

HOLIDAY



READING

Reading between the Party Lines

P

hillip Clark speculates on the reading habits of the headline haunters.

As the sun gets hotter and the sunshine sharper the minds of most of us may be turning to the summer holidays and what we'll be doing at the beach or the septic-scented holiday house.

We may be contemplating these matters stretched out in one of those Brazilian hammocks which we bought in an optimistic rush from a credit card gift catalogue months ago and for which we are alarmed to discover that we are finally being billed.

Lying beside the hammock is the inevitable pile of unread books. Yes,

the resolutions are still painfully fresh. As fresh as the spines on the stack of Picadors. Remember how you were really going to come to grips with Foucault this year, to get on top of the tariff debate, put behind you those painful obfuscations required when the subject of post-modernism came up? Even to be able to crack a few witticisms about the latest Mary Wesley novel.

Good heavens, perhaps to have actually read one to the end.

Relax, you aren't alone. As the world collapses around us, even those we only read about at breakfast are learning that a good book is as safe a place to hide as the Cook Islands share register.

Using our special upside down reading glasses and periscopic lapel badge, we have managed to infiltrate the bookshelves of a number of 1990's headline inhabitants. The results are revealing.

Tim Fischer, federal leader of the National Party: Tim is a politician of the old school when a country vote was worth ten in the city, the pubs

closed at six and everyone knew how to dance the Pride of Erin. Tim has been forced to dip into *The Single Man's Guide to Picking up Girls* after a number of notable failures this year to find a wife despite presiding at a record number of country debutante balls. Tim's failure is inexplicable to most observers. Some have speculated that it's the *Complete Train Spotters Guide* protruding from his coat pocket that is putting some women off. Or perhaps his anecdotes about how he rode on the footplate with the engineer of the 3801 isn't the best way to break the ice.

Ron Boswell, leader of the National Party in the Senate: Ron is a robust sort of bloke who knows how politics works. When he arrived in the Senate he declared that he'd had to suck up to Joh to get there and what was wrong with that? Despite his high office, books are not Ron's strongest suit. One is reminded of the joke about the boy who complained about being given a book for Christmas because he already had one. Nevertheless Ron is thought to have made good progress on *The Cat*

in the *Hat* by Dr Seuss this year. Unfortunately he lost his place in *Seven Little Australians* early on and was never able to find it again.

Nick Greiner, premier of NSW: Nick has been absolutely snowed under with Federal Budget Paper Number One for the past few months, especially the bit about state tax sharing grants, but he's also had time for a bit of fiction. The premier can point to his briefcase copy of *Fearless in Green* — an adventure story which tells of how Alan, a newly graduated accountant, fights his way nearly to the top of a big state government statutory authority by introducing some new bookkeeping practices and reducing debt at the same time as increasing efficiency. This is so exciting that Nick can only dip into it a bit at a time. And with wife Kathryn pondering a life of her own, including a TV home renovation show, the premier has asked his top bureaucrats to prepare him some briefing papers on such baffling texts as *Frypan Surprises* and *Microwave Cooking for One*.

Michael Yabsley, NSW Minister for Corrective Services: Yabba has had a tough year and reading hasn't been high on the agenda. In fact most nights Yabba has been curling up on the couch watching his video copy of that film classic from the 20s, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* for light relaxation. Mr Yabsley is widely thought of as a tough guy. This is a popular misunderstanding. In fact Mr Yabsley is a gentle, kind man who nurses injured birds back to health and has a large library of books on the subject. All right, this is an even more serious misunderstanding. His shelves are actually stacked with original treatises of Dr Josef Mengele. Well, they may be. We concede there is no firm evidence for this.

In between pacing out the distance from the cells to the wire at Long Bay prison and considering whether he could get away with introducing a policy of making prisoners sleep toe to toe to save space, Yabba has had a chance to peruse a few recreational volumes. Top of the pile by his bedside this year are *The Count of Monte Christo* by Alexandre Dumas and Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of his Natural Life*.

Wal Murray, NSW leader of the National Party: Wal confessed recently on Sydney radio that he enjoyed thumbing through a Phantom comic from time to time, so his reading habits are no secret. The Nationals' behemoth is also a keen chef and in between scoffing down a few platefuls of his wife Dymphna's classic cheese crisps, the big fella is known to ponder the inner mysteries of *101 Ways with Beef, Pork, Lamb and Chicken*.

