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Messages from the Inside?:
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Australian Children’s Literature

Sharyn Pearce

The Beginnings

At the start of the 1950s, a massive intake of one and a half million European migrants was assimilated into the Australian community, effectively and permanently eroding Australia’s Anglo-Saxon–Celtic composition. (To gain some sense of the enormousness of the changed demographics, it is salutary to note that at the end of the Second World War the population of Australia was only seven and a half million, and over ninety-five percent of Australians came from British or Irish stock [McGregor 323]. By the late 1980s, after further waves of immigration, only 47% of the population was British and “Old Australian,” 23% was composed of non-English-speaking migrants and children, while 30% was a mixture and “growing” [Hirst 228].) In the 1950s many Australians were firmly convinced that their way of life was unique because it was based upon the mores of a homogenous community, and they were determined to prevent these norms from being broken down by the admission of large numbers of unassailable elements. And so these lucky immigrants were tolerated if they embraced the Australian way of life as enthusiastically as the author of They’re A Weird Mob, a book of such immense popularity that it was reprinted thirteen times in its second year of publication, and was later made into a highly successful family film (the novel was originally written for adults, but many children and teenagers also read it, and it subsequently became a favorite text in the secondary school English curriculum). The fervently nationalistic bravado of these mid-century times is reflected in the words of the narrator Nino Culotta, one-time Italian journalist and now a successful “New Australian” (in reality an Anglo-Australian writer called John O’Grady):
There are too many New Australians in this country who are still living in their homelands, who mix with people of their own nationality, and try to retain their own language and customs. Who even try to persuade Australians to adopt their customs and manners. Cut it out. There is no better way of life than that of the Australian. I firmly believe this. The grumbling, growling, cursing, profane, laughing, beer-drinking, abusive, loyal-to-his-mates Australian is one of the few free men left on this earth. He fears no one, crawls to no one, bludges to no one, and acknowledges no master. Learn his way. Learn his language. Get yourself accepted as one of him; and you will enter a world that you never dreamed existed. And once you have entered it, you will never leave it. (204)

The novel concludes with Nino’s recognition that Australia is really God’s Own Country, and that God himself is the biggest “Ocker” (that is, stereotyped beer-bellied Australian male, usually in blue singlet, shorts and rubber sandals) of them all:

There are hundreds of ways we could spend this sunny Sunday afternoon. Or we could just stay at home and do nothing, and perhaps that would be best of all. To rest on the seventh day. To thank God for letting us be here. To thank Him for letting me be an Australian. Sometimes I think that if I am ever fortunate enough to reach Heaven, I will know I am there when I hear Him say “Howyergoin’ mate, orright?” (204)

Now, at the beginning of the third millennium, this evangelizing assimilationist (and masculinist!) zealotry would thankfully seem to be no more: relegated, together with the paternalistic and patronizing attitudes so popular half a century ago, to the realms of the quaint past. Australia is now one of the most cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse countries in the world, and for nearly three decades multiculturalism has been its officially dominant discourse. Multiculturalism is part of the everyday currency of Australian life, where tolerance of cultural differences and respect and understanding in crosscultural contacts are promoted as ideal civic virtues, and migrants and their children are ideally integrated into an effectively harmonious society without alienating them by unreal assimilationist expectations. Because for the most part Old World disputes have not been seen to be transferred to the New Land, and a large number of differing cultures have been accommodated without overt conflict and because, also, of the immense economic advantages which have ensued, immigration and the subsequent adoption of multiculturalism as public policy have been hailed by many commentators as Australia’s greatest post-World War Two policies and achievements (Patience 34).1

