunuch (1970) and Millet’s Sexual Politics (1970) developed literary criticism into more general feminist arguments.
3 “The Art of the Dumb Question”.


8 Particularly in his *The Americans, Baby: a Discontinuous Narrative* (1972).


13 Goldsworthy, p.18ff.

14 Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word*.

15 Goldsworthy, p.37.


17 See, for example, the essays in Jenna Mead (ed), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life* (Sydney: Random House, 1997).

18 “The Art of the Dumb Question”.


20 I am grateful to my student, Caroline McKean, for this suggestion.


23 Stephen Muecke questions the simplicity of this view in “Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis”, *Southerly*, 48.4, (1988), pp.405–18, but offers a simplified account of it. I do not agree with his argument that *My Place* is a “confessional discourse” in the European tradition.

25 References are to Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987).
26 “Reader-response to Transcribed Oral Narrative”.
27 Muecke, pp.413–14.
30 Jackie Huggins, “Always Was Always Will Be” *Historical Studies*, 25.100, (1993), pp.459–64. This issue has other contributions to the debate.

**Interlude — A Masculine Crisis:**
**David Foster’s Mates of Mars**

1 See, for example, the discussion in *Island*, 27 (1986) in response to Gerard Windsor’s “Writers and Reviewers”, pp.15–32.
8 Schwenger, p.108.


### Chapter 6 — Feminist Experiment and Contemporary Women’s Writing


This lists more general references. Critical references to the novels and authors are cited in the notes to each chapter.


REAL RELATIONS


Helen Garner, True Stories (Melbourne: Text, 1996).


Ken Gelder “Postmodernism’s ‘Lost Objects’: desire in the recent fiction of Murnane, Brooks, Henshaw and Jones”, Island, 41 (Summer 1990), pp.49–53.


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