

SHARING A LANDSCAPE: a Seminar in Celebration of Difference

Saturday 14 June 2003

Session 1 chaired by Jennifer Rumsey

Anita Heiss - *Exploring Common Ground: Ideals that unite those who might not share language, location or even a meal*; Gerard Windsor - *A Symbiosis of Cultures: Irish-Catholic-Australian*

Session 2 chaired by Lesley Walter

Anna Maria Dell'oso - *Crossing Borders without a Passport: Authenticity, ethnicity and identity in the new global culture*; Yasmine Gooneratne - *Images in a Shared Landscape: Traditional culture meets classical literature*

Session 3 chaired by Barbara Fisher

Loubna Haikal - *Respect and Representation: Multiculturalism in Australian literature*; Andrew Riemer - *Figures in a Landscape: the puzzles of identity*

Session 4 Panel Discussion, chaired by Susan Steggall

Memories link us to place, to time and to nation: they enable us to place value on our individual and our social experiences, and they enable us to inhabit our own country (Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* Oxford University Press Melbourne 1994).

Tapping into that wellspring of collective memories to structure our world and understand its past is, of course, the business of writers and poets. The Society of Women Writers NSW Inc. decided to explore 'our own country' in a daylong seminar at The NSW Writers' Centre. The six speakers came from very diverse backgrounds yet there were several common threads linking their presentations.

- Identity and its relationship to language.
- Growing up in English, a language with no physical relationship to terra australis. Or not growing up in English but acquiring the confidence to claim and use it.
- The second-generation experience of knowing parents' countries of birth through *their* memories rather than firsthand knowledge.
- The importance of the internal, emotional landscape.
- The need for writers to sort and map the cultural landscape and keep our stories.

Anita Heiss began by acknowledging the Indigenous Garrigal people on whose land the seminar took place. As an urban Aboriginal woman, her physical landscape is the industrial space of the city and has nothing to do with scenic vistas. So sharing a landscape must involve a much broader view and include an internal, mental perspective. Anita talked about many landscapes, most of them involving sharing, such as the coming together of people at

peace rallies, reconciliation gatherings and in organisations which aim to return politics to people. In these landscapes, people of diverse ages and socio-economic and educational backgrounds stand shoulder to shoulder in a common cause, even if they never actually meet. Anita quoted from Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem *Integration Yes* about learning to change, about rising up not going under, and emphasised the importance of poetry in bridging gaps between people.

As a Koori without a language of her own, Anita Heiss uses English, the language of the coloniser, for Indigenous advancement. 'Aboriginals write as a community,' she said. 'White fellas write as individuals. I do not have that luxury but have a responsibility to write as an ambassador for my people'. We must acknowledge and respect our differences yet hold together. Land, river and tree... perhaps it is, ultimately, the physical landscape that binds us, as Kevin Gilbert wrote in his poem *Unity*.

For Gerard Windsor, the seminar represented a premise and a question: that we have a very diverse Australian society but we are all here, as individuals, and what are we to do about it? He talked of his personal and specific Irish-Catholic-Australian landscape and described how each element is complete in itself but that each makes up a complete 'I', which is wholly 'Australian'.

The Irish-Catholic identity is a self-sufficient world culture. School, church and home life are framed by it and it is very enriching for a writer although its language, Hibernian English, can be stifling florid and overdone. But that identity is increasingly no longer available. Irish-Catholic culture has begun to break down and fade.

Gerard referred to Barry Hill's book *Broken Song* about T.G.H. Strehlow who, in the 1930s wrote of

the land as having ‘stern majesty’ in ‘slumbering old age’. As the country, so the language of its Indigenous inhabitants: plain and worn down yet rugged and grand and intimately related to the land in which they live. ‘Although this linking of landscape with language is fascinating’, Gerard said, ‘The Australian English that I speak, read and write has no relationship to that land. Even though I am moved by it, I cannot have the same spiritual connection to the land as Indigenous people’. Gerard has come to realise that what makes him feel ‘Australian’ has more to do with the people he knows and loves, than the physical landscape.

Yasmine Gooneratne comes from a family who, for many generations has looked to Britain for its culture. Growing up in Sri Lanka, she had a view of life that was always coloured by the literature of classical India, ‘glowing with the landscape of human emotion’. Early travellers to the subcontinent took back to the British Isles tales of the mythical island of Serendip (the old name for Sri Lanka), which entered English literature as an Eden of beauty, wealth, spices, citrus fruits, plenty and peace. Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century English writers reinforced these images.