Steve Cossor, Broadcom boss: since losing control of Channel Ten, Steve has found himself with a lot of reading time on his hands. He's probably made his way through all of fellow Broadcom director Max Walsh's economic articles but is none the wiser about where he went wrong. A dog-eared *The Art of the Deal* by Donald Trump didn't help him much either. He's had to settle back with Robert Roget's *Retribution* to see if that gets him anywhere.

Bob Hawke, prime minister: With Bob's prostrate in the condition it is he finds being stranded at the 11th tee and far from the clubhouse a nightmare. Admittedly this is an improvement on matters before the operation when he was lucky to make it down the first fairway before that feeling started. The solution? Improve his game so that he can get around the course faster and nip that rusty nail sensation before it strikes. The book? Tommy Armour's *ABC of Golf*.

John Hewson, federal opposition leader: Dr Hewson is trying hard to look like a prime minister but he'll have to give away that former swanky image. Earlier in the year he was understood to be engrossed in such tomes as *Fabulous Marques: the Life of Enzo Ferrari*, *How To Get More Punch out of your Porsche* as well as thumbing through back issues of *Modern Motor* magazine.

With his new responsibilities Dr Hewson is now thought to have put reading aside in favour of writing his autobiography, *There's a Track Winding Back to an Old Fibro Shack*.

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The Best of Everything

Our thoroughly eclectic selection of guest reviewers choose their favourite reads of 1990: from Cervantes to Slaven, from Kafka to Clyde Cameron

Kangaroos and Rin Tin Tin

Were you a television-tube child? Do you, like me, have an attention span of less than a minute? Are you already only half-reading this review as you begin to think of something else? Well, do I have a book for you! It's called *The Ultimate Irrelevant Encyclopaedia* and it's perfect for today's "upwardly immobile" - those paralysed by the onslaught of so many bits of information they don't know what's important any more.

In a world where, increasingly, the only difference between the lead story on a news bulletin — "350 perish in industrial disaster" — and the cute one they have at the end — "Coming up, the French poodle that thinks it's Elvis" — is the half-smile



Andrew Denton

on a newsreader's face, it's comforting to know that somebody has finally published a book which treats "information" with the contempt it deserves.

The Ultimate Irrelevant Encyclopaedia is a compendium of apparently useless facts cross-referenced in such a way that, when strung together, they begin to take on their own weird significance.

For example: Being a jingoistic soul, I always judge a good encyclopaedia by what it has to say about Australia. So, look up Australia on page 14 and you find that: "Mount Isa is the largest city area in the world, being about the same size as Switzerland. But Switzerland can offer a taxi-service by hang-glider which Mount Isa has yet to inaugurate".

Fair enough, but check the cross-references which, for Australia, include: Barbados, Borneo, Misunderstanding and Seaside and you start to see the true value of this book...

Under Barbados, a chat about the eggs of Barbados flying fish which leads on to the fact that "in Australia a folk remedy for boils is to cover the affected area with the wetted skin of a boiled egg".

Under Borneo, news that "during the Borneo border war, the Australian army dropped a detach-

ment of five cats in order to clear a forward post of rats".

Under Misunderstanding, a tale about Captain Cook seeing an odd creature bounding past and asking a native what it was called. "The Aborigine replied 'kangaroo'. Only some years later, after the name had stuck, did the good captain learn that 'kangaroo' in the local dialect meant 'I don't understand'."

And under Seaside: "If you do like to be beside the seaside, try Canada. It has the longest coastline of any country, six times that of Australia".

Face it, if you really must know something about this wide brown land of ours, you might as well know something irrelevant. That way, you can know fuck-all, but still seem informed! Believe me, that's how most of the 'smart money' became smart.

Heaven knows how the authors, William Hartston and Jill Dawson, went about the awesome task of working out what was not important enough to go into this encyclopaedia but, obviously, they consider it definitive as - according to the front cover - this is the "Fully Unrevised Edition". The great thing is, though, it doesn't matter.

