

## Frank Moorhouse: A Retrospective

Today, publication in the United States represents for probably most Australian writers, and readers, the same kind of recognition that publication in England did for so long in the past. Until toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the establishment of local presses coincided with conscious effort to develop a native literature, London or Edinburgh offered the Australian writer virtually the only chance of publication. A consequence of this cultural colonialism for this century has been a tendency to distinguish between 'characteristically' Australian writing published locally and the more 'international' writing by Australians published elsewhere—even though this has often been confused by consideration of the writers' country of birth or residence, their concerns, and the continuance from last century of the debate over the appropriateness of absolute 'universal' or relative 'local' critical criteria. There is nothing unusual about this in the history of a comparatively new literary culture, nor that 'metropolitan' recognition was sought and welcomed (with London, historically, providing the metropolis of letters). Writers who published abroad, however, often suffered delayed recognition in their own country: the most familiar examples among novelists would be Christina Stead and Patrick White, who from the beginnings of their careers published in London and New York. Although today the more artificial aspects of this distinction between local and international writing have faded, there still remains a 'metropolis', a perceived source of influence, of critical and financial success, but it is now much more likely to be located by Australian writers in New York than London.

For Australian readers, conspicuous recent examples of novelists who are winning 'international' recognition through publication in the United States would include: Thomas Keneally with *Confederates* (Collins, Sydney and London, 1979; Harper and Row, New York, 1980), David

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Malouf with *An Imaginary Life* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1978; Braziller, New York, 1978), and Roger McDonald with his first novel, *1915* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1979; Braziller, New York, 1980). As well, the new generation of short fiction writers has appeared in American magazines, including Murray Bail, Morris Lurie, and Michael Wilding in the *New Yorker*; and Peter Carey's collection *The Fat Man in History* has been published simultaneously by prestigious houses in London and New York (Faber, London, 1980; Random House, New York, 1980). Such examples could be multiplied, yet (and to come to the point), well-deserved as this recognition is, an element of adventitiousness enters into its achievement, in that the writers who attain it are not the only ones whose reputations are high among Australian readers. Conspicuously absent from the examples just given is Frank Moorhouse, who is generally seen as among the most original and substantial of the writers who emerged in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. There seems some perversity in his not having received international recognition through publication in America, because the impact of American culture on Australia is a recurring subject in his fiction—and the book with which he first established his reputation is entitled *The Americans, Baby*.

Moorhouse's most recent collection of stories, *The Everlasting Secret Family* (1980), appears after a decade in which he published five others, including his first. It was also a period of distinct social, political, and cultural change, a period he has captured in a collection of 'new journalism', chiefly his own, titled *Days of Wine and Rage* (1980). Like this, *The Everlasting Secret Family* also has aspects of a retrospective collection. The early books—*Futility and Other Animals* (1969), *The Americans, Baby* (1972), and *The Electrical Experience* (1974)—were each subtitled 'a discontinuous narrative'; this is the form that Moorhouse has made his distinctive, though varied, means of structuring his fictions, and employed in *Conference-ville* (1976) and *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (1977). While individual stories can be read (and some have been published) separately, the interlinking of characters and themes relates them in each volume. As well, some characters reappear from volume to volume; and a story from the first recurs in the second, one from that in the third, underscoring the sense of a 'family'

relationship, or, one might say (not inappropriately, given its psychological associations), a 'polymorphous' relationship within each collection and among them all. The effect is that while the stories move through discrete social levels, generations, and locales, they also imply an elusive pattern of interaction, one in which connections are *not* made as they would be in a traditional novel.

Although Moorhouse is committedly a writer of stories rather than novels, his composed collections are among the most original, extended fictions of the past decade, and his discontinuous forms are essential to his view of the ways things happen and of the discreteness and fragmentation of individual experience. What happens does not 'develop' as in a continuous narrative, yet there is the sense that all is not random, disconnected, arbitrary. *The Everlasting Secret Family* develops, in the senses of further revealing and imaginatively extending, these relationships underlying his work to date. Although not subtitled 'a discontinuous narrative' as the first collections were, *The Everlasting Secret Family* contains such sequences in the first and third of its four sections. Readers expecting again a 'family' relationship among all the stories (and they would be right to do so) will find that in mode, mood, and subject these form more radically distinct groups than in any of the previous collections. The book appears a 'retrospective' in that each section develops different aspects of Moorhouse's characteristic manners and concerns, whereas the book as a whole (as its predecessors did successively) moves into different areas and new stylistic modulations.

The first group of stories, 'Pacific City', offers scenes from provincial life in an earlier generation—a classic subject of realist, and ironic, fiction. Although in comparison with other writers of 'contemporary' fiction (and his near contemporaries) like Murray Bail, Peter Carey, and Michael Wilding, Moorhouse is not so manifestly experimental in style and has tended to locate his fictions in immediate experience, to be ostensibly more the realist than the artificer, the realism of this opening sequence is in a very literary, artistically self-conscious mode. The town which is to be the site of the projected Pacific City is already familiar from earlier collections, especially *The Electrical Experience*, and is perhaps not unlike the town a hundred miles south of Sydney that the author himself (born 1938) came from. But it is also, with traditional literary and cultural associations, the Town as against the City, and a microcosm of the Society (as well as of a society in a

particular time and place) that in all times frustrates the Artist and the Seer. In this consciousness of—even parodic awareness of—archetypes, the ‘Pacific City’ sequence is closer to Patrick White’s first novel, *Happy Valley*, than it is to traditional fiction about Australian country town life. And Moorhouse’s style, in the particulars of his relocating classic themes in an alien environment, is not essentially different from White’s: the predominant sense of ‘slice of life’ realism is, at the same time, working figuratively, to transcend (and render arbitrary) that notional categorical separation into metonymic and metaphoric modes of writing posited by some theorists.

