

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 Pengilly. *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 Pengilly'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 ..."

Alice is a fearful child in what seems to her a mysterious and alien land. The shameful fact of her Indian heritage is sublimated as much as possible to the dominant British culture during an era when "it was pretty well accepted that families like ours inherited the worst of two races. We were supposed to be slightly subhuman, pariahs, outcasts ..." Yet it is from the Indian culture that Alice learns to confront fear and to decipher the riddle of existence. In accepting fear she rejects its power to immobilise and can fully embrace the "life-force."

*Midnight Voices* speaks of a dislocated people and the traumatising of a culture; it is also about courage and the cross-cultural fears that can appropriate our lives. The influence of those old colonials, Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling, is implicit in the text, but "The Mysterious Letter-writer" which opens the anthology comes perilously close to Maugham in both style and content. Pengilley does acknowledge Maugham at the end of the tale and later a character questions why it was chosen, which suggests that the author may have experienced the same misgivings. This is the only jarring note in an otherwise sensitive and moving account of people finding a way to live in a world of conflicting values.

## Paul Clark

Matthew Condon. *Usher*. UQP, Brisbane, 1991. ISBN 070 2224219 PBK

*Usher*, the latest book by the young Australian novelist Matthew Condon, ostensibly deals with a son's search for the identity of his father, drowned at the story's beginning. Around this well-worn narrative thread, however, the author has woven the much larger concern of the nature of cultural and national identities, and the illusory and fraudulent manner in which these identities are (indeed, can only ever be) projected.

Samuel Downs is furtively peepholing his neighbour as she takes a bath when he hears that his father, T. Nelson Downs, is missing, suspected drowned. All that remain of the father are the cap he wore as usher in the Universe-Cine-By-The-Sea, a black torch, and a handful of shredded matinee tickets lying on the beach. The son reacts to the tragedy by embarking on a world tour, during the course of which he recounts all that he knows of his father's story, keeping him alive in notes, jottings and anecdotes through which he can repress the death of a father he barely knew. In the course of this story we learn of T. Nelson's colourful life as a salesman, his doomed attempt to set up as a dealer in everyday objects dressed up as valuable antiques, his obsession with the cinema, and his triumph and eventual betrayal as a commercial botanist in the employ of the Government.

What binds the apparently arbitrary and disjointed structure of the book is the theme of pretence. In its many forms, it colours virtually every page. Pretence is at the root of T. Nelson's love of the cinema — one of the novel's governing metaphors. Samuel remembers his father's words: