

# Becoming 'Elizabeth Jolley': The First Twenty Years in Australia

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In 1959, at the age of 36, Elizabeth Jolley migrated from Scotland to Australia on the Pacific and Orient liner *Orion*. She was accompanied by her husband, who came to take up the position of Head Librarian at the University of Western Australia, by three young children, and by shipping containers full of the furnishings of family life – clothes and books, two grandfather clocks, a sewing basket packed just as movers found it. Among these felt possessions were also Jolley's as-yet unpublished writings: a dozen children's stories, one of which – 'The Adventures of George Henry' (a caterpillar) – had been broadcast on Midland BBC radio in late 1947; several short stories, some, like 'A Hedge of Rosemary,' to be rewritten and published in Australia during the mid-sixties; a still unpublished novel, first titled *A Question of Innocence* (a play on Anthony Powell's *A Question of Upbringing* [1951]) and later revised as *Eleanor Page*, and also a manuscript in several notebooks called *George's Wife and the Feast*, a precursor to Jolley's acclaimed Vera trilogy, (*My Father's Moon*, *Cabin Fever*, and *The Georges' Wife*). Leonard and Elizabeth Jolley's nickname for *Eleanor Page* was 'Elephant Page,' an allusion, perhaps, to its failing to be accepted for publication, like all the other pieces, excepting 'George Henry', that Jolley wrote in the these early years (Jolley, 'Letter to Leonard Jolley'). Their inclusion, nonetheless, in the shipping containers sent to Australia marks the persistent desire of an immigrant wife and mother to be something else as well: to be a writer.

In a short story, 'The Widow's House,' written when she had become an established writer, Jolley gives a (fictionalised) account of an early expression of her desire to write, recalling the stories she and her sister Madelaine concocted around a doll's house, its figures and furnishings, and the goings-on of the street outside their bedroom window in Wells Road, Wolverhampton. Still another source of her desire is given in 'Self-Portrait: A Child Went Forth,' her second published account of herself as a writer. There she remembers being at Sibford, a Quaker boarding School near the Cotswolds, some seventy-five miles from her Wolverhampton home, which she attended from ages eleven to seventeen:

The pain of homesickness has to be cured in some way. I wrote stories, mainly about rabbits which were rather like people I knew, and sent them home to my sister. I made up stories to tell in the dormitory at night. I made for myself a picture of a longed for cosy home life which never existed but which, in thought, comforted. (Jolley, 'Self Portrait' 305)

Another early testament to Jolley's desire not only to write, but also to become a writer, can be found in her resolving sometime in 1944, while training as a nurse at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital, to keep with her a notebook for jotting down ideas and observations – a writerly habit she persists with to this day.

Writing and 'being a writer,' however, are not the same. When Jolley arrived in Western Australia, she had been writing for years but her writing had been not published, nor read, nor recognised, nor rewarded. In short, she had not yet found access to what Robert Dessaix has called the 'intellectual infrastructure' of professional writing (Dessaix, *Speaking* 212). Such an infrastructure is the complex effect of intricate economic, institutional and discursive processes. It entails industries, such as publishing, grant-giving and writers' residencies. It entails distributive mechanisms, such as media reports and reviews, literary awards, school syllabi, university reading lists, academic conferences, scholarly journals and monographs. And finally it entails, again in one of Dessaix's phrases, being part of a culture's 'conversation' through taking part in associations, readings, festivals, media interviews, literary judging panels, and so forth (Dessaix, 'Spotlight' 217). Over her first twenty years in Australia, Jolley struggled to find access to its literary-cultural industry, and then in the following two decades her work freely circulated throughout the industry's distributive mechanisms and she became a central figure in its 'conversation', so much so that she figures as a mafiosa in Mark Davis's recent *Gangland*. Imaginably, such a mark of recognition is one that Jolley would not welcome. But, imaginably too, it might be one she could not wholly refuse, given her own profound understanding that writing and being a writer are not the same, that being a writer is a vocation as well as an avocation. 'After all,' she says in an early interview, 'publishing is a business' (Ellison 189).

The focus of this paper, then, is on Elizabeth Jolley's career as a writer – in particular, on the first twenty years of that career – where 'career' is understood as David Carter defines it: that which emerges through interdependent textual and institutional activities, through writing and the "business" of a writing life' (Carter, *Career* xi). One way Carter's point relates to Jolley is through the 200 page manuscript bibliography of her writings and of writings on her work (Milech and Dibble). Read one way, the bibliography is a record of one person's achievement, yet it presents not simply a catalogue of individual achievement, but also an implicit account of the institutional and discursive frameworks within which that achievement took place. The trajectory of Elizabeth Jolley's writing career emerges from the pages of the bibliography as a micro-history of cultural politics in Australia over the last four decades.

