

Best Books of the Year

Tony Birch

In a year when I did not look at much fiction, both the best and worst of my reading dealt with Australian culture and history. The bad writing I will leave aside. Mark Peel's *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty* (CUP) is an ethical and passionate account of the realities of living poor in Australia. Colin Tatz's *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide* (Verso) is an intelligent and mature engagement with a discussion that must be had in this country. Don Watson's *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Knopf) provides a timely warning that the issues of concern to Peel and Tatz will not be enhanced by using the word 'enhancement' (among others).

Neal Blewett

Two works of contemporary history — continents apart — left the most lasting impressions from my reading this year. *Dark Victory* (Allen & Unwin), by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, is a sombre, dispassionate, yet compassionate account of the *Tampa* and its consequences. Wide-ranging and meticulous in its research, this authoritative narrative of this shameful and shaming affair leaves few of the major participants with much credit, apart from that admirable Norwegian, Arne Rinnan, captain of the *Tampa*. Writing on a wider canvas, Paul Ginsborg, in *Italy and Its Discontents, 1980–2001* (Penguin), provides, through a wealth of detail lightly born and lucidly presented, a compelling account of Italy in the last decades of the last century. In it he analyses a corrupt and tainted political order, the social and cultural elements that sustained it, and the forces that swept it all away — leaders, parties and electoral system — between 1992 and 1994. The one disappointment is his failure to explain in the depth we had come to expect how the promise of the early 1990s was frittered away in the sands or, as he wryly captures it in the title of his last chapter, 'From Berlusconi to Berlusconi'. I look forward to reading his study of the Berlusconi phenomenon.

Ian Britain

Elsewhere in these pages, I pay tangential tribute to Rudolf Nureyev, the tenth anniversary of whose death is being marked this year in various forms around the world. Colum McCann's *Dancer: A Novel* (Metropolitan) brings Nureyev's galvanic presence to the page in a way I have rarely observed in the best ballet criticism. Perhaps the most readable critical writing today is on the movies. If you find

Anthony Lane's collected *New Yorker* reviews (*Nobody's Perfect*, Picador) a bit too relentlessly smarty-pants, try Ryan Gilbey's *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond* (Faber) for a display of prodigious erudition in gym-trim prose.

Alison Broinowski

We will decide, said Stalin, what words mean and what they don't. The writers of my three best books all reclaim that right. David Marr and Marian Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* (Allen & Unwin) shows that our leaders lied about *Tampa* and warn that, realising it worked, they can do so again. Don Watson's *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Knopf) delves into our decayed language, and reveals an Australian instinct to disguise the truth from ourselves. Clyde Prestowitz's *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* (Basic Books) empties the US can of words about war, trade and the environment, and shows that there's worse still in there. All three books provoke more independent Australian decision-making.

Paul Brunton

Alan Frost's *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764–1815* (Miegunyah Press) is an enthralling account of the world's first worldwide empire, told by a scholar who wears his considerable learning lightly. It was pursuant to this global strategy that the colony of New South Wales was established in 1788. Right from the beginning, we were an integral part of the wider world, no mere dumping ground for convicts. The product of a lifetime's research, this book is a landmark. *India, China, Australia: Trade and Society, 1788–1850*,

by James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard and Margaret Steven (Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales), breaks new ground in demonstrating, through the surviving artefacts (many of which are beautifully illustrated), the bustling interchange between the young colony and our northern neighbours. It was a colony that looked outward. David Marr and Marian Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* (Allen & Unwin), a skilful dissection of the *Tampa* affair, will be required reading for many years. Investigative reporting at its best.

Inga Clendinnen

The New History: Confessions and Conversations (Polity Press), a book of relaxed interviews with nine major historians — Jack Goody, Asa Briggs, Natalie Zemon Davis,

Keith Thomas, Danile Roche, Peter Burke, Robert Darnton, Carlo Ginsburg and Quentin Skinner — put together by Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke (yes, she is Peter Burke's wife). A new edition of *Clouded Sky* (Sheep Meadow Press), by Miklós Radnóti, a Hungarian poet murdered by fascists in 1944, but not known to me until a month ago. Alan Frost's *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764–1815* (Miegunyah Press), which told me many interesting things I didn't know. And Hilary Mantel's strange, turbulent, beautifully complicated memoir, *Giving up the Ghost* (Fourth Estate).

