

Distant Context, Local Colour: Australian ‘post September 11’ Fiction

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INTRODUCTION: SEPTEMBER 11 AND AFTER

In the (almost) decade since the attacks on New York and Washington a number of novels have emerged that report on, respond to or are inflected by that day’s events and its consequences. These works, by authors from across the literary spectrum, add to the existing libraries of stories sparked by critical and/or traumatic events: the Shoah, the effects of apartheid, the dispossession of peoples in colonized regions, and the whole sad story of abuse and oppression that marks human history.

Viewed from the perspective of the broader history of traumatic events, it can seem remarkable that 11 September 2001, however shocking the events of that day, has received so much literary attention. Although the attacks lasted only hours, and resulted in comparatively limited death and destruction, the effects have been global in their reach. In the days immediately following the attacks, media commentators insisted that the world had changed,¹ and there is some validity to this assertion. Though parts of the world remain untouched, in many places the effects have been profound. For we who live in the privileged west, the changes have mainly been experienced by our military forces, who have been deployed in the Middle East for several years now. For civilians, the changes have primarily manifested in the form of increased inconvenience and surveillance during international air travel, though some individuals have also suffered the suspension of their civil liberties in the interests of ‘security’. For members of the Muslim community in the west and elsewhere, the changes have been felt far more personally and intrusively, from the direct assault on communities in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the escalating levels of suspicion directed towards people marked as ‘Muslim’. In many ways the world is again divided along religious lines, and the events initiated by the 11 September attacks continue to cast a shadow: in the intractable wars across the Middle East and Central Asia; in social discourses and attitudes; and in the legislative instruments that came into being as a direct consequence of the war on terror. John Frow writes:

the events of 9/11 did indeed inaugurate a genuine historical break which has transformed the conduct of politics throughout the Western world in ways that push us beyond the informing values of modernity. What seems to change after 9/11 is the apparent permanence of the organisation of the modern state around secular and pluralistic Enlightenment principles.

This is a distressing ‘transformation’, because governments in Australia, the US and Britain, though couching their activities in the language of ‘freedom’, have put in place a package of laws that permit remarkable intrusions on citizens’ freedom. They also enable the suspension of normal practice, such as habeas corpus, or freedom of expression and association. This social and legal transformation is critically traced in the two novels that are the subject of this essay: Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown*

Terrorist, and Andrew McGahan's *Underground*. These are flawed but fascinating books, worth attention not only for their content and form, but also as instances of what may be called 'post September 11' novels.

'Post September 11 fiction' is the name given by many to what, in the first decade of the 21st century, has come to be seen as a new genre. Jo Lampert (2004), Benjamin Bird (2007), Kristiaan Versluys (2009) and many other critics and commentators have made use of this phrase to describe the literature that emerged in the wake of, and responded to, the events of that day. It is a name that I suspect will prove to be imprecise and hence impermanent: Linda Kauffman notes, perhaps cheekily, that 'Don DeLillo has been writing 9/11 novels for thirty years' (Kauffman 652). DeLillo is not the only one, and I suspect this apparently new genre will become a sub-form of that much wider group of novels that address marginality, trauma and human rights: what Jonathan Franzen characterises as 'the literature of emergency' (Franzen 108).

September 11 did not seem, initially, to be particularly generative of fiction. Though poems, plays and nonfiction appeared almost immediately, even within a few years of the event there had not been a flood of fiction, and nor did the handful of novels written about the event receive much positive attention from reviewers. Perhaps novelists found it difficult to craft an entry point to the narrative world that September 11 affords (see Webb 2009); perhaps the mass of visual material from that day rendered fiction redundant. In late September 2007 Bob Minzesheimer wrote, in *USA Today*:

Six years after the twin towers fell, enough non-fiction has been published about Sept. 11, 2001, to fill an entire section of a bookstore: 1,036 titles, according to Books in Print. But novels inspired by 9/11 could fit on one shelf. There are only about 30, and none has seized the public imagination.

