Helen Vines. *Eve Langley and the Pea Pickers*. Monash University Publishing, 2021.
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Helen Vines's *Eve Langley and the Pea Pickers* attempts more than its title suggests: it is both literary biography, and a literary critical exercise, aiming to separate the life from the fiction but inevitably seeing the interrelationships. However, because Langley writes fictionalised autobiography (no-one disputes this), Helen Vines sifts the known facts judiciously in chapters 1–5, but in chapter 6, she writes (explicitly) speculatively, drawing on a small repertoire of five clinical texts and articles and the opinion of an unnamed clinical psychologist, for some of her insights. This small body of texts and articles dates from the 1980s.

Separating fact from fiction is, of course, not a new departure for literary critics whether they are writing biography or dealing with autobiographical fiction. The difficulty lies in looking into the extent to which the fiction is a (necessarily inventive) act of self-creation and self-discovery on the one hand or involves acts of evasion and repression on the other. This book ventures into this murky territory, where all these manoeuvres can be happening simultaneously. Its methodology is to read the novels carefully for what they offer by way of evidence about Eve's family anti-romance and to use unpublished manuscripts and other ephemera (letters, notebooks, and a sketch), and Eve's sister June's representation of Eve's life, to extend the analysis.

Vines's biography is ambitious: it offers a rich account of Langley's published and unpublished writings (4000 pages of tight typescript in the Mitchell Library and more have been examined) as acts of literary and personal self-fashioning. In reading the fiction, her eye is selective. It is focussed on what the works reveal of the family drama. As well, the biography delves into the Angus & Robertson archive to cast much light on the professional relationship between Eve and her editors, Beatrice Davis and Nan McDonald, and its undermining by Eve's sister June.

I had not re-read *The Pea Pickers* for several decades and wondered if the gender issues of our times might be a good reason to revisit it. I certainly assumed prescience on Langley's part because of the hype generated around the text in the 1940s and for some time after that (it was set for reading in secondary schools), not only by Doug Stewart, its first champion but also subsequently by Harry Heseltine, and later by feminist scholars. Doug Stewart's second review to mark the reprinting of the novel (on 22 August 1958 for the Red Page) was far more equivocal than his first in 1942. By then, he knew about her long committal to a psychiatric facility. H.M. Green, another contemporary, was not as unqualified in his praise as Stewart had been in his first review: Green was moved by the novel's vitality (in the quaint parlance of the time, 'abundance of life') but made the more literary judgment that the novel was 'long, crowded, undisciplined, self-conscious and highly fanciful fictionalised autobiography,' exactly the suite of problems that forced Langley's long-suffering and kindly editors to abandon publishing her novels after her second novel, *White Topee*.[1]

What I take from Chapter 3, which is devoted to Langley's dealings with her editors at A&R, is that she wrote out of psychic need, a need for catharsis, and having written, was content for her editors to do the re-reading and editing. Although Vines describes the relationship with the editors as professional, there is much evidence that not all aspects of it were; for example, Langley's refusal to self-edit. It was an indulgence that cost all parties dearly, and eventually

sabotaged a literary career. The editors' sensibilities are understandable at a human level: they were concerned about her fragile psychological state, especially given their awareness that she had been committed by her husband to the care of the Auckland Mental Hospital on 14 August 1942 for almost eight years (she was released on 18 April 1950), and that once released, she was again committed for a shorter period in September 1950 (the Public Trustee did not relinquish control of her affairs until 1954). The writer and her editors were, moreover, separated by the Tasman Sea, so their reliance on Langley's sister June's questionable assessment of Langley's condition, while understandable on the grounds of sensitivity to Eve's vulnerabilities both as a woman and a writer, created dilemmas all round, not least of which were complex ethical dilemmas for the editors and June. Eve remained unaware of the currents of interpretation swirling around her and was distraught when the rejection slips kept arriving in response to more and more uninhibited, chaotic and fantastical manuscripts.

Comparing *The Pea Pickers* with two texts that preceded Langley's by four and two decades respectively—*Such is Life* and *Ulysses*—that, like hers, ventured into autobiographical fiction and the territory of gender-fluidity, proved disappointing to me. Langley's Steve and Blue, fictional alter-egos for Eve and June, affect cross-dressing for fun rather than for a serious assault on or questioning of constricting gender codes. Furthermore, despite coded hints of same-sex desire, the text moves, disconcertingly for a modern reader, in the direction of a quite conventional kind of teen romance and a strangely perverse refusal of sexuality and touch, made stranger because of the protagonist's continual and romantic assertion of her need to be loved. Helen Vines seeks the reason for this in Eve's deeply troubled relationship with her father.

This biography works hard to separate fact from fiction, and to expose the many untruths and half-truths generated by the family. Eve participated in these rewritings of family history, as did June and Mia, their mother. Vines brings a sceptical eye to their testimonies, unlike some earlier biographers such as Joy Thwaite, whom she accuses, probably justly, of uncritically accepting June's lens on the family. The family members were especially reticent, if not untruthful, in their accounts of important matters like the births and deaths of children, and unreliable in their accounts of the father and mother. In addition, June sought to alter radically the trajectory of her sister's life by exploring with a brain surgeon the possibility of a frontal lobotomy for Eve (252), a profound betrayal that appears never to have been discussed with Eve. Vines performs a service in patiently uncovering the extent of deliberate obfuscation of issues the family sought to keep out of the public gaze (like the birth and death of June's first child to an heir of the Wedgwood fortune—see pp.30–33).