It is usually argued that multiculturalism was eventually welcomed and celebrated largely because it appealed to traditional Australian values such as easygoing tolerance, and egalitarian informality; in short,
the tendency of the locals to defend everyone’s right to have “a fair go” (Hirst 228). Recent developments, have, however, tended to dim the picture of a people triumphing over their tribulations and prejudices to embrace diversity and tolerance with an egalitarian generosity, and to confirm instead the pessimistic view that the never entirely dormant nostalgic hankering for a pre-1950s monocultural, assimilationist lifestyle has of late been gaining crucial momentum. The view from what social commentator Hugh Mackay calls the “rose-colored rear-window” (qtd. in Dale 316) currently seems attractive to a significant number of Australians who apparently have reached saturation point with the narratives of difference, and yearn instead to return to Nino’s Australia to a world which reflects the cultural homogeneity of the past rather than the enriched cultural diversity and hybridity of the present. Yet the impatience with multiculturalism appears to have specific, highly visible and highly “different” targets within its sights: Central European migrants are accepted, mostly without question, but Asian and Middle Eastern ones often face a different reception, for reasons which are deeply embedded in the national psyche. Rich, empty Australia, tantalizingly close to some of the most populous nations in the world, has, over the last century or so, seen adroit political manipulation of the old anxieties and fears about being overrun by nonwhites, but few have been more recent or more breathtakingly cynical than in the 2001 Federal Election, when the ruling Conservative Coalition parties, which had previously been languishing in the polls, retained power via a campaign which presented them as the stout defenders of Australia against a deluge of invading Asian hordes—in this case, desperate Afghan asylum-seekers, fleeing to Australia in scrappy, makeshift boats, who were successfully demonized as threats to the nation’s wellbeing. Moreover, since the attacks upon the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 and the repercussions which have reverberated about the globe, intakes of non-Europeans, nonwhites and non-Christians have tested community tolerance, and multiculturalism is on uneasy ground, with a raft of right-wing commentators calling for an end to that bedrock achievement of the last forty years, the racially and religiously nondiscriminatory immigration program (Sheridan 11). It could be argued, as the country bunkers down once more into Fortress Australia mode, that some migrants are now more equal than others.2

Nonetheless, despite the swirling tides of White Australia revisionism fuelled by vociferous media commentators and paranoid “shock jocks,” multiculturalism still retains, for the moment at least, the status of a desirable social value to be inculcated in child readers. It is, in fact, a
judicious exercise to examine the progress of multiculturalism in books for children and young adults, for while it may be seen that literature rarely initiates trends, it certainly responds to societal changes, and books can legitimately be viewed as crucial agents of socialization of the young into appropriate channels of behavior and deportment, or as valuable conduits of altered or enlightened governmental policies. Over ten years ago, in a germinal article entitled “Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children’s Literature after 1972,” John Stephens demonstrated that as the complexion of Australian society was changing, the inclusion of themes of migration, identity and cultural differences into literature for children became more relevant and necessary. Just as Australia’s political and educational institutions adopted multiculturalism, he argues, so did Australian children’s literature. Yet Stephens also contends that while the texts of the 1970s and 1980s reveal an increasing acceptance of “difference” and heterogeneity, they were still, in the main, written by Anglo-Celtic authors, few of whom were actually of the classes, races or even demographic areas represented in their stories. Stephens also wryly observes that the focalizers in these “multicultural” narratives are overwhelmingly members of the majority culture, that “the privilege of narrative subjectivity is rarely bestowed upon minority groups” (181), and that the usual plotline is that of a person from mainstream society being influenced, in some positive way, by the exotic Other. Moreover, he notes that novels tend “to rewrite social and cultural history for the purpose of shaping the present” (181):

The books certainly recognize that racism has been deeply ingrained in Australian culture, but construct situations in which it is invariably physically or morally defeated. In addition, the books characteristically generate motifs or significant objects or incidents that function as symbols or metaphors for the ideology of multiculturalism, usually standing for some way in which the coexistence of cultural difference offers mutual enrichment. (181)

In summary, he concludes that despite the fact that there is a significant corollary between the development of a personal identity and that of a national (that is, multicultural) identity, multiculturalism in texts of the 1970s and 1980s is rarely treated in a radical way, but is invariably presented in a superficial or cosmetic fashion.³

Revisiting this topic some five years further on, Stephens once again notes a continuation of this tendency for more recent texts to disclose inherent multicultural tendencies in earlier Australian history, particularly in periods prior to the era of mass-migration. He also detects a significant shift in the treatment of positionality: now the experiences of
members of minority communities are more frequently depicted from an insider perspective, with a significant number of texts being narrated, or focalized, by a member of a cultural minority ("(re)-connecting" 3–4). Yet, as Stephens is also aware, while first-person narration by a member of a minority community is indeed a very powerful method of expressing subjectivity, this achievement is nonetheless a limited one when in many instances the representation of people from other cultures continues to be mediated by British-Australian authors. Benign or commendable though their intentions might be, mainstream dominant-majority writers can still legitimately be accused of appropriating other cultures and silencing or erasing them by speaking in their place. By imposing their own interpretations, mainstream authors can have the effect of being oppressive, and of reinscribing the marginalization of minorities through overwriting according to their own forms and norms. Bearing this in mind, what I propose to do in this paper is firstly to examine two texts which illustrate that even today Stephens’s findings remain apposite; then, in the final part of this paper, I propose to add a third stage to Stephens’s closely-argued multicultural progression. In particular I will disagree with another critic in this field who contends that:

we are still a long way from a realistic portrayal in children’s literature of Australian multicultural society. . . Most writers are Anglo-Australian and their books make only small tokenistic gestures towards multiculturalism. You have to wait for the authentic voice to come from the cultures themselves. (Starke 24)

