

**Brian Dibble. *Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley*. Crawley: U of Western Australia P, 2008, 334pp.**

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Elizabeth Jolley was an honoured guest at several ASAL conferences. At Townsville in 1986, she prefaced her reading of the story, 'Winter Nelis', by commenting that Richard Walsh, as editor of *Pol*, had declined the story as 'too menopausal' just as Richard, running late for the session, burst into the room. Jolley went on to say that she had taken his advice when revising the story. She certainly knew that Walsh was at the conference and her comment was part of a carefully measured comic performance. In his biography of Jolley, *Doing Life*, Brian Dibble notes Walsh among a list of publishers and editors who rejected Jolley's work in the 1970s. She had waited for a long time to find a public that understood her work, yet there was good humour in her performance. It was apparent that, now that she was finally recognised, Jolley could even enjoy the wit (and justice?) of Walsh's appraisal.

Many of us will remember Jolley's appearances at festivals and conferences: always dressed in an Indian cotton dress, she read clearly and carefully, never signalling the absurdities or ironies in her work as she presented herself as the daffy elderly woman, rather surprised to find herself in front of all these people. At the 1991 Wagga Wagga conference Jolley, with a writer's sharp curiosity, asked me why my marriage had ended. Then she told me that she had recently reread her story 'The Shepherd on the Roof', and realised how deeply unhappy she had been when she wrote it. It is the story of a middle-aged wife's longing for the blessing of affection from her husband.

Jolley's relationship with her husband, Leonard Jolley, is central to Dibble's biography. Leonard (unnamed at his first appearance in the book) was a patient at the Pyrford hospital where Monica Knight (Elizabeth Jolley's birth name) began her work as trainee nurse in 1940, at the age of sixteen. He was not one of the heroic wounded who would soon fill the hospitals of Britain, but a chronically ill pacifist who liked to flirt with the nurses and listen to classical music. Monica met him again when she was posted to another hospital near Birmingham; he and his wife, Joyce, became her closest friends, sharing her love of classical music and literature. As readers of *My Father's Moon* (1986), *Cabin Fever* (1990) and *The Georges' Wife* (1993) will guess, this *ménage à trois* resulted in Monica's pregnancy and the end of her nursing career. Joyce, too, was pregnant, giving birth to a baby girl two months after Monica. Jolley eventually divorced his wife to cohabit with Monica, marrying her before the birth of their second child in 1952. He also insisted that she change her name to Elizabeth Jolley.

Clearly, Leonard was a source and an incitement, a problem and solution for Jolley's art and life. He made decisions—such as taking the University librarian's job in Western Australia—that made immense differences to her prospects as a writer. He created some of her roles: the dutiful wife, the President of the University wives' club, as well as the Pommy migrant or even the marriage wrecker. Yet he was also her artistic and intellectual mentor who helped

compensate for her lack of formal education; he shared her wit and unconventional approach to life. In their early days together they collaborated on a garden diary that reveals some of their delight in each other's cleverness. Monica Knight, as Dibble shows, was writing seriously from her teenage years; she read the classic works of English and European literature with a dedication that suggests a writer in the making. Her relationship with Leonard Jolley gave her some of the emotional experience and knowledge to develop into the novelist we know. Her novels so often create characters who passively fall in with the wishes of more dominant people, or who practise cruelty within a limited domestic or institutional sphere. But she is also alert to the shifts in power within relationships and the desire for control that often accompanies love. Jolley's novels reveal the unconventionality behind seemingly conventional marriages, and the way that sexual desire and loneliness can lead even the most 'conservative' people into a maze of wayward relationships.

Despite the evidence for Jolley's difficult devotion to Leonard and the crisis of her first pregnancy, Dibble insists that 'the central drama in her life' was her mother's relationship with Mr Berrington, the friend and possibly lover, who shared her parents' marriage. Her father, Wilfred Knight, had suffered imprisonment during World War One as a conscientious objector. He travelled to Vienna after the war (apparently seeking Sigmund Freud) where he met and married the beautiful and temperamental Margarete Fehr. Margarete found British domestic life with a mild-mannered, unambitious schoolteacher inhibiting and dreary. Berrington relieved her discontent by providing an avenue to opera and European cultural life, even taking her daughters with them on some holidays. In her essay 'Mr Berrington', Jolley wrote about her loyalty to her father in his predicament, but Berrington appears to have genuinely cared about the Knight family, providing generous support to them all. Perhaps this arrangement was not so strange an accommodation among people who never considered divorce.

