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REVIEW

The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories Ed. Mary Lord. Published by Penguin Books Australia. Ringwood 1991.

Best Australian Short Stories published by Penguin and edited by Mary Lord provides an interesting and varied reading experience for discerning short story buffs. The collection, arranged in chronological sequence, spans the period from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century and traces the development of Australian short story writing from our early formative years to the contemporary literary scene. It reflects the changing concerns and attitudes of writers over the past one hundred and thirty years. For example, the setting has moved from being predominately rural based to urban based. In the early stories the protagonists were constantly pitted against the bush (or "Outback"), with all its inherent dangers, but in the later stories it is the vicissitudes of contemporary urban life that are of most concern.

Writing styles have also undergone a transformation. It would seem that colonial readers needed the reassurance of reliable no-nonsense story telling. The "journalistic" style of the early writers tended to lend an air of authenticity to the narrative, but it lacked the spontaneity of more inspirational fiction. In "The Ghost Upon the Rail" by George Land, we are given a blow by blow description of events leading up to a final resolution that is not totally unexpected. The suspense is a bit too contrived — the ghost just won't say "die" until justice is done. In "The Dead Witness; or The Bush Waterhole", a variation on the crime theme, the detective-hero, "Brooke, The Detective" (58) wins out by following up all the clues. He gets his man (and presumably sometimes his woman). Justice has triumphed again in the bush...but a little too conveniently.

Social realist themes tended to add more depth and dimension to early colonial writing. Lost or sick children, and the heavy toll that the bush exacted from both men and women were popular themes exploited by writers of this period. "Pretty Dick" by Marcus Clarke tells the tale of a young child lost in the bush. This is a timeless phenomenon, but modern readers may have some difficulty coming to terms with the heavy-handed

sentimentality in this story. Another story concerned with a child's suffering is Henry Lawson's "Brighten's Sister-in-Law". This time the child is sick and could possibly die — an all too common real life scenario in pioneering Australia. This story examines relationships, and how, in Lawson's world, only the strong survive and manage to hang on to some semblance of their dignity; the weak just manage to exist in a vacuum of despair, beaten by their environment and circumstances.

Lawson's often pessimistic outlook is not, however, a universal one. There is some comic relief to be found in the early bush stories. Arthur Hoey Davis (Steele Rudd) in "Dad and the Donovans" delights us with the familiar antics of those old time favourites — Dad, Dave and family. In "The Golden Shanty" by Edward Dyson, the action revolves around a humorous contest between two groups of equally determined combatants, the non-too-bright Irish publican of the Shamrock Hotel, Michael Doyle, and the "pestiferous heathen" (99) Chinese. The Shamrock Hotel, a "...rambling, disjointed structure...built on sun-dried bricks of an unhealthy, bilious tint" (97) is the sought-after prize. It is a constant source of fascination for the Chinese. In "Far Inland Football" by John Arthur Barry, the characters — personalities rather than real people — seem to be inordinately naive or stupid. They form a football team. But the good folk of Cruppertown have a unique style of playing "football", with amusing repercussions.

But the Outback is not always peopled with quaint, harmless, characters. Barbara Baynton's "Billy Skywonkie" paints a rather sinister picture of life in the Outback. "Billy Skywonkie" seems to spawn a most disreputable host of characters, not the least is Billy Skywonkie himself, who was probably closer to the "real" bushman of the later nineteenth/early-twentieth century than Lawson's often idealised models. In this story Barbara Baynton is courageous enough to tackle the controversial issues of sexual harassment and racial prejudice.

Two stories, set in the 1930's, denote a change of mood and style. The style of Katharine Susannah Prichard's "The Curse" is much more sophisticated and experimental than what has preceded it. The setting is still rural, but the narrative, with its symbolic imagery, has left the naive style of the earlier bush stories far behind. Henry Handel Richardson's "Conversation in a Pantry" is a sensitive study of a young girl's sexual curiosity. Not too much is given away, but the surprise is that the subject is raised at all.

In the latter section of the book the bush is no longer featured as the dominant backdrop. The Australians of these later stories are mainly city folk with city concerns. In Tim Winton's "Neighbours", the human face of multiculturalism is exposed. A young Australian couple discover that life is the living and the sharing of it, and that there are more important things than the twentieth century novel.

"The Lottery" by Marjorie Barnard is about winning and losing in the humdrum of working-class suburbia. Ted Bilboroung is self-centred and smug, and takes his long-suffering wife, Grace, for granted. He accepts as his due "...the tidy house" (190) that she maintains. She is a "good wife" (190) and he knows that he is a "good husband...(who has) always brought his money home" (190) ...and told her how to spend it. Grace's lottery win decides the fate of these two and catches the reader slightly off-guard.

Two other stories in this collection that have a definite "sting in the tale" are "Monsieur Caloche" — a very early example written in 1889 by Jessie Couvreur — and Elizabeth Jolley's "A Gentleman's Agreement". In "Monsieur Caloche" appearances are definitely not what they seem. Those readers who are familiar with Elizabeth Jolley have come to expect the unexpected in her writing and this tale is no exception. It is peopled with the usual odd assortment of Jolley characters who decide that life in the country is for them. The "sting" is how they manage it.

Hal Porter and Frank Moorehouse tell self-indulgent little stories about characters that seem to bear a strong resemblance to their creator. "Hal", an innocent from the country in "Party Forty-two and Mrs Brewer", seems to be doing his best to drown himself in alcohol during his visit to the city and Mrs Brewer (Brewer!) is more pathetic than funny. Frank Moorehouse's "Francois and the Fishbone Incident" is an amusing and light hearted charade. The moral seems to be: be careful when eating fish.

Patrick White points a satirical finger at Australiana in "Miss Slattery's Demon Lover". Poor Miss Slattery does not even know the difference between lino and marble (196), and Tibor (Tibby) Szabo, Miss Slattery's lover, is fat and dark, and...Hungarian — the very antithesis of the "typical" long, lean, fair Australian. He talks funny and he obviously does not like roast lamb (Australia's almost national dish!). If this is White's attempt at humour, it touches a nerve rather than amuses.

The contributions from Michael Wilding, "The Words She Types"; Peter Carey, "The Last Days of a Famous Mime"; and Helen

Garner, "The Dark, The Light", have taken us a long way from the relatively "unsophisticated" fiction of the early stories. In the works of these authors the boundaries between art and life, writer and reader, have become fuzzy. Their fiction has become more internalised, more removed from realism, and forces the reader into some kind of pact with the author to contribute more in order to impose a "meaning" on the work.

The collection ends on an eerie note. "Belladonna Gardens" by Marion Halligan, is a misnomer for what has become a wasteland in Australia's "Garden City", Canberra. It has become a wasteland of dreams as well as material neglect. Realism is stretched to the limit in this very unpleasant and topical portrayal of life in contemporary Australia. Bureaucratic dogmatism is in control of the situation and artistic and aesthetic values are pushed (or rather should be cleaned up) underground. The artist/social deviant must leave for a more fertile and sympathetic environment.

Other writers included in this collection are William Astley, John Morrison, Christina Stead, Morris Laurie, Olga Masters, Beverley Farmer and Jeanette Turner Hospital, whose contributions maintained the general high standard. The end result is a potpourri of quality reading that is highly recommended.