## Decades of Debate

Jolley's forty-year career in Australia divides rather neatly into two periods: an initial twenty years or so during which she slowly finds her way into print as a short-story and radio-play writer, followed by another two decades during which

she establishes a national and international reputation as one of Australia's pre-eminent novelists. The degree to which this division reflects not simply the 'natural' progression of one writer's career, but also the shaping forces of the institutionalised forms and practices of literary production and reception in a particular time and place is suggested by recent institutional histories of Australian literature. Typically such histories identify precisely these same two twenty-year periods as distinct phases in a motile national literary debate conducted over the last forty years in publishing houses, universities, literary journals, the media, and like institutions.

In the first of these two phases, debate centered on two competing understandings of 'Australian literature.' One understanding, 'usually characterized as proletarian and nationalist,' defined Australian literature 'by its content, its manner, and its setting'; while the other, 'characterised as elitist, Eurocentric, and metaphysical,' defined it 'through ... the application of "universal" aesthetic standards as an antidote to the ephemeral attractions of local colour' (Turner 77). By the end of this first phase, the Eurocentric, modernist view prevailed for the most part. Then came the watershed of the early eighties, which Bob White speaks of as the 'coming of age' of Australian literature and David Carter, more soberly, describes as 'another major shift' in the discourses that establish our understandings of a national literature (White 88; Carter, 'Literary Canons' 32). During these twenty years, modernist notions of literature's aesthetic and ethical autonomy give way to a notion of literature as one among many salient cultural forms; and, concomitantly, the New-Critical enterprise of canon formation and maintenance yields to anti-canonical criticism inspired by feminist and Aboriginal liberationist movements, by governmental constructions of a multi-cultural society, and by the tertiary sector's embrace of theory in general, and feminist, post-colonial and post-structuralist theories in particular. Put differently, the earlier watchword 'world-class' gave way to the contemporary shibboleth 'diversity' as a dominant metaphor in contemporary Australian literary debate.

Like all periodisations, this one is necessarily reductive. What it tends to occlude are the particular discursive and institutional developments of the seventies. Take, for example, Carter's account of canon formation since federation ('Literary Canons' 24-6). Carter begins by identifying a prehistory of canon formation, lasting from the 1890s through to the 1930s, during which a national(ist) literature was established, but only in a weak form, in so far as Australian literature was thought of as a regional variety of English literature. He then distinguishes three stages in Australia's post-war literary debate. In the first, the 1940s/1950s, an older nationalist tradition found new emphases through the activities of writers and intellectuals. In the second, the 1950s/1960s, this intellectual cadre was displaced by university-based professionals (among them, Leonard Jolley) who, applying the twin criteria of literariness (universal generic excellence) *and* Australian-ness (specific national reference), constructed a 'new' literary canon. And then, in the last stage, the 1980s/1990s, this reformulated canon gives way to the dominant practice of anti-canonical readings, whose tendency, Carter argues, is a fundamental ahistorism that may well re-import ethico-aestheticism in a political guise. Certainly, Carter's

analysis is a subtle version of the usual bi-phasic periodisation. Gone missing here, however, is an entire decade. And yet the specific discursive and institutional forces of that decade – the seventies – were critical to the development of Elizabeth Jolley's career.

## A Regional Career

Jolley sought to be professionally published from the outset – she told one interviewer that 'I would never have published anything myself, ever' (emphasis added, Kavanaugh 446). After arriving in Australia she submitted to all possible professional outlets. In the mid-sixties and early seventies she circulated various versions of *The George's Wife and The Feast*, *The Leila Family*, *Palomino*, *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (as well as at least five variant collections of short stories) to some thirteen publishers in Australia and England – London and Melbourne Macmillan, Angus and Robertson, University of Queensland Press, Heineman, Penguin, Nelson, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and so on. So, for example, she submitted versions of *Palomino* to eight publishers, and drafts of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *Newspaper of Claremont Street* each to seven publishers. Success was not forthcoming until *Palomino* shared the Con Weickhart Prize for an unpublished novel in the 1975 Victorian FAW Moomba competition. Little wonder then that Jolley gratefully remembers that London's Macmillan representative spent an entire day with her in 1966, when she was in England accompanying her husband on his sabbatical, explaining that, though her manuscript was unpublishable, she had talent as a writer.