After all, is it any more important how they decided on their information than the fact that the elephant's penis may be 5 feet long (Sleep, p.226) or that Rin Tin Tin died in the arms of Jean Harlow (Acting, p.2)? Of course, it isn't. Anyone who thinks otherwise should immediately go and watch a news bulletin or read today's newspaper then come back and tell me what was in it. If all you can remember is the newsreader's name or the syndicated cartoon, then this is your book.

The Ultimate Irrelevant Encyclopaedia is essential reading for people who've come to realise that nothing is essential any more. It could, in fact, be the most useless and unimportant book of the latter part of this century. I thoroughly recommend it.

The Ultimate Irrelevant Encyclopaedia. William Hartston and Jill Dawson. Unwin.

ANDREW DENTON hosts *The Money or the Gun* on ABC TV.

Ulladulla Unmasked



Paul Murphy

The last time I wrote in this space was to praise the book *Pants Off* by H.G. Nelson and Roy Slaven. I did more than praise it; I pronounced it the best book I'd ever read.

Well, I was wrong. There's an even better book available at all good bookstores now and it's been written by the redoubtable Slaven. It's called *This is the South Coast and I'm Paul Murphy* volume 2, a collection of Slaven's hilarious news bulletins which can be heard every Saturday afternoon at 5 o'clock on Triple Jay's This Sporting Life.

It's not widely known that almost all of this country's past sporting and entertainment greats once had the same idea, quite independently of each other, to retire to the same place. Changa Langlands, Barry Jarman, Ian Redpath, Denis Pittard, Bobby Limb, Marcia Hines, Linda McGill, Leonard Teale, Ted Mulry, Billy Thorpe and Bruce Laird, just to mention a few of them, are living highly eventful lives in the beautiful NSW South Coast town of Ulladulla and, at the same time, transforming

the area into the cultural and sporting heart of Australia.

Most of them have lived there for years, getting to know each other in a variety of places, like the imposing Tunks Centre in town, or on picnics in the Keith Barnes Reserve or on the limpid waters of Lake Ray Price, or again in the majestic forests of Mick Cronin National Park.

What these people get up to in Uladulla is excitingly reported by Roy Slaven, the man who makes it his business to know other people's business. And the things they get up to! It's not uncommon for young Rugby League players to suffer bite wounds to the buttocks requiring 60 or more stitches after the game. Quite a few big, boofy sporting giants renowned for their masculine

Clyde's Style

For reasons that have little to do with literary merit, the book I most enjoyed during 1990 was *The Cameron Diaries*.

It affords a glimpse into the mind of a quintessentially professional politician, a man to whom politics is life and life is politics.

The time that has elapsed since Clyde Cameron recorded these momentous events tends to underline their essential triviality. The book is a warning to readers to discount much of the hype which surrounds such events at the time they are happening. Like now.

I derived a lot of pleasure from a memoir of a very different kind, John Updike's *Self Consciousness*. He is a master of a literary art with a long and honoured lineage, that of making the ordinary seem extraordinary and vice versa. Distinguished precursors were Flaubert and Jane Austen.

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authority on the field often choose to relax after hours in a frock, high heels and mascara rather than the traditional tracksuit. And some of the relationships, particularly the fiery liaison between Ashley Mallett and Marcia Hines, leave so-so yarns like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Anna Karenina* in the literary shade where they belong.

Slaven's book is a winner! It's a raunchy and exciting read made even more delectable by the brilliant and daring illustrations of Bill Leak. I can confidently say this is the best book I've ever read. As Roy said to me the other day, you won't want to put it down!

Paul Murphy is presenter of not only *This is the South Coast News*, but also *PM*, ABC radio's current affairs program, and *Dateline* for SBS TV.



Jim McClelland

Gloom Busters

The recession of 1990 has not been felt yet in the quality or quantity of Australian books being published. This will change dramatically in 1991. Fewer books will be published and fewer books sold in the next 12 months. So these recommendations are really an urgent call from the front line for a halt to the 'short arm, long pocket' crises. My top 10 Australian titles for this year are:

1. *Poppy*. Drusilla Modjeska.

A terrific meditation on Modjeska's mother that peels back layers of a life.

2. *The Selling of the Australian Mind*. Stephen Knight.

