

More than ‘Rotten Apples’: Australian Literature and the Possibility of Redemption for Men Who Abuse

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There are important parallels in the development of therapy and literature, in their shared commitment to understanding even that which may be considered monstrous. It is my contention in this essay that some Australian novels contribute significantly to the invitational, narrative and feminist approaches that seek to understand and then to prevent the epidemic of male violence towards women and children.

Invitational therapeutic practices, developed by Alan Jenkins, and narrative therapeutic approaches, created by Michael White, emerged in Australia in the mid-1980s, challenging popular assumptions that men who used violence sought only power and control (Jenkins, White). Rather, Jenkins and White developed therapeutic practices that supported men to ‘discover their own preferences and capacities for respectful ways of being and relating’ (Jenkins 163). These therapeutic practices use the metaphor of storytelling to help men explore their intentions for safe and respectful relationships (Wendt *et al.* 8). The use of holistic and non-judgmental storytelling distinguishes invitational and narrative practices from more punitive or psychological therapies. It evidences an important world view that supports hope and justice for every individual, regardless of their transgressions. This worldview prefers understanding to contempt, and compassion to condemnation. A similar worldview has helped contemporary Australian literary authors express the disconnected local male voice in ways that individual men often cannot, particularly when they are viewed as only the sum of their violence.

Here I examine the parallels between invitational and narrative therapeutic approaches and selected contemporary Australian novels and short stories notable for how they have developed contextual understanding about how individual men are recruited into dominant and coercive practices towards women and children. These texts are Sofie Laguna’s *The Eye of the Sheep* (2014); Zoe Morrison’s *Music and Freedom* (2016); Richard Flanagan’s *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997); Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) and Christos Tsiolkas’s short story, ‘Merciless Gods,’ that appeared in *Merciless Gods* (2014). These literary works offer important observations about the nature of therapeutic and societal approaches to treating men who abuse. In different ways, each work focuses on the contradictions and complexities of flawed male protagonists and opens the possibility for understanding and redemption even after the most reprehensible acts. They explore the history of injustice in Australian society and the universality of our subjugation to dominant practices of gender, competition, and individualism.

Through a close reading of these selected Australian literary works, the essay considers what we have to learn from these contextual examinations of men’s violence, and the contributions that they make to societal and therapeutic approaches to gendered violence. It will show that these texts explore how individual men are caught up within prevailing male discourses of dominance, control, and coercion without underplaying the effects of men’s violent actions on women and children. The concepts of complicity and resistance are foundational to invitational and narrative practices that invite men to consider how they are recruited to become complicit

in dominant male discourses, but also how they resist these ideas through an ethics of fairness and respect. A contextual analysis of the conditions that support gendered violence is central to Australian literature which has focused on the idea of men's complicity as a social category rather than individual deviance, allowing for more hopeful contextualisation of men as individuals. These Australian authors avoid punitive, dichotomous descriptions of individual men in favour of personal reflexion and exploration. They suggest that a just society needs to demonstrate understanding and compassion even for those individuals who act in unjust ways.

Importantly, I also propose that fiction is able to explore the contexts of men's lives in a way that some therapeutic practitioners are reluctant to do because of their prioritisation of the safety and wellbeing of women and children. Some practitioners in men's perpetrator programs have reported ambivalence regarding the capacity of men to change, claiming that men constantly minimise their use of violence or shift the blame for their actions, showing no intent to change the behaviour that puts women and children in danger (Moss 6). This has seen some therapy with men maintain a strict focus on their violent actions, rather than exploring the broader socio-political contexts of their lives. I do not seek to challenge this approach, rather to focus the discussion on the way selected Australian novels examine acts of violence, physical and psychological, committed by men and the attendant subject positions these individuals are forced to deal with.

There is precedent for reading imaginative texts alongside therapeutic approaches. In the development of invitational practice, Jenkins cites the work of Raimond Gaita and Raewyn Connell as influencing the development of invitational practices through their contextual analyses of masculinity and the dynamic power structures that affect the individual men who abuse. Gaita and Connell were particularly supportive of Jenkins's belief in dual realities: that men can desire both power and control and connection and fairness. Significantly, both Gaita and Connell draw heavily on creative works to further their complex understandings of masculinity. Connell writes:

Imaginative work does not directly report social experience. But it builds on social experience, it documents cultural problems, and in some circumstances may be the most forceful way to present a troubled reality. (202)

In the context of my work with invitational and narrative therapeutic approaches, I will stress how these novels might be read as advocating for a respectful and contextual understanding of each individual man. I will suggest that we need parallel political journeys of respect for men who abuse and the therapists who work with them.

