Reviews

"The Politics of 'Commonsense'"

Greg Manning

Robert Hughes. *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*. New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, 1993. 210 pp. ISBN 0 19 507676 1

The state and direction of cultural policy in America has been a site for intense and acrimonious exchanges since the early years of Reagan. These battles take place between a left which includes Marxists and post-Marxists, poststructuralists, feminists, postmodernists, Afro-Americanists and multiculturalists, and a right which poses as the champion of everything the left can be imagined to threaten — God and country, true spiritual values, Western civilisation, the flag, home and family and all the rest of the clichés that made America. The leftists (sometimes known to the right as "tenured radicals") work mostly from the academy; the right has members there as well, but is more comfortable with populist fora such as the Senate podium or the magazine column.

Culture of Complaint is a withering account of the cultural climate this exchange has produced. According to Robert Hughes, American public discourse is in so wretched a state as to threaten the long-term well-being of the Republic itself:

> A culture obsessed with therapies and filled with the distrust of formal politics; skeptical of authority and prey to superstition; its political language corroded by fake pity and euphemism. Like late Rome, unlike the early republic, in its long imperial reach, in the corruption and verbosity of its senators, in its reliance on sacred geese (those feathered ancestors of our own pollsters and spin-doctors) and in its submission to senile, deified emperors controlled by astrologers and extravagant wives. [4]

The barbarians are no longer at the gates. The citizenry have become them. This kind of talk sounds very similar to the bellyaching of the right, except that for Hughes the mess is as attributable to the right as to the left:

> One would rather swim than get in the same dinghy as the PC [political correctness] folk. But neither would one wish to don blazer and topsiders on the gin-palace with its twin 400-horse Buckleys, its Buchanan squawkbox, its Falwell and Robertson compass, its Quayle depthfinder and its broken-down bilgepump, that now sits listing in the Potomac as its crew bickers over who "really" lost the 1992 election. [26]

Hughes considers the right and left after the Cold War to be as self-absorbed, out-of-date and rudderless as each other, exchanging insults that impress only the converted while the nation's best interests subside around them. Such a scenario gives him a gold pass to the commonsensical middle ground, and he has the talent for ridicule to use this topography to blistering effect. His arguments will be attractive to Australians, especially when he contrasts American follies with levelheaded policies here, but one does well to resist these seductions, because Hughes is not always so benignly reasonable as his centrist manoeuvring implies. Arguments which oppose a ratbag radical right to a loony radical left depoliticise their own conservatism, representing it as the lonely path of good sense. "Am I alone in finding something rather narrow-minded and stultifying about all this?", one asks near the end to cue the reader's "No!", but Hughes' skill as an advocate can draw the reader's attention from a mind which is often less patient or scrupulous than the task he has assumed demands. Still, he is always worth reading, doubly so for the contexts he gives to ideas which are also making an impact this side of the Pacific.

The three main targets of *Culture of Complaint* are the "political correctness" movement, American multiculturalism, and the increasing politicization of art and art exhibitions. These were the respective topics of the lectures in which Hughes first expressed these ideas, and the book follows the lecture format in taking them one at a time, a tactic which helps to accumulate vivid impressions of folly but finds little room for sustained analysis.

In Australia the term "political correctness" usually refers to a more-or-less nebulous social pressure to avoid being seen to hold certain prejudices (sexist, racist, homophobic, etc.), but in America it names an active policy designed to curb racist, sexist (etc.) behaviour on the nation's campuses. Put simply, the policy attempts to turn the insight that language makes ideas more or less thinkable to the doing of good works. The long-term hope is that when racist, sexist (etc.) language is removed from utterance, the prejudices themselves will wither and die. Its publicity so far has been mostly negative. The pedantry and pettiness that any bureaucracy will sometimes display have become its emblems, used to suggest that the green woods of liberalism are dying beneath the attempt to remove a few noxious weeds of prejudice, while the number of officially-designated weeds is growing by the month:

> The range of victims available ten years ago — blacks, chicanos, Indians, women, homosexuals — has now expanded to include every permutation of the halt, the blind, the lame and the short, or to put it correctly, the differently abled, the other-visioned and the vertically challenged. [17]

Hughes is predictably trenchant:

> Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone back in the days of the Carter administration

