Social democracy, the attempt to create a “state within the state” gets its run in Chapter 4—though curiously it is German, not Scandinavian, debates that provide the “potent theoretical legacy”. Given the attention to a “marxist reformism” in Swedish social democracy, it seems odd that the contributions of the world’s most successful labour movement are not considered. But the issues to be prioritised here are the obligation to work (or, perhaps, the duties of citizenship more generally) and the perceived tension between citizenship entitlements and labour’s (proletarian) struggles (which are presumed to be less encompassing). The debates between Bernstein and Kautsky—over the status of socialism (goal or principle?), over the meaning of class politics, over the relation between liberalism’s accomplishments and the socialist critique—provide the background to what are, once again, only muted statements of Beilharz’s own position. Particularly irritating for me was the repetition that there is no theory of politics in Marx. The claim amounts to the assertion that formal political economy is not the whole story if it remains at the level of formal political economy; for Marx, of course, the point was to insist that politics under capitalism was initially supportive of accumulation later becomes an impediment unless the sphere of the market contracts and politics expands as part of the extension of democracy.

Herein lies the nub of a theory of social democracy that has not been well recognised by those anxious to abandon “grand theory”. The extension of democracy beyond liberal (political) democracy calls not for an increasing number of citizens to be ceded representation—that is a problem for political democracy itself—but for an expansion of the range of issues in respect of which political or public or democratic or institutional criteria can legitimately be brought to bear.

This is the sense in which socialism is the heir of liberalism; the former respects the latter’s achievements while criticising its limitations, most notably those deriving from the commodity status accorded labour (and everyone else) and the intrinsically undemocratic nature of liberal market allocative criteria. Social democracy’s charter is not to enhance representation, but to extend entitlement of all citizens to share equitably in the standards of living the society and economy are capable of delivering. To unhitch reward from explicit effort is what unites the demands of labour and feminism in a long-term emancipatory project. Beilharz ascribes to social democracy a weberian sobriety, but this does less than justice to the expansiveness of the break with the “pig philosophies” of utilitarianism.

There are limits therefore to a social democratic politics, limits given by capacities in the state and the economy; and these seem to be recognised: “The choices are constrained, but choices they are”. Labour’s utopia must inevitably accept, with Marx, that things can’t be done before they’re possible. The social democratic struggle is to push towards the maximisation of what it is within our capability to achieve, to embrace the institutions that would make such a struggle feasible and to use the gains as a threshold for the further extension of the entitlements that can then be contemplated. Yes, this is a statist conception of political development; but it seems to me the only way to purge anglo-saxon polities of their socially damaging ‘stop-go’ proclivities.

GEOFF DOW teaches in government at the University of Queensland.

Flamingo Gate by Gary Disher (Imprint $12.95). Reviewed by Matthew Schultz.

The stories in this collection by Gary Disher are all set in a quietly menacing suburban landscape, whose inhabitants are defined by media images and symbols of consumerism. It is a complex world of brandnames and signs; a relationship with a video recorder, television or computer might become more important than a relationship with another person. It is a world where an advertisement might prowl slowly across the sky, in the sinister form of an airship with HELM Finance printed across it; where serial killers become television stars. At the centre of this elaborate and ordered surface layer of modern meanings exists the chaotic realm of human relations — both on a personal and wider social level — which is the source of much paranoia. The characters in Disher’s stories, fearing their vulnerability, keep themselves shut away in their houses, lock their objects away, keep an obsessive watch upon their neighbours.

Lonely and dislocated, many of Disher’s characters are attracted by the pervers, macabre and strange. In the novella Flamingo Gate, for example, the author tells the story of Maslen, a profoundly dissatisfied lawyer whose spare time is divided between watching ’50s crime movies on his video machine and tracking down a serial killer. Maslen’s relationship with his daughter is juxtaposed against his relationship with the killer, whom he knows only through the imaginary world of an information-filled computer screen. The implications of Disher’s story are dark: what society regards as its worst aspects — here, a murderer — becomes Maslen’s source of fulfilment, even more so than his own child.