Complicity and Restraint

In *Becoming Ethical: A Parallel, Political Journey with Men Who Have Abused*, psychologist Alan Jenkins cited the post-structural philosophy of Michel Foucault to describe how modern power structures privilege practices of dominance, entitlement and the abdication of responsibility (7). Jenkins went on to say that there are many invitations within our culture for men to learn to privilege their own needs in ways that objectify and minimise women and children. This practice of inferior subjectification was previously seen as a tactic to uphold gendered power. By contrast, invitational practice was based on the understanding that men become complicit in dominant practices of masculinity through control, aggression, and abuse, but resistant when they preference safety, care and connection. Such a viewpoint assumes that every man prefers to participate in mutually caring relationships with women and children. This

can be contrasted with psychological deficit theories which assumes that men perpetrate violence because of psychological or biological deviance. Jenkins posited that men who engage in violence are practicing over-conformity rather than deviance (7). These men may feel obliged to obtain the unconditional respect of female partners or children, and its absence may lead them to withhold or minimise opportunities for their female partners or children to *relate* to them—to hold opinions, to criticise, or to exercise their own choice in financial, social or sexual matters. Jenkins worked with men to examine dominant understandings of what it means to be a man, and how these societal messages may lead them towards violence and abuse. These behaviours, he suggested, stand in contrast to the kinds of fathers or partners they would like to be.

In work foundational to the field of narrative-based practices with men who abuse, social worker Michael White sought to externalise male power and abuse as a way of identifying the beliefs individual men hold that stand against this violence. He emphasised the importance of identifying the contradictions between a man's actions and his beliefs:

If there are certain strategies or attitudes to which the man has not been an accomplice, these indicate to us certain values the man holds that contradict some aspects of a culture of control/domination. These are unique outcomes. These are entry points to other possibilities. (106)

The identification of restraint in men who frequently behave in unsafe, bullying ways is oft-debated, particularly where women and children are at risk. Resonating with the development of narrative therapy as a distinctly Australian discipline, some contemporary Australian literary authors have explored the dual realities of complicity and resistance in individual men, while still focusing on the devastating effects of violence on women and children. Laguna's *The Eye of the Sheep* and Morrison's *Music and Freedom* are examples of contemporary texts that focus on the contradictions in individual men who show the capacity for love and connection, but also frequently practice violence and contempt. Both novels, in different ways, explore the possibilities of redemption for individual men through an exploration of these contradictions.

The Eye of the Sheep tells the story of Gavin Flick, a man whose actions towards his closest family are often violent and cruel. However, Laguna has spoken of a desire to create a more complex character, in this case a father figure. Discussing her character with Susan Bugg, in an interview in 2014, she said: 'I cared for and loved Dad [Gavin Flick]. I wanted to make sure he was redeemable. I thought he had all the potential in the world to be a good and present dad' (Bugg). This motivation allows Laguna to examine entry points and unique outcomes that display Gavin's acts of resistance against the violence he has known since childhood. Given that Gavin's partner pays the ultimate price for his violent actions, and that his oldest son refuses to speak to him, it would not be unusual for a therapist to experience ambivalence regarding Gavin's ability to change. Indeed, in the criminal justice system, he may have been assessed as without remorse, or monstrous. But by telling the story of Gavin through his child's eyes, Laguna humanises Gavin's constant battle between love and violence, while also examining the effects of fear, self-doubt and anxiety for his partner and child who live with his violence. This is shown particularly through Gavin's relationship with his oldest son Robby where his violence proves a permanent obstacle to the possibility of a different kind of relationship.

The day Robby left I was passing the sitting room when I saw Dad standing at the window. He held the framed photograph of him and Robby on the *Lady Free*. He didn't notice me at the door. Dad was on the *Lady Free* with Robby and the fish.

There was nobody else; just his newborn. He stood and stood with the picture gripped in his hands. (93)

Unlike Gavin Flick, Zoe Morrison's Edward Hayward is not portrayed as redeemable, although *Music and Freedom* also deals with themes of patriarchal violence and its impact on women and children. Edward uses violence and control in a more measured and linear way than Gavin Flick, here more notably as a mechanism to uphold his privileged existence as a husband, father and 1950s Oxford academic. His ruthless disregard for his wife Alice's wellbeing and his determination to dominate her are shown when he makes provision for a meagre weekly allowance for her in his will, despite their significant shared wealth and a relationship of fifty-five years. Perversely, he demonstrates brief kindnesses only after he has beaten up Alice, recalling feminist theorist Lenore Walker's notion of 'the cycle of abuse.' In *The Battered Woman*, Walker examines the kind of relationships where men claim remorse and promise to change during the 'honeymoon period' immediately following physical or sexual assault, only then to re-enact that violence again and again (Walker 92). Morrison depicts Edward Hayward as someone whose kindnesses are motivated by self-interest rather than genuine empathy, as when he intercepts Alice at the train station after she decides to leave him.