> decided that, for official purposes, he was "physically challenged"? Does the homosexual suppose that others love him more or hate him less because he is called a "gay" ...? The net gain is that thugs who used to go faggot-bashing now go gay bashing. [18-19]

Sweet sophistry. The amount of self-evident truth in these observations entices a reader to overlook the harder questions. Quick-return metaphors of profit-and-loss lack the attention span to assess a strategy that must, by the nature of language, take time to take effect, and the fact that a change of name cannot make the lame walk vulgarises the complex relations between nomenclature, perception, expectation and civil rights. Paraplegics may not rise from their wheelchairs, but the world the "cripple" inhabits is shaped as much by *what it means* to be in a wheelchair as it is by the physical reality of the condition. The same goes, more obviously, for the contemptuous and disdainful tags that are sometimes attached to racial minorities, homosexuals, and to women. It is naive to believe that the forced removal of prejudicial terms will banish prejudice, and it is true that their prohibition has at times been policed with a lack of proportion, but these are matters of detail rather than of policy. What Hughes needs to engage with — and does not, in any convincing way — is the philosophy of language that underlies the policy, but all he does is harrumph about "all this fuss about 'man'", and explains that "in Old English and Anglo-Saxon, the suffix *-man* was gender neutral." So what? It was then, it's not now. On the next page Hughes acknowledges that "there are, of course, many new terms and usages that seemed picky and unnecessary to conservatives when they appeared, but are now indispensable", such as "Ms" and "African-American". This seems to be intended to show even-handedness, but it amounts to self-contradiction.

The most valuable aspect of Hughes' account of PC is his exposition of its continuity with the ancient impulses of American Puritanism. The Puritans arrived in America in 1630, and their cast of mind lives on in the deep structure of many of its institutions, traditions and practices. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Amherst and many other great colleges were commissioned to train Puritan ministers; writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to John Updike have mapped the links between Puritan obsessions with sin and redemption and the national addiction to spiritual rebirth, cultism, utopian social schemes and political moralism, from Oneida and Brook Farm through Utah to Jonestown and Waco. The Puritan mind is guided by an unforgiving conscience, which in a land of robber barons and con artists can make it a force for dissent, as it was with the Transcendentalists, but between 1950 and 1990 political dissent in the United States was muzzled by the Cold War. Now dissentient politics are back, but they return at the cost of all mention of Marxism, and so have lost the best possibility of rigorous readings of postmodern capital. As Hughes puts it,

> Marxism is dead; that part of history is over. Its carcass will continue to make sounds and smells, as fluids drain and pockets of gas expand; ... [73]

The dogs of politics are back, but they are gone in the teeth. By confusing communism with Marxism, post-Cold War American radical thought denies itself its best chance at effective economic critique. Hughes' analysis, sadly, perpetuates the confusion, but he does at least reflect the current American perception.

Hughes shows that American "progressives" have turned to an agenda of purification through language, but he cannot say *why*. This is a question for the universities, but when Hughes looks in that direction he replaces interpretation with caricature:

> The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallocentricity is inscribed in Dickens' portrayal of Little Nell. [72]

I doubt that all of the American academic left is to be found in Literature Departments, and even if it were, what is wrong with them analysing "how phallocentricity is inscribed in Dickens' portrayal of Little Nell"? As one approach among others, or as part of a larger study, it seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate thing to do. And is it suddenly wrong, when the wall falls on the other side of the world, for literary academics to talk about literature? They might be considered to be doing their job.

For Hughes, though, academic literary theory is not just self-absorbed, it is a bit of a dodo:

> I am also reminded of Australia, the home of lost biological causes: just as the pouched macropods and egg-laying mammals, the kangaroos and wallabies and echidnas and platypi, flourished undisturbed on their drifting fragment of the mother-continent Gondwana eons after they were extinct everywhere else on the globe, so the last Derrideans and Lyotardians and Baudrillardians are still hopping and snuffling around in American academe, years after their intellectual mentors ceased to interest the French themselves. [73]

Note that last clause. Scratch an Aussie, no matter how brash he is or how long he has been away, and it seems you soon reach the cringe. I do not know whether or not Derrida, Lyotard or Baudrillard have long since ceased to interest "the French" — years ago it was said that they never had, that Derrida was thought of in France as a *vedette americaine* — but what does that matter, if Americans find their work valuable? Did Baudelaire worry that the Americans ignored Poe, or Truffaut fret over David Goodis's lack of a domestic reputation? Why then do Americans need French approval to read French writers? Surely it is time Australians stopped worrying about other people's approval, even in polemics.

