THE AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORY: AN OVERVIEW

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The Australian short story over the last two decades shows a distinctive relation to the problems of a national, transnational and international nature. Australia’s search for identity at home and abroad can be detected in short-story writing which tends to concentrate on the country’s cultural diversity.

The Australian short story in the last quarter of the twentieth century was intimately linked with the country’s isolated geographic status and search for national identity as well as international status. Given that Australia is the world’s largest island, cut off from its cultural and political colonizing roots in Great Britain and given the relatively small population (only nineteen million presently for a country fourteen times larger than France), artists have always been tempted to leave the country in order to be recognized outside what has sometimes been seen as a cultural backwater. Three short-story writers since the mid-1970s lived for long periods abroad while managing to attract an international readership: Patrick White, David Malouf and Peter Carey. After the Second World War, Australia revised its isolationist “white Australia” policy and began to attract immigrants from Europe and Asia. Australia’s multiculturalism is reflected in the short stories of a number of writers who have travelled abroad and who use their transnational experience to nourish their artistic output (for example Beverley Farmer, Marion Halligan, Janette Turner Hospital and Gail Jones). The search for a national identity, emphasizing Australia’s insularity, has preoccupied writers such as Thea Astley, Hospital and Malouf, but is more particularly evident in the presence

since the 1990s of multi-author anthologies of stories published for local consumption.

Three male Australian novelists, each of whom lived outside of Australia for varied amounts of time, made forays into short-story writing. Due to the success of their novels published first in Australia, then soon after at the two centres of publishing power in the English-speaking world, London and New York, this short-story production easily found an international audience. Patrick White, winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for literature, published *The Cockatoos* in 1974, his second collection of stories referred to in the paratext as “shorter novels and stories.” White spent most of his youth either in England where he was educated, later in France and Germany prior to the Second World War, before being posted in Egypt for his military service. This voyaging is evident in the choice of setting for some of the stories included in *The Cockatoos* where we find descriptions of Egypt, Greece and Sicily. After 1948, White settled permanently in Sydney where he stayed until his death in 1990.

David Malouf, who received White’s literary blessing in the 1980s, has divided his time between Australia and Italy. Refusing to leave his native country permanently, he has attempted to write about Australia from a distance. Like White, Malouf is principally known for his novels which, since the 1990s especially, have attracted widespread international appeal, together with an impressive number of literary prizes and awards, including the Prix Fémina Étranger for *The Great World* in 1991 and, four years later, the inaugural international IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the highest paid award of its kind in the world. In March 2000, Malouf added the Neustadt International Prize for literature and $40,000 to his collection of public accolades. David Malouf has two published collections of short stories, separated by fifteen years dedicated to other literary genres. *Antipodes*, a collection of thirteen stories, appeared in 1985. Malouf’s most recent work, published in 2000, is his second compilation, this time of nine stories, entitled *Dream Stuff*. It is true that numerous stories of *Antipodes* are set in Australia, especially Brisbane, where Malouf grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, but given Malouf’s taste for international travel, it is not surprising to find parts of stories set in Austria, Italy or Belgium. Malouf likes to follow the fate of Australianized Europeans or Australians on holiday on the Continent.

Unlike White and Malouf whose stories written in the realist mode can be seen as a supplement to their novelistic production, Peter Carey made the decision to leave Australia at a moment when he had achieved international fame for his novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, winner of the 1988 Booker prize. Since 1989, Carey has taken up residence in New York. Similar to White and Malouf, Carey’s New York and London publishers assure him international recognition. Two factors, however, distinguish him from his literary counterparts. Rather than writing stories as an adjunct to his usual novelistic activity, Peter
Carey, after writing three unpublished novels in the 1960s, turned to the short-story genre in the 1970s in order to learn his craft as a writer. Two volumes of stories launched Carey’s literary career, *The Fat Man in History*, published in 1974, and *War Crimes* which appeared in 1979. Some of the twenty-three stories included in these collections were republished in London and New York in 1980. Together with four new stories, all of Peter Carey’s previously published stories reappeared in *Collected Stories* in 1995. This new collection, available in Australia, Great Britain and the United States, was made necessary due to the author’s increasing international fame as a leading late-twentieth century novelist.

