

National Obsessions

Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture, David Rowe and Geoff Lawrence (eds), Sydney, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990. Reviewed by Brian Stoddart.

This is another set of thought-provoking essays edited by Rowe and Lawrence, a sequel to the 1986 collection entitled *Power Play* which concentrated solely on sport. As they point out in their introduction (which, it must be said, is sometimes a bit too self-serving), the addition of leisure is crucial to a real understanding of what is happening to sport as a whole.

Perhaps because of that realisation, the essays in the leisure section here are collectively fresher and more stimulating than those in the sports section. In particular, I found Jon Stratton's piece on tourism as leisure most stimulating, the message being that tourism has become increasingly integrated as a factor within consumerism during the course of the last hundred years of capitalist maturation. The implications for tourist sites are immense, particularly in the developing world, where exploitative tourism has replaced exploitative economic imperialism. As, for example, in former sugar-producing colonies in the Caribbean entities and Fiji.

Rob Lynch maps out a much-neglected area of social research in New South Wales, especially that of the licensed clubs and their poker-machine playing patrons who produce a major budget line item. Similarly, Gay Hawkins investigates one of the theme parks which are becoming so prevalent in the Australian leisure landscape and provides some useful avenues by which these capital accumulations, by way of

leisure/pleasure-provision institutions, might be analysed and interpreted.

The most interesting papers for me in the sports section were those by Toby Miller, Lindsay Fitzclarence and Patrick Heaven/David Rowe which focus upon the body as a contested site. This is becoming a popular area



of social research in the field of sports studies and, while much of its genesis lies with Foucault, has the intellectual bonus of drawing together across disciplines many of the strands of preoccupation. Miller's paper is particularly significant here as he investigates the Duncan Armstrong saga from the integrated viewpoint of, as he describes them, three regimens of knowledge: the educational/disciplinary, the sexual and the televisual. The result is an incisive interpretation that expands our existing understanding.

That cannot be said for all the papers in the collection for reasons which can be grouped into two main categories.

First, as with much of the writing in *Power Play*, there are wide-ranging assumptions about what Australian sport was like in its pre-1970s form. In Bruce Wilson's piece about the commercialisation of football, for example, the key theme is about how the Sydney and Melbourne codes have been appropriated from their previous 'owners'. At one level that is all well and good, but it glosses over the pre-extant conditions. The arguments about Collingwood and Balmain being 'working class' teams do not negate the point about either commercialisation or the niceties of social hierarchy. Very early in the histories of many clubs, community identities used those clubs for capital accumulation or for the exercise of social power, even though club members technically all identified with the community's interests and were drawn from the same socio-economic caste. As in the case of much writing about the sport/television nexus, intellectual coolness has often been replaced by idealised romanticism. That leads to the second major problem with many of the essays. In an endeavour to do away with the dreaded empirico-positivism deemed to be the weakness of most other writings in the field, this collection represents almost an 'anything goes' theoretical proliferation under the guise of postmodernism.

While postmodernism as a construct provides useful insights (as the editors point out in their introduction), it also provides an easy out in the service of interpretational neatness.

Ian Harriss, for example, arrestingly identifies Packer's impact on cricket as symptomatic of a postmodern consciousness. The argument, essentially, is that a once deep and meaningful game has gone the way of most cultural forms in a postmodern condition to become "a glossy surface without depth". It is a nice idea but, in this instance, flawed in two major

respects. First, in its depiction of test match and one-day games as equivalent to theatre and television, it not only depicts its essential location within the fruitless high culture/low culture debate, but also undermines the legitimisation of popular cultural forms so central to many works in this field.

Second, it plays several sleights of hand with the history and practice of the game itself. It is too easy, for example, to say that interwar cricket literature ceased to be dominated by issues of batting style in favour of

praise for the great accumulators. Think of Jackson, Fingleton and Richardson in Australia and Chapman, Hammond and Pataudi in England, to name but a few at first class level, and the doubts are clear.

And it is just as easy to claim that one-day tactics are inferior to and less demanding than those of the traditional test match when, in practice, that is not necessarily the case.

