# Geraldine Brooks, Historical Fiction and Australian Writers in the US

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A number of Australian expatriate authors in the United States have made an impact on the American public in a variety of genres: Lily Brett, Geraldine Brooks, Peter Carey, Shirley Hazzard, Thomas Keneally, Jill Ker Conway, Sumner Locke Elliott, Robert Hughes, Kate Jennings, Christina Stead, Janette Turner Hospital and others. In addition, the experiences of these writers in the United States have informed their work in distinctive ways that have been important to Australian literature, and to Australian literary culture. Contemporary Australian authors such as Chloe Hooper and Nam Le have undertaken creative writing training in the US, and have returned to live in Australia.

Over the last twenty years however, the globalisation of the book trade has not dissolved the concept of the expatriate writer, or removed the problems for writers linked to origin, readership, visibility, remuneration for, and recognition of their work. In fact, ironically, it seems that there is a renewed imperative for Australian writers to live outside Australia in order to gain access to a global readership and lucrative publishing opportunities. The success of high-profile expatriate writers in the US, such as Brooks and Carey, supports this claim.

This article considers the historical fiction of Geraldine Brooks, who is, alongside Peter Carey, an exceptionally successful author with an immense readership in the US and across the world. Unlike Carey, however, Brooks is largely ignored by Australian critics. What follows explores Brooks's fiction in the context of her career as a war correspondent, her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *March* (2005), and the effect of her many years covering war and conflict on her work. It examines the distinctive potency of Brooks's fiction in the context of historical fiction as an evolving genre for contemporary audiences.

## Australian Writers in the US

One of Robert Dixon's special interests is the literary and cultural engagement between Australia and the United States. This essay develops some of the key themes of that interest, focussing on the experience of contemporary Australian writers in the US and the career of one of those writers: Geraldine Brooks.

The United States of America is currently the biggest export market for Australian books, yet many Australian authors struggle to reach audiences in the US. In parallel, some authors who expatriate over a long period, and who turn their attention away from Australia in their work, tend to be neglected by Australian critics, continuing a practice that affected writers such as Christina Stead and Shirley Hazzard for many years. Over the past century several Australian authors who have lived in the US for short, or for extended periods of their lives, have made a significant impact on Australian literature.

Currently, the two most successful living Australian authors, Geraldine Brooks and Peter Carey, reside in the US, and have lived there for many years. While their reasons for living in the US are varied—and in this they are no different to expatriates of earlier generations—it is

significant that they have chosen to remain there. American interest in Australian writing is strong at present, and contemporary writers have been recognised in the US through a range of awards, but this does not translate into sales for Australian authors more generally. Geraldine Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for her novel *March* (2005) and has achieved extraordinary success with each of her other novels. Peter Carey also enjoys a massive following in the US. He had already won the first of his two Booker prizes before leaving Australia to live in the States in 1990, and continues to reach large audiences in the two countries.

The late Jill Ker Conway won a National Humanities Award in 2013, presented to her by President Obama. Both Helen Garner and Ali Cobby Eckermann won the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Clearly, there is considerable interest in Australian authors and the 'Academy' recognises their work. On the other hand, many Australian authors, even those who have been recognised through literary prizes, struggle to reach American audiences. It would appear therefore that the globalisation of publishing has not resolved or dissolved the difficulties experienced by Australian authors seeking broader audiences, or the specific problems faced by the expatriate writer. Nor have globalisation and the greater possibilities of global publishing necessarily increased the visibility of Australian authors, or offered any significant gains in remuneration, recognition or interest in the trans-Pacific context.