Hughes' cursory treatment of academic theory, which I suspect is a more or less reluctant supplement to his original lectures, perhaps added at his publishers' bidding, amounts in fact to a *refusal to read*, and by so refusing he diminishes his account of the intellectual climate he is examining. Cultural

theory is not just one more of the problems confronting American criticism at the present time — it is as important to an understanding of the situation as the end of the Cold War, the "death of Marxism", and the Puritan unconscious.

In the lecture on multiculturalism Hughes' quarrel is not with the ideal, but with its American realisation:

> The linkage of multiculturalism with political correctness ... has turned what ought to be a generous recognition of cultural diversity into a worthless symbolic program, clogged with lumpen-radical jargon. Its offshoot is the rhetoric of cultural separatism. [83]

Hughes insists that multiculturalism must be pluralist and inclusive to be sustainable at all, and claims that the various sub-groups in America have focussed so intently on themselves and their rights and resentments that no communication between groups takes place. Conflicts cannot be resolved because no-one can assume a vantage point from which they might be mediated. As a result, the state everyone still has to live in promises to come apart at the seams.

I suspect that Hughes may be right about this. The concept of culture has been so pluralised — "traditional", "popular", "high", women's, Afro-American, Native, Latino, gay, lesbian, working-class, and so on — that everything has become relative across several different planes. No-one can stand at the centre of this multi-dimensional maze; no means whereby one "culture" can communicate with another can be posited in the abstract without treading on toes. And if "reality", or "experience", is culturally mediated, or culturally produced, then the prospect of communication across cultural paradigms disappears, because there is no transcendent "real" for cultures to share. As Hughes suggests, the consequences of this "fraying" could be disastrous, but the most common solution — overtly or covertly to impose some norm on this divergence (government culture? network television?) — would surely be worse. Eastern Europe proves that forced unions never bond, no matter how long they are clamped together.

Hughes' account of multiculturalism is hampered by nostalgia and an inadequate acknowledgment of privilege. Two pages in he is reminiscing about his education at a Jesuit College and Sydney University, arguing that the training in Latin and English Literature he received left him perfectly open to Asian, Jewish, Aboriginal and other cultures. I'm not convinced that even the rest of this book entirely bears him out but, be that as it may, he can hardly recommend private schools for everyone, nor such Eurocentrism now. Come to that, if a training as Eurocentric as his did so little harm, why is he so worried at the prospect of others receiving comparably monocultural training in other cultures today? Can they not grow out of theirs as well?

Perhaps they will, but that is not Hughes' point. He wants to defend his own cultural heritage against white post-imperialists who would erase it and

assert the right of other cultures to assert theirs. For Hughes this exercise in cultural self-destruction is typified by

> the inconclusive debate over "The Canon", that oppressive Big Bertha whose muzzle is trained over the battlements of Western Civ at the black, the gay, and the female. The Canon, we're told, is a list of books by dead Europeans — Shakespeare and Dante and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Stendhal and John Donne and T.S. Eliot . . . you know, *them*, the pale patriarchal penis people. [102]

Hughes argues that the dilemma over the canon derives from a misunderstanding of the role of literature and the way it should be taught, which in turn relates to the Puritan preacherly impulse in American education, "the sturdy assumption that works of art are or ought to be therapeutic." He maintains to the contrary that

> Literature isn't a nice normalizing course of treatment whose purpose is to guide and cuff us into becoming better citizens of whatever republic we are reading in. [104]

I agree completely — provided that we are clear on what we mean by "literature", and I think Hughes (like many literature teachers) fails to distinguish between "What Appears on Literature Courses" and "What is Written". Literature as it is written, from Rabelais through Sade to Wyndham Lewis, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker and Bret Easton Ellis, has no obligation to behave in any way at all, but more things go into a literature course than a sense of quality or intensity of experience. Literature courses have social responsibilities, and while it seems to me mistaken — and insulting to students — to select only texts that reflect progressive values, a text on a literature course *is*, inevitably, a different object from a book read for fun, fashion or diversion. Hughes' arguments against the academic critique of the canon show little sense of literature as a subject which is taught, and so never really engage with the *pedagogic* (as distinct from therapeutic) aspect of the problem.

