

“The Cretaceous Border: Writing Non-Realist Fiction in North Queensland”

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This article combines the voice of an academic with that of a writer/author who is also a native of North Queensland, and one who, less commonly, publishes non-realist, or speculative fiction. This area, now often called *specific* in Australia, covers the genres of science fiction, or SF, fantasy, and horror. Here I will examine the way in which the three forms’ generic protocols and markets can intersect with the establishment of a North Queensland writer’s regional and/or gendered voice.

“*Specific*” is in general non-realist fiction, in that it allows events and entities considered unreal in current consensual Western “reality”: demons, Ets, ghosts, FTL or time travel and so on. “*Specific*” genres are also what Samuel Delany called *paraliteratures*(57): beyond the usual critical values, their criteria include, in particular, the ability to create a sense of wonder and build a secondary world.

Most secondary world-makers present an analogue Earth with handily similar gravity, atmospheric proportions, and satellites. Tolkien notes that anyone can say “the green sun,” but that to make a secondary world where the green sun is credible will “probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill” (140). The more rigorous SF version is sketched by Ursula Le Guin:

As soon as you . . . have said ‘The green sun had already set, but the red one was hanging like a bloated salami above the mountains,’ you had better have a pretty fair idea in your head concerning the type and size of green suns and red suns . . . and the arguments concerning the existence of planets in a binary system, and the probable effects of a double primary on

orbits, tides, seasons, and biological rhythms . . . if you're bored by the labour of figuring [these details] out, then surely you shouldn't be writing science fiction. ("Cosmology," 122).

"Sense of wonder" is a good deal more subjective, has been around long enough in SF to be satiarised as "sensawunda," but in fact has a pedigree going back to Aristotle. Stephen Greenblatt, discussing the wonder felt by European explorers encountering the New World, revives the equally marvelous phrase of Aquinas' teacher: wonder causes a "systole of the heart" (79-81). "Sensawunda" is a mainspring of readerly desire in SF and Fantasy: an experienced librarian divides all readers into Type A and Type B: Type A readers want what they are used to: in generic terms, realism. Type Bs, the specific readers, want, at the extreme end of the bell-curve, "total departure from the known world" (Tyson, cited Bujold 157.)

Such departure can also come from another fundamental specific technique: Tolkien called it recovery (of freshness in the familiar) (146). In SF, Darko Suvin borrowed from Brecht's basic concept of estrangement, and Suvin's own theory ("Poetics," 62) has become telescoped as the term "cognitive estrangement": in essence, inserting in a text one new piece of data, or novum, that steadily transforms what appears an ordinary realist primary world. (*Metamorphoses* 63-65). Robert Heinlein's, "The door irised shut," is a much-cited example. In contemporary horror, where Lovecraft's Thing from Outer Space has ceded supremacy to Richard Matheson's Thing from the Sugar Bowl, the same technique appears. That is, horror functions by producing cognitive estrangement, as a series of non-real elements enter a setting that has been established as almost complete realism. Classic examples are Stephen King novels like *Pet Sematary* and *It*.

Fantasy is also moving to such a reliance, as 'high' fantasy like Tolkien's is overtaken in popularity by the shift to urban, contemporary and, in the wake of J. K. Rowlings and Stephanie Meyer, YA (Young Adult) forms. Hence current fantasy most often relies on depicting a quasi-realist primary world where non-real elements intrude. Rowling's Platform 9^{3/4} is a very well-known example.

The specific emphases on setting parallel a focus on the land or landscape long-remarked in Australian writing. It is by now a truism that in socio-cultural constructions of Australia, first Queensland and then North Queensland were developed as circumferences seen from various centres, all repeating the ambiguity of a distant area seen at once as a redneck hell, and a tropical paradise. In specific, such constructions can be a palpable advantage: a sense of

wonder comes most easily from developing the exotic, and here is the North Australian homeground, ready exoticised for us. This is particularly useful at the moment (2009), because in the US, Australia is a flavour of the month, and SF and fantasy's major audiences are American.

In fact, though Australian SF writers use some form of local landscape quite readily, Australian fantasy writers, even well-known and internationally published writers like Kate Forsyth, Lian Hearn and Juliet Marillier, tend to use European, or sometimes Asian-based secondary worlds. Among the reasons that I canvassed for my own MA, it may be that unlike SF, fantasy looks to the past for its sense of wonder, and there is relatively little white past in Australia. Again, the setting in fantasy fiction – aka “romance,” in Fredric Jameson's terms – is a very powerful element, but most high fantasy has used traditional, non-urban landscape elements. And this ties to another important factor: fantasy has also relied on deep traditional mythologies to “numinize” its landscape; and the deep traditional mythology that informs the Australian primary world is Indigenous. As Australian writer Pamela Freeman, (E-mail, 1) has remarked, the white Australian fantasy writer therefore faces the dilemma of appropriating indigenous myths, or grafting on European ones, and though either has been done in US local settings, it doesn't seem to happen here.