Currently, Australian authors are attempting to reach American audiences in new ways, by signing contracts with Amazon rather than with traditional publishers, by selling film rights if they can, and by selling audio book rights in the first instance. The potential rewards for authors whose books are adapted for scripted drama on film or for television are immense. Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014) offers a recent example of the success an adaptation can bring the author and the actors. It also reveals a heightened synergy between actors and authors in the new environment. For example, the Australian actor Nicole Kidman, a long-time resident of the US, featured in the cast of the HBO television series adapted from the novel and served as executive producer. The novel is set in Australia, but the television series is set in California, and part of its appeal lies in the cinematography of the rugged coastline around which the community sits. Meryl Streep appeared in Series Two and the two leading actors, Kidman and Reese Witherspoon, were paid a million US dollars per episode for their appearances in this series, which was written by Moriarty.

The rewards for the author and for the actors are high in this scenario. But the adaptation does raise the question of why the television series could not be produced in Australia with the setting and Australian cultural context retained. Further questions arise about the possible overall effect of this scenario, and whether it represents a threat to Australian literary and screen culture in many complex ways. Moreover, comparisons with the 1960s in Australia when our screen culture was swamped with American television products are not far-fetched.

Even before the advent of television, the impetus to change settings was in play. In 1940, Christina Stead's publisher required her to change the setting of her novel *The Man who Loved Children* from Sydney to Baltimore. Clearly, therefore, the challenges of meeting the requirements and capturing the interest of American audiences are still considerable for writers, actors and producers. Even so, celebrity book clubs, high profile actors serving as producers, and the immense demand for material for adaptation to scripted drama should mean that the opportunities are greater than they ever were for Australian authors seeking to reach broader audiences. Yet most Australian authors do not find audiences in the US.

The response by Australian writers and actors varies immensely by individual but also by industry. The answer to the problem posed by this situation for actors is to expatriate, or frequently to spend lengthy periods of time travelling from the US to Australia: that phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay. Some authors also leave Australia for the United States for extended periods, whereas once the primary destination for authors was the UK. Younger Australian authors such as Chloe Hooper and Nam Le have undertaken creative writing training in the US, and returned to live in Australia. David Carter has documented the erratic or uneven interest in Australian literature in the US over a number of years (357) and observes the 1980s as the high watermark for Australian authors in the US (355). Roger Osborne points out that for an Australian novel to be taken up it needs to attract the attention of the 'most dominant institutions (read periodicals)' and, as he observes, this is no easy task (307). While the platforms for securing a place in the literary conversation may have changed a little over the last few decades, they have not changed significantly, and Australian authors still struggle to attract interest and to make any impact on the American public culture.

Scholars have thoroughly investigated the phenomenon of Australian writers and other creative practitioners leaving Australia for the UK over two centuries (Alomes 1999; Bennett and Pender 2013; Britain 1997; Morton 2011). However, in spite of the recent turn to US-Australian relations in literary studies (Dixon and Birns 2010; Giles 2013), scholars have not addressed the issue of Australian expatriatism to the US historically or in the present period. While a number of scholars have focussed on the work of Christina Stead (Williams 1989; Rowley 1994; Pender 2002; Ackland 2016; Morrison 2019 to name only a small fraction of them), Sumner Locke Elliott (Clarke 1996), Peter Carey (Hassall 1994; Huggan 1996; Giles 2013), and Shirley Hazzard (Olubas 2012), they have not explored the expatriate status of the authors as a collective, or examined their individual work through the lens of expatriatism. Yet this lens may offer a useful perspective for understanding the work of such authors and the circulation of their work across the Pacific and the world.

In addition to this gap in scholarship, the work of the most high-profile expatriate Australian author internationally, Geraldine Brooks, is neglected by Australian literary studies scholars. This is difficult to explain, given Brooks's achievements as an essayist and, most importantly, as an author of fiction. The reach of Brooks's work and her status in both Australia and the United States is considerable, with her five novels published in multiple editions and in many languages. Brooks's immediate success from the beginning of her career as a fiction writer publishing with American publishing houses means that she has not encountered the difficulties experienced by the majority of Australian writers seeking audiences in the US. Brooks is therefore exceptional in relation to the situation described above in that her work is widely read there.