There are far more than 30 novels available now,² nearly three years after Minzesheimer's account. In Australia alone the number of novels that can be included in this list is approaching 30. Nathanael O'Reilly in 2009 counted 22 Australian adult novels published since 2001 that take terrorism as their theme (O'Reilly 295); a year later I counted 29.³ Despite the rapid increase in relevant titles, and the fact that many of the biggest names in fiction have had a stab at a post September 11 novel, the books have, by and large, enjoyed at best uneven critical reception. This may be because the form demands certain breaches of the conventions of fiction. Reviewer Magdalena Ball, for instance, wrote in her review of an Australian post September 11 novel, 'One of the key objections I had to Richard Flanagan's last novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, was that it put the ideology first: making a political point at the expense of the characters and the plot'.

Similar criticisms are made in a number of reviews of other novels in the genre, including those by luminaries such as Don DeLillo or John Updike. This is despite the fact that, at least as I read them, few of the novels in fact 'put the ideology first'. Apart from a handful—such as Chris Cleave's *Incendiary* or Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*—novels in this genre tend to focus on the sufferings of individuals, on individual experiences of and responses to the attacks and their aftermath, and on the changed sense of being in the world. While their context is

political, set as they are within the Big Picture of national and international politics, their *content* is more likely to focus on small, localized stories. So perhaps the problem is either that reviewers expect a novel that truly clarifies this changed world, and offers a way forward; or else that the novelists perhaps raced into production before they had fully digested and objectified their experiences of and responses to this transformative moment.

THE AUSTRALIAN SCENE

This possible haste and lack of clarity can be understood when considering novelists based in the USA or the UK, nations that have been attacked on home ground, or novelists based in nations in the thick of the consequences, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. These writers are very close to the events they depict in their novels. But Australian authors have also contributed books to the list despite the fact that Australia has, government discourse to the contrary, been relatively free of the turmoil caused by September 11. What has happened to us has (mostly) happened outside the borders of this country: Australians caught up in the Bali or London bombings, Australian 'terrorists' captured in the American net, Australians trapped in the Twin Towers, Australians in the war zones ... But we live in a globalised world, and so though our stories may remain inflected by the local context, they will necessarily be informed by global events.

Richard Carr claims that, 'The terrorist has become a familiar figure and terrorism a common referent in recent Australian writing' (63), but in fact there have been comparatively few Australian novels that explicitly address the global 'war on terror' or that incorporate the figure of the terrorist. The figures I note above about the numbers of 'terrorism' novels published in Australia in recent years represent a comparatively small percentage of all Australian books. Further, publishers I interviewed in 2004 and 2005 about writing and human rights told me they had not observed any (post September 11) increase in submissions of fiction manuscripts that deal with global human rights abuses (see Webb and Williams 2008). Indeed, one book publisher told me that, of the few received, 'I've rejected them on the basis that politics changes, and books like that have very short shelf lives'.

It may be that the comparatively small number of novels in Australia and abroad that directly engage the 'war on terror' can be related to the refusal of publishers to contract them; it may be that there has not yet been time for authors to digest the information and its emotional context, and produce a well written novel; it may be that the critical events will for the most part be packaged within a story of broader or longer concern than the current issues. In fact, one senior editor from a major publishing house told me that although he received few or no submissions of 'war on terror' novels, Australian authors regularly write about what he called the 'tried and true' human rights issues of immigration and racism. Such stories do, of course, reflect and often interrogate the political context; few Australians would have forgotten the 2001 election campaign when the Howard government on the one hand demonised both the Iraq and the Afghanistan governments for their abuse of their people, and at the same time demonised the boatload of refugees from those very countries who sailed into Australian waters to seek asylum (Schirato and Webb 2003).

Although the issue has long been off the boil in media terms, it remains current for at least some authors. In 2003 David Marr offered a passionate plea to writers of fiction to take such issues on board in their work, saying:

So few Australian novels—now I take my life in my hands—address in worldly, adult ways the country and the time in which we live. It's no good ceding that territory to people like me—to journalists. ... Even the best journalism dies because so much journalism is written in the air. But fiction lives—an essential in a country with a dramatically short attention span. Where is our passion for reconciliation and the republic? All gone. How long can we remain passionate about refugees—and what our treatment of these people tell us about the mood and temper of this country? Probably not long.

Australian novelists have shown that they have not forgotten the 2001 election campaign, and that they are indeed 'passionate about refugees' and their treatment, detained in what amount to prisons in isolated parts of the country, or held off-shore under the so-called Pacific Solution. Linda Jaivin's *Infernal Optimist* (2006), Eva Sallis' *The Marsh Birds* (2005), Robert Drewe's *Grace* (2005) and Tom Keneally's *The Tyrant's Novel* (2004) all directly engage official failures to deliver human rights to those seeking refuge; all provide characters, names, lives and identities to people often subsumed under the catch-all term 'boat people'. So, although the 'problem' of asylum seekers long predates 2001, the current context of that problem is both of the moment, and 'tried and true'.

