

shaded her size 22 to size 18 in the late  
afternoon light.  
She smoothed the soft fabric over  
her bust and  
pulled in what she could to a smooth  
alpine slope.

*The Fat Lady* explores—at her own pace—the big issues; death, love and the absence of God. Mrs Arthur P.'s throaty laugh will insinuate itself into your imagination, just as gracefully as she does into the arms of—ah, but that would be telling. And like these five extremely talented poets, a critic should know what value there is in space, and silence.

*Vivien Maloney*

## DON'S BEST?

Anderson, Don (ed). *Contemporary Classics: The Best Australian Short Fiction 1965-1995*. Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1996. 678 pp RRP \$19.95 ISBN 0 09 183075 3.

Couldn't get the washing dry with everyone screaming for clean clothes, the puppy had chewed my new shoes, the biggest tree in the back garden fell over and hit the roof, the swimming pool pump broke down, the downstairs freezer was accidentally turned off

and I didn't know about it for four days. So it was with an audible sigh of relief that I settled down to read Don Anderson's recent anthology of Australian short fiction, *Contemporary Classics*. Not all at one sitting, of course. Even my highest levels of relief could not prepare me for 670 pages of short stories.

I began with the introduction and enjoyed a silent chuckle as Anderson explained the genesis of his anthology. As he tells it, he asked a group of "literate" first year students at the beginning of a tutorial in 1994 if they had read Helen Garner's short story "Two Friends." The question was met with silence. So he made the next one more general, asking if anyone had heard of Helen Garner. Again silence. In the next tutorial the same questions met the same silences.

Being myself halfway through a thesis on contemporary Australian women's short fiction, the response to Anderson's questions did not surprise me. What did surprise me, however, was that Anderson took unfamiliarity with Garner to mean that his students, most of whom were straight out of high school, had not experienced the joy of reading short fiction *per se*. Anderson's assumptions about the responses to his questions *may* have been accurate—or perhaps the students didn't answer in fear of his next question. Maybe they thought they'd turned up at the wrong class. But he might have unearthed a very different

result if he had asked a slightly different question: had they read or heard of Patrick White, Frank Moorhouse, Murray Bail, Peter Carey? Flacco (for Triple J listeners)? Or, perhaps, the much less contemporary Henry Lawson? Anderson puts his students' lack of experience of short fiction down, in part, to the "narrow focus" of the HSC curriculum, and he's probably right. But if this is the case he seems to have missed the most important point his questions highlight: that those who formulate that curriculum and make the decisions about what and whom students will read have come through a system that has, over the years, and with its own narrow focus, either diminished the importance of women's writing or ignored it completely. Luckily for Anderson, publishing houses have recently begun to promote women's fiction. With a ratio of 24 women writers to 22 men, his anthology displays a very welcome shift in gender ratios, and is in marked contrast to earlier anthologies.

Of course, selecting contemporary short fictions to come up with a "document of achievement, a substantial body of national work" (x) is a daunting task, impossible without guidelines. And while he admits to breaking his own rules, one of Anderson's guidelines is that the writer should be established by reputation as a short-story writer and have published at least one volume of short fiction. This has somewhat confined Anderson's selection, and means that the

anthology (and therefore the reader) misses out on one-off gems.

Titles, as any short fiction addict knows, are significant. They catch your eye and encourage you to read on. Anderson's title suggests the time frame and, perhaps, the enduring quality of the short fiction he has chosen, although I have trouble with the term "classic" applied to a piece like Flacco's "A Word in the Hand." I also have trouble with any anthology (short fiction or not) that, with a selection of 47 items, purports to be the 'best' Australia has to offer, particularly over a period of thirty years. Certainly this description may have been a publisher's decision (like the front cover, which I found repugnant), but it is unnecessary. The stories here are well written, interesting and worth reading; they may indeed be some of our best. But it seems detrimental to Australian short fiction in general to suggest that over such a long period this group is "it," that these writers, as the back cover blurb suggests, are our "finest." Too many of the writers whose collections are currently on my bookshelf and who could be readily categorized as "established" are excluded by such a claim.