This may be due to the settlers' guilt which perhaps underlay and has certainly succeeded the '50s and '60s Australian cultural cringe. In the 1970s, my own first serious fiction project looked firmly to the European centre: I wanted to write a historical novel about the Second Punic War, and experience had taught me that I needed to see the actual settings in Spain and Italy and Africa, not least, as I found later, get the light values right. But after four years overseas I came back to a landscape that for me now held Tolkien's recovered freshness, or, as Said theorized Western constructions of the Orient, that had become at once familiar and wholly new (59.) When I literally chanced to start a fantasy novel, rather than deliberately flout tradition, I impulsively chose to lay out an east-Australian geography: desert westward, ocean eastward, ice not to north but south. It was a more deliberate choice to build a world whose landscapes, flora and fauna were analogue Australian. By 1980, with post-colonial studies hardly begun, I felt none of the sensibility whose absence Peter Read laments in Douglas Stewart (10). Though I created my own mythologies, I also felt no anxiety about appropriating this long-loved and newly re-visioned landscape to create a fantasy secondary world.

With the flora and fauna, though, I learnt the third major reason Australian fantasy writers go European: words like “koala,” “kangaroo” and “kookaburra,” are now so well-known that they would instantly puncture a secondary world’s credibility. Along with invented characters and places I used invented names, which troubles some readers; but in fact, real names like “paddymelon” and “silverleaf ironbark” would be just as meaningless to the major US fantasy audience.

Queensland proper entered the first novel as a nation seen by a traveling bard whose home kingdom lies somewhere around our Barossa Valley. Crossing the ranges to “Holym,” the narrator describes:

Its long, rolling prospect of summer-brownd and silvered plains ... broken by stands of staring white helliens, tall black coastal elonds, and the short twisted trees named riendel for their lovely white and scarlet-filamented flowers. (*Everran’s Bane*, 104)

He goes on to the country’s salient feature:

Holym is called cattle-land with reason: save a few mines near the Mellyngthir delta marshes, and some sheep running along the Quarred border, the cattle own it all. Nor do they keep a few head on each farm as in Everran. The Holym cattle are numbered by tens of thousands, they live wild on holdings big as a Resh, they are worked with horses by men who set small value on their necks, and they are not our short hairy red breed, but huge smooth-skinned whites, blacks, yellows, and brindles, with horns long as bows and temperaments to match. The towns comprise a few houses along streets widened to handle such herds, and in place of markets there are stockyards tall as houses: moreover, the cattle jump out of them. This I have seen. (104)

While this landscape is definitely coastal North Queensland, and usages like “working” cattle indicate insider knowledge, it is very much the orthodox frontier-from-centre construction: the cattle are wild, the men rash, the towns primitive. The portrait grows increasingly satiric, but though it draws heavily on the life style and characters of the area round our station at the time, it is not a North Queensland that releases passion and steams up the imagination, as in some of the writers Cheryl Taylor has discussed.

Even an analogue North Queensland, seen by a male outsider, was still well within the parameters of orthodox NQ constructions. I drew closer to both the primary North

Queensland and to my own regional voice in a second novel, this time SF, whose narrator was not only female, but originally was planned to be “old Townsville white.” Plausibilities and plot necessities eventually made her a Classical and underwater archaeologist of Welsh extraction, so the regional voice still remained somewhat manque.

Indeed, my first try at contemporary quasi-realism almost derailed the novel: even if the town had an alias, did you use real street names? What about real people? Real institutions? When did disclaimers on the front page fail to ward off a libel suit? The canny SF solution was to make the apparent Townsville part of another alternate world, where Princess Diana didn’t die, but in 2001 was elected a “people’s queen.” So, in some alternate universe there is now a Luis Torres University, with a close but not complete resemblance to James Cook, near an NQ town called Ibisville.

A “genuine” local narrator finally appeared with the 2008 short story, “The Cretaceous Border;” she was actually a minor character from the SF novel, also inhabiting Ibisville. Since my short fiction rarely comes spontaneously, the story was generated by a call for submissions in one of the principle specific markets for short fiction: an anthology, in this case one whose theme was “Universes next door.” And I began with three deliberate aims: to write to the anthology theme, to establish a low-key Thing from the Sugarbowl setting, and to consciously exploit the double-dip exoticism of North Queensland, for specifically American editors.

