In *The Sky Between the Trees* Preston tells the story of the boyhood of Peter McLaren who grew up in turn-of-the-century Gippsland, to become Victorian State, then Australian and finally World Champion Axeman. It is a story of determination and courage, written in basic, simple language and narrated in the first person, almost as if the boy is recounting his own experiences. From the time that the boy feels the first thrill of swinging the axe and of watching the brawny axemen compete in local country sports contests, all the time learning his craft, he dreams that he will one day be world champion. His father's early encouragement turns to opposition after bush fire and crop failure threaten the McLaren family's precarious livelihood. Peter has to work like a man now and his woodchopping ambitions have to be set aside with other childish things. The family tragedy that could have been averted, had Peter been given his way, adds a terrible irony. But the dreams are eventually fulfilled. The family does win through sorrow to triumph and happiness. Peter's success as a champion becomes legendary and he travels far from his native Gippsland to compete in all the countries of the world.

**ANNA BOCK**

**WHO WANTS TO BE A GUARDIAN ANGEL?**


In his recently published novel *A Difficult Love* Manfred Jurgensen deals with the experiences of a German migrant living in Queensland. The socio-cultural theme is interwoven with a triangular love story in which the women represent partial aspects of both the new and the old country. The title has a double meaning: it refers to the women and the land. The female characters therefore are to a certain extent allegorical: they represent Australia and Germany, as well as themselves.

The double meaning determines the form of the novel. Over most of its length it contains reflections on people and venues which are linked together loosely, like a diary without dates. There is no clear distinction between time of action and narrative time, but the novel generally follows a synchron—horizontal line; the course of events evolves gradually through the reminiscences of the narrator. That principle is interrupted in the first half of the second part, where reports from outsiders
are used (e.g. a constable, a prostitute, relatives and friends). Instead of
traditional ways of creating suspense via ascent, climax and descent,
Jurgensen employs a spiral structure which leads to the crucial event,
Amalia's self-slaughter.

The narrator works as a lecturer in literature at the Queensland
University. He has come from a provincial town in Northern Germany,
first to Melbourne to study, then to Brisbane to teach.

The women in his life are also of non-Australian origin. Margret,
his first wife, apparently is Swiss and, after the divorce, returns to
Switzerland to work for the International Union for the Conservation of
Nature. Ushi, his second wife, is surely German. An intellectual with
social concerns, she becomes involved in the Brisbane political scene:
sober, self-controlled and determined. The third and strongest of the
female characters, Amalia, is the product of a Nazi "breeding camp" and
on top of that, cursed with a fascist stepfather who rapes her while she is
still a young girl. In her basic, animal vitality she reminds me of Nance
Lightfoot in Patrick White's *The Vivisector* (but big models throw big
shadows; Amalia could not live up to that.) In the confrontation of the
two characters Ushi and Amalia, the ancient opposition of the "good"
and the "bad" woman is re-enacted. It is the whore against the lady,
who, in the modern version, is not into charity but into APO (the
German version of out-of-parliament opposition) and social solidarity.
The central figure — notwithstanding the intention to create non-
patriarchal male literature¹ — is the narrator with a male Ego of truly
remarkable size. It is perhaps the only really implausible feature of the
novel that the women put up with him for any length of time. A vision
appears of a man with a birdcage made of "I"s over his head who then
complains that the world is full of bars. (In some chapters the word "I"
occurs on an average twenty times per page.)

The cage over the head especially affects the perception of the new
country, Australia.

Many modern migrants from Germany have left the country — as
the narrator did — in a rejection of too regimented interhuman relations
due to narrowness, population density and the Prussian heritage. They
seem to appreciate the relative freedom and space for movement over
here.