When Hughes attempts to outline why a text might or might not count as literature, he is singularly unconvincing:

> The sense of quality, of style, of measure is not an imposition bearing on literature from the domain of class, race or gender. It lives independently of group stereotypes. Every writer carries in his or her mind an invisible tribunal of dead writers, whose appointment is an imaginative act and not merely a browbeaten response to some notion of authority. This tribunal sits in judgement on our work. We intuit our standards from it. From its unenforceable verdict, there is no appeal. ... If the tribunal weren't there, every first draft would be a final manuscript. You can't fool Mother Culture. [111]

Thank you Father Leavis. Really, this is no more than warmed-over T.S. Eliot, with the Tradition drawn briefly down from the heaven where Eliot used to keep it and converted into a subjective principle. By the end of the passage it has been re-elevated as a Grand Transcendent Force, "Mother Culture". Of course aesthetic senses differ from the demands of ideology — the politically sound book is not always, indeed not often, the interesting one — but that is very different from claiming that a sense of quality exists *independent* of the pressures of history, or of cultural relativities. The claim that "the arts confront the sensitive citizen with the difference between good artists, mediocre ones and absolute duffers" — if they don't, it presumably shows that you aren't sensitive enough — is plainly insufficient. Ask Van Gogh about sensitive citizens.

In fact, Hughes' comments on the canon may have more value in Australia than in America. Hughes shows quite clearly that "the Canon" in Australia, insofar as one can speak of such a thing at all, differs from the American phenomenon. The modern American "Canon of Western Literature" has three sources: a thoroughly ideological tradition of courses in "Western Civilisation" which began during World War I to show the doughboys what they were fighting for, and later were made part of the freshman year; a commercial offshoot of such courses, those morocco-bound sets of "Great Books of the Western World" that are advertised in every American publication with pretensions to literacy, and which give "the canon" a material being almost as fixed and *distingué* as the books of the Bible; and thirdly, a nation where in 1991 60% of the population did not buy a single book. Australian education has not used "Western Civilisation" as a founding principle, readers buy paperbacks rather than posh volumes, and people read. Thus, where American educators have the Canon, Australians teach a syllabus, a much more secular, less fixed, less peremptory set of texts, which is designed to be supplemented in the course of a reading life. Australian quarrels with "the Canon", Hughes implicitly suggests, tend to tilt at images of windmills which are not to be found in antipodean fields.

Hughes closes his discussion of multiculturalism with a particularly unhappy account of a document which, he assures us, is "altering the curricula of school systems all over the country." *The Portland African-American Baseline Essays* are so obscure that Hughes thanks his supplier in the acknowledgments; they exist only in Xerox form, and their arguments seem too thin to last long. They claim primacy for African culture over European by arguing that European culture derives from Egypt and is therefore fundamentally African, where in fact the theory of Egyptian derivation was destroyed by carbon-dating twenty years ago and is now seen to reflect the imperialist assumptions of late C19th archaeologists. The Portland Baseline Essays are straw targets. By elevating them beyond their significance to represent "Afro-American separatism" Hughes stoops to the tactics of a

P.J. O'Rourke, and silently returns Whitey to his place at the centre, passing judgement via caricaturish representatives on the legitimacy of cultures.

In the third lecture, on government and the arts, he is on home turf, where the sensible middle is his for the taking. On the left are photographers Andres Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* submerges a cheap plastic crucifix in yellow liquid, and the late Robert Mapplethorpe. On the right are the congressmen who pursued the money trail attaching to (unfunded) exhibitions of these artists' work so far as to threaten "guilty" galleries with the withdrawal of funding for *other* shows. Senator Jesse Helms reacted to Mapplethorpe's 1988-90 retrospective by proposing that no government funds should be given by the National Endowment for the Arts to "promote, disseminate or produce ... material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion" (!), or "material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin." And so Hughes' circle is complete. Like the end of *Animal Farm*, you can't tell the farmers from the piggies any more. The Helms amendment is indistinguishable from the prohibitions on abusive language on politically correct campuses; both share the same lack of regard for liberal democratic freedoms, for the ordinary animals outside the farmhouse window.

