

Book Reviews

Bronwen Levy's introduction to this volume suggests that it did matter that Helen was a woman artist, rather than an ungendered 'pen'. She was part of a creative scene in South-East Queensland in the 1960s and 1970s that included poets Bruce Dawe, Rodney Hall, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Tom Shapcott. This volume, published with the support of the Jani Haenke Charitable Trust, redeems her forgotten creative life. Perhaps it might also be a catalyst for research that explores the 'creative community' that is contemporary Ipswich and that places her work in a wider Queensland literary history.

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Melissa Fagan, *What Will Be Worn: A McWhirters Story*, Brisbane: Transit Lounge, 2018, 296 pp., ISBN 9 7819 2576 0095, A\$29.99.

When Melissa Fagan stands before the famed McWhirters building in Valley Corner, she tries 'to decipher what this immutable object, this icon, means to the city and me', but finds that 'the building is in my way' (2018: 8). In this book, she tries to move beyond the Art Deco department store to examine the lives and work of the women who were connected to it by blood and marriage. Weaving together research, reportage, imagined lives and personal memoir, she illuminates the impact of wealth, social expectations and loss across five generations of women.

It is more her mother's story than her own, Fagan explains in her prologue, but to know the life of her mother means knowing the women who formed her. So in Part One, 'The Romantic Rise of Agnes Cameron', Fagan tracks back in time to locate her great-grandmother, Agnes, who in 1874 gave birth to an illegitimate child, named James after his father. This father, a draper, set sail for Brisbane in 1878. Agnes followed two years later with the boy and, on her arrival, she married James McWhirter in secret. In 1899, father and son bought the land in Fortitude Valley for the McWhirter building, but construction did not begin until 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression.

Agnes, like many young women, may have aspired to romance, but her life was one of duty. After bearing another six children, she travelled between England, Scotland and Australia, but never stayed in Australia for long. Her son's premature death brought her back to Brisbane belatedly and briefly, but the opening of McWhirters in 1931 failed to summon her. By her eighties she had settled in Stirling in a mansion. Ill with throat cancer, she drank half a bottle of champagne every morning on her doctor's orders, and died in 1932.

There are few archives related to the McWhirters building, as Fagan finds on a disappointing trip to Melbourne, and these are largely official. Archives, as Carole Gerson observes in *Working in Women's Archives*, are not neutral collections. Rather, they are developed from cultural assumptions that dictate what is valuable, and these assumptions often exclude the documentation of women's lives. Fagan,

writing of Agnes McWhirter's many daughters, does not have access to 'diaries or letters or stories handed down from one generation to the next, which might reveal something of their selves' (2018: 64). She is left to rely on imagination, conjuring the circumstances of James Junior's illegitimate birth in Scotland; the way a woman might spend a day wandering through McWhirter's fifty departments; her mother as a child, floating like a star in the Toowong Baths before being summoned to leave the life she knows.

What has remained are accounts of the roles the McWhirter women played, often as mannequins. 'Thanks to the nameless, faceless, columnists of Queensland's social pages', Fagan writes in Part Two, 'What Will Be Worn', 'I know what clothes the McWhirter women wore to euchre parties, to the races, to charity balls and doily teas. I know what they wore to their weddings. I know what they wore because in the age before colour photography and television, clothes could only be truly seen if they were written about' (2018: 64). These women became 'brand ambassadors long before the term existed' (2018: 65). As Fagan observes, the most likely reality for a McWhirter woman, despite her social privilege and wealth, was that her life was 'never her own. It was entwined, for better or worse, with the economic imperative of the McWhirter business' (2018: 63). But some McWhirter women tried to resist, most notably Joan, Fagan's grandmother.

In 1953, Fagan recounts in Part Three, 'The Passion of Joan McWhirter', Joan bundled her four children into the car and left her husband Stirling, prone to drink and disinterested in providing for his family, for a man from Ipswich. The affair was short lived, ruptured by Stirling's stalking, but the fallout was extensive, the divorce and custody battles burning through the papers. Joan's life, cramped by circumstance, had for a brief moment been enlarged by passion. She was made to 'feel strong again, in control. Then he took that away' (2018: 159).

