

Hiroshima, "They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation," a phrase which reminds us that the countries of the world are still quick to intercede when, for example, oil is at stake (Kuwait), but not as keen when the issue is "simply" human rights (Tiannamen Square, East Timor).

*The English Patient* is a paradoxical work, at once sweeping in its locations and ideas, and yet condensed to a hard gleaming mass which is difficult to unpack. Part of the novel's elusiveness arises because of Ondaatje's love of intertextuality—of references to other fictions which are brought in to embellish, refract or confuse the straight-forward nature of storytelling. A love story of sorts, from Herodotus' *The Histories*, becomes the model for betrayal and adultery in one of the novel's peripheral episodes, leading us to wonder whether the latter episode occurs because of or despite the earlier one. And perhaps the most crucial of these meta-textual moments of repetition is the book's cast of characters who first emerged in *In the Skin of a Lion*. A reader unfamiliar with this work may well find the present novel marginally more complicated.

In fact, it would not be unfair to say that *In the Skin of a Lion* informs this book on more levels than one. Patrick, for example, who does not walk through these pages except as a painful absence for his daughter, was an explosives expert, who helped to build the city of Toronto. In some ways, Patrick and Kip share a similar love of Hana, and explosives. And although one made explosions happen while the other prevented them, there is a commensurability of aesthetics concerning their respective jobs: they both understand and respect the delicacy, the sheer honesty of mechanisms, in a way which cannot be said about the deceit and complexity of human organisms.

Both novels are also concerned with fictionality and use many of the terms which contemporary theory has figured forth to talk about the games which texts can play. Characters become "gaps in the plot" or significant absences. Unlike many writers who trouble the boundaries of fiction for the sake of trendiness, however, Ondaatje has always played sophisticated games with textuality and his "deceptions" are joyous and extraordinary, reflecting years of craft and purpose. We are being shown how to *escape* destructive fictions—war propaganda, white versions of history—when we learn to distrust institutional order. And yet we are also shown the importance of seeking such order, particularly through art. As Ondaatje puts it in *Skin*, "Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become."

In the earlier book, Ondaatje comments, "trust me, there is order here, very faint, very human", and in *The English Patient* he tells us, "Most books open with an author's assurance of order.... But novels commenced with hesitation or chaos. Readers [are] never fully in balance". A novel, he also points out, "is a mirror walking down a road." Both novels work to remind us that observed reality, like history, is constructed by those in power. And it is important for us as viewers, just as it is crucial for the artist, to see the world differently, to avoid reading, expecting, or re-creating the simple story.

Order, storytelling and politics naturally conjoin in Ondaatje's work. His characters are invariably marginal figures who test the outer limits of established rules and values. Frequently these characters devolve into a removed self-sufficiency. Like Peter Carey's Herbert Badgery in *Illywhacker*, Kip learns to become invisible, because this is a defence against victimisation and abuse. "It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world." It is a pity, then, that Kip, unlike Badgery, never develops the latter's exuberance of personality.

Indeed, if there is a flaw in Ondaatje's work it is perhaps that too many of his characters remain uninvolved and shadowy. Patrick in the earlier novel is never truly fleshed out, and here both Hana and Kip are so paired back and ethereal in their self-sufficiency that it is sometimes difficult to care about them because you wonder whether they are really there. Occasionally, like the beautiful language of this novel, they exist for the poetry of sound rather than as real people.

But there is so much in this novel to compensate for this shadowiness that it seems almost petty to criticise. The English patient, like most of the figures who inhabit Ondaatje's world, is not who he says (or thinks) he is. Rather, as Caravaggio comes to suspect, he may well be a Hungarian spy known as Almásy, who worked for Rommel and who travelled the desert both as a scientific and as a militaristic explorer. In the sections which discuss the desert and the patient's background we are exposed to a world of depth and complexity, and of artistic prose which is simply exquisite. Ondaatje is a master stylist and these passages resonate with the sounds and sights of the desert landscape, moments which even cast light on the act of exploration itself.

There was a time when map-makers named the places they travelled through with the names of lovers rather than their own. Someone seen bathing in a desert caravan, holding up muslin with one arm in front of her. Some old Arab poet's woman, whose white-dove shoulders made him describe an oasis with her name. The skin bucket spreads water

over her, she wraps herself in the cloth, and the old scribe turns from her to describe Zerzura.

So a man in the desert can slip into a name as if within a discovered well, and in its shadowed coolness be tempted never to leave such containment.

