moments”). They, the white fellas, are the forever thieves. After stealing the land, they’ll take off with your dreaming too, but won’t have the sense to recognise the value of a landrights’ flag. Well, not yet, anyway.

Also with the title poem “itinerant blue,” humour undercuts the opening grand emotion of the poet’s romantic angst, loneliness, the gambler’s luck, the need to understand the world heavy on his shoulders—

\[
\text{as the only muse that serenades you is a computer generated image}
\]

\[
\text{wishing to advise}
\]

\[
\text{you have limited credit to make this call ...}
\]

\[
\text{("itinerant blue" 20)}
\]

Surreality in these poems has a cinematic edge. I particularly liked, and find resonant, “back road.” It is one of those poems that recalls childhood moments, squirming in the back seat as Dad drives over the back road. Watson’s skill is manifest in the concluding lines that open the image of the past out as the poem closes on “the rear-view mirror / keeping its eye on us” (“back road”).

All the horizons witnessed from the road are drawn together in the final prose poem. When I first read it, I wondered about Watson’s word choice, that clunkiness getting in my way with lines like “Twilight is for the communion of soil and water.”

Visions of Anglican parsons hovered over the word “communion.” On reading it again, even though I carry to that word communion my own burden of associations, the overall piece is elevated by Watson’s ability to balance quietly humorous observation with serious metaphysical speculation.

Certainly, I look forward to reading more of Watson’s warm and welcoming poetry as I do Margaret Bradstock’s fine interpretation of history, for both reinforce my belief that despite the dispiriting politics of our times, there is room for optimism.

Rhonda Ellis

THERE’S MORE THAN ONE WAY...


Pat Skinner, a Masters graduate of Sydney’s University of Technology Writing course, has previously published short fiction and poetry in journals and anthologies in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
Bonding with Boofy is her first collection of short stories. Although the text is well presented this engaging narrative deserves a more enticing cover design.

The arrangement of the stories suggests various narrative progressions. One is in the age of the protagonists and in the development of their emotional maturity and sense of fulfillment. This progression parallels the collection’s underlying theme of tension between members of families. The theme simmers beneath the surface of parent/child relationships and stories of manipulation, loss and resentment. Familial tensions never quite boil over and, not unexpectedly, a feminist narrative stance develops.

Another progression that can be read into the story order is both geographical and cultural. The stories’ locales range from North Queensland to the Blue Mountains, the NSW Riverina district and suburban and inner city Sydney. These environments are imbued with cultural meanings and, if the stories are read in order, a progression appears in how much or how little importance the narrative attitude attaches to those meanings.

“Cake Forks at Lake Titicaca”, “Big Girls Don’t Fly” and “Murrumcat” are set geographically at a distance yet they are loaded with a particular cultural distinctiveness. Here is a world of floral pinafores and polyester dresses, New Idea and Bobby Limb, tinned peaches with custard and Nescafé with arrowroot biscuits. This kind of unfashionable and class-ridden milieu in anything other than pure comedy has been a germ for the malady of a national cultural cringe. Yet, on opposite sides of the continent, Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet, and Jennifer Kremmer’s Pegasus in the Suburbs, embrace a similar world of commonplaces and win literary awards. A return to popularity of books by 1940s and 50s Australian women writers of working-class social realism, some who are masters of the milieu, can be evidenced in the recent republication of Dorothy Hewett’s novel, the long-out-of-print Bobbin Up. However, despite the naff frocks and bland fare in Bonding with Boofy, Skinner is writing neither pure comedy nor social realism. Her three opening stories are touched with a surrealist brush.

The first two explore the disturbing inner life of a girl and each toys differently with the “real”. “Cake Forks at Lake Titicaca” is told with the naiveté of a child’s voice. Feenie is the only girl in an unpretentious suburban family and under the ministrations of her decorous Great-aunt Vera (“Splayds are degenerate and slothful”) she develops a particular obsession for niceties. Feenie resolves to seek a more rarefied air and escape from her older brothers who are vicious and bloodthirsty. Or are they? Another
kind of ambiguity can be read into "Big Girls Don't Fly." Grace's fraught relationship with her parents and the prejudice against obesity that shatters her Icarian dream are real enough and leave her in a fragile world. But, reflecting that element of surrealism that infects the plot of Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, there is an intriguing uncertainty here about not one but two doubtful deaths.