One of the difficulties Australian critics may grapple with in relation to approaching Brooks's fiction is the question of how to read her work in the face of the fact that four of her five novels have little or no obvious connection to Australia, given the convention in Australian literary studies of reading in relation to the nation, underpinned by a persistent or residual cultural nationalism in the discipline. As well, in a new world of 'global texts,' local critics may rightly wonder what context should frame an analysis of Brooks's fiction. Given the homogenising tendency of a US-centric scaling up of 'world literature' that Robert Dixon (adapting Neil Brenner) has called 'all the world is America,' in parallel with a corresponding fallacy that sees 'the nation as a redundant form of territoriality' associated with 'borderless flows' (4), critics naturally tread carefully. It is conceivable that Brooks's fiction therefore falls through a crack into the category of the transnational in which critics find themselves without a map. Moreover,

the subject matter of a novel such as *March*, with its story of a transcendentalist preacher caught up in the Civil War, locates the work squarely in American literature and a North American cultural and historical context from which Australian literary critics may well retreat, regarding it as outside their interests and expertise. But the limits of nationalist reading practices are also problematic, as Dixon suggests. His call for a 'scale sensitive' analysis (8) in which there is 'movement above, below and around the national level' of literary studies usefully informs readings of an author such as Brooks, as it has in relation to the work of Peter Carey, and offers a platform for enquiry and analysis of Australian authors in the US. Furthermore, Paul Giles identifies a complex set of reasons for the 'relative invisibility of the southern continent' in the US over two centuries, arguing that the two nations 'exist in a triangular relationship with Great Britain' within a range of colonial legacies (5–6). Giles's book *Antipodean America* explores the antipodean 'aspect' and reach into American literature in a way that offers a new approach to US literature, and a productive perspective on the reading practices of Australian literary criticism at the same time.

**Brooks as War Correspondent and Insider**

Along with the predilection for reading in relation to the nation in Australian literary studies, there are two added difficulties that may have given critics pause in regard to Brooks's writing. The first is that of her chosen genre, historical fiction, and the second is her background as a journalist. In order to account for these other possible barriers or blindspots for critics, and to explore Brooks's work, it is useful to acknowledge the context for her writing, and that the historic treatment of expatriates by critics stands out as a salient parallel, bearing in mind that every case is unique.

Australian critics took a long time to recognise the work of both Christina Stead and Patrick White, and the same is proving to be true in relation to Brooks. David Carter argues that the careers of both Stead and Patrick White were firmly 'shaped' by their American publishing 'connection rather than the US being merely a site of secondary publication' (354). Brooks's career, like those of Stead and White, has been fundamentally shaped by her American connection, with all her books first published in New York. Her first novel *Year of Wonders* was published in New York in 2001. Unlike Stead and White however, Brooks had another career before she took up fiction writing, and that career to a large extent informs her approach to fiction, her choice of genre and subject matter. Arguably, it has provided her with a firm footing in an American reading and writing culture that sets her apart from other expatriate Australian writers.

Brooks worked as a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and covered dozens of crises in the Middle East, Gulf States, Africa, and the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout her career as a foreign correspondent, she took seriously the challenge and opportunity of bearing witness to brutality and oppression and of talking to those whose opinions are rarely sought. Although she learned to be a war correspondent primarily by doing it, early in her career she turned to other female war correspondents for inspiration—particularly Martha Gellhorn, whose writing focused on civilians rather than soldiers (Pender Interview with Brooks, 2018). While she spent many years reporting from various countries for the *Wall Street Journal*, her orientation to her reporting work was shaped firmly by American anchor points, the needs of American audiences, and the directions of her American employer. So, unlike Stead and White, Brooks had a strong foothold in the American reading and writing milieu, because of her two decades of work as a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*. Of course, while this did not give her any advantage in taking on fiction writing itself, her position in the society when she turned away