Other peculiarities in Jolley's upbringing must have contributed to her intellectual and emotional development. Both her parents were well-educated and fluent in more than one language. Though her father's religious and ethical quest eventually returned him to Methodism, his pacifism led him to sympathise with the Society of Friends, and his daughters went to a Quaker boarding school. Berrington, too, was a pacifist, and the family mixed with a wider community of people with pacifist views. The Knights sent their ten year-old daughter to the psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, when she suffered from nightmares; her mother schooled her daughters at home until they were released to Sibford boarding school. During a period of international crisis and war, the family sheltered European refugees, but Monica wrote to Hitler from school (receiving two postcards from him) and Margarete Knight continued to long for the return of the Hapsburgs. Elizabeth Jolley made friends with German schoolgirls on her holidays there before the war. In wartime Britain, this family pushed against the tide of patriotism and jingoism; they maintained their right to independent thought. Treating the victims of the D-Day landings their daughter was shocked to find her fellow nurses withheld compassion from the wounded Germans and Poles they found in their care.

Dibble's account of Jolley's family and her life up to her migration to Australia is rich with details of this kind. He places her experience of institutional living, her personal struggles with loneliness and isolation after her pregnancy, and her literary ambitions within a context of European turmoil. She was British in a nonconformist way, and European in her cultural interests, yet she found herself in a relatively isolated part of Australia trying to establish herself as a writer in her middle age.

Jolley's determination and stamina in pursuing publication is almost as amazing as the writing itself. Her fiction brought a European sensibility to the Australian literary scene, and an awareness of the pain of displacement that she knew at first hand—Dibble's account of Jolley's relationship with Ludmila Blotnicki gives an instance of her sympathy for those cast adrift by migration. The observant, playful and peculiar nature of her fiction would have established her position in Australia as a leading contemporary exponent of domestic irony, with a postmodern inflection. But *My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever* demand to be considered as major literary achievements, even by those who find Jolley's other work too whimsical. Dibble spends too much time reprimanding critics (including me) who have commented on the autobiographical basis of these novels. They have an emotional complexity and clear signposts to Jolley's own experience (Vera Wright plays the part of Monica Knight) that suggest the author intended readers to understand them as a form of self-examination. Of course, they are not factually accurate; Dibble gives us the facts that throw their achievement into greater relief. In the end, though, Jolley was not brave enough to confront Joyce's fate in her fiction, and Mr George must leave only his sister in order to marry Vera. This, too, has a poignancy, given Jolley's habitual sympathy for others.

This is a biography largely informed by interviews with its subject over many years, though Dibble's discussions with Jolley's sister and other friends give further perspectives on particular events and relationships. His work in providing a fuller context for Jolley's fiction is invaluable and, in passing, it also gives us a new perspective on aspects of twentieth-century Europe and migrant Australia in the postwar years. Though the bibliography is substantial, readers will find Dibble and Barbara Milech's online bibliography fuller and easier to access at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/jolley/>.

Dibble's discussion of Jolley's fiction is fairly perfunctory and he doesn't really address the nature and achievement of her art. He makes connections between people she knew and similar characters who appear in her fiction—Blotnicki, for example, as the inspiration for Nastasya in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1985)—but he does not venture into a full engagement with its particular contribution to our literature. His reference to the work of other critics is minimal, perhaps because this isn't a critical biography and he wants to leave the way clear for literary critics to return to Jolley's work with renewed interest. It is time now for the full critical study that Jolley's fiction deserves. This biography will send readers back to Jolley's novels with greater appreciation of her gift to them. It is to be hoped that it will also inspire a talented literary critic to engage with the full range of Jolley's writing.

*Susan Lever, University of Sydney*