The next two stories are also told from a child's point of view. "Murrumcat" moves to a rural setting and the surrealist element used here reflects not that of *The Well* but of another Winton novel, *The Riders*. Josh has a hallucinatory vision of a swimming cat. The narrative connection between that trope and the boy's empathy for his mother and her lost singing career is tenuous and the story line tends to wander. Josh, like Feenie, also has two older brothers. Their preference for "big boofy dogs" sets their characterisation against that of Josh, which the narrative positions as more sensitive. This is the seed of an idea linking a preference for felines over canines to a feminine or masculine "personality type." The idea is hinted at again in the next piece, "Excavating" and culminates later in the title story. In "Excavating" a precocious child plots an emotional involvement for her perfectly happy and independent mother. The story's setting has moved up a notch in class and sophistication. The fare served up here (somewhat self-consciously) includes taramasalata dip and rosemary potatoes.

For "Compass Rose: a politically directionless fairytale" the narrative style returns to the naïve. The story suggests an allegory belying its subtitle when Donald, a young man who has never found his way out of the fog he was born in, discovers he is not the only one with a problem. Perhaps the epithet is added because this is the only love story (at least the only heterosexual love story) in the collection.

"Cushions" presents a tale within a tale. The exterior narrative level is hung about with interiors. That is, Moroccan, Italian modular, oriental and Tuscan chintz interiors. The intradiegetic story is about childhood angst, parental alienation and a little girl's resistance to conditioning for motherhood. It reintroduces a girl/maiden aunt relationship, albeit one more benign that Feenie's with Great-aunt Vera. "Cushions," like its female business-partner characters, deals with texture, softness and comfort and delivers more than it promises. In the next story, "Curtains," an aspiring young writer's problem mother is railroading her into single parenthood. And curtains.

The title piece, "Bonding with Boofy" is an amusing (although it could have been funnier) parody of a recent divorcee's access visit. The subject of Martin's visit is the cat of
the marriage, currently in the custody of his ex-wife. An obtrusive narrator takes a pot shot at the pretensions in this world of chocolate croissants from "La Gerbe d'Or", scented gardens and fake cowhide upholstery: "Who's been reading Domain then?" "Bonding with Boofy" seems to mark the climax and the completion of the narrative's preoccupation with cultural distinctions. It is as though an anxiety has moved through the collection's story order from a fibro house in Wagga Wagga to a renovated terrace in Paddington via an interior design shop and after this peak of self-consciousness begins to relax on the point. The cat/dog motif, introduced earlier, is narrated here either as tongue-in-cheek mockery or as a political point. And it may be both. A character named Lucas in "Bonding with Boofy" could be identified with the protagonist of the next story which furthers the notion of masculinity and alienation. "Découpage" is one of the few pieces in this collection that has not had a previous outing in a journal. In it, Lucas is the only man in the découpage class. He is cutting up (not cutting out) pictures of cherubs to paste onto his private treasure box. Why? To tell would be preemptive. Read it and weep for Lucas cannot.

In the book's last two stories the emotional maturity of the characters, the depth of subject matter and the finesse of the writing reach culmination. "Blue Silk Pyjamas" the shortest piece, is set among female friends, deals with feelings of love and inadequacy and the trauma of mastectomy. "Salt," the collection's final story and probably its best, enters a new emotional and geographic landscape. Its fifty year-old protagonist has found contentment for her woman-oriented love. Yet, while caring for her ailing sister, she experiences familial crisis when faced with the unwanted attentions of her redneck brother-in-law. The narrative plays with the theme of salt while ripping into the man's patriarchal assumptions and his refusal to heed the warning signs of land salinisation. "Salt" develops through successful temporal structuring and maintains its tension to the end.

There are many ways to read these stories; as political and social comment, as parody, metaphor or parable or as sheer entertainment. It is likely that, the second and third time you pick up this little volume to revisit its many mysteries, you will find yet another way to read them.