At other times it is a phrase which calls us to order—“the trees make a sieve of moonlight”—or an image, such as the crucifix adorned with sardine cans suspended on strings used in this war-torn landscape as a scarecrow for a meagre garden. Even the English patient's horrific burns are given an extraordinary beauty of sorts—he was “burned to the colour of aubergine”—one which succeeds in conveying not only the agony of the injury, but also the devotion with which he has been cared for by the desert tribes, and later by Hana.

It would be possible to describe this book as a detective story, as a love story, or as an extended poem. Labels, however, are usually insufficient with Ondaatje, just as it seems pointless to offer a detailed summary here of the plot. The novel is quite simply extraordinary; it moves with its own inner logic and personal mystery. It is truly a mirror walking down a road, and the magic of it is watching closely to see if, or how often, we see our own weakness, evil or goodness occasionally reflected back to us, in a light which can teach us to understand ourselves more deeply.

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CONSTANCE BACKHOUSE AND DAVID H. FLAHERTY, eds.  
*CHALLENGING TIMES: THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN  
CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES.* Kingston and Montreal:  
McGill-Queen's UP, 1992.

*Challenging Times* is a collection of articles originally presented as conference papers. It displays the strengths and weaknesses of its genre. Many articles retain the liveliness of spoken papers and the editors have made an attempt to draw out the themes and guide the reader among them. The articles are somewhat dated and the discussion among participants that adds richness to the necessary brevity of conference papers is missing. As with any set of conference papers, it provides a

reminder of some of the issues that were important for North American feminist scholars in mid-1989.

There are eight sections addressing a number of those issues. The first two reflect on the origins of the various women's movements in Canada and the United States and the interactions between national groupings since the 1960s. While the different interests and politics of francophone and anglophone feminism in Canada were discussed at some length, differences within the United States women's movements based on class and race were less visible. In addition, although Canadian authors make frequent references to events and publications in the United States, the US feminists seem to assume that their analyses have wider applicability and that comparisons will be obvious, in spite of their apparent ignorance of Canadian experience.

I would be very interested in the discussion provoked by the three articles addressing the relationship between feminist political activism and feminist academic work—both teaching and scholarship. Margrit Eichler reports on her research into links between women's studies and the women's movement through the personal experiences of women's/feminist studies academics. She found that feminist academics were also active in the women's movement. Yet, the links between academic work and political activism go far beyond the lives of academics. Lorraine Greaves makes the point that feminist research takes place outside Universities as does women's studies teaching. She deplores the distance that she as a community college teacher feels from “academic feminism”. How much more so, she argues, is the distance felt by women who do not have secure jobs, who do not use words for a living. She calls for greater inclusion in the enterprise of feminism.

I was surprised that there was only one non-academic speaker at the conference on the women's movement (she was a civil liberties lawyer). Women in trade union positions, community based organisations and policy areas in governments have valuable contributions to make to any consideration of the relationship between feminist research and the women's movement. Universities are not the only source of feminist knowledge, perhaps not even the main one. The failure to include non-academic experts in particular areas of concern meant there was often a curious sense of absence in some articles.

While I agree with Greaves's call for greater inclusiveness, I also think that some greater acceptance of a division of labour may be necessary as well; no one can do everything, understand every level of each issue. Community based activists may have to give up their hopes of understanding every feminist word published. Academics will have to

admit their limitations and integrate feminist practitioners from other arenas into conferences and books of conference papers. Further, academics will have to acknowledge that the explanations for particular activist tactics are based not on carefully articulated theory but on insiders' understandings of the likely strategies deployed in a changing political field.

Nowhere is the need to bring in women from other institutional locations more obvious than in the formal discussion of racism. The articles discuss the need to open Women's Studies to the insights and experiences of women of colour. Few Women's Studies teachers would disagree, but an understanding of the meanings of those experiences by white women requires more than the inclusion of one or two classes using Black writing as Glenda Simms illustrates in "Beyond the White Veil". Simms reports an interview with an exchange student from Gambia who found that a friendly and welcoming white woman was taken aback to learn that she owned and used sophisticated domestic appliances at home. The Gambian woman knew about the Western world and did not need a benefactor or guide; she wanted a friend. The white woman had a mistaken notion of the meaning of being a Black woman in Africa.

A paper or two about the struggles to work through some of the issues of race, culture and class during activist projects would have helped to break out of the concentration on writing and classroom practice. The inclusion of papers by activists reflecting on their practice would also provide an acknowledgment of women's movement as a social movement rather than making it an object of knowledge.

