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NURTURING THE AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORY

Laurie Clancy, *The Wife Specialist.* Melbourne, Hyland House, 1979. Cloth $9.95. 169 pp.

John Emery, *Summer Ends Now.* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth $8.95, Paper $4.95. 164 pp.

James McQueen, *The Electric Beach.* Wynyard: Robin Books, 1978. Cloth $6.50, Paper $4.50. 133 pp.

Michael Wilding (ed.), *The Tabloid Story Pocket Book.* Glebe: Wild & Woolley, 1978. Paper $3.95. 320 pp.

The narrator in one of James McQueen's stories, "Waiting for Rain," is himself writing a story, pondering as he does so on his "experimental" style: "I wonder how *Tabloid Story* would regard this format? Perhaps they would consider it grossly eccentric, flagrantly contrived?" *Tabloid Story*'s editors are prepared to take the risk of publishing the eccentric and the contrived, and their editorial policy encourages experiment: "no more formula bush tales; no more restrictions to the beginning, middle and end story, no more preconceptions about a well rounded tale." This policy, and the unorthodox distribution method have given the short story renewed prominence. Laurie Clancy, John Emery and James McQueen are only three "Tabloid" writers whose collections have appeared recently. Two others who are represented in the *Pocket Book* – Peter Carey and Murray Bail – have now established reputations to match those of Michael Wilding and Frank Moorhouse.

Laurie Clancy's stories are mainly set in Carlton and are peopled with academics, writers and eccentrics. Against the firmly fixed background of Drummond, Rathdowne and Lygon Streets, the Pram Factory, Melbourne University and the nearby pubs, marriages fall apart, and little else endures. The "wife specialist" of the title story finds that his is "a lonely identity" since not many men are able to be friends with the partner in their wives' "creative adultery." In "Monologue, with Interrup-

tions" Smithy ends her catalogue of men she has "fucked with" by asking her auditor "But where have they all gone, Sam, where have they all gone?"

Smithy is typical of Clancy's women characters who indulge their new-found sexual freedom and assume control of relationships. This control gives point to the witty story "A Question of Principle." Dani, "Carlton's most popular girl" does not extend the "ecumenical spirit" of her sexuality to Jamieson and when he takes advantage of her drunkeness she exacts a public revenge. Lisa, in "Civilized People" plays a cruel New Year Party joke at the expense of her former husband. By contrast with these sexually emancipated women, many of Clancy's male characters lack confidence and view women with suspicion. Forrester, in "Forrester's First" thinks of the typists in his office as "battery hens" and of women generally as "predators."

Sam Green appears in a number of stories either as character or narrator, and his presence loosely links the Carlton stories. Cumulatively the reader is acquainted with Green as schoolboy and adult, and with various of his friends, but his characterization never achieves any depth. Clancy's characterization relies upon the recognition of types seen against the authentic detail of the Carlton background.

Two stories in this collection rise above those in the "Carlton" category. They are "Spinning Jenny," a love story where Clancy's control of point of view is such that the narrator (the lover who lost out to an older but less worthy man) remains sympathetic almost in spite of himself; and the pathos of Jenny's suicide is not allowed to decline into sentimentality.

The outstanding story of the collection, "The Goose Girl" not surprisingly won the Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers Short Story competition. Its subject is sexual jealousy, and all the elements of the tightly controlled story suggest the working of suspicion on possessive love, the transformation of the "good girl, smiling/skirts muddied" to "the loose girl, laughing/skirts raised" in the frenzied mind of the husband who finally cuts his wife's throat, like the throat of the bird they had bought for dinner.

In Laurie Clancy's stories, the Carlton setting represents the common values and experiences of his characters, and lends a sense of continuity to the stories. However pointless and unhappy his characters' lives may seem to be, the carefully authenticated background reflects at least the economic security of their existence and the reassurance of belonging to a closely knit community. Many of the stories in John Emery's collection, *Summer Ends Now* are concerned with the absence of such certainties. The subjects of his stories are Aborigines, itinerant workers, the aged, people for whom survival is an end in itself. While these stories could be classified as social realism, Emery's focus is always on the dignity of the individual, and on the strength drawn from the bonds of love and affection. These people are set apart from society, but criticism of that society is implicit in the stories. The focus shifts to society and away from realism in futuristic parables such as "Tourists" and "The Day the Young Men Came," while in the final story "In the End" a portrait of a close knit family gives point and poignancy to a scenario depicting a probable outcome of foreign and domestic policies which deny basic rights to Aborigines and Asians.

The use of a child as narrator promotes the sense of uncertainty and impotence which is created in two stories, "Caravan Park" and "Country Music." A family of three, living in a caravan, need money to repair their car if they are to be able to move on in search of work. The father's labouring job at a cement works comes to an abrupt end. Because the story is told from the child's point of view, the fragility of the father's self esteem is registered mainly on an emotional level. Father and son go fishing together, and the father relaxes, but tension returns with the mother's news that their "good omen" cat is dead. The child feels the effects of those mercurial changes in temperament and instinctively understands the depths of despair they reflect.