Not so in this case: The narrator feels imprisoned here too. He feels
actually threatened by the fascistic traits of Queensland politics and
more metaphorically, by the never-never, the Dead Heart of the barren
interior. He feels put out by the indifference of the native Australians
who in his view are all migrants: non-belongers with a "hidden guilt
feeling" because of their usurpation of the land and its Aboriginal
culture.
The problem with the narrator’s comments on Australia is by no means the critical approach. That rather is hoped for when someone looks at a place with new eyes. The problem is the narrowness of the view, the lack of thoroughness in observation, presentation and final conclusions. This can be shown for instance in the limited number of spots which make up the narrator’s Brisbane; his desk at Uni, his flat with Ushi and Amalia’s various ‘caves’. One could add the occasional gaze out of the window, and the Courier Mail. Short trips to the interior are mentioned but they hardly go beyond a touristy approach. A promising attempt is made with a visit to an early German settlement in the outback (the scene from which the title is drawn). But like many other interesting topics and fictive images (e.g. the blockade) it is dropped after half a page, and we are back to feuilleton generalities like the Big Australian Weekend or the narrator’s longing for Ushi. It cannot surprise when native Australians react to such kind comments from newcomers. They have the right to be paid better attention.

Jurgensen’s novel perhaps is simply over-ambitious. It wants to be involved and detached at the same time. It wants to capture a continent, it wants to be a love story, a critical comment, an intimate confession, and on top a modern novel (the obligatory ingredients of which are of course well-known to the author). It wants to combine synchronous with diachronous narrative structures. It wants to replace fictive characters with fragmented subject construction, without losing the hero appeal. Less would have been more.

It appears to me that the novel is at its best where it is least controlled by the intentions of the author, for example in the fringe stories about the Far East. Its handicap is its strength: the difficulty of writing in a foreign language. Though the sentence structure is cautious (mainly S-P-O-patterns, simple main clause/subclause chains), and the vocabulary occasionally is somewhat restrictive (e.g. the undifferentiated use of “absence”), the urge to express oneself in a second language creates an intensity which the text might not have gained otherwise. One has the impression that many of the topical iterations and repetitive phrases are due to a subconscious fear of not being well understood. As the hunter circles around the scrub until he finally seizes his prey, the narrator circles around in the text to hit a specific meaning.

Along with paranoia of the bird-caged Ego another strong emotional force thus comes into the text: an erotic wish for communication. From comments Jurgensen made about his novel one can assume that to solve the emotional tensions — that is, the paranoic feeling of being caged in by external and internal powers — is the actual interest of the novel. The answer he offers to this is the comfort the woman (in the end only the wife) can give to the man by — so to speak — rescuing him from
himself. The importance of the role which the women are granted in this basically moral recovery is probably at the core of Jürgensen's concept of non-partriarchal male literature. From a female point of view I fail to see much benefit in this. I do not want to go as far as quoting Wilhelm Busch seriously:

      Und was Natur und Zeit getan,
      das seht der Mensch als Bess'rung an.\textsuperscript{2}

One also does not need the experiences of a barmaid to be familiar with midlife repentance. It is quite a common feature and should not be over-rated. New male literature ought to be conceived as one of emancipation, not as another attempt to solve problems on other people's backs. Here I can only see old patterns revived. Who wants to be the guardian angel . . . .

\textbf{NOTES}

\textsuperscript{1}On its book cover Manfred Jürgensen's recently published German novel \textit{Versuchsperson} is described as 'neue nicht-patriarchalische Maennerliteratur'.

\textsuperscript{2}"And what nature and time have done, man regards as a [moral] achievement."

\textbf{ELIZABETH PERKINS}

\textbf{REVIEW}


Joan Priest is an experienced biographer, her three earlier books, \textit{Virtue in Flying} (1975), a life of the aviator Keith Virtue, \textit{Outback Airman} (1979) written in collaboration with Harry Purvis, and \textit{The Thiess Story} (1981) receiving warm responses from readers. \textit{Scholars and Gentlemen} is a complex and demanding biography which Priest has organized with unifying directness. It is Priest's achievement that the reader has no difficulty in tracing through the pages the story of the remarkable Mackerras family, beginning with the musician Isaac Nathan who came to New South Wales in 1841. Nathan, who had earlier written music to accompany the best known of Byron's \textit{Hebrew Melodies}, including the beautiful "She Walks in Beauty Like the Night", made an important contribution to the Sydney music world. He opened an academy of singing, by means of which he supported his six