



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

**Kunapipi**

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 5

---

1982

Thea Astley

Graeme Kinross Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Smith, Graeme Kinross, Thea Astley, *Kunapipi*, 4(1), 1982.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol4/iss1/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Thea Astley

## **Abstract**

I'm still an apprentice at writing. I'd be doomed if I thought otherwise. Nobody's work improves unless they're pretty humbly aware of its failings ... I love the English language - it offers the most beautiful smorgasbord. It's an inexhaustible smorgasbord ... Symbols? I don't know. Anything can be a symbol. Was Moby Dick a symbol - a huge penis in the Atlantic? Many people have speculated on suffering as being an impetus to the creative instinct. Similar to being a Catholic perhaps, with Catholicism's early emphases on the nature of guilt, damnation, eternal punishment, the beauty of suffering (not involuntarily but voluntarily), being a Queenslander in Australia provides much in the nature of achieving possible apotheosis

## Thea Astley



Thea Astley at Macquarie University, 1978.

I'm still an apprentice at writing. I'd be doomed if I thought otherwise. Nobody's work improves unless they're pretty humbly aware of its failings...

I love the English language — it offers the most beautiful smorgasbord. It's an inexhaustible smorgasbord...

Symbols? I don't know. Anything can be a symbol. Was *Moby Dick* a symbol — a huge penis in the Atlantic?

Many people have speculated on suffering as being an impetus to the creative instinct. Similar to being a Catholic perhaps, with Catholicism's early emphases on the nature of guilt, damnation, eternal punishment, the beauty of suffering (not involuntarily but voluntarily), being a Queenslander in Australia provides much in the nature of achieving possible apotheosis.

Given a choice of talents, I would plump for a musical one, an ability to play jazz piano. For there, as you play, instant orgasm.

I am incapable of playing the game of the writer-taking-himself-seriously seriously. Flippancy is my defence. What's yours?

When I start writing I'm either unhappy, angry or indignant. After a while I feel a kind of mad amusement and then I feel a genial compassion for the character I'm sending up.

Thea Astley, in slacks and loose shirt, lolls there, arm and cigarette resting over the back of the chair. Her face is open, dark eyes pinned to her mood, and a shock of dark hair crossing her brow. She doesn't like talking about herself, yet words come easily to her tongue to tie down her subject precisely. She seems relaxed, sits forward leaning on her elbows, but keeps smoking ('purely an oral habit. I don't inhale'). It is easy to imagine her as a girl — mischievous, critical, lively as Miles Franklin before her, and as questioning of life. She likes to talk about life's finer nuances, has a lovably candid way of declaring her enthusiasms. She is sensitive to both the hurt of beauty and the absurdity of life. She chats about a lecture she was invited to give in Italy:

'It was in 1977. I stopped off briefly in Rome and then went on to Venice. I liked the feeling of Italy — grubby, warm, friendly, slow. I stayed in Venice for four days. It was absolutely beautiful. I stayed in a hotel next to Vivaldi's old church. I know it's corny but I was quite sentimental about it, took off my shoes so that my feet could feel the old stone. It must have been the same stone that Vivaldi trod. Venice was so lovely that I cried — I literally cried. It was a revelation.' She pauses, butts her cigarette. 'And what else did I do? Oh, yes, on the flight there I had an exciting experience. I sat in the pilot's cabin while they brought the plane down in Bangkok. They invited me up. And the funniest thing happened. Someone picked an old grubby exercise book from near a window, and started reading out these things. And there's the pilot sitting in front of me, putting it all into action — «Ailerons!» And the pilot goes click, presses down a button. «Wing flaps!» Click! «Tail lights!» Click! And so on down the list. There were about twelve terms, and he read 'em all out from this thumbled book — it looked like an old manuscript. The pilot followed instructions, and the next minute the plane's on the ground. Here I was clutching the back of the assistant pilot's seat. And I thought, my God, this is how it's done. Ah, yes, that was as revelatory as Venice!'

Her face relaxes, creases into a laugh. Outside it's hot and windy — the air seethes round the house in the Sydney suburb of Epping, rasping the hard palm fronds across each other in the garden. Its dryness thrashes in the westerly, running out from the two-storeyed timber house through bamboo and lawn, oleander and pittosporum to the deep-

guttered street. This is where most of Thea Astley's eight novels have been written — at the downstairs table in the big lounge room, or in other corners with good window light, while she put on the chops and potatoes for her husband Jack and her musician son Edmund, or prepared lectures and corrected essays for her students at Macquarie University, not five minutes away in the car.

For the last twenty years Thea Astley has lived in Sydney while writing about that other place, her home state, Queensland. All but one of her novels are set there. They bring alive many facets of life in the huge tropical state — schoolteaching; small-town society; the musical coteries of Brisbane and its hinterland; the problems of extra-marital love, of adolescence, and of the Catholic religion both for those inside the church and those without. Others of her novels treat the world of the journalist, or the unthinking racism and violence of Queensland's past.

