62.2

New Writing from Western Australia
Fiction
Poetry
Essays
Reviews

In this Issue
Ouyang Yu
Sampurna Chattarji
Christopher Kelen
Josephine Wilson
Huang Yuanshen

Westerly

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From the Editor

Since its infancy, *Westerly* has had a long interest in the literatures and cultures of the Indian Ocean, southern and eastern Asia. Poised on the west coast, we are constantly looking out, facing away from mainland Australia. This space is not an empty one. It is rich with a history of movement and exchange, going back (as Sarah Ridhuan's essay in this issue reminds us) well beyond Australia's colonisation.

Curated with a special focus, this issue continues the Magazine's exploration of Australia's geographic and cultural position within the Asian and Indian Ocean region. It was imagined first with the concept of opening a creative space to foster these diverse cultural networks, and explore the connections embodied by that fluid space of ocean. It collects the work of both Australian and international authors and translators. Their writing is marked by the conditions of exchange—it operates across complex negotiations of language and cultural positioning, it draws in implicit histories and traditions from a myriad of different places, it emerges through conversation, at moments in dual languages. In all of these ways, this is a collection which (I hope) will be read as conveying too the unique dynamic of transnational connection.

There is a purpose in making space for this sensation. Reminding ourselves of our involvement in these currents of connection and exchange is part of remembering the universality of the human experience, even while it points simultaneously to difference. The tension in this experience is seemingly productive, in a creative sense—many of the submissions we received for this issue pushed at the boundaries of expression. The work featured from specific projects (Japanese poetry in translation, work from the China-Australia Writing Centre and a Korean-Australian writing exchange) shows this again and again as a common feature of the work produced regardless of the cultural connections sustaining it.

To explore such experiences, purposefully, unashamedly and with skill enough to make them readable, demands talent, something that Gonsalves clearly has in droves. The only disappointment in *The Permanent Resident* rises from it ending so soon.

A Review of *Billy Sing* by Ouyang Yu

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Yu, Ouyang. 2017. *Billy Sing: A Novel*. Melbourne, Victoria: Transit Lounge. RRP: $27.95, 144pp. ISBN: 9780995359444

Warning: This review contains spoilers.

Ouyang Yu's latest novel, *Billy Sing*, is unusual. What might seem to be an accurate account of William Edward 'Billy' Sing's life is, in actuality, a historical fiction that goes beyond just the retelling of his military career. In a small number of pages, Yu effectively amalgamates a trio of themes—race, war and the Australian landscape—to present a unique narrative that depicts the triumphant but conflicted life of a 'half-caste' Australian in the late 19th to early 20th century.

We follow Billy as he transitions from child to adult. Born in 1886 as the 'Australian son of both "Mother England" and "Father Cathay"' in rural Queensland, Billy suffers a lonely and troubled childhood as he is subjected to racial abuse, due to his mixed race. This was around the time when Chinese miners were immigrating to Australia for the gold rush. It led to multiple tensions between Chinese and European miners (Drake 104). In his loneliness, he becomes proficient in shooting and in 1914, he enlists for the army, where he goes on to have a triumphant career and is accepted for who he is. He marries a Scottish woman named Fenella and they return to Proserpine where he is celebrated as a war hero. However, this happiness is short-lived as his wife leaves him, and he reverts to his pre-war, outsider position. To end this sad tale, Billy dies alone in his hut, during a sensual and frightening dream.

Although this synopsis is largely biographical, Yu engages many prose techniques that make this narrative unusual, unique and a far cry from the

conventional biography. He employs first-person narration to emulate the spirit of Billy, making this intention clear in the prologue:

> And I'm doing exactly that, living in another existence, through another individual, to tell the tale, a tale of my own life. (9)

Through this voice, Yu shapes his prose around historical benchmarks in Billy's life to 'resuscitate' his experiences for us. One example of Yu's exceptional merger of fact and fiction is when Billy's wife (supposedly) leaves him:

> When I woke up from the dream, she was gone. I searched everywhere … It was almost as if another dream had begun after my dream of the Flower Woman. All I had to do, I thought to myself, was to wait till I woke up … (125).

Historically, it is uncertain whether Fenella ever made the passage to Australia. Yu's use of dreams to navigate this ambiguity, whilst also characterising Billy's desperation, is clever.

While Yu resuscitates Billy's experiences for us, he also provides a three-dimensional scope of the cultural issues of the era. A notable example is Yu's revival of Billy's experience as a victim of institutionalised, or 'educational', racism:

> … Mark initiated a topic on Australia's future, as part of the arts subject, and he introduced it by inviting the students to comment … 'It should be a eugenic one in which all the lesser beings are removed, such as the Chinaman and the Abos.' He got five out of five … 'Australia's future is bound to be white, as white as a snowball, never to be tarnished by any colour, black, brown, yellow …' … When it came to my turn to answer, I simply said, 'I don't know.' I got zero out of five because Mark hated my guts for it. (37–38)

We wince on his behalf as he is forced to endure and partake in this offensive discussion. We also gain an insight into the attitudes that led up to the White Australia policy. Additionally, we extend this to our current cultural context, as although we would like to think that Australia has progressed from these fictionalised thoughts, these opinions are eerily reflective of the contemporary hate-rhetoric towards multiculturalism. In this sense, *Billy Sing* can become more than a historical fiction on Billy's life. It can also be an accessible historical document that opens conversations on Australia's racist past and contemporary parallels.

Despite Yu's clever prose, I have one misgiving. A reviewer for *The Saturday Paper* observed that the book contained a lot of 'damp and dissolute and decayed' images such as blood, semen and faeces (J. R.). Although this is probably symbolic and realistic to the subject matters of race and war, I found that these were, at times, uncomfortable and unnecessary. As an example, Billy comes across his Captain, who, while ejaculating, 'held it like a hose, swaying it from side to side, in an act of spraying, as if he were sprinkling his fluid over a bed of flowers …' (81). Although it probably reflects the loneliness of the soldiers, I do not think that scenes like these amplified Yu's artistic purpose.

Billy Sing is still an elegant rendition of the sad but poignant life of William Edward 'Billy' Sing. It is also a vivid and accessible enunciation of the 19th and early 20th century. Yu's capsizing of literary conventions allows him to pack multiple hard-hitting themes into a brief space, and his ability to make it a compelling read reinforces his mastery as a novelist.

Works Cited

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J. R. 'Billy Sing.' *The Saturday Paper*, 8 April 2017, https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2017/04/30/billy-sing/14915736004449