from journalism to write her first novel was one of an insider rather than an outsider, which is always an advantage. This undoubtedly gave her something of a boost that only one other Australian expatriate author has previously enjoyed: Sumner Locke Elliott. The difference is that when Locke Elliott turned his attention to fiction after some years living in New York as a successful screen writer, and therefore arguably something of an insider, he set his novels in Australia, once more opening up a chasm for American readers that was not crossed. Here it is worth observing that the marketing of Brooks's books bears little or no relation to her background as an Australian. In the note on the author in each novel a line appears 'Born and raised in Australia, she lives on Martha's Vineyard with her husband Tony Horwitz.'[1] My research, conducted in the US, amongst general readers (as opposed to those in the Academy) finds that a majority of American readers of her work do not know that she is Australian.

Brooks was born in Sydney and grew up in Australia where she trained as a journalist. She moved to the United States in 1982 to study for a Master's degree in journalism at Columbia University, funded by a scholarship created in honour of the Australian journalist Greg Shackleton, who was murdered by Indonesian soldiers while covering the invasion of East Timor. Shackleton had hoped to study at Columbia and Brooks understood his mission of bearing witness. Working with the Australian journalist Wendy Bacon on the *National Times* during a stint back in Sydney later on also helped develop her appetite for difficult investigative reporting and provided a model of ethical journalism (Pender Interview with Brooks, 2018). Like Gellhorn, Brooks has focused on civilians in her writing. And like other war correspondents Brooks demonstrated considerable courage in the face of extreme danger. Travelling long distances at a moment's notice to report on a battle or an uprising, she grew accustomed to confronting the realities of war as part of her job. She has said that she will never forget the sight of dozens of corpses of teenage Iranian boys who had run headlong into the gunfire of teenage Iraqi soldiers on the battlefield of Majnoon (Brooks Public Conversation with Anne Pender, 2018). In Halabja she witnessed Kurdish families attempting to dig their relatives out of mass graves, the victims of Saddam Hussein's poison gas attacks who they had not been permitted to bury. 'It was the most intense reporting,' Brooks recalled, 'watching the people return to their bulldozed villages, free for the first time in years, and yet having to confront so many dead' (Pender Interview with Brooks 2018). In 1990 she and her late husband won the Overseas Press Club Award for their reporting from the Persian Gulf. Brooks was imprisoned in 1994 after investigating the massacre of protestors in the Niger Delta. Despite her experience in prison, Brooks continued to work as a foreign correspondent, covering the civil war in Yugoslavia. It was only when she had her first child that she gave up the job, believing it would be difficult to combine the two roles. She settled in the US with her husband and published two potent works of non-fiction: an account of her interactions with women in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates entitled *Nine Parts of Desire* (1995), and a memoir, *Foreign Correspondence* (1998).

Personally Brooks does not warm to the term expatriate, considers herself Australian, in spite of her long-term residence in the US, and believes that Australian fiction can be set anywhere, tackle any topic and does not need to confine itself to histories, subject matter or characters, or spaces that fall within the national borders. She is open about her own background: Brooks's father was an American who ended up in Australia by accident as a young man. In interviews I conducted with Brooks she mentioned her frequent visits home, future plans to live in Australia, and the fact that she wrote *March* while residing here. Brooks was appointed Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) in 2016. On that occasion she referred to her own books as 'essentially Australian,' adding: 'They're a product of an Australian attitude of being turned out towards the world, feeling a stake in all the world's cultures, because of the multicultural

nature of our own neighbourhoods and communities. Also, they're focused on some very Australian themes of social justice and the corrosiveness of class and exclusion' (Wyndham 2016 online).