Walker's 'cycle of abuse' has been central to some feminist analyses of men's abuse as a tactic, played out in ways that deliberately keep women enslaved through the practice of inconsistent and confusing messages. However, this contrasts with invitational and narrative practices by construing men's attempts at kindness as part of an overarching strategy of domestic terrorism.¹ Whereas in Laguna's novel Gavin's incompetent attempts at connection with his wife and children appear to convey restraint, even if in embryonic form, Morrison's account of Edward's actions and motivations is more pessimistic. This is perhaps because the novel was impelled by Morrison's own research on the experiences of women in domestic and family violence shelters.² Through this work, Morrison learned first-hand the social, financial and emotional price that women and children pay for the violence of men. As she said in an interview with Michael Cathcart: 'These stories affected me deeply, they got inside me.' Morrison suggests that she sought to write a novel about a woman who loses physical, sexual, emotional and social freedom at the hands of her callous husband (ABC Radio).

Nonetheless, although Morrison is deliberately sceptical about Edward's acts of resistance, the novel also hints at a more redeemable side to his character. His initial love of Alice's piano performance appears at odds with his conservative background, one that taught him to mistrust creativity or emotion. Further, this brief period resists everything he has ever been taught. Inevitably, Alice's music becomes synonymous with the expression of her emotions and of a self beyond Edward's control, something he finds threatening and confusing. He increasingly implements control over her piano playing, determined to isolate Alice from her creativity:

He had spoken only a little of his childhood before. He told me about never really knowing his parents except as two tall, handsome figures in a grand drawing room; being paraded in front of them by different nannies when he was young and being asked questions by them. He did not seem to remember a single act of kindness from them. (99)

Over time Edward privileges his own work over Alice's creativity, until eventually he forbids her from playing the piano while he is in the house. Edward makes sense of a world that has otherwise remained a mystery to him through the proliferation of his economic rationalist theories. He contributes to dominant patriarchal traditions through spending his time with other

misogynistic male professors at Oxford, and so is both victim and perpetrator of prevailing patriarchal discourses. As Edward achieves the success he has always craved, his mistreatment of Alice becomes more pronounced. From a feminist viewpoint, his violence might be read as a tactic to conserve his authority, and to prevent the change which frightens and confuses him.

Some feminist theorists have drawn attention to how a father's responsibility is often made invisible in child protection, family law and therapeutic contexts (Humphreys and Campo). These theories discuss the unequal expectations of mothers and fathers, and how this ensures that mothers are constantly judged for their parenting, while fathers escape the same critical lens. In *Music and Freedom*, the fracturing of Alice's relationship with her son, Richard, can be read as alluding to the effects of maternal alienation commonly felt by women whose male partners use social, economic and political coercion to divide and fracture maternal relationships (Morris 414). Faced with his own inadequacies, Edward demands that Richard be sent to boarding school because he is jealous of Alice's relationship with him and suspicious of the intimacy that they share. The following passage, narrated from Alice's viewpoint, is especially significant:

I should have left then, of course, and taken Richard with me. But I worried, I doubted. I worried about Richard's future, son of a single mother, a cripple, a woman who has not got on in the world. I knew Edward would try to stop me. I worried about paying for Richard's music lessons, his books, his shoes. I worried that Edward would prevent me from seeing his son at all. I had no belief in my capacity to survive. (203)

In choosing to follow Edward's masculine blueprint Richard serves as a fascinating study in intergenerational compliance and resistance. Later, as an older woman, Alice bemoans her disconnection from him; he rarely visits and when he does, he treats her as an imposition. In fact, Richard only becomes interested in Alice when he becomes infatuated with Emily, her neighbour and friend, and Alice again becomes dispensable once she is no longer useful. Like Edward, Richard becomes a successful professional, but, pointedly, he chooses music—his mother's passion—as his profession. Now he realises that his father was an 'arsehole' (266). Richard's choice of a creative profession is symbolic of Morrison's hope that he has the capacity to be different from his father, and that Alice's connection with him has survived Edward's attempts at alienation. But Richard also retains many of Edward's traits, particularly his self-serving attitude to Alice, who he treats with respect only when he needs something, such as her permission to sell Edward's papers. As Alice observes:

But I was too frightened to tell him. Even though it was just Richard, my son, he had picked up some of Edwards' verbal style, and the similarity now unnerved me. He got more frustrated with my obfuscation and insisted I tell him what had happened, or else he would assume I was not competent, which enraged me. (264–65)

Although familiar gendered patterns emerge as Richard and Alice tentatively forge a new relationship, there are important symbolic contrasts. Alice is considerably more assertive in her dealings with Richard, enabled by a growing sense of entitlement that is in part connected to the return of her creativity.

Morrison shows the differences between Richard and Edward, particularly in Richard's ability to demonstrate compassion and connection through his music, cooking and burgeoning

relationship with Emily. Ultimately, this conveys hope for a new way of being for Richard in his relationships with women, reinforced by his new understandings of his mother and an emerging ability to feel love and compassion toward his own children. Although Morrison's story holds little hope for redemption for Edward, it does conceive of a new way of kindness and connection between women and men. Through Richard, Morrison affirms her hope that Australian society will continue to learn from the horrific experiences of women such as Alice Murray, and that creativity, love and connection will triumph over economic rationalism, conservatism and violence. In this way, what narrative therapy would describe as alternative stories are obvious in Morrison's fiction, in that men such as Richard can stand against dominant understandings of masculinity, to practise alternative relationships with women and children.