Thea Astley, back in 'the south' for a brief visit, sits on the edge of the greening swimming pool behind her house in Sydney and talks about Queensland, where she has made her permanent home since retiring from Macquarie University.

'Yes, I've always thought about Queensland a lot. I suppose it's my dream country if you like. From here, these cooler climes, I think of it as sprawl — physical sprawl in the sense of its size and distances, mental sprawl, bodily sprawl that its climate brings out. The livin' is easy! Things are green there, even in «the Dry». Actually I don't like the heat, but I like that do-it-tomorrow feeling. And I like the plants, the rainforest, the water cobalt off the shore, the tropicana. It's my dream country. And you know — the dream country is always where you aren't!

She was born in Brisbane in 1925. Her father was a journalist on the *Courier Mail*. Her mother's father, Con Lindsay, who was Canadian born had also been a journalist whose regular column appeared in the magazine *Bohemia* of the Bread and Cheese Club in Melbourne. He was also a member of Sydney's Dawn and Dusk Club. From both men she inherited a love for the sound of words, and a delight in using them. Thea Astley had her primary and secondary education at All Hallows Convent near Brisbane's Storey Bridge. Her schooling began in the economically uncertain days of the early 1930s and turned her out as a student teacher doing an Arts degree part-time in the grimmest days of the war in the Pacific, with Brisbane full of American soldiers and the city prepared for invasion. Thea Astley, like most writers, finds that her experience stays with her, etched into her consciousness. In a hundred places in her novels and short stories she has retailed in dramatic terms experience imbibed in her childhood as she grew up with her one brother

in Brisbane. On the rare occasions when she has spoken and written about her life and writing she has also touched on this, as in an article written for *Southerly* in 1970:

I've always been enormously responsive to scenery, landscapes with or without figures: my dad singing shanties in the sea-rotted houses we used to rent along the Queensland coast when I was a small girl, one particular green valley, yellow with light, in the Tweed, my head stuck out of a bus window draining it in and thinking 'I must keep this one'. I was thirteen then and I've still kept it: a still pre-storm late afternoon in the Mary Valley, bruised purple over pine forest as I walked off from my last degree paper — economics — the script decorated with cream stains from the cake my supervisor's wife brought me for afternoon tea. These moments are neither cerebral nor academic, but I offer them as reasons why now I still want to write about the Queensland littoral.

Her convent upbringing was rigorous. It implanted in her attributes that have lasted and that she does not regret. Her teachers were very good, setting an example of dedication and self-effacement. They were perfectionists. From them Thea Astley took a strong work ethic and an appreciation of the value of self-denial. In comparison with the Catholic church she knew then, however, today's church disappoints her.

'It seems to have lost its dignity,' she says. 'Then at least it was a tough religion, but now it seems unbending in an ingratiating way. There's no longer the Latin mass. In fact, I look to see the shadow of Christ in all the Christian churches, but he seems to have been pushed out by property. They pine for him, but seem to have grown into big public relations organizations that are empty of the old values.'

At the same time, the Catholic upbringing she experienced had its other side — what she saw as an emphasis on guilt. 'Catholicism is an insidious religion because it constantly forces children to examine themselves,' she said in an interview in 1965. 'All of a sudden you're 14 and you think: Heavens, I had a dirty thought! This sort of guilt doesn't seem healthy to me.'

Music and language, two key elements in her life and writing accompanied Thea Astley's schooldays. Her piano teacher, Arthur Sharman, took her through Heller studies, Clementi sonatas and Beethoven sonatas — it left her with 'a lush reaction to the Romantics, a strangling urge to sing lieder with no voice, and the deepest adulating envy of performers like Richter and Vince Guiraldi,' as she wrote facetiously later. Her study of languages — English, Latin, French — continued through school and at the University. It stood her in good stead in her later craft with words. Her interest in literature and writing

was fired particularly by one of her teachers, Sister Mary Claver — ‘an amazing enthusiast, a lover of books and the language’.

In 1942, the girls of All Hallows Convent were evacuated from Brisbane to the country town of Warwick, 160 km south-west of the capital, because of the possibility of a Japanese attack on Brisbane. At Warwick (later to become the ‘Condamine’ of her novels) Thea Astley finished her Senior School Certificate, being taught in a big hall that the nuns had converted for school-use, with brown paper gummed over the windows as a blackout precaution. ‘We had air raid shelters in the grounds,’ Thea Astley recalls; ‘and often did rehearsals for bombing raids. We’d rush into the slit trenches with *The Elements of Deductive Logic* clutched under our arms. It often was the most exciting thing — the only thing that gave the school-day any point!’