During these years Jolley also wrote and rewrote, submitted and resubmitted short stories, most of which are now familiar from her five published short story collections and her collection of radio plays. She sent stories to literary competitions, to anthologies, and to the reigning literary magazines, mostly in Australia but also overseas. She sent script versions of the stories to the British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Perth and Sydney, and in 1969 to Richard Attenborough at Woodfell Films and to the Film Corporation in Melbourne. She sent stories to newspapers and women's magazines, including even *People*, *Reader's Digest* and *Tom's Weekly*. The history of 'Hilda's Wedding' – arguably one of Jolley's best short stories, though not published in print until its inclusion in *Woman and the Lampshade* – illustrates Jolley's determination to be published. Over more than a decade, short or long versions of the story were submitted to Macmillan's *Summer Tales* and *Winter Tales*, to the 1965 Melbourne Festival Competition, to *Argosy*, to publishers A. P. Watt, Walter King, and Nelson, to the 1968 *Coast to Coast* anthology as well as to another anthology in Western Australia, to *London Magazine*, to a 1968 *Woman's Weekly* short story competition and eight years later to the magazine itself, to the Australian literary journals *Tabloid Story* and *Pol* (twice), to the overseas literary journals *Listener*, *Nova* and *New Yorker*, to the 1970 and 1971 Moomba Festival competitions, to the Melbourne's

Fellowship of Australian Writer's 1977 Alan Marshall Award competition, and to the ABC in 1968 and then again later. The ABC broadcast the story in January 1976.

The story of the long progress of 'Hilda's Wedding' toward being broadcast and published can be read in more than one way. Though often rejected, Jolley drew lessons:

Professor McAuley in *Quadrant* drew attention to my capital letters and punctuation which was a help ... [And] Richard Walsh ... when he was editor of *Pol* ... sent me a letter to say that one of my stories appealed to him but was too menopausal for *Pol* which was a great help because I made it more menopausal and made it into a better story you see. (Reid 60)

In such recollections one can read her sense of avocation in the face of the 'disaster' of repeated rejection in the sixties and early seventies (Willbanks 113). In more than one interview she recalls that in one of those years she received 39 rejections (Ellison 178 and Kavanaugh 446). But, equally, one can read a writerly canniness – a determination not only to write her own way, but also to find access to the literary infrastructure of the time and place to which she had migrated. In Carter's terms, the publishing history of 'Hilda's Wedding' traces both Jolley's writing and her writing life, both her sense of an avocation and her sense of a vocation.

In the sixties and early seventies, then, Jolley found publishing 'a slow, hard business from Western Australia' (Baker 216). From her position as a 'new Australian' living in Western Australia, it seemed to her that Carter's 1940s/1950s republican nationalists still held sway. So she gave 'an Australian character' to some of the stories brought with her from Scotland: in her words, she gave them gum nuts and goannas, and themes of Australian struggles (Milech). At the same time she located new stories, many about migrants, in an Australian setting, and imagined potentially symbolic Australian landscapes for the novels she worked on across these years: *Palomino*, *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and, later, *Milk and Honey* (Kavanaugh 448–59). Giving her stories an Australian quality was perhaps Jolley's best strategy, for her writing could not easily be assimilated to the different sorts of 'new writing' that stormed the Australian stage in the late sixties and early seventies. It exhibited none of the ocker nationalism of David Williamson, Jack Hibberd and others associated with Melbourne's La Mama Theatre in the late 1960s, for example. And Jolley's exploration of unconventional sexualities in the early short stories and novels had little in common with the self-proclaimed 'onslaught on bourgeois sexual repression' by the young men of Sydney – Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wilding – through their Sydney-based 1972 *Tabloid* venture (Wilding 229).