I guess it's easy to sit back and pick holes in someone else's subjective choices. In some instances Anderson's choices would not be mine. It's also impossible in a review of this kind to do justice to so much short fiction. No theme binds the stories; they show a diversity that has, I think, always

been evident in Australian short fiction and this too makes it difficult to choose favourites. So, since my interest is in women's short fiction and since this anthology was prompted because Don Anderson's students had apparently not read Garner, let me begin with a woman writer.

Carmel Bird's "The Woodpecker Toy Fact" shows that, like her narrator, Bird knows how to assemble "facts in a special way." She can weave a "golden thread" and entwine her reader in her own net of toy facts. With a nostalgic touch, Bird's narrator, the child of a "magger" (you'll have to read the story to find out what a magger is) allows the reader a glimpse of childhood in the 1940s. A child of the '50s myself, I can remember my mother, her hair in curlers and turban scarf, enjoying what Bird describes as "a continuous ribbon of talk" over the neighbour's fence, and can recall being the "child listener." When I walked into the room my mother, grandmother or aunt, ribbon flowing, would mumble "ears" and the topic of conversation would subtly change. It was some time before I realised that the word referred to me. Occasionally my entry went unnoticed and I heard the kind of convoluted conversations that Bird's narrator describes, as they moved continuously and effortlessly from one subject to another, seeming to encompass everyone and everything.

Another version of this sort of "adult talk" appears in Anna Couani's story, "Xmas in the Bush." Rather than quote actual conversation, Couani describes the subject matter as it moves the discussion, pyramid-like, from the local to the world stage:

The father talks about snags in the river. They all discuss the difference between snags as in water hazards and snags as in sausages. Sausage dogs. Smoke. Children who've drowned ... Bottle tops. The corrosive qualities of Coca-Cola. Big Business. Monopolies. Bigger and bigger monopolies. Free enterprise. Russia. The idea of women working in men's jobs. Suez. American election campaigns...

As discussion ends, the father turns down the "tilly lamp" and as a reader I felt the stillness, the silence, of the Australian bush. Couani's story is brief and looks simple (as though we all could write one) but it is cleverly and thoughtfully written.

Just as well written is Peter Carey's "American Dreams," a story which shows Carey to be as visually oriented in his short fiction as he is in his novels, as if he writes with film rights in mind. I'm not sure whether Australians still believe uncritically in "American Dream": perhaps we are comfortable enough about ourselves to have Australian ones now. But Carey's 1974 story still has something to say about how disappointing and deceptive these dreams can be, how we can get so

caught up in Dreams of the "big city, of wealth, of modern houses, of big motor cars" that we fail to see the value of what we have.

As an enthusiastic writer of letters I also enjoyed "New York, New York" by Rosemary Creswell and Kerry Goldsworthy's "A Patron of the Arts." They show the diverse potential of this form. It made me wonder whether there were enough epistolary stories to make an anthology, and whether men use letter writing as much as women. "New York, New York" is a letter from Creswell's *Colouring In*, in which all the stories are linked in some way by continuing characters: I remain unconvinced that it reads as well in isolation. Goldsworthy's "A Patron of the Arts," by contrast, consists of a number of letters. It reads like a one-sided conversation as the convenor of a literary conference attempts to extract payment for expenses from a guest speaker.

Of the other stories, Olga Masters' ironically titled "The Good Marriage" deserves a mention, as do David Malouf's "Southern Skies", John Tranter's "Gloria," Ania Walwicz's "stories my mother told me" and "dad," Barry Hill's "Getting to the Pig" (where the patronising white male thoroughly deserves his dengue fever), Richard Lunn's "The Duel Catalogue" and Candida Baker's "The Powerful Owl." The last named, a story about infidelity, loss and psychic connections, ends with a great description of the writing

process: as Owl "she must eat everything, regurgitating the pellets of her memories, endlessly."

Despite its size and its claims, this anthology is not a main meal. It is more a sampler at a food fair: it should whet the appetite, excite the taste buds, and encourage further reading and awareness of the richness of Australian short fiction.

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