The current context of the problem in the 2000s is one created by the actions of governments on a global scale. The tide of people fleeing into exile as a direct result of contemporary conflicts, and being treated badly by governments (including Australia) who are signatories to the United Nations Convention and later Protocol relating to the status of refugees, is a direct result of the 'war on terror'. Given this, it may be difficult, or even meaningless, to separate out the stories of immigration, asylum and racism from the category of post September 11 novels. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will for the moment discuss only 'terrorism' novels under the rubric of post September 11 novels, and suggest that, in such works, Australian writers can carve out a democratic and local space to discuss, represent and account for contemporary states of emergency, catastrophe and disaster. I say 'democratic' and 'local' because arguably one of the most significant fallouts from September 11 was a sustained assault on the idea of a global agora; not only was the world striated into social, ethnic and religious spaces, but spaces for the encounter of ideas, argument and politics were closed off. This was when the irresistible force of the terrorist met the immovable object of government forces, with ordinary people caught in between. It occurred again when the self-avowedly democratic governments turned on their own populations as well as on those of other nations, silenced genuine debate, and effectively shut down the agora. This is not to say that they demanded silence, but rather that the new discursive regimes made it clear that some things were better not said. This was managed sometimes by legislation, sometimes by segregating those who said the wrong things, and often by filling up the space with words, with what Michel Foucault has called 'the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse' (Foucault 229) emanating from the media and from government offices.

The novels that comprise the sub-genre of post September 11 fiction, to varying degrees, attempt to pry open the agora and reinvigorate public debate. A non-exhaustive list of relevant works includes Janette Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations for the Plague* (2003) and *Orpheus Lost* (2007); Steven Lang's *An Accidental Terrorist* (2005); Andrew McGahan's *Underground* and Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (both 2006); and, in 2007, Adib Khan's *Spiral Road* and Adrian d'Hage's *The Beijing Conspiracy*. These books are very different from each other in story, point of view and characterization, though generally speaking, their authors write in a local 'accent' about how Australia is touched and framed by broader forces. Significantly, none offers a representation of the events that would have seemed most likely to trigger Australian post September 11 writing: the attack on the Twin Towers, the London bombings, and the Bali bombings. Khan's novel investigates secret wars and secret alliances, mainly in Bangladesh, with a Bangladeshi Australian as the protagonist. Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost* also treats secret wars, this time those in which the US is involved, and is focalized in part through a musician who grew up in an idyllic family home in the rain forests of northern Queensland. Adrian d'Hage (a writer with a long military career behind him) takes on al-Qaeda and bioterrorism, and focuses on the US and China rather than home-based problems; and Lang's story—set in the 1980s, in the New South Wales rainforests—is only provisionally included in this list by virtue of its publication date and the terrorism theme.

The two novels that are the subject of this essay differ from the other Australian texts and from most other novels in the category. They are different from their Australian counterparts because they are set entirely in Australia; they are different from others in the genre because of their explicitly political angle, and the accusations they direct at the Australian political system. For Flanagan and McGahan, the sources of terror are not the outsiders, the Muslims, the suicide bombers. Rather, they are us—the indifferent, the democratically complacent; and our governments, whom we have allowed to become monsters. I have not seen this attitude represented much in the other post September 11 novels, at least those written in Western democracies. Flanagan and McGahan offer a view of western governments—*our* governments—not as defenders of freedom or protectors of the rule of law but as organizations that, to use Frow's phrasing, manifest a 'contempt for the rule of law and for rational policy formation'.

