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ANNA RUTHERFORD

Foreword

This book had its genesis around 1989-90. One of my joys is to travel and when I do I tend to meet the literary community and start talking about writers. And one of the things that always strikes me – if I’m honest, irritates/depresses me – is the almost total ignorance of the people I speak to about writers who are not only well known but famous in their own country but totally unknown outside it. When these unknown names are mentioned, one feels as one does when one looks in the fishmonger’s window and sees the glassy look in the eyes of the fish! This, I must hasten to add, is not the fault of the people to whom I am speaking. The fault lies in the fact, as Rosemary Sørensen, editor of Australian Book Review, pointed out in her report on the Commonwealth Writers Prize, that we are faced with a publishing culture threatened with increasing banality, as multinational conglomerates ‘rationalize’ the market (Australian Book Review, December 1993/January 1994). Rosemary had just been present at the judging of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in Singapore, a prize sponsored by the Commonwealth Foundation. The Foundation is not only one of the few, it is the only major body to try to bring to the attention of the rest of the world the wealth of writing to be found in the Commonwealth countries, and we all owe it a great debt.

Also present in Singapore was Michael Ondaatje and he, too, brought up the problem of writers getting their stories told – an issue that is raised again and again in this book. His solution was the small presses, but the economic climate is slowly, but surely, eliminating those small presses. As a director of a small press, with a staff of one, I can speak with conviction and experience. BUT I come from a family which, if you’re kind, you can say are strong-minded, and if you’re Australian and honest you can say are ‘bloody-minded’. Indeed, it was said of my relatives, the Bradys, ‘if any one of them drowned in the river, one shouldn’t bother to look for the body downstream because it was sure to go upstream’.

And so I decided to try in a small way to rectify this situation and put out a special women’s issue of Kunapipi (the journal I edit, which goes to most countries in the world, including the island St Helena). My aim is to present as many different voices as possible, and to introduce to a wide audience, those different voices and their concerns.

It set out to be a single issue of Kunapipi, but it just grew and grew so now there are nearly seven hundred pages, and what was first known as
‘The Women’s Issue’ is now rather sarcastically referred to by some of my ‘friends’ as ‘The Women’s Encyclopedia’. For the lucky people who subscribe to *Kunapipi* it still remains a single issue, because the Literature Board of the Australia Council insists that you can only have single issues, no matter what the size. It is a decision I accept and respect because without the aid of the Literature Board *Kunapipi* would have ceased to exist long ago. However, I am also issuing it as a book – a great book, I believe, and I hope you, the readers, think so too.

I might say it hasn’t been an easy book to put together. I have discovered that I’m not the only person who likes to travel – writers do as well, and they are rarely where they are supposed to be.

I am also aware that it is uneven in its contents. Africa is a huge continent, but the African section is small. However, this is due essentially to circumstances quite outside my control. To give one example: The only way I could get in contact with Kanchana Ugbabe was via Ralph Elliott in Canberra who had a friend in the Nigerian High Commission. The letter was sent by diplomatic bag to Nigeria, car to Jos and back to Lagos, diplomatic bag to Canberra and faxed to me in Denmark.

In another book I edited, *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, in my note to contributors I suggested that they believed I had a secret urge to be a sleuth. At that time I denied it. But now, after putting this book together and tracking down so many people, I’m not so sure!

My aim, and the aim of this book, is to bring a rich, variegated world of women writers to you. Being women they have certain things in common, but living in different social, political and cultural worlds, their concerns must almost of necessity be different. True, they have much in common, but true also is the fact, as Jamaica Kincaid pointed out in her novel *Lucy*, that what might for one woman symbolize one of the most beautiful things in the world can for another woman, from another section of the world, symbolize ‘a scene of conquered and conquests’. I am referring to the scene where Mariah (American) presents Lucy (West Indian) with her first view of daffodils. Mariah is upset about Lucy’s negative reaction, and as the two women walk away in silence, Lucy contemplates the situation:

> It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness. The same thing could cause us to shed tears, but those tears would not taste the same. (*Lucy*, p. 30)

This volume contains both the tears, laughter and thoughts of women from around the world. Some of it you will recognize and share, and some of it will, I hope, surprise you and add to your understanding of women’s tears, laughter and thoughts in faraway or unknown places and situations.
AUSTRALIA

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