Martin Duwell

Utterly different as these two books are, they fit intimately together in my reading experience, perhaps because they look at each other from opposed corners in poetry's complex polyhedron. Emma Lew's *Anything the Landlord Touches* (Giramondo) is made up of intense, surreal and fragmented dramas, each poem a brief glimpse of a barely comprehensible world that always feels right. Peter Porter's *Max Is Missing* (Picador) is a privileged opportunity to visit again the complex world of 'Porterland'. The poems of this place are culturally and intellectually daunting, but always brilliant and often very moving or very funny. As one of the poems ruefully notes, 'even my jokes aspired to footnotes'.

Morag Fraser

In *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Knopf), Don Watson makes his timely, irascible case for the decline of public utterance by providing the evidence. Alas, so much of it. What drongos we are to put up with such outcomes and enhancements. Then (and this is his coup) he demonstrates in his own prose how witty, effective and inspiring public language can be. Brian Castro's beguiling *Shanghai Dancing* (Giramondo) is built, like an opportunist's nest, out of the shimmering lives of his forbears in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau and Australia. It's the best kind of literary lost and found department. In *Drop City* (Bloomsbury), T.C. Boyle, a post-hippie chronicler of California, is a shrewd guide to the complexities of the state that elected Arnie.

Andrea Goldsmith

One wonders if the Booker judges were struck by collective idiocy to omit *Elizabeth Costello* (Knopf). J.M. Coetzee shows the power of fiction to unravel human truths and uncertainties. This passionate and readable book takes the novel into lush new territory. Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Love* (Polity Press) explores love and desire in an era of listless and mindless groping for the ever new. The same factors that

undermine enduring love between two people are also evident in the persecution of stateless people and refugees. Essential reading for romantic intellectuals who are distraught over the inhumanity of our dark times.

Kerryn Goldsworthy

As the polls go on suggesting that most Australians don't mind what lies they're told as long as it keeps the Aborigines down and the foreigners out, my picks for 2003 are *The Meeting of the Waters* (Hodder), by Margaret Simons, about the aftermath of the Hindmarsh Island case, and *Dark Victory* (Allen & Unwin), by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, about the affair of the *Tampa* and the 2001 federal election. Both books are exhaustively researched and superlatively well written; and both are acts of resistance, in a climate where such acts seem increasingly rare.

Peter Goldsworthy

In the last fifteen minutes of the year came Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers* (Text), a subtle look at the main protagonists during the First Contact years of First Fleeters and original 'Australians', as Clendinnen, for carefully argued reasons, decides to call them. In a recent piece in the *Financial Review*, Clendinnen wrote: 'The discipline of history demands rigorous self-criticism, a patient, even attentiveness, a practised tolerance for uncertainty.' In this book, she practises precisely what she preaches. Robert Gray's *afterimages* (Duffy & Snellgrove) was published in 2002, but I didn't get a copy until it was reprinted this year. How many poets can boast such early reprints? As always with Gray, every line contains things that surprise the eye as much as the ear. There are prose writers of similar imagistic power — Updike, Nabokov — but I know of no other poet writing in English who gets anywhere near Gray's word-pictures. Still on poetry, Rob Riel's Picaro Press keeps turning out

a chapbook poet a month in its Wagtail series. These sell for three dollars (sic) each. The latest two are especially good: a kind of greatest hits of Peter Bakowski (Wagtail 26: 'Some Beliefs of Mine') — a perfectly wonderful read, this — and the fascinating, left-field flavours of Jennifer Compton (Wagtail 27: 'Brick'). These small books would be perfect for secondary student class-sets, for stocking fillers and, perhaps especially, as readable bookmarks in big, stupid Christmas novels.

Bridget Griffen-Foley

Too often journalists write infuriating books — anecdotal, egotistical and self-indulgent — but each time I am near to despairing of the genre, I encounter a book that reminds me of just how fine writers with journalistic backgrounds can

be. There were two such works this year: Gideon Haigh's *Bad Company: The Cult of the CEO* (Quarterly Essay), a fascinating foray into the history and pretensions of corporate culture, and Bruce Page's *The Murdoch Archipelago* (Simon & Schuster), a scarifying critique of Sir Keith and Rupert Murdoch's business methods. Elegantly crafted and unashamedly polemical, both books are the culmination of a lifetime of reading; there is as much instruction and delight to be found in the eclectic notes on sources as in the texts themselves.