**A Tale of Two Histories**

Whether for children or for adults, Australian writing has traditionally been predicated upon the perpetual themes of displacement and dislocation, the reconciliation of personal and national identity, and the establishment of a sense of belonging. It comes as no surprise, then, that the end of the second millennium (a thoughtful time, one could say) has witnessed, in Australia, the publication of a welter of historical texts for children and young people, which focus particularly upon these themes. To celebrate the 2001 Centenary of Federation, 4 Scholastic Press produced a new series of historical fictions presumably designed primarily for school classrooms. This series explores seminal periods of history through the observant jottings of young female authors, and one of these texts, Nadia Wheatley’s *A Banner Bold* (2000), is an exemplary instance of the anachronistic approach described by Stephens in his two analyses. Set in the turbulent and colorful times of mid-nineteenth-century Austra-
lia, this piece of engagingly blatant proselytizing endeavors to demonstrate that Australia has always been a multicultural society. The novel is based upon actual historical events; during the days of the Gold Rushes in the colony of Victoria, miners had to pay a monthly license fee of thirty shillings for the right to dig for their fortunes. This fee was enormously resented, particularly because it was so rigorously enforced by the police and governmental authorities. In December 1854 men from a range of countries including Ireland, America, Canada, France, Italy, Germany and England refused to pay the miners’ fees, and in an act of rebellion against the repressive colonial government flew their own flag, the Southern Cross (so-called after a constellation of stars seen only in the Southern hemisphere) above the Eureka gold diggings. Although this revolt was quickly suppressed, it has subsequently garnered hugely symbolic significance in Australian history, as an iconic moment linked in the minds of many with the beginnings of republicanism, with egalitarianism, and with the rejection of Empire.

The hero of Wheatley’s tale is Rosa Aarons, a secular German Jew, who writes a journal for her friend Jenny Marx (daughter of the more famous Karl, who had some connection with the events depicted in the novel in that in 1855 he actually wrote an account of this riot for a German newspaper called the Neu Oder-Zeitung). Freedom-loving Rosa is already multicultural or at least a citizen of the world as she is of German birth, yet speaks English fluently, together with a number of other European languages, including Yiddish. Moreover Rosa is, like her father, a committed republican and a staunch anti-imperialist. When the new governor of the colony of Victoria, Sir Charles Hotham, arrives from England, Rosa disapproves of the “Royalist circus” that accompanies him, echoing her father’s question, “When will these people demand the right to elect their own rulers?” (22). Like her parents, she abstains from singing “God Save the Queen” and “Rule Britannia,” and while at school, much to her teacher’s chagrin, she sews “All Power Proceeds from the People,” rather than the usual Biblical or patriotic text, onto her needlework sampler. Rosa quickly makes friends with children from a range of nationalities, and together they form a theatrical group which originally intends to perform a play written by Rosa, about Judith, the Jewish heroine who rescues her people from tyranny. Following the incendiary political events, however, they perform the story of the valiant Eureka uprising instead. Moreover, the children are not merely witnesses to “History in the making” (122), and they do have a real part to play: Rosa suggests the Southern Cross design for the rebels’ flag, while she and her friends are also responsible for helping the leader of the uprising,
Peter Lalor (later to become a respected member of the Victorian Parliament), to escape from the soldiers.

