

## THE 2010 RAY MATHEW LECTURE



### Everywhere and Nowhere

**Kate Jennings**

*Kate Jennings gave the second Ray Mathew Lecture at the National Library of Australia on 29 June 2010.*

To be standing here today is a deeply felt honor because Ray Mathew, the poet, novelist, short-story writer, and playwright in whose name this lecture series was established, was a friend of mine. Ray died in 2002, and his companion, Eva Kollsman, in 2005, but before she died, Eva had the inspired and generous idea of creating a trust that, among other functions, enables 'an Australian living abroad' – quote, unquote – to come to Canberra to give this lecture. Thank you, Ray. Thank you, Eva. A business-class plane ticket! Delicious.

I was told that the subject matter of this lecture is wide open. Goodness! I'm a person of consuming passions and enthusiasms: Bankers, anyone? Caucasian rugs? South East Asian ikats? The films of Jean-Pierre Melville? Swimming, the history thereof? I wish now I'd chosen swimming: its history is fascinating and also amusing because up until the twentieth century the British refused to put their heads under the water or splash with their arms or feet – that was thought to be ungentlemanlike. So they did what my swimming trainer and I call the Johnny Weissmuller stroke, head stuck turtlelike out of the water, propelled by a scissor kick. Not only is this awkward, you don't go anywhere fast. Not a race-winning stroke. But heaven forbid you splash! Those Brits!

However, as I'm only the second person to give the lecture – Geraldine Brooks gave the inaugural address last year, titled 'The Opportunity of Distance' – I want to address the phrase that snagged my attention reading the description of the trust: 'an Australian living abroad', a.k.a. an expat. And to talk a little about Ray Mathew. To talk a little about what Ray and I talked about.

Myself, I *intensely* dislike the word 'expat'. Makes me think of Bette Davis in William Wyler's *The Letter*. Verandas and gin slings and affairs gone wrong. I'm wondering if it isn't time to retire the word. Aren't we *all* global citizens these days? Aren't we all from everywhere and nowhere, as the saying goes?

Yet, as Carmen Callil, who like Ray Mathew left Australia in 1960, noted in a kind review of my new book, *Trouble*, I am 'catalogued as an 'Expatriate Author''. She continued, 'Australia is the only country I have come across that divides its writers into residents and those who have dared to live elsewhere. Can one imagine Americans writing of Ernest Hemingway, or the Brits of Auden, thus?' As you no doubt know, Carmen founded Virago Press, one of the great publishing achievements, as well as writing *Bad Faith: A Forgotten History of Family & Fatherland*, another formidable achievement.

The operative word here is 'dared'. Tom Keneally was getting at the same idea when he observed with characteristic bluntness that Australians don't like their expats because they are envious: they act as if we have escaped from a bad marriage – a marriage in which they are stuck. If this were *ever* true, it's not, I'd argue, any longer. Each year thousands of young professional Australians take off for all parts of the globe. Some stay away, some return. They're not escaping or daring to live somewhere else, as my generation was doing – they're following career paths. James Gorman, who now runs Morgan Stanley, is not thought by anyone to be an expat Australian. He's thought to be something much worse: a Wall Street warlord. Marc Newson: an extremely gifted, highly original designer, not an Aussie expat designer. And Rupert Murdoch, well-known global citizen, what

he is depends on which side of political divide you reside, but the word 'expat' won't be part of the description.

So why the continued use of the word 'expat', in particular to describe writers such as Carmen Callil and myself? A leftover, maybe, from the cultural-tinge days, when Australians could be, well, a tad defensive? To be sure, some writers come back to Australia and can be mightily condescending, embarrassingly ill informed. In fact, we could have a competition, with a prize going to the most obnoxious statement from an Aussie expat writer. But the reason resides not in their expat status but personalities that are prone to self-regard. As you grow older, you notice which of your peers don't listen and instead lecture. The ones who have turned into bores. No matter how large and creative your mind, stop listening and you're dead on the vine.