The Contexts of Men's Violence

Another way that Australian fictional representations of men's violence can be linked to contemporaneous invitational and narrative therapeutic approaches is in their attention to the socio-economic context of men's lives and in men's own history of trauma and disadvantage. In the development of invitational practices, Jenkins described 'the politics of disadvantage,' where many of his male clients recounted stories of political and economic marginalisation, racial discrimination, or child abuse. Jenkins described how these men invariably had long histories of 'being done to' (9). Both Jenkins and White became intensely curious about men's stories of disadvantage, noticing that in the retelling of these stories men would often describe their own ethics of fairness and respect. Similarly, the selected Australian authors describe men's preferences for caring relationships through a detailed exploration of their histories of social and political subjugation.

Like invitational and narrative practices, the selected Australian texts provide a position from which to view men's violence that enlarges upon earlier work with men who abuse. The difference lies in the curiosity both these mediums hold for the man's entire history, rather than only his history of violence. Early male perpetrator theory was predicated on the many thousands of women who presented to women's shelters as a result of men's violence. Men's behaviour change programs necessarily focused on the suffering of brutalised women and children and achieved hard fought victories in defining public perceptions of violence as systemic and political, rather than private and episodic. Because these programs necessarily focused on women and children, men who abused their close family were seen as a homogenous cohort who exercised power uniformly, regardless of context. That men might themselves be victims of violence from other men or experience multiple disadvantages because of their relative underprivilege was initially not considered. *The Duluth Power and Control Wheel*, for example, was developed by therapists Michael Paymer and Ellen Pence in Minnesota, as a way of holding men to account for their violent actions towards women and children. *The Duluth Model* stressed that all men exercised violence to maintain a privileged position of power with women and children, and that contextual understandings of men's personal history would distract from the primary goal of keeping women and children safe. Paymer and Pence wrote: 'We have no illusion that most men will stop their violence and give up power' (xiv). Because the Duluth approach focused solely on accountability it was not designed to explore men's history of childhood trauma, poverty or disadvantage. Rather, it took as a given that there were already many invitations accessible for men to minimise responsibility for their use of violence. Early adaptations of *The Duluth Model* had assumed moreover that all men experienced the benefits of patriarchy in uniform ways, and that all men colluded to uphold gendered power.

However, in recent decades, discourses around men's violence have borrowed from feminist understandings of how the intersection of race, culture, age, poverty and disadvantage shape women's experience of abuse. Drawing on the insights of intersectional feminism, a focus on the heterogeneity of men who abuse was developed in invitational and narrative practices to encourage men to describe the contextual significance of their own lives, their hopes and preferences for their relationships. Jenkins believed that a detailed understanding of men's own victimisation by masculine culture is critical in exploring their own ethics around fairness and compassion. He is also careful not to overlook possibilities for men to find new and hopeful ways to connect with women and children. He wrote:

When we isolate the safety of women and children as an end, we lose something about interconnectedness. There is something about the capacity to affect and be affective that is present in an interconnected world. It's like saying, ok, if this guy stops hitting people, but continues a view of contempt, is that ok? There's an interesting dilemma. It's vital we keep thinking about how we act in ways that don't attend to one problem but create another. (cited in Moss 8)

In Laguna's novel, Gavin Flick's violence is more complex than a conscious choice to exercise power over his family and the novel intricately traces its roots through his own experiences of childhood abuse and poverty. Laguna shows that not all men benefit equally from the political and economic privilege of neo-liberal Australia. While gendered violence is the ultimate expression of disrespect, the violence used by Laguna's working-class Gavin Flick is inextricably linked to the desperation of his own economic and personal hardships. His own father was violent and abusive, particularly singling out his younger brother Ray, breaking several of his ribs with his jemmy bar (113). Ray himself is now in prison in Queensland for rape and another brother, Stephen, tragically drives his car into a tree after a history of alcohol and drug misuse. This stands as a comment on the generational traumatic impact of violence. In this way, Laguna challenges readers to contemplate the obstacles Gavin faces in his attempts to act with love and compassion, given that violence and economic hardship were all he ever knew. Laguna complicates the assertion from *The Duluth Model* that violence is solely about choice by showing the intergenerational transmission of violence, maternal alienation and hardship in the Flick family.