Interestingly, and as Andrew McCann points out, these two books are affiliated with popular rather than literary fiction: 'They are ... stories of political awakening embedded in popular genres and idioms' (McCann 54). While the event of September 11 is increasingly appearing in novels from across the fictional spectrum, the majority of the works published in the last nine years that received critical attention have been expressly 'literary' novels. They have, however, made use of some of the conventions associated with popular fiction, and especially with the thriller genre; something I suspect may have been a canny move on the part of the authors to improve the marketability of their books. This would be a very reasonable move on their part, given the context Mark Davis describes in his analysis of Australian book publishing, which shows a rapid decline in the numbers of literary novels published locally—from 60 in 1996 to 32 in 2004 (Davis 95).⁴ Possibly the design of the narratives, along with the marketing and dissemination of the novels, was a deliberate strategy to broaden the readership beyond that of the usual consumers of literary fiction. But neither novel fully complies with the thriller genre; they show their hand, they spend

too much time with the protagonist involved in introspection, and they wear their politics on their sleeve. As O'Reilly argues, they 'expose and interrogate the interdependent relationship between governments, the media, and terrorism, while critiquing the use of terrorism by governments and the media to exert, maintain, and increase power' (296). This changes them from the sort of novel that is designed primarily to pass the time, to the sort of novel that is designed as something to think with, something explicitly involved with public life and public critique.

Both novels are extraordinary archives of a period of Australian, and global, history, and infused with what I can only read as rage, and outrage. Both have attracted considerable negative comment from reviewers. John Tague, reviewing Flanagan's novel for the *Independent*, writes, 'This is a bitter polemic brimming with a disbelieving contempt for the cynical manoeuvring of those in authority' and goes on to name it 'a blunt work, often flawed'. McGahan's novel too has its problems of reception: Cath Keneally, writing for the *Australian*, complains, 'It ain't subtle, it ain't even-handed, it's a call to arms, plainly intended as a boot up the backside', while James Ley in the *Sydney Morning Herald* calls it 'McGahan's most problematic and least satisfying work to date'. While I identify more positive qualities in the novels than do many of the reviewers, I agree that they are not their authors' best books; but I would nonetheless argue, with O'Reilly, that they contribute to a heightened awareness of the world within which we live. Bruce Bennett writes, in his Cook's Tour of the Australian war on terror novels:

Because stealth and secrecy are hallmarks of the burgeoning activity in espionage and terrorism, it behoves us to read and discuss this new fiction with a view to better imagining and interpreting the clandestine conflicts of our time. (Bennett 19)

In each of these books, a scenario is crafted which dramatically forces into the light the clandestine games being played by government. They thus offer something that can really only be found in fiction. That is what Denis Dutton refers to as the 'decoupling mechanisms that isolate real from pretend worlds' (108), which affords a space between actuality and storytelling, a safe space from which both writers and readers can find 'a view to better imagining and interpreting': can reflect on and narrate real events. Each of these novels, warts and all, provide just this effect and hence this safe space.

FLANAGAN'S DOLL

Let me start with *The Unknown Terrorist*, a local rendering of Heinrich Böll's 1974 novel, *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*. Most reviewers I have read have been, like me, left or left leaning, and strongly in favour of the overarching theme of the novel: that the media and political systems have captured our attention; that we have, just as Adorno warned, been turned into cultural dupes; that our focus is on getting and having, and not on being or giving. But this sympathy does not mean the critics have enjoyed the book: they don't hesitate to point out its flaws. And they are many.

The novel can be read as a disquisition on love and the absence of love. Also in cameo form we meet terror, sexual exploitation, racism and cupidity; and as this concatenation of nouns suggests, this makes for an often-incoherent narrative. After a

somewhat chaotic preface that identifies Jesus as the world's first suicide bomber, the story moves to the last few days in the life of Gina Davis, a young woman known as The Doll. She is a pole dancer in King's Cross, and as the novel is primarily focalized through her, readers come to know her well. There is little to admire about her. She is unabashedly racist ('slimy Lebs I really hate' (11)), despite the fact that she seems to be what the media call 'of middle Eastern appearance'.⁵ She is entirely cupidinous, in the original meaning of the word—from the Latin *cupiditās*, eager, desirous—eager, desirous of wealth, to the point that:

Each night after work she would play out the same ritual: shower, retrieve the silk batik bag from the ceiling, lie on her bed and begin covering her naked body with her hundred-dollar notes. (57)

But it is not money for its own sake that she desires: she is touchingly modest in her ambitions. What the money will deliver is the ability to buy a nice apartment filled with designer goods, to go to university, to get a good job. These are quite innocent longings, and entirely in line with contemporary social values.