The tensions of marriage and its ties, particularly in terms of social *éclat* and money, ripple through this work, pooling in the present through Fagan's father and mother, the daughter of Joan McWhirter. Fagan's parents also divorce, and the McWhirter inheritance disappears with her mother's gambling, as her grandfather Stirling's inheritance had diminished with his bets on the horses. Part Four of the book, 'Everything for the Home', details how the past keeps reappearing in the present through this legacy of gambling — although, with the help of her children, Fagan's mother reins in her addiction, tying off that thread with a knot.

In the final part of the work, 'Hers and Mine', Fagan charts her mother's life, as she charts the life of her grandmother Joan and great-grandmother Agnes, and acknowledges that her mother, like them, 'had a thwarted desire to forge a life that had its own pattern, not the one her mother made — not realising that it was impossible, that both lives had been fashioned from a single piece of cloth' (2018: 266). As has Fagan's.

The narrative zig-zags back and forth in time, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Sometimes it loops back just a few decades before moving forward, the way a seam is sewn to stop it fraying. In this way, the warp and weft of Fagan's heritage becomes apparent in her own life, particularly through her borrowing and wearing of her mother's clothes.

What Will Be Worn weaves an engaging history of a Brisbane store, the family that built it and the lives that moved through it. More importantly, it details the building's impact on generations of women, something that has been obscured from

history. By imagining, researching and recording the generations of McWhirter women in her engaging and at times luminous prose, Fagan has shown that these women's lives were alternately rich and compromised, but always valid.

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Nadia Jamal, *Headstrong Daughters*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2018, 261240 pp., ISBN 9 7817 6029 3314, A \$29.99.

This book presents valuable insight into the lived experiences of Muslim women in Australia, highlighting the ways they organise their identities and obligations within the broader community while ‘staying true to their faith’ (2018: xiv). Most importantly, the book emphasises the fact that ‘Islam is not practised in a vacuum’ (2018: xv–xvi), along with the need to recognise that the Muslim community in Australia is not homogenous — that there are complexities that arise from the ethnic, cultural and geographic diversity present within communities (2018: 205).

The author is inspired by her own experiences as a Muslim woman, but also draws on her background as a former journalist to recognise the difference between ‘getting a story’ and having the story, in order to illustrate the ‘complex multicultural story of Australia’ (2018: xvii). Through interviews with Muslim women in Australia, the book covers a variety of subjects. Beginning with a look at the tensions that exist between Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, Jamal notes the inherent irony of those believing in the same God being prejudiced against one another (2018: 3). This is followed by an exploration of a single woman, Zara’s, journey undertaking *Haji* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, outlining the challenges for single Muslim women, who are expected to be accompanied by a *mahram* (a male guardian) (2018: 22). Subsequent chapters reflect on key foundations of Islam, like the notion of family, which is seen as strongly guiding Islamic scholars in determining whether modern reproductive technologies, such as IVF, egg-freezing or sperm donors, are permissible. The book also examines religious norms around family in relation to the adoption and fostering of children.

The book similarly explores inheritance and divorce, noting that while religious provisions may appear to treat women unequally, there is a logic behind them that is fundamentally about fairness. This does not prevent some interviewees from feeling conflicted about these principles; importantly, Jamal notes that there are external ‘patriarchal cultural attitudes’ that contribute to the disadvantage of Muslim women (2018: 81), cautioning readers to not conflate religion and culture as being the same. In this vein, the chapter exploring the separation of men and women within the homes of some Muslims observes that this is also a practice where religious rules are often “‘blurred” with cultural mores’ (2018: 88). Jamal additionally presents experiences relating to death and mourning, namely *iddah* (a period of waiting observed by women) and Muslim