Alice is a fearful child in what seems to her a mysterious and alien land. The shameful fact of her Indian heritage is sublimated as much as possible to the dominant British culture during an era when "it was pretty well accepted that families like ours inherited the worst of two races. We were supposed to be slightly subhuman, pariahs, outcasts ..." Yet it is from the Indian culture that Alice learns to confront fear and to decipher the riddle of existence. In accepting fear she rejects its power to immobilise and can fully embrace the "life-force."

Midnight Voices speaks of a dislocated people and the traumatising of a culture; it is also about courage and the cross-cultural fears that can appropriate our lives. The influence of those old colonials, Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling, is implicit in the text, but "The Mysterious Letter-writer" which opens the anthology comes perilously close to Maugham in both style and content. Pengilley does acknowledge Maugham at the end of the tale and later a character questions why it was chosen, which suggests that the author may have experienced the same misgivings. This is the only jarring note in an otherwise sensitive and moving account of people finding a way to live in a world of conflicting values.

Paul Clark


Usher, the latest book by the young Australian novelist Matthew Condon, ostensibly deals with a son's search for the identity of his father, drowned at the story's beginning. Around this well-worn narrative thread, however, the author has woven the much larger concern of the nature of cultural and national identities, and the illusory and fraudulent manner in which these identities are (indeed, can only ever be) projected.

Samuel Downs is furtively peepholing his neighbour as she takes a bath when he hears that his father, T. Nelson Downs, is missing, suspected drowned. All that remain of the father are the cap he wore as usher in the Universe-Cine-By-The-Sea, a black torch, and a handful of shredded matinee tickets lying on the beach. The son reacts to the tragedy by embarking on a world tour, during the course of which he recounts all that he knows of his father's story, keeping him alive in notes, jottings and anecdotes through which he can repress the death of a father he barely knew. In the course of this story we learn of T. Nelson's colourful life as a salesman, his doomed attempt to set up as a dealer in everyday objects dressed up as valuable antiques, his obsession with the cinema, and his triumph and eventual betrayal as a commercial botanist in the employ of the Government.

What binds the apparently arbitrary and disjointed structure of the book is the theme of pretence. In its many forms, it colours virtually every page. Pretence is at the root of T. Nelson's love of the cinema — one of the novel's governing metaphors. Samuel remembers his father's words:

LiNQ 20/2 (1993)
The cinema ... means a lot to me. I want to give people a bit of wonder again. If they want to go to Paris, or to the casino in Monte Carlo, or the Austrian Alps, or someone else's house, whatever, they come and see me. I can take them there.

The underlying idea behind this statement, that through metonymy a country can be reduced to a watery and facile simulacrum of itself, finds vivid expression in the son's experiences of world travel. Thus, New Zealand becomes a jade club, Hawaii becomes a lei, and America becomes, in turn, a trail of Hollywood landmarks, or else the dilution of its history to the level of a child's picture-book. On this journey, and indeed for much of the book, no representation can be true, and no sign can be trusted. In a particularly illuminating episode, Samuel finds that the farewell cocktail party for the tourists is to be conducted in national dress. He decides that he has nothing to wear (what, after all, can be called Australian national dress?), and goes as he is:

At the party I was asked about my costume. Where was it? Where was my kangaroo suit, the West Germans asked? Where was my stockman's hat and were they really made of compressed rabbit skins?

Condon's message in this, and in the denouement, is that Australia is in imminent danger of suffering the kind of commercial repackaging that has afflicted other, possibly more established, cultures. By accident, T. Nelson had come between the Government and its dream of constructing a massive theme park in Queensland. The sinister machinery of officialdom moved against the man, discrediting him and accusing him of false crimes, and perhaps ultimately causing his death (although this last point is left ambiguous). The theme park has gone ahead, comprising a series of huge replicas of native Australian fauna, and commercialism wins out to the detriment of national identity.

The final justification of the father's life by the son also entails, by implication, an upheld awareness of the complexity and diversity of this country, and what it means for the individual to call him or herself an Australian.

Beneath the shifting, unreliable surface of the world that the author portrays, however, some solidity is still discernible. Water, fire and earth were all, in one form or another, preoccupations of Samuel's father: water killed him, fire terrified him, and the earth precipitated his downfall. Furthermore, water becomes of crucial importance to the son, who abandons himself to the same waves that took his father on the day of his marriage, in a final effort to be reconciled, to be close to his father, before his own journey into life truly begins. Once the corrupt charade of the ministers and the marketing men has crumbled, these elements will always remain. For Samuel, water, fire and earth constitute permanence, and that in turn gives a source of hope.

The range and scope of Usher is vast, and the technical demands it makes of its author, to do justice to his material, are correspondingly great. It is my belief that this is where Condon is least successful, having opted to relate the
story through a gallery of voices that interweave, overlap, and ultimately drown each other out. The rapid intercutting of these voices only obfuscates the material, and the temporal and geographical switches are, I feel, poorly handled.

Condon's prose is rich, if perhaps a little clichéd. A strong thread of bizarre humour runs through the work, although this can at times appear laboured and overworked, especially in some of the early exchanges in the book. The often dazzling style of Usher cannot, in the end, compensate for its fundamental lack of coherence. In fact, this often works to the novel's detriment, blinding the reader to what the author might have to say, rather than allowing one to participate in the story. The over-complex structure and the flashiness of the writing refuse, rather than facilitate, the reader's engagement.

Even though the final impression of Usher is of a promising, if rather poorly-executed, idea, Condon has at least shown that he has the courage to tackle large and potentially sensitive themes. It is a shame that they are allowed to surface only rarely above the superficialities of the style. Nevertheless, the tale is a precautionary one, pointing out the dangers that await should Australia go the way of so many other developed countries — the danger of it becoming what the narrator describes as "The biggest living museum on the planet."

Helen Sotiriadis


The range of stories selected for Wilder Shores, this first ever collection of Australian women's travel stories, provides readers with much more than traditional accounts of the new or the exotic. For as editors Robin Lucas and Clare Forster point out in their preface, "these are voyages with ambiguous outcomes, multiple meanings, uncertain motives"; voyages where the focus rests on the revelations, adventures and risks of the women's journeys rather than on their points of destination.

By drawing from such diverse travel stories, Lucas and Forster have successfully demonstrated that women's travels go far beyond the search for romance or indeed "the good-hearted adventure stories by unusual spinsters". Wilder Shores contains short stories as well as excerpts from novels, letters, diary entries, autobiographies, essays and the more traditional travel writing accounts. The authors are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the career-minded, pioneers, migrants, wives, political activists, school-girls. They journey by ship, by plane, by car, by camel — even by elephant. Their reasons for journeying are as varied as their modes of transport.

When arranging the material, Lucas and Forster have decided against a chronological or historical ordering of material in favour of grouping seemingly