After picking up a young man named Tariq at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, despite her previously avowed racism, she spends a night of exhilarating sex with him, but he disappears the next day. It transpires that he has been murdered and, since he is Egyptian, he is easily cast as a terrorist by those in authority. In fact he is only an IT expert and a small time drug runner, but this is the way the police, secret services, media and organized crime (in an unholy alliance) choose to play it. For government forces, this is an important move in the game of maintaining public vigilance: as an ASIO official states, late in the novel, 'The terrorists want to turn all our cities into Baghdad. It's bloody frightening, Tony, and people need to be frightened' (271).

The effect on the Doll is profound: her association with Tariq, however fleeting, means she too is identified as a terrorist. The fact that she once performed as the burqah-clad Black Widow in an erotic dance lends a shaky credence to this. In a plot that involves appallingly venal media and government representatives and unlikely coincidences, she careens from one bad decision to another, confronted at each step by the combined xenophobia and indifference of the public, and her increasing awareness that she too is part of that cruel public. Finally—so effective is the production of this woman as terrorist—she performs the role; she steals a gun and murders the journalist who has stage-managed the event. She is then herself shot when a police officer, who was racing to save her from herself, is tackled by the club bouncer, drops his gun, and it accidentally fires. By the magic of fiction the bullet is on precisely the right trajectory to hit her, and she dies.

I did not find myself particularly moved by her accidental death. The novel is driven by an improbable 'Perils of Pauline' story arc⁶ as the Doll lurches from crisis to crisis, which makes it difficult to empathise with her. Besides, her death has not deprived her of much. The Sydney of this novel is depraved and debased; nothing about it charms, not even the beautiful beach which nearly drowns the little son of her best—her only—friend, and is itself marred by 'the outfall sewage frothing to a latte on distant points' (11). The streets are contaminated with filth, old women piss in the gutters, homeless men are battered by passing thugs, and Muslims are publicly reviled (by the Doll herself as well as by other citizens). Virtually every character is either damaged

or vile. The elites are empty, self-absorbed and predatory: 'Like reptiles waiting to strike, they gazed out on Australia, unable to see anything' (25); the poor and the middle classes are ignorant and selfish; government officials are corrupt and corrupting, and the media lack all integrity. The shock-jock journalist Richard Cody is particularly repulsive. Even his penis is horrible: a fellow pole dancer who had sex with him tells the Doll he had 'a flat fat cock like a crushed Coke can' (49). The Doll's biography would have led her to expect nothing more than this debased, abusive and unpleasantly sexualized world: she was abandoned by her mother and sexually molested by her father. She suffered the stillbirth of her only son, worked in a profession that the narrator suggests is humiliating, lived on the edge of organized crime, found and then lost a possible love, was publicly vilified and hounded, and finally felt herself betrayed by her best friend.

This material is thickly laid on, to the extent that, as Oscar Wilde said about the death of Little Nell, you'd need a heart of stone not to laugh. Tague excuses the flaws he identifies on the grounds that the world of fiction has been taken over by the mass media, and perhaps Flanagan's narrator is simply turning the tables by making the media the villain of this tale. Simon Butler of the *Green Left Weekly*, like John Tague, finds himself driven to forgive the novel's flaws on the grounds that

in an era of blatant government racism and relentless media hypocrisy to demand Australian novelists only reflect on this with a non-committal subtlety is at best unconsciously ironic and at worst down right mischievous. ... It is left up to the novel's readers to make sure a different kind of Australia is built.

The 'kind of Australia' that presently obtains is, surely, the focus of this story. Richard Carr asserts that post September 11 novels on terrorism 'entered a world attuned to the destructive potential of the terrorist and wary of the terrorist desire to wreak and skill at wreaking havoc' (63). If this is true, then the Australian novels available to date by and large look critically at that wary world, and offer a different perspective on it. Both *The Unknown Terrorist* and *Underground* hold society to account for what has happened in our culture, and to our people. Flanagan makes this explicit during a 2006 interview with Kerry O'Brien where he says: 'We [Australians] are more frightened, we are more frightening, we are less free, we are more unjust, we are more callous' (O'Brien). Flanagan's Doll discovers empathy, and realises the effects of racism and abuse, only when she becomes the target of these actions and attitudes, and too late to atone or to make any changes. So, *pace* Butler, perhaps it is not feasible to ask individuals to rebuild Australia, but rather to use stories to shed light on the lies and machinations of government forces, on the grounds that the sudden visibility of what was designed to be secret will force social change.