Pop Flick the old bastard who hit them on Saturday nights and sometimes during the week until their feelings inverted, shot backwards and stole their language and drove them apart, drove them to jail, drove them into trees, drove them to Cutty Sark, split them, divided them and took them from Mother Beloved. (124)

Gavin Flick's potential as a better father than his own is displayed intermittently throughout *The Eye of the Sheep* when he takes Jimmy on a trip to the town of his youth in Queensland, or he makes him a go-cart. But the looming threat of violence is omnipresent, indistinguishable from his economically marginalised, working class history and symbolised by his green reflector jacket that hangs inexorably from the back door. Importantly, in her depiction of Gavin, Laguna avoids passing judgment about his flaws. Rather, her novel considers how people like him have been let down by social and political conditions of Australian society that have been unable to support and nurture all families and children.

Social conditions also play a significant role in Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, a story of the difficult relationship between an isolated, alcoholic father and his daughter. Moreover, Flanagan inextricably links the degradation of the Tasmanian landscape

with the brutality experienced by women and children at the hands of the workers in the camps. Flanagan suggests the consequences of the national economic ambition is that some people's lives are considered more important than others. The health of the migrant families, who become physically and mentally broken through hard labour, alcohol and gendered violence and the Tasmanian landscape become expendable because of Australia's fascination with electric power.

One of Flanagan's migrant workers is Bojan Buloh, a man who emigrated from Poland after his family were slain, to work on a construction camp in Tasmania in 1954. When Bojan's wife deserts him he is left to care for Sonja, his young daughter, while making his way working in the camps. Bojan is eventually estranged from Sonja as well, as she moves to Sydney as a teenager because he nearly kills her (318–29). Prior to that, however, unable to care for Sonja, Bojan sends her to a series of boarding houses while he moves from one work camp to the next. The novel shows how Sonja experiences the harsh reality faced by women and children in an environment that privileges the survival of the fittest and favours economic prosperity at the cost of humanity. In a passage that serves as a comment on the impact of modernity and progress on the natural and human worlds, we read:

By such alchemy the dull fear of the past was transformed into electrical power, the coveted gold of the new age, and at the bottom of the alchemists' distilling flask all that remained were the pestilential by-products of that magical process for which nobody cared: the cracked natural world and the broken human lives, both dregs easily accounted when their insignificant cost was tallied against the growing treasure of the hydro-electricity grid. (22)

Flanagan seems to suggest that when we purposefully dehumanise men who abuse, or assume they have nothing to contribute because of their crimes, we contribute to the politics of intolerance and refusal of contextual understanding that is such a powerful precursor to individual acts of violence.

At first glance, Bojan might easily fit into a category casually espoused in popular culture for men like him: a monster, an evil man, and someone who cannot be allowed to use his disadvantage as an excuse for his actions. But Flanagan's more nuanced exploration allows us both to recognise and condemn Bojan's acts of violence as destructive *and* to empathise with his own experiences of cruelty and suffering; as well as the violence of being deemed an 'outsider,' a 'wog' and a 'loser.' He is a man living on the margins in a strange and harsh land. Flanagan describes how Bojan moves into a series of boarding houses where his room contains only a mattress and is devoid of possessions or comforts, so demonstrating his transience and the consequences of dehumanisation. The novel does not pass moral judgment on Bojan and Flanagan is careful to avoid essentialist claims about the worth of his character as a man. This ultimately allows for a story about what Flanagan describes as the 'redemptive power of love' (Flanagan 37). His treatment of Bojan echoes Laguna's treatment of Gavin Flick, as both protagonists are depicted as trying to escape the violence they have known all their lives and work towards safe and respectful relationships with their children, despite their previous violence.

Laguna and Flanagan avoid describing gendered violence solely through a power-and-control lens and while both Gavin and Bojan act in dominant and self-centred ways, their violence is partially influenced by their desperation. While Flanagan describes the proliferation and manipulation of the migrant working force during the 1950s, Laguna focuses on the erosion of

the working class in Australia and the abandonment of men whose skills are no longer required. As well as the grisly descriptions of Bojan's disconnection and violent behaviour, Flanagan makes room for his hopes for himself as a father and as a man and returns to the motif of woodwork as the one place where Bojan can demonstrate his care, honour and love. Bojan's connection with woodwork contrasts with Tasmanian deforestation and the lack of respect for history that underlies the power plants. It represents Bojan's hope for a different life and a kind of self-therapy that makes room for the possibility of redemption and a caring relationship with his Sonja, based on the man that he would like to become:

And in the dance of the hammer and the sweet rhythm of the saw Sonja saw that there was another man inside him, a good man, the man she loved as her father. Which was perhaps why she liked working with Bojan in the makeshift workshop he would invariably set up wherever they lived, sometimes temporarily on a veranda, sometimes a little more permanently in a borrowed shed. (190)

Parallel Political Journeys

Jenkins and White believed it was impossible to expect men to consider more respectful and empathetic behaviours with women and children if therapists held them in a position of contempt. In this way, they believed that practitioners could risk perpetrating the same kinds of colonising behaviours in therapy that they sought to eradicate in their male clients. They believed that parallel political journeys became possible when therapists committed to more respectful and curious therapeutic practices, while men committed to safer and more ethical practices towards women and children. White believed that therapists should avoid shaming or confrontational practices with male clients and that they should work to identify unique outcomes where the man manages to avoid violence or demonstrates practices of respect towards women and children (106).