Peter Carey used the short story as a stepping stone and experimental ground before turning back to what has become his central literary occupation, writing novels. Each of Carey’s twenty-odd stories is a novel in miniature, usually set in a difficult to locate no-man’s-land. Each displays a characteristic voice and tone and contains a mixture of fantasy and realism. Carey experiments with different literary genres: science fiction, realism and surrealism. The strength and scope of Carey’s imaginative universe is unparalleled by other Australian short-story writers.

Various short stories justify the claim that Carey’s literary ancestors lie outside the Australian tradition. In “Crabs,” the eponymous male adolescent undergoes a metamorphosis by turning into a car, thus allowing the author to satirize the fetishization of cars. “Peeling” ends with a Kafkaesque transformation of a girl by the shedding of layers of skin. She turns into a boy with a penis, then sheds more skin to reveal another girl with breasts. Finally, her/his legs, arms and head come off to reveal a small doll. Absurd rituals reminiscent of Beckett often appear in the stories, as in “Life and Death in South Side Pavilion,” where a man who looks after horses despairs when they gradually fall into a swimming pool one after another and drown, only to be replaced by more horses who presumably will suffer the same fate.

Common themes of Peter Carey’s stories are freaks and monsters, post-apocalyptic nightmares, the ravages of consumer capitalism and the debunking of New Age myths. Sex, drugs and violence abound. A striking example is “Withdrawal” which features a second-hand dealer, a “pornographer of death” who exhibits photographs of dead bodies in his shop. He visits a house where the corpse of an old lady is seated at a table and contemplates the future sale of the dead body to a necrophiliac. A noisy pig, usually fed on the excrement of drug addicts, is screaming in the garden, eager for its next fix of shit. The pornographer puts the pig into his car and takes it home with him. In “The Fat Man in History,” six post-revolutionary fat men live in a house together. One is put on a barbecue, cooked and eaten by the others. “The Uses of Williamson Wood” shows the manager of a Lost and Found office. He regularly abuses a female employee by forcing her to have sex until she taunts the avaricious maniac by inducing him
to eat a dog turd for two hundred dollars. He does. In these four stories, the critique of consumerism takes on a literal truth that may shock some readers. Peter Carey’s short stories are rich in images which both intrigue and disturb the reader: talking unicorns, a blow job on a blue penis, the rape of a young girl at a cinema during interval by a sixteen-year-old smiling moron. Carey excels at the exotic and the erotic, drawing our attention to the maniacs and monsters of any industrialized postmodern society.

Due to the geographic isolation of Australia from Europe, Asia and North America, Australians have always tended to be inveterate travellers desirous of escaping from Down Under. Since 1945, Australia has begun to open its doors and increasingly welcome immigration from overseas, especially from Europe, Great-Britain, and more recently, from Asia. The country’s multiculturalism is reflected in the short stories of a number of writers who draw on their experience as travellers abroad thus providing exoticism for the Australian short story. Others examine the cultural mix inside Australia reflecting as it now does a less Anglo-Saxon and more hybrid cultural diversity.

Beverley Farmer is an example of an Australian novelist and short-story writer interested in multiculturalism. Born in Melbourne in 1941, the second largest Greek-speaking city in the world after Athens, Farmer married a Greek immigrant in 1965 before living with her husband’s family in Greece for a number of years. Three collections of short stories appeared between 1983 and 1990 based on her Hellenic experience. Most of these rather dead-pan, realistic, women’s magazine stories full of banal dialogues and sprinkling of Greek words reappeared in *Collected Stories* published by the University of Queensland Press in 1996.

Another European traveller is Marion Halligan, a former schoolteacher, born in New South Wales in 1940 but who now lives in Canberra. Five novels and three collections of short stories have been published in Australia. The collection *The Living Hothouse* was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1988 and Penguin Australia brought out another collection the following year, *The Hanged Man in the Garden*. Minerva published a third collection, *The Worry Box*, in 1993. In 1997, the University of Queensland Press published *Collected Stories*, bringing together fifty-five Halligan stories for the first time. In the United States, Halligan’s first collection of stories is not easily available. Her second is out of print and *Collected Stories* declared to be the same. English bookshops, online or otherwise, have never heard of her.