The novel itself sheds light on the current legal situation, by drawing attention to the National Security Information (Criminal Proceedings) Bill 2004, the Anti-Terrorism Act 2005, and similar legislative articles. When these were first proposed in parliament, there was a flurry of media attention, but before long they faded into the background, leaving unobserved a staggeringly broad and excessive set of powers, whereby almost any of us could be branded a terrorist or advocate of terrorism for the most innocent or trivial actions or words, with little or no legal recourse. In *The Unknown Terrorist*, these laws are brought to bear without evidence and without

justice on the Doll and her friend Wilder, and their lives are lost (the Doll) or damaged (Wilder) in the process, without publicity, remedy or recourse.

Richard Carr does not see this sort of silencing and abuse as something particularly new in Australian culture. He writes:

a truth about this post-9/11 Australia [is that] the terrorist threat, the increased security, the government alerts, the suspicion directed against anyone or anything perceived as anti-Australian—all is based on lies. ... Reaching back to its origins, modern Australia has grown and thriven on various sets of lies. The New and the Old Australia are perhaps not so different after all. (65-66)

However, I would argue that at least in these two novels we can see something new: the use of legislation alongside the lies to contain and control citizens, even in the absence of any material threat to the security or stability of the nation, and all grounded on an appropriation of what remains still a foreign matter: terrorism and the war on terror.

MCGAHAN'S RESISTANCE

Underground is a heavy-handed, often very funny satire about the politics of nation in a geopolitical world. It is over-the-top dramatic: as one reviewer writes, 'parts of [it] read as if Matthew Reilly had suddenly and miraculously discovered how to write competent prose' (Ley). However, it cannot be dismissed as a page turner or 'mere' satire. Nathanael O'Reilly, in an essay that relies extensively on Slavoj Žižek's thesis about the current era of 'terror' (Žižek 2002), reads *Underground*—as do I—as 'an extremely serious and political novel' despite its absurdism (301). Its serious and political note are visible not least in its setting: in an ugly world, ten years after the September 11 attacks, and in an Australia that has become a police state in thrall to America. The country is dotted with prison camps, parts of each city have been transformed into Muslim ghettos, citizens have set up patriotic movements complete with flags, songs, uniforms and rallies; and, because of the politics of the country, Australia has become a pariah in the international sports community: no one but the Americans will play cricket against the Australian team, providing opportunities for some good farcical scenes.

The novel is narrated by Leo James, the laconic but dissolute twin brother of the Australian prime minister, a John Howard clone. It opens on the Queensland coast in mid-cyclone—a cyclone that is named Yusef, suggesting in the satirical voice of this work that even the weather represents Muslim-as-threat. Leo, three sheets to the wind in both alcoholic and meteorological terms, escapes a shoddily built hotel (one of his less successful investment properties) that is being torn apart by sea and wind, only to be kidnapped by the followers of New Islam. He is then rescued by the federal police who turn out to be an execution squad; and re-rescued by the Oz Underground. Saved with him is his kidnapper, a vicious young woman, a rabid neo-Muslim who has taken the name Aisha, perhaps the most confrontational name she could have chosen. She tells Leo that she murdered her own middle class parents, and will unhesitatingly slaughter anyone else who crosses the path of the group New Islam. She is utterly devoted to what she believes to be the will of the Messiah Osama bin Laden, but fails

to follow Muslim religious or cultural dictates, and will shoot down ordinary Muslims if they get in her way. With Harry, an immigration officer *cum* member of the Oz Underground resistance movement, they career across the country, leaving many bodies in their wake: the Hervey Bay chapter of Oz Underground who help them escape from Queensland are rounded up; the Melbourne Muslim ghetto comes under a savage assault; in their escape through the desert, they shoot down a small army troop who were guarding a group of Muslim refugees, and leave the refugees to die. This is a movement whose heart may be in the right place, but which is so clumsy, so outgunned and so under-informed that it has no hope of success: every attempt fails; everyone dies. At the end, Aisha is killed by bin Laden, Harry by the troops guarding Canberra airport, and we leave Leo waiting for the arrival of his execution squad. He is not shot down with his companions, but brought in for interrogation (torture), and imprisoned, ironically, in the House of Representatives.