In England Yasmine was conscious of treading on familiar ground but when she arrived in Australia she found both landscape and culture strange and unknown. This had a debilitating effect on her capacity to write creatively; there was longing for order, a pining for stability. She looked for ways to relate to the Australian landscape, but living in suburban Ryde was a stark introduction. The traffic lights and zebra crossings displayed a terrifying efficiency – no bicycles or bullock drays, just a ‘waterfall of cars’.

A visit to Jenolan Caves made a strong impression. The darkness, the silence and the amazing stalagmites and stalactites in the caves revived her poetic imagination. She realised that even times of depression, and fear that words might end in nothingness, could be periods of growth. She used the image of the caves in darkness as a metaphor for the creative process that continues unseen, in spite of difficulties. She began publishing poetry again and writing fiction. Living here has taught her to appreciate Australian humour. ‘It is neither British, nor American nor Sri Lankan,’ she said. ‘It is a laconic way of looking at life and restoring the world. It puts things back into perspective and balance’.

Anna Maria Dell’oso introduced a deeply reflective note to the discussion. As other writers have found poetry emerging from the darkness of the soul, so too did Anna find creativity rising out of a landscape of defeat. She asks: ‘How does the landscape share us and what are our obligations to our mental and emotional landscape?’ Instead of being defeated, it is at breaking point where we find our writing, find authenticity in our lives. ‘It is for writers to do the spiritual and cultural housekeeping,’ Anna said. ‘We need to notice, caretake, map, keep, record, worship and give thanks in this landscape. We must tend our human connectedness on every level of the spiral of life’.

Anna Maria Dell’oso was a child of migrant parents in the 1950s – a time of economic security and good education yet one of cultural loss and emotional confusion. She was both a ‘lucky girl’ in a lucky country and a ‘greasy wog’. The pendulum of migrant acceptance frequently oscillates between exclusion and inclusion so there is always a need for those sorting tasks, to break down discrimination against disability, colour and difference.

At school, Anna had to confront bullying and then worry about perpetuating that behaviour herself. Many migrant families arrived ‘with a passport’ in the 1950s, internalised all the difficulties encountered in postwar immigration and now want to deny entry to those newly arrived. Sometimes refugees and migrants tell so many stories to survive that truth is buried. Writers are needed to hold up a mirror to throw light on what is in shadow and must map this landscape too, however difficult.

Andrew Riemer talked about the experience of translating from French into English the novel *L’Enfant d’un Peuple ancien*, set in 1870-77. The book is about a Tasmanian Aboriginal boy who is kidnapped by white people, sold to a circus, rescued and ends up in north Queensland. It was an encounter with someone *not* sharing but intruding into a landscape, someone who lives in Paris and has never set foot in Australia.

Andrew agreed to do the translation out of respect for the privilege of writers to take on subjects irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, religion or allegiances. He soon found that much tact was required to explain to this Franco-Algerian author, some of the problems of writing about an embattled, vulnerable culture. Andrew highlighted the moral dilemma of the translator as to how much he could intrude in the text and in the process revealed

interesting insights into the way the writing landscape changes from one culture to another. There is no moral or ethical problem in writing a work of fiction that celebrates Indigenous culture, the problem is the manner in which that society are portrayed and the manner in which we in this country have access to knowledge concerning the extermination of Tasmanian Aboriginals.

Yet even in fiction, the story must not stray beyond a certain point. It might not trouble a French reader, but there will be Australians quite troubled to read of a coral reef encircling a Tasmania in which kookaburras live.

'I believe in the 'broad church of literature', Andrew said, 'but whenever we talk about 'sharing a landscape', we must look at how the observer looks at the landscape and what that figure in the landscape is representing for the observer'.

Loubna Haikal continued the theme of the misrepresentation of one society by writers from another - in her case Lebanese culture. She does not believe in the ghetto-isation of literature but does object to non-Arabs writing simplistically about Arabic culture. 'Preserving your own exclusive right to write about a culture by denying others outside that culture the right to write about, is not the way either,' she said. 'By keeping cultures separate, we are excluding them from the Australian identity. The litmus test is ethical, moral and spiritual integrity'.