The author is to the Left what Geoffrey Blainey is to the Right. Fascinating essays that sweep from the bourgeois dinner party to a defence of the humanities.

3. *Spidercup*. Marion Halligan.

Great beach reading for the guilty: a tale of obsessive jealousy that will find echoes, unfortunately, in both men and women.

4. *Taking Shelter*. Jessica Anderson.

This last novel from one of Australia's finest writers is an intriguing tale of a middle-class life touched by AIDS and the youth culture.

5. *The Quest for Grace*. Manning Clark.

Volume Two in Clark's autobiography brings us appreciably closer to a sense of the historian's origins.

6. *At Last!* edited by Geoff Slattery.

A most important document for football and a testimony to the dedication of Collingwood supporters.

7. *Flying Lessons*. Susan Johnson.

This latest novel, by the author of *Messages from Chaos*, *Flying Les-*

sons is a feat of the imagination that holds both a contemporary and historical story in mind. The quest for a missing brother becomes the quest for a self and a family history.

8. *Isobars*. Janette Turner Hospital.

A new collection of stories that again proves the writer's capacity for a truly cosmopolitan voice.

9. *The Very Best of Friends*. Margaret Wild, illustrated by Julie Vivas.

Wonderful picture book for the under eights. I have successfully achieved the horizontal a number of times with this one so it is terrific.

10. *Longleg*. Glenda Adams.

A wonderful novel that had me confirmed in my belief in the Oedipus complex. The story of a boy's quest for his mother's love with an unforgettable image of Mum's twirling dancing skirts that takes her further away from our hero's longing.

LOUISE ADLER is the publisher for Heinemann Books Australia.



Louise Adler

Bali High

Autodidacts are forever catching up and so this year's feat has been the Smollet translation of *Don Quixote*.

What surprised me was the Don behaves exactly the way I do, and I suppose that everyone else does, in order to get through the day; that is, he imagines that everything is something else. Apparently Marx taught himself to read Spanish by reading his way through the Don, but then he already had Latin and French, to mention only the most related ones.

Yet even historians have to come out from under their moss-covered stones and sample the current atmosphere. Of the new books I enjoyed in 1990, Adrian Vickers' *Bali* (Penguin) is at the top of my list to

impose on friends for their enjoyment and edification. As the only middle-class Australian never to have been to Bali, I learnt a great deal. This uninformed judgment was kindly confirmed by a friend with the appropriate expertise. Vickers approaches his material in a way that left me confident that he could see around corners. He presents the history of Bali through the images of its foreign describers without showing how smart he is by making his prose dreary. A book for anyone who has been, is going or refuses to visit the place. An ideal summer time present. But you may have to order it since booksellers are reluctant to stock a volume that is better than a travel guide.

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Loyal Grouser

The book that captured my interest in the last month or so was the biography of the former British leader of the Independent Labour Party, James Maxton, by current Labour Party frontbencher, Gordon Brown.

I have to declare an interest first of all and indicate that I am a biography junkie. Often looking for non-work reading material I turn to biographies and, in particular, political biographies. Maxton provides a fascinating study of reform politics and the people and motivations which bring about reform, as well as the history of those involved.

The interesting thing about reading this particular book is that it gives one a chance to learn about Maxton, perhaps a figure in British Labour history little known to members of the Australian Left; and simultaneously about Gordon Brown.

I was first attracted to the book because of its author, having met him during a 1989 visit to the UK. I found him very impressive and I expect him to be a key player, perhaps Secretary of State for Industry, in the Kinnock Labour government after the next British election.

The book is also an interesting read for political junkies of all persuasions. As the fly leaf says: "James Maxton was Britain's most charismatic socialist politician of the inter-war period and the best known platform orator of his time." As Scottish MP for Bridgeton in Glasgow from 1922 until his death in 1946 he never ceased to speak out against privilege, inequality, poverty and, in particular, unemployment.

As with all political biographies it is interesting to see the connections between life experience and political attitudes and practice, both as a matter of philosophy and as a matter of style. There are also some points

of contemporary interest. One worth noting for itself and as it relates to previous events in Australian Labor history, is a quote from Aneurin Bevan to Jennie Lee, another ILP MP. He said:

I tell you what the epitaph of you Scottish dissenters will be - pure but impotent. Yes, you'll be pure alright but remember at the price of impotency you will not influence the course of British politics by as much as a hair's breadth.