At this point the story loses its satirical tone, and shifts to tragedy. Between bouts with his interrogators, Leo writes down his story, in the hopes that the future will be different, and that the record he leaves will have a reading. He also reads Hansard: 'Miserable fucking reading that is, believe me. Although I *do* read it' (292). It is, after all, the only material available to him. And in reading the record of parliamentary debate, the old politicians come alive to him: 'their ghosts may be heard. They don't sound happy' (293). They remind him that the vast Australian public is the foundation not only for Parliament, but for democracy; and that it has a history that is, in some ways, admirable: a history currently obscured by government lies. His pending death, by the direct command of his own twin brother and in front of an Australian firing squad is, of course, a heavy symbol of the death of democracy in Australia. But just as we leave him still (barely) alive, so too we leave Australian democracy still (if barely) alive—there is an element of hope. Leo dies with a degree of honour; he refuses to buy into his brother's game; and he has both embarrassed and frightened his brother and the system of power he embodies. Leo will not beg for mercy, and will not play on his brother's team, and in this his death takes on some small meaning.

But perhaps the only real hope in this story is found in the characters of an Indigenous family, drug dealers, who rescue Leo, Aisha and Harry, and help them move on to their next rendezvous, and who, the narrative suggests, are going to be just fine, being part of a community of people who have been in the country of tens of thousands of years, and haven't been destroyed yet. This draws attention to two very differing relationships with, or perspectives on, history: the long tradition of Indigenous culture, and the frenetic, erratic culture of the west. Harry, Aisha and Leo engage with contemporary events as though they are all that requires our attention—and as though they require all our attention. This, I suggest, positions history as something that is manufactured by contemporary actors, and that judges our actions. But the members of the Indigenous family seem, by contrast, simply to be getting on with life, providing an alternative view—that history is not a system of judgment, but rather a series of events that happen in time and place. Their approach allows capital H History to flow around them, in all the busyness and drama of current events, and effectively limits the impact of contemporary discourses and practices on their lives. The implication, in this scene, is that their interests and concerns, being both more quotidian and more focused on the long term than are Leo's, Harry's or Aisha's, will survive the nightmare that is contemporary Australia.

James Ley identifies 'an interesting nationalistic lament running through *Underground*: how could a country that turned Ned Kelly into a folk hero accept the systematic corroding of its freedoms?' This is a lament that could equally apply to *The Unknown Terrorist*, but the blame for this corrosion of freedoms is apportioned differently in the two novels. In *The Unknown Terrorist*, every member of society is devoid of merit; everyone is shit. In *Underground*, there is considerable indifference (like the Doll, Leo is forced to recognize his own complicity with the state of things, and his own lack of compassion for others), but they are not all beyond redemption. McGahan's narrator is far more tender towards ordinary people than is Flanagan's. It may be true that the ordinary people of Australia have let this catastrophe come among us but, as Leo's experience with the Oz Underground shows, and as his reading of Hansard suggests, it is those same ordinary people who resist the repressive regime, in many cases to death. The Australia of *Underground* is a society worth defending; the Australia of *The Unknown Terrorist* might just as well be washed into the sea.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan Franzen wrote, 'One frequent problem with the literature of emergency is that it doesn't age well' (Franzen 109), and this may well be the fate of post September 11 novels. There are very obvious craft problems evident in both *The Unknown Terrorist* and *Underground*: both tend toward cliché; both seem to rely more on their anger than on the production of a satisfying narrative. But both put on record something important about Australia and western politics more broadly in the age of the 'war on terror': that the government has gone terribly wrong. It was the Australian government that nuked Canberra in *Underground*, and that funded and directed terrorist groups like the New Islam; in *The Unknown Terrorist*, it was Australian government forces that set off bombs at Homebush to elevate the terror levels. This culture of lies and repression is, for O'Reilly and Vernay, perhaps impossible to resist: 'There is not much citizens can do about this situation', they argue, because 'security, which requires transparency and information tampering, is invariably gained at the expense of privacy and personal freedom' (O'Reilly and Vernay 5). But what these novels point out is the risk that the drive for security will be accompanied not only by secrecy, but also by blatant abuse. Both the Doll and Leo seem to realize that they are living under Bateson's theory of the double bind (Bateson *et al.*), where the call to law and order is accompanied by the overthrow of law and order; there is no way out, for either character, and thus they are, finally, tragic characters in tragic novels. But their stories in these novels put on the record—and on trial—an important feature of recent Australian culture, and for a while at least they will act as accounts of that time.