The works of Jameson, Baudrillard, Eco and the rest are important to an understanding of the social condition

in change, and the empiricists do need to learn from them.

But many of those who lionise the theorists without a deep appreciation of actual practice and historical evolution run the grave risk of never allowing the evidence to get in the way of a good interpretation. The good papers here marry theory and practice, the weaker ones do not.

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SPORT AND LEISURE

Trends in Australian Popular Culture

edited by
David Rowe and Geoff Lawrence

A unique book for the Australian market. Discover for yourself the truth behind Australia's sporting and leisure culture.

From the introduction...

The term 'sport', derived from the Middle-English word 'sporten', once meant 'to divert' — that is, to amuse. There is still diversion in sport, but it is diversion of people's minds from social issues and the diversion of their money into the hands of those who control the leisure industry. Similarly, the term 'leisure' is derived from its Latin root 'licere', meaning 'licence' or freedom. Today, leisure increasingly means the illusory freedom of the market and the licence to print money.

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Larger Than Life

Wild Card - an autobiography 1923-1958 by Dorothy Hewett, McPhee Gribble 1990, \$19.99. Reviewed by Joyce Stevens.

When I heard Dorothy Hewett read a part of her autobiography *Wild Card* earlier this year I knew that it was a definite candidate for my reader's list. She chose to read the section about her unique journey to the Pilbara in December 1946 to write the story of Aboriginal stockmen on strike since May for 35 shillings a week and their keep. She met their leaders Don McLeod and the Aboriginal Clancy McKenna, but not Dooley Bin Bin who was being hunted by the law and was out in the country organising the strike.

From this experience came her famous ballad Clancy, Dooley and Don McLeod:

Clancy, Dooley and Don McLeod
Walked by the wurlies when the wind was loud.
And their voice was new as the fresh sap running
And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.

The book takes us through the first 35 years of Dorothy Hewett's remarkable life, from a comfortable middle class existence on a West Australian wheat and sheep farm to becoming a dedicated communist and factory worker and to the eventual realisation that much of her political idealism had been betrayed or falsely based.

She captures our attention with seeming ease in her opening lines: "The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away. It is the house of childhood myth, inhabited by characters larger than life whose murmured conversations whisper and tug at the mind". Such deceptively simple phrases are scattered

through the book and the reader must pause to settle the images that career through one's own memory.

But often they are stretched even further as with this one, for we return at the end of the book to the childhood homestead where "lying in the hollow



were a scatter of corrugated-iron sheds and a single brick chimney...Only the four main rooms, with glassless windows and the old dunny had survived.

"'Oh God,' we cried. 'Oh, God! Is that the house?'"

The reality stands in stark contrast to the author's reassertion of the heart's fidelity to childhood memory.

Yet it is not so much the events in this book which make it a fascinating and sometimes disturbing journey for the reader. It is the author's struggle to realise a talent present from early childhood. "I have my vocation...there is nothing I can do about it, except get better at it...Words fall out, I am possessed by them."

This talent is "outside sex, and yet my sex is part of it" she writes and both these desires, fuelled by rebellion against the authority of her parents, take her during adolescence to the point of suicide. During her life she is

"suborned" into all the roles of "daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, grandmother, domestic treasure", though for the latter vocation she confesses only a clumsy and half-hearted dedication.

Readers familiar with the author's earlier play *The Chapel Perilous* will recognise some familiar territory. The young Dorothy and Sally from the play are as one in the passionate declaration, "Life's not an abstraction. It's not a set of rules or a great sacrifice of the self! It's all we've got, and I'm going to live it to the fullest stretch of my imagination." The difficult trick for those as brave as Dorothy Hewett or even for those of us who lack such imagination and courage is how to engage in all of life's experiences without doing irreparable damage. Such an ambition poses particular hazards for women seeking reaffirmation in the eyes of another that we are truly immortal when the attractions of conventional beauty and sexual desire are so often confused with love and true friendship.

Yet paths of quite a different kind are no less hazardous, as this book reveals. However, it is not a theoretical manual on life and its hazards. It is part of one woman's life - it is moving, sad, powerful, wryly humorous - and it will touch the lives of its many readers in a multitude of ways. As with the writings of such women as Simone de Beauvoir who have had the courage to reveal some of their most intimate experiences it does provide new insights into the universal experiences of women.