Marion Halligan is a female writer who writes for a female audience. Her protagonists are almost always female English teachers, virgins or otherwise, all looking for love, sex and/or good food. Invariably there is a stock heroine, Candida, Cressida, Rachel, Frances, Meg, Laura, Sophie (the name changes, but the character stays the same), who is confronted with a problem (cancer, old age, getting a man) and this problem
becomes the centre of focus for each story. Men, a bit of a dark continent in Halligan’s short stories, are sketchy husbands, lovers or lechers based on a pulp-fiction recipe. The hunk in “A Whiff of Brimstone” has “brawny brown arms covered with silver down” (Halligan, 1997, 93) and the Frenchman in “The Porch of Paradise” is described as having “delicious good looks,” endowed with a “gorgeous and melting handsome-ness” (Halligan, 1997, 215). Erotic triangles abound, as in “A Whiff of Brimstone” featuring (yet another) bored female English teacher, an intellectual husband and a stunning Austrian ski-instructor. Usually we are given the details of how heroine, husband and lover get on, except that here the narrator stops dead in her tracks with: “No need to plot on with this any further. Of course Meg and Tony became lovers” (Halligan, 1997, 96).

There is nothing Australian about Halligan’s short stories, bar the odd “actually,” “lovely” and “superb”. There is no interest in landscape or cityscape, just objects, things, bric-à-brac. A Francophile, Marion Halligan, who surprisingly lets slip “Montpelier” [sic] and “Cité” [sic], conveys an enthusiastic interest in Frenchness, even if this too often becomes reduced to brie, foie gras, pâté and a baguette. Stereotyping of nationalities is evident in “Trespassers or Guests?” where the Australian heroine is said to “rav[e] on a bit the way one does in French” (Halligan, 1997, 48), as if “raving on” were typically French and un-Australian. Perhaps all foreigners give the impression of “raving on” to some Australians?

What is especially vexing about Marion Halligan’s short stories, is the implied status the author attributes to Australian women. Halligan would have us believe that women Down Under are mindless creatures only interested in flowers and food, husbands, babies and dinner parties. The heroines tend to suffer from an inferiority complex; they are shown to be intellectually deficient in their search of good wine or a good lover. The author forgets that women rule the roost in Australia. The country is a matriarchy. It is strange, to say the least, to find such a facile female fantasy of domestic bliss from a writer who was Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council from 1992 to 1995. Characteristically, Halligan’s ponderings on the short story, as reported in 1998 in The Weekend Australian, reduce the genre to a series of hard ones and soft ones: “And a collection—well, that’s a bit like a box of chocolates; you read one story and it’s wonderful and rich and it impels you to read another; that’s also fantastic and then you read a third and it becomes like that third chocolate—“what have I done?” you ask, because the diet is a bit too rich . . .” In Halligan’s own stories there is a curious absence of hard ones.

One of Australia’s most notable globe-trotters is Janette Turner Hospital, born in Melbourne in 1942, but who moved to Brisbane aged seven. The author of six novels, Janette Turner Hospital published two volumes of short stories in rapid succession. The first, Dislocations, came out in 1987 and was followed by a second collection, Isobars,
which appeared three years later. The stories contained in these two collections had been previously published in Australia, Canada, the United States and England over a fifteen-year period. In 1995, the University of Queensland Press published *Collected Stories 1970-1995*, bringing together all the stories of *Dislocations* and *Isobars*, plus seven others which had appeared in various publications in the early nineties. Although Turner Hospital’s short stories (and most of her novels) are nowhere to be seen in English bookshops, her two volumes are said to be available online. In the United States, the paperback version of *Dislocations* is out of stock, *Isobars* is not easily available and *Collected Stories* falsely said to be out of print. English online shoppers have still to learn of the publication of the collected stories.

Like many of her compatriot short-story writers, Janette Turner Hospital has a background of high-school teaching and later academic work at universities in Australia, Canada, the United States, England and Europe. She has lived for long periods of time outside Australia, especially in North America. This cosmopolitanism is evident in Hospital’s first collection of stories written in the late 1970s and 1980s. The stories of *Dislocations* are set in Australia, India, Canada and the United States. The choice of title, connoting a sense of discontinuity and displacement, reflects the author’s peregrinations inside and outside her country of birth. In one story of *Dislocations*, “The Bloody Past, The Wandering Future,” the narrator asks a question which is of fundamental importance for the author: “Who will unravel the routes and reasons of my nomadic life?” (Turner, 1995, 157). Most of the stories of *Dislocations* are an artistic attempt to understand memories and impressions of life in four main geographic locations. The use of dislocations rather than relocations implies that Turner Hospital’s nomadic existence has been the source of negative feelings that the writing of stories somehow tries to overcome or understand.

