Editors' Note

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Australian literary criticism always has engaged with ethical and social issues. There has been, however, a marked resurgence of interest in the relationship between texts and their social, political and ethical contexts and meanings over the last decade. The 1998 ASAL conference on "Australian Literature and the Public Sphere" was one obvious marker of this renewed academic interest in the relationship between literature and society; and the 2004 ASAL conference on "World and Text: Ethics, Aesthetics and Emotions" is a more recent one. In the international arena, the publication of texts such as *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility* (1999), and the "Literature and Ethics" conference held in July 1996 at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, demonstrate a similar concern to explore the connections between literary studies and public life. The Wales conference invoked Steven Connor's remark that "[t]he word 'ethics' seems to have replaced 'textuality' as the most charged term in the vocabulary of contemporary literary and cultural theory" (*TLS*, 5 January 1996). This critical turn is reflected in many of the essays in this volume of *JASAL*, an issue which demonstrates how careful literary analysis can provide effective ways of discussing textual strategies to do with power, freedom, equity, identity and responsibility.

Susan Lever's "Ratbag Writers and Cranky Critic: In Their Praise" insists on the need for critics to argue with each other about literature and ideas. Significantly, Lever suggests that writers are currently in a better position than academics to ask "uncomfortable questions about the values behind our society." This essay comes at a crucial time in Australian literary studies, a time when, as Drusilla Modjeska has suggested, the changing relationship between fiction and the world in which

it is written is "producing a crisis in fiction" (*Timepieces* 202). As Lever rightly notes, critics need to pay more attention to the world inhabited by writers and to respond to those writers and their work in "a human and understanding way."

Critical discussion of ethics and literature often focuses on "ethics *in* literature"—as Noel Rowe puts it, on how "value statements [are] affirmed or denied by literary works." Rowe, however, reads Hal Porter's plays in order to talk about ethics *and* literature, arguing for a narrative model of ethical reflection that recognises the constitutive role of narrative (literary, social, personal) in ethical being. This emphasis on a reciprocity between the domains of ethics and literature leads him to attend equally to the textual and ethical qualities of Porter's plays. And Melinda Jewell is comparably but differently concerned with intersections between the life and the work of the writer in "Terpsichorean Moments in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala* and Hal Porter's *The Titled Cross*," which offers a fresh perspective on the meaning of dance, and how dance is or can be written in Australian fiction.

The notion of narrative as integral to the (ethical) questions of how to discern the good, the bad and the indifferent, and to live accordingly, is also central to Tanya Dalziell's discussion of Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* and "its specific preoccupations with the ethics of writing a life of an other in the face of loss." Her analysis draws on Martha Nussbaum's notion of narrative as a space for ethical reflection in the interrogative mode, and on Derrida's notion of "proleptic mourning," in order to emphasise the importance to ethical understanding of listening to as well as telling stories, of (in Jean-Francois Lyotard's term) response-ability.

One of Dalziell's conclusions is that "[a]ffirmation and hope are made possible not by exorcising ghosts of the dead, of the lost, but by entertaining them, however unsettling, painful and confronting. . . ." The essays by Brian Dibble and Liz Parsons echo this conclusion, each in different ways. Dibble moves between the biography and texts of Elizabeth Jolley to remark on how Jolley uses narrative as a space for meditation in order to retrieve an "ethic of hope" from the loss and pain of family life, particularly that related to conflicts between mothers and daughters. And Liz Parson's looks closely at the verbal and visual textual strategies of two remarkable children's books that portray childhood melancholia, in order to argue for narrative as a space within which there can be "a transformative solution to sadness, a solution that is, in effect, art."

The themes of loss and childhood are taken up in another way by Kathryn Burns in "Landscapes of Australian Childhoods," which offers a regional comparison of Edenic imaginings in a range of texts dealing with Australian childhoods, arguing that the portrayal of childhood landscapes in terms of an ancient mythology rep-

resents a yearning for an inevitably lost sense of unity between self and place, self and others. And Joanna Mendelssohn outlines the many intimate connections between Norman Lindsay's personal circumstances and his *Cousin from Fiji*, providing still another look at the connections between a writer's life and work, as well as the painful dynamics of family life.

Julieanne Lamond's essay on M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* focuses on the question of literature's ethical role at the level of social as opposed to family life, and speaks about the limitations of, and the possibilities for, the role of literature in public life. This essay—in reading *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* as a novel about writing and writers, and how they fit in to the world around them—is an example of the kind of criticism Lever advocates.

And Ben Authers' consideration of Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded* also thinks of ethics and literature at the level of the social. In the vein of Emmanuel Levinas, who relates ethics to, and makes it a relation to, otherness, Authers traces the novel's construction of (sexual and ethnic) otherness, suggesting that the official policy of multiculturalism espoused by the Australian federal government in 1999 promotes assimilation over difference, and that the novel's textual strategies both affirm the importance of an accepting listening to "otherness" and—in the face of the protagonist's nihilism—a social ethic "of solidarity and love."

Writing and speaking always incorporate acts of power that have ethical as well as textual value. Issues of writing, language, and power are central to Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*. Lisa Slater identifies some of the ethical difficulties faced by Scott in writing *Benang*—Should he speak, if so how? Should he write, if so, what?—before discussing some of the narrative strategies Scott employs to destabilise fixed notions of identity and open up a space for cross-cultural dialogue, a space that allows for a transformative engagement between "others."

Scott seeks to reinscribe a multiplicity of voices and registers previously silenced by the dominant white colonial narrative. That silencing took a number of forms, one of which is discussed in Judith Johnston's case study of the production and reception of Katherine Langloh Parker's work: the appropriation of Indigenous stories through the process of translation. Johnston's essay demonstrates how the act of translation can never be "innocent." She describes how, despite Langloh Parker's genuine interest in, and occasional acknowledgement of, the origin of these stories, and despite her intention that these stories should be a celebration of difference, ultimately her ethical and aesthetic considerations gave way to market forces (and a dominating male editor).

Gender, writing and the public sphere are also at issue in the last two essays of this volume. In a consciously political move Elizabeth McMahon discusses the work of two Australian feminist intellectuals, Germaine Greer and Sylvia Lawson, in the context of global traditions of self-embodying female intellectuals pioneered by Gertrude Stein. The essay focuses on the "rhetorical operations by which the personal and public lives of women are rendered interchangeable, as are their embodied subjectivities and their literary work." And Sandra Knowles' essay (which won the A.D. Hope award for the best postgraduate submission), "The Not Quite Real Miles Franklin: Diaries as Performance," convincingly argues that Franklin's deployment of a genre conventionally regarded as a private, confessional space was in fact a performance "integral to her identity as an author": "her diaries were written to be published posthumously and to project her future fame."

This is a robust collection of essays and reviews that in varied ways explore the complex, perplexing connections between writer and writing, biography and literature, ethics *and* literature. It is one of the pleasures of editing to be able to read and reread such essays—a pleasure enhanced by the able editorial assistance of Jane Scott. And a pleasure we hope readers of this issue of *JASAL* will share.