Irving Bow, ‘the proprietor of darkness’ in the story so titled, and proprietor of the Odeon Cinema, is the focus for the ironic comedy in these stories which contrast mundane existence in the small town with the Life of the imagination, of dreams and visions, but also of deceptions and delusions. Left money by his mother, Bow has built his Odeon facing away from the town toward the projected Pacific City (the year is 1927). With its plaster statues of the Muses in the foyer, it is his temple of art and promise of the Golden Age to come, advanced by electricity, when Pacific City will be a pleasure resort like Baden or Nice and the Odeon the centre of its public life. But unsuspected by the townspeople who accept as real the illusions the cinema offers them, it is also a most transpontine theatre (my archaic flourish; but justified by ‘The Crying Organ’ story, in which a troupe of strolling players protests at competition from the cinema and topples the statue of Thalia). In the stories’ own images, it is Bow’s castle, Romanesque balcony and all, his retreat from the desert of the town; and, as keeper of his temple’s mysteries, Bow is the proprietor of darkness in another sense—he is the dark stranger in the lives of the town’s more attractive pubescents whom, with their compliance, he temporarily enslaves while he poses as a jaded Emperor. Or he shows ‘Passion’s Slave’ again to Dr. Trenbow in a private screening. His associates in the town are others who feel apart from it: Trenbow, whose ambition is to pursue the study of human psychology in Vienna; Backhouse, the newspaper editor, who aspires to Fleet Street; Scribner, the town’s bohemian of mysterious means, who is reputed to be an old Balliol man. ‘The Town Philosophers’ Banquet’ gathers together these and other luminaries, including Branton, who is regarded as a classics scholar, although he teaches something else at the local school, and Selfridge, the athlete returned from the Amsterdam Olympics,

who brings a body balm back from Greece (or Bow wants to think it's from Greece). Bow entertains them in the cinema's banquet room; as the guests discuss physical pleasure over the wine, the children of a Sicilian immigrant, dressed in Grecian costume, dance before them, their performance culminating in a mime of seduction. Afterward, Bow is left with the athletic but sleeping Selfridge, trying to delude himself from his balcony that 'Pacific City and its glittering noise, automobiles, and neon gas lights, had already arrived'.<sup>1</sup>

The ironically Platonic associations of this story's title and the Hellenic allusions (including pederasty) within it convey the timeless nature of Irving Bow's dissatisfactions and his idealisation of the City. His 'lonely unrespectability' is both specific to this town and time and simultaneously the romantic idealist's perennial sense of estrangement. The other 'philosophers' also feel exiled from an ideal metropolis. 'The Science Club Meets' brings them together again, around the body of a two-headed calf, to hear Bow lecture on the cinematograph. Afterward, the secretary reads a letter from the Institute of Patentees, London:

'Our correspondent says that little groups of patentees were still discussing points from the lecture among themselves on the stairs well after the close of the meeting.'

The secretary looked up. 'That's all.'

They sat there in silence, wanting so badly to have been among the small groups of patentees who gathered on the musty but well-polished stairs of the Institute in Westminster, the portraits of Faraday, Edison, Stephenson and Isambard Kingdom Brunel on the walls, the gas lights being turned out by the caretakers who told them to hurry along as they talked excitedly about Rynder's talk and spilled out into the spring air, pulling on their caps, going then maybe to a comfortable English public house for a pint, each giving guarded information about his latest theory, invention or calculation.

McDowell broke the wistful silence by moving in a quiet voice that the report of the Institute of Patentees be received. (p.51)

1 'Frank Moorhouse, *The Everlasting Secret Family and Other Stories* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1980), p.36. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

This sense of not fully belonging, of being spiritually estranged, remote from the true cultural centre (whether it be a fanciful classical Athens or Rome, imagined contemporary London or Vienna, or the idealised but never to be built Pacific City) pervades these stories. At the realistic level it captures the colonialist and provincial consciousness of this generation. At the metaphoric, and consciously literary, level, it insinuates the irony that such delusions of a finer, fuller life in some other place and time are perennial. The 'Pacific City' sequence closes with 'To Be Continued', quietly underscoring this recognition of the timeless conflict between the real and the ideal.

The complex play against the conventions of local literature is especially apparent in 'The Illegality of the Imagination', a reworking of the traditional subject of the child lost in the bush. Conventionally, this subject should oppose a sense of community to the inhospitality of the bush, but Bow's alienation from both the landscape and the people of the countryside expresses the author's rejection of conventions that would sentimentalise life in this place, at this time. After a premonition of death, Bow finds the child, which is then thrashed by its father, and later loses itself in the bush again, never to be found. The 'illegality' of Bow's imagination in conjuring up an image of the boy's skull on his naked body, and then remembering how the boy clung to him, corresponds with Moorhouse's own in venturing outside the conventions which traditionally prescribe how such subjects should be presented.

If Irving Bow, the corrupt master of illusions, is perceived as a type of the artist, forced into silence and exile, finding no one amongst his kindred to take his confession, but speaking the truth cunningly to the townspeople 'in a way that it would not be understood' (p.8), then the next section, 'The Dutch Letters', can also be seen as having problematical implications for art. The author-narrator tells us that he has found some letters in the student's room he is occupying during a conference, and he divulges their contents in full. The discovery is not accidental: the writer, curious to the point of invading the privacy of others, has actually broken into the student's locker and searched for the secret trap that conceals the letters in a writing cabinet. For the reader, the 'status' of this story is uncertain: is it a *conte trouvé* (to use the title of one of Moorhouse's uncollected stories), and are the letters genuine? Or are the letters, and the writer-narrator, the invention of another writer who likes to play on the boundary between fact and fiction? The writer

in this fiction is unable imaginatively to penetrate the lives, empathetically enter the relationships, that the letters present. All he can do is to document these documents, producing a jumble of discordant footnotes. The writers of the letters refuse to be 'written'; their experiences remain intractable to this writer. From him the reader has a confession, such as Bow, another furtive voyeur, wanted to make. From Moorhouse, the writer 'behind' this narrator, we have—what? Either the dramatic presentation of the gap between the recorded experience of others and the missing imaginative version that a 'real' writer would create from it, or a confession of a violation of others' secrets and of imaginative failure on the part of the real writer.