In 1943, Thea Astley began an Arts degree as an evening student of the University of Queensland. After each day as a student primary teacher she went to lectures at the old site of the University which was then in George Street, Brisbane. It was still the period of the ‘brown-out’. She raced home from classes at night through a city replete with air-raid wardens, pill-boxes, gun-pits and roving American and Australian servicemen. ‘I didn’t know a single Yank,’ she says. ‘I must have been the only teenage girl in Brisbane who didn’t!’



The town of Warwick in southern Queensland, to which Thea Astley's class from All Hallows Convent was evacuated during the threat of Japanese bombing in 1942. Warwick became the model for the town of Condamine in Thea Astley's novels.

During that period of study and teaching, she began writing — ‘a lot of facile verse, and surprisingly some of it got published.’ When she was eighteen she met the poet Paul Grano. His first collection of poems, *Poems Old and New*, were revelatory for her — here was a poet whose touchstones were to be found in Brisbane, and in Queensland landscapes and country towns. She fell in with other Brisbane writers who called themselves the Barjai group. These were senior students from Brisbane High School who established a youth magazine for literary contributions called *Barjai*. It ran for five years. Her urge to write received a great spur from writers in the group like Laurence Collinson, Barrett Reid, Vida Smith and Charles Osborne. Clem Christesen, then a sub-editor working on the Brisbane *Courier Mail*, was another, with Peter Miller, who ‘continued her beginnings’ as a writer, as she puts it. Christesen was in the throes of establishing his literary journal, *Meanjin Papers*, at the time. But she didn’t publish in *Meanjin* at that stage — she appeared in the *ABC Weekly* and in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Writing as Thea Astley, she recalls, she earned £3 for a poem, but under her pseudonym of ‘Phillip Cressey’ she was paid £5 — ‘a genital loading’, she says in her drawing way of flat Australian statement.



The Railway Hotel, Imbil, Queensland, where Thea Astley boarded during her time as a teacher in the small town in the Mary River Valley north of Brisbane.

But it was the loneliness of the out-of-school hours as a teacher in small country towns that started her in earnest as a prose-writer, a potential novelist. Her first school was at Mount Crosby, beyond the present suburb of Kenmore and close to the filter-beds that serve for Brisbane's water-supply. Her second was at Shorncliffe near Sandgate, her third in the deeper north at Townsville, and then at Imbil in the valley of the Mary River and at Pomona not far from there. 'I liked the teaching,' she recalls. 'Especially those mid-primary years around ten or eleven years of age where you can see the progress in the children so clearly. It's an age at which children are beautifully unaffected and generous.' But living in small-town hotels was often desolating. In 1965, she looked back on that period of her life in the 1940s. Her words conjure up to some extent the partly autobiographical portrait of the young teacher that she created in her first novel, *Girl With a Monkey*. The novel was based, as she explained in an interview in 1965, on her last day of duty at the primary school in Townsville, before she was transferred to the Queensland south:

There's nowhere so lonely as a country town if you're a young and somewhat priggish city girl. Even in places like Townsville you can be spiritually lonely. I used to go to my hotel room after tea and write and write, purely for something to do.

But country towns fascinated me for all their loneliness. Where else but Australia would you get the local constable closing the doors of the pub at closing time, and locking himself in with the drinkers. I used to lie upstairs and hear the laughing and the clinking of glasses and the sound of them playing billiards.

By this time Thea Astley had given over her piano playing in favour of writing. 'It seemed easier to turn to playing about with words rather than notes...An exercise book, a beautifully fluid biro and thousands of words that could be arranged in endless attractive permutations made the overhead idiotically cheap and the possibility entirely seductive.' She had also come to a realization that would provide her with the motivation and material for her novels over the next three decades. She explained it simply to an audience at Sydney University when she delivered the 1976 Herbert Blaiklock Memorial Lecture, entitled 'Being a Queenslander: a form of literary and geographical conceit':

I realized the shabby areas of town and country which I publicly demolished to my southern friends but privately adored could be unashamedly declared as lyric argument. You see the nub of my paper is that literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal.

In 1947, sitting for her last University examination at the little town of Imbil, in the Mary Valley, Thea Astley completed her Bachelor of Arts degree. In 1948 she married Jack Gregson, an accountant. In the same year she moved from Pomona in southern Queensland to Sydney as a teacher for the New South Wales Education Department. It was then, separated from her own tropical home territory, and smarting at being dubbed a 'first-year' teacher in New South Wales after five years of teaching in Queensland, that her 'love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness', as she puts it. Until this time, her writing had not satisfied her. She regarded it as inept. But now she began to realize her power. Settling into the teaching of English in New South Wales secondary schools, she began to write in earnest from her Queensland experience, working mainly at night.