The reverse can also be true. Time and again on trips to Australia, I've been cornered and told at length what's what with the U.S. I long ago gave up saying, 'I live there. Bit more to it than that'. They're not listening, either, just hugging unchallengeable opinions tight to their chests. Similarly, whenever I've tried to promote discussion, say, about issues that concern me, such as writing schools and how they produce fiction that is narrow in scope, I've had the sensation that the words coming out of my mouth couldn't actually be heard.

There's a psychological phenomenon called cultural blindness. Sometimes called cognitive blindness. Psychologists did an experiment and dropped a gorilla amongst a group of people – I'm simplifying here – and they couldn't see the gorilla because they didn't expect one to be there, in the middle of the street. And then there is oft-told and maybe apocryphal story of the Pacific islanders who physically couldn't see a ship with big white sails that had anchored in their harbor because such a vessel didn't exist in their world. Similarly, the issue I was bringing up wasn't part of intellectual debate in Australia and, thus, couldn't be heard. Not a value judgment: every culture has different preoccupations.

Anyway, that's my *generous* interpretation of the silence that greeted an essay I wrote called 'Gutless Fiction', about how anorexic and inward-looking fiction has become. I was that gorilla, that ship. I could posit a few less generous interpretations, one of them being that I was thought of as an expat and who in their right mind listens to *them*? That's why I would like to see the word expat' retired. Pigeonholing is lazy. An easy way to denigrate and dismiss, if that's your inclination.

When Shirley Hazzard gave the 1984 Boyer Lectures, published as *Coming of Age in Australia*, intellectuals piled on as if they were playing Rugby. A *vicious* game of Rugby. My old friend Don Anderson in the *National Times* opined – yes, *opined*, no other word for it – that *Coming of Age in Australia* was 'a Jeremiad or, if that sounds sexist, then it resembles nothing so much as a speech-day address by a headmistress of a girl's private school of, dare I suggest, Queenwood'. I'm still trying to figure out why a jeremiad is sexist, but nasty jibes about headmistresses of private schools – Hazzard attended Queenwood in Mosman – well, yes, indubitably sexist.

I admire Don Anderson's writing – witty, biting, terrifically intelligent – but this attack was plain churlish. Hazzard's reputation in Australia has never recovered nor her writing given its due, despite the high esteem with which it's held in the United States. She wipes her shoes on us as if we were dust, someone said at a recent Sydney Institute event for Des O'Grady, and I'd bet dollars to doughnuts that the person saying this has never read *Coming of Age in Australia*. But that's the word on Shirley Hazzard, unthinkingly relayed: she wipes her shoes on Australians.

While I didn't agree with everything Hazzard said in her Boyer Lectures, her ideas deserved consideration. You could argue around the time she gave the lectures that Australia did come of age. Australians started looking outward as never before, in particular toward Asia. Money was poured into the arts, and confidence floated heavenward. Instead, what Shirley got was a head-bashing, groin-kicking scrum.

I don't see Don and his pals piling on Peter Carey for his closing address at this year's Sydney Writers Festival, although I believe Bryce Courtenay let his feelings be known. Lamenting the supposed parlous state of reading in Australia, Carey affected the same faux ockerism as Bob Hughes in the television series *Australia: Beyond the Fatal Shore*. He informed the audience that getting drunk or having sex doesn't preclude, quote unquote, 'this literature thing'.

Whenever I come back to Australia, my cousin Stephen, a lawyer, invites my brother, Dare, and I to a Swans game; Stephen has season tickets. Nothing quite like a good Aussie Rules game. [Childhood story. Sunday... old Vauxhall... grandparents... thermos and sandwiches... off we'd go to Arian Park or Ardlethan. The cars would nose up to the fence around the field. Thinking back, those football fields were rough. No grass. Stone and cat's heads.] Not so at the SCG. While we watch, Stephen tells me about books he's read recently, and I remember him being very excited one year about Anna Funder's *Stasiland*. So you can add watching footie to the list of activities that doesn't prevent an appreciation of serious literature. *Pace* Peter, but from where I sit, Australia seems chockers with literary festivals and people who read. His speech can be seen on Slow TV.

