

Review of *Other People's Words*, by Hilary McPhee. *JAS Review* 4 (Jan 2002).

Hilary McPhee *Other People's Words*, Sydney: Picador/Pan Macmillan, 2001.

Hardback \$35.00

Review by Kate Douglas

Other People's Words reads as though a book about the long production of itself. Many times throughout *Other People's Words*, readers are given a publisher's insight into what makes a good piece of writing as well as the pitfalls of poor literary production and circulation. A reading of Hilary McPhee's thoughtful, experiential book reveals that McPhee knew well enough when she read a stimulating, well-crafted novel, and used this knowledge to produce an outstanding work of her own.

Other People's Words documents McPhee's experience of, and role in, Australian publishing from the 1960s to the late 1980s. The story begins, as many autobiographies do, in McPhee's childhood, which accounts for McPhee's value of, and commitment to stories, books and reading. McPhee uses her childhood recollections to discuss the absence of certain narratives in Australian history (particularly indigenous stories, but also the de-valuing of Australian literature in Australia in favour of British culture). McPhee writes about her mother, "I cannot remember an Australian poem or novel she admired. This occurred to me at precisely the moment when I'd decided that they mattered to me a great deal." (15) Like Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*, *Other People's Words* is concerned with the unreliability of memory, particularly collective socio-historical memory. McPhee's narrative of her own development explores her canonical education and her struggle to come to terms with the importance of Australian history and literature, to assert how she eventually became a champion of emerging Australian writers.

An awareness of the centrality of Australia's diverse literary output began when McPhee worked for *Meanjin* for two years before travelling to Europe in the mid-1960s. McPhee

writes: “like thousands of other yearning young Australians in the mid-1960s, I couldn’t wait to leave” (75). McPhee lived in Greece for a time and then in the Publications Branch of the British Council in London, but craved a return to Australia. She began working for Penguin from 1969, where she ultimately experienced the sort of personal/professional struggles commonly faced by women in male dominated workplaces. After brief periods at a consulting firm and two years working for William Heinemann, Hilary McPhee and Dianna Gribble established McPhee Gribble Publishers in 1975.

Although McPhee Gribble was a small, independent company, it became a strong, creative and pioneering force in Australian publishing. Many important names in contemporary Australian writing came from McPhee Gribble, including Helen Garner, Drusilla Modjeska and Tim Winton. As the book jacket of *Other People’s Words* suggests, McPhee Gribble brought “new perspectives on Australian life and history, new stories – and, fleetingly, hope that an Australian company could become a fully fledged player in the international publishing industry.” In terms of its commitment, knowledge and drive, McPhee Gribble could survive; financially it could not. As McPhee suggests, “This was just another transfer of copyrights from a small independent imprint to a large successful company. It was happening everywhere . . .” (272). Following the acquisition of McPhee Gribble by Penguin in 1989, McPhee worked for Penguin for two years before becoming Publishing Director at Pan Macmillan. McPhee has also worked as chair of the Australia Council between 1994 and 1997 and is presently the Vice Chancellor’s Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

McPhee’s book could be bitter, but it is far from it. Rather than an autobiographical expose, *Other People’s Words* works as a consistently intriguing insight into the workings of the industry to which McPhee has devoted her professional life. The significance of McPhee’s work is marked by its consideration of some of the most important issues facing the contemporary publishing industry. *Other People’s Words* is concerned with the importance of quality editing, the dedicated role of book traders in the

Australian literary scene and how these two factors conflict with the increasing 'big business' commodification of writers and writing.

The events of McPhee's life in publishing are consistently contextualised in public affairs of the period. *Other People's Words* can also be considered a socio-cultural history, an account of Australian social life struggling to emerge in all of its artistic diversity in the second half of this century. McPhee's book examines, in great detail, notions of Australian creativity, as well as perceptions and representations of Australian artistic production, for example the growth of Australian writing and its international recognition (or lack thereof). Most significantly though, *Other People's Words* functions as an exploration of the development of Australian publishing; McPhee's autobiographical perspective is both insightful and reflective.

As a form, auto/biography has experienced a notable boom in the past decade. Yet McPhee's is not of the "tell all" form, nor is it a chronology of her personal-life or family relationships. *Other People's Words* is best described as a personal history (or an autobiography) of a working life in publishing. This considered, *Other People's Words* is a significant autobiographical text. Autobiography was traditionally a form that documented the working lives and associated heroics of so-called 'great men'. Challenges to the form by women and minorities in recent decades have come in the mode of highly personal narratives of personal lives (for instance, family, relationships, and identities). McPhee's text is primarily an autobiography of professional, working life; personal disclosure is marginalised in favour of exploring her professional life. This autobiography then, works as a powerful assertion of the importance of documenting women's professional autobiographies as well as their personal autobiographies.

The only criticism I have of *Other People's Words* is that at times, narrator McPhee perhaps overlooks the extensiveness of her own knowledge and experience, and assumes her reader will follow her in some rather inaccessible passages about publishing, and through leaps in time, space and thought. While McPhee's presumption of a knowledgeable reader is a strength of her book (and, seemingly, part of her agenda), and

some of these leaps reflect McPhee's challenges to autobiography itself, *Other People's Words* occasionally reads like a book about the book-trade, for members of the book-trade, rather than for potential non-industry readers.

I was fortunate to hear Hilary McPhee speak on a panel at the Brisbane Writer's Festival (19th October 2001) on issues in contemporary publishing. McPhee seems deeply committed to books as a process from writer to reader, via what McPhee describes as the "pipeline": the invariably crucial actions of receiving or soliciting manuscripts, proof-reading, editing, publishing and the trading of books. McPhee encouraged those who attended the panel to consider these processes as part of the books themselves. McPhee was perhaps suggesting that if readers, both professional and recreational, were more conscious of book production and circulation, they may take their roles as readers more seriously. Readers may then consider reading as a socio-political act. *Other People's Words* is a book that encourages such a consciousness. Ultimately *Other People's Words* confirms McPhee's vision: despite the reservations she expresses about a possible decline in literary standards, McPhee's text highlights that the processes of inventive, thoughtful and intelligent writing remain strong in Australian literary production.