I have to say the study of the book indicates that Bevan's critique, at least of the 1930s ILP proved to be correct.

But either way, it is an important statement about the nature of the political reform process with the trade-offs we all have to contemplate and the hard decisions we are prepared to make, in general and on each specific occasion, when we are confronted with a political dilemma.

The other interesting fact, of course, is that perhaps many of you, like I, thought that this was a Gough Whitlam original. Or at least I thought it was a Graham Freudenberg original. But then again I should have known what a great student of labour history Freudenberg is.

It is also interesting to note in such a hard line political activist as Maxton, his judgment of Ramsay MacDonald. When all those in the Labour movement were criticising MacDonald for his treachery, when he left the party to lead the National government, Maxton expressed the view that accusations about treachery were out of place. His view was that MacDonald shouldn't be criticised for being true to his own beliefs. The misfortune was that MacDonald's beliefs were unsound and his theory of society and social development unsound.

It is a more interesting analysis of the motives of opponents within the movement than most in the

Australian Labor movement are prepared to give to their opponents in contemporary analysis. The book also provides an interesting insight into other better known characters such as Attlee, Bevan and, of course, MacDonald.

As an aid to analysis of British politics in the 20s and 30s, and British social history of the time, *Maxton* is really worthwhile.

An insight into the reform process, it merits reading and it also will give a return on your investment in time by shedding light on one of the leaders of the next British Labour government. More than that, if you are interested in politics and the political process, and if you like a slightly esoteric journey in that overall arena, I think *Maxton* by Gordon Brown, published by Mainstream Publishing, is well worth a look over Christmas.

Senator Bob McMullan is Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer.

A Hollow Faith

The famous little guy of Czech literature, the Good Soldier Svejk, once remarked of a prison sentence: "I never imagined they'd sentence an innocent man to ten years...sentencing an innocent man to five years, that's something I've heard of, but ten, that's a bit much."

A vein of satire runs through much Czech writing, all the more remarkable when the real world beyond the writer's imagination is offering daily examples of unconscious satire richer than anything the most gifted writer could dream up, as it did with a vengeance in postwar Czechoslovakia.

Pinnacles of absurdity were reached during those bitter 40 years. Heights of lunacy transcended. Interrogators demanded of the Czech actress

caught staging a reading of *Macbeth* in her living room that she name the play's subversive author.

Wide-eyed Prague schoolchildren were herded into the police museum to gaze on its most infamous exhibit, a stuffed border Alsatian dog, a canine hero for apprehending the largest number of escaping dissidents. "Open a page of *Canine News*", wrote Ivan Klima in one of his short stories, "and there on the very first page you come across yet another wretched article about someone else's glorious revolution."

A philosopher of Klima's student days once considered the great hope of Czech philosophy worked as a night watchman in the Institute of Philosophy. "How about that for an example of a special kind of absurdity?" Another philosopher dug tunnels for the metro; a literary critic washed windows; the Prague Hotel had the distinction of having its

boilers stoked at various times by 21 signatories of Charter 77.

In his collection of essays, *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator*, Ludvik Vaculik recalls once telling his interrogators how Charter signatories were treated; how people were dismissed from their jobs, had driving licences taken away from them, telephones disconnected, lives made miserable. They looked at him, the typist included, as if hearing something incredible. "I surrendered to my impression that I was talking to people who were working on so distant a site that they did not even know what their factory was producing." It is no coincidence that Kafka was born in Prague. Every year on the anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation in protest against the Soviet invasion of 1968, people light candles at his graveside, but Palach is no longer there. To extinguish his memory the regime had his body removed to a country

graveyard, replacing it with that of a young woman, and the mourners mourn at the tomb of Maria Jedlickova.