In 1956 she completed *Girl With a Monkey* based on her earlier life in Townsville. She eventually submitted it to Angus and Robertson. The publishers held it for two years, bringing it out in 1958. It is a novel that portrays the loneliness and helplessness of a young teacher in the face of her own relatively unfeeling assumption of superiority over her boyfriend Harry. Harry is a trench digger, untutored, determined, honest, and ultimately rejected. Their relationship is set in the midst of the milieu that Thea Astley knew well from her own experience — the boredom and banality of boarding-house life, the cramping restrictions of the teaching situation, the pecking order and unimaginative aridity of social life in small communities, and always the atmosphere of tropical living:

Most of the houses were built on stilts, some five feet high, some fifteen, but especially those which, although built on the gentle rise south of the river, tended to receive the full force of the January rains, partly because here they were so close to the sea and partly because on the whole all this side of town was much lower than the north bank. They were ugly and they were necessary. Especially you thought them ugly in mid-year when the mud had hardened and the fowls ran squawking below the building, latticed only with tarred up-rights, so you could see tubs and old packing cases and the underneath rain-water tank all jumbled together. But you knew they were necessary when the first flood-waters lapped the bottom step and the whole backyard and every other backyard was a shining lake whose level rose foot by foot till even the fence lines vanished, and at nights in bed you could hear the wavelets sucking at the tin ant-caps on top of the house piers. Some of the houses did not have lattice, but stood precariously on their long poles like swamp-birds. They were painted biscuit and chocolate, and some were even ice-cream colour, but mostly they were drab, lacking in windows and roofed with iron on which the rain drummed frenziedly from December to February.

Elsie remembered how those storms had been precluded by heavy round drops that fell singly into the dust and bent the leaves, then, without warning, the rain had

fallen like a thick curtain. All through that first week she tramped home under the javelin thrust of water, bare-foot like the children, with her rain-cape soaked right through to the rubber and her umbrella a pulp, hardly able to find her way, so alike were the flat, flooded streets and the box-like houses. During the day, whenever a gasp of watery blue edged its way into the sky, the whole class would point and laugh, and the men standing in their mud-splashed sports trousers along the verandas would light votive cigarettes and breathe the smoke in reverently in the first sunshine for nine days. But by two o'clock the gigantic cumulus would have rolled up from the horizon, heavily white and woolly with edges and underside dark-blue, and by three the whole sky would be black again with nimbus and the wind, springing up without warning as it did in these latitudes, would be on them with the first drops of the next storm.

*Girl With a Monkey* earned favourable mention in a literary competition. This spurred Thea Astley to more concentrated writing. In 1955 her only son, Edmund, had been born. Now with a child to look after ('my favourite production'), she wrote on, a little each day, sitting in bed at night with a pen and an exercise book. Her next novel, *A Descant For Gossips*, appeared in 1960. Its physical setting was modelled on the town of Pomona where she had taught for a year. The burden of its story is anger against the intolerance shown by the social set of Gungee, a small Queensland town, for two middle-aged teachers — one a widow, the other with a permanently hospitalized wife — who became lovers. Already developing in the novel are the concerns that perhaps dominate Thea Astley's fiction — her interest in the 'outsider' in society, and, as she has stressed many times, her plea for generosity and understanding in human relationships. Both Robert Moller and Helen Striebel, the teachers, are already marked out for suffering by being outsiders in terms of the values of Gungee:

At those times when the summer evenings drifted in from the sea in a green translucence that lay over the hills and paddocks like clear water and the after-tea hours lay ahead as empty as the sky limits, he would have liked Helen with him to share the silence or the idly dropped word. But his neighbours watched with unkindly interest the most trivial actions of a man who did not belong to any of the local clubs, refrained from attending any church, and found horses and bridge boring beyond endurance. Occasionally he played an uninterested game of badminton at the doctor's home, but that was not sufficient to excuse his lack of interest in sport. His love of books and music made him immediately suspect, and his preference for drinking at the hotel bars with the working class, instead of at the private polite parties, marked him down as rather common. He did not know, and he certainly would not have cared if he had.

In much the same fashion Helen Striebel was criticized by the women of the town, who resented the way she was able to keep to herself, disliking her because of a self-sufficiency that precluded the need to swap knitting patterns and sponge recipes and

allowed her to retire blamelessly to her room at seven. This sort of behaviour was accepted as a personal affront by the active women's organizations, who regarded it angrily as voiceless criticism of their behaviour. In a way perhaps it was, though it was unintentional.

Finally the strength of malicious gossip in the town sees Helen Striebel transferred to Camooweal at the other end of the state. She has to leave, not knowing that a girl from a background of poverty, whom she and Moller had befriended in the school, has been goaded to suicide by the evil-tongued suggestions of her classmates, the sons and daughters of the town's gossips.

'The outsider interests me enormously,' Thea Astley wrote in 1970. 'Not self-conscious, phoney, arty outsiders, but bums and old ladies and people who are lonely, seedy and unsuccessful. I haven't travelled, but I assume — is this presumptuous? — that there must be Upper Mongolian and North Vietnamese Mrs Everages and Sandy Stones. There *have* to be...' And again, speaking of her published novels, she has written that they 'have always been, despite the failure of the reviewers to see it, a plea for charity — in the Pauline sense of course — to be accorded to those not ruthless enough or grand enough to be gigantic tragic figures, but who, in their own way, record the same *via crucis*.'