Then there is the story of an exhibition at the National Museum of American Art which tried to deconstruct the myth of the west but apparently overdid the ideology on the wall-labels, and the coterie who wanted to close the show for suggesting that John Wayne wasn't true to life. The museum became the victim when it was told to shut its mouth or lose its funding, but the next month the same museum banned a 1960s work by Sol LeWitt which included serial enlargements of a full-frontal photo of a naked woman. Censorship, it seems, is the common friend; only the cause changes.

This is when Hughes asks "Am I alone in finding something rather narrow-minded and stultifying about this?" Of course he's not, and he says as much, but the question is designed to reinforce his authority in preparation for a move into more dubious territory. He claims that political pressure from the left and the right has driven the museums to try to "get the embattled NEA off the hook of making any discriminations at all" by filling their shows with "Hmong needlework, coastal sea-grass basketry, south-east Alaska native dance, American Indian basketry and woodcraft, Pacific Island canoe-building, and Appalachian banjo-playing." [198] Hughes is scathing about this stuff: he calls it "pious hobbyism", "affirmative, prolix kitsch" which does "little that might, in aesthetic terms, challenge, refine, criticise or in any way extend the thinking of the status quo." Not that Hughes was especially impressed when Serrano or Mapplethorpe challenged the status quo, and the contempt drips as he describes

> a work by Jessica Diamond consisting of an equals sign cancelled out with a cross, underneath which was lettered in a feeble script, 'Totally Unequal'.

> Anyone who thinks that this plaintive diagram contributes anything fresh to one's grasp of privilege in America, merely by virtue of getting some wall-space in a museum, is dreaming. [186]

I concur, but I wonder what, in the New York post-avant garde art scene, might "challenge, refine, criticise or in any way extend the thinking of the status quo". After all this, Hughes cannot be calling for politically aggressive art. If not, what is "the status quo"? If "avant-garde" is, as Hughes notes, a nonword in America now, this is because there is no status quo for an avant-gardist to offend (except for the call to challenge the status quo). Hughes discounts multiculturalist art against an ideal that is, by his own account, no longer possible.

Hughes' case against the official embrace of multicultural art is too blunt for anybody's good. He wants art which takes on the tradition in the way that he thinks of his writing as fronting a tribunal — but when artworks challenge *his own* predilections, he dismisses them. He wants art which extends the debates Western culture has conducted with itself for centuries, which seems reasonable, but there is no need to demean "Hmong needlework" or "Pacific Island canoe building" to get it. Better to explore how placing such objects in galleries or museums falsifies them. No-one makes — or did make, when canoemakers were boatbuilders and not artists — a canoe to hang on a wall. Canoes float; baskets carry things: they obviously embody art of a sort, but to become Western-style art objects they must surrender much of their identity. Such art is only laid open to charges of "hobbyism" when it is made with galleries or museums in mind, as a kind of second-order object of anthropology. The problem with this kind of multiculturalism is not that it is too multicultural, as Hughes implies, but that it is not multicultural enough.

Nor, indeed, is Hughes' conclusion. To defend the merit of merit, he describes his reverence for Japanese woodworkers:

> And when I see the level of woodworking in a Japanese structure like the great temple of Horyu-ji, the precision of the complex joints, the understanding of *hinoki* cypress as a live substance, I know that I couldn't do anything like that if I had my whole life to live over. People who can do such things are an elite; they have earned the right to be. Does this fill me, the wood-butcher whose joints meet at 89 or 91 degrees, with resentment? Absolutely not. Reverence and pleasure, more like. [202]

As so often in this book, the fluency of the writing threatens to camouflage the holes in the argument. To revere such skill is well and good — but this experience is not comparable to that of a viewer of postmodern Western art. What makes Japanese temple art, or Gothic cathedrals, or Elizabethan sonnets so *perfect* is the support of an authoritative aesthetic tradition, and that is precisely what is lacking in the postmodern West. Even Hughes himself demands art which "refines, criticises or extends the thinking of the status quo", not art which accepts a place inside a set of conventions. By refusing the

difference between Japanese classicism and Western modernisms — by insisting, to the contrary, that "*mutatis mutandis*, it's the same in writing and in the visual arts", Hughes condemns himself to end on a note of profound speciousness:

> Likewise, museum people serve not only the public but the artist, *whether that artist's work is in the collection or not*, by a scrupulous adherence to high artistic and intellectual standards. ... Only if it resists both can the museum continue with its task of helping us discover a great but always partially lost civilisation: our own. [203]

It is not surprising that the commonsensical notion of "high artistic standards" should be invoked so often in a book which provides no contemporary examples of them. In this kind of rhetoric, the absent ideal chastises the merely actual, which must suffer by comparison. In Hughes' case, this gesture masks an ultimately counterproductive rigidity in the face of artistic and intellectual standards other than those which are compatible with the kind he was trained into. Perhaps that Jesuit education was more limiting than he thought.