In *Dislocations*, Janette Turner Hospital treats a number of common themes linked with multiculturalism, travelling and the differences between various cultural traditions. The few stories which treat India and Hinduism simply exemplify the exoticism of Otherness. The same lesson is learned by Doris, the sixty-five-year-old protagonist of “Port after Port.” She travels by cargo boat stopping in various ports of the globe. Each temporary destination offers the possibility to understand alterity.

An example of a fresh, new direction in the Australian short story from a writer who has travelled and is deeply influenced by European and American intellectual traditions is the work of Gail Jones, an academic from Western Australia, born in 1955. Jones has so far published two collections of stories, *The House of Breathing* (1992), winner of four Australian literary prizes, and *Fetish Lives* (1997). Both volumes, originally brought out by the Fremantle Arts Centre in Western Australia, have recently been republished in New York by George Braziller. The fact that an American publishing house has picked up
Jones’s work is a welcome sign which may help combat the self-congratulatory parochialism of much Australian short-story writing of the 1980s and 1990s.

_Fetish Lives_ contains twelve well-crafted stories of both famous and unknown fetishized lives. At the end of the book, Gail Jones provides a bibliography of the readings which inspired her to write these stories. Her source material extends from biographies of well-known writers (Proust, Chekhov, Whitman, Virginia Woolf) to works on Madame Tussaud, Marie Curie, Eleanor Marx, Mata Hari, and others. Subjects of interest in the anthology include astronomy, the Holocaust and a female impersonator of Elvis Presley. The stories bring back to life figures from the past, as Jones chooses to retell certain episodes and states of emotion half-way between fact and invention. The author succeeds in presenting a captivating narrative in each story, the use of language is often poetic and the overall effect shows a talented, vivid imagination. Here is a short-story writer who does not give the reader what Thea Astley once referred to as an “entirely closed feminine world” (Baker 45). For Gail Jones, ideas predominate over things.

It is a quirk of fate that a significant number of Australian short-story writers interested in writing about Australia and Australianness happen to come from Queensland. This means that growing up in tropical Queensland returns as a thematic link in the work of David Malouf, Janette Turner Hospital and Thea Astley. It just so happens that the publisher most active in promoting the Australian short story has been the University Press of Queensland which brought out many anthologies of collected stories in the 1990s. When Australian short-story writers attempt to portray what is typically Australian in their work, they end up writing about Queensland, Sydney (the largest city in the country) or the Outback.

The choice of the word “Antipodes” for Malouf’s first collection of stories would seem to suggest an interest in life Down Under, substantiated by the choice of the title “Southern Skies” for the opening story. _Antipodes_ is a mixed bag of successful vignettes together with less polished, often too long stories. The small number of stories which exceed twenty pages all fail for one reason or another. Malouf is much more effective in shorter stories, notably those attempting to deal with problems of adolescent angst. Numerous stories concentrate on male teenage crisis, usually provoked by contact with a more knowing and threatening adult world. A favourite technique is to show a protagonist remembering scenes of adolescence which have shaped personality and emotional development. A good example is “Southern Skies” in which the first-person narrator, Anton, recalls his awakening sexuality aided by a woman old enough to be his mother who caresses him. A fifty-year-old professor, an amateur astronomer, masturbates the boy who is having an epiphanic experience watching the starry welkin: “aware for the first time of the grainy reality of my own life, and then,... of the certainty of my death” (Malouf, 1985, 24).
Another story, “Out of Stream,” presents two Australian teenagers, both suffering in their own way and out of kink with the world. The motherless Hughie spends his time eating crisps, chocolate bars and drinking Coke in order to “turn into a real Australian kid and have a top physique” (Malouf, 1995, 76). Such an Americanized, aberrant logic is suitably satirized. Hughie’s friend, the fourteen-year-old Luke, is more intelligent but his brains do not help him from going through a suicide ritual with a dagger. Suicide of young males in Australia between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five used to be the highest in the world. Malouf conveys something of the emotional trauma experienced by Australian youths which in extreme cases can lead to carrying out a death wish. In “Sorrows and Secrets,” the young Gerry is confronted by male adult trauma. His friend Claude, a forty-year-old foreman, shoots himself for no apparent reason. The author suggests that the typically male Australian habit of keeping emotions bottled up inside may account for Claude’s desperate act: “All these men had stories, were dense with the details of their lives, but kept them in the dark” (Malouf, 1995, 53).