In some ways *A Banner Bold* is situated neatly within the social and cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Australia. Wheatley adroitly presents the radical-nationalist nineteenth-century longing for the country to be the earthly equivalent of the Promised Land, a utopian world freed from the deformation of class exploitation, a haven from the Old World hatreds, tensions and prejudices, a “working man’s paradise” where all men can prosper in egalitarian harmony. She harnesses the Legend of Eureka to the distinctively Australian ethos of mateship, born in that same century of the need for a cultural hero in a newly evolving society, and developed and extended by first-generation Australian authors and critics anxious to stress a new national identity. Yet in an Historical Note at the end of the novel, Wheatley deliberately creates a multicultural Australian history, linking migration from its beginnings with the indigenous Kulin people settling in what was later to be called the Ballarat Goldfields, to the miners with their polyglot backgrounds. This “melting pot” version of the past, complete with its romanticized, eulogized and totally partisan account of Eureka’s place in the national identity, appears to be designed to prove attractive to a modern-day generation, particularly one currently weaned upon contemporary debates about Australia’s future in terms of the hotly-argued republicanism versus monarchist debates of the 1990s.

In some important respects, then, Wheatley’s story amounts to a revisionist chronicling and whitewashing of the past. Against much evidence to the contrary, for example, she paints a picture of nineteenth-century Australian life where the much-vaunted egalitarianism and mateship includes all races, even Dr. Wong, whose Chinese medicine cures Rosa’s critically ill baby brother. Wheatley ignores the overriding concern for racial purity at this time, the prevalence of the notion of “race-suicide” (that is, that the Anglo-Saxon race was being outbred by Asian races), the fears of and the consequent paranoia about miscegenation, or, as one contemporary put it, the “unnatural mongrelizing” of races (Gilmore 9), which would inevitably lead to Australia’s decay. There is no indication at all that this was a time in which the stereotyped apparition of the rapacious Asian (seen perhaps most clearly in the cartoon depiction of the coolie-hatted Mongolian Octopus, its tentacles reaching out to ensnare all that defenseless, innocent White Australia held dear), was regularly invoked in the magazines of the day. The goldfields witnessed ugly outbreaks of racial violence, notably the Buckland River and Lambing Flats riots in 1857 and 1861, where the
Chinese, the largest non-European group in Australia, and distinctive in their appearance, language, religion and customs, encountered great hostility. They were condemned as a social and economic threat (as sweat workers and debauchers of white women) and had to pay special entry taxes that applied solely to them. The recent Australian unease about nonwhite boat people has its historical roots, after all, but Wheatley chooses to erase this unpalatable fact in her desire to inculcate the “right” values in her young audience.

Garry Disher’s *The Divine Wind* (1998) is another fascinating text, if for different reasons. Like *A Banner Bold*, this less polemical novel adheres to Stephens’s schema by advocating an ideology pertinent to contemporary Australia but generally anachronistic for the earlier historical periods. Yet instead of glossing over Australia’s awkward racist history, *The Divine Wind* confronts it more or less directly. Disher’s novel is set in the pearling town of Broome, in the northwest of Western Australia, against the backdrop of the Second World War, and, in keeping with another of Stephens’s observations (namely that multiculturalism is often advocated through harnessing the forms of a popular genre [16]), it is primarily a love story about an interracial relationship between Hart Penrose, the white son of a pearling boat captain, and Mitsy Sennosuke, the daughter of a Japanese diver employed by Hart’s father. In 1941 Broome was a unique and exotic racial mix, as a result of the generations of Japanese, Aboriginal, Malay, Chinese and Indonesian workers who flocked to the hot, balmy tropical town to work for the pearling masters (interestingly, it is now a major tourist destination, where foreigners and other Australians alike come to marvel at its robust fusion of races and ethnic identities, as well as its beautiful beaches and idyllic scenery).

