

KATE LIVETT

Reissues

Elizabeth Jolley, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*

UQP Modern Classics, 168pp pb
ISBN 978 0 7022 5350 8, RRP \$19.95

Thea Astley, *A Descant for Gossips*

UQP Modern Classics, 264pp pb
ISBN 978 0 7022 5355 3, RRP \$19.95 pb,

Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*

Harper Collins Australia, 1443pp hb
ISBN: 9780732299460, RRP: \$49.99

T.G.H. Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*

Giramondo Classic Reprints, 368pp pb
ISBN 9781922146779, RRP \$26.95

Elizabeth Jolley is surely one of the great Australian writers. Famous during the 1980s, her overtly postmodern, ironic style faded into unpopularity during the 1990s and her books went out of print, hence UQP's republication of her third novel, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), in their Modern Classics line. More controversially, there is reason to argue that her focus on women as complex subjects worthy of the full attention of a narrative not simply in romantic tropes and/or in their relation to men, was the underlying reason for an inevitable neglect in Australia's eternally masculinist culture. *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, along with most of Jolley's output, is unashamedly interested in women's relationships to power, knowledge, reality and fantasy and each other. The novel depicts an English lower-middle-class typist whose elderly mother keeps bedridden but nevertheless tyrannical sway over the home. She begins a correspondence with Diana, an Australian novelist, who sends Miss Peabody hand-written portions of a new novel, and includes brief mentions of her farm in Australia, horse-riding and outdoor life, all of which sets Miss Peabody's imagination and then her life tacking away towards a new horizon. Jolley's skill with irony allows her to deftly create comedy, pathos and genuine emotion, often in the same scene. It is a great thing to see *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* – an important and hilarious Australian novel – back in print. If you need an antidote to the depression induced by reading Herbert or Astley, this is the perfect foil, though it is by no means less of a social critique in its own way.

Brilliant, poetic writing, in the Modernist vein, Astley's *A Descant for Gossips* (1960) is a pleasure to read. It's also psychologically and emotionally upsetting, in the same way of Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect*, a novel with which Astley's shares a great deal. Like Harrower's novel, *A Descant for Gossips* is about the relations between a lonely, intellectually and emotionally neglected adolescent, and the adults who offer her hope. Unfortunately, as is the case in both novels, the education system that is the institution within which these adults can connect with these adolescents, is also an institution of public investment in private intellectual and psychological development. As an institution of the modern state it both enables the production of non-standard engagements and fiercely punishes those same relations. The sense of impending doom is present almost from the first pages, and builds slowly but surely as the two teachers give in – with reckless thrill and palpating foreknowledge of the town's inevitable reaction – to their meeting of minds and long-thwarted desire. As adults Moller and Striebel are able to act with agency in their interpersonal relations, despite their punishment by the social structure. Vinny, the thirteen-year-old student, is engaged in the practising of power relations with her adolescent peers, who have yet to develop the “refinements” of power use and abuse, and whose coarse, vicious wielding of power rivals that of the adults in its painful results. A probably still-accurate representation of the parochial and small-minded moralising of rural/suburban Australian society, and of the Modern Industrial institutions that, as Foucault argues, are the instruments of the decentralization of state power in the twentieth century.

Herbert's *huge* novel *Poor Fellow My Country* (1443 pages in this new hardback edition), first published in 1975, re-published by Harper Collins, is also available as an ebook, if you're wanting to read or re-read a canonical Australian novel on the train. But there's plenty of reason to buy the hardback instead, which is great value at the RRP: its crisp type and perfect-sized font, good-quality binding and beautiful dust-jacket image from the Merrepen Arts Centre in Daly River (NT), that's also pleasant to the touch, make reading Herbert's classic a pleasant sensory experience. Enjoy the material book alongside what Russell McDougall, in his introduction to this new edition, identifies as the “psychological complexity” of Herbert's characters, in this epic that spans less than a decade in the 1930s and 1940s but takes on the full gamut of British colonisation of Australia and Aboriginal dispossession. Herbert was a supporter of Indigenous rights in a time when most other whites were still actively engaged in racial oppression. His representation of Aboriginal people and his speaking on behalf of them would be problematic if it were written in contemporary times, but it wasn't, and *Poor Fellow My Country* is an historically important insight into the dissenting views that exist within any culture, even that of oppressive colonizers. Herbert shows the mechanisms through which radical political ideals can slide between intentions of social representation and self-determination to implementation as fascist hatred. As McDougall says: “*Poor Fellow My Country* has had a profound effect on Australia's political and literary culture” (xi).

Another reissue of a text by a white man that discusses Indigenous Australians, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969), is biography/autobiography in western genre terms, but also includes much telling of Aboriginal history not documented in western historical discourse. One early example that creates un-put-down-able suspense is the massacre and revenge story of

Irbmangkara and Central Arrernte groups (48-64). Several such (less grisly) histories form parallel, gripping narratives that travel alongside the primary story of Strehlow's last journey out of Hermannsburg, and is an unofficial history of the Arrernte people of the Central desert region. Written by the main figure's son, who refers to his youthful self in the third person, and keeps a business-like attempt at historical objectivity going, but is unable to prevent the emotional impact of the colonial situation and the private and public enmeshment of his parents from the page: "The boy had been involved far too intimately in his parents' agonising problems; and the spiritual and bodily troubles that were testing his parents to the very limits of their endurance were matters from which Theo was only too glad to have a chance of escaping for a while, even if it should only be a matter of two days. For the first time since his father had gone to bed the boy could move about again with a cheerful spirit" (94-5). The boy in the story, now the adult writing the story, tells of the theological beliefs and intentions and psychology of his father, his negotiations with the self-concerned Finke River Mission Board (that directed the management of Hermannsburg from the distance of the city), and the other whites in the central desert – mostly stockmen and station managers, and most of whom are shown as giving lip-service to Christianity but being in their daily behaviours cruel, miserly and immoral. Affection and warmth in the text is found by young Strehlow only in the Aboriginal people – the Arrernte children with whom Strehlow plays, and the adult male Arrernte stockmen who work at Hermannsburg and who accompany Strehlow's family on their journey through the desert. This cast of individuals and organisations of empire are depicted with a psychological detail and intensity that reflects the impressionable age at which the young Strehlow lived through these experiences. *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is an extremely important book in the history of Australian literature, and a fascinating and, sadly, educational read for many of today's non-indigenous Australians who know little to nothing about Aboriginal mythologies of Australia. Strehlow makes significant comments on a range of critiques of colonisation. The loss of tribal knowledge: "Theo inquired after [a table-like rock formation's] name. 'Its correct name is "Karalananga"', replied Njitiaka, 'but the young folk of today insist on calling it "the Talpanama mountain". That is because our young people spend all their time with the white folk, and grow up just as ignorant as the white men'" (129). The colonisers' treatment of animals: "[The Aboriginal people] never failed to comment on the brutal manner in which the white men so frequently maltreated their own animals" (111). The pathetic arrogance of a culture that considered itself superior but which struggled to even stay alive in desert conditions: "To the eye of a white man the sandhill country might have looked a useless waste, almost devoid of life; but the nomad Aranda hunters living at the middle Finke waterholes had once found the bordering dune country to be a rich source of food" (127).