The two articles about the politics of reproduction, demonstrate the power of including questions about race and class in the analysis of activism. Christine Overall discusses the concept "reproductive right" as it appears in different political contexts: the right not to reproduce as it appears in judgements in abortion cases in Canada and the US, and the right to reproduce, in both "strong" and "weak" senses, in arguments about the new reproductive technologies. She calls attention to the contradictory outcomes of the language of rights when used to support enforced pre-conception contracts or sale of gametes or embryos. "There can be no genuine entitlement to women's reproductive labour, or to buying or otherwise obtaining human infants". She seeks a way out of outcomes which seem to provide access to some women's reproductive capacities as a matter of "right". Overall suggests this can be done by keeping in mind the right not to reproduce and a weak sense

of the right to reproduce and at the same time developing a critical analysis of the way the strong sense arguments are being used.

M. Patricia Fernandez Kelly reflects on the effects of economic changes in the US over the 1970s and 1980s on the meanings of "life" and "choice". She argues that because the US has no language for a politics of class, those disenfranchised by the growing income differentials "have turned to the realm of morality to express class resentments". Fernandez Kelly expands on the philosophic reflections on the different meanings of reproductive rights. She argues that the question of choice can no longer be limited to a defence of personal autonomy and individual rights but must be reframed in terms of class, race/ethnicity and gender as social power relations.

I found her argument about the appeal of the "pro-life" movement in the US compelling in light of abortion politics in Australia. The language of class politics is central for those addressing effects of economic inequality. I think this is one reason for the weakness of the anti-abortion movement in spite of the considerable energies of a few prominent leaders and the mixed feelings about the act of abortion expressed by many Australians. This is a book for every library and the shelves of readers interested in cross-national feminist activism and thought.

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**ROBIN LUCAS AND CLARE FORSTER, eds. *WILDER SHORES: WOMEN'S TRAVEL STORIES OF AUSTRALIA AND BEYOND*. St. Lucia: UQP, 1992.**

I suppose there are a number of reasons why we read travel stories, and many of these have to do with our expectations about what those "other" places and people are like. Often we get a curious pleasure from having these expectations confirmed; this would verify our sense of ourselves as different from the "others"; but just as often we like to feel we are gaining a new perspective on other places and people, on ourselves, and on our place as well. Robin Lucas and Clare Forster have selected their anthology of women's travel stories, *Wilder Shores*, in such a way that both of these desires are satisfied, with some stories encouraging the reader to acknowledge the complex interplay between confirmation and challenge. The stories are arranged in three sections: "Arrivals", stories

involving expatriate Australians' and migrants' reflections on their initial experiences of Australia; "Away", views of foreign places and experiences from an Australian perspective; and "Journeys Within", tales of travel within Australia. All the stories are by women writers, and the travel involved, although focussed on real physical journeys, also concerns itself with emotional and attitudinal change.

The collection opens with a piece by Christina Stead which effectively illustrates the way in which many of the stories confirm our attitudes about ourselves and others. Stead's story moves from past to present, as many of the others do. The narrator begins by evoking scenes of excitement and release; emotions which were often felt by Australians who sailed overseas into what they believed to be a wider world:

There's a country minister and his wife, two dusty black bundles who conduct services in the cabin before a number of meek, coloured bundles in Sydney hats. The couple gain in stature the farther they travel, until, in the Red Sea, having lost all provincial glumness, the minister shouldering tall against the railing, arm and finger stretched, explains the texts, the riddle of the Pyramids, the meaning of Revelations.

The increasing sense of liberation which this passage embodies conforms to an Australian reader's feeling that there must be more opportunity elsewhere, even if this reflects negatively on the homeland itself and the limited possibilities it is seen to offer. However, even though Stead does acknowledge the attraction of "overseas freedom", she is also aware of the contrasting pull of the once familiar on her narrator's return to Australia some years later.

... at both dawn and dusk, the kookaburras thrilling high in the trees, the magpies—she had quite forgotten those musicians and their audacity—and there was even a scary, fiendish cry in the bush early; it came nearer, but remained distant. It was just a bantam cockerel—I had one myself years ago, in Santa Fe, and had forgotten the little dawn-demon with his one-string violin. Too long in London! Everything was like ringing and bright fire and all sharpness.

Many of the experiences are seen from this perspective of the white, Anglo-Saxon Australian, but the selection of travel experiences of migrant women offers a challenge to conventional Australian attitudes to Australia itself and to foreign places.

For example, Emma Ciccotosto's story of her migration from Italy to Australia describes feelings which form an ironic commentary on the more familiar experiences of the (Anglo-Saxon) Australian narrators of

other stories. On leaving Italy, there is certainly the prospect of greater possibilities in Australia, but the overwhelming grief and confusion in leaving family members outweighs this. And, on arrival at her father's farm in the bush outside Perth, she and her mother come to the conclusion that the unlimited possibilities have turned into something else altogether: "We are in a desert here".

