

## **‘All the world’s a stage’: Place and Identity in David de Vaux’s *Cassowary Hill***

**Stephen Torre**

James Cook University

“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.”

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Several decades ago or more when art was thought of as a liminal flicker at best of North Queensland culture in the anthropological sense, a handful of writers were trying to establish creative writing as a presence. Writing and publishing is a mostly exclusively metropolitan creative industry, so writers often struggle to be published and read outside urban areas. There are still challenges to being a writer in North Queensland—as described in Elizabeth Smyth’s 2016 piece for *Meanjin Quarterly*, “Sunday Bldy Sunday” (<https://meanjin.com.au/memoir/sunday-bldy-sunday/>).

But back in the 1990s a few anthologies of tropical North Queensland writing began to appear, writers’ groups began to form, arts bodies started taking notice, and James Cook University established a campus in Cairns where literature and writing were taught and tropical arts became a focus of research.

Among the pioneers back then was David de Vaux whose small press, El Kumanand, published *Spinning the Sun: Stories of Tropical Australia* (1995) and *Scorpion Tales: Four Tropical Novellas* (1996), both edited by David and containing stories by himself and other emerging North Queensland authors. To hand some 20 years later is David de Vaux’s first novel, *Cassowary Hill* (Glass House Books 2015), a dense readerly work, where the action spans the world from Australia, to South East Asia, to England and America, but the theme is very much anchored in the experience of the tropics and the search for an authentic experience of ‘dwelling’ and ‘being in the world’ as described by Martin Heidegger.

A brief biography of de Vaux serves to explain the breadth of his authentic rendering of setting. He has described himself as an almost lifelong expatriate and inveterate traveller since his birth after World War II in a non-existent country described on his birth certificate as the British Army on the Rhine. The son of a British officer stationed variously on three continents, when he was nine years old and in need of a passport, he was discovered to be a bureaucratic anomaly, and citizen of nowhere. Later, having disappointed his family by failing to embrace the expected patriotic, military, class and Church traditions, he attended the University of London and later the Newcastle College of Advanced Education in Australia. Along the way, he found gratification in the disciplines of Economics, Political Science, English literature and the theatre, especially Shakespeare. He then travelled and

lived in New Zealand, the Tongan Islands, India, England, the United States, as well as Far North Queensland where he put down roots and raised three children. He has worked in five countries, on the fringes of teaching, publishing, editing, arts funding, house building, activism, theatre and writing, has produced two collections of poetry and a handful of play scripts, and short fiction. He and his second wife now live in Portland, Oregon, keeping at least one toe in his beloved Queensland.

The narrator of *Cassowary Hill*, Tom Pryce-Bowyer, is a fictional avatar of David de Vaux. The novel opens as he returns to his remote rainforest retreat on the Atherton Tablelands of North Queensland, to concentrate on the commissioned ghost writing of a book about an eminent journalist, Bia Moraes. The book is to be the story of Bia's meeting with and love for Antonio, an East Timorese revolutionary, who is kicked and slashed to death before her by Indonesian soldiers acting with US support in a payback massacre after the 1999 independence referendum, where the East Timorese, despite considerable intimidation, voted for independence from Indonesia. Researching the story involves Tom in several international trips as he uncovers increasingly disturbing evidence of political machinations and human atrocities. Running parallel with this plot is the (often humorous) story of Tom's relationship with his close friend and compulsive philanderer Jack Tryvet, an intermittent guest at Tom's property, Cassowary Hill, and, as it emerges, a former British intelligence officer whose story converges with the Bia story when he hatches a plot to thwart the promotion of a US Army general who had covertly supported the Indonesian soldiers' oppression of the Timorese, despite official US policy to the contrary. Interwoven with these two plots is a third, Tom's developing affair with Emjay, a New York publisher, with whom he strikes up a whirlwind affair after their respective marriages break up. Again, this relationship unfolds on an international stage of trips to and fro between The US, England, New Zealand and various Australian locations. Despite the largely internationalist stage of this novel, a fourth plot, and one that anchors and subsumes the others, might be seen as the narrator's attempt to protect and conserve the idyllic rainforest reserve of Cassowary Hill from environmental degradation, from the incursions of a psychotic neighbour farmer, and to protect its animal life, in particular a cassowary which is presented as a sort of symbolic anthropomorphised spirit of place.

These 'multiple plots' (a feature of Renaissance and especially Shakespearian drama) overlap and intertwine in a pleasing way, using a unifying chronological forward-driving narrative with the occasional analepsis for effect and suspense. Also giving the diverse material cohesion is the presence of the first person involved narrator, Tom Pryce-Bowyer. Despite the omnipresence of this single narrative voice, this is a richly polyphonic novel, not the least because of the narrator's wealth of knowledge and experience which enables him to render many other voices, and the experiences of these others (he is very much like the omniscient intrusive narrators of pre-twentieth century fiction, and not a little unlike that of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*). Many references to literature help create the pleasing hybridity of this work. The narrator's wit and eloquence is consistent with his profession as a writer. In several scenes conversations take the form of literary one-upmanship based on Shakespearean quotes or some other eminent author. The scene where the outing of General Birns is plotted is discussed with the characters mimicking dialogue and roles from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—a delightful and comical extended passage.