Fortunately, attitudes about expat writers might be changing. Indeed, academics are looking at Shirley Hazzard afresh. Brigitta Olubas, who is writing a critical study on Hazzard, quotes the academic Robert Dixon in support of an approach which factors in 'overlapping allegiances and multiple affiliations' in a writer's life and work. No longer are we defined solely by our birthplace and penalized if we stray too far from it. Progress!

At the Sydney Institute event, Des O'Grady, another Australian who has lived abroad for most of his adult life, mentioned an interview with Shirley Hazzard in which she told him the reason she left: Australia was an inhospitable place for women. We forget, I think, the dimensions of the barriers for women in those days. Jill Ker Conway decamped for the same reason, and no doubt Germaine Greer and

Carmen Callil were similarly motivated. By expatriating myself to New York, I felt I had given physical form to a state of mind – a state of mind not uncommon in those days for Australian women.

Edward Said wrote at length and melodramatically about exile as ‘a condition of terminal loss’. For Australian women of my generation, exiling ourselves – it was more serious than expatriation – was one of gain, of wholeness. I shall never forget my early years in New York and finding for the first time that I didn’t have to defend my ambitions or be on either the defensive or the offensive as a woman. Misogyny existed, to be sure, but it wasn’t pervasive. While New York is an intensely competitive city, it is also an encouraging one.

Encouragement – choice elixir – was not something lavished on Australian women when I was growing up. Quite the opposite. Says she *tersely*.

Feelings about expatriation vary widely. When Geraldine Brooks gave the address last year, *her* attention was snagged by this sentence: ‘Ray Mathew left Australia in 1960, never to return’. She found this a ‘sad and terrible sentence’. To her, it is ‘a gift to travel, a boon to be able to live abroad ... But it’s a greater gift to come home.’ [Geraldine is younger than I am or the women I just mentioned, which perhaps affords her a warmer view.] She is clear on this: the United States is not her country. She cares about the U.S. -- she’s not taking a moral holiday from its problems or politics, as she quotes Peter Carey once saying he was able to do – but, at bottom, not her country. Living away brings what she loves about Australia into definition. She can adjust the binoculars of memory, sharpen the focus.

[Digression here on the Qantas slogan, ‘I still call Australia home.’ The filmmaker Phillip Noyce took me to a performance of *The Boy from Oz* on Broadway. Hugh Jackman’s star turn. Now, I’d been away so long I didn’t know the song ‘I Still Call Australia Home’ or that Qantas used it. In the musical, the number is sung by women in depression-era print dresses, the men with hats with corks on them, the sun setting behind them. I couldn’t believe it. Every cliché in the book. I sunk in

my seat, gurgling from embarrassment. After the performance, we went backstage for a chat with Hugh. Just the three of us. Phillip began by saying, 'Kate *loved* the musical. But she especially loved the song 'I Still Call Australia Home'.' Both of them looked at me expectantly. Big smiles. I looked at the ceiling, I looked at the ground, squirmed, and finally said, 'Actually, I didn't. I thought it was, ah, *soppy*.' Phillip is very fast on his feet. 'Oh, that's right. Kate isn't sentimental.' Got that right, Phillip. Awkward moment glossed over.]

I could be completely wrong about this, but Ray did not find it 'tragic' that he never returned home. He had tragedy aplenty in his life, but that wasn't one of them. I don't think he even considered Australia 'home'. Home to him was 1010 Fifth Avenue with Eva Kollman. Home was the Carnegie Hill neighborhood where he was a beloved figure, an unofficial mayor. Home was the Crawford Doyle bookstore around the corner from their apartment, the church basements where he went to his twelve-step meetings. A man with a big heart, always ready to help others, Ray had a full and satisfying life on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan.

