

Eve Stafford

## BEAT ABOUT THE BUSH

*From Bush to Beach: An Anthology of New Queensland Writing.* QAC Press, 1995. ISBN 1 86369 202 9

The geographic references in the title promise an overview of the territory of regional writing, and how the natural world encroaches on the mindscape of people who live scattered across the vast expanse of Queensland.

Urban editors commonly misunderstand the prominent role of climate and landscape in stories from less populous places. *Where are the characters*, they ask? To bush Queenslanders, who almost live outdoors, or on wide exposed verandahs, with fauna living in their ceilings, and flora leaning in open windows, it's obvious that the environment asserts itself as a character, whether minor or major, shaping lives and behaviour.

In *From Bush to Beach*, some stories are almost depopulated as the character of the bush and its creatures take centre stage. These elements can take on mythological proportions as if, given a long enough epoch of white settlement out there, some folklore akin to Aboriginal landscape myths would emerge. With few successive generations to date, it merely borders on magic realism. The unselfconscious sincerity of much of the writing, along with isolation and distance, would

preclude this as literary fad, so one must assume it arises spontaneously from the experience of remote living.

Are these phantasmagorical stories akin to the fertile imagination of the child who, lacking playmates, invents characters? Does an adult version of the same fantasy life accommodate chronic cabin fever (short of its acute fulminating episodes) due to prolonged abandonment at too remote a posting?

All this sounds very grand, as if the dramas here are big ones, but this is very often pricked by the banalities of country living, the super-imposed bubble of middle class values surrounding all the human interaction. The dialogue is laconic and down-to-earth, as if there is no language to match this *otherness*, only flat, reductionist tones from the narrow conformity of everyday speech.

Could the social fragility of small communities stifle its inhabitants? The telling is so often restrained, particularly for the older generation, who write nostalgic war reminiscences like *Gallipoli Children*. Could it be that in these small circles, some slip against conformity and numbing boredom, however slight, would threaten a finely balanced peck order? Does shunning prevent certain social disintegration? How else to explain the repressed nature of living and speaking in Joan McDonald's *For Something To Do*, a small town narrative of stifling social censure following an affair. In the recent

Meryl Streep/Clint Eastwood rural film *Bridges of Madison County*, a whole town mobilises to similarly ostracise a woman for life.

There are some welcome exceptions. Christine Anderson's *Burnt Out* on the aftermath of a bushfire, rich in language and metaphor, suggests a writer with more to offer between the personal and the landscape. Anna-Louise Raccanello with *Between Green Walls* solves the problem of nothing much to write about in crushing domesticity with an economical tale covering rape and mental illness.

The *Beach* side of the title is in short supply. No chance to find out if the lush coastal strip held its reputation for hedonism, to contrast the harsh stoicism of the outback?

A regional sense of place alone is not enough to counterbalance the mainly urban definitions of Australian culture. Nor will it act as a bulwark to the tidal wave of UK and US publishing that swamps this country. Unfortunately, these offerings confirm rather than contradict stereotypes about regional writing being akin to community writing. Not because they are down-home and folksy, which they are, but because many are underdeveloped and incidental, even snippets.

The clue is the source. A true survey of undiscovered writers from the far flung regions will require a broader process than all works coming from the Open College of the Arts (OCA) "Starting to Write" course, which QAC

runs. It reeks of writing exercises when you get 2 cat poems, 2 cow poems, a finch, a dog, and other family pets. These are a long way from a Diane Fahey, who transforms critters by her poetic glimpse.

Also, the book lacks notes on contributors. Why do showcases of regional writers or artists commonly omit where they reside, while urban ones live in named cities? Identity is thus massed together as just "regional," disengaging the audience by defining the creators as an amorphous "other."

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*Greg Manning*

## WHAT BABY BOOMERS DO IN THEIR BEDROOMS

Patrick Buckridge, Pamela Murray, Jock Macleod. *Reading Professional Identities: The Boomers and Their Books*. Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, 1995. ISBN 0 86857 596 8. Available from the publisher, Griffith University, Qld 4111.

Literary academics talk endlessly about what to read and how to read it, but "out there," beyond the canons of academic courses, what do "ordinary passionate readers"