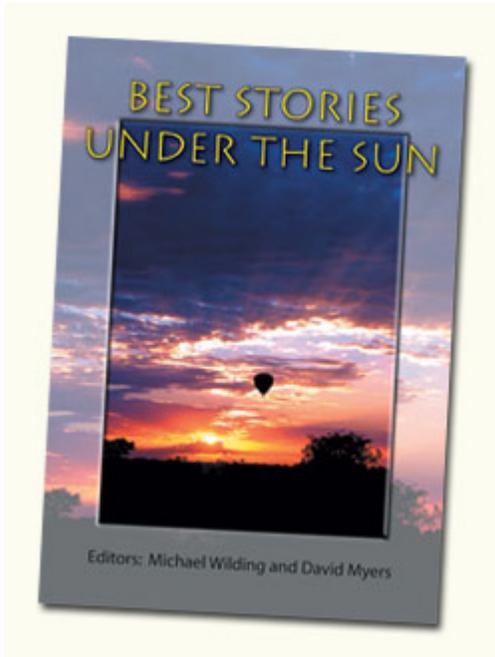


**Best stories under the sun** edited by Michael Wilding and David Myers. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2004pp. 186, paperback, ISBN 1 876780 58 4.



The aesthetic criteria for Wilding and Myer's collection, with its sunset cover photo emblematically overlapping the frame, are difficult to fathom, traditional narratives by better-known writers jostling for attention with young writers' more experimental stories. The co-editors were patently not constrained by geographic or thematic considerations, or even national notoriety, established authors, as well as a first-time writer (Neelam Maharaj) being included. The Gold Coast theme conveyed in a few narratives, like the 'best' qualifier in the title, possibly an allusion to the variety of literary prizes won by contributors, does not shed much light on Wilding and Myer's intentions either.

Though an introduction would have been welcome, each author's background and work is compressed into a short bio at the end of each contribution. This approach has the advantage of concision, but the disadvantage of lack of perspective: how is the reader to conceptualise each writer's trajectory, and the place of the story within it? There are no illustrations, unless the advertisements scattered between stories count as such. A little large for pockets (17 by 25 cm) the volume is printed in clear fonts, though the text suffers from a number of typos (over a dozen) and more particularly, examples of sloppy syntax – for example 'more like' at the end of a sentence (p. 162), 'whose' instead of 'who's' (p. 23) or the use of 'cause' to replace 'because' (pp. 18 and 84). Vernacular syncopation in the dialogue does not excuse lax expressions in the narrative voice. An interesting lexical item was the neologism 'restaurantot' (p. 75) no doubt synonymous with *restaurateur*.

Thematically, the selection offers a considerable range of settings and technique, from sci-fi (Ros Love's eugenic fantasy) to what passes as autobiography (Oakley's Melbourne from the forties to the sixties), Australian history (Hasluck's bushrangers), a more postmodern narrative technique (for example, Breen's casino story), and ethnic narratives (for example, Pira Sudham's first-person fiction on child prostitution in Thailand). Among other competent writers, David Myers (also the publisher) produces a quotidian slice of life (divorce and its aftermath) reminiscent of Robert Drewe's style. The only questionable choice is Jack London's piece, written in Australia and resurrected thanks to the on-line dispenser of classical texts, Project Gutenberg.

Don Graham – whose story features a writer at a conference (Marvell – an avatar of Wilding?) admired for the ‘conversion of instant experience into fiction’ (p. 74) – revives the question of origins. Extrapolating from Wilding’s contribution, and the correlative reference to CIA conspiracies, one is led to suspect that the core writers were recruited at a forum like the Sydney Writers’ Festival. Whatever the selection process, the bulk of the twenty-four stories provide a stimulating and sometimes challenging read. The collection will as easily grace the coffee table as the beach.

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