In your own area of economics, would you agree that in the last few years the *Herald* hasn’t offered as diverse a range of views as it might have done?

Well, I wouldn’t single out the *Sydney Morning Herald*, because I’m afraid that kind of question can be raised about at least one other prominent paper. I’ve got to be very careful here. I have a different point of view from the present economics writers, the major ones. Not only on the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but on *The Australian* too. Much less so with the *Age*. But I do agree that that’s a fair comment, and frankly, I believe that in the days of Sir Warwick it might well have been quite different.

Was it really so different in your day?

Oh yes. Circumstances were different, and therefore one cannot simply abstract the attitudes of Warwick Fair­fax and Rupert Henderson from economic conditions in the 1950s and 1960s, and say that that’s what they would do now. But with all that careful qualification, I have no doubt that those two men in their prime would have taken a very different view of the behaviour of this Labor government, and of Keating, who has got away with extraordinary assumptions, claims, assertions. I don’t think that would have stood up at all the way it has now. You may wonder whether I’m implying that highly intellectual proprietors and top managers are a bit lacking these days, and I’m inclined to raise that question as a possibility.

Do you think there’s any alternative as far as ownership goes to simply hoping for better individual proprietors?

Well, of course money calls the tune. There is an overwhelming case for diversity, as much diversity as possible, and I don’t think we have enough of it, already, let alone if Fairfax goes in certain directions. I think the only hope is in diversity. Powerful as the big media barons are, they are not all-powerful. Public opinion can still differ from them. After all, public estimation of the media is not always very high. But you do need other outlets. How you do that is very difficult.

I find it quite nasty that pontificating journalists of a rightwing view (though some of them don’t even know how rightwing they are) take great umbrage if, say, the ABC, presents viewpoints that are different from theirs. It seems to me that, given the enormous dominance of conservatism in the print media, particularly in Sydney, the fact that the ABC gives a certain amount of opportunity to differing views is highly desirable. And the last people who should be fussed about it are those who have this daily platform to put their own dogmatic views. It’s really extraordinary that this attitude is not only allowed, but even, in a vague sort of way, has some intimidatory effect. It’s ridiculous.

MIKE TICHER is a member of ALR’s editorial collective.

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Will Jock, minister in training, marry his fiance Sigrid, or be seduced into the Bohemian scene of Sydney in the 1890s? Will Denise, a university student in the swinging 60s, solve the unspeakable secrets of her grandmother’s love letters? What was the result of the fateful relationship between Sigrid’s friend, Ellen, and the original father of her daughter, and will similar problems trouble the relationship of Denise and her West Indian lover?

It is the 1960s in Penelope Nelson’s new novel, *Prophesying Backwards*, and Sigrid and her granddaughter Denise talk about the past while Sigrid listens to the famous ABC radio series *Blue Hills*. Intentionally or not, the appearance of a soapie in the first paragraphs of the book sets the tone for the novel—an easy-to-read potboiler with a 90s overview of the social issues involved.

Throughout the novel, two characters in *Blue Hills*, a part-Aboriginal man and a white woman, are worried about whether their child will be a black ‘throwback’ or whether the man’s blackness can be ‘bred out’. *Prophesying Backwards* uses this serial as a frame for writing about how society’s inequalities in dealing with differences in race and sex have blighted three heterosexual relationships: Sigrid and her fiance Jock, Ellen and William, and Denise and Ralston.

Unfortunately, the novel’s opening quote—‘The past must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently—offers more than Nelson delivers. By writing in the voices of both Sigrid and Denise she also offers a complex perspective of past and present. Many writers—Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Peter Carey—have successfully used multiple voices to question mainstream versions of history, with its tendency to assume a ‘national’ point of view, but Prophesying Backwards does not. Instead of exploring ambiguity, Nelson writes the past as a kind of mystery story, to which Denise, by studying the letters, provides the ‘right’ answer. Denise is rewarded by being able to progress with her life, while Sigrid ekes out her last years with brittle candied memories, refusing to admit the betrayals of her past.