The third section, 'Imogene Continued', is the most extended example of 'discontinuous narrative' within *The Everlasting Secret Family* (though the possibility of the whole collection being a variation on this form needs to be kept open). It is in the mode most frequently associated with earlier collections, in which the author plays the roles of acute, ironic observer of contemporary manners and comic realist who blurs the edges between fact and fiction. Although such a characterisation ignores the variations that exist between the previous collections, it has its point in summarising readers' expectations that Moorhouse will speak the truth about social and sexual relationships (even though, like Irving Bow, he may speak it in such a way that it is not understood). Set at the same conference as the preceding 'Dutch Letters,' this section introduces a range of contemporary intellectual and political types, some at least being sketched from life; and the ritualistic procedures and group behaviour at the conference are so drolly observed that the sequence reads rather more like 'new journalism' than fiction. Yet the sequence raises problematical questions about the relationships between these ostensibly distinct categories of 'reportage' and 'fiction' and contains its own authorial confessions.

Cindy, one of the academics attending the conference, and a former lover of the narrator (the same writer-narrator who had searched the student's room in the previous section), is raped by some delegates from the Aboriginal ghetto in Sydney. Her reaction to this, complicated by her vicarious guilt over the injustices accorded the Aboriginals historically (and the fact that the conference is being held in Queensland, where the police have a reputation for brutality and racism); the narrator's own reaction, affected by his past conditioning and earlier affair with

Cindy; and the further complication introduced by their discovering that one of the Aboriginals involved is a convicted child molester confuses their attempts to make rational, detached, mature responses. They find, in a variation of the wording in a lecture they attend, 'only the interaction of confusing things.' The subject of this lecture, John Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney from 1927–1958, had provided, through his empiricist rejection of totalising systems of thought, a rationale for generations of 'Libertarian' Sydney bohemians. Cindy and the narrator (like Moorhouse himself) had been Libertarians in their youth; the irony is that they find themselves experiencing, emotionally and confusedly, that 'interaction of complex things' which intellectually they hold as their understanding of life. It is an irony at the expense of the narrator, who establishes himself first of all as jauntily detached and self-possessed. While in public he retains this confidence, continuing to clown and to participate in the regressive antics of the conference, inwardly he is under the pressure of these personal confusions.

In the context of Moorhouse's work as a whole, these admissions of uncertainty by the writer-narrator must seem confessional for the author also. The Libertarian subculture, influenced by Anderson's thinking, is presented in Moorhouse's earliest collections, and their discontinuous narrative structures can be seen as fictional demonstrations of Anderson's 'interaction of complex things'. Cindy is a character in these collections, and a story from the first reappears in this latest among the documenting notes to 'Imogene Continued'—in which she admits to lying about the experience on which that earlier story was based. Such a play with fact and fiction seems designed to counter conventional distinctions between the author 'in the story' (who reveals Cindy's secret to others) and the 'real' author (who reveals it to us) and to be an admission that Moorhouse shares his narrator's or persona's uncertainties which he draws so confidently into his fiction.

The final, and title, sequence begins by asserting the conventional distinction between author and narrator. The author notes that this 'erotic memoir in six parts' has been prepared from various sources; the narrator remarks: 'This was originally to be published privately and circulated privately. I do not in any way wish to harm the conservative forces in this country. In so far as this memoir touches on political things (and caution delimited this severely) it does so simply as a fact of our lives.'



But having come to this after the preceding sections of the book, the reader is likely to be wary of such a disclaimer from one of Moorhouse's narrators and to suspect the opposite is being hinted at. Yet 'The Everlasting Secret Family' departs from realistic modes to embrace the conventions of high pornography: the vaguely specified setting in time and place, Gothic suggestions of sacrilege and defilement associated with rites and vestments, and a classic concentration less on luridly described physical encounters than on the psychology of dominance and submission. But the classic, conventional theme of the abasement of self and the subjugation of others through the senses is played upon by this being a homosexual confession. A decadent set of conventions is revitalised by regaining its power to shock the contemporary imagination.

The narrator had been seduced by his lover, a politician, when he was a schoolboy; now he is a willingly submissive slave, chained by the telephone to his master's fickle whims, abused and manipulated, but also furtively rebellious in his promiscuity. In time, he obeys the instruction to initiate his master's son into the "secret family":

I was joined to a line through history which went back to the first primitive tribal person who went my way, who took a virgin boy lover, and every boy who became a man and took, in due turn, a boy lover, through to Socrates. I had played a part now in the continuation of that chain. I had played my first part as a child in becoming a man's lover. I had now played my second part. I now belonged fully in that historical line. It was a way of passing on and preserving the special reality, a way of giving new life, the birth for the boy of a new reality, a joining of him to a secret family, the other family. To belong to that chain is to belong to another life. (p.204)

In the high artificiality of its mode, this sequence departs from the varieties of realism preceding it in the collection. It can be seen as purely imaginative, fictional play, a calculatingly provocative virtuoso flourish by an author who, like Irving Bow, is a 'proprietor of darkness,' indulging the 'illegality' of his imagination and, uncertainly, as a fable to be read, decoded, in political and psychological terms. In its engagement with taboo subjects and its revelation of secrets, it teasingly suggests possible 'secret' and 'family' relationships with the earlier

sections in different modes: the politics of personal, and especially sexual, relationships—the dissembling, manipulativenness, and treachery that enter into these—and the deceptiveness, even deviousness, of the art that presents them. Where, though, there is only ‘the interaction of complex things’ in the earlier sections, in ‘The Everlasting Secret Family’ there is the narrator’s discovering in his transported imagination a significance, a continuity, and an order in life—but a travesty of these traditional moral and literary positives. Here, clearly, the collection is implicitly rejecting any simple disjunction between the realistic, true-to-life, and the consciously fictional, true-to-art. Playing with the complicating possibilities between these opposed extremes, it constitutes a retrospective of Moorhouse’s development to date.

