

Just Words? Australian Authors Writing for Justice. Ed. Bernadette Brennan. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2008, 200pp.

AU\$32.95

ISBN 9780702236389 (pbk)

http://www.uqp.uq.edu.au/book_details.php?id=9780702236389

Christos Tsiolkas, Gideon Haigh and Alexis Wright, with an introduction by J. M. Coetzee. *Tolerance, Prejudice, Fear.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008, 176pp.

AU\$24.95

ISBN 9781741755022 (pbk)

<http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=94&book=9781741755022>

Mabo . . . Wik . . . Bringing Them Home . . . stolen children . . . sorry . . . queue jumper . . . Tampa . . . Siev-X . . . children overboard . . . asylum seeker . . . 9/11 . . . London . . . Bali . . . Hicks . . . Iraq . . . Afghanistan . . . Cronulla . . .

Shrapnel from broken headlines, these words and names are the indigestible residue of the last decade's public sphere. Like the fragments in a kaleidoscope, the patterns change but they don't. Even in spite of recent regime changes, this shell-grit will be rustling on the beaches of our national discourse for some time yet. This is a view given some support by two new anthologies—*Just Words?* edited by Bernadette Brennan, a senior lecturer in English at the University of Sydney, and *Tolerance, Fear and Prejudice*, commissioned by Sydney PEN as part of their '3 Writers Project'—each of which asks Australian authors to reflect on the national polity.

These books were born in the long last night of the Howardian winter, those inky moments before the Ruddy dawn. In the twinkling of an electoral eye Howard was gone, swept aside not, we must admit, by a storm of outrage, but by entropy and the shrewd, managerialist freshness of the alternative. A crumpled pile of patriotic parachute silk on the side of the stage is all that remains. The PEN book, with a smaller cast of writers, has the considerable advantage—in terms of being topical—of including this event in its narration. Brennan's on the other hand, serves to caution us against the all-too-tempting but always false sense of the unendingness of the status quo. But everything is paid for: UQP's *Just Words?* longer in the hatching, is faultlessly edited, while Allen & Unwin's *Tolerance, Fear and Prejudice* carries a few rough edges.

Just Words? collects 12 essays by Australian writers—novelists, activists, playwrights, academics, journalists and various combinations of these. Some

essays specifically address the challenges they perceive to have been posed by events in the national and international political context. Peter Manning's 'Writing in an 'Age of Terror'', Eva Sallis' 'Art in a time of crisis' and Rosie Scott's 'In Praise of Political Fiction' all advocate the role of art, writing, and intellectual critique as forces of opposition to political expedience and populist hatreds. Other essays are by writers who wish to show how their own work has done these very things, that is, sought to promote a position of tolerance and understanding in situations where those qualities appear in short supply. Thus, Gail Jones writes on the background to her novel *Sorry*, actor turned playwright Katherine Thomson reflects on the political dimension of her plays, and Jane Harrison narrates 'My Journey through *Stolen*', a play she wrote about the Stolen Generations and which led her to painful questions about her own Aboriginality. In a similar vein, Frank Brennan considers his advocacy and writing. Other contributions discover this redemptive role of writing in recent Aboriginal children's fiction (Anita Heiss), Clara Law's documentary about mandatory detention *Letter to Ali* (2004) (Bernadette Brennan), and the poems of Judith Wright, Francis Webb and James McAuley (Noel Rowe). The only essay I could genuinely not place within the rubric of the volume was that of Adrian Martin on recent(ish) Australian cinema. He finds it, for the most part, boring. Fair enough, but is this really a plea for justice? Surely these films have already been punished by being unwatched.

The book is dedicated to the late Noel Rowe, poet, critic and English lecturer at the University of Sydney. It was Rowe's essay 'Just Poetry', along with that by Kim Scott, that I admired the most for the simple fact that it did not reach out into the hysterical polemics of the moment to motivate its argument and because it was far less compromised by the disavowed narcissism of the virtuous. Whilst not blind to the very real injustices that the other writers decry, Rowe's response is in an altogether different key. He writes, for instance, on justice in the poetry of Francis Webb in these terms:

Webb seems to be interested in another kind of justice. More theological than political, more vulnerable than practical, his is a justice on the edge of absence, a justice that appears as the call made on 'us' by those who cannot effect what is due to them.

Rowe's Levinasian acuteness makes him a much fuller seer of the situation than most of the other contributors, who seem to exist in quaint ignorance of their dialectical debts, and whose underwriting question appears to be: 'why aren't people just good, like me?'

Kim Scott seldom lets me down and doesn't here. He writes with a mixture of honesty, grace and humour. He doesn't pull punches but he is not looking

for sympathy either. His essay, 'Island Home', goes to the heart—words and justice—of this collection. (Interestingly, 'heart' is one Noongar word for island).

What better way to appreciate the deeply human heritage of a place than by the language indigenous to it, the words and stories of its first society? Such words might even help a young, immigrant nation graft itself to the many older nations and older histories above which it shimmers.

Can that be done with justice?