In 1961 Thea Astley received her first Commonwealth Literary Fund grant. The time it afforded her helped in the writing of her next novel, *The Well-Dressed Explorer*, published in 1962. It also was written out of anger. George Brewster, its journalist protagonist is fallibly human in his egotism and in the ruses he employs to entrap women and to retain his self-esteem, even to the extent of a self-conscious and anti-human attempt to deny the flesh that leads to his conversion to Catholicism. The book is rich with Thea Astley's bitter and ironic understanding of how ordinary human beings become adept at self-deception. The book, which shared the Miles Franklin Award for the novel, is also remarkable for its portrayal of the life of a man from boyhood to old age. The truth about Brewster and his love affairs conducted in the face of his patient wife is calmly revealed by Peter Reardon, the husband of one of his lady conquests, as he comforts his wife:

Reardon shrugged. 'Eat your dinner. Try to eat something and I'll tell you,' he said. 'Brewster loves no one but himself. He doesn't know that. He wouldn't believe it if you shouted it at him, but it is nevertheless true. He's not capable of selfless love. Can't you see? Enormous egos like his with little real talent to support them must seek an emotional support. He uses people.'

'But he did say he loved me. He sounded sincere.'

'He puts love — or the words for it — in, so that he can take love out. And perhaps he did mean it for the moment. But it doesn't go deep. My poor dear,' he said, reaching across to touch her hand in tenderness. The disease he was cherishing within his fragile flesh and which was to carry him off in another year made him cough drily.

'He's by nature a bough-flitter. You must see it. Haven't you watched him at parties, even when you are there, and all his obsession should be directed at you? Perhaps he wants to believe in the grinding racking emotion for himself, but the truth is he's simply incapable of it. No one's fault. Not even his. And he's an utterly selfish man.'

Thea Astley's full maturity as a novelist came perhaps with *The Slow Natives*, also written while on a CLF grant in 1964. It was published in 1965, at a time when she was teaching English at Cheltenham Girls High School in Sydney. It won both the Miles Franklin Award and the Moomba Award for literature. Its setting is Brisbane suburbia, in which Bernard Levenson, father and music examiner, and Iris Levenson, mother and lover of another woman's husband, stumble on in their arid marriage, neglecting the needs of their adolescent son Keith until it is too late. His desperate absconding from home ends in near-tragedy. But in the background are other lives also, with their imperfections and needs — Leo Varga who acts as mentor figure and tutor for Keith; the down-trodden and inconsequentially violent youth, Chookie; the priests and nun whose path intersect with Bernard's in the world of piano lessons and music examinations in Queensland provincial centres. Early in the piece Keith, talking to a girlfriend, appraises his father:

'That's what's so ghastly. He loves me and I'm ashamed of him. He lets mum wear the pants because he simply isn't sufficiently interested to care. He repeats his jokes and forgets things a kid would know and makes feeble puns and stops talking about sex when I come into the room. And now — now he doesn't even play the piano particularly well.'

At the novel's conclusion, with his son badly injured in a car accident, Bernard Levenson analyses his own feelings and those of his wife:

'At least I am his father,' Bernard said carefully. 'But if we had a child now I wouldn't be so sure.'

The blood paused in Iris's face. 'What do you mean?'

'You know exactly what I mean. And, my dear Iris, so does Keith. And that is partly the cause of this bother. Oh, don't cry. If you do that I'll want to hit you. You entered on your whole little romance dry-eyed — and I knew — yes! Don't be surprised. I was the willing cuckold. And don't deny. I thought it might brighten your life. After all, we didn't seem to be going anywhere. What had I to lose — that I hadn't already lost?'

Now that he exposed his indifference to her she hated him, perversely, longing for him to want what he gave away so readily.

'No,' he went outrageously on. 'You had my blessing for what it was worth. Gerald was a clean, dull bore. But clean, Iris. I did like that clean bit. And I felt sorry for him, too, you know. It's no good being hurt when I say that. Only another man understands what I mean. After all, what was he depriving me of?'

'You go on about it now quite a lot for a man who didn't care.'

'But I didn't, Iris. Rest assured. That was a nice comfy cliché, wasn't it? But there was someone who did. Keith cared.'

'He never knew.'

'Ah yes. But he did.'

'How do you know?'

'In half a dozen ways that if you had been a more observant mother you might have noticed. The chief clue was his sudden aversion to you. Poor old Keith. He'd always missed out on something parental — father-love, you say. Yes. And then ... boom! Mother virtue collapses.'

'I don't believe you. You're only saying it to cover neglect.'

'No? Well, we can always ask him.'