You might think that a lot of strange things turn up in my backyard, if you didn’t actually live in Ibisville. For the tropics, though, the yard itself is pretty ordinary: picket fence, big hibiscus shrubs, golden-cane and fan palms, banks of military ferns, shade-houses at the back and sides. Spreading over it all, the quandong and fiddlewood and African mahogany trees.

But an ibis comes, of course, one or several, I can never tell, though he or she’s there every year, as soon as it gets dry: striding and jabbing wherever the hoses ran. There are honey-eaters too, three or four sorts, and once a Wompoo pigeon, orange and green and sumptuous purple bosom, a bulky vision in the quandong tree. And a few times, a black-and-yellow treesnake, getting a bit too close to the windows, in pursuit of poorly cached green frogs. (Cretaceous, 24)

SF stories often begin with what writers in the field call a data-dump: that is, not merely establishing a setting, but delivering essential information for the invented world (which may not be an oxy-breathing, Earth-gravity, 24-hour day-cycle complete analogue for ours.)

This opening, however also functions as Exoticism 101: a very forgiving invocation of the orthodox construction of NQ as a frontier. “Tropics” is the first deliberate clue: US readers would think maybe Florida, sunshine, palms, distant, but also, of course, Everglades, hurricanes, alligators. Nevertheless, “tropics” works as a cushion for the unfamiliar terms that follow: golden cane palms, fan palms, military ferns? Never mind, it’s tropical. And “palm,” “fern” and “trees” explain what form of vegetation they are. The same goes for the birds: ibises are world-wide, honey-eaters are self-explanatory, “Wompoo” is immediately followed by “pigeon.” The treesnakes betray an inveterate tendency for the redneck circumference to take the mickey out of the gullible center. But here they also recall the tropics’ alligator dimension: in this exotic, distant place, real dangers might happen, backyard or not.

The exotic distancing of “tropics” then works in tension with the “backyard” resonances – homely, cosy, familiar – to steady and then scale-down a classic narrative horror arc. In such an arc, the First Portent of the anomalous is a mysterious event: here a new voice in the night chorus of geckoes, mopokes and curlews. The First Victim is used to establish the novum’s nastiness: here, it’s a massacred toad. The Second Portent is often another victim’s lucky but alarming escape: a possum, this time. The Second Victim is usually more spectacular and demands reaction from the forces of good. In this case, the victim’s a disembowelled rat. The Finale, or in novels more often a long-drawn crisis, reveals the mystery and unveils or expels the invader/predator, and is managed this time with a flashlight photograph.

At this point the story’s divergences from both generic and national norms come uppermost, and in both aspects gender plays a critical part. It’s become a truism that SF was long woman-unfriendly; there’s still a strong tension and sense of deconstruction about many female SF characters, and upturnings of generic expectations by women SF writers, just as Vivienne Muller finds among women working in what she calls Australian writing’s masculinist and nationalist ethos (70). The basis that sets expectations for experienced SF readers here, however, is the title: “Cretaceous Border” instantly evokes the geologists’ K/T boundary, the narrow ribbon of iridium-rich clay found between Cretaceous and Tertiary deposits, which marks a probable asteroid impact that may have destroyed the dinosaurs. My

two seasoned SF work-in-progress readers instantly expected that somewhere in this garden a border would admit some form of dinosaur.

SF expectations for such a topic are vividly exemplified by two classics, Conan Doyle's The Lost World (1912), and Michael Crichton's/Stephen Spielberg's Jurassic Park (1990, 1993). In each case "tropics" are invoked; dinosaurs exist on a Caribbean island, or beyond a perilous trek up the Amazon, credibly and safely distant and gloriously magnified. The scenes where Conan Doyle's explorers hear a carnosaur massacring an iguanodon, and then find the predator threatening their own camp, carry a very high emotional charge indeed (112-114). And when Spielberg's T. Rex first hits the screen, it is seen trying to overturn and rip apart a Land Rover. But as we've seen with the horror arc, the back-yard setting in "Cretaceous" persistently undercuts these expectations. The best this predator can do is murder a toad, fail to stop a possum, and disembowel a rat.