The two of us occasionally discussed the possibility of his returning to Australia for a visit. Maybe I could speak with people, I proposed, and arrange that he attend the Adelaide Festival. He'd shrug. I was always reminded of Stevie Smith's poem 'My Hat', which finishes, *Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that*. To check the accuracy of this line, I had a delightful few hours reading Stevie Smith, something I hadn't done in a while. Marvelous poet. She wrote, of course, the eminently quotable lines: *I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning*. (I am told there is a rock band called Waving, Not Drowning.) My personal favorite is the poem titled *Lady 'Rogue' Singleton*:

*Come, wed me, Lady Singleton,  
And we will have a baby soon  
And we will live in Edmonton  
Where all the friendly people run.*

*I could never make you happy, darling,  
Or give you the baby that you want,  
I would always very much rather, dear,  
Live in a tent.*

*I am not a cold woman, Henry,  
But I do not feel for you,  
What I feel for the elephants and the miasmas,  
And the general view.*

Stevie Smith, of course, never strayed from Palmers Green in North London, however much she might have longed for elephants and miasmas. I digress but with purpose. Back to Ray Mathew. At the time Australia was caught up in multiculturalism and postmodern theory. Writers such as Ray – his work combined an intense lyricism with a clear-eyed sardonic humor – were out of fashion. Nobody cared about the Lyre-bird Writers. And, in truth, I couldn't have pulled any strings, not being flavor of the month myself – enter here as evidence, a book called *Trouble* -- although every now and again I would receive a letter from the Adelaide Festival organizers inviting me to attend. However, as I was an Australian, they couldn't pay my airfare, but if I was 'in the neighborhood', please drop by. I told them in no uncertain terms that I was not going to be 'in the neighborhood'. In fact, I was going to be 10,000 miles away. And no doubt I also told them what they could do with their letter.

It struck me as sad that Australians were not interested in their literary history – Ray represented a chunk of it – as I did, to a lesser degree, with the women's anthology, *Mother I'm Rooted*. I was in the weird position of having American writers such as Sharon Olds call me for tips about travelling in Australia, where to go, what to see, who to meet. Have a great time, Sharon! Said through gritted teeth. Eventually, in order to see family and friends, I turned to travel writing, and I am not sorry for that outcome. I saw more of Australia that way than I ever did living there.

I have lived now in New York nearly as long as I lived in Australia. Heretical as it might seem, Australia is neither my country nor my home, as it is for Geraldine. It's the place I started from, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot slightly. It shaped me, but so have my 30 years in New York City. I have, as Robert Dixon put it, 'overlapping allegiances and multiple affiliations'. I've constructed a life in Manhattan that suits my personality. Fast big-city life and its anonymity isn't for everyone, but it makes me as happy as a puddle-duck. I feel extremely fortunate. As my husband and I used to say when things turned out well: lucky, lucky, lucky!

At the moment, that home is in a 50-storey building where the staff and residents are represented by just about every nation on the planet. No exaggeration. The only country *not* represented on the building staff is Ireland, which pleases me no end because my old building, where I lived for 25 years, had *only* Irishmen on the staff. Let me explain. In New York, different nationalities have monopolies on work sectors. Stepping stones to the American Dream. The delis are owned by Koreans, coffee shops by Greeks, newspaper stands by Indians, limo services by Israelis. Traditionally, the police and firefighters were Irish, and so too were building staffs. Until recently, their unions made sure it stayed that way. And the Irish, as we all know, can carry a grudge. As a result not much work was done in my old building; instead, grievances were extensively, *ruinously* nursed. No slight was ever forgotten. My new building not only runs like clockwork – the superintendent is of German ancestry – but we even have a doorwoman. Lovely gal named Maritza from the Dominican Republic. Tiny, strong, reliable, caring. My old building would never have countenanced such a hire. Latino *and* a woman.