**Brooks and Historical Fiction**

Historical fiction is an immensely popular genre in the current period, attracting millions of readers. It has created an ever-expanding global publishing phenomenon, with the novels of Hilary Mantel amongst the most widely read fiction of all time. As Jerome de Groot demonstrates in his book-length study of the historical novel, the last thirty years or so 'have seen an explosion in the sales and popularity of novels set in the past' (1). De Groot notes that the historical novel can variously 'consider the articulation of nationhood via the past, highlight the subjectivism of narratives of History, underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention' (2). Even so, he does not shy away from the fact that 'writing about history involves approaching insurmountable barriers' (5), and has been used as a tool for national self-definition, arguing that the historical novel 'is part of the typology of nationhood' (93). Yet he also offers a view that the genre is predicated on some degree of 'cultural translatability' (93–94), conveying a strong sense of the internationalism of many historical novels, including those of Salman Rushdie (97). So great is the prominence of historical fiction in de Groot's estimation that he refers to the 'historical turn' in British and Anglophone literature (98). He surveys a wide range of literary historical novels by authors as diverse as Rose Tremain, Pat Barker, Ian McEwan and Sebastian Faulks to substantiate this view.

Australian expatriate authors such as Christina Stead, Shirley Hazzard and Thomas Keneally have published a number of works of historical fiction. Moreover, Peter Carey and Geraldine Brooks both excel in the genre. Younger Australian non-expatriate authors have also recently ventured into historical fiction, for example James Bradley with *The Resurrectionist* (2006), Hannah Kent with *Burial Rites* (2014), and Christos Tsiolkas with *Damascus* (2019). Historical fiction has attracted disdain from critics for several reasons, including: its association with Sir Walter Scott and conservative nationalism; its necessary and yet problematic blending of fact and fiction; its connection with Gothic novels; its origins in romance, and its evolution into popular romances. Add to these the views expressed by Henry James in 1901, where he stated that historical fiction suffered from a 'fatal *cheapness*' because it is impossible for a writer to represent the consciousness of a person from an earlier time using their 'modern apparatus.' James argued that writers should come back to the 'palpable present' (James 360). Although James did not address the question of 'authenticity' at length, his argument veers in that direction. Questions of authenticity about who can or should write about historical events are complex and have rightly occupied many scholars and critics.

The *New Yorker* critic and Harvard-based writer James Wood also disparages historical fiction, labelling it a 'gimcrack genre not exactly jammed with greatness' (2012 online). Wood makes an exception for Mantel in his disdain for the genre, however, referring to her 'novelistic intelligence' and lack of sentimentality, and praising her characterisation. He distinguishes her writing in *Bring Up the Bodies* and *Wolf Hall* from that of the 'intelligent' and 'worthy historical fiction' of Peter Ackroyd and Susan Sontag' (2012 online). Wood puts Mantel's success down to her ability to provide 'animate' and not simply accurate detail, and her ingenious way of providing a modern sensibility in her characters, bypassing the 'knots' of the 'simulation of historical authenticity.' Wood marvels at Mantel's way of proceeding 'as if the past five hundred years were a relatively trivial interval in the annals of human motivation.'

The same case can be made for Brooks in her careful creation of sensibility in her characters. As well, Brooks frequently publishes essays—some of these might be categorised as long form journalism or creative non-fiction—that reflect on historical events and her interactions with historical sources, informants and archival forays, and some of these provide a bridge from her research to her fiction for her readers. For example, in a lengthy article published in the *New Yorker* in 2007 Brooks sets out in extraordinary detail her pursuit of the sources, events and living informants for her masterly novel *People of the Book*.

Brooks's turn to historical fiction is perhaps the most remarkable of her many achievements. In her first novel, *Year of Wonders* published in 2001, she portrays the plight of the inhabitants of a small village called Eyam in the north of England, who were hit by bubonic plague in 1665. The lethal bacteria arrived on a bolt of cloth, bringing agonising disfigurement and indiscriminate death to villagers within days of exposure. The terrified villagers shut down their village, preventing anyone from leaving or visiting in order to try to contain the danger. A year later some 260 were dead. During the scourge, several individuals showed immense courage, nursing the sick and dying. It was the challenge of imagining the response of the people to the calamity that inspired Brooks to write her novel and to portray their fears, faith, and moral choices. Strangely, at the time of my writing, this novel has exceptional resonance for millions of people in the context of the 2020 global coronavirus pandemic.