Moorhouse’s first collection, in which the story Cindy alludes to in *The Everlasting Secret Family* appears, was first issued by a publisher of ‘girlie’ magazines at the end of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Following the success of *The Americans, Baby*, it was later reissued by Angus and Robertson, traditionally the major publisher of Australian writing since the late colonial period. Angus and Robertson have continued to reissue *Futility and Other Animals* to meet rising demand and have published subsequent collections of Moorhouse’s fiction. The early stories were, in the main and on the surface, about being young in Sydney during the Vietnam war and experiencing the tensions induced by the prevailing subcultural ideology of ‘liberation’—political and sexual. A number of these stories had been rejected by editors of literary magazines (hence publication in popular but hardly cultural ‘girlies’), not only because they were considered as riskily indecent but also because they were counter to what it was felt an ‘Australian’ short story should be about: more ‘representative’ characters and a more normative set of attitudes. Moorhouse was consciously opposing such stereotypes and in an interview has commented upon his own earlier attempts to write such stories:

They were humanistic. They were kind to the working class. They were sympathetic to kangaroos. They were everything that

2 *Futility and Other Animals* (Gareth Powell Associates, Sydney, 1969).

Australian short stories should have been at that time. Social realism writing. It has to pretend to be realistic, and also at the same time to be the vehicle for sentiments, liberal sentiments.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative manner of *Futility and Other Animals* is realistic, but it is not the vehicle for liberal humanist sentiment. Rather, the stories present detachedly, without conventional judgment, the pressures of immediately contemporary experience and the conflicts between how the characters feel and the way they think they ought to feel.

In a prefatory note the author describes these characters as a 'tribe—a modern, urban tribe' sharing an environment that is 'both internal—anxieties, pleasures, and confusions—and external—houses streets, hotels...'. These experiences, the inner Sydney ambience, and the reappearance of various characters in different stories provide the common elements in this 'discontinuous narrative'. Although unconventional when it first appeared, because of its departure from the more 'representative' characters and settings and the more 'normal' situations of short stories then, it now seems more obviously a 'first' collection, preoccupied with youthful rites of passage (and it is a book that has continued to appeal to new generations of readers). In the main, its stories are about growing up, leaving home, coming to the city from the country, or returning there; first love affairs, hetero- or homosexual; and finding a peer group, a life style, an ideology, especially the anti-ideology of Libertarianism. 'Liberation' imposes its own stresses, conflicting with the desire for simple, secure relationships on the part of those who have rejected the 'bourgeois' romantic concept of love, and, additionally, for the women, with their desire to have children. While the characters' emotional experiences are often 'immature,' Moorhouse's ironic distance from them is characteristic of his own mature manner, which is marked by direct, dramatic presentation of a voice or voices and by a preference for freshly colloquial, metaphoric language. Even the authorial 'stage directions' for the dialogue (as later quotation will show) are conveyed by 'low' or homely concrete diction and comic metaphor rather than by abstract and polysyllabic description. The first story in *Futility and Other Animals* would seem implicitly to

3 'There's No Such Thing as a Gay Novel', interview with Frank Moorhouse by Martin Smith, *Sydney Campaign* [Sydney] 21 (1977), p.19.

acknowledge an early debt to Hemingway for this astringency of style and dramatic shaping.

*The Americans, Baby* opens with a fine example of this mature and characteristically ironic manner, 'Dell Goes into Politics', which carries over some of the concerns of the first collection.<sup>4</sup> It looks (or it did when it first appeared) very much a stereotypical 'Australian' short story about the return of a girl to her family in a small country town after living in the city. Her 'going into' politics is no more than her shouting out in the local pub, traditionally a male preserve, the anti-Vietnam slogans she has acquired from her Trotskyist lover in Sydney. Her family and friends, the rural working class, are embarrassed, even frightened. Dell's father tells her, "There's only one way to get along in this world—shut up". "What do you know about politics?" her mother said, suspicious, as though she's suspected she might also know about sex' (p.7), and then comforts herself with the ignorant thought that 'They don't let women into Parliament anyhow' (p.8). Harry, the boy Dell had thought of marrying on her return, looks 'as if he'd got a bee flying around him' when she asks if the politician in the pub is State or Federal—'Christ, Harry, that's about the least you can know' (p.4). The ironic registering of the impact of the war on public consciousness depends on the story being read against the conventions of a rural realism that sentimentalise the workers as a progressive class. As well, there is the impact of the war on individual consciousness with the revelation of Dell's bad faith. Her shouting 'Why don't you bring the boys back from Vietnam?' (p.5) is a displacement of her real concern, an evasion of the fact that she has come back home because she is pregnant. The nexus between politics and sex assumed by the revolutionaries in Sydney is here played with ironically.

The second story, 'The American Paul Johnson', introduces Carl, a radical student in Sydney, who thinks he should exploit an American he meets because he represents ideologically the 'enemy,' but instead discovers his own homosexuality through the encounter. Like the first story, this is a study in bad faith that reveals the private, emotional anxiety beneath a public involvement in politics. 'Becker and the Boys from the Band,' which like many of Moorhouse's titles contains an ironic

4 *The Americans, Baby* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972). Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

allusion (here to the play, then current, about New York homosexuals) introduces Becker, a Coca-Cola executive from Atlanta, Georgia. He seems another inauthentic figure, the creature of the corporation who would rather be back home, preferably playing piano in a jazz club; but his consciousness of his 'inauthenticity', his shrugging acceptance of his own limitations, makes him the most positive character in the book. In a time-honoured American tradition, Becker is the innocent abroad, in a country as remote to him as the moon ('Becker on the Moon', written after the U.S. moon landing, is another story in the collection), but, with a twist to the conventions, he is, ambiguously, liberated or corrupted in this New World of speed freaks, drag queens, and aggressively emancipated women.