A recurring theme in *Antipodes* is loss and attempts at recovery through memory, fantasy and writing. In “The Empty Lunch-Tin,” a mother still mourns the death of her son who died seven years before. An elderly, unmarried woman in “That Antic Jezebel” is confronted with the news of her lover’s death. At the end of the story she goes to bed alone and naked. “In Trust” is about the legacy of five X-rays, the sole trace of a grandmother’s husband who died in France during the First World War. All photos and memorabilia of this soldier disappeared in a fire thirty years before. Malouf shows the pain and torment caused by death and the ravages of time along with the often vain and always partial attempts to retrieve the past.

*Dream Stuff* contains the same strengths and weaknesses as Malouf’s first collection of stories. The theme of loss recurs in the opening story, “At Shindler’s,” in which an adolescent boy learns to accept the loss of his dead father. Two long stories, especially “Great Day,” extending to fifty-five pages and put at the end of the volume, demonstrate once again Malouf’s difficulty writing novella-type stories. Each is marred by faulty structure, cardboard characters and lack of depth. As in *Antipodes*, it is the shortest stories where Malouf is better able to control his subject-matter. The landscape of Malouf’s native Brisbane, already depicted in *Antipodes*, returns in *Dream Stuff*. The author likes to render this tropical vegetation of bananas, palms, tree-orchids, maidenhair and jacarandas. He is struck by its festering, fermenting greenness and irresistible growth: “everything spread quickly—germs, butter, rumours” (Malouf, 2000, 42). Two stories deal with the transformation of natural landscape into man-made monstrosities. “Dream Stuff” begins with what appears to be an autobiographical return of a novelist to his hometown Brisbane after thirty years, looking for “the slatternly, poor-white city of his youth” (Malouf, 2000,
36). Instead he discovers flyovers, carparks and towerblocks of metal and glass. “Jacko’s Reach” is a similar lament about bush near Sydney turned into a shopping mall, tennis courts and a Heritage Walk. “Blacksoul Country” is a successful attempt to render Australia’s Outback. It is shown to be the site of confrontation between white and Aboriginal populations. In contrast to the current climate of reconciliation, Malouf prefers to highlight the lack of trust and enmity between the white interlopers and Aboriginal Australians.

Malouf’s vision of Australian society is bleak. Whites and Aborigines kill each other in “Blacksoul Country,” an elderly couple on holiday in the bush are senselessly murdered in “Lone Pine” and a deserted husband with two children looks for a pick-up in “Sally’s Story.” Another story, “Closer,” is a satire of fundamentalist, homophobic Christians who call Sydney “Sodom.” Still, after years of exile in London and Tuscany, it is “wet, boiling, superficial, brash, beautiful, ugly Sydney” (White, Flaws in the Glass 151), where Malouf has now chosen to live. A fellow Queenslander, Thea Astley, was born in Brisbane in 1925 and moved to New South Wales in 1948 where she spent the next twenty years as a secondary-school teacher. From 1968 to 1980, she taught as a senior tutor at Macquarie University in Sydney. Astley is a prolific and accomplished novelist. Of the nineteen books published since 1958, four novels won Australia’s most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin Award. During her long career as a novelist, Astley wrote two collections of short stories, Hunting the Wild Pineapple (1979) and It’s Raining in Mango, published in New York in 1987 and in Australia two years later. The University of Queensland Press brought out a Collected Stories in 1997, containing a selection of stories from the previous two collections plus fourteen others published separately over a period of thirty years. An unabridged audio cassette version of It’s Raining in Mango appeared in 1999, available in Australia and the United States. Despite Astley’s literary standing in Australia, all her books are declared “out of stock” in the United States. In England, she is largely unknown and only one of her nineteen books is available online.