In *March* (2005) Brooks takes the characters Mr and Mrs March of the iconic novel *Little Women* and imagines Mr March as a minister of religion and chaplain serving in the Unionist army during the Civil War. It also presents Mrs March's urgent journey to be with him when he is hospitalised. In *People of the Book* (2008) Brooks presents a complex story about the Sarajevo Haggadah and the people in different centuries of different religious faiths who hid it in order to save it from destruction, including during the recent Bosnian war. *Caleb's Crossing* (2011) presents the story of the first Native American to attend and graduate from Harvard College in 1665, based on scanty known facts about the life of Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk, his upbringing on Martha's Vineyard and his education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Brooks's prose is supple and elegant in all her novels and her descriptions of the natural world are both strenuous and concise: these descriptions stand out particularly in *Caleb's Crossing*. *The Secret Chord* (2015) presents the life of King David from the point of view of a courtier. *People of the Book*, with its sweeping narratives set in various European settings and across centuries, is the only one of her novels that is not told primarily in the first person. Her preferred first-person narrative technique offers the worldview and interior life of the narrating character. Brooks also uses dialogue with strength and agility to juxtapose the social world against the interior world of the narrator, to establish the specificity of place and mores of setting, and in order to propel the action of her stories.

### *March*

Brooks's desire to write about the American Civil War grew directly from her experience of modern warfare, her observations of what it does to people and the ways they are 'changed by catastrophe, with no certainty of whether they will find courage and the impulse to self-sacrifice or whether they will become as morally lost as some boy soldiers, some Ba'athist torturers that I saw' (Pender Interview, 2018). Once she was back in the US and living in rural Virginia, Brooks began to contemplate the pacifists who were also abolitionists in the 1860s and faced the challenge of deciding whether 'the evils of slavery were greater than the evils of violence' (Pender Interview, 2018). The fact that some of these pacifists took up arms to fight on the Union side encouraged her to consider 'idealists at war.' After rereading Louisa May Alcott's

*Little Women*, Brooks settled on the idea of writing about March, the father-figure in *Little Women,* based on Bronson Alcott, and the effect of war on such a character. In her research for the book*,* Brooks drew on Bronson Alcott's journals and his 'massive' correspondence. She stated that Louisa May Alcott's mother, Abigail May Alcott, was 'no goody-goody, but a fervent and outspoken feminist and pioneer social worker. Her mother was much like my mother'—a revelation that emboldened Brooks as she wrote (Pender Interview with Brooks, 2018). All of Brooks's novels rely on historical fact, and meticulous research. In this way her approach to writing fiction flows readily out of her training and experience as a journalist. For her it is a matter of working with fact as the 'scaffolding' for a novel and allowing the imagination to provide the 'structure' for what cannot be known (Brooks, 'Conversation' 7).