> That night I heard them in bed again, and his voice made me clench my fists against the pillow, it was so bleak, whispering, "I can't. Please, I can't. I'm broken." And she said nothing, but I heard the bedclothes rustling and his breath laboring and I looked out into the night that was now black and cold and

the frost was falling around us and the van trembled as they moved.

It was like he was ill, that tremor, and I was ill too. For he had been the God in our world, and he had crumbled, and I was all alone, and mother was alone, and our van was so small in the immensity of the land, as small under the black sky, and then I heard mother's voice very low and very soft, like the sea breaking steadily against old and broken cliffs.

In "Country Music" the child-narrator's partial knowlege of the events he is witnessing similarly evokes an emotional response from the reader. The sentimental country ballad refrain used in "Country Music" provides a counterpoint to the voice of the pregnant woman who submits to the abortionist.

John Emery's stories are also concerned with personal relationships, with loyalty and dependence. "The First Day of Spring" shows how an unemployed Aborigine's sense of obligation to an alcoholic uncle jeopardises his own prospects of finding employment and affects his relationship with his white wife. "The Guest" explores a young woman's attraction to and desire for a woman friend. The title story in the collection, "Summer Ends Now" traces the growing attraction between a middle aged man and a young woman. The man is a migrant who left Germany before World War II and who has retired to a small fishing resort. For this man, retirement is also a time for self-realization. "It was when he finished building that he really took notice of the bay into which his life had finally fetched him." His neighbours are a young girl and her mother; the girl is a "problem" child who finds the man's apparently settled life appealing. The understanding they achieve grows to a sexual attraction, as the man watches unseen as the girl dances on the beach.

He watched, mesmerised. She stretched the other leg and slid her hands down her hips and shook her body as if cleansing it. He crouched further in the shadow. She reached up to the blackness of the sky with her hands and shook her head, so her hair danced too.

Finally the girl offers herself to him, hoping for cleansing "to make up for them. Just to get rid of the feeling they left" since she has been the victim of a sexual assault. The man resists her offer, at some cost. Throughout the story, the action of the tide,

"the bright silver hemline of the sea" provides an analogy with the developing relationship, and at the end the water sweeps away all trace of their footprints, and the sound of the sea, the wind and the shifting of sand signal the return of natural balance and order.

James McQueen's collection *The Electric Beach* exhibits a wide range of subjects and styles. The subtitle "short fictions" is rationalized in a prefatory note:

> By thinking in terms of *fictions* rather than *stories* I can start out without preconceived ideas of form. I can explore, expand my horizons a little. Each piece can find its own mood, pattern, tone of voice.

In two of the stories at least McQueen's belief that subject should dictate form results in a disjointed discontinuous narrative: in "To the River" the fragmented syntax and broken lines reflect the consciousness of the narrator, an old man who tries to break away from the humiliation of the nursing home he is confined in, seeking refuge in memories of the past and the prospect of his own end. "Christmas With a White Lady" uses similar devices to represent the erratic and incoherent thought of an alcoholic. This use of interior monologue directly exposes the disintegration of personality and the erosion of human dignity.

"The Fish Room" depicts a violent pack assault on a homosexual. Here McQueen uses both setting and point of view to evoke horror. The background of the fish room, with gutted fish and rotting flesh and stench is delineated before the subject of homosexuality is introduced. The narrator finds himself drawn into the group assault "I just feel an itching, a tingling, a terrible glow . . . and I know that *I* want to join in, to twist and punch and stamp . . . and oh Christ, I feel sick with it."

In "The Fish Room" setting is used to heighten the sordidness of physical brutality; in the title story "The Electric Beach" the landscape is used to create tension. The narrator is a man approaching middle age – a common persona in McQueen's fiction – whose success in material terms is not matched by any personal fulfilment. The beach is described as perfection "its curve is delicate, flawless. . . . The Sand is pure white . . . un-

marked, unmarred". The beach represents a perfection which is unattainable, and is surrounded by jagged landforms, and the sand which seems "electric." The story is a series of musings, reflections on a series of affairs and a marriage, which expose fear "I am afraid, afraid, in case her thoughts exclude me, are no longer mine;" possessiveness and intense sexual jealousy "I wish often that I could die . . . no transgressions." This sexual insecurity manifests itself in aggression "I will take her . . . impale her." The association of sexual consummation with violence and even death occurs in other stories – "Joke Without Laughter" is concerned with a middle aged bachelor's attraction to a pale sickly girl whose death represents a "loss of innocence;" while in "Holding Hands" a young woman exhumes the body of her lover, and sits holding the corpse's hand on her porch. This fiction recalls "A Rose for Emily" but McQueen does not leave much unsaid as Faulkner does. The final scene in "Holding Hands" accumulates detail which the imagination would readily have supplied.

The range of subject and style and the degree of accomplishment of these three writers – of whom Emery must be judged the best – reflects the reawakening of interest in the short story which *Tabloid Story* has fostered.