What I found most valuable in this book is the careful research into the relationship Eve Langley had with her editors at Angus & Robertson (A&R). The reader is offered a privileged insight into the fine detail of it, its processes and orientations, and the ways in which June's hostile interpretations of her sister's mental condition may have been unduly influential. The kindness of Beatrice Davis, from the earliest time in their relationship, is indeed moving. She knew she was dealing with a highly emotionally dependent and demanding writer and appears to have stepped willingly into the role of proactive editor. As the manuscripts continued to arrive in misshapen form, she progressively found her limits and then had to deal, still respectfully, with a vulnerable author. When Eve was on her knees financially after an abortive trip to Greece, Beatrice Davis and others prepaid royalties to enable the trip back to Australia; Douglas Stewart, by then an editorial assistant in the A&R office, helped Langley secure a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant of £100. Later, Beatrice would assist her application for an Invalid Pension. The A&R editors were not only literary midwives of the published fiction,

but even when Eve knew they would no longer publish her manuscripts, she required them to archive them at A&R, perhaps hoping for eventual or posthumous publication. The kind of intensive editing that Eve's works required had become a thing of the past in the newly corporatised publishing world after Walter Vincent Burn took over the firm, changing and 'modernising' A&R's culture. Despite holding fast to the notion that Eve's new works were unpublishable, they clearly cared about their protégée's mental and physical health.

Where this literary biography seems to me to stumble and overreach itself is in offering interpretations of why it was that Eve's emotional and psychic life was so troubled. The author is at pains to make clear that her conclusions are necessarily speculative but shapes the narrative towards a particular end point. Vines builds her case in the manner of a crime fiction writer, laying hints and clues along the way. This is a method of persuasion that to some extent obscures the quite slender foundations of her case in the psychology of incest—three journal articles and two books, all written in the 1980s, which she mines intelligently to build the substructure of her case. When literary biography moves into the realm of speculation about mental illness (and psychiatric records are not available), as Vines's book does in Chapter 6, perhaps more is needed by way of collaboration with clinicians to scaffold the argument.

Critical to Vines's argument is a sketch made by Langley in March 1974, months before her death in June, of 'a young girl called "Dolly" [one of Langley's nicknames] being pulled along by a near-naked man called "Apollo" at Forbes in 1913 aged 8' (73–74). The sketch is made to bear the weight of a 'lifetime of obfuscation' (pp.73 and 175 where the Apollo reference is cryptically adumbrated and a desire for reincarnation expressed) and a freight of meaning that the critic but not Eve Langley can discern. She claims that 'All the outstanding issues about books, gender identity and abuse come together in this one extraordinary drawing' (295). It is a large claim, and one that encompasses the girls' cross-dressing as well. Vines also makes much of the father's tendency to wear women's clothes, and of Steve's choice of the name Steve Hart (one of the Kelly Gang and a cross-dresser, who used women's clothes to evade capture). One wonders why such an important crux of the argument is not reproduced as a photograph among the book's illustrations (unless, of course, copyright prevented it). Demonstrating the difficulty of not allowing the fiction to infiltrate the biography, the case for the toxicity in the sibling relationship is derived from the charge that psychologically, Blue (a fictional alter ego of June) reminds Steve (Eve's fictional self) of their father: 'Blue's big handsome head looked, that morning, just like the head of our father' (cited in Vines 184). Vines poses a loaded rhetorical question: 'how can she love unequivocally someone who is so like the source of her grief?' (192) and construes the connection between the girls as a displaced lesbian one designed to evade the psychic repercussions of processing the alleged childhood abuse by her father.

This for me was a disturbing book, because it invites the reader to understand the personal tragedy of being adrift in a deeply dysfunctional family and raises questions about the extent to which it impacted Langley's writing. Eve left school at the age of thirteen in 1918, five years after the allegedly abusive behaviour of her father. It is a tragedy that her formerly close sibling June was unable to begin to understand her, and their relationship became in time a vexatious one. Being younger, June's experience of her father was entirely different, and she probably knew nothing about what is alleged to have happened to Eve. One has to admire Eve's response to her solitary burden and the immense energy and persistence she brought to the task of expressing her unprocessed grief at the loss of her childhood, if indeed that's what her creative endeavours amounted to. But did this loss make for outstanding literature, especially given that

the victim was never free, except in the cryptic sketch late in her life, to express the nature of the wound?

If Vines's theories are correct, they cast light on the immense, undigested body of work that never made it into print and the expressive imperatives that drove it. Vines's biography served to reinforce misgivings I now have as a result of revisiting *The Pea Picker*s before beginning the biography. It was a novel I read long ago, in a more innocent age, and with a different mindset. Langley's earliest readers, it seems, sensed the emotional investment but could not know or imagine the psychic wounds she had suffered, given the culture of silence that still exists about such alleged incestuous abuse.

My current misgivings now operate on two fronts: the sexual dynamics of the family even as they register as hints in the novel, and the quality of the writing. If Vines is right, Eve bore wounds that no amount of fine critical editing could hope to heal. Will this biography, I wonder, necessitate a clear-eyed reassessment of Langley's fictional legacy? While I doubt it will add to her literary reputation, if the theory is correct, it provides a more inclusive human and biographical frame for reading the novel and its excesses.

Frances Devlin-Glass, Deakin University

NOTES

[1] These are issues that subsequent editors Lucy Frost, Aorewa McLeod and Anita Segerberg have wrestled with (see Aorewa McLeod, 'Alternative Eves' (*Hecate*, vol 25, no. 2, Oct. 1999, p. 164. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A59222895/AONE?u=slv&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=968da33d.)