With its interest in writing and language play, and its many literary analogies, *Cassowary Hill* is a somewhat metafictional work. But also contributing to what Bakhtin would call the heteroglossia of this novel, is the text's blending of various narrative modes or discourses, thus creating a very complex stylistic multiplicity. The work is in part a political novel, a love

story, an expatriate novel, a meditation on nature and environment, and a ‘travel’ documentary contrasting tropical and global, or regional and international.

As a political novel *Cassowary Hill* brings back into sharp view the plight of East Timor in the crucial years leading up to its eventual independence. Historical accounts have exposed the duplicitous interventions (covert but disastrous) of the US and Australia in the conflict between the Indonesians and the East Timorese, and the novel works these facts into the story accurately and powerfully. But de Vaux’s real strength lies in the recreation of the people involved in these struggles (fictionalized but clearly descended from those actually involved), and the individualized experiences which history slides over. His recreation of the lives of Bia and her lover Antonio, their families and their associates, is realistic and believable. And through them we also get a sense of East Timor itself—the environment, the social structure and the multi-culture, the fates and the aspirations of a nation emerging painfully from colonial exploitation. This particularization of the historical facts is affecting and deepens the significance of the account. For Australians, as post-colonial subjects themselves, the experiences of a close neighbour are not to be ignored, and in the stories of the East Timorese people, we might gain a sense of the lingering traces of our own colonization.

In the researching and writing of Bia’s story, both Tom and Bia re-experience some of the anguish of the events of the past. But a revenge sub-plot helps to soften history. With this story—the attempted outing of the atrocities abetted by a General Birns in East Timor, for the purposes of thwarting his imminent promotion to the head of US military intelligence—the novel takes a turn toward the thriller mode, possibly even somewhat comical. Tom, Tryvet, and their associates plot to expose Birns in the media, but he is one step ahead of them, and at the end of the novel, they seem to have been neutralized. However, when Birns descends on Cassowary Hill to attempt to intimidate the conspirators, the weather, the landscape, and nature conspire to humiliate, scourge and eject the invader. The scene, involving monsoonal rain, stinging trees, and a charging cassowary conveys a wicked sense of pleasure—Birns may have gagged the plotters, but the moral victory is theirs.

As a love story, *Cassowary Hill* layers several accounts. Running throughout the novel is the story of the narrator’s developing relationship with Emjay. This is a very modern love story enacted on an international stage, the contemporary demands of work, career fulfilment, fast paced life, personal development, and relationship complementarity all working to complicate love. The inner search for love is projected through several meetings of the jet-setting lovers in various international destinations. Tom is an eloquent transcriber of place, and various settings for their affairs are evocatively rendered, and form a meditation on the notion of place as an enabler of deep inter-personal relationships. There is perhaps a sense that the closer one comes to nature, and in particular the tropical environment of Cassowary Hill, the more likely one is to experience an authentic romantic love. But over-simplification is not one of de Vaux’s temptations, and we are offered other love stories to balance the central one. At one extreme is the passionate love of Bia and Antonio with its tragic end. By contrast the affairs of Tryvet are more comic bedroom mazurkas, motivated by his compulsion to seduce married women (there is an interesting and hilarious twist to this with his last affair). Overall the novel holds out some hope that between the tragic and the profane, a romantic love should be possible.

The narrator’s expatriate status affords a logical motivation for his travels, as does his work as a writer, but his wanderings also serve to highlight a thematic consideration of the wanderer-settler dichotomy, especially in the context of modern globalized life. Circumstance compels us to wander in a wide, exciting and often beautiful world, but love, marriage, children, family, friendships, all beckon us to settle. One of the climactic episodes

of the novel concerns a dream in which Tom encounters and converses with Alfred, the cassowary whose territory encompasses Tom's property. In the dream Alfred attempts to allay Tom's fears of the uncertainty of the future, of the difficulty of finding meaning and purpose in life. Tom says:

"I am terribly afraid of loss. At the end, when everything is gone, evaporated, finished, I'm afraid that I'll only think it would have been better if some things, good things even, had never started at all."

...I look intently at Alfred's face... "Everything you need is right here."

"At the Hill..." I say, nodding.

"You'll find out that nothing is ever lost or lacking."

"But Alfred...on the outside it seems the other way around—that things never hold up. You can't hang on to anything."

"Whereas Cassowary Hill..." he prompts.

"Is different? We can depend on it?"

He gazes at me and I wait, in excitement now, to hear his confirmation.