Clive James

This year, while on a theatrical tour around Australia, I had an early plan to read nothing but the Bible, but once again I got stuck somewhere in Leviticus. Even on the move, the book-buying passion was not to be suppressed. I soon had to buy an extra hold-all to carry the Australian books I picked up, many of them second-hand. In Brisbane, I found a perfect copy of Lex Banning's *Apocalypse in Springtime* for (read this and weep, collectors) \$30. In its elegantly understated Edwards and Shaw binding, it was the glamour booklet of 1956, and, almost half a century later, its mere appearance still thrills me like the memory of my first visit to Sydney's sole upmarket bohemian hangout, Lorenzini's wine bar — where, when I was a student, the cruelly palsied, but strangely gracious, Banning was still to be seen *in situ*. Among the first-hand books, Stephen Edgar's new poetry collection, *Lost in the Foreground* (Duffy & Snellgrove), was the undoubted treasure. I had seen it in manuscript, and indeed had sent off a fervent endorsement, but not until I opened the neatly produced printed copy did I get the full impact of his craftsmanship, which is like carpentry raised to the level of sculpture. Helen Garner's *The Feel of Steel* (Picador) was another reminder that she can write prose a lot better than most poets can write verse. The chapter about the Antarctic ice rings like a frozen bell over a blood-chilling stretch of *paysage moralisée*. To go with the late Gwen Harwood's splendid *Collected Poems 1943–1995* (UQP), I bought its hefty companion, out two years ago: *A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen Harwood 1943–1995* (UQP). Gulping it down during flights between cities, I got through it in a few days, kicking myself that I had never met Harwood. (I would have enjoyed pointing out to her that, in business class, there is room to kick yourself: it was the kind of joke she liked.) I would have loved to hear her on music and philosophy, let alone on poetry, about which her judgments were funny in condemnation and unfailingly creative in approval — she sent me straight back to Robert Penn Warren, for example.

Perhaps her most remarkable talent, however, was for getting stuck in Hobart. She complained all the time, but look at what she wrote. If Stephen Edgar shows signs of living out the same antinomy, we might have to start accepting that something marvellous happens to the poetic faculties when the next stop southward is the ice.

Gail Jones

Brian Castro's *Shanghai Dancing* (Giramondo) is a work of stunning virtuosity. Bent on disorientation, it veers from 'images splintered and dissolved in Faustian shade' to those of assaulting vividness and almost demented acuity. Castro confabulates his family as an exemplary linguistic artefact framed by the metaphysical crisis of migrancy. Michelle de Kretser's beautifully written *The Hamilton Case* (Knopf) is another fabulous tale with a Faustian shadow. Centred on a Ceylonese lawyer deformed by Anglophiliac colonialism, it parodies the English detective novel and finds in its shattered ruins a grotesquely dysfunctional family. Diane Arbus's *Revelations* (Jonathan Cape) is the definitive book on her photography, what she claims as 'the ceremonial, curious and commonplace'.

Nicholas Jose

Three pieces of imaginative writing I enjoyed this year create narrative from those 'raids on the unspeakable' that Thomas Merton advocated. *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (Picador), by Nicolas Rothwell, is an exalting read, with its rich characterisations and its mood shifts, from hilarity or melancholy to lift-off. *The Outside Story* (Hardie Grant), Sylvia Lawson's novel about the Sydney Opera House, is fascinating for its sheer originality, a questioning study of how a community lives its history. Subhash Jaireth's poem sequence, *Yashodhara: Six Seasons without You* (Wild Peony), is told mostly in the voice of the Buddha's wife. The language combines purity and plenitude. This poet likes elephants; his poems have comparable presence.

Brian McFarlane

My three choices are as follows: Brenda Niall's *The Boyds* (Miegunyah Press), a magisterial biography of Australia's first family in the arts, brilliantly structured around their houses, written with insight, elegance and sympathy, and handsomely produced; William Boyd's *Any Human Heart* (Penguin), a technical tour de force, as its diary form mirrors the intellectual and affective growth of its protagonist from adolescence to old age, and an even greater humane achievement; and Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (Penguin), which I hadn't read since I was too young to value the wit and precision of its dissection of Victorian family life — a revelation.

