

***Halfway House: the poetics of Australian spaces.* Eds. Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010. 365 pp. AUD\$39.95 NZD\$54.95**



Halfway House is an impressive collection of essays that shows the range and depth of writing about place and space in Australia – scholarly, border-crossing, creative, always surprising, always making new connections. It begins with Stephen Muecke on country and Ross Gibson on changescapes, includes Paul Carter, and acknowledges Muecke’s co-authored *Reading the Country* (1984) and Deborah Bird Rose’s *Nourishing Terrains* (1996) as precursors. Not to mention Bachelard – unhoused by Jennifer Rutherford in her essay ‘Undwelling’. The title of the book comes from Alex Selenitsch’s essay on the Halfway House, one of his houses cum installations that takes us from the 1950s and migration to the culturally inclusive 1990s, via the Bicycle Shed, the Hut on Chicken Legs, the Shortwave clothes-line and the Window of Hope.

The essays originated as papers at a conference on the poetics of space in Australia and have been rewritten. The book reveals astute and creative editing on the part of Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, both of whom have contributed impressive essays, and Rutherford an engaging introduction.

The reader lands in fertile space where everything is in process, and everyone is on the move, always negotiating, adapting, crossing between the colonial and the indigenous, the modern and the ancient. Muecke negotiates the indigenous and the modern with an artful politics, a story about honeysuckle and the honey flow. Ross Gibson writes about systems as opposed to structures, evolving relationships, complex and adaptable, changescapes, acknowledging that an interrelated set of narratives not a snapshot of complexity or a schematized blueprint is what’s needed. Gibson writes: ‘Imagine if we learned better how to make and maintain contemplative environments, how to be in meditative and poetic places that can involve us, that can accord us space to make ourselves, that fold us into our lively built and ever-unbuilding environments’.

This halfway house is a shelter for ideas, a theatre for dancing between the indigenous and the colonial, the colonial and the modern, the migrant and the local, the creative and the analytical. The book acknowledges no borders or fences. Towards the end we enter some strange cartographies, following Keith and Merle’s caravan whirling around Australia in Barbara Holloway’s story that works as satire and meta-narrative, as well as

visiting Maralinga, and virtual detention centres. It's impossible to acknowledge all the essays. But impossible not to mention Brian Greenspan's essay about Greg Egan's 'science fiction' novel *Distress* (1995). Here is an alternative to detention centers, an offshore utopia called Stateless, 'a huge habitable starfish anchored to an extinct volcano'. It's a floating dream, a platform for living that, like a coral reef, is constantly made and unmade, and it requires co-operation and peace to stop it from dissolving back into the sea.

Barbara Brooks lectures in creative practices at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her book publications include *Verandahs*, a fictional memoir, forthcoming from Giramondo; *Eleanor Dark: a Writer's Life* co-authored with Judith Clark. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1998; and *Leaving Queensland*. By Barbara Brooks (with Anna Couani, *The Train*). Sydney: Sea Cruise, 1983.