

LAETTIA NANQUETTE AND ALI ALIZADEH

*Editorial*

We are delighted to present this special issue of *Southerly*, which has been prepared in response to both local and international circumstances, and is a reflection of growing visibility of Persian literary and cultural activities in Australia and around the world.

With the Persian-speaking community becoming stronger in Australia and its cultural production diversifying, this issue aims to offer an Australian audience a rich sample of texts and perspectives from a Persian-Australian point of view. Due to their number and active presence in Australia, this issue includes many writers from an Iranian background, but we have also included work from an Afghan-Australian perspective, such as Zarlisht Sarwari's wonderful essay, 'Afghan Australian Identities'. While we have sadly not been able to secure a text by an Australian author from a Tajik background, we hope this issue will nonetheless connect all writers from a Persian-language background and help bridge the divides that at times separate authors originally from these three nations.

An aspect of our intention to edit this issue of *Southerly* has been to provide a welcoming space for literary production and creativity by a group of Australians who have not thus far been explicitly included in the discourses of multicultural literature. A recent anthology of multicultural Australian poetry titled *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets*, for example, has explicitly stated in its introduction that it does not include a writer from Iranian background due to the editors' decision to view Asia as a continent that does not include the Middle East. While this editorial decision is not unique and reflects existing Australian definitions of the Asian continent – determined by Australia's geographic proximity to and historical engagements with only a part of the continent – it is hoped that our issue of *Southerly* may redress such exclusions by presenting new works of creative writing by Nasrin Mahoutchi, Niloofar Fanaiyan and Sanaz Fotouhi, among others.

Iranian literature, as well as the manner of its exchange with the world, also forms part of the background for our decision to edit this issue of *Southerly*. Iranian literature has changed its form and means of circulation since the Revolution of 1979, but it has not become impoverished. The contemporary landscape certainly has its constraints, including censorship, relative isolation from other world literatures, and a lack of coherence within the field due to divisions between Iran and the diaspora, as well as between those working independently or for government institutions in the field. Despite these constraints, the field is rich and varied both within Iran and in the many countries in which Iranians live and participate, including Australia. The increase in the volume of translations, the initiatives creating bridges between writers and readers across the world, and the slow reappearance of Iran on the international cultural scene are grounds for optimism. The appearance of an Iranian Orhan Pamuk – the Turkish writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006 – is not far off!

The Persianate world possesses a rich literary heritage, largely discussed in this issue in relation to the classical poet Hafez and in terms of the Australian take on the poetic form of the *ghazal*. This world also has a very personal rapport with its heritage, which is neither buried in libraries nor practised only in books. Classical and modern poems are recited daily in Iran and are instrumental when thinking about one's destiny. There is, for example, a well-known tradition, *fal-e Hafez*, where one draws a slip of paper from a box containing poems by Hafez and interprets it to decide what to do in a new situation. Bookshops, reading groups and creative writing workshops are also numerous. Since Iran is not a signatory to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (adopted in 1886), texts circulate freely, in book format or online, although there is also a strong movement to protect the rights of authors. Literary magazines come and go, depending on censorship, but some have been around for a long time – such as *Bokhara* since 1998 – offering a space of exchange on Persian as well as other literatures. There are numerous literary festivals, including those dedicated to specific literary forms, especially short forms, which are particularly popular. In addition, literary prizes abound, such as the government prize, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, or the independent prize, Houshang Golshiri.

After the 1979 Revolution, many intellectuals and writers left Iran for Europe or North America. More recently, Iranians have migrated in large numbers to Australia and Malaysia. Developments within Iran thus parallel developments in the diaspora. Some writers who publish directly in European languages have become famous in Western

countries, such as Azar Nafisi, with her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. There is a whole genre of Iranian-American memoirs narrating the trauma of the Revolution and adapting to life in America. Although this is not so predominant in Australia, there are examples of similar texts, such as Banafsheh Serov's *Under a Starless Sky*. The literary texts presented in this issue aim to offer a varied sample of work by writers using either Persian or English. By no means do they focus solely on the traumatic event of the Islamic Revolution or on events primarily of interest to people in the region.

Today, there is more exchange between countries to which Iranians have migrated and Iran itself than there has been since the Revolution, and one can hope that the increase in publications, translations and literary exchange will have a positive impact on Iranian literature, as well as on literature elsewhere, including Australia, which can only benefit from the input of writers of Persian-speaking origin. It is for this reason that we have included our own translations of the work of the contemporary modernist Iranian poet, Yadollah Royaei, whose fascinating innovations in poetics may be of interest to experimental writers in Australia and elsewhere.

And last but not least, one of the key reasons behind our decision to edit this issue of *Southerly* has been to celebrate Australian and international writers, from all backgrounds, who are openly influenced by Persian literary and cultural themes and genres. As explained in Darius Sepehri's terrific essay in this issue of *Southerly*, major Australian authors of the past such as Judith Wright were highly conversant with traditional Persian literature, an engagement which can be seen in the work of many contemporary Australian writers, such as the poetry of Melinda Smith or the translations of Hafez by Paul Smith. It is hoped that the selection of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and scholarship we have selected for this issue of *Southerly* will contribute to similar conversations and engagements in the future. The poems selected are often a testimony to the exchanges between Australia and Persian-speaking countries, while the short fiction are more personal reflections on such exchanges, insisting on the challenges of seeking asylum or being a migrant.

### Works Cited

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