Dorothy Hewett is a rebel who has spurned the orthodoxies of her class, of her sex and the political norms. None of this rebellion has been executed without cost. John Pilger's words on the front cover of the book are an apt summary of *Wild Card*: "Like the author, it is passionate, eloquent and, above all, wise."

JOYCE STEVENS isn't yet a household name in Australia (although God knows that she should be) and consequently needs a biography....

Divine Dining

An Angel at My Table, directed by Jane Campion. Opening at the Academy Twin, Pitt Centre and Walker cinemas, Sydney and the Longford and Brighton Bay cinemas, Melbourne on 21 September. Reviewed by Kitty Eggerking.

An Angel at My Table is not so much a film as an album of snapshots from the life of New Zealand writer Janet Frame. Jane Campion is the director in the sense that she's the one turning the pages. The earliest pages are flicked through, piling image upon image in hasty succession and lingering only occasionally to savour some important incident from the Frame family mythology - brother Bruddie's development of epilepsy, elder sister Myrtle's drowning - or some milestone on Frame's private path to "being different".

The opening shot of a girl standing on a long white country road is one of these, though the film does not mention its significance: it was the place where Frame first experienced loneliness and sadness as things, elements, external to her, as "something carried on the wind". The incident of the chewing gum is another of these private milestones, from which she earned the shaming title of 'thief', a perplexing outcome for a girl who simply had taken money from her father's pocket and generously bought chewing gum for the whole class.

The film follows Frame's three-volume autobiography in structure and, for the most part, content. It adopts the titles of the volumes as subtitles for its three parts: *To the Is-land*, *An Angel at My Table* and *The Envoy from Mirror City*. It is in the later parts that the page-turning slows and gives way to the detailing of various inci-



dents, which become episodes in a more steady storyline.

Discovering difference, succumbing to the difference, and living with the difference would be apt sub-headings, since the film, like the books, explores the life of Janet Frame from seemingly well-adjusted kid - with a penchant for words, books and secret places - to excruciatingly shy and awkward adolescent whose condition is not helped by having one outfit to her name - a grey serge school tunic - and then on through the torture of eight years in the Seacliff psychiatric hospital until emerging, miraculously 'normal', as a mature writer, who wins a travel grant to live in London and Ibiza, off the coast of Spain.

There is much here that is rich and makes for a very striking, though gentle and understated, film. Campion, together with script writer Laura Jones, has sensitively adapted Frame's autobiography to the screen,

and has done a superb job in preserving the mood and tone of the books.

Naturally, choices about inclusions, omissions and characterisations have had to be made. One of the most difficult is the bland rendering of the family as stolid working class, whereas Frame portrays the family, especially in *To the Is-land*, as delighting in puzzles, books, poetry and good-natured mayhem. Certainly Mum (Iris Churn) is not one for idle chatter, though in the film she is denied her poetry, stories and songs which, according to Frame, she would compose or recite all day as she went about the household chores. Mum the accordion player and Dad the bagpipe player are not to be found in the film, and this is the film's most noticeable lapse in judgment.

The choices are difficult, for there is too much in the original biography that clamours to be filmed. The plane trip home from the hospital after Mum's heart attack, living in a tent when she's finally released from hospital, working as a waitress in Dunedin or as an usherette in London, the sojourn at Paula's beach house, tea with the aunts before leaving New Zealand, searching for the elusive chess set in London and the interlude in Andorra (it was here rather than the London bedsit of the film that the miscarriage occurred) are all visually tempting, all contenders that have had to be dropped. As it is, the film is bursting with images, and has, we're told, Janet Frame's blessing.

An Angel at My Table has all the emotion and plot which are generally said to be lacking in antipodean films. It is a joy.

It is a film for anyone who has ever perceived themselves as "being different", but especially for those of us who endured or suffered, rather than revelled in, adolescence (in a serge uniform squirming in case the monthlies showed) and for those whose shyness drove them to books and writing, rather than sitting and talking about such pursuits in cafes.