Disher writes about a unique pre-1950s experience of different cultures, yet he does not offer an idealized picture of a community in harmony. He successfully recreates the character of Broome, with its steamy heat, long white beaches and swampy mudflats, and its bungalows on stilts, their broad verandahs choked by shady creepers. He shows that while the children have acclimatized and are “naturally” multicultural, the adults are hampered by outmoded and Old World notions of racial superiority (this generational device also appears in *A Banner Bold*, where Rosa adapts happily to her adventurous new life, never feeling displaced or dispossessed, while her mother is much more cautious and apprehensive). Hart’s mother, with her English gentility and class-ridden pretensions, is particularly out of place: “unlike the rest of us she did not have red dirt, mangoes or pearls in her blood” (2), and “we were too careless, too casual, too democratic for her tastes” (3). Dabbing at the
perspiration on her brow with a delicately-scented lace handkerchief, Mrs. Penrose walks the town, parasol in hand, covering miles in her attempt to escape (when she does manage to return to England midway through the novel, she is shortly afterwards killed in an air-raid, proving that you can never, ever go back home again). As part of his rite of passage, young Hart rejects not only those colonial snobberies and prejudices associated with an isolated colonial wife living in the tropics, but also the overtly racist attitudes endemic among the powerful men of the region, including their preoccupation with eugenics, with creating a “Little England,” breeding a “superior Australian type” of “good English stock—not your continental rubbish” (27). Hart (and the nomenclature is scarcely accidental) rebels against the men’s prejudices and appalling treatment of nonwhite workers, yet his liberal attitudes are sorely tested after Japan becomes Australia’s wartime enemy and his sister Alice, now a nurse, goes missing after Japanese planes bomb her hospital ship. In the face of mounting war losses and enemy attacks upon undefended Broome Harbour, Japanese like Mitsy begin to assume a kind of “shape-shifting” (125), and even Hart starts to believe the propaganda about the Japanese, who are demonized every evening in Department of Information broadcasts which sound astonishing to a modern-day ear:

The Japanese violate our deepest and most fundamental instincts. The principle of White Australia shall never be overturned by armed aggression. An enemy setting foot on Australian soil will find himself up against a manhood of unparalleled strength and determination. Australia shall remain forever the home of a people whose descendants came here, to southern waters, in peace and established an outpost of the British race . . .

Japan is not interested in peaceful co-existence with Australia. We are too valuable to them for that. In fact they hate us, vilely and savagely. But we do not hate. We find the Japanese too loathsome for hatred, and shall not rest until they have been cleared from the earth. (123–24)

Given that most multicultural novels to date have dealt with far less controversial European-Australian tensions, *The Divine Wind* is unusual in focusing upon Australian and Asian relations, and it is actually rather brave. This novel seems to be mirroring mid-1990s Australia, before the current conservative backlash, when there was an increased political and economic recognition of Australia’s place as part of Asia, and an increasing presence of immigrants and refugees from Asian countries. Yet there is also at times a discernible tentativeness about Disher’s novel, and it is highly debatable whether Disher shows enough understanding of Asian cultural differences. Part of the problem is that the love affair is seen entirely from a white Australian male perspective, and because of
this limited focalization strategy, readers never really get an understanding of Mitsy, or her dilemma of being caught between two worlds. Mitsy is the classic “narrative object” to whom Hart, as a representative of the dominant group, extends understanding, and “the privilege of narrative subjectivity” (Stephens, “Advocating Multiculturalism” 181) never applies to her. It is significant too, that in keeping with the unfinished colonial moment, the novel does not end with a conventional closure. In postwar Australia Hart and Mitsy are about to meet again, after Mitsy has been released from internment as an “enemy alien,” but future happiness is by no means certain. The last two sentences of the novel make for rather glum reading: “It won’t be easy. We may not make it” (151).

Moving On

While both these previous texts disseminate multiculturalism by disclosing inherent multicultural tendencies in earlier Australian history, or by attempting to delineate personal histories via transformations from an intercultural subjectivity to a multicultural subjectivity, one final novel deserves attention because it, far more than the previous two, demonstrates that third stage of the multicultural progression that I indicated earlier. At this present moment, as well as Stephens’s earlier stages (for I would argue very strongly that these progressions are more shardlike than seamless) some texts are being produced in which “authentic” ethnic voices are created by authors who themselves come from minority ethnic backgrounds (although in writing this I am also mindful of Wendy Morgan’s warning that to authorize a story as authentic by pointing to the (ethnic) identity or knowledge of the author behind it is to forget that the meanings of a text are not so definitively determined, and that it is readers who realize a particular meaning [272]). Most importantly, instead of offering generic models of newcomers adapting to a new society and culture or unique diasporic cultures surviving in an ersatz Australian culture, novels such as this one reveal that what is Australian is not the cultural purity, but the mix.