Maria Margaronis, journalist, writer and critic, has observed the anxieties surrounding the authenticity of historical fiction, noting the opportunities offered by postmodernism in the way it 'opened up a kind of solution, a way to speak without appearing to claim authenticity' (140). She writes about the ways in which Ian McEwan and Toni Morrison in their respective novels *Atonement* and *Beloved* 'engage deeply with the purposes and processes of writing historical fiction, so that questions of authority, responsibility and authenticity are absorbed and expressed in their form' (140). Brooks, too, explores the place of sources, literary legacy, and the relationship between historical personalities and their fictional counterparts, but also explicitly embraces the risks of invention as necessary—especially in relation to the portrayal of the enslaved in *March.* Like a historian, Brooks has drawn extensively on biographies of Alcott and letters and journals from his friends Emerson and Thoreau. She also uses direct quotations from Alcott's own letters. But she takes liberties, making him a minister of the church when he was actually a teacher. On the other hand, his radicalism, vegetarianism and progressive approach to religious beliefs, dogma and practice infuse the action and spirit of the novel. *March* offers a rich and resonant response to *Little Women*, imagining the consciousness of a man, based on an actual historical figure, confronting the war and capturing the effects on him and on the slaves around him with insight. In that way—and against Henry James's edict—she does imagine the consciousness of a person from an earlier time, and her portrayal of individual subjectivity allows the reader to comprehend the Civil War in ways they simply could not by reading history alone. By taking a novel and its characters and imagining what happens to them in the periods that are not presented in the original text—that is, when they are out of the story and away from the action of the novel—Brooks also boldly embarks on a postmodernist literary project that reaches beyond the accepted nationalist self-definition inscribed by Alcott's classic, and offers a darker side of this almost sacred national story. Brooks takes other liberties, bringing the action forward a year and putting Mr March at the battle of Ball's Bluff in 1861, then portraying a farm worked by former slaves earlier than such farms began to operate in the South. This deliberate looseness with timelines and details does not detract from the imaginative project of the novel.

Brooks writes in the first person as Mr March in Part 1 and as Mrs March in Part 2, reverting back to Mr March in the last two chapters of the novel. Her style is compressed, economical and potent, as she creates the voice of the narrator and central character, conveying the inner world of the idealist as he sets down his memories and life-story interspersed with the immediate action of the battles of his Unionist unit. Brooks's realist style is vigorous and agile, focussed on achieving the worldview of the protagonist and his observations, complete with his personal misgivings, confessions and memories, so that the letters he writes, the texts we also receive, convey only a version of reality—one that becomes increasingly false because of his ejection from the unit to which he is attached, and because of his 'radical' behaviour and failure to conform to Unionist norms. This clash between March and the soldiers he serves is one of

many strongly imagined human situations of the novel as it shows the lack of authority he suffers in the milieu of the army, his lack of self-awareness, and his shame in being removed from his original unit. Twenty years earlier, March's headstrong pursuit of his own values and poor judgment was the cause of the brutal punishment of the servant Grace, and offers one of the most powerful and disturbing sequences in the novel.

By grounding the novel in a real historic figure, Alcott, who was a teacher, transcendentalist philosopher and abolitionist, Brooks brings her hefty knowledge of the man and his circle, including Thoreau and Emerson, into a new imaginative realm with extraordinary skill, creating the milieu of Concord anew, as recollected by her protagonist from the distance of the southern plantation and battlefields. The structure of the novel in the opening chapters juxtaposes March on the battlefield, with his memories of an earlier visit to the same plantation that is now occupied by the Union army, and his recollections of his earlier life. March's letters to his wife provide an account of his days and a chronicle of his intensifying struggle to communicate freely and truthfully. Through the letters and his ruminations, Brooks explicitly tackles the issue of writing and truth-telling.

Margaronis observes that McEwan's *Atonement* and Morrison's *Beloved* are both concerned with 'the way the past survives in the imagination . . . and what reimagining the past might mean' (140). McEwan states that 'Dunkirk or a wartime hospital can be novelistically realised but they cannot be reinvented' (cited by Margaronis 146). Brooks too concerns herself with how the Civil War 'survives in the imagination,' vividly realising in her novel a liberated plantation where the former slaves work during the conflict. She fills in the 'structure' of character, emotionality and relationships, drawing on her own first-hand observations of war in her career as a journalist, and the way it fractures the psyche. Her portrayal of March and the children with whom he works on the liberated plantation enriches understanding and offers a meaning that goes beyond the known facts of the Civil War for a contemporary reader. The novel is then a fiction built on a fiction that shows the fragility of religious conviction in the face of war and the hegemony of violence in a society. It is an audacious approach and self-consciously so. Her attention to the details of the sensibility of the real Bronson Alcott and the fictional Mr March created by Louisa May Alcott provides Brooks with a frame or a scaffold, to use her term, of factuality and cultural props. Her care and ingenious use of this frame give the novel a freshness of scope that draws on familiarity but transcends it. A second feature of this framing structure is that a reader does not necessarily need any familiarity with *Little Women*, nor does the earlier novel actually matter to the central themes and preoccupations of *March*. *March* is a novel about the realities of war and the failure of moral convictions in the face of it, between the clashing cultures of North and South.