With the tables now turned, more absurdity has been heaped on awesome tragedy. On the occasion of the publication of his new novel, *Love and Garbage*, Ivan Klima worried about the turnaround; "People who formerly shunned dissidents are so kind to us I nearly hate it". A dissident rock star is now MP for central Prague; the Foreign Minister once stoked boilers; half the cabinet cleaned windows. Writer Jiri Wolf got six years in jail for writing a letter to the Austrian Embassy about prison conditions; Vaclav Havel served more than four. Now President, Havel has abandoned the khaki of the palace guard, decking it in sparkling new red and blue uniforms designed by the costume designer for the film *Amadeus*. The Soviet general who commanded the invading tanks in 68 has visited Prague to apologise to Alexander Dubcek, and been told he was 22 years too late.

Without doubt, this is theatre of the absurd. For the people forced to live their lives on such a stage, however, the 40 lost years have been a tragedy of epic proportions and nowhere is

the tragedy of Czechoslovakia's moral desolation and decay better told than in the book this piece is ostensibly all about. My choice for *My Favourite* is the unforgettable memoir of a Czech woman who has known more suffering than most. Heda Margolius Kovaly survived a Nazi concentration camp to become a victim of stalinism. After the war her husband put all his faith in a communist ideal. He was a member of the government post-1948. In 1951, his faith shown to be hollow, he was executed with ten others, all of them Jews, following the infamous Slansky show trial of that year. All have since been "rehabilitated".

Prague Farewell is a warning about the dark side of human nature, a record of how the totalitarian state feeds on the blindness and weakness of human beings, and turns on the people, ridiculing the ideals of the true believers. Kovaly writes of absurdities as well; of the nouveau-riche snobbery among people parading their working class origins and proletarian principles, who rule in the name of workers and farmers; of tables groaning under the weight of rare delicacies while the people live on rations; of ideological babble, lies, cruelties and deceptions.

"The more dignified and humane an image of man was drawn by the Party, the less did men themselves come to mean in society. The better and more joyous our lives appeared in the pages of newspapers, the sadder they were in reality."

It was a reality her husband could never grasp. He could not give up his conviction that his ideal was essentially sound and good. Nor could he explain why it had failed, even then, as early as 1951. She knew why: "If the system could only function when the leadership is made up of geniuses and all the people are one hundred percent honest and infallible, then it's a bad system. It might work in heaven but it's a foolish and destructive illusion for this world."

Prague Farewell by Heda Margolius Kovaly, published in 1988 by Victor Gollancz Ltd. Other books mentioned: *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator* by Ludvik Vaculik, published by Readers International 1986; *My Merry Mornings*, short stories by Ivan Klima, published by Readers International 1985; *Love and Garbage* by Ivan Klima, published by Chatto and Windus 1990.

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Demystifying

Looking Beyond Yesterday is a superb anthology of Australian writers, cartoonists and activists, who muse about the threat of nuclear war and how their talents may be used to prevent such cataclysm.

Looking Beyond Yesterday is also an assault on the governments, media barons and the rich and powerful who seem to be saying, as the editor David Headon notes, "Hands off the big issues". The biggest issue with which the book deals is the threat posed by the existence of nuclear

weapons and the "Escalation Dominance policy" of which they are the structural core.

The pervasive power of this threat is demonstrated in the quoted story by Tilley Olsen in which the narrator's daughter, when asked about her exams, dismisses them from serious consideration saying that "in a couple of years when we'll be atom-dead they won't matter a bit".

Several contributors — among them John McLaren, Dorothy Green and David Martin — carefully and rigorously describe the facts about the nuclear threat, and using their skills as writers, go further than the

usual comments by strategic analysts.

John McLaren, for example, notes that "while the language of nuclear technology conceals the truth beneath euphemism, the words of the cold war warriors become weapons which destroy the possibility of reasoned agreement".

Dorothy Green notes an appalling report by a committee of scholars at Harvard in 1983 who said that nuclear weapons were part of the order of things and commented that "living with nuclear weapons is our only hope and there is no greater test of the human spirit". As she says,

"any sane person in answer to the question 'our only hope of what?' would reply at once, 'of damnation'".

Since this book was written the cold war has ended and we are being offered opportunities which have not been available to humankind for nearly a century. The 20th century has been the century of war, not only the First and Second World Wars, but an endless array of regional wars including the Vietnam War, and for the last 50 years the massively wasteful military spending associated with the Cold War. Yet the possibility of a period without war now exists — provided Bush and Hussein can be restrained. The conflict over Kuwait illustrates the fragility of the peace for which we were all hoping at the beginning of this year. That conflict could yet be the occasion on which nuclear weapons are used again if, for example, Iraq uses chemical weapons against Israel and Israel retaliates with its own nuclear bombs.