Moreover, the 'slow, hard business' of publishing seemed to Jolley to be a function of the fact that those who governed access to Eastern-based literary publishing had little interest in literary offerings from the West. But she persisted. The history of 'Hilda's Wedding' is a reminder that Jolley's first success in Australia was in radio. Though incomplete in this respect, the bibliography for this early stage of

her career records eleven BBC World Service broadcasts of stories recast for radio, the majority in the sixties. A bit later her work was accepted by the ABC which, from 1975 through 1980, broadcast five of the nine radio plays included in *Off the Air: Nine Plays for Radio by Elizabeth Jolley*. At the same time, Jolley was rewarded with the publication of 17 stories in Australian literary journals and anthologies from 1966 through to 1980, just over half of them in non-Western Australian enterprises. Significantly, it was the local *Westerly* that in 1967 published her second and third print stories – ‘A Hedge of Rosemary’ and ‘The Rhyme’ – both of which were written in Scotland and then represented with Australian settings. In the previous year ‘A Hedge of Rosemary’ had won Jolley the first of her many literary prizes – the 1966 Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers’ Moomba Short Story Award. Much later, Jolley received two further Victorian FAW Moomba Short Story Awards – in 1980 for ‘Running on the Spot,’ and in 1981 for ‘The Libation.’ More saliently for her early career was her 1975 shared first prize for *Palomino*, which in 1980 became Jolley’s first published novel. When asked what one thing especially made her career possible, she replied ‘the Moomba prizes’ (Milech).

But it was not simply the prizes that enabled Jolley finally to establish herself as a writer during the seventies. It was also a confluence of three infrastructural ‘miracles’ that happened in the early to mid-seventies. The most significant of these occurred nationally with the establishment of new levels of arts funding under the Whitlam government (1972–1975). Between 1973 and 1975 the Australia Council replaced the Australian Council for the Arts and, though the statutory act that invested the Australia Council was not passed until 1975, its seven original Boards, including the Literature Board (renamed the Literature Fund in 1996), dispersed grants to individuals, publishers and organisations from 1973 onwards. Then locally there was the establishment of the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1972, with its charter to foster the work of Western Australian artists and writers, together with the subsequent establishment in 1975 of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, whose brief was to serve as a non-profit regional publisher and distributor.

This regional development was directly tied to national ones. As a non-profit agency, the very existence of the Press depended on the new levels of arts funding in the seventies. Those funds came primarily from arts-funding agencies of the Western Australian government but from 1976 onwards the Press also regularly received substantial support from the Literature Board in the form of publishing subsidies (Templeman 79). Thus, for example, the two Jolley short story collections it published in the seventies were subsidised by the Literature Board, as were the two novels the Press published in the early eighties (Shapcott 199–200). The publication of *Palomino* by Outback Press (1980), of *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* by the University of Queensland Press (1983), and of *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* and *Woman in a Lampshade* by Penguin (both also in 1983) were also subsidised by the Literature Board (Shapcott 211–12). This record of subsidies to publishers of Jolley’s early novels is a measure of the larger impact of the new government patronage on the writing life in Australia in the seventies. And, to the extent that the rhetoric of regionalism of the early to mid-seventies was a strand of the new nationalism of

the Whitlam years that sutured such a funding policy, the existence of Fremantle Arts Centre Press can be seen to be linked to national developments not only institutionally through new levels of arts funding, but also discursively through new sorts of nationalism.

The third national-regional circumstance that contributed to the 'miracle of confluence' that shaped Jolley's career in the seventies was the institutionalisation of both Australian Studies and Creative Writing as disciplinary studies. In Western Australia in the early seventies, for example, the Fremantle Arts Centre ran both creative writing programs at the Centre and also creative writing workshops and book clubs for country districts through its Arts Access program. In the same period the Department of English at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, one of the new Colleges of Advanced Education which (along with the new universities) were established from 1968 onwards, set up three-year undergraduate majors in both Australian Studies and Creative Writing. These developments directly impacted on Jolley's career. In 1974 she began teaching at the Fremantle Arts Centre, in both its Perth courses and its country workshops (the same year she received the Victorian FAW Herb Thomas Literary Award). And in 1978 she began to teach creative writing classes at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University of Technology), where she is now Honorary Writer in Residence and also Professor of Creative Writing.

It was this conjunction of a new federal arts policy, a new rhetoric of regionalism (related to a renewed nationalism), and a new institutional base for creative writing that took Jolley from the position of someone who writes – a faculty wife, a mother, a grandmother – to the position of a professional writer. In 1976 the Fremantle Arts Centre Press published her first book, *Five Acre Virgin and other stories*. In 1978 she was a panelist at an early Fremantle Arts Centre seminar on 'Regionalism in Contemporary Australian Literature,' which resulted in her first published essay, 'Landscape and Figures'. And in that year she also attended her first national writers' festival – the Adelaide Writers' Festival – where she met Caroline Lurie of the recently established Australian Literary Management agency, and so found her first literary agent. In 1979 Fremantle published Jolley's second book, *The Travelling Entertainer and other stories* and in 1980 Outback Press, another small press heavily subsidised by the Literature Board, brought out her first novel, *Palomino*. Thus Jolley made the transition from writing to being a writer. That the transition was a complex one personally as well as institutionally is suggested by a story from her second short-story collection, 'The Performance'. It was, however, the early fruition of her desire to have a career in writing.