Gender supplies the other half of this scale-down. The human characters in "Cretaceous" are two middle-aged women who go running together. When the narrator goes out to investigate the possum attack she carries, not a burning branch, but a long-handled mop. For the final confrontation the weapon of choice is a live trap, after which the heroes plan to call Parks and Wildlife, and when the predator escapes the trap, they all run for their lives. This is hardly the heroic behaviour manifested by Conan Doyle's male-bonding explorers, with their big-game rifles, or even the less well-equipped humans in Jurassic Park. And when it comes to verification, Conan Doyle's professor gets a pterodactyl at least temporarily to London. My narrator can identify the predator, but she fails either to trap it or to publish the photographs. Who'd believe them, she asks, in these days of CGI and Photoshop?

On the national side, Australian writers are perfectly capable of dramatizing a hunt and upgrading their predators to the size of large crocodiles, for instance. The satiric eye is also well represented in Australian comic writing; but it usually shares the ethos which produced the "yarn:" another Australian institution which, in my own experience, is practiced and constructed almost exclusively about and by men. Here again, in a manner excoriated by male SF readers every 20 years or so, "women" have naughtily slewed the male genre. My characters just don't *do* the proper macho things. They remove the dead toad with a shovel, exclaiming "Eeuw!" My narrator gladly accepts her friend's company for the confrontation – after the friend has "cooked tea" for her family – and at one point they consider the whole affair may be just the effect of another hot flush.

The last piece I want to discuss is also short fiction, though unlike “Cretaceous,” it’s not yet published. Also unlike “Cretaceous,” it’s my second invited story – a step up the ladder in specific – and it’s for an Australian press, for a collection called Sprawl: a pioneering anthology not of urban, but of sub-urban Australian fantasy.

For a trigger here I looked at once to Ibisville. Mutant possums? No, that would be back to the backyard, and somebody’s done mutant wombats. Rasmussen vampires? Too many vampires already. They’ll pass the forefront of the cane toads heading south. Then, reading 1902 issues of The Northern Territory Times and Gazette while indexing for the Austlit Database, I discovered a gruesome Queensland murder, connected with a Merivale station; there’s a Merivale just near Charters Towers. History, then, I decided. Local history, and a simple ghost/haunting/ invasion, a variant on the hoary horror riff of, “be careful what you wish for,” as in “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902)

Again, I meant to exploit regionality, but this time for Australian editors and audience, right down to importing family yarns. Consequently, the first paragraph of “Acreage” is rather different.

Mr and Mrs Asquith bought land in Ibisville in the late 1970s. The town was hardly fashionable then, and by the ‘90s rosy, rotund Mr. Asquith could jeer in his jovial way at other Sydney stock-brokers “paying through the nose” for lots that could never match his two acres just below the local dam, in the suburb of Riverview. He spoke with authority on Wet Seasons – “‘78 was just like this” – and bought an Akubra to wear with his ride-on mower. He even contemplated growing a beard, to enhance his private recitations of “Saltbush Bill on the Patriarchs.” Mrs. Asquith, who had taught music in Sydney, still smiled a lot but rarely spoke, even when her husband held forth about the crocodile who nested at the foot of their garden. “Perfectly harmless! Fresh water, you know!”

This is the first fiction I’ve ever written out of first person or third intimate. This is remote third, and not at all sympathetic. In comparison with “Cretaceous,” it’s also not Exoticism 101. Nobody sites Ibisville in the tropics. Nobody tells you who Saltbush Bill is, let alone who wrote, “Saltbush Bill on the Patriarchs.” And the crocodile is a satiric reference to the fairies at the bottom of the garden cliché, with an ironic resonance from Conan Doyle himself, but the tone is not indulgent.

As a writer with a need to market, I worry if this in-house voice will make the story inaccessible, or even bar it from the anthology. As an academic, I recognize not just a regional voice, but a regional voice attempting to reverse the circumference/centre perspective. Like Amitav Ghosh in The Calcutta Chromosome, this is the circumference writing back, and not tendering the centre's ignorance.

Such assertion does converge with yet another Australian tradition, the attitude of the "old hand" to the "new chum." The tradition has morphed at least twice, first as home-grown Australians developed a sense of nationality in the late 19th Century, then with the backwash against Post WWII European and/or Asian immigrants. This story, I realized very early, is the voice of an old NQ hand militating against a form of internal colonizing: the demographic shift that is moving people from centre (South) to circumference (North), with varying degrees of local approval. I thought it was a purely North Queensland or even personal response, until the first reader with whom I checked its tone – thinking it might well be too nasty – identified with delight the sort of presumptuous newcomer her small Victorian town dislikes.