Two other Americans appear in the first group of stories. Angela, in 'The Girl from *The Family of Man*' (she claims her photograph as a child appears in that collection), is the epitome of a new variety of primness—countercultural selfrighteousness—whereas the narrator, who beds her, is uninhibitedly vulgar, lecherous, and aggressive. Hugo, in 'The Story of Nature' (who is carried over from *Futility and Other Animals*), is a 'nuclear refugee' from the States, a scientist turned primitive who piously throws away Cindy's contraceptive pills in attempting to impose his values on their relationship. These stories present variations on a conflict between instinct and ideology over a range of characters who seem unrelated and socially peripheral—an impression important to the collection as a whole for the way changing sexual attitudes and radical political attitudes recur in the different worlds of city and country, business and the counter-culture, but in no simple, coherent pattern.

The sixth story, 'The American Poet's Visit', is one of two described as an 'interlude', and these, strategically placed in the collection, move to the centre of contemporary consciousness in the 'metropolitan' Libertarian subculture influenced by Anderson's critical, or negative, ideology. The interludes also move closer to the author, who is elsewhere 'invisible'; in the interludes he is the author as schlemiel, employing a self-deprecating irony as his defence against both life and the reader. 'The American Poet's Visit' fictionally recounts Kenneth Rexroth's actual reception by Sydney Libertarians in the late 1960s, capturing their ingroup smugness but also their doubts and defensiveness when confronted by a figure from the truly metropolitan, indeed cosmopolitan,

counter-culture. The second interlude, 'The Girl Who Met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris', captures comically the threatening aspects of the women's movement for insecure males, and there is another painful reminder of their provincialism in the fact that de Beauvoir was met *in Paris*.

Between these comic interludes are stories about Dell's boyfriend Kim and his revolutionary friends, about Becker, another about Hugo; and there is 'Five Incidents Concerning the Flesh and the Blood', which, in tone and form, is quite distinct from these other stories about characters already introduced. Yet the thematic contrast it establishes between the rational, organised, and lifeless, *and* the spontaneous, instinctual, and vital, between 'the fleeting pleasures' and 'the groaning hours', opens up implications of a wider vision of life than the characters in the other stories, immersed in their subcultural preoccupations, can discern. In a self-consciously literary, perhaps too explicit way it points to a preference dramatically implied elsewhere in the collection for the vital and honest, if also messy and vulgar, as against the controlled and rationalised. The structuring of the collection also seems to assert this preference. Although after the second interlude there are stories about Becker's 'liberation' from life in the corporation (he ends up playing piano at the Silver Spade, Surfer's Paradise) and the story of Dell's rebelling against sexual indoctrination before returning home, to emphasise these narrative lines would be to give too 'novelettish' an account. *The Americans, Baby* has the length and the substance—in terms of psychological density, significant themes, contrasting characters, and social settings—for a novel, yet it deliberately avoids developing situations and relationships as a novel would. It even wilfully resists conclusion, the drawing together of latent relationships between characters and events, by ending with 'The Letters to Twiggy', which shows an exceedingly 'rational' but obsessive and sexually repressed mind quite out of control.

Through its structure, the collection presents a different view of the way things happen, the ways in which they do not form a simple, coherent, significant literary pattern, nor, in social terms, constitute a 'community' of experiences. It implies a view of contemporary Australian society that departs from received literary and sociological stereotypes such as the city and the country, 'Sydney or the Bush', an imposed Anglo-European tradition and a native, populist culture,

'authentic' working class values and 'inauthentic' middle class attitudes. Moorhouse's characters include Coca-Cola executives (as Americans, the transmitters of the dominant contemporary culture), a self-made, small town businessman, T. George McDowell, rural working class Dell, and varied representatives of the new class of predominantly young, predominantly middle class intellectuals, or lumpen-intellectuals; but all feel displaced, feel peripheral to their sense of a cultural centre. The discontinuous form, which sets up subtle and elusive refractions between the stories, cannot be considered in purely formal terms: it raises questions beyond these, and some of the most analytical commentary has come from social historians and cultural critics. But the drawing out of the ideological implications of what is dramatised, although an essential part of a full reading, cannot alone account for the book's qualities: its usually wry but at times exuberantly comic observation of the ways of the contemporary world, and its underlying perception of life as conflict, which cannot be resolved or avoided by observing abstract precepts. More abruptly than any other book of its decade, *The Americans, Baby* moved Australian fiction into the contemporary.

With this second collection, Moorhouse won national recognition and the reputation of being an accurate and acute observer of contemporary manners and morals, a reputation reinforced by his journalism and writings on the media. In the period which saw the emergence of a self-consciously 'new' fiction, Moorhouse clearly appeared more the realist than the fabulator. He continued to play a traditional role of the imaginative writer—a critical observer of social life—that many of his contemporaries were prepared to relinquish for formal and stylistic experimentation. Yet such broad distinctions, as were then forced, between 'realistic' and more 'imaginative' writing can have a dubious validity in particular cases. Not accorded equal recognition with his realism was Moorhouse's own, if less flamboyant, concern to 'make it new' formally and stylistically, as well as mimetically. This commitment has become more apparent as each book since *The Americans, Baby* has departed in its own way from its predecessors, and from readers' expectations formed by the first collections.

*The Electrical Experience* begins with the elderly businessman T. George McDowell in his small town talking to Becker about his

daughter Terri and the problems of young people today.<sup>5</sup> Terri is the disturbed young woman in *The Americans, Baby* who 'liberates' Becker from the corporation and launches him on his uncertain career as a jazz pianist. The finest of the Becker stories in that preceding collection reappears here, but in the very different context of McDowell's life. George is a self-made and successful manufacturer of soft drinks, who had first visited the United States as a youth in 1923 and been influenced by the efficiency and technological progress he found there. The stories present, out of strict chronological order, revealing moments in George's life: Terri's birth during the bush fires of 1939; her conception, or at least George's conception of family planning; his changing his name to follow progressive business practice; George as a young man struggling to overcome shyness and meeting Zane Grey during the depression and the approach of the second World War; and finally as an old man suffering a stroke. Externally, he lives in the same South Coast town as in the later 'Pacific City' stories—in which he also appears (as do Backhouse, Trenbow, and Scribner in these). Yet the town, or his perception of it, is different from Irving Bow's, that historical and spiritual outsider. George's town is located much more specifically, and more one dimensionally in time—especially through the photographs, recipes, technical tips, and folk sayings which are included among the collection's 'fragments'—though it is still as much a mental as a physical environment. He identifies with the town in a way that Bow cannot, believing that 'You had to find the right-size place for the size of man you were' (p.4), and the town is George externalised and extended.