In addition to drawing on these frames and the question of whether pacifism would override abolitionism in the minds of Quakers who were living on the edge of battlefields—questions that drove some of her research for the novel—Brooks drew on her own experience of trying to comprehend the rationale for war when she was a correspondent during the first Gulf War. Some years after she served in the role of correspondent, Brooks admitted that she herself had been wrong to support the US invasion of Iraq, even though she supported it at the time (Brooks, Colvin Interview online). This informs her portrait of Mrs March, who supported the Unionist cause at the beginning of the Civil War but changes her view after she visits the hospital for the wounded and dying, believing she has made a terrible error. It is in the 'novelistic realisation' of the hospital (to use McEwan's words) that *March* presents the reality of the effects of war on young men, their adolescent bodies disfigured and their spirits crushed, a reality informed by Brooks's own observations of the broken bodies of teenaged boys in Iraq. In this regard,

Margaronis points to Toni Morrison's critical discussion of the distinction between fact and truth, and the need for an author to bring 'human intelligence' to fact, commenting that the writer's 'subjective shaping of her material . . . makes the work of making meaning possible' (157).

In spite of the many published reviews of *March*, critical commentary is sparse, and Australian literary critics have largely neglected the work of Brooks. Ken Stewart, however, links the figure of March and the novel itself, to an 'idealist' Australian literary tradition. He places Brooks's character beside Richard Mahony in Richardson's classic trilogy, as well as the protagonists of White's *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, and that of Clarke's *The Term of His Natural Life*, observing that each author offers a portrait of a 'damaged metaphysical seeker in a destructive conformist philistine society' (Stewart 60). The novel also reveals the isolationist metaphysical seeker in futile contest with brutish violence on all sides, and the need to accept the impossibility of overcoming that violence. Kerryn Goldsworthy notes the 'anti-war argument' of the novel and points to the return of March to his family in Concord after a year 'shattered in mind, body and soul, his year's experience [having] taken him far beyond the possibility of fully truthful communication with his wife and daughters' (59). In this statement Goldsworthy captures the potency of Brooks's novel and speculates that the author 'has probably seen more fallout from more wars than any other fiction writer in the history of Australian literature except perhaps George Johnston' (59). If we accept Margaronis's view that fiction created out of extreme experience is authentic, then we cannot doubt the authenticity of Brooks's war novel. Her novel arose out of her own experiences of wars of all kinds in the Middle East, Northeast Africa and in the Balkans. It is human intelligence (to use Toni Morrison's phrase) and novelistic intelligence (to use James Wood's term) that the author brings to the facts, and to their experience, to create truth and authenticity in fiction.

Earlier generations of expatriate novelists such as Henry Handel Richardson found inspiration in Europe. Stead, Hazzard and Keneally also found inspiration in the range of places they lived and worked, and used those places as settings for their novels. In their fiction they made major contributions to world literature, and particularly to historical fiction. Peter Carey and Geraldine Brooks are celebrated expatriate authors who have lived in the United States for many years. Both of them have weighed into American history in their fiction, achieving considerable attention and acclaim, and their novels query established narratives of American national self-definition. Brooks's historical fiction builds upon her training as a foreign correspondent, writing primarily for an American readership. Her publishing career has been shaped in the US and she continues to set her fiction beyond Australia, while her extraordinary novels await close attention from Australian critics.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The research for this article was funded by the Australian–American Fulbright Commission under the auspices of the Senior Scholar Program. Anne Pender was hosted by Harvard University in 2018.

**NOTES**

[1] Tony Horwitz died on 27 May 2019.

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