As for the residents, my best friend on my hallway is eight-year-old Kyle. We have bonded over swimming. Whenever I have a session with my trainer – Ryan, American, gay, from Buffalo, NY – Kyle shyly shows up. Our pool is on the fifteenth floor. Press the elevator button and arrive at the pool. That, along with the NY Times hitting my door every morning ... ahhhh. Kyle is hungry for tips to improve his

strokes, and Ryan is a gifted teacher. Kyle's mother is Japanese; his father is Moroccan, educated in Belgium. And so it goes, from apartment to apartment: one big mashup of nationalities. When I left Australia, the country was largely Anglo, but you, too, resemble my apartment building, with inhabitants from everywhere and nowhere. My own niece and nephew are a mixture of Australian, Thai, African-American and American-Indian.

Everywhere and *nowhere*? When my novel *Moral Hazard* came out, I gave a reading at the Politics & Prose bookstore in Washington, sharing the stage with Peter Cameron, who had just published *The City of Your Final Destination*, set in Uruguay. Someone asked, why Uruguay? The answer: Uruguay was nowhere. He didn't want background distracting readers from his characters' problems. Uruguay as blank slate. Harrumph! I was overcome with righteousness and said that the people in Uruguay didn't think their country was nowhere, and in fact I had grown up in a farming area in Australia that Peter might consider nowhere, but, believe me, the people living there think it is somewhere. So the title of this lecture perhaps should be 'Everywhere and Somewhere'.

I miss some things about Australia. The living is much easier in Sydney than it is in New York. I remember the bleak February Sunday when the *New York Times* came out with an article by Ray Bonner on the pools cemented to headlands on Sydney beaches. *Bewitching* photos. *Glorious* photos. The phone rang all day. 'Are they *real*?' 'Yes.' 'Are they private? Gated communities?' 'No. Public. For everyone.' 'Why are you living here then!?!' Ray is an American journalist married to Jane Perlez, yet another Australian who has lived abroad most of her adult life. She is currently running the *Time's* Islamabad bureau. Scary job. The word 'expat' doesn't get attached to her, either. She's simply known as a brilliant journalist. Her bureau won the Pulitzer for International Reporting in 2009.

I gave up Australian beaches and those swimming pools, but what I gained was best expressed by the magnificent travel writer Freya

Stark: 'Only with long experience and the opening of his wares on many a beach where his language is not spoken, will the merchant come to know the worth of what he carries and what is parochial and what is universal in his choice.' I gained another kind of beach altogether. [First volume of her autobiography – one of the best of its kind. Sybille Bedford – *A Visit to Don Otavio*. Rose McCauley and Eleanor Clark.]

One of our doormen is a pint-size bouncy guy named Bobby Soto. He is from PR. Puerto Rico. [*Puerto Rico / My heart's devotion / Let it sink back in the ocean / Always the hurricanes blowing / Always the population growing / And the money owing / And the sunlight streaming / And the natives steaming.*<sup>1</sup>] Bobby and I have discovered that we are both members of 'the fellowship'. That is, we are in Alcoholics Anonymous.

The discovery no doubt went like this: I walked by the front desk looking grim, and he said, 'One day at a time, Miss Jennings.' I stopped in my tracks and inquired, 'Friend of Bill W., Bobby?' Not quite a Masonic handshake, but one has to be circumspect in such matters. Affirmation in the form of energetic nodding. 'Gotta walk the talk,' he probably then said, or 'It works if you work it,' as he doles out AA mantras to folk he thinks might be in need of them, in between dissecting the latest Mets game. Ever since then Bobby has been writing down AA sayings in Spanish on post-it notes for me. *Una dia a la vez*. Unique way to learn Spanish. Last Christmas I asked for a seasonally appropriate greeting, and he carefully wrote down *Besos a todos*. Kisses to all. It's become my favorite salutation. Besos!

Ray Mathew and I also met in 'the rooms'. Word made its way to him that there was another Australian writer in the fellowship and, being Ray, he sought me out. He was not only a poet but had done stints in one-room Outback schools, so we had much in common; he understood my rural background. (Temora – Eric Schlunke.) We

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<sup>1</sup> From 'America' from the musical *West Side Story* (1957), book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

became social friends as well as AA friends – he appreciated my husband, who, by the way, was born in New Orleans, Cuban mother, Texan father – but what we mainly talked about was our gratitude for our sobriety. Corny, eh? But remember the Stevie Smith lines: *I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning*. Both of us had been much too far out all our lives and now we weren't. We might not have been waving every day, but at least we weren't drowning.