What I find most frustrating about *Culture of Complaint* is not Hughes' conservatism — he has every right to that, even if his arguments are shifty at times — but the fact that his observations never lead to hard thinking. Indeed, he comes to bury systems of thought, not to use them: Marxism "is over"; Derrideans and Lyotardians are living fossils. In their place is chaos, absurdity and one sensible man's memory of "high artistic and intellectual standards", the things that "a sensitive person" can see "after a while" (as if the idea of "the sensitive person", the aristocrat of the senses, were not as imbued with ideology as courses in "Western Civ.").

It seems to me that the chaos Hughes describes is caused as much by his refusal to organise these matters as it is by the situation before him. Here we need to return to the academy, and to the context of French-derived theories of language and culture. Before the fall of the Berlin wall, when left-wing theory in America was the preserve of Ivy League academics, Marxism lost the leftist initiative to structuralism and its successors, particularly to Michel Foucault's ideas that societies are controlled through the ordering of discourse. For Foucault, knowledge is not something "true" that is "discovered", but a product which is made into truth through the operations of institutional power. His work, and that of others like him, affirms the cultural relativity of systems of knowledge and thus suggests that quite different, no less legitimate, systems of knowledge can be produced by other cultural formations. One of Foucault's best-known American advocates is Edward Said, a writer Hughes pauses to admire in the course of his book. The idea that adjustments to discourse can change a culture is fundamental to the PC movement; the idea that Western culture no longer has a right to central authority is a corollary of a sense of the relativity of culture and knowledge, and this implicitly invites feminist, gay and multiculturalist challenges to the *doxa*; and the critique of transcendent theories of aesthetics leaves all modes of apprehension of art riddled with

ideology and power. The graduates who studied Foucault (and Derrida, Barthes and Lyotard) in the seventies and eighties are now in positions of influence; their ideas are filtering through the system, often from Clinton consultancies.

A lengthier and less dismissive study of the impact of poststructuralist ideas in America could thus have drawn together the disparate scenario Hughes describes, to represent it as a broadly coherent series of responses to complex but legitimate questions of the moment. Vexed and flawed responses, no doubt, as most human efforts are, but defensible and explicable nevertheless. By painting American humanities departments as "a cross between a scandal and a sleeping pill", and dismissing the ideas they work with as fossils of the recent past, Hughes loses sight of these connections. To say as much is not to discount the importance of *Culture of Complaint*, especially its explication of American Puritanism today, but it is to regret that what might have been, in other hands, a truly constructive critique is, finally, yet another complaint.

"Other Dreams"

Mary Mackenzie

Patricia Pengilley. *Midnight Voices.* UQP, Brisbane, 1992. ISBN 07 022 23689

Fear is the otherness that invades our dreams and immobilises lives. The Anglo-Indians in Patricia Pengilley's "family anthology", caught between cultures in a no-man's land of conflicting values and beliefs, are stranded and excluded by the fear bred of otherness. The oral tradition has been used as a tactical strategy in the decolonising process, and women writers have played a significant role in the adoption of traditional forms to radically revise accepted literary norms. They may, for instance, substitute oral testimony for the modern short story. The family testimonials in *Midnight Voices* range from the days of the British Raj and the White Australia Policy to the post-colonial era and contemporary Australia.

Central to this collection is Alice's tale, "A Riddle and a Scorpion's Sting." When an Indian is stung by a scorpion, the opposing forces of Aunt Tosie, representing British tradition, and a Holy Man of India who stands for the local culture, wage psychological warfare over the right to treat the victim: "Aunt Tosie planted herself inside the circle with him. If this was the site for heathenish practices she was going to anchor herself to the earth, challenging anyone to move her. Holy Man didn't even try; still chuckling, he got her a chair." This metaphoric model of the tug-of-war for the Indian soul in colonial India is further emphasised in a speech made by another character to the watching child, Alice: "Now you see two sorcerers, without bows and arrows, fighting for the soul of a humble cook. Who shall win child? We shall see ..."