Again in *The Slow Natives* Thea Astley employs without strain her eye for the details of a life lived on the Queensland littoral. Brisbane is palpable as a city in the book, from its parks, the riverside Terrace, the coffee shops and juke boxes of the Valley to the green wings of the *Monstera Deliciosa* on the walls of the Town Hall.

In 1968 Thea Astley ended her secondary teaching of English and became a senior tutor in English at Macquarie University — 'a position somewhat superior to the tea lady and inferior to the building security men', she recalls with some bitterness. Her next novel, *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, appeared in the same year with its closed-community study of a group of people confronting their frailties amongst the bungalows, native stores, hotel, hospital, and mission buildings under the palms at Port Lena on a tropical island.

'I wanted to put some of the characters from *The Slow Natives* in something of an isolated and pressurized situation,' Thea Astley explained. 'I chose the French-English condominium of Port Vila in the New Hebrides as the setting. And I introduced the details about a hurricane that was experienced there in the 1950s. I read up on it in *The Pacific Monthly* and researched it in the Mitchell Library. I went to Port Vila for a fortnight to look about and I gained some more local information about the hurricane.'

But of course that material was largely background to the interplay of character which is always Thea Astley's major concern — the development of Father Lake's 'personal problem' (a proclivity for young boys) that was hinted at in *The Slow Natives*, the 'stewed guilts' of the ageing

spinster Miss Trumper, Mrs Seabrook teetering close to the decision to leave her husband, while the wind builds to its final destructive force.

After *A Boatload of Home Folk* Thea Astley began to build the story of the novel that became her favourite, *The Acolyte*. It finally appeared in 1972. Its tale is told by Paul Vesper, an engineer and devotee of music who becomes the acolyte to Holberg, a blind composer. He is drawn to Holberg as if to a callous and self-centred magnet. But Holberg has other qualities — an urbane panache and a touch of musical genius. While Vesper helps him transpose his sinfonia at his house on Tamborine Plateau south of Brisbane he is a creature of conflict in his admiration and sympathy for Holberg in the musical sense, while feeling a loathing for him in his tantrums, and his regal manipulation of other people. His craven acceptance of his role as 'Holberg's eunuch' ends in a rebellious eruption, when he devises a metal sling in the bush and rains rocks on Holberg, his plate glass house, his piano and his attendant women and hangers on:

What is it I want to do? Make a last gesture? Fling one last comment? The house is spread out full below me, the glass panes this side gleaming leadenly in the last light through the rain. This is the last light. The last drink. The last exchange. Crouched in the coil of my anger, I select the most venomous of those polished river rocks and place it in the cup. What is cup? a distant voice asks. That other half of me cries with despair. The arm is trained on the house, but I must readjust the finder so that it will sling its load in memorable fashion. How memorable?

I smear the rain off the finder and the grief from my eyes and tremble the dial into position so that Taurus is about to discover glass and music. I feed another rock within hand's reach and fighting a sound symphony of accusations press the lever. Goal! From below comes the joyous crash of annealed quarter-inch plate, and, seeking orgasm through the attached field-glasses, I discover I have scored a bull's-eye on the study and carried a fox-brush of pampas grass through to the carpet. My hands shake with the joy and the rage and the pity of it. Don't *think*, you fellows! our football coach used to pep-talk us. Get in there and kill 'em. I place the second stone in the cup and shift the range-finder slightly. Shouts are rising from below as if I'd made a find. Whiiiiip! The second window blazes stars and there is a violent gesticulating knot of people on the terrace. I whack another onto the roof for good measure and am just about to launch another and another and another when I see Jamie sauntering into the path of my vengeance, his hands cradling something, his head startled as a bird's. He is outraged by clotted throats and planetaria of glass slivers. There is blood on someone's face — Neilsen's — and Holberg is ramping wildly between his wives like a betrayed sultan.

Of all her novels *The Acolyte* was the one that gave Thea Astley the greatest joy to write. In comparison with the others she did not notice the effort of producing it, at perhaps a half page each day, written between nine and ten o'clock in the morning before her first university class. With

it she had little rewriting to do, although most of her work undergoes revision. She finds that the length of her sentences in a first draft errs on the short side — 'old fashioned synthesis becomes necessary to lengthen them', she says. 'I have to work hard at it.' *The Acolyte* won the Miles Franklin Award for the novel in 1972.