Ray taught me that the secret to smart, strong-willed people sticking with AA was to acknowledge that as far as our alcoholism went, we were just common-and-garden, run-of-the mill drunks. Nothing special about us. I tried to express this in a poem about an old university friend, Martin Johnston, the son of George Johnston and Charmian Clift. Martin died in his forties from alcoholism. The question I couldn't stop asking myself was why was I able to stop drinking and not Martin. I wrote a poem about him, his death, our relationship, which read in part as follows:

*Did you see your behavior and that of your family,  
almost all come to grief from the same disease,*

*as tragic — that's the word in your obituaries —  
or merely alcoholic? Maybe you would have hated*

*the reduction; it destroys what poetry there is,  
if any, in self-destruction.. Yet in that 'merely'*

*lies salvation. To see oneself as ordinary, a drunk  
amongst drunks — therein the key to silencing*

*the voice that pleads extenuating circumstances  
for intemperance.*

Ray himself had written a beautiful and prophetic poem title 'Autobiography' way back in 1953. It began like this:

*Long ago living  
was only growing,  
being merely and wholly  
me-and-mine-ness ...*

And finished with these lines:

*Not till much later  
did most living leave me  
so I could see me  
in those I encountered,  
so I could be me  
As one and a hundred.*

When I mentioned the poem in an interview I did with him for *Voices*, the National Library magazine, he laughed and said 'Poetry as autobiography-to-be.'

In that same interview, I asked this question: *Biographers often have a hard time attributing to alcohol what should be attributed to it. Here's a passage from a review of a Paul Scott biography: 'Even to the perceptive narrator of Scott's heartbreaking story, alcoholism presents itself with more disguises than a trickster; as ... a lost sexuality, as the human condition, as – a favorite, this – great art.'*

Ray answered: *For me alcoholism encouraged isolation, rationalization, a growing ignorance – 'a deeper superficiality' – a sense of nihilism [NIGH-ILISM]. And physically, it nearly killed me.*

I then asked : *You belong to a twelve-step group, as I do. It is hard to talk about one's experience of such a group. Why is that?*

Ray answered: *The experience is individual. Its revelations – and it produces revelations – are the product of each individual's capacity, perceptions, willingness. For the fortunate ones, it is a serene version of Hopkins' sonnets, perhaps, and for anyone it is at least a system of rules for being dry and not hopeless. There can be life the morning after.*

*The experience is individual.* Both Ray and I found a measure of peace in the rooms, gained knowledge of our limitations. Certainly, no more 'me and mine-ness'. And we found strength, which we would both later need. Life has a habit of coming at you hard.

I'd like to finish with a poem titled 'Gravy' by the short-story writer, Raymond Carver. After leaving much chaos and desolation in his wake, Carver got sober, only to die of lung cancer. The poem was his response to his diagnosis:

*No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.*

*Gravy, these past ten years.*

*Alive, sober, working, loving, and*

*being loved by a good woman. Eleven years*

*ago he was told he had six months to live*

*at the rate he was going. And he was going*

*nowhere but down. So he changed his ways*

*somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?*

*After that it was all gravy, every minute*

*of it, up to and including when he was told about,*

*well, some things that were breaking down and*

*building up inside his head. "Don't weep for me,"*

*he said to his friends. "I'm a lucky man.*

*I've had ten years longer than I or anyone*

*expected. Pure Gravy. And don't forget it."*

*Pure gravy. And don't forget it.* And neither Ray Mathew nor I ever did. Besos, Ray.

Thank you for listening. *Besos a todos.*

*The Ray Mathew Lecture is supported by the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust. You can hear the full text of the lecture at <http://www.nla.gov.au/podcasts/talks.html>*