Thea Astley’s second volume of stories, It’s Raining in Mango, more like a novel than a short story collection, is remarkable for its consistency in style, artistry and ability to interest and move the reader. Set in Queensland, the stories cover the history of the descendants of an Australian family from the 1860s to the 1980s. Astley begins with the arrival in Australia of the immigrant journalist, Cornelius Laffey, and ends with the suicide of Cornelius’s grandson, Will, aged in his sixties. In between, the author draws a vivid picture of life in colonial and contemporary Queensland. She shows the oppression of women and Aborigines, the power of the Church in country towns, awakening female sexuality, the problems involved with the expression of homosexual desire and the drug sub-culture of the 1980s. More generally, Astley is interested in the failure of human beings to find respect, hap-
piness or fulfilment. Convinced that there is something odd about Queensland, Astley once said: “I love the ambience of the tropics and the screwballs and characters who get lost there” (Baker 45). She refers to the specificity of her home-state in the story “A Man Who Is Tired of Swiper’s Creek Is Tired of Life”: “Chuck the facts together and you get a freak collage landscape where politicians, goodness gracious, my goodness, believe in apartheid; where bomb squads can spend up to an hour defusing a case of mangoes; where we have our own Rapetown, one of whose local thugs is accepted resignedly and affectionately as Virge the Ripper” (Astley, 1997, 149). It’s Raining in Mango shows Queensland to be the home of fanatics, violent racists, homophobes and drop-out druggies. And all this in a place where “the Wet,” that is the tropical rains, dominates everything.

The most successful stories of Janette Turner Hospital’s Dislocations are arguably the final ones in which the author gives a memoir-type history of her Australian ancestors. In light of a North American present, the author examines the “bloody past,” for example the flooding of Brisbane in 1974. The final story, “After Long Absence,” is an undisguised autobiographical account of a return to Brisbane. Malouf’s story “Dream Stuff” is a useful comparison. Whereas Malouf is interested in physical changes, Hospital is struck by the continuation of religious fundamentalism. Queensland is, after all, Queensland. Rather than attempting to show the historical basis for Queensland’s conservatism and oddity, as Astley does in her stories, Hospital’s scope is limited to a personal catharsis.

A new concept in short-story publishing gained popularity in Australia in the 1990s, a move away from single-author anthologies towards thematic collections by multiple authors, more often than not unknown to the public. While in theory such a practice may have offered a chance for new writers to have their work published, one suspects that the motivation behind such collections has been purely economic. As single-author collections of short stories are becoming harder to sell, especially those of any literary worth, publishers have started to exploit a new marketing tactic in order to encourage sales. The choice of themes chosen by different publishers is based on what they think will sell and betrays stereotypical notions of what is considered by some to constitute Australian identity.

Two categories can be distinguished in Australian short-story thematic collections: one related to sex and another which falls into a take-on-a-holiday or take-to-the-beach class. At least two anthologies were published in the 1990s destined for a gay and lesbian market. As well, the mainstream Australian publisher Allen and Unwin brought out String of Pearls in 1996, a volume of fourteen stories about cross-dressing. A more daring collection entitled Love Cries (1995) presents twenty-two texts which according to the Preface, “celebrate the subversive and unsettling power of erotic writing.” Subjects treated include incest, gender games and S/M.
On a softer side, Penguin, Random House and Oxford University Press have all been busy compiling bulky tomes guaranteed to keep one occupied in the youth hostel or on the beach towel. For the Australian male, *Smashed: Australian Drinking Stories* (1996) offers thirty-four accounts of inebriation. The book opens with a letter written to the *Bulletin* in 1903 by the famous Australian drunkard, Henry Lawson. The missive begins: “Dear Bulletin, I’m awfully surprised to find myself sober” (Condon and Lawson 11). It would seem that some of the contemporary authors may also have been under the influence at the time of writing. Here is a paragraph taken at random: “They just walked in an took it like they was takin cash outta a wall, I was sayin to Jan. What’s the world comin to. What’s the fucking world comin to” (33). Australian women in the 1990s could choose between *Australian Summer Stories*, *Australian Love Stories* and *Hot Sand: Stories of Sun, Salt and Sex*.

After a period of heightened artistic activity in the 1970s, dominated by White and Carey, the Australian short story declined in literary value in the next twenty years when it remained a sideline for aspiring novelists nearly all belonging to the generation of writers born in the 1940s who, for better or worse, make up the literary Establishment in Australia at the moment. Only Thea Astley, born a generation earlier, surpasses the generalized mediocrity of a large part of the short-story output of the 1980s and 1990s. A newcomer like Gail Jones suggests that stories written by an Australian can still impress readers by their freshness, artistry and escape from what Patrick White once called the “dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (Flynn and Brennan 16).

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