Let me leave the last words on this topic to Andrew McGahan, who writes:

normally I'd be wary of being so overtly political with a novel. But this no longer seems the time to be polite or indirect in fiction, or to be artfully diffident. It's time to confront the danger of what's going on here, head on. ... there are horrible pitfalls into which we could stray, if we aren't careful. (McGahan, 'On Writing *Underground*' 2)

NOTES

¹ This is, in fact, the header for a website titled *The archives of global change in the 21st century*, <<http://www.september11news.com/>> (accessed 23 October 2009).

Interestingly, while the western media in the early days following the attacks on the World Trade Centre wrote of 'the day the world changed', more recent texts speak more personally and more privately of 'the day our world changed', acknowledging perhaps that the world has kept turning, and life and trade and human activity have continued, and in many parts of the world have been untouched by that epochal event.

² A list of novels (written in English) in this category includes these 35, here in chronological order: 2002: Iain Banks, *Dead Air*; 2003: Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*; Lawrence Block, *Small Town*; William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*; Joyce Maynard, *The Usual Rules*; Tom Robbins, *Villa Incognito*; Janette Turner Hospital, *Due Preparations for the Plague*; 2004: Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*; Ian McEwan, *Saturday*; 2005: Paul Auster, *Brooklyn Follies*; Chris Cleave, *Incendiary*; Michael Cunningham, *Specimen Days*; Nick McDonell, *The Third Brother*; Reynolds Price, *The Good Priest's Son*; Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*; Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *The Writing on the Wall*; Ronald Sukenick, *Last Fall*; 2006: Richard Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*; Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; Ken Kalfus, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country: A Novel*; David Llewellyn, *Eleven*; Andrew McGahan, *Underground*; Jay McInerney, *The Good Life*; Claire Messud, *The Emperor's Children*; Philip Roth, *Everyman*; John Updike, *Terrorist*; Jess Walter, *The Zero*; 2007: Adrian d'Hage, *The Beijing Conspiracy*; Don DeLillo, *Falling man: a novel*; William Gibson, *Spook Country*; Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; Abid Khan, *Spiral Road*; Janette Turner Hospital, *Orpheus Lost*; 2008: John Le Carre, *A Most Wanted Man*; 2009: Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland*. There are more, of course. The bulge in 2005 and 2006 is interesting, in that it indicates both the gestation time for a novel about critical events, and the fairly short shelf life of the sub-genre. While novels continue to be written whose plots are inflected by the post September 11 world, increasingly the actual events are simply mentioned; the interest of the story is elsewhere. That is to say, the attacks on New York and Washington have become just a part of the history that might colour the plot of a novel, rather than being the feature of the story.

³ In O'Reilly's lists, taken from AustLit in 2009, there were 7 'literary' novels and 15 genre (mainly thriller) novels; my lists (from a search dated 2 April 2010) showed 7 'literary' novels and 21 genre (mainly thriller) novels. However the classification is a bit arbitrary; both McGahan's *Underground* and Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations for the Plague* are recorded as thrillers when they could equally be counted as literary fiction.

⁴ I should acknowledge here that David Carter (2001) tells a different story, because he reflects not on the numbers of titles published, but on Australian book culture. In his analysis, there has been since the mid-1990s an increase in the production and visibility of literary texts by authors he identifies as public intellectuals, a 'developing audience for certain modes of interiority and of aesthetic experience' and 'a taste for books that deal (stylishly) with "issues"'.

⁵ When we first meet the Doll we are told she is 'a small, dark woman, her fine-featured faced and almond eyes ... set off by woolly black hair' (5); her looks are 'exotic' (6), her voice has a 'suggestion of Lebanese and Greek-Australian about the edges of its ululating vowels' (10); her skin 'would turn cinnamon' in the sun (38);

and the manager of the strip house where she works 'milked the exotic appeal of the Doll with various special routines: the Belle of Andalusia; the Harem Dancer; but most successfully for American marines and army groups, as the Black Widow' where she began her dance 'in a long black dress and hijab' (40-41); that is, she looks like the very ethnic groups she despises.

⁶ *The Perils of Pauline* was a long running movie serial that dates from about 1914; Pauline is the quintessential damsel in distress, facing certain danger in every episode, constantly being rescued only to fall into the next disaster.

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