As a teenager she felt she carried the whole burden of Lebanese culture. She used to draw a map to show where Lebanon was and felt obliged to explain that 'my dad didn't have a harem and we didn't live in tents'. She was at first puzzled as to Australian society's expectation of Lebanese girls and tried to fit the image the other had of her. Language is very much a tool that chisels our identity and for a long time - as an outsider who could neither claim English as her language nor validate her interpretations and experiences as 'Australian' - she suffered from linguistic autism. Reading the works of Franz Fanon (*Black Skin White Masks* Grove Press New York 1967, *The Wretched of the Earth* Grove Press New York 1968) freed her from this. She committed 'an act of aggression' and claimed English as *her* language in which to speak and write.

Loubna found she could relate to Australian humour and admitted that she was 'a bit clever' in her book *Seducing Mr Maclean*, writing it humorously and with a deliberately 'Lebanese accent' - using

sentences where nouns carry the action 'without the restlessness of verbs'.

Writers and poets write for many reasons - from a sense of commitment and professional responsibility, out of anger, despair, frustration or discomfort. Yet there is joy and celebration too, especially in sharing the creative landscape. Music has its own language, one that easily crosses borders, and we were delighted that the men's Barbershop quartet, 'The Amazing Greys', shared their musical landscape with us.

Writing is a form of freedom, of travelling without falling ill or facing terrorists, flying mercurially without plane or passport, moving forwards or backwards, spiralling upwards, holding on or letting go, wrestling with the invisible. Anna Maria Dell'oso talked of a pool of ideas. The many rainbow-coloured pebbles, large and small, that were thrown into that pool during the seminar have caused ripples that continue to spread inspiration and courage to keep faith with the word and enable us to write all our landscapes, together.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Anna Maria Dell'oso was born in Melbourne. After tertiary studies in music and the humanities, she lived for a time in New Zealand, where she worked as a cadet journalist by day and as a violinist in the local symphony orchestra by night. In 1978 she returned to Australia. She has written short fiction, essays, dramatic works and several opera libretti, including *Bride of Fortune*, which was performed to acclaim at the Perth Festival in 1991. Her latest book, a collection of stories, *Songs of the Suitcase*, won the 1999 Steele Rudd Award.

Professor Yasmine Gooneratne was born in Sri Lanka, educated at the Universities of Ceylon and Cambridge and arrived in Australia in 1974. She is an Emeritus Professor of Macquarie University, where she held a Personal Chair in English Literature. She has published over eighteen volumes of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. These include *Jane Austen* (she is patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia), *Relative Merits*, a family memoir, and *A Change of Skies*, a novel. Her many awards include an AO for service to literature and education. Her latest work is *Masterpiece & Other Stories*.

Dr Loubna Haikal was born in Lebanon, where she was educated in French and Arabic before arriving in Australia with her parents in 1969. She learnt English on the job in the men's pyjama department at Myers and went on to study medicine at Melbourne University, graduating in 1980. Always drawn to the Arts she has been involved in theatre, film and writing. A Varuna fellowship allowed her to complete her first novel, *Seducing Mr Maclean*.

Dr Anita Heiss (Wiradjuri nation) is the Communication Adviser for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council. A novelist, poet, scriptwriter and social commentator, her latest book, *Dhuuluu Yala: talk straight*, derives from her PhD in Communication and Media (UWS, Nepean). She is also the Chair of Indij Readers Inc, and is on the Management Committee of the Australian Society of Authors. Anita is currently working on a comedy series for SBS.

Dr Andrew Riemer was born in Budapest and came to Sydney with his parents in 1947. Educated in Sydney and London, he was a member of the Department of English at the University of Sydney until 1994. His books include *Inside Outside*, *The Habsburg Café* and his memoir of academic life, *Sandstone Gothic*. His translation of Anouar Benmalek's *The Child of an Ancient People* will be published in London later this year. He is the chief book reviewer of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Gerard Windsor has lived most of his life in Sydney but with spells in other places - Melbourne, Canberra and Ireland. He was in the educational care of the Jesuits from the ages of five to twenty-five, and much of his writing, fiction and non-fiction, explores the great tentacular culture of Irish-Australian Catholicism. He has published seven books, the most recent of which is *The Mansions of Bedlam*, a collection of stories and essays. Represented in *Best Australian Stories 2002* and *Best Australian Essays 2002*, his articles on cultural topics appear regularly in Friday's *Financial Review*.