For some years Scott has been working, with characteristic modesty, to regenerate Noongar languages. *Kayang and Me* (2005) gave some insight into this, but this essay shows in detail the complexities of this process and the arguments that it causes mainly, and appropriately, amongst Noongar people themselves: 'Ironic: our arguments were conducted in English; and were a painful reminder of how oppressed communities turn on themselves'. For Scott, the process has been challenging to his very sense of himself and his calling as a writer. 'Surely', he writes, 'justice requires words and stories be returned to, and consolidated in, a community of descendants, and shared from there.' Is it possible that in certain contexts then, writing is itself an alienating act, exporting the language away from the place where it needs to be in order to live as a language?

Tolerance, Prejudice and Fear brings together three of my favourite Australian writers, the novelists Christos Tsiolkas and Alexis Wright, and whatever you call Gideon Haigh, whose suave prose and encyclopaedic knowledge blesses fields from corporate history to cricket. Each of these three contributors has that essential quality to good writing: wickedness. Aply introduced by émigré and Nobel laureate, J. M. Coetzee, these three authors unpack their surgery cases and go to work on the Australian body politic, which they all agree is looking a little green around the gills. That they each have the luxury of 50 or so pages leads to a different mode of discussion than one finds in the usual 5000 word anthology essay. This longer format was innovated successfully in this country by Black Inc. with its *Quarterly Essays*. As part of the Black Inc. stable, Haigh adapts most readily to this form, and he breezily moves through his subject—the resurgence of Australian patriotism—with erudition and unhurried digressiveness. Cicero, the Treaty of Westphalia, Vladimir Zhironovsky and generous helpings of Orwell are drawn into Haigh's web. Sometimes the historical parallels are startling. They don't always explain the present but they help us, nonetheless, in the difficult task of understanding it. Haigh is witty and few are spared. He does not indulge in the simplistic

degradation of former Prime Minister Howard but does concede that 'his prepared speeches betrayed a staggering vacuity, not just devoid of thought but actively antagonistic to it'. This was in point of fact true, but Haigh is right not to deduce stupidity or depravity from this mere fact. Feeling obliged rather belatedly to make a conclusion, Haigh teases out the idea that contemporary patriotism bears the imprint of a culture of narcissism. It is fair to say that Haigh is not at his strongest when he enters the terrain of social psychology, but the basic position is a cogent one. That in a society which demands ever greater individual responsibility, these agents (so called 'ordinary people') will require more intense ideological (cognitive) support in order to shoulder that burden. Hence, the more intimate, needy nature of the new patriot, her need to tattoo the southern cross onto the skin or wear the flag as a superhero's cape.

Cutting one layer deeper, Alexis Wright addresses the category of fear. Or perhaps fear is a meta-category in the sense that its essential elements—abandonment, dismemberment and submersion—constitute the pivot that makes categorisation possible? Wright's essay moves, in a way dissimilar to anyone else in either anthology, between childhood memory, community politics, national disquiet and transnational communication. Thus fear unites and divides, it holds us together and tears us apart. The fear that Wright evokes is as elusive as the narrative in *Carpentaria*, somehow seeming everywhere and nowhere. She analyses current difficulties in Aboriginal communities in terms of the injury caused by long-term fear. For all the excitement of an 'intervention', particularly if you get to use the army, anyone who has spent a little time becoming intimate with their own inner fears will know that they don't follow orders, no matter how sternly given. I don't always understand what Wright is saying, but I think I get her. She writes on the seam that separates lyricism from incoherence. She is one of the few who takes the time to talk to the part of me that doesn't understand things most of the time and I'm grateful for that.

Christos Tsiolkas writes on tolerance. He is an advocate of 'radical tolerance' at least in the field of art and writing:

I think it is essential for the writer, the artist, to be blasphemous. This is a position beyond the bourgeois politeness that taints the liberal's conception of free speech. And also a position at odds with the redemptionist hope that defines the socialist and feminist ideal of art . . . [We] are required, I believe, to always look towards that defined as unspeakable, intolerable, traitorous, seditious, evil and abject in order to ensure that the violence enacted against its expression is given a voice, shaped into memory.

Whilst I agree with the gist of this demand, there is also the nagging sense that it is . . . how do I put this? . . . intolerant. In other words, the radical tolerator must admit ultimately that there is something which they can't tolerate and this is, by definition, intolerance. Here Tsiolkas reaches the familiar libertarian impasse. Permit everything and no one will be oppressed by the impermissible. Of course, Tsiolkas is clear here that he is talking about 'art'. Art should be the sphere in which we get as close as possible to absolute tolerance. This rationale though, has two slightly inconsistent prongs. One is that art acts as a release valve for those instincts that we repress as the price of our civility, and thus stops us from exploding from accumulated politeness. The other prong is that art's specific but extended tolerance is instructive for social relations in general. The second is the more dubious proposition in my view. Also, the more infantile. Laws are what guarantee our freedom. The absence of laws is not liberty but tyranny, and exhausting to boot. Art is that part of our culture which registers the tragedy of the insufficiency of laws to happiness, and also, in individual cases, to justice. Events such as—to take only this week's news—the investigation of the photographer Bill Henson for child pornography and the bombing of the Danish embassy in Islamabad for a blasphemous political cartoon show that radical tolerance is going to be tested by other radicalisms in a manner which will throw pressure back on to the laws that allow freedoms, and disallow them.

Tony Hughes d'Aeth, The University of Western Australia