### **A Provisional Conclusion – Toward an (Inter)National Career**

The first two decades of Jolley's career was enabled, constrained and shaped by the institutional and discursive frameworks in which she sought to be a writer. Those circumstances included: the lingering of a 1940s/1950s nationalist/realist

sensibility throughout the sixties; the peripheral position of Western Australia with regard to new forms of writing and publishing in the late sixties and early seventies; the consequent strength of institutional and rhetorical forms of regionalism in Western Australia in that period; the impact of intensified governmental patronage of the arts in the early seventies; and the formation of creative writing as a discipline through being institutionalised as a course of study in both community and tertiary learning programs. These are the major, but not the only, formative circumstances of the first part of Jolley's career. There was, for example, also the influence of the gathering force of the women's movement in the seventies. It is not by chance that in 1979 one of her stories, 'Winter Nelis,' appeared in an anthology of women's writing.

Then there is still the other half of the story to tell – the story of Jolley's career from 1980 onwards. In the eighties Jolley remarkably published eleven books in ten years, five of them in a two-year period from 1983 to 1984. In this time she became a Penguin Australia writer, won numerous national literary awards and was the recipient of two Literature Board Fellowships (Shapcott 91). She was a regular reviewer for national newspapers, an often invited guest at national and local festivals, conferences and workshops, a frequent subject of news reports and media interviews and the President of the Australian Society of Authors (1985–1987). She also received three honorary doctorates and several civil honours, including being made an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to Australian literature (1988). In short, after twenty years of the slow hard work of getting published from a regional base, Jolley became a central figure in the distributional and conversational networks of Australian literary production and reception in the 1980s and 1990s.

The shape of that infrastructure is outlined in the record of events of one year in Jolley's professional life. To illustrate, in 1997 the business of her writing life was marked by these events: teaching creative writing at Curtin University over two semesters; publishing a novel, a short story, four articles and two book reviews; participating in three festivals (Melbourne, Perth, and Melbourne again); conducting writing workshops in Perth and Canberra; appearing as guest speaker at nine events in five capital cities; and taking part in publicity for *Lovesong* – which included an ABC television interview, six radio interviews, four print-media interviews, two readings, and six guest-speaker appearances. In the same year Jolley was awarded an honorary Doctor of Literature by the University of Queensland, and named as a 'National Treasure' by the (New South Wales) National Trust. The events of this one year in a writer's life, like those of other years across the last two decades, are not fortuitous. They are the result of the mature writings of the second period of Jolley's career; but they are also dependant upon the shaping framework of the industrial, distributive and discursive forces of writing in Australia over the last twenty or so years.

These forces entail, among other things, a more global, more market-oriented publishing industry; an electronically enabled national media that intersects with the publishing industry; a florescence of literary festivals, competitions, prizes,



and awards; an established place for creative writing and Australian literature in universities; and an entrenchment of government funding (however depleted). Jolley's 1997 itinerary across Australia and through its institutions illustrates the complex infrastructure of a literary career in Australia today. And it marks the changes in that infrastructure from the first twenty years of her career, changes that Tim Rowse began to chart in *Arguing the Arts* (1985), and that Mark Davis, avowedly speaking for a new generation, finds rebarbative. Curiously, Davis's response to the literary-cultural gangland of today finds some echoes in Jolley's more muted expression of the difficulties of getting noticed and published that she faced in the sixties and early seventies. Such a structural echo is perhaps a recommendation for McKenzie Wark's notion that what is needed in the national literary debate is a 'zone of indifference' – a place where different interests, purposes, styles and writings not only find expression but also an attentive hearing, a conversational zone whose vectors are inclusive rather than otherwise (Wark 52). And perhaps the usefulness of institutional histories like Rowse's early piece or, more recently, Wark's *Virtual Republic*, Robert Dessaix's *Speaking Their Mind*, and the collection edited by Delys Bird, Robert Dixon and Susan Lever, *CanonOZities*, is that they can help to provide just such a zone of inclusive debate.

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