These new novels are not “ethnic” texts, but texts about a social world (school, home life, friends and leisure pursuits) that would be recognized by many, if not most, Australian readers. While they feature minority groups in subject positions, multiple focalizations, and are told from an insider perspective, above all else they are important because they actually take their multicultural social contexts for granted as they get on with their plots (they are, in this respect, similar to a number of Australian films of the 1990s, like The Heartbreak Kid, in which ethnic
identity is implicit rather than explicit). The characters’ cultural heritage is incidental rather than pivotal, one of a number of factors influencing their subjectivity. After all, as French-Australian writer Sophie Masson comments:

People aren’t only “nesbies” (Non English Speaking Backgrounds) or “ethnics” or whatever: they are themselves, with their own circumstances. My non-English speaking background and experience has been an important catalyst in my life: but so has my interest in religion and mythology, my love of music, my dislike of smugness and complacency. (14–15)

Matt Zurbo’s Idiot Pride is representative of this trend. It never refers in any explicit or jarring way to the cultural backgrounds of the characters, and it is devoid of cultural cliches or emphases upon its characters’ exotic or alien lifestyles and behaviors. Instead, it incorporates ethnicity in a low-key manner, as a “normal” part of social life, and presents none of that hackneyed and hoarily problematic interface between ethnic identity and mainstream Australian life. There is a total absence of those often-tokenistic cultural stereotypes where multiculturalism is largely presented as a spectacular form of ethnicization involving costumes, customs and cooking (the so-called “pasta and polka” approach to migrant culture [Jupp 330]). Zurbo’s characters are not alien to Australian society but feel very much a part of it. Idiot Pride (shortlisted for the Children’s Book of the Year for Older Readers in 1997) deals with the lives of second-generation migrant families of Hungarian, Italian, Greek and Russian extraction, and in particular a group of seventeen-year-old boys (Gianpi, Johnny, Carlo, Serge and Matt) living in grimy inner-city Melbourne. With its tales of “grubby little working-class kids” (14), “scruffy mongrels in the inner-city Commission flats” (70), “depressing, rundown, four-smelly-old shops shopping centers” (57), broken homes, little money, and mothers on welfare, this novel foregrounds issues of class (and hegemonic masculinity) rather than ethnicity. Very much a text of its time, Idiot Pride speaks on behalf of disillusioned and disempowered youth and emphasizes life dominated by boredom and aimlessness, reflecting the “grunge” fad of the mid-to-late 1990s: “we’re doing nothing, going nowhere” (64) and “the day’s going nowhere” (111) as well.

Idiot Pride is a novel about streetwise young men searching for their identity, about how they hate school and are bored by its sheer irrelevance to their lives: “We sit around each lesson, scratching our balls and fannies, going insane, as a wog who has trouble with Aussie tries to read some dumb-arse language that died hundreds of years ago” (123). The novel is primarily concerned with boys’ relationships with their peers,
their casual experimentation with sex and anxieties about sexual performance, especially for first-timers (it is especially good in indicating that the “I-fuck-therefore-I-am” mentality of many testosterone-fuelled teenage boys, of whatever ethnic background, is not all-inclusive). *Idiot Pride* is about camaraderie, dreams, and regrets, its rather retrospective air reminiscent of actor Carrie Fisher’s remark that “the very best thing about going off the rails as an adolescent is that you get over it while you’re young, then you talk about it for the rest of your life” (qtd. in Harlen 11).

In Zurbo’s novel the characters are not contrived to serve ethnic stereotypes, and the lack of any patronizing generalizations leaves the characters free to use terms such as “wog” (Australian slang for a non-Anglo migrant) without offense or self-consciousness. Instead of being there as devices to show foreignness or isolation, the characters reveal the multifaceted reality, the multietnic composition of contemporary Australian inner-city communities. In the words of one reader, this novel illustrates the point that:

> you cannot single out one group as other or outsider, our identity as Australians is defined by the fact that we are all other. We cannot all claim to be white Anglo-Saxons, with similar spiritual and social beliefs. It is our acceptance of the differences in our midst, our ability to maintain a separate cultural identity whilst still functioning in a diverse society that make us typically Australian. (Pase 9)

In recent novels like the one discussed above, I would argue very strongly that the intertextuality of gender, ethnic and familial themes resonates with readers even if they do not share those same gendered, ethnic or family experiences. This particular point is reinforced in Pieter Aquilia’s analysis of *Head On*, a recent Australian youth movie that deals with a gay Greek-Australian boy living in Melbourne:

> in working across the usual line between an “ethnic” “minority” topic and the Anglo “mainstream” it begins to redefine what Australian national cinema and Australian national culture are, inscribing the Greek-Australian identity as equally central to any experience and not marginal or different. (108)