The novel plays upon the continuity between Sigrid and Denise’s own relationships, ultimately focussing on sexual ahead of racial oppression. While Jock betrays Sigrid, Denise’s West Indian lover also betrays her to the patriarchal posturing which underpinned the protests for racial equality by the Bohemian Sydney Push in the 1960s. This continuity,
Wyatt apparently doesn't have time to be handling. Although the book's title suggests somewhat paternally, that women involved in movements for social change are generally only the victims of men who use political rhetoric to avoid commitment.

I was depressed by this tendency of Nelson to paint over the complexities of the gender and race issues at stake in the novel with a broad brush. There are promising areas of the storyline that Nelson could have dwelt more on, such as Ellen's involvement with the temperance movement—a movement which, while espousing wowseryism, also pushed strongly for women's right to vote. Unfortunately, the characters are reduced to allegorical figures: the Aborigine, William, appears no longer in the text than is necessary to impregnate Ellen with their half-caste daughter. Jessie, a market gardener, sought out by women for her skill as a midwife but despised for being married to a Chinese man, is turned by Nelson into nothing but a cultural cipher. The novel does hold the possibility of rich ironies that could have received a longer, more subtle treatment.

Prophesying Backwards reassesses the 1890s and the 1960s with a jaded, rather than an ironic eye—since irony would suggest an awareness of subtleties beyond the reach of the novel or its characters.

I couldn't help contrasting Prophesying Backwards with Gillean Mears' wonderful Fineflour, which deluges the reader with the diverse histories of a country town. While Nelson ambitiously attempts to discover the lost stories of Australia's history, she has 'bred out' precisely the uncertainty and irony and diverse life that she seems to have tried to offer—which is, ironically, the achievement of soap opera.

DELIA FALCONER is a Sydney freelance writer.


Introducing Wyatt: he has been offered a lucrative job, and needs the money. He has all the attributes—toughness, coldness, calculation—necessary for a highly successful life of crime.

Wyatt doesn't waste time on small jobs or work with amateurs who could foul things up. A criminal, yes, but as the only character in this book who has any kind of integrity, he elicits the respect usually reserved for a hero. In many ways he is the archetypal hard-boiled crime fiction detective character transposed as the 'bad guy'.

This doesn't mean, however, that it is actually possible to relate to him, or that he is a nice guy; traditionally these characters have been caricatures rather than figures of realism, and Disher, in his treatment of Wyatt, perpetuates this idea. Wyatt is too cool to be real.

What would crime fiction be without a siren to the piece? The answer is Anna Reid, a lawyer who employs Wyatt to mastermind the theft of some bribe money (the 'kick back' of the book's title) which she knows her partner to be handling. Although Wyatt apparently doesn't have time for relationships in his finely-controlled life, this woman is allowed to be tough, educated and sexy enough to capture his attention. Disher again tips his cap to classic crime writing by detailing their sexual union in a somewhat voyeuristic (and perhaps gratuitous) manner.

Questionable though some of Wyatt's attributes may be, they are vastly superior to those of the small-time, low-life, hasty little crooks who provide the sub-plot which is cleverly woven into, and merges with, the main action of the story. Particularly troublesome to the smooth running of Wyatt's current operation is the jealously malicious Sugarfoot Younger who, despite his brutishness and stupidity is set up as Wyatt's nemesis. Sugarfoot becomes obsessed with a need to bring Wyatt down, disturbing Wyatt's usual smooth style with inept attempts at interference.

Disher has successfully transplanted the genre of crime fiction with its hard-boiled loner protagonists and variegated low-lifes into an Australian environment. The suburbs of Melbourne are well documented in the intricate comings and goings of preparation for the job, and is echoed in the psychological comings and goings and the altering motivations of the different characters. It will be interesting to see what job Wyatt pulls next time.

VIRGINIA ROSS is writing a detective novel.