With his Elbert Hubbard individualism and rural communalism, his Rotarian's respect for service and efficiency, and his sexual repression, he epitomises a past ethos that conflicts with that of his daughter's generation, the contemporary urban intelligentsia whom he sees as 'gipsies.' The contradictions in his life—psychologically, between his instincts and his sense of propriety; philosophically, between his individualism and his communalism, and between his rationalism and the larger questions that Rotary cannot answer—are 'discontinuities' articulated through the stories. But the major discontinuity of the book is that between his generation and his daughter's, which is brilliantly

5 *The Electrical Experience* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974). Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.



emphasised in the final story, 'Filming the Hatted Australian'. In it, a group of young film makers in Sydney, which includes Terri, is making a documentary about 'the prejudices, the beliefs, the life-style' (p.184) of the self-contained Australian of George's generation. They corner their specimen as though he were a primitive anthropological survivor and then proceed verbally to flay and dissect him. The sudden shift in temporal perspective and the disturbing shift in values capture the discontinuities within apparent social-historical continuity.

At this mimetic level, *The Electrical Experience* is immediately impressive as imaginative social history—both for its capturing of the individual's experience of social change through McDowell and through the motif of the transforming and dislocating effects of electricity. Like Moorhouse's other collections, this is not discontinuous with the world outside the book; yet neither are the language and the form transparent means of presenting a simple fictional version of historical processes, as the account above might suggest. In form and language, the book (a discontinuous unity in a way the thematically more complex *The Americans, Baby* is not) departs from conventions of literary and cultural realism, from received notions of 'the typical,' and from deterministic assumptions about personal and social development. The chronologically disordered structure works against naturalistic assumptions of causation; and George McDowell is not a representative 'product' of his time and region—when the film crew in the last story selects a 'subject' to fit its stereotype of George's generation, it chooses someone quite different from the same town. George expresses an ethos that in his own mind is more American than Australian; and it is through his expressing it, his language, that the reader is made conscious of Moorhouse's artistic concerns, which go together with his critical engagement with Australian society.

McDowell is a simple man with a simple language: 'I do not care for words in top hats. I believe in shirt sleeve words' (p.9). The 'invisible' Flaubertian narrator, using George's lexicon, creates gently, even affectionately, with superior irony, the gap between how George thinks and speaks and how we perceive him. This stylistic method is capable of the most delicate and subtle comedy when the author detaches himself by isolating George's favourite words and phrases within quotes. Like Irving Bow at the very beginning of the 'Pacific City' sequence, and the narrators of the other collections which follow *The Electrical Experience*,

George has a preoccupation with language. Language expresses and creates the contradiction between his outward confidence, his gregariousness and garrulity, and his inner shyness and uncertainty. This contradiction is apparent in the opening story, when he reflects that:

Life's experience had taught him that never once had speaking to a stranger been anything but to his advantage. Although inherently shy as a young man, he had learned early to talk to someone as if they owed you money. In all his life, including his world travel, the only person with whom he had been unable to converse in good fellowship was his daughter Terri, and this was a source of some distress to both [him] and Thelma. (p.10)

Yet even with his wife, Thelma, intimacy is inhibited; and George's inhibitions reveal themselves through the embarrassed and evasive syntax of his thought:

He observed that the limitations and restrictions on the matter of sexual indulgence, placed by Thelma in their marriage, sometimes aroused him, her unwillingness, he had perhaps the sort of personality which was, which savoured, well, the restraint she imposed, the limitations on when, and her refusals. And now and then, though rarely, he imposed himself on her, and the silent, wordless impositions he enjoyed too. It had to do; he speculated, with the basic economic principle of scarcity. Though really, this aspect of their lives he did not truly understand and did not ponder over much and which was not to say, either, that they did not conduct their married life *correctly*. (p.16)

George is fond of such economic notions—'Man's know-how was his personal capital. The bank inside his head' (p.52)—and mechanical metaphors—he sees children as society's 'replacement parts.' They encapsulate the rationalised view of life which his language systematises. His language defines his character and ethos. It cannot comfortably accommodate intimacy, nor what he alludes to as the 'Great Mysteries', his dim and resisted apprehensions of the more transcendent values of religion and art, which would demand different vocabularies.

Through his language, T. George McDowell creates his public and

speechifying self; and his adoption of this form of his name (which Backhouse tells him looks 'Americanized') suggests his consciousness of verbal role-playing. Moorhouse's own consciousness of language, as an essential part of his 'content' and not merely the vehicle for presenting it, is displayed with mastery in the final story. The abrupt shift, in diction and pace, into the speech of the young urban intellectuals contrasts them with their 'subject' and his generation. They make aggressive, even sadistic verbal assaults on Frederick Victor Turner to provoke and then to destroy his defences. They are self-righteous both in their presumed artistic justification for their deceptions and provocations, and in their assumed moral superiority to the racism and sexism of a stereotype they despise (but have relentlessly 'created' for the film). The easy ironies they achieve are not approved by the author-narrator in the story, nor are they consistent with the more comprehending, affectionate ironies of the book as a whole. Implicitly, the intention is the opposite of the film makers': toward an empathetic understanding of what it was like to be George McDowell, to see the world his way, and to feel that it is collapsing in the present. With *The Electrical Experience*, Moorhouse's ironic range, and the flexibility and precision of his control over dramatised language, made it obvious that as well as being a powerful 'realist' he was also among the very finest of 'stylists.'