Like the contemporary Australian authors discussed above, Jenkins reflected upon the inadequacy of an approach that shows care for some people, but not others. He believed that the 'act of reaching out to the world of the other' should privilege understanding and curiosity in all, not just those we agree with, or who act in ethical ways (24). In this way he reinforced many of the principles espoused by Raimond Gaita, who remains committed to the exploration of the redemptive possibilities of all individuals, and the principle that humans do not become less entitled to fairness when they commit violence. In *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, Gaita writes:

Those who believe that justice should belong only to 'human beings who behave like human beings' would not be moved by arguments of fairness which presuppose exactly what such people deny, namely that radical evil-doers still belong to the constituency in which considerations of fairness are relevant. (10)

Jenkins's invitational practice approach contemplates the hypocrisy of therapy that seeks to change men's behaviour by recreating the kinds of power imbalances and diminishment that are so supportive of gendered violence. Jenkins called this kind of therapy 'colonising practice.' He writes:

Colonisation involves processes of determining and labelling deficiencies in others, followed by correction, coercion and control. These practices are accompanied by sets of justifications and rationalisations, whereby the ends are

seen to justify the means. Such practices can be seen to involve the same kind of rationale and action which constitute all forms of abuse. Individual men are confronted through a kind of ‘benevolent bullying.’ (14–15)

Conventional masculine discourses generally rely on the validation of a winning and losing dichotomy. In Australia, there is again generally a quantifiable aspect to the individual’s position within domestic, economic, and social hierarchies. The dispensability of the other is inextricably linked within Australia’s history of colonisation and violence, from the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, to the destruction of the environment. A focus on competition and dispensability has assisted Australian authors to portray characters who are constrained by their preordained economic and socio-cultural roles within a society that orders and sorts its citizens into hierarchies of importance. Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things*, Richard Flanagan’s *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Christos Tsiolkas’s story ‘Merciless Gods’ explore how the systematic legitimisation of colonial violence affects the individual. This includes an examination of the way masculine culture, corporatisation and ecological degradation is inextricable linked with gendered violence.

Violence as a necessary product of ideology has been a key theme for Flanagan. In a 2015 article, he lamented how the government’s maligning of Gillian Trigg’s report on children in detention showed both the government’s misogyny and its determination to remain blinkered to the plight of refugees, given their inferior place in the social pecking order. Flanagan wrote:

Writing my novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* I came to conclude that great crimes like the Death Railway did not begin with the first beating or murder on that grim line of horror in 1943. They begin decades before with politicians, public figures, and journalists promoting the idea of some people being less than people.

Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things* is set on a remote island, a merciless setting enclosed by electrified wire in order to imprison a group of women guilty of embarrassing the patriarchal status quo. As with *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, there are clear winners and losers on Wood’s island, itself a microcosm of a neo-liberal society. While it is true that her male characters are entitled by their political and economic privilege, this is ultimately not enough to ensure their safety or prosperity. Like Flanagan, Wood asks whether violence towards women and children is an inevitable cost of political and economic ideology that privileges the lives of some at the expense of those of others. In *The Natural Way of Things*, she compares the plight of the women on the island to that of the prey her character Yolanda catches; both are at the mercy of people and systems with greater power and resources. In this way, Wood focuses on the formation and reformation of power hierarchies and the consequences for those deemed dispensable.

Wood’s anti-hero, Boncer, is a guard in charge of a group of female political prisoners including a victim of gang rape by high profile footballers, and a politician’s mistress. Boncer uses misogynistic insults and his whip to punish the women who have embarrassed the gendered status quo. Yet Boncer is also depicted as a hapless servant of patriarchy, not its creator, and this important difference allows for understanding and even compassion towards him. Wood shows him as the everyman of modern Australia: forgotten, uneducated, and with unfulfillable aspirations that condemn him to isolation and confusion. Wood’s novel asks the critical question: are men like Boncer the inevitable product of a particular economic and political climate?

When the large corporation that employs Boncer leaves him trapped without food, he becomes just as dispensable as the female captives, and less than human by virtue of his lack of social or economic status. The more pronounced Boncer's disenfranchisement, the more determined he becomes to behave in traditionally masculine, dominant ways. Wood does not excuse Boncer's violence or misogyny, but she does show him as someone who has also been manipulated and recruited into this role by the system he finds himself in. He is complicit because he has no other choice. Boncer's plight is contrasted with Yolanda's, who gains strength by hunting for prey in the wild, becoming stronger and less dependent on the rules that have been decided for her:

