

inland route to the heart). The seemingly logical structure of the "bone boxes" is belied by their whimsical contents.

*rear vision* is a vista conceived by two artists—Shane Rowlands who is a poet as well as a writer-performer, and Susi Blackwell who is a visual artist and graphic designer. This project had an integrated approach from its inception. The challenge Rowlands and Blackwell set themselves was to explore "the writerly dimensions of a designer's role .... & the design aesthetics which shape a writer's process." In this sense, "rear vision" is a stunning success. It embodies the artistic intent of a designer who cares about the content of the work, and illustrates the writer's desire to put forward a vision of her poetry that is not restricted by formal typographic structures. The sense of complete collaboration comes through—the word pictures, photographic images/questions and text structures unfold a unique concept that shapes a work that is not just "a book of poems" but a "poet's vision." It is a unique and inspiring artistic collaboration. *rear vision* will be appreciated by artists and writers alike for its innovative design and conceptual content.

*rear vision* is a rare vision indeed.

David McVeigh

## ETHNIC ANGST

*Sparring with Shadows*, Archimede Fusillo. ISBN 014 038 656 4. Penguin Paperback \$12.95

A few years ago, when the hit stage production *Wogs out of Work* played to theatres here in coastal North Queensland, where Italian descendants are more than a little thick on the ground, I remember squirming every time I saw the TV commercial, featuring a matronly but animated lady with a characteristic accent trilling "vera good—vera narce" at the camera. It could have been an exchange direct from Archimede Fusillo's new young adult novel, *Sparring with Shadows*. As in the stage show, the racial taunt, "wog," is defused through its appropriation by young Italian Australians and by immersion in a colourful teenage vernacular.

Fusillo introduces David Martinesi, "a first-generation Italian Australian growing up in an inner-city suburb" engaged in an adolescent stunt—climbing the huge silos that overshadow his home, as a dare from Nathan Welsh, "the school tough kid." Language, like the silos, dominates the novel, and constitutes one of the "shadows" that Martinesi's Italian heritage throws over his life. Except for his sister, Rose, and himself, his entire family is marked with the Italian immigrant's

trademark accent, which liberally and phonetically punctuates the text. The opening scene juxtaposes the brooding image of the silos with the aggressive taunt-language of the truly Australian adolescent male: "You always get a hard-on when you're shit scared?" Martinesi's reply in kind: "I'm not shit scared," marks him as a local, one of the herd, and his conquest of the silo positions him, early in the narrative, as a survivor. But he lives with his traditional, patriarchal Italian family.

The Martinesis are loving, passionate, fondly paranoid in matters of the family and, as David discovers, often hypocritical. To his burgeoning awareness, they and everyone around him represent an impossible mess of conflicting attitudes and morals. However, Virgil-like, Fusillo steers his character through a kind of teenage moral Purgatory in which the brave and good-at-heart rise from the foetid suburbia of the southern states and depart for sunny Queensland, while the ne'er-do-wells rather fittingly incinerate themselves at the scene of their crime. David's curious adoptive friend, Nathan, a rough kid from a violent home, reveals a preternaturally mature sense of family and responsibility as he "selects" David by a devious system of moral trials, as protector and mentor for his intellectually challenged half-brother, Ralph. As rough and lawless as he first appears, Nathan

teaches David the value of moral integrity. This is in stark contrast to Nathan's parallel character, the dissipated Mike Andrews, whom the Martinesis meet whilst on an unaccustomed holiday.

David finds that his adventures with Nathan engender both a new self-confidence and a fresh point of reference from which he is able to come to terms with, not only the Martinesis' neapolitan machinations, but also his family's place in Australian society. The end of the narrative leaves him better equipped to deal with, amongst other things, his father's double standard on drinking and gambling, and his favourite "Zia Paul's"—turgid private life. He also finds a new respect for the rather stolid Martinesi women.

Not surprisingly, in a novel whose subject is cultural difference and adolescence, the prose consists mainly of realistic back-street dialogue experienced through a mostly believable first-person narrator. But Fusillo's narrative does not always quite achieve an unambiguous separation between young narrator and mature author, or perhaps, young narrator and older narrator. Nathan Welsh's outburst at David after Ralph dies in the fire seems to conflate the pain and confusion of an hysterical child with the worldly-wise sneer of a much older mind:

"It's Ralph and he's dead, and we let it happen ... me and you and the old

man. You hear me, Martinesi, you stupid wog? Ralph's dead. Welcome to the other side."

Fusillo has written of *Sparring with Shadows* that "often it takes strong females to bolster the confidence in boys to break through their uncertainties." Fusillo's women, however, never really seem to engage the other characters in a meaningful way. Rather, they form a kind of seamless, maternal backdrop, in front of which the male characters puff and fight. David's "Nonna" and his mother variously dispense old-country female wisdom and tut-tut the men from the kitchen, while his little sister Rose provides him with the opportunity to discover his own cultural double standard, when she incenses him by announcing that she is "going out" with a Greek boy. Nathan's mother, though unseen, haunts the book as a kind of stoic, almost mythical figure, and we learn that even though Nathan's philandering and abusive father is also father to his arch-enemy, Ben, the two mothers, surprisingly, maintain a close, supportive relationship. Survival requires cooperation, and it is the women who provide the object lesson.

*Sparring with Shadows* reads with a simple, flowing style, certainly appropriate for the teenage reader, but at times requires at least a passing familiarity with the Italian language. Terms such as "Zia/Zio," "Nonna," and "aspetta qua," are

mostly decipherable through context, but while on the one hand, readers may be forgiven for thinking that the book is targeted at an inner-city Melbourne readership, on the other hand, we should be mindful that it is far from fashionable to critique say, Salman Rushdie in the same sense. Fusillo, in company with Australian writers such as Sally Morgan, writes from his own legitimate cultural position, and, refreshingly, brings a taste of the post-colonial debate into the young adult genre.