"Look, it's beginning to rain!" he says,

And so it is—great, isolated, splashy drops. We both look up at the sky and...he turns and strides right off the edge of the deck, disappearing into the grove of tree ferns. Realizing that I am getting wet and feeling elated, I take off my shirt and stretch out my arms, palms upward, ready to receive a drenching benediction. (253)

Eliot too, at the end of his poem, *The Wasteland*, uses drops of rain to symbolize the first signs of regeneration in the wreckage of modern civilization. The 'drenching benediction' in de Vaux's work is especially metonymic of nature in the wet tropics, and throughout the novel, longing for and enjoyment of the monsoon is foregrounded. Rain is a traditional symbol of fertility, and after this dream Tom witnesses Alfred for the first time with two chicks. After the dream Tom is left with "the intense memory of an enveloping intimacy" (p. 254). So, Cassowary Hill, at least in Tom's dreams, is imaged as the ideal place where 'everything you need' exists, including the possibility of love.

The real world though, as distinct from the ideal world, is never entirely displaced. The characters struggle with the dichotomy between the ideal and the real, between home and the world, the "gaping divide that existed between urban America and rural Australia" (p. 271-72). Tom fears that Emjay will never be able to 'bridge' this 'immense gulf' and their love will fail: "In the end, no place on earth is safe from the agony of impossible love" (p. 273). But Emjay and Tom come to realize that to some degree it is "the idea of distance, rather than its actuality, having suddenly become too overwhelming" (p. 277). Towards the end, as Emjay comes to experience more of Tom's ideal world, she realizes that "the world's starting to look a bit smaller to me now" (p. 325) and the novel ends with their approach to Cassowary Hill.

Earlier novels tended to present the Australian tropics as isolated, remote, difficult to reach, places to disappear into and withdraw from the world. More recent fiction has recognized that the tropics are no longer unreachable, or for that matter, insulated from change. They take their place as a 'destination' in our globalized world. Janet Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost*, like *Cassowary Hill*, is a novel with international reference, concerning America, Australia and the Middle East. Here, a musician tortured in a prison in Iraq is rescued by his lover and taken to the Daintree rainforest where physical and psychological healing occurs. To some extent then, the tropics, while no longer remote, may still, if conserved in their natural state,

restore and nurture the soul. Although de Vaux makes the reader aware of the external threats to Cassowary Hill, yet this is an environment which has the ability to regenerate itself:

I also knew that, after twelve months, nature would have efficiently modified the ruptured section of the forest, darkening the whitened ends of torn and snapped-off trees, rotting the broken vines and branches, and converting the whole pile into food for a thousand organisms, and finally covering all with a garden of aerial roots, creepers, reeds, ferns, funghi, and saplings. From the new road I would be able to look into the undergrowth on the lower side and marvel at beauty made from chaos... (308).

The tropical environment is also the only source of the sublime presented (repeatedly) in the novel, as in the stunning opening of the chapter “A Clatter in the Woodshed”:

One night, wandering around under a million stars, I recalled the reaction to such night skies of ours exhibited by...exchange students from Japan. Coming from densely urban places, with nights that were never truly dark, they hadn't seen more than a paltry show of stars at any time, so these young visitors were rendered speechless by the cloudless night skies over Wongabel.

The lightning storm had begun before midday, and short, violent cloudbursts followed sporadically throughout the afternoon...By sunset the clouds had been chased away by a brisk wind, which then dropped abruptly, leaving us with a roseate stillness and heady smell of wet vegetation...Later, looking at the crystal purity of the night sky I was bound to think that all the electric commotion arcing and flashing over our heads in the afternoon had somehow scoured the air of the suspended dust, smoke and soots of the dry season and its bushfires. It was as if the concave lens overhead had been cleansed by electrolysis, moistened, dried, and polished to perfect transparency—a microscope ready-focused on the brilliant details of infinity. (p. 211)

The narrator speculates on the mystical state afforded by the above event: “The creatures enfolded by the forest, which itself was held by some miracle in its appointed place in the firmament so brightly visible that tender night, were in state of grace”; such scenes, says the narrator, afford “transcendence and understanding” (p. 212)

*Cassowary Hill* takes the reader on a fascinating journey: from betrayal and corruption to heroism and altruism, from frivolous flirtation to tragic high romance, from metropolitan sophistication to Thoreau-like natural simplicity, and from confusion and doubt to ‘transcendence and understanding’. Just as in classical epic the traveller is aided by a knowledgeable guide, *Cassowary Hill* provides the reader with a most diverting though always humanely lifelike guide in its narrator, a delightfully appealing character, and one whose mind is as expansive as the panorama of settings which he navigates; he does indeed ‘in his time plays many parts’. But those ‘exits and entrances’ can only occur on stages—identity is formed in relation to place and others. With this novel, tropical nature finds definition, not as a place in which to withdraw from civilization, but as a state in which human beings might rebalance the conflicting demands made on their lives by the contemporary globalized world. This is a newly emerging sub-genre of internationalist fiction, and David de Vaux is a fine practitioner of the mode.

---

### **Works Cited**

De Vaux, D. (2015). *Cassowary Hill*. Carindale, QLD: Glass House Books.

Turner Hospital, J. (2007). *Orpheus Lost*. Sydney: Harper Collins.