She tensed, prepared to hurl herself away, took a deep breath with which to scream or vomit or roar or bite. Then she saw Boncer's white-knuckled hold on the leash strap. Saw his skinny pale mosquito-bitten wrists. She saw, finally, what Boncer was: a stupid, ugly child, underfed, afraid. She saw his pocked old acne scars. (142)

Of her female characters, Wood has said: 'As well as the place judging them, the girls are judging each other a lot of the time. They are not unified victims fighting the oppression of men' (Goldsworthy interview np). Wood complicates gendered power by presenting the patriarchal forces that oppress women and shackle their choice, while at the same time describing how some women perpetuate competition and misogyny. This is the case with Nancy, who works alongside Boncer to inhumanely guard the other women, eventually descending into madness as she is ostracised by both the male guards and the female prisoners and so left marginalised and friendless. Nancy uses the same hateful insults as Boncer, but she is unable to wield the same authority because of her gender. Her steadfast devotion to Boncer goes unrequited: 'Boncer began rations, keeping the storeroom key around his neck and fetching each day's meal packages day by day, with extra portions for Teddy and himself, but not for Nancy' (140). Nancy has limited positional power as a guard on the island and eventually loses her life as one of patriarchy's biggest losers.

Similarly, the prisoner Hetty becomes an expendable commodity to her fellow female prisoners who describe her as stumpy, ugly and fat. In the same way that Boncer is seen as less than human by the employers who betray him, the women offer Hetty to Boncer as a tactical sacrifice. She is condemned to playing the role of triumphant queen, while suffering incursions on her body by Boncer. Inequality occurs according to physical, economic and political strength at all levels on the island and is more complex than gendered inequity. This is the case despite the lack of choices faced by the women on the island.

Yet, in his improbable relationship with Hetty, Boncer shows his desire to provide care and compassion for another human being. This contradicts any easy assumptions that he is a man who cares only about imposing his will through intimidation. It also raises the possibility that he is merely playing the role that is expected of him both in their isolated society and in patriarchy more generally. It also suggests that although male he pays a high price for the current inequalities of patriarchy and neo-liberalism.

But Boncer is the surprise. Boncer is altered. He blushes as he nears the veranda. There is an air of triumph about him, but also something else: surrender. (214–15)

Although subtle, Wood finds an alternative story in Boncer's relationship with Hetty, and the possibility for redemption. There is a strong link here with White's narrative metaphor of the alternative story, which presents more positive, strength-based accounts of the individual's identity.

Written from the point of view of an unnamed narrator, Christos Tsiolkas's 'Merciless Gods' centres on a group of upwardly mobile, left-wing university students in the 90s who, unlike Wood's political prisoners, enjoy social, economic and political privileges. When Marie's friends organise a dinner party to celebrate her new job in San Francisco, they invite Vince, whom she has beaten to the job. Vince is a brilliant and intellectually aggressive young man who is shown smarting from his defeat: 'He did mind. He was proud and arrogant and hated being beaten. He minded deeply' (4). During a dinner party game, the guests take turns in retelling stories involving revenge. Vince retells the shocking story of his mutilation of a child who had robbed him during a holiday in Turkey. Vince mutilates the young boy because he reminds him of Nazim, a Turkish girl from his high school who spurned his invitation to dinner and humiliated him with a sly grin. Through this intertwining of violence as both perpetrated and perceived by Vince, Tsiolkas compares the savageness of Vince's story with the thinly veiled misanthropy of the dinner party, alluding to the violence that hides behind polite social conventions and identity politics.

Although his is a markedly different setting than Flanagan's or Wood's, Tsiolkas also focuses on the competitiveness of modern society and the inclination of the individual to sacrifice others to ensure victory. Vince tells his terrible story to exact retribution for losing a job to Marie and to brutally dismantle their friendships. The reader—like the other guests—is never sure which parts of his story are true:

It was clear that Vince would have loved nothing more than for Anthony to punch him, that it would have been the fitting antediluvian response to the night. Vince was already victorious, I doubt he would have even felt the need to return the punch. But we were not such men. (43)

For Vince, the friendships he has made at university become secondary to his need to win and to exact revenge, just as the young boy's basic human rights became secondary to his need to exact revenge on Nazim in his story. Tsiolkas has previously examined the effects of masculine competition and societal hypocrisy in *The Slap* (2008) and *Barracuda* (2013) and physical and psychological brutality in *Dead Europe* (2005). In 'Merciless Gods,' he continues to criticise the middle classes and their practice of participating in and condoning certain kinds of socially sanctioned symbolic violence on one hand, while vilifying and condemning the perpetration of other forms of violence on the other. Tsiolkas deliberately complicates the reliability of Vince's story, focusing on the reactions of the other dinner guests, who all in their own ways contribute to the modern power structures that thrive upon a lack of compassion and kindness and therefore make violence more likely.