The first of the dozen 'episodes' comprising *Conference-ville* is entitled 'In Flight Sadism'; in it, the author-narrator flying to a conference meets 'a conversational sadist,' the academic who is going to introduce his paper, that is, he adds, if the conference eventuates.<sup>6</sup> In this book, language is more markedly an essential dimension of what is being realistically, and critically, presented. Moorhouse, playing the same uncertainly fictional role of author-narrator as in the middle sections of *The Everlasting Secret Family*, registers confusions that are not only expressed through language but arise from it, as he attempts to define his 'position' in response to conflicting information and demands from others. At the conference there is incessant squabbling over and playing with words, the counter for counter interpretations of reality, while the author inwardly broods over his inability to find a coherent grammar of response for the comically varied situations he discovers himself in.

6 *Conference-ville* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1976. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

Others have their confident positions, readily identifiable and entailing ready linguistic responses for interpersonal political skirmishes; the author has only his critically detached awareness of how their language reveals their positions, and the inadequacy of his own.

As a serially arranged collection of 'episodes' (part of its original conception was that it could be issued as a magazine serial), *Conferenceville* differs from the earlier books in having a linear narrative development (though what 'develops' remains problematical). It is closer to the novel, or at least novella form, but its more simple coherence can be seen as issuing from the author's preoccupation with what would prevent him from writing a novel. It is a non-novel about the difficulties, the impossibility of writing, in a form so traditional and confident of its conventions as the novel, about how we live now, in Australia in January 1976. The novel that is 'unwritable,' because about experiences which cannot be engaged truthfully and fictionally at the same time, would be about the effects of the *coup d'état* of November 1975 when the reformist Labor government, the first for a quarter of a century, was dismissed by the Governor-General, with suspicions that this unprecedented 'destabilisation' had been engineered by the C.I.A. The resulting 'cold civil war' and the impossibility for the author of reaching a confident 'position' in interpreting these events provide the subject of Moorhouse's non-novel. Lacking such a position, and being in actual circumstances which created confusion and induced 'paranoia' (but then there was Chile), he cannot present a clear, coherent fictional interpretation, even a confidently paranoid, 'new' fictional response to a plausibly paranoid political reality. The implicit discontinuity becomes that between confident fiction and uncertain experience.

Ostensibly personalised 'new journalism,' with many public figures referred to as appearing at the actual conference on which it is based, *Conferenceville* also engages with some concerns of the 'new' fiction. It is literature as process, writing about being a writer, confessing inadequacies and betrayals ('You could've changed the names at least,' one character reproaches the author (p.116) in the last episode). The author-narrator engages with the 'unwritability' of contemporary life, registering his defeat in assuming honestly an authorial position that would allow him to organise, control, develop, and shape meaningfully the 'interaction of complex things' he has encountered. This uncommitted, sceptical position of the author-narrator, so precisely

caught by the other author, or other self, behind him is this book's artistic strength: it turns the apparent negations of commitment into a positive open stance and shapes the uncertainties of writing about the contemporary into a taut set of images.

In the opening episode of *Conference-ville*, the academic 'conversational sadist' mentions another (and actual) Australian writer who had been 'the darling of the literary scene in the late fifties,' who had broken 'new ground' but whom no one reads today. The author-narrator winces:

He meant me. It could happen to me. Not yet the darling, not yet unread.

I chattered on, but damned Markham had set my mind on anxious literary introspection ... will my other books be just obsessional pacing over the same initial life experiences ... or attempts to reproduce what had succeeded earlier ... worse, selfconscious attempts to 'break' with the preoccupations of earlier work ... rationally conceived fiction ... no heat ... no madness. (pp.4-5)

Moorhouse's next book shares with its predecessors the characteristic of breaking 'new ground,' and although it is exceedingly self-conscious, in a problematical way, the 'heat' and the 'madness' are there from the very beginning:

The Malaya restaurant, city of Sydney, my mouth burning with sambal, splashed with chilled beer, tasting only hot and cold. My psyche also running hot and cold. They are back. Milton and Hestia are back from the States.

Milton's hand on my shoulder. Our first physical touching since his return. It rings through me. I can't hear the message. It's a confused line.

'Well, I'm glad you're both back,' I say suddenly, pleased with my spontaneity and correctness.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1977), p.2. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

Contrary to the fears of the author in *Conference-ville, Tales of Mystery and Romance* impresses less as a 'rationally-conceived fiction' than as a series of virtuoso stylistic performances by the author, who as a zany version of the same 'narrator, or set of clowning variations on the authorial self, dances with desperate playfulness on the indeterminate boundary between truth-telling and story-telling—or lying.

The title suggests a self-conscious literariness, with its nineteenth-century Gothic evocations of the fantastic and the erotic; and the preoccupations with perversion, incest, metamorphoses, drug-induced fantasies, and death of an earlier decadence are comically translated into a contemporary version here. The 'tales' (the tale being to the story as the romance is to the novel, in claiming a greater imaginative 'latitude'?)<sup>8</sup> are set in a variety of typefaces to correspond with the discontinuities in mood between them; but despite this visual reinforcement of their tonal differences, the personality of their common narrator and the pattern of his emotional life emerge progressively. He is a thirty-seven year old poet-philosopher from Concord—the Sydney suburb, not the rural seat of Transcendentalism—who finds himself between two worlds. One, which is lost to him, is that of his family, childhood security, first love, marriage and fatherhood, the world of conventional domesticity: 'A cold quandary blows permanently on the moors of abnormality. The cheery lighted house of normality is a distant stage set' (p.94). The other is the world of Milton, his distant and beloved, his erstwhile intimate friend (but never, fully, his lover), his academic alter ego. Milton is now into a whole new 'scene'—Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, the occult, living in a commune with Lance and Karrine, Hildergarde, Margit, Tina, Sheena ... all, the narrator ruefully observes, under-thirties names. Although scornful, the lad from Concord with his Low Anglican, Boy Scout, small capitalist, individualist background is hurt by Milton's serenely frenetic pursuit of the now scene. He remembers that last year they were supposed to be nonhappy people, always freaking out; now it's satori, meditation, and deep relaxation. In a classic display of displaced, frustrated rage, he attacks a member of the Hare Krishna who accosts him on the street, embarrassing Milton and Milton's new friend: a most droll

8 A reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's oft-quoted distinction between novel and romance in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*.

presentation of his insecurities which have been intensified by Milton's countercultural cant.