I doubt if Australia's most effective contribution to ending the nuclear threat is armed neutrality as suggested by David Martin for that is a recipe for increased military expenditure here and competitive rearmament elsewhere. Rather, cannot we concentrate on co-operative, collaborative arms reductions by, for example, establishing a conference on security and co-operation in East Asia through which confidence building measures could be negotiated, leading on in due course to multilateral disarmament in this region in the same way as it is now happening in Europe.

The nuclear threat is far from being the only issue effectively addressed in *Looking Beyond Yesterday*. A number of writers comment on the superficiality of the popular press and the link between that and the concentration of media ownership. The fact that 70% of our metropolitan newspapers are controlled by one company, dominated by one foreigner, is perhaps the major failure of Australian democracy. This degree of concentration of media ownership is unprecedented in any liberal democracy at any time yet it is the most notable non-story in public af-

fairs reporting. Rodney Hall outlines the possible significance of that in his description of the plot of *Kisses of the Enemy*. David Headon is right to emphasise the critical role of the artist in truth-finding and truth-telling in this world in which the mass media are in the hands of a small group of entrepreneurial robber barons. We can share Gore Vidal's foreboding that we are not threatened so much by Big Brother watching us by his choice, as by us watching him, by ours.

Another theme which goes to the heart of the malaise within the Australian body politic is the rise of the "new breed of economist politicians". Most Australian government policy during the last decade has originated in the minds of the waspish males in the Treasury and the Prime Minister's Department and the like whose basis for action is an ideology of perfect markets. This ideology is naive because all markets fail and therefore to rely on them for either efficiency or equity, let alone humanity, is foolish utopianism. Perhaps the community will recognise the inadequacy of their prescriptions and of their deregulatory and privatising policies as a result of the massive corporate failures, and of the corporate exploitation of market power which has led to the explosive growth of directors' and executives' incomes.

Many other themes are picked up by the contributors: the dehumanising impact of mechanisation; the sense of powerlessness which is widespread within the politically alienated community; and the oppression of women, minorities and the poor.

It is not, though, the identification of these issues which is inspirational; it is the way in which the writers wrestle with how to bring together their political convictions and their artistic integrity. Amanda Lohrey notes that "politically informed fiction has had a bad press in literary circles. It is assumed to be the fellow traveller of 'dun-coloured realism', not really art but propaganda..." Most contributors agree with Judith Wright that "art is not propaganda" and that the responsibility of the writer "goes deep into the centre of

humanity, and to the natural world by which and through which we live...and it goes not only to our potential readers, but to those who for one reason or another are fringe-dwellers, ignored, oppressed, out of touch or out of sight".

There is much fascinating discussion of the process of writing — by Rodney Hall, Amanda Lohrey and Martha Ansara, for example. It is a pleasure to read writers demystifying their work: I often wish that economists would more frankly demystify their because that would show the shallowness of much of it. David Headon and Amanda Lohrey rightly emphasise the potency of humour. Mockery is the most powerful political weapon but many forms of writing are available simply telling stories effectively is perhaps the most compelling. Bruce Dawe notes the poet's power through using images as paradigms. A striking example is Ian Matthews' phrase from *Beowulf* on the 'peace weavers' to describe the poets and cartoonists who pick up the strands which often run in opposing directions.

An appealing vision for the future comes from the ecologists. Alan Runciman writes of the goal of "a just, compassionate and sustainable future". In an unexpected chapter by Colin Campbell and David Macmillan the life sciences are assigned the role of bringing a new vision of the world as alive, with functions inter-related as "its care and nurture a matter of sustaining life". They advocate accelerating the movement "from economics to ecology as the governing science of our era".

Patrick White reminds us that part of the required vision for the future is simply to recognise that, in a quotation from Robert Gray:

...all that's important is the ordinary things.
 Making the fire
 To boil some bathwater, pounding rice, pulling the weeds
 And knocking dirt out of their roots, or pouring tea.

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