It is a common characteristic of the stories in the collection that the author does not supply an historical context in which his characters might be
placed. Rather, we tap into a moment of their lives — most often a subtle moment of crisis — in which nothing is made explicit. A man helps drive two people who have been involved in a car accident to a hospital; a father is given the responsibility of his young asthma suffering daughter for the day; a man’s house is invaded by a gang of thieves. The tendency to withhold background information on characters gives Disher’s stories an immediacy and clarity, which at the same time often leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling of not knowing enough.

Disher, who is a crime writer, is preoccupied with gaps in stories, the way in which the reader might be able to detect what is missing. Although these stories could not really be defined as crime writing, one is still forced to play an active role — that of the detective — in reading. The emotional motive of a character is as interesting a puzzle to solve as a criminal motive: the two are often intertwined. What leads two of the characters — both middle-class middle-aged men — to inflict damage upon their neighbour’s property? Why does a woman take her boyfriend on a strange trip to meet her ex-lover?

The language used in these stories — precise, well-crafted — helps to create the sense of clarity. It has a stylised, ‘hard-edged’ quality to it, which no doubt stems from Disher’s background as a writer of detective fiction.

There is something American in his tone, yet the stories — as a result of keen observation of characters, objects and settings — remain particularly Australian.

This is, finally, an entertaining book. It is also an engaging collection, whose complexity is perhaps initially hidden. Disher knows how to write a story that will grab and retain attention, whilst at the same time reflecting intelligently upon our society.

MATTHEW SCHULTZ is a poet whose work has appeared in Westerly, Overland, Outrider, Mattarra Poetry Prize Anthology and other journals. He is currently writing a novel.


Davida Allen’s Close to the Bone is not one of those books that inspires you to write a precious and brilliant review, in fact it just doesn’t inspire — not like the way you were inspired years ago by reading To Kill a Mockingbird or by seeing your first Robert de Niro movie. No, Close to the Bone is not even as thrilling as watching When Harry Met Sally on television the other week — which is probably why I read the book in the commercial breaks. It is rather sad that a book which is all about escaping boredom and reading orgasmic levels of excitement should leave you with such a “Yeah, so what?” feeling.

Close to the Bone as autobiography reconstructs the life of an artist, artistically of course, in montage. Vicki Myers, whose autobiography the text claims to be, is quite obviously Davida Allen herself. Allen presents the autobiography as a “portrait of the Artist As Ordinary Housewife”. But despite this claim to ordinariness Vicki delights in showing us that she is in fact extraordinary, as she invites us to wallow with her in the “unique creative mind” of an “Artist”.

It is when Vicki is most threatened with becoming merely ordinary — like all other housebound mothers — that her “unique creative mind” comes to the rescue, rising above the seemingly insurmountable mountains of nappies and taking her to the dizzying heights of artistic imagination. Vicki’s art liberates her, her “rage at being a woman” explodes into, and is somehow resolved by the sexual fantasies she plays out in her paintings. But Vicki’s paintings and her relationship with Greg (the husband who encourages Vicki’s self-liberation through art) suggest a sexual violence and objectification in which Vicki revels. “I like being the one ravaged. I don’t ever want to be [Greg’s] equal sexually” she says. Vicki likes the idea of a woman as a vessel of love and passion. Being Greg’s vessel is very important to me”.

Apart from being dubious about the nature of Vicki’s self-liberation, I was disappointed by Allen’s failure to make the connection between Vicki’s “rage at being a woman”, and the rage of millions of other women trapped in “domestic horror”. But perhaps I am being overly critical — why should Allen’s portrait also represent images of other women? Autobiography/self-portraiture is, after all, by its very nature, self-obsessed. And why should the self-portrait be of a self which is like others; for isn’t every “Artist’s” greatest fear the fear of being thought not brilliant, not genuine, not extraordinary?

MOHA MELHEM is a Sydney-based writer.