The crucial difference between these kinds of texts and those representing the earlier stages is that in texts like these, *ethnicity is not a marker of cultural difference, but an accepted part of Australian life*. Instead of crossing the boundaries between “us” and “them,” Hungarian-Australian or Italian-Australian experiences are fully commensurate with Anglo-Australian ones. In texts like this, where second- and third-generation non-Anglo-Australian writers are finding their places in shaping a
national identity, we seem to have reached a point where non-Anglo-Australians are no longer seen as in any way undesirable or suspect, marginalized or displaced, but reveal that creolization rather than ghettoization or assimilation is nowadays the norm. Ethnic otherness, once implicitly depicted as “deviating from a norm and therefore inevitably subordinate” (Stephens, “Multiculturalism” 4), has been domesticated at last. Given that these multicultural texts are sites where the meanings of a plurality of cultures are being contested, reworked and renegotiated, one would hope that a further progression would include Asian-Australian families in this same naturalistic, all-inclusive way.

Final Forebodings

It remains to be seen whether the events toward the end of 2001 in Australia and elsewhere will produce a triumphant counterdiscourse of assimilation and/or exclusion, and whether the tolerant pluralism of the multicultural society, so comparatively recently and arduously asserted, is exposed as fragile and illusory. In the future, Australians might continue to accept and embrace diversity, or we might hearken back to the hegemony of the old Anglo-Celtic order, those old stereotypes of national identity, the insularity and xenophobia and closemindedness of a bygone era, where migrants were tolerated as long as they merged into society as soon as was decently proper, and where appropriately grateful, well-educated English-speakers were cordially received, but the attitudes towards immigrants not fitting these rigid criteria were grudging and uncharitable. A children’s literature reflecting a society intent upon renovating the fading picture of a homogenous Australia, one peopled by junior Crocodile Dundees saying, like Nino’s God, “Howyergoin’mate, orright?,” really would be a step backwards.

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Notes

1 Definitions of multiculturalism are slippery, and have in fact changed in recent years: while the term is used to imply non-Anglo-Celtic, representing people whose first language is not English, this is no longer necessarily the case:
as Jon Stratton argues, many British migrants, eager to retain an entitlement that was once naturally theirs, now assert that as their society and culture is not the same as Australian society and culture, they should be treated like other migrant groups to the country. “British self-ethnicization . . . is an attempt to gain a new status, this time one which places British-Australians on an equivalence with other ethnic groups in Australia, arguing for the same rights and treatment accorded non-English speaking migrants by asserting their own ethnic backgrounds” (23–24).

2 The movement to return to the core values of the formerly ascendant Anglo-Celtic cultural and political past gathered great momentum from the mid-1990s onwards. In her maiden speech in the Federal Parliament, Pauline Hanson, leader of the ultraconservative, anti-Asian immigration One Nation Party, declared: “a truly multicultural [country] can never be strong or united . . . We do not want little ethnic islands. We want migrants who can integrate, not congregate, or the country will start falling apart because of violence, gang warfare and ethnic separatism” (10 Sep. 1996). One in four Queenslanders voted for Hanson’s party in the State elections in 1998, and it may be argued that the 2001 Federal election was won because the Conservative parties successfully hijacked One Nation’s policies.

3 The distinction Stephens is making coincides with that later made in the American context by Stanley Fish, when he distinguishes between “boutique multiculturalism” and “strong multiculturalism.” Fish argues that, “Boutique multiculturalism is characterized by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection” (378), whereas “strong multiculturalism . . . accord[s] a deep respect to all cultures at their core” (382).

4 Amid much celebration, Australia relinquished its colonial status in 1901 in order to become a fully-fledged member of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

5 This is the title of an enormously popular book published in 1892 by the utopian socialist and editor of the Worker, William Lane.

6 In the years preceding the Centenary of Federation in 2001, the Australian public was subjected to much (often acrimonious) debate concerning the nation’s political future, particularly whether it should become a republic or remain a constitutional monarchy with the English Queen as its Head of State. Although republicans were in the slight majority, a referendum in 1998 voted to maintain the existing arrangement, largely because the pro-republican organizations squabbled over the methods of electing the nation’s first president (who would, if their campaign proved successful, replace the English monarch as the leader of the people).
Given these kinds of racist attitudes, it is not surprising that when Arthur Caldwell, Australia’s first Minister for Immigration, famously quipped “Two Wongs don’t make a White” (in defense of his decision to deport Chinese refugees in 1947), his remark was greeted with general good humor and approbation.

Works Cited