For Milton, the narrator is pathetically passé, vulgar in his pursuit of 'volupté,' inauthentic:

'Look around you,' he said, and I did, and he exasperatedly said, 'no, I mean around your scene—not the oval—hasn't it come home to you. Haven't you noticed we are all into a different trip now. It isn't champagne breakfasts. It's not watching the rosy fingers of dawn at the Taxi Club. It isn't throwing people into swimming pools, it isn't expensive dinners and mock speeches, and it isn't going to ethnic night clubs and joining in the handkerchief dance, having your photograph taken with the belly dancer, putting dollar notes down the crevice of her breast, it isn't getting your photograph in the newspapers wearing a cowboy hat, it isn't appearing in public places in drag, it isn't being seen arm-in-arm with two negresses in New Orleans. Oh you know that I mean, the scene has changed. And look at your age.'

Listening carefully to what he said, I replied, 'You make it sound *first class*. The long years of penury have led me into wild excesses. Like Raphael de Valentin, I have dreamed of a life on a princely scale and now I can make the dream come true. My bills for champagne alone are enormous. Under the influence of Eugene Sue I see myself as a dandy, for I have a horror of the solemn imbecilities indulged in by the English with their much vaunted sang froid. I suppose you are troubled by my white house gowns with gold tasselled girdles?'

'Your dabbling in effeminacy doesn't interest me. But I'll tell you another thing it isn't—it isn't dodging being a real person by hiding in irony, self-concealing humour, hiding behind ambiguity, double-edged humour, switching of persona, self-deprecation—that's all so much shit.' (pp.97–98)

The dynamics of their conflict are verbal; the systems that clash, linguistic. Milton tells him that, 'You must let go of words like "decide," "intellectualize," "explain"' (p.122). (The 'must' is good.) The narrator suspects that Milton's copy of the 'Desiderata', purportedly found in Old St Paul's, Baltimore, and dated 1692, is a fraud on internal linguistic

evidence. Yet beneath his verbal braggadocio and glib sententiousness is the underlying sadness of the clown. The central, revealing story here, 'The Loss of a Friend by Cablegram', is also the central story of the collection structurally.

In this, the narrator, visiting his ex-wife, receives Milton's telegram rejecting him for his new lifestyle. As he is attempting defensively to explain, she is reading from his notebook cryptic entries, some in the first person, others in the third, that reveal the confusion of his thoughts and values, and his theory of 'the distortion of information by fictional suction': 'The attention of the audience, the reporter's expectations, the audience's expectations even in conversation, drag you away from the complicated, ragged reality, from say, pointlessness, away from stray and unrelated material towards a distorting order, a distorting sensationalism' (p.83). The discontinuities of mode and mood throughout the collection find their centre here in the discontinuities of a personality that is overwhelmed by consciousness of the 'complicated, ragged reality' and refuses to accept 'a distorting reality' from among those offered in the language and value systems embraced by others. The narrator is vulnerable, exposed, accused by his wife of being on the very edge of reality; and in tone this is much more a 'confessional' story than most of the others (excepting the one in the form of letters to the same ex-wife), bringing out the lonely and uncomfortable integrity underlying the comic surface elsewhere.

*Tales of Mystery and Romance* is both satisfying and enigmatic. A book of brilliant comic surfaces and rhetorical flourishes, yet one that conceals or complicates as much as it reveals. The presentation of the narrator's various selves is as much the real action as his encounters with Milton and his ex-wife; but the confusions and uncertainties of this narrator are dramatised with such confidence that we cannot completely identify him with the author. The implications for art are enigmatic. 'Lying and fiction are brothers? But not twins,' we are told (p.79), but which is which here—which lies, which secrets? Is the author, again like Irving Bow in the next collection, speaking the truth in a way that it will not be understood? Or, in accordance with the jottings in the narrator's notebook, is the truth being presented without the distortion and sensationalisation of fiction? With *Tales of Mystery and Romance*, Moorhouse may seem to have moved across the spectrum from his early critical, realistic engagement with social experience to



that mode in which the only sure subject is the style, and the only true value the act of writing itself. Yet the pattern of his work is not so simple, as such a simplistic distinction would assume, and as, in its retrospective aspect, *The Everlasting Secret Family* makes clear.

In form, in theme, in social 'subject matter,' and personal pre-occupations, this latest collection looks back but, appropriately from a writer who has emphasised discontinuities between all levels of experience, including the artistic, in no simple way. 'Pacific City' returns to the lost world of T. George McDowell, but from a different perspective, and shows Moorhouse the subtle, delicately ironic stylist. 'The Dutch Letters' and 'Imogene Continued' return to the narrative stance of *Conference-ville*, to the immediacies of personal and public life, and to the tensions between them; they show Moorhouse in his most commonly recognised and easily identified role as the witty, acute, but sceptical intelligence critically engaged in defining and interpreting contemporary social reality. While the title sequence apparently disrupts this emerging retrospective pattern, it also exhibits another characteristic of his writing: his continuing to break 'new ground' and old taboos, and to break also from his readers', his patrons' expectations, which could otherwise imprison him like the narrator in this sequence. In drawing together and further developing these different aspects of his work to date, *The Everlasting Secret Family* makes apparent the continuance throughout his varied books of his simultaneous concerns with experience and art: with finding the appropriate forms, styles, and authorial stances for engaging experience—past and present, personal and social, real and imaginative. Each may be discontinuous with the other, but discontinuity would seem to presuppose some continuity to depart from, and this latest collection suggests the 'familial' though 'secret' relationships between them all which provide his work with its unique, imaginative pattern.