Brenda Niall

I liked two hefty books, both scholarly productions, both wonderfully readable and beautifully produced. *Venice: Fragile City* (Yale University Press), by Margaret Plant, looks at every aspect of the modern city: history and architecture, high art and pop art, urban living, tourism, even the drainage system. Plant dramatises the paradox of Venice, whose hold over the imagination grows while the city itself declines and crumbles. Two centuries of Venice: five years of one man's life in *The Diaries of Donald Friend*, Volume 2 (National Library of Australia). Often exasperating but never dull, Friend is one of the great diarists. Paul Hetherington's perceptive introduction, and the brilliant interaction of text and drawings, complete the experience.

Ros Pesman

My interest in cosmopolitanism and women led me to Jennifer Vaughan Jones's *Anna Wickham: A Poet's Daring Life* (Madison Books), the first full-length biography of the early twentieth-century poet. Born Edith Hepburn in London in 1884, 'Wickham' made two visits to Australia in her childhood. Aged twenty, she returned on her own to Europe, carrying her father's injunction to rise to fame, and an Australian label through the reference to Wickham Terrace, Brisbane, in her pseudonym. A second biography that gave me both pleasure and insight was historian Richard Bosworth's *Mussolini* (Arnold). Mussolini's party and régime were Europe's first fascist experiment. One might wonder what Italy's new régime of rule by a media mogul augurs for elsewhere. British journalist Tobias Jones's compelling exploration of Berlusconi's Italy, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (Faber), offers little comfort.

Peter Porter

As a contributor to both, I am ignoring convention in recommending Peter Craven's and Martin Duwell's rival and overlapping anthologies, *The Best Australian Poems 2003* (Black Inc.) and *The Best Australian Poetry 2003* (UQP), respectively. They add up to a portable cornucopia of fine verse. Poetry's fortunes all over the world have been in decline, but the editors have gathered an encouraging harvest of excellent work. It matters less that such a biopsy can be assembled over one year than that hundreds of pages of enjoyable reading are on offer. The best known are here, but so are many others, and it is with them that the brightest gems have been stowed. I recommend Luther Blissett's *Q* (Heinemann) to fans of *The Name of the Rose*. Nothing like as elegant and stylish as Umberto Eco's work, nevertheless this compendious novel strikes out brilliantly across the tortured Europe of the Reformation. You need a strong stomach for the violence

and the barbarity of the language, but no dull moments intervene. In *Medusa* (Faber), Michael Dibdin's detective Aurelio Zen, as miraculously brought back to the world as Sherlock Holmes was after the Reichenbach Falls, unravels a plot among neo-fascist military men in Verona. This latest adventure is particularly informative about that peculiar part of Italy, the Alto Adige, where Germany/Austria find themselves under Southern suzerainty. One of Dibdin's best.

Peter Steele

The Selected Poems of Howard Nemerov, edited by Daniel Anderson (Swallow Press/Ohio University Press), puts on exhibition some of the finest work of a poet who bridges the gap between 'the tender who value and the tough who measure'. Nemerov spent his life trying, often expertly, to distil the beautiful out of the bitter in life, by courtesy of ironical lyricism. *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, edited by Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (University of Pennsylvania Press), shows in word, illustration and commentary the sources and objects of the medieval fascination with memory's dramas — and how much we have forgotten of what they were determined to remember.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

The most powerful and deeply observed novel was, for me, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (Vintage), an unforgettable evocation of World War II and its changes. In poetry, I cannot go past Jamie McKendrick's *Ink Stone* (Faber). McKendrick's forms may look traditional, but his poems combine acuity of observation with his reaching deep into the provisionality of language, with its witty slippages: 'Was Hallé French for hello or for halo?' In non-fiction, Don Watson's *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* (Knopf) quivers diurnally in recalling sharply all those things we loved or hated about Paul Keating. In fact, all three writers are marvellous observers of phenomena, which is the heart of good writing.

Robyn Williams

Three women captured my imagination this year. Miriam Zolin's first novel, *Tristessa and Lucido* (UQP), is beguiling, original and brave. She's found a clear narrative voice from the very start. Robyn Arianrhod is passionate about maths as a universal language, and this is captured superbly in her *Einstein's Heroes* (UQP), a story about Faraday, Newton and, above all, the Scottish genius James Clerk Maxwell. Surprising and satisfying — your IQ has risen twenty points by the final chapter. Catherine Blackledge's *The Story Of V* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) is an intimate history of the vagina. Plenty you didn't know, much you'll enjoy reading, and scientifically sound. This, like the earlier pair, is a first book.