Two years later, in 1974, Thea Astley published *A Kindness Cup*, her seventh novel. She and Jack Gregson had bought a holiday shack near Mackay in north Queensland. Not far away at the foot of the mountain was The Leap hotel, below a promontory in the ranges where in the late 19th century white settlers forced some members of an aboriginal tribe over the cliffs to their deaths. Among those who crashed to the rocks below was an aboriginal girl and her child. The child miraculously survived. The tragedy fascinated Thea Astley. She researched it, found out more details from the locals, and built her novel around the incident and its imagined aftermath. In the novel, Tom Dorahy, a former teacher in the town, who had known the young aboriginal mother, Kowaha, before her death comes back twenty years after the massacre, on the occasion of the town's celebrations. He hopes to bring to book the men responsible for the killings, who are now well-entrenched first citizens of the district. He persuades Charlie Lunt, the white guardian of Kowaha's daughter, to come back as a conscience to the town's festivities. For their pains Lunt is killed and Dorahy brutally beaten. 'I had a lot of trouble with the ending of *Kindness*,' Thea Astley explains. It is the true artist, a perfectionist, speaking. 'I'm still dissatisfied with it. But I can't see another way it could have been told. You see, the true climax, Kowaha's fall to her death, has to come fairly early in the account. And that makes Lunt's death, and the beating up of Dorahy and Boyd at the end something of an anti-climax. But there you are.' She shrugs.

Her next book, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* published in 1979, is perhaps most accurately described as a series of connected short stories, a discontinuous narrative, with most of the episodes narrated by Keith Levenson, the adolescent of *The Slow Natives*, now a forty-year-old.

'It's set in the town of Mango, a sort of combination of several north Queensland towns, if you like,' says Thea Astley. 'The book had its impetus — and its title — from an experience I had when I was on a lecturing tour for the Commonwealth Literary Fund. One night after dinner at a place near Rockhampton our host simply said «OK, let's go and hunt the wild pineapple». For those who don't know, the wild pineapple is a symbol, I suppose, for Queensland. «Wild» in the sense of *savage*, untamed. Actually I brought a wild pineapple back to Sydney from up there. It must have been 14 inches of fruit — a big one — without the spines. And when I opened it — it was bad. I don't know whether that's a symbol for the book or not!'

So Thea Astley's fiction is work of density, of sharp experience gathered and used, of an inexorable build-up of power, of satirical irony and the phrasing that bites through sham and hypocrisy — 'I can always flush out a room in four minutes with some chamber music,' says her character Bernard Leverson, commenting on polite Australian cultural vacuousness. Or again, as she describes the middle-aged journalist George Brewster — 'the refusal to age spiritually despite the flagging energies of the body can be pitiful or miraculous. In George it was pitiful.' As a novelist and a person Thea Astley seems to understand so much. She knows a great deal about love — married and extra-marital, shallow and deep, adult and teenage. While her eyes are half-closed, her chin propped on a fist, cigarette motionless, she is absorbing, analysing, perhaps even deciding on a wording. She knows the self-deceptions by which we all survive and which sometimes catch us up. She knows the logic of feminine illogicality, and all the male egotistical wiles and vulnerability.

Music and religion could be seen as constants in Thea Astley's work. They both serve as illustrations of how she uses her experience. Music is the greatest art form, she maintains, but also the most difficult. It is lost, in a sense, the moment it is produced. And jazz improvisation is a greater skill still — 'instant creation'. Her own musical background is deep; her husband Jack Gregson is a very knowledgeable collector of music; her son Edmund is a guitarist. Music provides a milieu in *The Slow Natives* and *The Acolyte*. But Thea Astley has also used pieces of her own musical experience more specifically.

'I wrote the hands — I could see them — of my old music teacher Arthur Sharman into the story in the case of Bernard Leverson in *The Slow Natives*,' she reveals. 'In the same novel I mention another incident I heard of — a person having his sense of pitch altered as a result of a stroke. In *The Acolyte* I build it more directly into the character Bathgate. It's based on a man I knew around the corner — a gallant man — who had a stroke, who was still tottering on, bringing soup to his sick wife. He was a Bach enthusiast, and played good piano. After his stroke, his ear for pitch was raised a semi-tone.'

As for religion, Thea Astley is no longer closely involved in the Catholic church, but still clearly has a love-hate bond with it as an integral part of her early life. She has been charged with wishing ill-will on the church. In an article in 1970 she responded:

I am not, as the monsignor (I forgive you monsignor) of the parish in which I live, but of which I am not a member, said 'out to destroy the church'. Forgive the syntax

too, and I won't alter a word of it. Twelve years of convent school life is a lot of time, a lot of figures in the landscape. I describe what I have heard, seen, deduced. That's all.

That misreading of her intent is matched in her view by the failure of critics, in many cases, to see that her novels are not intended to be cruel, that she was 'trying to wring those trachyte reviewing hearts with my sympathy for the misfits'. But her view of the critical approach is balanced:

'I suppose the critics are the flies on the meat, aren't they? Sometimes they hurt. But sometimes, on the other hand, I think they've been too kind. Their role is vital, though, in retaining interest in a work where it might otherwise have slipped from sight, died. It's the sort of thing Beatrice Davis does — she's not a critic, but a great publisher's editor, of course. She's been a remarkable force in Australian literature, taking what writers have done and making it better, taking the broader view all the time, publishing books that may not be money spinners, but which fill out a cultural tradition. Beatrice took up the manuscript of my *Wild Pineapple*, and after my eight months of writing on it came up with suggestions for worthwhile revisions.'