The action's actual trigger evokes a wider tradition. Mr. Asquith develops a passion for local history. "So much to find out! So much to tell everyone!" From a potted history of Ibisville, he moves to local crime, down to obscure events such as the hooligans who held up what's now the Heritage Tea House outside Townsville. His one lament is "that he had not chosen acreage in Forbes or Glenrowan, or along the remains of Stringy Bark Creek. "“Imagine walking where Ben Hall and Ned Kelly trod! If you could time-travel – picture meeting Gilbert and O'Malley face to face!”"

Again, Ned Kelly might be recognized overseas, but there's no concession for those, in or out of Australia, who might not understand the allusion to Glenrowan, let alone Forbes or Stringy Bark Creek; these allusions do, however, draw on what's become a national, one might even say a folk mythology. And as the right Australian reader will instantly anticipate, "be careful what you wish for" involves bushrangers. By chance and further irony, this brought a further sense to 'place' in Acreage. Mr. Asquith is "out of place" to behave like a seasoned local. When I picked up the original NT Times article, I thought it described a North Queensland calamity that might plausibly generate ghosts. Research proved the NT Times had, firstly, misspelt a family name, and second, omitted area details. The people I wanted were Pat and

Jimmy Kenniff, sometimes called the last Queensland bushrangers, and the Merivale involved was in the Maranoa.

Consequently, when I finally finished trying to sort out the back history, the story had to slew from the traditional ghost's-return pattern. Instead, the "ghost" of Old Man Kenniff, head of a not particularly intelligent family, has got his psychic wires crossed. Drawn by Mr Asquith's "desire for bushrangers," more dangerous than Tolkien's youthful desire for dragons (135), Old Kenniff is trying to re-enact the aftermath of the murders in Mr. Asquith's suburban yard, possessing Mr. Asquith in the process. He is finally expelled by a ramshackle exorcism, in which the "psychic expert" makes him understand that he is "'in the wrong place!'"

Old Kenniff is displaced by a representative of "old white Townsville," one Bessie Bowyang, whose name is another local allusion ('Bill Bowyang' was the nom de plume of a well known NQ writer in the '30s.). The Asquiths in turn are displaced by the persistent night sounds of a ghostly corroboree. But where the invader in "Cretaceous" flees back to its own universe, the internal colonizers, like their forbears, are more persistent. When Bessie suggests that the Asquiths try "more salt" – sprinkling with salt being the adhoc method of removing Old Kenniff – Mrs. Asquith eventually poisons Mr. Asquith's prized "native" garden, and the Asquiths sell up; but they only retire to a unit on Castle Hill, where Mr. Asquith becomes "a passionate encyclopaedist of yachting."

As with "Cretaceous," gender also inflects the story, at least in the present day. Most obviously, unlike the case in The Exorcist, the victim of possession is male; Mr Asquith's loud if not outright bullying personality is not completely remodeled – that would be too much to expect – but in the length of the story he is reduced to uncharacteristic uncertainty, and even passivity. It is Mrs. Asquith who acts usefully and decisively as the episodes of possession worsen, and it is Bessie who takes the role of male expert and/or priest, and proves the actual ghost-buster. Indeed, in doing so Bessie perhaps comes a little too near the Magic Negro – the token Black figure in horror fiction like Stephen King's The Shining, whose special knowledge saves the white characters, though not himself. Bessie does survive, which is a good variation from the norm; on the other hand, she is white, which diminishes the effect.

Place thus became central to "Acreage" in ways I neither intended or expected, and the story approached a more assertive regionality, or even nationality, than anything else I have

written. There was an immediate effect among my work-in-progress readers, mostly the same ones who read “Cretaceous.” My Australian readers had no problem – indeed, some relished the story. A local comment, from a first generation Swiss German migrant, was, “What a ripper!” But my well-read and certainly alert US readers were frequently at a loss. “What,” one wrote, “is an Akubra?” Even the history buffs felt they lacked comprehension of a story where they had not known the background history beforehand.

This may, of course, be a failure in the story as it stands: it still awaits revision, since I’m concerned in particular about the length, which is over the anthology limit, and the scale of the elucidating “data dump,” when the possession and the murders are finally explained. So far as these murders can be, that is. At the same time, the question exposes a dilemma for anyone trying to develop a truly regional or national voice, a parallel to the question of dealing with aliens in SF. Complete regionality, like the wholly alien, may be unintelligible. For the working writer, the question is when to begin inserting glosses: is this Exoticism 101, or National Identity 501? And the work has to be not merely intelligible, but marketable. How far is one to compromise? Despite this ongoing consideration, so far the protocols and expectations of specific forms and their market have in my case assisted rather than limited the development of a regional North Queensland voice.

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