Several of the stories are structured around the kind of trepidation Stead's narrator felt on returning to a "home" country after a lengthy absence, a method which allows the authors to mingle past reflections and present fears. In Vasso Kalamaras's "The Anchorage Was Not Blue", the protagonist narrator can barely control the confusion she feels on seeing the Peiraias harbour. Having come back from the "wild bush" of Australia, would she feel "at home" here?

I was laughing but I wanted to cry. I was afraid. With much courage I looked down. Some people were waving handkerchiefs and, there among them, I made out—as if in a dream—my granny, my brother, my aunt, my own people.

My God, how did we bear it?

It is the concentration on the strength and confusion of contradictory emotions which distinguishes several of these travel stories by women writers. "Aeroplane Jelly" by Gillian Mears concerns another emotional journey which sees a woman grappling with happy and unhappy past memories, as she returns to Australia for a visit. On the plane trip "home", her flight companions are two Aussie agricultural scientists dressed in boys' clothes and armed with sexist jokes. The trip and all it contains, confirms her earlier reasons for leaving.

Other stories in the anthology confirm our stereotyped attitudes to national character in more expected ways. Indeed, Shirley Hazzard's "Observing the Conventions" draws attention to the narrator's world-weary look of surprise as her Italian male friend tries to kiss her among the ruins of Herculaneum; an encounter made all the more exciting for him by the fact that his wife was just around the corner. In a more comic vein, Janette Turner Hospital returns to India after an absence of thirteen years to find that the bureaucratic nightmare continues. Her traveller's cheque is given loving attention by the clerical staff at the State Bank of India in Trivandrum:

He has to make three entries into a ledger that is surely a parody of ledgers.... It has a wing span of over three feet. The clerk makes his entries with meticulous penmanship. I think: if he copied out every word of every visa in my passport, and every word on my traveller's cheque, I still don't understand how it could take this long. He stamps

all his entries with several rubber stamps. He handles the stamps with a reverence that suggests erotic involvement with the acts of certification.

In a similar manner, the (mis-)management of traffic is a motif that emerges in a number of stories in the selection as a reflection of the national characteristics of the inhabitants. Sri Lankan variety and chaos, for instance, versus Australian "order" and calm. Yasmine Gooneratne imposes her own ironic vision on the calm, ordered, yet frequently lethal Australian driving conditions. Worried about her husband's safety, she invokes the protection of the "Arjuna, the archer of the Mahabharata", but she visualises him on a surfboard, heroically riding the waves of Australian traffic.

In so often confirming our simplistic expectations of national types, the anthology sometimes leaves itself open to the charge that it is rather lightweight in its attitudes to the implications of such superficial judgments of cultures. And this is so despite the fact that many of these descriptions are themselves treating the stereotypes with a certain irony. Possibly too, the relative brevity of the selections may have encouraged the editors to go for the "recognisable" China, or Italy, or India, rather than to deepen our understanding of human experience and its relation to specific cultural practices.

On the other hand, the presentation of the complex human perspective of the protagonist/narrators is a vitally important feature of many of the stories. This seems to me to be a valuable departure from many travel writing anthologists' lack of attention to the writer's own life experience and the impact this has on what is seen and how it is seen.

I would have liked more contextual information about each selection. Where is it taken from? A novel? A book of Travel Memoirs? An autobiography? Knowledge of such origins can make a difference to what we can expect from the piece itself. (There is information in the Acknowledgements section, but it is not detailed or specific enough).

These considerations aside, the anthology is enjoyable throughout, seldom lagging in energy, and often making interesting and moving observations. There are moments which challenge our easy equation of travel with holiday, and other moments which capture the exhilaration of touching the exotic. I think of the poor mule, at the beginning of Mary Gaunt's thousand-mile journey through China, which objected, in rather a vertical manner, to having a chair strapped onto its back for her to sit upon! And I think also of the child, in Nancy Keesing's story, whose family was "lucky" enough to be accompanied, on the ship home from Auckland, by Wirths' Circus. The elephants travelled in holds

below deck and the children would feed them through trapdoors, but the narrator was once allowed to go below and see them at first hand. Here she experiences an "epiphany" every traveller hopes to feel sometimes (although not necessarily atop an elephant).

The trainer, a satirine man, calls something to the hugest elephant and oh! horror! her trunk is around my waist ... I was twisted away from the floor sideways; nearly upside-down. I was near the roof. I was on her back and somehow—ladder/rungs in the wall?—the keeper had perched on her rough, rock rump and held me securely. I rode the elephant.

The face of a child I knew in another life appeared close by through one of the holes in the deck. I returned its stare seriously. This was no moment for poking grimaces. For I am supreme. I am the lord, I am the lord, I am the lord of everything.

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