As she talks, there is always the impression that Thea Astley has grown beyond having illusions about herself. Her vaunted flippancy, for instance. She has been criticized for using the slick remark, the flash phrase. 'Well, that's me,' she says. 'I use a flippant approach to things I feel deeply about, you see. It's a defence. I dub some of the wives in the novels «cakemakers of distinction», and that's half-envy, and half-scorn, because I'm not so skilled at domestic matters like that.'

Coming to the consciousness of her craft, she speaks with self-knowledge born of trial and error and of long practice:

'I'd like to be seen as a prose-poet. I did write poetry as a girl — at a certain age you have poetry like you have acne. I still read it as stimulus to write prose — it stimulates the metaphors, heightens the word-use. But my mentors in style are people like Nabokov, John Cheever, or Updike. I don't see myself as a short-story writer — you have to see the moment, get it down so tightly. I don't do that so well. That's Hal Porter's territory.'

She is not a note-taker, a fact she sometimes regrets. In 1975 she took sabbatical leave in the USA, visiting Rollins College, New Smyrna Beach, Winter Park in Florida. It was her first trip overseas. She travelled the country by bus and train, chased Joe Pass and Ella Fitzgerald jazz concerts. Although a couple of short stories have come out of the sojourn, she fears she might lose some of the sparkling experiences she had there because she took no record. 'I missed those dark negro

faces, too, when I got back to Australia,' she says.

For more than ten years now she has balanced writing with University teaching, and before that with school teaching. In 1978 she was made a Creative Arts Fellow at Macquarie University. She likes young people, understands them, can relax with them, although she's concerned that the present young generation are selfish in a way that her generation could not afford to be — 'they self-indulge their psyches much more than we did, don't get insights from doing things for others. The philosophy of self as a *modus vivendi* is bad.' Her work load was heavy - nine tutorial groups of fourteen students each by two long essays per student each semester. She generally used to do her marking and write her lectures at home. As for her own writing, she finds that a room of one's own, in the Virginia Woolf tradition, is best. Once something sparks the idea for a novel, she does detailed planning, listing a couple of pages of incidents she is likely to use, then wrestles them into an order. She sometimes starts the detailed writing of a first draft at some mid-point of the story which she feels like writing and out of which she can get a sympathetic reaction that sets a tone for the whole work. Then she fills in the missing sections. But always there is the unplanned-for, the unexpected. 'In *Acolyte*,' she says, 'I had no idea that Vesper would build his sling in the bracken. I knew that at some stage the doormat that he had been had to rise up and bite the feet that used it — but not that he would do it by means of an engineered sling!' As for dialogue, she has settled on the test of reading it aloud now, as she writes it, finding that she can then hear where it needs to be pared down and improved.

Now the Gregson house in Sydney is only a place to visit. In 1980 Thea Astley retired from University lecturing and moved to Queensland. In the course of the Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures she gave in 1970, she had travelled as far north as Cairns for the first time. She saw that mountainous coastline, where there is very little littoral, with the Atherton Tableland rising sheer from the sea, where the golden beaches and cerulean water are empty in the summer — 'just when they need the sea most the danger of sharks and sea wasps pushes people into the Tobruk pools all along the coast.' In 1972 Thea and Jack Gregson (then retired from his post as Secretary of the Board of Secondary School Studies) gave up their shack near Mackay and bought another at Kuranda with a frontage on the Barron River, 1,200 feet up the mountain near Cairns. That's where they live now, on their two acres with its garden and ten-square house.

The north has Thea Astley in thrall. '...When my plane circles the last

small white-housed town along the reef and I watch hungrily through the port window for the high green-blue rise of tableland behind that town, I feel always that I am coming home,' she wrote in 1976. 'Home in its very nature that one must be able to laugh at as well as weep over.' The atmosphere of the north is palpable again in her most recent novel, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. She talks on about the river, and the rainfall (Kuranda had 10 feet 10 inches of rain between January 1 and January 25 in 1978 and was designated the wettest town in Australia) and the rain-forest that makes distant Sydney seem a claustrophobic dream. She describes crossing the flooded Barron River in a rubber boat, a plastic garbage bag of manuscripts between her knees, part of her heavy summer reading for the Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts, of which she has been a member since 1978.

Having begun a novel about a gold-strike in 1978, Thea Astley was diverted by her interest in Christie Palmerston, a character of the Palmer River goldrush that took place north of Cairns. But will she write as well in the lassitude of the far north? 'It worries me,' she says. 'I might find in the long run that I just mow grass and drink tea. Xavier Herbert's output in the heat up there amazes me. But we'll see. I love the Wet. I look forward to getting back there, to hear that rain pounding on the tin roof...'