Tsiolkas shows that the rage and competitive vanity that consumes Vince as perpetrator, is pervasive within the group of friends through their ambition, materialism and condemnation. One of the guests tells a story about following the son of a man who bashed a gay man to death to his school and then contemplating abducting the boy in order to hurt and punish his father. Through this story Tsiolkas shows the similarities between different men's violent fantasies. The fact that Vince may have acted on his fantasies, or at least concocted a malicious story, might single him out as a bad man. But Tsiolkas criticises this kind of dichotomous thinking

and the politics of intolerance that he believes has ‘straight-jacketed’ modern socialist and feminist thought, rendering us unable to understand the context of other people’s lives (61). In an article for *The New Left*, Tsiolkas writes:

The historic tragedies and outrages of Left totalitarianism are enough reason for any of us who still identify as socialist to choose inquiry over conviction, to favour the nuances of contradiction and doubt. (57)

Tsiolkas here suggests that a politics of intolerance makes us all complicit in the constant forming and reforming of neoliberalism. Vince is repeatedly described by the dinner party guests as ‘an evil man.’ But while the guests only see themselves as different to Vince, they fail to acknowledge their own contribution to the vicious cycle of competition for money, status and sexual power.

Tsiolkas’s take on violence resonates with Jenkins’s interest in a broader political climate of intolerance during the development of invitational practices. Jenkins has remarked how his initial book, *Invitations to Responsibility: The Therapeutic Engagement of Men Who Are Violent and Abusive* (1990) focused solely on the accountability of individual men, while his latest book, *Becoming Ethical: A Parallel, Political Journey with Men Who Have Abused* (2009), discussed the accountability of anyone who responds to men who perpetrate violence. This suggests a shared responsibility in acknowledging power differentials as they arise through many different contexts. Jenkins wrote:

As intervention workers, we inevitably become part of the network of the power relations in the man’s life. We operate within community agencies and institutions and within a broader social context which reflects dominant cultural interests and practices of power. We occupy positions of privilege and power relative to our clients and will inevitably reproduce inequalities of power and privilege in our work. (14)

Much of Tsiolkas’s work wrestles with similar ideas about how the middle classes influence modern power structures that legitimise violence. The characters in ‘Merciless Gods’ are disconnected after the night of the dinner party. The estrangement of this group of friends underlines Tsiolkas’s belief about the rise of individualism at the expense of community, and our inability to move beyond our own interests in favour of parallel political journeys of respect, fairness and understanding. In the words of the unnamed narrator in ‘Merciless Gods’:

Marriage, children, divorce, affairs, travel, work. It was inevitable that we would all drift apart. I once thought our group unshakeable but that was a delusion of youth. We were far more ordinary than we believed ourselves to be. (45)

Conclusion

Australian therapists’ attitudes to the behaviour of men whose actions and temperament are embodied in fictional characters such as Gavin Flick, Bojan Buloh, Vince or Boncer developed considerably through the adoption of approaches that help these therapists to better understand the context of this violence. As a result of the women’s shelter movement, moreover, men are now rightfully required to take responsibility for the effects of their violence within family law, and criminal and therapeutic structures. Invitational and narrative approaches to men have extended group and individual therapy by insisting upon the accountability of therapists in these

settings to what Jenkins called a ‘parallel political journey.’ This parallel political journey emphasises the point that it is not enough for therapists to only address the safety of women and children as they also need to care about male clients, despite their perpetration of horrific acts of violence. This in turn has been mirrored in a number of contemporary Australian literary works that seek to demonstrate the relationship between Australia’s history of colonisation, neo-liberalism and ecological degradation and the current epidemic of violence towards women and children. Both invitational therapy and the fictional works I have examined show how society’s tendency to view violence as the domain of the few rotten apples is inadequate and hypocritical.

The tyrannising, controlling and abusive actions of far too many men have deprived many women and children of their basic social, economic and sexual rights. It is a comforting and enticing thought that better policing of these individual men would resolve the issue. But works such as those by Wood, Tsiolkas, Flanagan, Morrison and Laguna suggest that the structural pillars of patriarchy are reliant on individualism, violence and gender inequality, and that the issue of gendered violence is much broader and more insidious than we care to imagine. These authors transcend dichotomous understandings of good and evil to allow for genuine exploration of characters who are torn between conformity to the mould of modern masculinity and practices of resistance through honouring connection, fairness and respect. In this way their characters need neither to be excused nor condemned; merely understood.

These authors all espouse the view that a just and respectful society needs to find ways to understand even those men who commit the most abhorrent acts. Their works reflect a belief in the power of narrative to expose, explore, and heal, and to engender hope for increased connectedness and kindness. Works such as these highlight a distinct contribution by contemporary Australian literature to invitational and narrative practices and to our understanding of the sociopolitical conditions that support the perpetration of violence.

NOTES

¹ White and Jenkins sought to view men as more than the sum of their violence and were therefore reluctant to categorise acts of kindness or connection as part of overarching and strategic control.

² As a researcher in the field of intimate partner violence, Zoe Morrison interviewed many women who had been subjected to physical and sexual violence.

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